

Our Bodies are Our Own:
A Critical Discourse
Analysis of Pro-life, Anti-
choice Discourse in
Canada

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Personal Experiences with Abortion

- My personal beliefs surrounding my body, my sexual and reproductive health, and my right to choose left me feeling secure and comfortable with my decision; yet I wondered if my decision was judged by my doctor, family, or friends.
- I feel the need to defend my decision for not having a baby.
- While legally my right to access abortion is protected, I feel a pervasive moral discourse.

Examining Pro-Choice and Pro-life Values

Pro-Choice

- The pro-choice position is such that women should have the right to decide how to best respond to pregnancy, whether it be abortion, adoption, or becoming a parent.
- This position is strongly connected to the right of women to have complete legal, medical, personal, emotional, physical, political, and social control over our reproductive bodies.
- Being pro-choice also means the right to have children or the decision to not have children, the right to parent as we wish, and the right to control our birthing options such as access to midwifery.



Examining Pro-Choice and Pro-life Values

Pro-life

- The pro-life position describes the point of view held by individuals who oppose women having the freedom to access abortion as a reproductive option when faced with an unwanted pregnancy.
- In some cases, this also includes the view that certain contraceptive choices such as the morning after pill should not be used, as interfere with the development of the fetus.

Research Question

What are the assumptions, values, and ideologies that are embedded in pro-life discourse;

Through the lens of my own experience with abortion, how does pro-life discourse contribute to women's reproductive health choices and feelings towards abortion;

How do dominant discourses contribute to the maintenance and traditional views of femininity and sexuality?



Theoretical Framework

Foucauldian feminist framework is influenced by the work of Foucault and a critical analysis of the production of power and its connection with patriarchy.

Literature Review

What is discourse? What do dominant discourses tell us about female sexuality?

What is the history of access to abortion in Canada?

What does the literature tell us about pro-life, anti-choice values and strategies?

Discourse

Michel Foucault describes discourse as a way of knowing and understanding the world that has developed historically (Chambon, 1999). Individuals come to know and understand the world through discourse and the particular lens that is developed through the positions that we hold within discourse (Chambon, 1999).

History of Abortion Access in Canada

Abortion was written into Section 179c of the 1892 Criminal Code of Canada, in which the sale of drugs or materials to prevent conception or to cause an abortion, warranted up to two years imprisonment.

The Criminal Code of Canada was modified in 1969, to allow for women with medical complications to be able to access abortion.

In 1988, after much struggle, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down this section of the Criminal Code of Canada because it infringed on '*security of the person*' under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and women in Canada were granted access to abortion.



Pro-life, Anti-Choice Values and Strategies

Gap in Canadian literature about pro-life organizing and strategies in Canada

- The fetus is a human being that has a right to life
- Abortion is represented as a negative experience, with side effects and severe consequences
- Use of feminist, women-centred arguments that access to abortion hurts women

Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis uses speech, text, writing, and practice as data because they reflect larger structures and social processes within discourse production and reproduction.

My critical discourse analysis used a genealogical lens, as proposed by Michel Foucault, which allows for an examination of the triad of discourse, power, and knowledge.

Data

1. Online content of the website of the pro-life group, the Campaign Life Coalition
2. The Briefing Book for Canadian Legislators, authored by the Campaign Life Coalition, also available on their website.
3. Six private members' bills and one government bill, as presented to Parliament

Data

	Bill	Member of Parliament	Description
1	Private Members' Bill Bill C-266	Ralph Ferguson Liberal	To propose a reorganization of the Criminal Code to give clear protection to the unborn child from the time of conception
2	Private Members' Bill Bill C-268	Don Boudria Progressive Conservative	To penalize provinces that pay for abortions in the case when the life of the mother is not in danger
3	Government Bill Bill C-43	Mulroney Conservative Government	To re-criminalize abortion except where the doctor deems an abortion necessary to preserve the woman's life or health
4	Private Members' Bill Bill C-208	Tom Wappel Liberal	To include a human foetus or embryo in the definition of 'human being' in the Criminal Code
5	Private Members' Bill Bill C-515	Jim Pankiw Reform	To provide a referendum on whether public funds should be used for medically unnecessary abortions
6	Private Members' Bill Bill C-484	Ken Epp Conservative	To amend the Criminal Code to make it an offence to injure or cause the death of a child before or during its birth while attempting or committing an offence against the mother
7	Private Members' Bill Bill C-537	Maurice Vellacott Conservative	To protect the right of health care providers to refuse without risk of reprisal, to participate in medical procedures that offend a tenet of their religion.

Critical Discourse Analysis

1. Get to know the data through reading and re-reading the content of the text
2. Identify themes within the text as a way to understand the assumptions, values, and ideologies within pro-life discourse
3. Look for interrelationships within discourse to identify other dominant discourses that invoke discourses of female sexuality, reproduction, and the family
4. Identify discursive strategies that begin to constitute the 'abortion subject.' A discursive strategy is the way in which discourse is used to give meaning and purpose to the object that is constituted within discourse
5. Identify the absences and silences within text. Whose voice is missing? What isn't being said?
6. Is there resistance within pro-life discourse? What could be a counter-discourse?
7. Begin to identify the effect of this discourse and the implications of power, knowledge, and discourse. I did this through the lens of my own experience with abortion.
8. Situate your analysis within the broader discursive context. What is the impact of pro-life, anti-choice discourse on women and female sexuality within the larger sociopolitical context?

Findings

Themes

Intersecting Discourses

Absences and Silences

The Broader Discursive Context

Themes

Life begins at conception

“Scientific evidence and biological data establish beyond a shadow of a doubt that the child in the womb is alive from the very beginning...the moment of conception.”
(Campaign Life Coalition, 2002, p. 1:1)

Abortion hurts women; it is a traumatic event

“Femininity is connected to, and defined by, the potential for motherhood. At some level, the destruction of a pregnancy is felt as a deprivation.” (Campaign Life Coalition, 2011, Harm to women section)



Themes

Abortion is wrong

“As believers, we do not judge the state of any person's soul; that is reserved to God alone; however, we can acknowledge that certain actions like abortion are intrinsically evil, always and in every case.” (Campaign Life Coalition, 2011, Spiritual implications of abortion section)

Abortion hurts Canadian Society

“Whether taxpayers like it or not, our limited tax dollars are being funnelled to pay for abortion. Everyone knows that abortion is not a medically necessary procedure. Pregnant women do not have a disease; nor are they sick or dying.” (Campaign Life Coalition, 2011, Economic drain section)



Intersecting Discourses

The maintenance of traditional family structures

The use of Christian values and discourse to justify limiting access to abortion

The connection of pro-life, anti-choice discourse to patriarchy

Absences and Silences

No discussion about women's experiences, realities, or reasons for reproductive health choices.

A complete absence of women's multiple realities, as they are shaped by gender, race, socioeconomic status, religion, geographic location, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or ability.

No discussion of the impact that pregnancy has on women's bodies or on women's economic, social, political, or legal status.

No discussion of male responsibility or the role that men play in relation to female reproduction, sexuality, pregnancy, or abortion.



The Broader Discursive Context

Pro-life discourse assumes that all women should want to have children, that abortion is immoral, and that children should be born into and raised in a true family.

Taken for Granted Assumptions

Abortion will always be accessible

Everyone believes in a woman's right to choose

Everyone in Canada currently has access to abortion



Abortion and Social Work

Silence in social work literature and education about sexual and reproductive health and abortion

Even though abortion is medical procedure, primarily handled by medical professionals, access to abortion is a sociopolitical issue and has a place in social work.

The silence is both striking and dangerous and speaks volumes to the controversial, moral discourse that surrounds abortion, female sexuality, reproduction, and choice.



Recommended Readings

Discourse as data: A guide for analysis, 2001

Sexualities: Personal Lives and Social Policy by Jean Carabine, 2004

www.campaignlifecoalition.com

