

Abstract

Abortion, not spontaneous abortion or miscarriage, the often sad but nevertheless natural component of gestation, but abortion in the sense of termination, the chosen ending of a pregnancy, is the topic under consideration in this study. Whilst almost certainly a component of human existence throughout the ages, and indeed, in some cultures, inscribed into the social mores of reproduction, in England and Wales the number of abortions being carried out has steadily risen since the Abortion Act 1967 legalised this procedure. This figure now stands at approximately 180,000 abortions per annum, and a third of women in England and Wales would have had at least one termination of pregnancy.

Working in the field of crisis pregnancy for over twenty years, and subsequently training as a psychotherapist and working for the Health Service until last year, I became aware of an apparent anomaly. Despite the numbers of women undergoing the procedure of termination, and the evidence of instances of obvious trauma apparent in the pregnancy crisis setting when clients who had had an abortion returned to the clinic in great emotional turmoil, this distress was not reflected in the referrals for therapy in the Health Service. However, the abortion was sometimes mentioned once a connection had been established and the working alliance was in place, and associations to the abortion could well prove to indicate significant psychological components.

Noting that the subject has received little attention in the literature, I began to question this apparent veiling of the issue of abortion, and decided to investigate the puzzle further by collecting stories from those who had had an abortion some years in the past to try and think about the issue as part of a “bigger picture”, rather than in the context of a post-traumatic stress syndrome. I sought to do this as a small-scale qualitative project using the free association narrative interview (Hollway & Jefferson, 2007), the collected narratives then analysed using a holistic-content perspective (Lieblich, et al., 1998). In order to give further value to this investigation, I sought to consider what psychotherapeutic input, if any and if appropriate, could be helpful to those who felt the need of help following a termination of pregnancy. This part of the project was informed by my setting up a collaborative inquiry and by the use of a questionnaire (Robson, 2002).

The study has led to a series of outputs, including articles submitted to psychotherapy journals and an information leaflet to assist lay awareness, which are intended to explore the issue of silence and secrecy and to raise the profile of abortion as an issue in its own right within the psychotherapeutic community.