

Adolescent Arguments in the Abortion Debate

Wanda Franz, Ph.D.



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Dr Franz is a developmental psychologist and a professor in Family and Consumer Sciences at West Virginia University. She is president of the National Right to Life Committee and also president of the Association for Interdisciplinary Research in Values and Social Change. This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting and Paper Session of the Association in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, June 26, 2002.

Dr. Franz has frequently debated the issue of abortion. It has been her experience that debating with pro-abortion advocates often involves dealing with adolescent thinking.

It has long been known that adolescence is the time when mature cognitive and intellectual abilities are being acquired. This period of time is experienced by the adolescent as one of confusion and frustration as new abilities are made available but are not fully utilized or understood by the adolescent. This is a time when there is an awakening to the internal feelings, needs, emotional drives and intellectual skills which, up until adolescence, function primarily at an unconscious level. What happens to adolescents is that they suddenly become conscious of the functioning of these internal events.

In addition, new capabilities for intellectual activity are made available to the adolescent. Piaget (Piaget & Inhelder, 1958) refers to these new skills as Formal Operational abilities. In Piaget's theory, operations are internal strategies or constructs of knowledge that allow adolescents to engage in such mental activities as manipulating mental ideas, organizing concepts into hierarchies, creating complex associations of multiple variables, and using hypothetico-deductive reasoning. These operations are called "formal" because they are abstract, organized entities that can be manipulated using abstract reasoning. While these complex, mature abilities are available to the adolescent, it is clear from research into adolescent functioning that they are not used on a regular basis (Elkind, 1978; Franz, 1994; Quadrel, Fischhoff & David, 1993).

There are a number of reasons why adolescents fail to make full use of these new intellectual skills. Elkind (1967) described a condition he called Adolescent Egocentrism, in which adolescents use these new abilities from their own limited perspective. For example, adolescents are powerfully aware of their own emotions, so they assume everyone else understands exactly what they are feeling, an example of what Elkind called "imaginary audience." In addition, they feel extraordinarily special so they have a sense of themselves as being above the usual problems that other people have. These things just won't happen to them, a condition Elkind called "personal fable."

Given these distortions in thinking, it is possible to understand why adolescents may fail to use their new

intellectual abilities in the most rational way. For example, they may be capable of reasoning that drinking and then driving is dangerous; however, in any specific incident the adolescent may take the risk and drive, reasoning that an accident just "won't happen to me."

Recent research on brain functioning in adolescence has demonstrated that adolescents, unlike adults, frequently don't use the rational part of the brain in solving problems. The amygdala is the part of the brain that manages emotions. This part of the brain goes through a major maturation during early adolescence (Dahl, 2001). It appears that adolescents are prone to over-use this new ability in situations when the use of rational components of the frontal lobe would be more appropriate. In one study, Baird and colleagues (Baird, et al., 1999) found that, when given a problem-solving task, adolescents primarily used the amygdala to solve it, while adults primarily used the frontal lobe.

Another explanation for adolescent failure to use mature reasoning skills has been suggested by Mitchell (1998) in his analysis of Developmental Narcissism in adolescents. Narcissism in the adolescent is the tendency for excessive self-love that takes the form of a compulsive need to protect the self from outside assaults. The environmental assaults that concern the adolescent are those that threaten the newly developing emotional and psychological self identity. This form of narcissism includes tendencies to selfishness and extreme sensitivity to any correction along with an extraordinary need for acceptance.

Even very rational adults may revert to narcissistic patterns in making arguments favoring abortion.

Mitchell argues that there are five features of the Narcissistic Style, as it appears in adolescence. These are: an expectation of entitlements, deadness to the feelings of others, a reduced capacity to give love, a reduced moral circumference and reduced intellectual objectivity. It is the last feature that concerns us here: the tendency to allow the needs of the self to control rational functioning. Mitchell provides a list of some of the problems adolescents have in making rational arguments. It is clear from analyzing these strategies that the adolescent is using them to avoid the real argument in favor of protecting the vulnerable self.

Very often, these are the kinds of arguments that are being made by adults, especially in situations of self-protective need. We might expect to find such arguments in the abortion debate, where people are trying to justify a position in order to protect their own self-concept. No one wants to admit that they have been supporting the brutal killing of innocent children. Thus, even very rational adults may revert to using some of these narcissistic patterns of making arguments when the debate concerns abortion.

I have taken ten of the most important examples given by Mitchell (1998) and put them into the pro-life context. It is my assumption that arguing with pro-abortion advocates often involves dealing with adolescent thinking. It is always helpful to understand the strategies being used against pro-life efforts, in order to be able to respond more effectively.

These ten strategies of argumentation are characterized by their manipulative approach to debate. The purpose is to win the debate, not clarify the issues. The arguments must be won at any cost, even if it means switching the terms of the debate and engaging in inconsistent and incompatible arguments. These arguments can be very irrational and it is very irritating to debate with someone who doesn't mind being irrational. That is why such debates often deteriorate into emotional conflicts. This is, of course, counter productive to educating people about the abortion issue. Following are ten of the strategies, characterized by adolescent limitations.

One. Opposing a proposition by misrepresenting it.

This approach allows the argument to be cut to fit the purposes of the arguer. Forms of misrepresentation include disagreeing with something that doesn't exist, disagreeing with a small portion of an issue, and disagreeing with a highly simplified version of the issue. This approach is very common in the abortion debate. Our opponents began their campaign for deregulation with lies about the reality of abortion. For example, they claimed "Tens of thousands of women have back-alley abortions and die every year, so we have to legalize abortion so women won't have to go into back alleys to get them." This argument is full of misrepresentations, particularly the issue of the huge numbers of women who died from abortion before legalization. All of these numbers were inflated in order to create the appropriate shock value, which made people feel good about their pro-abortion position.

Another common misrepresentation is the one that says, "Pro-life people hate women." This argument allows the pro-abortion lobby to dislike pro-lifers for a position that they don't hold. Our opponents can easily go from there to disliking all of the other positions that pro-life people hold, both accurate and inaccurate.

Arguments, such as these, are best handled with short, direct statements that undermine the basic premises. For example, "If pro-life people dislike women so much, why are they the ones running the 3,000 crisis pregnancy centers around the country to help women with crisis pregnancies?"

Two. Use of prestige words.

In the abortion debate, the needs of the self may control rational functioning.

The assumption of this approach is that the prestige words are more powerful than ordinary words. Showmanship like this is intended to gain points for style and winning the argument is essentially the same as creating the most theatrical presentation. This is very common in the pro-abortion arguments. The term "fetus" is intended to divert attention from the fact that we are talking about a "child." The term "reproductive health care providers" is intended to mask the fact that we are talking about abortionists, because everyone understands that abortionists kill babies. In arguments of this sort, it is important to avoid being drawn into using the prestige words in order to get style points. It is important to immediately deflate pompous statements, for example, "We are talking about living, growing babies."

Three. Diverting to a side issue.

This tactic is, in reality, a desperate effort to direct the argument away from a debate that is being lost. It allows the arguer to put the debate into an arena that is safer. It generally opens up issues that are much too big to debate without directing the discussion away from the rational analysis of an issue. It is most effective when it also arouses emotional reactions in the other party, thus completely undermining the original debate. An effective diversion often used by our opponents is to accuse the pro-lifer of trying to "impose your religion on everyone." This can arouse an emotional discussion about religion and take the debate completely off the abortion issue.

It is important to avoid being drawn off-topic by this strategy. A quick shot to the heart of the issue can sometimes cause an opponent to change his mind about getting into the diversion because it isn't keeping the discussion off-topic. For example, "I'm the one talking about scientific, biological facts of conception and fetal development. You are the one who doesn't seem to know when life begins."

Four. Enhancing a position by claiming compromise.

This approach is intended to give the impression of fair play, which isn't fair at all. This has been a very effective tactic of our opponents and it has worked well because the media have picked it up and used it as a tactic, as well. This began with the false compromise proposed at the time of Roe vs. Wade and used ever since that, "Roe vs. Wade represents the compromise (or middle-ground) position." This allowed our opponents to argue, ever after that, from a centrist position, when, in fact, Roe vs. Wade was the most extreme possible position. However, the pro-life position was then put into the stance of being extremist. We have been fighting an up-hill battle ever since. This is because in our country being extreme is, in and of itself, a negative thing. It is very hard to move public opinion when you are arguing from what appears to be the extreme side of the debate.

In recent years, a new version of this approach has been introduced into the abortion debate. This claim to compromise was Clinton's brilliant statement that abortion should be "rare." This implied to people that he was compromising, that is arguing for controls over abortion, while at the same time allowing it for "difficult" cases. In fact, his actual position was for unfettered abortion on demand, which is the most extreme case. If people believe that Clinton took a position that was "moderate" then to oppose his position was to automatically make the pro-lifer an extremist.

When life begins is not a matter of belief, it is a statement of fact that modern science understands quite well.

Five. Arguing by forced analogy.

An analogy is drawing a link between things that are otherwise not similar. A forced analogy occurs when the inference is then made that, if two things are alike in some respects, they will be alike in others. There are a number of these kinds of false arguments that have come from pro-abortion positions. For example, "The egg and sperm (like the embryo) are also human life and they die by the millions, so why are you so concerned about the death of the embryo?" It is true that the egg and sperm, like the embryo, are living human tissue, but they are different in kind because the embryo is a unique, living human person. That is what makes this particular analogy false.

Another common forced analogy heard in pro-abortion arguments is, "The fetus is just a part of the woman's body." The analogy here is that the fetus is in the woman's body so it is a part of it, like her liver and kidneys. This argument completely misunderstands the amazing biological event of pregnancy and the fact that a completely separate human person can live temporarily in the body of the mother. These arguments are more difficult to deflect because it is generally necessary to provide a great deal of education about human biology in order to prove the analogy false.

Six. Arguing by using a straw man

This is a tactic that can be very effective because the arguer sets up a false issue that can be easily knocked down in order to get an easy victory. Oftentimes these straw men have emotional or anxiety-provoking aspects that diffuse a logical approach to the argument. They are very useful in propaganda because they often appear to be logical when they are not. In the abortion debate, such arguments take the following form, "Unwanted children will be abused, so we have to have abortion available." "Women have to be able to pursue their careers, so they have to be able to get abortions." The straw men in these arguments are the false notions that unwanted children are abused and women can't pursue their careers if they are mothers. There is no evidence for either of these false arguments

It is difficult to deal with this type of deception because the average person doesn't have enough information

about the issue to recognize a false straw man. It requires patient educational efforts to explain why these are not reasons for legalized abortion.

Seven. Using proof by selected incidences

In this approach, the arguer uses selective cases that are easier to justify than the true situation. For example, "Poor women get pregnant and it ruins their lives." The assumption here, of course, is that having an abortion would improve their lives. Since the appeal is to try to draw the argument into sympathetic consideration of poor people, it can sometimes help to appeal to this sympathy by attacking the assumption. For example, "There is no evidence that having abortions improves the condition of poor women. It doesn't make them rich. What kind of a choice is it if a woman who is poor feels like abortion is her only solution?"

Another version of this type of argument is to point to individuals as examples. For example, "I know someone who had an abortion and she's fine." This is a tricky argument to handle because the argument could end up revolving around the circumstances of a particular person. This, of course, can distract the arguer from the real point, which is abortion as a legal option. On the other hand, it can help to personalize the argument if it is handled well. For example, "No one knows what is inside a person. It isn't possible to know if she is fine. Post abortion trauma usually doesn't show up in a person's life until months or years after the abortion.

Eight. Making statements in which "all" is implied but "some" is true.

This is a common approach to making arguments because it puts out the position the arguer wants to make and forces the opponent to refute it. This is particularly difficult because the statements are generally proposed as assumptions that should not be questioned.

A common statement heard by pro-life people is the one: "Americans are pro-choice." Because it is presented as an assumption, this statement must be refuted with facts. That, of course, requires knowing the latest polling data. Of course, some Americans are pro-choice, but we need to correct this error every time we hear it.

Nine. Statements that imply that no other position is plausible.

These arguments are, of course, the most difficult because they come from a mind-set that has accepted abortion as a necessity. The person making such statements has probably never made any attempt to understand the reasons supporting the position that is held. The position is accepted unconditionally without giving it any real thought. A common example of such a position encountered by pro-life individuals is the notion that, "Everyone has the right to choose. It's American."

Pro-abortion opponents may manipulate the discussion, knowing full well that the positions taken are dangerous.

A statement like this is based on so many misconceptions that it is difficult to know where to start to refute it. It is clear that a great deal of education is probably needed when this type of statement is made. The usual way to respond initially is to draw attention to the fact that "The baby doesn't get a choice" or "In America we usually don't give people the choice to kill other people." Responses like these can create a great deal of antagonism. The danger is that the person will be so annoyed that the emotions generated by the responses will cause the pro-life debater to lose the ability to continue a meaningful dialogue.

Ten. Simply restating without defending the merit of the position.

As a debating tactic, this is a very effective technique. It doesn't give the pro-life debater anything to refute. It eliminates opportunities to educate by responding to new comments made by the pro-abortion side. It puts the debater in the position of repeating the same argument in different ways to try to get the opponent to respond to the essence of the debate. This situation then eliminates the need for the pro-abortion opponent to have to respond to a number of different points.

A better tactic for the pro-life debater responding to this type of approach is to ignore the restatements and press on with pro-life education. This way the opponent is exposed to the various arguments that are being avoided by keeping the debate stuck on one topic.

These ten points are helpful because they provide a plan for dealing with opponents, whether the situation is an informal conversation or a formal debate format with an audience. When there is an audience, it is important to remember that education is occurring whether or not the opponent is being moved by the arguments. The audience must always be considered in such situations. Pro-abortion opponents, in such situations, may simply manipulate the discussion, knowing full well that the positions that are being taken are disingenuous.

I once had the experience of doing a radio interview for a program that had the format of using a "liberal" and a "conservative" interviewer. In this case, the conservative was pro-life and was very, helpful in supporting my point of view. The liberal was a very aggressive pro-abortion advocate. In the end, my debate was only with him. I had responded to all of his attempts to "back me into a corner." Finally he just said, "I don't believe that life begins at conception." The purpose of this statement, is, of course, to step out of the argument. He is essentially getting out of the way of the debate, side-stepping it.

He is saying that it is all a matter of belief and he just doesn't believe it. We are generally respectful of the beliefs of people and we generally realize that beliefs are basic assumptions that can't really be refuted by facts. I certainly think that there are many issues that are a matter of belief but when life begins is not one of them. It is a biological fact that modern science understands quite well. He obviously had had good success silencing his opponents with this technique in the past. Being a developmental psychologist, I decided to end that particular maneuver in the following way. I said, "I'm not surprised that you don't know when life begins. There is developmental research on this topic and many people don't know when life begins. For example, children don't know." I was going to explain the stages of development associated with a full understanding of when life begins, but he hung up on me before I could finish my sentence.

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