

Navigating the need for reproductive justice in a post-Roe v. Wade Aotearoa New Zealand

Eden V. Clarke, University of Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Although it is tempting to absolve Aotearoa New Zealand of reproductive injustice, conservative celebrations in response to the recent reversal of *Roe v. Wade* highlight an urgent need for abortion-focused advocacy in ostensibly *egalitarian* societies. Arguably, such advocacy could be catalysed within academia. Yet, navigating desires for social justice within disciplines that cherish apolitical science remains challenging. This article will unpack the aforementioned tension and discuss the author's experiences researching abortion attitudes and striving for social change in a post-*Roe v. Wade* Aotearoa New Zealand. A case is made for a divergence from *objective* science towards intersectional research and the recentring of social justice in abortion research to ensure gender equality in these precarious times.

KEYWORDS: Abortion; reproductive justice; gender equality

Despite progressive abortion legislation, the recent reversal of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States (US) has shaken the political climate in Aotearoa (McClure, 2022). More specifically, such a regression in human rights has sparked celebrations amongst conservative politicians and pro-life activists alike (Howie, 2022; Sedensky, 2022). And, with an increase in pro-life protests throughout Australasia (McClure, 2022), it is becoming evident that abortion attitudes fail to reflect the ongoing strides towards egalitarianism in Aotearoa New Zealand. With the associated threat on abortion rights looming, it is vital to consider the necessary steps to ensure reproductive justice.

Explicating reproductive justice

Reproductive justice refers to the achievement of reproductive autonomy with the explicit recognition that the "choice" to (a) have a child; (b) have an abortion; (c) safely parent a child; and/or (d) control birthing decisions is constrained

by one's socioeconomic position and wider socio-political and cultural environment (Ross, 2006). Although reproductive justice encapsulates a multitude of intersecting parts, my previous experience with abortion research will steer this article toward a focus on abortion rights. More specifically, I will unpack my experiences researching New Zealanders' abortion attitudes following the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. Special attention will be paid to the role of objective science and intersectionality in politically motivated research. The piece will conclude with a critical reflection on researchers' roles in ensuring reproductive justice.

Reflecting on "objectivity" in abortion research

To begin, it is important to recognise that the abortion debate has elicited an uneasy political climate since the early 19th century (Reagan, 1997). Consistent with feminists' struggles to achieve progressive abortion legislation (see Reagan, 1997), my gendered

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CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Eden V. Clarke
eden.clarke@auckland.ac.nz

experiences (as a young woman) with reproductive healthcare provoked my interest in abortion research long before the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. Nevertheless, the supreme court's decision instantly altered the severity and purpose of my research. It became clear that my work needed to do more than contribute data to the broader scholarship. Likewise, I needed to challenge the status quo and advocate for reproductive justice.

Such realisations came with a critical reflection of objective science and the ways in which (typically) quantitative researchers have been criticised for underplaying the political nature of their findings (Fox et al., 2009). Notwithstanding the qualitative and reflective aspects of this piece, I should note that I am primarily a quantitative researcher—and mirroring most quantitative work—have focused on illuminating social inequalities as a form of social justice (see Fox et al., 2009). Although I sustain that documenting reproductive injustice is a vital step in ensuring equality, it is becoming evident that cyclical theorising on inequalities—without advocating for political action—is motivated by desires to remain objective (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020; Teo, 2009). Such desires are concerning, given that my subjective experiences have undeniably shaped my political positions and related research (see Lazard & McAvoy, 2020). To these ends, I argue that attempts to produce objective research on the abortion debate would not only be naive and disingenuous, but would greatly disserve the multitude of feminist movements advocating for reproductive justice.

More specifically, although *apolitical* science has advanced the prestige of psychology (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020), I sustain that the fulfilment of human rights and sexual freedoms outweigh the benefits of objective science—particularly when considering that academics are uniquely positioned to influence political decisions on reproductive autonomy (see Beddoe et al., 2020). That is, the prestige associated with academia

affords researchers (including myself) the ability to make political and feminist claims without being villainised and ignored (Filatoff, 2019).

With this reflection, I have had to (uncomfortably) navigate my desires for *prestigious* science with my aspirations for social justice. Admittedly, this process remains challenging—in part due to the enduring debate on how to evoke social justice within academia (see Fox et al., 2009). Echoing the tensions faced by other scholars, I am attempting to navigate academia's calls for two seemingly divergent attempts at evoking change: promoting transformative practices and illuminating inequalities (see Fox et al., 2009). It is not my intention to unpack this debate here. I do, however, suggest that any attempts to promote meaningful change require intersectional research.

Navigating the need for intersectionality

Despite ostensible rises in researcher reflexivity (see Lazard & McAvoy, 2020), efforts toward objectivity continue to undermine intersectional practices. Although difficult to define, intersectionality commonly speaks to the ways in which gender, race, sexuality, and alternative identities cannot be understood in isolation from one another (Collins & Chepp, 2013). Rather, the intersections between these identities produce unique and inequitable experiences whereby certain identities are afforded more power than others (also see Joy, 2019). It is this power (or lack thereof) that impacts people's ability to *choose* to have an abortion. For instance, despite the promise of equal healthcare opportunities under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Māori rights to control their reproductive health are undermined by systematic racism (Reid et al., 2014) and a subsequent lack of understanding regarding Indigenous health outcomes (Reid et al., 2014) and perspectives on abortion (Le Grice & Braun, 2017). As

a result, Māori face more barriers (e.g., geological barriers) to reproductive health care than Pakeha (Laurence, 2019). In other words, despite 'equal' access to reproductive services in Aotearoa, systematic oppression in other domains (e.g., racism) undermines the nation's progressive legislation and enables inequitable access to reproductive health care (Ross, 2006).

The prevailing inequities in reproductive healthcare (e.g., Harned & Fuentes, 2023; Laurence, 2019) have motivated me to renegotiate my historically pro-choice stance. Namely, I argue for a renewed focus on reproductive justice as it critiques the typical conceptualisation of choice and challenges the structural inequalities that undermine unimpeded autonomy in the 21st century (Ross, 2006). This refocusing is vital as my position as a Pakeha, cisgender, and educated woman affords me the ability to access abortion services, even in the case of reproductive restrictions (see Harned & Fuentes, 2023). Thus—coupled with a lack of reflexivity—it is important to acknowledge that myopic attempts at promoting the pro-choice movement may have difficulty in addressing the reproductive injustice endured by those who face more challenging intersections (e.g., those constrained by their socioeconomic position).

The discomfort in these reflections promoted my search for an equitable solution. Yet, upon further reflection, it is evident that we (as academics) should remain uncomfortable—and concerned—about contributing to a discipline that has a history of oppressing diverse voices and enabling inequalities (see Buchanan et al., 2021). Therefore, I do not desire to reconcile these discomforts. Rather, I contest that this tension holds us accountable and encourages steps towards increased diversity. Consistent with this perspective, Collins (2013) and Fox et al. (2009) argued that a first step in ensuring social justice is an explicit recognition of privilege and *intellectual activism*. Specifically, ongoing discussion and promotion of intersectionality within

research constitute a form of activism that heralds similar benefits to collective action as it encourages the inclusion of various voices in academia.

Intellectual activism is not a silver bullet to the lack of diversity in psychology or a fast track to reproductive justice. But, given the recent pushback on reflexive practices (see Savolainen et al., 2023)—and that academics continue to be criticised for challenging conservative policies (e.g., Bhatia, 2023)—I argue that promoting intellectual activism is increasingly necessary to ensure reproductive justice. Additionally, despite ongoing struggles to promote social change—particularly in quantitative research—I argue that (most) academics are well-positioned to consider and integrate intersectionality in their research as a means of evoking change. It is, I argue, far more productive than the aforementioned debate between transformative and intellectual practices. This is not to suggest that we should remain uncritical of outdated research practices but to suggest that academics would be better off engaging in reflexive practices to promote diversity than encouraging an age-old debate that invites academic divisions.

Conclusion

The everlasting attack on reproductive justice forces us (as academics) to reconsider how we promote social change. Doing so requires a critical reflection on psychology's efforts toward objectivity and the ways such practices undermine intersectionality and opportunities for change. More specifically, striving for objectivity has strategically negated the privilege and power afforded to academics. Furthermore, overlooking the subjective nature of research restricts our ability to be reflexive and promote intersectional practices. Consequently, a multitude of abortion research remains inapplicable to those who face pervasive reproductive injustices. Although these practices cannot singlehandedly ensure

justice, a divergence from objectivity towards intellectual activism is one avenue in which scholars could ensure diversity within academia and promote unimpeded reproductive autonomy in the 21st century.

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2973-6508

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