

“Reproductive Justice Narratives of People with Disabilities: Overturned and Overlooked”

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Summary

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to delve into the first-hand perspectives of people with disabilities (PWD) in the United States, specifically focusing on their experiences around reproductive justice. The reproductive justice (RJ) theoretical framework embodies principles that promote rights to freedom of choice, regarding when and how a person decides to become a parent – or not. Historically, PWD have been refused these rights. The most recent issue was the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 by the Supreme Court of the United States. Its repeal has now designated the right to abortion to the governments of individual states.

Research and methodology

The research team consisted of a university professor and a 4th year student. They engaged in qualitative research, using narrative and document analysis from 2022-2023. Publicly available interviews, news articles, blogs, and webinars from the internet were analyzed, that featured first-hand narratives of PWD speaking about personal reproductive justice experiences. The research question was “What are the issues and concerns that people with disabilities face, in regard to their reproductive rights?” Sources were studied to extract prevailing themes and then ranked in order of prevalence. This happened relatively quickly, since there was such limited data on the topic.

Main Findings

Final analysis involved 23 internet sources, as subsequent articles began to present redundancy in themes. The researchers did not find any research articles that used narrative inquiry to explore reproductive justice and parenting issues for people with disabilities in the United States. Every article, blog, webinar, etc. included quotes from PWD that were analyzed through a reproductive justice lens, including topics such as birth control, abortion, parenting, infertility, and adoption. As a result, the researchers coded the following themes, in the general order of their prevalence among the sources: Intersectionality, Advocacy, Legislation, Support Structure, Socioeconomic Status, Emotions, Ethics, and Adopting Children with Disabilities.

Intersectionality generally refers to how multiple marginalized identities can have an exponentially negative impact on a person’s life experiences or how they are treated. In this research, it manifested as expressed hardships due to having a disability plus additional memberships in minority categories (i.e., regarding gender, sexual orientation, or being an immigrant). Advocacy captured instances of expressed needs or actions in support of the reproductive justice rights of people with disabilities. Legislation referred to quotes that mentioned specific laws and their implications on reproductive justice efforts. The theme of support structure represented instances of relationships that served as sources of strength and care for parents with disabilities and other RJ issues. Socioeconomic status as a theme captured the relationships between financial resources or employment and reproductive health, reproductive choices, and parenting capabilities. Whenever a narrator discussed

their feelings about an RJ experience, it was coded as emotions. Ethics represented instances of ethical misconduct from health professionals and social services staff, as they related to reproductive health and parenting experiences. The final theme of adopting children with disabilities described the tendency among the narratives to express feelings of inclination or preference to adopt children with disabilities, as adults with disabilities.

Main Implications

The main implication of the study is the importance of further research to explore the needs and perspectives of people with disabilities in the realm of reproductive justice. At the moment, Roe v. Wade remains repealed, and the United States awaits the election of a new presidential administration. “Nothing about us without us” is a mantra of the disability community, yet they have been consistently excluded from conversations and research on this topic, even though it impacts them in unique ways. The data that does exist does not sufficiently include the voices of PWD as non-female parents, with LGBTQ identities, as immigrants, and a variety of other identity groups. In addition to future research, there are implications for treatment and practice. Healthcare providers and those who work in social services capacities must be educated about disability and rehabilitation, so as not to discriminate against PWDs purposely or inadvertently, violate their legal rights, or impose their own beliefs onto their clients and patients. And in addition to being educated, practitioners and researchers must also be advocates. It is an ethical imperative.

Find out more

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