

Centre for Reproduction Research Seminar Series

Wednesday 9th October, 12 – 1.30, Edith Murphy House, Room TBC, De Montfort University,
Leicester, UK

Dr Yuliya Hilevych, University of Cambridge

"Infertility and childlessness before IVF: alternatives and activism in Britain"

As places are limited, please email CRR@dmu.ac.uk if you wish to attend to secure your place.

Abstract

In the contexts where infertility is seen as a traumatic and/or stigmatised experience while childlessness is accepted as in many Western societies, individuals may decide to present their infertility as a conscious decision to be childless (Inhorn and Van Balen 2002). As such, studying these experiences as disentangled may be difficult both ethically and methodologically. However, if we do not understand how these experiences come to be constituted as such, we run into a risk of producing simplifications linking infertility and childlessness as mere synonyms, which then become highly problematic if reapplied to other contexts both in academic and policy research. In this talk, I will argue that we need to develop historical-sociological perspectives to situate infertility experiences at the 'turning' points specific to local contexts. And I will examine the aforementioned infertility-childlessness nexus in the context of Britain by taking the period before the invention of IVF (1950-1980) as a turning point. These historical decades are interesting because it was the period when fertility declined to below replacement level, often referred to as a transition from the baby boom to baby bust. Furthermore, in these decades several new options became available to people who wanted but could not have biological children of their own, namely adoption, artificial insemination and accepting childlessness. In the first part of my talk, I will illustrate how these alternatives were appropriated and will highlight the role of 'imaging' biological relatedness as a crucial mechanism in making these to be perceived as such in first place. In the second part, I will show how the limited availability of some of these alternatives served as a milestone for the emergence of the first infertility awareness movement – National Association for the Childless in 1974/76.

Speaker biography

Yuliya's research focuses on the historical and sociological study of reproduction, with a specific focus on social relations and population politics. Her research spans a broad geography covering Ukraine, the Netherlands and the UK, where she has experience conducting fieldwork, as well as uses a cross-national comparative perspective, which she started developing in the course of her work for the United Nations. Currently, Yuliya is a British Academy Newton International Fellow at the Faculty of History in the University of Cambridge working on a project exploring social history of infertility in Britain, with a specific focus on infertility advice, counselling and activism. She is also a convenor of the CRASSH Research Network '[Health, Medicine and Agency](#)', sits on a steering committee of the [Cambridge Reproduction SRI](#), and is a member of '[Changing in/fertilities](#)' international network based in the [Reproductive Sociology Research Group](#) (ReproSoc) at the University of Cambridge.