Conspicuously absent from most discussions of the abortion issue are considerations of third party interests, especially those of the father. A survey of the literature reveals an implicit assumption by most writers that the issue to be viewed as a two party conflict - the rights of the fetus versus the rights of the mother - and that an adequate analysis of the balance of these rights is sufficient to determine the conditions under which abortion is morally permissible.¹ The U.S. Supreme Court has officially held that a husband has no legal right to even be notified prior to his wife obtaining an abortion.

Similarly, in the medical and social literature there is little information on the effects of abortion on men. Limited research has suggested that any man who deeply cares is likely to be devastated by the experience. Stories by post-abortive fathers have begun to appear in recent years and they confirm the potentially devastating effects that can occur.

How do men react to abortion? According to psychiatrist Neil Bernstein, men frequently react by "denial and distancing". Those who can get in touch with their feelings, he says, experience abortion with the same range of emotions and ambivalences that women do, including compassion for the partner, guilt about destroying life and disappointment at having made a mistake.²

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**Men react at the psychological level at which they experience abortion**

Psychiatrist Richard Epstein says that men react at the psychological level at which they experience abortion. For example, he says that a man may feel deeply rejected by the destruction of the most important thing he can give to the woman he loves and, if so, he may undergo a profound depression. Another possible response is "narcissistic identification" in which the man identifies with the child to such an extent that the loss of the child amounts to a "loss of self" almost to his own
death. A man may also experience an abortion as a loss of control over the woman - which for him may be essential to the relationship. A man may favor an abortion because he wants to remain the primary object of the woman's concern. Or a man might grieve because of a lost opportunity to generate and renew himself - to leave something of himself and his heritage behind in raising a child.²

**A Crisis of Values**

"I had not prepared myself to form an opinion on when does life begin? Is abortion right or wrong? Whose decision it to make at this point?" These are the words of a man whose girlfriend chose to have an abortion for which he had very little input and because of which was devastated.³ Apparently when a crisis pregnancy arises, many men have not considered when human life begins or whether abortion is right or wrong. In a program of group counseling for men developed at a Wisconsin abortion clinic, the major themes of discussion among the men were, 1) issues of right and wrong particularly in connection with religious beliefs; 2) whether or not a fetus was human or non-human; 3) whether a child should be brought into such a "troubled" world.⁴

**Abortion is a silent agony for many men.**

*Canadian abortionist Henry Morgentaler*

In the study by Arthur Shostak of 1000 males at U.S. abortion clinics in the U.S. during 1981, many of the respondents thought their male role had been initially shaped by an extraordinary shock (We're pregnant) and an almost immediate secondary shock (And I'm going to have an abortion).⁵

**Humanity of Life in the Womb**

Many men who have been involved in an abortion experience believe that a human life is being destroyed. Arthur Shostak in his 1981 study of 1000 men at abortion clinics found that 20% of the men believed that life began at conception or when the nervous system began to function (19%), 26% felt that abortion was the killing of a child and 32% said they did not know whether or not abortion was the killing of a child.⁶

A study of 60 men at a Connecticut abortion clinic (66% of whom said they were Catholic) found that many were confused and depressed. When asked "When do you feel life actually begins in a pregnancy?", the men gave a wide range of responses: 22% said at the moment of conception, 12% said from 1-12 weeks gestation, 25% said from 13-36 weeks gestation, 20% said life begins at birth and 22% did not want to respond. The men ranged from being mildly in favor to adamantly in favor of the woman making the decision.⁷

**Male Grief Patterns**

Sociologist Arthur Shostak says, "Most of the men I talk to think about the abortion years after it is over. They feel sad, they feel curious, they feel a lot of things; but usually they have talked to no one about it. It's a taboo. It's not accepted for them to talk about it... With the man, if he wants to shed a tear, he had better do it privately. If he feels that the abortion had denied him his child, he had better work it through himself. He does not share his pain with a clergyman, a minister; he does not share it with a close male friend while they're hunting in a duck blind. It just stays with him. And it stays for a long time."⁸

There is research evidence that men may experience long lasting grief following the loss of a child. Researchers at Lehigh University studied the grief responses of women and their partners following spontaneous abor-
tion, ectopic pregnancy, stillbirth and neonatal death. 16.9% had higher grief scores after two years than after two months following the event. 55% of those with higher grief scores after two years were men. They concluded that those who may be withdrawn and quietly despairing may be at the highest risk for severe grief.9

Researcher Brenda Majors and colleagues at the State University of New York at Buffalo studied couples prior to obtaining an elective abortion. Males were more likely than females to blame the pregnancy on their own character. It was noted that self-character blame has been associated with increased risk for depression and that males may therefore be at greater risk for depression following abortion than females.10

Rita Black, a researcher at Columbia University of Social Work, studied coping patterns of men and women (91% were married) who had experienced pregnancy losses following an elective abortion after abnormal prenatal test results or after spontaneous abortions. Men were far less able to talk about the loss both at one month and after six months than the women.11

Sometimes a man will undertake to grieve, in part, because the woman does not express any regret or guilt from the abortion and he feels that someone should do so. In one such case a man met and began dating a married woman with four children who wanted to end her marriage. After a few months she became pregnant by her boyfriend. Since her husband had had a vasectomy, she felt she had no choice but to have an abortion. However the man was deeply against abortion and even offered to pay her a large sum of money not to have the abortion, but she refused.

After the abortion she acted like nothing had happened. The man, however, was filled with anger and hatred which he could not repress. He felt he was carrying the pain and humiliation for both of them. "It was hell. I thought I'd be better off dead." He became obsessed with the abortion, thinking about it day and night, often crying for hours. He became extremely anxious, even experiencing panic attacks. After her divorce, he continued to date her. When she became pregnant a second time by him, she had another abortion over his strong objections which further destroyed their relationship.13

Repressed Feelings and Emotions

Observers of men at the Wisconsin abortion clinic said that men often attempt to be invulnerable, a "real man" by denying any expression of feelings. Many men said they did not express their feelings to their partners and instead felt they needed to be a source of support by presenting a strong front.4 Arthur Shostak's study made similar findings.6 The men frequently conformed to the notion that a woman has a legal right to an abortion, but at the expense of their own unexpressed feelings and values.

These repressed feelings may reveal themselves at a later time in various different ways. For example, Linda Bird Francke in her interviews of post-abortive men found that one man feared that a living son would be sacrificed for the aborted one; another felt sadness when he heard a certain song; still another experienced periodic impotence and depression. He also recalled, "When the eight year old son of a close friend was killed in a car accident, I went to pieces. It took a while to realize that my despair was the grief over the loss three years ago of my child, whom I never had a chance to grieve for or bury. I'm still not sure I have buried that fetus." She concludes by saying "Abortion is a far greater dilemma for men than researchers-counselors-and women have even begun to realize."12

Psychologist Jeanette Vought in her research on post abortion trauma found that men who did not have a voice in the decision-making process felt extreme anger and helplessness. She also found that this anger may turn inward and lead to depression which further damages relationships and creates
isolation. In one case she describes a man who had been sexually abused as a child and his parents did not give him the love and nurturing he needed. He developed a non-assertive, passive personality. Once married, he did not speak up when his wife and her parents desired to end a pregnancy by abortion, although he hated the fact that his child's life was being taken by abortion. In the years that followed, the abortion was seldom mentioned, but his pain from the abortion remained. The marriage continued to deteriorate. His repressed anger exploded in violent behavior and after repeated outbursts, his wife left and took the children with her. He became suicidal and finally sought counseling. He was finally able after 16 years to express his guilt and grief and his self-hate over the abortion.

In another case, a young man and women met and began to date. She had had a previous child out of wedlock which had been placed for adoption. As their relationship deepened, they became sexually active and she became pregnant once again. Everyone agreed that the couple should marry. However, her parents were very ashamed about the pregnancy and convinced her that she should have an abortion. The man was very upset about this, became extremely depressed and could not sleep. On the day of the abortion he sat on a remote beach feeling lower than he had ever felt before. Two months later when he returned, his girl-friend met him at the airport and asked to start over again.

Despite the fact that their relationship had changed, he still loved her and they were married. Later, they had another child and they sat in the recovery room and cried together. It seemed that many of the tears were for the aborted baby. When she became pregnant once again and was a few months along, the doctor told them he thought the baby was dead. When the baby did not spontaneously abort, the doctor tried to induce labor, but it didn’t work either. Finally, the doctor suggested removing the baby by cesarean section. All the old fears about the prior abortion re-

 surfaces in the husband. He was afraid they were taking another child away from him and he was worried about his wife. When the chaplain came to see them, they both sobbed. The wife said to her husband, “I’m sorry. I never meant to do this to you” (referring to his pain about the abortion). The couple is now in the process of getting a divorce.13

**Loss of Manhood/Fatherhood**

Abortion thwarts the most basic of paternal impulses - a man’s instinct to protect his children. As one post-abortive man stated “Not only is there a loss but you are also a failure. Your primary function in life is to provide and protect your family. And those (aborted) children are my family, and I failed. They’re dead and I’m not.”14 But as Dr. Vincent Rue says, “How can one protect, when one is not allowed by law to be involved in a life or death decision? How can one be responsible when knowledge can be purposefully withheld and patterned role exclusion is socially sanctioned?”15

Another very important aspect is the loss of fatherhood, sometimes permanently. A post-abortive man who had paid for his girlfriend's abortion 10 years ago and was still dwelling on it said, “I’ve never had a child. That may be the closest I ever come to having a child.”16 Still another said, “I still feel a lot of remorse, not only because I treated a good woman badly, but now that I’m entering into what I want to be my time to have children and be a father, I start to think about the preciousness of what I lost. That makes me feel very sad. I feel in my heart that I should have done more of something, said something, been there... I don’t know.”16

A third man, now age 39, looks back with ambivalence on the abortion he and a woman decided upon some 10 years ago. Both agreed that the time and circumstances were not right for them to have a child. Now he fears he will never marry, never have children. He
fantasizes about the relationship, the love, the pleasures he might be sharing with the child (which he imagines to be a boy).  

A fourth man is black, 28 years of age and with no children, appears at an abortion clinic to protest the plans of the woman with whom he has lived for 5 years to have an abortion. He regards abortion and the fathering of children as issues of control and pride. For him the abortion violates the very essence of masculinity. He also had a sense of heritage and the importance of perpetuating himself.  

**Substance Abuse**  

Except for scattered reports, little is known about this subject in post-abortive men. Drunkenness by a post-abortive father following the abortion was reported by his brother. As the brother recalls: "There was much sorrow and crying. We both got drunk together. He didn't want her to have the abortion but they already had one kid and didn't think they could afford another. They are separated." In another instance a friend of a post-abortive man stated: "A friend of mine, his lady had one... He turned to alcohol. He's always talking about the baby... He is still in the relationship but has other girls too. He is miserable about the whole thing. He won't admit it now, but I can tell."17 Another article on men and abortion describes a man who left a seminary in the late 1960's and subsequently had a hard time adjusting. When his girl friend became pregnant, he pleaded with her in vain not to have an abortion. He has had a major alcohol problem since.18  

Another post abortion man recalled: "Within 60 days I was in what I now call the 3 D's - Drugs, Daring, and Death and that is where I remained for three years. I was doing drugs constantly - 24 hours a day. I never was straight. I went to church stoned. I went to my job stoned. I also ruined my career.  

I was living on the edge of a daring life. I was the guy you saw on the ski slopes coming down missing the trees, doing flips and hitting those moguls at 90 miles per hour. I was driving fast and drinking and driving because I had lost my self-worth. I had everything bottled up within me. I was waiting for life to be snatched from me because it had lost its meaning and I wanted to die to atone for the one I had allowed to be taken.3  

**Guilt Following Abortion**  

Guilt may be related to the fact that the woman is pregnant for which the man may feel responsible. Guilt may also be present because the man realizes that a life has been taken by abortion.  

Some observers have concluded that men have stronger guilt reactions than women following abortion. A Los Angeles Times random telephone survey conducted March 3-10, 1989 found that among men who acknowledged having been the father of an aborted child, guilt was felt by almost two-thirds and regret by more than one out of three. Among women who acknowledged having had an abortion, the same survey found the 56% reported a sense of guilt about the abortion and 26% said they now mostly regret the abortion.19  

Guilt from an abortion may last many years. The following story was broadcast over Station WEAN in Providence, Rhode Island on August 18, 1983. A man by the name of Russell called in to a morning talk show concerning mens' feelings about abortion.  

Russell is over 70 years old. In 1942 he had an affair with an unmarried Norwegian girl which resulted in the girl becoming pregnant. Russell was married. The girl came from a very straight-laced family. Both Russell and his friend decided that the only solution was an abortion.  

Russell made arrangements with a doctor in California. When they arrived, the doctor explained that his nurse was not working that day and asked if Russell would assist him. Russell agreed and witnessed the birth of a beautiful, six month old, blond baby boy.
Please, Tell Me About Our Child

Please tell me about our child.
Don't tell me you haven't thought about it.
I know it's been on your mind a lot.
So tell me.
Please.
I need to know.
Was our baby a little boy or a little girl?
What would he have looked like?
Would she have smiled when you held her to your breast?
Would she have reached out with tiny hands with that warmth in her eyes
that comes from knowing that she was safe and loved?
How much did she weigh?
Was carrying her all that hard as you both grew larger and larger?
Did you feel full again and alive, like a woman?
What color was her hair, her eyes?
Did she kick inside you?
Don't tell me you haven't thought about it.
I know you have.
I know it's probably been on your mind a lot since then.
So please tell me.
I need to know.
I need to know because I am a man and I have thought about it a lot.
Every day.
Since before you left me.
And I know that if our baby's going away has torn out of me as much as it has,
it tore out of you, too, only more.
She was inside of you.
And she was torn out.
I know that what I say is true.
So please don't deny that.
I need to know.
And so do you.

This poem was written by a young single man whose girlfriend decided to have an abortion without consulting him.20

When the baby was born, the doctor asked Russell to turn his back and then proceeded to kill the child. Both Russell and the girl were totally devastated by the experience. They agreed never to see each other again.

Overcome with guilt Russell decided to tell his wife. She reacted with love and sympathy. She told her husband that if she had known about it, she would gladly have agreed to raise the child as her own. Subsequently, Russell and his wife adopted four children.

Russell told the talk show host that even after 40 years he still feels a great burden of guilt. He was sobbing and overcome with emotion before he finished telling the story - which he had never told to anyone, except his wife.

Suicidal Behavior

Little is reported in the literature on the nature and extent of suicidal behavior of post-abortive men. Possible reasons for suicidal behavior include a feeling of deep rejection as a possibility in which a man may undergo a profound depression. Another possible reason is “narcissistic identification” in which the man identifies with the child to such an extent that the loss of the child amounts to “loss of self” - almost to his own death.2
A clinical case of abortion-related suicide in a male has been reported in the literature. In this case, an 18 year old male gas station attendant shot himself and died 3 months after his father’s unexpected death. Only his closest friend knew that at the time of his suicide he was despondent over his girl friend’s abortion. The child had been conceived on the day of his father’s death. He had formed a mental image of the child and told his friend he planned to name his son after his father. The loss of his child and what he represented was more than he was able to bear. In another unreported instance, a post-abortive father committed suicide shortly after his partner’s abortion. He was a Vietnam war veteran and it is possible that trauma from the war experience may have been a contributing factor.

**Loss of Relationship/Intimacy**

A man who is strongly opposed to abortion may be particularly devastated if an abortion occurs without his prior knowledge as illustrated by the following example.

"In March 1979, my wife became pregnant. This was not a planned pregnancy. My wife was not using any form of birth control as she got sick from the pills and an IUD was painful for her.

My wife did not want the baby because of her age (33) and the fact she felt she had already raised three children (ages 8 to 15, from a previous marriage) at the time and did not want the pain of childrearing until she was in her late fifties. She also was just starting her career as an accountant.

I stressed to her...I loved her, would share the child raising, and I was beginning to love the baby.

In June 1979, she aborted the baby without my knowledge or consent. She had been both ill and very depressed during the pregnancy, and on the day of the abortion she was in high spirits while I was sad, angry, and cried much that day.

I tried for months to control my feelings on the abortion, but found myself thinking about it at work, on the road, and at home. I called it "the murder" when I talked with my wife. I found it affected my feelings for her more than I could control.

The marriage ended on December 8, 1979, in divorce. I had loved my wife deeply 'til that point, but I could not get out of my head that the abortion killed our love."

The loss of the relationship with a girlfriend is very common following abortion. Linda Bird Francke in her abortion research reported that "almost every relationship between single people broke up either before or after the abortion." In another study nearly half of the 250 women who elected abortion ended their relationship with the putative father. A study conducted at a New York City abortion clinic found that up to 70% of the relationships had failed 1 month post-abortion. Another study found that only 19.3% of the women who had an abortion were living with the father in the years following the abortion.

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**I could not get out of my head that the abortion killed our love.**

Why do these relationships frequently break up? Psychologist Vincent Rue points to increased male insecurity, alienation and role conflict as contributing to relational instability from abortion. Sociologist Arthur Shostak found that unexpected guilt and remorse, relief from tension, and anger at the woman were important reasons for break-up. Sexual relations and contraceptive questions also caused new stresses immediately after the abortion. Psychologist Arnold Medvene says that abortion is undeniably a death experience and if it gets blocked and remains unresolved, it is bound to have a destructive impact on the relationship. Counselor Teri Reisser
believes that one of the most important factors in the break-up of a committed relationship following abortion is the disillusionment experienced by the woman, a feeling of being deserted which may lead to disengaging emotionally from the male.26

Written by Thomas W. Strahan, Editor

Footnotes
1. "Fathers and Fetuses", George W. Harris, Ethics, 96:594-603, April, 1986