

Research Project Report “A Sociological Analysis of Current Reproductive Medicine in the Czech Republic”

Iva Šmídová

There are only few projects in the region of the Czech Republic analysing issues of health and illness from a critical social-science perspective. I, as a member of the research team, take the opportunity to introduce one of them that had Czech reproductive medicine as its core analytical field. The aim of this short research project presentation is to initiate international collaboration and critical debate on the issues under study, so – kind readers – do not hesitate to let us know your reactions and to discuss the theme with us. Our research is supported by The Czech Science Foundation and lasts for four years (2011 – 2014; GAP404/11/0621) – so there still remains time for engaging with us.

The core areas of study are childbirth, assisted reproduction, and embryo manipulation. The core analytical tools are biopower, biopolitics and governmentality. The research team deals with current reproductive medicine in the Czech Republic and focuses on biomedicine, as a particular manifestation of the normalization of modern society through the Western approach to human health and illness (Cahill 2001). The research is based on the concept of biopower as an analytical idea of a method of governance and administration of modern populations (Foucault 1978). We understand contemporary biopower/biopolitics and their demonstrations as fundamental for the understanding and interpretation of contemporary Czech reproductive medicine. In particular, it is relevant for a comprehension of how the process of medicalization accentuates categories of power, gender and the constitution of bodies. Along the same lines, our inspiration is also derived from texts by Brigitte Jordan and, in particular, her concept of authoritative knowledge, which enables analyses of hegemonies in the field – professional, gender, etc.

The aim of our endeavour is to conduct a critical sociological analysis of reproductive medicine, as one of the key poles in the current form of biopower (Rabinow, Rose 2003, 2006). Through qualitative sociological studies, the project explores the negotiation of power, boundaries between health and illness and the medical defining of normality. The reasons for focusing research on this area is the

relation between reproductive medicine in the Czech Republic and technology, the commodification of health and illness, and the normative character of reproductive medicine with its consequences in the wider social field.

When rereading the project annotation text above in our second project year (already!), I feel caught in the midst of our team's reconceptualising work, as well as in the starting to dive into the fieldwork itself. As already mentioned, the research focuses on three specific fields of reproductive medicine: childbirth, assisted reproduction, and embryo manipulation. Each subtheme is guaranteed and taken care of by one researcher. There are three of us, sociologists: Eva Šlesingerová, Lenka Slepíčková and myself, Iva Šmídová (formally the principal investigator, but in practice a researcher with the same share of input and insight as her colleagues).

Eva Šlesingerová, currently the head of the Social Anthropology Program at the Department of Sociology, at our home institution, the Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University (FSS MU), Brno (Czech Republic), concentrates on the question of how the status of bio-medicine – the manipulation with genes and DNA, and embryos, in her case – becomes the norm, and how such a normality is sustained through biomedicine. Analytical work on this issue has led her towards further elaborations on the ethical and moral aspects of practices in reproductive medicine. Her main argument focuses on an analysis of the specific discourses surrounding reproductive medicine, such as religion, legislation and popular culture as well. Through the use of critical theory, Šlesingerová examines the narratives concerning different strategies in the production of knowledge in the interpretation of various imaginative frames concerning DNA, genome and the embryo. The emergence of a new idea of immortality and new definitions of subjectivity, such as the main theme of the boundaries of humanness, are critically analysed within a broader area of contemporary forms of biopower: involving questions of "race", reproductive medicine or genomics. The direction of her further (ethnographic) research follows the theme of embryo DNA manipulation by posing questions such as: How is the icon of the human embryo represented? What kind of struggle between various discourses representing/talking about/acting on the embryo and DNA can be found in the Czech context? How is the moral/scientific/religious status of the human embryo/DNA negotiated?

Lenka Slepíčková, a researcher in the Office for Population Studies, also based at the FSS MU, has concentrated on researching involuntary childlessness resulting from physical infertility and its medicalization through the use of reproductive technologies. Following her successfully defended doctoral research on this topic, she contributes to answering our research question on the negotiation of the borders between normality/legitimacy in definitions of health and illness. In the area of infertility treatment, medical doctors openly admit that their practices do not always correspond with official limits, that their judgment of specific cases is indi-

vidual, and that they provide treatment even at the cost of violating official regulations. The whole process of differentiating between fertile and infertile, deserving and undeserving, normal and other is marked by moral discourse and it is a genuine example of Foucaultian biopower as a control over bodies, interaction and norms within the population performed by medical professionals and through the administration of medical treatment. The aim of the research is to analyse clinicians' perceptions of their patients and the decision-making process during infertility treatment and to indicate groups of patients defined by clinicians as "others", as less appropriate candidates for infertility treatment. This research focus is complemented by an analysis of discussions concerning the proposal to legalize infertility treatment for single women, as took place in the Czech Parliament in 2008. The research goal is to frame medical discourse within political discourse and to study the norms and moral values concerning reproduction and motherhood, as represented by politicians and other stakeholders. So, Lenka Slepíčková's questions explore the mechanisms of intervention of moral discourse into the process of infertility treatment.

Iva Šmídová, assistant professor at the Gender Studies program at the Department of Sociology FSS MU, has directed her research activity towards answering the project research question on the establishment of trust in the system of modern reproductive medicine, i.e. biomedicine, by researching the professional relations of medical personnel (doctors) towards established practices of childbirth (bio-medical, as well as potential alternative approaches) in the Czech context. The goal is to understand the relation between hegemonies of expert/authoritative knowledge and gender. Within the subtopic of "childbirth – representations, practices and hegemonies," Šmídová concentrates on internal debates within the profession (doctors advocating alternatives and gate-keeping the normative approach; hospital midwives often supporting the hegemonic approach vs. independent midwives advocating the alternative) rather than rivalries and clashes between representatives of distinct professions. She is also interested in "exits" – mechanisms and processes leading to adopting ideologies of childbirth alternative to the mainstream, often resulting in change of organizational affiliations of the medical staff concerned. The core research focus is directed towards re/production of hegemonies in the medical profession (dominance concerning both expert knowledge and the gender universe).

The next phases of our work will synthesise the particular research findings. Besides publications, we also plan to open a forum for critical debates on a planned international conference in the Fall of 2013. In the meanwhile, please do not hesitate to contact us at our alias e-mail: leviv@fss.muni.cz or find basic info at the project webpage: www.reprobiomed.fss.muni.cz.

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Iva Šmídová

krizala@fss.muni.cz

Faculty of Social studies, Masaryk University, Brno

www.fss.muni.cz