

Book Reviews

Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 9(1), 2017, pp 71-75
ISSN 1718-9748 © University of Alberta
<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/cjfy>

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

Reviewed by: Stephanie Cornejo, MacEwan University

As the title suggests, in their book “Reproducing Women: Family and Health Work Across Three Generations,” Marilyn Porter and Diana Gustafson present their findings concerning women’s reproductive lives through analyzing some of their most engaging interviews with three different generations of women across twenty-four different families in Newfoundland and Labrador. Porter and Gustafson thoughtfully examine the complexity of the role of family relationships from a woman’s perspective and understanding of her reproductive life based on a rigid focus on the women interviewee’s stories, knowledge, thoughts, and emotions.

The authors note that it is not very common for publications that investigate women’s reproductive processes to shift their focus from a biomedical context. In order to avoid this, Porter and Gustafson compellingly contribute to the literature on women’s reproductive health using their own findings based on case studies of women that follow a family-oriented, feminist, and overarching sociological perspective. More specifically, the authors achieve this through comparing and contrasting the perspectives of Generation A (grandmothers), B (daughters), and C (granddaughters) across different families on topics including menstruation, sex, pregnancy and motherhood, menopause, and aging. Additionally, the authors also compare and contrast how the women form their

perspectives against a variety of influential institutions of power including the medical field, the patriarchy, the state, religion, media, education, and other peers.

When the reader comes across the various interviews of the three different generations, it is evident that the comparisons and contrasts are complex; not all women show similar patterns across generations or between generations. Intuitively, the reader would expect that perspectives across the generations of women would gradually change from conservative to more liberal. Indeed, this pattern proved to be evident for many women in the book. For example, women from Generation C were more likely to be reluctant about becoming mothers than older generations (p. 83). Topics such as sex and menopause were very often seen as taboo among women of Generation A and Generation B. The topic of sex also tended to be tiptoed around, often including explanations for the origins of babies with statements like “the plane came and brought it” (p. 71) or mothers feeling as though they need to warn their young daughters about the consequences of sex, but only being able to say things such as “don’t let a boy touch you” (p. 73). Since menopause was not a popular subject for conversation among women from Generation A, the authors describe them as having “a folk understanding of reproductive issues” (p. 147). By the time women from Generation C were asked about these topics, most of them reported having more of a modern understanding as well as being more open to talking about such topics.

On the other hand, there are some exceptions in which these generations appear to have more complex dynamics because they do not necessarily adhere to such expected notions of conservatism or liberalism. For example, one woman from Generation A reports that her experience with learning about menstruation from her mother was overall

a positive one because she felt as though her mother properly equipped her with knowledge to the point where her friends would use her as a resource for their questions regarding menstruation and sex (p. 61). Additionally, one woman from Generation C admitted that a more traditional way of life in terms of women's gender roles would be a more preferred lifestyle as opposed to the contemporary pressures of women gaining their own independency (p. 52).

Further adding to the complexity is the evidence that the dynamics between the generations of each family are different. While one family can show a certain pattern between generations, this is not necessarily reflective of the next family. Even so, it is apparent that these multi-faceted family dynamics influence the teachings and understandings of each woman, whether it means that the woman subsequently goes on to embrace and adhere to what she was taught and pass on her knowledge and perspectives to her daughter, or whether instead she chooses a different manner of portraying womanhood.

Although the authors recognize the relevance of the dynamics that the family has for transmitting reproductive knowledge from grandmother to daughter, mother to daughter, and grandmother to granddaughter, they also recognize that external factors or groups can be impactful in this regard. Indeed, in some cases, they found that groups outside of the family could replace the role of grandmother or mother. For example, as previously mentioned, many of the women across generations admitted that their mothers did not elaborate on the mechanisms and consequences of sex. As a result of this, the women had no other choice but to gain knowledge elsewhere, often in the form of conversations with their peers (as with older generations) or through media resources

such as books, magazines, and television (as with younger generations) (p. 77). The medical field, which is mostly based in a biomedical perspective, also has a major influence on the way that women perceive their reproductive processes, especially when it comes to viewing menopause as a negative outcome (p. 147).

However, the authors found that even though such influences exist and affect the way that knowledge and perspectives are shaped outside of the realm of the family, grandmothers and mothers remain a relevant source. It is evident throughout the book that women of all ages and stages of reproduction are not simply static and medical bodies, which is often the way in which the biomedical community frames women. It was impossible to find only one pattern of knowledge, perspectives, and transmittance of these across and between the generations of interviewees, illustrating the dynamism and complexity of women. As well, the authors brought insight into the lives of women and highlighted the importance of social and cultural influences on these generations of women, which reduces the notion that a biomedical perspective on reproductive health is the only correct or prominent perspective.

The engaging interviews that the authors held across all three generations of women excellently served their ultimate goal of exploring the implications of social and cultural factors rather than biomedical factors on their knowledge and perspectives towards their reproductive health. More specifically, the authors achieved these goals through emphasizing the complexity of women across and between generations and comparing how external influences competed with family influences.

Because the authors chose to focus their study on women in rural communities in such a sociocultural context, it offered a valuable alternative to prominent literature based

Book Reviews

in non-feminist, non-sociological, and biomedical research. However, the book does suffer some limitations. As expressed by the authors, although the text does offer a unique case study basis for their research, the applicability of the authors' findings across a population outside of Newfoundland and Labrador is not possible. Therefore, the idea that women make decisions and form perspectives about their reproductive health in complex ways can only be restricted to the women in Porter and Gustafson's study for now. In order to improve the quality of universality on this topic, future researchers should intend to apply a less thorough method, such as carefully selected questions based on Porter and Gustafson's text, to apply to women across a wider population.

Porter and Gustafson's book has the opportunity to reach a wide variety of readers ranging from personal to academic purposes. The authors organized their book into different chapters based on the topic of reproduction being discussed. Each chapter provides the reader with background information on previous studies, interviews conducted on the chapter topic, and concludes with interesting findings by the authors. Since the structure of the study is easy to read and deals with the very personal topic of women's reproductive health, this book can be catered to non-academic readers. On the other hand, the sociological methods behind the study suggest that this book can also be useful for academic types in disciplines including sociology, anthropology, psychology, women's studies, and education as well as any person affiliated with a post-secondary institution. I find that the book's level of readability, organization and content of the interviews, and the focus on feminist sociocultural perspective contributes to an overall excellent and refreshing alternative study in a society where rigid biomedical models are all too often applied to women and praised overall.