

A Dissertation on the Labor of Anticipating Reproductive Futurity for Those Trying to Conceive with In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

Abstract

Marketed as a “hope technology,” In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) promises people the chance at a reproductive future¹ with children so long as they maintain hope and engage in anticipatory labor practices. While assistive reproductive technologies (ART), like IVF, offer ways to manage uncertainty over one’s reproductive future, they often require gendered reproductive labor that is complicated by entanglements with temporal, sociocultural, political, and material forces. Building on Clarke and colleagues’ articulation of anticipation (2009), this dissertation uses photovoice, autoethnography, and speculative methods to examine how people experiencing IVF imagine their reproductive futures, and what anticipatory labor they perform in turn. This work extends theories of anticipation and anticipation work by examining individuals’ labor in the IVF context. This study will help advance understandings of how to support individuals imagining and laboring toward their reproductive futures, and will highlight the additional unpaid labor people perform when trying to conceive with IVF.

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Overview

While technology enables people trying to become pregnant to manage uncertainty over their reproductive futures², reproduction-related labor³ is heavily contested and stratified across axes of race, gender, and class (Colen, 1995). People trying to become pregnant entangle with temporal, sociocultural, political, and material forces, and may navigate competing ideals for what reproductive futures are ‘desirable’ (Gentile, 2013; **Karizat et al., 2025**; Reime et al., 2023). My dissertation focuses on how people experiencing In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) imagine their reproductive futures, and what anticipatory labor they perform to secure these futures. This project prioritizes the dignity and well-being of people navigating IVF and aims to empower individuals and communities’ reproductive experiences by reformulating how reproductive technologies are understood and practiced.

My research builds on Clarke and colleagues’ articulation of anticipation as both an affect and affective state of relating to the future made possible by the belief that one can prepare for or ensure certain outcomes (Adams et al., 2009). Living in a state of anticipation prompts ‘anticipation work’ where people invest time, resources, and

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² **Reproductive Future(s)** refers to future experiences related to or as a result of some reproductive experience a person may or may not have.

³ **Labor** here refers to the anticipatory, physical, mental, and emotional **work** involved in reproduction broadly, such as the labor of trying to conceive or the work associated with carrying a pregnancy. It is not to be confused with labor describing the time when a baby is delivered during childbirth.

emotional energy into the labor of managing, preparing, and hoping for the future and the avoidance of risks (Clarke, 2016).

Background and Research Questions

Individuals and couples wanting children become medical subjects through their encounters with IVF, a technology promising to optimize human conception and increase chances for a reproductive future of pregnancy resulting in a live birth. Individuals become subjected to power embedded in medical institutions, while also subjecting themselves to self-governance informed by reproductive, medical, and sociotechnical norms (Kalbian, 2005; Lawlor & Nale, 2014). IVF experiences and its labor are gendered, disproportionately falling on women and those with capacity for pregnancy. The labor-intensive process of IVF extends beyond medical procedures, as individuals face financial, emotional, and physical burdens over months or years (Franklin, 2023).

Building on Clarke's (2016) concept of anticipation work, I argue that IVF is an inherently anticipatory experience—individuals navigate uncertain reproductive outcomes by working with medical professionals, family members, and technological instruments to maximize the chances of achieving their desired reproductive outcomes (Thompson, 2007). Individuals or couples continuously orient their present actions and resources toward securing their reproductive futures, while also performing anticipatory labor by imagining and preparing for uncertain or undesired reproductive futures. They perform this anticipatory IVF-labor because it is often framed as an investment toward a future where reproductive success is achieved only through the birth of a child (Kalbian, 2005).

Prior work reveals the child-centered nature of anticipatory IVF labor, but fails to examine labor motivated or sustained by hope as an affective orientation that considers other people and relationships. Questions remain about the anticipation work people perform that prioritizes themselves and their relationships—rather than a wouldbe child—in the presentfuture, as well as labor motivated in response to the alternative reproductive futures they might experience, such as taking actions to protect a partner's mental health or allocating present resources for alternative forms of kin-making. Little is known about how those experiencing IVF imagine alternative reproductive futures when the only 'successful future' in the IVF context is framed as one with children. This raises questions about how individuals and couples experiencing IVF can be supported and prepared for possible alternative reproductive futures in case 'IVF success' never arrives.

This dissertation responds to undertheorizations of anticipation and anticipation work in reproduction contexts by focusing on dimensions of anticipation and anticipation work that emerge when centering the **individual**, **relational**, and **embodied** aspects of trying to conceive with IVF. This project asks the following:

RQ1: Individual

- A. How do individuals imagine, and labor towards their anticipated reproductive future(s)? How do experiences with a “hope technology”, like IVF, shape what alternative reproductive futures they imagine are possible?

RQ2: Relational

- A. What additional forms of anticipation work emerge when its focus centers on an individual and others’ present/future wants and needs, instead of the would-be child?
- B. What are the relational dimensions of imagining reproductive futures and laboring towards them?

RQ3: Embodied

- A. How is anticipation and its IVF labor embodied, enacted, and felt in everyday life?

My dissertation consists of a three-part multi-methods study (photovoice, speculative interviews, and autoethnography), and sustained community engagement with online IVF communities.

Theoretical Frameworks

My dissertation uses the theoretical frameworks of **anticipation** (Adams et al., 2009) and **anticipation work** (Clarke, 2016) to examine how people imagine their reproductive futures, and how these imagined futures are experienced in the present.

Anticipation is both an affect and affective state in which one relates to the future in the present while hoping (and expecting) to prevent or ensure certain outcomes (Adams et al., 2009). Anticipation configures the future into something that can be viscerally experienced in the present, and prompts what Clarke calls **anticipation work**—the labor (including investing time and resources) that people do to manage, prepare, and hope for the future (Clarke, 2016). Anticipation work includes three forms of labor: abduction, simplification, and hope (Clarke, 2016).

Prior research on human reproduction has often framed labor and anticipation as investments toward a future where individuals or couples succeed only if a child is born (Kalbian, 2005). As a result, past work on IVF-related labor centers labor that is motivated or sustained by hope for a would-be child, rather than on labor that prioritizes people going through IVF (Franklin, 2023; Ku & Ackerman, 2023; Mamo, 2007). My dissertation’s preliminary findings point to nuances of hope⁴, labor, and anticipation—such as the *anticipatory labor of protection of the self and others*, or the ways people’s *reproductive hopes are entangled with anticipatory grief*—not yet examined, yet deeply embodied by those trying to conceive with IVF.

These theoretical frameworks provide a lens for situating people’s reproductive aspirations and the labor these aspirations motivate; illuminating why people might imagine and labor towards some reproductive futures and not others; how technological intervention might shape these processes of imagining and laboring towards a

⁴ Hope is a form of anticipation work coined by Adele Clarke (Clarke, 2016), and can be understood as a type of labor. However, I list it as separate from labor here due to the concept of ‘hope’ as a type of labor itself taking on many dimensions in the broader IVF experience.

reproductive future; how moral and social dimensions shape these processes; and how the affective, relational, and material dimensions of anticipating reproductive futurity intersect.

Methodology

Multiple Methods Approach

My dissertation has three parts aligned with my research questions, designed to uncover the complexities of imagining and laboring toward anticipated reproductive futures at the **individual, relational, and embodied levels**.

Firstly, I am conducting a photovoice study with **individuals** experiencing IVF to learn the nuances of their reproductive labor and the anticipatory practices they engage in to achieve their imagined reproductive futures. Photovoice is a visual narrative method empowering people to speak about their experiences through photography and the meanings they attribute to images (Wang & Burris, 1997). Aligning with my scholarly feminist commitments, photovoice values lived experience as expertise. I prompt participants with questions eliciting photos portraying their lived experiences with technology while trying to conceive with IVF, their imagined reproductive futures, and the anticipatory work they perform toward those futures [\[Appendix A\]](#). Afterward, I engage in collaborative analysis during interviews and focus groups. Since August 2025, I have been transcribing interviews and focus groups as I collect data, writing memos, and noting emerging themes (Braun et al., 2022).

Secondly, aware of the **relational** nature of the IVF experience, I will conduct speculative interviews with individuals experiencing IVF, their non-gestational partners⁵, and others who play significant roles in co-imagining and laboring toward anticipated reproductive futures. These speculative methods include activities like Participant Creative Drawings (PCD) (Anderson & Gettings, 2020) asking participants to imagine and speculate about what is assumed or anticipated rather than known.

Thirdly, I have conducted autoethnographic work on my own **embodied** IVF experience. I maintained an autoethnographic journal of my own experiences conceiving with IVF as a patient at [REDACTED] reproductive endocrinology clinic, January [REDACTED] through July [REDACTED], collecting artifacts (photos, medical protocols, communications with medical teams, etc.), and writing my observations and reflections.

Data Analysis

I will complete data collection by September 2026. I will analyze data iteratively and reflexively, informed by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), following familiarization and coding processes to produce themes that I will iterate and refine to understand embedded narratives (Braun et al., 2022).

⁵ Non-gestational partners—sometimes referred to as non-birthing parents—are individuals who do not physically carry a pregnancy, nor give birth to a child, but are understood as *a parent* to that child.

I intend to defend my dissertation in Winter 2027 and enter the job market in May 2027.

Contributions and Impacts

My dissertation makes theoretical and empirical contributions to the fields of Science, Technology, and Society (STS) studies and Social Computing, plus a community-oriented contribution.

My dissertation extends **theoretical** understandings of anticipation (Adams et al., 2009) and anticipation work (Clarke, 2016) by examining:

- Additional anticipation work forms that prioritize present realities and relationships, while working towards certain desired reproductive futures
- How imagining reproductive futures and anticipation is relationally experienced and produced
- An expanded framework for hope as a form of anticipation work, emphasizing affective, embodied, and person-centered hoping beyond child-centered narratives

Impact: These contributions will expand how STS and social computing scholarship engage with anticipation, reframing it as relational, embodied, and present-oriented. This leads to a nuanced understanding of how people grapple with uncertainty in technologically-mediated reproductive contexts and beyond.

My dissertation makes multiple **empirical** contributions by documenting:

- Evidence of the lived reality of anticipatory labor for those experiencing IVF beyond clinical environments
- How reproductive futures are lived, negotiated, and imagined in the present
- How people going through IVF enact anticipatory labor that prioritizes their present hopes and relationships over a would-be child
- How encounters with IVF technology shape what reproductive futures are imagined or deemed possible
- How imagined reproductive futures and hopes are relationally experienced and/or produced

Impact: These contributions clarify *how* IVF users actively construct their reproductive futures and reveal the relational and technological dynamics that shape this process. This project supports more humane, context-aware approaches to infertility and reproductive care. Further, the project supports the design of reproductive technologies and care environments that better respond to people's temporal, emotional, and relational needs while they navigate uncertain reproductive futures, thereby supporting encounters with alternative reproductive futures beyond limited "IVF success."

Community-Oriented contributions: I have spent the past year engaging with and establishing trust in two online Discord communities centered on IVF, totaling over 1,000 members. I intend to continue working with dissertation participants and these online communities to conduct zine-making workshops showcasing the narratives and lived experiences of trying to conceive with IVF. Responding to participants' and community members' excitement and desire to share experiences with others, this returns research products and participants' labor to those supporting this work and the general public.

Phase	Task	Dates	Location
Research Design	Work on the Dissertation Proposal, receive IRB approval, and apply for research funding	February 2025 - November 2025	[REDACTED]
Establish Online Community Rapport	Engage, observe, and participate with IVF-related communities online (e.g., Discord) to establish trust and community rapport	February 2025 - Ongoing	Online on two Discord Servers
Data Collection	Autoethnography; journaling, memo writing, and collecting artifacts about my own IVF experience (Embodied Level)	January 2025 - July 2025	[REDACTED]
	Photovoice Study; Interviews, and focus groups with individuals directly experiencing IVF (Individual Level)	August 2025 - February 2026	Virtual
	Speculative Methods; Interviews with individuals directly experiencing IVF and others sharing a relationship with those experiencing IVF (Relational Level)	May 2026 - September 2026	
[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Data Analysis	Ongoing Analysis of Data; Memo-writing	November 2025 - June 2026	[REDACTED]
Community Engagement & Knowledge Production	Zine-Building Workshops with Online Communities	May 2026 - September 2026	Virtual
Data Analysis and Writing	Finish analysis of transcripts and memos; Writing of Dissertation	July 2026 - March 2027	[REDACTED]
Dissertation Defense	Defend Dissertation and Enter the Academic Job Market	End of Winter 2027 Semester	

Table 1: Dissertation Timeline

Funding Source	Amount Granted	Purpose	Location
<i>Digital Studies Institute Graduate Research Grant</i>	████	Covers costs for needed materials, software, and participant compensation costs	Ann Arbor, MI
<i>Center for the Education of Women+ (CEW+): The Gutsy Broad Fellowship</i>	████		
<i>Rackham Graduate School Research Grant</i>	████		
<i>Arts Initiative at the University of Michigan</i>	████	Covers cost of software, material, and participant compensation costs for <i>Zine-Building Workshops</i> set to take place Summer 2026	
Total	████		

Table 2: Awarded Funding Sources

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Appendix A: Study 1 Photovoice Prompts Shared with Participants

When reading these prompts and questions, what images, feelings, and thoughts come to mind? Take photos that capture or represent your answers to these questions. What you photograph might be more literal, more symbolic, or something else. We encourage creativity, but whatever resonates with you is fine! Take as many photos as you'd like in response to these prompts.

Your Labor and Practices

- How does **technology**⁶ **affect your experiences** of trying to conceive?
- In your experiences trying to conceive, what are **the things that you do for yourself and for others** (e.g., family, friends, partners, etc.)?

Your Future

- When you think of your **life after IVF**, what do you **imagine**? What do you **want** to happen? What do you **not want** to happen?

Planning For and Managing Uncertainty

- What makes you feel **in control of your future** when trying to conceive with IVF?
- What makes you feel **out of control of your future** when trying to conceive with IVF?

⁶ For this study, we're using a very broad definition of technology, thinking of it as tools that support or influence you and your reproductive experiences. My definition is not limited to digital technologies, like fertility apps. It includes but is not limited to reproductive technologies (e.g., ultrasounds, algorithms), medications (e.g., fertility medications, contraception), mobile and Internet of Things (IoT) devices (e.g., wearable fertility monitors), social media and online forums. It could also include other tools/practices.