




Reproduction research: From complexity to methodological innovation - Commentary

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The study of human reproduction has developed into a rich and innovative theme within the social sciences. However, little systematic or specific consideration has been given to the means by which scholars working on the rapidly evolving world of reproduction have adapted, innovated and utilised research methods and philosophical dilemmas within their work. There has also been little systematic attention given to the ways in which classical methodological questions – such as the nature of social reality or the ways in which individuals are enmeshed within wider social structures – are applied or reformulated specifically in the growing field of ‘reproduction studies’. In this special issue, we bring together a collection of papers which begin to address such questions within this rapidly developing field.

In the context of a special issue about methodological innovation in reproduction research, a pertinent question relates to the specificity of reproduction as a case for consideration. What characteristics make this field of interest in methodological terms? How might it differ from or intersect with, for example, family and parenting studies, science and technology studies, gender studies or studies of health and well-being more generally? Can or should we claim that methodological innovation in this field is distinct from the ways in which researchers innovate in other areas of social inquiry? In this special issue, we invite reproduction researchers (both as authors and readers) to more closely consider these questions in their own work, and to prioritise thinking which aims to catalyse wider debate and discussion. To this end, we use this introduction to identify a number of central characteristics of reproduction research, drawing on examples from the wider field (though this is not in any way intended as an exhaustive review), as well as the contributions to this issue, to make our argument that reproduction studies demands increased methodological attention.

In making this case, we first suggest that the long-standing and deep-rooted interplay between reproduction studies and the feminist project marks it out for specific consideration. As both Sarah Franklin (2013a) and Charis Thompson (2005) have deftly identified in their respective reviews of work on assisted reproduction, a range of feminisms and feminist theorists have contributed to the significant and mutual shaping of thinking about reproducing bodies and their relationship to sex and gender; at both the interpersonal and structural levels. Due to the specific role reproduction can play in women’s oppression, feminist thinking and activism inspired an enduring legacy of work which scrutinised the development of IVF and assisted reproductive technologies in the 1980s and early 1990s, and which has gone on to demonstrate the paradoxical nature of IVF and the often conflicting implications of these technologies in relation to women’s empowerment and well-being (Rapp, 2004; Thompson, 2005).

Feminism is simultaneously a philosophy and a social and political movement, as well as providing a methodological toolkit for feminist researchers and gender scholars who (individually and collectively) have long been at the coalface of academic and policy debates about reproduction. The entanglement of ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies characteristic of feminism has given rise to fascinating questions relating to feminist epistemologies

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(Harding, 2004), research design (Stacey, 1988), researcher positionality (Roberts, 2001; Rose, 1997), ethical awareness of vulnerability (Letherby, 2003) and emotional labour (Carroll, 2013). It has also provided a rich vein of work on feminist ethics (Finch, 1993; Held, 2018) and reflexivity (Letherby, 2002; Nencel, 2014). Two papers in this issue pick up this esteemed baton. Christina Weis draws on her ethnographic research on commercial surrogacy in St Petersburg, to argue that while procedural ethics provide deontological safeguards from which to begin ethically rigorous feminist research, the nature of research on reproduction often requires a situational ethics approach. Such an approach, she suggests, not only pays attention to the power relations and imbalances at play but also works to ensure that the research is empowering and transformative. Caroline Law's paper on men and reproductive timing starts from the recognition that men too, lead gendered lives. This paper outlines the difficulty in including men in reproduction research, not only because reproduction has been cast as being peripheral to men, but the difficulties involved in recruiting them. Law suggests that the lack of focus on men in reproduction research inadvertently reinforces the unequal power relations in family building, which put the onus of responsibility on women, and disregards men's potential interest and contribution.

The second set of characteristics of reproduction as a field of study relates to its intensely political character, making it a site of social regulation, political intervention and raising significant questions in terms of equality and social justice. This, of course, not only explains the involvement of feminists in shaping the landscape but also gives rise to new questions of reproductive justice and new sets of reproductive rights. Recent landmark challenges to abortion legislation in Ireland, Argentina and Poland, as well as threats to the provision of reproductive healthcare in the United States, for example, have demanded attention of reproduction scholarship and activism on the global stage. The articulation of gender relations with other forms of social inequality requires increased space in our consciousness as reproduction intersects with pressing political questions relating to displacement, migration and citizenship (Dean et al., 2012); sexuality (Riggs and Due, 2014) and sex (Hines, 2018); social class (Bell, 2009); and race (Culley et al., 2009). The proliferation of cross-border reproduction and global reproductive bioeconomies have also provided new contours to long-standing debates regarding reproductive stratification and present researchers with new configurations of actors, affects and networks with which to engage (Nahman, 2016; Pavone and Goven, 2017; Waldby, 2012). Our methods are therefore facing novel challenges as researchers navigate new terrains and experience the policing of access to research sites by new gatekeepers (Lowe and Hayes, 2018). These developments require that we continue to innovate ways to solve new problems or to research with new marginal groups, and two papers in the issue address such questions. Kriss Fearon's work on the reproductive decisions of women with Turner

Syndrome draws on principles of Universal Design, an approach primarily used in technical disciplines, which aim to identify and then proactively remove or reduce barriers to access. She illustrates how positioning disability partly as the outcome of the participant's interaction with the environment and the researcher shifts focus to the way in which research practices may be disabling for participants. She argues that the researcher should proactively identify and facilitate adjustments that enable participation, rather than demanding that participants adapt to the researcher's requirements. Also addressing the politics of access and representation in her paper on queer motherhood, Sierra Holland explains her development of innovative queer methods which foreground the visualised queer body in order to understand queer reproduction and its representation. She demonstrates the importance of visuals that lesbian women create and use to challenge dominant images of motherhood and female identities and emphasises the importance for researchers to take seriously the means mobilised by marginalised groups to challenge existing models and to adapt their methods to suit this purpose.

The third set of defining methodological characteristics relate to the social and material complexity of reproduction. Specifically, the interplay between wider social and global structures and the increasing technologisation and molecularisation that is characteristic of reproduction in the modern era mark it out for attention. This complexity presents researchers with a set of tensions to manage between the intimate, material, embodied character of reproduction and its highly technical and political nature (Carroll, 2013). The rapid technological innovations shaping reproductive lives and bodies over the last 40 years also present reproduction scholars with new challenges. Recent advances in egg freezing and womb transplants, as well as techniques such as mitochondrial donation and genetic screening, present new questions about reproductive temporalities and materialities and how we can better understand these practices. Researchers have innovated ways to explore these entanglements, from classic lab-based ethnographic studies (Franklin, 2013b; Thompson, 2005), multi-sited methods (Rapp, 2004; Wahlberg, 2018), to field-wide approaches such as the new kinship studies (Carsten, 2004; Franklin and McKinnon, 2001) and new forms of social analysis (Clarke and Friese, 2007), ultimately leading to a body of work with considerable sophistication and which has much to offer social scientific methods more generally. Thinking in these terms will encourage the use of reproduction as a lens to explore wider social questions and social phenomena (Franklin, 2013a). As American sociologist, Rene Almeling so succinctly articulated in her recent review article on reproduction, we need to think about reproduction as a process which simultaneously involves bodily, individual, interactional, institutional and political factors (Almeling, 2015). In this issue, Julie Roberts reflects on the messiness and complexity of reproduction by trying to untangle the multiple ontologies of 'early labour'. Drawing on interviews with fathers interpreted using the conceptual work of Anne-Marie Mol, she

considers the complex practical, epistemological and ontological challenges in researching an issue where realist biomedical categories fail to align with the subjective meanings and experiences of participants.

Finally, we wish to draw attention to the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of reproduction research. While pioneered within discreet disciplines and heavily influenced by feminists, sociologists and anthropologists during the latter part of the twentieth century, there is an increasingly interdisciplinary focus on reproduction and a corresponding growth of interdisciplinary works (see for example, Davis Harte et al., 2014; Van Parys et al., 2016). The interdisciplinarity of the field forces researchers to question taken-for-granted assumptions and categories in their own fields and to think outside of the disciplinary and ontological box by creating new connections and new relations and allowing scholars to ask questions that might otherwise be taken for granted inside a single discipline. The pursuit of an interdisciplinary agenda, both within and outside social science, offers the possibility for us to tackle wider social and political questions.

This social and methodological complexity has provided a highly productive context within which reproduction researchers have innovated. At a conceptual, analytical and empirical level, we argue that the complexity of reproduction has stimulated methodological innovation by pushing researchers to create new connections among ideas, data, sites and actors. One ground-breaking and early example of this was the use of Melanesian thinking by Marilyn Strathern to address questions of kinship and reproduction in the United Kingdom (Strathern, 1992). The exchange of tools and concepts facilitated by a growing interdisciplinarity enables a methodological cross-fertilisation that challenges existing categories and assumptions and extends our capacity to address complex phenomena. Creativity and innovation within the field perhaps also flows from the centrality of reproduction or non-reproduction to all of our lives in one form or another (Almeling, 2015), with a number of authors demonstrating how direct engagement with the subject matter on a reflexive level can stimulate original methodological innovations as participants' experiences resonate with our own (Frost and Holt, 2014; Letherby, 2015).

The energy that comes from working in a field with such vibrant and often ground-breaking developments means that we may, on occasion, unintentionally overlook the equally compelling developments at the methodological level. This special edition hopes to give colleagues reason to pause and (re)consider their own methodological innovations and see that they are not taken for granted but are worthy of attention. Brought into dialogue, the papers in this issue offer a starting point for us to more systematically consider these proposals. The authors share their own experiences of challenging encounters in the field and give practical guidance about how they were tackled while preserving the quality and integrity of the research as well as the well-being of their participants. The papers collectively demonstrate the advanced sophistication with which reproduction research

methods are developing. They are also illustrative of how researchers negotiate the shifting medical and technoscientific landscape of reproduction by deploying not only existing but also increasingly innovative methodological approaches.

We wish to conclude this piece by making a brief and final point regarding the publication and wider impact of reproduction research and the links to methodological innovation. As momentum grows around the open access movement and we are engaged in an increasing array of activities designed to ensure our research reaches intended audiences and creates social impact, we have an increasing responsibility to ensure that our methodological and scholarly practice is rigorous and robust. One method to achieve this objective is to ensure that best practice is shared across and within disciplines and importantly, with researchers beginning their careers. That we take time to reflect, interrogate and adjust our methodological practices and share them in an open forum such as this journal is a way to fulfil this obligation. But broader still is our responsibility to the public with and about whom we conduct our studies. As the open access movement gains momentum, we should prepare for a future whereby more of our work is accessed outside of the academy. We should therefore seek ways to reinvigorate our approaches and strategies, develop inclusive methods of participation and assure end users that our work is trustworthy, transparent and robust.

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Author biographies

Nicky Hudson is a Medical Sociologist whose work is concerned with the relations between assisted reproductive technologies, subjectivities and social structures. She leads the Centre for Reproduction Research, an interdisciplinary centre of expertise dedicated to the production of scholarship on the social, cultural and political aspects of human reproduction based at De Montfort University.

Kylie Baldwin is a Medical Sociologist with the Centre for Reproduction for Research at De Montfort University in Leicester where she is Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Health Studies. Her research interests lie in the sociological study of reproductive timing, reproductive ageing and women’s experience of new reproductive technologies such as social egg freezing. Her work has been covered by national and international news outlets and she has discussed her research live on Sky News, BBC World TV and Radio Four’s ‘Woman’s Hour’.

Cathy Herbrand is a Reader in Medical Sociology at the Centre for Reproduction Research at De Montfort University (UK). She was awarded her PhD in Sociology from the Université libre de Bruxelles, and has previously held posts at King’s College London, London School of Economics and Political Science, and the University of Ottawa. Her research interests lie in the sociological and anthropological study of new family forms, biotechnologies, health and genetics, with a particular focus on reproductive decision-making and patients’ needs.

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