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Katherine A. Rafferty & Tessa Longbons,  
*#AbortionChangesYou: A Case Study to Understand the  
Communicative Tensions in Women's Medication  
Abortion Narratives.* 36 Health Commc'n 1485 (2021)

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Article in Health Communication · June 2020

DOI: 10.1080/10410236.2020.1770507

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To cite this article: Katherine A. Rafferty & Tessa Longbons (2020): #AbortionChangesYou: A Case Study to Understand the Communicative Tensions in Women's Medication Abortion Narratives, Health Communication, DOI: [10.1080/10410236.2020.1770507](https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1770507)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1770507>



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## #AbortionChangesYou: A Case Study to Understand the Communicative Tensions in Women's Medication Abortion Narratives

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### ABSTRACT

One out of four women in the United States will have an abortion by age 45. While abortion rates are steadily declining in the United States, the rate of medication abortions continues to increase, with 39% of all abortions being medication abortions. Our study is one of the first to analyze women's narratives after having had a medication abortion. Using relational dialectics theory, we conducted a case study of the nonpartisan website, *Abortion Changes You*. Our contrapuntal analysis rendered four sites of dialectical tension found across women's blog posts: *only choice vs. other alternatives*, *unprepared vs. knowledgeable*, *relief vs. regret*, and *silence vs. openness*. Each site of struggle characterized a different noteworthy moment within a woman's medication abortion experience: the decision, the medication abortion process, identity after abortion, and managing the stigmatizing silence before and after the abortion. We discuss theoretical and practical implications about how the larger politicized discourses prevalent within the abortion debate impact the liminality of women who are contemplating a medication abortion and affect their own narrative construction about the medication abortion experience.

One out of four women will undergo an abortion procedure in the United States by age 45 (R. K. Jones & Jerman, 2017), and 862, 320 reported abortions occur each year (Jones et al., 2019). Despite its frequency, abortion remains a highly contested and stigmatized biopolitical public health issue in the United States (Altshuler et al., 2017). The historic *Roe v. Wade* case has resulted in two nationalized political movements – Right to Life and Right to Choice – that have juxtaposed stances on the legality of abortion. However, the stigma and shame associated with abortion precede and transcend this historic case. Stormer (2010) concluded that a collective memory of secrets and shame has characterized the topic of abortion since Planned Parenthood's 1955 conference, "Abortion in the United States".

While abortion rates are steadily declining in the U.S. (Jones et al., 2019), the rate of medication abortions continues to increase. In 2000, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved mifepristone to be used in combination with misoprostol as a form of medication abortion. Since then, the annual number of medication abortions has risen steadily: less than 6% of all abortions in 2001 to 39% of all abortions in 2017 (Jones et al., 2019, 2008). Between 2014–2017, the number of medication abortions provided at facilities other than hospitals increased by 25% (Jones et al., 2019). Presently, over one-third of all reported abortions in the U.S. are medication abortions (Jones et al., 2019). In 2016, the FDA protocol expanded provider eligibility for dispensing mifepristone to women. Thus, abortion provision is transitioning from formalized medical procedures conducted in health care settings

to a protocol where most of the abortion occurs individually at home with limited clinician assistance (Biggs et al., 2019). Given the privatization of abortion provision, research is needed to examine the distinct experiences of women who have undergone this type of abortion. After all, researchers have found that women often elect to have a medication abortion over a surgical abortion because of more privacy, convenience, and the perception of having more control (Newton et al., 2016). However, medication abortion has been found to have a higher complication rate that results in more emergency department visits post-medication abortion compared to post-surgical abortion (Upadhyay et al., 2015).

Medication abortion practices in the U.S. adhere to the following evidence-based guidelines: using mifepristone in combination with a prostaglandin to carry success rates up to 99% for early pregnancy termination with rare occurrence of serious adverse events. However, the focus of this research is on successful terminations, increases in abortion access, and reductions of in-person clinic visits (H. E. Jones et al., 2017). There remains a dearth of research, particularly in the U.S., that examines women's personal experiences with having this type of abortion procedure (e.g., acknowledging their emotions, understanding their self-efficacy with completing the abortion at home, being aware of whether they are adequately informed about the process). To our knowledge, the only study is from Sweden; researchers used semi-structured telephone interviews with 119 women who had a medication abortion (Hedqvist et al., 2016). They found that almost half (43%) experienced more bleeding than expected, and one-

fourth (26%) bled for more than four weeks. In addition, one-third (34%) stated that they received insufficient information about what to expect. Women who had never had an abortion nor had gone through childbirth were more likely to feel misinformed.

Scholars know that the medication abortion process is distinct from surgical abortions, with the features of medication abortion (e.g., lack of medical presence, time required for abortion completion, personal experiences with pain and bleeding) influencing women's perception and satisfaction (Newton et al., 2016). Yet, this research on women's satisfaction with medication abortion is often conflicting (Kimport et al., 2012) and limited (Hedqvist et al., 2016). Given that women increasingly prefer medication abortion over surgical abortion (Newton et al., 2016), the need for studying women's experiences post-medication abortion becomes imperative.

### **Importance of analyzing unsolicited blogging narratives about one's abortion**

To understand women's medication abortion experiences, it is important to study platforms where women engage in unsolicited talk. Unsolicited talk is ideal for collecting formative research that can be studied to explore individual and cultural experiences (Baxter, 2011). First, the audience of these texts is a "generalized other" (Mead, 1982), or culture, rather than a specific individual with whom the author has a relationship (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). The absence of a specific audience encourages narrators to provide an unadulterated account of their experience, rather than tailor their story to specific individuals (e.g., a friend who has had a certain stance on the abortion issue). Similarly, anonymity allows for potentially muted or stigmatized groups to post information without fear of sanctioning. In a culture where abortion remains highly contested and talk about having had an abortion is often muted or stigmatized (Altshuler et al., 2017), it is likely that women may prefer to self-disclose their medication abortion experiences online rather than via face-to-face channels. Furthermore, because women traditionally constitute a co-culture who have historically been muted and must strategically use communication to participate in a dominant patriarchal society (M. Orbe, 2005; M. P. Orbe, 1998), scholars must study platforms where women are sharing unsolicited stories in back-channel outlets (e.g., online blogs).

### **Online blogs as a platform for unsolicited talk**

One backchannel platform of unsolicited talk is online blogs. Blogs provide a computer-mediated platform where people can self-disclose their personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences to others online. The proliferation of blogs in the last decade has transformed the way that we, as a society, "share, create, and curate information with individuals and communities" (Becker & Freburg, 2014, p. 415). Blogs often resemble online personal journal entries that enable writers to freely express themselves in ways that may be less face-threatening or stigmatizing (M. Jones & Alony, 2008). One of the many applications and uses of blogs is to share experiences and events through storytelling.

### **Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT)**

Because talking about one's abortion experience remains stigmatized and muted (Cockrill & Nack, 2013), examining women's stories after having had a medication abortion may illuminate the competing discourses surrounding this debated moral and social issue (e.g., largely evident in the two polarized movements: Right to Choice v. Right to Life), as well as some of the larger dominant discourses from the polarized political movements that influence how women tell their own medication abortion story. Given this goal, RDT (Baxter, 2011) is a relevant framework to assess the competing cultural norms and expectations, which are also referred to as discourses. At any given moment, discourses may be dominant/centripetal or marginalized/centrifugal (i.e., anything that deviates from the dominant discourse). Scholars use RDT as a framework to examine the interplay between certain discourses that then construct social meaning and reality for individuals. Within the theory, there are four types of utterances (i.e., speaking chains) from which dialectical tensions (i.e., centripetal vs. centrifugal) may stem: *distal already-spoken* – utterances reflecting the cultural meaning and discourses that cultural members give voice to in their talk; *proximal already-spoken* – utterances conveying past meanings and discourses within a given relationship; *proximal not-yet-spoken* – immediate response from the hearer in the interaction; and *distal not-yet-spoken* – anticipated responses of a generalized other within the culture. The purpose of this paper is to examine how, if at all, these four types of utterance chains are present within women's medication abortion narratives.

A second aspect of RDT (Baxter, 2011) is to understand how social reality is created discursively through power. Power is located in the struggle between marginalized/centrifugal and dominant/centripetal discourses. There are three ways that power can be located within discourses: diachronic separation, synchronic interplay, and discursive transformation. Diachronic separation occurs when discourses emerge in different texts or locations. Synchronic interplay is when discourses negate (total rejection of a competing discourse), counter (offer limited legitimacy to a discourse), and/or entertain (consider multiple worldviews/discourses or general ambivalence toward discourses) one another. Finally, discursive transformations occur when the interplay of competing discourses creates new meanings rather than remaining in opposition to one another (Baxter, 2011). This current study will focus on examining the synchronic interplay among the centripetal and centrifugal discourses.

### **A case study of women who have experienced medication abortion**

To analyze women's personal narratives and the larger discourses influencing their talk about their own medication abortion, we conducted a case study of the website [www.abortionchangesyou.com](http://www.abortionchangesyou.com). We selected this website for several reasons: it is not openly politicized, bloggers do not interact with others, bloggers post anonymously, bloggers do not need to create an account in order to post, and the platform is a space for unsolicited stories with no reward or

compensation to those who post. Furthermore, from a strategic storytelling standpoint (Tyler, 2007), it is important to study women's blogs from an organization that recognizes and respects each woman's individual narrative, as opposed to propagating narratives that openly align with the agenda of only one political movement. The woman who created this website has had an abortion herself and openly shares this information on the "About Us" page. The naming of her own abortion experience grounds co-cultural theorizing (M. Orbe, 2005; M. P. Orbe, 1998) such that other women who feel muted may be empowered and capable of finding similar language strategies.

In this case study, we explore the complexity and consequentiality of women's language choices with anonymously telling their own medication abortion story, as well as offer the potential to capture the interplay of individual, organizational, and social discourses surrounding the abortion debate. The current divisiveness surrounding the socio-political climate in the U.S. about abortion provides further exigency and credence for this research. Our critical analysis is rooted in the interpretive paradigm with the purpose of explaining, describing, and illustrating the stories that women share on this website (Tracy, 2013). The following research questions guide our iterative analysis:

RQ1: What topics are women disclosing to the "generalized other" in their blog?

RQ2: What (if any) sites of struggle characterize women's abortion narrative?

## Methods

We conducted a case study approach (Arden Ford et al., 2014) of one website, [www.abortiochangesyou.com](http://www.abortiochangesyou.com). Case studies are a contextual examination used to understand a phenomenon within a particular context "and with respect to multiple perspectives within that context" (Arden Ford et al., 2014, p. 118). By employing a case study approach, we were able to draw on multiple perspectives (e.g., 98 different blog stories) that were rooted in a specific context. This methodological choice is common in other communication research, where the unit of analysis is an organization and the goals are to provide an in-depth understanding of the unique particulars and complexities of the case within a larger social context (Norander & Brandhorst, 2017).

Our case study included 98 blogs from women who have had a medication abortion and shared their story on the website. We included all blogs posted between October 2007 – February 2018. This date range reflects the time period between the submission of the first medication abortion blog on the website in 2007, and the point at which we extracted our data for analysis in 2018. Women's blogs ranged in length from one paragraph to three pages of text, single-spaced (the average number of words for the 98 blogs was 655 words). All 98 blogs included content about one's own medication abortion; the vast majority (91 women; 93%) also discussed the events and emotions experienced before and after their medication abortion.

## Data analysis and synthesis

The case study approach allows for different data analysis strategies (Norander & Brandhorst, 2017). Because the purpose of our case study is to develop a thick description of the case, using an interpretive analytic strategy is most prudent. We selected Baxter's (2011) contrapuntal analysis to study the meanings circulating around individual and relational identities evidenced within the language choices of the women blogging about their own medication abortion. Given the larger competing discourses about the legality of abortion in the U.S., we felt that the struggle of competing and contradictory discourses would likely be apparent in women's personal blogging narratives. Further, contrapuntal analysis (Baxter, 2011) offered a critical perspective to our analysis as we studied the voices of marginalized women (e.g., women who have had a medication abortion) whose perspectives are often muted and stigmatized in society.

To understand the competing discourses and how meaning was constructed through their interplay, we conducted the first stages of thematic analysis to identify the discourses evident within each blog post (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process required the three coders to independently familiarize themselves with the entire data set: reading the blogs several times and conducting line-by-line coding that captured the essence of the story in each line. Many of the inductive analytic codes applied to the text were descriptive (e.g., uncertainty; not ready), process (e.g., discovering pregnancy, taking the pills), or in vivo codes (e.g., wanted baby; alone; Saldaña, 2013). The coders met regularly for five months to discuss the codes independently applied to each blog post. During this time, codes emerged into themes as processes were identified in the data and repetitively noticed by all three coders (e.g., changing self perception, silence, responsibility, good parenting). Discrepancies in coding were discussed during coding meetings and resolved through group consensus (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

During the third and fourth months of data analysis, we went back to the data set to identify where discourses competed (e.g., culpability; justification). Here, we paid particular attention to where the bloggers used instances of negating (e.g., claiming another discourse as irrelevant or rejecting it), countering (e.g., offering a particular discursive position in replacement of another), and entertaining (e.g., not completely rejecting a discourse, but instead noting the potential possibilities with different discourses; Baxter, 2011). Women used negating when saying, "can't," "not," "couldn't," and "never." Examples of countering were most apparent when women used the word "but." Entertaining often occurred when women used the words "possibility" and "could have." Finally, we identified where and how competing discourses interpenetrated (Baxter, 2011). Dialogically contractive discursive practices are silenced discourses. Examples of these discursive practices included negating talk, such as: "can't talk about the abortion," or "there was no other choice." In contrast, dialogically expansive discursive practices are discourses that are encouraged and amplified. Women used these discourses when saying things like: "I don't want the procedure, but I don't want the baby" or "hoping for a brighter future now that it is over."



Data were analyzed until the point of theoretical saturation (i.e., no new thematic categories were present in the blog posts; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which occurred after the 54<sup>th</sup> blog post. However, we continued to analyze the remaining blog posts in an effort to verify that our analysis of the discourses evident in the 54 posts accurately reflected all of the posts within the entire data set. Further, we wanted to extract the best exemplars from the entire case study and desired that quotations within all posts be considered for representation. Clear and concise exemplars of competing discourses within women's narratives were then selected and agreed upon by all coders.

### Trustworthiness and rigor

Evaluation of the quality of case study research should be determined by criteria associated within the naturalistic paradigm (Arden Ford et al., 2014). Trustworthiness is the criterion that assesses the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data collection and analysis processes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We upheld these principles when conducting this study by beginning with a careful design that clearly defined its purpose, research questions, and notion of "boundedness" (i.e., establishing the limits and context of the case; Arden Ford et al., 2014). Second, we spent sufficient time developing and analyzing the case: our analysis transpired over five months. Third, we upheld the principles of reflexivity by using inductive coding for all blog posts and writing individual and group memos throughout the entire coding process as a way to remain transparent and keep a data audit. Fourth, we had a team of three female coders, which allowed for the presence of multiple feminine perspectives.

### Findings

Our research questions focused on the topics that women discussed in their personal online blogging narrative posted to [www.abortionchangesyou.com](http://www.abortionchangesyou.com) (RQ1), and what (if any) sites of struggle were evident in these narratives (RQ2). Our contrapuntal analysis (Baxter, 2011) rendered four sites of dialectical tension: *only choice* vs. *other alternatives*, *unprepared* vs. *knowledgeable*, *relief* vs. *regret*, and *silence* vs. *openness*. Each site of struggle characterized a different noteworthy moment within a woman's medication abortion experience: the decision, the medication abortion process, identity after the abortion, and managing the stigmatizing silence before and after the abortion. When recounting their decision to have an abortion, women referenced the struggle of *only choice* vs. *other alternatives*. As women discussed the medication abortion process, the competing discourse of *unprepared* vs. *knowledgeable* was evidenced. Women's narratives about their identity after the abortion indicated the dialectical struggle of *relief* vs. *regret*. Finally, the challenges with managing the tension between *silence* vs. *openness* pervaded women's narratives. Below we discuss each site of struggle using exemplar quotes from women's blogs. Quotes were not edited from their original post.

### The decision: Only choice vs. other alternatives

Part of women's narratives included a detailed account of their decision to have a medication abortion. This decision was described as being rife with contradiction, and not a flippant choice. Women enumerated various reasons that were influential in their decision-making process: bad timing, financial instability, relationship problems, lack of family support, not married, too young, too many other children, not prepared to be a parent yet, and/or best decision given the circumstances. After stating one of the aforementioned reasons, 92 women (94%) also explained that abortion was the only or best option given the circumstances. For example, one woman said: "I felt the child growing inside of me. I was rubbing my stomach without me even knowing. I felt the doubt in my heart, but kept telling myself this is the best decision I needed to make" (6-18-17). A different woman recounted:

"I always leaned more towards keeping the baby and my boyfriend more towards abortion. I knew I could have the baby but it would be difficult. We both work jobs that barely pay over minimum wage and we both were scared to grow up and care for a child" (10-24-17).

Collectively, these exemplars illustrate how any possibility of keeping the baby was negated by one of the reasons that warranted the need for having a medication abortion. Many of the reasons women cited for choosing abortion align with the discourses from the Right to Choice movement: "A pregnancy to a woman is perhaps one of the most determinative aspects of her life. It disrupts her body. It disrupts her education. It disrupts her employment. And it often disrupts her entire family life" (*Roe v. Wade*).

However, the decision to have a medication abortion was not always independently made by the woman. In fact, 52 women (53%) reported that the father to their child or other family members (e.g., parents) negated women's own desires to keep the baby. For example, one woman said:

"I remember my husband telling me, 'well, don't expect me to be too happy with the idea of having it if you decide to keep it. I won't be too loving.' That was a knife through my heart and I made the tough decision to go through with the abortion" (7-6-12).

Other family members also influenced women's medication abortion decision, albeit her own desires to keep her baby:

"But my father on the other hand was a different story. He is an old school Puerto Rican who told me that I had to leave if I kept the baby. I had 2 weeks to get an abortion or else he would disown me forever" (3-8-2018).

In both accounts, women communicated their personal choice to have their baby; yet, their choice was negated by family and friends who advocated that abortion was necessary. Centrifugal discourses about others influencing or pressuring women to have an abortion are marginalized discourses.

Finally, when making their decision, 48 women (49%) reported vacillating between keeping their baby and having a medication abortion. Ultimately, outside circumstances or other people influenced their decision to abort. As mentioned earlier, 92 women (94%) shared that abortion was the best or

only option available given the circumstances. In many of these narratives, women did not believe nor realize that other alternatives, besides abortion, were tenable options until after having the abortion. For instance, one woman said:

“They all tell you ‘it’s your choice’ in the moment, but you don’t feel that it is. Being unable to afford it, unable to tell your loved ones, not having the help or feeling unable to support a child. When your partner doesn’t want it like you do. All these things push you, blind you to a decision that you don’t realize will destroy you” (8-23-17).

Similarly, another woman recounted: “I was kind of excited but I was so scared to tell my family .... I told my mom and her first response was I hope you’re getting an abortion. You’re going to be a terrible mom” (11-5-17). Both exemplars illustrate the distal and proximal already-spoken discourses that influenced each woman’s decision to have a medication abortion. Ultimately, these centripetal discourses (coming from society, the pro-choice movement, other people in their lives, or their own fears) negated the centrifugal discourse that other alternatives (adoption or keeping their baby) were justifiable options available to them.

### **The medication abortion process: Unprepared vs. knowledgeable**

Medication abortions where women undergo most of the process individually at home with limited assistance from a medical provider are becoming more commonplace (Biggs et al., 2019; H. E. Jones et al., 2017). While this process is generally reported to be safe and adhere to evidence-based guidelines (H. E. Jones et al., 2017), little is known about women’s personal experiences with having this type of abortion. All women in this case study reported having had a medication abortion. Forty-eight women (49%) provided detailed accounts of their actual medication abortion experience at home. Women said things like: “I felt her come out” (1-8-16). Some women detailed the hardships of this process by saying: “I was in so much pain on the bathroom floor” (3-15-18); “the pills made me vomit, lose control of my bowels, sweat, faint, pass out, and go into full labor” (10-9-09); and “I lay on my bed in the fetal position, holding my stomach” (9-5-15). Other women did not self-report such negative experiences: “The actual process of taking the pill was frightening but not as bad as I imagined” (9-8-15) and “I just popped some pills and got a period” (7-1-15).

In analyzing women’s talk about the medication abortion process, a second site of struggle was identified: *knowledgeable vs. unprepared*. In this struggle, women discussed how they were told certain information about the medication abortion process (e.g., when to take the pills, what the pills do, the need to contact a provider if complications arise), but ultimately this information was insufficient, limited, or misleading. Fourteen women (14%) reported being inadequately prepared about what to expect during the medication abortion process. For example, one woman said:

“They lied to me and said they would give me some pills that would make it just like a late period with a little cramping ... The pain of the contractions was so intense I felt like my intestines

were pulled out slowly. I collapsed screaming on my bathroom floor, sweat, tears, blood, vomit, and shit all over me” (10-9-09).

Similarly, a different woman recounted:

“They told me, if you by chance are in pain you can take these pain relievers. If by chance I’m in pain? That sounded like the process would be easy and not so painful. Well NO that was not the case, within 30 minutes I felt really bad cramping. It just kept getting worse and worse. I was crying and moaning from the pain. I literally thought I was dying” (9-2-17).

In both instances, women’s personal abortion experiences did not align with the proximal-already-spoken messages (e.g., “it’s just a pill”) that they were told by their medical providers.

When women’s personal experiences contradicted what they were originally told by health care providers, family, or friends women felt deceived. One woman communicated her frustration by saying: “They told me it wouldn’t hurt and I wouldn’t feel a thing. THAT WAS SUCH A LIE. I felt everything, I heard everything, I seen everything. I ended up blacking out from the pain and puking all over myself” (11-5-17). Similarly, another woman said:

“We were told we would go back to normal and it won’t affect us but they were wrong!!! All I feel is emptiness and hatred. I used to be the happiest most positive girl. All I want is to take it back” (12-15-14).

Even if women did not explicitly report feeling deceived, many women stated that they were inadequately prepared about what to expect. For instance, one woman said: “I knew to expect blood clotting, but nothing could’ve prepared me for seeing her body. It was the color of my own skin, and was actually starting to look like a person” (1-8-16). Within women’s narratives, they expressed a desire for more detailed information about things such as: potential side effects, the intensity of cramping and bleeding, what to do after passing the baby, and potential negative emotions (e.g., fear, uncertainty, sadness, pain) felt after the abortion. When this comprehensive information was not communicated to them prior to taking the pills at home, women reported feeling misled, misinformed, and even deceived. These types of experiences and feelings after having had a medication abortion remain centrifugal discourses that are muted within the abortion debate.

### **Identity after medication abortion: Relief vs. regret**

A third site of dialectical struggle was found in women’s talk about their identity after the medication abortion. Most women (N = 81; 83%) reported that their medication abortion changed them, which is not surprising given the name of the website: *Abortion Changes You*. Of noteworthy significance is understanding *how* women talked about these changes and the tension evident in this part of their narrative. Of the 81 women (83%) who stated feeling *changed* after their medication abortion, 75 women (77%) reported being changed in a negative way. Here, women said things like: “I really thought that I could somehow go back to the way things were before finding out I was pregnant. But I cannot. I am not the same person, and my husband is certainly not the same either” (7-11-11). Negative changes often occurred when women’s



actual abortion experience did not align with their preconceived ideas about what to expect. These ideas were informed by larger discourses from society, as well as messages from others (e.g., health care providers). Three women indicated a positive change after their abortion by noting something like:

“Abortion did change my life ... As soon as the stomach cramps (only slightly worse than regular menstrual pains) went away, I felt like a whole new person. I couldn’t believe how much energy I had again. It was like waking out of a deep depression” (7-1-15).

Positive changes were denoted by experiencing an initial sense of relief with no longer being pregnant. Finally, three women were ambivalent or didn’t report their change as positive or negative. One woman said: “I truly believe there is no right and wrong with this situation, it is a life changer but it’s your choice” (9-7-10).

Women discussed various issues when talking about change: impact on their emotional health as a result of the abortion, differences in their relationship with their partner/spouse, and new perspectives on their general views of abortion. However, conflicting emotions were evident across all women’s blog posts. For instance, one woman said:

“I went home and confessed to my mother ... She helped pull the gigantic blood clots from my body ... No one told me it would be like this; the clinic simply gave me what I asked for without telling me what it entailed” (7-20-16).

Similarly, another woman recounted: “I thought maybe after the due date I would feel better, but it doesn’t end there. It NEVER ends! The pain and emptiness stays there forever” (4-30-17). In these different accounts, the women alluded to their initial expectations of what the medication abortion would entail or what others told them would happen after their abortion. When a woman’s actual medication abortion experience did not align with these messages, women felt disempowered, vulnerable, lost, upset, and sometimes deceived.

When discussing the changes experienced after the abortion, many women talked about emotional changes. One woman said:

“At first it all seemed like a weight had been lifted and everything was okay then I started to feel really sad and low and now all I do is think about how many weeks pregnant I would have been and what my baby would look like and I miss so much” (4-26-10).

As mentioned, processing one’s abortion experience was emotional and took time. Some women wrestled with experiencing negative and difficult emotions after having their abortion. In fact, 37 women (38%) explicitly stated problems with anxiety, depression, drug abuse, and suicidal thoughts as a result of the abortion. For example, one woman said: “I am haunted by the image of my tiny baby. I always will be. I cut myself and even wanted to die” (3-22-13). Another woman recounted: “Looking at my kids thinking of another beautiful child. Couldn’t live with myself. Wishing God would take my life” (12-16-11). Collectively, these exemplars illustrate women’s emotional changes about processing of their medication abortion.

Finally, 75 women (77%) explicitly stated that they regretted their decision to have an abortion. However, the

term regret was rife with contradiction and also included talk about initial relief. For instance, one woman said: “I know I did the right thing for myself and it would be a lot harder for me right now. But I still would give anything to go back in time and keep my baby” (11-19-12). Regret was regarded as a process that was realized over time and through one’s life experience. One woman stated: “Had I known how badly I would feel now, I would have kept the baby, even if I had to go through it alone” (10-21-15). Another woman elaborated upon this process by saying:

“Knowing what I know now at almost a year later I would not have the abortion. That was my child and I should have done what I needed to do to give them a great life. I thought I had no options but I did. I should have put my child first. No matter how early the abortion is its still a growing life and i wish i had done things differently” (4-30-17).

In both accounts, women defined regret as the emotional pain, suffering, remorse, and guilt felt after the medication abortion. Yet, these emotions were often coupled with initial feelings of relief from no longer being pregnant. In sum, the decision to have a medication abortion was significant, transformative, and lifechanging for these women. One woman noted this change by saying: “From the outside, our life looks exactly the same as it would have. But on the inside, everything has changed for me” (10-21-15). Collectively, these accounts expose how the different emotional changes resulted in a lived, dialectical tension between their life before the abortion and their life after the abortion.

### ***Managing the comprehensive stigmatizing silence: Silence vs. openness***

Across women’s narratives, there existed an overarching dialectical tension of *silence vs. openness*, which was difficult for many women to manage when interacting with others. In this struggle, women shared how their medication abortion was often a solo, private experience that was not openly shared with others. Many women decided *not* to inform certain family members about their pregnancy and abortion. Women noted feelings of shame, embarrassment, worry, or fear as some of the reasons for not telling others. Along with stating these emotions, women said things like: “I never told the father and I don’t intend to” (8-4-17); “I don’t know if I will ever tell my husband and children about what I did” (2-11-12); or “I couldn’t talk to my family” (3-16-17). The initial decision to remain silent made it difficult to talk openly with others about their feelings and experiences after their medication abortion. Silence was also experienced in other ways: one woman was glad she was home alone during her abortion so no one could hear her, while a different woman left the abortion clinic and began crying and said, “why is there so much silence here?” as she was taking her pill alone in her bathroom at home.

Even if women did allow certain family members to become privy to their abortion decision, openly discussing their feelings after the abortion remained difficult. When talking with others, one woman said: “I love my husband but it is beyond difficult for me to talk to him about this,

because I know he wants nothing more than to just move on from this” (4–28-18). A different woman recounted: “My close friends know here but I don’t really feel I can talk to them about it. I don’t feel like i can talk to anyone about it” (2-9-13). Despite these women’s desires to talk about their abortion, others (e.g., the baby’s father, their husband, family members) refused to engage in conversation with them. As a result, women said things like: “I feel like I have no one to speak to about it since he doesn’t think about it the way I do” (9-8-15), and “I try to talk about it with my family and the baby’s dad but they all tell me it’s in the past” (10–28-17).

Oftentimes, certain dates (such as their child’s due date) or friends with other babies who are of similar age to their “would-have-been child” led to triggering events where women desired to express their feelings with others, but felt like they couldn’t talk openly. For instance, one woman said: “But I haven’t really been able to share the true regret and near constant jealousy of my loved ones engagements or pregnancies” (11–21-16). Another woman stated: “I knew I had to have an abortion, but these feelings I have right now I never imagined I’d have. I don’t want to go out, I don’t want to tell anyone, all I feel like doing is crying” (7-8-18). Thus, the isolation and silence leading up to her own medication abortion continued to pervade after the abortion, creating additional communication challenges with freely expressing her emotions with family and friends.

Silence was often described as being frustrating and challenging. In fact, 59 women (60%) reported feelings of isolation and alienation. As a result, some women personally attacked themselves. For example, one woman said: “I feel like I’m living a lie I get up get ready for work get my family up like normal the days go on like normal but I’m not normal I killed my baby I’m a monster!!” (3–14-17). Similarly, a different woman wrote: “As a mom I feel like a monster and I have to act like nothing happened” (4–18-17). These demeaning language choices (e.g., monster, killer) are present in the distal-already-spoken societal discourses about abortion. Women’s awareness of these larger discourses led some women to write about their intentional use of selective language choices when talking about their abortion with others. One woman shared: “I tried to find an OBGYN that could see me ASAP. I went in and told them I had a miscarriage because I was ashamed of the truth of what I did” (3–21-18). Finally, some women reported struggling in silence by saying things like: “I am in desperate need of assistance and I am too embarrassed to attend an in person support group” (11–21-16), and “And when I got home, I had to hold it all in. I was so ashamed of my choice. I couldn’t let anyone know” (2–11-11). Even though these women were able to anonymously write about their abortion on this website, they felt muted by their loved ones because of the centripetal discourses of shame and embarrassment associated with abortion.

## Discussion

A national study that assessed women’s support for and interest in alternative models of abortion provision found that about half of

U.S. women are supportive of and nearly one-third are interested in medication abortion (Biggs et al., 2019). The growing interest and practice in this type of abortion provision warrant scholars to understand women’s experiences. Our study is the first in the U.S. to conduct a case analysis of women’s online blogging narratives about having had a medication abortion. We focused on understanding the discursive dynamics and contradictions that influenced and shaped women’s talk about their own experiences. Our analysis rendered four sites of dialectical tension: *only choice* vs. *other alternatives*, *unprepared* vs. *knowledgeable*, *relief* vs. *regret*, and *silence* vs. *openness*. Each site of struggle characterized a different stage of women’s medication abortion narrative: the decision, the medication abortion process, after-abortion identity, and the general stigmatizing silence associated with abortion.

As other scholars have noted (Kimport & Doty, 2019), we found that women relied upon language choices that aligned with the existing ideological frameworks from both the Right to Life and Right to Choice movements. For instance, some women used the words “fetal tissue,” while other women used the word “baby” when referencing their pregnancy. Women also explicitly mentioned distal already-spoken messages from both movements about how they were told “it’s just a pill” or “I’ve killed my baby.” Such language choices are not idle linguistic distinctions, but rather indicate a woman’s awareness of the different semantics and terminology surrounding the larger cultural narratives about abortion. This awareness was particularly evident when women discussed the overarching silence stigmatizing one’s abilities to openly talk with family and friends about their medication abortion experience. Thus, women’s talk about their own personal experiences, their justification for having an abortion, and their own sense-making after the medication abortion were shaped by the available heuristics and frames from larger cultural discourses and political movements (Kimport & Doty, 2019).

Cultural narratives of abortion are powerful and construct meaning and truth (Ludlow, 2008). While a woman’s personal story about her medication abortion is individual and now occurs in a more private setting (e.g., at home), this experience remains social and political, defined, and reified by larger cultural narratives and semantics (Beynon-Jones, 2017; Cockrill & Nack, 2013). The sexual liberalism script that reflects positive attitudes toward nontraditional sexual behaviors influences individual’s attitudes about abortion (Tokunaga et al., 2015), as well as their own narratives about medication abortion. We found evidence of these larger discourses within women’s talk about their own medication abortion, and in particular, their rationale for their decision, their description of the medication abortion process, their reflections on their identity after the abortion, and the overall stigmatizing silence resulting in a muted voice and the public illegitimacy of their own narrative. For instance, many of the justifiable reasons recounted by women in this case study for having an abortion align with the centripetal discourses of the Right to Choice movement regarding bodily rights and a woman’s freedom of choice. Among women having abortions in the U.S., finances and lack of readiness are the most commonly cited reasons for choosing abortion (Finer et al., 2005).

The presence of larger cultural narratives can result in dialectical tensions as one seeks to construct her own abortion narrative and considers disclosing that narrative to others. In

particular, many women described experiencing both relief and regret after their abortion. Historically, these two emotions have been juxtaposed and positioned as binary emotions that are socially and politically aligned (Ehrlich & Doan, 2019). The Right to Choice movement discourse aligns with the notion that abortion proffers emotional relief, whereas the Right to Life movement discourse positions itself with abortion resulting in regret. This polarized alignment and framing results in both movements speaking different languages and never fully listening nor engaging with the other (Wiederhold, 2014). One proposed origin of this framing dates back to the legal reasoning of the 2007 U.S. Supreme Court case *Gonzales v. Carhart*, where the federal partial-birth abortion ban was upheld. However, our analysis of women's narratives post-medication abortion exposes the complex duality of these two emotions often being experienced in tandem, as opposed to being simplistic binaries. The either-or, unidimensional script from both the Right to Choice and Right to Life movements – abortion provides either relief or results in regret – fueled a sense of tension for many of the women as they processed their identity after the abortion and considered openly disclosing those private experiences with others. Thus, these women's narratives illustrate that one's individual experiences with having had a medication abortion may result in a both/and: initial relief coupled with later regret. A reliance upon political movement discourses to construct one's own narrative may continue to marginalize or invalidate one's own private medication abortion experience when the larger scripts remain politically charged and polarized (LaRoche & Foster, 2018).

The stigma and risk that characterize the topic of abortion are influenced and shaped by the larger centrifugal discourses from both the Right to Choice and Right to Life movements (Beynon-Jones, 2017; Cockrill & Nack, 2013). For example, Cockrill and Nack (2013) found that women seeking an abortion often attempt to manage the stigma of abortion through non-disclosure, stating their reasons for having an abortion as "exceptional" and necessary, or condemning the Right to Life perspectives about abortion. In a different study on Southside Chicago African-American adolescent females, the majority of sexually active teens never talked with their parents about the topic of abortion, and almost 20% expressed fears of harm or eviction if their parent were to learn of an abortion in their past (Sisco et al., 2014). In our case study, we found that women also experienced stigma, silence, and fear that led them to remain private and/or secretive with certain individuals throughout their medication abortion experience. Silence before or during the medication abortion process resulted in women experiencing additional challenges later on with talking openly about one's experiences. Altogether, these findings align with communication scholars who have found that when private health information disclosures are deemed as being threatening or stigmatizing, one's private health information remains concealed (Baxter & Akkoor, 2011; Ebersole & Hernandez, 2016). This is important because secrecy of one's abortion is associated with poorer coping (Major & Gramzow, 1999; Major et al., 1997), and may result in further isolation and lack of social support from others (Cockrill & Biggs, 2017).

Recent movements such as Shout Your Abortion and #YouKnowMe have tried to dispel the stigma and silence surrounding abortion. However, these movements remain politically aligned and purport the "American Dream" abortion narrative: I was able to go to college/graduate/get a good job due to my abortion. These more recent public narratives frame abortion as a restitution or quest experience (Frank, 1995), where women are portrayed as being able to return to normalcy and good health, or regard their abortion story as one part of their personal journey that they were able to overcome. While such discourses were evident in some women's blogs and have been shown to reduce abortion stigma when openly disclosed (Cockrill & Biggs, 2017), many women's narratives within this case study characterized chaos narratives (Frank, 1995) where the abortion experience interrupted their daily lives and left them feeling out of control. Most notably, over 50% of the sample reported that the father to their child or other family members used negating language as a means to justify a woman's need for an abortion, albeit her own desires to keep her baby. In addition, 75 women (77%) regretted their decision, and 37 women (38%) reported struggling with mental illness and suicidal thoughts after the abortion. While previous scholarship has also found evidence of some women experiencing negative outcomes after an abortion due to a lack of decision-making power and limited social support (Kimport et al., 2011), as well as possible significant relationships between abortion and mental health problems (see Fergusson et al., 2013; Reardon, 2018), these centrifugal discourses remain muted and marginalized in the U.S. abortion debate.

### **Limitations and directions for future research**

As with all scholarship there are limitations. Most notably, there is a lack of generalizability due to the limited scope: we only analyzed women's medication abortion narratives anonymously posted to one website. However, it is important to note that the purpose of this project was to make analytic generalizations based on gathering an in-depth descriptive understanding of these women's medication abortion narratives. Second, all qualitative case studies are limited by the sensitivity and integrity of the investigators. We attempted to surmount this obstacle by having three qualitatively trained female researchers who completed independent coding and collectively participated in the contrapuntal analysis process. Third, case study research is criticized for not having a clear set of systematic procedures (Yin, 2014). To address this concern, we sought to clarify and provide transparency with the methodological techniques used. Fourth, the anonymity of women's blog submissions to the website did not allow us to gather and report the social demographics of the women who anonymously shared their abortion narratives, which again hinders the generalizability of our findings. Finally, the population of women who write an anonymous post about their abortion experience may be different from those who do not.

All of these limitations provide avenues for future research. Most importantly, this single case study demonstrates the need for a broader, pluralistic, mixed-method research strategy that



assesses women's medication abortion narratives, particularly given its increased popularity amongst women seeking this type of abortion provision. Such research could interview women who have had a medication abortion, as well as use surveys to assess different variables such as demographic factors, health literacy, and privacy management strategies employed when talking about one's medication abortion.

## Conclusion

In sum, our findings show that the medication abortion experience is rife with tension and contradiction. This complexity and duality are not evident in much of the larger cultural discourses and political debates about abortion. Many women in this case study noted that their decision to have a medication abortion was not a flippant decision or an easy choice where women remained unscathed. Women's narratives about their medication abortion experience were complex, and no singular narrative fully encapsulated or defined what women experienced during and after their medication abortion. Therefore, it is critical to transcend the silence in order to expose both sides of the debate and understand how these larger discourses influenced women's personal language choices when constructing their own abortion narrative and anonymously sharing it with others online. The tensions and dialectical struggles experienced after having a medication abortion and attempting to share it with others remain silent from public discourse and debate (Hallgarten, 2018). Presently, this silence positions one's abortion story as an either-or, binary experience that is politically aligned with one movement or another. The larger discourses prevalent within both the Right to Life and Right to Choice movements impact the liminality of women who are contemplating a medication abortion and affect their own narrative reconstruction and sense-making after their private medication abortion.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Chuck Donovan, Michaelene Fredenburg, and Genevieve Plaster for their support and assistance throughout the entire research process. We also want to thank Caroline Funk for her assistance with data analysis. In addition, we would like to recognize the women, who through their own accord and as separate from this research study, chose to publicly share their story online.

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