Teaching Abortion as a Historical Construct: The Case of Early Twentieth-Century Brazil and Beyond

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Introduction and rationale

Historians of medicine, sex, and gender have demonstrated that the definition of what today constitutes an “abortion” has changed across time, place, and language (Jaffary, 2016; Reagan, 1997; Roth, 2020). Thus, teaching abortion as a historical construct requires helping students to historicize abortion — or place the practice within its proper context, including time period, geographic location, and socio-cultural framework. In this activity, students will learn that abortion is, to paraphrase O’Brien (2021), an unstable historical concept. Using open-access primary sources available online, I show how to teach abortion as an unstable category through a specific case study, early twentieth-century Brazil. The week-long module, although specific to one geographic region and chronological period, can serve as a lesson plan for undergraduate history courses on various subjects including Latin America, gender, and/or medicine. But the lesson can also serve as a model for undergraduate courses in other disciplines, particularly those that use genealogy methods, including communication studies and sociology. Instructors who teach interdisciplinary courses — women, gender, and sexuality studies; Latin American studies; medical humanities — may also find this lesson useful, even if they use different sources to teach abortion meaning-making.

The lesson plan helps undergraduates think critically about what we think we know about abortion and how our current understandings are not fixed but rather contingent on the society in which we live and on who is practicing abortion. Changing understandings of what constitutes an abortion — from medical, legal, and moral standpoints — further influence who can access the procedure and who is penalized for doing so. Thus, the lesson employs an intersectional approach toward the history of abortion by emphasizing how changing knowledge affects the embodied histories of women in different ways.

Learning objectives

In this module, students explore two historical sources available in Portuguese and English, one note and one photograph, to discuss abortion as an unstable historical concept. The module has two overall learning objectives:

1. Students will learn how to read a historical primary source from a critical perspective. They will identify the perspective of the source’s author and intended audience, and accurately locate the source within its geographical and temporal contexts;
2. Students will think about how we as individuals and as members of larger socio-cultural groups define abortion based on the race, class, and gender norms of our time. History instructors can continue to emphasize the historical interpretation of the text. Instructors in other disciplines can ask students to compare past understandings with our own and to trace continuities or changes.

**Explanation and Debriefing**

Teaching students to historicize the meanings and practices of abortion can be difficult. For example, in the early nineteenth-century U.S., women and the public at large considered “bringing down the menses,” now seen as a euphemism for first-trimester abortion, as separate from an abortion (American Historical Association, 2022; Klepp, 2009; Reagan, 1997; Wittycombe, 2019). In the first trimester, women and their physicians viewed illness as the primary possible cause of missed menstrual cycles (amenorrhea). Americans did not directly connect amenorrhea and pregnancy like we do today. Women and physicians viewed quickening, or the period of first fetal movements during the mid-second trimester, as the marker of a viable pregnancy. Actions taken before quickening to restore menstrual bleeding were different from ending a pregnancy, even though today we would consider those one and the same. Instructors can also zoom out here to show how scholars across time and place – from medieval and early modern Europe to nineteenth-century Latin America – have convincingly demonstrated that people truly believed that missed periods before quickening were not a sign of pregnancy (Green, 2008; Jaffary, 2016; Roth, 2020; Ruggiero, 1992). Today, we understand amenorrhea, or the lack of a period, as something other than pregnancy. In a less medicalized society, with fewer diagnostic tools and technology, we can imagine how illness, and not pregnancy, could be the primary lens through which women and health practitioners viewed a missed period.

For instructors hoping to provide context for students, detailing the changes that occurred in Western thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be helpful. New understandings of abortion were first driven by the consolidation of Catholic doctrine that posited that life began at conception in the late nineteenth century (Coriden, 1973). Twentieth-century technological advancements in medicine further changed definitions of abortion, including the laboratory test to hormonally verify pregnancy in 1927 and the mass production of tests in the 1970s (Freidenfelds, 2020). Since the 1970s, the fetal ultrasound has improved fetal and maternal health and given countless parents a tangible way to experience their pregnancies (Wolf, 2018), but the religious right in the U.S. and abroad has also weaponized the technology to push for fetal personhood and further restrict abortion access (Dubow, 2011).
Thus, by the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, change has been more co-constitutive, with religious conservatives using medical technologies to redefine the parameters of abortion in ever more restrictive terms for the pregnant person, and reintroducing those moral judgements in a clinical setting. Many religious conservatives from the U.S. to Brazil view fertilized eggs that have not yet implanted in the uterine wall as babies. They have reframed third-trimester abortions as “partial-birth” procedures, rhetorically collapsing the practice of an abortion, which involves in utero demise, with that of infanticide, which requires the birth of a live child and its subsequent intentional death.

It is important to work through the idea of a contingent definition of abortion with students. This set of primary sources from early twentieth-century Rio de Janeiro, Brazil is one way to do so. The online introductory texts to the sources as well as a contextualizing article provide historical context (Roth, 2017). The first source is a handwritten note by a female neighbor denouncing a young woman for an illegal abortion (Roth, 2022a). (The procedure remains illegal with some limited exceptions today.)

In the early twentieth century, Brazil was marked by hierarchies of race, class, and gender. It had only recently abolished slavery (1888), still restricted voting to literate men, and had no formal public education system. In this environment, a woman denounced her female neighbor to the police for attempting an abortion and then practicing infanticide (Roth, 2020). The woman’s denunciation note is remarkable in many ways, not only because she was in a minority of literate women but also because the police believed her and launched an extensive investigation into the accusations.

The second source, a photograph, was part of the 1933 police investigation into the death of an eighteen-year-old Black woman. The woman, Mercedes dos Santos, a migrant domestic servant who worked in the home of another Black woman, miscarried at her place of work and later died in the hospital from a ruptured uterus and subsequent hemorrhaging. Despite lack of evidence, the police investigated the Black employer for performing an abortion. Here, we see the police quick to blame a Black woman for provoking an alleged abortion.

I present the lesson outline here in a Monday-Wednesday-Friday (M/W/F) 50-minute class format, but instructors can modify the outline for other class schedules. Instructors can use the explanatory information on historicizing abortion provided here to briefly introduce the module at the beginning of the first day.

Class One: The main learning objective is to introduce students to different understandings of abortion in history to prepare them for analyzing the meaning-making surrounding abortion in any context.
1. **Pre-class requirements:** a) Watch “History Behind the Headlines: Abortion, Choice, and the Supreme Court” (American Historical Association, 2022), a one-hour webinar on historicizing abortion; b) Post two questions, comments, or concerns online. These form the basis of the in-class discussions, and they allow students to gather their thoughts before coming to class. I prefer to not provide guided questions on day one to gauge baseline student understanding.

2. **In-class structure:** Think-pair-share with pre-assigned groups to facilitate conversation based on posted questions. At the end of the first class, I ask students to complete a one-minute paper explaining how they would describe abortion as a historical concept to a family member. I collect and keep the response.

**Class Two:** The main learning objective is to have students identify the multiple social, cultural, and historical factors that shape how we as humans understand abortion and how these understandings change over time.

1. **Pre-class requirements:** a) Read: “Introduction” and Transcription” from “Notes on ‘Reproductive Crimes’” and “Introduction” and accompanying photograph “Story of a Young Black Brazilian Women” (Roth, 2022a); b) Think about the following guided discussion questions as you read: The author of the note muddles the boundaries between abortion and infanticide. When does an abortion become infanticide according to these women? How did the police and law define the two practices? Are there differences? Why or why not? Another line of inquiry is into the gender and racial identities of those involved. Who is criminalized for supposed reproductive crimes? Who is believed? After taking both the note and the photograph into account, what role do race and inequality play in our understanding of abortion, both of what constitutes an abortion (in this example versus a miscarriage) and who gets criminalized for its practice?

2. **In-class structure:** I break the class into four groups (depending on size), with two groups focusing on the note and two groups focusing on the photograph. This discussion, based on the questions proposed above, takes about one-third of the class. I don’t expect the groups to come to definitive conclusions, an exercise I aim for in the full-class discussion that takes up most of the remainder of the time. At the end of this class, I again ask students to complete a one-minute paper explaining how they would describe abortion as a historical concept to a family member. I collect and keep the responses.
Class Three: The main learning objectives is to teach students how to trace the evolution of their own understanding on abortion as a historical (socio-cultural) construct and to connect this idea to current events.

1. **Pre-class requirement:** Find and read one first-hand account of abortion in any context (historical or contemporary) and from any perspective (the pregnant person’s, a physician, a police officer). This will serve as the basis of their written assignment detailed below.

2. **In-class structure:** The first half of the class is focused on students sharing how they found and why they chose their accounts. Then, I pass out the one-minute responses from the two previous classes. I ask students to take several minutes to see if their responses changed over the module and if so how. We then share as a class.

   Debriefing is integrated into each class day through one-minute papers. However, at the end of the third day, I return to the idea of “who gets criminalized” for abortion in the sources/accounts the students found. Here, students can bring in the theory of intersectionality and make connections to our current-day context, in which, even before the overturning of Roe, poor women and women of color have been arrested for having miscarriages or suspected abortions (Paltrow & Flavin, 2013).

**Assessment**

Students will use the first-hand account on abortion they brought to class as the basis for a primary source/critical analysis essay of a suggested length of 1000 words (roughly four double-spaced pages).

*Purpose and Knowledge:* The purpose of this assignment is to critically read and analyze a primary source/first-hand account of abortion. Students must go beyond providing general summaries of the source to think about the source’s/account’s content, (historical/sociological) context, and the (historical/social) cultural values that shaped it.

*Skills:* After completing this assignment, students will be able to: 1) identify and find a historical primary source/first-hand account of abortion; 2) explain the perspective of the source’s author and intended audience; 3) locate it within its geographical (regional/national/global) context, time period, and relevance to class themes.

Since the 2022 overturning of Roe v. Wade, many libraries have curated histories of reproductive health, which are listed below. Students and instructors
can also research the digital collections of the National Library of Medicine, Digital Public Library of America, HathiTrust, and the Internet Archive. Contemporary oral histories and social media actions on abortion are becoming ever more ubiquitous. Some important ones include The Abortion Diary, 2Plus Abortions, and #ShoutYourAbortion.
References


