Reproductive Regimes: Governing Gendered Bodies

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Introduction

This chapter examines the intersections between biological and social dimensions of gender and health with special reference to reproduction. We explore the notion of reproductive regimes through the consideration of four case studies that exemplify how contemporary women’s reproductive bodies may engage with biomedicine. A major assumption running throughout the chapter is that, whilst the processes of reproduction may emerge as regulatory regimes for all bodies, women more than men have been viewed and managed as ‘foetal containers’. Today there are social and cultural forces that afford pregnant women the opportunity to make ‘choices’ that challenge this notion of passivity. As the principle of patient choice becomes widespread in public and private healthcare systems across the developed countries of the western world and feminism increasingly operates in arenas of entitlement and individualism nevertheless the question remains: How is women’s agency constrained by gendered disciplinary processes in the field of reproduction?

First, we discuss why an awareness of the sex/gender binary alongside the above biological and social intersections provides a ‘backstory’ to understand governing reproductive bodies. Next, we define reproductive regimes and analyse gendered disciplinary processes that evoke simultaneously the language of choice and control upon birthing bodies with reference to the rise of caesarean section (CS). We then consider genetic screening as a reproductive regime; we explore the stigmatization of deviant pregnant bodies with reference to substance misuse and outline future directions in biomedical surveillance within the context of public health and pregnancy.

The sex/gender binary and the challenges of fluid corporeality

A strong tradition of feminist work in the field of reproduction has a variety of constituents, including those that:
draw attention to the ways in which women’s reproductive bodies have long been regulated by the male-dominated medical profession;

are concerned about the inadequacy of either an uncritical position that defers without question to the advances of science, or a pessimistic position that sees in contemporary reproductive technologies an unmitigated attack on women;

focus on the global abuse of women’s reproductive capacities, especially rape with its general health risks and risks of the spread of HIV/AIDS (Farmer, 2005);

emphasize significant divisions between women in a now global market of reproductive body parts – such as ova and embryos – and services.

The authors’ own contributions to the field of reproduction are overtly feminist and ‘embodiment orientated’. Ettorre’s (2002; 2007) work focuses on how female bodies are shaped and controlled through reproductive genetics as well as how pregnant bodies are designated as ‘embodying deviance’ through substance use. Works by Kingdon et al. (2006; 2009) explore women’s embodied agency during pregnancy and birth, retaining a critical edge in relation to questions concerning how knowledge about reproductive bodies is produced, by whom, and with what consequences.

With regards to the above, feminist writing on the body is complex, varied and vast. One distinctive argument has replaced the assumption that inequalities between the sexes are derivative of ‘nature’ and fixed in biology – such as sex – with the notion that inequalities are derived from nurture and maintained by culture – such as gender (Price and Shildrick, 1999). More recently, feminist scholars of science have revealed how cultural ideas about maleness and femaleness are attributed to bodily parts that have no gender (Martin, 1991). Others recognize that irrespective of science’s misrepresentations of the human female body as gendered, subordinate and defective, women are bodies in ways men are not – their unique capacity to gestate and birth young should be celebrated. This appreciation of real sexual difference is often criticized for essentialism but is nevertheless key (Annandale, 2009).

In recent years, the sex/gender binary conceptualization of body politics has broken down, while there exists a simultaneous trend to posit a corporeality that is fluid in its investments, meanings and performativities (Butler, 1993). In both feminist and masculinist scholarship on the body there is now widespread recognition of how culture can shape and alter the physical body (Bordo, 1993); thus the body is increasingly conceptualized as ‘concurrently socially constructed and organically founded’ (Turner, 1992: 17). Specifically in the field of reproduction, feminists influenced by the claims of post-structuralist scholars and others contend that gender has emerged as a powerful social institution that employs prescriptive moral claims and