The good, the bad and the innocent

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Félags- og mannvísindadeild

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Rannsóknir í félagsvíslindum XIV. Erindi flutt á ráðstefnu í október 2013
Reykjavík: Félagsvíslindastofnun Háskóla Íslands
ISBN 978 9935 424 17 4
Abortion is the fulcrum of a much broader ideological struggle in which the very meanings of the family, the state, motherhood, and young women's sexuality are contested (Petchesky 1990, p. 3).

The right to choose is a longstanding feminist issue as well as a current concern, rooted in the belief that women should reclaim their bodies to gain sexual autonomy. Feminists made abortion on demand, as well as free contraception one of their main demands during the 1960's and 70's because they realised that without reproductive freedom women’s oppression would remain intact (Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1983). The importance of this demand seems to have lost its resonance with many women today as the anti-abortion movement has gained momentum. This has especially been the case in the USA but according to Thornham (2000) the backlash against women’s reproductive rights can also be viewed as a backlash against the feminist reconceptualization of subjectivity. The threat to women’s reproductive freedom is not only legislative but also an ideological threat, where anti-abortion rhetoric is used to distort and challenge the way women view their reproductive choices.

In 2008 in the UK unsuccessful attempts were made in parliament to restrict the law on abortion and abortion became, once again, a much contested topic. In light of the abortion debates that emerged in the political arena, as well as in the media; the aim of this study was to examine the discourses surrounding the abortion debate as it was played out in the British press in 2007/2008.

Background and methodology

In the UK the abortion act of 1967, as amended by the Human Fertilization and Embryology Act of 1990, permits the termination of pregnancy up to 24 weeks gestation where two doctors have formed the opinion that:

The continuance of the pregnancy would involve risk, greater than if the pregnancy were terminated, of injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman or any existing children of her family (Boyle, 1997, p. 6).

Since the Abortion Act of 1967 there have been several debates and private members Bills put forth in parliament, trying to implement changes to the act. The latest attempt was in 2008 when MPs and Peers who opposed the current time limit of 24 weeks tried to implement changes. This attempt tried to bring about a more restrictive abortion law and focused on three key arguments; a reduction of the 24 week time limit, an end to confidentiality for under sixteen year olds and compulsory counselling about the mental health ‘risks’ of abortion. These Bills have all failed, yet they indicate that there are continuing attempts in the UK to formulate new arguments against abortion (Bristow, 2007).

In light of these abortion debates that have been waged in the political arena and in the media; this paper examines the discourses surrounding the abortion debate of 2007/2008 in the British press, demonstrating how four British newspapers constructed the abortion debate, and what discourses about women were
(re)produced in that media coverage. It is important to look at how debates such as these are constructed in the media because even though popular culture and the media have had a significant role in shaping our attitudes about women and their reproductive roles, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of the media in constructing those roles (Keller 1994).

The research was conducted using documentary analysis, a method that focuses on material, produced by an individual or an institution, which describes a certain social reality. Discourse analysis was used to analyse the texts, incorporating relevant feminist literature and Foucauldian theories on bio-power to clarify the issues at hand. Texts were gathered from four newspapers, The Times, The Guardian, The Daily Mail and The Daily Telegraph. The texts were collected using a word search on the newspapers websites for a ten month period from June 2007 - April 2008. This search yielded 1829 articles which contained the word “abortion”. They were then narrowed down to 205 by disregarding any articles that were not really about abortion, or those that were too short or had little relevance or those who focused on abortion in other countries. After several close readings of all the articles, the three key themes revealed were; the foetus, women as mothers and women who abort.

The innocent

In the last 20 years we have witnessed the emergence of the foetus both in medical literature and as a subject in its own right in popular culture. This development has been well documented by feminist scholars and points to a significant shift away from the perception of the foetus as a passive passenger in the womb (Petchesky, 1990). This has resulted in a substantial increase in the notion of foetal personhood, where various techniques are used to convey the idea that a foetus is literally a baby from the moment of conception. Subsequently medical discourses on the subject of abortion have mostly taken the place of ethical or religious opposition (Boyle, 1997; Franklin, 1991; Kaplan, 1994; Petchesky, 1987). This discursive construction of an autonomous foetus has been embraced by popular culture and the media. The foetus is now seen as being quite separate and independent from the mother who is reduced to a suitable or unsuitable host.

The idea of foetal personhood is maintained in the press by printing images of foetuses that reveal distinguishable physical features, as well as constantly referring to foetuses as babies or children. In the texts where foetuses were discussed the word “baby” was most often used when referring to a foetus, but the words “child” (“I had one”, 2008), “unborn child” (“Abortion: too”, 2007), “human being” (“All evidence”, 2008), and “human entity” (“Like a slave”, 2007) were also used. According to the newspapers the foetuses showed a range of behavioural skills, including; “smiling, crying, sucking and almost dancing at 24 weeks and earlier” (“Make it easier”, 2007), as well as “very young embryos [who] look and move like babies and can respond to stimuli such as pain” (“I had one”, 2008).

Scientific findings regarding foetal development are freely used to convey the idea that a foetus is exactly the same as a new-born baby, only smaller, and what is interesting is how this argument is made to apply to all foetuses, not just the 24 week old foetuses that were supposedly the main concern in this debate. According to The Daily Mail; “We know that as early as 13 weeks, a foetus appears to yawn and rub their eyes; that at 15 weeks, they gain a sense of taste; that at 18 weeks they begin to hear” (“Why I”, 2007) and on the foetal monitor screens we see their “arms and legs waving” and they even seem “healthy and [look] remarkable happy” (“I tried”, 2007). This way of referring to foetuses as if they were babies is part of a wider net of discourses on which the success of the anti-abortion movement on the cultural front depends. We as
media consumers are bombarded with images and texts of foetuses looking and behaving like babies and if we indeed take the view that, foetuses are the same as babies we are less likely to approve of abortion.

A well-known tactic of the anti-abortion movement is to present gruesome descriptions of aborted foetuses, particularly those aborted late, where the emphasis is on the grotesque. The aim of this is to shock and disgust the public in such a powerful way that they withdraw their support of abortions by making the reader identify with the foetus as subject. This focus on the grotesque aspects of the abortion procedure relies on “us” the media consumers to accept the parameters of the debate; that a foetus equals a baby and killing babies is wrong. There are many examples of this in the texts where the infatuation with the unusually morbid and gruesome aspects of the abortion procedure is used as anti-abortion rhetoric:

Discussing the termination she had just performed, she said: “The babies were so strong and were crying so loudly that I didn’t know what to do. Eventually, I had to bash their heads to shut them up” (“MPs plan”, 2007).

These kinds of “horror” stories are specifically used to make people reject “late” abortions and add weight to the argument that aborting an “older” foetus is especially abhorrent.

Connected to this rhetoric are the familiar texts about tiny children born prematurely, where the emphasis is on the extraordinary achievements of medical science (McNeil, 1991). The stories about tiny “miracle babies” are often associated with stories about “older” foetuses being aborted and the boundaries between a wanted child and an aborted foetus are blurred. The Daily Telegraph finds it to be a “hideous irony of killing 24-week-old babies in one ward while trying to save them in another” (“Keep the courts”, 2007). The difference between babies born prematurely and aborted foetuses is made to seem arbitrary and the success stories of babies who have been born very prematurely and survived are used as examples of what could happen if there were no “late” abortions:

“I thought I was miscarrying but when I saw him he was perfect. I know it is different if a baby is sick, but if there are no problems then the limit should be lower” (“MPs unite”, 2008).

The stories of women who have had premature babies are used explicitly to give weight to the argument of lowering the time limit for abortions, as the experiences of those mothers validates the discourse of foetuses, in this case older foetuses, being just the same as babies. What is also worth noting is the categorisation of most foetuses as healthy and normal which is based on the eugenic distinction that the “quality” of children is of central importance when it comes to abortions (Steinberg, 1991). This eugenic distinction is evident in the texts whereby “healthy” foetuses are portrayed as non-disposable and “unhealthy” ones as disposable. The common view expressed in the texts, that women should be able to choose whether or not to have an abortion if some abnormality is discovered in the foetus, but should have no choice if they carry a “healthy” baby, is further evidence for the way in which the abortion debate seems to be about the preservation of healthy foetuses and the preservation of the nuclear family, but not about the women who carry them. This preoccupation with the rights of “healthy” foetuses can be identified as part of an ideology that has achieved dominance within our specific culture, which fails to be recognized as such and passes as self-evident or “common sense.”
The good mother

In the years since [the abortion], I have struggled hugely with the way I rejected my baby. I know it was a dreadfully unmotherly thing to do (“Abortion is never”, 2008).

One of the most influential choices a writer makes is naming the things s/he writes about. Calling women who have had abortions mothers seems contradictory but it is nevertheless done repeatedly in the texts. It seems evident that following the discursive trend of calling foetuses babies, women have also become mothers straight after conception, and their actions following that, determine whether they are “good” or “bad” mothers. A “bad” mother could therefore have an abortion, but a “good” mother never would. The guilt of having “rejected [the] baby” is experienced by one of the women quoted in the Daily Mail as “foremost and overwhelming” and that “guilt, [she] realise[s] now, [she] will have forever” (“Abortion is never”, 2008). This “guilt and regret” discourse is very prominent when we look at both mothers and women who abort and is based on the assumption that moral beings would and should feel guilty and remorseful if they do something morally wrong. Here the morally wrong thing is to abort and this cannot be expressed without the complementary “guilt and regret” discourse:

Yes, I am filled with regret that my circumstances didn’t allow me to have three children. If we’d had a bigger house and more money, I would not have had a termination and I’d be a very happy mother of three. I realise my decision may affect me later in life, but I try not to dwell on my decision for the sake of my children (“Abortion: meet”, 2007).

Following Foucault we can understand this particular human-interest, press discourse as a type of confessional, where “individuals are induced to reveal the most intimate and precise details about the nature of their desires” (McNay, 1994, p. 122) and their confessions are then turned into a normalised “truth” whereby (other) individuals are judged and categorised as normal or deviant (Foucault, 1978). A “normal” individual would then express guilt and regret over having had an abortion while a “deviant” individual would express none.

The discourse of maternalism which infiltrates every moral discourse about abortion is based on the way women in modern societies are trained to internalize certain behaviours in their behaviour towards others, whether they want to be mothers themselves or not (Chodorow, 1978; Petchesky, 1990). This particular discourse does not only construct the “good” mother as such, but also implies that inside every “good” woman is a “good” mother. The message is that motherhood, unlike abortion is never regrettable and women even experience guilt over letting their children down by not being able to carry them to full term:

“Don’t call me mummy”, says a mother of twins, born at 25 weeks gestation as she paces desperately between the two intensive care wards where her babies lie. “I don’t deserve that name. I should have kept them inside me for longer. They should be inside me now. I feel so guilty. Words can’t describe how awful I feel. It’s such a terrible guilt for letting them down in this way” (“Inside the unit”, 2008).

The great lengths women should go to in order to protect their foetuses include choosing their own death over abortion. This is true, according to The Daily Mail of the woman with cancer who lived, and subsequently died for her husband and children:
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[W]ith steadfast courage… [she told doctors] “If I am going to die, my baby is going to live” She told them straight away they were not going to get rid of the baby. She’d have lost the will to fight. She lived for her husband and children. She was a big personality with a heart of gold (“Mother sacrificed”, 2008).

If this is representative of the self-sacrificing “good” mother, then the “guilt and regret” discourse expressed by some of the women can be constructed both as an apology for not fulfilling their “good” mother role and also as a cautionary tale for others contemplating abortion.

The bad

Ann Kaplan (1992) points out that the categories of the “good” and “bad” mother are frequently used to serve the interests of the state and economy and it has been noted that most western women are familiar with the discourse/narrative of “good mothering” even though they may respond differently to it (Sevón, 2011). The worldview presented by the popular press consists of a culturally organized set of categories and nowhere is this more apparent than when we examine the categories of “good” and “bad” mothers. The criteria of “good-mothering” are heavily bound up with social class and sexuality and single mothers, like lesbian mothers present a threat to the nuclear family, which has historically been one of the main sites where gendered identities were being reproduced. Interestingly enough young, single mothers are sometimes used as an argument in pro-abortion rhetoric as a cautioning tale of what might occur if abortions weren’t allowed:

Watch young mothers slap their troublesome offspring in the supermarket and see what I mean. Because you wanted a baby does not mean you wanted a child (“Why we”, 2008).

Young, single women are therefore discursively positioned in a no-win situation where they are vilified if they do (abort), and vilified if they don’t (abort). This particular type of pro-abortion rhetoric is inherently sexist and does not in any way enhance women’s subject status or autonomy over their own bodies, nor does it do anything to eradicate the arbitrary distinction between “good” and “bad” mothering. If anything it solidifies the argument that abortions are not about women at all, but about foetuses and importantly also about control.

Post-abortion trauma

Foucault described two related forms of bio power, which is a power that “acts principally through the human body” (McNay, 1994, p. 99), both of them are relevant to abortion. The first consists of a bio politics of the population, a series of social and economic policies, laws and interventions relating to birth, death, marriage, health and reproduction. The second form is disciplinary power which operates through social institutions and relationships making people more productive and also more manageable and docile (Foucault, 1994). Disciplinary power has incorporated psychological and medical theory and practice to normalize motherhood and create or reinforce negative discourses around “not motherhood.” Foucault’s argument that one of the important functions of discourse is to render certain courses of action reasonable and to make alternatives seem inappropriate is important when we examine how medical discourses surrounding abortion are made to seem reasonable and women- or feminist centred discourses rendered inappropriate.

The label “post-abortion trauma” can be considered one in a series which throughout the history of medicine have provided the medical profession with the tools for
regulating female behaviour (McNeil, 1991). The issue of woman’s mental health has historically been a significant part of the pathologization of the female body, which in turn, goes all the way to the heart of modern science and medicine (Jacobus, 1990). Medicalization labels certain behaviours as unhealthy and threatening to the social norm, by the aid of scientific or medical discourses, and can therefore become another means by which women are positioned in the place of the Other, justifying their continued subjugation (Ussher, 1992). Discourses about women who have had abortions are often limited and centre on the hardships of the abortion. The majority of the analysed texts mentioned and/or expanded on various mental problems such as regret, guilt and depression following abortion. Those negative feelings are all part of a discourse which make women’s traumatic abortions seem reasonable and normal and all other reactions inappropriate, thus cautioning women contemplating abortion against the procedure.

Women, we are told, can expect to feel: “an intense, emotional experience that irreversibly changes their lives” and “with each year that has passed…a growing sense of guilt and regret” (“MPs plan”, 2007). Some women “[fall] into a deep depression” (“What WE”, 2007), while for others the abortion “can be a personal disaster” (“It’s time”, 2008) where “mothers may be left seriously depressed and anguished by it, their lives blighted for years” (“Why should”, 2007). The consequences of abortions can be even more devastating, we are led to believe, where women can be left with “[physical] complications” such as, “[the] end of [their fertility]” and “more premature deliveries later on” (MPs plan”, 2007). This particular discourse on the dangers of abortions to women’s physical and mental health is presented as a warning for other women whereby “they ought at least to know what they’re letting themselves in for” (“What they don’t”, 2007). By focusing so extensively on how abortions allegedly jeopardize women’s physical and mental health the newspapers are validating the much contested medical term of “post-abortion trauma”.

Out of control women

The idea that abortions are “out of control” is another discursive trend that becomes apparent when you look at the abortion debate within the British printed press. The underlying assumption is that too many abortions are being performed each year and that society is in a downward spiral towards moral bankruptcy. This discourse focuses especially on young women and their apparent lack of sexual constraint and responsibility, men or boys are on the other hand conveniently ignored. According to Petchesky (1990) this conservative trend is a result of the social, demographic and sexual changes in young women’s lives as well as peoples’ attempts to interpret those changes. For many, abortion is the issue that best exemplifies those changes. Strangely puritanical explanations, not to mention sexist views are put forth as to why the abortion rate is as high as it is, and young women are represented as the ideal scapegoat:

I’m afraid we are now in a time when sex is mere recreational pleasure to thousands of young women (“Why we”, 2008).

“Out of control” sexual activity results in “out of control” abortion rates but the “out of control” women that are presented in the texts are not represented directly in the pages of the newspapers unlike the guilt ridden and depressed women mentioned earlier. They have no voice within this debate, but are on the other hand talked about with a great deal of contempt. This testifies to the impact of social class and how middle- and upper class women have historically been seen to embody the ideal mother figure. Middle- or upper class women are seen to have no apparent reason to resist or reject motherhood, especially if they are in a hetero-normative relationship, and are therefore presented as the ideal. Women of a lower social class should on the
other hand be very careful, so they do not burden society with their abortions, or their offspring’s. The abortions of these “out of control” young women who believe abortions are “a trivial matter” and “[have] the impression that abortions are “like having an appendix out” (“A record”, 2008) are portrayed as being taken far too lightly and for trivial reasons. It seems that if women’s reasons for having abortions are not centred on rape, abuse, mental or physical illness then they are often presented in a derogatory way and women’s moral judgement is questioned. The “out of control” women who are constructed in this particular discourse are an important aberration from the guilt ridden and victimized women who still carry around “a huge sense of loss and feel that what [they] did was the wrong thing” (“What WE”, 2007). Even though the “out of control” women are not victimized, they are certainly vilified by the conservative moral majority/minority and have no voice or agency within the text.

Conclusion

Through my analysis of the abortion debate in the British press I have established that the continuing trend of personifying the foetus displaces and objectifies the pregnant woman, whilst our collective sympathies are awarded to the foetus/child. I have also pointed to a discursive trend whereby the right to choose has increasingly been portrayed as a secondary right to the foetuses right to live and by the incorporation of a viability discourse, the distinction between wanted baby and aborted foetus is made to seem irrelevant. These discourses all assist in the control and confinement of women who are reduced to “good” or “bad” mothers, subordinate to their unborn children. The discourses support and promote the label of “post-abortion trauma” as a serious consequence of abortions. Having abortions is therefore not constructed as a matter of personal choice but becomes a “serious health risk” which should be avoided at all cost. Motherhood is normalized and negative discourses around “not-motherhood” are consistently reinforced in the British press and this suggests that there are social changes taking place with regard to mothering that are perceived as threatening. Certainly the perceived impact of single or lesbian mothers and the advancement of various fertility treatments and the threat of women controlling their reproduction in a way that doesn’t rely on men could cause anxiety amongst some, while for others abortions simply represent “out of control” sexuality and moral chaos. Discourses that sentimentalize motherhood and portray it as something that comes “natural” to all women are the ideological underpinnings of the anti-abortion movement and without those, the attack on abortion would be futile. The portrayal and representation of mothers and motherhood is therefore a possible site for immense opposition where ruling discourses could be effectively challenged.

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