

In its ambition to fill the gap between Mothering Studies and Mennonite Studies, *Mothering Mennonite* does not claim to be comprehensive in its approach; however, the varying perspectives of the sixteen essays in this volume serve to sketch out a dialogic and generative response to the subject that invites further inquiry. The editors themselves suggest areas for further studies of mothering, including mothering in the cultural contexts of Africa, Asia and Latin America, where more than 50 percent of contemporary Mennonites reside, the impact of the mission field and relief and development work, and the situation of mothering in the discourses of colonization in the areas where they have resided. I would also suggest that studies of single mothering, LGBTQ parenting, blended families, and adoption would complement these inquiries. Overall, this volume does much to restore a sense of value and meaning to the act of mothering as well as to articulate it as creative and culturally constructive work.

Reproducing Women: Family and Health Work Across Three Generations

Marilyn Porter and Diana L. Gustafson.
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REVIEWED BY VALERIE HEFFERNAN

Marilyn Porter and Diana L. Gustafson's book *Reproducing Women* presents the results of a qualitative study of how women understand their reproductive lives and how they transmit this understanding within their families and across generational lines. The authors interviewed three generations of women in twenty-four families from the Atlantic province of Newfoundland and Labrador and asked them to tell their stories of the major transitional events—or what they term “relational moments” (14)—in their reproductive lives: menarche, pregnancy and childbirth, mothering, menopause, and ageing. The stories presented in this book reveal how the participants' understanding of what it means to become and be a woman is situated in a strong familial, social, cultural and often religious context. Moreover, the intergenerational relationships between the women mean that their attitudes and experiences undergo a constant process of renegotiation, as the older generations shape the experiences of the generations that follow and the young influence their mothers and grandmothers.

Two introductory chapters construct the framework within which the study is situated. The first explains the key concepts and explains how this study both builds on and advances feminist scholarship on reproductive health, whereas the second elucidates the significance of the intergenerational relationships between the female family members as a basis for the study. Thereafter, each chapter is devoted to exploring the women's experiences of the key "relational moments" in their reproductive lives: their stories of entering womanhood; of becoming a mother; of doing the work of mothering; of entering menopause; and of grandmothing. A concluding chapter summarizes the findings and explores common themes that emerged in the interviews and that appear to have shaped the women's experiences throughout their reproductive lives.

At the end of each chapter, the authors analyze the women's stories in terms of what they reveal about how women from different generations view their changing bodies and changing social and familial roles. Some of these are predictable enough. For example, readers will probably not be surprised to learn that the accounts of the women of the younger generation, most of whom were born at a time when sex education was firmly embedded in the school curriculum, reveal that they had much better access to accurate information about menstruation and contraception when they were growing up and were thus far better prepared for their first period or their first sexual experiences than their mothers or grandmothers were. On the other hand, the authors' examination of the participants' understanding of the many different kinds of work involved in mothering their children as they grow and mature is illuminating and adds significantly to our understanding of what feminist maternal scholars have called "motherwork", namely the public and private work carried out by mothers in nurturing children.

Some of the more enlightening insights of the study emerge from how its intergenerational focus allows the authors to draw inferences about changing social and cultural attitudes over the years. For example, the women's stories about their experiences of pregnancy and childbirth differ markedly from one generation to the next, a factor that coincides with the increased public framing of pregnancy as a medical issue in Canada and the U.S. and the relocation of childbirth from the home to the hospital in many western societies. In a similar vein, the older interviewees are less open about their experiences of menopause but also less likely to view it as a problem requiring medical intervention; their daughters, by contrast, reveal themselves to be much better informed about the biological processes involved in menopause and the various treatments available. This difference in attitudes reflects an increased public openness and awareness of the menopause as both a normal part of women's lives and a health issue that can be managed.

A particular strength of the study is its focus on narrative as a source of ethnographic data and as a vehicle for enquiry. In a recent documentary about her family history, filmmaker Sarah Polley muses on the complexity of family stories. “I’m interested in the way we tell stories about our lives,” she explains. “About the fact that the truth about the past is often ephemeral and difficult to pin down. And many of our stories, when we don’t take the proper time to do research about our pasts, which is almost always the case, end up with shifts and fictions in them, mostly unintended” (Polley 2012). In their analysis of the many stories recounted by the female family members in their study, Porter and Gustafson celebrate this lack of fixity and view it as an important element in understanding broader family narratives. For example, in explaining two family members’ omission of an incident that was particularly significant to the third member of their family, the authors are keen to point out: “This apparent inconsistency is not a reflection of completeness, distortion or exaggeration by different women in the family but rather of the variability of meaning and richness emerging from women’s different standpoints in inter-generational research” (20). Their willingness to give voice to the fractures, contradictions, and discontinuities that characterize most familial narratives is refreshing and adds to the appeal of the volume.

In short, this study provides a fascinating snapshot of contemporary attitudes towards women’s bodies, their social and familial roles, and their relationships, in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. As the authors readily acknowledge, the implications of their findings are limited by their focus on one geographical area. As a case study of one province in Atlantic Canada, the present volume more than fulfils its goal of “contribut[ing] to a more complex picture of what it means to be a Canadian woman by adding the experiences of women living in small urban centres and rural and remote communities” (24). This reviewer very much hopes that Porter and Gustafson will continue in the same vein and extend their research to include families across Canada.

References

Polley, Sarah. *Stories We Tell*. Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 2012. [film].