

FERTILITY HOLIDAYS IVF TOURISM AND THE REPRODUCTION OF WHITENESS AMY SPEIER

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

Why Consider this Book for Your Class?

- Includes ethnographic data gathered over the course of five years in North America and the Czech Republic. Offers firsthand experience of North American couples who are traveling to the Czech Republic for assisted reproductive technologies
- Offers a critical medical anthropological engagement with cross-border reproductive care in Eastern Europe. A feminist critique of the contradictions of fertility holidays.
- The writing is accessible and engaging, with unique insight into lower middle class North American reproductive travelers.

"*Fertility Holidays* focuses on a group of North Americans traveling to the Czech Republic in search of respectful medical care at market-driven low prices, combined with a European vacation. In Speier's adroit analysis, their layers of techno-hope cannot be separated from a desire to stabilize their chances of giving birth to 'white' babies. This compelling ethnographic account of Eastern European fertility entrepreneurship provides feminist insight into the marketization of reproductive bodies, showing how multilayered and multi-sited medical travel has become."

-Rayna Rapp, author of *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America*

Fertility Holidays

IVF TOURISM AND
THE REPRODUCTION
OF WHITENESS

AMY SPEIER

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General Summary

Each year, more and more Americans travel out of the country seeking low cost medical treatments abroad, including fertility treatments such as in vitro fertilization (IVF). As the lower middle classes of the United States have been priced out of an expensive privatized “baby business,” the Czech Republic has emerged as a central hub of fertility tourism, offering a plentitude of blonde-haired, blue-eyed egg donors at a fraction of the price.

Fertility Holidays presents a critical analysis of white, working class North Americans’ motivations and experiences when traveling to Central Europe for donor egg IVF. Within this diaspora, patients become consumers, urged on by the representation of a white Europe and an empathetic health care system, which seems nonexistent at home. As the volume traces these American fertility journeys halfway around the world, it uncovers layers of contradiction embedded in global reproductive medicine. Speier reveals the extent to which reproductive travel heightens the hope ingrained in reproductive technologies, especially when the procedures are framed as “holidays.” The pitch of combining a vacation with their treatment promises couples a stress-free IVF cycle; yet, in truth, they may become tangled in fraught situations as they endure an emotionally wrought cycle of IVF in a strange place.

Offering an intimate, first-hand account of North Americans’ journeys to the Czech Republic for IVF, *Fertility Holidays* exposes reproductive travel as a form of consumption which is motivated by complex layers of desire for white babies, a European vacation, better health care, and technological success.

INTRODUCTION

SUMMARY

In the opening chapter of *Fertility Holidays*, Speier begins with a vignette of a couple that discovers they are infertile yet cannot afford treatment at home. It follows them as they travel on a “fertility holiday.” Speier introduces the general phenomenon of reproductive travel and surveys the existing literature about this type of “medical tourism.” Fertility holidays are framed as “political economies of hope” (Rose and Novas 2005:442), and Speier applies feminist and globalization theories to this phenomenon. Global neoliberal processes enable reproductive travel, and Speier introduces the primary actors who constructed this global care chain: IVF brokers who promise lower middle class North Americans they can have blonde-haired, blue-eyed babies, a European vacation, and excellent health care at affordable prices. Speier introduces the North Americans who travel to the Czech Republic for IVF and become “biomedical self-shapers” (Rose and Novas 2005:442). Ultimately, as North Americans embark on IVF “holidays,” they experience multiple contradictions that are traced throughout the rest of the book. The first chapter ends with a brief discussion of the ethnographic methodology and a layout of the rest of the chapters of the book.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the debates surrounding the term “reproductive tourism”?
- Who is traveling to the Czech Republic for assisted reproductive technologies?
- What are the global neoliberal factors that have shaped global medical travel?
- Who are the IVF brokers who have paved this global care route between North America and the Czech Republic?

CHAPTER 1: FROM HOPE TO ALIENATION: NORTH AMERICANS ENTER THE BABY BUSINESS

SUMMARY

This chapter discusses the struggle involved in coping with infertility. Having children seems almost like a rite of passage, signaled by pregnancy announcements from one's friends. Couples often assume that conceiving will be an effortless process, and the inability to get pregnant leads to feelings of stress and shame associated with the social stigma inherent in not being able to conceive. The chapter explains that infertility, the work involved with conceiving, and the emotional toll experienced, are largely gendered, with women feeling the brunt of responsibility for being unable to conceive. Women often feel compelled to inform others that their inability to conceive is not a reflection of their health; this sense of responsibility is fostered by the medical system, which uses a system of hope to generate the desire to continue treatment, which may work if you are responsible and diligent. This increases the likelihood that patients continue expensive treatments and may even become a compulsion. Many women become disillusioned to the process as they begin to see the enormous expenses associated with the seemingly never-ending treatments. This, combined with the intense emotional strain and perceived lack of care from providers, may lead some women to explore alternative IVF treatments outside the US.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How does infertility interrupt a woman's normative life stages?
- What are the central elements of North America's "baby business"?
- List some of the ways women feel they are proactive in their conception efforts.
- How do couples experience alienation throughout the process of seeking assisted reproductive technologies at home?
- Do you think that people should have more access to reproductive technologies?

CHAPTER 2: VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AND MARKETS

CHAPTER 2

SUMMARY

Chapter 2 looks at the role the Internet plays in facilitating connections for fertility travelers. Feeling isolated from the doctors in the States, women may utilize online search engines for information. This can also lead to interaction with support groups and fertility forums. This is another responsibility that falls to women, and they may also find comfort from the connections they make online. Patients become consumers in a global marketplace of healthcare. Speier applies Andrea Whittaker's label of "global biological citizen, embodying a neoliberal dream," to North American reproductive travelers. Her second chapter focuses mostly on the online communities and their centrality for women and how they become lay experts. Through online networks, individuals may hear about foreign IVF treatments, and the companies that assist in the fertility tourism to Czech utilize the testimonials of previous clients to promote the image of a relaxing vacation IVF experience. IVF brokers are branding these reproductive trips as "holidays" because they allow couples to travel to a different country and promises to be "worry free". These sites also prey upon the imagination of the tourists, and promise to provide a caring environment where you are treated like family. They promise to provide what the American consumer is seeking: "white babies, advanced technologies, lower costs, and a holiday" (Speier, 45).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How do women utilize the Internet in their search for treatment options for infertility?
- How is the Internet both empowering and disempowering for women suffering infertility?
- How do IVF brokers market "fertility holidays"?
- On page 45, the author states, "the imaginations that the tourists take with them are an active part of their physical travels." List some of the expectations these fertility travelers have for their trip to a foreign country for treatment, and list some of the ways these are promoted.

CHAPTER 3: INTIMATE LABOR WITHIN CZECH CLINICS

SUMMARY

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How has the Czech Republic become a destination site of reproductive travel?
- How have Czech clinics transformed in their treatment of foreign patients?
- What are the ethical dilemmas associated with anonymous egg donation?
- How do IVF brokers manage North American clinic visits?
- How are Czech clinical experiences different than those in the United States?
- What are North Americans hoping for by traveling to the Czech Republic seeking IVF using an egg donor?

CHAPTER 4: CONTRADICTIONS OF FERTILITY HOLIDAYS

CHAPTER 4

SUMMARY

Chapter 4 looks at some of the contradictions inherent in Czech reproductive tourism, which in large hinges on the conflict inherent in enjoying a vacation that springs from struggles with infertility. As described in other chapters, these tourists do a lot of work researching their options and ultimately invest a great deal of time, effort, hope into their Czech trip, so they want to ensure that they are doing all they can to make it successful. There is a pervasive rhetoric that remaining positive will aid in conception, but the entire process involves a great deal of stress, which is often deflected and downplayed through the concentration on the travel aspect of the Czech visit. The couples visiting interact with each other and those engaged in intimate tourism, forming bonds that create encouragement and distraction. These interactions also lead to opportunities for judgment and resentment for those unworthy of conception--those not trying hard enough and those who have already experienced the blessing of coveted conception. The clinics support notions of responsibility and positive thinking, informing the patients that "the only people who don't get pregnant are those who stop trying." In essence, the clinics tell patients that if they want it, they'll get it, so long as they are responsible, and are willing to continue trying. This is similar to the rhetoric seen in the States, but this is interpreted very differently in Czech clinics. What this does though is create additional forms of responsibility burdens on the women seeking treating. This adds to the yoke they bear, and they now must struggle with the complicated idea that they must work hard enough to relax properly.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How are "fertility holidays" imbued with contradiction?
- Why do North American reproductive travelers try to stay positive and relax?
- Why is the pension so important for North American reproductive travelers?
- What are the elements of the "intimate labor" provided by the pension and clinics?
- How do women make decisions regarding embryo transfers?

CHAPTER 5: SEPARATE BUT CONNECTED PATHS

SUMMARY

The last chapter of *Fertility Holidays* follows the paths patients take in the effort to have children, as well as the bonds these couples form with others along the way. A big part of the journey involves the kinship relations that are formed, and the couples seeking treatment often stay in touch with each other and with those they met in the Czech Republic. Another facet of connections mentioned in this chapter revolves around the connection the parents have with their child. Parents often emphasize whatever it is which makes them feel connected to their child--struggles with getting pregnant or pregnancy itself, genetic connections, similar appearances, --solidifying their role as rightful parent. Complicating this claim to parenthood and legitimacy is the question of whether or not to disclose to the child if they are a product of infertility treatments. Women continue to keep in contact with other patients and their "Czech family," which is yet another contradiction for those parents who feel that their children should not be made aware of their IVF history.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How do North American reproductive travelers create social kinship bonds?
- How are those bonds sustained when patients return home to the United States?
- How do North Americans grapple with issues of disclosure to their children?
- How are babies conceived via IVF in the Czech Republic similar to "souvenir babies"?
- How do women using an egg donor conceive of their relationship to their future children?
- What is epigenetics and how has it changed ideas regarding genetics?
- How does IVF lead to the birth of more multiples? What are the serious consequences of raising twins or triplets?
- How does "resemblance talk" and other forms of social control affect how women assume they will or will not disclose to their children about using an egg donor?
- Why do many North American reproductive travelers return to the Czech Republic?

CONCLUSION: AN EYE TO THE FUTURE

SUMMARY

The conclusion of this book begins with the sad story of Alida and Allan from Austin who had a premature baby; the other twin had died. Their case also is an example of the many risks and costs of reproductive technologies. Speier anticipates future issues that may arise for those children conceived using assisted reproductive technologies. She then summarizes her research and ends with the contradiction of “holidays” in “fertility holidays.”