

BOOK REVIEWS

THE SEARCH FOR AN ABORTIONIST

NANCY HOWELL LEE

Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1969
207 pp. \$7.50.

It is extremely difficult to make a review of the book by Nancy Howell Lee, inasmuch as it touches on a wide variety of complex and controversial aspects of this tabooed subject in the United States. The author has gone to tremendous effort to bring to the surface the intricate social networks associated with illegal abortion in this country.

The specific aims have been set in the following fashion: (1) To acquire specific knowledge of exactly how some abortions were arranged; (2) To investigate a large enough number of cases; and (3) To avoid any harm to women supplying the information.

One can wonder about the possibilities of extrapolating the findings to the entire American female population, considering the size of the study group (114) and the method of selection; i.e., volunteers who had had one or more abortions. It is surprising to compare this rather reduced sample with epidemiologic studies carried out in Chile where a random sample of nearly 4,000 women in the child-bearing age was so easily reached through home visits.¹⁻³ The enforcement of the law and cultural patterns may account for this difference. Out of 1,000 questionnaires sent out to various agencies by Mrs. Lee, only 89 were properly completed.

On the average, about four years elapsed from the time of the first abortion until the time of the study, making it difficult to ascertain time location and to analyze trends.

The breakdown of data relating to age, marital status, household composition, residence, education and so forth, although exhaustive, throws little light in terms of describing the universe, without reference to the appropriate denominators. Mrs. Lee appears to be quite conscious of the limitations of her findings when she states: "it does mean that caution is needed in interpreting the results of this study," and moreover: "the findings may be an artifact of the recruitment process."

It is also surprising to realize that such a tight schedule of events and activities, involving millions of people every year in the United States, may occur in the underground of society. The phenomenon appears consistent with the opening statement made by E. W. Overstreet, "in the United States the abortion problem is like an iceberg," the size of which is estimated around one million annually.⁴ If this is the case, an accurate insight into the cases of 114 women who experienced one or more abortions, only 25 of whom were personally interviewed, may be of rather limited value to describe the social variables involved in such a huge and complex problem. The total number of persons consulted before, at the time of the abortion and afterwards may amount to more than 20 million every year. If persons associated by confidence and gossip are considered, the social network discussing abortion in the United States would theoretically approach one half of the adult population. If this turns out to be the case, the statement made on page 34 would seem contradictory: "For most of the women, abortion seems to be a subject which is rarely discussed, and then only in an intimate atmosphere with fairly close friends."

The patterns described relating to diagnosis of pregnancy, the relation with the man, use of contraceptives, the rather sympathetic attitude of doctors and persons consulted and the elaborate chain of links leading to the abortionist, although interesting enough, fall within the same limitations and the

caution necessary to interpret the results mentioned before. It would appear as noteworthy that, although one-third of the induced abortions recorded were performed outside the United States, no mention is made of Cuba, perhaps because Castro took over well before the study was carried out. It has been universally admitted that Havana before 1960 was a close and active abortion center for American women and that not less than 1,000 doctors made a substantial income out of this practice during Batista times. Most of them fled and the abortion pressure began to be felt in Puerto Rico, Mexico and even as far away as Japan.

With regard to complications, 12 of the women with the more severe complications required admission to hospitals, mostly for bleeding or infection, including one case with a ruptured cervix and another with perforation of the uterus. This finding seems very meaningful to us, even in comparison with the hospitalization rate found in Santiago, Chile, which was around 30 per cent and with a wide range of variation depending on the month of pregnancy, the operator and the method used. It has been estimated that in 1960, the National Health Service in Chile spent more than one million dollars in hospital care for women who had had abortions.⁶ The data supplied by Mrs. Lee stimulate thought on the magnitude of expense caused by medical care of complicated cases admitted to United States hospitals.

If the mass of illegal abortions is considered in the light of the fees and other incidental expenses described in the book (the abortionist's fees alone amounted to an average of \$337.00), the money spent by the United States population in this hidden practice must reach hundreds of millions of dollars.

Self-induced abortions seem rare. In the great majority of women in the sample (93) the procedure used was dilatation and curettage, with or without anesthesia. It is interesting to note that six obtained legal abortions in United States hospitals. Streeter estimates that between 5,000 and 9,000 therapeutic abortions occur in the United States each year, or approxi-

mately one per 480 live births.⁴ He also states that therapeutic abortion appears two to three times more frequently among private patients and the higher income groups, as compared to medically indigents and hospital cases. On the basis of these figures and those produced by Mrs. Lee, it is possible to speculate about the proportion of illegal operations that are masked under the label of "therapeutic" abortion. One of the women interviewed stated: "my abortion was performed legally, cleanly, respectably and successfully." Moreover, mention is made in the book of three women who "obtained permission for therapeutic abortions by misrepresenting or exaggerating their condition."

With respect to religious feelings, Mrs. Lee states that "it is fair to say that the study group is not religious." Requena found in Santiago, Chile, that abortion rates were higher for Catholic and agnostic women, as compared to Pentecostals; and among Catholic women, the rates correlate paradoxically with the degree of religious fervor as measured by their attendance at church services.⁵

It is interesting to note that 43 per cent of women who had their first abortion experienced a second one, and that of those who were at risk of having a third abortion, 32 per cent had done so. This pattern coincides with findings elsewhere, suggesting the existence of a group of "abortion-prone" women. In our own findings in Santiago, ten per cent of the women had contributed 30 per cent of the abortions analyzed.³

The effect that abortion had on the relation with the man causing the pregnancy is described on pages 107-108. Much attention has been given to several medical and psychological after effects, however the relation with the man has been rather neglected. In the sample studied by Mrs. Lee, 60 couples broke off their relation when the abortion was completed, and only 23 reported that the relation improved during the pregnancy and recovery period, because the joint problems faced brought them closer together and gave them an opportunity to demonstrate and appreciate the love and understanding they shared.

If this is the case throughout the entire population, it may be postulated that abortion is a problem deeply associated with maladjustment of the couple.

After going through the book and checking the contents against the specific aims set forth at the beginning of the thesis, one has no doubt that the first and last objectives have been fulfilled in a very satisfactory way. As for the second—that is, to investigate a large enough number of cases—the question arises as to the definition of the term “large enough,” considering the complexities of the problem and the nature of the study. Statistically, the size of the study group would not comply with the two basic requirements of being representative of the universe (method of selection) and having the appropriate size to allow for extrapolation of results. Nevertheless, considering that the study touches on such a tabooed subject and it represents a valuable attempt to break through the fears, prejudices and emotions associated with abortion, one may congratulate Mrs. Lee on her task.

With regard to the channels of communication, either through the acquaintance networks or the formal structure associated with the professional or occupational standing of the people involved, the patterns described are of great interest. In this as in several other respects, the study carried out by Mrs. Lee appears unique.

It is only regrettable that the author missed this opportunity to explore more deeply into the etiologic factors associated with induced abortion. It is the decision of the woman that ultimately matters, being the final product of the algebraic sum of a number of complex interacting factors. In this particular case, attention should be focussed sharply on the individual and ecology.

We fully agree with the final statement “as long as abortion remains surreptitious and illegal and women still insist upon seeking abortion under some circumstances, it is difficult to see how the situation can be alleviated.” Mrs. Lee postulates legislation of abortion leaving the decision in the hands of the woman and the doctor she chooses.

In summary, the book represents a positive contribution in displaying the hidden dramatic and human insight into a problem that has been universally neglected or evaded. It could properly be considered as a landmark paving the way for surveys on random samples of women, throwing light on the real magnitude and distribution characteristics of abortion in the United States.

A final consideration refers to the kind of reader for which this book is suited, and its value in terms of stimulating further research. It can be expected that the broad public would be interested in reading the book and feel identified with the cases analyzed. Medical students and those in other allied sciences should also be interested, as well as all who, in one way or another, have been involved in abortion studies.

ROLANDO ARMIJO

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