Chapter One

Introduction

Fargo, North Dakota, is a small metropolitan center and crossroads providing commercial and service industries for the surrounding rural area. Its residents pride themselves on their clean air, regular church attendance, rich topsoil, and their actual and metaphorical distance from places like New York City. The orderly pace of Fargo's daily life was disrupted in the fall of 1981 when the Fargo Women's Health Organization—the first freestanding facility in the state to offer abortions publicly—opened for business. Immediately, it became the focus of a full-scale controversy, which continues to divide and engage many people in this otherwise quiet prairie city. A local pro-life coalition against the clinic formed and, soon after, a pro-choice group emerged to respond to the antiabortion activities. By the end of 1981, each organization had approximately one thousand members and a hard core of ten to twenty activists. Since then, both groups have experienced changes in memberships, philosophies, and strategies.

The battle over the opening of the clinic in Fargo typifies the development of the abortion debate in the 1980s. Though arising from a local event, the controversy has come to represent the construction of abortion and its attendant meanings as they have been debated at the national level in America. For the local pro-life proponents, the availability of abortion in their own community represented the intrusion of secularism, narcissism, and materialism, the reshaping of women into "structural men." Pro-choice activists reacted to right-to-life protesters as the forces of narrow-minded intolerance who would deny women access to a choice that they see

as fundamental to women's freedom and ability to overcome sexual discrimination.

Despite the protests that are staged outside the abortion clinic, inside approximately twenty abortions are performed every week. For many women in the region, the clinic was a long-awaited blessing: the Fargo Women's Health Organization has greatly increased their access to reasonably priced, safe abortion services.[1] The administrator makes frequent trips to bring information about the clinic to the surrounding area where information on birth control, let alone abortion, is hard to come by. The small towns where she stops are marked from the expanses of prairie by little more than a grid of eight or nine streets, a railroad stop, a grain elevator, a bar, a coffee shop, and five or six churches. Pamphlets about the clinic sit on shelves in medical waiting rooms next to boxes of Girl Scout cookies and calendars from the local tractor sales outlet. Over half the clinic's patients come from places like this in North Dakota, nearby states, and Canada (Henshaw 1987: table 4). According to the clinic administrator, the average patient is a young, unmarried woman with relatively little sexual experience. In her words,

> Pretty typically, our patients come from small towns. They didn't want to plan to have sex. They thought that was bad so they failed to take preventive measures. So they end up getting pregnant because they didn't want to be classified as having premeditated sex. The majority are happy and healthy. If anything is guilt and trauma inducing, it's these people picketing in front of our clinic.

For the individual woman seeking to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, confronting a bomb scare or a phalanx of pickets, or even journeying outside familiar health care settings can serve as condensed reminders of the social stigma still attached to her decision to abort. Despite its legality and frequency, abortion continues to exist in a gray area on the borders of acceptable social and medical terrain (Forrest and Henshaw 1987). The pro-life protests around clinics in Fargo and elsewhere are intended to create conditions for the contemporary experience of abortion that draw attention to its contested status.

In the years since the 1973 *Roe* v. *Wade* decision legalizing abortion, over one thousand freestanding clinics providing first trimester abortions have been established throughout America. In 1985,

although they were only 15 percent of all providers, over 83 percent of abortions were performed in such clinics.[2] The introduction of these abortion clinics is rarely easy. The conflict generated by the opening of the Fargo clinic shows at close range how the 1973 Supreme Court ruling is being woven, with difficulty, into the social fabric.

The passions generated in such battles over abortion rights indicate that there is more to the conflict than single-issue politics. It provides a symbolic focus for the assertion of mutually exclusive understandings of a broader range of themes at a time when the society and the place of women in it seem in disarray. The power of this controversy to arouse intense commitment on the part of female activists in particular reveals its potent metaphorical connection to critical sources of cultural and social identity, especially in relation to sexuality and reproduction.

The Setting

I went to Fargo to see this critical "backstage" setting for the national abortion drama,[3] to get a sense of the specific shape and impact it has at the local level, and to understand the abortion controversy from "the actor's point of view" in the context of everyday life. Like Muncie, Indiana, described in the classic *Middletown* studies (Lynd and Lynd 1929, 1937), Fargo, with a population of approximately 62,000, is small enough to provide a coherent social universe; yet its proximity to Moorhead, Minnesota (population 30,000), just across the Red River, makes it sufficiently large to encompass some diversity in class, ethnic, and religious identities.

Fargo has been the marketing and financial center for farmers of the region since the 1880s. White-collar labor—managerial, professional, and technical—makes up more than 40 percent of the local work force; more than 22 percent are blue-collar workers; and the remainder work in service occupations. Education and health industries are major employers in the area. Three universities and five technical schools teach about twenty thousand students. Five hospitals and three clinics make Fargo–Moorhead the largest center for medical care between Minneapolis and Seattle, employing over four thousand people. Retail trade, providing another eight thousand jobs, has flourished since 1972 when a sixteen-acre shop-

ping area was built west of the city on what had been wheat fields and "prairie chicken" land. A new highway has also encouraged the growth of numerous motels and fast-food restaurants along its route, the latest advance in Fargo's hundred-year history as a crossroads for tourists and traveling salespeople in the region. With a labor force that is nearly half female and with over one-third of its jobs in relatively low-paying service work, Fargo's economy is changing in step with the rest of the United States.[4] The recent discovery of oil in the area, the use of the state as a nuclear missile base, and the legalization of gambling for charities have all brought new wealth to Fargo. Yet, for long-time residents, they also engender a nervousness that undesirable and irreversible social change is being imposed on them from without. While many people in Fargo view themselves as politically conservative, they also value a tradition of populism and defense of individual rights.

These values cannot be considered apart from the role of religion in the area. The Fargo–Moorhead area has over ninety churches serving fifty thousand adult members, over one-third of whom are Lutheran, and just under one-third are Catholic. The balance belong to non-Lutheran Protestant denominations, with Fundamentalist and Evangelical congregations growing faster than any others in the area. The Chamber of Commerce boasts that the Fargo–Moorhead area has the highest regular church attendance of any standard metropolitan area. This fact takes on significance in light of survey research that shows that regular participation in church is one of the most significant variables associated with opposition to abortion (Blake and Pinal 1980). That correlation was demonstrated in the defeat of a referendum vote to liberalize abortion laws in the state in 1972 and again, more than a decade later, in the reaction of Fargo residents to news that abortion services were going to be offered in their city.

Fieldwork: The Observer Observed

I have been following the conflict over the Fargo abortion clinic since it opened in 1981, including twelve months of fieldwork (five in 1982 and seven in 1983), and a return visit in 1986. During 1982, I was also working as a producer for a television documentary on the clinic controversy.[5] For that reason, local people viewed me

initially as a journalist, a position that enabled me to establish rapport quickly with both sides, each of which was seeking publicity. When I returned in 1983, I lived with a family with no direct involvement in the abortion conflict and identified myself as an anthropologist. In addition to following the development of the organizations that formed for and against the clinic and participating in community life in general, I also collected life histories with abortion activists in order to see how their activism and personal and historical experiences were intertwined.

I was concerned, initially, that being a young, unmarried, Jewish, and urban visitor from New York City might pose serious barriers to communication with Fargo residents. Most are married, Christian, and from rural or small-town backgrounds. Much to my surprise, the fact that I was in many ways "culturally strange" to Fargo occasionally served to my advantage. Interviews frequently ended with curious questions regarding Jewish holidays, customs, and ceremonies. Had I been a member of a Christian denomination, I would have had to negotiate my way through the numerous inter- and intra-church conflicts in town and my questions about religion and frequent "church hopping" would have been viewed with some suspicion. As a single woman, my queries and interest in people's feelings about marriage, birth control, motherhood, and the like were treated as natural curiosity; responses were often framed as if I were being counseled for my own future conjugal happiness.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of my role was my identity as a New Yorker. Stereotypes abound of New York; it is often represented as Fargo's opposite: "Well, they might have *that* [prostitution, "adult" bookstores, abortion] in New York but in Fargo?" New Yorkers are considered rude, snobbish, morally questionable, and unappreciative of middle-American values. As my rapport with people increased, their desire to disengage me from my New York identity became apparent in the sighs of relief and mutterings of "I thought so" that I heard every time I mentioned that I actually grew up in the Midwest, albeit Chicago. My genuine enthusiasm for Fargo life helped mitigate my urban East Coast stigma as well. Over time, my sense of people's lives was enriched as I joined them not only in activities in Fargo but on visits to family farms and hometown reunions as well.

While I went to Fargo to study the contemporary debate over abortion, I focused on people who are, by definition, atypical: female social activists involved at the local level in the 1980s. Implicit in their passion for social change is a particular understanding and critique of the culture at large. I viewed local activists as cultural agents mediating between a social situation they inhabit in the present and a desired alternative future, a world they are envisioning and enacting in their abortion activism. My goal was to understand how this grass-roots conflict shaped and was shaped by activists' experiences of self, gender, family, community, and culture in a specific setting. In a situated contest such as the one in Fargo, one can see more generally how abortion comes to signify conflicting social and personal identifications capable of mobilizing and polarizing people. The close focus of anthropological inquiry helped me delineate how larger cultural processes in contemporary American culture that inform the abortion controversy take on shape and meaning for activists in terms of local knowledge and experience.

The Conflict as a Challenge to Essentialist Views of Women

Although the abortion conflict is a clearly contested domain, the features that distinguish the central actors are not always obvious. Pro-choice and pro-life activists do not divide neatly along ethnic, economic, occupational, or even religious lines. At the local level, where activity is strongest, grass-roots activists on both sides of the abortion issue are primarily white, middle-class, and female (Granberg 1981; Luker 1984).[6] These facts are a reminder that women, even with similar class and cultural backgrounds, rarely experience themselves or act as a homogeneous social group with a universal set of interests. Indeed, the controversy can be seen as a contest in which the very definition of female is "up for grabs." To understand the movements, then, and the different understandings of gender they promote, one must listen to the rhetoric activists use to construct their world, the classic anthropological task of grasping "the natives' point of view."

Women for and against abortion divide most clearly in their view of the causes for and solutions to the unequal effects of sexual ac-

tivity for men and women in America. Pro-choice activists consider inequalities between the sexes to be rooted in social, legal, and cultural forms of gender discrimination, and they seek to remedy that condition by structural change in the economic and political system. From this point of view, safe and legal abortion is seen as an essential safeguard against the differential effects of pregnancy on men and women. It is a basic condition enabling heterosexually active women to have the power to control whether, when, and with whom they will have children.

Pro-life activists, on the other hand, accept difference, but not necessarily hierarchy, in the social and biological roles of men and women. Their reform efforts are directed toward creating and promoting a social and political context that they feel will protect and enhance one essential condition that, in general, distinguishes men from women: pregnancy and motherhood. In their view, social changes that could be interpreted as casting reproduction and childrearing as a liability are antiwoman. Abortion is thus a condensed symbol for the devaluation of motherhood and the central attribute assigned to it in this culture—the self-sacrificing nurturance of dependents. Abortion represents, in addition, a threat to social guarantees that a woman with children will be supported by the child's father. It is seen as undermining an informal cultural code that links sex with reproduction and male support of families.

In this conflict, then, one sees a struggle taking place over the meaning attached to reproduction and its place in American culture. Regardless of differences, both groups, through a variety of social, legal, and political processes, are working to reform American society according to what they understand to be the best interests of women.[7] Thus, the movements organized around abortion provide arenas for innovation; through them cultural understandings of gender, procreation, sexuality, and dependency are being transformed.

The Right-to-Life Movement and American Culture

This book, though it is concerned with activists on *both* sides of the abortion issue, is engaged more often with analyzing the pro-life position because of the prominent role this movement has played

in the political and cultural shifts of the 1980s. I began to explore the idea for this research on female grass-roots abortion activists in 1980, the year that Ronald Reagan was elected President, an event that has come to be associated with what is called the rise of the New Right.[8] My interest was in trying to understand this rightward swing in the United States from the viewpoint of those engaged in conservative social movements at the local level. With a few exceptions (Fitzgerald 1981b; Gordon and Hunter 1977–78; Harding 1981), most who wrote on the topic focused on the political organization and leadership of a few well-known groups and leaders—for example, Phyllis Schlafly and her campaign to stop the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority, and Richard Viguerie and the National Conservative Political Action Committee (NCPAC). Few had gone out and talked to the different people whom these movement leaders claimed as their supporters, to find out who they are, how they live, and what motivates them. Since then, several studies that look at grass-roots activists have come out, such as Connie Paige's *The Right-to-Lifers* (1983), Kristin Luker's *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (1984a), and Rebecca Klatch's *Women of the New Right* (1987).

In the 1980s, pro-life activity has been most engaged and effective at the local level and for that reason is particularly appropriate for anthropological research. Right-to-life groups draw their strength from local social life. Their activity is embedded in the kind of ongoing face-to-face interaction that is the stock and trade of the anthropological enterprise, unlike the direct mass-mail organizing of some of the New Right groups such as NCPAC.

The mainstream right-to-life movement has, to some extent, resisted efforts of New Right leaders to claim the abortion issue as their own both in their rhetoric and by co-opting existing groups. For the pro-life movement, such alliances are seen as potentially dangerous to its single-issue organizing style and philosophy. In addition, the political conservatism and laissez-faire capitalism of the New Right program are often at odds with the mainstream right-to-life agenda. This movement, like many other single-issue groups, encompasses a broad range of ideological positions, from radical pacifism (Pro-Lifers for Survival, an antinuclear group, for example), to liberal Catholics and Protestants, to fundamentalist Christians. Regardless of differences, most right-to-life activists

not only share the goal of recriminalizing abortion but also see abortion as symptomatic of other social problems. In particular they are concerned that materialism and narcissism are displacing nurturant ties of kin and community. In other words, much of their agenda could be interpreted as a desire to reform the more dehumanizing aspects of contemporary capitalist culture. In this respect, although their solutions differ, the larger concerns of many right-to-life activists resemble, in many ways, those of some of their pro-choice opponents. At the same time, their supposed allies on the New Right who favor a more libertarian conservative philosophy may favor a pro-choice position.[9]

While the pro-life movement is large and diverse, in general, three themes seem to predominate in the metaphorical connections made between abortion and American culture. Broadly outlined, these are:

1. Antagonism to "irresponsible sexual behavior," identified as natural to men and unnatural to women.
2. A concern with the social and cultural devaluation of dependent people. The "unborn child," the elderly, the unwed mother, and the handicapped are central images around which the movement organizes its crusade. They represent the most extreme versions of human dependency in our society—those who because of disability, misfortune, or age cannot function independently or participate in productive activity.
3. A critique of market rationality and instrumentality in human relations, which they see as growing and dangerous trends that must be reversed.

These visions paint a particular portrait of our culture, its central dilemmas, and the remedies that should be instituted. They are tied to two central images of abortion: the destruction of the fetus and the violation of the boundary of the impregnated womb by male figures representing the profit motive. As Bernard Nathanson, the narrator of *The Silent Scream*—a 1984 videotape produced for the right-to-life movement—tells the audience as it watches an abortion take place: "You are seeing the silent scream of a child threatened imminently with its extinction by the presence of an aggressor in its sanctuary."

In right-to-life discourse, these three themes are used to claim

the same ground as other social groups in America, both contemporary and historical. For example, while stereotypes cast right-to-life advocates as unswervingly hostile to feminism, much of their rhetoric seeks to engage concerns raised by the women's movement to justify pro-life arguments.[10] In the book *A Private Choice* by John Noonan, one of the key philosophers of the movement, abortion is cast as antiwoman, the agenda of upper-class men. Noonan writes:

> When strong and comprehensive anti-abortion statutes were being enacted in nineteenth-century America, the militant feminists had been outspoken in their scorn and condemnation of abortion. . . . Who wanted the liberty of abortion in 1970? Only a minority of any section of the population favored it, but the stablest and strongest supporters of the liberty were white upper-class males. (1979: 48–49)

Noonan goes on to quote from Eugene O'Neill's play, *Abortion*, written in 1914. In it, the protagonist Jack Townsend, a rich young college student, impregnates a local town girl for whom he arranges an abortion, which proves fatal to her and the fetus. Noonan also provides statistics and legal arguments as evidence for his case that abortion casts women as the victims of male lust and the uncaring penetration of upper-class privilege into the ranks of the less fortunate.

Abortion Activism and American Gender Paradigms

This case poses a counterexample to what some anthropologists consider to be a general rule of symbolic oppositions between the sexes[11] in which the assignment of female to nature and "self-interest" and male to culture and "the social good" is considered to be the fundamental truth of the symbolic and social organization of gender worldwide (Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 7). The American instance I am interpreting subverts this formulation on at least two counts. First, in the gender model expressed in the rhetoric of these movements, it is not the natural divisive woman who must be controlled. Rather the lust of men must be regulated by the "civilizing" influence of women for the benefit of the social good. To twist a phrase from Lévi-Strauss, it is women in American culture who are responsible for converting raw masculinity into cooked do-

mesticity, just as they bring into the world the unformed natural matter of infants whom they transform into cultural creatures. As one leader phrased it, in a voice that echoes the cadences of late nineteenth-century feminists,

> Who is the New Traditional Woman? She is a mother of the citizens of the twenty-first century. It is she who will more than anyone else transmit civilization and humanity to future generations and by her response to the challenges of life, determine whether America will be a strong, virtuous nation. (Connaught Marshner, quoted in Jepsen 1984: 63–64)

The ideal attributes assigned to gender in a given cultural setting are rooted, at least in part, in what it is that men and women do, or should do in daily life. In their political, economic, and social definitions, American men and women have been set apart as belonging to separate if not mutually hostile spheres of activity, which are, nevertheless, interdependent. Writ small on the human body, the moment of particular risk in the system is expressed in the penetration of the female arena—nurturance, self-sacrifice, child-rearing, and domesticity—by forces identified as oppositional, predatory, and masculine. I am not proposing that one simply rearrange the pieces of a static structuralist gender paradigm. Rather, I am suggesting that in America, gender and sexual practice are continually reinterpreted by female activists through a particular cultural frame: the resistance of women to the imposition of what they see as male cultural forms that corrupt and exploit women if left unchecked.

Female Activists: Historical Precedents and Cultural Patterns

The themes expressed by right-to-life activists in the contemporary abortion controversy—the dangers of male lust, and the protection of the weak against the depredations of self-interest unleashed—are similar to concerns voiced by women activists in America over the past two centuries. They have been most prominent in female-led moral reform movements that have been active periodically since the eighteenth century. These movements emerged with the material and cultural separation of wage and domestic labor that came to be identified as male and female arenas of activity in America. Like activists in the current abortion conflict, prior social re-

formers sought alliances with religious and state authorities so that law and public policy would conform to and enforce their view of what would most enhance women's position in this country. (That their interests may not, in fact, represent the interests of all women is another matter.)

In this book, I use historical material to provide a broad temporal context for the contemporary controversy over abortion. The participation of women in past social movements engaged in reformulating the cultural order and the construction of gender in it demonstrates how these themes are continually reorganized and given new meaning in relation to socioeconomic change. This cross-fertilization of historical and anthropological paradigms and material is particularly helpful on two counts. First, it is a method for achieving distance in a study of one's own society. Second, a temporal perspective helps to clarify the historical conditions and underlying cultural principles through which people struggle to make sense of problematic experiences in their everyday lives, a process that results in what Anthony Giddens has called "practical consciousness" (1979: 24–25).[12] Looking at the abortion controversy as part of "la longue durée" of action on issues pertaining to women reveals not only how categories of gender and politics are interwoven, but also how they are "put to empirical risk" in action (Sahlins 1985) and thus reorganized and reproduced in new form.[13] However, dependence on the long view can also lead to a determinism in which causality rests in abstract concepts as if they, rather than people, were the sources of all volition and power in human action.

Self-Definition through Social Action

Female social reformers, including those in the contemporary abortion battle, are not just acting out cultural constructs or economic imperatives of which they have no awareness. They are conscious of the terms of the oppositions that constrain them as they struggle to transcend constraint, using political activism to challenge in different ways the control of the domestic domain to which they have been assigned. It is my argument that in so doing, women act continually to adjust the boundaries of those spheres to fit the shape of

new experiences in their lives that seem at odds with the available interpretations of gender.

My focus on activists as agents of transformation reflects recent critiques of theories of action and social movements in which "the characteristics of the actor as a subject remain unexplored or implicit" (Giddens 1979: 55). I have tried in my analysis to attend to the capacity of social actors "to 'explain' why they act as they do" (Giddens 1979: 57). Methodologically, such explanations

> only form discrete accounts in the context of queries, whether initiated by others, or as elements of a process of self-examination by the actor. (Giddens 1979: 57)

To understand the "explanations" abortion activists made when consciously connecting their own experience—biographical and historical—to their commitment to the abortion issue, I collected life stories from the activists in Fargo.

My analysis of life stories of these grass-roots abortion activists indicates that the narratives revolve around transitions in the female life cycle that were experienced as stressful and incongruous, generating a "life crisis."[14] Because the narratives were so frequently concerned with transitional reproductive events as well as women's relationship to both biological and social reproduction, I call them "procreation stories." For many of the women I interviewed, a sense of crisis emerged out of the dissonance they felt between the conditions they faced—for example, becoming a mother—and the available cultural resources for structuring that change, cognitively and socially. Specifically, a particular interpretation of abortion becomes part of the explanatory frame through which activists "made sense of" difficult transitions in the female life cycle experienced as discontinuous with the rest of their experience and expectations.

In my view, the shape of these narratives reflects a historical moment when, for a variety of reasons ranging from the increasing labor force participation of women to the new reproductive technologies, there is no clear ideal biography for the female life course. Without a hegemonic ordering for the ever-increasing range of possibilities of a woman's life, the struggles over proposed interpretations are particularly acrimonious.

This is hardly unexpected as increasing numbers of women, especially those with young children, are entering or staying in wage work, and as what Americans think of as traditional marriage arrangements are increasingly unstable. At least some women reaching adulthood in the midst of such conditions are using their activism on the abortion issue to give orderly if intolerant shape to such "disorderly" experiences. More generally, what this indicates is that the relationship of women to procreation and the work of mothering is the object of tremendous logistical and interpretive struggle in contemporary America.

Organization of the Book

This book began as an anthropological analysis of a struggle over an abortion clinic in an American community. While that is my focal point, I have tried to situate that event in broader contexts. I am particularly concerned with the temporal dimension of analysis—for example, in the use of life histories, the following of a social drama over several years, and the tracing of abortion debates and moral reform movements over the past two centuries.

The current debate is only the most recent expression of the long history of changes in the meaning and practice of abortion in America. Chapters 2 and 3 sketch this context, beginning with the first public controversy over abortion that occurred in the nineteenth century when abortion served as an issue that consolidated a movement to enhance the status and control of the medical profession in this country. The result was the enactment of wide-ranging legislation that made abortion virtually illegal throughout the United States by the end of the nineteenth century, even though the practice of abortion had widespread popular acceptance through the 1860s. The efforts by physicians to criminalize its practice required that they succeed in reinterpreting its meaning. Through the efforts of the physicians' crusade, abortion and pregnancy became subject to medical and legal intervention, what Michel Foucault would call a new sexual discourse in which

> the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used. Through the themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species, and the vitality of the so-

cial body, power spoke *of* sexuality and *to* sexuality; the latter was not a mark or a symbol, it was an object and a target . . . an *effect with a meaning value.* (1978: 147–48)

The transformations of "meaning value" in the practice and interpretations of abortion in the twentieth century occurred not only through the efforts of "experts" and state intervention but also via popular agitation. As more and more American women resorted to illegal abortions, particular events and practices—from the early underground abortion referral networks to the thalidomide and rubella scares of the 1960s—helped to catalyze broadly based movements that demanded reform and then repeal of antiabortion laws. The 1973 Supreme Court decision, *Roe* v. *Wade,* was both a product of these and other changes and a catalyst to subsequent developments that Americans have come to identify as the current controversy, particularly the rise of the right-to-life movement.

The tenacity of the conflict over abortion after its legalization indicates how the issue has come to stand for much larger cultural concerns. The activism of the past decade, which has engaged female activists in particular, has taken the shape of an intense, almost populist struggle for contending interpretations of gender, sexuality, and reproduction. Increasingly, the battles are played out over the delivery of abortion services in communities.

In chapters 4 through 7, I describe and analyze the conflict over abortion in Fargo, North Dakota, beginning with its development at the state level. A 1972 statewide referendum on abortion, for example, shows how the social drama over the abortion clinic that occurred a decade later—its themes, players, and performance styles—was first "rehearsed." After the 1973 *Roe* v. *Wade* ruling, as pro-life activism in particular spread to a broad grass-roots base, the signification of abortion as a social issue became generalized and polarized. Although I did not select Fargo for its "typicality," the controversy over the opening of the first abortion clinic in North Dakota is representative of the shape of the conflict in the 1980s.[15] While the social field of the controversy expanded, becoming both more broadly based and ideologically elaborated, the arena of action has been increasingly at the local level.[16] (In 1987, when Chief Justice Warren Burger and Justice Lewis Powell announced their retirements from the Supreme Court, the appointment of their replacements became an additional focus.)[17]

Chapters 5 and 6 describe and analyze the community-based drama and the actors. Both pro-life and pro-choice activists asked for support by presenting themselves as under attack, yet simultaneously claimed to represent the "true" interests of the community. When pro-life forces failed to close the Fargo clinic through local political and legal processes, they changed their strategy. Increasingly, the contest has focused on the women with unplanned pregnancies who are the clinic's actual or potential clientele. In the efforts right-to-life activists make to persuade these women, one can see the metaphors and dramatic themes that give shape, meaning, and visibility to opposing understandings of abortion and its attendant meanings in the local body politic. As chapter 6 demonstrates, this shift has had an impact on players beyond those directly involved in the conflict. In addition to abortion activists, social workers, state agencies, churches, and voluntary groups have become involved in what I am calling a "problem pregnancy industry," as each develops institutional responses to unplanned pregnancy.[18]

Chapter 7 shows how, in a setting like Fargo, where actors are known to each other, moderation is rewarded over radical action. Local norms are respected by actors on both sides and set limits to their behavior. More radical "direct action" right-to-life activists have never really been accepted in Fargo, although their nearly violent behavior is highly visible. This contrast became particularly apparent with the visit of a network television team to Fargo. The show they produced, and community response to it, illustrates the way the conflict is systematically distorted in the national media and the impact such interventions can have on the course of local events.

The knowledge each side has of the other is a prominent feature in the life stories I collected with activists. In them, a particular understanding of both self and other is enacted through abortion activism; this process is the focus of chapters 8, 9, and 10. Chapter 8 lays out the theoretical bases for interpreting activists' narratives. In chapters 9 and 10 I focus on individual narratives to show how abortion provides activists on each side with culture-reconstructing agendas that mesh with their historical and biographical—and especially reproductive—experiences. In both their referential and formal dimensions, activists' stories resemble conversion testimonies, bearing witness to a kind of rebirth. These take a loose generational shape.

Pro-choice stories, analyzed in chapter 9, indicate that the social protests of the 1960s, including the second wave of feminism, were a central experience for almost all of the activists. Most describe their encounter with these movements as an awakening or passage from a world defined by motherhood into one filled with broader possibilities. Right-to-life women (chapter 10) cluster in two cohorts. Those born in the 1920s were most active in pro-life work in the early 1970s. A second cohort, the one currently most active, was born in the 1950s. Many women in this latter group share some feminist sentiments with pro-choice women (e.g., on issues not directly related to sexuality such as comparable worth). Their commitment to the right-to-life movement is described as a kind of conversion, usually tied, in the narrative, to the birth of a child. For younger women in this group, this event often coincides with moving out of the paid work force to stay home and raise children. In their procreation stories, women of each group struggle to come to terms with problematic historical and life-cycle transitions, while simultaneously articulating a particular view of American culture and the place of men and women in it.

In chapter 11, I present evidence to support my argument that the visions and actions of contemporary abortion activists are the most recent expression of enduring cultural themes regarding gender in America, most clearly expressed in female moral reform movements that have been active periodically over the past two centuries. The central gender structure of home and workplace as separate male and female spheres that developed with industrial capitalism in America has endured, even as its expression in the social system has been reformulated self-consciously by female social activists.

Abortion Activism in America and the Issue of Nurturance

Abortion activists in Fargo, like other moral reformers who preceded them in American history, view themselves as directing the transformation of the culture to the betterment of both themselves and the whole society. In this sense, each side offers an embedded cultural critique of the contradictions of a cultural opposition between work and home for women in American culture. Both sides

argue against what they see as the sexist elements of the system. The pro-choice activists criticize those structures that confine women to nurturance in the domestic domain and suggest it be expanded to become a more collective responsibility. Pro-life advocates critique a cultural and social system that assigns nurturance to women yet degrades it as a vocation. They promote agendas in which the material and ideological resources of church and state would be assigned to support the status and activities of the domestic domain where nurturance of dependents currently takes place.

What these formulations indicate is how, in a sense, the separation of workplace from home has served as a metaphor for a cultural code in which ideals of individual autonomy and achievement are separated from the fact of human dependency over the life course. In opposition to the market relations of capitalism, nurturance stands for noncontingent and self-sacrificing support and love in "the home."[19] Thus, in American culture, the general social problem of caring for dependents has been "hidden in the household"[20] and nurturance escapes consideration as a larger cultural concern, as it is in other cultures.

At such moments of reformulation of cultural definitions, models from other societies are instructive. New Guinea and Australia provide notable cases in which nurturance and reproduction are broadly defined, and a high valuation is placed on the role of men as well as women in "growing up" the next generation. Writing on the Trobriand Islanders, Annette Weiner points out:

> All societies make commitments to the reproduction of their most valued resources, i.e., resources that encompass human reproduction as well as the regeneration of social, material, and cosmological phenomena. In our Western tradition, however, the cyclical process of the regeneration of elements is not of central concern. Even the value of biological reproduction remains a secondary order of events in terms of power and immortality achieved through male domains. Yet in other societies, reproduction, in its most inclusive form, may be a basic principle through which other major societal structures are linked. (1979: 330)

Such cross-cultural comparisons are reminders that our own arrangements are not written into nature. Similarly, the changes brought about in the abortion struggle demonstrate that reproduction, so frequently reified in American categorizations as a biologi-

cal domain of activity, is always given meaning and value and subject to change within a historically specific set of cultural conditions.

To understand the contrasting views represented by opposing positions on the abortion issue, I needed to see how they took shape in everyday life in a community where the issue was fresh and activists are known to each other. Such concrete placement is essential to any anthropological research, especially in a complex society where the local translation of larger processes often goes unnoticed. In this study, the Fargo conflict acts as a kind of prism that refracts on a human scale the abstractions of each side of the abortion debate. It is my hope that readers will find, as I did, that the facets of this particular place illuminate a larger landscape: the social and symbolic organization of gender, reproduction, and nurturance in the United States.