

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Jacqueline Ann Christodoulou, *Identity, Health and Women: A Critical Social Psychological Perspective*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 240pp. \$US85.00 hardcover (978-0-230-24179-4)

Any confluence of the terms “identity,” “health,” and “woman” is bound to provoke interdisciplinary debate. Although Christodoulou’s book is indebted to psychological social psychology, it references many key texts of sociological social psychology which affirm the centrality of socialized subject formation. In the terms of Owens, Robinson, and Smith Lovin’s “Three Faces of Identity” (*Annual Review of Sociology* 2010), Christodoulou’s analysis is firmly planted in the tradition in which social positions and their meanings are internalized in the self. There are occasional glimpses of the impact of cultural meanings and social situations on actors’ identities, and she perhaps wishes that the women involved in the study had a collective identity.

This book offers an extended sequence of theoretical perspectives on how women’s identity is affected by health and medical concerns around the central health issue of perimenopause, also known as the menopausal transition, a somewhat ill-defined “time around the menopause.” From a complex feminist perspective it engages an impressive range of powerful intellectual traditions and influences, but arguably loses in depth what it gains in breadth as a result. More than a third of the book is spent establishing this context before explaining and justifying her use of qualitative methods to gather more intimate and personal narratives. The latter part of the book engages interview data from a pool of women from Oldham (an economically depressed town in the North West of England), whom Christodoulou describes as “perimenopausal” which, it emerges, describes any woman from her mid thirties to mid fifties. The extent to which this “condition” of being menopausal or perimenopausal is or should be defined in medical terms is not sufficiently discussed.

The specific context of Oldham (a town associated with mass unemployment, racial tension, riots, and extreme right wing political organizations) is never sufficiently considered, and the severe economic pressures on women’s lives and women’s health is treated incidentally rather than systematically. The extent therefore to which this very distinct community of English women can bear the weight of theoretic-

al generalization that is prepared for them is questionable. The use of semistructured as opposed to narrative interview techniques suggests that the voices invoked have been constrained and focused in ways that belie the author's commitment to "give women a voice." In addition, the interview extracts we are given betray no trace of the distinctive accents and idioms of Oldham, and the criteria that have been applied to make these voices clearer and more intelligible are nowhere stated. Thus, despite the author's claim to give voice to these women, we do not in fact hear their northern English voices.

This book defies categories and its intended audience and use are difficult to determine. It offers too broad a theoretical sweep to be considered as a straightforward empirical study. The theory itself is too broad and "pedagogic" to represent a decisive theoretical intervention. The context is too specific for the book to be regarded as a textbook. It cannot be regarded as a book about methods, since it fails to either entertain alternative methodological strategies or adequately justify and explain the specific method employed. Nor can it be regarded as a book that seeks to make general conclusions about women, identity, and health, despite seeking to offer a new model of identity that links women and health. The author includes theorized visions of "woman" as a social construct, invoking eminent feminist philosophers from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler. The social construction of "health" as a category is not subject to equivalent theorization, and it is unclear to what extent the interviewees imagine, do not imagine, or are pressured to imagine their own life experiences within a medicalized paradigm.

The book is always interesting and offers moments of genuine insight and imagination. The use of Ricoeur to describe how women's "not wanting to be their mother" illustrates the narrative, fictive imperatives defining all so-called "histories," both personal and communal, is both suggestive and persuasive. Having a critical social psychological perspective which uses narrative as a key qualitative methodological device is valuable. Feminist discussions of how health and illness can affect already fluid perceptions of identity, whether conceived in personal psychological, interpersonal, or socioeconomic terms, are always welcome. This book enlivens and stimulates such discussions while leaving the reader restless for further study.

The final section, "Praxis," is only a few pages long and offers a disappointingly inadequate synthesis of the theoretical and empirical work which precedes it. A more expansive and persuasive "praxis" might have juxtaposed the qualitative work with a larger statistical context. The index of this book is poorly constructed and does not provide an

adequate means of checking names and sources. In a work so rich in theoretical references, this deficiency is particularly felt.

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