
Books Forum Introduction

IVF and stem cells: The social life of some ethical quandaries

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In-vitro fertilization (IVF) has enabled both the creation of stem cells for research purposes and assisted reproduction. Both phenomena have challenged previously established conceptions of human life and provoked heated bioethics controversies over the artificial creation of human embryos, which are either destroyed in the process of harvesting embryonic stem cells or implanted in a womb where they develop into babies – ‘test tube babies’, as critics put it. This Books Forum discusses a selection of recent social scientific publications on IVF and stem cell research.

Ethical concerns over use and abuse of embryos could have been allayed if the Japanese research team around Haruko Obokata at RIKEN Center for Developmental Biology had found a way of creating pluripotent stem cells from specialized spleen cells, as they claimed in January 2014. A few months later, however, Obokata was found guilty of scientific misconduct and had to

retract their *Nature* publication. Subsequently, her coauthor and mentor Yoshiki Sasai committed suicide. Doing fieldwork in a neighboring stem cell laboratory, STS scholar Wakana Suzuki asks of Charis Thompson’s *Good Science: The Ethical Choreography of Stem Cell Research* whether the proposed integration of science and ethics could have avoided this latest and most tragic case of fraud in this extremely competitive field.

Vincenzo Pavone borrows Sarah Franklin’s metaphor of IVF as a looking glass to juxtapose her book *Biological Relatives: IVF, Stem Cells and the Future of Kinship* with Elizabeth Roberts’ *God’s Laboratory: Assisted Reproduction in the Andes* as two studies that scrutinize these uses of a biotechnology to get at much bigger questions about a neoliberal organization of labor and family in Great Britain or race relations in Ecuador where assisted reproduction is part of a whitening process for those who can afford it. In both works, however, Pavone misses a more economic analysis of how IVF reproduces structural inequalities as the commercialization of human tissues is becoming a political project.

Although questions of ethics are at the center of all three books, the reviews collected in this Books Forum show how current social scientific investigations go beyond metaphysical disputes over human dignity of pluripotent stem cells and embryos, embedding these discussions in less speculative questions of kinship, racial and economic inequality, science policy and fraud, as they are posed in different local contexts, from Ecuador to the United Kingdom and Japan.

Nicolas Langlitz is Assistant Professor at The New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of *Neuropsychedelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain* and currently studies the epistemic culture of neurophilosophy and the culture controversy in primatology.