

Contradictions in womxn's experiences of pre-abortion counselling in South Africa: Implications for client-centred practice

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Abstract

Pre-abortion counselling may play a key role in abortion seekers' understanding of their decision to terminate a pregnancy and the subsequent emotions that they feel. In this paper, we report on a study conducted in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa concerning womxn's experiences of the pre-abortion counselling offered as part of the implementation of the Choice of Termination Act that governs the provision of legal abortion in the country. Using a narrative-discursive lens, the analysis revealed four micro-narratives in which participants appreciated non-directive and empathic counselling, as well as being provided with information. They also indicated that the counselling was upsetting and hurtful, particularly when providers drew on the awfulisation of abortion discourse to suggest that abortion leads to terrible consequences, and foetal personhood discourse to intimate that terminating the pregnancy is wrong and other alternatives (adoption, parenting) are better. The connection between these broadly positive and negative responses may lie in the dominance of anti-abortion discourses coupled with the powerful positioning of healthcare providers as experts. The attendant disempowerment of clients within the health clinic setting may constrain pregnant people's ability to question such 'expert' information. The implications for feminist client-centred pre-abortion counselling are discussed.

KEYWORDS

abortion, client, counselling, discourse, experiences, narratives, qualitative research, South Africa

1 | INTRODUCTION

Experiences of abortion counselling have generally been explored as part of studies focusing on womxn's¹ abortion experiences in general. Few studies (e.g. Baron, Cameron, & Johnstone, 2015; Birdsey,

Crankshaw, Mould, & Ramklass, 2016; Ely, 2007; Moore, Frohwirth, & Blades, 2011; Tong, Low, Wong, Choong, & Jegasothy, 2012; Vandamme, Wyverkens, Buysse, Vrancken, & Brondeel, 2013) have treated womxn's experiences of abortion counselling as the main problematic of the research. Given the key role that pre-abortion counselling may play in womxn's understanding of their decision to terminate a pregnancy and the subsequent emotions they may feel, in-depth research on pre-abortion counselling is indicated. In this article, we report on a study that was conducted in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa in which womxn accessing abortion

¹We use 'womxn' (and the possessive form 'womxn's') here to foreground the social construction of sex and gender, and to foreground how these terms historically, and often still continue to, exclude some womxn-identifying persons, including trans womxn and intersex persons, and black womxn both in everyday discursive practices and feminist praxes. We do note, however, that the term is not inclusive of gender non-conforming and non-binary persons.