

Wentzell, Emily A. 2022. *Collective Biologies. Healing Social Ills through Sexual Health Research in Mexico*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 240 pp. Pb.: \$25.95. ISBN: 9781478014881.

Book review by

Alana Walls

University of Nevada, Reno (USA)

Emily A. Wentzell's ethnography, *Collective Biologies*, offers a counter perspective to the limited and predominantly Anglo-American, concept of personhood dominating the field of biomedical research. Wentzell analyzes a series of annual interviews she conducted with thirty-one middle-class heterosexual men and their partners participating in the Human Papillomavirus Infection in Men (HIM) biomedical research study in Cuernavaca, Mexico from 2010-2013. Wentzell's analysis exposes how her interviewees conceptualize their participation in the HIM study as serving the "nonindividual, biosocial bodies" they understand themselves to be a part of, including their romantic partnerships, nuclear families, and the Mexican social body (p. 168).

Wentzell illuminates the collectivities to which her participants belong by structuring the chapters to reflect group membership. The first chapter introduces the reader to the smallest unit of analysis, the individual men, then romantic partnerships, the nuclear family, and finally, the largest unit of analysis, the Mexican social body. She concludes with a section complicating her argument on Evangelical Christian participants. Wentzell's analyses of her male participants and their partnerships focus on the intersection of gender, modernity, and race. She positions the men's participation in the study as a desire to embody an emerging form of masculinity, "companionate responsibility," in which men provide for their wives and families by cultivating and maintaining intimate relationships (p. 37). The men view their participation in the HIM study as exemplifying this form of masculinity and a conscious rejection of machismo, a trait they express as innate to Mexican men. Wentzell explores her participants' application of racialized ideology by analyzing the explanatory models employed by couples to understand HPV.

Both men and women describe men as carriers of HPV and, as Mexican men, biologically inclined to infidelity, and women as more susceptible to the virus' harm and thus, more biologically vulnerable. The couples understand the men's regular testing for HPV as providing them the opportunity to engage in a modern companionate marriage and actively positioning themselves away from what they conceive of as their natural inclination to machismo.

In the largest unit of analysis, the social body, interviewees recognize their HIM participation as contributing to the advancement of Mexican society by promoting risk prevention through health surveillance and supporting state-sponsored medical testing. Wentzell characterizes this as "biological citizenship," in which the participants model ideal, modern health behavior in an effort to advance the Mexican population as a whole (p.109). Like her other interviewees, Wentzell's Evangelical participants envision themselves as members of nonindividual social bodies. In addition to drawing on the ideology of "Mexicans as mestizos who share a unique biological and cultural essence," Evangelical Christians cite spiritual ideology as guiding their actions, specifically believing the HIM study to serve as a form of testimonio, or pious living (p. 17). This framework offers an illustration of the multiple worldviews from which her participants draw. It also illuminates an important element of the study; her participants are a specific subset of Cuernavaca's population, most of whom share similar experiences, life trajectories, and demographics.

As Wentzell acknowledges, her participants are not representative of the Cuernavaca population. She describes her participants as members of a growing population of urban, middle-class Mexicans exemplifying modernity through companionate marriage, progressive gender practices, and civic duty. The value of Wentzell's ethnography, then, lies not in its universality but rather that it demonstrates how collectively oriented people derive meaning from and engage in biomedical research testing. While her work certainly contributes to anthropological research, specifically at the intersection of gender, health, intimacy, class, and projects of modernity, the implication of Wentzell's work extends beyond anthropology. Biomedical research's presumption of personhood as individualistic and autonomous narrows the field of study to individual bodies, eschewing a more comprehensive understanding of human health phenomena. This text offers both a model for improvement and a thorough account of why this inhibits research.

Wentzell's primary form of data collection, longitudinal interviews, serves her goal of advocating for the incorporation of collective biologies into bioscientific research. The choice to interview couples rather than individuals allows Wentzell to concentrate on

relationships as the underlying unit of analysis. Wentzell's successful employment of this methodology stems from the framing of her interviews, not only as sites for narrative production, but also a location for her participants to embody and navigate who they are as partners, gendered beings, and Mexican citizens. For example, testing positive for HPV provided some couples the opportunity to embody progressive gender ideals by refusing to discuss which partner first contracted the virus. Interviews also present a platform for participants to situate themselves as both culturally and biologically intertwined with the Mexican social body. Wentzell draws on literature analyzing the post-Revolution Mexican government's *mestizaje* modernity project, an ideology of assimilation into whiteness. Her participants describe a "culture of ignorance" within Mexican society and envision their role in state medical testing as contributing to the population's advancement (p.108). Wentzell's interviews uncover how her participants conceptualize themselves as intertwined with nonindividual collectivities; thus, seeking to treat the body or understand the impact of medical treatment on an individual neglects to account for the vast networks to which individuals belong.

While Wentzell utilizes little traditional participant observation, the rich vignettes featuring her participants provide sufficient ethnographic detail. The framing of her interviews and the longitudinal construction of the project offer a deep analysis of the couples' life experiences, similar to a more traditional ethnography. In one example, the reader is privy to Arturo's path to Evangelicalism and the role of biomedical research testing in his spiritual transformation. That said, Wentzell is mostly confined to the medical testing office to meet with her participants, and this limitation narrows her description of Cuernavaca. She does offer a picture of the increased violence and a short vignette of Cuernavaca's geography, but readers not familiar with central Mexico may desire more information to locally situate her participants. Despite this small reservation, Wentzell offers valuable insight into Mexico's modernity project, biomedical research testing, and a keen analysis of human interdependence.