

The creation of “monsters”: the discourse of opposition to in vitro fertilization in Poland

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Abstract: *In Poland, there is a campaign to criminalise in vitro fertilization, led by the Catholic church. This article explores how this campaign makes “monsters” of IVF children in its discourse, that is, embodiments of “the other” in the sense of Frankenstein’s monster. Basing the analysis primarily on Catholic mass media publications, the article investigates the discursive strategies employed to oppose IVF, most notably by the Catholic clergy and activists and journalists associated with the Church. They attribute “monstrosity” to the children in the following ways: physical (possible bodily deformity), psychological (survivor syndrome, identity crisis), social (loneliness, uncertain place in family relations), and ethical (a life burdened with the deaths of many embryos). Although the world of families with IVF does not provide examples of children who could be considered monsters in any of these terms, these arguments have become the primary reasons given for banning IVF. © 2012 Reproductive Health Matters*

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“What is the literary representation of Frankenstein, a creature brought to life against nature, if not a prototype of in vitro?”

This question was asked in 2009 by one of the key players on the Polish political scene, Catholic bishop Tadeusz Pieronek.¹ His is one among many such opinions in the Polish debate on whether in vitro fertilization (IVF) should be allowed, the most recent phase of which began at the end of 2007 (and continues to this day), when the then Minister of Health announced reimbursement from the state budget for IVF. However, there have been no reimbursements as yet, although health care is public in Poland and IVF has been provided for over 20 years, successfully and with broad social approval. The cost of one IVF procedure in 2012, and IVF very often needs to be repeated, was € 1800–3000² and considerably exceeds average monthly per capita income in Poland, which in 2011 was 1227 PLN (€ 300).³

Infertility clinics, of which there are currently about 40 in Poland, employ virtually all available contemporary infertility treatments and attain good pregnancy rates on a global comparison. Approximately 20% of couples in Poland are infertile (no pregnancy after at least 12 months of unprotected intercourse). IVF children constitute

about 1.5% of all children, the average for highly developed countries. Patients who seek IVF are entirely dependent on treatment offered by the private sector, which dictates the conditions of the programmes and manages the provision of information on assisted reproductive technology.

IVF is not regulated by law in Poland. Several draft bills were submitted to the Polish Parliament, ranging from a very restrictive bill to ban IVF, to one drafted by a right-wing party making IVF provision punishable by imprisonment, to a liberal one with no limitations on IVF. None were passed. Poland’s ruling Civic Platform produced two competing draft bills: one which stipulates that IVF would be legal only for married couples and prohibiting the freezing or destruction of embryos, and a more liberal one that allows for producing and freezing of extra embryos and allowing IVF also for single women and unmarried couples. However, neither draft bill included public funding for the treatment.⁴

In 2012 several politicians announced yet again that they wanted to regulate this field, and in response right-wing activists made frozen embryos an issue. However, nothing has changed.

As Polish feminists have shown, reproductive rights are limited and not respected in Poland.^{5–7}

Moreover, “laws and customs concerning sexual mores and reproduction are heavily influenced by the Roman Catholic church”.⁵ However, although the vast majority of Poles consider themselves Catholic, research by Polish sociologists shows that when it comes to certain issues, including ones concerning morality, its followers often do not agree with the standpoint of the Church.⁸

The main voices and perspectives in the IVF debate

A mapping of attitudes towards IVF on the basis of the main Polish media outlets shows that the main actors in this debate are politicians and Roman Catholic priests.⁹ Representatives of feminist circles rarely appear in the mainstream media (and in general feminist voices are given little attention in Poland). However, a few feminist organizations in Poland work actively for women’s reproductive rights,¹⁰ and there is a very active non-governmental organization, Association for the Treatment of Infertility and Adoption “*Nasz Bocian*” (“Our Stork”).¹¹ Although in Poland infertility is rather medicalized, biologists’ and physicians’ voices are also often overlooked in the public debate. The same may be said of the voices of couples struggling with infertility, who are only occasionally cited in newspaper commentaries. The main voices are those of politicians and clergy; hence, IVF, like abortion, is debated as a socially sensitive issue. As Agata Chełstowska points out:

*“Throughout 2008 and 2009 IVF became ‘the new abortion debate’. Politicians on the right used the same language to talk about fertilized eggs in laboratories that they use to talk about fetuses. They claimed to ‘defend life’ and ‘prevent murder’.”*¹²

In this article I investigate the discursive strategy used to condemn the use of IVF by advocates for the criminalization and prohibition of IVF in Poland, represented most notably by Catholic clergy, activists and journalists associated with the Church. I base my analysis primarily on Catholic mass media publications, including:

- the very conservative and very widely distributed weekly news magazines *Niedziela* and *Gość Niedzielny* (circulation each about 150,000);¹³
- the ultra-conservative and nationalistic daily newspapers *Nasz Dziennik*¹⁴ (circulation about 150,000); the circulation of the tabloid-style *Fakt*, the biggest-selling paper in the country is about

450,000, and the circulation of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the leading newspaper, is about 330,000;¹³

- *Tygodnik Powszechny*, a magazine representative of the more liberal and intellectual wing of Polish Catholicism (circulation about 22,000);¹³
- internet publications by authors associated with the Catholic Church, particularly those posted on popular Catholic portals (such as *opoka.pl*, *fronda.pl*); and
- public appearances by Catholic clergy.

I am also interested in the experiences of those who have decided to try IVF. Since 2009, I have been following the largest Polish internet forums pertaining to infertility, where infertile women tell their life stories and exchange information about their treatments. The main sites of this type are *NaszBocian.pl*, affiliated with the Association “*Nasz Bocian*”, and *Gazeta.pl*, which belongs to the largest group of Polish online services. Both forums are open to the public. I have also been conducting interviews with people struggling with infertility, a few of whom are quoted here.

I am aware of the rich anthropological literature on the problematic of new reproductive technologies,¹⁵ and of reflections on assisted reproductive technology deriving from feminist studies.¹⁶ In this article, however, I will mainly call upon theories dealing with the problem of the social construction of IVF children as monsters.

I agree with David Gilmore, who says: “*The mind needs monsters. Monsters embody all that is dangerous and horrible in the human imagination.*”¹⁷ From this perspective, the monster is not only a terrifying entity but also a metaphor. As Zakiya Hanafi says:

*“The monster is a concept that we need in order to tell ourselves what we are not... Monsters do exist whenever people mention them or describe them, even if they may not exist in the real world... Most monsters exist by dint of being repeatedly described in words rather than by being sighted in the flesh.”*¹⁸

Frankenstein is the most popular monster story. Jon Turney, in an inspiring book about relations between modern science and popular myths, calls this story “the governing myth of modern biology”.¹⁹ It is a reference point in today’s debate about biotechnology, especially new reproductive technology. So, it is not without reason that Frankenstein’s creature appears in debates on IVF in Poland. It is invoked to express fears of biotechnology and support the argumentation of its opponents.

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