Women’s Rights and Unborn Life: The Development of Pro-Choice and Pro-Life Activists’ World Views

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Abstract

Since the Supreme Court’s landmark Roe v. Wade decision legalized abortion in the Unites States, the debate over abortion has been a prominent feature of the American political landscape. While much research has investigated the difference between pro-choice and pro-life activists’ political and moral beliefs, this thesis investigates the role these activists’ childhood religious, social and cultural contexts played in the development of their political and moral beliefs about abortion, as well as the impact long term conversations between opposing activists has on the continued development of their beliefs after they have become engaged in political activism. Research was conducted through oral histories interviews with sixteen pro-choice and pro-life activists between the ages of fifty and ninety in Mid-Coast Maine and Eastern Massachusetts in the summer of 2017, and one facilitator of a past pro-choice/life discussion group. Both pro-choice and pro-life activists’ moral and political beliefs were strongly influenced by their religious beliefs, and their communities’ support for traditional constructions of white femininity and heteronormative family structure, while long term dialogues helped to deepen activists’ own beliefs and build relationships across political divides.

Key Words: abortion, morality, pro-choice, pro-life, dialogue, Reproductive Justice,
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Introduction

“When I was a teenager, or perhaps early in college, the daughter of some family friends got pregnant. She was about fifteen, and the decision was she would go, be sent away, have the child, give it up for adoption, and I was very angry about that.
And I said, “Why can’t she have an abortion?”
And my mother said, “Well you know, her father is a doctor, and if anything were to come out about this….”
So, I said, “Well that’s just not fair.” – Anne Fowler

“When I was like seventeen or eighteen, I heard [my sister] speaking with her husband about taking something to get rid of [their fifth] baby and I was just appalled.
And I said to her, ‘Please, don’t do this.’
And she said, ‘Well, you know, we have the other children, and we don’t want to have a child.’
And I said to her, ‘This is a person, this is a real person,’ I said, ‘when this baby is born, you will love this baby.’
And she said, ‘Of course I will.’
And I said, ‘Why would you want to get rid of it now.’” – Madeline McComish

These stories were shared with me by two women who spent decades working in direct opposition to each other on the question of abortion access in Massachusetts. Both stories are these women’s first memories of encountering abortion, and despite the vastly different political and moral beliefs of the women recalling them, they share remarkable similarities. Both took place when the women were teenagers in northern New England over a decade before abortion was legalized nationwide in the United States, both women had immediate reactions about how someone close to them should handle and unwanted pregnancy, and the outcomes of both situations deeply influenced both women’s moral beliefs and political activism. The difference between the two stories, of course, is that Anne believed her pregnant friend should have the option to have an abortion, while Madeline believed her sister would be killing her baby if she had an abortion.
While I was conducting my field work for this thesis, I continually heard stories similar to these, of young women encountering the challenges of unintended pregnancies, either their own or a close friend or relative’s. Often, they were the first memories activists would share with me after I asked what got them involved with the pro-choice or pro-life movement, or how they first became aware of abortion. Activists often described these moments as either informing or crystalizing their beliefs that abortion was the killing of an innocent baby, or an essential right to which all women ought to have access. While I was conducting my field work, I was not surprised that early life experiences had such strong influences on these future activists’ world views and beliefs. What did surprise me, however, was how similar the stories were that pro-life and pro-choice activists shared with me. As in Anne and Madeline’s stories, the only immediately obvious difference between the stories of activists on either side were the conclusions the drew from their early experiences. These similarities only deepened my interest in how pro-choice and pro-life activists developed their beliefs.

My initial interest in studying pro-choice and pro-life activists grew out of my family’s history work in the field of reproductive rights. Two of my great grandfathers were pioneers in the birth control movement in the early 20th century, working both domestically and internationally to increase women’s access to contraception safe obstetric and gynecological healthcare. Many of my relatives followed my great grandfathers to work in the field of reproductive rights.¹ I grew up learning from my family about the importance of reproductive rights.

¹ My great grandfathers were Dr. Robert Latou Dickenson and Dr. Clarence James Gamble. Dr. Dickenson worked as an OBGYN at multiple hospitals in New York City in the late 19th and early 20th century. He founded the National Committee on Maternal Health, served as the Senior Vice President of Planned Parenthood Federation for America, and worked closely with Margaret Sanger studying contraceptives. Dr. Dickenson also served as President of the New York Obstetrical Society, the Euthanasia Society of America, and the American Gynecological Society, and was also a Fellow and Director of the American College of Surgeons (“Dickinson, Robert Latou, 1861-1950. Papers, 1881-1972 (Inclusive), 1926-1951 (Bulk): Finding Aid.” n.d.). Dr. Gamble began working in the 1920s as a philanthropist and researcher, supporting the establishment of clinics to provide women access to contraceptives in the United States and sixty other countries. He worked closely with both Dr. Dickenson and Margaret Sanger.
choice, and the pride they took in our family’s history of working to ensure people of all genders had access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare. Because of this, I have been familiar with pro-choice arguments as long as I have been aware of the political debate over abortion. However, as I began considering writing my thesis on a topic related to reproductive health and justice in my junior year of college, I found myself also being interested in researching pro-life arguments. It seemed to me both sides of the abortion debate viewed themselves as working to improve people’s lives, and yet also viewed the other side as systematically working to hurt people’s lives. I was intrigued by how people who ostensibly cared about the same things – women and children’s wellbeing – ended up so diametrically opposed to each other on the issue of abortion. It seemed to me that once one’s beliefs about abortion were developed – either that it was essential for a woman to have control over her own reproductive capabilities, or that abortion is the killing of an unborn child – activism on either side made logical sense. And so, I decided to research how people on either side of the abortion debate developed their beliefs and became politically active.

Two members of my family helped facilitate my connections to the pro-choice and pro-life activists I interviewed for my research during the summer of 2017. In Maine, my research advocating for contraceptive access and researching new forms of effective contraceptives. In 1957 Dr. Gamble founded the Pathfinder Fund (later Pathfinder International), an international family planning organization that worked to create community-based family planning clinics in other countries. During his career he also served on the boards of the Birth Control Federation of America and Planned Parenthood Federation of America (“Gamble, Clarence James, 1894-. Papers, 1920-1970s (Inclusive), 1920-1966 (Bulk): Finding Aid.” n.d.; “Our History” 2018). Dr. Gamble’s son and my grandfather, Richard Gamble, served both on the board and as president of Pathfinder International. Additionally, he also served on the boards of the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts, and the International Women’s Health Coalition (Marquard 2009). Three of Richard Gamble’s siblings, and many of their children have also served on Pathfinder International’s board (“Staff Members Archive” 2018). Nicki Nichols Gamble, Richard Gamble’s wife and my grandmother was President and CEO of the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts for twenty-five years. She has also served as the president of the National Abortion Federation, and on the boards of the Center for Reproductive Rights, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Ipas, and the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts Foundation (“Nicki Nichols Gamble” 2012). In addition to serving on the board of Pathfinder International, Judy Kahlrl, Dr. Gamble’s daughter and my great aunt, also founded Grandmothers for Reproductive Rights, a Maine based reproductive rights, justice and healthcare advocacy and education organization (“Grandmothers for Reproductive Rights” 2018).
was facilitated by my great aunt, Judy Karhl, who is the founder of Grandmothers for Reproductive Rights (GRR), an organization of elderly women in southern Maine that works on advocacy and education around reproductive rights, justice and healthcare. She put me in touch with many of the members of the group, GRRs as the call themselves, who I was able to interview. In Massachusetts, my research was facilitated by my grandmother, Nicki Nichols Gamble, who is the former President of the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts. She put me in touch with friends and colleagues who were involved in both the pro-choice and pro-life movements and, using the snowball method, I was able to contact and interview additional activists from both movements.

In order to more fully understand the stories, beliefs and experiences of the activists I interviewed, it is important to contextualize their words, both in the broader history of the pro-choice and pro-life movements, as well as in the socio-political environments of eastern Massachusetts and southern Maine in which they worked.

Although debate over abortion is commonly framed as having started as a response to the supreme court’s Roe v. Wade decision in 1973, in reality the debates over the morality and legality of abortion in the United States stretch back to the 19th century. Through the early 1800s, abortion was legal in the United States up until the moment of quickening, or roughly the first trimester of pregnancy, and illegal thereafter (Luker 1984). This legal timeline also mirrored the official moral teaching of the catholic church, which would not come to oppose abortion at any stage until the 20th century (Luker 1984). The first political activism around abortion began in the middle of the 19th century, when physicians began advocating for abortion bans on the grounds that it was murder as a way to gain credibility for their profession in the face of competition from others offering medical services who had not attended medical school (Luker...
By 1900, every state banned abortion except when it was necessary to preserve the health of the mother (Luker 1984). This remained the legal status quo until the 1960s, when physicians, by this time firmly established as licensed medical professionals, began supporting women’s efforts to legalize abortions (Staggenborg 1991). During this time, political activism grew significantly, both among those supporting changes in the law to make abortion legal, and among those working to keep it illegal. On the pro-choice side, the National Association to Repeal Abortion Laws (NARAL) was founded as the first national political organization supporting unrestricted abortion access (Staggenborg 1991). On the pro-life side, the National Council of Catholic Bishops, with support from Pope Paul VI, started what has become a decades long vocal political opposition to the legalization of abortion (Munson 2014). However, the landscape of abortion politics would be radically changed in the early 1970s.

The modern pro-life movement was created in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, which legalized abortion nationwide. The decision shocked many people across the country, and triggered a sharp increase in pro-life activism (Haugeberg 2017; Munson 2014). A number of other strategies and political developments also helped to increase the size and effectiveness of the right-to-life movement. As abortion clinics became more common following Roe v. Wade, pro-life activists also began establishing crisis pregnancy centers, which often posed as comprehensive reproductive health clinics, but did not offer abortions and counseled pregnant women strongly against pursuing them elsewhere. Many of these centers used religious arguments to make their case, and some even went as far as providing medically false information about the dangers of abortions (Haugeberg 2017). During the 1970s and 1980s, the pro-life movement’s numbers swelled, most notably with catholic women, many of whom had experience in the anti-war and environmental movements, and evangelical men (Haugeberg
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2017; Williams 2011, 2015). At the same time, on the national political scene, republican political strategists began working to appeal simultaneously to Catholics and Evangelicals with a strong pro-life message in order to elect Richard Nixon (Williams 2015, 2011). During this time, Operation Rescue also became well known for its aggressive and even violent protesting tactics outside abortion clinics (Haugeberg 2017). In the 1990s, the most extreme wing of the right-to-life movement carried out a string of violent attacks on abortion clinics and providers, successfully killing multiple doctors and destroying equipment in clinics (Haugeberg 2017). While the pro-life movement’s early legislative efforts to pass a constitutional amendment banning abortion were frustrated, it achieved a major victory in 1976 with the passage of the Hyde amendment, which banned the use of federal Medicaid funds for abortions across the country (Munson 2014).

In response to the increase in pro-life activism following the Roe v. Wade decision, the pro-choice movement also saw substantial growth. At the grass roots level, the pro-choice movement was also helped by the experience of many activists who had previously participated in the anti-war, environmental and women’s movements (Stettner 2013; Staggenborg 1991). Additionally, NARAL and Planned Parenthood grew into powerful, national political lobbying organizations with significant support from grass roots activists (Staggenborg 1991). In the mid 1990s, activists led by women of color, feeling that the dominant pro-choice movement privileged the needs and concerns of middle class white women over those of women of color, poor and queer women, began advocating understandings of reproductive health and choice in a broader framework of reproductive justice, which took into account the ways in which histories

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2 Operation Rescue is a radical, pro-life organization that gained notoriety during the 1970s and 1980s for vandalizing or otherwise shutting down abortion clinics in attempts to prevent abortions taking place. Some members of operation rescue even went as far as attempting to kill or otherwise physically harm abortion providers (Haugeberg 2017).
of forced sterilization and race and class oppression that many women had experienced
intersected to create unique forms of oppression (Roberts 2015; Asian Communities for
Reproductive Justice advocates further argued that true reproductive freedom included the ability
for individuals to have, or not have, as many children as they wanted, at whatever time they
wanted, with access to affordable, high quality healthcare, and the ability to raise those children
in safe environments (Roberts 2015; Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice 2005; Nixon
2013; Stern 2005). In 1992, the Supreme Court ruled in another landmark case, Planned
Parenthood v. Casey, which provided both pro-choice and pro-life movements with cause to
celebrate. The court’s ruling reaffirmed the constitutionality of legal abortions, but also allowed
states to impose restrictions on abortion access, provided they didn’t constitute an “undue
burden” (Munson 2014; Devins 2009).

In the 21st century, the two most significant events in abortion politics were the 2010
midterm elections, and the Supreme Court’s ruling in Whole Women’s Healthcare v. Hellerstedt.
In 2010, a large number of pro-life legislators were elected to state legislatures around the
country and in the five years following almost three hundred new state laws restricting access to
abortion in some capacity were passed (“Last Five Years Account for More Than One-Quarter of
All Abortion Restrictions Enacted Since Roe” 2016). In 2016, the Supreme Court’s Whole
Women’s Healthcare v. Hellerstedt decision struck down Texas state laws which required
abortion facilities to meet ambulatory surgical center regulations, and required abortion providers
to have admitting privileges at local hospitals (“Laws Affecting Reproductive Health and Rights:
State Trends at Midyear, 2016” 2016). Five other states had passed similar laws, which had
greatly restricted access to abortion (“Laws Affecting Reproductive Health and Rights: State
Trends at Midyear, 2016” 2016). Political activism over abortion laws continues at the national level, however it is also important to understand the local and state context in which the activists I interviewed lived and worked.

The political climate around abortion access and activism in the Maine and Massachusetts shared many similarities but were also had significant differences. Both of my research areas are in regions of northern New England states that have reputations for being politically liberal, and both states have relatively liberal abortion laws. As of 2014 there were nine facilities in Maine providing abortion services, while in Massachusetts there were forty-three (“State Facts About Abortion: Maine” 2016; “State Facts About Abortion: Massachusetts” 2016). At the time of my research, the only restriction on abortion access in Maine was a ban on the use of public funds for abortion except in cases of rape, incest, or endangerment to the life of the mother, while in Massachusetts, parental consent was required before minors could receive abortions and abortions after twenty-four weeks were banned accept in cases when the mother’s life was endangered (“State Facts About Abortion: Maine” 2016; “State Facts About Abortion: Massachusetts” 2016). Despite these differences in laws, however, among the activists I spoke with there was a perception that politically, the state government in Massachusetts was much more dependably supportive of unrestricted abortion access than the state government in Maine. In Massachusetts, democrats, who were viewed in both states as being pro-choice, controlled both houses of the state legislature, and the governor, while republican, had been outspoken in his support for abortion rights (Swasey 2014). In Maine, Republicans controlled the State Senate and democrats controlled the House of Representatives, while the republican governor was staunchly pro-life and had been elected as part of the Tea Party’s widespread electoral success in 2010 that led to many states significantly restricting abortion access (Shepherd 2013). As a
result, the activists I interviewed in Maine viewed abortion access as an active political issue, while the those in Massachusetts on both sides recognized that the pro-choice views of the state government left far less room for significant political change to the status quo in the immediate future. However, this has not prevented the pro-life movement from being active in Boston. The greater Boston area is roughly thirty percent Catholic (Lipka 2015), and given the Church’s strong stance against abortion, this has helped to fuel a strong, decades long tradition of robust pro-life activism in the region.

In total I interviewed seventeen people, six of whom I made contact with through Grandmothers for Reproductive Rights, ten of whom I made contact with through the Flagship Group Discussion on Abortion, and one of whom I contacted through a personal connection, as she was the wife of my first cousin once removed. Eleven of my interviewees identified as pro-choice, five identified as pro-life, and one was the facilitator of the Flagship Group, who although openly being pro-choice herself, was not an activist, and was of interest to my research because of her facilitation work. One identified as a man, while the rest identified as women. All but two of my interviewees currently lived in either mid-coast Maine or the greater Boston area. Of the two that did not, one currently lived in California but had previously lived in Maine year-round and currently vacationed there in the summer. The other lived in the Washington DC area and was referred to me by another interviewee with whom she had a professional connection. All but one of my interviewees were white, while one identified as Hispanic. All of my interviewees were middle to upper-class and ranged in age from their fifties to their nineties. Furthermore, the vast majority of them had grown up in middle or upper class white communities in which

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3 The Flagship Discussion Group on Abortion is a group of three pro-choice and three pro-life leaders from Massachusetts, including my grandmother, who secretly met to discuss their beliefs relating to abortion for six years. For more details on the Flagship Discussion Group, see Chapter 3.
traditional concepts of racialized gender roles and heteronormative family structures were strongly, albeit usually implicitly, valued. All of my interviewees had undergraduate degrees, and many had one or more advanced degrees as well. Many of them expressed familiarity with the process of conducting large academic research projects, such as this one, and asked to be sent my final thesis once it was completed. In this thesis, I refer to most of the people I interviewed using pseudonyms in order to protect their identity, however I have not done this for all of the members of the Flagship Discussion Group or my great aunt, Judy Kahrl, the founder of GRR. Pseudonyms for these women would have done very little to protect their identities, as members of the Flagship Discussion Group are mentioned by name in multiple published sources about their years of conversations which I cite, and Judy is easily searchable online given the information I provide about our family and her founding an activist organization of grandmothers in Maine. However, all seven of these women voluntarily gave me permission to use their real names.

My research consisted of semi-structured oral histories interviews. I brought a list of prepared questions to each interview but tried to follow the natural flow of the conversation as much as I could while touching on the topics that were of interest to me. I conducted two of the interviews by phone, while the rest were in person at cafes, parks, interviewees homes or professional offices. The conversations ranged in length from half an hour to two hours, but on average lasted about an hour. In a few instances I emailed interviewees after our conversations to clarify something they had said or ask a question I had not had time to get to during our interview.

My own positionality undoubtedly impacted my interviews and thus the information I gathered in myriad ways. However, there were certain aspects of my identity and positionality
that were an obvious part of every interaction I had my interviewees and something of which I was always consciously aware. First and foremost was my family’s connection to the reproductive rights movement. In the Boston area, my grandmother was very well known in the world of pro-life and pro-choice activism, and all of my potential interviewees could immediately identify me as being related to her as soon as I first contacted them through my last name in my email signature. Similarly, in Maine, all my interviewees knew I was related to my great aunt before I contacted them and were familiar with her family’s history in reproductive rights activism. I made a point not to mention my own views on abortion, contraception, or sexual morality in all of my interviews. Additionally, did everything I could not react judgmentally to anything my interviewees said, at times even reassuring them that I was interested in their beliefs and would not judge them. Despite this, all of my interviewees assumed I was pro-choice, I imagine because of my family connection. I believe this made the pro-choice activists more comfortable sharing their thoughts and beliefs with me than the pro-life activists were, because they were more confident I would agree with and not judge them. I wanted to interview more pro-life activists than I did and was given the names of several others by the pro-life members of the Flagship Group. However, I was not able to interview them because they did not respond when I emailed them to describe my thesis and ask if they would like to participate. While this could have been for any number of reason, I was told a by one pro-life member of the Flagship Group that some of her colleagues to whom she had mentioned my research were concerned about being taken out of context and having their views misrepresented in my thesis. I offered, through her, to let them read what I wrote about them before finalizing it, but still did not hear back from most of them. I cannot know for sure, but I imagine that some of this anxiety over being misrepresented or lack of response to my outreach could well have been due to my
relation to such well known and strident pro-choice activists. While I do not know if any of the pro-life activists I attempted to contact or interviewed had ever been interviewed for academic research, many of the pro-life activist I interviewed explained to me that they believed the mainstream press had a pro-choice bias, and frequently portrayed them negatively. When quoting both pro-choice and pro-life activists, I have chosen to often include long block quotes in order to provide as much context as possible for their beliefs, views and memories and to try to avoid taking anything they said out of context. I am aware, however, that this disparity between the number of pro-choice and pro-life activists may impact my analysis of their views, as I had a far greater diversity of life experiences from which to draw on the pro-choice side than on the pro-life.

The second aspect of my positionality which undoubtedly impacted in interviews was my race and class. Like all but one of my interviewees I am white, and like many of them I grew up in a small, white, upper middle-class community in New England. While there are undoubtedly differences in the life experiences of middle and upper class white individuals living in New England which are erased by such broad categories such as “white people” or “New Englanders,” there are also distinct similarities in life experiences which I shared with all of my interviewees by virtue of being white and having grown up in the same region in which they lived. Specifically, all of us shared a common, albeit implicit, understanding of traditional, racialized gender roles and heteronormative constructions of family in New England, and all of us gained our understanding of reproductive health and abortion politics first through the specific history of white people’s engagement with these issues.

The last aspect of my positionality of which I was continually aware was my gender. As a cis-gendered man, I can never become pregnant or have an abortion, and also benefit from the
patriarchal power structure which many of the women I interviewed saw as being systematically oppressive to all women. I routinely asked interviewees about their experiences having abortions, using or not using birth control, and encountering sexism and living with systemic patriarchy. While I tried hard to be aware of my own privilege and sensitive in the way I asked these questions my identity as a cis-gendered man could well have affected the ways in which interviewees responded to my questions, or the extent to which they were willing to share their personal experiences and beliefs. In some instances, it was very clear this was happening, when interviewees began complaining about how “men” acted, before back tracking to clarify that they did not mean to include me in that category.

The debate over abortion between pro-choice and pro-life leaders is extremely contentious, and because of this, there are some concepts to which I refer in this thesis for which there are no politically neutral terms. For example, there is no neutral term for what pro-choice activists call a “fetus” and pro-life activists call “unborn babies.” Pro-choice activists prefer the term “fetus” because many feel life does not begin at conception, and they do not want to imply that having an abortion would be taking the life of a baby. Pro-life activists prefer the term “unborn babies” because they do believe life begins at conception, and very much want to remind those with whom they speak that they believe abortion is a form of killing. While the participants of the Flagship Group settled on the term “human fetus” as a compromise between both of these beliefs, neither side was completely comfortable with it. I have chosen not to use this term for this reason, as well as because the majority of the activists I interviewed did not participate in these discussions, and thus have no familiarity with the term. I therefore feel that it would be inappropriate to refer their descriptions of their beliefs using a term they do not themselves use, and thus may well be uncomfortable with. As there is thus no neutral term for
this, I have chosen to use the preferred term of the group about whom I am most directly writing. Thus, in Chapter 1, which is primarily concerned pro-life activists, I use “unborn baby” or “unborn human life,” while in Chapter 2, I use terms such as “fetus” and “embryo.” I recognize that this inconsistency could be confusing, however feel that it is the only way to authentically and respectfully represent the views of the activists who I interviewed.

While there has been extensive research conducted on the pro-choice/life movements, and the activists who make them up, most of this scholarship has focused on the development of the social movements, and difference between the moral and political beliefs of pro-choice and pro-life activists (Staggenborg 1991; Stettner 2013; Luker 1984; Lakoff 1995; Haidt 2012). What research has been conducted on the development of pro-choice/life activists moral and political beliefs has almost exclusively focused on activists as adults, largely ignores their race and class, and implicitly assumes that their beliefs stop developing after they become involved in political activism (Luker 1984; Haugeberg 2017; Munson 2014). However, as multiple feminist scholars and activists have argued, individuals’ political and moral beliefs are shaped by the different ways they are treated by individuals and institutions around them as a result of their intersecting identities, including their race, class, and gender (Roberts 2015; Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice 2005). While reproductive justice scholars have applied this kind of intersectional approach to their research, they have primarily focused on studying women of color and queer folk (Roberts 2015; Nixon 2013; Stern 2005), and there thus remains a lack intersectional research exploring the development of white activists’ moral and political views in the pro-choice/life movements.

I will argue that pro-choice/life activists’ political and moral beliefs about abortion begin to develop during their childhoods, as their growing moral understandings of the world are
deeply impacted by the religious, cultural and social contexts of the families and communities in which they grow up. When activist later become aware of abortion, they interpret significant events which bring it to their attention through these moral frameworks, which help to determine their eventual political and moral views on the issue. These events usually leave activists feeling motivated to somehow try to affect change, however they typically don’t become involved in activism until professional or social opportunities enable them to do so. I further contend that pro-choice/life activists’ beliefs do not stop developing once they become involved in activism. When given the opportunity to engage in private, safe dialogues with activists from the other side, they deepened their own political, moral, and religious understandings of both their own and their opponents’ beliefs, came to see their political opponents as fully human and developed long-lasting friendships across their political differences. This thesis sheds light on the different impact institutional religion, and constructions of racialized gender and heteronormative family structure can have on young children, and the ways in which political opponents can build relationships through breaking down stereotypes and being willing to show vulnerability when engaging with each other. My hope is that this will help to illuminate the ways in which political conflicts get passed down through generations and provide a potential path towards building and maintaining relationships across political divides.
Chapter 1: The Development of the Pro-Life Women’s Beliefs

Since Roe v. Wade triggered the rise of the modern pro-life movement, conflict over views on abortion have been a consistent feature of political dialogue in the United States. This sustained debate has inspired extensive scholarly research on the pro-life movement. However, much of this research has focused on the growth of the pro-life movement, and the differences between pro-life activists’ world views and those of their pro-choice political opponents (Luker 1984, 1975; Staggenborg 1991; Stettner 2013; Neitz 1981; F. D. Ginsburg 1991; Early 2015; Lakoff 1995). Specifically, multiple scholars have argued that pro-life and pro-choice activists’ different political views stem from different moral frameworks that support their world views (Lakoff 1995; Luker 1984; Early 2015; F. Ginsburg 1987). Faye Ginsburg argues that many pro-life activists world views are partially made up of a chain of associations connecting their opposition to abortion to other issues of gender and sexual morality in support of a larger effort to protect the bases of appropriate “biological, cultural and social reproduction” (F. Ginsburg 1987). Two scholars have specifically investigated the ways in which pro-life activists develop their moral and political beliefs about abortion. In Women Against Abortion: Inside the Largest Moral Reform Movement of the Twentieth Century, Karissa Haugeberg explored the ways in which women became motivated to join the pro-life movement, and how some women within the movement became radicalized to the point of committing acts of terrorism against healthcare professionals providing abortion services and the clinics in which they worked (Haugeberg 2017). While this research provided valuable insights into the process of radicalization, Haugeberg did not focus on the ways in which women in the mainstream, non-violent, pro-life movement developed their beliefs about abortion. Ziad Munson addressed this topic much more directly in, The Making of Pro-Life Activists: How Social Movement Mobilization Works,
explaining that the activists he spoke with largely developed their beliefs and desire to become involved in the pro-life movement through social connections with individuals who were already fully fledged pro-life activists (Munson 2014). It is undoubtedly important to recognize the importance social connections can have on the development of activists’ beliefs, however Munson did not question why the individuals he interviewed became friends with pro-life activists and took for granted that they were receptive to these friends’ pro-life beliefs. Additionally, while many studies, have focused on the role activists’ gender and religious faith play on both the development of their beliefs and their political activism, very little research has explored the ways in which activists’ race and class similarly influence their beliefs. This clearly represents a significant gap in scholarship, for as multiple feminist scholars have argued, individuals’ political and moral beliefs begin developing during childhood, and are deeply influenced by their intersecting racial, class, and gender identities, as well as those of those around them (The Comabhee River Collective 1983; Moon 1999). I therefore strive to fill this gap in scholarship, analyzing the development the pro-life women’s beliefs who I interviewed in the context of their own racial, class, gender, and religious identities and beliefs, as well as those of the communities and families in which they grew up.

In multiple important ways, all five of the pro-life women I interviewed grew up in very similar environments. Four of the five identified as white, while one identified as Hispanic. Beyond stating that her family was Hispanic, however, this woman provided very little information in our interview, or in a subsequent email specifically requesting information about what her family’s racial, ethnic, or cultural background was while growing up (Samantha 2018). However, from our conversation, it was extremely clear that her family embraced the same constructions of racialized gender and heteronormative family structure as the other pro-life
women (Samantha 2017, 2018). Because of this, and the fact that she did not elaborate any more on her family’s racial, ethnic, or cultural identity, I include her in my analysis of the other pro-life women’s acceptance of white femininity and heteronormative family structure. In addition to the pro-life women’s family’s similar racial identity, all of the pro-life women were raised in practicing catholic families, all attended catholic schools for a portion, if not all, of their education, and remained practicing Catholics throughout their adult lives. Four of the women also grew up in the greater Boston area, making the cultural contexts of their childhoods very similar. The reason for this religious homogeneity begins with the makeup of the Flagship Group Discussion on Abortion, as they were the first women I spoke with and the people with whom I started the snowballing process of finding more interviewees. During my interview with one of the facilitators of the Flagship Group, I asked why all three pro-life women were catholic, while the three pro-choice women each came from different religious or spiritual backgrounds. She replied that this had not been by design, but because Boston is such a catholic city, virtually all pro-life leaders in the area ended up being catholic. The two other pro-life activists I interviewed were referred to me by members of the Flagship Group, and I only found out while talking with them that they too were catholic. Both in Massachusetts and nationally, the pro-life movement is religiously diverse, with evangelical Christians having played a particularly significant role in the movement’s evolution and growth (Haugeberg 2017; Williams 2015). It is therefore important to note that the life experiences of the pro-life activists I interviewed are not representative of the diversity of experiences that exist within the larger pro-life movement. However, their experiences do provide valuable insights into the specific cultural, religious and political factors which influenced the development of their beliefs across the course of their lifetimes. I will argue that the development of the pro-life women’s political and moral beliefs
about abortion began during their childhood when they learned from their families and communities to value three distinct pillars of morality: their catholic faith, belief in traditional constructions of the heteronormative family and white femininity, and a belief in the importance of human rights. While these beliefs did not specifically concern abortion, they made up the first links of the Ginsburg’s chain of associations that make up pro-life world views. These links created moral frameworks through which they later interpreted significant personal events which brought abortion as a political issue into their consciousness, crystalized their views on abortion and motivate them to engage in political activism.

Abortion, as political or controversial issue, was not a significant part of all but one of the pro-life women’s childhood. Madeline McComish, whose was quoted at the beginning of this thesis, overheard her older sister planning to have an abortion when she was a teenager. Madeline’s sister chose to have a medical abortion, however it was unsuccessful, and she ended up carrying her baby to term, and raising her once she was born (McComish 2017). While this event had a lasting impact on Madeline, she described her sister’s attempted abortion as an isolated, private event in her childhood, and was not aware of any larger, social or political discussions around the issue until much later in her life (McComish 2017). Samantha had a similar reaction to Madeline to the issue of abortion when she discussed it in middle school after Roe v. Wade was decided, seeing it as, “a human rights issue,” and believing that, “for something that is human, the only response can be respect, and killing is a violation of that” (Samantha 2017). The other women all recalled being aware of the catholic church’s teaching that abortion was morally wrong, but did not remember thinking about or consciously engaging with the issue at all while they were growing up (Margaret 2017; Thorp 2017; Hogan 2017). Thus, it is clear that none of the pro-life women ever spent any time questioning their own
beliefs about the immorality of abortion, and instead felt that opposing abortion was a natural extension of their broader moral beliefs system. In order to understand how they came to oppose abortion, it is thus important to explore the development of the three pillars of morality which formed the basis for their pro-life world views.

Catholic Faith

All of the pro-life women were raised in practicing catholic families, and they all described their catholic upbringing as being very influential in the development of their moral beliefs. Two of the women specifically mentioned their religious education as having a strong impact on their moral development. Samantha attended catholic schools through high school, and as previously mentioned, explicitly discussed the immorality of abortion in school. While discussing the ways in which the church taught morality around social issues like contraception and abortion, she explained:

The Catholic Church was – the size and the scope, and the activity of the catholic church was a given. We were huge, and the catholic schools were bursting. There were a hundred kids per class. They almost felt like they didn’t have to say a lot (Samantha 2017).

She here makes clear that the catholic church was an integral part of her community while growing up, and as a result it’s moral authority went largely unquestioned. Like Samantha, Madeline also attended catholic schools while growing up, and brought them up while we were discussing her later work in pro-life activism. While describing her understanding of morality that guided her activism, Madeline explained, “It comes down to what I believe is right and wrong…. I believe in an absolute morality. Something is either right or wrong” (McComish 2017).” When I asked her how she came to see the world in terms of absolute morality, she replied:
Well probably from our religious upbringing, I think. Because as I say, I went to catholic schools from kindergarten on. And also, my parents. You sort of reflect what your parents believe (McComish 2017).

Samantha and Madeline make quite clear here that their catholic educations had deep impacts on the development of their understandings of morality. Similarly, many of the other pro-life women acknowledged that their opposition to abortion was either rooted in, or clearly aligned with their catholic faith. Thus, in order to understand the ways in which the pro-life women’s catholic faith influenced their conceptions of morality, it is important to understand the catholic church’s doctrine on abortion.

The Catholic Church’s teaching and activism on abortion in the United States has evolved since the 19th century in response developments in the scientific understanding of pregnancy and the broader context of political debates around abortion. The page of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website dedicated to abortion strongly emphasizes that the catholic church has always been opposed to abortion. The page includes a quote from the Catechism of the Catholic Church which states, “Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2018). The page goes on to explain that church’s opposition to abortion has followed the evolution of the scientific understanding of pregnancy, such that before the mid-19th century the church opposed abortion from the moment of ensoulment on, however once scientists discovered the ovum and understood the role played by both the sperm and the egg in the process of conception, the church opposed abortion from the moment of conception (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2018). In Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood, Kristin Luker argues that, practically speaking in the United States, this meant that until the beginning of the 20th century, the catholic
church did not oppose abortion until the moment of quickening, which roughly corresponds to the first trimester of pregnancy (Luker 1984). However, as abortion became an increasingly controversial topic during the 20th century, the catholic church began taking strong political stance against it. In 1968, Pope Paul VI wrote *Humanae Vitae*, an encyclical letter addressed to all members of the catholic church, spelling out its official position on the regulation of birth. In it, he specifically condemned contraception as “unlawful,” regardless of how “upright and serious” one’s reasons’ for wanting to use contraception might appear, and declared that abortion for any reason was “absolutely excluded as a lawful means of regulating the number of children” (Pope Paul VI 1968). Pope Paul VI thus made absolutely clear that the catholic church considered birth control and abortion to be entirely immoral. This message was vigorously taken up by the catholic hierarchy in the United States, and from the time the political debate over abortion began to heat up during the 1950s and 1960s, the church established itself as an outspoken opponent of legalizing abortion (Munson 2014; Haugeberg 2017). Pope Paul VI also wrote that natural family planning, or engaging in sexual intercourse only during the infertile period of a woman’s menstrual cycle, did, “not in the least offend … moral principles” and accordingly the catholic church also became a strong advocate of these methods as a means of spacing or regulating births during this same time (Pope Paul VI 1968). Within the catholic doctrine, sexual activity is only acceptable within heterosexual marriage, and all other sexual activity, including between unmarried individuals is considered a sin (Catholic Church 1997, 565). Thus, Pope Paul VI’s support of natural family planning implicitly applies only to heterosexually married couples. It is important to point out that Catholic Church’s official teachings against abortion are directly connected to their opposition to birth control and
premarital sex and situated within a larger discussion of the importance of protecting traditional heteronormative family structure.

These official catholic teachings provide important context for understanding how the pro-life women developed their beliefs around these issues. Some of the women who attended catholic high schools or colleges remembered explicitly talking about contraception and or abortion in their ethics classes. While in college, Madeline had a summer job working for Pfizer, a pharmaceutical company, which although it was not producing hormonal birth control at the time, easily could have been (McComish 2017). Aware of church’s position on the use of birth control and knowing she could possible work for a company producing it in the future, she raised the subject with her ethics professor, asking, “What if I was working and I realized the company, the drug company that I was working for produced contraception” (McComish 2017). Madeline’s professor replied, “You really couldn’t work there if you were involved in producing contraceptives yourself” (McComish 2017). Madeline’s ethics professor at her Catholic college clearly gave her instructions on what was and was not morally acceptable professional behavior in light of the catholic church’s teaching on contraception. Given the catholic church’s strong political stance on both contraception and abortion, it is virtually inevitable that the other women would also have been taught contraception and abortion were morally wrong, and natural family planning was the only morally acceptable means by which to plan pregnancies. Even for the women who did not specifically remember talking about these topics, it is was implicitly clear that they never heard their parents, teachers, or any other influential adults arguing that contraception or abortion were morally right. With the exception of Madeline, who’s sister attempted to have an abortion, none of the women described being aware while they were growing up of anyone having an abortion, and only one of them was described being aware of
people using, or wanting to use, contraception. It therefore clear that there was a strong unspoken assumption in their communities that everyone was following the catholic church’s prohibition against contraception and abortion.

Thus, the catholic church’s teachings had a significant impact on the early development of the pro-life women’s moral frameworks and beliefs. In her article “Procreation Stories: Reproduction, Nurturance, and Procreation in Life Narratives of Abortion Activists,” Fay Ginsburg argues that pro-life activists typically understand their opposition to abortion as part of a larger effort to protect individuals, families, and society from larger structural harm.

In the pro-life world view, to subvert the fertile union of men and women, either by denying procreative sex or the differentiation of male and female character, is to destroy the bases of biological, cultural, and social reproduction. This chain of associations to reproductive, heterosexual sex is central to the organization of meaning in pro-life discourse. For most right-to-lifers, abortion is not simply the termination of an individual potential life, or even that act multiplied a million-fold. It represents an active denial of the reproductive consequences of sex and a rejection of female nurturance… (F. Ginsburg 1987).

Ginsburg here describes how in the prototypical pro-life world view, procreative, heterosexual sex is understood as the basis on which all biological, cultural and social reproduction is built. Accordingly, anything that obstructs this from taking place, such as contraception or abortion, is a threat to all of these forms of procreation. This chain of association is clearly quite similar to the catholic church’s teachings that contraception, abortion and extramarital sex are immoral because they obstruct the natural process of procreation designed by God (Pope Paul VI 1968).

Thus, while abortion was not a significant part of the pro-life women’s consciousness during their childhood, their catholic faith clearly influenced the development in the early links of the chain of association (i.e. a belief in heterosexual marriage, and opposition to contraception) which would later develop into a fully-fledged pro-life world view.
White Femininity and the Heteronormative Family

The religious messages that the pro-life women received about family structure and appropriate sexual activity were reinforced by the social and cultural norms which they learned to take for granted from their families. Fran did not recall being specifically aware of abortion while growing up, however she was aware of unintended pregnancies occurring in her family, and her relatives’ responses to them ended up having a profound impact on her beliefs about the best way to handle such a challenging situation.

My background is that my father was one of sixteen children and it was a big raucous Irish family…. But if someone in his family got in trouble, as we used to say, one of the girls, they just welcomed the child. Everybody took care of the child…. And I had it happen that one of my own nieces got pregnant when she was a junior in high school, at a catholic high school, and she didn’t tell us, of course naturally. And then when we did find out we didn't tell anyone in the family until the child was born.

And then I called her godfather to tell him and he said, “Oh God,” he said, “I thought you're going to give me bad news.”

And then he said, “Never forget, no matter the circumstances the birth of a child is always good news.”

And that just resonated with me because that's what I believed in my heart. The birth of a child is always good news (Hogan 2017).

Fran’s recollections here make clear that her relatives’ dedication to welcoming, loving and supporting any and all children that were born into the family, regardless of whether or not they were born out of wedlock, clearly had a strong influence on her belief that, as she put it, “the birth of a child is always good news” (Hogan 2017). However, the language Fran uses in describing these memories also offers insights into implicit social and cultural values which her family took for granted, that help to reinforce the messages she received from the catholic church. In her description of her niece’s unintended pregnancy, abortion was never considered as an option. This again illustrates the fact that most, if not all, of Fran’s family was implicitly opposed to abortion. Additionally, Fran’s use of phrase, “got in trouble” to describe young, female relatives getting pregnant, and the fact that she described it as “natural” not to tell anyone
her niece was pregnant until the baby was born, reveals the implicit value which her family placed on traditional construction of white femininity and heteronormative family structure.

Fran, and all of the other pro-life women, did not explicitly identify these cultural norms in their memories of their upbringings, however through their descriptions it became very clear that these factors had significant impacts on the development of their beliefs about sex, contraception and family.

The implicit acceptance of white femininity extended beyond the pro-life women’s families and were clearly the broader cultural norm within many of the communities in which the pro-life women grew up. While Fran’s comments above alluded to a general belief about what was considered appropriate sexual behavior for girls when she was in high school, Margaret addressed this topic much more explicitly while we were discussing the differences between teenagers’ behavior when she was growing up and today.

When I was in high school, we knew we were important, and we weren’t going to get tricked by any boy.

Well now these poor girls, “Oh love me, love me, love me.”

It’s a whole different thing.... We were in charge, and the girls are not in charge any more, and we knew we were important. And if he didn’t call by Tuesday, forget about it (Margaret 2017).

Margaret’s comments here show that while by the time she had reached high school, she had learned to embrace many aspects of traditional white femininity. She first ties girls’ self-esteem and understanding of their own importance to their lack of sexual activity and implies that the only reason a girl would engage in sexual activity when she was in high school would be because she was “tricked” into doing so by a boy. Margaret further implies that today, girls only engage in sexual activity because they have low self-esteem and are trying to solicit some form of affirmation from boys through their sexual activity. These implications obviously place a high value on girls maintaining their chastity, and entirely discounts the possibility that teenage girls
could want to engage in sexual activity for their own pleasure. These values very clearly align with the traditional construction of white femininity, which Barbara Welter traces back to the mid 19th century. In *The Cult of True Womanhood*, Welter explains that during this time, true womanhood, or femininity, which implicitly could only apply to white women, came to be defined by a number of specific characteristics, one of the most important of which was chastity, or sexual purity (Welter 1966). Describing the value placed on this, she writes,

> Purity was as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as unnatural and unfeminine. Without it she was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order. A “fallen woman” was a “fallen angel,” unworthy of the celestial company of her sex…. Therefore all True Women were urged, in the strongest possible terms, to maintain their virtue, although men, being by nature more sensual than they, would try to assault it (Welter 1966).

Welter makes clear that women’s worth as individuals was explicitly tied to their ability to resist men’s attempts to “assault” their “virtue,” or, in other words, refrain from engaging in sexual activity. While this description was based upon Welter’s research into 19th century constructions of femininity, these values are clearly reflected in Margaret’s description of her understanding of appropriate behavior for high school girls. Both tie teenage girls’ value to their sexual chastity, and also imply that the only reason they might stray from this course would be if they were tricked into satisfying a man’s immoral sexual desires. Similarly, Fran’s use of the phrase, “getting in trouble” to describe teenage girls getting pregnant, and her family’s reluctance to tell anyone that her niece was pregnant until the baby was born reveal the same value being placed on teenage girl’s chastity. The implicit assumption in the sexual values espoused in *The Cult of True Womanhood*, to which the pro-life women adhered, was that the only appropriate space for sexual activity was within heterosexual marriage.

All of the pro-life women grew up in families and communities in which traditional heterosexual marriage was strongly valued as the ideal family form and space in which to raise
children. None of the them mentioned explicitly being taught that heterosexual marriage was the proper form a family should take, however it could clearly be inferred from their descriptions of their childhoods and other values they had that this was taken to for granted while they were growing up. All of the pro-life women were raised by heterosexually married parents, except for Madeline, who was raised by her older sister and her husband after her mother died when she was eleven (McComish 2017). Additionally, in my conversations with both Samantha and Margaret, both women lamented the breakdown of the traditional, heterosexual family that had occurred since they grew up, which they believed had very negative impacts on society (Margaret 2017; Samantha 2017). As previously mentioned, heteronormative family structure is explicitly part of the catholic church’s teachings, however this religious endorsement does not fully explain why this family structure was so universally understood to be the norm in the pro-life women’s childhood communities.

Since middle of the 19th century, heteronormative family structure has also been systematically supported and encouraged by the state in the United States government. In The Way We Never Were, Stephanie Coontz explains that at the same time that The Cult of True Womanhood was solidifying gender roles for middleclass white women, the white middleclass, heterosexual family was systematically normalized as the ideal space in which to raise children (Coontz 2016, 168). Legislatures and courts around the country passed laws and handed down decisions which established and protected childhood as a “separate and protected stage of life,” domestic affairs as being specifically women’s responsibility, and the financial support of a family as being specifically men’s responsibility (Coontz 2016). These legal efforts were supported by moral reformers, many of whom were motivated by the values of protestant faiths, who campaigned to spread this nuclear family structure to lower class whites, and black families
as well (Coontz 2016). Government support for this family structure continued through the 20th century, most notably with the passage of the Social Security Act in 1939, which made financial support for low income individuals dependent on family status (Coontz 2016). Thus, by the time the pro-life women were born, heterosexual marriage had been supported by the state for multiple generations, which helped to create a culture of compulsory heterosexuality, in which women, particularly white middle and upper-class women, were expected and pressured into heterosexual marriages. Again, this cultural of normalized family structure also directly overlapped with the Catholic Church’s teachings on heteronormative marriage and family. These overlapping religious and cultural messages help to explain why the pro-life women implicitly accepted the ideas that heteronormative families were the best, and only appropriate space in which to raise children, and that any sexual activity outside of such a structure was immoral, both in and of itself, and because of the potential risk it raised of children being born and raised out of wedlock.

It is also important to note, however, that many of the pro-life women also had very good reasons to believe that families constructed in this manner could meaningfully support individual members through significant challenges in life. Madeline is a clear example of this. After her mother died, Madeline’s sister brought her up with her own children who were close in age to Madeline (McComish 2017). Similarly, Samantha also described her parents instilling in her the importance of taking care of others through the support and care they provided her family members.

The messages that I received about human life were all in the doing. We cared for my great grandmother, physically and personally until she died. We cared for my grandmother, physically, personally, in a hospital bed in our house for seven years. We cared for my severely disabled sister. No matter what someone’s religion, or race, or background was – I remember in the ‘60s and ‘70s, my parents were just so moved by human kindness I was like, yes, this is the way to go. And then when my disabled sister
would be made fun of, or I saw people who would distance themselves from their elderly relatives, I was like, no, no, that’s not the way to go (Samantha 2017).

Samantha here explains that she was deeply involved in caring for her elderly relatives and her disabled sister during her childhood and connects those experiences to her parents’ belief in the importance of treating all people equally. Throughout our interview she repeatedly came back to her experience being her sister’s “advocate,” and “watch dog”, as she phrased it, to explain how she came to value the importance of standing up for and defending the rights of vulnerable individuals. Lastly, as mentioned earlier, Fran’s extended family modeled the belief while she was growing up that any children born out of wedlock would be welcomed and supported by the entire family. Thus, it is clear that many of the pro-life women grew up with the understanding that extended families, which implicitly conformed to the traditional, heteronormative structure, could and should be able to support any individual members that encountered significant personal challenges in life.

Human Rights

The last pillar of the pro-life women’s moral frameworks which developed during their childhoods was a deep belief in the importance of human rights and advocating for those who were less fortunate than themselves. Fran specifically remembered her parents explicitly teaching her about the value of standing up for those who were less fortunate than herself. Her father was a lawyer, and she grew up hearing from him about the important role the law played in protecting individuals’ rights and wellbeing. In particular, Fran recalled one trip she took with her parents as a child as being particularly influential.

In the summer of 1954, they took us on a trip to Washington DC to see all of the historic monuments, the Capitol, the White House and the Supreme Court. Because it was the summer, we were allowed to enter into the actual chambers of the Supreme
Court. *Brown v. Board of Education* had just been decided. The case held, essentially, that it was unconstitutional for public school districts to have separate (but “equal”) schools for white children and black children. My Dad was very moved by this decision and was very proud to tell us that day in Washington that we could depend on this Court to protect those at the margins of life... those who had no one to speak for themselves... those who were not powerful. And, as an eight-year-old child who had such enormous respect and love for her father, this made a very big impression on me. Mirroring my father’s thoughts, I too developed enormous respect for the Court and saw it as the final safeguard of human life and human rights. As we stood in the chamber that day, my Dad spoke eloquently about the Court’s role in this important decision and how the Court was very important in the life of our country in assuring that everyone’s basic human rights were protected (Hogan 2018).

While this experience was the most explicit example Fran remembered of her parents teaching about the importance of human rights, and standing up for marginalized individuals and communities, she made clear that this was by no means an isolated incident, and that the themes of what her father spoke about that day in the chambers of the Supreme Court were continually reinforced by both her parents throughout her childhood. Fran’s experiences of her parents teaching her so explicitly about the importance of human rights were relatively unique among the pro-life women, however her early belief in these ideals was not. Barbara’s introduction to human rights advocacy and support for those she viewed as being unfairly persecuted came through her participation in anti-Vietnam War activism.

I graduated from high school in 1969.... There was a lot going on in terms of society and particularly the Viet Nam War [which was a] challenging issue for many people, and I was very active in an anti-war effort.... In the early ’70s [I] went to jail as a result of that type of [activism].... My involvement with the anti-war movement was really driven by... Life Magazine.... There had been an issue of Life that had small photographs of all the people who had been killed.... Particularly the air war at that time was, seemed to me especially pernicious and treacherous because the damage to ... innocent people. It was just the so-called enemy. It was the napalm and everything that you’ve heard about it.... There was something about it that struck me – the distance that those who were dropping these bombs were in airplanes.... Not that makes it better but it looking and having the people in front of you, but there seemed something about that that was so cruel (Thorp 2017).
Barbara here explains how she became involved in anti-war activism after learning about the violence and cruelty that was taking place in Viet Nam through life Magazine. She went on to make clear that her opposition to the war was fueled by her belief in the importance of standing up for those who were systematically disadvantaged (Thorp 2017). It is important note that this commitment to human rights and helping the poor and vulnerable, which Fran and Barbara internalized while growing up, also feature prominently in the catholic church’s teachings (Catholic Church 1997). Neither Fran nor Barbara explicitly connected their belief in advocating for human rights to the issue of abortion at the time of these memories, however they clearly developed an early commitment to defending those who were systematically disadvantaged and could not speak for themselves.

Thus, the pro-life women’s childhood were clearly important, formative times during which their moral beliefs took shape. While abortion was not something any of them thought about as an explicitly political issue, they did develop moral frameworks which were significantly influenced by their catholic religious beliefs, the implicit social and cultural norms to which their families and communities adhered, and the explicit messages their parents imparted to them regarding morality. The pro-life women can to place significant moral value on premarital chastity, the heteronormative family as the appropriate space in which to raise children, and the importance of being an advocate for those who were disadvantaged and unable to advocate for themselves.

Crystallization of Pro-Life Beliefs

Because the pro-life women grew up in communities and families in which abortion was implicitly considered to be immoral, they did not become aware of the political debates around
abortion until significant political and personal events focused their attention squarely on the issue. For three of the pro-life women, the Supreme Court’s decision in Roe v. Wade, and the increase in public debate and pro-life activism that followed was what motivated them to become involved in the pro-life movement. Fran, whose belief in her father’s description of the Supreme Court as the “final safeguard of human rights and life” had remained strong since her childhood trip to Washington DC, was very surprised by court’s new decision.

I was simply shocked. For almost twenty years, I had been convinced by my 1954 experience that the Supreme Court would protect the lives and the human rights of those who had no one to speak for them. This was a devastating blow for me and it helped compel me to get active in the pro-life movement…. I had been brought up to respect all human persons without exception…. [and] it made me realize was that my Dad’s faith in the Court had been betrayed and that the citizens of this country could no longer count on the Court to protect the most basic of human rights… the right to life. My illusions about the Supreme Court were crushed and I decided to do whatever I could to protect those who could not speak for themselves whether it be the poor, disadvantaged, handicapped, elderly or the unborn (Hogan 2018).

Fran here explains her sense of betrayal by Roe v. Wade decision. As previously described, she had grown up always taking it for granted that abortion was morally wrong, because human life began at the moment of conception, and thus abortion was ending a human life. She makes clear that when Roe v. Wade was decided, she saw this as a direct violation of basic human rights and was directly motivated by this event to become involved in the pro-life movement. This trajectory into activism immediately following Roe v. Wade was extremely common for pro-life activists of Fran’s generation. Ziad Munson explains that the modern pro-life movement was jump started by people just like Fran, who were shocked and appalled by the Supreme Court’s decision, and decided to commit themselves to trying to end abortion (Munson 2014). Common as this was, however, the other two pro-life women I interviewed who were motivated by Roe v.
Wade were not immediately aware of the court’s decision and followed a slightly different path into activism.

Madeline only became involved in pro-life political activism after attending events that were a part of the groundswell in pro-life activism that rose in the years after the court’s decision. Madeline was totally unaware of abortion politics until four years after abortion was legalized, and only became aware of the change in the law when she heard that the 1977 national right to life convention was being held in Boston. She and her husband decided to attend simply out of curiosity over what such a national convention would be like, however the event ended up having a profound and life changing impact on her.

That is really one of the reasons, one of the major reasons that I got involved. They had major speakers. They had Jerome Lejeune who … spoke about the fact that at conception all the information is there. That it’s like a tape that begins to play, and if it’s not interrupted it will go on for seventy, eighty, or longer years. And that that person in the womb there should be protected. And then he talked about, he said, “The kangaroo, she has that pouch. And she won’t let anything in that pouch except her child. And the embryo climbs out and makes its way up into the pouch.”

And he said, “If this kangaroo with her tiny brain recognizes that little embryo as her child, how much more the woman with her magnificent brain should recognize that the child in her womb, that that is her child.”

And then there was Sir Albert Wiley, he was an Australian physician…. He’s the one that developed amniocentesis. And they brought up a little girl that’s three years old, and they said she would not be alive except for she was given these transfusions [which] she was given … in utero, and that’s why she is alive now. So, I was really touched by those speakers. And I’m a scientist, and I was really touched by the science involved there, so that’s when I said, “Let’s start a chapter [of Massachusetts Citizens for Life]” (McComish 2017).

In this story, Madeline makes clear that her attendance at the national pro-life convention was critically important to her becoming engaged in pro-life activism. She recalls being motivated to take action by the speakers’ scientific arguments against abortion, however her description of the different talks she attended make clear that the speakers were also making emotional and moral arguments as well. For example, Jerome Lejeune’s argument that if kangaroos recognize
embryos as children than women, being much smarter, should as well, implies that women who choose to have abortions are not smart enough to recognize that their embryos are their children, and that they ought to protect them. Additionally, Sir Albert Wiley bringing a young girl who almost died in utero onto stage is also a clear emotional appeal to the audience. Madeline states that she was moved by the science involved in their arguments, and there is no reason to doubt that this is the case. However, it is important to recognize that Lejeune and Wiley were largely making moral arguments that abortion was ethically wrong. The examples of scientific findings they described did not inherently support laws against abortion, but instead only became evidence for pro-life policies once they were interpreted through the speakers’ pro-life world views. Given that Madeline was raised in a community in which motherhood was implicitly understood to be an important part of white femininity, it makes sense that she would find Lejeune’s argument that women ought to be smart enough to recognize an embryo as their child and want to raise it, and Wiley’s use of a young girl who almost died in utero extremely convincing.

Like Madeline, Margaret was inspired to become involved in the pro-life movement by a political event she attended in the years following Roe v. Wade. In her case, it was a local talk given by a pro-life doctor shortly after the decision. Margaret described being “appalled” when she heard abortion had been legalized, and when she heard about Massachusetts Citizens for Life at the talk, she promptly became involved in their activism (Margaret 2017). In many ways, these stories align with Munson’s theory of how pro-life activists develop their beliefs and become involved in political activism. He argues that most pro-life activists do not begin with clearly established political beliefs about abortion, but instead develop them through a three step process (Munson 2014). First, a person must connect socially with an existing pro-life activist, second,
they must attend a political event with this new friend, and third, through continuing to participate in political events and making more social connections, the person eventually develops their political beliefs in opposition to abortion and becomes an activist in their own right (Munson 2014). While it is clear that attending political events motivated both Madeline and Margaret to become engaged in activism, and connected them to existing networks of activists, unlike the activists Munson studied, their beliefs were not created through their social connections to existing activists. Although neither Madeline or Margaret had been aware of the political debate over abortion before attending these political events, they both clearly had an implicit assumption that abortion was immoral and should not be legal, as evidenced by Madeline’s story of her sister’s attempted abortion. Furthermore, they also already held many moral beliefs, such as their opposition to contraception and belief in compulsory heteronormativity, which, as Ginsburg notes, are part of a chain of assumptions which make up the typical pro-life world view (F. Ginsburg 1987). Because of these beliefs about abortion, contraception, and compulsory heteronormativity, Madeline and Margaret were predisposed to be receptive to the messages they heard from activists already engaged in the pro-life. Thus, the events they attended in the years following Roe v. Wade did not create their beliefs from scratch, but instead were the catalysts which convinced them to become engaged in political activism.

For another one of the women, however, it was a very different type of event that motivated her to become engaged in pro-life issues.

For Barbara Thorp, the experience of her first pregnancy was the factor that motivated her to become professionally involved in pro-life work. Growing up, Barbara recalled being aware of the catholic church’s teaching against abortion but was not involved in any kind of activism related to the issue (Thorp 2017). While she had been deeply involved in anti-war
activism, it was not until her first pregnancy that she connected her beliefs about protecting innocent life to the topic of abortion.

The thing that really moved me … to be engaged with, and have an awareness, unborn life and abortion was really my first pregnancy, my oldest daughter. Being pregnant for the first time, and the awareness that – just how awed I was at the fact that, out of the love I shared with my husband, we were now carrying, this tiny little new life. It struck me that, that this extraordinary aspect of human life is so precious and so treasured that it just led me in a path of feeling that while I was experiencing something very personal, that this reality of life was true, not just for me, but this is how we all become into being, through two people coming together. Even if there isn’t love involved that this is still a magnificent human being that has begun and will continue. At that time, I had [also] learned of a program of outreach to women who had had abortions. This was very new in the church. It was called Project Rachel, and it was a mission of real healing and concern for women who had had abortions and who were really hurting for all kinds of reasons (Thorp 2017).

Barbara went on to explain that shortly thereafter she was hired as the Director of the Pro-Life Office of the Archdiocese of Boston with the expectation that she would immediately work to bring Project Rachel programing to the Boston area (Thorp 2017). It is clear that Barbara’s first pregnancy motivated her to become involved in the pro-life movement through her work for Project Rachel, however, as with the other pro-life women who were motivated by Roe v. Wade, Barbara’s pro-life belief that abortion was morally wrong did not develop from scratch during her pregnancy. Like the other women, she grew up accepting the catholic church’s teaching that life begins at conception, and that birth control was immoral because it violated the natural process of reproduction (Thorp 2017). Additionally, as evidence through her activism in the anti-Viet Nam War protests, she also had a strong commitment to human rights. Thus, it makes sense that upon having her attention brought to unborn human life by her first pregnancy, she would view abortion as the taking of innocent human lives that had no ability advocate for themselves.

The pro-life women’s belief that abortion was morally wrong, and their motivation to become actively involved in the pro-life movement can therefore clearly be traced back to the
religious, social and cultural environments in which they grew up. They received mutually reinforcing messages both implicitly and explicitly, from the catholic church, their families, and their broader communities that supported traditional constructions of heteronormative families and white femininity, opposed contraception, and supported human rights. These beliefs, which the pro-life women internalized, formed the basis of their moral frameworks. When significant events in their lives later brought the political issue of abortion to the pro-life women’s attention, they interpreted them through these frameworks, and were predisposed to be receptive to the pro-life messages many of them received from friends and acquaintances already involved in the pro-life movement. These events solidified their belief that abortion was morally wrong and motivated them to become involved in the pro-life movement.
Chapter 2: The Development of the Pro-Choice Women’s Beliefs

The modern political debate over abortion has inspired at least as much scholarly research into the pro-choice movement as there has been into the pro-life movement. However, much of this research has focused on the rise of the pro-choice activism in the context of second wave feminism and other social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, and the motivation of individuals to become engaged in the surge of liberal political activism that took place during those decades (Staggenborg 1991; Stettner 2013; Luker 1984). However, as with the pro-life movement, research into this generation of pro-choice activists has focused much more on the differences between pro-choice and pro-life world views than on how pro-choice activists developed their political and moral beliefs (Luker 1984; Lakoff 1995; Early 2015; F. Ginsburg 1987). What little research has been done on the development of this generation of pro-choice activists focuses primarily on their experiences as adults, and pays little attention to their experiences growing up, or the influence these activists’ race or class had on the development of their belief (Luker 1984; Stettner 2013; Staggenborg 1991). Separately, research into the more recent reproductive justice movement has taken a more intersectional approach, by exploring the ways racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of oppression have uniquely impacted women of color and queer individuals’ reproductive lives (Crenshaw 1991; Stern 2005; Nixon 2013; Roberts 2015). Much of this scholarship has focused on documenting the unique experiences of women of color, and rightly so, as they were largely marginalized in the early pro-choice movement, and thus also the scholarship investigating it. There is, however, much less research using this same intersectional approach to explore the lives and experiences of white pro-choice activists, and the development, from childhood onward of their moral and political beliefs about abortion. This chapter seeks to fill that void.
In comparison to the pro-life women, the group of pro-choice women I interviewed was both much larger – eleven in total – and in some ways also much more diverse. The pro-choice women came from a variety of religious backgrounds, with the majority being raised in families that were at least nominally Christian. However, many of the women no longer considered themselves very religious, and only one, who was a retired Episcopal priest, described her faith as playing an important role in her beliefs about abortion and contraception. Additionally, while all the pro-choice women lived in Maine or Massachusetts at the time I interviewed them, save for one who lived in California, they had grown up and spent significant portions of their lives living in a larger number of different states in virtually all regions of the continental United States. However, despite this geographic diversity, their descriptions of the social and cultural climates around abortion, and contraception during the childhoods and early adulthoods were remarkably similar. In order to understand the ways in which the pro-choice women’s beliefs about abortion and contraception developed, it is important to understand that they view political and moral debates around abortion and contraception through a very different framework than women discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas the pro-life women consider preserving human life to be the primary issue at stake in these debates, the pro-choice women consider women’s rights, and working to counter the history of women’s systematic oppression to be the issues of most significance. I will argue that the pro-choice women’s moral frameworks, in which women’s rights were so highly valued, developed through experience in their childhood and young adult years of having strong female role models, experiences of being treated unfairly because of their gender identity, being directly exposed to the idea that contraception ought to be widely accessible, or witnessing the negative impacts the policing of traditional white femininity can have on those who do not adhere to it. While these events solidified the pro-choice women’s
political and moral beliefs about abortion, they did not become involved in political activism until later in their adult lives, when they either did so as part of their professions or joined Grandmothers for Reproductive Rights in response to the surge in pro-life legislation that was passed after the 2010 midterm elections.

None of the pro-choice women remembered being aware of political debates around abortion while they were growing up. Most of the women explained that in the communities in which they grew up in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, abortion, and often anything else related to sex, was simply not discussed. There were, however, a few women who were exceptions, and who were aware of abortion while growing up. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Anne was aware it was possible to have illegal abortions when she was in high school, however she did not describe being conscious of any larger political debate around abortion (Fowler 2017). Additionally, Jessica and Melissa, who were younger than the rest of the pro-choice women grew up taking legal abortion for granted, as Roe v. Wade was decided when they were in high school, however they too did not remember being aware of a larger discussion on abortion. It is therefore clear that, with the exception of Jessica and Melissa, none of the pro-choice women grew up explicitly learning that abortion was morally acceptable. Thus, in order to understand how they came to believe that abortion was not immoral and ought to be widely accessible, it is important to have a better understanding of how they developed the moral frameworks through which they viewed world.

Childhood Awareness of Women’s Rights

The pro-choice women traced their belief in the importance of women’s rights back to having strong female role models, personal experience with being treated unfairly because of
their gender identity, or early awareness and acceptance of contraception. Both Melissa, whose mother was a political activist and Elizabeth, whose mother was a doctor and provided reproductive healthcare to many women, described their mothers as leading them to take for granted that women should be treated equally and be able to lead full professional lives (Kogut 2017; Elizabeth 2017). Both women, who ended up following their mothers into political advocacy and reproductive healthcare respectively, described their mothers as being significant professional inspirations. (Kogut 2017; Elizabeth 2017). Similarly, Anne, recalled her grandmother, who she described as, “a very forceful person,” as having a very big influence on her life and her desire to become an activist for those who were disadvantaged (Fowler 2017). Although she could not remember exactly how old she was when she found out, Anne also recalled her grandmother having friends who had had illegal abortions during the 1920s, and implied that this helped influence her later belief that access to abortion ought to be a right to which all women were entitled (Fowler 2017). All of these women later credited these early role models with helping them develop their belief that women deserved to be treated equally to men and inspiring them to dedicate substantial parts of their professional lives to working towards this goal.

In contrast to these examples of feeling empowered by other women while growing up, some of the other pro-choice women recalled being resentful of the way they were treated because of their gender identity. Shannon remembered that the different expectations her parents had for her and her brothers had a profound impact on her beliefs about how people in general, and women in particular ought to be treated.

I was the third of three, two boys and a girl, and there were things I was not allowed to do. And I remember telling my mother I was going to meet with a friend somewhere to go down to the pond, because I would never have been allowed to go down to the pond by myself, because girls didn’t do that. Girls didn’t get dirty, girls weren’t rough and
tumble. They allowed my brothers to pick on me. So I think that instilled in me that all people are valuable and don’t deserve to be brutalized, and girls should be able to go to the pond and get dirty (Shannon 2017).

Nicki recalled having a similar experience of being treated very different than her brother.

I think I intuited, and I think I was right in intuiting that women and girls were not valued as much as boys. I think part of that was that I was the older of two children, and when my brother was born I was four and a half years old…. I was sort of isolated from my family, came home and had a new brother who had childhood asthma and so he got this enormous amount of attention because he needed it. But I think I was just green with jealousy. And I just hated it…. And it always seemed to me that [our relatives] favored him. You know, partly because he had their names, but I think partly because he was the boy. So I worked up a kind of super sensitivity, I think, to how boys were treated differently girls (N. Gamble 2017).

Both Shannon and Nicki here recalled that even from a very early age, they were acutely aware that their brothers were treated better and favored by their parents and other adult relatives because they were boys. Both women bridled at the unfairness of this, but as children they could do little about it. However, they both credited these experiences as being the reason they felt such strong motivations later in life to work to increase women’s rights and reduce inequality between men and women. Thus, while strong female role models and unfair gender-based treatment clearly brought these women’s attention to women’s rights from opposite directions, both types of experiences nonetheless helped these women develop very awareness of women’s inequality and a desire to change that at very early ages.

The last type of childhood experience which helped shape multiple pro-life women’s belief in the importance of women’s rights was an early exposure from their parents to the idea that women ought to have the right to be able to control their own fertility through the use of contraception. Of all the women I interviewed, Judy undoubtedly received the most explicit messages about the importance of family planning as a child. Her father, Clarence Gamble, was a philanthropist and researcher and worked to develop new forms of birth control and set up family
planning clinics both in the United States and other countries around the world (“Gamble, Clarence James, 1894-. Papers, 1920-1970s (Inclusive), 1920-1966 (Bulk): Finding Aid.” n.d.; “Our History” 2018). As Judy grew up, her father’s work was a frequent topic of casual conversation in her family. She explained, “He would talk in terms of spacing children, and that really was a couple’s decision to make. So, for me, it was the air I breathed, as far as accepting the whole idea of contraception” (Kahrl 2017). In fact, Judy and her siblings became so familiar with his work trying to convince others of the value of contraception, that they even started a running joke about his habits. “When we were traveling with my father,” she recalled, “some of us would take bets, how long would it be before he pulls a contraceptive out of his pocket” (Kahrl 2017). While none of the other pro-choice women’s parents were quite this explicit in their belief in birth control, some of the pro-choice women did grow up knowing that their parents used contraception. In contrast to Judy’s experiences growing up, Shannon’s family never spoke about contraception, yet despite this she still found out her parents used birth control.

Well I knew that my parents used contraception, and I knew that we were all almost exactly – I had two older brothers – I knew that we were almost exactly two years apart. And that happens for a reason. But my family wasn’t one where such things were talked about. I only knew because I discovered – my mother would die if she were alive and heard me talking about this – because I found the … diaphragm. I’m sure she was mortified I found it and asked her what it was (Shannon 2017).

Despite how awkward Shannon’s mother found it to discuss her diaphragm with Shannon, she still explained what it was and why she used it (Shannon 2017). Jessica recalled having a slightly different experience in being aware of the specific time at which her parents started using contraception.

I grew up Catholic, and I was the oldest of five, and when my mom was pregnant with her last child, she was really upset, and it was overwhelming for her. And they had been
following the catholic guidelines at that point – no contraception – and then after that she said,
“No, I’m not doing this anymore.”
And so I believe, I was only ten at the time, and I believe at that point she started using contraception, and then we left the church about six years later (Jessica 2017).

It is significant to note in this story, that even though she was only ten-years-old when her mother became pregnant for the fifth time, Jessica was still aware of how upset her mother was because of this unintended pregnancy. Additionally, as she grew older she realized that her parents must have started using contraception (Jessica 2017). In all of these stories, the women’s parents made clear that not only what contraception was, but that it was entirely acceptable to use. Judy’s parents could hardly have been more explicit in their support for contraception, traveling the world to promote it as they did. Shannon’s mother, despite being extremely embarrassed to be asked about her diaphragm, still explained what it was and why she had it. This clearly sent a message to Shannon that contraception was an entirely acceptable thing for women to use. Jessica’s parents may not have discussed birth control with her, but her mother’s frustration upon becoming pregnant a fifth time, and subsequent decisions to prevent further pregnancies, and leave the catholic church, which had been discouraging the use of birth control, sent strong messages that contraception was morally acceptable. Implicit in all of these messages that the women received from their parents about contraception was the idea that women ought to have the right to control their own fertility, and by doing so, also have greater control over the direction of their lives. It is also important to point out, that unlike the pro-life women, none of the pro-choice remembered women received messages from their parents or communities that contraception in and of itself was immoral regardless of the context in which it was used. Thus, again these are further examples of the ways in which the pro-choice women were exposed as children to the idea that women ought to have equal rights.
Impacts of Policing Gender

While all of the stories described above clearly helped shape the pro-choice women’s views on women’s rights, the experiences that most directly and immediately impacted their beliefs about abortion were undoubtedly those in which they witnessed the negative impacts the policing of women’s gender can have on those who did not adhere to the strict sexual mores of traditional white femininity. As mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, when Anne was in high school, the daughter of one of her family friends became pregnant and was sent away to deliver the baby in secret (Fowler 2017). Two of the other women had similar memories. Hannah remembered multiple peers getting pregnant in high school because of the social scandals they caused.

In high school, there would be these bright kids who would disappear, girls, and they had gone off, they had sent them off to have a baby…. I knew there were kids in my class, a couple of girls in my class, but they didn’t have abortions, they went some place and they were never heard from again (Hannah 2017).

Like Hannah, Katie also was aware of peers in high school becoming pregnant, but also had two close family members who did as well.

My own sister got married at nineteen after her freshman year of college … [but] I don’t even know if anybody thought about abortion…. So, couples getting married in the middle of high school…. [Today] girls go to high school now and are pregnant and have babies and take classes and they didn’t then. They disappeared. I also had a first cousin then, who was about three years older … and all of a sudden, she was away at school for a year…. Well, apparently the stable boy at the stables where she rode, he was black, and of course the baby was up for adoption and she came back home. And I didn’t know all of this until about twenty years ago when my mother told us…. The story I was told was that she was raped4 (Katie 2017).

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4 Katie later mentioned that while talking about this story recently with the GRRs, another woman had raised the possibility that her cousin’s affair with the stable boy had been consensual but had been called rape because miscegenation was illegal at the time. Katie acknowledged that this was possible but said there was no way to know for sure at this point what had actually happened (Katie 2017).
From the way in which Katie says she didn’t, “know if anybody thought about abortion” after stating her sister got married at nineteen, the clear implication both for her sister and the other couples she describes getting married in high school, is that they became pregnant, and then were forced to get married to avoid the scandal and shame of being pregnant out of wedlock. At the time, these practices were extremely common, especially for white middle class teenagers (Frank 2007). Scholars have estimated that as many as half of teenagers girls that married during the 1950s were pregnant at the time of their wedding (Frank 2007). Girls who became pregnant and for any reason were unable or unwilling to marry their sexual partner could also be sent away to so called “industrial schools,” penal institutions designed to rehabilitate “delinquent” (i.e. sexually active) girls, until they gave birth and gave their child up for adoption, at which point they could safely return to polite society (Keup 2012). Very real consequences existed for white middle class teenager girls who failed to maintain the public façade of their premarital virginity, from shame and social alienation to their children’s birth certificates and school records permanently being stamped “illegitimate,” which officially transferred this shame and stigmatization from mother to child in the eyes of doctors, teachers and other government officials (Coontz 2005). While Katie and Hannah may not have been aware of the extent to which teenage girls could be punished for becoming pregnant out of wedlock, it was clearly obvious that the girls they were aware of who did, had their lives suddenly and drastically changed, presumably without having much say in the matter at all.

These stories, of teenage girls being sent away or forced to marry after getting pregnant show that many of the pro-choice women were exposed at an early age to the ways in which white femininity is often aggressively policed. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the construction of white femininity as chaste until inevitable marriage and obediently domestic
thereafter can be traced back to the 19th century (Coontz 2016; Welter 1966). However, belief in these values was no casual expectation. White femininity was both constructed and maintained through aggressive policing of strict racialized gender roles. In her book, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching*, Crystal Feimster explains that the defeat of the Confederacy in the Civil War led to significant changes in the constructions of racialized gender as southern white elites sought to maintain political and economic control of the south.

Explaining the logic that went into the new construction of white femininity, she writes,

> Convinced that interracial sex would undermine racial hierarchy, nightriders [white supremacist terrorists] policed and punished men and women, most of them black, accused of engaging in interracial sex…. Southern men anxiously sought the reinstitution of a strict gender and racial hierarchy dependent on black deference and white female subordination. Postwar, however, they extended protection to all white women, not just southern “ladies” (Feimster 2009).

Feimster here describes how white femininity, which had previously only included southern elites, was reconstructed to include all white women as a means through which to maintain the system of racial patriarchy and keep people of color subordinate to whites. She goes on to write that in order to protect the white power structure, white women’s fragility and vulnerability to the ever present threat of black male rapists was strongly emphasized (Feimster 2009). As she explains in the quote above, this then allowed southern whites to violently police this construction of racialized gender by lynching any people of color who were in any way perceived to threaten white womanhood, and by extension the system of white supremacy which it helped to support (Feimster 2009). While ideas of purity and domesticity as essential to white femininity did not originate in the postbellum south, this active enforcement of this construction of racialized gender grew significantly during this time. The state actively supported the ongoing construction of this form of white femininity by recruiting unmarried white women around the country to become teachers, arguing that their pious, domestic influence could help “civilize”
students (Meiners 2007). This greatly increased incentives for white women and their families to be seen to be conforming to these gender roles, and in turn this created an environment where aggressive policing of white femininity within families could easily come to be normalized.

While overt forms of forceful policing such as extra-legal lynching have become far less common over time, during the latter half of the 20th century, when the pro-choice women were growing up, middle class white families still aggressively policed the constructions of racialized gender which they inherited from their 19th century postbellum ancestors. Dreama Moon argues that modern white femininity is deeply connected to ideas of “respectability” and the production of “good (white) girls” (Moon 1999). Explaining the ways in which these standards of respectability are passed on and policed, she writes,

One of the ways that racialized notions of respectability often play out within white relations is through the deployment of what hooks (1994) calls “bourgeois decorum,” a repertoire of strategies that censor rigorous opposition and resistance to party lines. By silencing dissenters, the tyranny of bourgeois decorum creates “safe” spaces in which dominant ideologies go unchallenged, harmony is preserved, and the party line is maintained. Within these “safe” spaces, dissenting voices are often punished by exclusion and ostracism from the white community (Moon 1999).

Moon here explains that one of the ways in which white respectability is maintained is through the silencing or ostracizing of any opposing points of view. While the examples Moon cites from her fieldwork primarily involve verbal silencing of white individuals who challenge that status quo of white respectability, the pro-life women’s memories of classmates and family members being sent away or forced into early marriages demonstrate that this silencing and ostracizing can also be much more literal and aggressive. Given that while the pro-choice women were growing up, chastity until marriage, and domesticity following marriage were still core tenants of white femininity, becoming pregnant as an unmarried teenager was clearly a challenge to this construction. Thus, the actions these teenager girls’ parents took can clearly be seen to literally
ostracize this challenge to white femininity, by sending them away to deliver their babies, or silencing potential challenges, by forcing them to outwardly conform to the norm of chastity until marriage by getting married before they could be publicly recognized as pregnant. The pro-choice women who witnessed these aggressive forms of policing white femininity were obviously aware of how disruptive and potentially traumatic these actions could be for women and girls who were deemed to be a challenge to the status quo of racialized gender. These experiences left them with a clear and brutal understanding of the ways in which women lacked equal rights, particularly around issues of sexuality and reproduction, and instilled in them a strong desire to change this.

Thus, over the course of their childhoods and adolescent years, the pro-choice women developed clear understandings of the numerous ways in which women lacked equal rights to men, particularly with regard to their ability to control their own reproductive capabilities. As a result of this, they all felt it was important work to change norms and help empower women. Either through the examples their parents set, or because harsh treatment of their pregnant peers that they witnessed, all the pro-choice women came to understand access to contraception was an essential part of women’s rights.

Crystallization of Pro-Choice Beliefs

While few of the pro-choice women actively considered access to abortion to be a part of women’s ability control their fertility during their adolescence, this changed as they grew older. During their young adult years, their views on abortion were shaped by two distinct types of experiences. Many of the women came to support all women’s right to access an abortion after having an abortion themselves or being aware of a close friend or relative having an abortion.
Others reached the same conclusion after interacting with patients while training to be doctors, social workers, or other healthcare professionals.

For all of the women who had abortions, or were close to other women who had abortions, the experience greatly increased or reinvigorated their support for abortion access. All of the women remembered these experiences as very intense and significant moments in their lives. Two of the pro-choice women had close personal experiences with legal abortion in the United States – Anne had an abortion herself, and Hannah had a daughter who chose to have an abortion (Fowler 2017; Hannah 2017). Due to the fact that both Anne and Hannah’s daughter were comfortably middle class and living in states with liberal abortion laws, neither of them had any difficulty accessing safe, high-quality care for their procedures (Fowler 2017; Hannah 2017). However, they both described the experiences as really “bringing home,” as Hannah put it, the importance of ensuring all women had similar access (Hannah 2017; Fowler 2017). Not all of the women who had personal experiences with abortion were this lucky.

Three of the pro-choice women faced significantly greater obstacles when trying to access abortions for themselves or their friends as a result of being in countries where, at the time, abortion was illegal. Nicki was in graduate school in the United States when she became pregnant. She chose not to tell anyone in her life, and went to England to have an abortion (N. Gamble 2017). She remembered the entire process as being an incredibly emotional and challenging experience.

Now that was scary as hell. I flew to England, had a legal abortion there, and flew home ... because I didn't want to have an illegal abortion. You could get them here. But a friend of mine said just don't that. It wasn't difficult for me to make that decision. I knew I wasn’t ready to give birth and have a child, but it was pretty hard to fly another country on your first trip abroad and be alone.... It was just scary to travel by myself. It was scary to have the procedure. I'm sure I didn't understand fully how really safe it is. The other fear was that you weren't quite sure how customs would treat you because they knew that
women were coming, and they could spot you. A mile away they could spot you’re traveling alone, you’re young. So that was a little nervous making (N. Gamble 2017).

It is important to note, here, that Nicki was only able to access a safe, legal abortion because of her socio-economic class. The cost of flying to and from England, staying there, and procedure itself would have been quite substantial at the time, and prohibitively expensive for most women in the United States. However, despite the access to a legal abortion that Nicki’s class privilege afforded her, her description illuminates the multiple challenges that still remained. Being alone while leaving the country for the first time, the fear that customs agents might somehow stop or otherwise harass her, and the psychological challenge of undergoing the procedure she did not fully understand caused her significant emotional distress and made the experience undoubtedly more challenging than it would have been had she been able to access a safe legal abortion in Massachusetts.

Both Sarah and Katie also had experiences of trying to find abortion providers in Europe, however their experiences were slightly different, as they were both trying to help pregnant friends have abortions in countries where it was illegal (Katie 2017; Sarah 2017). In 1962, Katie traveled to Europe with two friends a few years after graduating college, and one of them became pregnant on they were crossing the Atlantic by ship (Katie 2017). After traveling around the continent for three months, they eventually found a doctor willing to perform an illegal abortion in Holland through a cousin of Katie’s who had also had an abortion (Katie 2017). The procedure ended up being, “as mess,” as Katie put it, as her friend, “bled very badly for a couple of days,” and ended up having to stay in Holland for an extra month to regain her strength (Katie 2017). However, Katie was confident the procedure had a long term effect on her friend, explaining, “She’s never had any kids, and I suspect that probably there was damage done” (Katie 2017). Katie’s experience was again, clearly influenced by her class privilege. First and
foremost, the entire trip was only possible because she and her friends could afford to take time off work to and travel around Europe in their mid-twenties, something most women in the United States at that time could never have been able to do. Additionally, as Katie recalls, after her friend became pregnant, there was never any question about being able to afford the abortion, which they were only able to access because Katie’s relatives knew of a provider having previously been able to afford an abortion themselves. Had Katie and her friends been of unable to access or pay for the abortion, as countless women at that time were, Katie’s friend could easily have been forced to carry her pregnancy to term. However, despite this privilege, Katie’s friend’s experience was clearly traumatic, both emotionally and physically, and made Katie acutely aware of the very real danger women routinely faced as a result of efforts to police their gender through their sexual activity.

In contrast to this, Sarah had a very different experience while studying abroad in Florence during college when. After one of her friends became pregnant, she explained,

We talked to a British woman who had temporarily hosted us before we found housing…. She put us in touch with a local GP [general practice doctor], who very quietly found a doctor in Milan who was willing to do a D&C [dilation and curettage]. It wasn’t an abortion, but it was. So, we went up to Milan, she went into his office, she had her D&C…. She had excellent care. (Sarah 2017).

Sarah’s friend was likely able to receive such high-quality care because while abortion was illegal in Italy at the time, dilation and curettage procedures had multiple purposes beyond abortion, and the doctor was willing to simply hide the fact that she had been pregnant. Like Katie, Sarah’s friend was able to find an abortion provider through an underground network of sympathetic women and healthcare providers. Again, Sarah and her friend’s class privilege had a profound impact on their experience. First and foremost, they were only in Italy because they able to both afford to attend college and on top of that study abroad in Italy. Additionally, like
Nicki and Katie’s friend, Sarah and her friend were able to afford the cost of travel to the provider and the procedure itself and had social access to the underground network which connected them to the provider, which was undoubtedly primarily made up of middle and upper-class women who could also afford abortions. Yet despite how easy it was to access an abortion, Sarah and her friend were undoubtedly aware that they were breaking the law to do so, and thus potentially at risk of running afoul of legal authorities. While in many ways these three women’s experiences of finding abortion providers for themselves or their friends were made easier because of their socio-economic class, they were all exposed to the challenges and risks that many women who want abortions face when it is illegal. These experiences powerfully shaped their beliefs on the importance of abortions being legal and easily accessible.

The challenges these three women faced in trying to access abortion care when it was illegal are another example of the ways in which experiencing the negative impacts policing of traditional gender roles inspired the pro-life women to become advocates for women’s equality and freedom of reproductive choice. The three women who had experiences with abortion before it was legal all came face to face with the potentially negative impacts these efforts to police traditional gender roles can have on women who do not conform. Nicki faced the significant challenge of having to arrange to travel overseas to have an abortion, and believed that she could be in legal jeopardy when crossing international boarders to do so (N. Gamble 2017). Katie’s friend’s abortion turned out to be physically harmful, which was undoubtedly due in part to it being illegal and thus unregulated (Katie 2017). While Sarah’s friend’s abortion ended up going very well, both she and Katie’s friend both faced the prospect of legal jeopardy or denial of service if their plans to have an illegal procedure had been discovered by legal authorities (Katie 2017; Sarah 2017). As discussed in the previous chapter, those who support bans on abortion
have, and continue to do so for a wide variety of reasons. Many people, including all of the pro-life women I interviewed, firmly believe that human life begins at the moment of conception and thus abortions are morally no different than ending a human life at any other stage of life after birth (Thorp 2017; Hogan 2017; McComish 2017; Samantha 2017; Margaret 2017). However, many supporters of abortion bans, including the catholic church, also cite moral and religious beliefs about the importance of eliminating premarital sexual activity, and confining reproduction to heterosexual marriages (Pope Paul VI 1968). Thus, abortion bans cannot solely be seen to purely be efforts to protect unborn human life, and instead must also be seen as intentional efforts to enforce traditional constructions of gender and heteronormative family structure. All three of these women cited their experiences of facing challenges and dangers as strongly motivating them to work to make it easier and safer for other women to access abortion (N. Gamble 2017; Sarah 2017; Katie 2017). Similarly, Anne and Hannah made clear that their experiences with legal abortions forced them to consider how much more difficult things could have been if abortion was not legal, and thus how important they felt it was to ensure that it remained so (Fowler 2017; Hannah 2017). As previously mentioned, many of the pro-choice women’s experiences of witnessing the impacts of efforts to police constructions of the heteronormative family and traditional white femininity inspired their belief in the importance of women’s rights and equality. It is thus also clear that these experiences of accessing abortion when it was illegal helped to connect these more general beliefs about women’s rights to the specific issue of abortion access and safety. In addition to these memories of trying to access abortion for themselves or others, the other most common experience the pro-life women described as having a strong impact on their support for abortion access were clinical experiences in medical contexts or social work.
Many of the pro-life women described their experiences of interacting with patients, particularly those who were struggling to access the care they desire, as strongly motivating them to support women’s right to access safe, legal abortions. Elizabeth first became aware of abortion while in medical school when she met patients who had attempted to end their pregnancies themselves.

In medical school, it was before Roe v. Wade, and I’ll never forget the whole ward that was filled with people who were dying from their own induced abortions or septic abortions. [Some] people … had the finances to go elsewhere, over to Europe, but the people who didn’t were on our wards, which was really a big issue (Elizabeth 2017). Before Roe v. Wade legalized abortion, maternal mortality as a result of unsafe abortions were quite common. The Guttmacher Institute estimates that in 1965, eight years before Roe v. Wade, 200 women died from illegal abortions, which accounted for seventeen percent of all deaths related to pregnancy (Gold 2003). This threat of death from unsafe abortions was disproportionately born by poor women, and women of color, who were twice as likely as white women to die from abortion related causes (Gold 2003). These statistics, and the women Elizabeth saw in the septic abortion ward are the clearest illustration of a belief that many of the pro-choice women expressed, that some women will always seek to end unwanted pregnancies, even if it is illegal. Elizabeth went on to explain that meeting these patients in medical school helped inspire her to pursue a career in pediatric gynecology (Elizabeth 2017).

Nicki and Shannon had slightly different experiences, as neither of them were physicians, yet both found their experiences working in the field of mental health to profoundly impact their political beliefs about abortion. While in graduate school for clinical psychology, Nicki worked at a non-profit organization that provided community based mental health services to children

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5 A septic abortion is an infection of the placenta and/or uterus, which can often be life threatening.
6 The Guttmacher Institute is an organization which conducts research on the state of reproductive and sexual health in the United States and Internationally (“Induced Abortion in the United States” 2016).
Gamble (2017). She explained that her experiences working with pregnant adolescents and their parents inspired her to change her career goals from private counseling to working in a larger public advocacy context.

I began to understand how deeply individuals could be impaired by problems that began in their homes around sexuality when it wasn't discussed openly when there were family secrets about sexuality, incest and inappropriate behavior the with parents and kids. And it seemed to me that this was a whole area that was really culturally influenced and that by taking a broader approach toward sexuality, contraception etc. that you might avoid some of these really horrible things that were happening to individuals. So that's what drew me out of thinking I was just going to be at a regular clinician and toward a public setting (N. Gamble 2017).

Nicki explains here that encountering the trauma that many adolescents at the community non-profit had encountered as a result of a culture of repressive sexuality inspired her to want to work to try to affect broader cultural change. Shortly after graduating, Nicki was hired as the director of the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts, where she worked for the twenty-five years until her retirement (N. Gamble 2017). Shannon similarly felt that her belief that women ought to have the right to choose whether or not they wanted to have an abortion stemmed most directly from her experiences working as a social worker (Shannon 2017). While she did help some clients decide whether or not they wanted to have an abortion, what she found more influential on her political beliefs about abortion than any of these specific cases was the approach towards social work that she believed to be most ethical and effective.

As a social worker I believe strongly that it’s not my place to set people’s goals. It’s my place to help them identify – if they choose – identify their goals and help identify and address road blocks to get to where they choose to go…. who am I to say whether they should or shouldn’t [have an abortion]. It’s their decision, and I’m not here to judge you on that issue or any other (Shannon 2017).

Shannon makes clear here that she did not feel it was her place as a social worker to try to tell any of her clients what they should do or be trying to achieve in their life, but instead was to help them work towards the goals that they themselves felt were important. She went on to explain
that she felt this that this professional ethos translated into her political beliefs around abortion in that she did not feel anyone ought to be able to tell a woman what they could or could not do with their own bodies (Shannon 2017). Multiple feminist scholars and activists have articulated this belief, that women have the right to both not have children, and have children, as a core tenant of reproductive justice, and an essential part of working towards greater racial, gender and economic equity (Roberts 2015; Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice 2005). Thus, all of these women’s experiences working with patients and clients in clinical contexts clearly had direct impacts on their political and moral beliefs that abortion ought to be safe and accessible for all women. However, while these experiences solidified their beliefs, many of the them did not then immediately become involved in activism.

All of the pro-choice women I interviewed followed one of two paths in to direct political activism well after their moral beliefs about abortion had solidified, either becoming involved in pro-choice politics through their professional work or joining Grandmothers for Reproductive Rights. All four of the pro-choice women I interviewed who were not members of GRR became involved in political activism through their political work. Both Nicki and Melissa were strongly pro-choice, and took opportunities to apply for explicitly political jobs in the field of reproductive rights as their first career track jobs after getting out of school (N. Gamble 2017; Kogut 2017). As previously mentioned, Nicki’s first job out of graduate school was as the President and CEO of Planned Parenthood of Massachusetts (N. Gamble 2017). Melissa started as a volunteer at NARAL Pro-Choice Massachusetts, the state chapter of a national pro-choice political organizing non-profit, shortly after she graduated college, and after serving on their board and working in a staff position, was eventually hired as their executive director (Kogut 2017). After her experience having an abortion, Anne started speaking out in favor of pro-choice
policies from her position as an Episcopal priest, focusing particularly on explaining abortion access as a Christian moral choice (Fowler 2017). Jessica was not as directly involved in activism, however as a physician working in women’s health, and for a portion of her career working in an abortion clinic, she was intimately aware of and affected by much of the political abortion debate (Jessica 2017). All of the remaining pro-choice women became most directly involved in political advocacy when they joined GRR. Judy was motivated to found the group in 2013 out of a mixture of frustration at the state of abortion politics nationally, and inspiration from other grandmothers internationally.

I was thinking about reproductive rights, and how they were being restricted…. And then I – I guess I’d also read a book about grandmother power, or something – older women in other societies that were doing remarkable things, and suddenly it came into my head – grandmothers for reproductive rights, and that was GRR! … And then I went to Mozambique to see some Pathfinder projects and saw some older women there, and they were impressive, they were taking the word out about contraception and AIDS prevention, and helping people who were living with AIDS, and they were powerful. And that really struck me. So, when I got back from that trip, I sent an email saying, “Help Wanted” and telling why… (Kahrl 2017)

Judy’s idea bringing together a group of grandmothers to be advocates in Maine (and eventually nationally) for reproductive rights resonated with many of the women she first contacted, and GRR has been steadily growing since then (Kahrl 2017). Many of the members of GRR I interviewed had been in the original meeting, while others had heard about the group from friends, and decided to join. Despite being long-time supporters of contraception and abortion access, almost none of the women I interviewed had been involved in any serious political activism or lobbying before joining GRR. However, all of them explained that they had been surprised by how much they enjoyed learning more about the political process while lobbying in Augusta (Maine’s capital) and Washington D.C., and how important they felt it was to ensure that the progress they believed had been made during their lifetime towards greater access to
reproductive rights and access was protected. Many of the GRRs expressed similar concerns to Judy, about the large number bills that had been passed in recent years by state legislatures limiting access to abortion. Thus, their motivation to political activism, like the pro-life women’s, can be understood as a response to a significant political event. However, unlike the pro-life women, the at the time of the event GRRs all had well established moral and political beliefs about abortion, stemming largely from the experiences earlier in their lives.

The pro-choice women’s support for universal access to safe and legal abortion was clearly evolved over the course of decades. The process of developing these beliefs began in their childhoods when they became aware of gender inequality and committed to working for women’s rights through having empowered female role models, personal experiences of gender inequality, and exposure to contraception as a normal and morally acceptable thing for women to use. Additionally, many of the pro-choice women were also acutely aware of women’s oppression through their exposure to the negative impacts that systematic efforts to police traditional constructions of white femininity often have on women who challenge these norms. The pro-choice women’s experiences of seeing friends and family members forced to leave their communities, have shotgun weddings, or encounter difficulties when trying to find an abortion provider solidified their beliefs that reproductive freedom is an essential part of women’s equality. The pro-choice women connected their broader belief in women’s rights and reproductive freedom to abortion when they were exposed to the traumatic impacts laws attempting to ban abortion and police women’s sexual activity can have on those who will inevitably attempt to access abortion regardless of the law. While most of these experiences took place during the pro-choice women’s early adulthood, their engagement in political activism only occurred later in their adult lives, when they were either motivated by the chance to become
professionally engaged in activism, or by concern over new laws limiting abortion access and the opportunity to join GRR.
Chapter 3: The Flagship Discussion Group on Abortion

Thus far, I have largely discussed pro-life and pro-choice activists as separate groups and explored the development of their beliefs up until the point that they became engaged in political activism. This is largely how most scholarship examining the ways in which pro-choice/life activists develop their beliefs, and the differences in their beliefs is structured. There are many good reasons for these structures being so common. Pro-choice/life activists largely engage in their work, as two separate groups of people and organizations, working in direct opposition to each other. Much of their work is focused on trying to rally support from people who shared their views on abortion or trying to convince people who may be more ambivalent about abortion politics to join their side. Many of the activists I interviewed acknowledged that they had rarely if ever had any discussion with individuals with whom they disagreed about abortion outside of family members or media appearances with activists from the opposing sides. Furthermore, many of the activists I interviewed also acknowledged that most of their friends share their political views on abortion, and thus they do not spend much time talking about it as they all know they agree with each other and don’t feel they have much to talk about. It therefore makes sense that most scholarship has focused on pro-choice/life activists as separate groups and has seemed to assume that their views largely stop developing after they become in activism (with the exception of research into how violent extremists become radicalized) (Staggenborg 1991; Luker 1975; Munson 2014; Haugeberg 2017). Logical as this may seem however, the members of the Flagship Discussion Group on Abortion are living examples that neither of these assumptions are universal. The explicit purpose of the Flagship Group was for opposing activists to engage with each other in discussions free from public scrutiny, without trying to convince those on the opposite side of one’s position (Podziba 2012). The six women who participated in
these discussions only initially agreed to meet four times over the course of a month but continued collectively agreeing to extend their meetings for what eventually became six years (Podziba 2012). To my knowledge, there have not been other instances in which pro-choice/life leaders have met together in private for this long, and thus there have not been other opportunities for scholars to research the impact this has on activists’ beliefs. I will argue that participating in secret conversations for six years enabled pro-choice/life leaders’ beliefs about the abortion and each other to continue to evolve and grow, even years after they became professionally engaged in activism. Furthermore, this experience also helped develop close personal relationships across their political and moral differences that have lasted for over two decades.

The Activists’ Initial Views

While most scholarship on the pro-choice/life movements does not focus on activists’ views of those on the opposing side, it is widely acknowledged that talking about abortion can be extremely difficult. Christin Luker argues that because the values that make up individuals world views are so deeply seated, many people take them for granted to the point that they have a hard time imagining any moral person not sharing them (Luker 1984). This was clearly the case for many of the individuals I interviewed. As previously discussed, all of the pro-life and some of the pro-choice women grew up in environments in which opposition to or support for abortion was taken for granted. It makes sense that, as many of the women recalled, abortion was not a common topic of conversation, for in such an environment where everyone’s views are taken for granted, it makes sense that there would not be much to discuss. This reasoning, of course, does not apply to the pro-choice women I interviewed who grew up in environments where most
people were strongly opposed to abortion, however for these individuals, it is still easy to understand why abortion was not a frequent topic of conversation. Luker goes on to argue that because most people take it for granted that their world views are shared by others, when they find themselves being challenged, they typically react with “surprise, outrage, and vindictiveness” in an attempt to distance themselves from the possibility that others’ views could have any validity (Luker 1984). Being on the receiving end of such a response would undoubtedly be unpleasant, to say the least, and in all likelihood cause one to view the person lashing out as an unkind, if not immoral person. This helps to explain why, as I will explain below, none of the pro-choice/life leaders who participated in the Flagship Discussion Group on Abortion viewed those on the other side at all positively before the discussion began. However, in addition to this theoretical explanation, it is also important to understand the larger historical context in which they were working, and which also led up to the events which most directly inspired the desire for conversation between the two sides.

Beginning in the 1980s, radical members of the pro-life movement began using increasingly aggressive and violent direct action to target abortion providers and their supporters. The strategies of these activists ranged from escalating rhetoric in the media, frequently comparing abortion providers to genocidal Nazis, to more aggressive acts such as stalking abortion providers and sending death threats to judges who had written decisions increasing access to abortion (Haugeberg 2017). The most extreme activists began calling themselves the “Army of God,” and carrying out acts of physical violence, fire-bombing many abortion clinics across the country during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Haugeberg 2017). In 1993, an anti-abortion extremist shot and killed an abortion doctor in Florida, and another attempted to kill an abortion doctor in Kansas (Haugeberg 2017). While there had not been any abortion related
violence in New England in the 1980s or the early 1990s, the violence in other states still created an extremely polarized and vitriolic environment in Massachusetts.

Many of the pro-choice/life leaders who would later take part in the Flagship Discussion Group admitted viewing those on the other side extremely negatively and using rhetoric in public statements that maintained and even heightened the tension between the two sides. I asked all of the participants what they thought leaders from the opposing movement before the talks began and received mostly negative responses. Anne Fowler, an episcopal priest and one of the pro-choice participants, recalled that before the talks, “I thought they were a bunch of violent, stupid idiots, frankly” (Fowler 2017). Melissa Kogut, one of the pro-choice participates and at the time the Executive Director of the Massachusetts affiliate of NARAL, recalled thinking of pro-life leaders as, “one dimensional, religious, humorless, [and] not smart” (Kogut 2017). Nicki Gamble, the last of the pro-choice participants and then the President and CEO of Planned Parenthood of Massachusetts, recalled not only thinking negatively of pro-life leaders, but actively contributing to the culture of inflammatory rhetoric which pervaded the abortion debate at the time. “I'd been right up there with the worst of them in how I described people who were anti-choice. I mean I thought of them as evil and I hated them. I wasn't as crazy, I think, verbally as a lot of people but I certainly said demeaning things about them” (N. Gamble 2017). These comments show that the pro-choice leaders not only did not like the pro-life leaders, but also thought of them as bad, and unpleasant people. The pro-life participants were not quite as blunt in their descriptions of how they viewed pro-choice leaders before the conversations, however they did admit to not viewing them positively. Fran Hogan, a pro-life participant and member of

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7 I suspect that the pro-life participants, who were unfailingly kind and polite during our interviews, may have been more tactful in describing their views of pro-choice leaders before the talks because they did not want to insult my grandmother in front of me. However, they could also have not thought of pro-life leaders in as demeaning terms as the pro-choice leaders thought them. I have no way of knowing for sure which is the case.
Vatican Bioethical Advisory Committee, recalled, “…they were just the opposite of everything that I believed in. You know I'm not saying they were personally the enemy, but their beliefs were the enemy” (Hogan 2017). Similarly, Madeline McComish, another pro-life member and President of Massachusetts Citizens for Life, did not view the pro-choice movement or its leaders positively.

I viewed it as a bad thing, because they were taking innocent life. I’d say, [The] Guttmacher [Institute] says there’s been, I don’t know, 60 million abortions since ’73 in this country. That’s an enormous number of babies that have been done away with. And God knows what we’ve lost (McComish 2017).

These comments make clear that the pro-life women also viewed pro-choice leaders as people who were actively engaged harming innocent babies, and thus, at least professionally, not good or moral people. This, then, was the backdrop against which the events leading up to the Flagship Group Discussions on Abortion took place.

In 1994, the violence against abortion providers and advocates that had been spreading across the country reached Massachusetts, when Jon Salvi attacked two abortion clinics in the Boston area (Daly 1996). The attacks had profound impacts on the women from both sides who would later participate in the discussions. Nicki described her memories of the events and the impact it had on both her organization and the broader reproductive health community.

On December 30th in 1994, John Salvi entered our Brookline clinic…. We didn't have locked doors then. He walked in and shot and killed our receptionist, he shot and severely injured another staff person and he severely injured two men who were in the waiting room, waiting for their significant other to have an abortion procedure finished. We had had some people killed in the abortion movement before that. We had some doctors who were killed, had some terrible violence of people invading clinics and very hostile marches and protests outside of clinics…. But that's the first time that anyone other than a doctor. I mean we had protests, but they were kind of brought in from outside. So that … that changed everything. It was just horrible. It permeated, it was in the press all [over] the world. It stunned Planned Parenthood facilities and made everyone feel directly

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8 The Guttmacher Institute, annually publishes the number of abortions that have been conducted in the past year, but does not publish a total number of abortions that have been conducted since abortion became legal in 1973 (“Induced Abortion in the United States” 2016).
threatened. And the Planned Parenthood movement was just rocked by it. I personally was stunned by it because this was my staff member, my clinic. I felt unbelievably guilty (N. Gamble 2017).

Nicki makes clear here that not only were the shootings extremely traumatizing for her and the larger pro-choice movement, but they also made many pro-choice activists, including herself, feel directly threatened. All of the pro-life women who would later participate in the discussions, also expressed being shocked and deeply saddened by the attacks (McComish 2017; Hogan 2017; Thorp 2017) Madeline, recalled feeling that Salvi’s actions had no place in the pro-life movement as she understood it, and was concerned for its future in the state.

When the Salvi business happened, I remember saying to God, "If you want Mass Citizens to go down on my watch, alright.” What can I say. I mean it was just so terrible. This poor young man, he was nuts, I mean really. And he just got it into his head to go killing people, and it’s against everything we believe to go around killing people. It was just a terrible time, a terrible time (McComish 2017).

It is thus clear that in addition to viewing each other as people who were actively working to make the world a worse place, following the shootings, the participants from both sides also felt like the cause to which they had committed so much of their lives was very directly under attack or in danger of failing completely.

The Flagship Group Discussions on Abortion

A few days after the shootings, the Governor of Massachusetts, William Weld, and the Archbishop of Boston, Cardinal Bernard Law, put out a joint statement calling for “common ground talks” between the pro-life and pro-choice movements (Podziba 2012). While it was not clear exactly what this meant, Nicki was quoted in a newspaper article saying she would not participate in any talks unless they were professionally mediated (Podziba 2012). In the months before the talks the Public Conversations Project, a small non-profit organization that specialized
in facilitating conversations over divisive public issues based in identity, beliefs, and values (“About Us” 2014), had begun using a new form of facilitation in a series of short discussions on abortion that were open to the public (Podziba 2012). Upon reading Nicki’s interview, two facilitators associated with the Public Conversations Project contacted the Governor and the Cardinal, and with their blessings, began working to find leaders on both sides of the abortion debate who would be willing to participate in some form of dialogues (Podziba 2012). The process of interviewing potential candidates took months, and was carried out in complete secrecy, for, as one of the facilitators later wrote,

As extremists vehemently opposed the talks, [we] set our first principle: Do no harm. I took that to mean that no one should get killed or injured because of the talks. At the time there was palpable fear from people who threatened to harm anyone who would dare meet “with the devil”(Podziba 2012).

The fear that the facilitator describes here resulted from other extremist individuals claiming membership in the pro-life movement who celebrated Salvi’s attacks, and after the call for common ground talks, threatened to carry out similar violence against any pro-life leaders who were willing to participate (Podziba 2012). Despite these challenges, however, by September the facilitators had settled on six women, three from each side, who had agreed to participate in four, four hour long, entirely secret discussions over the course of a month (Podziba 2012). While all of the women had chosen voluntarily to participate in these talks, before the first meeting, many of them had extremely mixed emotions.

Both pro-life and pro-choice leaders remembered being both extremely nervous and cautiously hopeful as they prepared for the first meeting. All of the pro-life women explained that they were most intimidated to meet Nicki, because they only knew her from her media appearances, which in which, as she acknowledged, she had been openly demeaning towards the pro-life movement. Madeline even recalled being “terrified” of meeting Nicki, because “she
[was] actually in the clinic where they actually kill the babies” (McComish 2017). Because of this, however, they were also very hopeful that something good could come of the meetings. Barbara said she was, “longlining to have some communication” with the pro-choice leaders after the shootings occurred, while Madeline was sure that there were “people of good will on both sides” and hoped that the conversations could help calm the environment (Thorp 2017; McComish 2017). While Fran shared both the nervousness and hope of both of the other women, she also carried with her a deep feeling of shame because of an experience she had shared with Nicki in the immediate aftermath of the Salvi attacks. Explaining her memories of the day after the shootings, she recalled,

[W]e got calls to go on TV shows. I was on with your grandmother [Nicki]. We met…. I don't think I'd ever actually met her in person. We were in the in the waiting room … and she was in the corner, it must've been with your grandfather and I was there alone and everything I wanted to do I didn't do. Normally in that situation I would have gone over to the other person, you know, told them how sorry I was, blah, blah, blah. But because of the roles we played I did not do that. And we went on TV and we get our shtick blah blah blah…. that was a horrible thing that I did I didn't get up and go over to [her] and do those things (Hogan 2017).

Fran clearly felt terrible because of her inability in that moment to express sympathy and condolences to Nicki, and one of the facilitators later wrote that before the first meeting, Fran had expressed a desire to make amends for that mistake and reclaim the humanity she had lost in that moment (Podziba 2012). The pro-choice women similarly had mixed emotions. Nicki, as previously discussed, did not think very highly of pro-life leaders, however, she also stated emphatically that, “I was committed to, I was really committed to doing it because I did think that if we could lower the lack of civility that we might be able to prevent violence” (N. Gamble 2017). Melissa Kogut, was more skeptical, and explained that, “I didn't have expectations that anything good was going to happen” (Kogut 2017). The women on both sides, therefore, were hopeful that these discussions might lead to something positive, but in no way convinced that
they would be successful, given the negative views many of them held of the women on the other side.

Once they began, the discussions were tightly orchestrated in order to help the women move past their trepidations and preconceived notions of each other and engage in productive dialogue. In the first meeting, the facilitators asked each of the women to describe the impact the shootings had had on them individually, so as to start the discussions from a mutual understanding that all of the participants considered the attacks to be morally reprehensible, and, in different ways, had been hurt by them (Podziba 2012). From there they moved on to anti-stereotyping exercises and worked on developing communication tools in order to help the participants be able to effectively communicate. The exercise all of the participants remembered as being most helpful was the “hot button” exercise, which one of the facilitators later described in her book.

To start, we asked the participants to list every word and phrase of the abortion debate sloganeering that shut down anyone’s ability to listen to the next word. These included murderer, justifiable homicide, anti-choice, fetus, pro-life, unborn child, products of conception. That was the easy part of the exercise. Then we asked the leaders to discuss the issue of abortion without using any of the words….

It wasn’t easy. The women caught each other whenever someone pressed a “hot button.” There was a lot of laughter as they all struggled to make their points without using their value-laden buzzwords. They came to realize they had been speaking in code. Many simple worlds, - fetus, unborn child – were actually shorthand expressions for complex positions and moral judgements (Podziba 2012).

In my interviews with them, all of the women recalled how difficult it had been to discuss the abortion without using any of these buzzwords. However, this exercise did more than simply challenge the women to expand their vocabularies. It also subtly helped to breakdown the two-dimensional, negative caricatures that the women had made each other into. As the facilitator recounts, all of the women struggled and got tripped up while trying not to use the buzzwords. This was an inherently humanizing process, as it would have been quite difficult for women on
either side to view themselves as inherently superior to those on the other side when they were all making the same mistakes. Furthermore, this exercise also began the process of helping the women look more deeply into their own beliefs. Without being able to use the short-hand expressions they were accustomed to, which were triggering for the other side, the women were forced to look within themselves to understand what exactly they meant by those phrases.

After the first four meetings which they had all agreed to, all of the women felt there was still more they to discuss, and so they agreed to continue meeting. This process repeated itself multiple times and their meetings continued on for years (Podziba 2012). Over the course of those meetings, the women discussed many different issues related to abortion, including “feminism, sex education, euthanasia, suicide, the death penalty, the role of law in society and individual responsibility” (Fowler et al. 2001). In the last years of the meetings, the women also spent significant time working to collectively write an article, which was eventually published in the Boston Globe (Podziba 2012). Over the course of this process, however, the women slowly began to find that their views and beliefs began to deepen and change.

All of the women recalled feeling like the process of discussing their beliefs about abortion and all of the many related issues with people who had profoundly different views deepened their commitment their own moral positions. Fran explained that before the discussions, she hadn’t ever questioned her beliefs about abortion and, “the dignity of the human person,” because she had always felt they were “instinctual”, however the process of having her beliefs questioned forced her to “dig deeper” to understand the basis of her beliefs (Hogan 2017). Eventually, however, she came to a new understanding of the reasoning behind her pro-life world view.

Two reasons one from a faith perspective because every human being is an unrepeatable gift of the Creator. And second of all that no society, no just society can ever not treat
those at the edges of life with the dignity that they deserve. I believe that everybody deserves equal dignity whether it be the poorest of the poor or the richest of the rich. They’re equal in my mind. And this made me think about who comes within the encircling laws of the country who should be protected. And to me we have a special obligation to protect those at the margins of life who can't speak for themselves (Hogan 2017).

Fran here explains that her pro-life beliefs, which include her opposition to abortion, are based both in her religious faith, and in her understanding of society’s obligation to protect those individuals who are particularly vulnerable. Throughout our interview she explained in addition to her pro-life work against abortion, she has also put these beliefs into practice through her work as a lawyer representing individuals in low income housing, and through her political lobbying to prevent physician assisted suicide from becoming legal (Hogan 2017). Fran went on to further emphasize this latter point by passionately arguing that the common criticism of the pro-life movement, that they only care about babies up until the moment they are born, is fundamentally untrue (Hogan 2017). She explained that just as she felt a moral obligation to protect unborn human life, she felt an equal moral obligation to offer support for families in poverty who struggle to provide for their children (Hogan 2017). This explanation of Fran’s beliefs clearly reflects her description of her father’s words all those years ago in the Supreme Court, and thus is a testament to the long-lasting influence his strong moral positions had on her. Furthermore, her description also makes clear that her beliefs did not stop developing when she became involved in pro-life activism. Instead, the Flagship Discussions pushed her to continue to explore her beliefs and allowed her to more deeply understand the moral and spiritual dimensions of her opposition to abortion. Fran was not alone if feeling that the discussions provided her with a better understanding of her political and moral positions.

Nicki recalled that the process of being questioned by the pro-life women helped her to become more comfortable with the reality of her support for abortion access. Before the
discussions, she explained, she had always struggled with a specific moral aspect of her pro-choice beliefs.

For me it was very hard over the years to try to figure out how to juxtapose the fact that abortion is definitively the taking of a human life albeit at a fetal stage, and my support of it…. In my early days at Planned Parenthood when I was doing public stuff, I would always get nervous because I couldn’t, I wasn't at a point where I could acknowledge that the fetus was a human fetus (N. Gamble 2017).

Nicki was forced to confront this discomfort with the fact that abortion ends fetal life head on during the group’s discussions over what to call what the pro-life women referred to as “unborn human life” or “babies,” and the pro-choice women referred to as “fetuses” (N. Gamble 2017). All the women remembered this discussion as being particularly challenging, because of the political implications that were attached to the different terms, but eventually they decided on “human fetus” (N. Gamble 2017). Nicki recalled that through this process, she came to understand that while abortion undeniable kills, what was more important to her was, “…questions of who decides and for me coming to a sense that I think the woman gets to decide no matter what the reason” (N. Gamble 2017). It is important to note that an essential part of what made this process of reflection possible was the secret nature of the discussions. Where previously she had always shied away from engaging with the idea of abortion ending life out of fear of negative political repercussions, the secrecy of the discussions enabled her to seriously listen to the pro-life women and question her own beliefs in light of their points, before eventually reaffirming her own position with a greater level of comfort and understanding therein. Both Fran and Nicki clearly articulated that their beliefs, while not changing necessarily, deepened as they became better able to comfortable articulate the reasoning behind their positions, and the implications that came with those political stances.
Over the course of the six years during which the discussion group met, all of the women came to care deeply about each other. The women on both sides came to see those on the other side as much more fully human. The pro-choice women, who had previously thought of the women on the other side as not smart, humorless, and controlled by men, came to respect the pro-life activists as incredibly intelligent women, at the peaks of their respective professional fields, who were motivated in their pro-life work by deeply held personal convictions (N. Gamble 2017; Fowler 2017; Kogut 2017). For their part, the pro-life women also came to respect the pro-choice women much more as individuals, and gained a much deeper understanding of their motivations (Hogan 2017; Thorp 2017; McComish 2017). However, what all the women described to me as one of the most important impacts of the discussions, was the fact that they all came to be close friends and care deeply about each other (N. Gamble 2017; Thorp 2017; Hogan 2017; McComish 2017; Fowler 2017; Kogut 2017). Throughout my conversations with all of the women, it became clear how much they valued these improbably relationships with each other by how often they would bring up, often unprompted, how much they “loved” or were “fond of each other (N. Gamble 2017; Thorp 2017; Hogan 2017; McComish 2017; Fowler 2017; Kogut 2017). At the time I interviewed them, sixteen years after their official meetings ended, they continued to get together for dinner a few times a year, simply because they enjoyed each other’s company, and valued the unique bonds, built across political differences, that they had built with each other (N. Gamble 2017; McComish 2017; Kogut 2017; Hogan 2017; Thorp 2017; Fowler 2017). This clearly is a radical change from the ways in which they viewed each other before the discussions began. Thus, it is clear that by participating secret meetings over such an extended period of time without the pressure of public scrutiny, the women were able to entirely break down the negative stereotypes and views that they had previously had of each other and see each
other as human beings who were all working to improve the world, according to their understanding of what that was. This is the clearest example that in contrast to the ways in which most scholarship has implicitly treated activists’ beliefs as unchanging past the point of engaging in the pro-choice/life movements, activists beliefs can and do change in deep an profound ways.

All of the women made abundantly clear throughout our conversations how much the process of the discussions and the relationships they had built continued to shape their lives. There were multiple examples of very tangible ways in which the women’s relationships had impacted their personal and professional lives. Fran alerted the FBI when she became aware of a death threat against Nicki made by someone connected to the pro-life movement (Hogan 2017), Madeline wrote to a conservative minister planning to speak in Massachusetts who had praised John Salvi, and made clear he was unwelcome in the state (McComish 2017). While all of the women agreed that the conversations made them better listeners in their personal and professional lives, Madeline recalled her newfound understanding of directly impacting her work as President of Massachusetts Citizens for Life. A year after the Salvi shootings, Nicki wrote an article reflecting on the attack and all that had happened since. One of Madeline’s staffers at Massachusetts Citizens for Life wrote a response that criticized Nicki using many common negative stereotypes of pro-choice leaders (McComish 2017). Madeline wouldn’t let it be published explaining to her employee that she had entirely missed Nicki’s point and mischaracterized her beliefs, much to her employee’s frustration (McComish 2017). However, the most noticeable changes the talks caused in the women’s lives came when they finally published their article, describing their years of conversations in the Boston Globe. All of the women were inundated with letters and emails from around the world, telling them that their example gave people hope, and telling them that it had inspired countless people to try to
reconnect with estranged family members and friends (N. Gamble 2017; Fowler 2017; Kogut 2017; Hogan 2017; McComish 2017; Thorp 2017). Additionally, the women were invited to speak to groups across the country and explain the structures and exercises that had made the conversations possible, and talk about the relationships they had formed over the course of the years (N. Gamble 2017; Fowler 2017; Kogut 2017; Hogan 2017; McComish 2017; Thorp 2017).

None of the other activists I interviewed had as deep an understanding of the opposing side or had ever been able to have any productive discussions about the issue of abortion with anyone with whom they disagreed. It was clear from the way that activists on both sides who had not participated in the discussions spoke, that many of them believed in negative stereotypes about those on the opposing sides. Pro-choice activists often criticized members of the pro-life movement for not caring about the quality of babies lives after they were born, and not supporting poor women after they gave birth (Kahrl 2017; Katie 2017). While this may be true of some members of the pro-life movement, it is clearly not the case of the pro-life activists I interviewed, as previously explained. On the other side, one of the pro-life women strongly implied that members of the pro-choice movement try to coerce pregnant women into having abortion so that abortion providers can increase their profits, and repeatedly implied that pro-choice leaders were akin to Hitler and other despotic leaders who carried out genocides (Margaret 2017). While it is possible that some members of the pro-choice movement may have coerced individuals into having abortions, it is again clearly not true of any of the pro-choice activists I interviewed. As previously discussed, all of them believed strongly in women’s right to choose whether or not to have an abortion herself, without coercion either way. Additionally, the activists who had not participated in the discussions also displayed much less appreciation for conversing, let alone maintaining conversations, with people who held different views on
abortion. I asked everyone I interviewed if they had ever had conversations with people from the other side of the abortion debate, and most people who had not participated in the discussions said that they had only had a few conversations that had been unproductive, because they hadn’t been able to change the other person’s mind. However, none of them seemed to believe there was any inherent value in discussing their views across political differences.

Thus, it is clear that the Flagship Discussion Group on Abortion clearly had profound and lasting impacts on the participants beliefs about both abortion, and their political opponents. Having their viewpoints respectfully challenged in a safe space enabled the women from both sides to question and explore their own beliefs, and eventually helped them to reach deeper levels of understanding and comfort with the political and moral positions that they held. Additionally, the discussions also radically changed the women’s views of each other. Whereas they had previously viewed each other as two dimensional, negative stereotypes of people who were actively working to make the world a worse place, both the pro-choice and pro-life leaders came to see each other as smart, loving people who were working to improve the world according to their world view and understanding of what that was. Furthermore, they had more sophisticated understandings of the other side’s positions than any other activists I spoke with, and also developed close friendships with each other that have lasted for over two decades.
Conclusion

In contrast to the way it has been represented in most scholarship, the development of pro-choice/life activists’ moral and political beliefs about abortion is clearly a lifelong process. Due to the cultural norms in the communities in which the activists I interviewed grew up, abortion was largely a taboo subject, and thus not an issue the vast majority of them were aware of while growing up. However, their broader moral frameworks and world views, which would later help inform their views on abortion, began developing during their childhoods. These beliefs are socially constructed, and as such are deeply influenced by the religious, racial, cultural, social, and socio-economic contexts in which activists live. These influences are particularly strong during future activists’ childhoods, when they are actively soliciting and receiving messages about appropriate moral behavior from their parents and communities. Among the activists I interviewed, religious, and socio-cultural moral messages about sexuality, white femininity and heteronormative family structures were particularly significant in the formation of their moral frameworks and world views. Virtually all of the activists became aware of abortion during their adolescence or early adulthood, when significant life events brought it sharply and suddenly into their attention. While many of these experiences were similar between pro-choice and pro-life activist, they interpreted them in extremely different ways as a result of the different moral frameworks which they had developed while growing up. These events crystalized the activists’ moral and political beliefs about abortion and motivated them to want to make a change in some way to either increase or decrease access to abortion, depending on their world view. However, many of the women did not become directly involved in political activism until they had either professional or social opportunities to do so. The activists’ beliefs did not stop developing when they became involved in pro-choice/live movements. Those in the
Flagship Discussion Group on Abortion, who spent six years discussing their beliefs with activists from both movements learned not only more about their political opponents’ world views, but also became more aware and comfortable in their own. Additionally, the experience of discussing such personal issues in a safe and private space in which they were forced to make themselves vulnerable eventually led all six of the women to develop extremely close relationships. While none of the women ended up changing each other’s minds on the morality of abortion, they came to understand that their conversations had had a different and perhaps more powerful purpose than trying to shift others’ opinions. As Anne recalled one of the moderators, who has since passed away, putting it during one of their discussions, “We were not here to come to an agreement, we came here to build community” (Fowler 2017).

As previously mentioned, this research was potentially limited by the unequal numbers of pro-choice and pro-life activists that I was able to interview. The smaller numbers of pro-life leaders could have affected my analysis of the development of their beliefs, as there was much less diversity than in there was among the pro-choice activists. Additionally, this research was also limited by the racial, class, and gender homogeneity of the people I interviewed. As all but one of the activists I interviewed identified as white, all but one identified as women, and all were of middle or upper socioeconomic status, I was unable to explore whether people of color, men and gender non-conforming individuals, and people of low socio-economic status went through similar processes as they developed their beliefs about abortion. Additionally, all of the individuals I interviewed grew up between the 1940s and 1970s. Thus, it would also be interesting to explore whether these same religious, social, and cultural factors have continued to impact the development of individuals political and moral beliefs about abortion across multiple generations.
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