

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

DIANE DRIEDGER and MICHELLE OWEN, *Dissonant Disabilities: Women with Chronic Illnesses Explore their Lives*. Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press Inc/Women's Press, 2008, 217 p. + index.

In this timely anthology, editors Diane Driedger and Michelle Owen open the floor to pertinent questions concerning the under-examined issues of women living with chronic illness. As they state: “the voices of women with chronic illness must be offered a forum, which this anthology begins to provide” (2). In their pursuit, Driedger and Owen are successful. The essays by 26 women living with a variety of chronic mental and physical disorders including Chronic Fatigue, Bipolar Disorder, Cancer, Anorexia, Depression, Autoimmunity and Fibromyalgia are divided into five sections: societal attitudes to women’s bodies, the social construction of idealized bodies, the negotiation of work, the navigation of personal relationships, and coming to terms with chronic illness. The 18 essays collected in this anthology – some presented in the form of a personal story, while others in traditional research form – reveal candid accounts of the personal, physiological, psychological and social experiences of living with chronic illness, and in this respect, serve as an accessible introduction to the study of chronic illness.

This anthology offers valuable insights for both feminist and disability studies, despite the book’s claims that the study of chronic illness has been traditionally excluded from both disciplines – from the latter because of its tendencies to avoid associations with illness; and from the former because of its perceived preoccupation with superwomen who can work long hours and take on many tasks, feats not always, or at least not consistently, possible for those living with chronic illness. Working against biomedical understandings of disability, this collection operates instead from the definition that “disability, like racism or sexism, is discrimination and social oppression” (3). As such, *Dissonant Disabilities* effectively repositions disability as a social category that influences “us” and not just “them.” Through the many personal accounts of chronic illness presented throughout the anthology, readers can see how chronic illness as disability affects many aspects of a person’s life.

Because of the book’s specific inclusion of women’s stories, and because of its (somewhat) varied theoretical and methodological approaches, it contributes to a variety of (western) feminisms, especially those concerned with issues relating to the body, illness and identity. However, with the collection’s overwhelming emphasis on chronic illness experience, it most

notably pursues a feminist standpoint epistemology. While the collection claims to want to investigate the relationships between chronic illness experience and broader cultural norms, there is little rigorous analysis of the ways in which the social, the historical and the political come to act upon, and produce, the personal. There are, however, three notable exceptions. Susan Wendell's "Notes from Bed," Mary Delaney and Sandra Bell's "The Complexities of Negotiating Power under Conditions of Chronic Illness," and Ruth Roach Pierson's "The Personal is Pedagogical/The Pedagogical is Personal" all offer more critical approaches concerning the constitutive effects of power and how they affect one's embodied experience with chronic illness. That said, some of the more strictly personal essays are highly compelling. In particular, I enjoyed Mandy Fraser and Jennifer Matwee's "Crazy Talk: A Dialogue between Two Young Women about Depression," Amy Chow's "This Is Not Going to Control My Life: Young and Living with Fibromyalgia," and Julie Devaney's "There Always Seems to Be Excuses: A Grad Student's Narrative of Autoimmunity."

While the book – some might argue – necessarily examines only women's experiences (the editors state up front that their goal is to offer women a forum from which to begin talking about their experiences with chronic illness) the exclusion of men's stories is the anthology's major weakness. Reading through the many stories of women's experiences with chronic illnesses I could not help but wonder: Don't men suffer from many of the same stigmas? Don't they face similar challenges in a culture that values efficiency, productivity and consistency? Isn't there greater political benefit in highlighting the similarities between men's and women's experiences rather than reiterating their seemingly ever-dichotomous status? By only including women's stories, the book, paradoxically, reinscribes that which it wishes to write against: namely hegemonic masculine ideals that portray women as weak, sick and pathologized. Because women, in this book, are the ones voicing their experiences with chronic illness, their voices remain the only ones associated with its suffering, and thus, dominant stereotypes are reproduced. As a feminist, I found this book to be important because it highlights the struggles faced by women with chronic illness, but it is also problematic in that it does not challenge – and unfortunately perpetuates and maintains – dominant assumptions of the gender binary. I realize that this critique is a theoretical position that not everyone will share (or, for that matter, will even notice), but it is one that consistently troubled me throughout the book.

This critique notwithstanding, the anthology does make a concerted effort to include representation from a variety of women (albeit with two self-acknowledged limitations: one of an over-representation of educated women, including academics; and the other of an under-representation of aboriginal respondents). Individual contributors speak to a variety of illness, age, race, ethnic, sexual, and relationship experiences, effectively highlighting some of the "shared barriers of living with chronic illness" (2). Because of the book's inclusion of a wide range of (women's) illness experiences, its audiences, I imagine, are wide-reaching. Academics and non-academics alike will find this anthology of use – whether it is to relate

personally to experiences of chronic illness, or for purposes of pedagogy and/or research. The focus on personal experience renders this collection ideal for instructors of undergraduate sociology, health, and/or women's studies classes wishing to – as the book sets out to do – begin the much-needed discussions about women and chronic illness.

Alissa Overend, University of Alberta.

© Canadian Sociological Association/La Société canadienne de sociologie