TEACHING ABOUT REPRODUCTION, POLITICS, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

KIMALA PRICE

We have spent the last three decades—starting with the Presidential administration of Ronald Reagan and bookended by the administration of George W. Bush—in a conservative social and political climate hostile to honest discussions about bodies, sex, and sexuality. This climate is best illustrated by the devaluation and subsequent deterioration of comprehensive sex education in public schools as abstinence-only programs have taken hold in school systems nationwide. Approximately one billion dollars in federal funds have been allotted to these programs, even though evaluation studies show that they are not as effective as their proponents claim.

Abstinence-only programs have failed to produce statistically significant changes in sexual behaviors among their participants (Bayerstein; Connelly; Denny and Young; Santelli; Santelli et al; Wilson et al.). Almost half (46%) of all fifteen to nineteen-year-olds in the United States have had sex at least once, and by age nineteen, seven in ten teens have engaged in sexual intercourse (Guttmacher). Teens who participate in abstinence-only sex education programs are less likely to take precautions against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases when they eventually engage in sexual activity (Bayerstein; Connolly).

Given the misleading, inaccurate, and blatantly false information that is trafficked in abstinence-only programs, many undergraduates do not have a basic, working knowledge and understanding of their bodies, reproduction, sex, sexual health, and sexuality. For example, some abstinence-only textbooks claim that condom use is not effective in reducing the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and that touching a person’s genitals “can result in pregnancy” (United States House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform 12). Masturbation, sexual pleasure, and sexual orientation are taboo subjects; abortion, if even mentioned, is often labeled as murder (Connolly; United States House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform). As a result, many undergraduates are entering universities without a basic understanding of their bodies.

I have taught reproduction, reproductive rights, and social justice in a variety of settings, including two-hour workshop sessions at activist conventions, such as the National Hip Hop Political Convention held in 2004 in Newark, New Jersey. I have also incorporated these issues into introductory women’s studies courses, general education undergraduate
courses focused on law and public policy, and an upper division undergraduate course (also taken by graduate students), "Gender, Race and Class." These courses were taught at two large, public universities, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and San Diego State University (SDSU). Although the students at both institutions are predominantly white, SDSU has a significantly larger percentage of Latino/Latina students.

Given student demand and enthusiasm for analyzing reproductive rights issues in my department at SDSU, I developed an upper division undergraduate/graduate course, "Reproductive Rights and Justice" which I first taught in fall 2008. Although I have given guest lectures on women of color and reproductive justice at law schools and schools of public health, conducted research on reproductive policy, and been active in reproductive rights politics for more than a decade, putting this course together was a challenge primarily because of the interdisciplinary nature of the field.

Instead of focusing on the narrow concept of individual choice, which dominates discussions of reproductive rights in the United States, I wanted to develop a course that addressed the human rights and social justice aspects of reproduction; that is, I wanted students to understand how social, political, and economic institutions and processes, and intersecting oppressions and privileges can affect the reproductive choices of individual women and entire communities. In the remainder of this essay, I discuss the theoretical foundations of reproductive justice and offer some strategies for incorporating this framework into courses on the politics of reproduction.

**The Foundations of Reproductive Justice**

Many activists have become disillusioned with the mainstream reproductive rights movement in the US as it is represented through national organizations such as NARAL Pro-Choice America, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the Feminist Majority Foundation. Many scholars and activists have criticized the "pro-choice" rhetoric of the mainstream movement for being too narrowly focused on abortion, arguing that after Roe v. Wade (1973), "the right to choose" devolved into the singular "right to have an abortion" (A. Smith, "Beyond Pro-Choice"). This narrow agenda has been detrimental to other reproductive rights issues—including the right to safe and effective contraception and access to healthcare—that are of particular interest to women of color, immigrant women, and low-income women.¹ As a result, a coalition of activist groups has created a parallel movement based on the concept of "reproductive justice," which places social justice and international human rights doctrines, rather than individual choice, at the center of the debate.

Women of color activist organizations have been pivotal in developing the reproductive justice framework. SisterSong, a coalition of more than eighty women of color and allied advocacy organizations, argues that reproductive justice:

¹ See Saletan for a fuller discussion of the "pro-choice" rhetoric adopted by the mainstream reproductive rights movement.
Make[s] the connections between women and their families, and the conditions necessary for women to make reproductive decisions about their lives: opportunities to work at living wages, opportunities for affordable quality education, responsible and accessible public services such as good health care, quality schools, and accessible and affordable child care, freedom from personal and state violence, and environmentally safe communities....By shifting the definition of the problem to one of reproductive oppression (the control and exploitation of women, girls, and individuals through our bodies, sexuality, labor, and reproduction) rather than a narrow focus on protecting the legal right to abortion, we are developing a more inclusive vision of how to move forward in building a new movement. (Ross, "Understanding Reproductive Choice"

The reproductive justice framework is useful for examining a range of issues beyond abortion and contraception including: government-sponsored fertility-control programs, coercive sterilization campaigns, the connections among immigration policy and reproduction, the sexual regulation of women receiving welfare benefits, the ethics of genetic testing and assisted reproductive technology (ART), the criminalization of motherhood, and the right to create “alternative” families. The reproductive justice framework also allows instructors to connect reproductive rights to environmental justice, highlighting concerns about infertility rates and toxins in mothers’ breast milk in communities located next to chemical plants and toxic dumpsites (Bullard). Using the reproductive justice framework, students are able to analyze how reproductive rights intersect with broader issues such as economic justice, poverty, racism, access to health care, and LGBTQI rights.

Many people assume that women of color have not been actively involved in the social movement for reproductive freedom, and that the current reproductive justice movement is the first significant instance in which women of color have taken on leadership roles within this movement (Ross, “African-American Women and Abortion”). To challenge this misconception, I assign Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice, a collection of essays that presents a more inclusive history of the reproductive rights movement (Silliman et al.). An alternative text is Jennifer Nelson’s Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement, which is a comprehensive examination of how women of color merged the political philosophy and agendas of the Black and Puerto Rican Nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s with the principles of reproductive rights.

I also include primary documents published by activists and policy advocates. These materials provide students with a better sense of the evolution of reproductive justice. A report by Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACR), entitled A New Vision for Advancing Our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Justice, is particularly useful for introducing students to the concept of reproductive oppression:

The control and exploitation of women and girls through our bodies, sexuality, and reproduction is a strategic pathway to regulating
entire populations that is implemented by families, communities, institutions, and society. Thus, the regulation of reproduction and exploitation of women’s bodies and labor is both a tool and a result of systems of oppression based on race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age and immigration status. This is reproductive oppression as we use the term. (Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice 2)

ACRJ argues that placing reproductive oppression at the center of its analysis distinguishes the reproductive justice framework from the concepts of reproductive rights and reproductive health. Although many people use these terms interchangeably, each represents a different approach to reproduction. Reproductive rights narrowly focuses on the lack of legal protection and enforcement of laws, while reproductive health is more specifically concerned with the lack of access to reproductive health services and the lack of accurate health information and data. Reproductive justice, in contrast, seeks to transform political, social, and economic institutions and values grassroots organizing within traditionally marginalized communities.

One of the primary documents I assign is a public statement, “We Remember,” issued by African American Women are for Reproductive Freedom in the late 1980s; this group included prominent political African American women, including Byllye Avery, Shirley Chisholm, Dorothy Height, and Rep. Maxine Waters. The statement addresses government restrictions to abortion, particularly the prohibition against using federal resources, such as Medicaid, for funding abortions (Springer, Still Lifting). Although this statement does not explicitly use the term “reproductive justice,” it foreshadows the emerging movement:

We understand why African American women risked their lives then, and why they seek legal abortion now. It's been a matter of survival. Hunger and homelessness. Inadequate housing and income to properly provide for themselves and their children. Family instability. Rape. Incest. Abuse. Too young. Too old. Too sick, too tired. Emotional, physical, mental, economic, social—the reasons for not carrying a pregnancy to term are endless and varied, personal, urgent and private. (Springer, Still Lifting 39)\(^5\)

When developing the curriculum for a reproductive course or workshop, it is useful to keep the three components of reproductive justice as outlined by SisterSong in mind: 1) the right not to have children, 2) the right to have children, and 3) the right to parent one’s children.\(^6\) It is also important to emphasize the theoretical foundations of reproductive justice: 1) the feminist critique of “choice” by feminist scholars such as Dorothy Roberts and Andrea Smith; 2) the theory of intersectionality as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins; 3) the historical scholarship on fertility control, especially by Angela Davis, Andrea Smith, and Rickie Solinger; 4) the political work of activist organizations such as Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, the National Latina Health Organization, the Black Women’s Health Imperative, and SisterSong (Nelson; Silliman et al; Springer, Still Lifting 39).

\(^5\) I also use articles from a special edition of *Off Our Backs* focusing on women of color and reproductive justice (Ross and Roberts).

\(^6\) I would add sexual pleasure and desire, sexual identity, and free sexual expression to this definition of reproductive justice.
Living for the Revolution); 5) international human rights doctrines, including the Universal Declaration for Human Rights (1948); and 6) the connections to other social justice movements that focus on issues such as economic justice, social welfare, the adoption and foster care systems, prison reform, immigration policy, environmental justice, and LGBTQI rights

Reproductive Justice Pedagogy

In fall 2008, I began my Reproductive Rights and Justice course at SDSU with a discussion of the biological aspects of reproduction. This is a subject that feminists have traditionally avoided lest they be accused of essentialism or biological determinism (Thiel). Although it is understandable why feminist educators would not want to promote or reinforce essentialist ideas, we cannot deny that our biological functions shape our lives. We are born, have sex, menstruate, reproduce, age, and die, among other things. It is important that we understand these processes.

On the first day of the class, I tested students' knowledge of basic anatomy and reproductive processes either as an in-class quiz or online survey. Questions included:

1. What is the cervix?
2. In what year was abortion legalized in the United States?
3. Over the last decade, the teen pregnancy rate has: a) increased, b) declined or c) stayed the same?
4. What percentage of women obtain abortions in a given year in the U.S.? a) 2% b) 8% c) 13% d) 27%
5. Name at least two barrier methods used for contraception.

On the same quiz, I also asked students to identify specific parts of female genitalia on a diagram. Only two of my students could identify the cervix. Several students did not know more than two of the seven parts, and several used slang to refer to some of the parts, referring to the urethra as "the pee hole" for example.

At the end of the quiz, students were asked to write one question (about sex, sexuality, or reproduction) that they have always wanted answered and/or were too embarrassed to ask. A surprising number of students wanted to learn about the physiology of orgasms and wondered how to achieve one. Based on the results of the completed quizzes, I devised a basic review of anatomy, which incorporated sexual pleasure, with the assistance of a local sex educator. I paired this review with chapters from Our Bodies, Ourselves.

The sex educator, who owns and runs a local feminist, queer-friendly sex boutique, was the guest lecturer for the anatomy session. Tailoring her presentation to the results of the quiz, she conducted a pleasure-based anatomy lesson, using diagrams, videos, and a plastic model. She also discussed female ejaculation (which many of my students did not know existed) and
gave a brief history of sex toys; she had several toys on hand for students to examine. Her presentation provoked a frank discussion of sexual pleasure and desire. This session helped to establish rapport among the students and me that allowed us to have open class discussions for the rest of the semester.

The remainder of the course focused more specifically on the political, legal, economic, and cultural dimensions of reproductive justice; I used the results of the initial quiz and the basic anatomy session to tailor the lectures and the class discussions for the next three class sessions. The topics of these sessions were: current US reproductive policy, the history of reproduction in the US, and teen sexuality and pregnancy. These lectures were designed to dismantle some of the misconceptions students had about reproductive issues. The students were surprised to learn that only about two percent of women in the United States have abortions in a given year and that the US teen pregnancy rate has been declining over the last two decades. These revelations led to an in-class analysis of why myths and stereotypes about out-of-control teenage pregnancy rates and women using abortion as a form of birth control persist, despite evidence to the contrary. To deepen this discussion, students worked in pairs to analyze the introductory section of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, the so-called welfare reform bill. I asked students to address the following questions: Who are the targeted groups? How are they constructed? What exactly is the "problem" identified in the bill? What are the "solutions" to this problem?

In the process of answering these questions, students were surprised that the main focus of the legislation was on teenage girls (who only comprise a small portion of the population who are poor and receive public assistance), and unwed mothers, and that the proposed solutions to end poverty were abstinence, "responsible fatherhood," and marriage. The students also noted that many of the conclusions and findings (which mostly consist of un-cited statistics taken out of context) were inconsistent with the assigned readings. Specifically, they noticed that the legislation did not address the elimination of poverty, nor the overall well-being of citizens who are less fortunate; instead, the emphasis was on the supposed immorality of unwed motherhood. It was apparent to the students that the Congressional supporters of this legislation were arguing that single motherhood is the primary cause of poverty, crime, lower cognitive skills among poor children, and the overall moral decline in civil society. Moreover, students perceptively argued that the single-minded emphasis on teenage girls (and crime rates) is a means of racializing the debate over welfare without explicitly talking about race and ethnicity. After all, they argued, the prevailing public image of a welfare mother is that of an unwed, promiscuous African American teenaged girl who lives in the inner city. In other words, the coded language of the legislation plays into ingrained cultural assumptions about the alleged hyper-sexuality of African American women and the supposed inclination toward criminality of poor communities of color.

I dedicated a couple of the sessions in the reproductive justice course to representations of reproduction in popular culture. I paired film screen-
ings (either in their entirety or in relevant excerpts) with readings that provided cultural analyses of reproduction and articles that incorporated public opinion data on various reproductive rights issues. Juno (2007) was particularly effective for analyzing the portrayal of teen pregnancy and sexuality, abortion, surrogacy, and adoption in popular films. The film is a tragicomedy about an independent-minded teenage girl, Juno, who is unintentionally impregnated by her friend, Paulie. Juno ultimately decides to hand her unborn child over for adoption by an upper middle-class, professional heterosexual couple. I screened the first forty-five minutes of the film, which covers Juno’s discovery of the unintended pregnancy, the events leading to her decision not to terminate the pregnancy, and the meeting that she and her father have with the potential adoptive couple.

In the week prior to the film screening, class discussions were focused on teen sexuality and pregnancy for which I assigned two compelling readings: Amy Schalet’s “Raging Hormones, Regulated Love: Adolescent Sexuality and the Constitution of the Modern Individual in the United States and the Netherlands,” and a recent government report that evaluates the content of federally-funded abstinence-only programs (United States House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform). For the week of the screening, students were also assigned two news articles commenting on the representation of abortion in popular culture and a report conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation that analyzes the portrayal of sex on television (Kunkel et al.; Navarro; Rickey).

To encourage class discussion after the screening, I distributed copies of movie reviews from three viewpoints: a critic from a mainstream magazine (Schwarzbilam), a critic from a feminist journal (Anna Lisa) and a conservative columnist (Schalkly). Students were surprised by the feminist stance of film critic Lisa Schwarzbilam in Entertainment Weekly. She writes:

The old-school feminist in me wishes Juno spent more time, even a tart sentence or two, acknowledging that the options taken for granted by this one attractive, articulate teen are in fact hard-won, precious rights, and need to be guarded by a new-generation army of Junes and Bleekers, spreading the word by text message as well as by hamburger phone. Separate but equal truth: This movie is so delightful and good-hearted a portrait of the kind of new-generation army I’d like to hang with that I accept the admonition “Silencio, old woman.” (1)

This critique resonated with several students who thought that the film’s handling of the abortion issue was glib at best, especially the scenes chronicling Juno’s encounters with a pro-life protester and an indifferent receptionist at an abortion clinic.

In contrast, the students were outraged by the assertions of conservative columnist Phyllis Schalkly. The following excerpt elicited the most ire from students:

Juno, which won an Academy Award for best original screenplay,
is a movie sure to delight feminists. The script answers "No" to the question posed in the title of Maureen Dowd's book, "Are Men Necessary?" Juno is the name of a bratty 16-year-old girl (and I do mean "girl" because she's too immature to be called a woman). She finds herself in what the feminists call an unplanned pregnancy after initiating a loveless one-night incident with a classmate named Paulie....

The theme of this movie isn't love, romance, or respect for life, but the triumph of feminist ideology; i.e., the irrelevancy of men, especially fathers. The men in the movie are likable, but marginalized; beyond their sperm and paychecks, they have no value worth considering, and can be thrown overboard by independent women and girls. (Schafly 1)

Comparing and contrasting the opinions in these articles helped frame the class discussion. We were able to analyze the prevailing gender and sexual assumptions and stereotypes in society, and consider how the assigned readings challenged those assumptions. The students astutely examined the ways in which class was marked in the film, through clothes, possessions, lifestyle, and cultural tastes and assumptions. For example, they highlighted the marked class differences between Juno and her working-class family and the suburban, professional couple seeking to adopt Juno's child; these differences were especially apparent in the scene in which Juno and her father meet with the yuppie couple and their lawyer in the couple's comfortable home in an affluent neighborhood.

The Assignments

Given that most of my courses have a law and social policy focus, I design assignments that simulate the kinds of activities a policy analyst would perform in practice. In these assignments, I usually asked students to assume the role of an aide to a member of Congress, a state legislator, or a policy director of an advocacy group. This is important given that many of my women's studies students are preparing for careers in advocacy, social services, and other practice-oriented careers with a social justice focus. The role-play allows students to understand how to implement a reproductive justice framework by considering some of the following questions: How does one incorporate a reproductive justice framework within the agenda of an environmental rights organization? How does one use a reproductive justice framework when developing a piece of legislation for a state legislator who may only have a cursory knowledge of the relevant issues? How does one articulate a reproductive justice perspective while doing community-organizing work?

I require students to turn in short briefs of the court cases that relate to reproductive rights, such as Roe v. Wade (1973), Webster v. Reproductive Health Services (1989), and Planned Parenthood v. Casey (1992). The process of writing these briefs helps students to prepare for class discussions.
Students focus on the following questions in their briefs: Who are the plaintiffs and defendants in the case? What are the specific circumstances of the case? What is the claim being made by the plaintiff? Is the plaintiff challenging a state or federal law or a particular organizational practice? What is the constitutional basis on which the case is grounded? What was the final ruling of the court? How did the justices vote? Who voted in the majority? Who dissented? Why? What was the reasoning behind the ruling? What was the final ruling’s relation to the lower court ruling (e.g. did it uphold or strike down a lower court’s decision)?

In one graduate-level social policy course, students were required to put together a policy-briefing portfolio on the issue of their choice for their final projects. This portfolio included an executive summary of the issue, a list of ten talking points, an annotated bibliography of ten academic, government, and legal sources, and a ten-minute oral presentation. Inspired by Amber Dean’s approach to incorporating feminist activism in courses, I took a different approach in the 500-level “Reproductive Rights and Justice” course. Students were given a choice of action-oriented activities for their final projects including interviewing activists or volunteering for a group, such as Planned Parenthood of San Diego and Riverside Counties or California Latinas for Reproductive Justice.

The students in the reproductive justice course embraced the action-oriented final project. Several students chose to create ‘zines that targeted young women, while a few opted for media analyses. One student put together a handbook on reproductive rights and justice for residents of the state of California. Another student, a biology major interested in feminist science studies (and the sole male in the class), created a website on menopause and estrogen replacement therapy with the goal of building an online community. Another student profiled a local evangelical Christian-based crisis pregnancy center located near campus; the final product was a revealing look at how such centers use religion, abstinence-only programs, and ultrasound images to convince women to continue their pregnancies and to promote their “pro-life” agenda. Another student examined the history of ballot initiatives that would require parental notification for teen girls seeking abortions in the state of California; the analysis included an interview with the leader of the local conservative advocacy group that has been responsible for sponsoring and bankrolling these initiatives in recent years.

Assignments do not have to focus solely on law, politics, and public policy. In the community workshops I have conducted, I start by having participants reflect upon their personal experiences with reproduction, sex, sexuality, and their bodies. I then show how governmental laws and policies, such as the prohibition of the use of federal monies to fund abortions for low-income women and parental notification/consent requirements for teen girls seeking abortions, are related to their experiences. This activity can be adapted into a writing assignment where students dissect their personal experiences in a series of journal entries; these entries could be used as a springboard for class discussion. An instructor must use cau-
tion when employing this strategy, however, since it might lead to students revealing disturbing memories of unintended pregnancies, abortions, adoptions, sexual assault, or incest. An alternative assignment would be to use published narratives that describe women’s experiences with a range of reproductive health issues. I suggest using two recent films, *I Had an Abortion* (2005) which documents the first-person accounts of ten women who have had an abortion; and *The Abortion Diaries* (c2006) which covers a variety of issues including motherhood, work, sexuality, and violence.

**Conclusion**

By definition and design, a course on reproductive justice is challenging because of the focus on reproduction, sex and sexuality and the centrality of race, ethnicity, class, ability, oppression, and privilege in class discussions; students might be unnerved by the analyses of some (or even most) of the assigned authors, such as Dorothy Roberts, Andrea Smith, Rickie Solinger, and the Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice. It is important, therefore, to establish ground rules for respectful dialogue: do not interrupt other classmates, do not provide knee-jerk or judgmental reactions, and listen to the opinions of others before responding.9 The multi-pronged approach, including statistical and research data, films, and court cases that I have proposed is something that was developed over time through trial and error. This approach can mitigate the intensity of some of the subjects covered and the biases that might surface. Discussions can be off-putting at first, not only for students but for some instructors. Comfort grows with familiarity and practice. In an ideal world, we would talk candidly about sex, sexuality, reproduction, and our bodies without shame, fear, or disgust. We would also not fear teen sexuality and provide teens and children with accurate knowledge about these matters so that they can make good decisions about their health and their lives. Sadly, we are not quite there yet. In the meantime, it is up to a few dedicated educators to ensure that we get closer to that world.

---

**Works Cited**


—. "Where are the Women in Public Policy Cases?" Women's Policy Journal 1 (2001): 87-98.


KIMALA PRICE is an Assistant Professor of Women's Studies at San Diego State University, where she teaches courses on women, law and policy; gender, race and class; and reproductive justice. Dr. Price holds a Ph.D. in political science and a graduate certificate in women's studies from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. For more than fifteen years, she has been active in the reproductive justice movement.

CATHERINE RAISSIGUIER is the Coordinator and a Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at New Jersey City University. The author of Becoming Women/Becoming Workers: Identity Formation in a French High School (1994), Dr. Raissiguier is at work on the final revisions of her second book; Reinventing the Republic: Gender, Migration, and Citizenship in France, which is under contract with Stanford University Press. She has also published in such journals as International Feminist Journal of Politics, Radical History Review, and Educational Foundations.

CYNTHIA RICHARDS, Professor of English at Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio, won the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies Innovative Course Design Competition in 2002-03 and received a Fulbright Teaching Award in 2004. Currently, she is editing, along with Mary Ann O'Donnell, Manhattan College, the forthcoming Approaches to Teaching Aphra Behn's Oroonoko. Her most recent essay, "The Body of Her Work, the Work of Her Body: Accounting for the Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft" will appear in the summer 2009 issue of Eighteenth-Century Fiction.

JOELLE RUBY RYAN is a Ph.D. Candidate in American Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University. Her dissertation examines the gendered and sexual politics of transgender images in film and television. In addition to LGBT and media studies, Joelle's research interests include feminist theory, fat studies, and sex work. She has taught classes in a variety of disciplines, including Women's Studies, American Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Film Studies. She has created several short films and published a book of poems entitled Gender Quake. She is also an activist dedicated to issues of racial and economic justice, feminism and peace.

JOSJE WEUSTEN is a lecturer and junior researcher at the Centre for Gender and Diversity of Maastricht University in the Netherlands. She has been involved in the development, coordination, and teaching of several undergraduate courses in cultural studies and gender studies. Her dissertation focuses on the analysis of cultural and literary representations of motherhood and fatherhood in the Netherlands from 1980 onwards, in which discourse analysis is one of the methods employed.