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Discourse, Meaning-Making, and Emotion: The Pressure to have a “Feminist Abortion Experience”

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Discourse, Meaning-Making, and Emotion: The Pressure to have a “Feminist Abortion Experience”

A Thesis Presented

by

DEREK P. SIEGEL

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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DISCOURSE, MEANING-MAKING, AND EMOTION: THE PRESSURE TO HAVE A
“FEMINIST ABORTION EXPERIENCE”

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ABSTRACT

DISCOURSE, MEANING-MAKING, AND EMOTION: THE PRESSURE TO HAVE A “FEMINIST ABORTION EXPERIENCE”

MAY 2019

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During interviews with self-identified feminists (n=27), respondents express discomfort when their abortion experiences fail to match perceived expectations from the pro-choice movement. They describe a “feminist abortion experience” as eliciting a sense of relief, empowerment, and detachment. An “anti-feminist abortion,” on the other hand, involves sadness, ambivalence, and a high attachment to the pregnancy. Respondents not only self-police this boundary but also perform emotion work to change an undesirable emotional state. First, I ask how pro-choice norms are constructed and perpetuated? I find that people learn what is expected of them from the contents of pro-choice discourse and learn about undesirable emotions from their absence in pro-choice discourse. Second, I ask how feminists manage discrepancies between these perceived expectations (how they believe they “should” feel) and their actual experiences. In particular, what motivates them to change their feeling states in the event of such a discrepancy? Extending Arlie Hochschild’s feeling rules framework (1979), I argue that because of respondents’ personal and collective identities as feminists, they feel obligated to other people in the movement to have the “right kind of abortion.” Whereas the feeling rules framework suggests that people perform emotion work to achieve an ideal feeling state, I argue that they also work to avoid stigmatized emotions. Lastly, I hypothesize that

personal and collective identities might also explain emotion work in other social movement contexts. When a movement politicizes and promotes certain emotions, members will feel obligated to match these norms.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Due to the polarizing nature of abortion in the United States, pregnant people¹ face heightened scrutiny before, during, and after their abortions. Even their most personal experiences have become a site of political contestation; for example, pro-life activists argue that abortion elicits regret, and thus it is unsafe and should be banned (Siegel 2008; Kelly 2014), whereas pro-choice activists argue that most people feel relieved after their abortions (Ludlow 2008; Weitz, Moore, Gordon, and Adler 2008). I am interested in how pregnant people navigate these powerful emotional expectations. Specifically, I show how group context shapes abortion experience and how ideological norms can produce more stress around an often, already fraught situation. Because of my focus on feminist-identified people, I also examine how membership in a social movement mediates the way somebody processes and evaluates their emotions.

I did not set out to study feminist-identified individuals or the practice of emotion management, but in my first wave of interviews (n=20), I was struck by respondents' perception that certain abortion-related emotions (such as relief, empowerment, and detachment from the pregnancy) are normal and more desirable than others. At that point, two questions drove me back into the field to collect more interviews (n=7). First, I wanted to learn about how these norms are constructed and perpetuated. In other words, how do feminists come to experience them as real? Second, how do feminists manage discrepancies between these perceived expectations and their own abortion experiences?

¹ Given the fact that not all people who get abortions are women (including transgender men and gender non-conforming individuals), I use the term “pregnant people” over “pregnant women” or “women,” when discussing this general population (Midwives Alliance of North America). My sample contains three genderqueer participants, who do not identify as men or women.

My respondents report that pro-choice discourse normalizes various emotions, but they also discuss how the absence of other emotions—such as sadness or ambivalence—from pro-choice discourse can stigmatize these aspects of their experience. Not only are feminists aware of the “right” and “wrong” way to have an abortion, but they also put a lot of work into negotiating this perceived boundary. I wanted to understand why the failure to conform to perceived expectations would motivate someone to minimize or alter their “negative feelings.” I found that my respondents self-police their emotions for several reasons. On one hand, they wanted to avoid being labeled a “bad feminist.” On the other hand, due to the precarious state of abortion access in the U.S., they feared that their negative emotions would be used to restrict abortion access for other people.

To understand how feminists manage these perceived abortion-related expectations, I extend Arlie Hochschild’s feeling rules framework (1979) in two different ways. Whereas the feeling rules framework argues that people compare themselves against a desirable norm, I use the concept of stigma to show how respondents also compare themselves against undesirable categories they wish to avoid, developing a framework that I call “emotional hierarchies.” I use the concepts of personal and collective identity to explain what motivates feminists to self-police their emotional state. Whereas Hochschild attributes emotion work to a sense of obligation in private relationships (what we “owe” our loved ones) or on the labor market (what we “owe” our customers), I argue that respondents are motivated both by the desire to manage their feminist identities as well as a sense of collective obligation to the pro-choice movement.

Because emotional hierarchies exist in other political contexts, my findings are not limited to this case. Social movement identification and participation might predict,

for example, how people articulate their memory of childhood sexual assault (Whittier 2001) or how they navigate public mourning during the AIDS crisis (Gould 2008). When movements politicize personal experience, people who already feel indebted to their communities regulate their behavior in the interest of the group. Over the years, social movement scholars have demonstrated the role of perceived obligation in rallying individuals to join a cause (Polletta & Jasper 2001). I argue that the experience of collective identification—and its perceived obligations—also impacts people’s social and emotional lives outside the movement context. It is important that we not underestimate group-level membership as a determinant of even people’s most personal experiences.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Abortion, Emotion, and Pro-Choice Discourse

While abortion discourses vary across time and are contested even *within* social movements, in the United States today two dominant perspectives prevail. Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht (2002) find that pro-choice discourses overwhelmingly describe abortion as a gender-based right (24%) or as a private matter between someone and their doctor (51%), whereas pro-life discourses frame abortion as murder (48%)². In order to combat anti-abortion stigma, feminists attempt to “normalize” abortion through practices like the *1 in 3 Campaign*, a storytelling project based on the statistic that one in three cisgender women get an abortion in their lifetime (Jones & Kavanaugh 2014). Through their constant repetition, these discourses produce a “powerful set of expectations that burden [pregnant people’s] feelings leading up to and after their abortions,” (Millar 2017).

Neither pro-choice nor pro-life discourse, however, fully capture the complexity of most people’s actual abortion experiences (Keys 2010; Kimport 2012; Millar 2017). On one hand, pro-choice activists suggest that upon completing their abortion, most people feel relieved and empowered, with little or no attachment to the pregnancy (Ludlow 2008; Weitz, Moore, Gordon & Adler 2008). Pro-life activists, on the other hand, argue that people always feel attached to their pregnancies, and thus experience

² These numbers are based on a review of over 18,000 passages from the New York Times and Los Angeles Times.

degrees of guilt and regret after their abortion (Siegel 2008; Kelly 2014)³. Less formal abortion talk can also reinforce which emotions are considered “normal” or “desirable.” For example, Mallary Allen (2014) observes how users on pro-choice message boards consistently invoke themes such as certainty and empowerment. Since these message boards are public, Allen argues that users strategically position themselves within certain “sympathetic” formula stories. But if pro-choice discourse teaches feminists what they should feel, how do they learn what emotions to avoid? And what occurs when someone’s experience deviates from these emotional norms?

Scholars who study the relationship between discourse and abortion experiences draw heavily on the sociology of emotion, particularly Arlie Hochschild’s feeling rules framework (1979). Feeling rules dictate the proper emotion for a given situation, including the extent, direction, and duration of this response. “[They] are the side of ideology that deal with emotions,” Hochschild (1979) explains, so “when an individual changes an ideological stance, [they] drop old rules and assume new ones.” People measure their experiences against a perceived norm, becoming aware of any “discrepancy between what one does feel and what one wants to feel,” (Hochschild 1979). When facing an emotional mismatch, they will then perform emotion work or emotion management (both terms refer to the same process) in order to resolve this tension. In the context of abortion, feeling rules “do not automatically produce the desired emotion state,” but rather pregnant people engage in different forms of emotion work to “achieve a feeling state that is [most] consistent with their ideology,” (Keys 2010).

³ Drawing on various psychological literatures, Kimport (2012) argues that regret is not an emotion but a cognitive evaluation. Therefore, it is not a “feeling rule” per say but a prescribed way to think about and reflect on your own experience.

In her research, Hochschild examines how and why the failure to meet a feeling rule motivates someone to engage in emotion work. In other words, what makes someone so discontent with a mismatch between ideology and experience that it drives them to change their emotional state? Hochschild argues that emotion work involves social exchange. In private relationships one feels they “owe” their loved ones an emotional debt and on the labor market, in order to keep their jobs, service workers feel they have an obligation to please their customers (1983). For example, flight attendants are expected to “disguise fatigue and irritation” by forcing a smile or communicating a “more appropriate” emotion.

Yet why would my respondents perform emotion work in a situation where neither their relationships nor their employment status are threatened? While Jennifer Keys (2010) provides a thorough review of *how* individuals manage the gap between abortion ideology and experience⁴, abortion scholars do not address why pregnant people might feel compelled to resolve this tension in the first place. Hochschild’s feeling rules framework is definitely one piece of the puzzle, but in order to fully understand what motivates respondents’ emotion work, we must incorporate other theoretical approaches.

Stigma and Hierarchies of Experience

Because “normal” and “abnormal” are co-constructed categories, the very presence of an emotional norm suggests an undesirable or stigmatized counterpart. According to Goffman (1963), stigma occurs when someone has or is perceived to have

⁴ Some strategies include suppressing inconsistent emotions, avoiding situational triggers, rituals and substance use, as well as reinterpreting one’s experience through a different lens.

an attribute that deviates from a social norm. Stigma involves a drop in social status or prestige, which can result in negative social, psychological, and even financial outcomes. Sexuality scholars, however, argue that deviant behaviors do not necessarily stigmatize social actors, and that stigma and labeling are two distinct processes. For example, although homosexuality itself carried stigma in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the law and religion treated it as a behavior rather than an identity. One could repent the sin or accept a punishment without carrying the stigma as an individual (Plummer 1981).

When we normalize some behavior and stigmatize others, we end up constructing and reinforcing hierarchies of experience. In Gayle Rubin’s analysis of sex hierarchies (1994), she observes an unequal distribution of value among behaviors. According to Rubin, certain sex acts—such as coupled, vanilla, and/or monogamous sex—belong to a “charmed circle” because they are seen as normal and natural, whereas pathologized acts such as group, kinky, and/or casual sex occupy the “outer limits” of the model. People perceive a boundary between “good and bad sex,” and if broken, fear this will produce “sexual chaos,” which explains why social actors invest so deeply in this boundary.

Borrowing the concept of sex hierarchies, I argue that pro-choice feminists construct a similar hierarchy of abortion experiences when they normalize the expression of certain emotions and stigmatize others. Stigma, in fact, is key in understanding both how the pro-choice movement produces emotional norms *and* how individuals negotiate these expectations. Just as individuals compare themselves against pro-choice feeling rules, they also assess their own and other people’s experiences vis a vis perceived emotional hierarchies. According to Hanschmidt et al. (2016), abortion stigma contains three sub-categories: *perceived* (“awareness of the devaluing attitudes of others,”),

internalized (“when a [person] incorporates devaluing social norms into [their] self-image,”), and *enacted* (“actual experiences of discrimination,”). This paper involves primarily the first two sub-categories, and also departs from most literature on abortion stigma, which tends to conflate abortion-related stigma and anti-abortion sentiments (Kumar et al. 2009). As Keys (2010) asserts, people tend to internalize messages that align with their ideological worldview, so to understand how feminists navigate emotional expectations around abortion, we must also consider their political identities.

Navigating Collective & Personal Identities in Social Movements

In the social movements literature, *collective identity* refers to the “shared sense of one-ness or we-ness....real or imagined...among those who comprise [a] collectivity,” (Snow 2001). For some authors, Polletta & Jasper (2001) argue, collective identity “is shorthand for the affective connections one has to members of a group that oblige one to protest with or on behalf of them.” Common characteristics of collective identity include shared definitions, boundaries between in-group and out-group, group consciousness, and negotiation among members (Melucci 1995; Taylor & Whittier 1992). Personal identities—or the meanings someone attributes to themselves—differ from collective identities but may also overlap in meaningful ways (Snow 2001; Polletta & Jasper 2001). Among my respondents, “feminist” constitutes both a personal and collective identity.

In recent years, social movement scholars who had previously explained political participation in terms of self-interest or class-consciousness (Fireman & Gamson 1979; Hunt & Benford 2004) have turned to collective identity because it “better captures the pleasures and obligations that actually persuade people to mobilize,” (Polletta & Jasper

2001). Some scholars believe that collective identity does not function well at the movement level due to vast internal variation (Saunders 2008). Others argue that because meanings “are constantly changing rather than static,” that collective identities can exist even in heterogeneous feminist movements (Whittier 1995; Rupp & Taylor 1999). In fact, Whittier (2001) argues that individuals “make sense of and reconstruct emotions collectively through movement practices.” Given that individuals possess multiple personal and collective identities, Snow and McAdam (2000) signal the potential for conflict or incongruence. When identities converge, “an extant collectivity provides a venue for an individual to act in accordance with his or her personal identity...[but] in the absence of correspondence between personal and collective identities, some variety of identity work is necessary in order to facilitate their alignment.”

In this paper I explore the overlap between emotion work and identity work when pregnant people’s abortion experiences differ from pro-choice feeling rules. I also argue that the sense of mutual obligation associated with collective identity shapes the way that people negotiate their abortion-related emotions. Although individuals claim a multitude of identities, political membership is particularly salient in determining which movement discourses someone consumes and internalizes. These movement discourses, and the way that individuals reproduce this discourse, set the parameters for what responsibilities group membership entails. I believe this study will address a crucial gap in the social movements literature, because while some scholars study the production and management of feeling rules, we know little about how someone’s attachment to a movement mediates the process of emotion management.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Entering the field, I wanted to learn more about how people make meaning out of their abortion experiences. This question emerged from my background as an abortion counselor, offering emotional support and helping low-income callers acquire funding to terminate their pregnancies⁵. Noticing that people's abortion experiences were almost always more nuanced than either pro-choice or pro-life discourses suggest, I decided to interview pregnant people about their recent abortions. In the course of this initial research, I re-framed my research to focus on respondents' perceived expectations from the pro-choice movement about what an abortion should feel like. I wanted to know how these particular expectations are constructed and maintained, and how respondents manage discrepancies between these expectations and their own experiences. More specifically, some respondents expressed profound discomfort if they deviated from these perceived norms, and I wanted to understand this reaction. With a new focus, in the second round of interviews, I decided to speak with more people who were both involved in the pro-choice movement and have had recent abortions. Below I detail the specifics of the iterative process of question formation, data collection, and question reformulation.

I conducted the first round of interviews from August 2017 – January 2018 (n=20), restricting eligibility to individuals over the age of 18 whose abortions occurred within the past five years. I was interested in the range and complexity of people's abortion experiences, particularly in how they make meaning out of the process. The bulk of each interview revolved around a reflection exercise where I asked respondents to

⁵ Due to the 1977 Hyde Amendment, no federal funds in the United States can go towards abortion, meaning that Medicaid does not cover abortion in 34 states. The average first-trimester abortion costs \$470 (Jones and Koostra 2011).

describe what they were thinking, how they were feeling physically, and how they felt emotionally *before, during, and after* their most recent abortions. Each intensive, semi-structured interview lasted between 50-120 minutes. Because people typically share abortion stories in small, private settings, I found that the intimate nature of a semi-structured interview closely mirrors how people typically share their abortion stories⁶. Each respondent consented to our conversation being voice-recorded and upon completion received a \$20 gift card to a major retailer. They also selected a pseudonym.

My recruitment process involved two approaches, both of which allowed potential respondents to self-select into the study. First, I contacted around 50 community centers and organizations in two Northeastern U.S. cities, both with high availability of clinics and relatively low barriers to abortion access per state laws. I requested that these organization share my call for participants with their membership and about half of them responded to my request; 19 groups agreed to distribute my flyer, mostly student groups and feminist organizations. From there, I used a respondent-driven sampling method, asking participants to share word of my study and my contact information with their networks. Overall, 32 people reached out to inquire about my study, five of whom did not meet the eligibility requirements and seven who ultimately did not schedule an interview.

Using NVIVO, I coded responses based on how someone “framed” their abortion experience: as a routine medical procedure, an opportunity for growth, an emotional burden, and a form of loss. I arrived at these frames inductively, and while there were others, none showed up as consistently as these four did. Most people mobilized multiple frames, which often co-existed without conflict but sometimes were experienced as

⁶ Eliasoph and Lichterman make a similar claim in defense of Ann Swidler’s “Talk of Love,” explaining the similarities between the interview setting and how people usually discuss matters of love and intimacy (2003).

contradictory. In particular, I was struck by the degree to which respondents grappled with perceived expectations (from the pro-choice movement) about abortion-related emotions. Based on this finding, I wondered how these expectations are constructed and how feminists react when their experiences fail to match these perceived norms.

I decided to go back into the field, conducting more interviews (n=7), specifically with pro-choice activists who had recently terminated a pregnancy. In addition to questions from the first round, I asked respondents to reflect on feminist messages about abortion, which of these messages resonated with their experience, and how these messages are communicated. I conducted this second round of interviews in July 2018, advertising this time exclusively with pro-choice organizations that shared my call for participants on social media. Having introduced the option of a video rather than in-person interview, participants in this round reside in various parts of the country. Perhaps due to existing networks of reproductive justice activists, all out-of-state respondents also resided in states with relatively high access to abortion, and I did not notice any difference in the quality of these interviews. I concluded this round when I noticed that the data had reached saturation.

Table 1. Demographic Information

Demographic Question	Response
Gender	Cisgender Women (24); Genderqueer (3)
Race	White (14); Black (3); White Latina (4); Asian (2); Mixed (2)
	Hispanic (1); Laguna Pueblo/Mescalero Apache (1)
Age	Range: 19-48. Average: 27.2 years old
Household Income	< \$50k/year (14); > \$50k/year (13)
Education	In College (3); Associate's (1); Bachelor's (13); Master's (9)
Reproductive Histories	Current Parents (5); One Abortion (23); Two Abortions (4)
Elapsed Time Since Abortion	One Year (8); Two Years (3); Three Years (8); Four Years (3); Five Years (5). Average: 3 Years
Religion (Current)	Christian (1); Jewish (2); Hindu (1); Buddhist (3)
	Catholic (1); Spiritual (2); Atheist, Agnostic, None (17)
Religion (Growing Up)	Christian (9); Catholic (5); Jewish (3); Hindu (1)
	Traditional (1); Buddhist (1); Atheist, None (6)

Of the 27 people I interviewed, 18 specifically identified as part of the pro-choice or reproductive justice movements. Five more self-identified as feminists or discussed their intent to become more involved in the movement. The remaining four mobilized popular feminist slogans (such as, “my body, my choice”) but did not explicitly self-identify. My sample includes both cisgender women and genderqueer individuals (who use they/them pronouns), most of whom were highly educated and from a middle-class household across a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. With the exception of one respondent who terminated at 14 weeks and another at 21 weeks of pregnancy, the rest had first trimester abortions (<13 weeks). 14 respondents opted for the in-clinic vacuum aspiration abortion, ten had the mifepristone/misoprostol combination at the clinic, otherwise known as the “abortion pill,” and three respondents acquired misoprostol outside the clinical context, two by preference and one because her country of residence (at the time of termination) did not offer legal abortion services. Finally, the overwhelming number of atheist or agnostic respondents in my sample likely have encountered less pro-life messages in the absence of religious backgrounds. In other words, my findings do not necessarily reflect the general population but rather individuals who affiliate with feminist movements and who, more specifically, consume pro-choice media and internalize pro-choice messages about abortion.

Positionality

I approach this topic with an extensive background in abortion financial and counseling hotlines. These last few years, I have spoken with several thousand individuals before or after termination from all over the U.S. and Canada. Anticipating

concerns about my political motivations and gender presentation⁷, I chose to disclose on my recruitment materials that I work for “local and national abortion rights organizations,” to establish a sense of trust and legitimacy. Because I am studying how feminist-identified people negotiate pro-choice messages, I am less concerned, in this particular study, about whether this choice alienated a more diverse ideological sample.

While people always present themselves in consideration of potential reference groups, by disclosing my professional background I may have further skewed responses toward what someone thought I might want to hear. This disclosure helped establish quick rapport with respondents. As I became interested in how feminists hold each other accountable for having a certain kind of abortion, I saw how disclosing my professional background in some ways mimics this social process. If respondents perceive us as two feminists discussing their abortion experience, then this transforms the interview itself into a useful source of data that I analyze in greater depth below.

⁷ Because my name and gender expression are typically read as male, at odds with a cultural understanding of abortion as a “women’s issue,” I inferred that this would be another point of concern. Indeed, each participant asked about my “interest in the subject,” and several explicitly cite my gender as the reason for their inquiry

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

“I just wanted the abortion story where a woman feels liberated afterwards”: The Makings of a Feminist and Anti-feminist Abortion Experience

Respondents describe the pro-choice movement itself as an important source of education about how they are *supposed* to feel about their abortion. The messages they see and hear in the media reinforce the idea that abortion should elicit particular emotions, such as relief or empowerment. “I’ve seen a bunch of Facebook articles or little cartoons where a woman gets an abortion and that’s it,” Lucy explains, “there’s little emotional nuance.” Andi discusses her experience reading pro-choice message boards before her abortion: “For the most part, they were all very positive. People talk about how their abortions let them continue with school or their careers.” Like Andi, Rania researches abortion online to see what she should expect from her own. “All of the websites said you were supposed to feel relief after your abortion,” Rania says, “You were supposed to feel relieved that it was over with.”

This portrayal of abortion and abortion-related emotions creates a standard by which interviewees judge their own experience. Rania says, for instance: “I waited and waited to feel that relief but it never came. I mostly felt empty and irritable.” Lucy also expected and aspired to the emotions that she knew she was supposed to feel. Lucy did not initially feel attached to her pregnancy. “This isn’t really a big deal,” she remembers thinking, “I don’t feel sad.” Looking back at the experience and recognizing her limited support system at the time, Lucy now sees this reaction as somewhat strategic: “I don’t think I could process it all at once. I couldn’t deal with what was happening so I cut

myself off emotionally. I didn't want to feel attached." According to Lucy, her ideal abortion experience would not have involved emotional ambiguity or a sense of loss. "I just wanted the abortion story where a woman feels liberated afterwards. She just goes back to her business career and I wanted it to be that simple."

Some interviewees feel affirmed by pro-choice discourse that normalizes the abortion process. "I like that there are people writing about the fact that it's not a hard choice for everybody and not everybody feels conflicted about it afterwards," Julie tells me, "I'm glad that people are [admitting that] sometimes [the decision is] really clear." Sam feels similarly. "Looking back, and it's been about a year and a half since my abortion, it feels like a normal part of my life," Sam says, "Abortion can seem like this big mystery, so I like to make a point that it's a normal thing that happens to a lot of people." For individuals like Julie and Sam, pro-choice discourses resonate with and affirm their own experiences

For the vast majority of the people I interviewed, however, the normalizing discourse of abortion in pro-choice circles can feel constraining. In other words, respondents feel that they are not supposed to have strong, negative, or complicated emotions. "You're not allowed to grieve. You're not allowed to feel complicated about having an abortion," Nicole says, summarizing feminist messages about abortion that they have heard. "And it's not necessarily [communicated through] what's being said, but it's in what's not being said." As a reproductive justice and indigenous rights activist, Nicole remarks: "I've never seen people being given the space and compassion to just sit with the complicated feelings they may have around abortion." They continue: "We talk

about mental health and anxiety and depression in social justice circles, but it doesn't feel acceptable to talk about these things in relation to abortion."

Maria illustrates the disconnect between movement discourse and the narrow set of emotions it legitimates, on the one hand, and lived experience on the other. After her second abortion she felt angry with her partner over his absence and that he did not understand the extent of her grief and other emotions, "he was like this external living, walking connection to that pregnancy, to that energy, or whatever." Around this time, the Shout Your Abortion twitter campaign began, which aimed to challenge abortion stigma in the wake of a congressional push to defund Planned Parenthood. "I was super excited [about the campaign]," Maria says, "But at the end of the day it wasn't the full picture for me, and I was suppressing the more emotional connection. I felt mad love for my pregnancies and a lot of reproductive justice spaces don't make room for that part of my experience." Her impulse to suppress these other emotions, unrepresented in the Shout Your Abortion campaign, suggests their perceived lack of value.

The content (and absence) of pro-choice discourse do not merely appear to endorse the expression of certain emotions and stigmatize others. They create, I argue, a hierarchy of abortion experiences that differentiates between "feminist" and "anti-feminist" emotions: relief and empowerment are perceived as normal or "feminist" responses to abortion, whereas, emotions like ambiguity and grief occupy an unnatural or "anti-feminist" category. This hierarchy impacts how pregnant people interpret and manage their own emotions. Valerie, for instance, invokes the normativity and desirability of certain abortion experiences over others. "I felt sad," she says, "and I know it's crazy. I don't even want to say it [out loud], but I felt like I was losing my baby. I'm

sure it was a fetus at that point, but I started reading, being very cliché – I don't want to be cliché – I read that at this week the baby develops fingernails and eyes.” One interpretation is that Valerie uses words like “crazy” and “cliché” to describe her attachment to the pregnancy because such attachments do not exist within the rubric of pro-choice discourse. Perhaps Valerie dismisses her sadness when she has no viable models with which she can reconcile these feelings with other feminist experiences.

Dylan also perceives there to be stigma attached to certain abortion-related emotions. They seem uncomfortable with how they feel four years after their abortion: “I still feel a bit of shame, which I hate to admit. But I do...I'm embarrassed by the fact that I [feel ashamed].” They describe the ambivalence they feel when seeing pro-life billboards driving down the highway. One read, “Aren't you glad that your mom chose life?” Dylan scoffs, “It makes me feel like I chose death when I should be feeling that I chose not to bring someone into this world in the shitty condition that it's in.” From one perspective, it appears that Dylan grapples with both pro-choice and pro-life messages about abortion—neither adequately affirms their experience. But it is also worth noting that Dylan would have preferred to feel relief after their abortion, indeed believes they “should have” felt relief. Dylan feels ashamed for overstepping the perceived boundary of what feminists deem desirable or normal reactions to abortion.

Interpersonal exchanges reinforce the categories of feminist and anti-feminist abortion experiences. Through such interactions, people normalize certain abortion stories and appear to stigmatize others. For example, while working at a women's center on her college campus, Valerie received multiple messages about the “right way” to terminate. On one hand, her boss and coworkers understood abortion as an empowering

experience and expected Valerie to feel the same way. When Valerie, a Black woman, disclosed her abortion to her white coworkers, they “acted very excited, like it was a badge of feminism.” Her coworkers also implied that abortion was an easy decision or a routine practice: “It was very like, “*so you’re getting an abortion.*” Like that’s the logical next step and getting an abortion is easy and unchallenging because I’m a feminist.” Valerie reflects further on this expectation of emotional detachment, “[they see abortion] as something passive. Like if you’re pregnant then it is just a box you check off.”

I am not suggesting that feminists maliciously thrust their worldview onto others. Rather, in the process of comforting a friend, someone may reinforce expectations, particularly when they lack personal experience of abortion. After all, in their ubiquity, pro-choice platitudes may be the most available tool at their disposal. For Andi, while comfortable now, at the time of her abortion she regretted not knowing more about her pregnancy options. Her feminist friends from the college activist circuit, however, were not equipped to affirm her emotional ambivalence. “Because usually feminists only talk about positive stories, I don’t think my friends were expecting there to be negative feelings associated with [my abortion],” Andi explains. They attempt to normalize the experience for her: “they kept saying things like “*I’m not judging you*” or “*it’s your body, your choice.*” I know it’s my choice, but that doesn’t mean I don’t feel like shit about it right now.” Aside from failing to address Andi’s specific emotional needs, “normalization” suggests an emotional ideal, sending the message that low attachment to the pregnancy is both normal and desirable.

Inadvertently, respondents may also contribute to the narrow discourse of acceptable emotions in pro-choice circles by selectively sharing certain details of their

experience but not others. Some variation, of course, is expected; activist Renee Bracey Sherman (2016) reflects that someone's story can change every time they share it because of shifting circumstances. Nevertheless, several respondents describe how normative expectations shape the story-telling process. Jenny, for example, did not disclose her "negative feelings" during an abortion speak out because "it didn't feel like it would have been productive for the space ... it wouldn't have matched what we were all talking about." In other words, she believes that a "normal" abortion exists, and further assumes that her feelings of guilt and attachment to the pregnancy make her experience an outlier.

Gina, a long time activist in the women's movement, also perceives her abortion as atypical. She felt hesitant to participate in the interview because she thought the sadness and regret she experienced "might throw off [my] work." At one point, Chelsea even asks, "Are you getting a lot of people like me [in your sample]? In reality, the majority of the feminist-identified people I interviewed did express some emotion that deviated from these perceived feminist norms. Take RJ, for example. At one point, she recalls thinking during her medication abortion, "when will this parasite be gone?" First discovering her pregnancy, however, she felt a lot of anxiety and dread. "I tried to force it out [by drinking] alcohol," RJ tells me. "I remember sobbing in my room, holding my stomach and saying I'm sorry. I think I was apologizing to myself, I was apologize to the kid that could've been." Lucy, at various points, describes her pregnancy as a "clump of cells," "a possible energy," and "like a real human child to [her]." Despite this multiplicity of experiences, however, my respondents have internalized a distinction between normal and abnormal feelings, a distinction that enables a tiered value system (desirable/undesirable; feminist/anti-feminist) to emerge.

Self-Policing the Boundary Between a “Feminist” and “Anti-feminist” Abortion

My respondents work hard—often unconsciously—to create the emotions they regard as feminist and to avoid the emotions they regard as anti-feminist. RJ, who works with several pro-choice groups in her area, uses humor to cultivate a detached emotional state more aligned with the belief that abortion is just another medical procedure.

Although she feels very angry before her abortion, RJ minimizes her anger when talking to her sister by making a joke: “well if statistically one in three women get abortions, then you [and our other sister] don’t need to worry about it.” Others work to replace so-called undesirable emotions. For Jenny, the fear of embodying an anti-feminist abortion was palpable. After her abortion she felt conflicted, “thinking about the spirit of [her] potential child and how [she] may have wronged it” by terminating the pregnancy. These feelings, however, did not match her desired state of mind. “I wanted so badly to just be happy and feel liberated,” Jenny says, “I had this guilt as a feminist for not having the traditional story where I felt empowered. I felt guilty about being guilty!” Over the years, Jenny has reconciled these anxieties through her activism, but at one point recalls, “feel[ing] like I’d abandoned all my values and principles because of how I felt.”

Jenny experiences two layers of guilt. The first involves her attachment to the pregnancy and a sense of possible loss, which she understands as an “untraditional feminist story,” or what I call “an anti-feminist abortion.” It deviates from the norm, or how many respondents believe they are supposed to feel. Jenny also feels what she later calls “bad feminist guilt” because she has overstepped the boundary of appropriate behavior: “to be totally frank, I was scared of judgment or rejection from the feminist

movement.” She also expresses concern that having negative feelings meant that she was letting down previous generations of feminist activists. Notice how Jenny believes that her abortion experience has the potential to either confirm or deny her value as a feminist. Whether or not other feminists would alienate her is a separate question. Rather, we can say that Jenny has internalized the perceived stigma associated with negative feelings, and fears that this stigma would also threaten her feminist identity.

Nicole also speaks to the ways in which abortion-related emotions have become a litmus test of feminist identity. “We’re made to feel like bad feminists for having complicated feelings after an abortion or during a pregnancy,” Nicole explains, “we’re told that we should feel empowered by our decision and that when it doesn’t happen that way, that there’s something wrong with us.” Again, not only are certain emotions stigmatized but also the people who experience them. Nicole continues, recalling hushed conversations with patients that she had as a clinic worker. “Someone might say, “*Am I a bad person if I feel sad about this?*” or “*I hope you don’t think I’m a bad person because I feel complicated about this.*” According to Nicole’s interpretation, patients do not feel like bad people because they have sinned or murdered their babies, as pro-life ideology might argue. Rather, they are self-conscious about feeling sad or complex about their abortions, for having violated the perceived norms of pro-choice ideology.

Gina, too, sees her feminist identity at stake in the pressure to have the “right” kind of abortion, without emotional baggage or attachment to the pregnancy. Of her second abortion, which took place shortly after the birth of her third child, Gina says, “I was completely crushed. I felt like I abandoned one of my children.” Her friends, however, interpreted the abortion quite differently from Gina and were not validating her

experience. “It’s just an abortion,” someone told her, “it’s a collection of cells.” Gina felt dismissed: “they weren’t hearing that [the abortion] wasn’t the right thing for me.” Her feminist friends and colleagues could not understand the depth of her sadness, so instead pathologize Gina. “From their perspective,” Gina explains, “something must have been wrong with me because it can’t be about the baby.” It feels like a rebuke of her feminism. “They didn’t come out and say, *this is un-feminist*, but that’s what it felt like...and I get it. I’m a feminist, and I would’ve been annoyed by me before this whole thing.”

Respondents fear that undesirable emotions undermine one’s ability to claim a feminist identity and will diminish their credibility in the pro-choice movement.

Emotion Management in a Precarious Political Context

The broader political context also provokes emotional self-regulation. More specifically, respondents fear that having an anti-feminist abortion experience may threaten the precarious state of abortion rights in the U.S. Maria, for example, worries about how “anti-abortion activists use [a person’s connection to the pregnancy] to argue that abortion is wrong. It’s like that kids story, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. If you give [pro-lifers] an inch, they’ll turn it into a whole thing. Like the anti-abortion side might use my emotional connection [to the pregnancy] to argue that abortion is wrong. They call it Post-Abortion Syndrome or whatever.” Jenny adds:

“I feel like the feminist movement doesn’t always allow for much nuance because the other side will have a *gotcha moment*. They’ll be like, “see? You regretted it, so maybe we shouldn’t have legal abortion at all.” Even on the comments section of an online forum, folks who are anti-choice latch on so hard to anyone who has anything other than a positive experience as a justification for why abortion shouldn’t be legal or should only be legal up to a certain point.”

Embedded in the reproductive justice movement, respondents can imagine very real consequences for overstepping the boundaries of a feminist abortion experience.

Respondents also demonstrate profound awareness of this bifurcated meaning system when it comes to their own stories. They know that other people will interpret their complicated abortion experiences through the more narrow categories of good/bad, feminist/anti-feminist. Comparing her first and second abortions, for example, Frances explains how she felt sad and overwhelmed by her first one, especially because she was in a committed relationship at the time and also keeping the abortion secret from her family. “It didn’t feel like Ra, Ra, Ra, my body, my choice,” Frances says, “I guess I identified with the other guys, the first time around, the bad guys.” Frances says this with a smile and we both laugh at the absurdity of these categories. Frances works with a doula collective and is about as far from an anti-abortion activist as I could imagine. Yet Frances understood the polarized categories of feminist and anti-feminist to place her behavior under such intense scrutiny that even a bout of shame or sadness could threaten her position as a feminist subject and turn her into “one of the bad guys.”

Concern that pro-life activists will take their experiences out of context shapes the way that people share their abortion stories. In what would become a recurring pattern during my interviews, someone discloses an abortion-related emotion that violates pro-choice expectations and then immediately qualifies this emotion. “I started feeling complicated about my abortion,” Maria says, “but I never regretted it, never for a millisecond, either of my abortions.” I never asked Maria or any of my participants if they regret their abortions, but she felt the urge to clarify and “correct” a possible misconception that sadness or ambivalence were her primary emotional reactions.

This rhetorical formula, disclosure followed by immediate qualification, occurs again and again. Hermione, for example, describes her abortion as “emotionally all over the place,” warning her husband that he would need to support her, even if she spent the 48 hours of her mifepristone/misoprostol regimen in tears. She proceeds to minimize these emotions: “I think that has to do with the hormones.” Susan says, “I’d say that I felt kind of depressed for a couple days and latent sadness for a few weeks after that, it was a somber thing.” Then she quickly adds, “But I’m really OK. I didn’t have any regrets about it, and I knew that it was the right thing to do.” Valerie discloses that she felt a sense of anguish upon leaving the clinic, and then clarifies this statement. “Even in that pain I never regretted [the abortion]. I was just sad this was happening to me.”

In the context of our interview, I am yet another reference group and possible source of accountability. Having established myself as a feminist during the recruitment process, I imagine that participants presumed that I share the dominant perspectives of the pro-choice movement. Therefore, such “corrections” could have been meant to signal to me, as the researcher, that they are not overstepping the boundary of a feminist abortion experience. On the other hand, given respondents’ high levels of education, I imagine they are familiar with the research process and the power I wield as a researcher to present their stories to audiences both within and outside feminist circles. For this reason, the self-policing of undesirable emotions may involve anxieties both around feminist identity management and minimizing potential political backlash.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Throughout our interviews, respondents continually differentiate between desirable or “feminist” emotions (relief, empowerment, and detachment) and undesirable or “anti-feminist” ones (sadness and ambiguity). The pro-choice movement does not outwardly endorse this binary, so in this section I elaborate on how these norms are perpetuated and ultimately experienced as real. I also examine how feminist-identified people negotiate gaps between perceived expectations and their own experiences. What motivates someone in this situation to change their emotional state? To answer these questions, I engage with the following concepts: feeling rules, stigma, and personal and collective identity. Extending Hochschild’s feeling rules framework, I find that respondents self-regulate their emotions for several reasons, in pursuit of desirable outcomes *and* to avoid undesirable ones. Finally, I discuss how the perceived obligations associated with social movement participation can impact someone’s day-to-day life.

The feeling rules framework represents one piece of this analytic puzzle. As Hochschild suggests, my respondents observe discrepancies between their experiences and perceived pro-choice expectations. Dylan, for instance, expresses embarrassment at feeling ashamed when they “ought” to be feeling relieved after their abortion. Moreover, in the case of a mismatch between feeling rules and experience, respondents engage in emotion work to resolve this tension. For example, after disclosing sadness or another negative emotion, they might clarify their lack of regret, contorting their emotions toward something they perceive as more desirable.

I propose emotional hierarchies as a complement to the feeling rules framework—a tool, collectively, for understanding how people negotiate ideological expectations. Respondents do not only differentiate between clusters of abortion-related emotions, but also assign them hierarchical values, which is to say that some emotions are seen as desirable and others carry stigma. Pro-choice abortion talk serves an instructive function, teaching pregnant people what to expect from their own experiences and reinforcing particular norms. While scholars have pointed out the discursive construction of a “good abortion,” (Allen 2014; Settles & Fugerson 2015) and its impact on pregnant people’s experiences (Keys 2010; Millar 2017), I argue that pro-choice discourse also constructs a negative or stigmatized category, which I call an “anti-feminist abortion.” When certain stories or emotions are absent from pro-choice discourses, my respondents believe this sends the message that no one should feel that way, particularly feminists.

Norms “become real” through their repeated presence or absence in pro-choice discourse. They also “become real” as respondents reproduce the hierarchy between feminist and anti-feminist abortions, through public speech acts, private reflections, and their own self-regulatory behavior. We cannot ignore the fact that pro-life discourses exist and likely make intelligible respondents’ feelings of sadness or ambiguity. Chelsea, for example, discusses both pro-life and pro-choice feeling rules. “I don’t necessarily think of [the pregnancy] as a child,” she says, “It’s funny, I go back and forth because there’s the Catholic guilt in me that really hates the feminist part of me.” I single out pro-choice discourse, however, because people in my sample self-identify as feminists and participate in pro-choice communities. As Keys (2010) reminds us, folks usually internalize those messages most consistent with their ideological background.

Moving on, in the feeling rules framework, Hochschild (1979) highlights an important interpretive act that precedes emotion work. She argues that when someone senses a gap between their ideal and actual emotion state, that this observation provokes them to alter their emotions. According to this perspective, respondents pursue the perceived norm or feeling rule, motivated by the desire to have a feminist abortion experience. An emotional hierarchies perspective, on the other hand, sees the stigmatized category as an equally powerful drive in this process. Respondents do not only compare themselves against the desirable category but also against the undesirable category in order to avoid stigma. What I call an “anti-feminist abortion,” Martin et al. (2017) refer to as “dangertalk.” Abortion providers “perceive that the pro-choice movement requires them to remain silent about the ethical and emotional complexities of their work.” Like my respondents, they experience “the expectation (and burden) of self-censorship.”

But even if someone notices a mismatch between their experience and the desired (or undesirable) feeling state, this does not guarantee emotion work. People deviate from all kinds of social norms, so what makes feeling rules so powerful? Hochschild offers one explanation, arguing that people manage their emotions when they feel they “owe” an emotional debt in either a private relationship or on the labor market. I argue that respondents’ personal *and* collective identities, as feminists, are key in how they negotiate their abortion-related emotions. In particular, the theory of collective identity helps explain why feminists feel obligated to adhere to pro-choice feeling rules, even when neither their private relationships nor their employment status are at stake.

On one hand, feminism involves a respondent’s *personal identity* or sense of self—for example, I ask Jenny, “*what is a feminist?*”, to which she replies, “Me. I’m a

feminist.” When respondents perceive a hierarchical distinction between a feminist and anti-feminist abortion, their self-regulatory behavior constitutes both “emotion work” and “identity work.” Take the aforementioned pattern, where feminists disclose a negative emotion and then immediately assert a lack of regret or that they are “really OK.” As a form of emotion work, someone changes an emotion that is inconsistent with perceived pro-choice feeling rules. As a form of identity work, someone negotiates how others perceive them as a feminist and how they appraise their own identity. When they qualify their negative emotions, this could be an appeal to say that just because they exhibit the traits of an anti-feminist abortion, that does not make them a “bad feminist.”

Over the past century, feminists have diverged on a number of issues, including porn and sex work (Rubin 1984), constructing a dichotomy between “good” and “bad feminists” and a perceived mandate to police one another’s feminist identity (Gay 2014). Due to the intensity and ubiquity of pro-choice messages about what an abortion should feel like, abortion has become another site in which feminists have been called upon to prove their authenticity. And whether or not feminists do experience social consequences for having the wrong kind of abortion, many believe they will. The problem of identity performance, however, does not belong exclusively to feminism. Societies contain a multitude of “accountability structures” (West & Zimmerman 1987) that essentialize difference and call upon individuals to conform to ideological norms. I argue that social movements function as quasi-accountability structures that have the capacity to police members through perceived (and sometimes actual) criteria.

In addition to personal identities, respondents also *collectively* identify as feminists. When asked about the pro-choice movement, respondents often speak in the

collective voice. For example, RJ explains, “I didn’t realize how little *we* talk about the abortion itself.” In this situation, “we” refers to the social movement organizations to which she belongs. At the end of our interview, Holly argues that “*we’re* making progress toward more nuanced abortion stories,” “we” being the movement itself⁸. Social movement scholars argue that through the process of collective identity actors develop a sense of mutual obligation toward one another (Polletta & Jasper 2001). This sense of obligation associated with feminist collective identity—and respondents’ personal identities as feminists—both incite respondents to monitor and manage their emotions.

I have argued that respondents imagine a boundary between feminist and anti-feminist abortion experiences, and they fear that crossing this boundary will pose a threat to abortion access. Although respondents have already had *their* abortions, they feel they owe other people the same opportunities they have had. This commitment drives respondents to self-police their feelings, which have come to represent far more than their own personal experience in the court of public opinion. It also explains why some respondents care so much that their experiences deviate from pro-choice feeling rules. Teske (1997) and Lichterman (1996) argue that that social obligation and self-interest are not mutually exclusive motivations to political participation. Similarly, I find that both *self-interest*—in preserving one’s standing as a feminist—and *social obligation*—toward collective goals and other group members—can provoke someone to change their emotional state when it deviates from the desired norm.

⁸ It would be misleading to suggest that my respondents perceive or support a universal feminist movement; after all, they offer fierce critiques of mainstream feminism’s exclusion of marginalized voices. Even so, respondents still believe in a collective feminist project to advance the rights and dignity of all people.

In some ways, abortion presents a unique case of emotion management, both in the sheer amount of abortion talk in the United States and in the degree of scrutiny abortion encounters in other fields (such as law, medicine, religion, etc.) So how might these findings apply to other social movement contexts? Some authors have already discussed how different movements use feeling rules to encourage members to self-police their emotions. Gould (2008), for example, studies the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and their mobilization strategies, finding that activists were often encouraged to suppress public grief and channel it into anger. Whittier (2001) discusses how the feminist anti-rape movement expects assault survivors to express a mixture of trauma and resistance to “legitimize women’s claims against male violence.”

In these cases, and other cases where someone’s emotions have been politicized, I argue that personal and collective identities are key to understanding how feeling rules come to matter, and why someone would feel obligated to change their emotional state. In terms of personal identity, someone might feel, for example, that their status as a “good feminist” or “radical queer activist” would be threatened if they deviate from these internalized feeling rules. And in terms of collective identity, we know that ACT UP is a solidarity-based organization (Gould 2008). I imagine that members might have felt that if they were not angry enough, then other queer people would continue to die from AIDS and government inattention. Based on my findings on how feminists negotiate their abortion-related emotions, I call for future research on how collective identity produces a sense of obligation to a social movement and its members, and how this obligation provokes emotion work at the individual and collective level.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Whereas we typically think of emotions as a private experience, abortion-related emotions are often the object of public scrutiny. For example, pro-choice activists argue that most people feel relieved after an abortion. Speaking with feminist-identified people about their recent abortions, I noticed how uncomfortable some respondents are when their experiences deviate from what they believe they “ought” to be feeling. I wanted to know how these expectations are constructed and experienced as real, and how feminists manage gaps between these perceived expectations and their own experiences. During my interviews, I found that some respondents try to minimize or alter their “negative emotions.” I am interested in what motivates them to do so, as well as what this case can tell us about how social movement identification shapes emotion management.

The feeling rules framework partially explains this puzzle. Respondents, for example, perform emotion work to make themselves feel more relieved or empowered, as they believe the pro-choice movement demands of them. But they are also motivated by the desire to avoid stigmatized emotions, such as sadness or attachment to the pregnancy. In this paper, I develop an emotional hierarchies framework to account for how respondents compare themselves against both desirable and undesirable categories. Focusing only on people’s pursuit of an ideal emotional state, or what I call a “feminist abortion experience,” we miss out on other aspects of emotion management, including respondents’ avoidance of what I call an “anti-feminist abortion experience.”

I also argue that both personal *and* collective identities motivate someone to change their emotional state. Feminists self-police their emotions out of self-preservation

and collective responsibility, not necessarily out of “obligation” to loved ones or customers, as Hochschild (1979) suggests. On one hand, knowing that their emotions will likely be interpreted through the narrow, binary categories of good/bad, feminist/anti-feminist, they regulate their emotions as a form of identity presentation—not wanting to be labeled a “bad feminist.” On the other hand, many respondents also feel a collective obligation to uphold abortion access for all people, and fear that pro-life activists might misappropriate their negative emotions in order to claim that abortion is harmful.

Furthermore, I hypothesize that personal and collective identities provoke emotion work in other social movement contexts. Because collective identity involves a sense of mutual obligation, it produces the conditions under which someone is likely to care whether or not their experiences match the perceived norm. This research prompts a re-consideration of the “everyday experience,” of belonging to a social movement. For instance, what are other ways in which the perceived obligations associated with personal and collective identification affect members’ lives? How does social movement participation blur the oft-contested lines between personal and private spheres?

Lastly, while I understand how the pro-choice movement can use normalizing discourses to combat anti-abortion stigma, this can also compel feminists to feel they need to have the “right kind of abortion.” In order to combat the pressure to have a feminist abortion experience, my respondents offer several suggestions that might break this hierarchy. Gina, for example, argues that a politics of non-shaming might better fit abortion advocacy than a paradigm of normalizing vs. judgment. Whereas a normalizing vs. judgment paradigm focuses on how someone experiences their abortion, a politics of non-shaming redirects attention toward the behavior of *other people* and the forms of

support they do or do not offer. I agree with my respondents' critique of "normalization." If movement actors wish to better accommodate pregnant people's realities, it is not enough to expand what counts as "normal" (ie. "it's normal for some people to feel sad or conflicted"). This would merely shift the boundary between a feminist and anti-feminist abortion, still assigning someone moral and political value based on their experience.

Andi argues that the pro-choice movement simply needs to expand the types of stories they profile online and in their advocacy efforts. While it is not necessarily the responsibility of the pro-choice movement to resolve individual feminists' anxieties around abortion, I do want to highlight the role of pro-choice discourse in reproducing the emotional hierarchies that organize the way people negotiate abortion-related feelings. Because pregnant people internalize those messages most aligned with their political ideology, I think the pro-choice movement could be quite effective in mitigating the perceived tension between feminists' expectations and experiences of abortion. It is not that abortion cannot be relieving or empowering, but for many individuals it involves greater complexity, and as Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie reminds us, the danger of a single story is not that it is wrong, but rather that it is incomplete (2006).

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