“Pro-choice is not pro-abortion; no one is pro-abortion.” As an avid Internet peruser and social media enthusiast, this is a sentiment I frequently, and unfortunately, see bandied about by pro-choice activists online. It’s unfortunate because while it is true that these terms are not equivalent, it’s also true that they are not incompatible. Yet when this notion is expressed by those in the pro-choice community, it usually carries with it the implication that pro-choice is a noble label and worthy cause—a sentiment with which I heartily agree—while pro-abortion is an insulting attack on a person’s moral fibre. This does not have to be the case. Pro-abortion need not be an inherently disparaging term; rather, it has abundant potential to be utilized within a positive and empowering framework. In this context, the term is worth exploring: What exactly does it mean to be pro-abortion? How can we, as a movement, shift the discourse to elicit more positive associations? And, perhaps more importantly, why should we do so?
First, it is imperative to recognize that *pro-abortion*, like most labels, carries with it no uncomplicated, cut-and-dried definition. When used by those who are anti-choice, it tends to carry the implication that they are exposing the term *pro-choice* as a euphemism used to gain support for a cause based solely around providing abortions; thus, in their opinion, *pro-abortion* is a more transparent, direct, and accurate label. For instance, in 2013, when Planned Parenthood announced its decision to move on from the pro-choice label, Jill Stanek, writing for the anti-abortion LifeSite News, rallied behind this shift, claiming that *pro-choice* was initially developed as a way “to counter ‘pro-life’ with an ‘anything-but-abortion’ phrase.” She goes on to assert that Planned Parenthood’s linguistic shift should be viewed as a victory for the anti-choice movement, since they had successfully “made the term ‘pro-choice’ synonymous with ‘pro-abortion.’”

While this anti-choice misunderstanding is worrisome and a worthy topic of discussion in and of itself, what predominantly elicits my concern is the way in which *pro-abortion* is comprehended by those who identify as pro-choice. Common, though not ubiquitous, within the pro-choice discussion of this term is the understanding that *pro-abortion* necessarily entails the pursuit of coerced termination and a belief in abortion as the preferred choice for all pregnant persons. For instance, in her article “What Pro-choice Really Means,” Joyce Arthur, founder and executive director of the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada, asserts that “pro-choice does not mean pro-abortion. We do not advocate for abortion over birth.” Likewise, Stacey Jacobs, a Canadian Planned Parenthood sexual health educator, explicitly argues that “no one is pro-abortion.” She explains this position by stating her hope that “no one would want a woman to be in a position where she has to make the decision to terminate her pregnancy,” thus implying that such a belief would be intrinsic to a pro-abortion stance. In essence, although statements such as these do reject the problematic anti-choice notion that *pro-choice* and *pro-abortion* are synonymous, in doing so, they concede the point that pro-abortion is a derogatory term and therefore seek to distance themselves—and, by extension, the pro-choice movement—from it.

These interpretations, both anti- and pro-choice alike, seem to stem from a variety of sources, including fear of abortion and the fact that abortion is entrenched in social stigma. But particularly significant for my defence of the term here is the fact that its rejection by pro-choice activists seems to be a defensive reaction to its misappropriation by abortion opponents, who
hurl it derisively at the pro-choice cause. Of course, if we are to accept the pejorative definitions of *pro-abortion* ascribed by abortion opponents, then intelligent and thoughtful pro-choice advocates, such as Arthur and Jacobs, are correct to argue that no one is pro-abortion. It hardly needs saying that there are few people—if any—who advocate for coercive abortion practices or the termination of all pregnancies, or who take pleasure in a person’s experience with an unwanted pregnancy. Moreover, such sentiments are certainly not within the purview of a pro-choice stance. However, while I agree that the aforementioned formulations of *pro-abortion* are abhorrent, it is also possible to consciously and actively reject these negative characterizations in favour of a positive, empowering definition of the term. When I state that I’m pro-abortion, what I hope to convey is that I unequivocally and unconditionally support the existence of safe, legal, accessible abortion services; I recognize that abortion is a common, necessary medical procedure that is undeserving of the shame and stigma it currently receives; I acknowledge that any reason for choosing abortion is a valid one; and I understand that it’s not up to me, nor anyone else, to police individuals’ motivations for exercising control over their own reproductive lives. I do not, however, advocate for the termination of all pregnancies, nor do I condone coercing individuals into accessing abortion.

Plainly stated, I do not believe that every pregnant person should have an abortion—only those who require one. And to be clear, by “those who require,” I mean anyone who is pregnant and either does not want to be or wants to be but is unable to continue on with the pregnancy for whatever reason. With this in mind, it is pertinent to reinforce the point that *pro-choice* and *pro-abortion*, though correlated, are not interchangeable, despite the anti-choice assertion to the contrary. My identity as pro-abortion is only a part of my identity as pro-choice, which, in turn, is only one component of being a reproductive rights advocate. Along this vein, I consider myself the bearer of many simultaneous and intersecting labels including pro-choice, pro–birth rights, pro–pregnant person, pro-family, pro-child, pro-adoption, and pro-abortion. None of these labels is equivalent or contradictory to any of the others, though I do consider them each to fall under the rubric of reproductive justice. Effectively, what I hope this far-from-exhaustive list is able to convey is that although *pro-abortion* and *pro-choice* may not be interchangeable, they need not exist in conflict; in fact, they have great capacity to complement each other.
I understand that even with a positive definition available, there will be those who identify as pro-choice who will still not feel comfortable calling themselves pro-abortion, and that’s okay; it’s not up to me, or anyone else, to tell others how they should self-identify. There is still an overwhelming amount of societally imposed stigma surrounding abortion, and even people who recognize the need for it to be an available choice may still not look too kindly upon the procedure itself. This can be clearly seen, for example, in the oft-quoted and pervasive motto—initiated by Bill Clinton and adopted by many in the pro-choice community—that abortion ought to be “safe, legal, and rare.” This seemingly enviable goal of ensuring the rarity of abortion is itself a value judgement, however, as it implies there is something invalid and shameful about abortion as a procedure. In her 2010 research article, which seeks to re-examine the “safe, legal, rare” mantra, Tracy Weitz, director for Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health, argues that “‘rare’ suggests that abortion is happening more than it should, and that there are some conditions for which abortion should and should not occur. It separates good abortions from bad abortions.” Jessica Valenti, author and co-founder of Feministing.com, agrees, stating that “the ‘rare’ framework adds to the stigmatisation of the procedure.” That is, rather than focusing on reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies, increasing knowledge of and access to contraception, or expanding support for new parents, this viewpoint problematizes abortion as something we should strive to diminish, even while recognizing its necessity. Overall, it is unlikely that those who subscribe to the perspective that abortion is a morally fraught, though necessary, procedure will be apt to call themselves pro-abortion, despite identifying as pro-choice.

This may lead one to question my ultimate goal of appropriating the term if I do not hold the expectation that all who identify as pro-choice will also adopt the pro-abortion label for themselves. While I strive for a more common and normalized inclusion of the label into the pro-choice discourse, what I would most like to see is for fellow reproductive rights advocates to simply have a more genial view of the term. More specifically, I would urge allies not to dismiss the label entirely or, at the very least, not to disparage it alongside abortion opponents. I realize this is no easy feat, as the term pro-abortion often gets thrust upon those who are pro-choice by the anti-choice crowd with the intent of making our movement seem reductive and cold. Of course, this only works if we accept the pejorative connotations
with which it has been imbued; moreover, it only works if we accept that abortion is a shameful word, capable of breeding insult.

Words carry incredible power, and it’s a clever rhetorical trick to take something a group supports, make it sound disgraceful, and then proceed to throw it back in their faces. Not only is it clever; it’s apparently also effective, since many who are pro-choice seem not to think twice about deriding the term pro-abortion in tandem with those who are anti-choice. However, when pro-choice advocates spew forth this internalized invective, they are perpetuating the idea that abortion is a shameful procedure worthy of derision, which only furthers anti-choice sentiments regarding the morality of abortion and those who access it. It’s a divisive practice that leads to pro-choice infighting and derails the movement from its ultimate goal of reproductive justice for all. That is, focus shifts from concerns such as expanding access to and knowledge about reproductive services to a defensive rejection of pro-abortion, a label that has potential to be used productively as a way to express acceptance of a procedure that is integral to achieving comprehensive reproductive health care.

It’s important to remember that language is malleable, and we have the power to resist shame-inducing and restrictive definitions of pro-abortion. Whether by not reacting defensively when we are labelled pro-abortion by those who are anti-choice, or by not capitulating to the notion that it’s an inherently vicious label, or by explicitly and unapologetically identifying ourselves as pro-abortion, we can challenge how this term is currently defined. In doing so, we can shift the discourse so that pro-abortion connotes nothing less than support for abortion as a valid medical procedure and support for those who require access to abortion services. This does not mean, however, that we should leave unchallenged any assertion that pro-abortion is synonymous with pro-choice. We can and should dispute this equivalency. As previously stated, pro-choice is indicative of much more than abortion access; moreover, there are numerous issues unrelated to abortion that are central to the reproductive rights movement. It is a dynamic and complex movement that cannot be reduced to a single cause. Thus, regardless of whether individuals incorporate the pro-abortion label into their personal repertoires, we, as a movement, should ensure that we’re not denigrating the term or making those who do choose to adopt it feel ashamed, or as if they’re somehow faulty reproductive rights advocates, for doing so.
What is central to this discussion is the understanding that abortion is neither a shameful word nor a shameful concept, so why would we treat it as if it were? By incorporating *pro-abortion* into the reproductive justice discourse within a positive capacity, we can actively work to reduce the shame and stigma that are needlessly and undeservedly associated with this common, legal medical procedure. As a wise, albeit fictional, professor once said, “Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.” Abortion and those who access abortion services do not deserve fear or shame; they deserve support and compassion, as well as the knowledge that their choice is a valid one. Therefore, let’s not sit complacently by and accept the hostile and insulting implications associated with current usage; instead, let’s actively reject attempts to imbue *pro-abortion*, and thus abortion itself, with negative connotations. I, for one, am proud to be pro-abortion.

**Notes**

1. In addition to hostile interpretations by those who are anti-choice, a quick Internet search using the phrase “pro-choice is not pro-abortion” will reveal that pro-choice advocates also have many antagonistic understandings of *pro-abortion*. For a few examples, see Corey Purdy-Smith, “Pro-choice Is Not Pro-abortion,” Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada, September 2008, http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/presentations/smith.html; Kimberly Johnson, “I’m Pro-choice Not Pro-abortion,” *Liberals Unite*, 8 August 2014, http://samuel-warde.com/2014/08/im-pro-choice-pro-abortion/; and responses to the question “Is Pro-choice a Code Name for Pro-abortion?” at *Debate.org*, n.d., http://www.debate.org/opinions/is-pro-choice-a-code-name-for-pro-abortion.


5. I say this with the acknowledgement that *reproductive justice* is a historically rich term that was developed by women of colour to account for disparities between their experiences with reproductive health care and

6 Tracy A. Weitz, “Rethinking the Mantra That Abortion Should Be ‘Safe, Legal, and Rare,’” *Journal of Women’s History* 22, no. 3 (2010): 164.

7 Jessica Valenti, “Hillary Clinton Must Reject the Stigma That Abortion Should Be Legal but ‘Rare,’” *The Guardian*, 9 July 2014.