

Conceptualizing abortion as adaptive: Throwing the baby out with the bathwater?

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, we respond to Kimport and McLemore (2022), Leyser-Whalen (2022), Mavuso (2022), and Shaw's (2022) commentaries on our article (Adair & Lozano, 2022) proposing the advantages of using multiple psychological perspectives to situate abortion decisions as adaptive choices, existing in stigmatized spaces, that can increase individual's ability to survive and thrive. We agree that the future of abortion scholarship should address outstanding issues such as the centering of ciswomen, but we continue to endorse the value of research - including work incorporating large-scale models - to explore the environmental, developmental, and social factors that shape reproductive decision-making.

Keywords: abortion, stigma, reproductive justice, the motherhood mandate, pronatalism

### **Conceptualizing abortion as adaptive: Throwing the baby out with the bathwater?**

Our article (Adair & Lozano, 2022) emphasizes the benefits of using evolutionary, social, and clinical psychological perspectives to study the adaptive choice to abort a pregnancy. We address the norms, and resultant stigma, that characterize motherhood as natural and abortion as unnatural, proposing that reproductive policy and legislation, as well as representations of abortion in the media and research, are affected by and act to transmit pronatalist expectations. Evolutionary, social, and clinical psychological perspectives can assist in radically repositioning abortion decisions as natural, adaptive, and fitness-enhancing for pregnant individuals in patriarchal and repro-normative sociocultural contexts.

### **Is evolutionary psychology appropriate for studying abortion?**

Many of the commentaries questioned whether evolutionary psychology perspectives are truly appropriate given their history of being misused to justify and reinforce systems of oppression. However, modern evolutionary science takes an integrated approach to understanding the forces that shape human behavior and cognition, recognizing the complex interactions between and interdependence of ultimate and proximate mechanisms of change. Hrdy (2013) describes this integrated ‘nature’ + ‘nurture’ approach as a “wider angled evolutionary lens” (p. xvi) that can accommodate a more nuanced account of human behavior, including representations of women as agentic, active strategists rather than passive observers of male-male competition for mates and power. Evolutionary psychology is an appropriate lens to view, and re-story, abortion given modern scholars’ willingness to approach human behavior as “... a matter of social and cultural negotiation as well as embedded in our physical bodies, ecological affiliations, and phylogenic histories” (Davis, 2020, p. 2). If evolutionary theory is dismissed as inappropriate in its application to abortion research, we ‘throw the baby out with the

bathwater.’ Are the unique insights and methodological tools in the evolutionary sciences destined for the rubbish bin, even though modern applications of evolutionary theory do not fall prey to the evolutionary generalizations of our predecessors?

### **Integrated Evolutionary Psychology**

Integrated applications of evolutionary theory do not endorse genetic determinism, and instead recognize that “environmental cues and contexts interact with evolved psychology... to produce behaviors and cognitions that fit current environmental constraints and demands” (Adair & Ferenczi, in press, p. XX). Rather than argue for human universals, integrated applications instead explain how cultural variation is evoked by specific social and environmental demands. Specifically, an evoked culture model (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992) provides structure and theoretical justifications for testing evolutionary predictions across cultures. That is, cross-cultural variability of certain traits (e.g., prioritization of physical attractiveness in mate selection) is reliably related to different ecological challenges and opportunities (e.g., pathogen prevalence; Gangestad et al., 2006). This represents one of the many systematic ways to study questions about cultural variability, using evolutionary tools. Indeed, the beauty of an evolutionary approach to cultural (in)variability is that it can predict and explain the nature of cultural differences in a given phenomenon at a specific point in time and the nature of cultural change over time (Mesoudi et al., 2006). By integrating an evolutionary approach with other psychological and interdisciplinary perspectives, scholars have the potential to understand culturally variant abortion experiences and reproductive norms.

### **Is ‘justification’ necessary?**

Kimport and McLemore (2022) write that that by studying abortion, we “other” those who have abortions and inadvertently give credence to anti-abortion advocates. Yet, within the

proposed adaptive choice model, abortion is constructed as natural and of relevance to those who study humans. We disagree that large-scale models designed to explore the ‘why’ and ‘when’ of abortion - including those that illuminate mechanisms supporting cross-cultural variability in abortion experiences and stigma - position as deviant certain reproductive outcomes or certain communities. Rather, evolutionary psychology points to the importance of abortion as a reproductive strategy throughout human history and can highlight the need for supportive reproductive practices given the evolutionary novelty of childrearing within an isolated nuclear family. While Leyser-Whalen (2022) cautions against the use of evolutionary psychology and anthropology to challenge the ‘nuclear as normal’ assumption, we maintain that re-storying reproduction in ways that recognize our evolutionary history can provide a platform from which to critically examine the importance of government and community support for people who choose to parent *or* choose to abort. Recognizing the nuclear family ideal as modern and evolutionarily novel can also act as a theoretical springboard for participatory action research focused on the experiences and needs of parents in the non-nuclear family structure. Abortion has been available as a reproductive choice for millennia (Drife, 2010) and has supported our ancestors in navigating the high cost of parental investment while maintaining their own survivability and success. Yet, the rich evolutionary history of abortion as an adaptive choice is often forgotten in the context of the modern and contentious “abortion debate.”

Furthermore, rather than “over-provincializing” (Mavuso, 2022), research in this field can help us understand aspects of human nature that are not universal and may have been inappropriately positioned as ‘universal’ due to the impact of colonialism and imperialism on psychology’s history. Cross-cultural research exploring abortion experiences and stigma can help us question colonial assumptions about human behavior and can help us understand the

relationship between social and ecological variables and our evolved reproductive psychologies. By expanding the abortion literature, researchers are helping to naturalize and humanize the abortion experience; something which is often dehumanized because of its link to moralization in the debate about abortion access (Bastian, Laham, Wilson, Haslam, & Koval, 2011). Psychology intrinsically values explaining and understanding human behavior; as we deepen knowledge around abortion science, we are also better able to develop solutions to real human problems (e.g., increase support resources for pregnant people, including those considering stigmatized reproductive strategies).

The underlying question that the authors (Kimport & McLemore, 2022) appear to be asking is ‘why does this matter?’ And, to that, we would point to the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), which states that interaction between members of different groups (e.g., racial identity, ethnic identity, age, mental illness) can decrease prejudice. Pettigrew and Tropp’s (2006) meta-analysis indicates that contact between individuals that differ along some stigmatized characteristic can create more positive attitudes towards both the “immediate participants” (in the study) and towards “the entire outgroup [and] outgroup members in other situations” (p. 766). The better we, as scholars, understand and represent the experiences of people who obtain abortions, the better we can represent a complex and humanizing image of reproductive diversity to those who oppose abortion. Given that abortion is a common reproductive strategy (Bearak et al., 2020) and that abortion experiences are infrequently disclosed (Gbogbo, 2020), it is likely that those who are anti-abortion are unknowingly in contact with someone who has had an abortion. Decreasing prejudice between these groups could be a critical first step in disrupting the relationship between anti-abortion attitudes and support for restrictive abortion policy and legislation.

## **The power of ‘re-storying’ abortion**

Mavuso (2022) deems that the “stories we tell about abortion can uphold and/or challenge the systems of power that govern gender and reproduction” (p. XX). Thus, researchers in the field of reproductive health can use abortion scholarship to re-story abortion in ways that are more inclusive, destigmatizing, disruptive to existing power structures, and empowering. This sentiment is well-aligned with the objectives of our paper (Adair & Lozano, 2022), in which we detail ways that research across the subfields of psychology can deepen our scientific understanding and - as a vehicle for destigmatization - radically shift the abortion narrative.

Mavuso (2022) highlights how the stigmatization of abortion is attributable to both patriarchal prescriptions of womanhood, such as the motherhood mandate, and cis-normative assumptions, including the assumption that abortion seekers are ciswomen. Therefore, destigmatizing abortion through scholarship is going to involve both challenging reproductivity and challenging cis-normativity. An advantage of gender-inclusive abortion research is its uniquely situated ability to explore the ways in which reproduction is not universally encouraged, an issue highlighted by the commentaries. Intersectional approaches in future research can emphasize the ways in which identity, age, socioeconomic status, parenting status, and relationship status combine to shape access to medically assisted abortion services, experiences of abortion stigma or support, and decisional autonomy. Future research is needed to resolve conflicting findings suggesting that anti-natal sentiment towards transmen persists (particularly for individuals who report no individuals with queer sexual and/or gender identities in their social network; Goldman et al., 2017) and that pronatalist expectations persist and are transmitted to trans and nonbinary individuals through parents’ and medical professionals’ insistence upon fertility preservation procedures (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2020).

Shaw (2022) highlights how self-managed or community-supported abortion procedures can empower abortion seekers to achieve personal and reproductive goals outside of formalized healthcare systems. It is important to recognize that non-medically assisted abortions are not necessarily unsafe, and do not automatically place the pregnant person at greater risk, especially when the abortion technique requires very few specific skills to successfully administer. When abortion scholars recognize and represent this reality, we can participate in a re-storying of abortion that centers other feminist concerns, such as affordability and accessibility to all pregnant people, particularly those living in communities with limited access to medically assisted abortion and/or severe and persistent abortion stigma. As such, representing self-managed abortion as safe, normal and natural, as well as accessible in scholarly work will support a radical and liberating re-storying of abortion. As Shaw (2022) writes, “it [self-managed abortion] is a human rights issue because it centers abortion as a necessary tool that reduces gender inequity and awards women control over their reproductive lives - and therefore their lives in general” (p. XX).

### **Conclusion**

We had two goals for our paper (Adair & Lozano, 2022): to address the norms and stigmas that normalize motherhood and thus characterize abortion as abnormal and unnatural, and to advocate for integrating multiple psychological perspectives to further abortion research. Specifically, exploring evolutionary, clinical, and social psychological perspectives will allow for a more robust research agenda because these areas interact within, and therefore could *expand*, the abortion story.

Evolutionary psychology argues that abortion can act as a strategy to optimize a person's survival and success in a given environment, developmental stage, and personal circumstance.



Clinical psychology notes that policies, procedures, and professionals impose barriers to receiving abortion services because of anti-abortion attitudes and beliefs. And social psychology highlights the patriarchal power structures that rely on strict and narrow conceptualizations of gender and family identity, and how these restrictive expectations create identity conflicts and dilemmas when someone is considering the choice to abort or parent.

Employing all three perspectives can support research that represents both the ultimate (e.g., environmental pressures and contexts that shape the adaptive value of certain reproductive strategies) and proximate (e.g., power structures, expectations and norms, intersecting identities, interactions with institutional and individual barriers to reproductive autonomy) factors that shape the lived experiences of pregnant people. The following research questions (among many others) would uniquely benefit from this integrated perspective: *How has colonization shaped our understanding of abortion decisions, desires, and outcomes?*, *How can the scholarly re-storying of abortion as natural, empowered, and gender-inclusive shape the lived experiences of pregnant people?*, *How can de-constructing the 'nuclear as normal' assumption facilitate greater institutional and social support for pregnant people?*

By having commentaries from scholars outside of psychology, the need for and unique advantages of more interdisciplinary work in this area comes to the fore. We thank the authors of these commentary pieces for sharing their knowledge and expertise, and for continuing the critical conversation around abortion research. Each commentary raised points that can support a future of liberating and inclusive abortion scholarship. We contend that in engaging in this research, we are providing the opportunity to re-story the abortion narrative from an action that is viewed as resulting from a traumatic decision to a decision that is empowering and is made within the evolutionary, clinical, and social context of what that person needs to lead a good life.

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