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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

‘The men who made the breakthrough’: How the British press represented Patrick Steptoe and Robert Edwards in 1978

Katharine Dow

University of Cambridge, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RQ, UK



Katharine Dow is a senior research associate in the Reproductive Sociology Research Group (ReproSoc) at the University of Cambridge, where she is working on a study of media representations of IVF in Britain in the late 20th century. Her book, *Making a Good Life: an Ethnography of Nature, Ethics, and Reproduction* was published by Princeton University Press in 2016.

Abstract This article examines how the British press represented Patrick Steptoe and Robert Edwards in the story of the birth of the first ‘test-tube baby’, Louise Brown. In 1978, the British press represented the birth of Louise Brown as both a success and a source of hope. The main pairs of protagonists in this story were Steptoe and Edwards and Lesley and John Brown, who metonymically represented British science and infertile couples, respectively. In the dominant ‘success’ narrative of the birth of Louise Brown as depicted in the British press in 1978, Edwards and Steptoe seemed to embody ‘British’ values of industriousness, perseverance, altruism, ingenuity and teamwork. Thus, their success was simultaneously a British success. With Louise Brown’s birth, in-vitro fertilization came to stand for the potential happiness of infertile people and a bright future for British science and industry.

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Introduction

Scholars and journalists alike typically cite the birth of Louise Brown, the world’s first ‘test-tube baby’, in Oldham, Greater

Manchester, UK on 25 July 1978 as the origin story of in-vitro fertilization (IVF). The birth was not only a medical ‘breakthrough’, but also a media sensation. Important scholarly and journalistic work has been done on the international (and particularly American-led) media response to this key event in 20th-century medical science (Condit, 1994; Harris, 2006; Henig, 2004; Nelkin and Raymond, 1980; Seguin, 2001; Van

E-mail address: kld52@cam.ac.uk.

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Dyck, 1998), and on how it developed existing tropes about the artificial creation of life in the English-speaking world (Squier, 1994; Turney, 1998). Social scientists have also shed light on the different national responses to subsequent IVF firsts, helpfully drawing attention to the way that this technology interacts with specific social contexts and media histories (Bharadwaj, 2000; Birenbaum-Carmeli et al., 2000; Shalev and Lemish, 2012; see also Michelle, 2007).

Although many scholars of IVF are aware of media representations of this technology, research tends to focus on individual patients' experiences. In particular, very little work has considered seriously the role of the British media in the history of IVF. Yet, as Sarah Franklin has written, 'These representations are an important public source of both formal knowledge and commonsense understandings of the experience of infertility and the rapidly expanding field of "test-tube baby" science' (1990: 201). They also help shape policy towards IVF and the other forms of research and technology that have sprung from it (Franklin, 2013; Johnson et al., 2010; Mulkay, 1997; Petersen, 2001; Williams et al., 2003).

In 1978, there was public disquiet across the world, and particularly in the USA, about the birth of the world's first IVF baby, and concern about what it might mean for technology and for humans' relationships with nature, god and each other (Harris, 2006; Henig, 2004; Nelkin, 1987: 50; Nelkin and Raymond, 1980). The British researchers who had brought about Louise Brown's in-vitro conception, consultant gynaecologist Patrick Steptoe and research scientist Robert Edwards, had been criticized for their experimental work on IVF in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Edwards and Steptoe, 1980), and embryological research was to face intense scrutiny in the 1980s (Mulkay, 1997). However, in 1978, the British press' story of IVF was an overwhelmingly positive tale of happiness for Louise's parents, Lesley and John Brown, and success for Edwards and Steptoe, which represented hope for other infertile couples and demonstrated the country's excellence in medical research and innovation.¹ In the UK, although some newspapers did report that the technique was controversial, they rarely, if ever, substantiated these claims with any specific examples.² Across broadsheets and tabloids, the dominant narrative was that Louise's birth was good news for both her family and the country. The celebration of 'firsts' is one clear point of intersection between scientific and journalistic thinking, and the birth of Louise Brown was both a medical and a media event that was celebrated as a world first.

This article will focus on Steptoe and Edwards, 'the men who made the breakthrough', as they were described in the *Daily Express* newspaper (11 July 1978). The press' representation of Lesley and John Brown is to be covered separately (Dow, in preparation). Importantly, in 1978, the

newspapers put Patrick Steptoe at the forefront of their reports about the pair. While much of their success was attributed to their teamwork, Steptoe, the older man who had a rather commanding manner, was assumed to be the leading figure, although the pair thought of their partnership as equal and complementary. The newspapers did not mention Jean Purdy, their clinical assistant, whom Edwards and Steptoe considered invaluable to their work (Johnson and Elder, 2015a, b).

Assisted reproductive technology continues to stimulate media interest and public debate, and Louise Brown's birth is routinely referred back to as the origin point of any article. Of course, it is always difficult to gauge exactly what effect media has on its audience, but as Adrian Bingham (2009) reports, although newspapers had started to lose their position as the main source of news to television by the 1970s, newspaper reading was still widespread throughout British society and, he argues, reading the nationals produced in London even seemed to foster a sense of national community above and beyond local or regional identity (2009: 16). Over time, the public response to assisted reproduction has been variable, reflecting a deep-seated ambivalence, which is also true of broader attitudes to science and technology in the 20th century (Franklin, 2013; Turney, 1998). From the discovery of penicillin to the development of nuclear bombs, the 20th century brought a rapid array of new technologies that offered not only new hope for life through the eradication of disease but also the spectre of death (Edgerton and Pickstone, 2008). As Ayesha Nathoo (2009: 33–34) notes, by the 1960s, medical innovations were still celebrated in the media, but were no longer thought of as an area that needed protection from criticism. By the late 1970s, the application of investigative journalism techniques to science stories was well established. Given this, the positivity with which the British press framed IVF within the story of the birth of Louise Brown in 1978 is notable, and it underlines the point that something more was at stake than the happiness of Lesley and John Brown at the birth of their daughter.

Louise Brown was born just months before the Winter of Discontent, which marked the culmination of a series of severe industrial disputes that led to the downfall of Prime Minister Jim Callaghan, and ushered in a new era of neoliberal economic policy and increased social conservatism under his successor, Margaret Thatcher. A sense of Britain as a divided nation with profound economic troubles would have been particularly acute somewhere like Oldham, a former milling and mining town that had, at its peak, produced more spun cotton than France and Germany combined, but which now epitomized the decline of the industrial North and waning of secure employment in the latter half of the 20th century. In the dominant press narrative of the time, Steptoe and Edwards were seen to embody certain values that allowed them to be the pioneers of IVF, but they were celebrated not only for their personal success, but also with national pride. Therefore, the story of the birth of Louise Brown was, in the newspapers of the time, a story of British ingenuity and hard work. It spoke of both the moral ideology of a socially conservative historical context that celebrated 'family values' – which also chimed with the stance of most British newspapers – and of hope for British industry and innovation in a time of economic and political turmoil, and declining geopolitical influence.

¹ In the newspapers' coverage of the story, science and medicine were typically elided, and Steptoe and Edwards were described as both scientists and doctors. I have reflected this in this article by treating the press' representation of the story of the birth of Louise Brown as a scientific *and* a medical one (and, of course, it touched on many more domains of life besides).

² Nelkin notes that media coverage of science stories often reflects a 'preoccupation with the existence, not the substance, of controversy' (1987: 58).

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