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## Pro-Life PDX! An Exploration of Values and Feminism in Portland's Pro-Life Community

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# Pro-Life PDX!

An Exploration of Values and Feminism in Portland's Pro-Life  
Community

by

Belen H. Chapin

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in University Honors

and

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## **Introduction: Why Pro-Life in Portland**

Babies are a realm I devoted little thought to in my twenty three years of existence, yet babies became the center of my world for a years long endeavor in engaging with Portland's Pro-Life community. Sitting in the office of one of my interviewees, discussed at length later, my eyes took note of the walls lined with posters of babies, while listening to my interviewee talk about the cuteness of babies. Babies, babies, babies. Baby versus fetus. Babies. In a study presented by the CDC in 2006, 49% of pregnancies reported were unintended (Finer et al. 2011), accounting for almost half of the US population of women. Debates surrounding the use of abortion services by women, and as captured in my interviews the "destruction of babies", in dealing with unintended pregnancies have entered mainstream media in the form of discussions about the usefulness of Planned Parenthood, and whether or not Planned Parenthood should be defunded by the government. On December 3, 2015, the Senate "passed legislation to defund Planned Parenthood... with a 52-47 vote" (Chang 2015), illustrating the divide in the US over abortion politics, and the public's reengagement with an age old debate over when life begins, as well as larger structural pressures placed on women in dealing with unintended pregnancies.

Within this debate exists a dichotomy; pro-choice and pro-life women, and further, pro-choice and pro-life feminist women. After speaking to several self identified pro-life advocates within Portland's community, I quickly took interest into their identification as both pro-life, and feminist, wanting to further understand how both views could align to produce a perspective of pro-life interests as woman centered, and thus producing the framework for this ethnographic account. My research question asks; What values are central to Pro-life women, and how do these values intersect with feminism to produce a view of Pro-Life as woman-centric? Through in-depth interviews and participant observation, I examine the values and beliefs of pro-life women, focusing on the intersection between feminism and pro-life, ultimately gaining an introductory understanding of the leading values of Portland's female population who engage in Portland's pro-life activism.

In this study of Portland's Pro-Life community, I am less interested in assessing the legitimacy of views, and more interested in presenting the variation that exists within Portland's Pro-life community, and how the women that make up the

community view women's health and use of health services in dealing with unintended pregnancies. I am interested in presenting an account that illustrates pro-life views that place women's care at the center, illustrating how pro-life feminism views women's relationship to their bodies and wombs, and what values they ascribe to the fetus, or in the mind of many pro-life supported to the baby. What is presented in this ethnographic account is a reflection of the real, lived experiences of women in Portland responding to themes of agency, reproductive rights, fetal rights, concepts of fetal personhood, women's rights to control their bodies, and woman's rights to mother all encompassed in the debate over abortion. My ethnographic material is based on my subjective interpretation of a community that I feel I only began to sample through this ethnographic project. Every statement presented through my ethnography is grounded in my interpretation of this varied community, and what I emphasize most in reading this is that this ethnography in no way captures the wide variation within Portland's Pro-Life community, and thus should be read as introductory material.

## **Themes in the Literature**

To ground my analysis of Portland's Pro-Life community past just my judgements and assessments, it is necessary to look to the literature for themes present in other communities across space and time. In accessing the literature on abortion and pro-life engagement, I have divided my review into several sections, all of which aided me in building my methodological tool kit, yielding an ethnography that is grounded in cultural theory, but also interested in employing techniques of feminist anthropology and applied praxis. The sections that follow highlight the different subjects of research that are encapsulated in exploring a complex community such as Pro-Life, including an interest in methods, and pro-life feminism, and the development of fetal personhood.

### **Feminist Anthropology and Defining Pro-Life Feminism**

The incorporation of feminism into my application of cultural anthropological methods seems only natural in responding to a female-centered debate, where the

woman, her womb, and the consequence of her unintended pregnancy are all called in question. A feminist research design allows for an “understanding [of] the experiences of women and gendered power relationships and discourses in a predominantly patriarchal society” (Gilbert et al. 2014), and a lens that acknowledges that abortion debates and pressures are larger and not only isolated to just the pro-life, pro-choice communities. Conceptions, values, and ideas associated with these three realms discussed above potentially implicate every woman’s life in dealing with an unintended pregnancy, producing two outcomes; abortion or life, as is framed in the dichotomous advocacy groupings of pro-life and pro-choice. It is important when framing the discussion on abortion to adopt both the micro and macro perspective, accounting for both the interpersonal effects of pressures on women in dealing with unintended pregnancy, and the larger structural hegemonic (Bourdieu 1977) forces influencing women’s decision in dealing with their reproduction.

Women’s decisions are noted to be structurally constrained by their socioeconomic status, cultural and religious affiliation, influences of domestic violence, and beliefs of what makes a good mother (Gilbert et al. 2014, Finer 2005). As noted by Morgan, “a woman’s life circumstances (and the pregnancy itself) are embedded within and determined by a larger social context” (Morgan 1996). This illustrates how women are informed and influenced, hitting upon the themes of religiosity, culture, class, economic status, education levels, violence, and ideas of mothering.

Violence as a theme for resistance to abortion is adopted by many pro-life feminist advocates, who frame abortion as murder, and further, abortion as violence towards women, as “abortion condones violence against women and fetuses, [causing] emotional and physical suffering for women, and contributes to the social devaluation of motherhood” (Oaks 2009; Mac Nair et al. 1995, 2005). This same message is found on the website Feminists For Life, presenting abortion as a violent option, that is “a reflection that our society has failed to meet the needs of women” (Feminist for Life of America 2013), and that abortion is considered anti-feminist (Oaks 2009). Continuing with the Feminist for Life website, under the Frequently Asked Questions, pro-choice feminism is defined as following in the foot steps of early American feminists who opposed abortion, including Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Feminist for Life of America 2013), which is echoed by other pro-life feminists in establishing their historical roots. They state that “our efforts are shaped by the core feminist values of

nondiscrimination, nonviolence, and justice for all... [seeking] real solutions to the challenges women face” (Feminist for Life of America 2013).

These themes of nondiscrimination, nonviolence, and justice for all, extending to the unrecognized fetus, are at the heart of pro-life feminist identification, viewing all women as capable of mothering, and further “that society support the unique life-giving capacity of women, so that no woman feels driven to abortion” (Feminist for Life of America 2013). This is echoed in other areas of the literature that present pro-life feminism as being pro-woman, representing the best interests of women and feminism (Oaks 2009), opposing abortion or anti-motherhood social attitudes, as abortion is anti-woman (Oaks 2009). Women facing unintended pregnancies often see pregnancy as an obstacle to fully participating in education and the workplace, as supported by the study produced by Gilbert and Sewpaul (2015) who reported that women interviewed in the Durban metropolitan area viewed pregnancy as in opposition to their goals as women, and functioning members of society. Pro-life feminism asserts that “abortion is not a choice a woman makes, but an action society dictates... perpetuating an uncaring, male dominated society” (Oaks 2009).

### **Fetal Personhood: Connections to the Fetus**

It is consistent in the literature that the onset and incorporation of technology, such as ultra sounds, has presented a new concept of the fetus as tangible, present, and already in existence, transcending biology or views of the fetus as solely a component to the mother that carries it (Halva-Neubauer et al. 2010, Rothman 1986, Morgan 1996, Oaks 2000, Doan 2002). Technology has enabled the fetus to gain social status prior to its biological status (Morgan 1996), depicted by pro-life groups as “free-floating, disembodied little babies at the mercy of their uncaring mothers” (Morgan 1996). This shift from viewing “the fetus as a baby, rather than as something that will become a baby” (Halva-Neubauer et al. 2010), illustrates that one of the most consistent arguments in the pro-life movement is founded on establishing and presenting the personhood of the fetus in connection to the baby it could grow to be. Though historically in the ruling of *Roe v. Wade*, personhood was not granted to the fetus (Donovan 1983), thus reinforcing pro-choice arguments that the fetus is not to be considered a person (Halva-Neubauer et al 2010), those who support the pro-life

vision contend that personhood begins at gestation, thus including the fetus as a person upon biological conception.

It is noted that in North America, biological markers are used to establish personhood (Conklin et al 1996), reinforced by the pro-life assertion that the fetus is already biologically established, thus in existence, thus leading to abortion symbolizing the termination of already established biology (Morgan 1996), or murder as noted by many pro-life advocates. The fetus in the early weeks of gestation is framed to already be in existence as a human being, capable of consciousness and feeling (Morgan 1996), not just tissues and cells, as if often the adopted position of those in support of pro-choice. It is noted that conceptions of the fetus have entered popular culture (Oaks 2000), ascribing an identity to the fetus that extends beyond its biological category, thus reasserting the personhood of the fetus into not only political and healthcare domains, but also mainstream, popular culture imaginaries. The framing of the fetus as a person speaks to how pro-life advocates adopt a concept of personhood that ascribes social meanings to the fetal body (Conklin et al 1996), despite it not being fully formed or fully recognized as a baby. This social meaning carries weight, making women feel they must protect the fetal person who has no rights, as ruled by *Roe v. Wade* (Doan 2002). The fetus thus is transformed in the pro-life imaginary from the potential, intangible, into an already formed being, in need of protection from not only the mothers that wish to abort it, but larger structural pressures, such as healthcare providers, clinics who perform abortions, and family members who push abortion in response to unintended pregnancy (Gilbert et al. 2015).

## Methodology

It is understood in Anthropology that quality ethnographic material engages in a process of triangulation, meaning engaging in three different ethnographic methods to produce a thicker account of culture. In my ethnography of Portland's Pro-Life community I have elected to use two methods only; in-depth interviews and participant observations. Though it can be argued that surveys may be of use in gaining a broader, more generalized understanding of what pro-life women value, I found it hard to pin point and access Pro-Life women as a whole, as they are not a fixed population who congregate on a regular basis in one fixed location. Being pro-life is the same as

adopting any political stance, it is an opinion, a belief, and thus not always visible in public ways. In accessing Portland's pro-life community, I adopted the association to pro-life activism as a way of gaining entry into the pro-life community, and identifying women who publicly identify as pro-life. I consulted with various pregnancy and mothering resource centers, acting as my gate keepers into the community, and snowball sampled from there. In this sense, my ethnographic depicts women who are active and engaged in their interests as pro-life, working in the community through resource centers, as well as in more blatant examples of activism such as rallies and vigils. Due to time restrictions, and limited knowledge of the community, I was unable to conduct focus groups, though ideally that would be my third and final method.

Though acknowledging my weakness of only having two methods, these two methods were carefully selected to reflect to realms of activism and belief: the public and private. Participant observation of two different levels of public activism and engagement provides me with a public accounting of what values are presented from Pro-Life groups in this realm. These two events included the annual Roe v. Wade memorial rally, held in Pioneer Square Downtown, as well as a weekly vigil held outside of Planned Parenthood. Participant observation in the Roe V. Wade rally provided me with a larger, less intimate gathering of the pro-life community, encapsulating speakers that represent the community and present pro-life discourse to those who oppose them. This rally also allowed me to observe written material disseminated at public, large scale events like these. My second participant observation will take place outside a Planned Parenthood, and unlike my first sample, this event is likely to be more directive and charged, as it is directly opposing the services offered at Planned Parenthood, thus presenting a more active, less passive display of activism and engagement. Together, both these events can be compared and contrasted for similar themes and values presented to gain a deeper understanding of the variance that exists in activism within Portland.

My second method of in-depth interviews will allow me access to the private values of pro-life members, who may engage in activism in ways that differ from the populations sampled through participant observation. Without the pressures of supporting the majority opinion or conforming to what is being presented by the larger public discourse, these one on one, twenty question interviews will allow me to probe deeper on an individual basis. I used a snow ball sample method, where one person

lead me to the next, highlighting some of the more outspoken, known members of the community. The values collected here will reflect each individual's beliefs, free of the constraints of being judged for their beliefs by their fellow pro-life activists.

Before beginning every structured interview, I explained to each participant what their answers would be used towards, informing them that everything, including all personal information, and any quotes or references to the answers provided would remain anonymous, or represented by a pseudonym assigned. I explained that all answers were voluntary, and that if at any point a question was uncomfortable, we could skip it, or end the interview at any point. I shared with each respondent the research question, as well as aim of my ethnography, remaining as transparent as possible in my interaction.

Together, both these methods allow me to overcome my issues of access by locating my community within the realms of activism and public engagement. Both participant observations of two very different displays of public activism, and interviews allow for more personal, in-depth accounts of values, also allowing me to understand how each person views feminism in relation to pro-life. The topic of feminism could only be introduced and assessed through the verbal exchange of interviews, as feminism was not featured as a topic of discussion at either event.

## **Rallies**

In attending and passively participating in two very different rallies, the larger Roe v. Wade Memorial held in Pioneer Square and a smaller Planned Parenthood vigil, I have gathered what values were publicly displayed and disseminated, presenting them in this section. These values are partly subjective; based on my observations and the material I was given or was provided by the various educational booths at the first event. I did not speak with anyone at the Roe v. Wade Memorial, whereas I spoke directly with the women present at the Planned Parenthood vigil, offering different experiences and richness of data.

### **Roe v. Wade Memorial Rally**

The Roe V. Wade Memorial Rally hosted by Oregon's Right to Life was held in Pioneer Square in Downtown Portland on a typically Portland rainy day. Despite the light showers, the square was full of participants, ranging from families with children to groups of women to individuals of men of all ages and races. The tone seemed uplifting; through out the whole rally there was no inner group disagreements or hostility, nor hostility from individuals not involved in the rally. A large stage was set up, directing and organizing where participants stood. Next to the stage, a large screen and projector were set up as well, where two videos were played, including a video titled 58 Million Lost: Visualized. This video presented a count of all the lives lost to abortion as the various states legalized abortion over time, featuring loud ringing church bells that marked the passage of time. Overall, the layout of the rally allowed for participants to gather around the stage, filling Pioneer Square and establishing a large presence. Various booths were set up along the periphery, offering pamphlets and take homes, including small plastic fetus dolls with white and darker skin.

I noted that the crowd was highly diverse, with an emphasis on whole families being present, with many family units featuring small children. Many participants held home made signs I presumed they prepared in anticipation for this event, or had created for another rallies. Some of the messages included on the signs touched on themes of religion, abortion, and fetal personhood, with many having images of the fetus or babies as a part of their signs. Signs in Spanish were also present, as well as signs featuring personal abortion stories. Examples of the messages relayed on these signs include; stop abortion pain, abortion is not healthcare, and a person is a person no matter how small just to cite a few. Yellow balloons with black uppercase text reading LIFE were handed out, creating a sea of yellow amongst the crowd that a presenter later illustrated as a symbol of unity against murder. The balloons were also highlighted by a presenter as showing those not involved in the rally what they were rallying towards, using the balloons to establish inner group presence and as a message to those not involved. I noted that many younger children held the balloons. The crowd was compliant and enthusiastic towards everything the presenters said, offering the occasional agreements, applause, and bowing their heads for prayer.

The event was centered on the remembrance of the 58 million lives lost to abortion since the Supreme Court ruling of Roe v. Wade, featuring speakers that ranged from leading community activists, such as Liberty Pike, Harmony Daws, and Lila

Rose, to two male pastors who both offered a group prayer for the lives of those lost to abortion, followed by a mother and daughter who told their personal story of countering abortion. The speakers presented abortion as the senseless murder of innocent lives unable to advocate for themselves, and that pro-life exists to advocate for the rights of all people, despite their size or vulnerability. Presenters spoke to abortion as killing the most weakest, vulnerable populations and that abortion is a matter of social justice and equality for all, including those unable to advocate for themselves. Lila Rose stated that she works towards a strong and prospering America, but can not ignore that America is built off the blood of those that are treated as disposable and those that are truly vulnerable.

Life and protection of life was consistently mentioned in all speeches to one degree or another, framed by either the individual's experience or my God's will, or secret investigations done in abortion facilities such as Planned Parenthood. Planned Parenthood was identified as a tax payers funded abortion mill, quoted as being "one of those most hopeless places in Los Angeles" encouraging women to lie or cover up their sexual abuse in seeking secret abortions. Planned Parenthood was highlighted as a place where women are pushed towards abortion, and that the people present at the rally were there to take a stand and fight against powerful systematic and structural alliances that push abortion on women, as abortion is ultimately the biggest act of violence for a woman to commit on herself and her children.

Recognition of the woman's role in the abortion was noted, saying that abortion and pro-choice are lies that frame women's empowerment in separation from her children, or even as a stance against her womb and children. Lila Rose spoke to the point of pro-choice viewing killing a child to push a woman forward in society, but that women deserve better than abortion and that their children are a gift, not a threat. The similar presentation of children as a gift, not a threat, was echoed by all speakers, including the two male pastors that gave speeches and lead prayers for those who had lost their lives to abortion. One of the pastors highlighted how Oregon's beauty and splendor is enjoyed by all, despite political orientation, and that the love for creation is inconsistent when it comes to honoring life in all forms, and that respect is not shown to "the crowning work of God's creation, the human person". Depiction of the fetus as in God's plan was emphasized, followed by the common rhetoric used in pro-life

messaging including presentation of the fetus as God's child and an intentional gift given by God to the mother.

Lastly, the final presenter featured a woman, her young adolescent daughter, and a younger child who was later uncovered to be the product of saying no to abortion. A story of teen pregnancy, loss, fear, and despair were presented by the mother, then repeated by her daughter. In summary, the story told was that of her younger daughter getting pregnant as a teen, feeling pressured by her teenage boyfriend to seek an abortion, followed by the teen's fear towards getting an abortion. The mother intervened in the teen's attempt to obtain an abortion, ultimately lending support to her daughter in carrying the pregnancy to term, accounting for the presence of the small child holding hands with the teen mother. This story was emotionally charged and offered an example of a real life situation where abortion was sought, then countered, producing the young girl who held her mother's hand.

### **Planned Parenthood Vigil**

Unlike the Roe v. Wade memorial rally, the vigil held outside Planned Parenthood was small scale, featuring two women and two men. The participants were older, most likely in their fifties or above, and stood along the side walk adjacent to the parking lot attached to Planned Parenthood. Similarly to the Roe V. Wade rally, a participant held a sign featuring the image of a full term baby with the words "there is hope". While observing, only one individual was followed; a man in tears over his daughter's medical condition. Overall, the tone of the vigil was more a one on one basis, offering a more personal experience of anti-abortion activism where the women directly sought and interacted with those entering Planned Parenthood.

After speaking with the two representatives at the vigil, one being the regular organizer at these events, I learned that their mission was to offer last minute hope and guidance to anyone seeking an abortion before they entered Planned Parenthood. A care package of a rose and an information sheet featuring a lengthy referral of services, including pregnancy resources, church groups, and adoption centers, was held by the women and offered as a gift to people entering in Planned Parenthood. The women highlighted that many of the young women that go to Planned Parenthood do not want to have abortions, but feel driven to by society, their families, and partners,

to obtain an abortion, and that their role was to offer last minute hope and assistance in keeping the baby. Empowerment of the women as mother was again highlighted, saying that they want to empower every woman to be a mother and through supporting the mothers they are able to support the life of the fetus. Lack of choices and pressures were emphasized by the women, stating that when the male figures in the family do not support the mother they are most likely to seek abortion, so their role is to pray and be the last minute persuaders against abortion. They viewed themselves as the last stand before abortion, offering on the floor guidance. The two men present stood to the side praying out loud the whole time, and I did not speak with them, as I intentionally excluded the male perspective on abortion, as I am solely interested in women's views. They were described as the most dedicated of the participants, as they are always present reciting prayers for those lost to abortion at all Planned Parenthood rallies.

When speaking with the women, they relayed that decisions towards abortion come from lack of support, and that that lack of support forces women to make decisions that harm themselves, as grief for the loss of the child follows. One of the participants shared with me her story of motherhood, and how she felt overwhelmed and pressured into aborting her last child after acknowledging that she did not have the financial resources to take care of six children. She shared that through church and conversations with women from her church that she felt empowered to keep the baby despite her hesitations, ultimately concluding this very personal story by connecting it to other women who feel as if abortion is their only option. She stated that she understands the grief and impossible decision making women experience, but that all women deserve a chance at mothering despite the larger pressures placed on them.

The two women also stressed that the baby is a gift, and that the mother should honor her gift and follow through with the pregnancy in order to achieve a happier life. They shared with me the story of a woman who they stopped outside of an abortion clinic, talking with her as she walked towards the clinic and ultimately persuading her to not abort her pregnancy that day. The woman seeking the abortion shared with them that she had felt pressured and like she had no other decision, because she did not have the financial resources to support the baby, despite her boyfriend being supportive. They offered the woman the list of services, giving her the same information sheet they showed me, and promised the woman that they would help her

through her pregnancy and beyond, sticking by her side the whole process. This story was their crowning jewel; the woman gave birth to two healthy twins, and has thanked them for supporting her and helping her decide against aborting her children.

## Interviews

To capture the private thoughts and feelings of pro-life women in Portland, I conducted eleven semi-structured twenty question interviews with women ranging from their mid 20's to early 50's. Before discussing the data and larger themes yielded through my interviews, it is important to identify that these eleven interviews are only preliminary, and by no means represent the view points of the pro-life community as a whole. The themes identified are unique to this small sample of women, providing an introductory analysis to be further expanded upon, an analysis that uses ground theory to identify and categorize variables that reflect what was emphasized in my interviews. Any names that are included are pseudonyms, meant to protect the identity of all my participants, some of whom I quote directly in an effort to let the women of my ethnography speak for themselves.

The first theme is that of religiosity, as all eleven women in one way or another spoke to how they are members of a church. The women's involvement with their church varied significantly; some identifying as leaders in their church community, where others limited their involvement to routine attendance. One woman stated;

“My pro-life involvement goes hand and hand with I learnt from my church and my mother. My mother was a self proclaimed feminist in a time where abortions were illegal and women were dying trying to get them, and she also took us to church every week. I just feel like God choose this path for me and wants me to do the work I am doing and wants me to help women. That's what my pro-life agenda is about; helping women with the power of God behind me”.

Though not yielded through my interviews, but relevant to the theme of religiosity, the woman who led the Planned Parenthood vigil attended church following the vigil, stating that she would pray for all those women who she was unable to reach that day through her side walk engagement, again highlighting how pro-life activism works in

tandem with prayer and church attendance. Each woman interviewed included various details about their church experiences and values, presenting pro-life arguments that stem from a religious belief that all were created equal, and that a baby is included in God's plan, despite the mother's feelings towards their pregnancy. This is echoed in Liz's interview where she explained her church and pro-life involvement;

"I grew up in a Christian family where our values were taught to me by my pastor and my parents. These values were always around. When I grew up and as an adult looking into what I believe personally, it was just impossible to get away from what I had been raised on and taught. What I taught still held up and made sense for me. I was always taught that human life is valuable, and babies are just little humans, so their life should not be taken away from them".

Through all conversations, the fetus was highlighted as an already formed human being, past the point of a collection of cells. Viewing the fetus as human from the point of conception was important to all the women in situating their beliefs within a religious framework, as all babies were noted, despite their development, to be God's creations and God's gift to women and the world as a whole. Another woman highlighted this, stating that;

"God created life, and told us that each life is valuable. Babies are the marginalized, the voiceless. If their mothers are not standing up for them in utero, who is? I feel like the rights of women are not being met, and the rights of the marginalized are not being defended if abortion is available. Abortion is a devaluation of both woman and child".

All women were raised in church communities from a young age, carrying on their involvement to different degrees in their adulthood. One woman expressed that

"the only way you would know I was pro-life is through my involvement with the church. I lead classes for kids that teach them that all life is valuable".

All women believed that the baby was apart of God's intentions and plans, and that abortion was in direct refusal of God's wishes. Three out of the eleven women spoke to how it is not the fault of the mothers in seeking abortion, but rather the lack of support from all other areas that lead women to seek abortion, which they argued was from lack of faith or trust that God would work everything out for them. One woman

strongly believed that “God would not endow a woman with something she could not handle” and thus, abortion again was in direct opposition to the will of God.

The second theme yielded in my interviews was feeling about abortion which varied significantly. Six out of the eleven, almost half of my interview sample, believed abortion is murder of a helpless child, and that a baby is a gift not to be left to the mercy of the mother’s poor decision making. One woman shared;

“Abortion is the result of women’s true rights not being protected and women being told they are not good enough to mother. I am an advocate for women’s rights and this includes the rights of the baby. Babies shouldn’t be killed just because the mother does not want them. Adoption is the solution to unnecessary murder”.

These women believed abortion should not be legal, as it is murder and criminal in that one person is playing God and deciding another’s fate. The other half of my sample believed abortion should remain legal, and that abortion legality was not the core issue, but rather lack of support and empowerment of the mother in believing that she can raise her baby. One of these women shared;

“I have worked a long time with low-income mothers, and teen moms too mothers who come to me as a last result, mothers who desperately want to keep their babies but feel like they have no other options except abortion. These are the women I want to empower and help. These are the women that need our help. They need to be given the support and be told maybe even for the first time that they are good enough and strong enough to do this”.

Three of the five women who believed abortion should still be accessible to women acknowledged that it would do more harm to women making it illegal, as they would still seek the abortion despite its legality, and in turn be put in dangerous situations that could threaten their life.

Another important theme that emerged in my interviews was lending support to the baby, and advocating for the fetus that has no voice or rights, as deemed by *Roe v. Wade*. Each woman identified with the issue of abortion coming from a lack of options, believing that women see abortion as their primary option, where adoption and other means of support are preferred as alternatives to abortion, as echoed in the quote

above. One of the woman spoke about how just because one woman passes on the chance to mother does not mean another woman, who is biologically incapable of producing offspring, would not happily adopt the child that one mother does not want. She shared;

“Women who do not want their baby should consider that many other women, who want babies, are biologically incapable of having one. This is why adoption is a better alternative to abortion. Destruction is unnecessary when life is a beautiful gift that someone else can cherish”.

In her eyes, the destruction of the fetus through abortion was an act of taking for granted the ability to produce offspring and mother. One of my interviewees highlighted that the constitutional rights should be awarded to the fetus, not just the mother, and that the fetus should be guaranteed a chance at happiness, which can not happen unless the fetus is allowed life through the mother. This woman spoke at length about constitutional rights and how a fetus is a member of society upon conception, not to be controlled and manipulated by women and care facilities, such as Planned Parenthood. This woman shared;

“The fetus is a marginalized population, which deemed by Roe V. Wade does not have any rights. They are left to the mercy of the mother’s decision making, and I’m here to advocate for the voiceless, the rightness. The constitution guarantees everybody a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Abortion violates the first right to life, so how can you except that person to have a chance at liberty and pursuit of happiness if you deny them their first right? Fetuses are humans too, and just because they do not have any rights does not mean their lives are not valued and just as important as the mother who does have rights. If the mother doesn’t want to protect those rights, I feel it my place to”.

Many of the participants felt that the fetus has no agency under our constitutional rights, and that because of this, those that do should speak for the unspoken and marginalized, as illustrated in the former quote. Another interview participant highlighted how cute babies are, pointing to posters she had of babies on the wall and stating that those posters serve as a constant reminder of the work she does and who

she is advocating for. She asked me several times through the interview how anyone could hate babies or want to destroy them? She referenced the posters several times and repeated “they’re just so cute! how could you want to harm anything that cute?”.

Many women had different degrees of issue with Planned Parenthood and the role they serve in the community; half the women agreeing that Planned Parenthood served an important role outside of abortion, with half the women stating that Planned Parenthood pushes abortion more than anything else and for this reason is irrelevant to women’s health services. The term “abortion mill” was used by three of the eleven participants, echoing the vocabulary used at the Roe v. Wade Memorial rally. One woman expressed;

“Planned Parenthood is a harm to the community telling women what they should do with their bodies. One of my co-workers told me about how her friend’s daughter had gone to Planned Parenthood seeking a check up and the literature pushed on her was all about abortion and all the reasons why she was unfit to be a mother. The nurses at PP push abortion on their patients as the only option, and this is a harm to the community”.

Another woman stated “theres plenty of other, better low-income clinics that can better serve our community. Planned Parenthood is just flashy and knows how to sell sex really well and that’s why they are so heavily funded”. At the vigil outside of Planned Parenthood, I was given an information sheet exposing all the harm Planned Parenthood does to women, pushing abortions on scared, vulnerable women as the only means of dealing with their unintended pregnancy. Many of the women felt that mothers are pressured by Planned Parenthood to obtain abortions, but that this pressure was not the fault of Planned Parenthood, but rather larger medical structures that rob women of their potential to mother.

The last theme touched upon in all eleven interviews was views of feminism and importance of empowerment as an alternative to abortion. All the women had varying views on where to lend support; half of the women focusing on supporting the child through empowerment of the mother, and the other focusing on the fetus as an independent voiceless individual in need of rights, separate from the mother. One of my interviews yielded blame towards the mother; stating that the baby should not be

punished for the decisions of the mom, and that she was there to advocate for that baby since the mother neglected to. Karen stated;

“I just want everyone to consider life an option. Life is the greatest gift given to us, so women that choose to see their babies’ life as anything but a gift shouldn’t make it the babies’ fault for wanting to live. They should give that baby a chance at life, even if they don’t want to be apart of their child’s life”.

The remaining ten interviews did not blame the mother, but rather highlighted various aspects of a woman’s life that could effect her decision to abort, including income, partner support, family support, and access to services. Five of the eleven women identified as feminists, while the other women found identification as a feminist to be counter to their goals as pro-life activists. Amanda captured this in her statement;

“My pro-life work isn’t about policing women’s bodies or their decisions, or their rights. I want every woman to feel like they have options and the support to be mothers despite their economical backgrounds. I just want them to know that life is an option, not because I need that to be their option, but that they have that option for their baby and we have the resources and support to help them.

For the five women who identified as feminists, feminism to them meant empowering and helping women to believe in themselves and their capacity to mother despite society telling them they are not good enough. Personal stories were relayed, including descriptions of young women who were scared and ashamed of their unintended pregnancy and felt like abortion was their only option. Young girls were highlighted in this discussion, framed as a vulnerable population of women that are often blamed for their unintended pregnancy, and thus feel shame and regret, rather than excitement for their gift of life. Amanda shared that working with young mothers she found;

“they just really, truly feel hopeless. They think abortion is their only option because their boyfriends tell them they don’t want the kid, and their parents threaten to kick them out if they go through with the pregnancy. It’s lack of support, you know, and it’s why I do the work I do for the women that need the support. I’m here for mom’s, and here to tell women they are good enough to mother. Some girls go their whole life with people telling them they can’t and

they're not good enough. Its just so sad and I want everyone to feel like their good enough to do the things they do".

These women who identified with feminism as a means of resistance towards societal pressures that make women feel they are not good enough to mother highlighted how empowerment and even just being told you are good enough is a key part of their pro-life activism. They viewed themselves as wanting to help empower women to be mothers, and offer women guidance and support in navigating their pregnancy.

## **Pulling Themes for Analysis**

In collecting data, speaking with women, and engaging in two very different pro-life events, it is now the appropriate time to tie everything together, producing an analysis of values central to my sample of pro-life advocates. As presented in the sections that proceeded, various themes were highlighted and repeated in my interviews that were also present in both the rally and vigil. It is also of use to restate my research question at this point, as it will guide the discussion of values and way my data is discussed;

What values are central to Pro-life women, and how do these values intersect with feminism to produce a view of Pro-Life as woman-centric?

### **Language and Fetal Personhood**

Though more of a linguistic observation, I noted that similar vocabulary was used among the three samples, illustrating that the pro-life community in Portland adopts similar terms and strategies in presenting and articulating their pro-life views. Among this language includes the way the fetus is presented and described, noted by all participants to be synonymous with a baby. From the pro-life perspective, the fetus and baby are one in the same, the only difference being a baby is given the opportunity at life, while the term fetus is used in relation to abortion, or termination, because the fetus is unable to grow into the culturally recognized label of baby. This concept is noted in the literature (Halva-Neubauer et al. 2010, Rothman 1986, Morgan 1996,

Oaks 2000, Doan 2002) to be described as viewing the fetus as having personhood from conception, despite the linguistic distinction between baby and fetus indicating two different stages of development. Pro-life adopts the view that babies are babies from the moment they are conceived, and making a distinction between fetus and baby is not recognizing the potential life of that fetus.

In my interviews, fetus and baby were used interchangeably, and the fetus as a less personal way to describe a pregnancy. In two of the offices I interviewed in, photos of babies were featured and pointed out, further illustrating that there is no distinction between fetus and baby to many of the women I spoke with, and that the fetus is imagined and depicted as having personhood. As discussed above, one of the women talked at length about the cuteness of babies, and how she could not understand how you would want to kill anything so cute. This was echoed by the signs held by many at the rallies that featured images of cute, sleeping babies, as well as the take homes plastic fetus figurines available for collection at the Roe v. Wade Memorial Rally. These plastic fetus figurines drove this point home to me, as it illustrated that at the core of the pro-life viewpoint is deeply personal relation and acknowledgement of the fetus as a tangible thing, past the point of a collection of cells (Morgan 1996), past the point of biology, and rather, a matter of morality and fellow human reliability. Once one has accepted and adopted a view of the fetus as having personhood despite its development in the womb, it is impossible to remove the humanistic appeal of the fetus, and thus is central to many women's motivations and activism within pro-life.

This interchangeable dominant view of fetus as baby and baby as fetus, and in turn baby and fetus as both equally human, despite the linguistic distinction, is essential to the views and values of women who identify as pro-life. Viewing the fetus as a baby, and a baby in turn as a already formed human being, creates a tangible, relatable, and emotionally compelling way for pro-life women to connect with the issue of abortion on a deeper level, as it gives them someone to rally and advocate for. This was illustrated by the varying views of the fetus relayed in my interviews, as some women went as far as to situate the fetus within its lack of constitutional rights, which was echoed by the language used in the Roe v. Wade Memorial Rally in presenting abortion as the murder of 58 million innocent lives. The development of ultrasound technology discussed in the literature (Oaks 2000), and the emergence of the view of

the fetus as having personhood (Morgan 1996, Conklin et al 1996, Halva–Neubauer et al 2010), is confirmed in my sample of values, as fetal personhood, or viewing the fetus as an already formed human being, was highlighted in all areas of sample, to varying degrees, that illustrate the importance of viewing the fetus as a baby, capable of life past the womb and mother’s reproductive decision making. Though more of a linguistic than cultural focus, the repeat use of language used in describing the fetus illustrates a discourse produced by pro–life advocates that is consistent and relatable among members of the community, thus continually legitimizing and strengthening the pro–life rhetoric, as repeat use of the same language and touching upon the same points creates a reconfirming consistent collective identity that views fetal personhood and loss of life as central issues.

### **Religion and God’s Gift**

In addition to viewing the fetus as having personhood in the womb, religiosity played a large part in all three realms of observation, and was a theme highlighted over and over again. All women sampled in my interviews spoke to the fetus as being apart of God’s plan, some women going as far as saying that God would not give a woman a baby if he did not think she was capable of mothering it. This same rhetoric was repeated in the Roe v. Wade Memorial Rally, where the religious figures that lead prayers highlighted how all individuals, despite their size or location, are God’s children and created by God, thus should be allowed life under God’s plan. The men present at the Planned Parenthood vigil served as an example of members of the pro–life community dedicated to prayer, as it was noted by one of the woman at the vigil that the two men had been praying for the lost lives of the unborn for years. At the vigil, one of the women noted that she would pray for all those who entered Planned Parenthood at her church following the vigil, and that she hoped her prayers made a difference. She stated that she knows God hears her and approves of the work she does. Being a member of a church was highlighted by various women in strengthening their pro–life engagement, as the church and their church communities all believed abortion to be murder of God’s children and in direct opposition to their values of life as taught to them through the word of God. Church was also a central location noted as a place of pro–life activism, as many of the women engaged in anti–abortion work through their churches.

## **You Can Mother: Women Deserve Better**

In responding to and in answering the second portion of my research question, dealing with the intersection of pro-life and feminism, I argue that though only five out of the eleven women I spoke with identified as feminist, as a whole, the women I worked with adopted a feministic, woman-centered lens in their pro-life activism, working towards empowering women to mother. As noted in the literature, “abortion [is thought of as condoning] violence against women and fetuses, [causing] emotional and physical suffering for women, and contributes to the social devaluation of motherhood” (Oaks 2009; Mac Nair et al. 1995, 2005). Though not articulated in the same way, many of the women I spoke with view abortion as the most violent decision women can make against their bodies, and that abortion is in direct opposition of God’s will and a woman’s best interests. Some of the women talked about their friends who had abortions, and how their decision to abort their baby haunted them, and caused emotional suffering that they believed is avoidable and unnecessary. Though this view assumes every pregnant woman wants to become a mother, and thus can be viewed as restricting women to the realm of motherhood, the intentions of many of the pro-life women I spoke with were to empower women to make decisions free of pressures or fears of poor parenting. Ideals of motherhood are noted in the literature to be one of the constraining factors for women dealing with unintended pregnancies (Gilbert et al. 2014, Finer 2005), and this was highlighted in many of the conversations I had. They felt that many women feel pressured by external forces, and internal oppressions, to feel like they are not good enough to care for their fetus, or that they will fail as mothers because of lack of resources, stability, support, or income. Though not all women shared this common belief, one placing blame directly on women who seek abortions, many of the women viewed abortion as a crime against all women and their potential to be strong, successful mothers. Many of the women, and the speakers at the Roe v. Wade Memorial Rally, spoke of abortion as the largest act of self-imposed violence against the female body and the unique female capacity to carry offspring and mother.

Though abortion was noted by all the women as a violent act of murder, many of the women felt that women make the decision to abort their babies based on societal pressures that tell them they are not good enough, and that pro-life exists to

support and empower women to mother. This recognition of abortion being the result of intersectional factors that play out in a woman's life, such as inability to financially support the child, or lack of kinship relationships to support the woman and her baby, was articulated by the women I spoke with, and connects to feminist research design methodology that allows for an "understanding [of] the experiences of women and gendered power relationships and discourses in a predominantly patriarchal society" (Gilbert et al. 2014). As argued above, the interest of the pro-life women I spoke with was to help empower women to feel good enough to keep their babies, viewing society as in opposition to this goal. Their advocacy for the fetus, and in turn the mother in choosing to keep her fetus, creates an intersection between pro-life and feminism that informs the way pro-life women engage in their activism. Many of the women spoke of kindness and compassion towards other women in dealing with an unexpected and scary situation, and that their goal in their pro-life engagement was to help every woman feel good enough and supported in carrying out her pregnancy. The joy of having a child and experiencing parenthood is something the women felt was a gift, and that through support of the mother, their gift could be realized as well.

## **Reconciling Difference as a Researcher**

Having presented a years worth of ethnographic research, accounting for an introductory sample of Pro-Life views and values in Portland, it is now important for me to include a reflection of my experience as an anthropologist in training, and further, as a feminist pro-choice researcher, in direct opposition of the community I accessed in this ethnography.

During my year long engagement with the pro-life community, my intentions in speaking with pro-life women were questioned by every woman I spoke with. All the women questioned what their answers would be used for, and in anticipation of this, I decided that ethically as a researcher remaining as transparent and honest with my participants was important to me, as I feel an honest relationship is necessary when relating to people through anthropology. I was honest with my status as pro-choice

with all my participants, explaining to them that I was interested in understanding the other side's views. Much of cultural anthropological research entails a close relationship with the people whose culture you are trying to capture, and in my case, I quickly realized that the data I present and depict in this introductory ethnographic account has real life implications. These are real women, engaging in pro-life activism, and thus, as a researcher I have a duty to honor and respect this, despite my personal opinions and beliefs. My positionality and admittance to being pro-choice framed the conversations I had, and how I experienced the two rallies. I had hoped to include a third rally at a late term abortion clinic, but found attending the rallies to be too uncomfortable, and thus illustrating a bias in this research. My access to the community was limited to what I felt was comfortable for me as a researcher to attend, given my own values and beliefs, as I felt putting pressure on women seeking abortions was not my place, or something I wanted to participate in, despite it being an important example of pro-life activism.

## Conclusions

In answering my research question what values are central to Pro-life women, and how do these values intersect with feminism to produce a view of Pro-Life as woman-centric?, I utilized in-depth interviews and participant observation of two rallies to produce an introductory ethnographic account of Portland's pro-life values and viewpoints, to later be expanded upon. This year long engagement with Portland's pro-life community yielded the values of religiosity, and strong, firm faith in God's plan, belief of the fetus as having personhood and in need of advocacy, and goals of empowerment for women seeking abortions. The last theme is related to feminism in that pro-life women adopt a woman-centered lens in their activism, focusing on empowering and supporting women who seek abortion as a solution to what they perceive as societal pressures that deem women as not good enough to mother.

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