

Exploring the perceptions and experiences of stigma among abortion patients in the United States

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INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that one out of every three women in the United States will have an abortion in their reproductive lifetime (Guttmacher Institute, 2008). Despite the common occurrence of abortion in the U.S., stigmatization of abortion, and the women who have them, proliferates. Kumar and Mitchell (2007) define abortion stigma as a negative attribute ascribed to women who seek to terminate a pregnancy that marks them, internally or externally, as inferior to the ideal of “womanhood.” A 3-domain framework of social stigma is useful in further defining and conceptualizing abortion stigma. The first domain, perceived stigma, refers to an individual’s perception of how other people feel about abortion or women who have them. Experienced stigma, the second domain, includes rejection by a spouse, family member, friends and peers; physical, verbal or emotional abuse; being devalued as a wife or mother; and being mistreated in the home, community or healthcare setting. The third domain, internalized stigma, manifests itself as feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety or other negative feelings about self. Fear of disclosure can also be a result of the internalization of perceived or experienced stigma.

Depending on the individual and the type of stigma (i.e., visible or concealable; health-related or judgment-related), being ascribed a stigmatized attribute can: influence an individual’s disclosure decisions and behaviors; create conflict in their relationships with family, friends and romantic partners; lead to discrimination with regard to health care, either by being denied healthcare services or by being treated poorly by healthcare professionals; and impact their physical and mental health, as well as their overall well-being (Major & Eccleston, 2004; Link *et al.*, 2004; Major & O’Brien, 2005; Link & Phelan, 2006). The process of internalizing or coping with stigma can directly impact a person’s self-perception, self-esteem and health outcomes (Link *et al.*, 1997; Fife & Wright, 2000), as well as lead to self-doubt and depression (Santana & Dancy, 2000; Berger *et al.*, 2001; Link & Phelan, 2006).

Given the controversial nature of abortion in the United States, some women are likely to perceive or experience stigmatization about their decision to have an abortion. For individuals who perceive stigmatization, the process of managing potentially stigmatizing information usually takes one of two forms – secrecy or disclosure. When disclosure will likely lead to negative outcomes, secrecy is the coping mechanism most often used by people who have a “concealable stigma.” Research has shown that concealment of a stigma can negatively impact a person’s physical and mental health (Major & Gramzow, 1999; Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Pachankis, 2007). Secrecy and feelings of guilt and shame are believed to weigh heavily upon people and may ultimately lead to high stress levels as people deal with the constant threat that someone may discover their secret (Breitkopf, 2004). Thus abortion stigma, much like the stigma attached to other behaviors and attributes, can potentially impact women’s stress levels, mental

health and also their overall abortion experience. This study aims to explore women's perceptions of and experiences with abortion stigma, and motivations and experiences with concealment.

METHODS

We conducted 49 semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) with women 18 years of age or older at abortion clinics either on the day (or the first day) of their abortion procedure or when they returned to the clinic for their follow-up appointment (approximately two weeks post-procedure). All women obtaining surgical or medication abortion were eligible for participation in the study. Interviews with women seeking surgical abortion were conducted prior to the procedure; interviews with women seeking medication abortion were conducted prior to taking the first dose of medication.

We recruited women from three different regions of the United States. For confidentiality purposes, we do not identify the 3 clinics where the study was conducted. Twenty-five IDIs were conducted in a mid-size city in the southern region of the United States, fifteen were conducted in a large town located in a rural area of the northwest, and 9 were conducted in a small city the northeast. All IDIs took place on-site at the abortion clinic. Women were informed about the study by clinic staff (usually either by the receptionist, a counselor or an ultrasound technician), and if they were interested in participating, a member of the research team escorted them to a private space to conduct the interview.

Participants were interviewed by one of three interviewers who were trained on the informed consent process, the administration of the interview guide, and interviewing techniques. The interviewers are all women and they traveled in pairs to the study sites where they were on-site for approximately 5-7 days conducting interviews¹. Data collection took place between July and October 2008.

Our study was ethically reviewed and approved by the Research Review Committee at the Guttmacher Institute. We obtained women's verbal informed consent after explaining that participation was voluntary and anonymous, that we were not affiliated with the clinic where they were seeking care and that their decision to participate would not affect the care they received at the clinic. Women were also informed that they must consent to the interview being recorded. Interviews typically last between 45 and 90 minutes, and women received \$35 cash for their participation. The participants were asked to fill out a short questionnaire on their socio-demographic characteristics at the conclusion of the interview.

Instrument

The in-depth interview guide included open-ended questions and asked women about their general feelings and perceptions of abortion, what they think (or know) about other women's abortion experiences and their own experiences with the current abortion. If women reported previous abortions, they were asked about their feelings and experiences with that/those

¹ With the exception of the northeastern site, where interviewers were only on-site for 2 days.

abortion(s) also. The guide was specifically developed to elicit responses on several specific stigma-related themes such as: abortion decision-making and care-seeking experiences; disclosure and concealment of abortion; the impact of the abortion on close relationships (e.g. partner or close friends and family); potential positive and negative consequences of the abortion; and how having an abortion makes women feel about themselves. We pilot tested the interview guide with 7 women at one of the three clinics. Significant changes were made to the interview guide after the pilot phase so pilot interviews are not included in the final analysis. All 49 interviews included in the analysis were conducted using the same guide; interviewers used it flexibly and changed the ordering of the questions to encourage flow of the interview and to follow-up on emergent issues.

Data Management and Analysis

All of the IDIs were conducted in English and digitally recorded using two digital recorders. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim using standard transcription techniques and interviewers compared each digital recording to its transcription to ensure quality data. Once all of the interviews were transcribed and cleaned, a code list was developed to label sections of the transcripts. The list of codes was developed inductively and deductively. The inductive codes were developed based on issues or language that emerged directly from the transcripts; the deductive codes were developed based on questions asked during the interviews which seemed to best fit the data.

The list of codes was then used to code all 49 interviews in NVivo 8 (QSR International, Cambridge, MA). During the coding process, codes were refined (e.g. two codes merged together) to accurately represent the themes and issues that emerged from the data. Once coding was complete, NVivo was used to generate reports for each code or groupings of codes by participant. These reports were used to create a set of matrices in Excel where rows represent each study participant and columns represent qualitative themes (e.g. perceived stigma) and subthemes (e.g. from family and friends). Once all the matrices were complete, analyses were conducted to assign meaning to themes and concepts, and to explore patterns of similarities and differences across interviews. Key themes that emerged in the analysis are illustrated here by using direct quotes from participants and by summarizing respondents' comments.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

The basic socio-demographic and selected reproductive history characteristics of study participants are presented in Table 1 (broken down by geographic region). A total of 49 women participated in the study. Thirty-one were White, 6 were Black, 2 were Asian/Pacific Islander, 1 was American Indian and 9 were Other (women who identified Latina as their race are included in this group). Thirty-seven percent of women (n=18) self-identified as Hispanic or Latina. Women's ages ranged from 18-41, with 63% of women being between the age of 18 and 24, 14% were 25-29, 18% were 30-34, and 4% were 35 or older. Eighteen percent of the sample had at least a high-school education, 61% had some college experience and 14% had graduated from

college. About a quarter of the women were married, half were in a relationship and another quarter was not currently in a relationship. Sixty-seven percent of the women were categorized as low income, meaning they were at or below 250% of the 2008 federal poverty line, based on their income and family size. Seventy-three percent of women identified their religion as Protestant (16%), Catholic (39%) or other (18%). The “other” category was primarily women who identified as Christian.

With regard to women’s reproductive history characteristics, about half of the women (51%) had given birth to 1 or more children. Nineteen women (39%) had had at least 1 previous abortion and 76% of women were in their first trimester of the pregnancy.

Perceived Stigma

All of the interview participants acknowledged that some people in the United States “don’t believe in abortion” or “are against abortion”. Women perceived varying degrees of stigma from friends and family, and from their community or society in general, much of it emanating from religious teachings and beliefs. Women who reported worrying that other people will “think of them differently,” “look down on them,” or “judge them for their decision,” said that this makes them feel bad about their decision and prevents them from talking openly about the abortion, even with people very close to them. Among the women who reported being unaffected by what other people think, a few said that they still weren’t planning on telling people about the abortion because of the controversial nature of the issue. One participant explained:

“Well, society has their own views, so I mean it’s kind of like, I don’t know, like people have strong feelings about [abortion] so I would just rather not bring out controversial issues and be like, ‘Yeah, I was a part of that.’”

~ Latina, 19 years old, Catholic, no previous abortion

Friends and Family

Participants voiced concern that someone in their life - friends and/or family members - would be disappointed in them for making the decision to have an abortion. One young woman explained the reaction she expected from her parents:

If I came home and told them I had an abortion I think they would be more disappointed in that than if I came home and told them, “Hey I am having a kid.” ... if I came home and was like, “I had an abortion” I think my mom and dad would probably be really, really sad and disappointed in me.

~ Latina 21 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

Phrases such as, “my family doesn’t believe in abortion” or “my friends don’t agree with abortion” were common responses when women were asked about how people close to them feel about abortion. Women acknowledged that some of their responses were grounded in dialogue they’d had with people about the issue of abortion, and others were based on an assumption that certain people in her life are morally against abortion. Fear of judgment from people close to them was a significant concern among participants:

I think I am scared of people judging me for it, but it's like they don't -- like they won't understand or you know because a lot of people are against it so that's like I don't like telling a lot of people that I am having it done. I don't think it's -- I don't want to be judged for something that I feel that I am doing the best thing for the baby and for me...

~ White, 25 years old, no religious affiliation, 1 previous abortion

Even among women who voiced little concern about other people's opinions regarding their decision, the idea of being judged was still a prominent theme:

I really don't care what they [family members] think, it is my choice, but they are just really judgmental and they would be judgmental towards my aunt or my father. [...] They would think, I am sinning, I am going against my religion, just I am a bad person, I shouldn't have done that. ...they would be judgmental, they wouldn't really think of me as the sweet, innocent person that I used to be or something.

~ Latina, 20 years old, Catholic, 1 previous abortion

The idea that women who have abortions are somehow perceived as different from women who do not have abortions was a prominent theme in the data. Women expressed concern that friends and family would look down on them or view them as a bad or horrible person, or as an irresponsible person, for deciding to have an abortion. As one woman explained, having an abortion can make people forget all the good things they previously thought about a person:

Like they could look, they can look at someone and think that they are you know all you are pretty, you are smart you are you know so strong willed and all this and that and then they found you had an abortion. "Oh my god you had abortion." And then it's like all that stuff goes down the drain just because they had abortion.

~ Black, 23 years old, no religious affiliation, 3 previous abortions

Another woman commented:

So, yeah, everyone is going to be really disappointed about my decision, so that's why I don't want anyone to know. I think that it will just be really just disappointed because I got pregnant, but they will be really, they will think that I'm really coward to like not have this baby, like not taking responsibility of things that I have done so.

~ Latina, 21 years old, Catholic, no previous abortion

Women seemed particularly concerned about the reactions of their parents, siblings and grandparents. Several women explained that if certain family members knew about her plans to terminate the pregnancy that they wouldn't allow it to happen or would go to great lengths to stop her from having an abortion. Some participants were unsure of the potential consequences or repercussions if people found out about the abortion after the fact, but it ranged from not being talked to by friends, to being disowned by family members.

My parents wouldn't know about it ever, because I don't know, I am really afraid about their reaction... they wouldn't be happy about it. Abortion it's not simply acceptable

morally, so it's not a good idea for [my family] to know. And then my mother, like as I said before, I don't know, I am kind of afraid she would disown me.

~ Asian, 22 years old, no religious affiliation, no previous abortions

A few women acknowledged that there would be no consequences if people close to them knew about the abortion but they still didn't want people to know. Even with no foreseeable consequences, some women still harbor fears of being looked down upon or judged for their decision. When asked about what would happen if certain people in her life knew about the abortion, one woman responded:

No consequences. I just don't want to be looked down upon or have them think less of me, which they wouldn't I mean I know them too well.

~White, 28 years old, Catholic, 1 previous abortion

Community or General Society

Women were asked about how they think their community feels about the issue of abortion, and more specifically, how people from their community would perceive them if they knew about the abortion. For women who couldn't identify a community of their own, they often responded to the questions with how they perceive general society to feel about abortion. A few women felt (or at least hoped) that their communities were supportive of a woman's right to an abortion. One woman, whose family is pro-life, detailed how she hoped her community felt:

... I'm hoping that they are accepting of it and have positive feelings about it just because I think it's a necessary, something necessary for a woman to have the right to have to choice of. I definitely don't want I don't want to live in a pro-life country. [...] I think it's a community I hope that most people are pro-choice and they want to keep it that way. And I hope that people are understanding and respectful of women's choices. I mean. That's what I seem to think. I think that, if not, this clinic would not be in [this town] because there are lots of other places where clinics are not. So as a community basis and thinking that [this town] is pretty accepting of that, I don't think this clinic would be here, definitely.

~ White, 32 years old, Pagan, 2 previous abortion

Another response from several participants was that a woman's community was "split down the middle" or "half and half," as one young woman explained:

I mean a lot of people I know are with it and a lot of people are against it, and a lot of people are just kind of like, they don't know how they feel.

~ White, 21 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

Another woman went into detail about why she thinks half of her town is against abortion:

It's half and half because where I live it's mainly Hispanics and Hispanics are very religious and so it's like half and half, so you really don't know. It's kind of weird like you could go down the street and you could see a billboard that says, you know, "killing a

baby from God is a sin” or something and you just feel like oh okay, so it's pretty much like the environment you are in, that is a big thing.

~ Latina, 23 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

Much like with perceived stigma from friends and family, many women said that they perceived their community to be against abortion and assumed that people would look down on them for deciding to terminate a pregnancy. Women perceived that they would be seen as a bad person, as an irresponsible person or as someone who doesn't have a conscience, and that people's opinion of them would change for the worse as a result of the abortion. In particular, a woman's reputation was at stake if people found out about their decision. One participant from a small town voiced concerns that her family name would be tarnished if people knew about the abortion, and another woman described why she feels that people would respect her less:

I don't think I would have the same respect that I have now.[...] I don't know, they always kind of just saw me as -- everybody thinks that, you know, people who get abortions and stuff like that just aren't smart and responsible and everything like that. And that's kind of -- I have always been the most responsible out of everyone, so it just kind of takes that away in their mind.

~ Asian, 24 years old, non- denominational Christian, no previous abortions

One woman was concerned that people her parents' age (i.e. older people) would shun her if they knew about the abortion:

Yeah, I think, I think maybe you found it back home and they found out, I think people would tell their daughters, “I don't want you to run around with her, you know, because, you know, she did this, and I don't want you to do that and I don't want you to even start thinking like she thinks.”

~ Latina, 21 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

Another woman² commented on how knowledge of the abortion would not only damage her reputation but that of her family:

People would still connect having abortion as being a whore..., I don't know the right word, I can't think of the right word, but yeah like you would sleep around. [...] So they might think of me as, yeah sleeping around, whoring around.[...] Their opinion, yeah they would look at me differently, like dirtier look or something, and they would talk, “That girl is like too loose.” And I live with my parents when I am in [my home country] so that would make their reputation go down too, because it's a family thing you know. So I don't want that to happen either like by what I did, my parents, like the reputation and the relationship of my parents to their neighbors would go down, that's not what I want to see.

~ Asian, 22 years old, no religious affiliation, no previous abortions

² This participant was a woman from Asia studying in the US. Although not a US citizen, her data was included in the analysis because of the significant amount of stigma she perceived from her family and community.

There were a variety of reasons for why a woman perceived her community to be against abortion. Women associated having an older, more conservative, religious population with being anti-abortion. One woman recalled overhearing negative conversations about abortion within her community:

Well here, I had some people talk about it kind of freely. I mean, but of course they are all young and my age and I have also heard older people talking about it at church or just even out and about, you know. I have heard people talking about how it should be banned and how presidents that don't ban it should not be presidents and you know they just talk about it like that. [...] I've actually had a couple of – a lady talk about it and I guess I was kind of eavesdropping in her conversation where she is talking about how you know they [women who have abortions] are going to burn in hell and how it's not their choice to, that it's not their choice to let another - whether or not that person - the little baby - should live or not, you know. So, I mean, I have heard people talking about it you know, kind of harsh, about people who do it, they only did it because of “this” or they only did it because of “that”. And I want to say that they are just judging that person because obviously they don't know what that person went through [respondent very upset].

~Latina, 21 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

A protestor presence at local abortion clinics or other types of anti-abortion propaganda such as billboards, commercials, bumper stickers or crosses dedicated to aborted fetuses, were also an indication to women that their community is against abortion. Additionally, some women took being from a community with “really good people” or a town with lots of families and kids to mean that the community is disapproving of abortion. When asked how her community feels about abortion, one woman replied:

Oh, anti [abortion]. I mean nobody is protesting on the streets. I am sure I mean everybody has got things in their closet but no, it's not something that people are for. [...] I don't know. They are all really good people. [...] anyway so yeah it's not something - they are not against it, they are just not for it. [...] They are good people and all those just kind of follow suit so I don't even think the topic of abortion is ever really, it's not really discussed.

~ White, 37 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

Another commented:

Most of [my co-workers and friends] don't think highly of it. [...] It's my assumption because most of them are also family oriented, you know like they're married, have kids, all the other stuff.

~ Asian, 24 years old, non-denominational Christian, no previous abortions

The idea that abortion is simply not talked about or is something to be kept secret was common among these women who perceived their community to be against abortion and among those who thought their community was “half and half.” Several women also commented on the fact

that even though abortion isn't talked about in their community, they had gotten the message that abortion is bad:

Yeah no one said that but it's just the thing you get from society that 'Abortions – they're bad.' No one wants to talk about it... I really don't even need know where I got that from, I just know that it's bad, that's what you know, you hear that abortions are doing something very bad.

~ Hispanic, 23 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

Another commented:

It's not talked about as much as it was when I was younger. It's still out there. I don't see commercials and billboards and stuff like that anymore but I mean it's talked about a little bit not a lot, not so where it's on your mind. Because before it just burned in my head like abortion is bad, abortion is bad, abortion is bad and now it's just it's there but it's not there, it's like hidden, it's like a little secret I guess.

~ Black, 25 years old, Protestant, 1 previous abortion

Emanating from religion

When women talked about perceived stigma from friends, family and community, many brought up the issue of religion and identified it as a factor driving people's beliefs about abortion. It was common to hear women say that their church "is strongly against abortion" or "doesn't believe in abortion," or that they were raised to believe that abortion is wrong, even in the case of fetal anomaly, and that women who have them will go to hell. Women who were raised with self-described "Christian values" seemed to use harsh language to describe abortion and referred to it as murder or killing. One young woman described where her church stands on the issue of abortion:

I mean it's not good, in my religion it is not a good thing to do. That's why I was told not to get pregnant again was to prevent this. [...] God won't give you what you feel like you can't handle. That you don't kill a baby, it's really a murder, you don't kill a baby. It's a child because of my mistakes that God is not, you know, he doesn't agree with it. You are not supposed to have an abortion.

~ Black, 21 years old, Protestant, no previous abortions

Three women, two who identified as Catholic and one as Christian, were unsure of where they would stand religion wise after the abortion:

I am just worried that, you know, like my fiancé and I wanted to start taking our/my kids to church every week and I felt like, "Well, am I going to be able to go now?" and not feel guilty or wrong to be there and you know will it really affect like what will happen when I die later on. [...] Because, I am really not sure morally I guess or religious wise, what it will do or how God looks about it. So I didn't know or I felt kind of like, I guess bad or guilty and then going to church, I would just feel kind of wrong, I don't know.

~ White, 30 years old, Seventh Day Adventist, no previous abortions

It's really hard because I grew up Catholic, but probably after today, I won't be. So, that was really hard.

~ White, 37 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

I grew up Catholic but for the last 8 years I haven't gone to church and I have kind of fallen away from being religious and I also feel like I shouldn't step foot back in the Catholic church after what I have done. I don't think I am a bad person but I am not perfect that's for sure.

~ Latina, 28 years old, Catholic, 1 previous abortion

A few women, who didn't identify as being religious themselves, stated that there definitely would be judgment about their abortion from religious people. One woman commented on why she thought there would be judgment from other people about her decision:

It's probably because religion plays such a big part in this country that people want to keep it very, very quiet and hush-hush. People make it out to seem so horrible... There would be judgment from a lot of religious people. [...] [Abortion is] common but it's not talked about. People, especially in this country are pro-religion, and they are more judgmental. It's common but it's still taboo.

~ Latina, 20 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

Another woman remarked:

I have been around people that are really judgmental and they just feel like they are all about religion and they go to church and they feel there are other options and that [abortion] shouldn't even be an option, they are just so against it. Just being -- no one that I know is that judgmental.

~ Latina, 23 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

Experienced Stigma

From Friends or Family

Very few women spoke of experiencing stigmatization from close friends and family. Women's fears of feeling stigmatized and the impact that has on their disclosure behaviors were far more prominent themes. Even when women told people who were less than supportive, the consequences were few and most often involved arguments, periods of disagreement and feelings of disappointment on the part of family and friends; women didn't feel that the conflict would have a long term impact on their relationships. Women did voice concerns of experiencing stigmatization outside of their intimate social circle, citing that "you never know how people feel about abortion." As one participant expressed:

[Abortion is] not something that you just sort of bring up to people and let 'em know what you did. It's not something I want to speak about and talk about.

~ Black, 22 years old, no religious affiliation, 1 previous abortion

Another participant noted:

[Abortion is] such a touchy subject. I mean nobody really every brings it up unless you're in the situation where you are going to have one or you know somebody that's had one.

~ White, 22 years old, Catholic, 1 previous abortion

One woman described overt experiences of people trying to stigmatize her for the decision to terminate a pregnancy. Her close family members stop talking to her after she came out publically in her community as someone who'd had an abortion:

Well, my father and my stepmother -- I had a lot of family in [city] and they stopped speaking to me. My stepmother is a "born again" - I think is what she calls herself, and so I was immediately a murderer and going to hell and embarrassing the family. So I lost them, but that was really, it was okay. They weren't people I really wanted to be around anyway.

~ White, 27 years old, no religious affiliation, 1 previous abortion

From Protestors

We asked women directly about any experiences they'd had with protestors. Many women had seen protestors outside of the clinic on the day of the interview and others had seen protestors at a different clinic or with previous abortions. A protestor presence outside of a clinic is one of the most overt forms of stigmatization and women reported interactions ranging from being yelled at by people standing outside of the clinic to being approached and told that the protestors could help her "keep her baby." The experience of having things yelled at them by protestors was upsetting for several women:

That's a big scare, I mean, you know, because you don't want somebody to deter you and call you a murderer and everything else they have to say about you and have no problems saying things to your face...I think that everybody is afraid about it's like, "Oh God, there are going to be protestors!" You know, because you don't want to have to fight your way through the crowd, you don't want somebody yelling and screaming things that you think haven't already crossed your mind, so yeah definitely that's a big fear for anybody.

~ Latina, 32 years old, Pagan, 2 previous abortions

It kind of just made me ask myself, do I really want to do this because, you know, I know they go up to you and they talk to you and they give you booklets and they, then you get out of the car and they start yelling at you, "don't kill your baby, why are you doing this, don't you know that's a baby?" [...] And I tried just to zone them out, but it's kind of hard when people are yelling at you saying stuff like that.

~ Latina, 23 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

One woman, whose pregnancy was the result of rape, described her particularly disturbing experience with protestors:

The clinic in [other city], I had to get past picketers and some of them pushed me down, but you just want to turn around, slap them and say “I didn’t choose this. It’s not my fault somebody raped me!” They don’t understand and I also feel sorry for the women that have to have it because if they don’t have an abortion it could possible kill them and people put them down for that... There weren’t a whole lot of them. There were at least 20 people there and they were from the church down the street, one of the churches, and just the signs and blah, blah, blah and they actually carried like imitations of actual fetuses in their hands and throw it at you. That’s devastating. I don’t want to kill a baby but I am also stuck on my circum[stances]. [...]To get through them, I had to pretty much push my way through and I wound up getting knocked down to my knees, and when I stood back up out of my pure own meanness I knocked one down by her knees to get her away from it and buzzed the door and of course they let me in instantly.

~ White, 24 years old, non-denominational Christian, no previous abortions

Some women felt that protestors had the constitutional right to be there and were merely “expressing their beliefs,” but other women felt as though it was violating to have people watching women come and go from the clinic. Just the idea of seeing protestors caused one woman to seek out an abortion at a clinic where she didn’t think there would be a protestor presence:

... I have never seen them before out here. I mean I have seen them at other abortion clinics and so that's why I felt very comfortable coming here and like I actually thought that the other day why they don't have protestors out here but next to my boyfriend's apartment there is I guess it's an abortion clinic. Because there are always protestors out there every weekend and I think that's, I mean that's horrible for a woman having an abortion, like so, yeah, I definitely didn't go there.

~ Latina, 19 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

Although not all participants had personal interactions with protestors, most participants felt irritated at the idea of women being made to feel bad about their decision by people who knew nothing about their life circumstances. One participant commented on the presence of protestors outside the clinic:

“Everybody is one circumstance away from where somebody else is at; I mean you don’t know until you are in that person’s shoes. So I mean you don’t know what somebody is going through or what the situation looks like. And I think some of [the protestors], you know like when they are just standing there holding signs they don’t get seen. But if somebody is raped or molested and they are trying to get to an abortion clinic and there are protestors out there and they are already freaking out, maybe they don’t believe in [abortion] but they don’t want to have a baby and remember the person that raped them or molested them and that just creates guilt. In some people’s head, they are already making a hard decision like they are already here at the clinic and I just feel like it’s like bringing somebody down.”

~ American Indian, 31 years old, “other” religion, 2 previous abortions

Impact of Stigma

During the interviews, women discussed ways in which the stigma of abortion impacts (or could potentially impact) their lives. Women's descriptions centered around two main themes, negative feelings about self and concealment of abortion, which are described below.

Negative Feelings about Self

Most women said that having an abortion doesn't say anything about who they are, nor does it change how they feel about themselves. However, women did say that it probably changes how other people view them and that is difficult to deal with for some women. The following excerpt illustrates why a woman doesn't want people to know about the abortion:

"If I tell everybody, I don't know if they would judge me about it or not... there is only like 2 people who know and I want it to just stay that way because I don't want them to think anything different of me. I think if people thought different of me, I would think different of myself."

~ Latina, 21 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

The idea that if other people thought negatively about a woman's decision to terminate a pregnancy then she in turn would feel bad about herself or her decision was common among interview participants. Among women who expressed some level of guilt or disappointment about the abortion based on their own religious or moral beliefs, the disapproval of other people worsened those negative feelings about self. One woman explained that if her family found out about the abortion that they would be disgusted and disappointed in her. She said this reaction would make her feel ashamed and worthless, and that being around them afterwards would cause her to feel disgusted with herself. When asked directly how other people's disapproval would make women feel, several responded:

Yeah, it would make me feel bad because as it is, I know that I am doing a bad thing, but just to hear it and just for other people to say it out loud makes it real, it makes you feel ugly. You don't want to hear that you are a bad person and what you are doing is wrong, and stuff like that. [...] Because it's not good in everyone's eyes, like you are a bad person in certain people's eyes, like that. It's bad. [...] Like it makes you feel ashamed and you don't want to feel ashamed. You don't want people to know "Oh, she did that" or have people talking about you.

~ Latina, 23 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

But the [people] that know, I know deep down that they are not judging me or they would never show that or tell me, but you can't help it but feel that. And when you are disappointed in yourself, the ones that know about it, you feel like they are disappointed in you too, that's how I feel. So, it kind of makes it a little bit worse.

~ White, 24 years old, non-denominational Christian, no previous abortions

I do feel that I am a bad person but you know what I am saying, I just pray that's basically it. And I do feel bad probably because I don't have anybody to talk to about it

but I know if I would tell somebody else, “Oh you are doing the wrong thing” and I am not going to have them make me feel worse than I already do.

~ Latina, 33 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

For women who weren't personally against abortion and expressed feeling confident in their decision, the thought of having other people disapprove of or be disappointed in their decision was still potentially upsetting and could cause them to feel badly. These women described a clear difference between assuming that people feel a certain way about their decision and actually hearing people express negative feelings. The latter was a much more damaging scenario:

I think I would be upset hearing someone, people I know, like rant about how wrong it is and then probably I would roll my eyes to it but I think at some level it would kind of upset me to hear it that how bad it is when it's not.

~ White, 21 years old, Catholic, 1 previous abortion

Other women commented:

I mean if it was to get out and somebody would just come up and completely slander me about it, I'd, you know, I'd feel horrible but at the other time, I'd be thinking like this is my choice.

~ Latina, 20 years old, Catholic, 1 previous abortion

I think it's something that happens or something that you should have a choice to do and be safe at but by no means don't throw a party about it, you know, I mean that's just how I feel about it. And so for me, less people that know in my life the better. I don't want some “Oh, she had this or she went and did that.” I don't want to hear that. That would make me upset and I think that having people that understand and are willing to lend their support in that is just fine.

~ Latina, 32 years old, Pagan, 2 previous abortions

One woman described how a perceived negative stereotype about women who have abortions could cause her to think bad things about herself even when she knows it to not be true:

It just seems like such a personal thing to me, and also just the views on abortion and everything like that, I don't want people thinking of me like that. Just like, I don't know. Usually when people think of people who have abortions, it's like, “Oh, she is a slut,” or you know, some kind of viewpoint like that. [...] It's kind of like what I said earlier, just being a slut and not being strong enough and everything so...I might think of myself like that, which cause I know I'm not but –

~ Asian, 24 years old, non-denominational Christian, no previous abortions

Although many women expressed sadness or guilt associated with having an abortion, many women were equally, if not more concerned about other people's opinions about their choice. The following quote illustrates that sentiment:

I think it just, it was hard for me when I first went in [the counseling session] and they asked me “How do you think you will feel afterwards?” It wasn’t so much how I thought I would feel, it was how people would perceive me if they knew. [...] [In the waiting room] I did kept looking around just to make sure I didn’t know anyone. And it crossed my mind about what would I say if someone asked why I was here, I don’t think I would have said I was going for an abortion. I think I would have lied.

~ White, 34 years old, Protestant, no previous abortions

One woman described why she thinks having to keep an abortion a secret may potentially change a woman’s self-image:

I think that it just gives you a different self-image of yourself. I think they, you know, if it’s something that you keep to yourself. It is something kind of forbidden and not talked about it and not okay, versus having said something about it and so I think they -- it just has been something in your mind is it’s not okay, so I don’t know, saying something definitely doesn’t make it any easy or any more okay, but I think it makes it a little bit easier.

~Latina, 32 years old, Pagan, 2 previous abortions

Concealment or Secrecy

Almost all of the women had told someone about the pregnancy and their intention to terminate it; the people most often told were the man involved with the pregnancy, family members and close female friends. Only one woman had told absolutely no one about the pregnancy and had no intention of ever doing so. A few women would have preferred not to tell certain people about the pregnancy and abortion but were forced to in order to pay for the abortion or find a ride to the clinic. In response to a question about who she didn’t want to know about her abortion, one respondent said:

[With] my first [abortion], it was my parents but then I had to tell them [about this one] because I needed the money so they were the only people I really didn’t want to know about it.

~ Black, 22 years old, no religious affiliation, 1 previous abortion

Most respondents had certain people in their lives that they definitely did not want to know about the abortion for fear of being judged, looked down upon or somehow punished – often this was a family member or close friend who opposes abortion or is highly religious. Parents, grandparents and siblings were mentioned most often as people the respondent needed to hide the abortion from although extended family was also mentioned. Several women, of varying ages, mentioned that they couldn’t tell their parents because they would try to talk them out of their decision or simply that “they absolutely would not allow it.” One woman commented:

If I told my mom or dad, they wouldn’t let me; I know they would not let me have this abortion. [...] My brother and my mom would never let it go, my dad probably would not be happy with me but he wouldn’t bring it up anymore.

~ White, 30 years old, Christian, 1 previous abortion

Several women stated that they wanted to keep the abortion a secret from close friends because of their negative views on abortion. In particular, women were concerned about judgment or disapproval from their best or closest friend. One woman explained why:

Yeah I would really like to tell my old roommate. She is like my best friend but I just don't know how she would react to it so I don't think I am ever going to tell her. [...] I think at first she would be pretty judgmental but then if she found out that I didn't tell her specifically because I thought she was going to be judgmental I think she would feel bad. But I don't want to tell her because I just can't handle being judged by such a good friend so I think I will just avoid the situation that's how I will handle it. [...] Because we were such good friends and I respect her and I care about her and it's someone that cares about me so I do care what she thinks.

~ White, 23 years old, Protestant, no previous abortions

Some women expressed dissatisfaction with having to lie or feel “sneaky” about having the abortion, but it was what they needed to do to protect themselves from potential judgment or conflict with people close to them. As one woman expressed:

... I feel like I am the one who has to go through this and do this and I should be able to just say and not have to defend what I am doing or you know. I don't like it. I don't like having to keep it from them because I feel like I am being sneaky and I am 31 years old you know. I don't like that, but you know, that's what I have to do, that's what I have to do. You know what I mean?

~ American Indian, 31 years old, “other” religion, 2 previous abortions

Another woman commented on the difficulty of having to keep it from her parents:

I mean it feels a little bad, I mean, it's hard because I tell my mom everything, so keeping something from her and being this big, I mean it's kind of, I feel like I am lying to my parents. I mean it's kind of, I mean I guess it is lying even though they didn't ask me and I said no or whatever, but I mean it just kind of sucks you know because I have to keep it from my mom and dad and maybe you know after I am married or something, I may be able to tell my mom and dad, but I don't know if I will.

~ Latina, 21 years old, Catholic, no previous abortions

Women were asked whether the people they were planning on keeping the abortion a secret from were people with whom they would normally talk about important life events. Some women indicated that they didn't usually share personal things (especially those related to sex) with family members so it was particularly upsetting to keep the abortion a secret. Other women felt very close to the family member(s) or friend(s) from whom they were concealing the abortion and expressed that they would usually talk to that person about “*every other thing in the world except for this.*” These women in particular talked about how secrecy around the abortion affects them negatively:

It affects me because that's what just that idea stops you from letting people know, you know because you think that they are going to think negative of you because they know that you had an abortion. So yeah it affects me negatively.

~ Black, 23 years old, no religious affiliation, 3 previous abortions

It affects me like negatively because I am not able to be open about it and like be at peace with talking to someone like a close friend like that. Since I know that she'd judge me in a bad way. I'd feel better if I had a close friend and I can tell someone who had been through that and knows where I stand. But I don't have anyone like that or at least I think I don't because I don't tell anyone, and I am afraid like if I told my sister that she'd tell my mom and I don't want my mom to know.

~ Latina, 24 years old, no religious affiliation, 1 previous abortion

Several women perceived such an extreme level of disapproval among their family and friends, that they were going to tell people who knew about the pregnancy that they had a miscarriage or that they never were really pregnant in the first place. One woman explained why she would tell people she had a miscarriage instead of an abortion:

I feel like I might feel shame or fear, fear or shame [about the abortion]. Shame would be like somebody thought that like, "Karen³, why did you do that? We thought you were more responsible than that." I always perceive myself as being a more responsible person than accidentally getting pregnant and having an abortion because of it, you know, that I would go that route. But at the same time I am like, it's not their life. [...] [Miscarriage is] more acceptable to the society.

~ Latina, 41 years old, Catholic, 2 previous abortions

The following excerpt illustrates how one participant and her boyfriend attempted to hide the fact that she was even pregnant in the first place:

[My boyfriend's step-mom] accidentally leaked it to her youngest daughter who immediately told her sister and at that point we had to retract all of it and go back and be like, 'No, we were just pulling a prank on her, it's not true.' And I had to reiterate multiple times, 'No, I am not pregnant.'

~ White, 20 years old, no religious affiliation, no previous abortions

DISCUSSION and IMPLICATIONS

This study found that many abortion patients perceived there to be high levels of stigma associated with voluntarily terminating a pregnancy. Women felt like friends and family, as well as people from their community or general society would judge them or look down on them for their decision. It was common for women to perceive that other people would think they were a bad or horrible person for having an abortion, or that they would potentially be labeled negatively as a slut or a bad mother. Much of the perceived stigma appeared to emanate from religious teachings, with many women voicing their church's beliefs about abortion as the reason why people in their life were "against abortion" or "don't believe in abortion."

³ This is a pseudonym.

Few women reported actually experiencing some type of stigmatization. For those who did, it was usually connected to an experience with protestors, or in one woman's case, a crisis pregnancy center. Women who had interactions with protestors, either just seeing them outside the clinic or actually exchanging words, described the experience as upsetting. These women acknowledged that they had already gone through a tough decision making process and didn't need strangers yelling terrible things at them as they walked into the clinic. It seemed to be common response among respondents that even though the protestors had the right to be there, they didn't have the right to make judgments about women's reproductive decisions without knowing the story of how that woman ended up at the clinic.

In general, women who perceive or experience stigmatization related to their abortion do not necessarily internalize those negative perceptions or experiences, but for women who do, our study found that it impacts women in two ways: creating negative feelings about self and desire to keep their abortion a secret from certain people in their life. Although most women expressed that they currently didn't feel bad about themselves because of the abortion, many women stated that they would feel terrible if they had to be confronted by other people's negative opinions about their decision. The thought of hearing people say negative things about them was a situation most women wanted to avoid, and understandably so. Keeping the abortion a secret from other people who could potentially disapprove of their decision was common among study participants – including people who they considered to be very close to them and with whom they would normally discuss important life events.

Many women in our study expected that keeping the abortion a secret would not be upsetting for them, but for other women, keeping such an event from people close to them was expected to be difficult. The inability to talk to people close to them about their emotions related to the abortion was something that women found challenging. Because of the timing of the interviews in relation to the abortion procedure, we cannot speculate on how concealment of abortion impacted these women after they left the abortion clinic, but in studies of other stigma-related issues, concealment of a stigma has been found to negatively impact a person's physical and mental health, as well as lead to high levels of stress associated with keeping a secret (Major & Gramzow, 1999; Breitkopf, 2004; Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Pachankis, 2007).

This study has several strengths. The use of open-ended questions used during the interviews allowed respondents to talk about their abortion experience in their own words, and also provided the interviewer with the opportunity to probe on unanticipated or interesting responses. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, are useful in conducting exploratory research and describing in detail complex issues such as abortion stigma. The analysis was carried out systematically using NVivo 8 to code the transcripts and matrices to understand the data. Additionally, the data were coded by two researchers, allowing for assessment of inter-rater reliability which contributes to the overall reliability of the findings.

Despite these strengths, this study also has several limitations. Women who agreed to be interviewed may be different qualitatively than women who refused participation. Due to recruitment procedures, we were unable to calculate a non-response rate or to know anything about women who refused to participate in the study. If a different mix of women had agreed to

be interviewed, it is possible that our findings would have varied. Although qualitative research is not intended to provide generalizable results, our findings may not reflect the abortion experiences of women outside of the 3 communities where we interviewed. Further, the timing of the interview, i.e. it most often took place on the same day as the procedure, didn't allow for fully exploring a majority of women's lived experiences with regard to stigma.

This study has implications for both research and programmatic activity. With regard to research, the findings could be used to develop a scale to measure all 3 domains of stigma. A scale such as this could be used in research looking at the relationship between abortion and mental health, and could also possibly be used as a screening tool during abortion counseling to ensure that a woman is provided the appropriate resources for her situation. There were several topics we were unable to fully address in this study that warrant further research; priorities for future research could include: the relationship between abortion and decision-making, access to abortion and delays in care. All are topics that are not currently well understood. Based on the time limitation of our study, it is suggested that interviews on abortion stigma take place at least 3 months post-procedure.

In addition to these research implications, this research has programmatic implications. Our findings suggest that some women having abortions do not necessarily have people in their lives that they can talk to about their abortion experience. Although most women had told at least one person about the abortion - usually the man involved in the pregnancy or a close friend or family member - that was not necessarily synonymous with feeling like they had someone to talk to about their feelings related to the abortion. At the provider/clinic level, it would be helpful for counselors to assess a woman's support system, as well as her desire to talk about the event with people close to her. If a woman indicates that she has no one or few people to talk to because of fear of negative consequences, she should be provided with proper resources for exploring her post-abortion feelings.

The idea that abortion is a stigmatized behavior and that women who have them are somehow looked down upon by society is not new, but this is one of very few studies aimed specifically at understanding women's perceptions and experiences with abortion stigma. Until recently, this issue has been largely ignored in US based abortion research, assumedly because abortion has been legal for the last 35 years and therefore the stigma of abortion has not put women's physical health in harms way. As access to abortion becomes more restrictive in the US, it is likely to also become more stigmatized and the potential for women to seek out illegal and possible unsafe ways to terminate an unwanted pregnancy is not beyond the realm of possibility; anecdotal evidence indicates that it may already be happening. Besides potentially putting women's physical health in harms way, abortion stigma has the potential to impact a woman's abortion experience in several other ways, including her emotional health in the time leading up to and after an abortion, and delaying or restricting access to care.

In summary, it should not be denied that some women feel guilt, shame or embarrassment from having an abortion, but the findings of this study indicate that many of women's negative feelings about abortion are rooted in concerns about how others view her decision (i.e. feeling stigmatized), not in her own personal beliefs or attitudes about abortion. The stigma associated with abortion, much like stigma attached to other "moral" issues or behaviors can have

unfortunate consequences. For women, it can confuse and delay an already challenging decision-making process, it can cause unnecessary guilt or remorse, and it can lead to a feeling of alienation and isolation. Our results indicate that it is important to further explore the social consequences of abortion in women's lives so as to not only avoid misattributing psychological distress to the act of having an abortion, but to begin to work towards de-stigmatization. Building an evidence-based body of research that acknowledges the role of stigma in women's abortion experiences will be useful in informing public policy, programs and public opinion.

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Table 1. Sample Characteristics by Site Location

	Southwest (n=25) n(%)	Northwest (n=15) n(%)	Northeast (n=9) n(%)	Total (n=49) n(%)
Age				
18-19	2 (8)	3 (20)	0 (0)	5 (10)
20-24	16 (64)	3 (20)	7 (78)	26 (53)
25-29	4 (16)	2 (13)	1 (11)	7 (14)
30-34	3 (12)	5 (33)	1 (11)	9 (18)
35+	0 (0)	2 (13)	0 (0)	2 (4)
Race and Ethnicity				
White	14 (56)	14 (93)	3 (33)	31 (63)
Black	2 (8)	0 (0)	4 (44)	6 (12)
Asian/Pacific Islander	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (22)	2 (4)
American Indian	0 (0)	1 (7)	0 (0)	1 (2)
Other*	9 (36)	0 (0)	0 (0)	9
Ethnicity				
Hispanic or Latina	13 (52)	4 (27)	2 (22)	18 (37)
Non-Hispanic	12 (48)	11 (73)	7 (78)	30 (61)
Education level				
9-11th Grade	3 (12)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (6)
High School graduate/GED	3 (12)	5 (33)	1 (11)	9 (18)
Some College	14 (56)	9 (60)	7 (78)	30 (61)
College Graduate	5 (20)	1 (7)	1 (11)	7 (14)
Union Status				
Married	4 (16)	4 (27)	3 (33)	11 (22)
Relationship, lives w/ partner	7 (28)	4 (27)	0 (0)	11 (22)
Relationship, does not w/ partner	6 (24)	2 (13)	4 (44)	12 (24)
Not in a relationship	7 (28)	5 (33)	2 (22)	14 (29)
Not applicable‡	1 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (2)
Religion				
Protestant	4 (16)	2 (13)	2 (22)	8 (16)
Catholic	11 (44)	5 (33)	3 (33)	19 (39)
Jewish	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Other	3 (12)	4 (27)	2 (22)	9 (18)
None	7 (28)	4 (27)	2 (22)	13 (27)
Income†				
Low	15 (60)	12 (80)	6 (67)	33 (67)
High	10 (40)	3 (20)	3 (33)	16 (33)
Parity				
0	14 (56)	4 (27)	6 (67)	24 (49)
1	4 (16)	2 (13)	1 (11)	7 (14)
2	4 (16)	3 (20)	2 (22)	9 (18)
3	3 (12)	6 (40)	0 (0)	9 (18)
Previous Abortion				
Yes	9 (36)	7 (47)	3 (33)	19 (39)
No	16 (64)	8 (53)	6 (67)	30 (61)
Trimester				
1st Trimester	19 (76)	9 (60)	9 (100)	37 (76)
2nd Trimester	6 (24)	6 (40)	0 (0)	12 (24)

* Other includes women who wrote in Latina or Hispanic as their race

‡ These 2 women were victims of rape

† Low Income = Living at or below 250% of the 2008 Federal Poverty Level

