

College Students' Attitudes Toward Abortion and Commitment to the Issue

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Male and female participants were surveyed on abortion attitudes, commitment, and abortion experience. Results revealed a normal distribution of abortion attitudes rejecting the notion that the vast majority of the sample would have significantly pro-choice views. No significant difference was found in overall abortion attitudes of males vs. females, however, individuals with direct abortion experience were found to have significantly stronger pro-choice attitudes than individuals without direct abortion experience. Overall, college students reported a moderate degree of commitment to the issue of abortion. Females were significantly more committed than males, individuals with direct abortion experience were significantly more committed than individuals without direct abortion experience, and individuals with more extreme abortion attitudes were significantly more committed than those with weaker, more ambivalent, attitudes. No significant difference was found in level of commitment between pro-choice and pro-life individuals.

Although previous research has indicated that the majority of Americans are pro-choice regarding attitudes toward abortion rights (Baily, 1993; Bryan and Freed, 1992; Petkova, Ajzen, and Driver, 1995), the pro-life movement continues to have a surprisingly strong presence in political and social debate. The purpose of the present study was to examine college students' abortion attitudes and level of commitment to the issue in an attempt to

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account for this seemingly paradoxical discrepancy between reported attitudes and observed vocalization.

The issue of abortion clearly generates a great deal of public interest, however, this may not be the case with younger generations, particularly those populations often most available for research (i.e., college students). Slevin and Aday (1993) found that college students did not perceive themselves as particularly knowledgeable about the current issue of abortion, and this may be indirect evidence of their lack of interest and/or commitment. Furthermore, direct or indirect exposure on a more personal level to an abortion experience may increase interest and commitment to the issue, however many college students have not experienced such exposure.

Very little research attention has been devoted to the possible role abortion experience plays in determining abortion attitudes. Nevertheless, one study conducted by Hollis and Morris (1992) found that female undergraduates who had first- or second-hand experience with abortion held the most liberal attitudes toward the right to abortion. The findings suggested that experiencing an abortion, even indirectly, exposed individuals to the many serious considerations factoring into an abortion decision.

Gender differences in commitment to the abortion issue is another neglected area of research. Slevin and Aday (1993) did, however, find that females perceived themselves as significantly more knowledgeable about current abortion issues than males. Because abortion affects women more directly than men, it seems logical to assume that females would indicate more commitment to the abortion issue than would males.

Researchers have found that pro-life individuals tend to have more unified attitude structures than pro-choice individuals (Stets and Leik, 1993), one possible explanation for the success of the pro-life movement. Here, the term "unified" indicated monolithic and less complex attitudes toward abortion. Stets and Leik found that not only did pro-life respondents have a more unified attitude structure than pro-choice respondents regarding the issue of abortion, but they also tended to have more unified attitudes relative to politics, religion, and social issues. Moreover, Tamney, Johnson, and Burton (1992) found that pro-life supporters were more likely than pro-choice individuals to claim that the abortion issue was personally important enough to them that a candidate's stand on abortion would determine their vote.

A second possible explanation for the high level of vocalization within the pro-life movement may lie in the nature of pro-life philosophy. One could argue that it is more socially acceptable to speak out against perceived murder and immorality than it is to stand up for what is regarded as personal freedom and individual rights. The political arena seems to lend indirect support to this idea, as pro-life politicians are much more likely to make the abortion issue a prominent platform than are pro-choice politicians.

Regardless of the reason, if pro-life supporters are found to make a significantly stronger commitment to the issue of abortion, it might help explain the strength of their minority opinion. Interestingly, Petkova, Ajzen, and Driver (1995), found that although extreme pro-lifers and extreme pro-choicers were equally committed according to the commitment scale developed by the authors, pro-life supporters were significantly more likely to act on that commitment.

In view of the previously reviewed research, the following hypotheses were explored in the context of the current investigation: (1) Most of the participants would report a pro-choice abortion attitude, however, females would have significantly stronger pro-

choice attitudes than males; (2) both males and females with abortion experience would have stronger pro-choice attitudes than individuals without any direct abortion experience; (3) most college students would report little commitment to the issue of abortion; that males would report significantly less commitment to the issue than females; and (4) individuals who are pro-life would report significantly more commitment to the issue than individuals who are pro-choice.

METHOD

Participants

Male and female volunteers were recruited from a midsized southeastern university participant pool. Students used participation in this study to fulfill a general psychology course requirement or as extra credit in a psychology course. The resultant sample was comprised of 1,118 students of whom 33.6% ($n = 350$) were male and 66.3% ($n = 663$) were female. The majority of students (70.1%) were 18 or 19 years old, and another 19.2% were 20 or 21. Only 4.2% were under age eighteen, 3.9% were 22 or 23, and 2.5% were 24 years or older.

Instruments

A previously constructed survey designed by two of the authors of the current study was used to assess students' attitudes toward and experience with abortion. From this survey, a 20-item scale was developed to assess abortion attitudes as construed on a pro-life to pro-choice continuum. The item content reflected the degree to which respondents believed abortion was acceptable in a number of situations. Responses to the items on a five-point Likert scale ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Reliability analyses indicated high internal consistency among scale items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$). The range of possible scores was from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicative of more conservative, pro-life attitudes toward abortion. A criterion-referenced approach was used to group the participants according to their stance on the abortion issue. Specifically, participants whose scores ranged from 20 to 30 were labeled extremely pro-choice; those whose scores ranged from 31 to 40 were labeled very pro-choice; those whose scores ranged from 41 to 50 were labeled moderately pro-choice; those whose scores ranged from 51 to 60 were labeled slightly pro-choice; those whose scores ranged from 61 to 70 were labeled slightly pro-life; those whose scores ranged from 71 to 80 were labeled moderately pro-life; those whose scores ranged from 81 to 90 were labeled very pro-life; and those whose scores ranged from 91 to 100 were labeled extremely pro-life.

An additional 14 items were drawn from the survey to assess students' ideological and behavioral commitment to the issue of abortion. Specifically, this scale tapped into interest in, knowledge of, and active involvement in the issue. Again, a five-point Likert scale was used with responses ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Possible scores could thus range from 14 to 70, with higher scores corresponding to greater commitment to the issue of abortion. Reliability analyses indicated high internal consistency among scale items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$). Finally, demographic data on gender, age, year in college, and abortion experience was drawn from the survey.

Procedure

All participants were surveyed in a standard classroom, with minimal distractions. Testing was completed in approximately 30 min. Before signing an informed consent form, participants were informed of the researchers' goal to study feelings, attitudes toward, and experience with abortion. Participants were also given the name and phone number of a licensed professional counselor to contact if they felt any aspect of the research was stressful.

RESULTS

Participants' scores on the abortion attitude scale ranged from 20 to 100, covering all possible scores, with a mean of 60.02 ($SD = 18.58$). Respondents' scores on the commitment scale ranged from 20 to 70, on a scale of possible scores ranging from 14 to 70, with a mean of 46.97 ($SD = 8.40$). Participants were most likely to endorse abortion rights in cases of rape or in cases involving physical or mental disabilities of the pregnant female or the fetus. The majority of participants (66.9%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, "Abortion is morally unacceptable for any reason." Participants were least likely to endorse abortion as a method of birth control or beyond the first three months of pregnancy. Additionally, participants were unlikely to endorse abortion "when a female already has several children to care for," or "when a child is perceived as a threat to the soundness of a couple's relationship."

Overall, scores from the abortion attitude scale revealed a fairly normal distribution. These results did not support the first hypothesis that the vast majority of participants tend toward a pro-choice stance on the abortion issue. Instead, 54.7% ($n = 611$) were classified as pro-choice and 45.3% ($n = 507$) as pro-life. Specifically, 5.0% ($n = 56$) were classified as extremely pro-choice, 9.7% ($n = 108$) as very pro-choice, 18.2% ($n = 204$) as moderately pro-choice, 21.7% ($n = 243$) as slightly pro-choice, 16.9% ($n = 189$) as slightly pro-life, 12.8% ($n = 143$) as moderately pro-life, 8.2% ($n = 92$) as very pro-life, and 7.4% ($n = 83$) as extremely pro-life.

Results did not support the second part of the first hypothesis which stated that females would report significantly more pro-choice attitudes than males, ($t(1117) = -0.29, p = .77$). Males and females did, however, respond significantly different to two individual items. Specifically, females were significantly more likely than males to disagree with the statement, "It is acceptable to allow an abortion beyond the first three months of pregnancy" ($t(1117) = -3.76, p < .01$). The mean score for males on this item after the directionality of responses was reversed for scoring was 3.98 ($SD = 1.28$), whereas the mean score for females was 4.28 ($SD = 1.17$). Counter to the hypothesized expectation, females were less likely to endorse abortion. Similarly, females were less likely to endorse the right to an abortion as a method of birth control ($t(1117) = -3.21, p < .001$). The mean score for males on this item was 3.42 ($SD = 1.22$), whereas the mean score for females was 3.68 ($SD = 1.20$).

Results supported the second hypothesis which postulated that individuals with direct abortion experience ($M = 50.8; SD = 19.30$) would report significantly more pro-choice abortion attitudes than those without direct abortion experience ($M = 60.52; SD = 18.82$), ($t(1117) = -4.01, p < .0001$). Similarly, individuals with direct abortion experience

Table 1. Mean Commitment Scores by Abortion Stance

Group	Abortion Stance	N	M	SD	Group								
					5	6	4	3	7	2	8	1	
5	Slightly Pro-life	168	43.21	7.28									
6	Moderately Pro-life	138	44.55	8.34									
4	Slightly Pro-choice	210	44.64	7.15									
3	Moderately Pro-choice	203	47.24	7.42	*								
7	Very Pro-life	90	48.97	8.79	*	*	*						
2	Very Pro-choice	104	51.15	7.93	*	*	*	*					
8	Extremely Pro-life	82	53.02	8.32	*	*	*	*					
1	Extremely Pro-choice	53	53.55	7.97	*	*	*	*					

* Pairs of groups significantly different at the $p < .05$ level.

reported significantly more commitment ($M = 51.40$; $SD = 9.13$) to the issue than those without direct abortion experience ($M = 46.79$; $SD = 8.32$), $t(1117) = 3.81, p < .0001$.

The first part of the third hypothesis, which predicted that college students, in general, would not report a great deal of commitment to the issue of abortion was not supported as scores generally formed a normal distribution around the mean of 46.86 ($SD = 8.40$).

The distribution of responses varied greatly among individual commitment scale items. Surprisingly, an overwhelming majority (71.1%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed they were “very interested in the issue of abortion.” A similar percentage (72.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “I do not understand why abortion has become such a politically important topic in recent years.” Likewise, 77% of the sample disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “I have given the issue of abortion very little thought.” The majority of respondents (64.2%) reportedly disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “I have invested my own personal time to the issue of abortion.”

Results supported the second part of the third hypothesis that postulated that females would be significantly more committed to the abortion issue than are males, $t(1117) = -6.60, p < .001$. The mean commitment score for males was 44.62 ($SD = 8.44$), whereas the mean commitment score for females was 48.26 ($SD = 8.12$).

Based on the previously arranged divisions of extremely pro-choice, very pro-choice, moderately pro-choice, slightly pro-choice, slightly pro-life, moderately pro-life, very pro-life and extremely pro-life, the one factor analysis of variance revealed significant differences among group means of commitment scores $F(7,1110) = 30.39, p < .001$, thereby supporting the fourth hypothesis. As Table 1 indicates, individuals with a more extreme stance on the abortion issue generally reported greater commitment to the issue than those individuals with more neutral views. Fig. 1 illustrates this direct relationship between attitude strength and commitment.

DISCUSSION

Results did not support the hypothesis that the vast majority of students are significantly pro-choice. In fact, the present study did not find majority approval of abortion in most circumstances, as previous research has indicated (Hollis and Morris, 1992; Wright and Rogers, 1987). Instead, most reported ambivalent attitudes toward abortion and were only

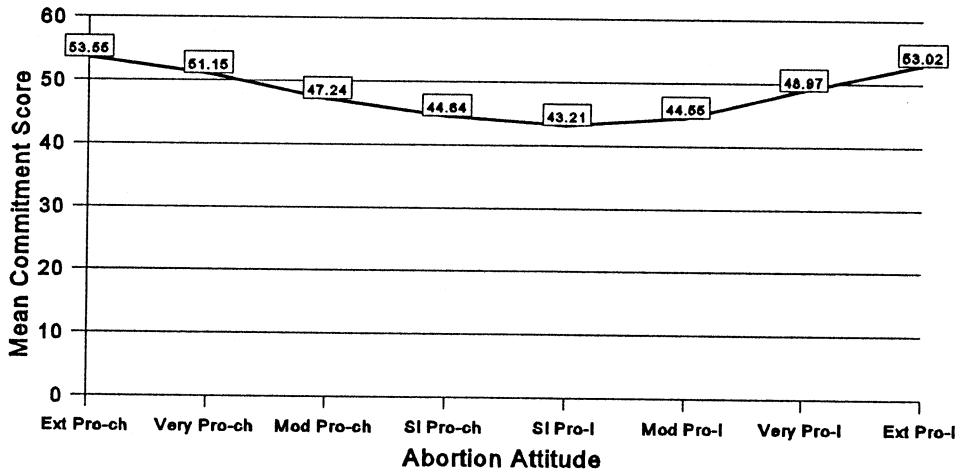


Figure 1. Mean commitment scores by abortion stance.

conditionally approving of legal abortions. Moreover, the data indicated that many college students in the sample have considered the issue, despite the fact that most have not experienced an abortion situation themselves. The stereotypical image of college students as apathetic toward social action and politics may indeed be false as Monaghan (1994) has suggested.

The results did not support the hypothesis that females would demonstrate stronger pro-choice attitudes than males. Interestingly, however, the specific items that suggested possible gender differences, indicated that females tended to lean slightly more toward the pro-life position than males. The results supported the hypothesis that females have more commitment to the issue of abortion than males do. Although abortion is generally considered to be primarily a female issue, males are also affected by abortion policies as partners, friends, fathers, other relatives, and health professionals. Fortunately, previous research has found the majority of college students do not believe abortion is strictly a female issue. In fact, male college students indicated a desire for greater responsibility in abortion decisions (Nelson, Coleman, and Swager, 1997).

The finding that individuals with direct abortion experience have significantly stronger pro-choice attitudes than those without direct experience is consistent with the limited amount of previous research that is available (Hollis and Morris, 1992; Wright and Rogers, 1987). Further, the present study supported the hypothesis that personal experience in abortion situations would tend to increase commitment to the issue among both males and females.

Results did not support the hypothesis that pro-lifers are more committed to the issue of abortion than are pro-choicers. Perhaps pro-lifers are presently more vocal than pro-choicers simply because the current laws are generally not supportive of their views. Abortion is a guaranteed right according to the United States Constitution and, in most states, is legal for a broad range of circumstances. Studies investigating how the public perceives current abortion policies and how likely they feel the policies might change could provide interesting insight into what encourages individuals to become actively involved in the issue.

The present research highlighted many of the difficulties inherent in attempts to determine the true distribution of abortion attitudes in America today. Abortion attitudes should, perhaps, be construed on a continuum, as many reported undecided, ambivalent, and/or moderate views on the issue. Situational factors surrounding abortions were found to play a large role in determining whether or not college students believed an abortion was acceptable and merit more research attention. Future research could further investigate the systematic differences found among males' and females' abortion attitudes for specific abortion situations. The newly devised abortion attitude scale and commitment scale used in the present study could prove useful in future research, as both employed broad definitions of abortion attitude and commitment, whereas maintaining high internal consistency among items.

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