

Shifting the Medical Gaze: Towards a Feminist Ethic of Childbirth

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Shifting the Medical Gaze: Towards a Feminist Ethic of Childbirth

The term "reproductive rights" has become synonymous with abortion rights, birth control access, and issues surrounding reproductive technologies, yet the struggle for a woman's right to choose when and how to become pregnant often overshadows a woman's right to choose where and how to give birth. The lack of [feminist](#) discourse and activism surrounding issues of childbirth may attest to the hegemony in the modern American birth ritual of increasing [medical](#) intervention from obstetricians in hospital settings. There are currently several movements to challenge this dominant birth model--prepared childbirth advocates offer education classes and natural childbirth advocates lobby for the rights of midwives and home births--but I refrain from giving either of these movements a feminist label because neither are invested in challenging prevailing gender ideology or the equation of woman with motherhood. This paper will argue that a feminist discourse of childbirth is necessary by using a Foucauldian analysis to chart the current web of power and knowledge in the American hospital delivery room and how it works to deny agency to women in labor, alienating them from their experience. Recognizing that power and

knowledge operate on a myriad of levels and tactics, including counter-tactics, I will not [limit](#) my focus to the dominant discourse of medical experts, but also explore what I call counter discourses of childbirth, particularly from the prepared childbirth and natural childbirth advocates. Within this discussion, I hope to offer suggestions on a feminist ethic of childbirth that reaffirms women's autonomy during labor, but does not limit them to prevailing codes o...

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