

OFAP SEMINAR

Parenting Today: navigating through new research pathways

February 10th, 2023 - Sala Maria de Sousa, Instituto de Ciências Sociais

A CALL FOR A “MORE-THAN-HUMAN” PERSPECTIVE ON ACHIEVING PARENTHOOD: THE CASE OF ASSISTED REPRODUCTION FAMILIES

CATARINA DELAUNAY



ETHICHO

Ethico-ontological choreographies:
Forms of objectification and evaluation of the human
embryo in vitro in the context of Assisted Reproductive
Technologies and Scientific Research




PRESENTATION CORE MESSAGE

- In the case of families built on assisted reproductive technologies (ART), a **“more-than-human” perspective on achieving parenthood is needed**, challenging the received view of parenthood where human exceptionalism rules.
- **Ontological categories such as the human subject and technical objects are not separate or stand-alone within In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) techniques**; they exchange properties, they shift position, and they intra-act, and this must be acknowledged in future research (Delaunay et al, 2023).



PREVIOUS FINDINGS

- **Four embryo's attributive metaphors** (status, attributes and meanings) (Delaunay et al., 2021):
 - **Possibilities** of success of treatment (an opportunity to achieve a successful pregnancy);
 - **Utilities** that can be the object of ownership and dispositional control (a biological resource and a step in the process of having a child);
 - **Potential offspring** with whom there are family and emotional ties;
 - **Counter-gift** to science or to other beneficiaries (a way of expressing gratitude and repaying the fact of reproductive medicine gave them the possibility to be mothers and fathers).
- 

THE PROJECT

- ETHICHO - Ethico-ontological choreographies: Forms of objectification and evaluation of the human embryo *in vitro* in the context of Assisted Reproductive Technologies and Scientific Research.
- Project funded by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (PTDC/SOC-SOC/29764/2017).
- Host institution: NOVA FCSH / CICS.NOVA.
- Aims: Analyse the expert and lay meaning-making about human embryos created *in vitro* during ART.
- Team: Catarina Delaunay (IR), Alexandre Martins (Co-IR), Amélia Augusto, Daniela Soares, Flávio Martins, José Manuel Resende, Luís Gouveia, Mário Santos, Pedro Caetano, Rita Morais e Tiago Correia.



METHODS AND MATERIAL

- *Mixed-methods approach*, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods:

- Online survey with ART beneficiaries (85 respondents);
 - 69 interviews with users; 49 interviews with professionals (reproductive doctors, clinical embryologists, nurses and psychologists).
- Focus on 69 interviews with a diverse sample of In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) and/or Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI) beneficiaries – Interviews conducted with couples or individuals between September 5th, 2019 and January 20th, 2021.



METHODS AND MATERIAL (CONT.)

○ Interviewees' sample:

- Ages ranged from 25 to 47 years old (with an average of 38)
- All cisgender and the vast majority female (slightly above 90%)
- All but five interviewees were Portuguese
- Approximately 95% were living together with a partner (whether married or in a non-marital partnership)
- Only four interviewees were part of homosexual parenting projects
- The vast majority had higher education (81.8%) – a Master's and/or PhD (35%).
- All interviewees were employed



METHODS AND MATERIAL (CONT.)

- Topics concerning the meaning-making and the emotion and cognitive work produced around embryos:**
 - (a) The diversity and contingency of the embryo;**
 - (b) The value of genetic connectedness;**
 - (c) The spatial and temporal embeddedness of the embryo;**
 - (d) The interplay between religious faith and trust in scientific institutions.**



THE VALUE OF GENETIC CONNECTEDNESS

Leonardo: In the first IVF, yes, because we only had one [embryo]. The one that was actually fertilised and became an embryo, there was only one. So it was a bit of **the golden child**.

Denise: **It was a loss of a child.** [...] Because it was the union with Leonardo's DNA, it was **that magical matching**, that crossing over, that fantastic thing.. we who study biology and see it transposed in the embryo... and as it was the only chance, maybe **the mourning was harder**. Maybe if there were three, four, five, six, maybe things would flow, but this was hard, I mean...

Leonardo: I think it was harder for you than it was for me, because of the impossibility of... it closed there in genetic terms.

Denise: But at the same time it was beautiful because that's how I know that somewhere in time there was an embryo formed from my DNA and Leonardo's DNA. It existed for three days or four, but it existed. And that is beautiful, at the same time **it leaves me with a full heart.** [...]

Denise: **[When that embryo did not develop] it was just frustrating,** I mean...with that idea that something else will go wrong, right? **There's no emotional connection.**

Leonardo: I actually saw it as a chance, chance... **the idea was for us to have four [embryos], so that's fine.** (2ICSI; 6OE; 1ST; 3CE)



THE SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL EMBEDDEDNESS OF THE EMBRYO

Rita: To think, hey, **it's an embryo, with the same genetics, practically identical to your daughter's. It's a sister.** Suddenly, to be able to cross the barrier that I had put on this subject, it's a human being, and to say that ... calm down, there will be someone in the world who will have, someone who is, like, Luna's sister, my daughter, because she is a sister, genetically speaking. (...) **it is not a biological material, it's an embryo, which has exactly the same configuration as my daughter's...** it's a feeling... that's why, it's because of my daughter. (1IVF; 3OE; 1ST; 1CE)




THE SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL EMBEDDEDNESS OF THE EMBRYO (CONT.)

Laura: That's why I celebrate September 18th. It was around 2:20 p.m. And I have the photograph and I always look at it. September 18th for me is a day that is always marked. Because **it was the day I got pregnant, the day my son got into my belly and we started our life together.** (1IVF; 5OE; 1ST; 1CE)

Flora: **From the moment I got a positive pregnancy test, I tried to actually connect, and then yes, I was talking to the baby.** From that time on, for me it was, in fact, a baby. (...) the embryo for me was something alive and a potential baby, but it wasn't a baby yet. (4ICSI; 6OE; 0ST; 0CE)

Nora: **It was when I heard the heartbeat that I thought 'there's a person there who is developing' and I felt like a mother.** And that's when everything changed. For me, we went from being in a biological and health process to being in a much more emotional process. (1FIV; 3-5 OE; 2ST; 1CE)



THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN RELIGIOUS FAITH AND TRUST IN SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTIONS

Carla: The embryo I transferred along with this baby, I still think about it... But **that has to do with my beliefs. For me there is life from the moment there is an embryo...** and I still think about it, but of course one thing is **what we do not control and when we have to resign ourselves to...** (1ICSI; 7OE; 1ST; 5CE)

Sandra: **The big difference, I think, was after the doulas' training course and beginning to look at the conception differently. The concept of the soul.** When does the soul come? Do those embryos already have a soul? Have no soul? I don't know, but those are things I wondered about. (1ICSI; 9OE; 1ST; 7CE)



THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN RELIGIOUS FAITH AND TRUST IN SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTIONS (CONT.)

Paula: [The cryopreserved embryos] for as long as they were kept there in a fridge, it was going to make me confused. It was like we were wasting time. Because their role would be to make someone happy. [...] they would be in the same status and with the same goal, but somewhere else. So it was going to give someone else the possibility to be happy. Even if someday I knew “look, that child was generated with your egg”, naturally it would be a great emotion, but I doubt I would consider my child. Barely compared to parents who have children and don’t want them and give them up for adoption, or are taken away for adoption. After all, **they are also allowing other couples to be happy, right?** [...] I think it’s just like after you die whether or not your organs are donated to science, I think it is a yes. **Yes, please help someone, I don’t know, who has a disease, find the cure for all these sorrows.** If you can contribute with anything, it is not a loss, it is letting go, and gaining another life. (3ICSI; 5OE; 0ST; 0CE)



IN CONCLUSION

- **The interplay between, on the one hand, technology-society relations as they are enacted in biomedical practice and, on the other, the emotional life of In Vitro Fertilization.**
- **How the technical procedures that make up IVF and the emotional work undertaken by its human participants co-constitute the social bond of parenthood, along with kinship and emotional attachment.**



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Delaunay, C., Gouveia, L., Santos, M. JDS & Morais, R. (2023). (De)Bonding with Embryos: The Emotional Choreographies of Portuguese IVF Patients. *Social Science & Medicine*. DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.115770

Gouveia, L.; Delaunay, C. (2022). 'Focusing and Unfocusing'—Cognitive, Evaluative, and Emotional Dynamics in the Relationship with Human Embryos among ART Beneficiaries. *Societies*, 12(1), 7. DOI: 10.3390/soc12010007

Delaunay, C., Santos, M. JDS & Gouveia, L. (2021). In vitro metaphors: ART beneficiaries' meaning-making about human embryos in the context of IVF in Portugal. *Reproductive Biomedicine and Society Online*, 13, 62-74. DOI: 10.1016/j.rbms.2021.05.003.

Delaunay, C. & Santos, M. JDS (2020). Proximidade e distanciamento aos mundos do embrião in vitro: experiências significantes em tempos de desassossego. *Terceiro Milênio: Revista Crítica de Sociologia e Política*, 14(1), 14-40.

Url: <http://revistaterceiromilenio.uenf.br/index.php/rtm/article/view/186>



Thank you very much for your attention!

catarinadelaunay@fcs.unl.pt

