

Postprint Version	1.0
Journal website	http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(98)00195-6
Pubmed link	
DOI	10.1016/S0277-9536(98)00195-6

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Book Review: Gender and the social construction of illness

BY JUDITH LORBER. Sage Publications, Inc. Thousand Oaks, 1997, 148 pp. US \$17.95.

Judith Lorber focuses on health, illness and medicine in her contribution to 'The Gender Lens' series, weaving together medical, sociological and feminist concerns. The 'body in its social context' is the book's subject, to quote the author (p. 3). The framework of this gender lens on illness and health is the transformation of the body through gendered social practices. The author reviews gender differences that emerge from social interaction and social statuses (gender, race, class, ethnicity and culture) in complex interplay with biology, genetic inheritance, hormones and physiology (p. 6). In four chapters Judith Lorber examines major concepts in medical sociology through a gender lens perspective, stating that women's and men's social location produce their patterns of illness and health behavior. These areas are social epidemiology and risks of disease; the doctor-nurse-patient relationship and the sick role; the politics of diagnosis and 'woman troubles' (pre-menstrual syndrome and menopause); and the social construction of AIDS - a modern plague.

In each chapter the author shows by means of many striking examples that gender is an important part of social life and determines the social construction of illness, and the behavior of and interaction between patients and professionals. The concluding chapter discusses the way in which the recommendations of feminist health care can be applied to everyone - which I support very much.

This book gives a clear overview of different perspectives on gender, health and illness in the society, and in this respect it is innovative. Moreover, the author provides the reader with many references, which can serve as a guide to go further into the matter. Slight disadvantages are the relatively low attention paid to the influence of gender on doctor-patient communication - which nowadays is seen as a main aspect of quality of care - and the chiefly North-American literature referred to, e.g. in the last chapter when she discusses women's health care (p. 101). The book is useful for both starting and experienced researchers on the field of gender and illness. Moreover, health care professionals (doctors, nurses) may also benefit from reading (parts of) this book.

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