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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 future with children so long as they maintain hope and engage in physical, emotional, and logistical work. While assisted reproductive technologies, like IVF, offer ways to manage uncertainty over one's reproductive future(s), they also demand anticipatory labor that is complicated by temporal, sociocultural, political, and material forces. Building on Clarke and colleagues' articulation of anticipation (2009), this multi-method dissertation uses photovoice and autoethnographic methods to examine anticipatory labor performed by people undergoing IVF. Drawing attention to the lived individual, relational, and embodied experiences of navigating technologically-mediated reproductive uncertainty, my arguments and concepts (e.g., *Anticipatory Theater of Disciplined Reproduction*) respond to under-theorizations of reproductive labor and anticipation in Science, Technology, and Society studies. This work has implications for more human-centered approaches to the design and delivery of (in)fertility care and reproductive technologies.

Overview

While technology can contribute to sentiments of having more control over one's reproductive outcomes, reproductive uncertainty persists. Furthermore, reproductive labor[1] is heavily contested and stratified along axes of race, gender, and class [6]. People trying to conceive are entangled with temporal, sociocultural, material and political forces. They may also be navigating competing ideals for 'desirable' reproductive outcomes, such as having children or being childfree [8, 10, 15]. This dissertation presents a multi-method photovoice *and* autoethnographic empirical account of how people trying to conceive with In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) imagine their reproductive futures[2], and the anticipatory labor they perform to try and ensure their desired reproductive outcomes.

The preliminary findings from the photovoice portion of this dissertation, which includes interviews and focus groups with 37 people subjected to IVF or their non-gestational partner[3], reveal that to manage high levels of uncertainty regarding their future reproductive outcomes *and* the all-consuming labor demands of IVF, participants find themselves entangled in a performance that is part of what I call the *anticipatory*

[1] **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.
[2] **Reproductive Futures** refers to future experiences related to or as a result of some reproductive experience a person may or may not have.
[3] **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.

theater of disciplined reproduction[4]. This **Anticipatory Theater of Disciplined Reproduction** refers to the web of often invisibilized labor practices undertaken to withstand the uncertain and messy realities of assisted reproduction. To exist within this anticipatory theater means tacitly accepting the uncertainty of reproductive outcomes, but continuing to engage in anticipatory labor.

Bridging theories of anticipation, reproductive technologies and labor [1, 4–6], my dissertation examines **(1)** the anticipatory sociotechnical, interpersonal and embodied practices of trying to conceive with IVF, **(2)** the impact of discourse and norms surrounding assisted reproductive technologies (ART) and (in)fertility in shaping imaginaries of reproductive futures, and **(3)** ways to create more human-centered approaches to the design and delivery of (in)fertility care, reproductive technologies and other associated technologies.

Background and Research Questions

IVF is one type of ART embedded with promises to optimize human conception and increase chances for reproductive futures of pregnancy resulting in a live birth. In IVF, individuals and couples are subjected to power embedded in medical institutions, while also engaging in self-governance that is informed by reproductive, medical, and sociotechnical norms [9, 12]. IVF is a prolonged, labor-intensive process fraught with financial, emotional, and physical burdens, extending far beyond medical procedures [7]. This labor is heavily gendered, disproportionately falling on women and those with capacity for pregnancy. Building on Clarke's (2016) concept of anticipation work, I argue that IVF is an inherently anticipatory experience—individuals navigate reproductive uncertainty by working with medical professionals, family members, and technological instruments to maximize the chances of achieving their desired reproductive outcomes [16]. Individuals or couples continuously orient their present actions and resources toward trying to secure hoped-for reproductive futures, performing the anticipatory labor of imagining and preparing for desired outcomes that may (not) arrive, and risks that may (not) be prevented.

Prior research on IVF often frames labor and anticipation as successful investments toward a future *only if* a child is born [9]. As a result, past research on IVF centers labor that is motivated or sustained by hope for a future child, rather than labor that centers other people and relationships [7, 11, 14]. Questions remain about the anticipation work that prioritizes the person(s) directly experiencing IVF and their relationships, as well as labor motivated by other alternative reproductive futures they might experience: This might look like a non-gestational partner taking on administrative and logistical labor to lessen the burden on their partner, or a couple setting aside money for travel post-IVF in case they end up childfree not by choice. Further, 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 [9]. More

[4] Historians of science have shown that reproductive sciences as a research discipline emerged from a desire by governments and scientists to control life and its reproduction [5]. At the turn of the twentieth century, the rationalist notion of **'disciplining reproduction'** shaped the then-current idea of pregnancy as something that can be mastered if only one sacrifices and/or struggles for the well-being of a fetus or would-be child [13]. Today, reproductive technologies are still embedded with values of rational, scientific management [5], values that undergird attempts to discipline and problematize the (pre)pregnant body as something purportedly controllable [13, 18].

research is needed to understand how individuals and couples experiencing IVF can be supported for possible alternative reproductive futures in case 'IVF success' never arrives.

To address this gap, my dissertation consists of a multi-methods study (photovoice and autoethnography) with sustained community engagement in online IVF communities. It responds to undertheorizations of reproductive labor and anticipation theory in assisted reproduction contexts by focusing on dimensions of anticipation and labor that emerge at the **individual**, **relational**, and **embodied** levels of trying to conceive with IVF.

Research Questions		
Level of Analysis	**RQ1: Individual**	A. How do individuals imagine, and labor towards their anticipated reproductive future(s)? B. How do experiences with a 'hope technology', like IVF, shape the variety of reproductive futures people imagine are *possible*?
	RQ2: Relational	A. What *new* forms of anticipation work emerge when one centers the individual(s) directly experiencing IVF or those they share relationships with, rather than a potential child? B. What are the relational dimensions of imagining and laboring towards reproductive futures?
	RQ3: Embodied	A. How is anticipation and its IVF labor embodied, enacted, and felt in everyday life?

Table 1: Research Questions

Theoretical Frameworks

My dissertation uses the theoretical frameworks of **anticipation** [1] and **anticipation work** [4] to examine how people imagine their reproductive futures, and how these imagined futures are experienced in the present through people's labor and imaginaries.

Anticipation is 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 [1]. Anticipation transforms the future into something that can be viscerally experienced in the present through what Clarke calls **anticipation work**—the labor (including investing time and resources) that people do to manage, prepare, and hope for the future [4].

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; understanding how technological intervention, moral and social dimensions might

shape these processes of imagining and laboring towards a reproductive future; and making sense of how the affective, relational, and material dimensions of negotiating and living with reproductive uncertainty intersect.

Methodology

Multiple Methods Approach
My dissertation begins with a photovoice study with **individuals** experiencing IVF to understand their reproductive labor and the anticipatory practices they engage in to achieve their imagined reproductive futures, as well as the **relational** dimensions salient to their experiences. Photovoice is a visual narrative method empowering people to speak about their experiences through photography and the meanings they attribute to images [19]. Aligning with my scholarly feminist commitments, photovoice values lived experience as expertise. I prompted participants with questions that solicited photos reflecting their sociotechnical and interpersonal labor and practices while trying to conceive with IVF, their imagined reproductive futures, and the ways they plan and manage reproductive uncertainty. Afterward, I engaged in collaborative analysis with participants during interviews and focus groups.

Secondly, I conducted autoethnographic work on my own **embodied** IVF experience. I extensively maintained an autoethnographic journal of my own experiences trying to conceive with IVF when I was a patient at UM's reproductive endocrinology clinic from January through July 2025, and again in October 2026. During my time as an active patient at the clinic, I collected artifacts from my experiences (e.g., photos, medical protocols, communications with medical teams), and kept a record of my observations and reflections.

Data Gathering and Analysis

I have **finished all data gathering** for the photovoice portion (**37 interviews** and hosted **7 focus groups)** with a soft continuation of the autoethnographic portion. All interview and focus group recordings have been transcribed and anonymized. I am continuing to write memos, noting emerging themes in the data [3]. I have been analyzing data iteratively and reflexively, informed by reflexive thematic analysis [2]. [See Appendix A for a timeline of progress towards finishing this dissertation.]

Impact and Contributions

My dissertation makes theoretical and empirical contributions to the fields of Science, Technology, and Society (STS) studies and Social Computing.

First, it contributes to **theoretical** understandings of how people negotiate and live with reproductive uncertainty against the pervasive backdrop of disciplined reproduction [5, 17]. Further, most work on reproductive technologies, labor, and anticipation focuses on anticipatory labor that prioritizes a potential child [1, 4, 5, 9]. My dissertation redirects attention to those presently embedded with reproductive technologies by asking what anticipatory labor is performed that centers those going through IVF or who share a relationship with them. In doing so, this dissertation offers an expanded understanding of

anticipation work, emphasizing its affective, embodied, and person-centered dimensions beyond the more child-centric. While some research has examined individual anticipatory behaviors [11, 14], this dissertation opens up new inquiry into how imagining reproductive futures and anticipation is relationally experienced. 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.

Secondly, my dissertation is one of the first studies using photovoice methods to examine the information practices and labor of anticipating one's reproductive futures for those trying to conceive with IVF. This work highlights *how* those experiencing IVF actively try to craft their reproductive futures and reveal the relational and sociotechnical dynamics that shape this process. Further, my work produces **empirical** data that will inform the delivery of (in)fertility care and the design of associated technologies so that they can be more human-centered and better respond to people's temporal, emotional, and relational needs while they live in reproductive uncertainty.

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Appendix A: Dissertation Timeline

Phase	Task	Dates	Location	Status
Research Design	Work on the Dissertation Proposal, receive IRB approval, and apply for research funding	Feb 2025 - Nov 2025	Ann Arbor, MI	**Complete**
Establish and Maintain Online Community Rapport	Engage, observe, and participate with IVF-related communities online (e.g., Discord) to establish trust and community rapport	Feb 2025 - Ongoing	Online in 2 Discord communities	**Complete/ Ongoing**
Data Gathering	Autoethnography; journaling, memo writing, and collecting artifacts about my own IVF experience (**Embodied Level)**	Jan 2025 - July 2025; Oct 2026 - Ongoing	Ann Arbor, MI	**Complete/ Ongoing**
	Photovoice Study; Interviews, and focus groups with individuals directly experiencing IVF **(Individual/Relational Level)**	Aug 2025 - Oct 2026	Virtual	**Complete**
Data Analysis	Ongoing Analysis of Data; Memo-writing	Nov 2025 - Oct 2026	Ann Arbor, MI	**Complete**
Data Analysis and Writing	**Finish analysis of transcripts and memos; Writing of Dissertation and Paper Manuscripts Submitted to Journals and Conference Proceedings**	**Nov 2026 - April 2028**	**Ann Arbor, MI**	**Ongoing**
Dissertation Defense	Defend Dissertation and Enter the Academic Job Market	End of Winter 2028 Semester		**Not Started**