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Abstract

The Reproductive Rights Movement has, throughout its history, been heavily affected by public perception. Both its proponents and opponents have therefore taken to using language in order to frame the controversial issues in ways that best achieve their respective objectives. This paper explores the terminology used to discuss such issues as birth control, sterilization, and abortion since 1914, when the term 'birth control' was first used.

Keywords

birth control, reproductive rights, pro-choice, pro-life, sterilization, abortion, Planned Parenthood

Disciplines

Gender and Sexuality | History | History of Gender | Social History | United States History | Women's History | Women's Studies

The Reproductive Rights Movement: 1914-Present

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I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

For longer than the country of the United States has existed, women in what is now the US have been struggling with the issue of reproductive rights. Finding reliable birth control, an abortionist who doesn't permanently injure clients, fighting off sexual assault from neighbors, strangers, even owners, and more have always been a part of the American landscape. The actual movement for reproductive rights, however, is mostly a part of the 20th and 21st centuries. There have been women, often the women involved in the First Wave of Feminism, who have advocated the use of birth control, but until the period just before World War I, there was no real movement of any sort on the reproductive front. The movement began with a focus on birth control, but interwove with the eugenics and sterilization movements, and eventually expanded its focus on abortion rights as well. Throughout the history of reproductive rights issues in America, both proponents and opponents have used language and naming as a way of framing these issues in order to gain and keep constituents.

The Early Reproductive Rights Movement:

Birth Control

Though the beginning of the movement is ambiguous, June 1914 was the date when the *Woman Rebel*, a magazine that deliberately defied the Comstock laws, first “used the phrase ‘birth control’ and first cited the existence of a birth control movement.”¹ The Comstock laws, a series of Puritanical rules that concerned obscene content, particularly distributed through mail, had prevented the discussion and distribution of birth control. The original birth control movement was aimed mostly toward working-class women, though all women were welcomed. Margaret Sanger, who was the main activist in the movement, had first-hand knowledge of the

¹ Peter Engelman, *A History of the Birth Control Movement*, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011: 23.

struggles working-class women faced, particularly from the example of her own mother. She also worked with working-class women, often women of color, which at the time included even Eastern European immigrants.² In her essay on the Reproductive Rights Movement, Angela Davis elaborates on Sanger's early emphasis on the working class: "Sanger's familiarity with New York's working-class districts was a result of her numerous visits as a trained nurse to the poor sections of the city. During these visits, she points out in her autobiography, she met countless numbers of women who desperately desired knowledge about birth control."³ These working women returned the favor in 1917 at the Brownsville Clinic trial, where one by one they took the stand and recounted the reasons they had gone to get birth control from the clinic.⁴

The main goal of the birth control movement was to allow women access to birth control, but in order to truly achieve this goal, proponents had to essentially change the view of society on contraception. The term 'birth control' itself was a revolutionary concept invented by Margaret Sanger and the other radicals behind *The Woman Rebel*.⁵ By inventing the term "birth control," Sanger and her allies had in one term identified a major problem for people—unwanted pregnancies— and proposed a solution that allowed them to prevent that problem from occurring. In Benford and Snow's essay on collective action frames, they stress the importance of "diagnostic" and "prognostic framing," where a social movement organization articulates a problem and then the means of fixing it.⁶ With this term, the problem and solution are placed with the sexually active couple, particularly with the woman. Birth control is something people

² Rebecca M. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009. 3

³ Angela Davis, "Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights," in *Women, Race, and Class*, 1981, <http://greenhouse.economics.utah.edu/pipermail/margins-to-centre/2006-December/001051.html> Accessed April 3, 2012.

⁴ Engelman, 89-90.

⁵ Engelman, xviii.

⁶ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 26, 2000: 615-616.

use, something they take responsibility for, controlling themselves. Instead of Comstock's vision of contraception as an obscenity that "led to 'the degradation of youth,'" ⁷ the term "birth control" was assertive, a term that involved people taking control over their bodies. Degradation is something that was done to helpless victims, to innocent youth, while birth control rejects any notion of age or morality. Ordinary people of all reproductive ages could practice "birth control" and feel empowered and responsible, so once this idea became common, the social perception of contraception changed to meet it.

Besides using the new term, the movement also used "frame amplification" to emphasize the reasons ordinary, decent folks would want to support birth control. "Frame amplification," as defined by Benford and Snow, "involves the idealization, embellishment, clarification, or invigoration of existing values or beliefs."⁸ In this instance, the general public was starting to view contraception as a medical need. At first, Sanger had framed the issue of birth control as a political one, a woman's basic right to her own body, as a way to get around the remaining discomfort with speaking openly about sex for pleasure.⁹ But with the Brownsville Clinic patients winning public sympathy with their tales of medically-related woe and veterans from WWI continuing to practice the condom use they had learned overseas, society was beginning to accept that birth control was a health issue. Sanger went with this approach whole-heartedly, emphasizing the medical benefits of spacing and limiting children on both women and children, and leading the rest of the movement to do so as well. If it was becoming common to sympathize with women struggling to care for their existing children while fighting off sickness and physical limitations, then it was simply the next step to point out that birth control gave mothers the

⁷ Engelman, 16.

⁸ Benford and Snow, 624.

⁹ Engelman, 116.

opportunity to care for their children and better prepare for more. If veterans were accustomed to using condoms to prevent disease and unwanted children from the local women and prostitutes where they were stationed, it was easy enough to broaden that sort of practicality to the women here at home. The new outlook was widely successful, with the term ‘birth control’ being publically acceptable by 1923 and widely practiced and approved of by 1925.¹⁰

However, by the 1940s, the birth control movement had to adjust its framing to a more conservative society. As soldiers returned home and women left the factories, the famous Fifties ideals of a suburban life as a married couple with children began to take shape. Most people still practiced birth control, and very few seemed to question the fact that most Americans still had small families, but openly championing birth control, particularly for the middle-class, was somewhat controversial.¹¹ In order to align itself with the current social values, the long-standing Birth Control League of America became “Planned Parenthood” in 1942, because it sounded more respectful of the family and didn’t carry all the radical, feminist connotations that ‘birth control’ did.¹² “Parenthood” still emphasized the family, where there would be children soon, even if there weren’t now, and “planned” still carried the old connotation of individual responsibility that had been so successful earlier, but in a long-term, laid-back fashion. In fact, the BCFA used the phrase “planned parenthood” in 1941, “committing itself to ‘planned parenthood in the widest sense’ [and] declaring that it was ‘the duty and responsibility of parents to have as many children as their health or economic circumstances justify.’”¹³ Just as the movement had used frame amplification to extend existing social values to birth control in the

¹⁰ Engelman, 141.

¹¹ Engelman, 178.

¹² Engelman, 178.

¹³ Ibid.

1910s and 1920s, they were taking the more conservative values of the 1940s and 1950s and re-establishing contraception as a part of those values.

Eugenics

Eugenics was a popular philosophy of the early 20th century which advocated for the betterment of the human race by having the ‘fit’ reproduce and the ‘unfit’ not reproduce. Many leading figures of the time advocated eugenics, including Teddy Roosevelt , Winston Churchill, George Bernard Shaw, and Alexander Graham Bell.¹⁴ Proponents of eugenics did not see themselves as racists or prejudiced against the disabled, but rather as the saviors of the human race. The leading scientific consensus of the time was that problems of criminality, illegitimacy, feeblemindedness, etc. were genetically linked, and that in order to keep them from being passed on, anyone fitting that description must be forbidden from producing children.¹⁵ The immense popularity of the eugenics movement at the time was a response to a growing immigrant population, a shrinking Anglo-Saxon Protestant upper-class population, and changing societal values, exemplified by Teddy Roosevelt’s cries of “race suicide” at the proliferation of birth control use among “fit” Anglo-Saxon Protestant upper-class women.¹⁶ Yet the eugenics movement ended up embracing birth control as a part of its new public relations campaign.

The eugenics movement began to use birth control as a part of their new framing: ‘unfit’ women would be permanently sterilized for the greater good of society and humanity. Like the early birth control movement, the eugenicists diagnosed a social problem— the ‘wrong’ kind of people out-producing the ‘right’ kind of people— and proposed a solution, a program of

¹⁴ Engelman, 131.

¹⁵ Rebecca M. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009: 1.

¹⁶ Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*, New York: New York University Press, 2005. 7

sterilization. In this way, sterilization was the eugenics movement's form of prognostic framing, both a solution and a plan of attack that gained support for the movement.¹⁷ Indiana's 1907 law was the first to give government the responsibility of sterilizing the unfit for the good of society,¹⁸ but it sparked a trend that only grew more quickly when the case *Buck v Bell* upheld Virginia's similar law.¹⁹

An additional and effective part of this frame was that supporting sterilization of the 'unfit' was a not only a civic responsibility, but a kindness to the victims. Eugenicists took the existing social values of compassion and duty and linked them forced sterilization programs, a method identified by Benford and Snow as "frame building."²⁰ It wasn't a matter of invading the bodily integrity of poor women of color, it was a way of preventing the genetically-caused problems of criminality, illegitimacy, feeble-mindedness, etc. from being passed on, thus excising the burden they placed on society.²¹ This allowed most members of society to think of themselves as kind and morally upright, and prevented the lower-class victims from getting a platform to expose the truth behind forced sterilization. If people were convinced that part of being a good citizen was supporting sterilization, and already unconvinced that the lower classes were trustworthy, the opposition to these programs was effectively silenced.

However, eugenics rather fell out of fashion after World War II and the Nazi era, and so to remain relevant in a new world, the eugenics movement reframed itself to become the quieter neo-eugenics movement. This is perhaps best exemplified by the main organization behind much of the sterilization movement in general, founded in 1937 as the Sterilization League of New

¹⁷ Benford and Snow, 616.

¹⁸ Kluchin, 14.

¹⁹ Kluchin, 2.

²⁰ Benford and Snow, 624.

²¹ Kluchin 1.

Jersey, a respectable and modern-thinking organization determined to help society with its eugenic program. The Sterilization League of New Jersey became the Birthright Association in 1943, and the Human Betterment Association of America in 1950.²² While the “Sterilization League of New Jersey” seemed very narrowly focused, intent on sterilizing everyone; the “Birthright Association” sounded much more open and positive. The “Human Betterment Association of America” continued this trend, emphasizing not only its new national status, but using a phrase that sounded so helpful and high-minded as its new name. These changes are a textbook example of what Benford and Snow call the “audience effects,” where an organization modifies its image in order to appeal to a broader audience. While most of American might not want to support such a cold- and clinical-sounding organization as the Sterilization League of New Jersey, ‘Birthright’ and ‘Human Betterment’ are the sort of vague but morally decent sorts of endeavors that average American might support. Eventually, the organization changed to the “Association for Voluntary Sterilization,” returning to the original blunt focus on sterilization, which at the time was becoming a popular procedure among white women who were done having children.²³ However, they softened the clinical emphasis with the word “voluntary,” which separated it from the old eugenics movement and the Nazi associations it was forever tied to, painting the image of an organization that fought for human rights and decision-making, rather than ignoring individual desires in favor of ideology.

Like the general movement, the newly-branded organization set about changing its image and ideology to fit the new audience. Frame amplification again came into play as the neo-eugenics movement established itself. Instead of being openly eugenic-based, they focused on sterilization as an entirely voluntary way for all Americans to have access to permanent

²² Kluchin, 27.

²³ David P. Cline, *Creating Choice*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 22.

contraception, with a special emphasis on offering it to the unfit.²⁴ It was about empowering individuals, especially certain ones, not at all like the genocidal forces American had just defeated. Rather than fight the post-war narrative of fighting communism by being happy, white nuclear families in the suburbs, the neo-eugenics movement embraced that ideal by encouraging those who didn't fit this picture to be sterilized.²⁵ If anything, the neo-eugenicists were helping to provide American with the ideals they cherished. "By preventing poor women of color, especially single mothers, from bearing children, neo-eugenicists sought to preclude them from creating families that these women would predictably endow with the destructive values they embodied. Neo-eugenicists recognized the role of the environment in shaping behavior, but they argued that the most effective means of preventing the cultural transmission of defects was to surgically prevent the "unfit" from bearing children in the first place."²⁶ By framing sterilization in such a way that it amplified the ideal of the family as a building block of society, neo-eugenicists were able to get doctors, social workers, and the general population to go along with— or at least ignore— the violation of human rights that was going on with sterilization.

The Modern Reproductive Rights Movement

In 1960, a revolutionary breakthrough in medicine gave the world the Pill. It says everything about its significance that no one ever has to specify which pill. For the first time, women were getting a truly reliable form of contraception, and it made them eager for more. Suddenly, 'birth control' could in some ways be taken for granted. Rather than using unreliable and uncomfortable methods, women and their partners could have some assurance that they

²⁴ Kluchin, 5. They also ousted their founder, Marion Olden, whose continued support for the Nazis had become quite an embarrassment. 27.

²⁵ Kluchin, 29.

²⁶ Kluchin, 4.

would, in fact, be able to control the possibility of pregnancy. The legal barriers were vanishing: the Comstock laws were either gone or never enforced, and the 1965 decision *Griswold v. CT* established birth control as a basic right for married couples, extending the right to single people in the 1972 decision *Eisenstadt v. Baird*. More importantly, society had accepted birth control in the 1920s, and that showed no sign of changing. With birth control ingraining itself into the social conscious, issues like sterilization rights and abuses and abortion rights could come into greater focus on the movement agenda.

Sterilization

Sterilization was not a new method, but the recent surge in successful birth control and in modern medicine had brought it back into the mainstream. White middle- and upper-class women and even men were eager to have an entirely reliable method of birth control, especially if they were done having children. Stories like that of Florence Caffarelli, a white, working-class housewife with three children, who sued a hospital that refused to perform tubal ligation on her, became household news.²⁷

Yet for women of color, forced sterilizations were still commonplace. Though sterilization was supposedly an entirely voluntary procedure, in reality it was forced on 'unfit' women, particularly black women in the South, Mexican-American women in the West, and Native American women everywhere.²⁸ It wasn't until the 1970s that these sterilization abuses started to gain attention, in particular with the 1973 case of the Relf sisters. Two of the Relf family's daughters had been sterilized at 12yrs and 14yrs, with the consent form signed by their illiterate mother, who thought she was signing for birth control shots. Other coercive cases were

²⁷ Cline, 6.

²⁸ Cline, 7.

becoming mainstream. In 1975, Elena Orozco filed suit against a hospital that had sterilized her. She had refused the procedure a few times before, but had finally given in, like many other women, when the medical staff had surrounded her as she was giving birth and pressured her to agree.²⁹ These two entirely different realities formed the basis of the two frames of the sterilization part of the reproductive rights movement.

For many women, sterilization was all about a right to have a personal medical procedure done without being overruled by an outside party. Women like Florence Caffarelli were clamoring for sterilization, and the neo-eugenic doctors and nurses who had championed the procedure were scrambling to find all the restrictions and blocks the hospitals had to offer.³⁰ Yet men of similar races and backgrounds had rarely if ever had their judgment or ability to make medical procedures questioned, with hospitals that “restricted access to tubal ligation, but not to vasectomy,” and top medical organizations endorsing rules like the 120 rule, where a woman’s age times the number of her children must be over 120 in order to qualify for this surgery.³¹ Having been raised in a world where their basic rights about sterilization were being limited and taken because they were women, the white women who championed sterilization rights very often tended to frame the issue as one that focused on gaining access to these procedures. The side of sterilization rights and individual decisions that talked about the right to not be forcibly sterilized was not a frame they understood, because it was nothing like what they had experienced. When these women diagnosed a problem and used prognostic framing to formulate a solution, it was always about what they had experienced, because those were the problems they saw.

²⁹ Kluchin 7.

³⁰ David P. Cline, *Creating Choice*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 22.

³¹ Kluchin, 23.

To women of color and to the disabled, the diagnostic framing was almost entirely based around the problem of not being allowed to have children, with a prognostic framing that emphasized the importance of consent. Certainly, they wanted access to birth control and abortion when they chose it,³² but there was no issue of having too many children if a woman had been sterilized before she graduated from high school. The fight to end sterilization abuses almost always talked about the way sterilization was forced on women, without proper consent from anyone.

In the case of the Relf sisters, the narrative always emphasized the total vulnerability and lack of consent that led to the sterilization abuses of middle-school children as a frame amplification. The *Time* article published just after the suit was filed introduces Mary Alice immediately as ‘mentally retarded,’ with a ‘speech defect, and. . . born without a right hand.’³³ Their poverty is emphasized as well, presenting them as helpless victims of government overreach, while the author explains the utter lack of regulation in performing the procedure in a consensual manner.³⁴ In the *Chicago Defender*, a daily Black newspaper,³⁵ article on the case called it a “clear and revolting instance of Southern race privilege intruding itself into the private lives of illiterate blacks bereft of either power or influence.”³⁶ This focus on the victimization helped convince bystanders that sterilization abuse was in fact a major issue that they should care about. As the *Chicago Defender* stated, it “stirred widespread interest, because it represents a blatant infringement of human rights, an issue that still occupies the attention of American courts

³² Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, New York: New York University Press, 2003. 59.

³³ "Sterilized: why? case of the Relf sisters," *Time* 102, (July 23, 1973): 50. *Readers' Guide Retrospective: 1890-1982 (H.W. Wilson)*, accessed April 11, 2012.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ “History,” *Chicago Defender Online*, <http://www.chicagodefender.com/article-1369-about-us.html>, July 10, 2009.

³⁶ “The Relf Girls’ Case,” *Chicago Defender*, July 25, 1973.

in the context of our democratic avowals.”³⁷ By appealing to the American sense of democracy and high-minded idealism, movement proponents were able to get average, ordinary Americans to be outraged about an issue they had not cared or even known about before. As Benford and Snow point out, frame amplification “appears to be particularly relevant to movements reliant on conscience constituents who are strikingly different from the movement beneficiaries.”³⁸ Since most Americans, particularly those who were white, able-bodied, and middle-class, had never been in the position of the Relf girls or of any woman who had been forcibly sterilized in the name of public good, they were not going to fight for the cause unless they saw it as a horrible violation of all the principles and values they held dear.

Abortion in the Modern Movement: Pre-Roe

Though today the reproductive rights movement is associated almost entirely with abortion, it had not been much of a social issue until the reproductive rights movement of the Second Wave. Abortion was a matter of the medical community and a common but secret tale of tragedy and desperation among women. It was not until around 1967 that there arose a movement advocating for abortion rights.

To the new movement on abortion rights, the central focus was frame transformation, where the activists took a medical procedure and turned it into a matter of individual rights, drawing upon the experience of individual people to grow and succeed. The leaders claimed that

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Benford and Snow, 624.

“abortion was a *right*. . . essential to their right to equality— the right to be treated as individuals rather than as potential mothers.”³⁹ The Society for Humane Abortions always used the language of rights and framed the issue of abortion around a woman’s need to control her own body to be truly free.⁴⁰ Instead of talking about abortion as a medical issue, or a matter of philosophy, these women began to reach out to other women by framing abortion as something that everyday women dealt with. The idea of taking this matter that had always been a shameful secret or a discussion strictly for medical professionals and turning it into an everyday matter was revolutionary. Activists continued the Second-Wave focus on individual women, with the famous phrase “the personal is political,” and reintroduced the individual rights frame into reproductive rights in a fashion that had not been seen since Planned Parenthood dropped all pretenses of individual rights to focus on pleasing a conservative society.⁴¹ And as the movement gained strength, the landmark case of *Roe v. Wade* made access to abortion an individual right, vindicating this new frame and forever changing the landscape of American politics.

Countermovement: The Pro-life Movement

In response to the decision *Roe v. Wade*, as well as to the reproductive rights movement in general, a countermovement calling itself the “pro-life” movement began to form.

Consistently throughout the history of the movement, they have used a combination of frame bridging and frame amplification as a way to convince the general public that abortion, and reproductive rights in general, are entirely issues of morality, with a specific emphasis on so-

³⁹ Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984. 92.

⁴⁰ Luker, 97.

⁴¹ Engelman, 178. This had infuriated Sanger, who considered this refocusing a “very weakening influence on the future of the movement,” and wanted to preserve at least something of its origins as a woman’s rights movement. 179.

called traditional family values and religious values. Proponents use the family and often Christianity as infallible sources of truth and morality, where abortion is inherently evil due to its murder of children and direct defiance to god.⁴² Much of the pro-life movement is affiliated with religious organizations. One of the most famous and long-standing pro-life organizations, the American Life League, has a mission statement stating that it “exists to serve God by helping to build a society that respects and protects individual innocent human beings from creation to natural death—without compromise, without exception, without apology.”⁴³ These statements link anti-abortion sentiment to being a good, god-fearing person, particularly a good Christian, both bridging the gap between religious morality and abortion politics and amplifying existing desires and beliefs that people hold.

A major distinction of the pro-life movement is also how proponents frame abortion in the context of general reproductive rights and sexuality. Unlike any pro-choice groups, many pro-life organizations and advocates take the view that sex is only for procreative purposes within a marriage, which leads them to be against birth control as well, including famous pro-life activists Jill Stanek and Alveda King, as well as the American Life League.⁴⁴ By invoking these values, pro-lifers then further their point by portraying women who get abortions as promiscuous and irresponsible, not caring about innocent children as they pursue selfish lives.⁴⁵ This is frame amplification not only in that it reinforces existing values to certain audiences, but in that it helps

⁴² Luker ,174.

⁴³ “Mission.” American Life League. <http://www.all.org/nav/index/heading/MTQ/cat/MjA3/>

⁴⁴ Jill Stanek, “Stanek Weekend Question: What’s Wrong (If Anything) With Premarital Sex?,” <http://www.jillstanek.com/2011/03/stanek-weekend-question-whats-wrong-if-anything-with-premarital-sex/>; Alveda King, “Contraception and the Breakdown of the Family: Fruits of the Same Tree,” <http://www.priestsforlife.org/africanamerican/blog/index.php/contraception-and-the-breakdown-of-the-family-fruits-of-the-same-tree>; “Birth Control,” *American Life League*. <http://www.all.org/nav/index/cat/Mzc/heading/OQ/>

⁴⁵ Ibid, Luker, 228.

a movement whose “beliefs and/or values contradict the dominant culture’s core values.”⁴⁶ Pro-life groups see themselves as fighting a culture war, against a “culture of death”⁴⁷ which strengthens the group’s collective identity, their sense of shared purpose, and allows them to fight more fiercely for their goals.

Pro-Life vs. Pro-Choice

One of the biggest parts of the pro-choice vs. pro-life debates was—and still is—counterframing. It is shown very clearly in the terms each movement uses to describe itself and its opponent. According to the New York Times “On Language” column author William Safire, the term “pro-choice” is credited to Alan L. Otten, a writer for the Wall Street Journal, with the term “pro-life” appearing “more than nine months later, on Jan. 18, 1976, in a New York Times quotation of a ‘pastoral plan for pro-life activities.’”⁴⁸ Even the names of the movements are significant: pro-choice people are all about individual rights, about leaving medical decisions involving one’s own body up to the person it affects, while pro-life people are all about preventing murder. The Wall Street Journal article mentioned earlier discusses the state of abortion politics at the time, where already charges of “murder” are being thrown around.⁴⁹ Even at the beginning of the debate, language is an important part of how each movement portrays the other. As a member of NARAL put it, “if pro-lifers are the moralists, the pro-choicers are the

⁴⁶ Benford and Snow, 624.

⁴⁷ Archbishop Raymond Leo Burke, “Catholic Orthodoxy; Antidote Against the Culture of Death,” <http://www.priestsforlife.org/articles/3354-catholic-orthodoxy-antidote-against-the-culture-of-death>

⁴⁸ William Safire, “On Language, Right On, Dead-On,” *The New York Times*, September 16th, 1990. <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/16/magazine/on-language-right-on-dead-on.html?ref=williamsafire>

⁴⁹ Alan L. Otten, “Politics & People: Abortion,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 1975: 22.

pragmatists.”⁵⁰ If a movement claims that opposition to abortion is an easy amplification of opposition to cold-blooded murder, as do most pro-life organizations,⁵¹ it is a matter of black and white morality, with no room for compromise. But a movement that is all about the right to choose is inherently grey, because every woman is given the ability to make her own decisions in a unique set of circumstances. Black and white morality makes no sense in the pro-choice view of the world, because choice is never black and white. Therefore, to pro-choicers, people who advocate the pro-life view are unreasonable zealots, which does nothing to further discussion.

The Pro-choice Movement

The pro-choice movement has always relied on a single assertion: women should be able to make decisions about their own bodies. They, too, use frame bridging and amplification, taking existing values like bodily integrity, medical privacy, and personal responsibility, and apply them to abortion rights. Both Planned Parenthood and NARAL Pro-Choice, two of the most powerful pro-choice groups in America, emphasize personal bodily autonomy in their mission statements: Planned Parenthood’s approach to medicine is “based on respect for each individual’s right to make informed, independent decisions about health, sex, and family planning,” and NARAL “[connects] what happens in Congress or in the states to how it affects your ability to make private decisions, like choosing legal abortion.”⁵² Both statements are aimed at individuals, people who may not be activists in the movement, but who do have an interest in

⁵⁰ Cristina Page, *How the Pro-Choice Movement Saved America*, New York: Basic Books, 2006: 32.

⁵¹ “Abortion,” *American Life League*, <http://www.all.org/nav/index/heading/OO/cat/MzQ/>; “If Abortion is Murder, Let’s Act Like it and Tell It Like It Is,” *Pro-life Blogs*, http://www.prolifeblogs.com/articles/archives/2009/02/if_abortion_is.php

⁵² “Planned Parenthood Federation of America Mission Statement: A Reason for Being.” [Plannedparenthood.org. http://www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/who-we-are/vision-4837.htm](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/who-we-are/vision-4837.htm); “About Us,” NARAL, <http://prochoiceamerica.org/about-us/>

preserving their individual rights and liberties. For an organization like Planned Parenthood, which operates nationwide and assists a wide variety of people, the message is not going to be anything controversial. No one is going to argue against an individual's right or informed decisions, and tying Planned Parenthood to these assertions only reinforces the notion that Planned Parenthood is an organization with worthy goals. Even NARAL, a much more activist group than the series of medical clinics, portrays the cause as part of the democratic idea that governments should not make personal decisions for people. It is much easier to convince people to take their existing beliefs and carry them one step further than it is to start weaving a complicated philosophy and hope that people agree with it, so when it comes to framing the issue of reproductive rights to the general public, the tactic is mostly to remain as uncontroversial as possible.

Over the years, the pro-choice movement has also broadened the scope of what "pro-choice" issues are. Frame extension, a term used when social movements introduce new issues that are important to potential members, is easily applicable to the pro-choice movement.⁵³ While it started out as the movement of birth control, today, NARAL focuses on comprehensive sex education, various aspects of the birth control and abortion rights movements, access to neonatal care, and access to adoption rights,⁵⁴ while Planned Parenthood has expanded its general reproductive health agenda to include body image, men's sexual health, information on safe relationships, sexuality, and women's general health. Other activists like those at Feminists

⁵³ Benford and Snow, 625.

⁵⁴ "What is Choice?" *NARAL Pro-Choice*. <http://www.prochoiceamerica.org/what-is-choice/>

for Choice include affordable childcare and ending domestic violence as a necessary part of the pro-choice movement.⁵⁵

These goals are in part a response to the growing realization that not all women consider access to abortion to be the primary issue of reproductive rights. The need for better child-care and welfare efforts has been a central part of the fight for reproductive rights of women of color, which unfortunately, as usual, went unnoticed in the beginnings of the pro-choice movement. As Angela Davis, a famous Civil Rights activist, wrote, “If the abortion rights campaign of the early 1970s needed to be reminded that women of color wanted desperately to escape the back-room quack abortionists, they should have also realized that. . . they were in favor of *abortion rights*, which did not mean that they were proponents of abortion. When Black and Latina women resort to abortions. . . the stories they tell are not so much about their desire to be free of their pregnancy, but rather about the miserable social conditions which dissuade them from bringing new lives into the world.”⁵⁶ While women of color were very much in favor of reproductive rights, they were not only fighting for the right not to have children they did not want, but for the right to actually have children when they wanted. In order to make women of color a true part of the reproductive rights movement, the pro-choice movement had to expand its goals and interests to actually include problems relevant to the women who had been alienated by the movement. Of course, as Benford and Snow point out with frame extension in general, this strategy only works if women of color agree with the newly-expanded framing.⁵⁷

In Conclusion

⁵⁵ “Limits to Choice: Affordable Childcare,” *Feminists For Choice*, <http://feministsforchoice.com/limits-to-choice-affordable-child-care.htm>

⁵⁶ Davis, “Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights.”

⁵⁷ Benford and Snow, 625.

Throughout the years, the reproductive rights movement has changed considerably. From its origin as a group of political radicals trying to distribute birth control to its modern incarnation as a series of groups with a variety of goals, the movement has consistently used framing devices to get the general public to agree with its reasoning. The counter-movements have also attempted to change the public meaning of the issue, with both sides making significant gains in affecting the social and political landscape of America. People don't tend to care about an issue until it directly affects their lives or is so morally outrageous that they are forced to get involved, and the issues of reproductive rights have consistently been framed in ways that appeal to each aspect. The movement that began with the outrageous idea that birth control should be legally available and discussable now lives in a nation where the outrage is at those who want to take away birth control. Certainly a great deal of the movement has been successful, both at accomplishing goals and more recently at broadening the scope of the movement to include more than middle-class white women. But until every woman and every man can fully control their reproductive rights, the movement will never be over.

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