

Book Reviews

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

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Marilyn Porter and Diana L. Gustafson's book, "Reproducing Women," is an analysis of the social and cultural factors affecting the identity and understanding of females as reproductive members of society. This book identifies the reproductive stages of a woman's life in relation to social context as opposed to strictly biological events. Although religious, educational, and historical factors are taken into account, the authors focus primarily on family as the key social institution in shaping individual understandings and changes with regards to female reproduction. By taking a generational approach to their analysis through interviews with fifty-six women from twenty-four different families, Porter and Gustafson are able to address general themes within the experiences of women between generations, with the purpose of identifying the general pattern of women in Canadian society. Through a chapter by chapter analysis, the authors examine the social components of the three transitional periods within a female's life; child to reproductive adult, reproductive adult to mother, and eventually the transition to the end of a woman's reproductive years.

Biologically, a female child transitions into a potentially reproductive adult at the time of their first menstruation cycle. However, Porter and Gustafson argue that in a social context, a female's reproductive life begins long before this moment. Once a young girl identifies as female, they are met with the social expectation that they, like their mothers, will one day have their own children (p. 58). This knowledge comes before they are educated about the biological

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event of menarche. The authors ultimately suggest that the general pattern among women when recalling their transition from girl to woman, depended on the relationship between the girl and her mother, how much information the mother provided her, and at what age. The type of information and the way in which the mother explained it was often determined how the girl relayed this information to her own children later on. The authors use the example that mothers who had been deprived of information growing up “carefully considered about how to pass along information about sex to their own daughters” (p. 75). Therefore, this relational moment between mother and daughter was key in shaping relationships between females of this family in future generations. It was also instrumental in shaping in what light the girl viewed her own body and sexuality. Many also viewed this social moment of strengthening their relationship with their mother through sharing of this knowledge as the key moment in their transition from girl to woman, as opposed to the actual biological event of first menstruation.

Porter and Gustafson also address the impact of educational and religious institutions on the reproductive lives of women, especially as young girls. They noted how the increased teaching of sex education in schools generally caused a change in the younger generations. Due to this, discussion of such topics appeared more common amongst peers and people outside of the family. This often lead to contradicting messages and knowledge gained from different sources. On another end of the spectrum, the authors noticed a pattern in girls brought up in religious institutions. The knowledge passed down to these girls was often more confined and suggested that sexual acts were considered unholy until after marriage. The common finding by the authors among girls transitioning to women was that this transition begins long before the biological events occur, and is often composed of conflicting messages and beliefs imposed by various social institutions.

According to the authors, the transition from a woman to a mother is another critical point in a female's reproductive life. The biological marker for this moment would be the birth of a child, however the authors argue that motherhood begins before this moment, and continues long after. Porter and Gustafson begin by stating that motherhood begins as soon as deciding whether or not to be a mother. This decision is a pivotal moment in a female's reproductive life and will ultimately shape her future. A common pattern the authors identify is that more and more females are deciding to postpone motherhood until a later age. This is shaped by changing social, economic, and political factors. With the establishment of woman's rights and increasing opportunities for women, more females are delaying motherhood in order to focus on education and their career. These social factors have a significant impact on a woman's reproductive life, as she may choose not to be a mother at all, or if she chooses to do so at a later age, there may be an increased risk of health risks for both the mother and the child.

Pregnancy and child birth at any age is associated with health factors, therefore influencing every woman's decision. Once the decision has been made to become a mother, the authors found a commonality among their research in that the rest of the woman's life is shaped around motherwork. A woman's identity shifts as she must now take on the role her mother once did for her. However, being a mother extends beyond the biological event of procreating and birthing a child; the woman is now also responsible for accepting the gendered role of mothering. Although the authors identify the generational shift in regard to the roles of parenting due to the increased opportunities for working women, females are still generally socially viewed as the primary facilitators in the upbringing of the child. Therefore, the authors argue that after a woman becomes a mother, and long after the biological event is finished, she will still shape her choices around her identity as a mother.

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Previously, menopause was viewed as the end of a woman's reproductive life. However, with the drastic increase in life expectancy for humans over the past few generations, females may spend over half of their life as biologically unproductive. Porter and Gustafson argue that the inability for a woman to reproduce does not mean the end of her reproductive life. For many of the women in their interviews, this was simply another transition into the role of a grandmother. As a general observation within the families interviewed, the role of grandmother was often to provide emotional support for daughters and granddaughters, as well as provide knowledge of family values and concepts. The grandmother continues on many mothering roles, both for her daughter and possibly granddaughter. This not only continues to strengthen the family relationships, but passes down knowledge through the generations. As mentioned previously by the authors, the role of mothering never ends. The grandmother is still carrying on aspects of this in her reproductive life, despite being biologically unproductive.

With the use of interviews spanning three generations, Porter and Gustafson's "Reproducing Women" accomplishes two goals; understanding a woman's biological experiences in relation to social context, and identifying changes in these reproductive lives throughout the generations. The authors identify that there is no one true way of explaining these experiences, as every female and family is unique. However, the use of multiple families and interviews is relevant to establishing overall patterns and changes spanning the three key transitional periods. This work would be beneficial to sociologists researching the role of women in society, as well as anthropologists interested in the changing roles of women over time, with a focus in Eastern Canadian culture. I also believe this book would benefit post-secondary students studying gender roles in society as well as their changes over time and the social factors causing these changes. Although this work draws on the personal experiences of women, the authors

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suggested it may represent Canadian women as a whole. I do not believe, however, that a sample from only one Canadian province is sufficient in representing the whole country. Job opportunities, and therefore family ways of life, are drastically different in other locations of the country. I believe this would play a significant role in the reproductive lives of the women in other locations. The authors also mentioned that the sample group was primarily white women, however with Canada being multicultural, I believe this is another poor representation of the country and limits the information presented. Overall, the personal experiences of the women interviewed was enlightening, and the changing patterns identified over the generations was informative. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in woman studies or the changing roles of women over time.