

# The Reaction of the Man to His Spouse's Abortion

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*I. Krymko-Bleton, L. Saint-Germain, D. Achim\*, C. Deschambault*

Department of Psychology of the University of Quebec at Montréal

\* Montréal Centre-South CLSC (Local Centre for Community Services)

## **Abstract**

The paper presents some preliminary results of research on reactions of men who accompany their partner at the time of her voluntary abortion. This research is undertaken at the Université du Québec in collaboration with the community health team that practices abortions. Discourse analysis within psychoanalytical framework was the methodological approach. The emotional reactions of men, their feelings of guilt are illustrated and defense mechanisms against such feelings are discussed.

## **Zusammenfassung**

Die Arbeit berichtet die vorläufigen Ergebnisse einer Forschungsarbeit, die an der Universität von Quebec in Zusammenarbeit mit dem städtischen Zentrum für Schwangerschaftsabbruch durchgeführt wurde, und zwar bei Männern, die ihre Partnerinnen begleiteten, wenn diese um einen Abbruch nachsuchten. Es wird die Methodik des Forschungsvorgehens, das psychoanalytisch orientiert ist, beschrieben, und vorläufige Ergebnisse der Auswertung der Interviews werden dargestellt. Die emotionale Beteiligung der Männer, ihre Schuldgefühle und ihre Abwehrmechanismen dagegen werden diskutiert.

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Common sense and psychological as well as social research tend to represent abortion as an essentially feminine affair. Largely adequate, this vision nevertheless leaves in shadow the affective reaction of men whose partner undergoes an abortion. The big court cases filed by men wanting to force their partners to

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Correspondence to: Irène Krymko-Bleton, Prof. PhD, 4015 Grey Avenue, Montréal H4A 3N9, Canada

give birth may serve to revive the pro-life/pro-choice debate, but they reveal only very little of the real meaning of the abortion for the man or of his involvement in the decision-making process. Nevertheless such cases indicate a deep malaise which is expressed by these legal procedures and militant attitudes. They also attract attention to the consequences which the decision to abort and, even more so, the procedure itself have on the life of the couple.

Even in our present social context, where a “new fatherhood” – an expression which means the deep involvement of men with children even before their birth – is ideologically promoted, abortion is still exclusively a feminine affair. Everything happens as if, because it focuses with such intensity on the woman’s body, abortion no longer permits us to see, to hear or take account of the masculine partner, even when he is perfectly assimilated into the other aspects of the couple’s life. Even though the results of psycho-demographic studies show a convergence between men’s and women’s responses concerning the ideal number of children, contraceptive methods and even sterilisation, and the decision to have a child is most frequently a common one, abortion clearly appears to result from a unilateral decision of the mother, for the majority of countries studied.

A search of the literature permitted us to gather in all thirty-odd texts dealing directly with the question of the man’s reactions to his partner’s abortion. The subject appears to have been practically ignored until the 1980’s. The census taken by Imber (Shostak 1982) on writings on abortion between 1975 and 1979 reveals that the role of the man is never mentioned. However, we have found a few articles (cited below) which this author missed. Among the articles published after 1980, several refer to or summarise Shostak’s research.

Of the writings we have gathered, approximately half come from research on material produced by men themselves; the others from the medical personnel, the women or the couples jointly. With the exception of one study founded on joint interviews of the couple (Colin 1989), the investigations were based on questionnaires. A few articles come from the impressions of clinicians (for example, Clerget 1986; Paterson 1987).

The existing literature thus furnishes us at this moment with very little on what men whom we would call almost-fathers have said about their experience. The most complete study is that already cited, by Shostak, of American men between the ages of 16 and 34, undertaken by the analysis of closed categories, without any claims to generalization. Shostak reports that, hypothetically, 69 % of the subjects declared themselves without reservation in favour of the right to abortion, 9 % were opposed, while 21 % were undecided; however two-thirds of these men had an ambivalent or even disapproving attitude toward certain aspects of abortion itself. With regard to their own experience, 60 % of the men questioned stated having passed through a difficult or very difficult moment when the couple took the decision to abort; 28 % put the partial or total responsibility for the situation on the woman; 45 % remembered not having made reproaches to their partner; 25 % stated that no one was to blame; 63 % stated that the abortion had not altered their relationship and 38 % that it had brought them closer together. On the whole, a greater number of the white subjects made reproaches, while the black subjects were more sensitive to the closeness created by this ordeal.

Fifty-seven percent stated they sometimes dreamed or thought about the child to whom they might have been a father and 90 % stated they were more careful not to risk pregnancy. Forty percent said nothing about the whole affair to anyone.

An investigation made in Geneva of more than a thousand women (Pasini 1981) showed that in the last resort it is the woman alone who decides on an abortion, influenced foremost by friends and colleagues, with the opinion of their husbands being relatively accessory. In fact, the legislation in effect in France, in the United States, in Great Britain as well as in Quebec and common practice seem to exclude the man from the decision-making processes concerning the interruption of pregnancy; it can be decided by the woman, without the consent of her partner.

Nevertheless, several of the studies in our survey of the literature show that the reality concerning the actual experience of couples and the process of reaching the decision to abort is not as simple as was believed up to the moment of the investigation (for example, Collin 1988).

In our opinion, although it gives an outline or sketch of the situation, the experimental approach of closed categories (as in Shostak's study) does not really lead to a good understanding of what has happened for the men and for the couples who responded to his inquiry.

If a better understanding of the men's problems with the experience of abortion is a privileged way of understanding the disconcerting situation of men in our society, it is also a means of analysing the very unstable marital situation which characterises it. The paradoxical reverse of the "new fatherhood", the one-parent family signifies the growing retreat of men with regard to their responsibilities as fathers. The problem of abortion goes hand in hand with the question of fatherhood, that is, the desire of men to bring up children. It is also linked with the question of the place that women reserve for men in the family configuration.

We can try to shed some light on the relation between the man and the question of abortion from men's point of view, by referring to the problems of pregnancy and the process of "becoming a father". We note then that the psychic dynamics of the father, both conscious and unconscious, tend most often in our society to be repressed, if not denied with scepticism, ridicule or omission (Ebtinger 1978). The fathers themselves have a tendency to deny the existence of problems or conflicts linked to the situation of becoming fathers (Krymko-Bleton, Beaulieu 1989). One of the characteristics of the brooding phenomenon (the appearance of certain physical symptoms in men whose partners are pregnant) resides in the very fact that neither the men concerned nor the people around them establish a link between the brooding syndrome and the situation of waiting for the birth of a child.

Certain psychoanalysts underline the extent to which the production of fantasies provoked by pregnancy will develop around residual conflicts and remain principally defensive in nature (Benedek 1959; Martinat 1985). The spouse's pregnancy can provoke in men the resurgence of past psychological conflicts, which are likely to reappear in his relation with the mother: envy of the woman's

capacity to carry the child in her stomach (This 1980); identification with the pregnant woman, charged with guilt-producing ambivalence and hostility; fear of the destruction of the woman's body (Ebtinger idem; Anthony, Benedek 1957; Bigras 1971; Boehm 1973; Lavie 1975; Krymko-Bleton 1987). An unconscious rivalry can loom with the child; identification with the child can awaken the original dependence on the mother and fantasies of maternal omnipotence (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1974) as well as infantile fantasies about sexuality (what concerns us particularly here are fantasies relating to the duality of a good sexuality – the creation of babies – and a bad sexuality – the murder of babies; cf. Klein 1950).

The transition from the state of a son to that of a father can represent the realisation of oedipal desires with the fear of being punished by his father, but also the fear that the child will feed the same feelings (This 1980). Becoming a father is also a return to a representation of death – one's own, but especially that of one's father.

The experience of becoming a father can certainly constitute a privileged time of integration of previous phases of development toward a greater maturity. The process of waiting for a child is heavily marked by denial, because of the regression which characterizes it. But all this abundance of fantasy is already denied, even when the pregnancy is carried to term; one can only ask what can come of it when the pregnancy is abruptly terminated.

An abortion radically questions the man's desire for a child. If fatherhood is a crossroads in which several desires are realised, the desire to attain fatherhood is not necessarily synonymous with a true desire for a child (Bourdier 1978). The feelings of wanting and not wanting a child usually coexist. This ambivalence is manifested in consultations with medical personnel. The couple expresses a desire for a child, but the waiting for it and its birth cause problems (Berchewitz 1979). Abortion may not be the direct outcome of not wanting a child but rather the result of ambivalent feelings which arise from waiting for the child (Lainé 1979). The decision to abort, which bears witness to the ambivalence which is always present between the desire for and the refusal of a child, shows that the desire for pregnancy does not necessarily coincide with the desire for a child; it may, for example, be rooted in the search for proof of fertility for the man as well as for the woman (Blumenfeld 1978).

The degree of involvement on the part of the man in the experience of the termination of pregnancy seems proportional to the intensity of his involvement in the life of the couple (Peloquin 1977; Kellerhals, Pasini 1976; Dunn 1983). Although his reasons for being present at the abortion may be numerous – to appease his anxiety, to try a form of punishment, to be witness to the procedure to assure himself that all is completely finished and at the same time to say good-bye to this child which will never be – the man generally adopts a supportive role (Shostak 1985). The men in Shostak's inquiry state that they repress and control their own ideas or feelings, in order not to influence their partners in the decision, for they consider that the final decision rests with the woman (since it is her who will undergo the medical procedure). As in the situation of waiting for a child, several therapists consider that men are little inclined to talk about their

feelings before or after the abortion (Shostak 1984; Paterson 1982). When they do, they have a tendency to rationalise, to block or deny their feelings in order to escape or forget this experience in which they felt guilt for destroying a life, guilt for a lack of responsibility for contraception, the anxiety of being held responsible for the situation by their partner, the fear of not being able to cope with such a stressful situation, the fear that the experience will cause changes in the relationship of the couple or provoke its break-up; anger, aggressivity, shame, etc. (Paterson 1982; Shostak 1984; Rothstein 1977).

Generally, the reasons put forward for justifying abortion are socioeconomically- and family-oriented (Colin 1988). In our modern context of control over conception, an accidental pregnancy also seems to the couple a blow to their power to control their life; it seems meaningless, even though it is rightly a lapse in meaning, an escape from meaningfulness (Colin 1988). Following his study undertaken for the French Association of Centres for Conjugal Consultation, Colin proposes that for certain couples an abortion can take the meaning of a sacrifice or a rite of passage or initiation. For juvenile couples, the sacrifice of the foetus can signify the sacrifice of their childhood: through the bodily experience of pregnancy and abortion a process of differentiation of men and women takes place, with a mutual acknowledgment of the functions and power proper to each in procreation and future parenthood. For couples having had a couple and parental experience with another partner, the meaning of the abortion can refer to rites of change. For others, it can be a confirmation of the procreative capacities of the two partners, a proof of the capacity for fatherhood, proof of the quality of the couple or the rite of its consolidation as well as the warding off of external and internal dangers (the sacrifice has the function of turning away a menace of the splitting up or the degradation of the couple). Men would have a tendency of exacting the sacrifice of the foetus to assure of their place as the man of the couple and the father of the future family.

An abortion is always, whether the woman knows it or not, whether her spouse knows it or not, whether the doctor knows it or not . . . an event that has an unconscious structuring or destructuring dynamic effect on the symbolic life of the woman and the man responsible with her for the termination of this pregnancy; pregnancy according to the way in which it will be integrated as something important or not as a fully responsible experience in their life. (Dolto 1982, p. 316)

This fact and the harmful consequences of the lack of elaboration and integration of this experience is brought to light daily in therapeutic practice, but largely ignored by medical circles and the general public. Interest such as was shown by the CLSC which requested this research is rare.

Integration in the sense of a maturation comes, on the one hand, from the decision-making and, on the other, from the assimilation of experience, which in the case of an abortion, confronts the man as much as the woman with loss and mourning (Epstein, cited in Paterson 1987; results of our own pre-experiment).

Modern control over fertility, promoting an exclusively feminine power of decision-making, seems to add the weight of a greater reality to the fantasy of the man-child excluded from all decisions, facing an all-powerful feminine image locking the man-child on the path of denial and feminine identification. The

minimization of the impact of the experience of abortion on a woman's life and even more so on the man's psyche, and the silence which surrounds it as an emotional experience make it difficult to elaborate on a beneficial integration of the experience.

The present hesitations of legislators on the subject of the right to abortion and the conditions surrounding its practice risk favouring the certitudes and ideological involvement of militants to the detriment of an understanding of what is really at play within the spouse, the couple and the family.

Because this research has been undertaken at the request of the abortion team of the Montreal Central-South CLSC, which wishes to receive the couples coming to undergo this medical intervention under better psychological conditions, our research aims at examining the personal dynamics and the conscious or unconscious processes at play in men and women living as couples, during the voluntary termination of pregnancy. We will briefly present our research methodology and some preliminary results of this study with regards to the point of view of the men involved. Our aim in the present article is to demonstrate how we try to bring to light the emotional states and personal problems underlying the official speech delivered by men after their partner's abortion. On the whole, this study is the initial part of our research on couple dynamics in cases of induced abortion.

### **Research Methodology**

Given the paucity of knowledge on the subject, we have opted for an exploratory, descriptive research, a research on the facts – here meaning that the facts are the signification, the sense that men give to an experience.

Our instruments are the semi-directed interview conducted on the model of the clinical evaluation interview and the comments left by men and women on a jotting pad (available to everyone in the waiting room). This pad is very frequently used.

The interview, conducted separately with each partner, always includes:

- questions about the dynamics of the couple: the first reaction to the pregnancy, the decision-making, the role during the abortion, contraception and fertility, communication with third parties, pros and cons, and consequences;
- historical aspects: the history of the couple, personal history;
- the dimension of fantasy: perceptions of the abortion, the representation of the foetus, fantasies related to the pregnancy, fatherhood/plans for fatherhood, the parental model.

They are completed by some socioeconomic data gathered in a short questionnaire used at the end of the interview.

The preliminary analysis concerns a small sample comprised of approximately fifty voluntary subjects: men and adolescents having accompanied their partner to the procedure. Some of them were experiencing their partner's abortion for the first time; others had already experienced abortion, either with their present

or with another companion. We have chosen to address ourselves to the men who accompany their partner because it is this sample in which the medical team is specifically interested. In addition, the men who accompany their partners are involved in the process and therefore are more likely to speak to us more, and to speak more freely than those who do not come with their partner – a fact which is important to us in an exploratory study. These men, in effect, have sufficient personal reasons to decide to be present at the procedure itself or to wait for their partner in the waiting room. They have become sufficiently involved in their couple relationship to feel concerned, or they are afraid that, without them, their partner might not have the abortion, or they are afraid that the secret of the pregnancy will become known if the partner is accompanied by someone else, etc. In one way or another, they have chosen an active role in this event and they are involved in the process. If the choice of such a non-discriminated sample presents certain inconveniences, it allows for the gathering of a greater variety of reactions, positions, and motivations.

The interviews are tape-recorded and transcribed – a procedure in which the complete anonymity of the subjects is maintained. On the other hand, the writings on the jotting pad are anonymous or signed and this fact is taken into account in our analysis.

All the analyses are submitted for the evaluation of two independent evaluators, according to the procedure tried during the preparatory phase.

### **The Analytical Model: Qualitative Analysis of Conversation**

The interviews and the jotting pad comments were treated in a complementary fashion. We are actually developing a method of analysing written and spoken clinical material. In this part of our study the gathered material was submitted to a triple procedure of content analysis.

1. Analysis of explicit content (Bardin 1977). This procedure involves the establishment of an a priori list of themes and its comparison with the themes actually dealt with in the interview. This alternating between the two lists (that of the 'a priori' possibilities and that of the themes identified from the transcription of the interviews) allows us to draw an outline of the arguments and the thematic nucleus of the material studied, and thus to measure the impact of the conditions in which these messages were produced and received, before proceeding to their interpretation. This analysis unexpectedly uncovered a theme which will require careful verification: several men in our sample (5 out of 12) spontaneously spoke at length of the bad treatment they had suffered during their childhood.

This method, which allows only for the analysis of the conscious level of speech, was followed by:

2. Analysis of interlocutory positions taken in dialogue (Flahault 1979), which gives us an intermediary step between the analysis of explicit speech and research into the implicit. Flahault questions the positions that speakers try to take in relation to each other during a discussion. Talking is not only

advancing certain ideas and arguing, but also defining oneself in relation to the other person. Usually the position of the speakers are implicit in the exchange. It is more or less conditioned by the context, but it is also dependant on the strategies which one puts to work during the exchange. Flahault identifies four types of place connections at play between speakers in all situations of verbal interaction:

- their place in the social background to which they belong (the ideological register)
- the place which unfolds for each of them in the specific situation in which the interaction is produced (the register instituted by the actual situation)
- the place taken by each of the speakers in relation to the conversation which, in this situation, tends to be the dominant conversation (the register of the circulation of insignia).
- their place in the unspoken relations that have unconsciously structured the exchange ( the unconscious register)

Each of the registers can play a primary or secondary role in a dialogue, but all four are always present.

This analytical framework seemed particularly well adapted to our research, which draws data from two very different sources of discourse. The first was comprised of our interviews. The second by a jotting pad for comments or free writings of any kind which was put at the disposition of the couples in the waiting room. In the first case, the subject addresses himself to a researcher who asks for and conducts the interview. In the second, the person to whom the subject is speaking is imagined; the subject is writing “for others in the same situation” and its production is totally free. We must, in fact, take into account that, by definition, the interview is addressed to us. All the men told us, at one point or another, that they were afraid of the reactions of others, of being judged by “an old morality”, of hearing “old speeches”. Questioned on how he felt when the clinical staff told him of our presence, one of the subjects described his own reaction as well as that of two other men in the waiting room: “Now, we’re going to go and tell that to the woman over there. Again we’re going to be treated as disgusting guys who don’t understand women.” Upon which he added that all three of them laughed at that.

The preliminary phase reveals that, according to whether they come from one source or the other, the discourses reveal very different themes, doubtless because of the position that the subject attributes to the person to whom he is speaking and the conditions under which the discourse is produced.

We notice that, in the interviews given to the researcher, the subjects very regularly refer to the feminist ideological discourse. To cite an extreme example, one of the subjects practically addressed us a manifesto. He offered a discourse strongly inspired by two ideological discourses: the feminist discourse and that of alternative medicine. He affirmed that the woman is the sole mistress of her body, that she is the only one to decide whether she wants an abortion or not. In other respects, he praised the “natural” life (using alternative medicines and

natural contraception – that is, excluding the pill and the diaphragm. This man, whose second partner was having an abortion, always accompanied these partners to the abortion and said he felt very at ease in this situation: the determining character of registers 1 and 3 (ideology and circulation of insinuations of Flahault's classification) in his explicit discourse.

It is only a third level of analysis, the analysis of latent content, which permits us to put into perspective the determining character of these registers by making register 4 evident.

3. Analysis of latent content. This analysis proceeds by spotting internal contradictions in the argument, and the analysis of the symbolic elements of the material (L'Ecuyer 1987). We were also inspired by the analysis of the implicit level of discourse (Ducrot 1980, 1984) which we are adapting to our way of proceeding and to our material. By studying the argumentative orientation of a statement in relation to another according to its construction and elaboration, the analysis of assumptions highlights the implicit (the assumptions and implications) that the linguistic context and conditions of production of the statements provide as interpreters of the explicit statements.

If we return to the example of the interview cited above, we immediately note a first contradiction. This militant of natural contraception, in fact, speaks to us of abortion as a method of contraception and would consider having a vasectomy, under certain unrealistic conditions, ("if I was sure of having a daughter, I would want to keep my sperm in a sperm bank"). We note the divergence between the defence of natural methods and the particular violence in sentences such as "When she is pregnant, we take advantage of it"; the context enables us to understand that it is implied here that one does not have to be careful, or deprive oneself, since she is already pregnant. The violence already included in the expression "we take advantage of it" is reinforced by the meaning of this implication, which contradicts the enthusiasm for natural methods. These require periods of abstinence or make the man co-responsible for the pregnancy when he is not "careful" enough.

In addition, this subject, who says he is very much at ease in the present situation, who does not admit having any ambivalence with the decision to abort, who actively supports the "pro-choice" movement and participates in its various demonstrations, regularly uses (4 times during the interview) the expression "to be guilty" in relation to himself. "Again, it was me who was guilty" (of the abortion of the first companion), he said, "I am the guilty one", etc. These statements are not, however, affirmations or confessions of a conscious guilt. They are intended to be humorous or ironic and are addressed to us – the interlocutor – as if to an accomplice.

We can believe that the ideological pro-choice discourse serves this man as a means of defence against feelings of guilt. Does this unconscious guilt and violence weigh on his growth as a man and in his couple relations? Without drawing any conclusions we note that he has already left (or was left by) a companion after an abortion took place. Is he in the dynamics of repetition?

We find in other interviews the confirmation of the defensive use of ideological discourse. These interviews no longer have the character of a manifesto and we find in them the categories identified by Flahault, in a more balanced way. Nevertheless in almost all the interviews we find the affirmation that the decision to abort is the woman's alone, since it is she alone who can decide about her body. This affirmation ("it's her who decides, it's her who's going to have the operation, so it's up to her to make the decision", "me, I have nothing to say, it's her body" etc. ) is found also in all the investigations on men and constitutes the major demand of women's liberation movements. The analysis of the interviews of our pre-experimental group lead us to think that this ideological discourse served several men as a defence against the feeling of guilt linked to the idea of their own responsibility in the decision to proceed with an abortion. In effect, at the same time as they affirm the free choice of women, five of the twelve men interviewed confide in us that they have the impression that, if it were their companion's choice alone, she would have kept the child, and two others wonder about it. In spite of affirming women's free choice, they feel they had an important influence on her decision. Thus they maintain contradictory views.

Three principal questions emerge from the reading of our interviews:

1. the men's guilt (implicit or explicit). It fluctuates with their perception of the ambivalence of women in regards to abortion. The issue of guilt occupies a central place in the men's personal dynamics; it appears only implicitly (concealed by defensive discourse).
2. the feeling of loss. Mentioned directly or indirectly, it brings up the issue of mourning and its occurrence in the couple relation.
3. the importance of the abuse and violence that the men in our sample have reported suffering during their childhood (5). The prospect of fatherhood seems to be, for these men, at least hazardous, if not impossible.

When we compare the transcribed texts of the interviews with the comments in the jotting pad left at the disposition of everyone in the waiting room, one is struck by the change in tone. The references to ideological discourse disappear completely. The style changes, and becomes lyrical: the men write poems, draw, express emotions. A first reading uncovers two themes:

1. the affirmation of love for the partner who is undergoing an abortion
2. the feeling of loss, mixed with relief. ("My baby is no longer in this world, or rather she is gone to a better world. It hurts, a lot").

It seems that beyond the explicit themes, the question of guilt takes a central place even here. The discursive argument concerning this theme is, however, very different:

1. it is fatalistic ("it is fate", "it had to be this way");
2. it deals also with the theme of the age of the foetus: certain men rejoice at the fact that the abortion happens rapidly enough that the foetus is not yet a child, or that they can not become attached to it;
3. others regret the hastiness of the decision by putting the onus for the decision taken on the medical team, accusing them of rushing it.

4. It is in the notebook that the theme of death finally appears; (that of the physical pain of the partner is present in both types of discourse).

So, the themes developed in the comments on the jotting pad are, in opposition to that of the interviews, the feeling of loss and the emotional link with the partner. They underlie our impressions of the importance of men's guilt and feeling of loss.

## Conclusions

We will present our methodological steps separately in the near future. Here the richness of the men's experiences at the time of their partner's abortion is established. This contradicts many of the accepted ideas which circulate in the milieus concerned with abortion, ideas often confirmed by the literature on the subject. We have also shown that, contrary to the ideas put forth in the literature, men can speak about this experience.

We hope that the continuation of our research will lead us to an understanding of the couple dynamics involved in induced abortion and will help establish psycho-medical procedures favouring a better integration of this experience.

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