

Deconstructing Reproductive Discourses and Infertility in Graphic Memoirs

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Abstract

Infertility is a health condition that affects all genders, yet women tend to experience significant rejection and mistreatment because a woman's body is seen to be primarily meant for procreation. The prevalence of cultural norms that idealize childbirth and stigmatize infertility has a negative influence on those affected, as it disrupts their sense of self and intensifies their distress as a patient. Graphic memoirs, such as Paula Knight's *The Facts of Life*, Emily Steinberg's *Broken Eggs*, and Phoebe Potts's *Good Eggs*, provide insights into the impact of infertility on women's identity in a society that not only promotes but also glorifies childbirth. The study aims to assess the effectiveness of graphic memoirs in shaping contemporary perspectives on reproductive health and rights among women, utilizing a descriptive research methodology with secondary data collection to analyze prevalent viewpoints and attitudes toward reproductive issues in society. The study's analyses delve deeply into the personal narratives, historical power dynamics, and cultural perspectives on reproduction and infertility found in the memoirs analyzed. To sum up, the study sheds light on the multifaceted nature of reproductive discourses and shows how graphic memoirs can be an effective tool for advocacy and storytelling about women's health.

Keywords: Reproductive health, Women's Health, Infertility, medical, comics, Graphic medicine, graphic memoirs, *The Facts of Life*, *Broken Eggs*, and *Good Eggs*.

1. Introduction

Deconstruction is a theoretical method that entails critically examining and breaking down established beliefs, assumptions, and binary oppositions present in a certain speech or text. Breaking down in deconstructing reproductive discourses involves analyzing the intricate relationship among societal narratives, modern viewpoints, and personal experiences about women's bodies and reproductive health. To analyze infertility in this context, the study intends to examine the prevailing perceptions about infertility, question the simplistic views of fertility and infertility, investigate the real-life experiences of people dealing with infertility, and study how graphic memoirs present different viewpoints on this matter, ultimately demonstrating the complex nature of discussions about reproduction.

The deconstruction approach to textual analysis is associated with uncovering elements that contradict the fundamental meaning or structure of the texts. As a post-structuralist methodology, a deconstructive analysis centres on engaging with the texts and uncovering the inherent contradictions within them. The readers distinguish themselves from the author and analyse and comprehend the internal coherence of ideas or the significance of the texts based on their own interpretation of the main points. Put simply, a deconstructive reading does not have a definitive interpretation for any specific text. This notion of deconstruction repositions the author's fundamental function in literary critique to the readers. Therefore, the interpretations of the texts are solely dependent on the readers. By employing the reader-response strategy, the interpretation of the texts becomes more flexible and less inflexible, leading to diverse meanings and subjects of conversation. The deconstruction technique, in contrast to other methods, enables readers to engage in critical examination of texts and the fluid and subversive nature of binary opposition, rather than a fixed hierarchical framework.

Reproduction is the natural process of creating new life. There is an increasing focus in discourse concerning women's bodies on how society and culture shape ideas of femininity and the female body. Throughout history, patriarchal structures and beliefs have exerted control and regulation over women's bodies, limiting their roles to reproduction and motherhood (Attwood, et.al., 2017). The discourse encompassing women's bodies has been influenced by societal expectations that have assigned specific roles to women within the domestic environment. These roles have emphasized the importance of fertility and nurturing abilities, often equating womanhood with motherhood. Within contemporary society, conversations are influenced by gender, and the distinction between the mind and body - as explored by feminist theory - is a concept that associates men with thought, intellect, and reason, while women are associated with the body, emotion, and intuition (Halberstam, 2018).

The historical power dynamics between genders have no symbolic consistency. In an era where contemporary discourses seem to be pushing us towards questioning gender identities, it may seem regressive or unintelligent to

emphasize the importance of maintaining the integrity between the conventional female and male genders (McClive & Golombok, 2017). By unravelling these complex associations of significance, which arise from the influence of dominance, one might reinstate, as a metaphorical potential, not only the authority of women (in relation to motherhood) but also the authority of men (in relation to fatherhood). In summary, individuals could gain the capacity for gender distinction as it may manifest itself across various areas of tension, including the interaction between human biology and cultural endeavours (Spillers, 2022).

Intersectionality is a useful tool for analysis and for shaping social policy because it exposes the ways in which social positions and identities interact with one another and influence people's behavior in specific contexts. Intersectionality is the concept that social categorizations like race, class, gender, and sexuality are interrelated, leading to overlapping systems of discrimination or disadvantages. Intersectionality in "Deconstructing Reproductive Discourses" analyzes how different elements of identity overlap and influence individuals' views and experiences related to women's bodies and reproductive health. It acknowledges that individuals might face various types of oppression or privilege at the same time, and these intersections impact their everyday experiences. The study intends to reveal the intricate and multifaceted processes inside discussions about reproduction by examining the junction of gender, modern perspectives, and graphic memoirs. The study holds significance in unravelling societal narratives around women's reproductive experiences, navigating the intersections of the female body, contemporary perspectives, and graphic memoirs. By deconstructing reproductive discourses, it contributes to a nuanced understanding of women's experiences, fostering dialogue and challenging prevailing norms through visual and literary mediums. In the conclusion part, the study also suggests ways in which graphic memoirs can be used as a tool for education and advocacy in the field of reproductive health.

The objectives of the study encompass a multifaceted exploration of reproductive discourses through various lenses. Firstly, it seeks to delve into contemporary perspectives surrounding reproductive health, rights, and the lived experiences of women. This involves analyzing prevalent viewpoints and attitudes towards reproductive issues in society. Secondly, the study aims to evaluate the impact of visual storytelling, particularly through graphic memoirs, on the comprehension and perception of women's reproductive health matters. It intends to assess how visual narratives contribute to shaping individuals' understanding of these issues. Thirdly, the research endeavors to investigate the utilization of graphic memoirs as a medium for depicting and comprehending women's reproductive narratives, exploring their effectiveness in portraying complex experiences. Lastly, the study aims to propose recommendations on leveraging graphic memoirs as educational and advocacy tools in the realm of reproductive health, aiming to foster greater awareness, understanding, and social change.

The study delves into the deconstruction of reproductive discourses by thoroughly examining cultural perspectives, historical power dynamics, and personal narratives around reproduction and infertility found in the analyzed memoirs. The study thoroughly analyzes various graphic memoirs, such as Paula Knight's- *The Facts of Life*, Emily Steinberg's- *Broken Eggs*, and Phoebe Potts's- *Good Eggs*, to investigate the complex interplay among gender norms, graphic narratives, and societal attitudes concerning women's bodies and reproductive health.

In the context of the study 'Deconstructing Reproductive Discourses', a descriptive research methodology with secondary data collection involves analyzing existing literature, graphic memoirs, and scholarly works related to reproductive health, women's experiences, and visual storytelling. This approach entails synthesizing information from various sources such as academic journals, books, and online databases to gain insights into contemporary perspectives on reproductive health, the impact of visual narratives, and the intersectionality of women's experiences within the broader discourse.

Discourse is the utilization of language to communicate and shape understanding, concepts, and societal constructs within a particular setting or group. Communication includes not just spoken or written language but also the fundamental beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions that influence it. Power functions in speech through methods like framing, normalization, and exclusion. Individuals who dominate or impact prevailing conversations has the authority to mould society standards, convictions, and actions, frequently strengthening current power hierarchies and excluding specific voices or viewpoints. Comprehending discourse entails acknowledging the impact of power dynamics on language and communication, which shape our perception of social concerns such as reproductive rights and women's bodies. Since the beginning of efforts to modernize in the early 1900s, women's bodies and sexuality have consistently been used in discourse to establish spiritual and moral legitimacy in social, cultural, and political domains (Cindoglu& Unal, 2017).

Beyoncé, an American singer and songwriter, quickly garnered millions of views on social media after announcing her latest pregnancy. The meticulously orchestrated photographs of Beyoncé dressed as a fertility deity, adorned with floral wreaths, garnered widespread approval and dissemination, resulting in the rapid proliferation of memes and parodies that achieved the same level of online popularity as the original image. The phenomenon of pregnancy appears to possess the ability to captivate attention, particularly when it occurs to a public figure. Indian celebrities from Kareena Kapoor to Anushka Sharma have often been the centre of attention for their fans. Indian actresses, especially during their pregnancy, attract significant attention from the audience. This attention is occasionally expressed as admiration,

while at other times it is characterized by belittling. Reproduction is prominently evident in modern society, as seen in media coverage of celebrity births, such as Serena Williams' case which highlighted post-partum complications and the higher morbidity rates among Black women. Additionally, companies like Google and Facebook are offering to cover the cost of egg freezing for their female employees. The media also reports on the growing trend of transnational surrogacy, particularly in countries like India. Furthermore, there is public awareness about the health risks (Markens, et.al., 2019). These prominent prevailing subject lines indicate that reproduction carries significant cultural significance and importance for both people and society. Reproduction plays a crucial role in driving many individuals' behaviour and social practices. It is a fundamental aspect of political, economic, and cultural processes and discourses. Furthermore, it is infused with profound meaning, symbolism, and ceremonial practices.

Reproduction serves as a valuable perspective for understanding various social phenomena. It reveals our convictions about what is considered natural, gender norms and roles, the influence of scientific knowledge and biomedicine, professional expertise, intimate and family relationships, ideas about physical existence, risk and responsibility, methods of social regulation, the creation of social hierarchy and inequality, and notions of race and nation (Gubrium, et.al., 2016). From an analytical and political perspective, reproduction serves as a boundary-crossing and ambiguous concept that challenges the distinction between nature and culture. The inherent desire of individuals to reproduce and the societal control over reproduction both involve concepts related to structure and agency. While it is commonly believed that individual reproductive experiences fall under the private domain, ongoing political debates surrounding contraception, abortion, and the conditions under which reproduction occurs reveal that reproduction is a highly politicized and frequently disputed public issue (Smietana, et.al., 2018).

Infertility is a widespread issue affecting reproductive health on a global scale. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 48.5 million couples worldwide are unable to succeed in conceiving (Dierickx, et.al., 2018). Infertility is a global societal issue that has a detrimental impact on individuals worldwide. Women may experience stigma, social ostracism, and derision within their communities. Infertility can also serve as a possible cause of strain in romantic relationships. Childlessness in a marriage might lead to instances where husbands subject their spouses to verbal or physical violence and polygamy. Women convey emotions of apprehension, discontent, sorrow, diminished self-worth, and an overall perception of helplessness.

WHO data indicates that about 180 million couples in developing nations experience primary or secondary infertility. Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) is an umbrella term used to describe medical procedures and techniques aimed at facilitating pregnancy in women. These include: "in vitro fertilization (IVF), intrauterine insemination (IUI), intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI)", as well as practices like egg and embryo freezing, sperm and egg donation, gestational surrogacy, and the use of ovulation-inducing hormones (Herrick, 2019). These treatments are designed to address the clinical criteria for infertility, which is characterized as a medical condition of the reproductive system characterized by the inability to achieve a clinical pregnancy after engaging in regular unprotected sexual intercourse for a period of 12 months or longer.

While IVF and its associated treatments receive significant public attention, it is crucial to recognize that infertility care encompasses more than just assisted reproductive techniques (MacBride-Stewart, et.al., 2017). Equally significant alternatives include providing emotional support and counselling for couples experiencing infertility, ensuring access to fundamental diagnostic procedures, providing convenient means of ovarian stimulation and scheduled sexual interaction, providing intrauterine insemination, and offering reproductive surgery, among others. The effects of involuntary childlessness are significantly more profound in developing nations and can give rise to more extensive societal challenges, notably for women, in comparison to Western civilizations (Luca, et.al., 2021).

Cultures across the globe depict women as the embodiment of love, kindness, patience, and other comparable attributes due to their capacity for childbearing (Mendonça, 2018). As a result, individuals who are unable to conceive owing to medical issues are subjected to social stigma and made to feel inadequate and abnormal (Venkatesan & Murali, 2018). Infertility is a health condition that affects both genders, yet women experience significant rejection and mistreatment. The presence of cultural norms that idealize childbirth and stigmatize infertility has a negative influence on those affected, as it disrupts their sense of self and intensifies their distress as a patient. Graphic memoirs, such as Paula Knight's *The Facts of Life* (Knight, 2017), Emily Steinberg's *Broken Eggs*, and Phoebe Potts's *Good Eggs*, provide insights into the impact of infertility on women's identity in a society that not only promotes but also glorifies childbirth.

Knight's *The Facts of Life* is broken down into three chapters, skillfully interweaving the artist's personal experience as a woman struggling to achieve a harmonious equilibrium between work and personal life. Following numerous unsuccessful endeavors to conceive, Knight embarks on an exploration of other avenues of motherhood, utilizing artistic ingenuity and a commitment to environmental awareness (Venkatesan & Murali, 2019). The author effectively utilizes the visual capabilities of the comic medium to their fullest extent in terms of layout. Knight demonstrates the traumatizing nature of her exposed existence by utilizing the formal potency of the comics' medium. Knight's narrative demonstrates the medical establishment's callous treatment of the infertile female body, which is exposed, humiliated, and rendered vulnerable. Knight's depiction of her reproductive anatomy in the panel not only expresses her lack of

confidence in her ability to reproduce, but also highlights the transitional and uncertain state of her existence under the scrutiny of medical gaze. Even when the examination room reads, “PLEASE RESPECT PATIENT DIGNITY” (Knight, 2017), the author is left with no respect for her infertile body under examination. She is left exposed to the interpretation with no right over her biological self as can be seen in the figure:

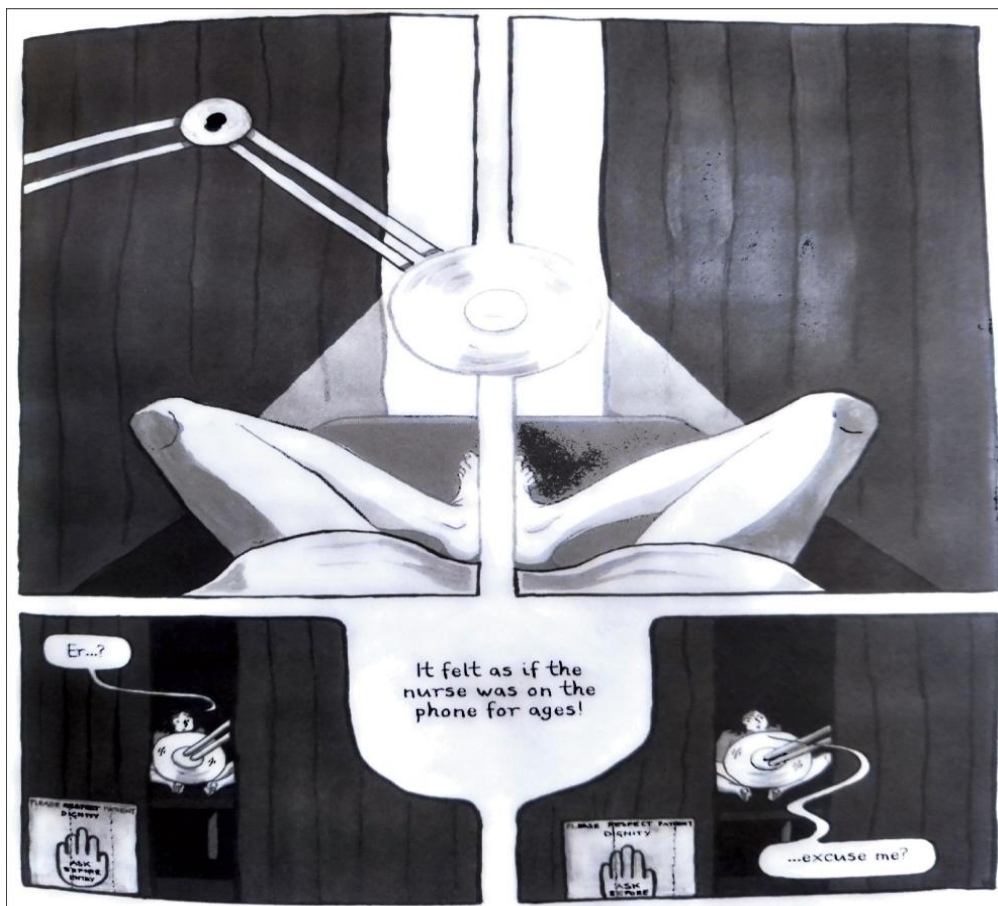


Figure1: Scrutiny of the female body under the medical gaze. (Knight, 2017)

Steinberg’s *Broken Eggs* primarily focuses on the medical aspect of infertility. After numerous unsuccessful attempts to conceive, the author ultimately relinquishes her hope of becoming a mother and abruptly concludes the story. *Broken Eggs* does not conform to the traditional definition of comics, but rather can be described as a visual narrative. Steinberg’s artistic skill is apparent in her adept use of colors, diverse fonts, varying font sizes, handwriting, and other techniques to express her biological terror and emotional distress (Lightman & Steinberg, 2018). The prevailing theme of the novel, regardless of whether it pertains to the egg or the shell, is Steinberg’s strong desire to have a child and her unyielding longing to become a mother.

Potts views her project of developing a comic centered around her challenges with infertility, which she refers to as her infertility odyssey, as a means of exerting influence over this unfavorable experience and as a method of gaining a better understanding of it. In the graphic memoir, *Good Eggs*, Potts effectively utilizes traditional panels while employing splash pages selectively (Venkatesan & Peter, 2020). *Good Eggs* impresses with its skillful incorporation of darker blank panels, a formal technique consistently employed by Potts in the text. The author uses several darkened panels to convey the feeling of despair that she feels when she receives a phone call from the fertility clinic informing her of her negative pregnancy test. Potts’s expertise in form and narrative methods enhances the intricacy of the matter (Shigley, 2017). It illustrates her harrowing experience in the clinic during embryo transfer, echoing the same emotions. The author envisions herself lying on the examination table with her legs apart and attached to the stirrups. The male doctor and two nurses are directing their attention to her completely exposed vagina.

An important theme that arises from these narratives is the societal creation of femininity and motherhood, which is upheld through many forms of communication. The celebration of motherhood and fertility in popular culture, often conveyed through historical accounts, biographies, religious beliefs, cultural symbols, and media, can have detrimental psychological effects on women who are unable to conceive (Kasthuri & Peter, 2021). Furthermore, these memoirs

deconstruct the prevailing account of modernity, which exhibits an unwavering belief in the capacity of science to improve the human condition and expand its potential. Steinberg claims to belong to a generation of women who were taught to have unwavering faith in the esteemed validity of science. The author's deliberate use of capitalizing the word 'THAT' indicates that the current generation no longer possesses unwavering trust in science, as postmodernity has revealed the unrealistic ideals of modernity. Women from Steinberg's generation were encouraged to use contraception and pursue a career in life because with science at their disposal, procreation at the ripe age of forty-one was "eminently doable" (*Broken Eggs*). The picture below demonstrates the argument presented above:



Figure 2: False promises of a scientific system that does not deliver. (Steinberg, 2014)

In one of the images, she exhibits herself undergoing intrauterine insemination, and her lower abdomen and thighs expand, as if her body is attempting to adapt to this new surreality. In another image, she depicts herself dwindling as she morphs into a creature comparable to a lab rat, stating, "I became a fertility guinea pig." This is an attempt to provide an explicit condemnation of infertility care, which regards her as a "fertility guinea pig." She employs capitalization and reiteration of phrases to emphasize her point, and she depicts herself as a fecund guinea pig confined within a cage, which signifies the clinic:



Figure 3: Woman reduced to the status of a pig in the fertility clinics. (Steinberg, 2014)

In *Good Eggs*, Potts expresses a strong criticism towards infertility clinics, viewing them as both exploitative and degrading. The author ironically refers to the clinic as a “fertility factory, a massive institution built on centuries of medical expertise, millions of dollars in salaries, a wide range of drugs sourced globally, and countless hours billed to legal teams and advertising agencies” (Magee, 2019). *Good Eggs* also exposes the inhumane aspect of insurance firms, who demand that individuals utilize the most cost-effective alternatives before seeking more coverage. In *The Facts of Life*, Knight portrays the myth of modernity, progress, and liberation brought about by science through a flowchart that represents significant cultural and scientific achievements (Boer, 2020). The artists challenge the exaggerated promises of science and reveal the underlying political dynamics of healthcare by portraying their personal interactions with infertility treatments and clinical settings.

On the last second page of *Broken Eggs*, the author is portrayed within a shattered eggshell, symbolizing an unfixable state of despair and melancholy. One can witness the angst and frustration of not being able to cope up with the bereavement of motherhood in the figure below:

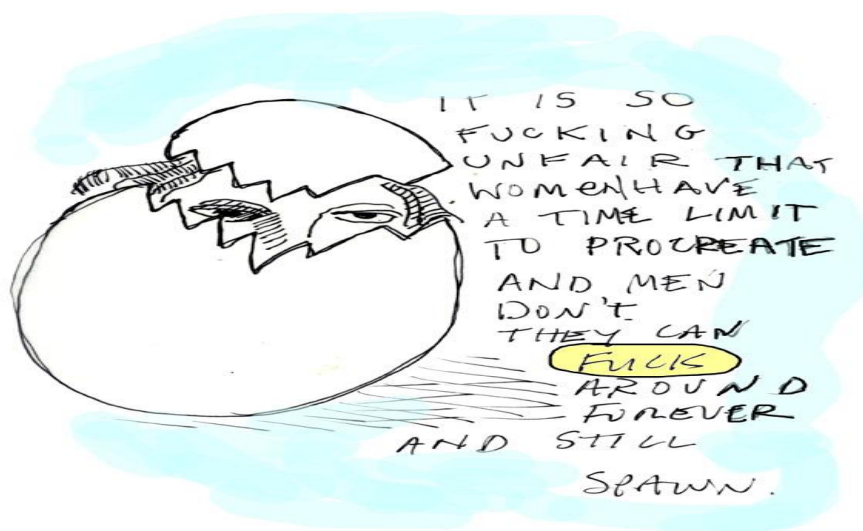


Figure 4: Broken egg as a symbol of shattered hopes. (Steinberg, 2014)

Steinberg's narrative concludes with the realization that the fragile carapace of optimism and innocence has been irreparably shattered, irrevocably replaced by a void. The title *Good Eggs* implies that Potts's story is one of optimism and possibility. After exploring all possible avenues to become a biological mother, the author considers the idea of adopting a baby but quickly finds that adoption is a ‘lengthy and costly’ process. In contrast to *Broken Eggs* and *Good*

Eggs, Knight's *The Facts of Life* presents alternate options for parenting as its conclusion (Streeten & Streeten, 2020). Another possibility proposed by Knight is the pursuit of art. Within one of the highly captivating splash pages, the artist portrays her two distinct personas (that of a mother and an artist) divided by a border like an hourglass. As Paula Knight herself quotes in an interview: "I think having children can give people a sense of life after life, and, for me, planting the trees provided that same sense: Trees last longer than people and are more environmentally friendly because they gobble up CO₂ rather than creating it" (Venkatesan & Murali, 2020).

Knight's *The Facts of Life*, Steinberg's *Broken Eggs*, and Potts's *Good Eggs* are graphic pathographies that delve into different aspects of female infertility. The authors vividly portray the psychological and physical distress of infertility in women through visual representations of their personal experiences, conveying a sense of heightened intensity and immediacy (Takhar, 2022). These writings exhibit courage and strength, both in their unflinching honesty and in the unique ways they individually approach the visual style to effectively convey the narrative. However, they are also noteworthy because they actively and vividly challenge a culture that predominantly values specific types of portrayals - such as the portrayal of contentment and simplicity in family life, fertility, optimism in the midst of sorrow and loss, and resolution.

Critics have contended that healthcare institutions and practices are inherently patriarchal, and that discourses regarding health care contribute to the misogynistic ideology. One such domain where the medical subjectification of women is plainly revealed is obstetrics, gynaecology, and reproductive medicine. Critics express their concern regarding the medicalization of women's reproduction, which they contend serves to reinforce patriarchal control over women's bodies. They criticize the treatment of expectant bodies as machines. Women's bodies are exposed, penetrated, and consequently rendered vulnerable while under medical surveillance. The technological intrusion of women's bodies, which is facilitated by ARTs, is the primary focus of contemporary feminist critique of reproductive medicine. Feminists observe that ARTs, while ostensibly providing women with reproductive autonomy, actually allows for medical manipulation of their reproductive conditions.

By experimenting with form and deploying graphic approaches, artists are able to vividly and dramatically express the complex interconnections of powerful factors such as social, medical, and historical influences. The subjective experiences of infertile women are conveyed with raw honesty through the use of dark lines, uneven grids, handwriting, and numerous affordances of the medium employed in these narratives (Streeten, 2020). By exploring the psychological, social, and physical factors related to involuntary childlessness, these accounts challenge the misconception surrounding motherhood and reduce the societal stigma associated with female infertility (Krüger-Fürhoff, et.al., 2017).

Conclusion

Ultimately, by conducting discourse analysis, the study revealed the impact of societal narratives and power dynamics on reproductive discourses, which contribute to stigma and inequity for individuals facing infertility. The study highlighted the importance of gaining a detailed understanding of women's experiences and suggests using graphic memoirs as effective tools for education and advocacy in reproductive health. Moreover, the study emphasized the importance of intersectionality in influencing people's reproductive experiences by acknowledging the interaction of different identities and social positions.

Consequently, through breaking down current discussions and encouraging conversation, the study sought to increase understanding, question established standards, and drive societal transformation. The study culminates by supporting a feminist perspective on reproductive freedom, emphasizing the importance of empowering women to make informed decisions about their reproductive health while avoiding maternal stereotypes. In general, the study provides important perspectives on the intricacies of reproductive discussions and underscores the effectiveness of graphic memoirs as a compelling tool for narrative and support in the field of women's health.

Moving forward, the study puts forward various implications and recommendations for future research and advocacy. Exploring the intersectionality of reproductive experiences involves considering how various factors like socioeconomic status, sexuality, and disability intersect with gender categories to shape individuals' reproductive health encounters. One way to improve future research is by conducting more comprehensive studies that highlight the perspectives of marginalized communities and tackle the specific obstacles they encounter when seeking reproductive healthcare. Furthermore, it is recommended to keep utilizing graphic memoirs and other creative methods to educate, advocate, and reduce the stigma surrounding reproductive issues. Further investigation could delve into how these platforms can effectively reach a wide range of audiences and shape public opinions and policies regarding reproductive rights and healthcare.

This assortment of narratives clearly delineates the authors' denigrating and disturbing experiences at the infertility clinics. By deconstructing their individual realities of enduring infertility treatment, these authors essentially give voice

to the isolated encounters of women whose bodies and lives are laid bare, cut off, and managed by an oppressive and patriarchal system of care.

Furthermore, continuous actions are required to break down societal norms and political structures that uphold stigma and disparities in discussions about reproduction. Advocating for policy changes, educational initiatives, and grassroots activism can help challenge existing norms and help in moving forward in the direction of ensuring equal reproductive rights for all individuals. Through ongoing efforts to dismantle and question existing narratives on the reproductive health of women, the study seeks to contribute to the development of a fairer and more diverse society where everyone can make well-informed decisions about their bodies and futures.

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