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# Embodied Progress

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A cultural account of assisted  
conception

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# Introduction

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This book attempts an anthropological project, though not in the manner accustomed to many anthropologists. The anthropology of contemporary Euro-American societies is becoming more well-established within the discipline, but anthropology retains a strong commitment to its legacy of cross-cultural comparison and its roots in the study of non-western societies. This legacy is, as everyone knows, a contested one, and much has been written on the construction of cultural 'others' within anthropological writings. Hence, contemporary anthropology exists in a state of tension, between the desire to continue to offer ethnographic representations and analysis of cultural diversity, whilst at the same time striving to be conscious of the legacy of its own cultural preoccupations and dispensations in so doing.

*Embodied Progress* works on the near side of the here and there that defines the anthropological project. By so doing it invites a traffic between the autocritique of anthropological writing and representation, and the continuing project of ethnographic documentation of cultural forms. In this book, the cultural forms are both English and Euro-American, and they are both ethnographically and historically described. This form of description proceeds as a sequence of frames or perspectives. Rather than making all of the connections explicit, the frames are set up to provide room for multiple refractions.

I begin by revisiting a historical chapter in anthropological theory, namely the celebrated controversy known as the 'virgin birth' debates. I argue in Chapter 1 that these debates demonstrate the importance of a biological model of 'the facts of life' within anthropology. As such, they reveal a great deal about the pre-suppositions structuring anthropological explanation, not only

concerning procreation, kinship and parenthood, but of knowledge, 'truth', empiricism and the effort to be 'scientific'. The givenness of 'natural facts', and in particular the 'facts of life', has allowed them to operate as fixed, unquestionable anchors for much of the history of anthropology, creating for the discipline a particular kind of 'genealogical amnesia' which has only recently been revealed as such (Delaney 1986). The importance of conception to these debates thus has a dual significance: I am concerned both with what anthropologists have had to say about conception, and with their own conceptions of this task. In other words, my focus is on anthropological concepts, as well as anthropological accounts of 'coming into being'.

It is by now well established that anthropology as a discipline cannot claim a purely neutral, objective or value-free approach to the question of cross-cultural comparison, or cultural analysis. Much as anthropology still represents itself as a science in many quarters, the question of what kind of 'science' it can be continues to arouse controversy, often of the visceral variety (Franklin 1995c). While the effort to acknowledge the locatedness of the anthropological enterprise is recognised as an essential antidote to the pretension of offering 'purely factual' descriptions of cultural forms, the precise implications of such a recognition are not agreed-upon. For some, the autocritique of anthropology can 'go too far', resulting in an impoverishment of its capacity to produce useful, reliable, scholarly knowledge. For others, anthropology does not go 'far enough' in widening its project, or allowing a greater diversity of approaches to be incorporated into its own disciplinary reproduction.

Yet, it would be inaccurate to posit, as this phrasing perhaps suggests, that there is some point between 'too far' and 'not far enough' where we might expect a line could be drawn. For it is unlikely ever to be the case that agreement will be reached on this matter. What will occur instead, as is occurring now, is that new kinds of anthropological analysis will be 'born' out of precisely these antipodes. In turn, 'the science question in anthropology' will take on a new aspect. Familiar problems will reassert themselves, past constructions will reappear in a new light, and constructions of the past in turn will alter. As Marilyn Strathern notes, the delightful feature of cultural reproduction is its very reliable tendency never to reproduce itself exactly. And the same can be said of disciplinarity.

Hence, this book is concerned with several levels of reproduction, and disciplinary reproduction is among them. My aim is to contribute

to the ongoing reinvention of anthropological theory and method, and by so doing to reinvent its past as well as its future. *Embodied Progress* looks both forward and back. The first chapter looks back at anthropological debates about 'the facts of life', and later chapters look at their contestation in the present and in relation to the future. Whereas the 'natural facts' of human fertility and procreation provided grounds for certainty in the past, contemporary attention to reproductive risk, dysfunction and failure has generated increasing uncertainty. The rapid rise of infertility services in Euro-American societies is the primary context for addressing these uncertainties in *Embodied Progress*. The ethnographic frame is central England in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The central focus is the advent of new reproductive technologies, which are explored from a variety of perspectives. These perspectives, from the popular media, from women who have chosen assisted conception techniques, from public and parliamentary debate of human fertilisation and embryology, and from social theorists who have analysed these different domains, are used as contexts for one another. The aim is to put these perspectives into play, and to develop a perspective on that process.<sup>1</sup>

A perspective is always relational, and relations also have a dual significance in this book. One of the important relations I am concerned with is between the anthropological project and its own past. This has particular significance for my fieldwork, since it was conducted in England, which was home to many of the debates out of which the discipline of anthropology was formed. After many years of living, researching, and teaching in England, I not only read Bronte, Austin and Dickens differently, I read Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown differently too. I understood differently the way that Englishness operated in both sets of accounts. This not only gave me a different appreciation of anthropology; it changed how I imagined my own relation to it, which, like being an American in England, has always been slightly uncomfortable, if also rewarding enough to stay longer than I had often thought I might.

It is no coincidence that England is where the world's first test-tube baby was born, in 1978, in Oldham, Lancashire – the same county where I now teach, at Lancaster University (Brown, *et al.*, 1979). England, after all, is the home of a long lineage of scientists concerned with 'the facts of life'. Arguably more than any other country, it has generated enormous scientific interest and accomplishment within the life sciences. From the founding of the Royal Society in London onwards, the modern biological sciences have a special relationship

to England.<sup>2</sup> Darwin, Galton, the Huxleys, the Haldanes, Watson and Crick, Steptoe and Edwards, the list is long and by any account distinguished. There are cultural reasons why this is so, and they too have been charted, especially by historians of science, who are also very active on English soil. I discuss these reasons, and the relationship of Englishness to this project, in more depth in Chapter 2.

Englishness also deeply informs the history of anthropology. Although David Schneider claims in his *Critique of the Study of Kinship* that many of the anthropological precepts guiding kinship theory have historically been 'folk models' or 'ethno-epistemologies' of *European* extraction, the description can be more narrowly drawn; they are often explicitly English. Mary Bouquet argues this point both emphatically and persuasively in *Reclaiming English Kinship: Portuguese refractions of British kinship theory* (1993). Specifically, she traces the importance of the notion of pedigree in the formation of the genealogical method by British social anthropologists, which she 'refracts' through her discovery of this model's incommensurability with the kinship universe described by her Portuguese anthropology students. The sense of 'refraction' Bouquet employs to depict the effects of this incommensurability is similar to the model of 'relations' and 'perspectives' I have developed in *Embodied Progress* (see also Bouquet 1996).

The approach taken also affirms the positions argued by Marilyn Strathern in her writings on both English kinship (1992a) and the context of assisted conception (1992b, 1993). It is in Strathern's work that the implications of shifts in perspective brought about by the advent of new reproductive technologies are made visible as a set of cultural effects specific to Euro-American, or English, knowledge practices. Assisted conception thus has a doubled significance in Strathern's rendering: assistance to nature, in the form of what she describes as the 'enterprising up' of kinship, produces consequences in how it is made known. It is the instrumentalisation of the 'facts of life' which makes them differently visible, and thus altered in their significance (their ability to signify). Assistance to conception thus refers both to how conception is technologised, and to its cultural reconception as a result. This link between reproductive models and cultural knowledge has been formative to the approach taken here.

New reproductive technologies not only create new persons; they create new relations, in both senses of the term. Children born from assisted conception technologies transform a 'couple' into a 'family', for example. The children are themselves 'new relations' in the

ordinary kinship sense of relatives, and they also create new relationships: of parenthood and kin connection. The desire to become a family also indexes wider social relations, and the significance of 'becoming a family' in Thatcher's Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s was distinctive. Thatcher famously claimed that 'there is no such thing as society, there are only individuals and their families'. Her redefinition of British citizenship through the 'enterprise culture' analogy of consumerism had important implications for families and their relatives in England.<sup>3</sup> Couples experiencing infertility often described their disenfranchisement not only from the world of kin and family, but from connections to the wider culture these relations were key to realising. Consumption on behalf of the family, and in particular the option to purchase a family home, were central to the Thatcherite social contract. In the context of an effort to redefine citizenship along the model of 'customers seeking services', the option to purchase costly reproductive services (assisted conception) in pursuit of creating a family, had an overdetermined quality. As one couple I interviewed put it: 'its either a baby or the decorating'. The trade-off, in consumer terms, between procreation and decoration, indexes a particular reproductive model. I discuss the context of Thatcher's Britain, and its relevance to this account, along with other aspects of Englishness, in Chapter 2.

The relative benefits of the baby or the decorating signal the most important reference for this study as a whole, which is kinship theory. Though I am arguing for an appreciation of the artefactual significance of kinship theory in this book, I am by no means arguing for its relegation to the dustbin. I am instead arguing for a specific means of reinventing it, and applying it, as Chapters 3, 4, and 5 make clear. These chapters present the findings of a study of women's experience of in vitro fertilisation, the most important, invasive and 'high tech' of the 'assisted conception' options. This study combined extensive observations in an infertility clinic with in-depth interviews. Twenty-two women, some with their partners and some without, participated in the interview component of the study, and provided accounts of the procedure. These accounts were transcribed, analysed and sorted into themes, which structure their presentation in the second half of the book.

In these chapters I am concerned with several aspects of the relativity that might be described as kinship. Specifically, I have sought to foreground the difference it makes to add technological enablement into the production of new relations. I argue that new

procreative technologies not only have implications for definitions of relatedness in the traditional kinship sense of ties established through reproduction. They also add a significant set of new relationships into the kinship equation, and these are the relationships to science and technology. These relationships are quite complex: they are at times tentative, at other times overwhelming, and often confusing. The process of making sense of both new and missed conceptions is productive of new conception stories, and these are the site of much personal, public and parliamentary contestation.<sup>4</sup>

The main refraction organising this book thus becomes apparent. I aim to 'refract' contemporary *uncertainties* about 'the facts of life' through the lens of historic certainties about their biological 'reality' which guided so much anthropological theorising about kinship and conception. By this means, two sets of conception accounts are refracted in and through one another. This two-way traffic, like the work of culture itself, produces new perspectives. The certainties of the past, about a process it is difficult for the most determined constructionist to pick apart – the tenet that it takes a sperm and egg to make a baby – take on a new aspect in light of the 'reality' that for an increasing number of people this equation does not hold. Similarly, the uncertainties about 'assisted conception' in the present, and their contested implications for the future, take on new dimensions in relation to the variety of conception accounts documented and debated by anthropologists in the past, albeit with nothing like the contemporary advent of new reproductive technologies in mind. I argue this refraction is productive, not only as 'a cultural account of assisted conception', but as a theoretical and methodological exercise for late twentieth-century anthropology.

In his trenchant critique of the study of kinship, David Schneider claims that 'kinship has been defined by European social scientists, and European social scientists use their own folk culture as the source of many, if not all, their ways of formulating and understanding the world around them' (1984: 193). This is the definition that produces their 'genealogical amnesia', or what Schneider calls the 'Doctrine of the Genealogical Unity of Mankind', in the form of Eurocentric, *a priori* assumptions about the existence of an object of study (kinship) which may or may not exist everywhere, and which, in any event, cannot usefully be presumed to refer, ultimately, to a genealogical grid. This is the same point Bouquet emphasises *within Europe*, namely that the *ur*-object of 'kinship' is not always 'pedigree'.

The implication is that the pedigree-referent (for that is the meaning of 'genealogy' to which Schneider refers) is *specifically English*, or at least British. Schneider's conclusion is that, unless anthropologists are willing to get rid of kinship altogether, which he advocates, they can only use kinship *as* a European folk model. The anthropologist would thus be armed with the question 'given this [European folk definition of kinship], do these particular people have it or not?' (Schneider, 1984: 200). As a result, he suggests, 'kinship might then become a special custom distinctive of European culture, an interesting oddity at worst, like the Toda bow ceremony' (201).

This study pursues this question somewhat differently. It presumes another option is to apply the distinctive British model of kinship to a distinctively late twentieth-century British kinship dilemma, which is the question of how to make sense of new forms of technological assistance to conception which create new 'relativities' in the space where certain relations once stood. Kinship may indeed be a 'special custom' of European folk culture. But even so, it is very poorly understood, as current uncertainties about its definition clearly indicate. That 'the definition of mother' and 'father' were being debated in the British Parliament at the time of this study is but a superficial indication of the scope of uncertainty and transition occurring in the realm of 'ties established through procreation', which is what kinship has traditionally meant to anthropologists.

The aim of *Embodied Progress* is thus differently comparative from the cross-cultural comparison familiar to anthropology. It aims to open up a scope of ('refractory') comparison *within* the cultural apparatus which makes up anthropology. I argue this dimension of cultural analysis itself comprises an *additional comparative perspective*, which in turn can be put into dialogue with the more traditional forms of anthropological comparison that are ongoing. Hence, this project speaks to the longstanding anthropological aims of elucidating and documenting cultural difference; however, it does so by addressing the question of *what kinds of difference these can be*. It is, I argue, only possible to appreciate the 'scale' of difference imaginable to the anthropologist if we in turn recognise the constitution of that 'scale' itself.

This premise widens the possibilities outlined by Schneider. He emphasised the fixity of the 'genealogical grid' as a point of reference for anthropologists seeking to define 'kinship', and argued that all anthropological definitions of kinship ultimately refer to it in a manner that makes them tautological. Yet, by stressing the given-

ness of genealogy, Schneider perhaps overstated its 'obviousness'. As Bouquet has shown in her recent work, the pedigree of genealogy *within Europe* is both complex and contradictory (1994, 1995a, 1995b). This point is also emphasised by Strathern, in her discussion of Darwin's use of genealogical analogies in his constitution of 'nature' as a consanguinous unity (1992a).<sup>5</sup> The option, in other words, is not only to presume genealogy as a fixed point of reference, but as an admittedly Eurocentric one (as Schneider suggests). Another option is to acknowledge that even within European, or English, usage, this concept is not as fixed as it appears.

As Bouquet has shown, the history of 'genealogy' in Europe reveals a far more complex picture of this presumed-to-be-self-evident term than has been previously acknowledged. A similar refraction is provided by new technology, which also 'defamiliarises' genealogy. The 'genealogical grid' that is argued to have been such a stable and rigid 'scale' for measuring other cultures' definitions of kinship can be argued itself to be destabilised and denaturalised by new technology. At the root of ideas of coming into being, whether they are defined 'reproductively' or not, has been the idea of vitality. Be it a spirit-child embodying a matrilineal ancestor, or a 'miracle baby' conceived in a test-tube, the notion of 'coming into being' has denoted the creation of new life. This is precisely the aim of much biotechnology: to create new life forms. But in so doing, technological assistance to life itself troubles previous certainties, about descent, relatedness, and kinship. Should children be conceived from the ovaries of aborted fetuses? Should a surrogate mother gestate a fetus that is genetically unrelated to her? Should 'twins' be gestated years apart? It is for these reasons that advances in the sciences of biotechnology engender cultural anxiety about scientists 'playing God' with 'the facts of life'. They are no longer playing by the genealogical grid that was once assumed to be both primordial, 'rimless' and irrevocable.

I argue in the conclusion to this book that kinship theory is an essential tool for understanding such contemporary Euro-American anxieties. Much as 'kinship' may rightly be characterised as an antique European 'folk model', it is none the less valuable for precisely these reasons, as is the rest of 'antique European folk culture'! Though it may seem unfamiliar to be arguing that just-because-its-traditional-doesn't-mean-its-reactionary in the service of proposing what I denominate 'postmodern kinship theory' at the end of this book, this is, in fact, wholly consistent with the most

traditional definition of postmodernism itself, namely the redeployment of traditional elements in new configurations.

This is one of several meanings of postmodern kinship theory with which I conclude this book. The new configurations, perspectives and refractions the history of kinship theory can provide are, in my view, multiple, available and necessary. I derive this view as much from my teaching of both graduate and undergraduate anthropology students, in England and in the United States, as I do from my own relationship to anthropology, which, like that of most of my generation, has been composed in equal parts of scepticism and appreciation. Although the 'virgin birth' debates will be familiar ground to readers of an older generation, born in the 1930s and 1940s, they are much less familiar to mine, born in the 1960s and the 1970s. It is for this reason I rehearse this much-travelled ground in what may seem to be redundant detail. This is because I share with other members of my age-cohort who trained in anthropology programs in the 1980s a troubled relationship to its past and future. Although clearly this is not a 'new' phenomenon, it has its own particularities for every generation, and the relationship of current anthropologists to the history of the discipline is an ongoing source of reinventing its future. This too is a reproductive dilemma, and one to which disciplinary technologies are as central a source of confusion as technology has become in other reproductive domains.

*Embodied Progress* also speaks to a wider audience of readers concerned with the implications of new reproductive and genetic technologies, which have become the source of a burgeoning literature in their own right. I hope it also offers useful insights and analysis for readers with their own experiences of reproductive assistance. In addition, this book contributes to the effort to bridge between anthropology and cultural studies. In particular, it contributes to the cultural analysis of science, which is also an expanding area of scholarship at present. To all of these areas, a concern with gender is central, and though I point to 'kinship' more often than 'gender' *per se* in this account, the centrality to both fields of biological models of reproduction provides a connecting thread I hope will be read as implicit throughout.

I derive my title, *Embodied Progress*, from the specific dilemmas I encountered among women and couples who have undergone assisted conception procedures, and the broader theme of how technological progress, as a cultural value, becomes embodied through reproductive practices. The ongoing development of new

life forms through new forms of scientific and technological innovation daily gains momentum: from transgenic and trans-species organisms, to the 'dry' algorithmic 'life' forms of artificial life laboratories, to the imagined recreations of extinct life forms in films such as *Jurassic Park*, to the Human Genome Project which is popularly dubbed 'Man's Second Genesis', to the germline modifications of human hereditary substance now being debated internationally, and the list goes on. With such forms of progress also emerge new uncertainties. Once grounded on the symbolic ground of 'naturalness', which represented 'nature' as a fixed, *a priori* given to which human interventions were always 'after', 'based upon', 'rooted in' or transformative of, human reproduction and the reproductive processes of plants, animals, bacteria and micro-organisms, are increasingly denaturalised by technology. Instead, it is the 'helping hand' of technological assistance, the cultural values of scientific progress and consumer choice, and the imperatives of economic growth which provide the representational ground such reproductive innovations are seen to be 'based upon', 'rooted in', 'after' or determined by. This does not mean reproduction is no longer seen as 'natural': to the contrary, new forms of reproductive technology are ubiquitously re-naturalised. Technology is seen to be 'giving nature a helping hand', as one pamphlet describing the technique of IVF analogises this relationship. None the less, technological progress, consumer choice and economic growth are cultural values which, unlike 'naturalness', convey open-ended malleability and the transcendence of limits. The instrumentalisation of conception described in *Embodied Progress* indexes the changing meanings of 'the facts of life' in such a context. The lived, immediate, and concrete dilemmas produced in one specific set of relations to the enterprising-up of life itself are indicated by the experience of the women and couples interviewed for this book, and it is for what their experiences can reveal about the other myriad variations on this encounter that it is entitled.

Above all, the experiences of women and couples undergoing IVF described here reveal three key components of the encounter with contemporary reproductive medicine. To begin with, a significant discrepancy can be seen to emerge between the representation of IVF as a series of progressive stages and the experience of the procedure (for the majority of couples) as a serial failure to progress. Against the will and determination to progress successfully through the many stages of IVF emerges a continual theme of, often unexplained,

failure – such as failure to produce enough eggs, failure of the eggs to fertilise, and so forth. This discrepancy can be seen in terms of a gap between the representation of IVF (as a progress narrative) and the infrequency of success (which occurs on average about 10 per cent of the time).

A second component of the encounter with IVF is the extent to which technological intervention and potential enablement come to define the reproductive process, and to become the focus of intense, preoccupying and often difficult hopes and desires on the part of both IVF clinicians and their clients. The several ways in which reproduction can be seen to be redefined by the process of becoming technologised, commodified, professionalised and achieved are explored in some depth in this study.

Finally, a consequence of these changes in the reproductive process is the production of new uncertainties. It is one of the central ironies of contemporary reproductive medicine that although the degree of intervention now possible into conception and pregnancy results from increasing confidence, technical sophistication and scientific knowledge, these very interventions increasingly reveal how poorly understood the 'facts of life' remain. For women and couples undergoing IVF, a consequence of the degree of unexplained failure in the context of assisted conception is that the goal of resolution becomes a receding horizon. "We'll just have a go" soon becomes a preoccupying gambit of tantalising prospects ('there is just some minor adjustment to be made') cross-cut by acute disappointments and ambiguities ('it could have worked, it should have worked, we really don't know why it didn't work').

It is the complex process whereby the lived, embodied dilemmas of IVF enact a transformative effect upon the women and couples engaged in the pursuit of a 'miracle baby' which is revealed through the vivid narratives of progress and failure related in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. Going into IVF, many women recalled having been motivated by what they initially perceived as a certain resolution to their reproductive uncertainty: either they would succeed, or at least they would have the knowledge that they had exhausted all options. Despite failure being acknowledged as the most likely outcome, even failure was perceived to bring with it a peace of mind that otherwise evaded them.

Unforeseen in such a bid for resolution is the extent to which IVF 'takes over' and becomes 'a way of life'. The unexpected complexity, ambiguity and difficulty of the IVF procedure subtly changes

the landscape of options into a bewildering array of refinements, adjustments, new procedures and possibilities. The very potential which may have appeared at the outset to be enabling, hopeful and welcome may over time become disabling, stressful and even threatening.

Deciding to abandon hope for success may have become much more difficult after 'living for the dream' from cycle to cycle, often over several years. Against the urge to terminate unsuccessful treatment may be the fear that success is only one step away. Hence, the certainty of resolution – one way or another – which often characterises the decision to undertake IVF can be seen to dissipate over the course of serial failure (which, even for the minority of couples who eventually succeed, most often comprises the better part of their treatment).

Beliefs and hope concerning progress, and the difficulty of 'making sense of misconceptions', thus comprise the antipodes of 'living IVF'. One reason a narrative approach has proven useful to the analysis of conception, and assisted conception, is because of its generic composition out of beginnings and endings, obstacles and resolutions, and the seriality of events. Narrative time recapitulates biological time in its progressive, developmental and cumulative linearity. Temporalised as causal sequences, conception narratives make most sense read backwards, after the fact of successful outcomes. When all of the causal elements are present, but the expected outcome is not realised, an important element of narrativity is lost: it is not clear if the story has ended, there is no resolution, and thus no closure.

Narrative form also structures accounts of scientific progress, which often proceed as stories of discovery, revelation and triumph. Highly gendered, the adventure narratives of scientific progress rely heavily upon the idiom of marching forward into the unknown. The image of scientific pioneers, embarking upon an expedition or voyage of discovery, analogises scientific progress to exploration, conquest and acquisitory penetration into unmapped territory.

Assisted conception thus comprises a densely narrativised cultural practice: from the well-known developmental trajectory of the 'facts of life'; to the post-Darwinian temporalisation of natural history in terms of evolutionary progress; to the progressivist history of modern science; to the depiction of techniques such as IVF in terms of a series of progressive stages.

Ethnographically, that is, from the point of view of the women and

couples who encounter IVF as a 'way of life', as participants in the demands of assisted conception procedures, the search for resolutions can be understood as a narrative dilemma: how to reach 'the end of the story' when neither the causality nor seriality of events can be ordered as a progressive sequence?

Like the experiences of so many of the women and couples interviewed for this study, the mode of presentation in this book is not a seamless trajectory, but a series of reframings. Like the broken conception narratives which are its primary objects of study, this account achieves greatest coherence at the post-ultimate moment, that is, upon retrospection. Some patience, therefore, is asked of the reader in negotiating a series of frame-shifts. At the outset, 'Conception among the Anthropologists' considers 'the facts of life' in terms of the classic ethnographic dilemma posed by non-biological conception narratives. Within this frame, 'the facts of life' are considered a scientific certainty among the anthropologists, and the anthropological dilemma consists of making sense of non-western ('primitive') models of causality and agency through which coming into being is explained. In turn, this very certainty comes to be read as symptomatic of the ethnocentrism towards which late twentieth-century anthropology has become critically self-conscious. Within this frame, then, the 'facts of life' are transformed from a presumed (universal, self-evident, biological and scientific) certainty into an occasion to reveal what that certainty has obscured. In this sense, 'Conception among the Anthropologists' has been refracted through wider debates about science as an authoritative knowledge system, modern biology as a discursive system, and the cultural specificity of anthropology's own representational devices.

The frame shifts rather abruptly in Chapter 2, 'Contested conceptions in the enterprise culture', to Thatcher's Britain in the late 1980s, in which the desire to produce a family acquired very specific cultural meanings as part of a radical redefinition of the nation, the citizen and the body politic. In this context, technological assistance to conception emerges as a distinctive niche market in the increasingly privatised economy of healthcare services. Although reproduction, in plants, animals and micro-organisms as well as humans, has become increasingly technologised, commodified and managed since the 1950s, and although this is in many ways a global or transnational phenomenon, Chapter 2 emphasises the ways in which such transformations always occur as part of specific local, national, and regional cultures. In attempting to identify a specifically British,

or English, component to the findings of this study, 'Contested conceptions in the enterprise culture' introduces 'the facts of life' as they are represented, contested and enacted in a specific time and place.

In turn, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 present the results of research based in two British IVF clinics, one public and one private, during the years 1988 and 1989. Organised in relation to the two key themes that emerged out of participant-observation and interviews with twenty-two women and couples, these chapters depict 'the facts of life' in the context of assisted, or achieved (or, more often, not-achieved) conception. Far from a certain, self-evident, scientifically understood or biologically determined causal sequence, conception in the context of IVF emerges as a miraculous, mysterious and unpredictable process. How women and couples come to feel they 'have to try' IVF, how it then 'takes over' and becomes 'a way of life', and how both success and failure become more complicated matters than was initially presumed are some of the important features of achieved conception revealed in these chapters. Very much in contrast with the assumption guiding anthropological accounts of 'Other' cultures' (misconceived) conception models – that is, that it does, in fact, take a sperm and an egg to make a baby, not an ancestral spirit – the world of achieved conception clearly reveals how impoverished is the causal model of conception offered by modern biological science and clinical medicine.

These different frames are brought together in the concluding title chapter with the aim of suggesting numerous connections, contrasts, continuities and disjunctures suggested by the book as a whole. Rather than a denouement, the concluding chapter emphasises the play of certainty and uncertainty surrounding 'the facts of life' in twentieth-century anthropology, and within Euro-American cultural life more broadly. As a distinctive and powerful constellation of beliefs and knowledge concerning origins, development and progress, 'the facts of life' remain a uniquely important site of cultural practice.

As this account is not conventionally anthropological, so it is unconventionally ethnographic. One description of the approach taken here is 'multi-sited ethnography', a practice recently characterised by Marcus as: 'multi-sited research . . . designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection

among sites that in fact drives the argument of the ethnography' (1995: 105). The drive to establish a logic of connection among sites is paralleled here by the desire to explore a logic of connection among methods, such as those derived from feminist theory, cultural studies, science studies and globalisation theory as well as anthropology. Together, the attempt to respatialise anthropological approaches to culture, and to utilise more interdisciplinary approaches to cultural theory, comprise an effort to contribute to the reworking of contemporary ethnography. Hence, this project did not involve the degree of habitation or dwelling within a community which is often, and rightly, considered the hallmark of a specifically anthropological ethnographic method. However, as Marcus points out, the limitations of a more holistic approach to culture become particularly evident in the context of the more piecemeal, discontinuous, fragmented and incoherent 'lifeworlds' inhabited by participants in, for example, IVF as a 'way of life'. In other words, to use Marcus's formulation, 'multi-sited ethnography . . . arises in response to empirical changes in the world and therefore to transformed locations of cultural production. Empirically, following the thread of connection itself impels the move toward multi-sited ethnography' (1995: 97).

As the 'lifeworlds' brought into being among user-groups of reproductive services are constituted across a range of locations, so too is that service sector itself composed of a myriad of intersecting social, professional, financial, governmental and clinical institutions. The effort to provide an 'ethnographic' representation of such a process must also attend to the various local, national and discursive logics or systems in reference to which traditional questions of accommodation and resistance must be understood. Hence, although a degree of ethnographic detail is forfeited in the attempt to offer a qualitatively different method of cultural description – which moves from the history of anthropological theory, to the enterprise culture of Thatcherism, to the media representation of 'desperate' infertile couples, to parliamentary debate of human fertilisation and embryology, to the IVF clinic and into the private sitting rooms of a group of IVF clients – the aim is to reconnect culture, social organisation and individual experience along reconfigured dimensions of scale, perspective and system.

As a contribution to 'multi-sited ethnography', the present exercise must be read as a preliminary innovation. As in most such 'innovative' undertakings, there remain a number of unsatisfactory connections within the overall machinery. Where this account fails

to deliver a specificity of ethnographic detail, it is my hope to have compensated with a degree of recombinant possibility roughly equal to the costs of generic deviation. After all, even pedigrees are as much the product of mutation as continuity. In much the same way as my own location in this exercise has often felt awkward, unresolved and unevenly realised, so too are the framings offered in the following chapters notably inconsistent. The framing of the history of anthropological debates about conception is textually-based, composed entirely of formal, academic debate – albeit offered as an exercise in cultural interpretation. In Chapter 2, the frame is, by contrast, widely cast across a range of activities, from the history of the modern life sciences to contemporary public debate of assisted conception in Britain. Chapters 3, 4 and 5, though drawing on sources such as literature from pharmaceutical companies and conversations overheard in the nurses station, primarily consist of descriptions offered by women and couples of their experiences of IVF gained from interviews. Hence, little in the way of the ‘thick description’ available to a more spatially or communally circumscribed observer is reproduced here, much as such description remains central to the traditional project of anthropology.

Consequently, the form of cultural analysis offered here undertakes to be ethnographic through borrowing, refashioning and innovating rather than through generic imitation or technical conformity. The most important borrowing appears as a sensibility, rather than a technique; for if the methods utilised in this endeavour remain roughly-hewn, the sensibility is conventionally anthropological. Both intellectually and politically, the mode of researching this project is most decidedly ethnographic in its reluctance to adopt a singular, polemical or reductive perspective on the complex business of assisted conception. This is determinedly a project which moves away from the tendency in legal studies, bioethics, feminist criticism and many strands of cultural and science studies to take a position, or to argue for or against particular techniques. My interest lies elsewhere, specifically prior to such judgements, at the level of the effort to make visible the accumulated practices, assumptions and constraints which inform most contemporary assessment and discussion of new reproductive and genetic technologies. It is the different angle of vision, the openness of the ethnographic ear, and the willed naiveté of the ethnographic researcher which provided the enabling disciplinary technology for the account of assisted conceptions provided here.