

Research briefing

Normalising abortion:

Perspectives from women who have experienced abortions

Background

- Abortion is a stigmatised issue in many countries around the world. Previous research has identified causes of stigmatisation and factors that influence it.
- As part of our work in the Sexuality and Abortion Stigma Study (SASS), we sought to consider how stigmatisation is rejected and resisted by women and pregnant people (hereafter referred to as women) who have undergone abortion.
- We were interested in how women who have abortions talk about their experiences.
- This is the first UK research study to examine how the negativity which often dominates talk about abortion might be challenged and changed, and how abortion can be normalised through the ways in which women talk about it.
- We analysed data from a pool of 11 studies conducted across the UK from 2008 to 2018. We brought the data from these different projects together to look at them again with different research questions in mind (an approach called qualitative secondary analysis).
- In the part of the analysis presented in this briefing paper, we used a focused sub-sample of 25 one-to-one interviews with women who had undergone abortions.

Key findings

- While abortion is often framed negatively as a social ‘problem’, or something that people might disagree with, it is not experienced in this way by everyone who has had one. We identified examples from our data where abortion was described as a positive option or life event.
- Abortion was presented by many as the ‘right choice’ and even, for some, as something that made them happy.

“
I was so happy, you know, so happy... I just really didn't want to be pregnant, even one day more so...
”

- This counters the view, commonly presented in the media and elsewhere, that abortion should automatically be viewed in negative terms.
- However, we found strongly positive descriptions of abortion to be rare. Where relatively positive descriptions did appear, they were often still intertwined with negative language.

“
it was actually quite a good experience, I didn't feel like, y'know, ashamed of what I was doing. Nobody made me feel kind of bad or guilty for what I was going through.
”

- This highlights the complexity of women’s feelings about abortion and that ambivalence may be a common response.
- It also suggests that some may feel they can only talk about abortion in ways that are currently the norm – ie. that it is difficult and negative – and that talking about it in other, more positive, ways may not always be seen as an option, even if that more accurately reflects their experience.
- We observed a conflict between ways women talked about abortion in general (as a positive option which should be available), and abortion as their lived experience (which was in some ways challenging for them as an individual). Understanding and accepting that these two points of view can co-exist is key to recognising the complex reality of abortion as a lived experience.

Recommendations

- The dominance of negativity around abortion needs to shift, to offer women a fuller range of options in describing and understanding their experiences of abortion.
- Reworking negative framings of abortion in healthcare, the media, and elsewhere in society could enable anyone undergoing abortion to more easily talk about it in ways which accurately reflect their experiences. This includes encouraging a shift in how health professionals talk about abortion.
- This will help to normalise abortion, that is, to widen understanding of it as essential, everyday reproductive healthcare.

More information

The SASS project has been carried out by Dr Carrie Purcell and Dr Karen Maxwell (MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow), Dr Fiona Bloomer (Ulster University), Prof Sam Rowlands (Bournemouth University), and Prof Lesley Hoggart (Open University).

You can find more information on the [SASS project website](#) and on Twitter [@SASS_Project](#).

The full findings presented in brief here can be found in the following research paper:

Purcell, C., Maxwell, K., Bloomer, F., Rowlands, S. and Hoggart, L., 2019. Toward normalising abortion: findings from a qualitative secondary analysis study. [Culture, Health & Sexuality](#) 22:12, 1349-1364

A second briefing paper considers the views of health professionals who provide abortion services. (See [‘Normalising abortion: What role can health professionals play?’](#))

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