Panel ABSTRACT

Panel 22: Neo-eugenic practices and reproductive governance across the globe

Organizer: Lucia Gentile, Clémence Jullien

Abstract: While historically enforced through medical technologies and state policies—often with elements of coercion—eugenic ideologies persist today in more subtle forms. These ideologies are reflected in voluntary social, ritual, and dietary practices embraced by individuals and communities. This panel seeks to examine contemporary practices aimed at enhancing future generations, exploring their manifestations across the globe through three interrelated dimensions.

First, it examines the prevalent discourse of crisis, analyzing how narratives of social and biological degradation are invoked to legitimize urgent calls for improving progeny. Second, it investigates the governance of reproductive bodies, uncovering how these practices intersect with broader social inequalities and gender dynamics. Finally, the panel explores the tools and mechanisms deployed by neo-eugenicists by paying particular attention to the circulation of practices and the way in which knowledge from different epistemes coexists.

By addressing the fine line between health-oriented practices during the perinatal period and deliberate attempts to enhance progeny, this panel seeks to redefine notions of health and well-being. Contributions from interdisciplinary specialists (medical anthropologists, medical historians, medical sociologists, etc.) drawing on recent empirical research, will foster a critical debate on the relevance of the neo-eugenics framework, which emphasizes individual responsibility and self-management. This approach aligns with neoliberal ideologies of health, productivity, and optimization, offering insights into the evolving discourse surrounding reproductive practices and their societal implications.

SESSION SCHEDULE

19.09.2025 | Slot 1| 4-0-5

Clémence Audran: What are the limits of an ethical human genetic selection? Results of an exploratory survey in France (2023-2025)

Jiaqi Liu, Dong Dong, Jianfeng Zhu, Liuxu Chen, Jiayu Li, Mei Ding, Rui Jiang: Reproductive Governance and Transnational PGT Practices among Chinese Couples

Amélie Neuve-Eglise: Shaping the unborn child in contemporary Iran. Between intimacy and politics, representations and practices of pregnant Shia Muslim women

Sachiyo Yagi: Justification for Egg Freezing: Reproductive Optimisation and Moral Tensions in Contemporary Japan

SESSION PAPERS

What are the limits of an ethical human genetic selection? Results of an exploratory survey in France (2023-2025)

Clémence Audran

Preimplantation diagnosis and, possibly, modification of the genome of human embryos and gametes are two biotechnologies that aim to enable future parents to influence the genome of their child.
They can be used to prevent transmission of a serious and incurable genetic disease, or of genetic risk factors for acquired diseases; or to give to a child an appearance that satisfies his or her parents' wishes. These uses raise the question of what is an ethical genetic selection.
The aim of this communication is to present the results of an exploratory survey conducted in France between 2023 and 2025 on this question. It was discussed in 42 semi-structured interviews conducted with sixteen biologists; thirteen people who have a pathological gene, and as many who believe they are exempt from this type of gene.
They all believe that a ‘good parent’ and a ‘good grandparent’ have to prevent the transmission of serious and incurable genetic diseases. However, these ethical norms are not applied in the same way about preventing genetic risk factors, and about a child who has an appearance that satisfies his or her parents' wishes. They envisage different consequences for the health of the planned child and its potential descendants. These duties sometimes clash with the duty to preserve the well-being of all future human beings, as current members of the human species.
The aim of this communication is to present the limits of an ethical genetic selection for these 42 people.

Reproductive Governance and Transnational PGT Practices among Chinese Couples

Jiaqi Liu, Dong Dong, Jianfeng Zhu, Liuxu Chen, Jiayu Li, Mei Ding, Rui Jiang

This study investigates the growing phenomenon of cross-border reproductive travel among Chinese heterosexual couples who seek preimplantation genetic testing (PGT) services in Thailand. In China, the use of assisted reproductive technologies is tightly regulated, particularly in relation to the non-medical use of embryo screening and selection. However, recent years have witnessed the emergence of a transnational

fertility market that enables prospective parents to circumvent these restrictions by turning to clinics abroad.
Thailand has become a prominent hub in this landscape, offering regulatory flexibility, geographic proximity, and a rapidly expanding reproductive industry supported by international capital and intermediary networks. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Chinese couples undergoing PGT procedures and brokers facilitating these services, as well as ethnographic fieldwork in a Thai fertility clinic, this study explores how reproductive aspirations are being reshaped through the intersection of medical technologies, market infrastructures, and shifting notions of reproductive autonomy.

Rather than being solely a response to biomedical or clinical concerns, these practices reflect a broader transformation in reproductive governance—from state-centered population management to individualized, market-mediated strategies of family formation. Through cross-border engagement with selective reproductive technologies, Chinese couples are participating in new forms of stratified reproduction, raising questions about equity, access, and the globalization of reproductive care. This study situates such practices within ongoing debates about neoliberalism, biopolitics, and the subtle emergence of technoscientific forms of reproductive optimization.

Shaping the unborn child in contemporary Iran. Between intimacy and politics, representations and practices of pregnant Shia Muslim women

Amélie Neuve-Eglise

Since the beginning of the 2000s, a growing number of religious publications dedicated to pregnancy have gained a significant Shiite female readership in urban contexts. These books list practices and rituals for pregnant women, presented as ways to facilitate the transmission of certain physical and moral characteristics to their unborn child. Based on an ethnographic research conducted Tehran and Isfahan between 2013 and 2016 supplemented by remote interviews, this presentation aims to examine the ways these practices are carried out, as well as the representations of the beautiful, healthy and virtuous child that underpin them. We will consider how pregnant women refer to these publications, but also participate themselves in the elaboration of oral and written corpora, particularly in virtual spaces. While Iran faces multiple political and social crises, we will also study the way in which political authorities are seeking both to disseminate these practices and to standardize them, as part of a policy aimed at bringing about a new generation of citizens with “healthy” bodies and minds. Against a backdrop of an increasing medicalization of pregnancy, the ambivalence of such practices will also be underlined, as they may meet the women's desire to regain some control over their bodies, but also constitute new ways of exercising biopower.

Justification for Egg Freezing: Reproductive Optimisation and Moral Tensions in Contemporary Japan

Sachiyo Yagi

Egg freezing, an emerging form of assisted reproductive technology (ART), is intended

to allow women to postpone motherhood by freezing and preserving their oocytes. Targeting the inevitable process of age-related fertility decline in otherwise healthy women, egg freezing pathologises ovarian aging (Baldwin 2019) and medicalizes anticipated infertility (Martin 2010). The technology is also increasingly framed as a policy tool to address low fertility. For instance, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government has lately been subsidising egg freezing to counter the declining birthrate, even though ART has been problematised as 'unnatural' within the Japanese cultural context. Amid these seemingly contradictory moral tensions between a desire to optimise fertility through biomedical means and a drive to remain 'natural' by avoiding unnecessary medical interventions (Shirai 2020), how do different actors justify the use of biomedicine in the context of demographic anxieties? Drawing on ethnographic accounts of state policy, the fertility industry, and interviews with 51 women who froze their eggs in Japan, this paper discusses how the notions of reproductive optimisation and responsibilities are deployed in promoting and justifying the use of the technology, alongside prevailing gender norms, social expectations and moral obligations. This study contributes to expanding medical anthropological understandings of reprodutive governance by showing how neo-eugenic practices are embodied not only through engagement with biomedicine, but also through gendered and socially embedded practices, such as seeking the ideal partner, ensuring a healthy pregnancy, and securing a stable environment for raising a child.