

“How did I not know any of this?” Teaching Reproductive Justice in an Abortion Desert

Lena R. Hann
Augustana College, lenahann@augustana.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Public Health Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hann, Lena R. () "How did I not know any of this?" Teaching Reproductive Justice in an Abortion Desert," *Feminist Pedagogy*. Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol3/iss2/2>

This Critical Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Feminist Pedagogy by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@calpoly.edu.

“How did I not know any of this?” Teaching Reproductive Justice in an Abortion Desert

Cover Page Footnote

Special thanks to the Augustana College Academic Initiatives Fund for supporting the work included in this commentary

“How did I not know any of this?” Teaching Reproductive Justice in an Abortion Desert

Reproductive justice (RJ) is often used interchangeably with reproductive rights (RR) and reproductive health (RH), overshadowing the importance of each movement’s contribution to understanding bodily autonomy. Whereas RH is “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being ... in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes” (WHO, n.d.), RR includes “the composite of human rights that address matters of sexual and reproductive health” (Erdman & Cook, 2008). Black activists and scholars first defined RJ in 1994 in response to the overwhelmingly white and middle-class RR and RH movements that excluded women of color. 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,” RJ is a framework that analyzes how systems of power prevent equitable access to and enjoyment of rights and health (SisterSong, 2022).

I am a former abortion care worker, now faculty at a Lutheran¹ liberal arts college in an abortion desert, where my first year coincided with the 2016 presidential election. Our community has four crisis pregnancy centers—known to deceive clients about pregnancy services and refuse abortion referrals (Swartzendruber et al., 2019)—yet our closest in-state abortion provider is 100 miles away. Student activism from 2016-2019 led to several controversial campus events, including a sidewalk chalking of “feminism equals cancer,” an abortion rights art show, and an antiabortion display meant to symbolize aborted fetuses. Each event stimulated strong opinions from students and faculty, but reactive responses obscured deeper conversations about reproductive rights, health, and justice. By spring 2019 students had requested more evidence-based education about reproductive issues. In response, I developed a Reproductive Justice course cross-listed in Public Health (PUBH) and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS).

This course, taught immersively over 17 days in January 2020, centered the RJ framework to examine how gender, class, race, ability, sexual orientation, immigration status, and other multifaceted oppressions shape one’s reproductive self-determination. Readings, films, guest speakers, daily reflections, and discussions helped students examine the tenets of RJ and apply its concepts to their lived experiences. Topics included abortion, adoption, childbirth, childfree, contraception, infertility, parenting, pregnancy, sterilization, and surrogacy. The two focus areas I considered when teaching RJ at a religiously affiliated institution in an abortion desert were to identify the audience and center marginalized voices.

Identify the audience

¹ Affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. The institution is ecumenical and encourages scientific, skeptical, and intellectual engagement rather than evangelization.

Our students are mostly white, from rural or suburban Midwestern areas, yet domestic and international students of color are enrolling rapidly. Most students report a religious or spiritual identity, though a growing number identify as unaffiliated/secular. As both PUBH and WGSS have a greater proportion of underrepresented students, my goals for this course included: introducing students from diverse backgrounds to the topics under RJ's umbrella; differentiating between RR, RH, and RJ; understanding abortion within human rights; and applying RJ to students' lives. To foster students' deeper personal exploration, I connected these to the college's faith commitments of: 1) Interfaith Engagement, where religious and secular students can examine RJ with curiosity and respect; 2) Social Justice, where students "seek justice, kindness, and act with love and humility;" 3) Spiritual Exploration, where students can "ask meaningful questions about life, morality, and spiritual practice;" 4) Reasoned Examination, where students have space to "wrestle with ways in which faith and reason challenge and enrich each other," especially related to stigmatized issues like abortion; and 5) Vocational Discernment, where students develop their "sense of calling" through self-reflection (Augustana, 2015).

The first iteration of the course immediately filled with students from various geographical, racial, and religious backgrounds. This was the first time most students ever talked about the intersection of race, faith, and reproduction; daily reflections provided a private space for students to think deeply about the material and apply content to personal experiences before class. Students quickly took ownership of cultivating a respectful space where they could share sometimes messy or contradictory thoughts without fear of criticism, leading to surprisingly robust discussions. Several students shared that they assumed the class would be an "echo chamber" and were pleased by the nuanced views that we explored together and with guest speakers. Finding and engaging RJ guests was an essential part of the course's success.

Center marginalized voices

As a white person at an institution with few faculty of color, I strategically disclosed (Few-Demo, 2015) my identity as a first-generation child of immigrants, raised in the Catholic church, and previous abortion care work to highlight how personal experiences shape our engagement with the RJ framework. Readings, films, and guest speakers centered RJ activists, people of color, queer, immigrant, and incarcerated voices. The world had changed significantly by this course's second iteration in June 2020; COVID fatigue and increased requests for comment on racial and gender justice issues overburdened RJ professionals (Silverman, 2021). This continued throughout 2021 as states stripped away abortion rights and the *Dobbs* decision overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022 during the fifth teaching of this course.

Keeping RJ experts' burnout in mind, I continuously apply for institutional honoraria to pay every guest for their time and use my professional networks to schedule speakers. Throughout five offerings of this course, we have hosted experts from organizations like Pregnancy Justice, Shout Your Abortion, Fathers Incorporated, and Pact Adoption Alliance, as

well as researchers, abortion providers, and documentary directors. Several students have followed up with speakers outside of class, leading to RJ internships, mentorships, research collaborations, and jobs. Students from every iteration of this course reported that interacting with those “doing the RJ work” was their favorite part of class.

Areas for exploration and growth

Considering reactions to previous campus events, I worried that teaching about RJ and abortion would result in defensiveness or avoidance. Instead, students engaged thoughtfully with readings, films, and guest speakers, offering introspective reflections and thought-provoking analyses. For example, one nonbinary student critiqued gender-exclusionary language about pregnancy. Several students of color shared that RJ experts were the first professionals “who looked like [them]” they encountered in college. One self-identified antiabortion student reflected on how her faith intersected with the physical and emotional complexities of pregnancy. A pre-med student shared her desire to become an abortion provider.

Learning about RJ at a religiously affiliated institution in an abortion desert amplified the relevance of reproductive autonomy for students, exposing the lacuna of information most came to college with. Course evaluations consistently included revelations like, “how did I not know any of this?” Our overall campus climate about reproductive issues has noticeably changed from adversarial to inquisitive, collaborative, and service-oriented thanks to students’ commitment to applying the RJ framework. As I look ahead to the sixth iteration of this course, I must keep an eye on the changing demographics, experiences, and needs of our student body, and assess what marginalized voices need centering based on current events. This content will remain relevant to students for the foreseeable future; utilizing the RJ framework to examine abortion and other reproductive issues will provide them a new perspective from which to understand their lived experiences in adulthood, their communities, and beyond.

References

- Augustana College. (2015). *Five Faith Commitments*. <https://www.augustana.edu/about-us/president/commitments>
- Erdman, J.N., & Cook, R.J. (2008). Reproductive rights. In H.K. Heggenhougen (Ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Public Health* (pp.532-538). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-012373960-5.00478-0>.
- Few-Demo, A. L. (2015). A feminist rumination on the politics of self-disclosure. *Family Science Review*, 20(1), 1-11. DOI:
- Silverman, D. (2021, February 1). *We need to change the conversation on burnout*. ReproJobs. <https://www.reprojobs.org/blog/we-need-to-change-the-conversation-on-burnout>.
- SisterSong. (2022). *What is reproductive justice?* <https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice>.
- Swartzendruber, A., English, A., Greenberg, K. B., Murray, P. J., Freeman, M., Upadhyia, K., Simpson, T., Miller, E., & Santelli, J. (2019). Crisis pregnancy centers in the United States: Lack of adherence to medical and ethical practice standards; A joint position statement of the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine and the North American Society for Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology. *Journal of pediatric and adolescent gynecology*, 32(6), 563–566. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpag.2019.10.008>
- World Health Organization (WHO). (n.d.). *Reproductive health*. <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/health-topics/reproductive-health>