

Pro-Voice:

A Framework for Communicating Personal Experiences with Abortion

By Aspen Baker and Carolina De Robertis

Since the Presidential election, the nation is wrestling to understand the meaning of our moral values, and pro-choice leaders and organizations are struggling to find new messages that resonate with voters. Where once the idea of “choice” was thought to relay the significance of abortion rights and reproductive freedom, many abortion rights advocates, politicians and opinion leaders are searching for new ways to frame the dialogue about abortion, with respect for values.

“Framing” - the latest buzzword to enter the lexicon of the political left - is a strategy for telling stories. A process aimed at marketing a concept, issue, person, or a political party, framing requires that the messenger listen, and understand the experiences, motivations and values of the target audience. Should legal abortion be framed as a human right? A consumer choice? A moral decision? To which audiences, at which times, and in which venues? Successful framers tell engaging stories, stories with a clear message and a clear goal that resonate with their intended audience. Effective framing lays the groundwork upon which dialogue, analysis, and action take place.

For women who have abortions, the call to reframe the debate is long overdue. As columnist Anna Quindlen recently wrote in Newsweek, after an abortion, women wonder why the *“so called debate seems to have no connection to what they're thinking, feeling and doing.”*ⁱ Before this dialogue can move forward, it is important to understand the ways in which personal experiences with abortion have been framed since it was de-criminalized in 1973.

The Existing Frames

Abortion is typically discussed in the context of politics and morality. Articles and news stories about abortion, or issues that are perceived to be related to it, consistently refer to the subject as “highly controversial,” “politically divisive” or as a “hot button” and “wedge” issue. No article that details its role in public policy, religion, healthcare or civil liberties can begin without mentioning the current dichotomy. Even the terms used to describe each side are controversial, such that a journalist who used “pro-abortion” instead of “pro-choice” or “anti-choice” instead of “pro-life” needs to be ready to receive a slew of emails detailing their mistake. Not only does the dichotomy refer to abortion rights, it determines the way in which personal experiences with abortion are framed.

Since 1973, the battle over abortion has often centered on the women who have them. Selfish, immature, immoral, young, single, victimized, oversexed and irresponsible are some of the stereotypes created to marginalize and stigmatize women who have abortions, and establish them as outsiders. In addition to stereotypes that question their integrity, values and behaviors, myths about how women *feel*ⁱⁱ afterward are taking precedence in the discussion about values and rights. In the current pro-life vs. pro-choice debate, the feelings of women and men after an abortion are used as evidence for, or against, legal abortion.

The Pro-Life Frameⁱⁱⁱ

Those who work to criminalize abortion have been operating a massive, long-term campaign designed to “make abortion an unthinkable option^{iv}” for women in America. In addition to their attempts to humanize the fetus in such a way that its rights are equal to the rights of a woman, they have led a coordinated campaign with the message that abortion hurts women.

A major tactic in this “hearts and minds” campaign to end legal abortion is the creation of a false mental health disorder called Post-Abortion Stress Syndrome (PASS). Related to the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the presence of PASS as a real mental health condition is supported by dozens of websites, hundreds of post-abortion counseling services nationwide, and advocacy groups. The methods used to research the condition have been questioned by leading social scientists and the American Psychological Association has rejected its existence. While the stories and experiences of the women who “have PASS” are undoubtedly true and often tragic, the link between their *feelings* and suffering from a psychological condition is fragile.

Feelings like sadness, confusion or guilt are considered to be evidence of PASS, while lack of these feelings signals a person is in denial and it is only a matter of time before the emotional consequence of their abortion surfaces. A number of behaviors are also described as typical responses to abortion, including increased bitterness towards men and suicidal tendencies^v. Encouraging women to self-diagnose, PASS agencies prescribe seeking forgiveness from God and activism against abortion as part of a healing process. These agencies are Christian-religion based and offer a one-size-fits-all solution to after-abortion feelings.

The perceived negative emotional consequences of abortion are now a part of the public dialogue and influence public policy and federal spending. PASS, the need to research it, and the need to support women suffering from it, has been written into legislation, gained government funds, and was used by Jane Roe in her attempt to re-open Roe v. Wade, with the goal of overturning the decision. The impact of this political strategy is that *some women’s negative experiences of abortion are being used to justify ending every woman’s access and right to have an abortion.*

While the pro-life frame for people’s experiences with abortion acknowledges that for many women, abortion can have emotional consequences, including feelings of sadness, regret and grief, they never recognize that many women experience their abortion as a positive event or one that can have multiple layers. The pro-life frame does not acknowledge the diverse backgrounds of women who have abortions, their often-complex decision-making processes, or their various religious and spiritual practices. Most importantly, by claiming that women who have PASS are “victims” of abortion, women are denied their own agency in the abortion decision.

The Pro-Choice Frame

When it comes to offering a message for communicating people’s experiences with abortion, the pro-choice movement has typically used two strategies. Leaders engaged in policy work typically recite research that shows “most women feel relief” or focus on the barriers women face to accessing abortion, particularly stories of illegal abortion. The message implied is that obstacles women face in trying to get an abortion are more emotionally difficult than what they may experience afterward.

While research that shows “most women feel relief” after an abortion is legitimate, this statement is incomplete as a holistic picture of people’s experiences with abortion and unsatisfying as a political message designed to resonate with women who have had abortions. Because women who have abortions come from a wide variety of backgrounds in terms of religion, culture, class and race and because they can be single, married, straight, gay, youth, middle-aged, mothers or child-free, the “most women feel relief” banner doesn’t acknowledge the different ways in which the background and identity of each woman can affect her decision-making process, medical experience and feelings afterward.

For women who have abortions and look for support afterwards, they can expect to find few resources from pro-choice organizations. Most pro-choice websites that address post-abortion issues reference how pro-life organizations have created PASS and that it is not a real syndrome. Very few offer any type of direct service or language that reflects the wide range of emotions experienced by women after an abortion. Many abortion providers offer counseling or referrals to local resources, but there are many reasons why women may not want to, or be able to, return to their provider as a source of support.

Within the pro-choice movement, and particularly among communities of color and those providing direct services, there has been a history of activists working to increase acceptance for people’s unique experiences with abortion. Toni Bond, Founder and President of African American Women Evolving has said for years that there is a “lack of safe spaces where women could talk about their abortion experiences.” Anne Baker, the Director of Counseling at the Hope Clinic for Women, has created training curriculum, written comprehensive pamphlets and counseled hundreds of women and men after an abortion. Members of The November Gang, a self-selected group of abortion providers, created a pregnancy options workbook that acknowledges the complexity of the decision-making process and validates the range of feelings women can experience after an abortion. Generally, counselors, health educators and volunteers that work directly with women affirm the broad range of needs and feelings expressed by a woman before and after her abortion. While many women and their families were able to find needed support as a result of these pro-choice advocates, their experiences were typically excluded from broader pro-choice messages.

What the Existing Frames Have in Common

Pro-life groups have not only been successful at connecting their version of moral values to legislative action, they are effectively connecting people’s emotional response to abortion with their own attempts to criminalize it. In response, pro-choice organizations have narrowed their context and frame for talking about people’s individual experiences.

As a result, the pro-life and pro-choice frames collided and together they created a ***terrain of unacceptable emotions***. This terrain defines the correct way to experience an abortion and operates to ensure that each abortion story is filtered through a political frame. When pro-life frames tell women who experience positive feelings after an abortion that they are in denial, they have replaced the woman’s story with their own agenda. When pro-choice frames dismiss women who “come out” years after their abortion and speak of emotional pain, labeling their stories as pro-life tactics, the result is the same. Political agendas have deemed what are appropriate after-abortion feelings and defined the terrain of unacceptable emotions.

To keep women informed about the correct way to experience an abortion and to help them navigate away from the terrain of unacceptable emotions, pro-life and pro-choice frames showcase *voices of convenience*. Voices of convenience are used to further a political agenda by showcasing some people's voices, allowing the creation of a platform based on the exclusion of other voices. This is why pro-life organizations only tell stories of women experiencing deep regret and emotional consequences of abortion and why pro-choice organizations don't stray from the "most women feel relief" banner. There is never a pro-life story of women who were glad to have access to legal abortion or pro-choice stories of women who had a legal abortion, only to regret it years later.

When leaders and organizations rely solely on voices of convenience to communicate their message, society as a whole is prevented from learning the various ways in which women come to the decision of abortion and how they experience it. As a result, focus is brought to the limited specifics of each story we are allowed to see. When we see a woman wearing an "I had an abortion" T-shirt, our responses are focused on her, not the society in which she lives. We call her callous, a braggart, selfish and insensitive. We don't question the social climate that has closed itself to her story, allowing her only the vehicle of a T-shirt to express herself. When women who regret their abortion become advocates for the pro-life agenda, we deny her feelings and call her a victim of pro-life manipulation. In either situation, we judge the capacity and the rights of each woman to tell her story as she sees fit, deny her own agency, and replace the need for her self-expression with our political goals.

These *judgments*, whether cloaked as personal opinion, morality, or political strategy, invalidate individual experiences. Judgments are used to define the terrain of unacceptable emotions and prioritize voices of convenience. Historically, judgments, supported by social myths, have been used as tools of oppression and are used to perpetrate discrimination, dehumanize others and silence marginalized voices. When we judge how others *feel*, the perceived implications of their story or the way in which they choose to express themselves, we contribute to the cycle of stigma and shame around abortion that strengthens oppression in our communities and across the globe.

Implications for a New Frame

Framing, telling the story of abortion, is important because frames work. People compare their feelings to their expectations of an experience, which are influenced by the social climate, their personal beliefs and cultural background. If a woman can't be pro-choice and sad after an abortion (you should be glad you're alive), pro-choice and happy (you don't take abortion seriously enough) or pro-life and happy (you are obviously in denial of your true feelings, which you can expect will appear over time), then we have proven to her, her family and her community how little we care about her and how much we care about our position.

The millions of women who have had abortions in the last thirty-two years deserve a new frame, a new message. They deserve to see themselves and their stories represented in political messages and on T.V. They deserve not to have their feelings manipulated for someone else's political ends and they have the right to express themselves without fear of judgment or manipulation. We should all live in a world that respects us for where we've come from, who we are and what we want to be.

A New Pro-Choice Frame?

Recently, a number of interesting articles and projects have been introduced into the pro-choice frame and are contributing to expanding the dialogue about abortion, and people's personal experiences of it. Telling personal stories with abortion is an important strategy of this new expansion, though which stories are told and how they are shared continues to be debated.

Recognizing the importance of challenging the culture of shame and secrecy that surrounds abortion, leading Third Wave feminists Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards chose direct action as a strategy to challenge abortion stigma. Baumgardner introduced the "I had an abortion" public education project, which included the printing of T-shirts that had "I had an abortion" written across the front and Richards decided to tell her personal story with abortion in the pages of the New York Times Magazine. The response to both was swift. According to several articles, the t-shirts proved women take abortion too lightly and wearing one proved a woman didn't understand the seriousness of abortion. Letters to the editors at the New York Times cited Richard's decision-making process that led her to terminate two of the three fetuses she was carrying, as selfish and cold. Pro-choice leaders condemned Baumgardner's project as irresponsible and questioned Richard's right to tell her story during such a tenuous political time.

Another new public expression project got a decidedly different response from the pro-choice leadership. The website, I'm Not Sorry (www.imnotsorry.net) was created as an outlet for women with positive experiences with abortion to share their stories. Developed by a pro-choice woman, the website was made in response to her own frustration with other women that expressed feelings of guilt after an abortion. Despite being based on the marginalization of women who express negative emotions after an abortion, this website was heralded as an important pro-choice alternative to the pro-life frame and further linked people's personal experiences with political frames.

Offering a different lens, Catholics for a Free Choice President, Frances Kissling, has suggested that pro-choice leaders should frame abortion as a sad choice that involves the loss of life. In her article, "*Is There Life After Roe? How to Think About the Fetus,*" Kissling offers a sweeping analysis of the current climate and the importance of recognizing fetal value. With her article, Kissling opened an important dialogue in the pro-choice movement and created room for the experiences of women who value the baby growing inside them and decide to have an abortion and those with deeply held religious values. She also questions the tactics of Baumgardner and Richards and calls their strategies in "poor taste" because "no woman needs to brag about her choice."^{vi}

Baumgardner and Richards offered a direct attack on the social climate that seeks to judge and stigmatize women who have abortions and neither made claims about the ways in which women should express themselves. I'm Not Sorry offers an important venue for women who want to express their positive experiences with abortion but it does so at the expense of supporting women with negative experiences. Kissling's attempt to offer a frame for how to discuss fetal value and support women who feel sad is crucial to the expansion of the frame, but her solution of framing abortion as sad effectively excludes women who have not felt this way. Replacing "relief" with "sadness" in the description of what "most women feel" doesn't expand the dialogue, change the frame or create room for multiple emotions.

In addition to these attempts to expand the pro-choice frame, many academics and researchers are attempting to prove that abortion is no less emotionally harmful than other reproductive decisions or events, including adoption, miscarriage or parenthood. While important research, understanding the relationships between feelings and events is complex and not the best strategy on which to base a message that resonates with women who have had abortions. Responding to the debate by offering research on women's emotional responses to other events also doesn't change the fundamental frame. Instead it keeps *feelings* as a legitimate determinate of policy and rights.

Where does this leave the millions of women who have had abortions since it was decriminalized more than thirty years ago? As the link between personal experiences and political frames strengthens, women and men are finding their personal experiences becoming more narrowly defined.

The Pro-Voice Frame

From our inception in 2000, Exhale has worked to devise a framework that can ensure that each person's unique experience with abortion is respected, supported, and free from stigma. Our goal is to provide women, girls, and their communities with a space in which their experiences, needs, and feelings are heard and valued - regardless of where they might fall on a politicized spectrum. We soon learned that, in order to achieve this goal, we would need to develop a new frame for talking about abortion beyond the Pro-Choice/Pro-Life divide.

From our earliest work listening to the women and men who called the Exhale talkline, we learned that personal stories with abortion were more rich and varied than either existing political frame encompassed. We learned that what people felt, did, and needed in their actual lives went well beyond the voices of convenience showcased in the public sphere. In order to reflect those feelings and meet those needs, we learned to operate in a new framework for abortion.

This new framework values women, men, and their health. It prioritizes cultural respect and a commitment to social justice. It frees us to connect with, and thereby support, each individual within the context of her own life. Though it rises from the mission of offering direct emotional support to women and men after abortion, it holds broader implications for creating a social climate free from abortion stigma, where each person can find respect and support for their personal experience.

The frame we developed, and operate in, is Pro-Voice.

Pro-Voice Values Women

As counselors, we know that the depth of the answer to a question depends on how a question is framed. When we ask a close-ended question (one with a yes/no answer), we are liable to receive a two-dimensional response. For example, when a woman is asked "do you feel bad about your abortion?", there are only two possible responses: "yes" or "no". When asked the open-ended version of that question - "how do you feel about your abortion?" - she can respond in an infinite number of ways. She can use her own language and context to express her story.

The Pro-Voice frame is an open-ended question. It lifts abortion experiences out of the flattening, binary context of good/bad, black/white, easy/hard, trauma/relief, and offers each person open space in which to explore her feelings. Within this open space, women can - and *do* - feel a range of emotions in a range of ways. For example, a woman may feel that she killed her baby *and* that it was the best decision she could have made; feel relieved, happy, *and* embarrassed to tell her family; think her abortion was a tragic mistake *and* be about to have another one.

The Pro-Voice frame does not put words into people's mouths. It allows people to speak for themselves. Exhale's Empowerment Model of counseling demonstrates this in various concrete ways, such as the technique of reflecting the language of our callers. For example, if a woman refers to having "lost her baby", we will reflect the word "baby" back to her rather than replacing it with "fetus", "pregnancy tissue", or any other terms of our own. Whether or not we personally think of abortion in terms of "losing a baby", it is crucial to recognize each woman's right to define her own life experience in accordance with her beliefs. By using the woman's own language while discussing her experience, we convey that we hear what she is saying and respect her unique values and perspective.

In addition to reflecting language, the Pro-Voice perspective encourages us to recognize that the same language can mean different things to different people. For example, if a woman says "I'm so sad about my abortion", we do not assume what that means for her. It could mean that she feels sad about not becoming a mother, about the lack of support in her life, about having decided on abortion, about feeling far from God, about keeping a secret from her family, about being pregnant in the first place, about the poverty that kept her from having more options, or about innumerable other factors. Rather than interpret what people's words connote and how "correct" they are, we invite each person to unfold what their experiences mean to them—in their own lives, their own values, their own words.

Pro-Voice offers the opportunity to value women within their own frame. It places each person at the helm of defining her own voice, which is a fundamental principle of empowerment. A Pro-Voice frame allows us to meet people where they are, rather than where we think they "should" be. Rather than perceiving a person's perspective as "inconvenient" or threatening for being different from our own, we can approach it—and the person herself—as unique, valid, and valuable. Within the Pro-Voice framework, we can listen to women without funneling their stories immediately into a political agenda; we can listen to women because women are inherently worth listening to. Pro-Voice values women's voices: Pro-Voice, at its core, values women.

Pro-Voice Values Men

This framework also values men's voices around abortion. The political debate around abortion tends to focus on women's role and emotions, and men's stories and feelings are often invisible. However, men have immediate personal experiences with abortion too, whether as the intimate partner of the woman having an abortion, or as her parent, relative, or friend. Transgender men (people born biologically female who identify as male) can also become pregnant and have an abortion. Though male experiences with abortion vary broadly from each other, they can often share alienation from a public discourse that frames abortion as an issue that only touches women's lives.

Because the Pro-Voice frame is open-ended rather than closed-ended, and meets each person in the context of their own experience, there is room for men's stories to be heard and valued. Within it, people of all genders can express themselves on their own terms, both as supportive significant others and as individuals with valid abortion experiences of their own. This does not need to take space away from women; in fact, it can create more room for women's stories by contextualizing them in the families and communities in which their experiences take place, thereby bringing a fuller, more nuanced picture to light. By valuing male perspectives, the Pro-Voice frame expands the spectrum of voices, decreases overall stigma, and fosters a social climate of broadened awareness and respect.

Pro-Voice Values Health

The Pro-Voice frame values health because it places a woman's well-being before the need to make a political "point".

Social stigma and judgment create barriers to achieving health. According to the National Institutes of Health, the consequences of stigma are "disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and, ultimately, discrimination."^{vii} As a result, many women who have abortions decide to keep their personal experience a secret from friends and family. The need to keep the abortion a secret "can exacerbate psychological distress over time."^{viii} The terrains of unacceptable emotions that the Pro-Life and Pro-Choice frames create reinforce stigma and shame for those who do not fit the emotional profile that has been proscribed. This stigma keeps many women and men from talking freely about their experience, and thereby achieving post-abortion health and well-being.

Our experience with the Exhale talkline directly reflects the effects of stigma: by far the most frequent question callers pose is whether or not what they're feeling is normal. Some callers feel like a "bad feminist" for being sad after abortion. Others are surprised by their lack of guilt or regret, and fear that their response makes them cruel or callous. Many are confused by the mix of emotions they're experiencing and wonder whether they are the only ones who've felt this way. Across the range of experiences and backgrounds, callers often describe feeling alone and unable to talk about their feelings with their support networks.

The Pro-Voice frame recognizes that whatever a person is feeling is normal and thereby breaks down stigma. From the Pro-Voice perspective, each person's feelings are valid because it what they feel. If a woman feels relieved or even proud of her abortion, she has a space to say that, and be affirmed in her experience without being labeled as 'selfish' or 'insensitive'. If a woman feels guilty about her abortion, she deserves a place to express that feeling without being minimized ("don't feel that way", "you're brainwashed by the 'antis'"), or pinned into a syndrome ("you'll always feel this bad unless you seek forgiveness"). Validating a person's experience conveys that we believe that what they are saying is true for them, and that we care about their well-being enough to suspend our judgment and listen.

While the issue of nurturing emotional health is particularly applicable to a counseling setting and may seem less relevant to other contexts, it must be noted that each time we discuss a personal story we are choosing whether or not to validate its legitimacy. Each time we debate a moral nuance of abortion, the things we say can impact others in an immediate way. Political dialogues do not only shape policy; they also shape the socio-cultural climate in which we live our everyday lives.

A Pro-Voice frame cultivates awareness of how the rhetoric we use - whether in articles, march banners, letters to the editor, or chats across the dinner table - invalidates or validates, includes or excludes, the potential members of our audience. Even a seemingly subtle shift, such as saying “women can feel loss” rather than “women feel loss”, opens the door for people who may previously have felt shut out of the discussion. By incorporating a Pro-Voice consciousness, it is possible to shift public discussion of abortion toward one that validates more diverse experiences and thereby nurtures health and well-being.

Pro-Voice Values Culture and Social Justice

We don’t live in a culturally uniform nation—let alone a uniform world. The 1.3 million women who have abortions in the U.S. each year are widely diverse in culture, age, socioeconomic status, faith and spiritual beliefs, race, physical ability, immigration background, sexual identity, and other aspects of their lives. Each facet of a person’s background can affect their truth, their relationship with the world, and their experience with abortion.

It is therefore impossible to represent personal stories with abortion without a foundation in cultural competency. A “One Size Fits All” approach to conveying abortion experience ignores the tremendous range of culturally specific realities that take place every day. It invalidates a woman’s culture in addition to her feelings.

Because of pervasive power inequalities such as racism and classism, such an approach also tends to corroborate more “mainstream” stories and ignore the perspectives of the most marginalized sectors of society. For example, the Pro-Life assumption that forgiveness from a Christian God is essential to healing invalidates the experiences of anyone whose belief system is not Christian. On the other hand, the Pro-Choice focus on relief denies the range of ways that culture, race, economic access, faith, and a range of other factors inform women’s experiences, which all too often leads to the exclusion of low-income women and women of color’s voices, in particular. Oppression has historically functioned, in part, by invalidating the voices of those who have less institutional power. A minimizing response to personal experience with abortion—however politically “inconvenient” it may seem—can reinforce these silencing dynamics, further marginalizing those whose reproductive health and rights are often most at risk.

Cultural competency—the capacity to respond effectively to people of diverse cultures—is at the heart of the Pro-Voice frame. Its essential principles include awareness of one’s own biases and cultural assumptions; belief in each person’s right to define their own identity, rather than have it defined for them; a commitment to building awareness of cultures different from one’s own; and respect for each person’s unique perspective. These principles work together to ensure that each abortion experience is heard and respected *within* the person’s cultural context, rather than *in spite* of it. All of the previously mentioned techniques—from reflecting a woman’s language and avoiding generalizations to affirming the validity of each experience—support the goal of shaping a dialogue around abortion based on cultural sensitivity and respect.

The social justice implications of such a dialogue are broad. If our public discussion of abortion could truly create room for the full range of cultures, faiths, values, and experiences that women hold in their everyday lives, the social climate would, quite simply, be transformed. There would be room for women and men of all backgrounds to reflect on their

experience free from the double bind of abortion stigma and cultural insensitivity. There would be room for those whose abortion experiences relate directly to issues such as economic injustice, incarceration, or the criminalization of motherhood to strengthen social justice movements with their voices. There would be room for advocates of reproductive health and rights to build a movement strengthened by its relevance for, and responsiveness to, the many communities affected by abortion. On individual, societal, and movement levels, there would be more room for each voice to have positive impact.

We are well aware that the term “Voice” is often used in social justice contexts, from the names of social change organizations and progressive newsletters to the language of campaigns. The term “Voice” resonates powerfully with a social justice perspective. It affirms the importance of prioritizing historically silenced perspectives, connotes action that arises directly from people’s real needs and desires, and frames personal experience as a source of valid authority. Our use of the term “Pro-Voice” acknowledges, draws on, and adds to this rich legacy. The presentation of a Pro-Voice frame for approaching abortion offers an opportunity to further connect reproductive health and rights to the broader work of building a world based on justice, dignity, and respect.

Conclusion

As an organization whose primary purpose is to support women after an abortion, Exhale has struggled to define our values, mission and service within the constraints of the current pro-life and pro-choice dichotomy. As a direct service provider that welcomes calls from people of all backgrounds and operates with respect for the wide range of political, social and religious beliefs they hold, it is crucial that we don’t manipulate, or are perceived as manipulating, people’s emotions for political ends.

Yet, since our founding in 2000, what we do and who we are has been defined in relation to the only frames available. To create a frame that is reflective of Exhale’s values and to offer women who have abortions and their many allies and supporters, a frame that respects and supports their unique experiences, Exhale created Pro-Voice. The power that is conveyed by the word “voice,” implies authority, demands respect and offers legitimacy. It has historical relevance. It can be used in many contexts where people’s voice has been denied or marginalized. “Voice” has been used by organizations and movements as a strategy to transform oppression and promote justice. “Voice” describes the right to be heard. “Voice” is a place from which to create a frame, craft messages and demand rights.

Pro-voice doesn’t demand that people forsake their own values or change them. Rather, it offers a context for recognizing one’s own values while respecting those of others. This, in turn, creates an approach to discussing abortion that centers on—and thereby includes—the lens and context of the women who have them, and the families and communities in which they are members.

Individuals and organizations that adopt the Pro-Voice frame will re-examine their strategies and commit to language and actions that demonstrate support, not judgment, of women’s unique experiences with abortion. If you or your organization chooses to re-examine your strategies or language through a Pro-Voice lens, use the following guiding questions:

1. Does our strategy or language validate or invalidate a broad spectrum of unique personal experiences with abortion?

2. What communities are reflected, marginalized, affirmed, or stigmatized by this strategy or language?
3. How might this strategy or language be shifted, adapted, or enhanced to incorporate respect for a range of values and voices?

In a society where public conversations about abortion are fraught with dichotomies and judgment, every fresh look at language or subtle shift in strategy has the potential for extraordinary impact. By embracing the Pro-Voice frame, we can further the health and well-being of women and men, promote cultural respect and social justice, and create a social climate where each person's unique experience with abortion is respected, supported and free from stigma.

Will you join us?

Aspen Baker and Carolina De Robertis are founders and staff of Exhale. Exhale, based in Oakland, California, provides a national after-abortion talkline, offers trainings on after-abortion counseling and conducts public education to shift the public dialogue about abortion away from stigma and shame and towards support and respect. For more information about Exhale, visit their website at www.4exhale.org.

^{i i} Quindlen, Anna. "Life Begins at Conversation," Newsweek. November 29, 2004

ⁱⁱ Whereas feelings are an inherent aspect of being human, a psychological syndrome, condition or other type of mental illness can jeopardize health and well-being.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exhale supports the rights of callers to self-identify in terms of their political beliefs, gender and other types of identities. We also respect this right of political organizations.

^{iv} Silent No More Awareness Campaign, www.silentnomoreawareness.org

^v Priests for Life, www.priestsforlife.org

^{vi} Kissling, Frances, "Is There Life After Roe? How to Think about the Fetus," Conscience, Winter 2004/2005.

^{vii} National Institutes of Health, www.nih.gov

^{viii} Major, B and Gramzow, RH, "Abortion as stigma: Cognitive and Emotional Implications of Concealment," Journal of Psychology and Social Psychology, 1999, 77 (4): 735-745.