

Developing Principles for Research about Young Women and Abortion: A Feminist Analysis of Difficulties in Current South African Studies¹

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Introduction

Soon after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy (CTOP) Act of 1996, which legalised abortion for the first time, was passed. Since the introduction of the CTOP, a number of studies have been conducted on abortion in South Africa. Many have taken a health-related focus, but some research on young women and abortion has also been conducted, and it is to this (published) research that this article speaks. Two facts highlight the importance of this kind of research in the context of the abortion debate. Firstly, data from the Department of Health indicate that from 1997 to mid-2006, 12% of women undergoing terminations in the provinces in which age-related data are available were under the age of 18 (Department of Health: 2006). Secondly, the subsection of the Act allowing minors to request abortions without parental consent has caused some controversy. For example, the Christian Lawyers Association filed a suit in the Pretoria High Court in 2003, arguing that the above-mentioned subsection was unconstitutional. Their application was not successful.

The research conducted on young women and abortion is etched against a background of change and contradiction in young people's lives in South Africa. In addition to enabling legislation on termination of pregnancy, which is premised on the rights-based approach of the first democratically elected government of South Africa, various opportunities and challenges define the lives of young women. Specifically in relation to sexual and reproductive health, the Department of Health's National Adolescent Friendly Clinic Initiative aims to make family planning and other services more accessible and acceptable to young women (Dickson-Tetteh *et al.*, 2001). However,

HIV/AIDS and “safe sex” programmes define sex as dangerous and individual young women as responsible for close monitoring of heterosexual spaces. The Child Support Grant, shown to enable functional mothering (Case *et al.*, 2005), has sparked controversy in terms of providing perverse incentives for poor young women to conceive (a claim refuted by the research – Makiwane & Udjo, 2005). Young, black and poor women who conceive are, in particular, stigmatised and teenage pregnancy is in many respects racialised (Macleod & Durrheim, 2002).

In this paper I highlight some of the problems in the research conducted on young women and abortion in South Africa since the legalisation of abortion. The specific aim of the paper is, through this analysis, to draw out feminist principles that should be considered in this kind of research. My argument draws on postcolonial feminisms that theorise the multiplicity of oppression along gender and, *inter alia*, race, class, age and location lines (Macleod, 2006). The paper is premised on the assumption that, in a field as fraught with gendered, race and class politics as abortion, regardless of the method used, researchers need to inspect the ideological implications of their work, and to be vigilant about their scholastic practices, and any claims legitimately made.

To my knowledge, the ten articles featured in this paper represent all published research which focuses specifically on young women and abortion in South Africa following the legalisation of abortion. As such, they represent the body of “sanctioned” knowledge on young women and abortion, having gone through a peer review process. Two of the papers have been published in international journals². All the other studies were published in accredited South African journals³. Thus, the dominant focus has been on education or health. The studies can be placed into two broad categories: (1) those that explore the experiences of young women who have undergone a termination of pregnancy, and (2) those that investigate the views of the broader population on adolescence and abortion. A brief, factual description of each study appears in Appendix 1.

Based on my reading of these studies, the paper discusses feminist issues that arise with regard to research about young women and abortion. I first discuss the potential implications of how we conceptualise “adolescence”. Second, the language used to describe abortion and the “foetus” is inspected. Third, citation practices that mask ideological positions are criticised. Fourth, sampling issues pertinent to these kinds of studies are highlighted. Finally, the lacuna of comparative research and the potential for ascribing experiences to an abortion that may be a result of an unwanted pregnancy are highlighted.

How “Adolescence” is Conceptualised

Central to any understanding of adolescence and abortion is our theorising or, failing that, taken-for-granted assumptions concerning the nature of “adolescence”. In many of the articles reviewed here, statements of the nature of ‘adolescence’ were made as preludes to the study or, alternatively, as explanations for an observation. In other words, these statements did not emerge from the data but instead formed the taken-for-granted backdrop against which the problematic of young women and abortion were etched. A number of studies⁴ invoke a “transition” discourse of adolescence as a universal truth. Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001: 92) in fact state that “The adolescent’s affective development is unstable and variable in nature because they find themselves between the child and adult world”⁵. This “delicate” process, they state, can be disturbed by an abortion. The teenager who terminates a pregnancy is, in their words, confronted with a double developmental crisis – “adolescence” and abortion (the fact that two of the nine participants in their study were 22 years old and three 19 years old seems quite irrelevant to Geldenhuys and de Lange). Olivier *et al.* (2000: 213) and Olivier and Bloem (2004: 177) state that the person who terminates a pregnancy “is merely an adolescent”. Adolescence is seen as the period of life when major developmental changes take place “which challenge the child to make a transition from childhood to full adulthood” (Olivier *et al.*, 2000: 213). These “challenges” are naturalised and therefore rendered universal, as evidenced in the following statement of Olivier *et al.* (2000: 213): “It is quite normal that coping with the natural challenges of adolescence can be problematic for some adolescents”.

However, such transitional understanding is not self-evident or even necessary given the historical, social and cultural variability of what has been called “adolescence”. The construction of adolescence in the “West” as a separable developmental stage of transition is a relatively recent one. Compayré (1906)⁶ notes “A few lines by Aristotle [about adolescence], then nothing for 2000 years until Mr Stanley Hall’s 1300 pages”. Stanley Hall’s treatise on adolescence⁷ is famous for his theory that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny – that the transitional stage humans went through to move from primitiveness to civilization plays itself out in a similar form in the developmental transition of humans from childhood to adulthood. It was only at this stage that “adolescence” started to be seen in the Euro-American context as a time that required a moratorium on the assumption of adult

responsibilities, in contradistinction to the encouragement of young people in the 19th century to assume adult roles as soon as possible. Sociologically, this change in the understanding of young people's nature corresponded with the rise of mass schooling and the outlawing of child labour (Dubas *et al.*, 2003).

Caldwell *et al.* (1998: 137) stress the “underlying importance of different historical cultures in determining the nature of adolescence”. In Africa specifically, they argue that “adolescence” did not exist prior to colonisation. Rather the transition to adulthood took place through social mechanisms such as marriage and initiation practices. In other words, the achievement of adult status was not an individual matter, with the individual working through various crises and difficulties as is the premise of “adolescence as transition”, but was rather a social matter marked through social rituals. Indeed, through a range of colonial mechanisms such as schooling, the introduction of Christianity and an economy based on the exchange of money, the idea of “adolescence” has to some extent taken root. Despite these factors, there is currently great social and cultural variability in what is considered “adolescence”. For example, in an edited collection of research on youth in Africa, De Boeck and Honwana (2005: 1) stress that youth is a “plural and heterogeneous categor[y]”. Thus, while many young people may experience their lives in ways that echo the tenets of “adolescence” as defined by Stanley Hall and as taken up by various theorists in Psychology, many will not. Or, probably more accurately, young people will experience their lives in complex and contradictory ways, sometimes performing “adolescence” in the ways described above, and at other times in ways antithetical to these tenets.

Given these contradictions, setting our conceptualisation of young people at the “adolescence as transition” default becomes problematic. Yet, the deployment of a discourse of transition has potential effects. Firstly, the analytical lens is placed on the individual young woman who is developing according to a developmental blueprint. The context within which particular social interactions occur may be elided. For example, Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001), drawing on the “transition” discourse in which “lack” and “child-likeness” feature, indicate that apparently, the “adolescents” in their study were not always aware of the consequences of their sexual behaviour. This, they state, can be ascribed to a lack of information or misinformation. Sexual interaction is thus ascribed to the individual's lack or incompleteness. While it may be true that some young women lack information and awareness, ignorance and

lack of awareness cannot solely lead to intercourse or pregnancy. Heterosexual relations primarily take place within a gendered space. Thus, the gendered power relations within which sex occurs, and the potential for exploitation, coercion and violence need to be acknowledged. The literature on “teenage pregnancy” in South Africa has begun to highlight this latter aspect (Wood & Jewkes, 1997; Wood *et al.*, 1998).

Secondly, the discourse of transition, particularly if infused with notions of lack, creates the rationale for intervention and surveillance on the part of the adults/experts. This theme is taken up in the context of HIV/AIDS by Mitchell *et al.* (2004). They argue that the “politics of innocence” implicit in constructions of “childhood”, “youth” and “adolescence” excludes young people from the position of knower and in so doing legitimates certain kinds of interventions (e.g. the encouragement of abstinence) which may exacerbate their vulnerability to HIV infection. Four of the ten studies reviewed used their research findings (sometimes in a rather oblique way) to develop recommendations for interventions by experts (educational psychologists, educators, psychiatric nurses). By way of example, Olivier and Bloem (2004: 177) believe that the teacher “has to face the daily challenge to deal with the child in a variety of situations where the child is in need of meaningful accompaniment with regard to the complex world, characterized by changes in all spheres of life, fleeting contacts, superficial relationships, inadequate socialisation and insecurity in which the child is growing up”. In these recommendations, the educator or nurse remains invisible – the adult is assumed to be capable of, albeit challenged by, the task of accompanying or mentoring the “adolescent” into the realities of the adult world. The power relations implicit in this kind of “accompaniment” discourse and the potential, particularly in the area of abortion, for the infusion of the relationship with ideological injunctions are glossed over.

Naming Abortion and the “Foetus”

The way in which abortion and the “foetus” are spoken about will have a major impact on how the issue of young women and abortion is studied and the conclusions reached. While there has been significant debate in the international literature on these sorts of issues (Cannold, 1998; Smyth, 2002) careful reflection on the implications of referring to abortion and “foetus” in particular ways is lacking in the research under review. For example, Olivier and Bloem (2004: 178) state that the teachers who participated in their research

were “all employed at this school, where teachers were aware of the *problem* of abortions among adolescents, and which seemed likely to supply data “rich in information””. Slipped into a section concerning purposive sampling is an apparently innocent reference to the “problem” of abortion. To understand the implications of such a reference, it becomes necessary to replace “problem” with other terms which are more neutral such as “the ‘health issue’ of abortion” or even, the opposite of “problem”, “the ‘emancipatory potential’ of abortion”? Each of these pre-defines abortion in a different way and each has implications in terms of how researchers and participants understand and relate to the subject matter at hand.

One of the major controversies within the abortion debate is the status of the “foetus”. The most well known is the contest between Christian pro-life activists and pro-choice activists. The former argue that life begins at conception and that therefore the “foetus” is a person. The latter argue that the “foetus” is only potentially a life form and that separating the “foetus” from the mother’s embodiment makes little sense, especially as the “foetus” generally only becomes viable outside the womb from about 24 weeks or even later depending on the available medical technology. However, more subtle constructions are being highlighted in the literature, for example, Williams *et al.* (2001) discuss the various constructions of the “foetus” deployed by health care staff at a hospital in the UK. These included: person, patient, nobody, and commodity.

Given the centrality of the debate over the status of the “foetus”, the fact that it can be constructed in a number of ways, and the potential ideological implications of assigning a particular status to the “foetus”, researchers need to pay particular attention to the terms they use. In a classic text on abortion, Luker (1984) chooses to use the word “embryo” to avoid the implications of either a pro-abortion or anti-abortion stance. Nevertheless, “foetus” continues to be the term most commonly used in research. I choose to place “foetus” in inverted commas, thereby deploying, and simultaneously questioning the inevitability, of the signifier. This kind of careful thinking is lacking in some of the South African research on young women and abortion. One of the questions posed in the questionnaire administered by Kok (1999: 237) is “Has an unborn baby got the same right to life as you?”⁸. Geldenhuis and de Lange (2001: 95) refer repeatedly in their article to “die baba se vader [the baby’s father]” and indicate that a young woman’s decision to terminate her pregnancy is usually because “the baby has no reality for her [translated from

Afrikaans]”. Thus, in this article, the “foetus” is given the status of a fully formed baby, and parental status is conferred upon the young woman’s partner.

These seemingly minor slips have major implications. Firstly, within the discourse of rights which is so pertinent in the current South African constitutional context, denying a *person’s* rights is tantamount to a crime. The only answer available within this discourse to the question of whether another person (“the unborn baby”) has the same right to life as you is “yes”. It is little wonder that 86% of Kok’s respondents answered yes to his question, as the terms of possibility were set *a priori* by the ascription of personhood and the invocation of rights. Secondly, ascribing babyhood to the “foetus” allows for the positioning of a woman and her sexual partner as parents (e.g. Geldenhuys & De Lange, 2001). This implies certain duties and responsibilities that only the most neglectful would renege on. Furthermore, it would not be without justification if certain sanctions were brought to bear on the neglectful parents of a baby. Researchers need to be aware that implying, if only in an oblique way, that these duties and responsibilities and possible sanctions should form part of the discussion around abortion adds a particular ideological dimension to the discussion.

Masking Ideology Through Citation Practices

Research requires one to position oneself within a field of literature. Citing literature clearly serves a number of purposes, one of which is validation of particular findings, especially in qualitative research. Amongst the articles under review, Poggenpoel and Myburgh (1998: 733), for example, state that a “literature control was done to verify the results”. Mpshe *et al.* (2002: 71) and de Lange and Geldenhuys (2001: 248) use a “literature control” to “recontextualise data”. What is not alluded to in this rendition, however, is how citations can act as absent traces that potentially mask particular ideological positions. For example, Poggenpoel and Myburgh (1998), who self-label their research as “neutral”, use the Pro-Life Activist’s Encyclopaedia (Clow, 1995) to validate their claim that the partner of the young woman who has undergone a termination of pregnancy feels guilt and helplessness. This document, which, *inter alia*, equates abortion with the holocaust and calls homosexual groups “organised perverts on the march”, was first published in 1995 by the American Life League, a well-established and active anti-abortion group.

One assumes that Poggenpoel and Myburgh (1998) used the chapter on the “Impacts on Fathers [sic]” to validate their claim concerning the young

woman's partner. In this section of the Pro-Life Activist's Encyclopaedia, reference is made quite vaguely to "studies" with no citations. The tone instead is what one would expect of a fundamentalist pro-life activist group. For example, the authors state that "The impacts of abortion on the fathers of the preborn babies who go to their "little deaths" are largely ignored by hard-line pro-abortionists and the medical profession". Leaving aside the fact that this literature simply cannot serve as a validation of findings as it is not even a secondary source let alone primary research, the ideological content of the publication is clear. As such it serves the absent trace of an anti-abortion position, masked by the seeming neutrality of citation practices.

Sampling Issues

Abortion is a sensitive topic. Thus, women undergoing abortion may be viewed as a vulnerable population – although this in some ways perpetuates the (contested) view that abortion is necessarily deleterious. Because of the perceived vulnerability of this group, sampling in research that investigates women's responses to abortion tends to be convenience sampling. Of the studies reviewed here, only two – Kok (1999) and one aspect of Varga (2002) (neither of whom were studying women who had undergone a termination of pregnancy) – did not use convenience or purposive sampling. This is to be expected. Nevertheless, even within this kind of sampling, there are particular issues that need to be taken into consideration. One is period of gestation at the time of abortion and the other socio-political location.

The medical literature on abortion consistently differentiates between first trimester and second trimester abortions. The procedures recommended and medical management of cases are different, as are the potential medical outcomes (Huntington, 2002; Stubblefield *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, in the CTOP Act regulations (although perhaps not in reality), obtaining a second trimester abortion is substantially more difficult than obtaining a first trimester abortion. Second trimester abortions are granted under specified conditions whereas first trimester abortions are granted on request. Therefore, conflating women who undergo first trimester abortions with women who undergo second trimester abortions is problematic. Examples in which this kind of conflation occurs are the studies by Majopela-Batka and Schoeman (2003) and Mpshe *et al.* (2002). Although Majopela-Batka and Schoeman (2003) acknowledge that marital status and age may influence the emotional reactions of women who have terminated a pregnancy, they pay

little attention to gestation at the time of the termination in their sampling. Over half of the sample of women they interviewed had terminated their pregnancies after 12 weeks of pregnancy. Similarly, seven of the nine women interviewed by Mpshe *et al.* (2002) had terminated their pregnancies after 12 weeks. However, in both studies, no differentiation is made in the analysis between these women and those terminating their pregnancies in the first trimester. Although Majopela-Batka and Schoeman (2003: 146) indicate that their participants' reasons for requesting abortion "did not include risk to the mother's physical or mental health, the risk of giving birth to a genetically defected (sic) child, or pregnancy resulting from rape or incest", they (and Mpshe *et al.*, 2002) do not indicate the conditions (stipulated in the CTOP Act) under which participants in their second trimester at the time of abortion were granted a termination of pregnancy. In other studies, like de Lange and Geldenhuys (2001), information concerning gestation is simply missing, although the authors indicate that all the participants in their study had terminated their pregnancy in the first trimester.

Other than gestation, there are a number of complex, interweaving socio-political locations (e.g. race, class, language preference, educational status, geographical location or religious positioning of the participants) that need to be considered in terms of sampling and the kinds of conclusions that can be reached. In comparing the abortion experiences of Israeli women and Russian immigrants, Remennick and Segal (2001: 49) found that "dramatic emotional reactions are uncommon and, where present, are shaped by both *social context* and *concrete life circumstances*" (my emphasis). Hence, careful attention should be paid to spelling out the social context and socio-political location of the convenience sample of participants in order to situate the conclusions reached, something that has not always been done in the studies under review. The criteria for inclusion in Poggenpoel and Myburgh's (1998) study were: adolescent girl who had an abortion, her parents (if informed) and partner (if informed). However, no further information is provided on the axes of socio-political differentiation that feature strongly in South African social life. While language preference can be gleaned by the fact that the extracts from the interviews are in Afrikaans, the authors simply neglect to situate their results within the socio-political realities of these women's lives.

Describing a convenience sample carefully in terms of the socio-political axes mentioned above is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it provides the canvass against which we can attempt to understand young women's

responses to abortion. The day-to-day lives of young women in South Africa are fractured along the lines of race, class and locality, with vastly different access to resources, schooling, and opportunities being a key feature across these lines. Furthermore, the meanings of sexuality, pregnancy and fertility are disparate and take on local significance, as highlighted in the work of Preston-Whyte (1999) and Mkhwanazi (2004). Locating the findings of research within these realities is important in terms of increasing not only the scientific validity of the studies but also a nuanced and politically located understanding of young women and abortion.

Secondly, a careful description of convenience samples in terms of their socio-political positioning alerts us to the analytical conclusions that can be drawn. Yet, Geldenhuys and de Lange's (2001) study gives very little consideration to these issues. In the sampling section, we are told that they interviewed black adolescents. In the discussion section, we find that the young women they have interviewed have "inadequate" relationships with their parents. They mention, in a generalised way, that:

"In families where parents make a living as migrant labourers, the poor relationship can be further ascribed to the parents' absence that increases the possibility of poor communication, supervision, discipline and guidance" (Geldenhuys & de Lange, 2001: 94)⁹.

And yet there is no indication as to whether this statement holds for these particular young women. No information concerning their parents' occupational status is provided to the reader nor, as far as we can read, was it obtained from the participants. It is methodologically unsound to provide statements of "fact" that do not refer directly to your participant group. All the above statement achieves is to further pathologise the participants while glossing over the veracity of its relevance to the group under study.

Lacunae: Comparative Studies

In five of the studies under review, the experiences of young women who had undergone a termination of pregnancy were investigated. These studies took, for the most part, a phenomenological approach, with the aim of qualitatively describing the experiences of a small sample of participants. The results pointed to negative experiences, although some of the authors allude to some positive ones. While this kind of research is in and of itself methodologically sound, what is missing in South African research on young women and abortion is comparative data. We are thus still not any clearer about whether

the researchers' findings concerning the young women's relationships, emotions, decision-making, defence mechanisms, and moral standings hold true only for this group or whether similar findings would be found for older women who had undergone a termination of pregnancy or for young women who took their pregnancies to full term.

This, unfortunately, is true of research on abortion elsewhere in the world. Quinton, Major and Richards (2001: 492) bemoan the fact that "psychological literature currently contains no comprehensive, longitudinal, methodologically sound study that compares minor and adult women's psychological adjustment to abortion". Studies that compare groups of adolescents against each other are also few and far between, although the exception is Zabin *et al.* (1989), who followed 360 teenagers in the United States over two years after they had been interviewed when seeking a pregnancy test. These were divided into three groups: those who had a negative test, those who were pregnant and carried to full term, and those who were pregnant and had aborted their pregnancy. They concluded that those young women who had chosen abortion were doing as well as, and often better than, those who had carried to term or had not been pregnant.

Both these forms of comparative data (i.e. between teen-aged and older women and between teenagers who have different pregnancy outcomes) are important in honing our understanding of the experiences of abortion for young women. However, comparative studies that use age as a criterion have additional methodological problems to consider. Some studies such as Franz & Reardon (1992), have found that younger women react more negatively to abortion than older women. However, this does not necessarily mean that it is *age per se* that has led to these reactions. As Adler *et al.* (1998) point out, there are other variables confounded with age that may affect the relationship, one of which is marital status. Unmarried women are more prone to negative responses following abortion than married women. Whether this is owing to the potential increased emotional or economic support provided within a marital relationship is not clear. What is important to note here is that young women's possible negative reactions to a termination of pregnancy may have to do with these kinds of factors rather than age, as fewer younger than older women are married.

While researching the experiences of young women who undergo terminations of pregnancy is not problematic in itself, the process nevertheless involves a hidden danger. The lack of comparative data concerning the outcome of pregnancy (i.e. between groups of teenagers who conceive)

means that researchers may attribute experiences or effects to the abortion that may in fact be an artefact of an unintended and unwanted pregnancy. Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001) in fact note that one of the consequences of the abortion experience is mistrust in men:

"After the physical pain has been worked through, some of the adolescents experienced a feeling of relief ... After the feeling of relief, came a mistrust in men" (2001: 96)¹⁰.

They use the statements from two participants as evidence. One participant says that she does not ever want to be involved with a man, and the other states that she does not want to have a boyfriend until she has finished school. Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001) then verify their conclusion by quoting research in which women's feelings for their partners, their sexual lives and other aspects of their social lives weaken after an abortion. Hence, the analytical conclusion is that what Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001) construe as mistrust has been caused by the abortion and not the unwanted pregnancy. However, would these young women not have expressed a similar emotion had they taken their pregnancy to full term, given birth, and either kept the child or "given it up" for adoption? Without comparative data we cannot know.

Implications for Future Research on Young Women and Abortion

Abortion is, and in all probability will continue to be, a controversial issue. As indicated by the Christian Lawyer's Association's high court challenge of the subsection of the CTOP Act dealing with minors, these controversies take on even greater complexity where young women are concerned. Within this context, then, it becomes essential for researchers to be vigilant on the rigour of their research as well as the potential taken-for-granted assumptions and slippages that may occur. As seen in this article, this kind of vigilance and rigour has largely been lacking in current research on young women and abortion. The point of this article is not to disparage particular researchers or to suggest that their research has no value, but rather, through a process of analysing some of the difficulties encountered in the research, to draw lessons concerning research with respect to young women and abortion. So what are these lessons? I have divided these into two broad areas of consideration: political reflection and methodological carefulness.

Many of the studies¹¹ reviewed took an explicitly, self-labelled "neutral" approach. Others¹², while not explicitly stating that their research was neutral, imply this through their language and discussion of methodology. This assumption of neutrality is, in many respects, implicit in the canon of research

methodology employed by the researchers, ranging from the objective outsider position assumed in quantitative research¹² to the phenomenological method of bracketing that underlies many of the studies under review.

It is possible (although not necessary) for these kinds of methodologies to leave the researchers blind to the socio-political issues. In a review of phenomenological work conducted at Rhodes University, Painter (2005: 103) argues, that “phenomenological research practice, premised on [...] a strict adherence to an assumed methodological neutrality, treated the location from where it worked, an economically privileged white environment, as a neutral and transparent epistemological position”. Specifically, as shown in this article, the assumption of neutrality within research on young women and abortion may serve to disguise the infusion of the analysis with unexamined taken-for-granted assumptions concerning “adolescence”, abortion, and the “foetus”. Particular (circumscribed) understandings of “adolescence” may be treated as “fact” and the politics of abortion that is always already imbricated with gendered (and to a large extent racial and class) politics may be ignored.

We therefore need to engage in an ongoing process of political reflection in our research on young women and abortion, no matter what our chosen methodology is. This does not imply that researchers have to declare a pro-life or pro-choice position, as these positions represent a bifurcation that fails to capture the complexities of a politics of abortion. The politics of abortion collapses the private into the public and vice versa. Complex and contradictory ideologies of gender, motherhood, sexuality, religion, demography, and understandings of personhood and agency criss-cross public debate and personal reactions. For example, in their comparison of France and the United States, Husting and King (2005: 447) argue that “discourses on abortion are grounded in politics of nationalism. In the United Kingdom, Hopkins *et al.* (1996) show how psychological understandings are mobilised for political gain in the abortion debate. These complexities are part and parcel of any research on abortion. Instead of ignoring them, researchers need to engage in careful reflection that situates themselves and their work in relation to these complexities and that takes cognisance of the fact that writings, actions, practices and research on abortion are already carriers of political undertones.

In terms of research with young women and abortion, there are a number of specific issues I wish to highlight here. Firstly, we need to understand that the way in which we theorise adolescence has implications for how we position young women in relation to the termination of pregnancy. Adolescence may be understood theoretically in many ways. It is not a self-evident and homogenous

category of human development. Instead, it is experienced and practised in multiple ways, depending on context, “culture”, socio-economic status, location and gender, and within each of these, in contradictory ways. Setting the default mode as a “transition” discourse is indeed problematic. Although some young people may experience their lives according to the broad tenets of “adolescence as transition”, there is also enormous contextual variation in what constitutes youth. We should understand that conceptualising “adolescence” as transition potentially conceals the normalised end-product, allows for particular power relations to be explained as an individual “adolescent’s” lack, and allows for regulation of the lives of young women.

Secondly, the language we use should be constantly inspected in terms of its political and ideological consequences. Talking of abortion as a “problem” or of the foetus as a “baby” pre-defines what we are studying in a particular way. While there is no such thing as neutral language, vigilance concerning the implications of deploying particular signifiers is called for.

Thirdly, acknowledgement of the fact that the works we cite are inevitably steeped in the politics of abortion is necessary. Making the position of these works explicit, as well as our own position, is part of the political reflection in which we should engage.

In terms of methodological carefulness, we need to take cognisance of the following. We should be vigilant about what conclusions we can justifiably reach based on our methodology. In particular, we must be careful not to imply that a certain experience, perception, or reaction is caused by a young woman’s age or, alternatively, due to the abortion, when no comparative age related or pregnancy outcome data is available to verify such claims. The corollary to this is that researchers interested in studying young women’s experiences of abortion should consider designing age-related or pregnancy outcome comparative research. Moreover, we need to be rigorous in our understanding of the implications of our sampling. For example, we need to recognise that a first trimester pregnancy is not necessarily equivalent to a second trimester one. We need to acknowledge that the conclusions we can reach are circumscribed by the socio-political location of our sample.

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Appendix 1

De Lange and Geldenhuys (2001) interviewed nineteen teenagers undergoing a termination of pregnancy in the Eastern Cape. They used phenomenological interviews to collect the data but employed an ecosystemic perspective to analyse the experiences of these young women. Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001), utilising some of the same data, discuss the experience of black teenagers who are undergoing an abortion. Using a purposive sample, Mpshe, Gmeiner and van Wyk (2002) conducted an explorative, descriptive study of the experiences of nine black teenagers who had terminated a pregnancy. From this study, Gmeiner, van Wyk and Mpshe (2002) derive guidelines for the advanced psychiatric nurse in providing supportive counselling for these kinds of young women. Mojapelo-Batka and Schoeman (2003) studied black teen-aged women's moral concerns and emotional reactions to the termination of their pregnancy. They conducted interviews with seven women one day to three months post their abortion. The aim of Poggenpoel & Myburgh's (2000) research was to explore the teenage "girl's" and her partner's experience of an abortion and to describe the developmental implications of abortion for educational psychologists. Individual, phenomenological interviews were conducted with a purposive sample.

Kok (1999) investigated the reaction of matriculants to abortion soon after the promulgation of the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act. A questionnaire, which tapped knowledge, moral-ethical understandings, understandings of social and heterosexual relations, and opinions on the government's handling of the abortion issue, was administered to just under a thousand pupils in Gauteng and Mpumalanga. Olivier and Bloem (2004) explored the views of teachers regarding abortion amongst adolescents. They conducted focus group discussions with a purposive sample of teachers and subjected their data to descriptive analysis. Olivier, Myburgh & Poggenpoel (2000) researched the views "adolescents" have on the termination of pregnancy during "adolescence". They conducted focus group discussions with a purposive sample of Grade 9 teenagers. Varga (2002) used focus group discussions, narrative workshops, role playing, a survey and interviews to explore the role of abortion in young people's lives, its acceptability, why and how likely it would be that a young person would choose abortion, and the commonly used methods of abortion.

Endnotes

1. This article forms part of a larger project funded by the Johan Jacobs Foundation and the National Research Foundation. The author thanks Tracy Morison, Jateen Hansjee, Desmond Painter, Dave Edwards, and Lindy Wilbraham.
2. 'Studies in Family Planning' and 'Education'.
3. '*South African Journal of Education*', '*Health SA Gesondheid*', '*Society in Transition*', and '*South African Journal of Psychology*'.
4. Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001), de Lange and Geldenhuys (2001), Olivier *et al.* (2000) and Olivier and Bloem (2004).
5. Translated from Afrikaans.
6. Cited in Koops & Zuckerman (2003: 346).
7. Published in 1904.
8. Translated from Afrikaans.
9. Translated from Afrikaans
10. Translated from Afrikaans.
11. Mpshe, Gmeiner & van Wyk (2002), Olivier & Bloem (2004), Olivier, Myburgh & Poggenpoel (2000), Poggenpoel & Myburgh (1998).
12. de Lange & Geldenhuys (2001), Geldenhuys & de Lange (2001), Kok (1999), Varga (2002).
13. Quantitative methods were used by Kok (1999) and for part of Varga's (2002) study.