Culture as a discursive resource opposing legal abortion

Catriona Macleod\textsuperscript{a}, Nomakhosi Sigcau\textsuperscript{a} & Pumeza Luwaca\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} Psychology Department, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa
\textsuperscript{b} Psychology Department, University of Fort Hare, East London, South Africa

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Culture as a discursive resource opposing legal abortion

Catriona Macleod, Nomakhosi Sigcau and Pumeza Luwaca

Psychology Department, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa; Psychology Department, University of Fort Hare, East London, South Africa

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The notion of 'culture' features in the abortion literature to explicate, first, contestation of the meaning of abortion (as in the 'culture wars' about abortion), second, the normalisation of abortion in certain countries (as in 'abortion culture'), third, the response of women to abortion within a particular social milieu and fourth, cross-cultural variability in attitudes towards and experiences of abortion. What is missing is an exploration of how 'culture' may be deployed as a discursive resource to oppose legal abortion. In this article, we report on a study conducted in a rural area of South Africa. We conducted focus group discussions utilising hypothetical vignettes to stimulate talk. Although, inconsistencies were evident in participants' talk, in the context of cultural discussions, abortion was constructed as killing and inevitably destructive of cultural values and traditions. Abortion was equated with colonialisit interventions and as something that should be opposed in the preservation of culture. Furthermore, cultural opposition to abortion was rooted in fears around the breakdown of gendered and generational power relations. Examples of how culture may be used in everyday interactions to induce shame and negative experiences are also discussed.

Keywords: abortion; termination of pregnancy; culture; gender; generations

Introduction

The notion of culture is referred to in the literature on abortion in a range of ways. The term 'culture wars', deployed mostly in the United States, refers to the battle over the meaning of abortion and abortion legislation. Pederson (2007, p. 123), for example, discusses how '[r]eligion and medical science are caught in the politics and cultural wars about abortion', and Mouw and Sobel (2001) suggest ways in which polarisation in the culture wars over abortion opinion may be measured.

The term 'abortion culture' has been coined and refers to 'the widespread and deep-seated view that abortion is a 'normal' way of dealing with medical and socioeconomic hardships in personal and family life' (Karpov and Kaumläriäinen 2005, p. 13). This concept has been utilised to understand the high abortion rates mostly in Soviet and post-Soviet countries and Cuba despite the availability and state promotion of contraception (Bélanger and Flynn 2009).
Culture has also been used to understand women’s experiences of abortion within their particular social milieu. For example, Peterman (1998, p. 177) analyses the narrative of a Puerto Rican woman who had terminated a pregnancy, indicating how she tried ‘to figure out how to continue to embrace her family and her culture while rejecting the gender inequality within it’.

A number of cross-cultural analyses of abortion attitudes and experiences have been conducted. In this research, culture, attitudes and experiences are viewed as measurable variables. For example, Sahar and Karasawa (2005) used a combined model of attitudes to measure cross-cultural differences in attitudes to abortion amongst Japanese and American students. Rue et al. (2004) compared American and Russian women’s experiences of abortion utilising the Institute for Pregnancy Loss Questionnaire and the Traumatic Stress Institute’s Belief Scale.

What is missing from these accounts is how the notion of ‘culture’ may itself be used as a discursive resource in arguments concerning abortion. In other words, the strategic and political use of culture in opposing abortion has not been highlighted. In this article, we discuss how the notion of culture is deployed amongst villagers in the Eastern Cape of South Africa in discussions on abortion.

Context
In 1996 the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy (CTOP) Act replaced the Abortion and Sterilization Act of 1975 in South Africa. While access to abortion services was previously severely restricted, South Africa is now a country with very liberal abortion legislation. Currently, a woman may request a termination of pregnancy in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. No parental consent is required. After 12 weeks, a termination of pregnancy may be obtained under specified (relatively loose) conditions.

In many countries abortion is a publicly controversial issue that speaks to, and draws on, localised understandings of the role of women, the role of the state, the sanctity of life, society’s obligation to women and the right to privacy (Ferree et al. 2002). South Africa is no exception. Much debate accompanied the passing of the CTOP Act and there have been several legal challenges to the Act and its amendments. These controversies are embedded in a complex history of the practices of abortion and fertility control that intersected with racialised and gendered politics. For example, the introduction of colonialist medicine saw a progressive stigmatisation of abortion, the diminished use of traditional abortifacients and forced fertility control (via intra-uterine devices and sterilisation) for many black women (Bradford 1991).

Despite a significant decline in the maternal mortality associated with unsafe abortion as a result of the introduction of the CTOP Act, the social stigma attached to abortion, traditional moral values and fear of rejection by the community and partners continues to limit use of the service (Department of Health 2004).

Method
The research question driving the overarching study on which this article is based was: ‘What discourses do people from a rural setting in South Africa draw on when discussing issues relating to hypothetical cases of abortion?’ Focus group discussions,
which offer a distinctive method of collecting data through group interaction and discussion (Seale 2004), were considered appropriate given that the main focus of the project was on public discourses.

Fictitious vignettes were used to elicit discussion. In view of the potentially sensitive nature of discussions around abortion, the personal distance created by the vignettes was considered important. The vignettes were designed to sketch divergent scenarios regarding the context and reasons for an abortion. In the first vignette, a 17-year-old woman—in her final year of school and living with her parents and two sisters—finds out that she is pregnant. After consultation with friends, she decides to have an abortion. The second vignette presented the case of a 39-year-old woman, married for 17 years and living with her recently unemployed husband, their four children and her husband’s mother. The pregnancy occurs despite their use of contraceptives. After consultation with friends, they decide jointly on an abortion and the husband accompanies the woman to the clinic. Each vignette was interspersed with open-ended questions.

The questions and vignette were translated into isiXhosa and back-translated by an independent translator into English to check for linguistic and conceptual equivalence between the two versions. Minor alterations were effected as a result of this. The discussions were conducted in isiXhosa, the dominant language of the area, and facilitated by the second and third authors.

Purposive sampling was used. Eight focus group discussions were conducted with groups from three villages in rural parts of the Transkei area of South Africa. The Transkei is a former homeland of Apartheid South Africa that acted, along with other homelands, as a labour reserve for white capital. Owing to this history, the area is characterised by poor socioeconomic status and underdevelopment. The inhabitants are mainly Xhosa-speaking. The villages were selected on the basis that they are in the vicinity of a designated TOP clinic. Access to the communities was carefully negotiated with the traditional leaders.

Existing naturally forming groups in the villages were targeted on the basis that the discussions would be naturalistic in the sense of drawing on conversation between people who know each other. The groups were composed of: a women’s cooking group; a women’s local school feeding programme co-operative; a women’s burial society; a women’s sewing group; a women’s league group; a women’s youth society; a men’s bakery group and a men’s local soccer club. We had some difficulty locating naturally forming men’s groups, probably owing to the migrant labour patterns that continue to be a feature of the area. The groups, other than the youth society, were not age specific and any naturally forming group was utilised regardless of age dynamics. Ages ranged from 18 to 52 years.

Ethical clearance was obtained at both universities at which the researchers work. Participation in the focus group discussions was entirely voluntary and participants were informed that they might withdraw at any time. Participants were paid for their time. However, they were only made aware of this at the end of the discussion so as to obviate any potential for participants to feel coerced into participating (especially as the villages are relatively poor). Focus group discussions were held in available, convenient venues, including schools and people’s homes. Ground rules concerning shared confidentiality were set up at the outset of each group discussion.

The discussions were tape-recorded and permission to do this was sought from participants. Transcription and translation took place simultaneously. The validity of this process was cross-checked and confirmed by an independent
bilingual colleague. Pseudonyms are used in the presentation of results. The sex of the speaker (male or female; M or F) is indicated in brackets after their pseudonyms.

Data were analysed using discourse analysis, specifically the method outlined by Parker (1992). He specifies seven basic criteria and three auxiliary criteria for identifying discourses. These are: a discourse is realised in text; a discourse is about objects; a discourse contains subjects; a discourse is a coherent system of meanings; a discourse refers to other discourses; a discourse reflects on its way of speaking; a discourse is located in history; discourses support institutions; discourses produce power relations; discourses have ideological effects. Our analysis focussed specifically on the objects (abortion and culture) constructed in participants’ talk, the coherent system of meaning attached to these and the power relations implicit in deploying a cultural discourse.

**Analysis**

Despite the fact that abortion was constructed variously as killing, being culturally unacceptable, and a source of shame, contradictions and conditional acceptance of abortion were evident in the participants’ talk. For example, participants spoke positively of the reduced number of abandoned babies and of deaths from unsafe abortion since the introduction of the CTOP Act. They agreed that abortion was a suitable option under particular circumstances, such as rape, economic hardship and needing to complete school. Thus, their opposition to abortion was not consistent or unfailing.

Nevertheless, when culture was referred to an inevitable opposition was invoked. Abortion was depicted as leading to the destruction of culture and to the erosion of established gender and generational relationships.

**The destruction of ‘culture’**

In discussing the legalisation of abortion in South Africa, participants spoke repeatedly of the destruction of ‘culture’, ‘values’ and the ‘nation’.

*Extract 1*

Nandi (F): Abortion is going to destroy our culture. The government has given our children permission to kill.

*Extract 2*

Harriet (F): I think that the government is going to destroy our nation and our culture.

*Extract 3*

Nombeko (F): I know that this is legal but it is not acceptable culturally because it is killing.

In these extracts, abortion is constructed as killing. This is set in opposition to ‘cultural’ values, which are implicitly depicted as preserving life. The juxtaposition of abortion as killing and culture as the preserver of life implies that resistance to abortion is essential to the maintenance of cultural values and the nation.

In Extract 4, Ntombo locates the destruction of culture within colonialism.

*Extract 4*

Ntombo (F): Our culture says our children must be inspected [this refers to virginity testing – see later discussion]. Abortion is not among black people’s value system. It is
for white people. It came with white people and it is for whites only and not for us. By allowing abortion, the government is going to destroy our values. We have lost our traditions and customs and this is leading to disaster.

Postcolonial writers have noted the utilisation of notions of culture and indigeneity to resist colonialist interventions. In this, an appeal to shared history and origins is utilised to oppose colonial representations and practices (Parry 1996). In the extract above, Ntombo appeals to lost traditions and customs to oppose abortion.

Given the extensive media coverage of the transition to democracy in 1994 and of the national and local elections since then, Ntombo would in all likelihood be fully aware that the government to which she refers is the democratically elected (mostly black) government. Under the Apartheid, white government, abortion legislation was extremely restrictive. Prior to official Apartheid, colonial medicine and racialised politics undermined the administration of traditional abortifacients which, while not uncontroversial, was relatively common (Bradford 1991). Ntombo, nevertheless, invokes the notion of colonialist intrusion as promoting abortion and thus undermining black culture. In a complex rhetorical move, she deploys the notion of indigeneity and common cultural history, while simultaneously positioning the government, albeit black, as furthering white colonialist aims. Abortion is constructed as a colonialist tool that, along with other colonialist interventions, destroys African traditions and customs.

The destruction of gendered and generational power relations

Further analysis of the data revealed that participants’ cultural opposition to abortion was rooted in fears around the breakdown of gendered and generational power relations.

Extract 5
Tandeka (F): If you are married, our culture does not allow you to abort your husband’s child. People will say you have committed adultery, which is why you do not want to keep this child.

Extract 6
Ntando (F): Even if it was done when it was illegal, people hid it. Women feel that the government has come to destroy our values and culture. Although it was happening, it was not done in public. Now we are moving away from white weddings as boys are going to find it hard to trust these children.

Ntombo (F): I support Ntando. These children have got a lot of rights but not responsibility.

Harriet (F): …Now it’s no longer done secretly. This is promoting promiscuity.

Extract 7
Esther (F): It goes back to what we said earlier on about our culture. If they were from a different culture, they will still be together, but in our culture, I do not think that the man would love her after what she did.

Extract 8
Mziwakhe (M): They are married and old. What will they tell their children when they find themselves in a similar situation? They will not be able to tell a teenage girl to keep the child, yet she [the protagonist in the vignette] had an abortion.
Bafana (M): I agree with this. What will happen if their children ask them about abortion? It is wrong. They are married. It is against our culture and therefore a disgrace.

Extract 9
Tabo (F): I think women are worried because children are telling them that the law gives them permission to get pregnant and do an abortion.

Zodwa (F): They see the law or government that does not care for the future of the young generation. Parents are sad as they think that they do not know their children anymore. A parent will think that her child is still a virgin not knowing that she has done many abortions.

Extract 10
Ntando (F): The way teenagers behave is disgusting. Previously, teenage pregnancy was low as teenagers respected their parents. Currently, they just don’t care. They do not know how to behave because they have rights. Teenagers were inspected before to see if they maintained their virginity. The government is against this as it is called child abuse. You tell your child that abortion is killing and the government says something else.

Kumar et al. (2009) argue that abortion transgresses the ‘feminine’ ideals of fecundity and the inevitability of motherhood. In Extracts 5–7 and 8, we see how the ability of a woman to disrupt these feminine ideals through legal abortion positions her as untrustworthy and tainted. Abortion is constructed as implying infidelity and a rupture of the marital relationship. The white weddings that imply virginity and the intactness of conjugal rights are, according to Ntando, becoming a thing of the past. Esther suggests that ‘in our culture’ a man could not love, trust or stay with a woman who had a termination of pregnancy. Harriet indicates that abortion leads to promiscuity. Mziwakhe notes that a couple who terminates a pregnancy undermines the meaning of marriage and become untrustworthy parents.

Discussions around generational issues clearly point to experiences of loss of control. The legal nature of abortion (it is done publicly—Extract 6) is constructed as allowing young people to act in ways that are inimical to the older generation—being promiscuous, becoming pregnant, speaking back to parents, and being irresponsible. The notion of rights, which is central to the CTOP Act, is constructed as subverting reasonable control over the younger generation and as disempowering parents. An appeal to the ‘future’, a notion that occupies the signifier ‘youth’ in a range of political ways, is made to illustrate the unreasonableness of the CTOP Act.

In Extracts 4, 9 and 10, we can see an interesting intersection of virginity and abortion. Virginity testing involves a formalised ritual in which female elders examine young women to ascertain whether their virginity is intact. It has become a highly charged area of debate specifically in terms of ‘the tension between the politics of culture and the rights of women and girls to equality, privacy and sexual autonomy’ (George 2008, p. 1451). The controversy surrounding virginity testing is conflated in these extracts with abortion.

Culture and restricting access to abortion
In addition to being used to oppose abortion and to bolster particular gendered and generational power relations, ‘culture’ may be used to restrict women’s access to abortion. This is achieved through shaming and an appeal to negative consequences.
Extract 11
Tabile (M): The community will blame her because abortion is not accepted in the community. It is killing an innocent child.

Temba (M): The community will blame her. She knows that abortion is culturally unacceptable.

Extract 12
Esther (F): Yes, it will affect the mother and in our culture, I’m saying, in our culture these things lower the dignity of your home and the dignity of the parents.

Extract 13
Zodwa (F): She is going to be afraid to go to the hospital and tell the nurses that she has come to do an abortion. . . . Even the Bible is against abortion. Africans are raised according to religion, and scriptures tell us that, ‘Thou shalt not kill’.

Extract 14
Veronica (F): She will be guilty. Once you abort, you have killed someone. You are no different to a witch. She knows that this is a sin.

Extract 15
Thandiwe (M): During August a friend of mine had nightmares after he discovered that his girlfriend aborted their child. My friend started having nightmares about this. It became somehow connected with the ancestors and other things.

In Extracts 11 and 12, ‘culture’ is used to construct abortion as murder and as a sin. The repercussions of the cultural injunction against abortion are indicated as being individual stigma (Extract 11), familial stigma (Extract 12), fear of accessing services (Extracts 13), contravention of African Christian beliefs (Extract 13), guilt and association with witchcraft (Extract 14) and emotional difficulties (Extract 15). Thus, culture is utilised as a resource to restrict access through the construction both of the actual act of abortion (as killing) and of the consequences thereof.

‘Culture’ is interwoven here with both Christianity and African cosmology regarding the ancestors. Although, for the most part, ‘culture’ was deployed in a manner that implied timeless homogeneity, these extracts provide a glimpse into the hybrid and complex nature of understandings of ‘culture’ and religion in these villages. Despite these complexities, there is a commonality in the invocation of ‘culture’ and religious beliefs in terms of opposing abortion. While the relationship between religion and abortion politics is well recognised in the literature (cf. Minkenberg 2002), what we see here is the intermingling of religion and ‘culture’ in opposing abortion.

Conclusion
The notion of culture has been used in the abortion literature to describe conflict around abortion, the normalisation of abortion in particular settings, and differences in attitudes and experiences of abortion. In this article we trace how a discourse of ‘culture’ may be used to consolidate particular gendered and generational power relations with respect to abortion.

Yúdice (2003, p. 9) argues that ‘the role of culture has expanded in an unprecedented way into the political and economic . . . culture is increasingly wielded as a resource for both sociopolitical and economic amelioration’. In this article, we have shown how culture is used by participants as a resource to oppose abortion. An appeal is made to timeless, homogenous African ‘culture’ and values, which are
depicted as being under threat from the legalisation of abortion. Abortion is equated with colonialism, both of which are seen as inevitably leading to the destruction of African culture.

The ‘cultural’ opposition to abortion and the association of abortion with colonialism provides fertile ground for the discursive enactment of gendered and generational power relations. Women, and in particular young women, who terminate a pregnancy are positioned as untrustworthy, tainted and uncontrollable. The cultural values of parental authority, virginity and conjugal rights are depicted as being under threat. The association of abortion with opposition to virginity testing points to power relations around gender and generation being undermined by current policy and modern forms of behaviour.

Representations of ‘culture’ and of women dovetail with an injunction against individuals who undergo abortion. ‘Cultural’ responses are seen to induce individual and familial stigma, emotional difficulties, association with witchcraft and fear of accessing services.

In the light of these findings, we argue that ‘culture’ needs to be understood as a powerful discursive resource that may be utilised to restrict access to legal termination of pregnancy services. This is achieved by constructing abortion as contrary to African ‘cultural’ values, by defining abortion as disrupting conjugal and parental relations, and through ‘cultural’ shaming.

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