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**Running the Obstacle Course to Sexual and Reproductive Health: Lessons from Latin America, by Bonnie Shepard. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006**

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*Running the Obstacle Course to Sexual and Reproductive Health: Lessons from Latin America*, by Bonnie Shepard. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006.

Reviewed by Bianca Guzmán

This 215-page book provides a detailed and straightforward account of the challenges to implementing reproductive health–promotion programming in Latin America. As the title of the book suggests, the author explores the obstacles and the long-term, complex nature of the process of change, which includes alternating progress and setbacks, and how citizen participation impedes and/or promotes change in advocacy programs related to sexual and reproductive health. In the book, there are five chapters, which are organized into advocacy studies and program case studies.

Chapter 1, “The ‘Double Discourse’ on Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Latin America: The Chasm between Public Policy and Private Actions,” and chapter 2, “NGO Advocacy Networks in Latin America: Lessons from Experience in Promoting Women’s Reproductive Rights,” are advocacy studies. Chapter 3, “‘Let’s be Citizens, Not Patients!’ Promoting Partnerships between Women’s Groups and Health Services in Peru,” and chapter 4, “Conversations and Controversies: A Sexuality Education Program in Chile,” are program case studies. Chapter 5, “Crosscutting Issues,” the final chapter, discusses the dynamics of organizational changes that occur at the local and national levels that arise as functions of conducting controversial sexual and reproductive health–promotion programming in conservative Latin American societies.

In the introduction, the author explains the method used to collect the data for the book. In the advocacy studies, the author uses literature reviews, conference papers, agency-funded evaluation reports, unpublished theses, and the author’s own reflection of her experiences with advocacy initiatives in Latin America as her database. For the program case studies, the author conducted semistructured, face-to-face, and telephone interviews with the health professionals involved in each respective arena. The author also conducted site visits where the programming took place, and she reviewed evaluation reports, manuals, and newspaper articles related to the target programming. With this information, the author had a rich base of qualitative data from which to draw her assessments of the individual programs.

It must be pointed out that this book is dense with acronyms, and although there is a full listing of them at the beginning of the book, it is still difficult to read a chapter without having to pause and relearn and/or search out the full name of an acronym. This often dilutes some of the impact of the writing. Despite the difficulty in reading a book with many acronyms and unfamiliar political structures, the author does engage the reader by candidly discussing the real-life controversies of program implementation and evaluation in the controversial sexual health arena.

This book provides a wealth of information on the political aspects of conducting programming and evaluation in Latin American countries. As the book states, Bonnie Shepard is a researcher and program evaluator with 15 years of experience in the field of reproductive health. The author mentions that she was the program officer in charge of the Sexual and Reproductive Health Program at the Ford Foundation’s Andean and Southern Cone Regional Office from 1992 to 1998. In addition, the author also received an 18-month fellowship from the Ford Foundation and a 2-year fellowship from the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard to conduct the research that is contained in this book. These credentials suggest that the author has amassed a wealth of information about how programming and evaluation work in Latin America. With this experience, this author is uniquely placed in a position to educate evaluators who primarily conduct evaluation in first-world countries with information that can potentially enrich evaluation protocols that include assessment of individuals from Latin America and third-world countries.

In chapter 1, the author primarily explains the “double discourse” that is used when discussing reproductive rights in Latin America. This discourse is a system by which the status quo in repressive or negligent public policies is maintained, whereas there is an expansion of choice in the private arena. The

study elaborated in this chapter analyzes the cultural and religious norms that pose formidable obstacles to sexual and reproductive health in Chile and Colombia. One example that the author uses to illustrate how there is a chasm between public discourse and private actions is the issue of abortion in Chile. For example, in Chile, abortion is illegal; however, there are women who are primarily middle class who are able to obtain safe abortions without any legal penalties. Women who are low income often have to receive additional medical care after an abortion, and it is at these government-sponsored clinics that these women are reported to the local authorities for having had an abortion. As the author points out, it is these women who pay the price for the countries' use of the double discourse.

The discussion of this discourse is important to evaluators because a different version of this discourse can potentially take place when evaluators become involved in evaluating a controversial social issue such as teenage pregnancy, suicide, safe sex, or abortion. From my own personal experience as an evaluator of safe sex education programs in school settings, I have witnessed some school officials tell me that there are no guidelines for teaching safe sex education in their school district. On the other hand, when I talk to the counselors and teachers, they tell me that although there is no official policy about safe sex education, they are allowed to teach whatever curriculum works in their classroom as long as it does not raise the suspicions of parents and community members. As an evaluator assessing program policy about safe sex education, it becomes extremely difficult to evaluate the impact of a program that is not officially acknowledged by school officials. The most important lesson that can be learned from this example is that there is always some degree of a double discourse, and a competent evaluator will be able to assess this discourse and take it into account when creating evaluation protocols.

In chapter 2, the author analyzes the experiences of 13 Latin American regional and national networks of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that advocate for the issues of sexual and reproductive rights and women's rights. In this chapter, the author discusses how advocacy on contested issues or advocacy that confronts governmental abuses incurs costs that need to be taken into account. Facing these costs can exacerbate internal tensions, shrink the membership base, incur financial risks, and entangle the decision making of reproductive rights NGO networks. All of these points are important to consider when an evaluator becomes involved with NGOs. The evaluator must be aware that there is a political climate both within each individual organization and among organizations that can potentially affect program delivery and evaluation results.

In chapter 3, the author discusses a study in Peru called *Let's be Citizens, Not Patients*, in which a consortium of women's movement organizations promoted the respect of users' rights through involving four women's community organizations in evaluation of the quality of public health services. In this study, participants were taught two models of health care provisions—the citizenship model and the paternalistic model. In the citizenship model, health users have rights to access quality health care, to have freedom of choice, and to be treated with dignity when cared for by health professionals. In the paternalistic model, health users who are primarily low income are given care as a favor or as charity. In this model, the health care users have no rights and should be grateful for any care they receive. The overall assessment was that when health users were taught the models, they were able to become advocates for their own health care. This included individuals declining health care such as sterilization when they felt pressured to have a procedure simply because it was being offered by a health care professional. This chapter exemplifies how important it is to evaluate the constituents of advocacy programming. This chapter also discusses how economics often taint the ways in which individuals receive health care.

In chapter 4, the author examines a government-sponsored sexuality education program in Chile called *Conversation Workshops on Relationships and Sexuality*, or JOCAS (the acronym in Spanish). This chapter shows evaluators how a participatory program with empowerment goals for adolescents adapted to a socially conservative context when faced with intense public controversy. This study highlighted the strengths and the limitations of this highly decentralized and participatory model. It also analyzed the factors limiting parent participation and suggested possible mechanism to ensure students' access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information in locally controlled schools. Finally, the study examined the political dynamics and tensions that contributed to the demise of the program.

In the final chapter, the author discusses how government policies affect sexual and reproductive health rights. This is an important chapter because it highlights how the government can affect the

ability of NGOs to conduct sexual and reproductive health programming. For example, in Latin America when the government provides funding to a particular NGO, that organization is more likely to be pressured into providing programming that is sanctioned by the government. This can result in political debates within an NGO about how programming is conducted and about who is benefiting from the work being conducted. This conflict has the ability to divide and fragment the organization and to silence the more articulate and least conservative staff members of an organization. The topics discussed in this chapter have implications for evaluators to consider when evaluating NGOs that receive external funding. Many U.S.-based organizations receive private and public funding, and an evaluator has to be well aware of how these funding streams affect programming and the political climate of the NGO.

Overall, this book provides excellent insight into the issues of sexual and reproductive health in Latin America. Although the book analyzes programming in Latin America, I believe that most of the issues that are discussed are universal issues that arise as evaluators conduct evaluations of controversial issues. The author is to be commended for taking a first step in conducting such a thorough analysis of the mechanisms at play when individuals, organizations, and government agencies implement and evaluate health-promotion programming.