PART 3
Psychological and Sociocultural Issues
The six chapters in this part delineate a variety of perspectives on the psychological and sociocultural issues raised by reproductive genetic testing. Elena Gates poses a series of questions on the benefits and burdens of prenatal testing on women, including its impact on anxiety, sense of control, and relationships with family. Are reproductive genetic tests carried out for the benefit of the woman, the fetus, or society? Do the availability and application of the tests enhance or diminish a woman’s autonomy? Does testing increase rather than decrease the burdens of pregnancy? Does testing afford the promised reassurance or does it provide too much or too little reassuring information?

Sociocultural differences and similarities among consumers in relation to their decisions about reproductive genetic testing are examined in the next three chapters. The first of those chapters, by Nancy Press and Carole Browner, identifies factors that influence a woman’s decision to accept or reject prenatal testing. Their findings suggest that the way in which women were informed and the kind of information they were given had a greater impact on their decision than did their ethnic or social-class background. They argue that because reproductive genetic testing is becoming a routine part of prenatal care, and because of implicit beliefs concerning the value of scientific knowledge, individuals in society are enabled, regardless of ethnic or social
class, to remain silent about issues on which there is no societal consensus, such as abortion or genetic manipulation.

In contrast, Rayna Rapp describes her study of the social impact and cultural meaning of prenatal testing. Based on her anthropological study, she finds important ethnocultural and socioeconomic differences between providers and consumers. She concludes that providers must be sensitive to such diversity when delivering prenatal testing services.

Laurie Nsiah-Jefferson highlights the limited access to reproductive genetic testing faced by many low-income women, women of color, and geographically isolated women. She discusses barriers, not only to the specialized services, but to basic prenatal care. She further examines the difficulties created by lack of cultural sensitivity, perceived imbalance of power, and mistrust, which influence the provision (or lack) of genetic services.

The final two chapters refocus attention on the overall impact of reproductive genetic testing on women. Barbara Katz Rothman examines the ways in which prenatal diagnosis changes how a woman experiences pregnancy. In particular, she concludes that the pregnancy in its first half is overshadowed by the concern for what may happen in the second half. As a consequence, she argues that this “tentative pregnancy” is redefining the future of motherhood with increasing frequency.

Rita Beck Black then considers the experiences of women undergoing reproductive genetic testing, with special attention focused on the impact of pregnancy loss after testing. She discusses the way in which undergoing prenatal genetic testing can be a major psychological and social event for women, this being even more the case if the testing reveals a possible problem. She calls for further research in this area to provide a more in-depth understanding of the meaning of these experiences for women and their families.