

# Visualising abortion: emotion discourse and fetal imagery in a contemporary abortion debate

Nick Hopkins<sup>a,\*</sup>, Suzanne Zeedyk<sup>a</sup>, Fiona Raitt<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Psychology, Dundee University, Dundee DD1 4HN, Scotland, UK*

<sup>b</sup>*Department of Law, Dundee University, Dundee, UK*

Available online 12 January 2005

## Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of a recent UK anti-abortion campaign in which the use of fetal imagery—especially images of fetal remains—was a prominent issue. A striking feature of the texts produced by the group behind the campaign was the emphasis given to the emotions of those viewing such imagery. Traditionally, social scientific analyses of mass communication have problematised references to emotion and viewed them as being of significance because of their power to subvert the rational appraisal of message content. However, we argue that emotion discourse may be analysed from a different perspective. As the categorisation of the fetus is a social choice and contested, it follows that all protagonists in the abortion debate (whether pro- or anti-abortion) are faced with the task of constructing the fetus as a particular entity rather than another, and that they must seek to portray their preferred categorisation as objective and driven by an ‘out-there’ reality. Following this logic, we show how the emotional experience of viewing fetal imagery was represented so as to ground an anti-abortion construction of the fetus as objective. We also show how the arguments of the (pro-abortion) opposition were construed as totally discrepant with such emotions and so were invalidated as deceitful distortions of reality. The wider significance of this analysis for social scientific analyses of the abortion debate is discussed.

© 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Abortion; Emotion discourse; Fetal imagery; Rhetoric

## Introduction

The processes by which an issue such as abortion is made controversial, and public opinion mobilised in support of particular social policies, are complex and require different levels of analysis. For example, we need analyses of the organisational structure to activism and how organisational developments relate to wider social and economic changes (e.g., Staggborg, 1988). So too, we require consideration of how social/economic changes

affect a community’s conceptualisation of gender identities and the meaning of abortion (Oaks, 2003). Yet, such macro-level analyses need to be complemented by finer-grained studies exploring how particular understandings of issues are constructed and communicated. This requires a social psychological exploration of mass communication, and in this paper we analyse a recent UK anti-abortion campaign through paying close attention to the rhetorical organisation of its campaign materials.

### *Mass social influence*

In order to understand how people are mobilized, we must consider the ways in which issues are constructed

\*Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1382 344625; fax: +44 1382 229993.

*E-mail address:* [n.p.hopkins@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:n.p.hopkins@dundee.ac.uk) (N. Hopkins).

in activist groups' communications. That is, we must analyse such rhetoric in order to discern the ways in which issues are named and framed as social problems, and audience members constituted as people with particular identities and interests. Yet, all too often, social psychology theorises influence without regard to message contents, and focuses instead on how superficial aspects of a communication (i.e., aspects unrelated to message quality) bias message processing (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992). An important candidate for this treatment has been the emotional dimension to communications. Thus, one approach explores the persuasive effect of emotive symbolism in terms of classical conditioning (see Cacioppo, Marshall–Goodell, Tassinari, & Petty, 1992) and so implies that emotion-related rhetoric and symbolism are superficial sources of persuasion working independently of people's rational deliberation. Another, emphasises people's limited capacities to deliberate upon message contents and how emotion-related material distracts attention from the evaluation of message quality (see Rosselli, Skelly & Mackie, 1995). Running throughout this work is a concern that 'citizens might be swept away by skilful propagandists' and that 'emotional appeals might override rational ones' (Kinder, 1994, p. 309). This fear is testimony to the widespread influence of Gustav Le Bon (1895/1960). Writing about crowd psychology, Le Bon directed attention away from the contents of mass communication messages towards what were considered to be deeper, irrational, intra-psychic forces that determined crowd members' receptivity to an orator's appeals. For example, he maintained that 'a crowd is only impressed by excessive sentiments. An orator wishing to move a crowd must make an abusive use of violent affirmations. To exaggerate, to affirm, to resort to repetitions, and never to attempt to prove anything by reasoning are methods of argument well known to speakers at public meetings' (1895/1960, p. 51).

Recently, there has been some dissatisfaction with such characterisations of the role of emotion in the organisation of collective action. Most obviously, social movement theorists have been increasingly sensitised to the ways in which they may pathologise activism. Yet, if there has been a reaction against the Le Bonian tradition, it has been partial. Contemporary movement theorists typically deal with emotive rhetoric through simply ignoring it. As Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta (2000, p. 71) put it, 'while the earlier theorists had portrayed protestors as emotional to demonstrate their irrationality, the new theorists demonstrated their rationality by denying their emotions'. This is problematic in all manner of ways. Most obviously, this silence allows a neglect of a significant element of communication and leaves the field open for others to construe as irrational any activism in which an emotional dimension is particularly prominent

(especially if this activism promotes a project with which they disagree).

#### *Reconceptualising emotion in social movement communications*

As a first step towards questioning the idea that emotionality is synonymous with irrationality, several social movement theorists have observed that one's emotional reactions to events are informative. Thus Rosaldo (1984, p. 143) argues emotions 'are embodied thoughts, thoughts seeped with the apprehension that 'I am involved'' (cited in Aminzade & McAdam, 2001, p. 18). Pursuing this theme, a number of movement analysts have begun to address social movements' management of members' emotions (Groves, 1995). Indeed, Hochschild (1975, p. 298) argues that social movements for change 'make "bad" feelings okay, and they make them useful. Depending on one's point of view, they make bad feelings "rational"' (cited in Jasper, 1998, p. 408).

Social psychological analyses of persuasion are also beginning to rehabilitate emotion (e.g., Fabrigar & Petty, 1999; Huddy & Gunthorsdottir, 2000; Rosselli et al., 1995). Huddy and Gunthorsdottir (2000), e.g., question whether emotional appeals should be viewed as constituting a form of superficial manipulation and coin the term 'passionate reason' to refer to the interaction between emotion and reason in persuasion. Yet, these social psychological developments remain limited: most importantly they continue to neglect the content to persuasive communications and the ways in which talk about emotion may be relevant in helping an audience develop a potent representation of a situation and the action needed to address it.

In the present paper, we seek to address this lacuna through exploring the content to the communications of a particular (UK) anti-abortion group. Throughout, our focus is upon the presence of emotion-related talk in their communications. Inevitably, this is a limited focus. Any comprehensive analysis of communication processes requires attention be paid to audience reception. However, there is much to be gained from considering how talk about emotion may be integral to the representation of people and events, and we seek to show how such consideration may illuminate hitherto neglected dimensions of contemporary mobilisations around abortion.

#### *Emotion discourse*

There are several ways in which talk about emotion may be integral to message content. Take, e.g., the issue of moral rhetoric. Moral rhetoric does not merely communicate a choice or preference but constitutes a

situation and choice in a distinctive way. As Sparkes (1994) explains, moralities are not just collections of views about certain behaviours or domains of activity. First and foremost, they are ways of thinking and *feeling*. In similar vein, Turner (1996) observes that although the difference between moral sentiments and other beliefs is hard to specify, part of the difference is due to the fact that ‘emotion is aroused when moral norms are at issue’ while other matters ‘can remain entirely on an intellectual or cognitive plane’ (1996, p. 7). It therefore follows that an important aspect of the process through which issues come to be construed as moral problems concerns the development of a particular vocabulary in which talk of emotion is prominent, and Lee and Ungar (1989) highlight the ways in which talk of feeling and emotion is integral to the constitution of moral categories and the process through which certain options are talked out of a context of ‘taste’ and into a context of censure. To underline the significance of feelings and emotions in all of this, Lee and Ungar (1989, p. 693) observe that moralising discourse contains what they call ‘feeling rules’ which ‘instruct individuals on how they “ought to feel”, and then instigates the “emotion work” required to elicit the correct feeling’. For our present purposes, the key point is that emotion discourse should not necessarily be conceptualised in terms of its presumed biasing of rational deliberation. Rather, such discourse can be integral to the constitution of particular choices as moral dilemmas.

Yet emotion discourse is not only involved in the constitution of moral dilemmas. Analysts of discourse have recently drawn attention to how versions of reality are assembled and accomplished in talk (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992). Throughout this work, there is an emphasis upon the action orientation of talk with analysts interrogating the ways in which interested constructions of people and events are advanced against actual or potential alternatives so as to secure particular blamings, explanations, justifications, etc. In turn, there has been an interest in the argumentative resources (e.g., the narratives and rhetorical commonplaces) available to all within a community, and the ways in which these may be drawn upon and reworked so as to accomplish particular versions of people and events. Recently, such analysts have begun to consider how talk about emotion may function in working up versions of people and events which appear as veridical descriptions of an ‘out-there’ reality (rather than interested constructions). Indeed, Edwards (1999) suggests emotion discourse is immensely rich in this regard. Emotions are typically ‘conceived to be natural bodily experiences and expressions, older than language, irrational and subjective, unconscious rather than deliberate, genuine rather than artificial, feelings rather than thoughts’ (Edwards, 1999, p. 273) and this multi-dimensionality allows for considerable flexibility in

working up any number of versions of reality. More specifically, emotion can be contrasted from cognition in a number of ways to either dismiss or bolster the veridicality of particular versions of the world. Thus, just as emotion can be contrasted with thought so as to appear ‘irrational’ (and charges of emotionality used to discredit others’ positions); so too, emotion can be construed as ‘unmediated’ and ‘authentic’ (and constructions of emotional reaction employed to ground particular accounts as objective).

In the present paper, we develop this logic to illuminate the rhetorical subtleties and complexities to be found in a contemporary anti-abortion campaign.

### *Abortion*

The abortion debate has a long history and the characterisation of the issues and actors involved has undergone considerable reformulation over time (Condit, 1990). However, the key issue remains the status of the human fetus. As the fetus is both similar to, and different from, children and adults, its categorisation is dependent upon the argumentative construction of particular dimensions and attributes as relevant for our judgement. In turn, the weighing of these arguments about the existence, relevance and meaning of these criteria is necessarily bound up with a community’s beliefs and values. As a corollary, the categorisation of the fetus is a social choice (Condit, 1990). This is well illustrated in the anthropological literature which leads Morgan (1989) to conclude that ‘human’ and ‘person’ refer to distinct, non-interchangeable linguistic and cognitive categories, and that their usage indicates there to be no absolute definition of personhood isolated from sociocultural context. In other words, the attribution of personhood is contingent upon diverse practices of social recognition, and such social practices vary across communities. The importance of this is illustrated in cross-cultural differences in the conceptualisation of abortion. For example, Morgan (1997) observes that although many in the USA and in Ecuador see abortion as sinful, the bases for this commonality are divergent. If in Ecuador abortion is viewed as a sin, it is not a sin of ‘murder’ (as in the US) but rather a sin of ‘self-mutilation’, and Morgan relates this difference in the conception of abortion to the divergent social practices through which people relate to the fetus. Specifically, she holds that in contrast to the USA, Ecuadorian social practices are not organised so as to encourage the personification of the unborn.

Just as different communities construe the fetus in different ways, so too within communities there may be divergent positions which allow analysts to observe the argumentative/rhetorical resources and discursive practices through which different categorisations are

advanced and their alternatives undermined (Danet, 1980; Mulkay, 1997; Williams, Kitzinger, & Henderson, 2003). In what follows, we consider how emotion-related rhetoric functions in this respect. Specifically, we analyse the constructions of a UK anti-abortion group that sought to use images of dead fetuses in its mobilisation rhetoric.

#### *The resources and practices of contemporary anti-abortion rhetoric*

A key feature of contemporary anti-abortion campaigns is their use of fetal imagery, and developments in visualising technologies often prompt renewed debate about abortion. For example, the recent production of 3D ultrasound fetal images received considerable media interest and prompted one anti-abortion campaigner to argue that '(u)p until now babies in the womb have been unseen citizens. After this, everyone will see that abortion is as barbaric as killing a born baby' ('Room in the womb for those first steps', *Daily Mail*, 29/06/04, pp. 6–7).

However, a number of social scientific analyses question the idea that fetal imagery simply conveys hitherto invisible truths about fetal personhood. Rather, they suggest that we project onto such imagery our own meanings, but that this is typically obscured (Lavin, 2001; Petchesky, 1987). In turn, researchers have sought to document the viewing practices that make particular readings possible. For example, researchers have noted that ultrasound technology means that prospective parents are routinely provided with opportunities to participate in social practices that personify the fetus. Thus Morgan (1997) observes that when those excited at the prospect of parenthood use ultrasound to ascertain fetal sex, and use that knowledge to name their child, they are using the technology to construct the fetus as a valued member of the family (25–26). In similar vein, Mitchell and Georges's (1997) ethnography of sonographers' interactions with prospective parents shows that staff typically 'personalise' and 'sentimentalise' ultrasound with important implications for parents' conceptions of the fetus as a social actor. Again, the point is that the meaning of such images is not straightforward or given, but is a product of the viewing practices through which they are consumed. In Hartouni's (1992, p. 148) words, fetal personhood 'is not a "property" that can or will be "discovered" with greater scientific knowledge or increased technological capabilities, but is produced in and through the very practices that claim merely to "reveal" it'.

Turning to the issue of mass communications in the abortion debate, it follows that we need to consider how protagonists (of whichever side) seek to direct our reading of fetal images so as to privilege one categorisa-

tion of the fetus over their opponent's. As the meaning of such images is never given, it should be clear that both pro- and anti-abortion activists' constructions could be interrogated. However, as these images are particularly prominent in anti-abortion campaigning materials, it follows that detailed examination of how their readings are directed is likely to focus upon anti-abortion rhetoric. This does not mean that pro-abortion constructions do not concern us: any analysis of the rhetorical organisation to activists' communications requires attention to the ways in which alternative readings (both actual and potential) are anticipated, and one's preferred reading privileged. Thus in the present paper, we will be interested in the ways in which talk about emotional reactions to fetal imagery works to delegitimize alternatives and to represent activists' preferred readings as corresponding to an 'out-there' empirical reality attested to by the emotional experiences of ordinary people.

#### *Imagery in controversy: a case study of anti-abortion rhetoric*

In 1997, a UK political party committed to campaigning against abortion, the use of embryos in research, euthanasia, and a series of related issues—the Pro-Life Alliance—stood 55 candidates in the UK General Election and so was entitled to a Party Political Election Broadcast (PPEB) throughout the UK. In 2001 it stood enough candidates to get a PPEB in Wales. These PPEBs were to have included images of aborted fetuses. However, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) construed the images as offending standards of taste and decency and decided not to air the PPEBs in their original form (e.g., the 2001 PPEB was shown in Wales with the images replaced by a blank screen bearing the word 'censored'). The Alliance contested these decisions in the courts with the Court of Appeal issuing a judgement in favour of the Alliance (R (on the application of ProLife Alliance) vs. BBC (2002) 2 All ER 756, 14th March, 2002). Subsequently, this decision was reversed in the House of Lords (R (ProLife Alliance) vs. BBC, UKHL 23, (2004) 1 AC 185, 15th May, 2003). Given these legal disputes it should come as no surprise to find that the use of fetal imagery was an issue to which the Alliance devoted considerable attention and below we analyse materials published in the Alliance's newsletter—*Flame* (first issued in spring 2001).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Flame's* primary readership could be expected to be sympathetic to the Alliance. However, such newsletters are also important in communicating with the wider general public: they provide argumentative resources with which activists engage others and may be important in intensifying activists' commitment and motivation (Condit, 1990).

## Analysis

### *The rhetorical context*

Some sense of the controversy around the images (and hence the rhetorical context facing the Alliance) may be gleaned from a brief consideration of how its opponents characterised its use of fetal imagery. Take, e.g., the comments of Ann Furedi director of communications at the British Pregnancy Advisory Service in a piece entitled ‘Give them enough rope’ posted on a pro-abortion website.<sup>2</sup> Referring to the legal dispute, she argued: ‘There is good reason for the resort to court. Anti-abortion activists are so few in number, and so marginal to any meaningful social policy discussion, that a contrived stunt is about the only way they can make their voices heard’. With regard to the PPEB itself, she argued that the images of late gestation abortions were ‘horrible and disturbing’ but should not be banned:

As a potential voter I believe candidates should be able to put their case to me in the way they want to put it. Let me be the arbiter of what is tasteful and decent, and let me reward the candidate with my vote or contempt accordingly. The fact that ProLife Alliance wants to flaunt harrowing images tells us as much about their contempt for women as their actual arguments. ( ) women do not need sanctimonious campaigners to tell them their fetus looked like a baby with arms and legs ( ) I am happy to allow my opponents to expose themselves for what they are—dishonest, manipulative, irrational, ignorant fanatics who patronise women by insisting that they request abortion because they do not realise it involves the destruction of a fetus. The images that the anti-abortion lobby would like to thrust in front of us tell us little about abortion but a lot about the people who make them. I would prefer to allow the people of Wales to deliver their verdict. Let ProLife Alliance show their video and be damned.

Here, the use of fetal imagery is turned back upon the Alliance. Instead of the images revealing much about the reality of fetal personhood, Furedi construes the use of such imagery as revealing much about the psychology of Alliance activists. That is, Furedi’s comments are a good example of the strategy of psychologisation (Papastamou, 1986) in which the relevance of a message for a wider audience is minimised through emphasising the message source’s distinctive psychology. Furthermore, the imagery is represented as merely showing what women already know (i.e., that there is a physical

substance to fetal life and that it ‘looked like a baby’) with Furedi arguing that its usage actually reveals the Alliance’s distance from women and the complexity to these latter’s decision-making. Indeed, rather than feeling indignation about abortion, Furedi defines the appropriate reaction to the imagery as one of indignation at the Alliance itself.

Although much more could be said on how this pro-abortion activist redefines the emotions appropriate to the Alliance’s imagery, this brief analysis should give some indication of the potential for contestation around such images and the need for protagonists in the abortion debate (from whichever camp) to ground their characterisations of fetal life. Let us now turn to the Alliance’s own rhetoric. To anticipate a little, we will see how the Alliance construed ordinary people as ‘knowing’ fetal imagery to reveal the fetus to be a person and that, despite any appearance of marginality, the Alliance articulates this commonsense. In all of this we will see that the Alliance constructed the fetus through referring to a number of actors and their reactions to fetal imagery. First, we explore the Alliance’s account of the place of visual imagery in its campaign and how this implied a contrast between, on the one hand, the language employed in the description of abortion, and on the other hand, the emotions associated with viewing fetal remains, and how this works to privilege the Alliance’s characterisation of abortion. Second, we explore how having privileged the emotional experience of fetal imagery over language, the Alliance characterises the emotions of a number of social actors viewing fetal images as evidencing the status of fetuses as ‘babies’.

### *Appealing to the emotions and the legitimacy of using fetal imagery*

Employing material that can be described as ‘emotive’ is not straightforward: the very use of emotion can be made accountable and rendered problematic. Perhaps the most obvious danger is that a contrast with ‘cool logic’ lays one open to the accusation that one’s position is logically weak, and it was striking how the Alliance sought to defuse such potential counter-characterisations. For example, one article (‘Viewers Open Your Eyes to the Truth’, *Flame*, February, 2002) explained the PPEB’s use of images in these terms:

Many people believe that the abortion debate can be won on a purely abstract level, but experience has taught all of us that this is unrealistic optimism. Abortion cannot be justified rationally, so its proponents justify it emotionally, with focus on the tragic plight of women in the hands of back-street abortionists, struggling against poverty, rape, abuse, and so on. Our fight, too, must move to an emotional

<sup>2</sup>Posted on the ‘Opinion, Comment and Reviews’ section of the ‘Pro-choice forum’ website (<http://www.prochoiceforum.org.uk>).

as well as a rational level, which is why the images must be seen.

Here, the weaknesses stereotypically associated with the use of emotional appeals are invoked in relation to the opposition's rhetoric but not to the Alliance's own: if in the former, emotion is used as a substitute for weak logic, in the latter, it functions as an adjunct to rational argument. This was an important and recurring theme in the Alliance's rhetoric and typically involved a contrast between, on the one hand, words (which are construed as potentially deceitful), and, on the other, reality as evinced by visual images and our emotional reactions to such imagery. For example, the same article continued '(w)ords alone simply cannot begin to convey the true horror of abortion' for '(e)ven on those rare occasions when opponents concede that preborn babies are more than a blob of tissue they are still able to justify the killing to the satisfaction of their listeners'. What was needed were images that shocked. In the words of the article, although 'positive imagery of life in the womb' which depict 'the wonder of the developing baby' are helpful, such imagery is limited because just as 'it is possible to hide behind words, it is also possible to hide behind such positive imagery'. In contrast, visually shocking depictions of abortion cannot be reconstrued because our emotional reactions cannot be denied or misrepresented, and the article concluded that '(o)nly when the abortion apologists are confronted by images showing the true physical reality of abortion will they then find it impossible to justify it'.

A similar contrast between (deceitful) words and the (truth-conveying) emotional experience of viewing images of fetal remains was apparent in other articles. One ('Why abortion is Genocide', *Flame*, summer, 2002) argued that the term 'abortion' had 'lost most of its meaning' and continued:

Visual depictions of abortion are indispensable to the restoration of that meaning because words fail us when we attempt to describe its horror. Pictures make it impossible to maintain the pretence that "it's not a baby" and "abortion is not an act of violence". They also make clear the fact that abortion is an evil whose magnitude is comparable to that of any crime against humanity. Educators invariably use shocking imagery to teach about genocide, and we insist on the right to do the same.

Indeed, the article continued that the use of emotionally shocking visual imagery in relation to education about genocide is necessary

because perpetrators of genocide always call it something else. Victims of genocide are frequently compared to non-human life forms (i.e., parasites, reptiles, beasts, etc.), while their destruction is

euphemistically termed "The Final Solution" or "ethnic cleansing".

Another piece (entitled 'Sometimes the worst aspects of our history are Written in Blood', *Flame*, summer, 2002), argued that the decision to use visual imagery in the abortion debate had parallels elsewhere. Referring to campaigns in which images of dead children's bodies were used to warn against drug-taking or drink-driving, the article emphasised the power of emotional imagery to document reality. Indeed, a parallel was drawn with a photographic exhibition documenting racist lynchings in the USA. These visual images were construed as uniquely potent in breaking through the denials and defences adopted by both whites and blacks anxious to avoid facing the scale of anti-black violence. According to the article '(a)ny form of denial becomes untenable when one is faced with the photographic evidence' and it concluded with a comment on the power of the bloody image to move (and so speak to) us. Comparing the shock of the visual image of lynchings with the (verbal) accounts developed by historians, the article maintained: '(s)ometimes the worst aspects of our history are written in blood. The most eloquent statements are the photos of the lynchings. They are doing something historians never did'.

In these materials, it is striking how abortion is framed by its location alongside genocide and murder, and the emotional reactions to the latter made relevant to our conceptualisation of the former. It is also noteworthy how visual imagery is construed. It is not simply that image is privileged over language (indeed, as we have seen the Alliance believed 'positive images of life in the womb' to be vulnerable to linguistic distortion). Rather, there is a sense in which our emotional reaction to bloody images is portrayed as providing a window on reality. In other words, strong emotional reactions of disgust and outrage at the act of abortion are construed as deserving of attention and respect for the information that they convey. If this is implicit in much of the material cited above, it is more explicitly stated in another piece entitled 'Words Alone cannot do Justice' (*Flame*, Summer, 2002) which reported a lengthy excerpt from a work by the English essayist, William Hazlitt (1778–1830). Introduced with the commentary '(f)or anybody who still needs convincing that we need to deliver a stronger message if we are going to change the culture in which we live', the quote includes the following:

It is easy to raise an outcry against violent invectives, to talk loud against extravagance and enthusiasm, to pick a quarrel with everything but the most calm, candid and qualified statement of facts: but there are enormities to which no words can do adequate justice. Are we then, in order to form a complete idea

of them, to omit every circumstance of aggravation, or to suppress every feeling of impatience that arises out of details, lest we should be accused of giving way to the influence of prejudice and passion? This would be to falsify the impression altogether, to misconstrue reason and fly in the face of nature. ( )

Those evils that inflame the imagination and make the heart sick, ought not to leave the head cool. This is the very test and measure of the degree of the enormity, that it involuntarily staggers and appals the mind. If it were a common iniquity, if it were slight and partial, or necessary, it would not have this effect; but it very properly carries away the feelings, and (if you will) overpowers the judgement, because it is a mass of evil so monstrous and unwarranted as not to be endured, even in thought.

Here again, there is a sense in which strong emotions of outrage and indignation are entirely appropriate and, far from biasing the appraisal of reality, testify to its nature.

The legitimacy of this emotionality also works to frame the issue as a moral one on which only one position is tenable, and this was repeated elsewhere in the Alliance's newsletter. For example, reporting a debate within the anti-abortion movement over the use of images of fetal remains, one article reported an Alliance activist as characterising the debate as being between those who adopted 'advertising' techniques and those who adopted 'social reform' techniques ('Should graphic images be used in pro-life campaigning?' *Flame*, Winter 2004). More specifically, those eschewing the use of images of fetal remains and focusing instead on the pleasures of pregnancy and parenthood were characterised as adopting a 'selling hamburgers' approach, whilst the Alliance's own strategy was characterised as one that 'does not use "feel good" advertising techniques but social reform techniques to make people oppose abortion'. Again, the point is that emotions of indignation and outrage are legitimated and construed as integral (rather than superficial or tangential) to the issue being addressed. Indeed, reference to this emotional dimension helps construct the *moral* nature of the issue.

Thus far we have considered how the Alliance argued that the experience of passionate feeling when viewing images of fetal remains revealed much about the nature of reality. First, our reaction to such images reveals the deceitful nature of pro-abortion activists' (linguistic) categorisations of the fetus. Second, the experience of strong emotion testifies to the moral issues raised by abortion. In the next section we turn to another issue. Having, privileged emotion over language, the Alliance also defined the emotions of a number of social actors viewing ultrasound imagery so as to represent a

particular (anti-abortion) characterisation of the fetus as being rooted in ordinary people's experiences.

#### *Fetal images: words and emotions*

In this section, we consider how the emotional reactions of three social actors (the willingly pregnant, the unwillingly pregnant, and the PPEB viewer) were construed so as to support and sustain the Alliance's readings of fetal imagery and build up commonalities between the Alliance and a wider constituency.

(i) *Fetal images and the emotions of the willingly pregnant*: Throughout the material analysed, the emotional experiences of the willingly pregnant were recruited as testifying to the commonality between anti-abortion activists and public opinion: both were represented as knowing that pregnancies involve 'unborn children'.

By way of illustration, consider one article referring to the sense of loss felt by those whose pregnancies did not run full term ('At the beginning of life: Death', *Flame*, February, 2002). Set below a picture of the head and upper body of a sleeping newborn baby ( $10 \times 10 \text{ cm}^2$ ) and to the right of a smaller photograph ( $5 \times 3 \text{ cm}^2$ ) of a yawning newborn being stroked by what appears to be his/her mother, an activist referred to the recent experiences of Gordon Brown (the British Chancellor of the Exchequer) and his wife when their premature baby (born at 33 weeks) died 10 days after birth. For example, the article cited the Brown's description of their daughter as 'a little angel who came and went, and changed the lives of those she left more powerfully than her tiny size or brief life could ever have suggested'. This same piece also referred to the grief of the Countess of Wessex (the Queen's daughter-in-law) who had experienced an ectopic pregnancy and observed that 'the country felt genuine sympathy' for 'the mother and her husband in their sadness'. It continued to warrant the use of the term 'unborn child' through underlining the universal understanding of Sophie's emotional reaction: far from the categorisations 'unborn child' or 'baby' appearing to be advanced by an interested party (the Alliance), it seems they corresponded to a reality that everyone knew, a reality attested to by the concrete and tangible grief of those directly involved. Furthermore, all ordinary people identified with this grief and this construction. In the words of the piece:

Even though the pregnancy was at a very early stage, perhaps only in the second month of the first trimester, headlines in the streets of London read 'Sophie loses her baby'. Nobody described the experience in any other terms but as the loss of her unborn child.

Another noteworthy feature of this article was the continuity of emotion experienced by the willingly

pregnant. Set alongside the picture of the newborn baby being lovingly stroked, the textual accounts of the emotions of pregnancy loss construct a sense of emotional continuity. Regardless of gestational stage, a 'mother's' love stands as testimony to the true nature of the developing entity: her emotions reveal that, at every stage, it is a 'baby'.

This characterisation of emotional experience as providing a window on reality was given rhetorical force through portraying language as a deeply problematic medium, easily vulnerable to distortion. Thus, in this same article, linguistic categories such as 'embryo' and 'fetus' were construed as entirely discrepant with the reality evinced by a 'parent's' emotional reactions. For example, the article referred to another ordinary couple who had experienced a miscarriage at 24 weeks, and reported that they had contacted the Alliance to ask if abortion was permitted at such a stage. The article's author continued "'Yes", I had to tell him. "Babies can be aborted at 24 weeks and also at 33 weeks, even up to birth":

Except they would probably not have been called babies, because that is a word reserved exclusively for mothers who want to be pregnant. Those unfortunate unwanted small humans would be called "fetuses" because that appears to be a word less likely to upset us. And in the earlier weeks of pregnancy the baby destined to be aborted (75,908 in 2000) might possibly be called an embryo, or more vaguely a bunch of cells, or just a piece of tissue, or some other dismissive description. And there would be no front page stories or tears permitted for those involved in abortion. Because, according to the people who run abortion clinics, it cannot possibly hurt a woman emotionally to destroy her unborn child. It is only those mothers who wanted their babies who are allowed to cry, and have funerals and commemorate the bereavement.

Two features of this construction stand out. The first is the way in which ordinary people's emotional experiences of an accidental miscarriage and a planned termination are construed as equivalent and as testifying to the reality of the categorisation 'baby'. The second concerns the discrepancy between these emotions and the language of abortion.

Taken as a whole, such invocations of the emotions of the willingly pregnant as evincing what ordinary people know are rhetorically striking. Not only do they allow a particular characterisation of the fetus (one that is bound up with a particular social relationship) to be universalised, they also allow the activists' role in this process of construction to be obscured. Put simply, recruiting others' experiences in this way is akin to arguing that 'it's not just me saying this', and helps root

one's position in a wider social consensus (Dickerson, 1997). In turn, this allows the Alliance to turn their opponents' charge (such as Furedi's, above) that Alliance activists are 'dishonest, manipulative, irrational, ignorant fanatics' back upon their pro-abortion accusers.

(ii) *Fetal images and the emotions of the unwillingly pregnant*: Similar contrasts between emotional reality and linguistic categorisation were developed in relation to the unwillingly pregnant woman's consumption of fetal imagery. For example, in one article ('The Right to See INSIDE THE WOMB—the Right to Make an Informed Choice', *Flame*, Summer, 2002) an activist argued that if those contemplating abortion experience an ultrasound of their pregnancy, their reactions would be such as to make a termination impossible. Interestingly, the emotional experience of the unwillingly pregnant was constructed through reference to the emotions of the willingly pregnant (who had already welcomed the fetus into their lives). Alongside a photograph of a scan showing a head and upper body at 22 weeks after conception (photograph size  $10 \times 7 \text{ cm}^2$ ), the article referred to the author's pleasure at seeing an ultrasound scan of her baby:

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN a 10 week old unborn child bouncing around in the womb? Those of us who have been pregnant within the last 20 years are likely to have had that privilege—as long as the baby was 'wanted'. For those who have not had that experience, I can vouch that that first sight is an unforgettable moment. Probably for this reason, the general attitude of the medical profession is that we should only see our unborn children if it is a planned pregnancy.

Again, the emotional vantage point of those excitedly anticipating parenthood is used to construct a sharp contrast between reality (evinced in their strong emotional reaction), and the language used by others. However, the most striking feature of this article is the idea that the experience of ultrasound necessarily transforms the unwillingly pregnant woman's relationship with her pregnancy: as the article continues, 'when a mother is given the opportunity to see the living, moving child, it can often make all the difference between life and death for that child'. Two examples served to ground this argument. The first referred to a woman who changed her mind about undergoing a termination after her boyfriend caught a glimpse of the ultrasound (and swivelled around the screen so she could share it). Here, it is as if the scan allowed her to see through linguistic mystification and experience directly an emotion that allowed her to realise that she was in actuality already a 'mother' to a beautiful 'baby'. The second referred to the experiences of a willingly pregnant

woman carrying sextuplets who was forced to consider the abortion of four to save the lives of the remaining two. Once again, the significance of this is that the emotionally laden viewing practices of the willingly pregnant experiencing this terrible dilemma are set alongside, and used to define, the emotions and perceptions of the unwillingly pregnant. And again, the implication is that just as seeing the scan led her to change her mind, the same would be true for the unwillingly pregnant. This was repeated in the article's conclusion where it was argued that failing to allow women to see and experience their fetus before the abortion constituted a denial of the woman's right to know the truth:

when it comes to a 'woman's right to choose', the right to make an informed choice is frequently and systematically denied to women. ( ) doctors are guilty of violating a woman's right to know what is going on in her own body when they turn the screen away during a scan of her unborn child. Rather than being asked to look the other way, the mother should be encouraged to face reality.

(iii) *Fetal images in the PPEB and the emotions of the viewer*: In other articles it was implied that just as the woman contemplating abortion needed to see the images of her 'baby' (and feel the emotions associated with this visualisation), so too must the wider public see the PPEB's imagery. For example, in one article ('IN A MINORITY OF ONE The Truth is still the Truth', *Flame*, November, 2001), an activist argued:

It seems to me that the reason the ProLife Alliance did not win a seat in this election was not due to public apathy, but to the fact that voters were kept in unwitting ignorance. ( ) I am certain that the vast majority of UK residents who condone abortion would drop vastly and rapidly if they saw the (unedited) Alliance's election broadcast, which portrayed the tragic violence of abortion.

In relation to this, it is noteworthy how Alliance activists engaged with potential counter-constructions of the emotions experienced by PPEB viewers. Addressing the argument that the images ought not be shown because of their potential to cause offence, one article argued that such responses were actually testimony to the painful truth that the Alliance was seeking to communicate. The article, entitled 'When the truth that sets men free is THE TRUTH they would rather not see' (*Flame*, Summer, 2002), was set below a photograph of an eight week embryo in its sac ( $12 \times 9 \text{ cm}^2$ ) (captioned '8 weeks from conception and all the organs of the baby are present, including details such as the retina of the eye') and opened with these words:

IT IS A BASIC HUMAN INSTINCT to cover the eyes at the first sight of something frightening or disgusting. Like children who bury their faces and believe that it will make the threat disappear, society is particularly accomplished as "censoring out" horrible realities.

Here, all manner of emotional reactions to the use of images of fetal remains are construed as revealing a single truth. Rather than their opponents' anger at the use of such images reflecting a credible alternative position, this anger is reconstrued as simply confirming the enormity of the truth that Alliance activists already know. In turn, this reconstrual of the opposition to the PPEB's imagery was developed through the construction of a series of parallels with historically significant occasions where images had dramatically testified to the reality of cruel and dehumanising practices. Thus the same article continued:

In the days when Wilberforce was attempting to bring the plight of slaves to the attention of the public, Parliament thought it better that "horrid pictures" of slaves crammed into ships be kept well out of sight. In 1945, when reporters went into the newly liberated concentration camps, the first reaction of the BBC was to refuse to transmit Dimbelby's dispatch from Belsen. And today, the ProLife Alliance has had to fight for the right to show abortion as it actually is.

Obviously, the construction of such parallels is organised to challenge the decision not to show the PPEBs in their entirety. However, it is also appropriate to note how this construction works to reinforce the idea that the aborted fetus is to be placed alongside victims of slavery and Belsen, and that the emotional outrage felt on behalf of the latter is applicable to the former. Indeed, the article argued that any failure to experience the images of fetal remains in the same way was irrational. For example, it maintained that whilst people's reaction to pictures of massacred Rwandan children was of 'fury and disgust' and was directed to the perpetrators, the reaction to 'pictures of babies killed by surgical abortion is one of disgust directed at the distributors' and that this was wholly irrational (in the article's words, 'It is no good shooting the messenger'). Thus, once again, the text implies that the emotional reactions of the viewer would testify to the truth of the Alliance's position. Indeed, alternative readings, and the alternative emotional states with which they are associated (such as Furedi's outrage towards the Alliance, see above), are psychologised as evidence of a defence against a raw reality that the Alliance implies it merely conveys (rather than actively constructs).

## Discussion

Emotive rhetoric has traditionally been construed as superficial to message content. Indeed, it has often been viewed as having significance because of its power to detract attention from the rational appraisal of argument content. However, we have argued that emotion discourse may contribute to the informational content of a group's persuasive appeals. Emotion discourse is central in the constitution of moral issues. Furthermore, emotion discourse may be important in grounding versions of the world. Analysts of discourse have recently drawn our attention to the ways in which people 'work up' their preferred versions of actors and events so as to appear as but transparent descriptions of an empirical 'out-there' reality, and emotion discourse appears to be particularly rich in this regard (Edwards, 1999). If in some situations emotions may be contrasted from cognitions so as to represent feelings as superficial and an inadequate basis for judging reality, so in other situations (as when we talk of trusting one's 'gut instincts') the contrast may work to construe emotional experience as the arbiter of reality. From this perspective it would be erroneous to depict the appearance of emotion discourse in social movement rhetoric as evidencing an attempt to circumvent rational deliberation. To do so would not only be judgemental but would also miss the subtlety with which versions of the world (whether produced by anti- or pro-abortion activists, or anyone else) are constructed and communicated.

Inevitably, our focus upon a campaign group's texts means that we cannot say anything about the degree to which the Alliance's rhetoric was successful in grounding its version of fetal personhood, and some may be tempted to conclude that therefore we have little to say on mass social influence in general, or abortion-related communications in particular. However, we believe that analysing the rhetorical organisation of such communications is important. Whilst it is appropriate to investigate message reception (including the ways in which movement communications may shape audience emotions), the analysis of text is necessary to explicate the subtle ways in which constructions of people and events are naturalised. Indeed, we would contend that a sensitivity to this issue contributes to the social scientific literature concerning the conduct of the abortion debate. Much social scientific work (our own included) is based on the idea that the categorisation of the fetus is dependent upon the significance attributed to the similarities and differences between fetuses and persons. Implicitly this means that any characterisation of the fetus is a social choice but that for it to be convincing it must be represented as but a description of an empirical reality. As was observed in the introduction, a number of analysts have addressed the issue of how visual imagery may function in naturalising particular char-

acterisations of the fetus. One strand of this work has focused on the images themselves and the processes of their construction (Condit, 1999; Petchesky, 1987; Stabile, 1992). Typically, this work has observed that these images are constructed to facilitate the fetus's categorisation as 'person' through being selected and cropped to obscure the active presence of the woman and maximise the perceived similarity between fetus and neonate. Another strand has focused on the wider cultural context in which such images are consumed and how this contributes to particular readings of fetal personhood (Lavin, 2001; Sofia, 1984; Taylor, 1992). For example, referring to US culture, Lavin (2001) suggests that popular identification with fetal imagery could be attributable to the importance of individual identity in American culture. These approaches have been valuable and have highlighted certain aspects of the process whereby particular meanings are produced. However, a focus on either the properties of the pictures themselves, or upon the wider culture in which they are read may overlook the opportunities for contestation. Versions of the fetus (whether articulated by anti-abortion activists or their pro-abortion opponents) always have to be made convincing and 'worked up', and the analysis of the strategies by which particular constructions are accomplished requires that we attend to textual detail. It is in such detail that we may observe the diverse resources employed in construction (e.g., commonplace conceptions of emotion) and the diverse and flexible ways in which such resources are actually used as protagonists anticipate controversy and actively seek to ground their preferred version of people and events.

## References

- Aminzade, R. R., & McAdam, D. (2001). Emotion and contentious politics. In R. R. Aminzade, J. A. Goldstone, D. McAdam, E. J. Perry, W. H. Sewell, S. Tarrow, & C. Tilley (Eds.), *Silence and voice in the study of contentious politics* (pp. 14–50). New York and London: Cambridge University Press.
- Cacioppo, J. T., Marshall-Goodell, B. S., Tassinari, L., & Petty, R. E. (1992). Rudimentary determinants of attitudes: classical conditioning is more effective when prior knowledge about the attitude stimulus is low than high. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 28, 207–233.
- Condit, C. M. (1990). *Decoding abortion rhetoric: communicating social change*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Danet, B. (1980). 'Baby' or 'Fetus'? Language and the construction of reality in a manslaughter trial. *Semiotica*, 32, 187–219.
- Dickerson, P. (1997). 'It's not just me who's saying this...' The deployment of cited others in televised political discourse. *The British Journal of Social Psychology*, 36, 33–48.

- Edwards, D. (1999). Emotion discourse. *Culture and Psychology*, 5(3), 271–291.
- Edwards, D., & Potter, J. (1992). *Discursive psychology*. London: Sage.
- Fabrigar, L. R., & Petty, R. E. (1999). The role of the affective and cognitive bases of attitudes in susceptibility to affectively and cognitively based persuasion. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25, 363–381.
- Goodwin, J., Jasper, J. M., & Polletta, F. (2000). The return of the repressed: the fall and rise of emotions in social movement theory. *Mobilization*, 5(1), 65–84.
- Groves, J. M. (1995). Learning to feel: the neglected sociology of social movements. *The Sociological Review*, 43(3), 435–461.
- Hartouni, V. (1992). Fetal exposures: abortion politics and the optics of allusion. *Camera Obscura*, 7, 131–148.
- Hochschild, A. (1975). The sociology of feeling and emotion: selected possibilities. In M. Millman, & R. M. Kanter (Eds.), *Another voice*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Huddy, L., & Gunthorsdottir, A. H. (2000). The persuasive effects of emotive visual imagery: superficial manipulation or the product of passionate reason? *Political Psychology*, 21(4), 745–778.
- Jasper, J. M. (1998). The emotions of protest: affective and reactive emotions in and around social movements. *Sociological Forum*, 13(3), 397–424.
- Kinder, D. (1994). Reason and emotion in American political life. In R. C. Schank, & E. J. Lander (Eds.), *Beliefs, reasoning and decision-making: psychological in honour of Bob Abelson* (pp. 277–314). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Lavin, M. (2001). *Clean new world: culture, politics and graphic design*. Cambridge, MA, London: The MIT Press.
- Le Bon, G. (1895/1960). *The crowd (translation of psychologie des foules)*. New York: The Viking Press.
- Lee, J. A., & Ungar, S. (1989). A coding method for the analysis of moral discourse. *Human Relations*, 42(8), 691–715.
- Mitchell, L. M., & Georges, E. (1997). Cross-cultural cyborgs: Greek and Canadian women's discourses on fetal ultrasound. *Feminist Studies*, 23(2), 372–401.
- Morgan, L. M. (1989). When does life begin? A cross-cultural perspective. In E. Doerr, & J. Prescott (Eds.), *Abortion and fetal personhood*. Long Beach, CA: Centerline Press.
- Morgan, L. M. (1997). Imagining the unborn in the Ecuadorian Andes. *Feminist Studies*, 23(2), 323–350.
- Mulkay, M. (1997). *The embryo research debate: science and the politics of reproduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oaks, L. (2003). Antiabortion positions and young women's life plans in contemporary Ireland. *Social Science & Medicine*, 56, 1973–1986.
- Papastamou, S. (1986). Psychologization and processes of minority and majority influence. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 16, 165–180.
- Petchesky, R. (1987). Fetal images: the power of visual culture in the politics of Reproduction. *Feminist Studies*, 13(2), 263–292.
- Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: beyond attitudes and behaviour*. London: Sage.
- Pratkanis, A. R., & Aronson, E. (1992). *Age of propaganda: the everyday use and abuse of persuasion*. New York: WH Freeman.
- Rosaldo, M. Z. (1984). Toward an anthropology of self and feeling. In R. A. Shweder, & R. Levine (Eds.), *Culture theory: essays on mind, self and emotion* (pp. 137–157). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosselli, F., Skelly, J. J., & Mackie, D. M. (1995). Processing rational and emotional messages: the cognitive and affective mediation of persuasion. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 31, 163–190.
- Sofia, Z. (1984). Exterminating fetuses: abortion, disarmament, and the sexo-semantics of extraterrestrialism. *Diacritics*, 14(Summer), 47–59.
- Sparkes, A. W. (1994). *Talking politics: a wordbook*. London: Routledge.
- Stabile, C. A. (1992). Shooting the mother: fetal photography and the politics of disappearance. *Camera Obscura*, 28, 178–205.
- Staggenborg, S. (1988). The consequences of professionalization and formalization in the pro-choice movement. *American Sociological Review*, 51, 464–481.
- Taylor, J. S. (1992). The public fetus and the family car: from abortion politics to a Volvo advertisement. *Public Culture*, 4(2), 67–80.
- Turner, R. H. (1996). The moral issue in collective behaviour and collective action. *Mobilization*, 1(1), 1–15.
- Williams, C., Kitzinger, J., & Henderson, L. (2003). Envisaging the embryo in stem cell research: rhetorical strategies and media reporting of the ethical debates. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 25(7), 793–814.