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Governing Medically Assisted Human Reproduction

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Remapping the Germline: Dilemmas, Cultural Knowledge and Biopolitics

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Somewhat outside the traditional remit of bioethics is the concern of a growing number of anthropologists with the domain of foundational social ties denominated as kinship. Assistance to both reproduction and heredity raises questions about cultural consequences at the level of fundamental social ties, such as the definition of kin. These consequences comprise a specific domain of cultural 'effects', posing analytical concerns at a number of levels, including that of method.

Human somatic cell gene modification has been accepted to be legitimate medical therapy subject to regulation by many governments, including the United Kingdom and the United States. In part, this ethical decision is based on separation between somatic cell gene therapy and germline gene therapy, which would alter the gene pool in perpetuity. Yet, it has been acknowledged by bioethicists since the early 1990s that the somatic cell/germline distinction is something of an enabling fiction, as it is unverifiable scientifically at present. This poses several problems considered to be indicative of wider dilemmas in the field of genetic medicine. These difficulties attend the increasing number of cases in which a patient is no longer strictly (an) individual.

Kinship relations thus extend the 'human subject' to 'human subjects', as is also evident in the traditional designations of various congenital pathologies as 'familial'. The extension is both lateral, affecting contemporaneous relatives, and vertical, posing the question of 'intergenerational ethics'.

The argument offered in this short paper, based in part on traditional anthropological models of kin relatedness, is that 'health' comprises an inadequate ethical rubric under which to identify the social implications of new reproductive and genetic

technology. Instead, the specific effects of changing cultural values and emergent medical technologies in altering and refiguring fundamental social ties pose an important challenge to the social sciences. As more complex questions of governance arise in this domain it will become increasingly important to be able to address the relationship between changing cultural values and social negotiations of 'assisted genealogy'.