

Reproductive Justice: An Introduction

By Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017.
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Bringing Reproductive Justice and Activist Scholarship to Public Administration

Since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to an abortion in June 2022, questions abound as to what comes next. Although it was published in 2017, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* helps us understand how America got here, and how to move forward. Like other iconic duos—lightning and thunder, coffee and cream, a candle and a flame—authors Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger are the perfect duo to provide this primer. With depth and breadth, they carry us through the movement's aim to identify how reproductive oppression results from the intersection of multiple oppressions and is connected to the struggle for social justice and human rights. At the outset, they offer reflexivity statements that trace their backgrounds, the lens they bring, their professional expertise, and each describes how they pair well together. As coauthors, they invite us into this intimate, radical, sacred space.

For instance, Ross is a human rights and reproductive justice activist who was one of the founders of the movement. She spent two decades as a leader of Sister-Song Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective. As a Black feminist, she has provided a voice to the interwoven nature of white supremacy and reproductive destinies. Ross also stresses that she has needed historical and sociological analysis to support her activism.

That is where Solinger enters the equation. As an academic and historian, Rickie has studied the intersection of race, gender, sovereignty, and class for more than 25 years. As a white, Jewish teenager, she was keenly interested in understanding the events that led to the Holocaust and other atrocities. Conversely, history also taught her the power of voice, storytelling, and to look

for “champions of resistance as models,” a moniker she bestows on her coauthor (Ross and Solinger 2017, 4).

I highlight that this book was written by an activist and a scholar for a specific reason. In addition to providing an astounding intersectional analysis, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* also exemplifies good activist scholarship, “broadly defined as politically engaged scholarship which aims at furthering justice and equality of various forms” (Lennox and Yildiz 2020). Public administration continues to push up against the dominant paradigm of positivism. Thus, this book also serves as a guide for activist scholars because they are needed in the “range of heterogeneity in research traditions in public administration” (Ricucci 2010, 4).

In this book review, I first summarize some key takeaways from each chapter. Readers should note that the book is structured around the three primary principles of reproductive justice: 1) the right *not* to have a child; 2) the right to *have* a child; and 3) the right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments (Ross and Solinger 2017, 9). To my surprise, this book is much more than an account of abortion rights, legal decisions, and the pro-choice/pro-life debate. And it should be noted that this review is but a glimpse. After recounting some high points, I note how public administration scholars, activists, instructors, and students would benefit from this text. Finally, I conclude by highlighting how Ross and Solinger can contribute to the dialogue and practice of advancing equity in the post-*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* world.

Chapter Highlights

Chapter 1, “A Reproductive Justice History” acquaints readers with the core tenets of this framework. First, it highlights how the white supremacist, capitalistic

foundations of the United States have impacted fertility, sexuality, and parenting through the present day. Several laws and policies are noted to demonstrate how quickly the colonies and new nation began racializing the population to uphold primacy for whites. For instance, the Virginia Colony passed a law that “defined the status of a child—slave or free—as following the status of the mother” in 1662 (Ross and Solinger 2017, 18). Although this position was opposite to the English common law tradition of defining children based on the position of their father, the law soon spread to other colonies. This ensured that enslaved women of color who became pregnant at the hands of white owners would perpetuate a lineage of children who would be born into slavery as well.

Ross and Solinger incorporate various examples in their account of the development of discriminatory reproductive policies throughout the course of each century, such as the outlawing of interracial marriage, the criminalization of “mixed” children, the Indian Removal Act of 1830, 19th century laws against contraception and abortion, forcing Native children into boarding schools, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, eugenics of the 20th century, forced sterilization, and Depression Era programs that aimed to reduce the number of children born to people in poverty. The false racist ideas that were touted to justify such policies were founded on “an old charge: African American women and other women of color were hypersexual. They did not have the intellectual or the moral resources to be good mothers raising future citizens. Lacking these qualities, they did not qualify as rights-bearing persons” (Ross and Solinger 2017, 39).

Beginning in the 1950s, this chapter also outlines how reproductive justice issues have sparked some of the most charged domestic policy debates in American life. The authors chart a clear course from the legalization of birth control to *Roe v. Wade* to the Hyde Amendment, which outlawed the use of federal funding to provide abortion services for poor women in need. Notably, this chapter introduces the reasoning that white feminists selected the term “choice” in their campaign for abortion rights. More importantly, it provides an important critique made by women of color activists, explaining that the “pro-choice” position is problematic because it only accommodates “women who can afford to enter the marketplaces of choices” (47). The lack of inclusive policymaking further exacerbated efforts to forcibly

control the bodies of poor women of color rather than ensuring that they and their children had access to the services they needed to thrive.

The first chapter culminates by describing how the reproductive justice movement was founded in the 1990s in response to gaps noted throughout the chapter. Several organizations led by women of color came together to assert that “reproductive dignity did not depend simply on making good *personal choices*” (Ross and Solinger 2017, 54). From that moment onward, activists, scholars, and policymakers have considered reproductive justice as the right to reproduce, the right not to reproduce, and the right to parent children in a safe and healthy world. Instead of “choice,” the two key words that they have emphasized are *human rights*.

In chapter 2, “Reproductive Justice in the Twenty-First Century,” the authors provide a thorough explanation of what this movement is and why it matters. A major component revolves around the centrality of storytelling. Stories are critical because they help people understand what it looks like when human rights are either protected or violated. Ross and Solinger explain that the movement requires *polyvocality*, or “many voices telling their stories that together may be woven into a unified movement for human rights” (Ross and Solinger 2017, 59). They also stress the importance of *centering*, as demonstrated by 12 Black women who placed themselves at the center of the lens to find new ways to describe reality from their standpoint at a pro-choice conference. They noted, “while abortion was a crucial resource for us, we also needed health care, education, jobs, day care, and the right to motherhood” (Ross and Solinger 2017, 64). In other words, the most historically disadvantaged and vulnerable people with the fewest resources must be front and center of the movement to address systemic oppression.

Key definitions are provided in the context of a comprehensive matrix of reproductive activism proposed for the 21st century. Three specific frameworks—reproductive health, reproductive rights, and reproductive justice—are defined and introduced as distinctive yet interrelated. Specifically, Ross and Solinger (2017) note:

Reproductive Justice is a movement-building and organizing framework that identifies how reproductive oppression is the result of the intersection of multiple oppressions and is inherently connected to the struggle for social justice and human rights.

Reproductive justice argues that social institutions, the environment, economics, and culture affect each woman's reproductive life. Reproductive justice activists invoke the global human rights system as the relevant legal framework using treaties, [and] standards, [while] moving beyond the U.S. Constitution. (69)

The remainder of chapter 2 expands on this definition. It describes the limitations of the U.S. legal system, which constructs law based on intentions rather than effects of discriminatory practices. As an alternative, the authors propose following the legal precedent set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) that was crafted after World War II. The chapter further stresses the need for this approach given the reproductive oppression that has led to "the control and exploitation of women, girls, and individuals through our bodies, sexuality, [labor], and reproduction . . . It involves systems of oppression that are based on race, ability, class, gender, sexuality, age, and immigration status" (90).

Furthermore, the impact of neoliberalism on reproductive justice is outlined, demonstrating how American elites worked to construct an administrative state that promotes corporate welfare rather than social welfare. Relatedly, it notes how the question of who should be a mother emerged from white supremacy and class bias in the Reagan Era. As the authors close the chapter, they note: "With scant job opportunities, few living wage jobs, and severely slashed public services, child-bearing feels much more like a class privilege than a choice" (Ross and Solinger 2017, 109).

Chapter 3, "Managing Fertility," expands on how motherhood as a privilege has evolved. It notes that the promises of second wave feminism were only achievable based on a woman's access to money and other resources, all of which were mainly reserved for white women in the middle class or above. Ross and Solinger further penetrate the limits of "choice" from the perspective of low-income women of color. They link the lack of affordable health care writ large to the lack of affordable *reproductive* health care.

Constitutional law and white feminists' prioritization of the U.S. Supreme Court to advance this movement is also examined through a critical lens. Returning to the call for a human rights approach, they note that: "Human rights are first most powerfully expressed as

moral commitments, then political structures and opportunities, and then as legal demands" (Ross and Solinger 2017, 127). As previously noted, the Hyde Amendment limited the protections of *Roe v. Wade* for low-income women, which also opened the floodgates for criminalizing social problems like poverty and illness. Considering this through a post-*Dobbs* lens, the UDHR is particularly relevant to consult as a guide for future legal action.

Furthermore, the chapter discusses how reproductive justice analysis has provided understanding of how certain bodies are marked as healthy and fit for reproduction. Just as true, other bodies are not, such as those of immigrants. The lack of resources provided to the most socially vulnerable leads to the predictable consequences of unintended pregnancy. Yet, neoliberalism promotes the narrative of this being a lifestyle mistake rather than product of inadequate public services. The authors stress that the goal of fertility management should be to enhance health and well-being instead of reducing assistance, increasing religious and financial barriers, and blaming individuals for their situation. Furthermore, they argue that effective antipoverty programs must include reproductive justice (Ross and Solinger 2017, 158).

Finally, chapter 4, "Reproductive Justice and the Right to Parent" examines the other two tenets of the framework. It begins by restating the aims of building a world in which all children are wanted and cared for, in which all families receive support, and where, around the globe, priorities are on creating conditions for healthy, thriving lives. Again, the authors move the conversation beyond the choice debate. They highlight incorporating a lens toward other social needs, such as education and affordable housing. They promote the application of the social determinants of health to replace the "fitness standard" currently cast on many low-income women of color when it comes to motherhood. Furthermore, they highlight the use of dog whistles to maintain *heteropatriarchy*, or the ways in which European settlers used genocide and enslavement to colonize the United States and entrench ideas about sexuality, reproduction, and "value" that elevated white people and degraded everyone else (Ross and Solinger 2017, 173). Instead, they reframe the debate and make it into sexual citizenship based on the UDHR.

In other words, motherhood is a human right and should be treated as such. This primer urges readers to

understand the basis of birth injustice, such as obstetric violence in the form of cesarean sections performed against the will of mothers. They highlight the racial politics of motherhood, noting how white supremacy leads to the dehumanization of women, which enables vulnerability to sexual violence to persist. Furthermore, the massive expansion of the prison system is noted as a highly problematic injustice to women of color, who have experienced far greater incarceration rates, which takes away their rights as citizens. A reproductive justice lens is also applied to transgender issues, adoption and foster care, children with disabilities, and potential inequities that result from assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs).

Furthermore, the final chapter closes by noting several ways in which reproductive justice is impacted beyond biology itself. Ross and Solinger provide an intersectional analysis that includes several policy areas. For instance, they examine the connection between reproductive justice and immigration policy, noting that 80% of women are raped in transit. Considering criminal justice, they advocate for treating all pregnant women through the lens of public health. They reiterate the impact that discriminatory federal housing policies and gentrification have had on racial segregation and intergenerational poverty of women and children. In relation to education, they emphasize how parents of color must worry if their children will make it home from school alive. They call for an end to senseless violence against young people of color. And they close with a focus on environmental and reproductive justice. Notably, the authors make the critical counterpoint that the growing number of people on the planet should not be regarded as a reason to reduce fertility. Instead, they assert that advocating for environmental justice means objecting to persistent claims that those with the least power are causing the most harm. They point a finger at the real causes and effects of climate change and environmental degradation, such as conspicuous consumption, corporate greed, and the military-industrial complex.

The *Epilogue* is a great addition and should not be overlooked. It includes vignettes written by six leaders of organizations that are applying the theories and concepts covered in the book. Examples are provided from around the country, including the states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Colorado, Georgia, Florida, Oregon, and “beyond and around the U.S.-Canada imperial

border” (Ross and Solinger 2017, 255). This section is incredibly powerful and worth reading because it lends a practitioner’s perspective. It also demonstrates and celebrates how BIPOC women have made meaningful change.

Something for Everyone

Because it is a work of activist scholarship, the audience for *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* is far reaching. First, anyone involved in activism in the United States—whether it is on behalf of the pro-choice movement, Black Lives Matter, anti-poverty, or racial justice—needs to understand the history and intersectional lens presented in this book. This is especially true for white activists and feminists who have historically failed to include the lived experience and leadership of women of color.

Furthermore, voices of the women featured throughout the chapters, and especially in the epilogue, are valuable for two key reasons: first, they provide examples of how to organize for reproductive justice, and second, they are potential contacts for others interested in expanding their organizing and engagement into this holistic area of work.

In addition, public administration scholars specializing in social equity will benefit from Ross and Solinger’s approach. The book provides an astounding application of intersectionality in both theory and practice. This leads to a new perspective and telling of American history through a racial equity lens. For instance, their account of the racialization of reproduction in the early United States offers a keen critical perspective on the role of social construction in policymaking. Moreover, they reveal limits of the U.S. legal system and critique constitutional law. They continually point to the UDHR as a policy document that fulfills the human rights imperative. Although this book is written in the context of the American movement, the emphasis on UDHR opens an opportunity to explore the fight for reproductive justice on a more international, comparative plane.

Finally, this text would be a great fit for several Master of Public Administration elective courses. Classes that primarily focus on topics such as social entrepreneurship in nonprofits, health policy, criminal justice reform, and social problems have clear connections to the core topics. Furthermore, the style of writing is stu-

dent friendly. It is academic in nature, rooting theory with history, yet flows well and is easy to comprehend. This is the type of book that students will gain much in terms of knowledge and understanding without having to reread passages two or three times.

Final Thoughts: How *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* Can Advance Social Equity

In summary, Ross and Solinger present a radical critique and forward path to applying a human rights approach in the realm of women's rights and gender equity. They are skilled at intersectionality theory and practice and they know how to articulate it. Relatedly, the text serves as an instructive guide for how to incorporate storytelling into public administration research. This requires building relationships and lifting up the voices of those who are engaged in the work of advancing equity in their own communities. In other words, the book persuasively demonstrates that the greatest impact happens when social equity scholars join with activists and work side by side, as Ross and Solinger have done.

On a final note, one specific call resonated with me from the view of practice. It may be the key to restoring democratic institutions. As stated by Ross and Solinger (2017):

When activists assume that only those with whom they share particular identities are acceptable, safe, or credible, they are promoting a mechanical “angel/devil” practice of radical struggle, creating a false binary. This kind of “purity politics” foments criticism, shaming, and silencing—and turns naturally occurring political disagreements into ex-

cuses for dismissing the voices of others. . . . No one wins in the Oppression Olympics. In order to achieve reproductive justice, we need a united human rights movement that includes all persons and their voices. (75–76)

In other words, it is refreshing to see these radical leaders push for an end to the pro-choice/pro-life debate, and make a call for finding common ground. Relatedly, they also warn that there are some safe spaces where activists and scholars can go to be nurtured. However, “the road to human rights is not necessarily a protected space” (Ross and Solinger 2017, 76).

In reality, working for human rights and reproductive justice is difficult, scary, and uncomfortable. At times, we may say the wrong thing. However, as social equity scholars, we must have the courage to stumble and to keep on learning, to stick with it, and to move forward as one. I cannot stress enough how vitally important a collective approach is today considering the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. This book stands as a beacon for us to do just that.

References

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