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Born Unwanted: The developmental effects of denied abortion

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Introduction

Recent events reported in the media cite a case of a young male who was wanting to have his girlfriend reconsider having an abortion of their unwanted child. This was reported to have had many legal and moral implications. It also raises the question of the psychological implications. What are the psychological effects of denied abortion on the unwanted child?

As of May 1987 countries which allow for legal abortion on request account for 39% of the world's population. 24% live in nations where it is either illegal for any reason or only narrowly permitted when it clearly affects the health of the woman.

In 1954 abortion was only legal in Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and Japan. Since then 30 other countries have changed their laws. What all this means is we currently have many people in the world who are a product of unwanted pregnancies and there are still many being born as such. Also it seems safe to assume that there are many parents who to some extent do not want a child but not to the degree of seeking an abortion. Furthermore there must be many mothers and fathers who do not wish to have a child but are 'forced' into having one because of pressures from family, friends and peers.

So does being a child of an unwanted pregnancy mean anything? Are there any psychological effects on the child? Over the years there has been some research on this and in particular of late. This article will show some of these results. [Taken from David et al, 1988.]

Results

This is a difficult area to research as there are many differing reasons for not wanting a child, and after the child has been born the parent's attitude may change, at times, dramatically. For instance if a woman requests, [and is refused], an abortion for 'external' reasons such as difficult social and economic circumstances, poor housing, etc., the changes of accepting the child after birth are greater than if the reasons are deeper. These could be a negative attitude to the father, rejection of the child per se, disturbance of the female and maternal identity etc. Despite this there have been some research findings which are conclusive. Children of unwanted pregnancies compared to those of wanted pregnancies:

Frequently find it more difficult to cope with stress and frustration, [particularly boys]. The basic biological needs of these children were met less satisfactorily [i.e. there was less amount of breastfeeding in this group]. This lead to more vigorous behaviour to seek gratification and to assert themselves strongly. This lead to certain behavioural patterns which became ingrained over time and are/were problematic. Unconditional acceptance of the child by the mother is seen as an important prerequisite for sound emotional development. In this group there is little evidence of direct rejection of the child by the mother.

However, the acceptance was found to be "incomplete, ineffective, and ambivalent, leading to more or less deviant interactions, less empathy of the child's needs, less understanding of his/her behavioural signals, less warm emotional interchange of stimuli, etc." [p. 85]

This incomplete acceptance leads to a condition of 'sub deprivation'. The consequences of emotional deprivation and psychological poverty that is found in some institutional environments was found to occur in these children but in a subdued and less dramatic form.

These results apply to children in the stage of later childhood, and it appears that some of these alter as the child moves into adolescence and adulthood. In addition it must be realised that a mother who originally has a rejecting attitude to her pregnancy does not mean that she will raise a child with behavioural difficulties. The assumption that an unwanted foetus becomes an unwanted child is not necessarily true. After birth many a maternal attitude will alter. Alternatively not every woman denied an abortion appears to be born into a potentially handicapping situation" [p. 86].

Conclusion

A number of factors have not been considered in the research to date. The first being the role of the father. If the father is present what role does his love or lack of it play on the child's development.

Secondly, it is very easy from these results to blame the mother for the negative effects on the child from an unwanted pregnancy. This of course is most unfair on the mother, and blaming does not help anyone, mostly the child. However these results do raise further moral questions.

All people, governments, religions and other organisations are fully entitled to their Parent ego state beliefs about the sanctity of life and abortions. If however, any of these bodies tell others that they should not have abortions, or actually deny abortions then are they not morally obliged to pick up the 'tab' for such an activity. In the case of transactional analysis that 'tab' would include the provision of counselling/education to mothers and fathers about the potential problems of unwanted pregnancies and later on to the offspring of such pregnancies.

References

David, H.P., Dytrych, Z., & Schuller, V. 1988. *Born unwanted: Developmental effects of denied abortion*. Avicenum, Czechoslovak Medical Press: Prague.

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