Sexual and reproductive justice: From the margins to the centre

Tracy Morison and Jubulile Mary-Jane Jace Mavuso (Eds.)
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This book is an exciting and thought-provoking collection of chapters tackling issues of sexual and reproductive justice featuring contributors from Aotearoa New Zealand, South Africa, Australia, and Scotland. Editors Tracy Morison (Aotearoa New Zealand) and Jabulile Mary-Jane Jace Mavuso (South Africa) position this collection as considering areas in reproductive and sexual justice that have perhaps been overlooked and/or under-explored by others. Their clear introduction lays the groundwork for this collection by providing nuanced definitions of sexual and reproductive justice and then noting where the gaps and possibilities for new research might be located. Such an introduction not only sets the scene but is a valuable resource for anyone—researcher, student, social worker—who is interested in this field.

This editorial scene setting whets the reader's appetite for exploring the gaps in the existing literature. The first chapter (by Marion Stevens, Dudu Dlamini and Lance Louskieter) considers how South African sex workers experience sexual and reproductive oppressions. Here the importance of justice at every level in society is discussed with conclusions noting that, for these workers, sexual and reproductive justice cannot be separated from rights to safe working conditions (including decriminalisation and healthcare).

In Chapter Two, a team of researchers from Aotearoa (Jade Le Grice, Cheryl Turner, Linda Waimarie Nikora, and Nicola Gavey) discuss an issue with relevance beyond sexual and reproductive justice. The authors link these (in)justices to broader macro-level injustices: whose knowledge counts and is counted in community and government-led interventions? Through pūrakau[1], we hear how Māori community leaders developed and sustained a programme for their community to tackle sexual violence, only to have it appropriated, commodified and ultimately removed from their community by government agencies. The authors ask essential and broader questions about how and why Indigenous knowledge can be divorced from its context while also clearly articulating an injustice as "Indigenous leadership and self-determination [must be] taken seriously in the pursuit of protecting future generations of Indigenous people from sexual violence" (p. 55).

The following four chapters cover insightful discussions about navigating the complexities of sexual and reproductive justice for adolescents with intellectual disabilities, gender-affirming healthcare, gender-affirming mental healthcare, and finally, the reproductive agency and desires of teenage boys who become fathers. All these chapters have a South African context; however, the issues discussed have relevance for practitioners in other locations. For example, in the chapter about intellectual disabilities, there is a valuable discussion about how key workers treat these young people as asexual and, therefore, not needing information about sexual and reproductive wellbeing. Such assumptions often lead to adults making decisions for these young people without gaining their consent—thus breaching their human rights.

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Chapter Seven, by George Parker, is a compelling and insightful exploration of fat reproductive embodiment. Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews with fat pregnant people in Aotearoa New Zealand, Parker discusses how being fat during pregnancy is a location of intersectionally differentiated oppressions and, thus, is a site of reproductive injustices. Parker explains the work that fat pregnant people have to do while under the gaze of intensified bodily surveillance and notes the guilt and personal responsibility they feel. They conclude that such responsibilisation of fat pregnant people does not, and cannot improve either "maternal [or] child health but in fact undermines it" (p. 132) and instead proposes that we rethink (and reject) how fat pregnant bodies are constructed as unsafe and instead adopt a macro, contextualised view of the factors leading to more positive health and wellbeing outcomes in pregnancy.

Parker's chapter is followed by one discussing obstetric violence and then two offering different constructions of motherhood. These two latter chapters provide an interesting and fruitful juxtaposition for readers and centre on the reproductive justice principle of being able to parent in a supportive environment. The first, by Kristina Saunders, centres on the experiences of working-class mothers in Scotland and how they both resist and reinforce (neoliberal) ideals of mothering and the second, by Andrea Alexander, explores how young mothers and *their* mothers are stigmatised for, and responsibilised by, teen pregnancy. Both chapters ask critical questions about how we can support different stories of motherhood and parenting and thus build and contribute to reproductive justice.

The next chapter will be welcome to anyone involved in sexuality education for young people and adds to the literature that problematises current provisions by situating it within a sexual and reproductive justice framework. The authors here, discussing sexuality education in South Africa, note that it relies on strict gendered binaries and stereotyped ideas to regulate young bodies. This narrative will be familiar to anyone currently working in this field when it seems that discussions about young people, sexuality and gender are "space[s] where a moral panic related to sex, gender, and reproduction is articulated" (p. 198).

I particularly enjoyed the final three chapters of this book as they each had insightful takes on sexual and reproductive justice from very different contexts. The first explored constructions of idealised motherhood in court cases of infanticide in the South Pacific. The authors examined judicial files from 59 cases spanning from 1961-2019. They found that these mothers were positioned as particularly mentally unwell as they could only be considered through a lens of idealised motherhood (because only mentally unwell mothers could murder their children). They noted that this positioning swept away considerations of other factors, such as abuse and their ability to make sexual and reproductive choices.

The second of these final three explored South African and New Zealand women's experiences of conversations with contraception providers about long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs)—such as Jadelle. The researchers noted three types of conversations: expert-led, patient-led, and collaborative. Women stated a clear preference for collaborative discussions as these weren't found to be authoritarian (expert-led) or responsibilising (patient-led); instead, they incorporated biomedical knowledge and education with the specific context of the woman. The authors noted that it is likely that reproductive justice is more possible in collaborative spaces.

Finally, the last chapter featured a collaboration of three authors exploring how pre-abortion counselling can make abortion *psychologically* unsafe in jurisdictions where it might be physically safe. In making this argument, they problematise the World Health Organisation's definition of safe

abortion as only relating to physical provisions. By examining recordings of anti-abortion counselling sessions, they demonstrate that such sessions are harmful (and thus unsafe) as they draw on patriarchal discourses and position abortion seekers as ignorant and needing saving from themselves. They note that to be reproductively just, abortion counselling must therefore be "non-mandatory, client-centred [and] feminist" (p. 261).

Overall, this book is a welcome contribution to and expansion of literature centring reproductive and sexual justice concerns. It is difficult to narrow down an audience that this book would be *especially* useful for as that could indicate that sexual and reproductive justice can be neatly partitioned off into work that specifically centres reproductive and/or sexual health concerns. Clearly, it holds an appeal for any researcher interested in these fields. However, practitioners might ask, "How is it relevant to my work?" I would reply, how is sexual and reproductive justice *not* relevant to your work? Speaking specifically about social workers, other authors (Dodd, 2020) have noted that social work and social workers have not paid *enough* attention to how sexual and reproductive matters impact the lives of all of our clients and that we need to get much better at addressing this with our clients. Perhaps a book like this might encourage those social workers who read it—or even selected chapters—to consider how they might contribute to sexual and reproductive justice in work with *all* their clients.

(1) Pūrakau can be translated to mean Māori narrative and, in this context, is a research method.

References

Dodd, S. J. (2020). *Sex positive social work.* Columbia University Press.

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