"Historical Studies on Mortality," special issue, *Canadian Studies in Population* 39, no. 3–4 (2012): 135–136.

Reconceiving the Second Sex: Men, Masculinity and Reproduction

Edited by Marcia C. Inhorn, Tine Tjørnhøf-Thomsen, Helene Goldberg, and Maruska la Cour Mosegaard
New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009
ISBN 978-1-84545-472-2 (Hardback)
ISBN 978-1-84545-473-9 (Paperback)
$34.95, 402 pp.

Reviewed by Gillian Ranson
University of Calgary
ranson@ucalgary.ca

Simone de Beauvoir, the French feminist philosopher, famously referred to women as the "second sex," marginalized by their association with reproduction. The editors of this volume turn this notion on its head. As they contend in the book's introduction, the association of women with reproduction, and the subsequent almost exclusive scholarly focus on issues related to women's reproductive health, has accompanied a perception of men as uninterested and uninvolved in reproductive issues. This perception has led to a significant gap in understanding of men's relation to sexuality, fertility and reproduction. In this domain at least, men, not women, are "the second sex."

So "reconceiving" the second sex, the goal of this collection, involves a radical shift in focus. It requires "bringing men back into the reproductive imagery, as reproductive partners, progenitors, fathers, nurturers, and decision-makers" (p. 3). There is also a something of a disciplinary agenda. The book—which, according to the editors, is the first attempt by anthropologists to "examine men as reproducers" (p. 3)—is made up of essays from (mainly) medical anthropology, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork. The point is made, explicitly in some of the opening chapters, and then by example in later chapters, that anthropological research can make a valuable contribution to the study of men and reproduction by its traditional focus on local contexts and local variations. It can be an important accompaniment to large-scale demographic and biomedical research that may not be so nuanced, and can inform program and policy interventions that might otherwise be unworkable because they fail to take local context into account.

In other words, anthropological research can counter the tendency to universalize men's experience as sexual beings and as reproducers. In a deliberately challenging and provocative opening chapter, Matthew Gutmann points to the success of feminist scholars, following de Beauvoir, in demonstrating that for women, biology is not destiny. But, he argues, men's sexual destinies have tended to remain unproblematized. In particular, the category of the male heterosexual, "despite and perhaps because of its hidden dominance in models of sexuality, has […] too long gone overdetermined and understudied" (p. 75). With the intention of helping to mark this hitherto unmarked category, Gutmann proceeds to offer a list of "common mistakes and lies" about men, sexuality, and reproduction. His list (and the evidence he draws on to make his case) challenges many commonly held beliefs, among them: that reproduction and reproductive health only concern women; that male reproduction equals male sexuality; that men do not take responsibility for birth control; and that men's sexual impulse is a (natural) given.

This chapter leads Part 1 of the book, titled "Masculinity and Reproduction." According to the editors, this section is intended to introduce male reproduction from multiple theoretical perspectives. This intention no doubt explains the inclusion here of a chapter by Lisa Moore on the way increasing knowledge about sperm, and the way that knowledge is manipulated by various social actors, links to (changing) constructions of masculinities. While the chapter is interesting, it perhaps comes too soon and therefore coheres less well than the two other chapters in this section, by Matthew Dudgeon and Marcia Inhorn, which continue Gutmann's work of interrogating and de-

constructing common assumptions about men in excellent overviews, respectively, of anthropological research on gender, masculinity, and reproduction, and of men's influence on women's reproductive health.

The book's three remaining parts take up specific issues relating to men and reproduction. Part II deals with fertility and family planning, Part III deals with infertility and assisted reproduction, and Part IV covers childbirth and fatherhood. On every topic, illustrations of the way masculinity is constructed in a global array of local contexts are laid out. They contribute to a compelling argument for the power of anthropological research to illuminate many hidden corners of masculinity and reproduction—the point, and the strength, of the book.

Part II, on fertility and family planning, includes a chapter on the way manhood is framed in the marketing of the much anticipated "male pill." Another chapter unpacks the gender dynamics of contraceptive use and abortion in Vietnam, where according to author Nguyen Thi Thuy Hanh, the almost exclusive focus on women as being responsible for contraception, and the correspondingly limited male involvement in pregnancy prevention, has also been partly responsible for the country's high abortion rates. A third chapter, based on fieldwork in an ethnic minority village in southwest China, demonstrates the way male village leaders construct a "myth" about the village's conformity to national reproductive policies, while obscuring obvious violations and ignoring the pressing reproductive health needs of village women.

The section on infertility and assisted reproductive technologies is particularly interesting, since it sheds light on one of the most deeply hidden, and arguably the most stigmatizing, dimensions of masculinity and reproduction. Helene Goldberg's chapter explores the topic in an Israeli-Jewish context, in which "ideas of gender are constructed around military men and reproductive women" (p. 210), and military metaphors are also used to envisage and describe sperm. Infertility, as the author points out, is a public concern in Israel, which reportedly has the largest number of fertility clinics and the greatest per capita use of fertility treatments in the world. Yet silence prevails when it comes to men's infertility. Drawing on participant observation in fertility clinics in the Jerusalem area, she examines the extent to which a focus on male infertility becomes a discussion of sperm and, inevitably, sexual intercourse, with the (erroneous) conflation of infertility and sexual impotence only adding to the silence. Tine Tjørnhøj-Thomesen's chapter in this section examines the way a group of Danish men understand fatherhood and family life, and come to terms with their childlessness and their own masculine identities.

The concluding chapter in this section is by Marcia Inhorn, who co-authored two earlier chapters, and who is one of the book's co-editors. Drawn from field work in Egypt and Lebanon, it is a fascinating examination of why both fertile and infertile men in both countries voluntarily undergo "male genital cutting" through painful genital surgeries, including varicocelectomy (a procedure believed to increase fertility by removing varicose veins from the testicles). As Inhorn points out, this procedure has been widely criticized as being ineffective in improving men's fertility. Yet men undergo it, and other forms of genital surgery, in hopes of enhancing their reproductive capacity. She theorizes that they do this partly because of expectations about masculinity in the context of classic patriarchal family life, but also because they wish to share the burdens of reproduction with wives they care deeply for. Inhorn notes that in the Middle East, "many infertile men share painful 'body histories' with their wives […], a fact that has been little discussed by feminist scholars, infertility scholars, or the public health experts concerned with men and reproductive health" (p. 273).

The four chapters in the final section, on childbirth and fatherhood, are very good in their own right. But in my judgement they contribute less to the book's overall project of shedding new (anthropological) light on men's reproductive involvement. This may derive partly from a disciplinary bias of my own. As a sociologist working in the area of gender and families, I was surprised by the statement in the editors' introduction to this section that "fatherhood has not played a central role in studies and conceptualizations of masculinity" (pp. 2–3). Not in anthropology, perhaps, but there is a burgeoning sociological literature on the topic, which scholars interested in men and reproduction could profitably draw on. What the chapters on fatherhood and childbirth in this volume do certainly contribute is a global focus, with reports of research on men and childbirth education in Israel, middle-class US men's participation in pre-birth "contact" with their children in utero, husband-assisted childbirth among the Rarámuri of Northern Mexico, and the construction and experience of fatherhood among a group of gay Danish fathers.

Readers are left to draw their own conclusions about the wealth of material in this book. There is no synthesizing final chapter—perhaps because, as was made plain at the start, the point is to focus on the local, in all its splendid diversity, in order *not* to universalize. If some themes do seem to recur—notably, the privileging of dominant understandings of masculinity in many contexts—they are not the focus. This book is eminently successful in "bringing men back in" to the study of sexuality, fertility, and reproduction. It is also a thought-provoking and enjoyable read.