

Workshop:
The Anthropology of Reproduction: Childbirth, Obstetrics, Midwifery, and the New Reproductive Technologies

Presenter:

Robbie Davis-Floyd, Ph.D.
Senior Research Fellow, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Texas
Fellow, Society for Applied Anthropology
8526 Adirondack Trail, Austin Texas 78759
Home and Office: 512-263-2212 Mobile/Voicemail: 512-426-8969
E-mail: <davis-floyd@mail.utexas.edu> Website: <www.davis-floyd.com>

Biographical Sketch:

Robbie Davis-Floyd PhD, Senior Research Fellow, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Texas Austin, is a medical anthropologist specializing in the anthropology of reproduction. An international speaker and researcher, she is author of over 80 articles and of Birth as an American Rite of Passage (1992, 2004); coauthor of From Doctor to Healer: The Transformative Journey (1998); and coeditor of ten collections, including Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge: Cross-Cultural Perspectives (1997); Cyborg Babies: From Techno-Sex to Techno-Tots (1998); and Mainstreaming Midwives: The Politics of Change (2006). Her latest book is Birth Models That Work (2009), an edited collection that highlights excellent models of birth care around the world. This is Volume 1 of a 2-volume series; the second volume, entitled Birth Models on the Global Edge, is underway. Robbie's research on global trends and transformations in childbirth, obstetrics, and midwifery is ongoing. She currently serves as Editor and Board Member for the International MotherBaby Childbirth Organization (IMBCO).

Summary for brochures:

A whole college course in a day! This workshop offers an overview of the exciting sub-discipline of the anthropology of reproduction from its early beginnings to its latest findings. We will concentrate on anthropological studies in four major areas: childbirth, midwifery, the new reproductive technologies, and the politics of reproduction.

Abstract

This workshop offers an overview of the exciting sub-discipline of the anthropology of reproduction from its early beginnings to its latest findings. The anthropology of reproduction is a rapidly growing field. Its present span is too wide to fully encompass in one day, so in this workshop I will concentrate on anthropological studies in four major areas: childbirth, midwifery, the new reproductive technologies, and the politics of nation-states as they play out on women's bodies and affect women's reproductive lives. I will describe the works I consider to be key in each area and summarize their findings, and will suggest important directions for future research.

The first section of the workshop will focus on the anthropology of birth, a subfield called for by Margaret Mead and Niles Newton, and initiated by Brigitte Jordan, Margarita Kay, Sheila Kitzinger, Carole MacCormack, and others. For the first century of anthropology's existence, most anthropologists were men, who were either denied access to women's mysteries, including birth, or were simply not interested in studying women's issues. In the early 1970s Mead and Newton issued a call for the anthropological study of childbirth, and Brigitte Jordan went into the field to study indigenous birthways in rural Yucatan and contrast them with the urbanized and medicalized birthways of the US and Sweden, and the midwifery system of the Netherlands. That work was furthered by a number of social scientists (including Nancy Stoller Shaw, Karen Michaelson, Emily Martin, Sheila Kitzinger, Mavis Kirkham, Ann Oakley, Robbie Davis-Floyd, and others) who have focused exclusively on the birthways of the US, Canada, and the UK, providing detailed analyses of the cultural factors underlying the male takeover of birth in these countries and the spread of high technology.

Jordan's development of the notion of authoritative knowledge (the knowledge that counts in a given situation, on the basis of which people make decisions and take action) has proven to be a valuable key to unlock the profound differences in knowledge systems and to unveil the influence of culture on birth. We will examine this concept and trace its application to the analysis of a wide range of reproductive phenomena, from prenatal testing in the US and other countries to the relationship of indigenous and biomedical knowledge systems worldwide.

The work of Sheila Cosminsky on Guatemalan midwifery sparked the development of an anthropology of midwifery, which now includes the anthropological investigation of midwifery in most countries of the globe. Recurrent themes here include the problems of definition and classification associated with TBAs and professional midwives, their relative roles in the medical hierarchies established by colonial systems all over the Third World, issues of appropriate routes to midwifery education, and the shifting identities and role transformations experienced by what Davis-Floyd has called "postmodern midwives."

Finally we will address the wider arena of the anthropology of reproduction, a field of study which now encompasses the relationships between women's bodies and the politics of nation-states, the transnational and individual effects of the spread of the new reproductive technologies, and the increasing cyborgification of the entire reproductive process. Key figures in this emergent field include Rayna Rapp, Helena Ragone, Sarah Franklin, Eugenia Georges, and many others.

My goal is to provide a stimulating overview of these anthropological subdisciplines for midwives and others who want to know what the social scientists are up to, and to accompany that overview with an extensive annotated bibliography that will provide a helpful template for further exploration and research.

Learning Objectives:

Participants will be able to:

1. Define anthropology and describe its major subfields.
2. Identify major works in the anthropology of birth and their relevance to contemporary midwifery.
3. Name and describe the six subsistence strategies that humans have developed in the course of their cultural evolution.
4. Describe childbirth and midwifery across cultures in evolutionary perspective.
5. Discuss the politics of reproduction in relation to the new reproductive technologies, and describe the links between women's bodies and nation-states.

Outline of Session:

- I. The anthropology of birth
 - A. Origins of this subfield
 - B. Birth across cultures: The global meets the local
 - C. Childbirth and authoritative knowledge
- II. The anthropology of midwifery: Creation of a new subdiscipline
 - A. Midwifery in the developed world
 - B. Midwifery in the developing world
 - C. The postmodern midwife
- III. A wider arena: The anthropology of reproduction
 - A. The new reproductive technologies

- B. The politics of reproduction: Women's bodies and nation-states
- C. Prenatal diagnostic tests: Anthropological research on women's experiences and choices
- D. Cyborg anthropology