



Medicalized Masculinities: Tales of (In)Fertility, Sperm Donation, and Fatherhood

by Eva-Sabine Zehelein

ABSTRACT: Employing an intersectional approach—drawing on cultural and new kinship studies, (medical) anthropology, gender and media studies—this article analyzes how the 2013 MTV series *Generation Cryo* as cultural text deals with medicalized masculinities and (in)fertilities. It asks in what ways masculinities and also fathers, fathering, and fatherhoods are (re)presented and negotiated in a story which has sperm donation by an anonymous donor and the donor siblings and/in their respective families at its center. In the show, essentially an (auto)biographical narrative, all families emphasize social parenthood over genetic inheritance, yet there are also deep-seated insecurities (re)triggered by the donor who is literally and metaphorically a present absence transforming into a potential family member, thus shaking family tectonics and challenging familial/familiar gender and family roles. *Generation Cryo* is a story about donor conceived children, but also about clinically infertile men and their social roles as fathers, their struggles to narrate and embody individual forms of masculinities in the face of cultural normative templates of hegemonic masculinities—complex practices constantly oscillating between genetic essentialism and social parenthood.

KEY WORDS: masculinities; infertility; reality docu; *Generation Cryo*; ART; medicalization



Infertility is understood in clinical practice as “a disease of the reproductive system defined by the failure to achieve a clinical pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse” (Zegers-Hochschild et al. 1522).¹ It affects as many as 186 million people worldwide, and male infertility constitutes at least one third of all cases, although this fact often remains hidden and is not recognized as such, predominantly for two reasons: one, male infertility is still highly stigmatized and connected to feelings of shame and ‘unmanliness’ (cf. e.g. Hanna and Gough; Richard et al. 671). And second, the female body always remains the central object of infertility treatments, which might also explain why many studies and statistics on infertility are exclusively focused on women (e.g. CDC entry on “infertility;” Inhorn and Patrizio 412, 418; also Greil et al.; de Kok; Martins et al.; Billett and Sawyer 11-13). Reviewing the field of research on male infertility, Hanna and Gough called for research on, among others, “the intersection between masculinity and infertility” as well as on “the relationship between the desire to father and infertility” (1).

The following tries to help close this gap by analyzing how the 2013 MTV series *Generation Cryo* as cultural text deals with medicalized masculinities and (in)fertilities. It asks in what ways masculinities and also fathers, fathering, and fatherhoods are (re)presented and negotiated in a story which has sperm donation by an anonymous donor and the donor siblings and / in their respective families at its center. Since all cultural artefacts are constructed by, but also co-construct, reflect, yet also create their socio-cultural and political milieu, they are central epistemological media and their analysis via an intersectional and interdisciplinary practice can attempt to perform a lateral and thus richer and complex reading. Thus, rooted in cultural studies, the following analysis draws also primarily on sociology (new kinship studies) and medical anthropology, as well as media and gender studies.

First, I will introduce *Generation Cryo* itself. Then, I position the show briefly in the context of the reality TV “docu-diary,” focusing on the tricky claim to facticity, authenticity and truth that accompanies such an, as I argue, essentially (auto)biographical narrative form (Smith and Watson). In a third step, I highlight how *Generation Cryo* as (auto)biographical text (re)presents (re)negotiations of infertility and masculinities. I situate masculinities with Connell, Horlacher,² and Armengol³ within a

¹ Many couples in both developed as well as developing nations are victims of “stratified reproduction” (Ginsburg and Rapp)—meaning they cannot seek medical assistance for their infertility problems, due to either lack of medical care or due to lack of access to medical care, because of financial, socio-cultural and political, or legal barriers (Boivin et al.; Ombelet et al.; Culley et al.; see also Ceballos et al.—the first study on African-American women, the “Black fertility mandate” (503), and their silenced infertility).

² Narratives can be “a privileged space and epistemological medium where the manifold mechanisms of configuring ever different and divergent masculinities in the discursive condition becomes readable, knowable, and thereby also rewriteable” (Horlacher 5-6).

³ “As in the social sciences, the most innovative approaches to the discussion [of masculinity studies] in literary and cultural theory are those, I believe, that have been able to synthesize sexual politics and poststructuralist theories in new productive ways” (Armengol 66). See also Armengol et al., as well as Hearn.



gender and cultural studies context as constructed, flexible and situational performative narratives, which, as parts of the narrative of self, are fluid and have to be constantly (re)negotiated or adapted, in this case, throughout the life cycle of a family—at its conception, when the donor sperm is used, via pregnancy and birth of donor conceived children, through childhood and adolescence to the moment when the children at age 18 can initiate their search for their donor. *Generation Cryo* reveals that this can challenge the family tectonics and questions of the significance of genetic inheritance and family belonging may (re)surface—in the case of heterosexual parent families with infertile fathers, masculinities are discursively framed and constantly oscillating between genetic essentialism and social parenthood.

For the given context, Halberstam's idea of understanding masculinity by necessity as separate from the male body, that masculinity "becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (Halberstam 2), does not hold. Definitions and practices of masculinities as embodied are here closely and crucially linked to the male body's (in)ability to perform, i.e. of providing a 'healthy' sperm sample; this concerns first and foremost the infertile men and/as fathers in heterosexual relationships⁴ and the (here anonymous) donor, but also the female partners of infertile men, and all the donor siblings in their respective families. *Generation Cryo* is a rare cultural text to give voice to men's experiences with infertility and fatherhood, and to also shed light on women's experiences with male infertility and women's roles in men's reproductive health; these important facets are still "relatively unexplored fields of social inquiry" (Barnes 164).

As I will illustrate, two of the fundamental issues the show explores are what it means for men not to be the genetic fathers of their children, and how these men construct and perform their roles as fathers and husbands within their families and towards the sperm donor—for Eric, an infertile father, it's clear: "He's not family" ("The Reunion": 25:33).⁵

THE SHOW

Generation Cryo is a 2013 MTV show packaged as a reality docu-diary.⁶ Serialized in six 40-minute episodes, it portrays 17-year old Breeanna Speicher from Reno, Nevada, who sets out to meet as many of her 15 half-siblings (conceived with sperm from the same donor) as possible. And with their help, she is determined to find the donor, the guy who "did his thing in a cup" (Opening, "Who's Your Daddy?": 1:02-1:04) and whose

⁴ Surprisingly, recent publications such as Keith's do reserve space for medicalized masculinities, but focus—maybe tellingly—only on "crises of masculinity" caused by erectile dysfunction and desires for penis enlargements (227-29), without addressing the vital issue of (in)fertility at all.

⁵ Throughout and as a fundamental tenet, I conceptualize family as a network characterized also, but not exclusively, by genetic belonging (genetic essentialism), yet first and foremost by the longing to belong (relatedness).

⁶ For analysis of Hollywood films or TV series dealing with sperm donation see e.g. Akass et al.; Gupta; Kennedy; Maher; Tropp.



sperm her two mums, Sherry and Debra, had chosen from a cryo bank.⁷ The show is filmed to suggest that Bree records her trip with her own hand-held camera as a video diary. There are sections where she speaks into her camera, addressing the donor directly, and this is also, programmatically, how the show opens:

It's all for you, my sperm donor, so hi. For so long it hasn't even felt like reality that this mystery man brought me into the world and I am so appreciative of my life and where it's going and I just wanna know who you are. Hopefully one day, if you are willing, I would love to meet you, so I'm gonna try to find you and if I do, my diaries will tell you my whole story. (Opening, "Who's Your Daddy?": 0:18-0:42)

Over the summer of 2013, Bree travels the country—Atlanta, Boston, and California—to meet with ten of the siblings and their families: Jonah and Hilit Jacobson (and their parents Eric and Terri), Jesse Bogdan (and his parents Jim and Laurie, and his sister Emily, who is not donor conceived), Jesse and Jayme Clapoff (and their single mum by choice Janis), Molly, Paige, and Will Chaifetz (and their parents Perry Chaifetz, who doesn't feature in the show, and Laura Schofield), as well as Julian (whose single mum is not part of the show) and Maddi Walker (with her mum Mara, who conceived Maddi when she was single, and her dad Phil). With the help of some donor siblings, Bree tries to contact the anonymous donor via the sperm bank. While waiting for a response, they manage to discover enough information about him that they can identify his name, find his current address in Oakland, CA., a picture from a high school yearbook, and even get his birth certificate. Bree writes him a letter. He responds via email and promises to also write to those other siblings who wish to establish contact. All of them will see where these conversations will take them—and their families—in the future.

REALLY AUTO —BIOS —GRAPHE: IDENTITIES AND MASCULINE AUTHENTICITY

Reality TV "as a textual, social and cultural formation" (Kavka 4) is a highly hybrid form, characterized primarily by its "generic haziness"—"there is probably not a single feature that is shared by all of the programmes which fall under the rubric of 'reality TV'" (Kavka 1,8). Its single primary characteristic and selling point is that it presents (facets of) the authentic lives of ordinary people, challenging the private-public and 'fact-fiction' divides, opening opportunities to address social discourses in quasi documentary ways, no matter how scripted and selective the shows ultimately may be (Cummings), while aiming for high entertainment value with limited production costs (Murray and Ouellette 4). *Generation Cryo* finds itself on the opposite end of the Reality TV spectrum from, say, *Big Brother*, *Temptation Island* or *Survivor* (Feasey). This show is not about exhibitionism, celebrity culture, voyeurism and surveillance. It aims to introduce to a younger audience (MTV) a lived reality which is very much and increasingly so part and parcel of younger generations' lives and identities with wide reaching ramifications, and

⁷ For in depth analysis of the practices of gamete donation within neoliberal capitalist systems cf. e.g. Krollokke and Pant. On reproductive justice and infertility see e.g. Barnes and Fledderjohann.



might thus warrant not only some informed thought, but also lots of de-stigmatization. Far from showing men who survive on a desert island, restore a motorbike, or try to find their perfect female match, this show presents people who live the ordinary family life, with a focus on two men striving for masculine authenticity as family dads who are not genetically related to their children and struggle with the stigma and hardship of infertility. And the show also features the significant absent presence of a hypermasculine, virile, and fertile donor who remains anonymous, yet shakes up all families, their lives and the fathers' masculine self-identifications. The series does not invite the (male) viewer to coproduce a form of "hyperauthentic masculinity, in which White men fight to (re)claim a position of power and dominance" (Alexander and Woods 166). Rather than attempting to reclaim "cultural authority by appealing to those deeply entrenched traditional masculine ideals of toughness, self-reliance, and aggressive competitiveness" (Christian in Alexander and Woods 156), these men are depicted as struggling, sometimes in tears, together with their families for who they are and can be for them.

It might be particularly fruitful to focus on the show's use of the video diary format, suggesting that the story comes 'straight from the heart' of the protagonist and narrator, transforming the audience into sneaky witnesses to this quasi-confessional and intimate autobiographical narrative. What Carsten (689) and then also Klotz have described as a lack of agency, the lack of constitutive knowledge about genetic origins, be that in cases of adoption or sperm donation, might better be understood through the lens of self (*auto*) life (*bios*) narrative (*graphe*). No matter whether we see relatedness on the basis of genetics immediately as geneticization (e.g. Mamo) or not—a desire to explore origins and construct a self life narrative (Smith and Watson) as fundamental part of a self and identity is at the heart of *Generation Cryo*, and for all involved—every self is conceived "not as an essence, but as a subject, a moving target, which provisionally conjoins memory, identity, experience, relationality, embodiment, affect and limited agency" (Smith and Watson 71). Bree says in the opening: "I'm trying to piece together my history" (Opening, "Who's Your Daddy?": 1:26) accompanied by a photographic portrait of Bree being put together from many building blocks or pieces illustrating transtextually the idea of an autobiographical project. The self feels incomplete and hopes for or expects closure through finding the missing pieces. And the show as video diary supports this theme structurally as well: Bree tells her story, in words and images, with the help of her donor siblings who accompany her on her geographical as well as spiritual quest and autobiographical journey to find the donor and thus also (a part of) her self. At the same time, with every family we visit with Bree, *Generation Cryo* introduces us also to fundamental challenges to the individual identity constructions of all family members, and especially to the contested and complex masculinities of the social fathers. The project is thus autobiographical as well as biographical; it straddles the 'fact-fiction divide', entertains through the presentation of a topical human interest story told by 'real people', and in its formula also mirrors how public private decisions can become—the super private act of human procreation becomes a public issue when it comes to medical intervention or assistance, when bodies become medicalized and objects of legal as well as socio-cultural ramifications.



FATHER—FATHERHOOD—FATHERING AND (IN)FERTILITY

Fatherhood is where practices of masculinity and patriarchy are negotiated and where deeply ingrained role models and ideals, often culturally cemented, emerge (LaRossa). If the fundamental role and duty of any man is to procreate, to produce viable sperm and impregnate women to ensure the “survival of the species” (cf. e.g. Herrera 1063), male infertility, “one of the most stigmatizing of all male health conditions” (Inhorn et al. 10) and for many “a major life crisis” (Mikkelsen et al.), can have an emasculating effect, as it is also often equated with erectile dysfunction, impotence or a general lack of male virility (Mikkelsen et al. 1982; also e.g. Moore; Lloyd; Wischmann and Thorn).

Considering that “men do not line up around the block to sign up for a study of male infertility” (Barnes 119), the valor and value behind the consent of two heterosexual family fathers to talk about their infertility on television cannot be overstated. In *Generation Cryo*, Eric Jacobson and Jim Bogdan struggle with their self-worth and masculine identities which appear to them as diminished because they cannot fulfil the hegemonic masculinity template (Kimmel) that includes ‘fathering’ their own genetic offspring. They are willing to confront their pain about not being the genetic fathers to their children, and make sense of infertility and of what it means for them as individuals and as members of the collectives in which they perform. After all, certain cultural scripts are not attainable or performable in social practice and thus the *habitus* (Bourdieu) needs discursive or narrative reframing or re-articulation.

During a father-son activity, practicing their golf swings on a driving range, Jim tells his son that a former friend had once said to him: “if you need some help let me know” (“Coming to Grips”: 38:36-38:38). Both, father and son, agree that this was a serious affront against Jim’s masculine identity, and an all too common misconception of equating infertility with a lack of virility. And Jim makes it clear, with hugs and words, that Jesse is his son, no matter the genetics, that for him, there is a blood relation, and Jesse “is a Bogdan” (“Coming to Grips”: 38:50-39:40) and not a second-class kid to the sister who was conceived with Jim’s sperm “the natural way” (“Coming to Grips”: 18:55-19:05). The Bogdan family apparently emphasizes consanguinity as an archaic or Biblical marker of ex- and inclusion, a “paradigmatic substance for kin connection in Europe” (Franklin 292; see also Zehelein) and North America. A friend had called Jesse a “bastard;” sister Emily says: “I am more of a miracle, I am natural” (“Coming to Grips”: 38:16-38:20; 18:55-19:05).

Eric is the show’s most deeply hurt and threatened man and his divergent views and desires from those of his wife lead to a serious marital crisis. For Eric, it’s traumatic to the day that he “couldn’t do the one manly thing that every man is expected to do” (“Who’s Your Daddy?”: 28:50-28:53). Eric even says that his wife “didn’t lose anything, I lost everything” (“Who’s Your Daddy?”: 28:04-28:07) and that he had to undergo a process of grieving, of accepting that he cannot produce kids (“Who’s Your Daddy?”: 28:11-28:17). Inhorn has used the term “reproductive disruption” to capture “the sense of disjuncture, asynchrony, loss, injustice, and stigma that many infertile people feel when they discover that they are unable to conceive a child” (Inhorn 9). When Jonah tells his father: ““It’s about the raising of the kids and still keeping your name going”



("Who's Your Daddy?": 29:17-29:20), he reassures Eric of his position as *pater familias* which he has always performed well and which goes unchallenged, also with a redefinition of patriliney or patrilineal continuity. Whereas for Bourdieu male *habitus* develops among men and in a sphere exclusively reserved for men (Bourdieu), here, masculinity is narrated and performed in a kinship context which is also transgenerational. And while classically young men are considered as marginalized masculinities which threaten the father, here it is the mere existence of the sons which has endangered and fundamentally challenged notions of the father and of fatherhood, together with ideas about control, authority, belonging, genealogy and self-identification or self-perpetuation. The son here acknowledges the position of power and control his father holds within the family by drawing on normative traditional family scripts. However, the extension of the family and his wife's insistence that she will meet the donor are experienced by Eric as emasculating, as threats to his masculinity manifested in his role within the nuclear family and the loss of control over the family project. He says: "Any attack on my picture of what my family is, is an attack on me" ("Who's Your Daddy?": 32:55-33:05). When his wife Terri reasserts herself and her desire to meet the donor, because "he is half of our kids, I would want to know where they came from, because that would help me know my children. I just think that's important to understand family," he replies: "No matter what, this guy ain't family. He ain't family. He will never be family. He is not a part of the family. He donated the genetic mechanisms to conceive" ("The Reunion": 25:15-25:47). Whereas Terri acknowledges the, say, 50% make-up of her children deriving from the donor, Eric tries to separate the person from the sperm donation which is just a "mechanism" with no relevance for who the children are. He here downplays the genetic ties to the donor, because they are what potentially estranges the children from him. Terri tries to reassure her husband by stating explicitly: "The fact that you could not produce sperm is completely insignificant in our lives, for us" ("The Reunion": 26:22-26:32), yet for Eric, it's a painful reminder that he could not live up to the heteronormative nuclear family script he wanted so much to fulfill, that genetically Jonah and Hilit are not his children, and that for the family he has he might not be the father he had desired to be. In an act of quasi self-relinquishment, and acceptance of an imbalance of "biological capital" he then says to his wife: "You always do what you're gonna do, so you're gonna do whatever you're gonna do, and we will live with the consequences" ("The Reunion": 27:09-27:20).

In what might be called after Inhorn "emergent masculinities," described as "technoscientifically and morally agentive" (Inhorn 225),⁸ both infertile men here try to reframe their understanding and practices of masculinity and manhood by pushing

⁸ As she has shown for Arab men, infertility is not only a touchy, but also complex topic. In her interviews, she could not find a correlation between infertility and unmanliness. By arguing that "the body is at fault, not the man," "the *self*, the real seat of masculinity, remains intact and blameless" (Barnes 87, 95; italics in original), and masculinity and infertility are narratively disconnected. See also Bell who highlights that men use medicine and medical intervention—diagnosis and treatment of infertility—to construct their masculinity in the feminized contexts of reproduction (708). Bell highlights that fatherhoods—either their unreachability or their realization via donor sperm—are not within the scope of her field work (716). *Generation Cryo* as cultural text shows exactly that infertility was and is indeed deeply troubling and traumatic for the family fathers, their fatherhoods and masculine selves.



core elements of traditional understandings of masculinity, namely biological fatherhood and patrilineality, to the backseat for modern descriptors such as social fatherhood and families of emotional belonging—"you are my son" ("Who's Your Daddy?": 39:18; cf. also "The Reunion": 20:00-20:07).

The men are confronted with social 'competition' through the looming presence of the donor who, after nearly 20 years, might now all of a sudden vie for a place within the family texture and maybe even at the family dinner table. For a long time, he had remained a number, nothing but an arbitrary anonymizing symbol. The donor was a projection screen for individual desires and fears and within his anonymity lurked a projected masculinity, one of a person with a penis who "did his thing in a cup" (Opening, "Who's Your Daddy?": 1:02-1:04). And this person carries, according to the profile he filled in, certain (character) traits their parents valued when they chose him—in the case of Bree's moms "tall, athletic, and intelligent" (Opening, "Who's Your Daddy?," 1:08-1:11). On the one hand, he is a virile fertile man, maybe representing a form of hypermasculinity, yet at the same time, the man is condensed to a sperm sample in a vial, delivered in a nitrogen tank. His masculinity is thus reduced to his ability to produce 'good' sperm, sperm which—allegedly—carries (character) traits the intended parents were seeking. Diane Tober in *Romancing the Sperm* conceptualizes this "selecting for perceived desired traits [...] in an individualized, idiosyncratic, innocuous way that is a pushback against traditional eugenics" as "grassroots eugenics" (5). The donor is however much more than a sperm, namely an elephant in the room, a force which shakes up family tectonics. He was always there, literally from the beginning, and it is Bree who, through her visits to the families and their lives and stories, brings to the surface issues of identity and family relatedness which had always been unspoken, avoided, silenced. The donor is also a Pandora's Box. The families ask themselves—to them unsettling or disturbing—questions such as: what if he doesn't want any contact at all? What if he wants to meet all 'his children'? What if he wants to play an active role in their and their families' lives?

Generation Cryo's diary technique forces the viewer from the role of the anonymous observer into the position of the 'hunted' anonymous donor, to whom 'detective' Bree's diary is, after all, addressed—"you, the viewer" merges seamlessly into 'you, the donor' when Bree frequently says into her camera "I will find you!"⁹ For the donor, the loss of anonymity can bring a potential father role which can seriously disrupt his life and his self-identification and may demand a re-negotiation of performed masculinities and masculinity narratives.

Eric and Jim diminish his significance to just "jerking off in a cup," in contrast to what it means to parent. No matter how much medicine may have detached masculinity from sperm by framing infertility as a (often curable) disease and by placing "men on the periphery [of infertility treatments] as a 'mere ejaculatory extension' (Culley et al.

⁹ Being indirectly addressed by Bree, the viewer is constantly confronted with the dilemma of whose rights should rule supreme. Do the siblings have a natural right to know their genetic origins and thus the donor? Or does the donor, who clearly stated his wish to remain anonymous, have the right to see his anonymity protected? Consensus is spreading that donor conceived children have the right to know their genetic heritage, since it is part of their identity to know about their ancestry and their medical background, and significant to finding a place in the world (Harper et al.).



229)" (Bell 712)—in the lived family situations, sperm and masculinity are closely linked, and it takes a narrative and emotional effort to separate genetic belonging and social fatherhood. This protects the men as fathers in their social roles, reaffirming their superior status over the donor, and in their masculinities, which are defined and defended via long-term intensive social parenthood.

WOMEN, MEN, CHILDREN

Barnes has pointed out that women's experiences with male infertility and women's roles in men's reproductive health are still "relatively unexplored fields of social inquiry. Within marriage, women are highly influential in their husbands' medical treatment decisions and reserve the right to control their own bodies" (Barnes 164). *Generation Cryo* presents a rare glimpse at some women's responses, attitudes and narrative frames to conceptualize and narrativize what their partner's infertility and the use of donor sperm meant then and means today, and how they try to define their roles—particularly as biological mothers of a child not related genetically to their husbands.

Laura feels physically sick seeing the donor picture and is afraid of feeling she "betrayed" her husband—as if the use of donor sperm had been an act of adultery ("We're Your Family": 18:45-18:53). She also says that the existence of a donor is very difficult to accept for her husband, who, maybe tellingly, doesn't feature in the show ("The Reunion": 11:20-12:15). For this couple, too, the stigma of infertility seems to be deeply internalized and the cultural heteronormative template of heterosexual marital procreation as the singular and fundamental origin of family bonds cause notions of the use of donor sperm, practiced in a medical setting, as adultery.

Terry argues that she is adamant to know the science, the biology of it. She wants to know who is related to her children and has little understanding for her husband's fears and deep-seated anxieties concerning the impact of his infertility. In the story of Terri and Eric it becomes very clear that couples have to frame their parental identities and performances and non-biological parentage via anonymous sperm donation for and within their partnership. The donor is a silent presence, a third person in a couple relationship, an unknown other who wedges himself into the partnership and questions some fundamental tenets of self-same. Eric says:

Twenty years ago when we first had this conversation, you said to me, "dont worry, there'll never be a chance that we'll ever meet this guy," [...] and now you're enthusiastic about meeting him. It just—it really deeply, deeply hurts me, [...] it's almost like that the vow that we took has been negated, and, I feel as if we've gone past the line of no return, and that's—you just need to know it hurts me. ("The Reunion": 16:25-17:20)

Whereas Terri attempts to shift the thinking about the donor to a more abstract medical discourse about genetics and (character) traits, for Eric this turns out to be increasingly more difficult the more probable it becomes that the donor might cease being just a vial. In clear opposition to research done by Inhorn and Bell, these men do feel emasculated, deeply traumatized by their infertility, and threatened in their



identities and family performativities by the (still absent) presence of the virile hypermasculine sperm donor.

All children portrayed in *Generation Cryo* have known for as long as they can remember that they are donor conceived. For some, this fact remained largely insignificant to their identities and feelings of belonging, because of the presence of their social fathers. The fear of hurting the parents (Molly), the wish to protect the parents, the worry “that dad and you are both going to feel we’re not yours” (Molly), the fear that “it’s going to mess up my family relationship” (Jonah) (“The Reunion”: 11:49-11:53; 15:00-15:03), makes some siblings hesitate to help Bree on her journey, despite their “natural curiosity” to know who he is. Bree argues that meeting the donor will not change the siblings, and that the door they are about to open with their search “doesn’t open on hell” (“We’re Your Family”: 28:50-28:53), yet deep seated insecurities and unstable family and identity tectonics cannot be denied, since the nuclear family ideal, based on genetics, still looms so large, because it remains difficult to justify and perform fathering in the contexts of medicalized masculinities and the striking of genetics from the definition of fatherhood, and since the donor is, in the end, not just a sperm.

CONCLUSION: BELONGING AND LONGING TO BELONG

When Eric says that for him, the donor will never be family, he draws a clear line around his circled wagons and most other families and siblings do the same. Some consider meeting the donor, yet all will have to figure out individually where to put him in their lives. The infertile men in heterosexual family settings (as well as the lesbian non-biological mum) try hard to be open about the situation, yet struggle with feelings of insecurity and potential loss—loss of the role of father to the donor conceived children, loss of paternal authority or position within the family setting, loss of love and affection by the children and/or their wives.

Generation Cryo normalizes and inscribes into the cultural imaginary or narrative a family form which is still frequently either unknown or often marginalized or invalidated because not-normative. The format draws on narrative tropes and established cultural practices to close the gap between the known and sanctioned and the new and (often) censured. It emphasizes an inclusive understanding of family, celebrates togetherness, empathy, and friendship, which trump genetics. It welcomes networks of belonging as support structures with flexible practices of masculinities and femininities and understands those not as a threat but an enrichment to its individual members and societies at large (cf. Kramer and Kahn), despite the inherent complexities each and all members have to struggle and deal with. *Generation Cryo* is first the (auto)biographical story of Bree and her genetic siblings setting out on a journey to find the donor and to find and accept themselves, to rethink and reconfirm their family ties and autobiographical narratives.

Generation Cryo is also a story about clinically infertile men and their social roles as fathers, their struggles to narrate and embody individual forms of masculinities in the face of deeply ingrained cultural normative templates of hegemonic masculinities within nuclear family narratives. For the “dude who started it all” (Opening, “Who’s Your



Daddy?": 1:46) perceived and here also (re)presented as hyper masculine and virile, actions from some 20 years ago suddenly show their consequences—he has 15 children conceived with his sperm. He has to figure out who he is, wants to be, can be for these children and who they are, want to be, can be for him. For all men, especially the family fathers, masculinities and fathering are complex practices constantly oscillating between genetic essentialism and social parenthood.

WORKS CITED

Akass, Kim, *et al.*, editors. *Reading the L word: Outing Contemporary Television*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Alexander, Susan M., and Katie Woods. "Reality Television and the Doing of Hyperauthentic Masculinities." *Journal of Men's Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2019, pp. 149-68.

Armengol, Josep M. "Past, Present (and Future) of Studies of Literary Masculinities: A Case Study in Intersectionality." *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2019, pp. 64-74.

Armengol, Josep M., *et al.*, editors. *Masculinity and Literary Studies: Intersections and New Directions*. Routledge, 2017.

Barnes, Liberty W. *Conceiving Masculinity: Male Infertility, Medicine, and Identity*. Temple UP, 2014.

Barnes, Liberty, and Jasmine Fledderjohann. "Reproductive justice for the invisible infertile: A critical examination of reproductive surveillance and stratification." *Sociology Compass*, vol. 14, 2020, 1-18.

Bell, Ann V. "'I don't consider a cup performance; I consider it a test': masculinity and the medicalization of infertility." *Sociology of Health & Illness*, vol. 38, no. 5, 2016, pp. 706-20.

Billett, Paulina, and Anne-Maree Sawyer. *Infertility and Intimacy in an Online Community*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Boivin, Jean, *et al.* "International Estimates of Infertility Prevalence and Treatment-Seeking: Potential Need and Demand for Infertility Medical Care." *Human Reproduction*, vol. 22, no. 6, 2007, pp. 1506-12.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Masculine Domination*. Stanford UP, 2002.

Carsten, Janet. "'Knowing where you've come from: Ruptures and continuities of time and kinship in narratives of adoption reunions." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2000, pp. 687-703.

Ceballo, Rosario, *et al.* "Silent and Infertile: An Intersectional Analysis of the Experiences of Socioeconomically Diverse African-American Women with Infertility." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2015, pp. 497-511.

Connell, R.W. *Masculinities*, 2nd edition. Polity 2015.

Culley, Lorraine, *et al.*, editors. *Marginalized Reproduction: Ethnicity, Infertility, and Reproductive Technologies*. Earthscan, 2009.

Cummings, Dolan, editor. *Reality TV: how real is real?* Hodder & Stoughton, 2002.

De Kok, Bregje. "Infertility and relationships: the importance of constructions in context." *Families, Relationships and Societies*, vol. 2, 2013, pp. 23-42.



- Feasey, Rebecca. *Masculinity and Popular Television*. Edinburgh UP, 2008.
- Franklin, Sarah. "From Blood to Genes? Rethinking Consanguinity in the Context of Geneticization." *Blood and Kinship: Matter for Metaphor from Ancient Rome to the Present*, edited by Christopher H. Johnson, et al., Berghahn Books, 2013, pp. 285-306.
- Generation Cryo*. MTV, executive producers Betsy Forhan, et al., 2013.
- Ginsburg, Faye and Rayna Rapp, editors. *Conceiving the New World Order. The Global Politics of Reproduction*. U of California P, 1995.
- Greil, Arthur, et al. "The Social Construction of Infertility." *Sociology Compass*, vol. 5, no. 8, 2011, pp. 736-46.
- Gupta, Kristina. "Picturing space for lesbian nonsexualities: Rethinking sex-normative commitments through *The Kids Are All Right* (2010)." *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2013, pp. 103-18.
- Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Duke UP, 1998.
- Hanna, Esmée, and Brendan Gough. "Experiencing Male Infertility: A Review of the Qualitative Research Literature." *SAGE Open*, Oct.-Dec. 2015, pp. 1-9.
- Harper, Joyce C., et al. "The End of Donor Anonymity: How Genetic Testing Is Likely to Drive Anonymous Gamete Donation out of Business." *Human Reproduction*, vol. 31, no. 6, 2016, pp. 1135-40.
- Hearn, Jeff. "So What Has Been, Is, and Might Be Going on in Studying Men and Masculinities? Some Continuities and Discontinuities." *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2019, pp. 53-63.
- Herrera, Florencia. "'Men always adopt': Infertility and Reproduction from a Male Perspective." *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 34, 2013, pp. 1059-80.
- Hertz, Rosanna, and Margaret K. Nelson. *Random Families: Genetic Strangers, Sperm Donor Siblings, and the Creation of New Kin*. Oxford UP, 2019.
- Horlacher, Stefan. "Configuring Masculinity." *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice*, edited by Stefan Horlacher, Brill Rodopi, 2015, pp. 1-10.
- Inhorn, Marcia C., et al., editors. *Reconceiving the Second Sex. Men, Masculinity, and Reproduction*. Berghahn Books, 2009.
- Inhorn, Marcia C. *The New Arab Man: Emergent Masculinities, Technologies, and Islam in the Middle East*. Princeton UP, 2012.
- Inhorn, Marcia C., and Pasquale Patrizio. "Infertility around the globe: new thinking on gender, reproductive technologies and global movements in the 21st century." *Human Reproduction Update*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2015, pp. 411-26.
- Kavka, Misha. *Reality TV*. Edinburgh UP, 2012.
- Keith, Thomas. *Masculinities in Contemporary American Culture – An Intersectional Approach to the Complexities and Challenges of Male Identity*. Routledge, 2017.
- Kennedy, Tammie M. "Sustaining White Homonormativity: *The Kids Are All Right* as Public Pedagogy." *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2014, pp. 118-32.
- Kimmel, Michael. *Manhood in America. A Cultural History*. 3rd edition. Oxford UP, 2012.
- Klotz, Maren. "Wayward Relations: Novel Searches of the Donor-Conceived for Genetic Kinship." *Medical Anthropology*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2016, pp. 45-57.



Kramer, Wendy, and Naomi Cahn. *Finding Our Families: A First-of-Its Kind Book for Donor-Conceived People and Their Families*. Avery, 2013.

Krolokke, Charlotte H., and Saumya Pant. "I only need her uterus': Neo-liberal Discourses on Transnational Surrogacy." *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2012, pp. 233-48.

LaRossa, Ralph. "The historical study of fatherhood: theoretical and methodological considerations." *Fatherhood in Late Modernity: Cultural Images, Social Practices, Structural Frames*, edited by Mechtild Oechsle et al., Buderich, 2012, pp. 37-59.

Lloyd, Mike. "Condemned to be meaningful: Non-response in studies of men and infertility." *Sociology of Health & Illness*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1996, pp. 433-54.

Mamo, Laura. "Biomedicalizing Kinship. Sperm Banks and the Creation of Affinities." *Science as Culture*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2005, pp. 237-64.

Maher, Jennifer. "Something Else Besides a Father. Reproductive technology in recent Hollywood film." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 14, no. 5, 2014, pp. 853-67.

Martins, M.V., et al. "Dyadid dynamics of perceived social support in couples facing infertility." *Human Reproduction*, vol. 29, 2014, pp. 83-89.

Mikkelsen, Alice T., et al. "Psychological Aspects of Male Infertility Treatment." *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 69, no. 9, 2013, pp. 1977-86.

Moore, Lisa J. *Sperm Counts: Overcome by Man's Most Precious Fluid*. NYU P, 2007.

Murray, Susan, and Laurie Ouellette, editors. *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York UP, 2004.

Ombelet, William, et al., "Infertility and Provision of Infertility Medical Services in Developing Countries." *Human Reproduction Update*, vol. 14, no. 6, 2008, pp. 605-21.

Richard, Jeremie, et al. "So Much of This Story Could Be Me': Men's Use of Support in Online Infertility Discussion Boards." *American Journal of Men's Health*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2017, pp. 663-73.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. "Virtually me: a toolbox about online self-presentation." *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*, edited by Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, U of Wisconsin P, 2014, pp. 70-96.

Tober, Diane. *Romancing the Sperm. Shifting Biopolitics and the Making of Modern Families*. Rutgers UP, 2019.

Tropp, Laura. "Who's Your Daddy: Sperm Donation and the Cultural Construction of Fatherhood." *Deconstructing Dads—Changing Images of Fathers in Popular Culture*, edited by Laura Tropp et al., Lexington Books, 2016, pp. 31-49.

Wischmann, Tewes, and Petra Thorn. "(Male) Infertility: What does it mean to men? New evidence from quantitative and qualitative studies." *Reproductive BioMedicine Online*, vol. 27, 2013, pp. 236-43.

Zegers-Hochschild, Fernando, et al. (for ICMART and WHO). "International Committee for Monitoring Assisted Reproductive Technology (ICMART) and the World Health Organization (WHO) revised glossary of ART terminology, 2009." *Fertility and Sterility*, vol. 92, no. 5, 2009, pp. 1520-24.



Zehelein, Eva-Sabine. "Family Trees: Mnemonics, Identity, and Cultural Memory." *Trees in Literatures and the Arts: Humanarboreal Perspectives in the Anthropocene*, edited by Daniela Fargione and Carmen Concilio, Lexington Books, 2020, pp. tba.

Eva-Sabine Zehelein is Adjunct Professor of American Studies at Goethe University Frankfurt and Visiting Scholar at the Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center. She specializes in 20th/21st century North American literatures and (popular) cultures, leads an international and -disciplinary research group on "Family Matters," and investigates the (bio)politics of ARTs in transnational cultural texts through a reproductive justice lens. Most recently, she co-edited *Family in Crisis? Crossing Borders, Crossing Narratives* (Transcript, 2020, with A. Carosso, A. Rosende Pérez).

zehelein@em.uni-frankfurt.de

Zehelein, Eva-Sabine. "Medicalized Masculinities: Tales of (In)Fertility, Sperm Donation, and Fatherhood", n. 24, *La narrazione come cura: la rappresentazione della malattia nelle nuove pratiche delle Medical Humanities*, pp. 139-152, November 2020.

ISSN 2035-7680. Disponibile all'indirizzo:

<<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/AMonline/article/view/14605>>.

Ricevuto: 15/02/2020 Approvato: 26/05/2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13130/2035-7680/14605>