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**Relating Systems Thinking and Design
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The Ultimate Control

Using systems and futures thinking to confront “the Pill” as a system of liberation and oppression

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Alexis Tennent Consulting | Healthy Conversations

Informed choice is essential to realising reproductive justice, where people can enact their human right to bodily autonomy to have or not have children in healthy and sustainable communities (SisterSong, n.d.). The dominant system of Western society prioritises the use of hormonal contraceptives as the preferred tool and technology for reproductive justice. While we believe this solution has been revolutionary, it has not been without many unintended consequences that negatively impact women’s fertility, physical health, mental health, sexual health, and quality of life. Simultaneously, the over and early dependence on a solution that shuts off the body’s natural and healthy hormonal cycles prevents people from developing their body literacy and systemic understanding of how their bone, ovarian, and heart health are all interconnected (Hillard, 2014). This leads us to question if birth control not only controls the function of female reproduction but also controls the limitation to body literacy that could be attained by shutting off the completely natural and healthy functioning of one’s body. The purpose of this presentation is to explore the topic of birth control by applying systems thinking and strategic foresight lenses to confront it as both a system of oppression and liberation for female education, health and well-being, and economic prosperity.

KEYWORDS: reproductive justice, body literacy, holistic diagnosis, time, systemic design, future thinking, foresight

RSD TOPIC(S):, Health & Well-Being, Learning & Education, Society & Culture

Presentation description

Reproductive Justice is a “human right to maintain personal body autonomy, have children, or not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities” (Sister Song, n.d.). In order to have reproductive justice, one needs to have body literacy, that is, the ability to read and understand the language of the body (Wershler, 2012). This ability requires the capacity to think in systems in order to understand how one’s reproductive system works as an interconnected series of relationships. By developing body literacy, people gain the autonomy, agency, and ability to make informed decisions to suit their needs throughout their reproductive lives. Unfortunately, the majority of females lack foundational knowledge of how their reproductive system functions and do not understand the inter-relationships between their hormonal cycles, fertility, and the role that their menstrual cycle plays as a holistic vital sign (Vitti, 2014). A major cause of this is the overreliance on synthetic hormonal contraceptives, which temporarily shut down the body’s natural reproductive cycle. This not only makes it seem unnecessary to learn body literacy but also makes it impossible to do so.

While the introduction of hormonal birth control (HBC), aka “the Pill,” in the 1960s was a major milestone in confronting the oppression of women by enabling them more control and choice over their reproduction and sexual freedom. Mounting evidence in the past seven decades has shown that there are many unintended consequences to this technology (Lake & Epstein, 2021). For example, prolonged use of HBC has been shown to decrease fertility, decrease sexual pleasure, and lead to a higher risk of ovarian cancer, osteoporosis, and other negative health outcomes (Hendrickson-Jack, 2019). The paradox of the Pill is that it tampers with the natural system to prevent ovulation from achieving short-term benefits when one does not want to have children

or is not yet ready to. However, as women choose to have children later in life, the longer they stay on HBC, the higher the risk of fertility impacts due to the negative systemic impacts of preempting completely healthy and natural ovulatory cycles (Grigg-Spall, 2013).

Because the Pill has been revered as a revolutionary technology to address women's liberation, the unintended consequences of how it continues to oppress marginalised peoples are often unknown. Overuse of HBC as a cure-all remedy prevents people from developing knowledge of their reproductive systems and puts them on a path away from the safe and sustainable informed choices that would develop their body literacy and reproductive justice. Furthermore, because HBC is prescribed to females in their teens for reasons other than use as a contraceptive (e.g. menstrual cramps, acne, migraines, and endometriosis), it masks the underlying root causes of hormonal imbalances, and it exacerbates health conditions when these people chose to come off the Pill when they begin to be ready to think about their fertility and reproductive goals (Vitti, 2014).

So how do we reconcile the Pill as both a liberator and an oppressor, especially amidst the current context of threats to hard-won reproductive rights? The overturning of Roe v Wade has created a situation for many in which birth control simply cannot fail. If it does, those who cannot be pregnant or care for a child are forced to decide between what they know they cannot manage and committing a criminal act. If used perfectly, the Pill has been touted as a highly effective way to prevent pregnancy (Trussel & Guthrie, 2007). Ironically, "perfect use" requires that all people using it to prevent pregnancy (including those who themselves do not become pregnant, e.g. men) have a certain level of fertility and body literacy, which, as previously discussed, is hard to come by when one cannot collect data on one's own natural cycles. And yet, clearly, the Pill continues to liberate many by preventing innumerable unwanted pregnancies every year, as well as providing relief for other health conditions.

Systems-thinking analysis confirms that the Pill and other forms of hormonal birth control are indeed vehicles of empowerment, but we argue that the ceiling of empowerment is low. When these methods are used without fertility and body literacy,

they trap us in cycles of dependency and expose us to risk resulting from an inability to perform “perfect use” and the impacts of long-term body ignorance that could affect later attempts of achieving pregnancy or becoming aware of sinister health conditions. As such, we ask how we might raise the low ceiling of empowerment we have constructed around ourselves.

We believe future thinking can help harness new possibilities for birth control methods (both hormone-based and non) to advance empowerment among those seeking to prevent and achieve pregnancy. As such, we combine Tennent’s (2021) recommendations for future thinkers with Fleming’s (2022) systemic analysis of birth control and body literacy to reorient our past, present, and future selves to confront this issue individually and at a societal level. In particular, this lens considers how we might employ non-linear conceptions of time alongside foresight tools, such as the Three Horizons framework (Sharpe et al., 2016), to break long-running path dependencies surrounding birth control. This methodology calls on us to remember our personal ability to know our bodies and re-learn from where we left off as inquisitive children. It then asks us to collectively “re-member” (a concept inspired by Söderbäck as in Tyson, 2021) earlier reproductive justice work, reimagine the past (and thus the future), and renew our actions toward a newly empowered future.

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