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Persuasive impact of one-sided videos on reasoning about abortion

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Abstract

A study was conducted to assess the volatility of college students' reasoning about abortion. It is widely believed that individuals' views on this controversial issue have crystallized and are resistant to persuasion. The study investigated the persuasive impact of an opposing argument on subjects' current beliefs on the abortion issue. Thirty-three unpaid students of either gender at a private liberal arts college were shown a one-sided video on abortion presenting either the pro-life argument or the pro-choice argument. Subjects were Christians of various denominations. Abortion attitude was measured before and after the video using the Reasoning About Abortion Questionnaire (Parson, Richards, and Kanter, 1990). A gain/loss score was calculated for each subject to represent the degree and direction of attitude change. The results suggested that the videos had greater impact on liberal Christians (Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians) than on conservative Christians (Baptists or Catholics). A positive gain-score for the pro-choice video group (M = +8.09) and a negative gain-score for the pro-life video group (M = -15.13) suggested that each video helped to shift the viewers' reasoning in the direction it advocated. Each video had persuasive impact on viewers but the persuasion was asymmetrical. A significant (video x test) interaction, $F(1, 31) = 59.523$, $p < .001$ was obtained. It was concluded that college students' reasoning on abortion is less rigid than has been previously suggested, and that students respond to persuasive appeals.

Abortion is one of the most divisive issues in American society today and it remains the most perplexing and intractable moral problem of our times (Sachdev, 1985). In the wake of the Roe v. Wade (1973) decision, pro-lifers and pro-choicers have split the country in a moral and legal uproar. The two sides are firmly set in their beliefs in that abortion is either an immoral act comparable to murder, or that abortion is an important individual option for women. Since the landmark Supreme Court ruling, American women have had an estimated 23 million abortions (Weston, 1990). With the ruling of Webster v. Reproductive Health Services (1989), the locus of the abortion debate has shifted from the courts to the state legislatures. Abortion is now the hottest issue on the agendas of many state legislatures. This court ruling has resurrected the controversy, further dividing the nation.

The right to life philosophy is based on three interrelated beliefs: that the fetus is a person, that abortion is murder, and that only God is entitled to make such life and death decisions (Parsons, Richards, & Kanter, 1990). Pro-lifers argue that life begins at conception, or, at the very least, in the first trimester. The strictest pro-life position states that abortion is never justified, with the possible exception when the woman's life is endangered by the pregnancy (Kyes, 1990).

The alternative point of view is the pro-choice position. This viewpoint is also based on three interrelated beliefs: that human life begins at birth, that the fetus is an appendage of the mother, and that the abortion option is essential to women's right to self-determination (Parsons, Richards, and Kanter, 1990). Knutson (1973) found that those who are most favorable toward abortion believe that human life begins at birth or even later. The pro-choicers believe that choosing to have an abortion is a highly personal decision that cannot be legislated.

At the heart of the moral dispute is the question of whether a fetus is a person or merely a mass of formless tissue (Tribe, 1990, pp. 113-138). Although prenatal medicine has made great technological advancements in recent years, science has been unable to resolve this issue. To a
large extent, one’s views of abortion are a matter of religious belief. One’s religiosity, as measured by church attendance, has been found to be strongly related to abortion attitudes (Finlay, 1981). Liberal Christians tend to support abortion rights and they construe abortion in personal terms (Knutson, 1973). The Presbyterian Church declared that although abortion should not be used as a form of birth control, the decision to terminate a pregnancy must remain with the individual and be free from governmental interference (Weston, 1990). Likewise, the Methodist Church, Episcopal Church, and Christian Scientists have developed a similar stance on the issue.

"The Christian Church says human life is a gift from God, that it is something He has made, that it exists by His providence, and that as a result, it is an offense against God to destroy human life at any point during its development" (Noonan, 1970, p. 159). Conservative Christians, such as Baptists and Catholics, agree with this expressed viewpoint. Southern Baptists strongly object to abortion except when necessary to save the mother's life. Many favor government action to restrict or outlaw abortion. The Pentecostals adopt a similar stance (Weston, 1990). They base their views on several Biblical verses citing a fetus as a person. The Catholic Church takes a similar position. According to Zagono (1984, p. 173), Catholic theological doctrine consistently opposes abortion.

The major goal of this study was to investigate the impact of an opposing argument on the subjects' current beliefs on the abortion issue. It was hypothesized that the videos would more strongly influence liberal Christians than conservative Christians. Wright and Rogers (1987) found that affiliations with conservative churches related to participants' attitudes. Those who were members of anti-abortion churches had significantly more conservative attitudes toward abortion than those who were not.

It was also hypothesized that a video firmly presenting a one-sided stand on the abortion issue would alter subjects' present standing regarding attitudes toward abortion. An interaction (video x test) was expected. This interaction states that the strength of attitude change produced by the video interacts with the viewer's prior beliefs, with liberals being more persuadable than conservatives.

**Method**

**Subjects**

Undergraduate psychology students at a church-related private college served as subjects. The subjects were not paid for participation in the study, but received extra credit or met a course requirement for participation. The subjects had normal hearing and eyesight and spoke English as a native language.

The 33 subjects were 9 male and 24 female students. Subjects ranged in age from 16-21, and the mean age was 18.8 years. All subjects were Protestants except for one Catholic. The Protestants were split into two groups: conservatives (Catholics and Baptists) and liberals (Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians).

**Materials**

The RAQ is a 20-item scale developed to measure attitudes regarding abortion. The items on this scale assess approval or disapproval as well as reasoning about abortion, rather than simply measuring attitudes toward abortion. The format of the questionnaire required subjects to indicate their views on 5-point Likert scales that ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." High scores on the RAQ revealed pro-choice attitudes whereas low scores revealed pro-life attitudes. Ten personal items and ten moral items were included in the questionnaire.

Subjects were shown either of two thirty minute color videos which presented a strongly partisan viewpoint on the abortion issue. A video produced by the Fund for the Feminist Majority presented the pro-choice viewpoint. This video, entitled *Abortion for Survival*, featured brief interviews with women who
explained their pro-abortion views and how those views related to their individual experiences. The other video, *The Silent Scream*, was obtained from Lifeline, a pro-life organization. This video program had minimal narration but featured graphically shocking close-up film footage of the dismemberment of a mature fetus during a third trimester late abortion. Both video programs were shown on a standard color VHS video cassette television system.

**Design and Procedure**

The experimental arrangement was a two-group before-after research design. The subjects were randomly divided into two groups and were taken to two different classrooms. They were given instructions for completing the questionnaire and were told that all information would remain confidential. In addition, subjects were asked to indicate age, sex, and religious denomination on the questionnaire. After responding to each item on the pre-test, subjects were shown one video program presenting either the pro-life or pro-choice perspective. After viewing each film in its entirety, the RAQ was re-administered.

**Results**

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the RAQ scores revealed a significant (video x test) interaction, $F (1, 31) = 59.52, p < .001$. Simple effects tests of pre- and post-test scores were evaluated for the groups that viewed each video. Results revealed significant changes within each group: $F (1, 31) = 53.43, p < .001$ for the pro-life video and $F (1, 31) = 12.56, p < .005$ for the pro-choice video. Random assignment of subjects to the two groups should have produced equivalence on the pre-test measure of abortion reasoning prior to exposure to the videos; this prior equivalence was confirmed. There was no measured difference in abortion reasoning scores between the two groups prior to viewing the video, $F (1, 31) < 1.00$. The lack of group difference on pre-test means indicated that the random assignment procedure was unbiased.

The persuasive impact of the videos was evaluated by comparing before-after gain/loss mean scores between the two groups. This comparison showed that each video program succeeded in shifting viewers' attitudes in the direction favored by the video. Subjects who viewed the pro-choice video became more liberal in their abortion reasoning. The opposite was found for subjects who viewed the program which opposed abortion. A simple effect analysis revealed a significant difference in the direction of attitude change between the two program groups, $F (1, 31) = 8.740, p < .001$.

As shown in Table 1, the mean pre- and post-test scores for both life and choice groups were calculated and compared for the two different religious categories (liberals and conservatives). High scores on the RAQ revealed pro-choice attitudes whereas low scores denoted pro-life attitudes.

**Table 1**

*Mean Pre- and Post-test RAQ Scores for Both Groups Viewing the Persuasive One-Sided Videos*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>Gain/loss score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pro-life Group</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberals</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>-18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>-11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pro-choice Group</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberals</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>+8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>+7.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the pro-life group the liberals initially were very pro-choice, yet after viewing the video their attitudes changed...
ABORTION VIDEO

Figure 1. Mean pre- and post-test scores for pro-choice and pro-life groups before and after viewing the video.

greatly toward pro-life. The conservative group had previous pro-life views before the video. However, their scores on the post-test showed that the video boosted their pro-life attitude. In the pro-choice group the liberals strengthened their attitude after viewing the video. The conservatives also changed their attitudes toward the pro-choice arguments.

Discussion

The results obtained from this study support the hypothesis that the video program did change the subjects' personal and moral reasoning about abortion. Perhaps because conservative Christians attribute their abortion attitudes to Biblical scriptures, their attitudes are more crystallized and less susceptible to change than are the liberals' beliefs. The group difference in gain/loss attitude scores suggests that people are still apt to change their beliefs regarding such a controversial issue. However, this change may be a result of certain demand characteristics. That is, because of the before-after testing feature of the experimental design, subjects could easily determine the intentions of the study and then register changes in attitudes to conform to their perception of the project's goal. While this possibility exists, the authors believe that the post-test change reflects a genuine change in attitude, at least for short term intervals. Subjects with extreme RAQ scores on the pre-test would be expected to have the most intransigent or fixed beliefs on this issue, but they too showed change on the post-test measurement.

The obtained results are consistent with those of the Wright and Rogers' (1987) study. That is, members of conservative churches hold more conservative beliefs about abortion than those who are members of liberal denominations. This is shown by the less dramatic change in gain scores by the conservative Christians as compared to the liberal Christians for groups watching the different videos. According to Spees (1987), students hold progressively more conservative sexual beliefs and values than previously thought. The present study suggests that college students' attitudes on abortion are less crystallized than previously believed and those attitudes are easily persuaded, at least in the short term, by exposure to opposing arguments on the issue.

References


Authors' Notes

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Footnote

1. The validation of this scale has been completed. Sample copies can be obtained by writing to: Herbert C. Richards, Department of Educational Studies, Curry School of Education, Ruffner Hall, University of Virginia, 405 Emmet St., Charlottesville, VA 22903.