

The right choice and the free choice

An empirical ethical contribution to a Christian, feminist ethic of reproductive justice

How does freedom of choice relate to the context of the decision? And can we take for granted that moral demands are *just*? These questions underlie my thesis. In accordance with the Christian, feminist emphasis on the importance of integrating accounts of human experience, I have done an empirical, ethical study of women's experiences of the choice of whether or not to have an abortion. On the basis of 14 interviews with women concerning their decision-making processes, I have explored the relation – and tension – between *the right choice* and *the free choice* from a perspective of reproductive justice.

I found that the women were required to justify their choices in accordance with a relational ethic of reproductive choice (see Gilligan, 1982). The majority of the participants had experienced pressure either against or toward abortion, and by comparing how the right choice was constituted within the responses that the participants labeled as “pressure,” with the constitution of the right choice in the participants' own assessments, I found that *the right choice* tended to presuppose a rather selfless ethic of care. While the “emphatic” decision in most cases needed no further justification, the choice that was based on the woman's own preferences – as well as contrary to the default position within her context – was difficult to defend. Further, such decisions could be associated with selfishness and irresponsibility. Thus, the woman risked being constituted as immoral and/or a misfit mother (see Rapp, 2000). Hence, the free choice was negotiated through the creative interpretation of what was morally, or, relationally, at stake. Accordingly, the final decision had to be constituted as *the right choice* with regard to the future “good life” of the prospective father, the future child, and/or existing children – as well as with regard to the current existence of fetal “life.”

I argue that this indicates the existence of an overall justification paradigm of reproductive choice, that requires that women justify their reproductive decisions in accordance with concerns with regards to significant others. Notions such as *the imagined future*, the “good life,” and the “ruined” or “destroyed life” served as ethical criteria that regulated the legitimacy of the women's choices within this justification framework. A significant part of this justification paradigm was the justification framework of motherhood, that drew on the ideology of intensive mothering (see Hays, 1996), as well as the ideal of self-sacrifice, and constituted the responsibility for the future child's well-being as a gendered and

individualized responsibility. Further, both gender norms and the ideology of equality (see Svalastog, 1998), were presupposed in the constitution of the right choice with regard to the prospective father. This shows that while the constitution of relational concerns drew on different discourses and norms, as well as a contextual and normative normality, the commonality was nevertheless that these different normative mixtures seemed to be biased against the woman and toward the needs of others. While the woman tended to be constituted as active and responsible, the “innocence” of the future child, existing children, and the prospective father, seemed to be presupposed.

On this basis, I argue that *the relational ethic of reproductive choice* is unjust, and that it may represent a moral barrier to women’s freedom of choice. Further, I supplement Rebecca Todd Peters’ (2018) critique of the justification paradigm of abortion with an empirically-based critique of *the overall justification framework of reproductive choice*. This justification framework presupposes the same moral logic as the anti-choice stance, namely, a moral logic that equates women’s self-sacrificial care with goodness, which does not grant women’s reproductive *freedom* primary moral value. Hence, abortion pressure reflects the same unjust morality as the justification framework of abortion.