

Edit Szénássy

Willemijn de Jong and Olga Tkach, eds. *Making Bodies, Persons, and Families: Normalising Reproductive Technologies in Russia, Switzerland, and Germany*. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2009. 248 p. ISBN 978-3-6438-0020-6.

Edit Szénássy. Address for correspondence: Faculty of Arts, Institute of Ethnology, Charles University, Nám. Jana Palacha 2, 116 38, Prague 1, Czech Republic. szenedit@gmail.com.

As aptly pointed out by Sarah Franklin in the foreword (9), the book under review is the first anthology of its kind exploring what used to be called new reproductive technologies—now usually referred to as assisted reproductive technologies, or ARTs—in Russia and Switzerland, with reflections on the situation in Germany. Written by social anthropologists, sociologists, and journalists with an anthropological background from all three countries, this unique collection is the result of a three-year Swiss-funded research project between the St. Petersburg-based Centre for Independent Social Research and the social anthropology department of the University of Zurich. This joint effort conducted by exclusively female authors is perhaps most remarkable for its geographical foci.

Anthropological research on reproductive technologies has a tradition that goes back to the 1980s, but this prolific, primarily Anglo-American body of research has only marginally touched upon Switzerland, not to speak of Russia. The reviewed collection draws upon a limited body of literature written in German, as well as an even less well-known and certainly scarcer set of Russian-language sources. Indeed, one of the greatest assets of this collection is the mere fact that it puts these two countries on the map of ART-related social science research.

Confining themselves to the products and procedures of technologies such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) involving third party donation and surrogacy motherhood, the authors aim to “investigate the processes of development and distribution of ARTs” in Switzerland and Russia through an exploration of discursive and social practices relating to the “production, representations, and functions of the gendered body, the person and the family” (16). A central analytical concept in this inquiry is the discursive category of normality, as defined by Charis Thompson in her milestone ethnography *Making Parents* (2005), which serves as a constant source of inspiration for almost all contributors to this volume. Taking the concept of normalization as a point of departure allows the authors to escape the pitfalls of a “conventional cross-national and cross-cultural comparison” (16), while also delineating the scope of analysis for the individual chapters.

This collection examines incongruities in the way ARTs are normalized and legitimized by societies and individuals in two socioculturally distinct geographical spaces. What remains underexplored, however, are internal distinctions within the respective national boundaries: readers learn little about non-German-speaking,

non-middle-class Swiss experiences and understandings of ARTs; likewise, there is no discussion of the interpretive frameworks and embodied experiences of non-ethnic Russians. Reading the collection, one would almost be tempted to forget that both countries have multicultural and multiethnic populations.

The book is framed by an introduction, written by editors Jong and Tkach, describing the position of ARTs in both “East and West,” coupled with a reflection by Jong on the normalizing practices of statistical production, routinization, (super) naturalization, and sacralization, closely drawing on Thompson’s work, plus an appendix comprising a set of tables on the regulatory situation of ARTs in Russia, Switzerland, and Germany. Between these are five thematic sections, almost all of which involve a contribution with relevance to Russia or Switzerland, respectively. The first section provides a succinct account of national regimes (public debates, legal and social regulative contexts) of ARTs, whereas the fifth section tackles the relation of biomedical discourses and reproductive genetics through a study of normalizing efforts in Swiss scientific medical culture and a media analysis of guidelines used in Germany to facilitate the acceptance of new fertility technologies. The remaining three sections are structured around the themes of bodies and gender, parenthood and families, and embryos and children, each section composed of a chapter on Russia and Switzerland.

A note on methodology is due here. Strikingly, all three sections include contributions that give accounts of Russian understandings of reproductive technologies based on media analysis, whereas the parallel articles on the Swiss context are based on interviews. Moreover, the Russian discourse analyses not only make use of the same two national newspapers from the same time period but, predictably, feature even the same newspaper articles and cite the same quotations. In effect, three different authors end up working with an almost identical body of data, though from slightly differing perspectives. Correspondingly, the matching three articles on Switzerland deploy a similar approach: they are built on in-depth interviews with a small number of middle-class, German-speaking Swiss mothers or couples (some of whom underwent IVF). The collection would have greatly benefitted from a fine-grained, local-level ethnographic analysis of the cultural meanings and individual experiences of ARTs. This lack of an ethnographic approach is particularly striking given the fact that all authors have strong backgrounds in social anthropology. An additional area that remains unexplored in this collection is the normative dimension of cross-border reproductive care, which features prominently in the reproductive realities of Swiss, German, and Russian couples unable to conceive in their home countries precisely because of the restrictive legislation and financial constraints mentioned in many chapters. Still, in a climate in which one in sixty children is born with the help of ARTs (as is the case in Switzerland [245]), and where a growing infertility-treatment market is evolving (as in Russia), this book is a must-read for policymakers, advocates, and academics interested in the normalization of assisted reproduction in these countries.

REFERENCES

- Thompson, Charis. 2005. *Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.