



Why It Matters That Abortions are Kept Secret in the United States

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In the United States, more recognized pregnancies end in abortion than in miscarriages. But Americans experience exactly the opposite. They say they know more women who have had miscarriage than abortions. Why is that – and how do such misconceptions influence public opinion about abortion rights? My research speaks directly to these issues, because I study the secrets that people tend to share with associates, or hide from them. The implications, I find, are far-reaching, because not knowing what is really going on with other people creates social misconceptions and freezes public opinion into unrealistic stands.

Secrets and Misperceptions

In everyday life, people hear details about the lives of others – such as friends, family members, neighbors, and co-workers – and they are, in turn, influenced by what they hear. But sometimes personal secrets are kept under wraps, changing everyone's perception of social realities.

Imagine two people living in the same social network, one who hears secrets and one who does not. Depending on the secrets they do or do not hear, these two otherwise similar people will experience their social world differently. For instance, one may have learned that the schoolteacher is being treated for mental illness and realize that the pharmacist served prison time as a young man. But another person in that same community who has not heard these secrets will mistakenly think she knows no one with a mental illness or a criminal record. She will perceive community realities differently and not be affected by knowing close at hand about mental illness or troubles with the law. When people do not know the actualities of personal lives around them, they end up with different attitudes about important social issues.

The Case of Abortion versus Miscarriage in the United States

I have explored the dynamics of secret telling, perceptions of community realities, and the impact on social attitudes by American experiences with abortions and miscarriages. According to the Centers for Disease Control and the Guttmacher Institute, more recognized pregnancies in the United States end in abortions than in miscarriages. At current rates, one in three American women will have an abortion at some point in her lifetime.

But the events Americans hear about do not match these realities. By a margin of 79 percent to 52 percent, more say they have heard about another person having a miscarriage than about a person who has had an abortion. I learned this by analyzing answers to the nationally representative American Miscarriage and Abortion Communication Survey of more than 1600 adults. Respondents were asked questions about their knowledge of their own (or their partner's) miscarriages and abortions – and they were also asked what they had heard about the experiences of other people in their social circles. Answers to the survey reveal that Americans share this kind of personal information very differently.

- People talk about their own miscarriages more often and with more people, but say less to fewer people about abortions they have had.
- Confidants who hear about abortions or miscarriages experienced by someone they know tend to pass along the stories about miscarriages more often and more widely.

Abortion Stories and Views about the Procedure

Not only are personal facts about miscarriage shared more widely than facts about abortion, those told about abortions tend to be people already known to believe that abortions are acceptable. By contrast, abortions are often kept secret from friends and associates known to be opposed to this procedure. This divergence has clear implications: People who think abortion rights should be restricted are less likely to find out that someone they know has had an abortion. U.S. opponents of abortion simply know less about what is really going on around them.

- Americans who believe abortion should not be legal under any circumstance are 21 percent less likely than those who think it should be generally available to have heard about others they know who actually had an abortion.
- People between “pro-life” and “pro-choice” camps – who believe abortion should be legal only in cases of rape, incest, or to save the pregnant woman’s life – are 12 percent less likely than supporters of general availability to have heard about abortions in their circles.

How can we be sure that these findings are solid? That it is not just that pro-life Americans are much less likely to know a woman who has had an abortion? The design of my study took that into account by controlling statistically for characteristics that shape social ties, including race, age, religion, political party affiliation, and whether respondents to the survey regularly attend religious services. Even after taking these factors into account, people’s prior attitudes about abortion still affected whether they heard about abortion secrets from their social associates.

Why Secrets Matter for Public Debates

Hearing – or not hearing – about abortion secrets makes a real difference. Survey respondents mostly said that their views about abortion had not changed in years, but when people did report a shift in attitudes, they often pointed to personal experiences as a cause. As a person who turned against abortion explained “I know of too many instances where abortion was used instead of contraception.” Another person who became more open to the procedure said “I am dear friends with many who have had abortions...I understand why many choose abortion.”

If sharing personal information can change attitudes, then my research about who tends to share abortion secrets – or hide them – helps explain why American public attitudes about the legality and appropriateness of this procedure have been frozen in place for decades. Women of all backgrounds have abortions, but pro-choice Americans are more likely to hear about the facts than Americans who are opposed to legalized abortion. Everyone thinks the social world is less diverse and complicated than it actually is – which hardly promotes tolerance or openness to new ideas. Abortion is just one of many contentious issues for which this is true.

Read more in Sarah K. Cowan, “Secrets and Misperceptions: The Creation of Self-Fulfilling Illusions.” *Sociological Science* 1 (2014): 466-492.