Book Review

Bell, S. E.

DES Daughters: Embodied Knowledge and the Transformation of Women's Health Politics


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Susan Bell’s book DES Daughters draws on two decades of research into the lives of women affected by ‘DES’ (diethylstilbestrol) since the 1970s. DES is a synthetic estrogen that was used from the 1940s until the 1970s to prevent miscarriages and promote healthy pregnancies. However, in 1971 DES was discovered to be the ‘first transplacental carcinogen’ when it was found to affect the reproductive organs of the daughters, reducing their chances of conception and increasing their possibility of developing a rare type of vaginal cancer. This instigated the development of DES activist networks across the USA, who lobbied for DES related funding, research and legislation, and who are still active today.

Bell’s analysis combines three analytical frameworks. The first, ‘feminist health scholarship’, highlights the changes in the ways feminists have understood and analysed power and knowledge since the 1970s; moving from ‘sovereign’ conceptualisations, through to Foucault’s description of exercising ‘new regimes’ of power, to Bell’s analysis that seeks to go beyond ‘old’ and ‘new’ to show the complex and multilayered relations in healthcare.

Secondly, Bell describes the importance of ‘embodied health movements’. Bell’s book describes key moments in the formation of the DES movement, as they used their direct experiences of illness to critique the medical and scientific systems, instigate funding and legislation, and challenged the political economy and traditional assumptions. An ‘inextricable part’ of this was the relationship both activists and DES daughters had with science and medicine. Bell shows how this embodied health movement used their embodied experiences of illness to gain a seat at the scientific table.

Thirdly, Bell provides a narrative analysis of interviews with DES daughters, conducted from 1982 to 1995, as well as other textual and visual sources. In doing so Bell aims to show how DES daughters reflect, resist and transform the discourses that circulate around and through their experiences. To do this Bell emphasises the multiple narratives present in each story and across contexts. She argues that it is then possible to see how individual choices rework and refigure the discourses at hand to create new pathways through old narratives.

In chapter one Bell sets the context for understanding the stories of DES daughters. DES history is part of what has been described as the “hormonalisation” of women (Oudshoorn,
Bell maps the multiple strands of activism and regimes of practice from the early responses to DES, through the initial realisation of DES’s carcinogenic effects to the emergence of an embodied health movement.

In chapter two Bell focuses on the narratives of those DES daughters who were diagnosed with cancer and how they assumed the identity of a DES daughter and, in turn, how this developing identity and growing knowledge of DES affected their negotiations with medical practitioners. One of the strengths of Bell’s book is the empirical work she does to locate each narrative in the cultures surrounding them and showing how each DES daughter negotiated her way through these. Furthermore she is able to show how their, sometimes deficient, responses contributed to the transformation of relationships of knowledge and power in the care of DES daughters.

In chapter three Bell explores the ‘special irony’ of those DES daughters who have suffered from infertility and pregnancy loss, due to their exposure to DES; a treatment that was supposed to enhance reproduction. On the one hand Bell uses these narratives to highlight how, despite being the ‘embodied failure’ of reproductive technologies, many DES daughters pursue motherhood through risky new reproductive technologies. In doing so Bell finds a power in their voice to legitimise the knowledge they produce that both informs and contests the medical view. But on the other hand, Bell uses this to explore the social expectations and bodily experiences of DES daughters, in particular the expectation of ‘seamless movement’ from conception to birth. In turn she considers how DES has made many ‘counterdiscourses’ possible, such as ‘when enough [medical intervention] is enough’.

Chapter four continues this theme of analysis to show how limits of medicine enabled DES daughters to speak authoritatively about their bodies. Bell shows how, in reconstructing the knowledge about their bodies, the DES daughters were able to contest medical sovereignty. Nonetheless, as chapter five shows, knowledge and power over the body remained a co-constituted project. DES daughters relied on their doctors regimes and practices of knowledge, but were able to reposition their ‘subjugated knowledge’ (Foucault, 1978; cited in Bell, p120) through their embodied activism at the scientific table so that, Bell argues, there was now “multiple and shifting voices in the production of knowledge” (p13).

In the final chapter Bell draws all of the above together through an analysis of Judith Helfand’s (1996) autobiographical documentary A Healthy Baby Girl. Bell shows how multilayered narratives, including previously formed DES narratives, biomedicalise Helfand’s body and the life. However, Bell also explores how Helfand is able to reform these narratives and other resist cultural imperatives, such as the demand to become a mother, through engaging in ‘counternarratives’ that were then emerging in the DES activist milieu.

Two key themes therefore emerge from Bell’s analysis, the importance of multilayered narratives in the constitution of knowledge and the concomitant ‘circulation’ of the relations of power. If there were a critique of Bell’s analysis it would be this application of Foucault’s concepts, which too often feel juxtaposed to the excellent empirical work, rather than being emergent from it. Thankfully, this does not significantly detract from Bell’s excellent exploration of how DES daughters’ multilayered embodied knowledges challenged, resisted and reconfigured formal scientific and medical knowledge, across three decades and in multiple locations.