

Planned Parenthood and Reproductive Rights: Reframing the Organization Through a
Reproductive Justice Framework

Allison Matthews and Savanna Peterson-Wahl

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Professor Jocelyn Stitt

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In loose coalition with single-issue “abortionist” and population movements, the women’s movement became involved in the developing pro-choice versus pro-life debate in the 1960s (Staggenborg, 1991, p. 3). Before and since then, the debate has continued to grow and gain complexity with multiple organizations and groups backing each side. In particular, Planned Parenthood has its origins even before the articulation of pro-choice and pro-life movements and has been part of both abortionist and population movements since Margaret Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in 1916 (“Know Your Planned Parenthood”). In order to understand and analyze Planned Parenthood’s position within the pro-life/pro-choice debate in a local and contemporary context, a feminist interrogation of a case study of Planned Parenthood of Minnesota/South Dakota (PPM/SD) can lend some insight. In Nicole Courneya’s (2005) case study, *How Best to Serve: Planned Parenthood of Minnesota/South Dakota Defining its Place in the Pro-choice Landscape*, PPM/SD grapples with the possibility of creating a separate fund to endorse legislative candidates within a comprehensive organizational restructuring effort.

Once a feminist poststructuralist analysis of this case study is applied, one can see it is possible for PPM/SD to move beyond a campaign-based or legislative focus and a pro-choice/pro-life binary. Especially considering the pro-life movement’s mounting strength and the pro-choice movement’s move toward reactionary stances, creating a separate fund in which PPM/SD can endorse and fund state-level candidates will not necessarily help PPM/SD’s interests. Here, the term *reactionary* is used to represent a response or opposing action and not a regressive, conservative, and/or unchanging movement. The root word, *reaction*, is used to support a meaning that is less used and connotes a reply or a retort. Rather than falling into the trap of the pro-choice versus pro-life binary debate, it would be more useful for PPM/SD to maintain a sense of middle-ground and find a space of reconciliation outside of this binary. In

other words, PPM/SD should not create a separate fund and should instead redirect its energies toward a “reproductive justice” stance. PPM/SD should start paving a more inclusive path by creating a campaign to educate the public on its work for accessibility, education, and service. It can gain more political leverage with a stronger and healthier public opinion. This argument goes beyond the case study to suggest that PPM/SD take a more arbitrary stance between the pro-choice and pro-life movements to begin creating a space for alternative discourses, knowledge(s), and understandings of women’s reproductive health. Taking on characteristics of a third-wave feminist perspective, this would perhaps require PPM/SD to re-structure its messaging and efforts to include pro-life organizations such that each side of the binary can be brought together and develop spaces of agreement and shared action.

First and foremost, an introduction to mainstream pro-choice and pro-life viewpoints as well as the movement’s transformations is useful in understanding them as oppositional and based on a dual model. Glen A. Halva-Neubauer and Sara L. Zeigler (2010) describe mainstream political and social understandings of each movement clearly. They state that, “Pro-life activists adopt the view that abortion ends a human life...just like any other form of unjustified killing” (p. 102). On the other hand, “the mainstream pro-choice community...contends that the fetus is not a person and is not entitled to legal protection” (p. 102). Quite literally, the mainstream movements disagree about whether or not the fetus is a person. Personhood is a theme prevalent in the pro-life movement’s transformations. Before the Supreme Court’s legal case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, the pro-life movement tried to define the fetus as a legal person and advocated fetal rights over maternal rights. However, this 1992 Supreme Court ruling was ambiguous about fetal personhood and opened the door for pro-life activists to incrementally push for fetal personhood via statutory reforms and imagery. These

strategies were also effective considering that pro-life movements began framing fetal rights and abortion within an “intimate bond between the woman and the ‘child’” (Halva-Neubauer, 2010, p. 101). These strategies surrounding fetal personhood have been successful such that the pro-life movement has gained control over information and funding (p. 118). Compared to the pro-life movement, the pro-choice movement has had less success yet remains a significant part of the political atmosphere. After the “victory” of *Roe v. Wade*, which said that the fetus was not a person and legalized abortion, the pro-choice movement has leaned toward reactionary stances (again, the root meaning of the word is used here) as well as professionalized and institutionalized formulations (Staggenborg, 1991, pp. 4, 154). For instance, in response to pro-life suggestions of fetal personhood, pro-choice scholarly arguments say that the fetus is a person yet also legally justify its death (Halva-Neubauer, 2010, p. 102). While the pro-choice movement has been able to maintain itself through professionalization and institutionalization, these venues combine with reactionary stances to limit and narrow the pro-choice movement in terms of direct action and collective organizing (Staggenborg, 1991, p. 155).

Media and language continue this theme of a simplistic notion of pro-choice and pro-life movements with an undercurrent of complexity. This also has a real impact on women’s lives. In a compilation of the sources, many of the authors stated that communicating what phrase is being used in discussing reproductive issues is vital in developing a goal for women’s health issues. Andrea Smith (2005) showed an example of a typical conversation about the basic idea behind the pro-choice and pro-life movements. The respondent said he or she was pro-life but also said that funding should be available for those who have an abortion (p. 119). Smith said this response along with other responses showed a similar problem that many people do not have the same ideas of the paradigms so commonly showed in media. The positions of the pro-life and

pro-choice movements are conveyed as simplistic making it difficult for the public to fully grasp the reality of reproductive rights. The group, SisterSong, (2006) makes a valid point to help define the terms of reproductive justice and reproductive rights in its article, “Understanding Reproductive Justice.” The group decided to strengthen the framework by providing three main focuses with distinct terms. The group defined *reproductive health* as “service delivery,” *reproductive rights* that “address the legal regime,” and *reproductive justice* that “focuses on movement building” (p. 1). The group further explains reproductive justice as encompassing body of girls and women’s well-being (p.1). It involves shaping community standards and highlighting the systematic oppression of certain groups. This is a foundational concept for pro-choice movement that is not adequately conveyed to the public. Justice and rights are used interchangeably. One of the key messages of SisterSong is using specific definitions of health terms. Planned Parenthood could capitalize on the key definitions to reshape public attitudes of its work. The definitions of terms are important, and the public should be informed on proper definitions and the true meanings of the paradigms. PPM/SD could look to SisterSong as an example of how a campaign of clear and concise educational materials with straight-forward language can help it become a more transparent institution to supporters of both reproductive rights movements.

Moreover, media combines with political agendas to affect women’s reproductive health. Within the Planned Parenthood internal structure, the departments were segmented not allowing for clear communication on what department was sending mail to constituents. This problem is rooted in Minnesota and federal tax codes that put fractions of duties into different departments making for a complex system (Nicole Courneya, 2004-2005, p. 4). PPM/SD decided to take a reactive stance by reconstructing its internal organization because of the negative perception

continually perpetuated by pro-life politicians. It rewrote its mission statement to “Affirming human rights to reproductive health and freedom” (Nicole Courneya, 2004-2005, p. 6). The new focus PPM/SD wanted to show was that it was accountable “for reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies and abortions” (p. 6). PPM/SD strived to promote safe sex and education on where to find resources and services (p. 7). Communication with the public is crucial for Planned Parenthood because public perception influences the actions of politicians. Reva B. Siegel (2009) said public opinion is a highly determining factor for law (p. 1312). Public opinion is a driving force for the agendas in the reproductive justice political arena. Politicians seek the support of the public. In turn, the media perpetuates ideas of reproductive justice that are crucial in legal proceedings. In the case, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, the court decided to implement regulation of abortion based on public outlook in 1992 (p. 1313). Siegel (2009) said the Supreme Court said women’s dignity is protected when she is making a decision to have a child (p. 1316). But it is difficult when the views of Planned Parenthood are not only fragmented by negative publicity from the constant scrutiny of pro-life politicians. Liz Townsend (2006) wrote in her article about the simplistic, overdramatic, and misconstrued views against Planned Parenthood. Scott Fischbach, executive director of Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life said in Townsend’s article, ‘The bottom line with PP is simple: PP is abortion.’ When statements similar to this are constantly perpetuated in the media, the public is only viewing one-sided views. The media simplifies both paradigms, which have valid points for their arguments but only a certain angle is provided. The public votes based on the information infiltrated to them; if they are only receiving a certain message then PPM/SD has the difficult task of providing a clear and concise message that accurately reflects its values. Abortion becomes a topic highly misconstrued through the media. The potential damage this has to the entire institution of Planned Parenthood

is shown through the complexities Courneya highlights in the case study. Without the proper image of an already elusive organization in public opinion, Planned Parenthood could become known as solely an abortion facility when in reality it provides education and assistance to women and families that strive for health and access.

Another major issue within the problem of the construction of the pro-life and pro-choice movements is how both movements fail to recognize certain groups. Not only are individual women's voices silenced, but they are silenced on different levels depending on race and class. Contraceptives can be expensive. Only a small portion of the population can afford birth control, and others must rely on insurance to obtain it. According to Jaworski, PPM/SD dealt with the Debt Reduction Act of 2005 that set boundaries on discounts of birth control (p.112). This made it even more difficult for people of lower classes to get birth control. Both simplistic pro-choice and pro-life paradigms fail to recognize that reproductive justice is more than the white women's movement. According to Smith (2005), "the pro-life position is not so much a commitment to life, but rather a commitment to criminal justice interventions in reproductive justice issues (p. 123). Smith (2005) said, "the choice paradigm continues to govern much of its policies of mainstream groups in a manner which sustains the marginalization of women of color, poor women, and women with disabilities" (p. 129). She also said the paradigm does not say reproductive rights are innate to women (p. 128). Criminalizing abortion only reinforces the idea that it is a social problem (p.125). This concept is described as "reproductive oppression," which means the rule of girls and women by means of their bodies and sexuality (Ross, 2006, p. 2). SisterSong suggests a move beyond keeping abortion legal. The group wants a new movement that builds more inclusivity for groups typically left out of the movement. PPM/SD could also take a similar approach to SisterSong.

In Courneya's study, the Action Fund Board had to consider if having a separate fund for promoting its agenda even more would be beneficial for the public perception of PPM/SD. It had to think deeply about whether to support candidates based on their choice standpoint. That decision would inhibit bi-partisan settlements (Courneya, 2004-2005, p.8). This is only creating a more divisive pull between the movements. If PPM/SD wants to restructure its message to create a more education-based movement, then the separate fund adds to the existent binary of the pro-choice and pro-life paradigms. The public has fragmented knowledge of the actual movements and the actual work of PPM/SD. Planned Parenthood can take a path that fits within the existing social context that adds to the system. This concept known as "distributive justice" is pointed out by Iris Marion Young. She describes distributive justice as offering equal rights to everyone, but those rights lie within the system. Social justice is taking it one step further by changing the ways in which oppression within the system arises (Shanley, Asch, 2009, p. 853). A possible fix to the problem PPM/SD faces in receiving funds for advocacy is to reframe its position. Currently, Planned Parenthood is not just a place for women to check their health, but it is a place that provides a support that most other facilities cannot provide. It provides education and services that are private and accessible. A goal of PPM/SD should be to make its services even more accessible to those who may not have resources to obtain its services. Courneya said PPM/SD was one of the first facilities to provide reproductive health education and services in southern Minnesota (p.7). Beyond providing services and education, Planned Parenthood's reframing efforts need to go even deeper. Taking a social justice approach can mean more than a difference in access for people; it can mean that the work of Planned Parenthood can become more educational for a far greater number of people.

A feminist poststructuralist analysis helps to understand the deeper ideological reframing that Planned Parenthood needs to do. This parallels Smith's contentions of a pro-choice versus pro-life binary. Drawing from Joan W. Scott's (1988) essay, *Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference: or, The Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism*, feminist's uses of language, discourse, difference, and deconstruction can apply to PPM/SD's case study. In Scott's explanation, via Michael Foucault, *discourses* are contextually-specific structures of thinking that gain legitimacy and power by being seen as objective knowledges. Foucault describes that discourses gain power and legitimacy through "discursive fields of force" such as writing, disciplinary and professional organizations, institutions, and social relationships (p. 389). The pro-choice/pro-life debates have been argued on many different and specific points, including oppositional views on "men and women, sexuality, contraception, and morality," yet a discourse centering on conceptions of life and personhood is prevalent in all of these (Luker, 1984, p. 186).

This discourse is partially couched in truth versus faith perspectives (p. 189). Kristen Luker (1984) describes that a pro-life worldview is based on faith in God and the unpredictable (p. 186). However, the pro-choice worldview is a utilitarian one based on human capacities and reason within the here and now (p. 188). The pro-choice worldview draws its legitimacy from technological, science-based "objective" discourses, just as Scott describes. Luker (1984) states that, "pro-choice people do not see suffering as either ennobling or as spiritual discipline. In fact, they see it as stupid, as a waste, and as a failure, particularly when technology exists to eliminate it" (p. 189). The generalized pro-choice discourse draws its legitimacy from utilitarianism and technology. Similarly, while it does not consist of objective scientific knowledge, the generalized pro-life worldview draws its legitimacy from religious discourse, namely theological and moral "fields of force." Using the Ten Commandments and "Judeo-

Christian” law as legitimizing texts of morality, the pro-life movement subscribes to “explicit and well-articulated moral codes” that serve as consistent standards of behavior and thought (Luker, 1984, p. 174).

Acknowledging that Luker’s illustration of the pro-choice/pro-life sides can be slightly essentialist and generalizing, literally failing to take into account the possibilities of multiple worldviews within one movement, she does begin to point out some of the basic assumptions of and about pro-choice and pro-life movements. These assumptions of “life” versus the “quality of life” tend to materialize in pro-choice and pro-life tactics, language, and mobilization efforts in the real world (p. 189). This can be seen in PPM/SD’s case. The decision of whether or not to create a separate fund and therefore promote a significant pro-choice stance in legislature falls into a pro-choice effort to change women’s lives in the here and now. In order to counteract pro-life power in the government and change women’s legal reproductive rights within the short term, PPM/SD leans toward a reactionary and oppositional stance. This stance places PPM/SD firmly in a binary of pro-life versus pro-choice.

In addition to a discourse centering on “life” and the “quality of life,” the pro-life/pro-choice debate also focuses on a discourse of personhood. Adding to previous “fields of force,” those of law and the Constitution are invoked in the pro-life movement. The issue of personhood is one discourse in which both the pro-choice and pro-life movements have gained legitimacy and strength even before the case of *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*; however, the pro-life movement has been able to use this discourse more effectively than the pro-choice movement. The pro-life movement, following the Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade*, began strategizing against it and tried to amend the Constitution to define life and personhood at conception. Failing to re-define personhood directly through the Constitution, the pro-life

movement then began to make “incremental and indirect” strategies, such as fetal homicide and fetal pain, criminalizing the killing of fetuses (Halva-Neubauer, 2010, pp 103-104). These strategies, enacted in only a few legislatures, combined with imagery to gain prominence throughout the Reagan administration (p. 105). The *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* case provided theoretical and judicial force to the pro-life movement, therefore giving it legitimacy. Although the court supported the “abortion right,” it also narrowed the *Roe v. Wade* trimester framework to a standard of “undue burden” and failed to reinforce the exclusion of fetal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment (p. 106). The pro-life movement used the court case’s arbitrary stance and language to further its agenda. The language of “respect for fetal life” popped up in pro-life informational materials, and the language of fetal personhood became “subtler, less strident, and less inclined to posit an adversarial relationship between the pregnant woman and the fetus” (p. 107). After the court case, the pro-life movement combined an incremental approach, which aimed to make abortion rarer and less accessible, with the language and legislative tactics of fetal personhood as well as those of the cruelty and deception of abortion and abortion providers (pp. 108-112). Overall, the pro-life movement has consistently and effectively used language and the legislature to enhance its strength and agendas and gain legitimacy as a movement.

Unlike the pro-life movement, the pro-choice movement has been less successful, consistent, or effective both in its rationale and legislatively to come to terms with fetal personhood. Within the movement, there are inconsistent and multiple claims about fetal personhood; these claims have undermined the pro-choice movement’s ability to gain prominence. Even before *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, pro-choicer positions on fetal personhood had a wide range. The pro-choice movement has had “gradualist” views of personhood, or ones in which an embryo is not a full person yet is considered a potential person

whose rights increase over time (Luker, 1984, p. 180). Based on a constructionist approach that can range from broad to strict, the pro-choice movement takes into account a larger spectrum of perspectives than the pro-life movement (p. 79-80). This serves to divide the group and create a less than unified legislative agenda. For instance, the pro-choice mainstream idea that the fetus is not a person and therefore not protected under the Fourteenth Amendment conflicts with scholarly arguments that say that the fetus is a person yet justify its death (Halva-Neubauer, 2010, p. 102). Without a clear legislative and linguistic discourse to draw from, the pro-choice movement has not been able to gain the same amount of legitimacy as the pro-life movement.

Within all the problematic constructions of the pro-life/pro-choice movements, PPM/SD takes what it can to provide its services to as many people as possible. While it already has made great leaps and achievements in southern Minnesota, it faces the upheaval of gaining funds to reach the public. In early 2010, PPM/SD moved its location and revamped its look. On a typical visit now, the doctors of PPM/SD spend more time and offer more assistance on family planning. It is working to give more to its patients in terms of educational material. PPM/SD offers brochures, hand outs and other medicinal items to its patients. The Action Fund Board works closely with the Public Affairs office as they try to form a plan that can reach more constituents. This is an approach to garner more funds for family planning. In order for this tactic to work, PPM/SD can expand on the information given to patients. It could offer less biased information on reproductive rights and more information on family planning and healthy decisions. This could include an even distribution of information on pro-life and pro-choice ideas and methods. This approach is a small but possibly vital step in changing public and legislative perceptions.

Overall, definitions of pro-choice and pro-life movements tend to be simplistic and hide their complexity and historical transformations. The media and politics endorse these simplistic ideologies, and this affects real women's health through the marginalization of races, classes, and women with disabilities. Using a feminist poststructuralist analysis, it can be seen that many of these ideologies center around and gain legitimacy from "life" and "personhood." PPM/SD's choice stance plays into the pro-choice/pro-life binary and legitimizing discourses.

PPM/SD could strive to untangle these complexities by working toward a middle-ground approach that is less divisive for groups. Then, PPM/SD could endorse candidates on a basis of more than their stance on pro-choice/pro-life. It could help bring the paradigms together in less of a binary. PPM/SD works toward educating girls, women, and families of southern Minnesota and South Dakota. The education and services help offer healthier lives. Courneya (2005) suggests endorsing a broader range of candidates rather than focusing on a segmented fund (p. 9). This approach could help change public opinion of PPM/SD. This approach treads along a path of social justice for reproductive rights. Once the public's idea of abortion becomes less associated with the battle of pro-choice versus pro-life, perhaps the public will view PPM/SD has more of an educational facility that provides services.

This trend toward a reproductive justice that takes public opinion, education, and politics into account begins to look like Carisa Showden's (2009) perspective of third-wave feminism and the political possibilities it encompasses. We suggest that PPM/SD work in coalition with the pro-life movement to create alternative discourses, knowledge(s), and understandings of women's reproductive health as well as shared action. Likewise, Showden (2009) says that

“...third-wave feminists have generally provided a weak argument for the political significance of their cultural interventions, and they have yet to articulate the relationship to feminism of such interventions. Still...what is political about third-wave feminism is...the coalition building...[and] a committed focus on intersectional identities and multilayered discrimination” (p. 167).

Therefore, third-wave feminism pursues alternative discourses outside of binaries. In the case of PPM/SD, we attempt to provide a more concrete example of the “political significance of their [third wave feminists’] cultural interventions. PPM/SD could begin to bring pro-choice and pro-life voices and perspectives together at least initially through education programs. For instance, going beyond a “family planning” program, PPM/SD could create a “Health and Debate” program that looks at both pro-life and pro-choice perspectives and arguments about abortion as an informative tool for women considering abortions. As an optional program, it does not force a pro-life or pro-choice agenda; rather it begins a dialogue between the binary of pro-choice and pro-life. Politically, this program could have significance because it would appeal to both sides of the pro-choice/pro-life binary and create a space where women literally understand both sides of the coin and begin creating a discourse outside of the pro-choice/pro-life binary. The source of this educational program within a pro-choice-identified organization can definitely be problematic in legitimizing the program as an alternative to the pro-life/pro-choice, so either the program *must* move outside of PPM/SD or PPM/SD *must* revamp its coalitions, organizational frameworks, and mission entirely to follow this alternative discourse. Either way, an educational program is a viable option for moving beyond the binary.

Resources

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