

Littlejohn, Krystale E. (2021) *Just get on the pill: The uneven burden of reproductive politics*. University of California Press: Oakland, CA.

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Avoiding pregnancy is a complicated issue. For those who want to have sex but do not want it to result in a pregnancy, negotiations around which methods to use, how to procure contraception, and whose responsibility it is have to be faced. This involves a good deal of work and energy, and, as Krystale Littlejohn explains in *Just get on the pill*, is a form of gendered exploitation of women's bodies. In this book Littlejohn sets out what she calls 'gendered compulsory birth control' and details how women are socialized to adopt 'female' birth control methods. She argues that the prevailing belief that prescription birth control is the default option for those wishing to not become pregnant harms women, and particularly Black and less advantaged women. By making comparisons to other gendered labour such as housework, Littlejohn convincingly shows how forms of contraception that are gendered as 'women's methods' come with additional work including visiting clinics, experiencing invasive methods and side effects, and remembering to take birth control pills. Far from being emancipatory, liberating technologies, this book shows how contraception can be stressful, painful, a bone of contention between sexual partners, and a burden.

This book marks the fourth instalment in the University of California Press's 'Reproductive Justice: A new vision for the twenty-first century' series. The reproductive justice framework is introduced from the beginning of the book, following Loretta Ross' definition as the right to have a child, to not have a child, and the right to parent the children we do have. Reproductive justice has become a fundamental framework in academia and activism since its development in the 1990s, particularly due to its ability to connect reproductive rights and social justice and to move beyond narrow, individualizing conceptions of 'choice'. It is being increasingly adopted by feminist geographers to better attend to the complexities and structural disadvantages involved in childbearing, parenting, and in not having children. Reproductive justice is clearly of use in *Just get on the pill* for highlighting how access to reproductive services and how people are treated are differentiated by race, class, and gender, among other factors. Littlejohn refuses to view women's reproductive experiences as individualized or isolated events and instead uses the 'sociological imagination' framework to locate experiences in broader, structural contexts. This approach shows that 'rights' alone are not sufficient in providing safe and supported access to contraception.

A slim volume at just 134 pages of text, Littlejohn nevertheless provides a rich and thought-provoking account of the gendered politics of using contraception and preventing pregnancy. The research is based on 103 interviews with college-student women aged 20-29 in the San Francisco Bay Area and these women are quoted at length, giving prominence to their voices. This focus on empirical detail means it is an engaging, if at times upsetting, read and Littlejohn is a skilled writer who avoids complex theory or jargon where it is not necessary. Instead, Littlejohn manages to lightly touch on theoretical ideas such as reproductive justice or

'hegemony' through empirical examples in a way that draws the reader in rather than alienates them.

Just get on the pill starts with an introduction and then delves into the empirics in four chapters. While I at times wanted to see a clearer distinction between the chapters, the intertwined nature of the four themes means that such overlap is unavoidable. The first two explain the gendered division of contraception with some methods seen as 'his responsibility' and others as 'hers'. Chapter one explores the interviewee's experiences of negotiating condom use with their partners. Littlejohn shows how condoms have been socialized as 'a man's thing' through public health, education, marketing, and societal norms with the end result being that nearly half of the women interviewed have never purchased condoms. The assumption that condoms are a man's responsibility can have serious consequences for women protecting themselves from sexually transmitted diseases. Chapter two then examines how prescription birth control and other technologies have been gendered as 'women's methods'. The role of the family and friends comes to the fore here, especially in terms of mothers recommending that their daughters start using the pill once they become sexually active. Notably, Littlejohn found that mothers rarely aid their daughters in locating or using condoms which "demonstrates how gender can structure socialization away from condoms and toward hormonal methods" (p.51). The interviewees reflect on their embodied experiences with these technologies, particularly weight gain and mood changes.

The third chapter explores in more detail what consequences the gendered constructions of birth control techniques have on health inequity and bodily autonomy. Women explained that they felt using hormonal birth control was just something they 'had to do', especially when male partners refused to use condoms, and these experiences are rarely empowering. Moreover, some interviewees had had sex with men who removed the condom during intercourse, forcing them to seek emergency contraception to prevent becoming pregnant. While healthcare professionals also play a role in gendering birth control, this chapter highlights the negotiations that take place between sexual partners. These negotiations are not monolithic: Littlejohn also explains the varied ways in which the potential or actual pregnancy becomes the responsibility of the woman to 'resolve' or something that she gets no say in.

Chapter four, the final empirical chapter, examines in more detail the fifty interviewees who had experienced a pregnancy. Littlejohn finds racial disparities in how unplanned pregnancies came about with white and Asian women becoming pregnant due to inconsistent use of prescription birth control while Black and Latina women became pregnant due to inconsistent condom use. Littlejohn importantly uses this chapter to advocate for an intersectional approach that interrogates the social conditions that affect experiences of becoming pregnant and argues for the need to destabilise the gendering of birth control into 'men's methods' and 'women's methods'. This leads into the conclusion chapter where Littlejohn sets out her 'reproductively just' approach to birth control that particularly focuses on the social contexts that determine contraception access, use, and understandings.

In being so closely tied to the 103 interviewees there were aspects that were inevitably left less explored. All the interviewees were cisgender women and this means we do not hear about how men conceptualise contraception and how they feel about the imbalance of

responsibility in birth control methods. Nor do we hear about trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people's experiences although in the conclusion, Littlejohn is adamant that reproductive justice "requires that we protect the right to abortion – and the right to parent – for all women, transmen, and gender nonconforming people for whom pregnancy is at issue" (p.133). Some of the interviewees lamented the lack of a 'male birth control' method with one arguing that a male pill could counter the default approach of viewing "the woman as being at fault for pregnancy" (p.120) and it would have been interesting to hear more about the potential of 'male methods' beyond condoms and how this relates to Littlejohn's call to remove gendered language from contraceptive methods.

Just get on the pill is a timely study that makes a useful contribution to reproductive justice scholarship. It provides an important account of the challenges women face in using contraception, the need to pay attention to the specific contexts in which people try to avoid pregnancy and disease, and the problems of gendering birth control. While Littlejohn writes from a sociological background, this book will still be of interest to feminist geographers working on reproductive justice, sexual politics, gender disparities, and racialised experiences of sex and contraception. By deftly drawing on theory and never overloading the reader, Littlejohn displays the utility of centring interviewee narratives in a book that deserves to be read beyond academia.