

Making Parents: Reproductive Technologies and Parenting Culture Across Borders

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Introduction

It was Charis Thompspon (2005) who most clearly and explicitly drew our attention to the ability of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) to simultaneously create both babies *and* parents, and demonstrated the many ways in which various considerations and actions are ‘choreographed’ in order to engender these outcomes. It is apt, therefore, that this special collection, which emerges as an outcome of a project¹ aiming to bring two hitherto separate bodies of academic research into dialogue with each other, is entitled ‘Making Parents’ after Thompson’s influential work. In furthering Thompson’s dual attention to the creation of babies and parents, we wish here to develop a more comprehensive or holistic analysis of (attempts at) conception and parenting (aims and behaviours) as part of a connected and interactive process. The two bodies of research we therefore reference are the nascent field of sociological and social policy scholarship called ‘Parenting Culture Studies’, which examines the recent ‘intensification’ of parenting, and the burgeoning field of social science research investigating ARTs, in both ‘local’ and ‘global’ contexts. These two areas, whilst clearly having a lot in common in terms of their central focus on wanting, conceiving, having and raising children, have not, so far, been brought into any sort of substantial exchange; it is our belief that both fields stand to gain as we begin to foster a conversation between them.

In line with the aims and scope of *Sociological Research Online*, this special section focuses in particular on ‘making parents’ across borders, and specifically, in transnational contexts, an endeavor which often involves even more complex ‘ontological choreographies’ (Thompson, 2005), as each of the papers demonstrates. We centre our analysis on the use of reproductive technologies – including IVF, sperm donation, egg donation and surrogacy – not only to trace the forms of innovation, repetition and stratification the market in reproduction perpetuates, but also to think about the ‘spread’ of contemporary parenting culture.

To this end, the papers all discuss ways in which an increasingly globalized ‘parenting culture’ creates an appetite – explored in different national contexts as well as transnationally - for reproductive technologies, as well as the ways in which these

¹ The papers included here have been selected from those presented at our two ‘Making Parents’ events – a [double panel](#) at the American Anthropological Association meetings (Denver, USA, November 2015) and a joint meeting of the [BSA’s Human Reproduction and Families and Relationships](#) study groups (University of Roehampton, London, December 2015; please follow links for further information). A further panel was held at the British Sociological Association Annual Conference in April 2017.

same technologies for ‘making parents’ shape that very culture of ‘doing parenting’. In this introduction, we briefly outline these two fields of research, before moving to introduce the papers presented.

Theoretical context

In summarising the characteristics of what has been termed ‘intensive’ motherhood, Hays argues that ‘the methods of appropriate child-rearing are constructed as child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive’ (Hays 1996: 8). Rather than being a straightforward or common-sense activity, these researchers, largely working in middle-class Anglophone contexts, but also beyond have noted that raising children has become a more demanding task than it was in the past: far from simply ensuring the transition to adulthood, today’s parents are expected to do much more to protect and optimise the development of their children. Chiming with wider trends in literature around modernisation and risk-consciousness, ‘good’ parents are those who are reflexive, informed consumers, able to ‘account’ for their parenting strategies (Lee et al 2014).

In a more intensive parenting culture, which stresses personal fulfilment through parenthood, the social status of being a parent has been inflated - even being framed as a ‘human right’. Certainly, the reproductive technologies have played a pivotal role in this transition, in that becoming a (biological) parent has become (seemingly) more feasible for many couples. But as documented by a large, and ever growing, body of ethnographic research, these ‘global technologies’ are not practiced in cultural voids, but rather are tailored according to the social, legal, economic, religious, and moral conditions of the various terrains in which they are placed at the service of creating ‘local babies’ (see Inhorn and Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2008). However, while the regulations and frameworks around these technologies have diverged almost endlessly, the experiences of women and men undergoing them in different global locations have proven to be surprisingly similar and familiar. In many contexts, the study of ARTs highlights not only the centrality of reproduction to life expectations and normative assumptions of women and men, and the concomitant disruption caused by involuntary childlessness, but also the many ways in which persons and couples can ‘strategically naturalise’ (Thompson, 2005) their interactions with high-tech reproductive medicine.

In the current reproductive milieu, it is certainly the case that, men and women, parents, and parents-to-be, are faced with a number of competing, and at times contradictory, discourses regarding not only how they should plan and execute their reproductive activities, but also how, to whom, and in what ways they need to ‘account’ for these actions (Faircloth 2013). Elsewhere (Faircloth and Gurtin, 2017), we provide a fuller overview of the two fields, drawing out four interlinked themes – Reflexivity, Gender, Expertise, and Stratification – to illustrate the ways in which engaging in comparisons and seeking convergences between the fields can reveal ever more clearly the demands, challenges and paradoxes around reproduction faced by contemporary individuals and societies, in the business of ‘making’ parents and children. This special section contributes to this endeavor.

Overview of the papers

The first article, by Hudson, is based on interviews with men and women travelling from the UK for fertility treatment abroad, and looks at the formation of families in an era of 'globalised' IVF. This research addresses an important gap in the literature by exploring experiences within families *post-treatment* (rather than the typical focus, during or pre-conception). In doing so, the article highlights the complex relationship between 'parenting projects' and 'familial subjectivities', providing empirical research to flesh out Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's concept of 'world families' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2014:2). Looking in particular at couples who use donated gametes, the findings centre around two themes: The first is the idea that a distant 'other' (the donor) becomes central to the family; or, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue, that 'families find themselves confronted with the 'foreign world' in the interior of their family'. The second is the need for on-going 'reflexive negotiation' of this situation, involving the creation of 'specific procedures and practices by families in order to manage relationships, connections and emotions', often with a focus on concealment, minimized rupture and normalisation (themes echoed throughout the rest of the papers in this special section).

Like 'intensive' mothering, as outlined by Hays (1996), engaging in this sort of treatment is described by Hudson as a similarly 'intensive' activity, requiring active mediation, planning and co-ordination on the part of travellers as well as a high degree of emotional and financial investment. Indeed, as work around the intensification of parenting has argued more generally, this could be seen as an example of 'extending parenting culture backwards' (Lee et al., 2014), whereby the increasingly intensive requirements of pregnancy and parenting are assumed to be relevant even to the pre-conception period. These 'pre-conception parents' (Faircloth and Gurtin, 2017) are particularly evident in cases where involuntarily childless intending parents are explicitly required to jump through a series of hoops as they prove themselves deserving recipients of treatment (or adoption), aligning themselves much more closely with the ideals of an intensive parenting culture than many actual parents do, or have a need to.

Furthermore, in an era of cuts to public services (in the US and the UK in particular) studies of transnational fertility treatment are particularly timely, as decisions regarding who should be supported by the state to 'become' parents are increasingly politicized, and individuals are forced to adopt more and more extreme methods in their quest to make families. As with other articles in the section, Hudson's paper demonstrates the ways in which reproduction, and access to reproductive assistance, remains highly 'stratified' (Colen 1986), even in high-resource settings. Pointing to both the sexual politics and the political economy of reproduction, stratified reproduction as an analytic lens demands that we note the many explicit and implicit ways in which classed, raced, gendered, sexualised and placed hierarchies intersect with reproduction, meaning that some reproductive futures are valued and encouraged, while others are discouraged and curtailed.

This dovetails nicely into our second paper, in which Smietana foregrounds the accountability of European and American gay men who became fathers through surrogacy in the US, examining the ways they frame their involvement in this reproductive choreography. As other work in this field as shown, especially where third-party assistance is used, intending parents reinforce the closeness of the parent-child tie, while strategically emphasizing or de-emphasizing the role of genetics or gestation in creating such a tie. By drawing on ethnographic work with both intended parents and surrogates, Smietana looks at strategies of 'normalisation', with an eye on Stacey's (2011) contention about social pressure on non-heterosexual families to prove they are 'conventional'. There are two strategies that the analysis centres on here: 'the affective narrative of gift-giving and relatedness, and the economic narrative of equality and agency'. To this end, the author notes that whilst the narrative of altruism on the part of the surrogate is talked up, the class-based differences between intending parents and surrogates is typically written out, thereby intersecting with other forms of stratification (such as those around sexuality) in complex and multi-layered ways.

The third paper, by Speier, takes a different perspective on cross-border reproductive travel, comparing both the regulatory regimes, and social repercussions, surrounding 'open' and 'anonymous' egg donation in the US and Czech Republic. Unlike some other European countries (such as the UK), the Czech Republic allows for anonymous gamete donation, and – although there is a trend for 'open' donation – given the unregulated nature of the industry, the same possibility also exists in the US. Intending parents travelling to either location therefore have the choice as to which option to pursue. In her comparative analysis Speier notes that 'pre-conception parents' must navigate various discourses of healthy parenting and the importance of 'openness' regarding their conception with any resulting children. As Speier notes, 'They must be reflexive about their choices, and protective when weighing their options, always keeping their future child's mental, physical and genetic health in mind'. For couples travelling from North American contexts, there is a sense, it is argued, that knowledge of one's genetic heritage is crucial; the dangers of keeping this secret (and the perceived psychological effect that will ensue) are described as potentially 'lethal'

In spite of this, Speier also looks at the (well-documented) reasons couples may wish to pursue 'closed' donation, and keep the use of a donor secret from the child. Through interviews with professionals involved in 'the baby business' her analysis links the experiences of intending parents with wider patterns of stratification: many of these professionals are aware, for example, of the importance of maintaining a closed system of donation for the continued success of the country as a transnational hub of reproductive treatment. In line with the rest of the project, then, this paper looks explicitly at how global assisted reproductive technologies intersect with different 'parenting cultures' and ideas about healthy parenting across transnational borders.

The fourth paper, by Kantsa, Chatjouli and Daskalaki, picks up this thread by looking more deeply at the dynamics of disclosure, with a particular focus on relationships

within the couple. Rather than taking a transnational approach, this paper is based on research in Greece, with the authors noting that this context provides an interesting vantage point from which to observe the 'spread' of a globalised parenting culture and the use of reproductive technologies. In the Greek cultural context, they argue that sexuality, reproduction and family relations belong to the realm of private domesticity, and that these are matters not to be discussed in public. ARTs pose an interesting problem, then, in that reproduction moves outside the body and outside of the privacy of the house in to the public spaces of doctor's clinics and hospital laboratories. In the context of involuntary childlessness, the authors therefore focus on what implications this shift of private matters into public spaces has for the experiences and attitudes of Greek men and women towards both parenthood and partnership, and how they situate themselves towards their 'reproductive desires and decisions'. In era of an increasingly 'intensive' parenting culture, the analysis focuses on what the pressure to maintain secrecy around treatment *does* to a couple's relationship. Clearly, having children or even trying to conceive them, as well as cementing adult relationships, also places new pressures on them. This paper, unlike others in the section therefore, foregrounds not only ideals of proper parenthood, but also of proper partnership, following, as they say, 'local demands regarding family making and localized medicalization of reproduction'.

This introduces an important facet to our discussion on stratification, in that the analysis focuses explicitly on gender. Social and psychological studies of of assisted reproduction have been clear from the outset not only that 'his' and 'her' experiences of involuntary childlessness are different (Greil et al., 1988), but also that their burdens are unevenly distributed. Indeed, one of the most pervasive and most often repeated findings in this literature has been the gendered repercussions of infertility, usually impacting the gendered identity, social position, stigmatisation, and even safety and security of women more harshly than of men. Some have argued that these 'patriarchal paradoxes' become even clearer in cases of male-factor infertility (Inhorn, 2003) and are exacerbated as embodied physical costs since fertility treatment takes place predominantly on women's bodies.

This forms another link with our final paper, which looks at women's egg-freezing for social reasons in the UK – a technology enabling women to preserve a number of eggs for potential future use, after the decline of 'natural' fertility. Baldwin argues against current lay and media representations of this being a choice by women to delay motherhood in order to pursue career advancement. Instead, she makes the case that women's decisions are shaped by prevailing ideologies of parenting, which stress the need to be 'ready' to become an intensive, committed mother, who can parent in a proper way at the 'right time' (ideally with the support of a committed partner, echoing the discussion above). As Baldwin indicates, this ideology is not only one that is pervasive in the UK, but rather one that has transnational, even global resonance, not least because her study is the first to report on women travelling overseas for such a procedure.

In sum, the papers presented here encourage us to think about the wider social debates and dynamics around our contemporary culture of reproduction. What does the technologisation of reproduction do for society, in terms of our thinking about where children come from (as Strathern first, and presciently, drew our attention to in *After Nature*, 1992)? To what extent do the ideologies of intensive parenting and the technologies of assisted reproduction (particularly in the case of transnational donation and surrogacy) require the perpetuation or creation of inequalities and stratifications – be they at the global or familial level – in ways that do – *or should* – make us uncomfortable? In bringing work on assisted reproduction and parenting culture together, and bridging the dominant distinction between work that focuses on how ‘children come to be’ and ‘how children are cared for once they exist’ (cf. Almeling, 2015: 424), we hope to have contributed to an important dialogue about the simultaneous ‘making’ of babies and parents. This special section then illustrates the inter-dependence and mutual construction of ideas, ideals and expectations regarding the bearing and rearing of the next generation, particularly as it relates to globalized, transnational contexts, and aims to broaden our understanding of both ARTs and parenting culture.

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