

van de Wiel Lucy (2020) *Freezing Fertility: Oocyte Cryopreservation and the Gender Politics of Aging*. New York: New York University Press. 344 pages. ISBN: 9781479817900

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At the outset, sociologist Lucy van de Wiel's book 'Freezing Fertility' invites the reader on a journey to follow the human egg across time and space. Originating from the body and following a decision to preserve one's fertility from a ticking 'biological clock', eggs may be extracted and make their way to the freezers of biomedical facilities worldwide, thereby becoming part of wider, politicized infrastructures of oocyte markets. However, despite its cultural prominence, egg freezing in the Netherlands, the UK, and USA – the geographical focus of van de Wiel's analysis— is still a relatively small niche market where, with the help of in-vitro fertilization (IVF), only around 2-5% of people later decide to turn their eggs into human life, sometimes unsuccessfully. Given that most clients of the already small field of oocyte cryopreservation (OC) are well-off, well-educated, white, middle-class women, we may ask how much OC may really contribute to the wider socio-political discourses on reproductive policy and STS scholarship more generally.

But 'Freezing Fertility' is far from being a dry, jargon-laden book about oocyte technologies. Instead, van de Wiel, a cultural analysis scholar by training, manages to shed new light on the wider gender politics of aging by tracing out and sharply analyzing stories of anticipation, anxiety, loss and control in newspaper articles, websites, online blogs and TV documentaries. At the heart of these accounts, is the cultural trope of the 'biological

clock'— a widely found narrative that emerged in the 1970s with the advance of contraceptive technologies and more opportunities for women in the job market. Through close reading of various cultural artefacts, van de Wiel argues that the emblematic ticking of a woman's clock has gained a different quality now that novel opportunities to freeze fertility have emerged, allowing people to conceive later in life. According to van de Wiel, these culturally mediated narratives between fear and hope render fertility inherently precarious and therefore in need of social and medical intervention.

Following on from this, one of the key conceptual threads and theoretical contributions of the book is the concept of chrononormativities, the idea that institutional norms and patterns are temporal in nature. In relation to gender politics, one obvious chrononormativity is the aforementioned notion that women bodies are "in decline" (p.42) and that women need to hurry up if they want to 'have it all'. Men's fertility, on the other hand, is relatively stable, even in older age, which seems to alleviate the perceived sacrificial burden of choosing family over career, thereby exacerbating gender-related income inequalities and the persistence of high numbers of men in managerial positions.

But other chrononormativities that van de Wiel draws out are much more subtle. In a balanced analysis of a Dutch documentary, the protagonist

is shown to be reminiscent of her own childhood pictured in grainy, old home videos and photographs of her family. Here the protagonist's "proximity to [reproductive] retrospection" (p. 77) produces and informs her desire of a reproductive future. The tension between retrospection and anticipation of child rearing then shapes a *reproductive orientation* (p. 73). A reproductive orientation is a term borrowed from feminist Sara Ahmed and can be understood as the continuation of what is already 'there' and what we deem normal or desirable in the context of usually heteronormative practices around sexuality, fertility and family dynamics. It thereby creates a distinct orientedness towards the future that inevitably steers reproductive decision-making.

But these temporal logics of reproduction are not solely produced within the confines of an individual's body or close family ties. Once extracted, the eggs become part of a wider network of biomedical technologies and the ways they are operationalized and marketed. With each different actor that comes into contact with the eggs, be it through perks or insurance schemes at companies like Facebook or in labs through time-lapse imaging techniques, van de Wiel introduces the reader to yet another temporal dimension of cryopreservation. As the book develops and shifts in empirical scales and scopes, temporal perceptions shift alike. Eggs then no longer just operate under the logic of a time economy and loss but become part of an "alternate temporal logic of frozen time and averted loss" (p. 84), that nuances OC into languages around postponement of parenthood, extension of fertility, aversion of infertility and a data-driven approach quantifying, slowing down or speeding up origin stories under the microscopes of fertility clinics. 'Freezing fertility' thus contributes to an emergent vocabulary of various new temporal forms of fertility planning, whether or not there is a wish for a child or an imminent danger of infertility. These new temporal dimensions then re-contextualize the interface between cell and self, body and state, technology and reproductive policies and open up new questions to STS scholarship more widely.

Throughout, the book also dips its toes into wider feminist and political theory and points towards issues of social inequalities within the OC

discourse. For example, when it nods to Donna Haraway's kinship making technologies (p. 95), points to Sara Ahmed's willful objects (p. 150), mentions Nancy Fraser's ideas around financialized capitalism (p. 54) and hints towards Melinda Cooper's analysis around family values and neoliberalism (p. 161). However, the book stays frustratingly brief in its engagement with theory and only latent in its potential to develop a *political bite*. Indeed, the author points out that her "intention was to find a language for a nonanxious fertile embodiment" (p. 234), but by doing so, it misses the opportunity to take a loud, affective, and indeed affected, stance against agism, sexism, racism, or neoliberalism which seems so crucial in feminist scholarship and wellbeing (see Ahmed, 2017). van de Wiel's caution to become too political then leaves many socio-political and ethical questions around OC unanswered. For instance:

- Is the notion of motherhood at all costs still ethical in the light of multiple refugee crisis and climate justice (see Haraway's (2015) call to make kin not babies)?
- What slippery slopes around the potential eugenics of choosing the 'right' egg can be identified in the face of fast-paced advances in biomedicine?
- To which extent is the "taking back control of the body" yet another way to promote a meaningless version of empowerment, enabling neoliberal marketing strategies targeting women through sexist tropes and traditional gender norms?
- Is OC perhaps romanticizing ideas of single motherhood, not taking seriously the continuous struggles of being a low-income parent caught up in structures of domestic violence and oppression (see hooks, 2015)?
- Is OC giving a male-dominated labor market a free pass to continue with discriminatory and punitive practices around pregnancy and parental leave?
- What onto-epistemological impact does an empirical focus on OC-motherhood have on how we perceive 'conventional' motherhoods?

Despite its partly untapped potential to develop a more critical political stance against ‘anticipatory regimes’ (p.66), hetero-normative assumptions of what it means to be a (fertile) person with ovaries, and stubbornly persisting gender, health and income inequalities, van de Wiel nevertheless manages to develop a nuanced understanding of how temporal imaginaries are constructed at the nexus of culture and technology and what that tells us about current and future gender politics of aging. This becomes especially exciting in the last few pages of the book (pp. 234) where the author traces out future avenues for research policy and practice around the notion of *fertility literacy*—an

ability to understand “the rhetorical framing of fertility facts, situating one’s experiences within sociocultural and political-economic systems, and positioning oneself against structures of power” (p. 234). This call speaks to pressing concerns around a ‘post-truth era’ of public (health) policy and how health and pharma companies monetize the vulnerabilities of those who can afford to pay back their debt (see Dumit, 2012). As an antidote, van de Wiel’s fine-grained temporal, spatial and multi-actor infrastructure analysis may help contribute to such literacy and help people make informed reproductive decisions in a fast-changing world.

References

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