Panel ABSTRACT

Panel 18: Navigating reproductive ambivalence: strategies and subjectivities across the Global North and South

Organizer: Poonam Kamath, Luminita Mandache

Abstract: Human reproduction has always been marked by uncertainty. Throughout history, humans have sought to control and shape how reproduction is performed, embodied, and expressed. Demographic anxiety permeates both Global North and South alike (De Zordo, Mare, and Smietana 2022), with accelerated state, private, and third-sector efforts to either drastically reduce fertility rates in certain global regions, or increase them in others (Morgan and Robert 2012). In this context, this panel focuses on the reproductive trajectories that shape reproductive subjectivities, generating new identities, coping strategies, and sense-making amidst uncertainties and conflicting and competing gender, family, and demographic ideologies.

The goal of the panel is to use the umbrella-term ambivalence to document, describe, and theorize how uncertainty and precarity shape reproductive subjectivity. This panel examines (i) how entanglements with a range of reproductive technologies—that shape the most intimate spheres of human life—affect kin-making practices, particularly through the lenses of reproductive challenges (Tober 2019); (ii) how people strategize their reproductive choices within their broader social and moral worlds and competing global ideologies about gender, family and politics (Inhorn 2003; Mamo 2007), and (iii) the role of uncertainty (Huang 2022, Johnson-Hanks, 2006; Inhorn and Smith-Hefner 2021), inherent in individual reproductive lives, in shaping larger social dynamics.

SESSION SCHEDULE

18.09.2025 | Slot 1 & 2 | 6-0-1

SESSION PAPERS

Uncertainty in Parenthood across the Reproductive Life Course

Shalini Singh, Éva Beaujouan

Reproductive agency typically frames individuals either as rational decision-makers deliberately choosing their fertility level or as passive adherents to social norms and expectations. Yet, reproductive decision-making frequently navigates both perspectives and is characterized by considerable uncertainty shaped by personal circumstances, shifting desires, societal deadlines, and normative pressures. Using longitudinal data from the German Family Panel (PAIRFAM), this study examines how individuals who remain childless at age 37 and above have navigated uncertainties around parenthood across their reproductive life course, examining transitions between wanting, not wanting, and being unsure about having a first child.

Uncertainty in childbearing decisions emerges explicitly through expressed indecision ("unsure") and implicitly through frequent shifts between intention categories without realizing desired outcomes. Findings reveal substantial fluidity in reproductive intentions as individuals age. While men and women exhibit broadly similar patterns of changing intentions, a higher proportion of men consistently report being unsure across all age groups. Among childless women approaching the end of their reproductive window, transitions from clear positive intentions toward uncertainty or indecision become increasingly common. Personal circumstances, particularly partnership transitions such as union dissolution or prolonged singlehood, significantly shape this uncertainty. At later reproductive ages, uncertainty often represents a transitional phase between positive and negative fertility intentions—an adaptation period during which individuals come to terms with the possibility of never having children.

Our results underscore the importance of a longitudinal perspective in understanding the evolving uncertainties, offering deeper insights into how social timelines and personal experiences interweave, influencing reproductive subjectivities in contemporary societies.

The Elephant in the Womb: Biological Reality and its Exclusion from Surrogacy Narratives

Orit Chorowicz Bar-am, Yael Hashiloni-Dolev, Elly Teman

A recent Israeli court ruling on a tragic IVF mix-up revealed an unexpected legal connection to the surrogacy law. Despite the case not directly involving surrogacy arrangements, the court based its decision on a provision in the Israeli Surrogacy Law that acknowledges the biological ties between the surrogate and the child. This ruling highlights how the legal system acknowledges the biological relationship formed through pregnancy and birth - a connection that can supersede genetic ties in determining parenthood. This judicial recognition affirms what science increasingly demonstrates: carrying and birthing a child establishes epigenetic and biopsychosocial connections

that develop within the womb and affect child development. This paper examines the systematic erasure of biological ties in surrogacy arrangements. Through the analysis of 47 Israeli surrogates' narrative interviews, we reveal how their cognitive frameworks enable extraordinary giving while minimizing the weight of their gestational contribution and the carrier-child biological ties. Our findings demonstrate how surrogates selectively invoke their reproductive abilities—emphasizing gestational capacity when suited and beneficial while denying the biological ties created by the same capacity. Despite these efforts at exclusion, biological reality occasionally surfaces, disrupting constructed narratives. This blind spot not only serves commercial interests but shapes how surrogates articulate their experiences, creating narratives that both acknowledge and deny their embodied reality. Acknowledging the biological ties formed during surrogacy opens the path to new frameworks that reflect the complexity of human reproduction.

#KinderwunschVerbindet: Navigating (Re)productive Precariousness, Digital Biosociality and Biosolidarity in the German Instagram space

Poonam Kamath

Precariousness is an inherent quality of the human experience. Within the context of human reproduction, precariousness appears in relation with others such as unexpected infertility and other reproductive difficulties. Drawing on my digital ethnographic fieldwork on Instagram, I demonstrate how women with unfulfilled Kinderwunsch (the German term for the wish or desire to have children of one's own) in Germany navigate this emotionally and physically intensive period of reproductive uncertainty. For the German women who participated in my research, I suggest that one way they navigate this reproductive uncertainty and ambivalence, which I term as reproductive precariousness, is through forming social bonds with other women who find themselves in similar reproductive predicaments. Introducing reproductive precariousness as an orienting concept, the paper explores how users participate in exchanging autobiographical narratives of their infertility experiences, provide support, and construct shared digital identities as evidenced by the usage of hashtags such as #KinderwunschVerbindet (Kinderwunsch connects). These social bonds are elastic, fragile yet strong at the same time, a form of tenacious and pliable biosolidarity, characterized by reproductive precariousness. This reproductive precariousness can bring about novel forms of biosociality and biosolidarity which help make a non-normative and disruptive reproductive life trajectory bearable- making precariousness productive- a (re) 'productive' precariousness.

To be childless is to be whole: Tantric renunciate couples and post-secular approaches to voluntary childlessness

Carola Lorea

Discourses on "voluntary childlessness" and the "childfree" identity are largely shaped by secular, liberal, and individualist frameworks rooted in Global North epistemologies. These frameworks often overlook the complex historical and spiritual configurations of non-reproduction in other cultural contexts. This paper challenges these dominant

paradigms by exploring the lives of Tantric renunciate couples in West Bengal and Bangladesh, where childlessness is a personal decision but also a vow, enacted through ritual initiation and sustained by cosmological, ethical, and soteriological foundations. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, the paper illustrates how remaining childless within this Tantric milieu is framed as “wholeness” (akhanda): a spiritual accomplishment, an embodiment of divine unity and un-fragmented completeness, rather than a rejection of parenthood.
The paper critically interrogates the notions of "voluntariness" and of “childlessness” in reproductive decision-making. While some women actively choose renunciation to avoid marriage and motherhood, others enter this path due to structural conditions—poverty, widowhood, or their upbringing in Tantric ashrams from a young age. These layered motivations complicate simplistic binaries of choice and coercion. Moreover, the paper argues against the term "childfree," with its connotations of neoliberal freedom, consumerist logic, and implicit aversion to children, which misrepresents the affective, moral, and caregiving roles many renunciates maintain toward children within their lineages.
Applying a post-secular approach to medical anthropology, the paper foregrounds how reproductive subjectivities emerge within specific regimes of uncertainty, precarity, and devotion. It contributes to broader debates on reproduction, agency, and ethics, offering an account of non-procreation embedded in spiritual, yet sex-positive lifeworlds.

Unreproducible Past and Uncertain Futures: the social meaning of female voluntary sterilization in Northeast Brazil

Luminita Mandache, Jessica Jerome

The number of women seeking sterilization has almost doubled since legislative changes began to allow women without children to seek the procedure and changed the age limit from 25 to 21 (Abreu 2025). Since the 1990s, sterilization rates have been the highest among black, brown, or indigenous women with low socio-economic status and education level, from Brazil’s poorest regions (Amaral 2015). Considering the massive state investment in welfare provisions and the expansion of public healthcare services over the past two decades (Leal et al. 2018), sterilization rates were expected to drop and be replaced with reversible contraceptive methods that allow women to space pregnancies throughout their reproductive lives. Instead, the opposite has occurred. Based on 24 interviews with two generational cohorts of sterilized women from two low-income neighborhoods from the periphery of Fortaleza, Brazil, this paper explores the meanings behind women's reproductive decision-making. We argue that sterilization represents a historical cut from mothers’ and grandmothers’ experiences of maternity and womanhood. Unreliable public services and increasing drug-related violence led women to refrain from imagining optimistic futures when they could have children later in life, and opt for sterilization and a smaller family size instead. This shift reveals not only the adoption of modern lifestyles previously associated with the upper social classes, made possible by consumption-driven growth in Brazil, but also a broader sense of hopelessness in the future and short-term individual thinking in the absence of broader collective movements that can activate political imagination and instill hope through political projects.

Reproductive Misfortune: The Social Navigation of Teenage Pregnancy and Motherhood in Adonkia, Sierra Leone

Hamida Massaquoi

This thesis explores teenage pregnancy and motherhood in Sierra Leone through an anthropological lens, focusing on how young mothers navigate social expectations, kinship structures, and educational aspirations amidst uncertainty and moral judgement. Drawing on eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Adonkia community, the research examines how teenage girls manage pregnancy and reconstruct their social identities after giving birth.

The concepts of reproductive misfortune and social navigation are used analytically to foreground the doubleness of early pregnancy—as both a perceived disruption and a site of navigation and generative possibility. While teenage pregnancy is commonly framed as a barrier to education and development, this thesis reveals how young mothers strategically negotiate their roles as daughters, mothers, and students to achieve social respectability and pursue imagined futures. Kinship fostering, communal caregiving, and extended female support networks emerge as central to enabling teenage mothers to return to school and manage childcare demands.

Through life history narratives and case studies, the thesis illustrates how motherhood is redefined and enacted through cultural practices, religious values and aspirations for education and social mobility. It also highlights the generational tensions between teenage mothers and their parents, particularly regarding notions of ‘good’ mothering and responsibility.

This research challenges dominant public health narratives of teenage pregnancy as purely problematic, offering instead a nuanced understanding of the lived realities, agency, and resilience of young mothers. It contributes to broader debates in anthropology, gender studies, and development, particularly around youth, reproductive health, and social change in sub-Saharan Africa.

Family Lessons: Young Brazilian Women Carve Out a Future With or Without Children

Maureen O’Dougherty

In the latter 20th century, Brazil experienced a dramatic fertility decline (from 6.5 births per woman in the 1960s to 2.5 births 30 years later [Goldani 1999]). Social scientists documented how it was Brazilian women who accomplished the smaller family size despite limited legal contraception available, unhelpful medical and social network advice and uncooperative partners. Fertility rates declined to 1.6 by 2022. This paper explores young low-income women’s perspectives on reproduction based on fieldwork (2022 forward) on emerging adulthood in the periphery of Porto Alegre.

Young women’s life stories centered on the family of origin and context, ones featuring growing up in familial poverty, traumatic witnessing of community violence, covid 19 educational impacts, ample evidence of parents and peers struggling to raise young children, the elusiveness of love. Familial and community precarity in an uncertain

political economic context were the context for longings and efforts for a different future. Stating “I’m not sure I want kids,” some interlocutors were deferring reproduction in favor of securing better housing and vocational advancement. Others found having a child (unintentionally or not) prompted a clearer direction for such goals. Notably, many stories revealed bi-directional intergenerational supports, i.e., receiving housing and care from families of origin or providing it to parents. These women’s purposeful acts to safeguard against the very kinds of hardship and lack of opportunities they had experienced in the family of origin revealed a gendered agency to secure a better future -- with or without a partner, with or without children.

Emerging reproductive narratives/subjectivities in a turbulent time and small-island context, the Faroe Islands

Turið Hermannsdóttir

The empirical point of departure, for this talk, is abortion-seekers and queers in quest of fertility care in the context of the restrictive access in the Faroe Islands.
Methodologically, I seek to be attentive to the ambivalence in people’s reproductive narratives, imaginaries and struggles. In my PhD thesis, I write, “instead of understanding and treating these ambivalent emotions and ambiguities as contradictions (Merton 1976), I treat them as ‘complementary poles of intersubjectivity’ (Jackson 1998)” (Hermannsdóttir 2023, 89). Importantly, narratives as well as life-courses are not to be understood as linear processes nor with always an orientation (Johnson-Hanks 2002). They may be abrupt, inconsistent and at times, seemingly, contradictory. To methodologically stay in the ambivalent space, means being attentive of the voiced, the mumbling, the silences and the embodied.
Theoretically, I aim to analyse upon social change through empirical notions of ambivalence, uncertainty and not-knowing. In 'Moral laboratories' Cheryl Mattingly (2014) theorises on subjectivity processes, from the space of family’s suffering and struggles. Mattingly argues that these struggles and sufferings are also transformed into “spaces of possibilities” (ibid, p. 15), by the families/individuals. I approach the reproductive narratives as emerging, because many are silent and even silenced but also because they uttered (to me) in a time of turbulence in the Faroe Islands. To approach 'emerging reproductive narratives' (Hermannsdóttir 2023 p. 86-88; forthcoming), as a temporal point of research but also contextual, I argue that we can analyse upon contingent moments of social change.