

Book Reviews

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Porter, M. & Gustafson, D. (2012). Reproducing Women: Family and Health Work Across Three Generations. Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.

Reviewed by: Michal Buchanan, Macewan University

“Reproducing Women” by Marilyn Porter and Diana Gustafson is an exploration of the “reproductive lives” of women. Through sociological and feminist frameworks, the authors draw upon the results of their intergenerational research into the lived experiences of women as reproducers. The traditional understanding of reproduction as pertaining to biological procreation is considered and largely expanded upon: the authors are also interested in the ways that women perform the role of reproducing culture, history, beliefs and values within the context of their family, from generation to generation. The book explores qualitative data gathered from interviews with three generations of women across a range of families. It is an attempt to academically discuss and explore key moments in the biological reproductive lives of women in the social, familial, cultural and historical contexts in which they were experienced. The authors also bring attention throughout the book to the various ways in which information is shared both vertically (from older to younger and vice versa) and laterally (from social influences outside the family) in families.

After a thorough discussion of the methodologies used to produce the research presented in the book, the authors discuss two particular families, and the themes connecting all three generations of women interviewed. They show how the grandmother, mother, and adult daughter of the S family discussed themes of strict mothers, significant family events, sex and information about sex, and changing attitudes about homosexuality. The authors present excerpts from the

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interviews, and then analyze the anecdotes within the structural contexts of gender, race, socioeconomic status, and age. The S Family's quotes illustrate the ways in which women reproduce culture and values to the younger generations, but also that daughters can influence the attitudes and beliefs of the mothers and grandmothers' as well. The S Family daughter that was interviewed works in sexual health education, and the authors present compelling evidence of how this line of work has influenced both her mother and grandmother's attitudes toward homosexuality. Following a quotation from the daughter, Susan, they explain that,

she takes responsibility for sharing her own experience and what she feels to be right with them," and that her mother and grandmother both "do their best to understand her position and - so far as they feel able - to accept it and to modify their own views. (p. 46)

This section introduces the reader to the personal, yet sociological method of writing that follows in the rest of the book. It also highlights a key theme of the book: that information is passed both up and down throughout the generations in a family, but also that values adopted from outside of the family can shape other members of the family in equal measure.

Porter and Gustafson define menarche as "the moment when girls are faced with the inescapable nature of their female embodiment" (p. 59), and go on to discuss how the participants in their study dealt with that moment individually, and how information about menarche was passed down generationally. Their findings are similar across multiple families: girls are given some information by their mothers, but most girls look outside their families for information about menarche. The authors explore menarche as a pivotal moment in the gendering of the body: the women interviewed express shared sentiments about the female body being medicalized and defined as unhygienic through the process of males (fathers, classmates) reacting to the topic of menstruation with disdain or disgust. Participants also reflect on their

mothers having warned them about the newfound potential for pregnancy after menarche. The authors claim that these common reactions create “a context in which the association between menstruation and sex [...] makes it also seem dirty and, more certainly, dangerous” (p. 66). This is a crucial moment in the book, as highlights the theme of the connection between socialization and self-understanding. Women candidly discuss how the social reaction of friends and family to the natural, biological process of menstruation changed the very way they considered themselves as both social and biological beings.

The authors describe how girls and women turn to female relatives and peers to bridge the gaps in the information they receive about reproductive processes from both teachers and mothers. This information sharing is examined in every part of the reproductive lives of women as described in the book. Pauline, one of the women interviewed, emphasized the social bonding function of this knowledge sharing when she explained that “[girls] just like to know that [they] are not alone,” and that “[they] are not feeling this” in isolation, when describing how she used to talk about menstruation with her peers (p. 65). This sharing of knowledge is explored further in the authors’ discussion of the process of giving birth. By highlighting the shifts in attitudes about birth through the generations interviewed, the authors provide compelling evidence for how the medicalization of labour has taken away some of the female bonding that occurred when labour was more commonly done at home in the presence of midwives rather than in a hospital with medical professionals. Later, in the discussion of menopause, the authors describe how women “look to their female relatives, especially their mothers and grandmothers but sometimes their daughters and even granddaughters, to help make sense of lived experience,” which does well to summarize the ongoing theme of women sharing knowledge with each other (p. 144).

Throughout the book, the reader is presented with a wealth of data sourced from other sociological and demographic studies. Leading into the qualitative research with externally sourced quantitative statistics helps the reader to understand the greater context of the ‘reproductive lives’ as discussed within the narratives. They also place the various reproductive moments discussed under the context of the Christian moral ideology that is dominant in North America. It is helpful to place the reproductive lives of women in this context, and many of the women interviewed mention the ways in which growing up in a religious household shaped their reproductive lives. However, it is one of the ways in which the understanding of reproductive lives of women is limited by the lens with which the authors choose to analyze it. Growing up in Christian households is common for many women in Canada, but it is not the universal experience and so the context created by the authors (women growing up in Christian households) cannot be generalized to all women in Canada. When the authors claim that, “a girl’s destiny as mother is defined and reinforced by religious discourse” (p. 85), they are displaying a form of inductive reasoning that can be a drawback to qualitative research. Certainly, the reproductive lives of the women interviewed were influenced by religious discourse, but it does not necessarily follow that all girls, or all women, experience the effect.

In the conclusion, the authors do acknowledge the specific and exclusive nature of their study, in saying that,

although [their] research does not allow [them] to make any claims that [their] findings are representative of the population of the province, and much less of Canada as a whole, [they] believe they are not untypical of this relatively understudied population of Canadian women. (p. 171)

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This transparency and self-awareness increases the legitimacy of the book. Although qualitative research, by nature, can not be used to infer generalizations about the population as a whole, the narratives from interviews combined with statistics found by other researchers are used thoughtfully and effectively to describe the lives of women in rural Eastern Canada.

The authors succeed in placing the reproductive lives of women in a social, historical and familial context. Many of the processes (menarche, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause) covered in the book are generally considered solely biological in nature, and it is refreshing to see them explored in greater contexts. Porter and Gustafson explore these themes in a way that remains solidly academic and also endearingly thoughtful throughout the book. It is a strong piece of academic literature on the topic of female embodiment and reproduction, and also provides emotionally compelling insights into individual lived experiences through the use of narratives as supporting evidence. By including so many quotations from real women, the authors have created a book that is informative, creative, and deeply intimate. This book is an important piece of literature for feminist scholars, sociologists and any woman who has felt alone in or alienated by any of the reproductive processes explored within.