

The unexpected children of IVF

Noemie Merleau-Ponty, February '18

This starts with a walk. A walk in the English countryside, a few miles west of Cambridge. There is a village is close to where I rent my house. I have been there twice to enjoy Sunday roasts. At the bottom of my garden lies a public path, the trail is modestly designed through fields connecting human habitations.

It is raining, not enough to scare a walker, just enough to make an adventure. One of my dear colleagues has spent Saturday night at my place. While brunching, we talk about writing, field working, overcoming fatigue and anxiety, and enjoying our research. At the heart of winter beats the call of night; days are very short. We decide that we might as well take advantage of the few rainy hours infused with light. We decide to have a walk...to Bourn.

Bourn is a small village with a grand reputation. Its fertility clinic was founded in 1980 by Patrick Steptoe and Robert Edwards, the obstetrician and biologist who participated in the birth of the first *in vitro* fertilisation baby. This private establishment offers medical treatment for people who can benefit from reproductive technologies to conceive. Forty years later, more than [6.5 million](#) babies are born around the world after the use of an IVF.



Bourn Hall Clinic (2005) – Wikimedia Commons

I never realized that the Bourn I visited twice was THE Bourn. Why is that? Probably because, from my family education, I still have a quite vividly drawn line between my professional and my private life, the public history of IVF and my outside work activities. But, one characteristic of IVF is to blur such boundaries as reproduction is a home story and implies medical institutions, industries, marketization, legal technicalities, public debates and political choices.

Quite interestingly by the way, the [website](#) of Bourn Hall Clinic communicates about the professional team and the history of the institution precisely through boundary blurring. "We are family. At Bourn Hall, we have a special connection with both patients and our colleagues." This sentence could be understood as a corporate mentality, but, in the very context of this specific institution's purpose, it resonates differently. In addition to bringing domestic values into professional life, it "makes parents" [\[1\]](#) by relating patients and staff.

As we navigated wet fields with muddy boots and soaked jackets, smiles on our faces were to be seen by the birds living there. We were having a wonderful conversation on walking as a form of research activity. We had left our computers behind. We were heading towards one of the places where it happened! And there, it came to my mind.

We are the unexpected children of IVF.

When I say "we", I mean all those who study assisted reproductive technologies. This walk happened because IVF happened, among other vast areas of social activities that emerged from it, such as stem cell research, egg freezing, embryo donation, non-traditional surrogacy or preimplantation diagnosis, to name a few.

This walk happened because there is an entire research group dedicated to this topic in Cambridge. IVF has also contributed to the reproductive system that is the university, and education more broadly. This walk happened because this research group is very much aware that hospitality, relaxation or strolls are tools of resistance in competitive and neoliberal professional environments.

We arrived to Bourn and decided to stop by the farm where several geese, a pig and goats have shelters. Given the weather, they were not all very keen on socialising apart for one goat who graciously offered to do a selfie with us. Then, we found the entrance to Bourn Hall.

They did not let us in. Private property. Well, even if IVF has blurred some boundaries, they hold quite well, here and there. Determined not to give up that easily, we found a church. From its graveyard we could have a catch of the historical building. If this birthplace was locked to surprise visits from unusual relatives, from the past, death welcomed us for a glimpse of a site where the future is made.



[1] Charis Thompson, 2005, *Making Parents. The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press.