

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JULIE McMULLIN, *Understanding Social Inequality: Intersections of Class, Age, Gender, Ethnicity, and Race in Canada*. Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2004, x + 352 p. Index.

McMullin's book is largely a structural approach to understanding social inequality in Canada. By bringing together a plethora of past and contemporary research compiled from numerous sources, she revisits established social theories of age, class, gender, ethnicity, and race to assess their abilities to explain social inequality. Using five domains of social life – unpaid work, paid work, health, education, and the state – McMullin explores how these social variables intersect with one another in varied ways to structure social inequality in Canada. Her clear and concise writing style is further supported by the use of charts, tables, figures, and boxed inserts scattered throughout the book. These features help to simplify the understanding of the vast quantity of information and complex theoretical paradigms discussed.

McMullin claims to explore complex issues surrounding social inequality using a unique “intersectional” framework. Such frameworks, however, are neither unique to sociology in general nor to McMullin's work in particular. Scholars from historically marginalized social groups have a lengthy history of developing and utilizing intersectional frameworks, largely in response to western social theories and models that have tended to ignore their structural realities. Women of Color scholars, for instance, have produced seminal works on the intersections of race, class, gender, and ethnicity that have long been at the theoretical and empirical forefront of intersectional frameworks. In effect, much of McMullin's work is guided by a life-cycle model that privileges a White, Eurocentric, heterosexual, working/middle-class way of life. Unwittingly, this reinforces the dominant identity of Canada as a White, Eurocentric society, which itself works to strengthen existing social inequality.

This criticism reflects the larger weakness of McMullin's work, which is her continued privileging of social theories and models that reinforce conventional constructions of social inequality. While her book creates a space for the work of scholars whose contributions have been largely excluded from mainstream sociological work, such minority scholarship still remains extremely marginal in her presentation of social reality. Although McMullin acknowledges certain scholarship and works that critique and challenge dominant models of social inequality, this body of knowledge is positioned in her book as accessory and as marginal to

conventional theories and models. For example, her discussion of family and social inequality revolves around the Eurocentric, White, heterosexual, middle-class model of family. Even as she acknowledges and critiques the prevailing model using literature on race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, sexuality, and other social dimensions of difference, she continues to reinforce its privileged status by centering her discussions on the same dominant paradigms.

McMullin's work on gender, race, and ethnicity as markers of social inequality also reflects the same privileging of conventional social theories. For example, her examination of race and social inequality neglects the growing literature on "whiteness" that focuses on issues of entitlement and white privilege. While it is important to highlight traditional conceptions of the politics of race and racialization, it is equally important to make use of new and emergent critical theories of race that, among other things, interrogate the existing conventional theories of social inequality (including race-based theories). Of course, the aim here is not to dismiss the important contributions of traditional sociological theories, but to move beyond acknowledging the presence of marginalized and minoritized scholarship on the subject of social inequality in Canada and elsewhere.

McMullin's choice and use of variables in exploring a complex subject such as social inequality are quite limiting and insufficient. While she acknowledges the traditional markers of social inequality mentioned previously, she fails to adequately explore equally significant markers, such as sexual orientation, disability, language, and religion, among others. It is important to realize that the traditional categories of difference used to mark social inequality continue to shift as the Canadian social landscape changes. With these limitations in mind, McMullin's work still offers an important contribution to studies of social inequality in Canada and elsewhere. Students of social studies, activists, policymakers, politicians, and various community groups will find the work to be an invaluable source of reference and knowledge in dealing with issues of social justice, inequality, and equity.

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