

SARAH FRANKLIN

Queer Biology?

EVERYONE CHANGES THEIR research focus over the years, and even though mine has not altered very much in terms of topic (IVF), it has evolved considerably in terms of theory. My interest in "alternative" models of reproduction began as a graduate student in anthropology at NYU, where I worked with Annette Weiner, author of the breakthrough feminist ethnography *Women of Value, Men of Renown* (1976) and an early theorist of reproductive models. A friend and colleague of Weiner's, Carol Delaney, gave a presentation in the department in 1984 on her forthcoming article about "The Meaning of Paternity in the Virgin Birth Debate" (1986), which inspired my MA dissertation in which I revisited David Schneider's (1968) arguments about the centrality of sexual intercourse as a "core symbol" in American kinship systems. This led to my PhD on women's experiences of IVF – a project I understood then as a contribution to feminist science studies as well as feminist theory, by exploring how the new logics of technologically assisted conception involved in IVF directly challenged existing biological models of sexual reproduction (Franklin 1992). Since that time I have continued to explore what exactly is meant by the expression, "the biological facts of sexual reproduction" as the diversification of connections between sexuality, biology, and parenthood has become increasingly more explicit in the form of an ever widening array of new reproductive technologies, alternative families, and new kinships

that have thoroughly denaturalised older models of "the facts of life" (Franklin 2013).

While completing my PhD I worked with Marilyn Strathern in Manchester on the collaborative research project that became *Technologies of Procreation* (Edwards et al. 1993), and it was becoming increasingly clear to me how inherently flexible ideas about the biological could be in the context not only of assisted conception, but of what we might call assisted kinship. Throughout the 1990s the question of how biological "facts" could be rapidly reimagined and remade remained at the centre of my research and I thus began to think of how an anthropology of reproduction could expand to encompass not only kinship theory but ethnographies of bioscience. These interests led to several other collaborative projects including *Reproducing Reproduction* (Franklin and Ragone, eds. 1998) and *Global Nature, Global Culture* (Franklin, Lury and Stacey 2000).

It was in the chapter for the co-edited volume *Relative Values* (Franklin 2001) that I first began to analyse how "biologisation" might be understood from the point of view not only of gender and kinship but technology, and thus also how "technologies of gender" and "technologies of reproduction" could be understood as the basis for a different model of "biological facts" altogether. This in turn led back to the question of how the biological is constantly being remade not only in the lab, but also in the intimate contexts of personal reproductive quests, or pilgrimages. Here, the question of the biological reemerges not only as a kind of tactics or instrumentality, but a kind of work, or labour. Charis Thompson's (2005) persuasive accounts of "strategic naturalisation" and "ontological choreography" in the context of assisted reproduction helped many of us to see the conjunctures between what might be called "identity management" and the remaking of the biological – which remains such a fascinatingly ambivalent resource through which to fashion essentialising, but malleable, meanings of gender, kinship, and shared reproductive substance.

Increasingly throughout the early 21st century, the remaking of the biological in the contexts of kinship, conjugality, and identity has proven to be a rich source of theorising about what Gayle Rubin (1975) called

the "exact mechanisms" through which gender and sexuality are knitted into institutional conventions. Indeed, the rapid changes in what "conventional" parenthood involves is one of the most remarkable forms of social change characterising the past half century. One way to describe the international trend toward legalisation of lesbian and gay marriage is in terms of assimilation to a heteronormative set of institutions and conventions – and thus a form of conservative inclusion in essentially reactionary social structures. This view is countered by the extent to which the normalisation of alternative kinships and sexualities, as well as new reproductive technologies, have had a denaturalising effect on traditional models of the necessary moral unity of the conjugal and procreative functions, as well as the necessity of a two-sex model of either reproduction or parenthood.

From a sociological perspective both of these trajectories can be seen to coexist without contradiction; not only is social life diverse, but much empirical evidence has long revealed the extent to which biologisation often involves what we might call "magical thinking" – even amongst biologists. Hence, for example, we see time and again the careful editing and selection of which "biological" facts to emphasise, or de-emphasise, when people refer to concepts such as "genetic kinship" or "biological descent." There is a fascinating reverse causality evident in conception stories such as those provided by Corinne Hayden (1995) in her very early account of lesbian parenthood narratives, which emphasised the "kinetic" rather than "genetic" origins of offspring. Similarly, Helena Ragoné's (1994) revealing study of heterosexual couples' accounts of parenting in the context of surrogacy, where one parent had a "full" genetic connection to the offspring but the other had none, showed how, in the interests of emphasising conjugal love and equality above genes or biology, conception was relocated to "the heart."

The extent to which biological conception is renarrated, relocated, and refashioned, whilst often in language that simultaneously continues to rely on biologised idioms, returns us to Schneider's famous questions not only of "what kinship is all about" – but what biological discourse is for, exactly. I encounter this question often while supervising PhD

students who have interviewed one constituency or another about the use of new reproductive technologies and who find that the language of biology is alive and well despite being in other respects self-evidently superseded by other "codes of conduct." How to interpret statements such as claims to value the ongoing importance of genetic ties, or a desire for biological offspring "of one's own"? If the use of biology as a symbolic code for "normal" or "natural" is what is going on here, how does this finding square with an apparent loosening of ideas about what is "biologically natural" – for example in the contexts of gender, sexuality, and family formation?

A related question, then, is whether the language of the natural-biological has been dissociated from scientific literalism, but not from morality. In other words, has the ongoing connection between biologised discourse and the "diffuse, enduring solidarity" of kinship remained salient even in contexts of newly forged paths to parenthood, such as egg donation or international surrogacy arrangements, because kinship continues to be demarcated as a "special" domain of connection? Has biological connection remained the default marker of the "specialness" of kin relations because the care, commitment and labour involved in parenthood is not sufficiently distinctive of the unique form of moral obligation kinship is still understood to imply?

One way to investigate this question is to reverse it, namely to return to the question of what kind of moral commitments kin ties are understood to engender or impose. Clearly these vary widely – even within the wide span of relationships that emerge from the point of view of a single individual lifetime. This is the perspective that motivates studies such as those undertaken by the British feminist sociologist Carol Smart (2007), in her studies of intimacy and personal life, which explicitly try to move away from the more generalising institutional claims about "the family," "kinship" or even "parenthood." The question, for example, of the "moral biological" could be re-posed as one of the "personal biological" – a transposition that might enable us to refocus on the tactical, strategic, individual, and instrumental uses of "biological" reasoning described by Thompson (2005) – but in a broader context.

These days when I describe my research topic to myself I understand it less in terms of the "social and cultural dimensions of new reproductive technologies" or "the social study of bioscience and biomedicine" as the sociology of biology, or even the sociology of biological change. Admittedly this is still too confusing a moniker to put on my web page. But I did venture to explain to a biologist at a recent college dinner that my topic of research involved the social study of how the meaning of biology has changed since the mid-20th century – even for biologists. Even for biologists, the question of the difference between "basic biology," "basic biological research," and "biological translation" has become blurred in the context of increasingly sophisticated means of technological manipulation. Fundamental scientific understandings of biological phenomena such as conception and development have changed dramatically as they have been increasingly instrumentalised – often generating surprising results that reverse previous certainties. As I have argued in my most recent book, *Biological Relatives* (2013), the increasingly evident plasticity of biological phenomena is much commented upon within the professional scientific community, as well as by historians and sociologists of science. The meaning of biology has also changed outside of the laboratory – and not only because of Dolly the Sheep, *Jurassic Park*, the ear-mouse, and GM foods. Behind the rapid normalisation, and even naturalisation, of in vitro fertilisation is another story about how biological reproduction has come to signify something that can be remade. The radical version of this claim is that what has been intimately naturalised by IVF is bioartifice.

In her insightful ethnography of modern ideas of motherhood in Athens, anthropologist Heather Paxson (2004) points out that maternity is less a naturalised condition in contemporary Greek society than a form of art, or *techne* – more like a craft, skill or discipline than a biological predisposition or drive. Maternity is learnt and cultivated – more like the ability to play music, dance or ride a bike than to breathe, digest or yawn. We need not, then, think of the idea of a personal or moral biology being cultivated, disciplined or applied in a technical manner as necessarily new. Probably, in fact, the idea of a natural, involuntary

biological *telos* determining social relations such as kinship, parenthood or family life is the exception in both transhistorical and cross-cultural terms. The naturalisation of bioartifice in the form of newly conventional paths to parenthood such as IVF might thus be seen as a return to older models of personhood and identity as much as a symptom of "biology's big bang" in the 20th century.

Interestingly, if this is the case, then there is considerable scope for projects that link emergent forms of lesbian, gay, trans, and queer self-fashioning and identity to the explicit bioartifice involved in much contemporary parenting by heterosexual couples – whether they are using new forms of assisted conception technology or not. The extent to which the disappearance of a border between the natural biological and the cultivated biological has become a norm in many areas of contemporary social life – from agriculture to medicine to human reproduction – only confirms how naturally normal trans-queer existence has always been. It is only in the realm of the moral biological, some people's personal biological – often in the form of a return to prelapsarian ideas of a natural biological – that the idea of sexuality or gender as forms of explicit bioartifice is in any way exceptional. Indeed it was only perhaps in the second half of the 20th century, and even possibly primarily in the United States (Nelkin and Lindee 2004), that the equation between a presumed natural biological order of things, a morality based on "naturalised" normality, and the idealised model of the biological nuclear family rose to such preeminence.

In retrospect, the extent to which such a model is exceptional may become clearer. A return to a nonbiologised language of kinship, reproduction, sexuality, and family life is already much in evidence. The connection between the naturalised family and the exclusivity of hetero-conjugality has been irrevocably severed. The cut is, moreover, a contagious one; suddenly all of the other conventions tethered to a heteronormative natural-biological are quivering like icons on an activated iPad touchscreen – ready to be moved, eliminated, or rearranged. It might be premature to suggest that as a form of bioartificial self-fashioning queer and trans are the new (old) normal. But in the meantime it is

definitely listening with extra care to the data from studies of new queer kinships. For they undoubtedly confirm that the adjective "biological" has become an increasingly relative term.

SARAH FRANKLIN holds the University Chair of Sociology at Cambridge where she directs the Reproductive Sociology Research Group (ReproSoc). Her most recent book is *Biological Relatives: IVF, Stem Cells, and the Future of Kinship*, published by Duke University Press (2013).

REFERENCES

- Delaney, Carol. 1986. "The Meaning of Paternity and the Virgin Birth Debate." *Man: A Monthly Record of Anthropological Science* 21.3:491–513.
- Edwards, Jeanette, Sarah Franklin, Eric Hirsch, Frances Price, and Marilyn Strathern. 1993. *Technologies of Procreation: Kinship in the Age of Assisted Conception*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Franklin, Sarah. 1992. "Contested Conceptions: A Cultural Account of Assisted Reproduction." PhD diss., University of Birmingham.
- . 2001. "Biologization Revisited: Kinship Theory in the Context of the New Biologies." In *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Study*, edited by Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon, 302–22. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2013. *Biological Relatives: IVF, Stem Cells, and the Future of Kinship*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Franklin, Sarah, Celia Lury, and Jackie Stacey. 2000. *Global Nature, Global Culture*. London: Sage.
- Franklin, Sarah, and Helena Ragone, eds. 1998. *Reproducing Reproduction: Kinship, Power and Technological Innovation*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hayden, Corinne P. 1995. "Gender, Genetics, and Generation: Reformulating Biology in Lesbian Kinship." *Cultural Anthropology* 10.1:41–63.
- Nelkin, Dorothy, and Susan Lindee. 2004. *The DNA Mystique: The Gene as Cultural Icon*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Paxson, Heather. 2004. *Making Modern Mothers: Ethics and Family Planning in Urban Greece*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ragone, Helena. 1994. *Surrogate Motherhood: Conception in the Heart*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Rubin, Gayle. 1975. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex."

- In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna Reiter, 157–210. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Schneider, David. 1968. *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smart, Carol. 2007. *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Thompson, Charis. 2005. *Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Weiner, Annette. 1976. *Women of Value, Men of Renown: New Perspectives in Trobriand Exchange*. Austin: University of Texas Press.