

Blending Reproductive Justice into General Education Courses

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Blending Reproductive Justice into General Education Courses

Reproductive rights in the U.S. have been under attack for years, and, currently, people in the U.S. are reeling from the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. While reproductive justice (RJ) advocates are feeling a plethora of emotions, including helplessness, there is still work to be done. As abortion, and potentially other reproductive matters become further criminalized, it is important that educators not remain silent, as we know that silence increases stigma and draws public interest away from these critical issues (Cockrill & Nack, 2013). One way to maintain this conversation is by integrating RJ topics into our courses. Reproductive justice includes foundational ideas emerging from civil and human rights models and is defined as "the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities" (Sistersong, n.d., para #2).

As feminist educators invested in RJ and as social science faculty, we, the authors of this paper, co-designed a special topics Introduction to Sociology: Sociology of Reproduction course (also cross-listed as an Introduction to Women's Studies course) that has been taught every spring for the past six years, which presents introductory sociological topics through an RJ lens. Enrollment was never a problem for this class, capped at 35 (yet this would also work for larger classes), and it probably will remain so in the future given the pressing and relevant nature of RJ topics. There was no need for new course approval at our university when modifying a standard social or health sciences course into a special topics course-this newly designed course counted as an Introduction to Sociology course, which is offered nearly every semester at most colleges/ universities. Of note, one need not completely modify or re-name a course, but rather can integrate more RJ curricula into an existing course. At most universities, introductory-level courses count as block electives; Introduction to Sociology is one such course at UTEP and, thus, presents an opportunity to reach many students from different majors who have access to, and enroll in, this course. Although this is a sociology/women's studies course, it has potential to cover anthropology, political science, psychology, or health sciences topics.

We assign two texts in our course; the first is a reader. In the past we used Joffe and Reich's (2015) *Reproduction and Society: Interdisciplinary Readings*, which contains short chapters (approximately 5 pages each) on topics such as contraception, sterilization, and abortion. We plan to use a different reader this upcoming semester, *Radical*

Reproductive Justice (Ross et al., 2017). The second assigned text is an Introduction to Sociology book, and we use the free, online, OpenStax *Introduction to Sociology* book to manage costs for students.

The course design mirrors standard Introduction to Sociology courses that cover main introductory topics (e.g., culture, socialization, deviance, race, gender, class, etc.). Students read the *Introduction to Sociology* book chapter corresponding to the weekly topic, as well as one or more reader chapters. For example, the Ross et al. (2017) reader’s “Reproductive Justice and Resistance at the US-Mexico Borderlands” can be paired with the textbook’s politics or race/ethnicity chapter. The readings are strongly centered in an RJ framework and broach discussions of related current events such as criminalization, immigration, and health through examination of trends and data on how reproductive norms are often created and structurally sustained by those in power with more resources. Many reader chapters are intersectional and could complement several weeks’ textbook chapters. Whereas each reading is only assigned once during the semester, this does not pose problems with repetitive or related ideas, as these concepts build on one another throughout the progression of the course, and exhibit the realities of intersectional, multi-faceted lives.

We recognize that not all instructors will have familiarity with RJ and, moreover, that we should have more available RJ resources. We suggest Sister Song’s website (Sistersong.net), the largest RJ organizational coalition of people of color in the U.S. that coined the term reproductive justice, or *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Ross & Solinger, 2017). Yet, while instructors should familiarize themselves with the basics, social and health science’s role is to magnify the social, cultural, and political dimensions of RJ – with themes such as autonomy, privacy, discrimination, and social structures – about which instructors are quite familiar. Moreover, instructors can thoughtfully navigate challenges; we find that common “pitfalls” include students generalizing from their personal experiences rather than analyzing larger trends and data, which occurs with many social/ health science topics. To help students redirect their focus, instructors could offer examples of structural forces that may be more relevant to their lives (e.g., college selection, residential segregation) or create a quiz and reflection on RJ myths (Persell et al. 2008).

In order to ensure that students read and think about the larger picture, we assign a one-to-two-page short answer response to each reader chapter that gets graded on: 1) the quality of summarizing the reader chapter and 2) engagement with the larger topic through a description of how the reading relates to the week’s *Introduction to Sociology* book chapter. The assignments can also, then, serve as instructor assessments to evaluate student understanding and engagement. Classroom activities, lecture, and discussion

can include more standard, introductory material, wherein the reader chapters can be woven in, and/or activities, lecture, and discussion can focus more on RJ. We have found these discussions to be robust and engagement with RJ issues through a sociological lens (e.g., relationships to norms, deviance, power, etc.) seems to take some of the edge off loaded topics and keeps the discussion more data- and research-driven than opinion-based. Social and health sciences courses help students navigate their complex worlds as they uncover and discover layers of social norms and their relationships to larger structures (Persell et al., 2007). Adding nuance to these analyses through an RJ lens further helps students understand our current political and social landscape and normalizes these discussions.

Reproductive justice shapes life chances, social relations, and constrains or enables access to various other choices. However, we fear that RJ remains a marginal focus in general education courses and across university curricula. We implore instructors to formally assess its prevalence in higher education. This can and should include a review of the frequency and types of course materials used on abortion and other RJ issues in general education curriculum, with attention to the pedagogies most frequently and effectively used. As sociologists, we urge an analysis of RJ-related topics in the Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology (TRAILS) and the journal *Teaching Sociology* and an analysis of coverage of abortion and RJ in the most commonly used Introduction to Sociology textbooks. We also challenge other disciplines to enact similar measures. The topic of RJ arguably should be encountered repeatedly by students as they complete their general education requirements, because it is one of the most important challenges to human rights. To support this educational goal, ideally, general education courses and textbooks should adapt to reflect contemporary and relevant social issues.

However, such changes take time. Until then, instructors can adjust their curricula in order to infuse reproductive justice into their courses.

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