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Kuberska, K. & Turner, S.

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The presence of absence: Tensions and frictions of pregnancy losses – An introduction

Introduction: The personal is still political

Pregnancy loss can be a particularly difficult life event, immediately defying the scripts people may have for their own autobiographies (particularly as these relate to their reproductive lives) and overturning their expectations of grief and bereavement. Although pregnancy loss is a topic not usually openly discussed in public, it has attracted a considerable degree of academic attention in the last five decades, which has overlapped with a change in the standards of bereavement care following pregnancy loss in healthcare in some high-income countries (e.g. Davidson 2007; Duchemin-Pelletier 2017). At the same time, the fact that there are few widely accepted culturally-sanctioned ways for dealing with pregnancy loss, such as memorialisation rituals (in particular in the western world), coupled with the often unexpected nature of miscarriage, termination for foetal anomaly, or stillbirth, means that bereaved people - and those around them - are forced to forge their bereavement paths as they go along, questioning many previously held assumptions about pregnancy, parenthood, and grief (see e.g. Brier 2008; Kersting & Wagner 2012; Walker & Walker 2015)

The high incidence of pregnancy losses, increasing public awareness of these events, as well as relentless legislative attempts at regulating reproduction present a unique opportunity to apply an analytical lens and feminist perspective to this phenomenon. The personal has been political for the last fifty years and yet it deserves to be remembered, reconfirmed, redemonstrated. When it comes to reproductive lives and rights, it is particularly relevant to explore contexts in which pregnancy does not develop according to plan as they reveal the margins of regulatory imaginations as well as political and economic agendas behind them (see e.g. van der Sijpt & Notemans 2010; Layne 2003). These cases of deaths before births also show us the limits of the expectations we have for our personal lives.

Academic research has applied the lens of reproductive loss in a wide range of studies, only some of which we are able to mention here. Some well-known projects have investigated understandings of pregnancy and fertility (Layne 2003a; Earle, Komaromy & Layne [eds] 2012). Layne addresses multiple dimensions of life that intersect with pregnancy losses in late 20th century US: religion, economy, biomedicine, and family-making. In their edited volume, Earle, Komaromy and Layne invited contributors to use multidisciplinary perspectives in exploring the differences and commonalities between different types of pregnancy loss as well as between diverging ways of processing such losses. Anthropological takes on the topics of miscarriage, termination, and stillbirth have shown the impact of culture on the way people react to pregnancy loss (see e.g. Cecil [ed.] 1996; Gammeltoft et al. 2008; Pinto 2011; Gammeltoft 2014; Kilshaw 2017), reminding us that reactions to such losses remain highly culturally specific. A number of authors have

focused on grief work involved in the aftermath of the event (Malacrida 1998; Silverman & Baglia [eds] 2015) or have offered insight into perspectives and issues of care (Moulder 1998, 2001). More recently, moving beyond the tension of fighting for women's reproductive rights and acknowledging the potential cultural and social significance of the embryo/foetus (Layne 1999, 2003a, 2003b; Ludlow 2008), research has included feminist perspectives more explicitly: feminist geographies (McNiven 2014, 2016; Maddrell 2015), race (Paisley-Cleveland 2013; Shaw 2014), legislative frameworks (Sanger 2015; Löwy 2018), or the effects of pregnancy loss on social identity (Cahill, Norlock & Stoyles 2015). In addition to predominantly qualitative academic work on pregnancy loss, there is a large body of medical research work aimed at improving standards of care following pregnancy loss. The research suggests that parent-centred bereavement care following a loss can help people cope with this experience in the long term, and that staff training is crucial in raising healthcare providers' confidence in their ability to offer effective bereavement support (see e.g. Kingdon et al. 2015a, 2015b; Ellis et al. 2016; Shorter et al. 2019 for reviews).

Beyond “Death before Birth”

Our motivations for preparing this special issue emerged from our work on a socio-legal-linguistic research project entitled “Death Before Birth: Understanding, informing and supporting choices made by people who have experienced miscarriage, termination and stillbirth”¹ and carried out by a multidisciplinary team of researchers at the University of Birmingham and the University of Bristol between September 2016 and August 2018. The research had two concrete analytical angles: the socio-legal angle was concerned with practices surrounding the disposal of pregnancy remains in England, and the guidance on these practices (e.g. McGuinness & Kuberska 2017); the linguistic angle explored the language people use to speak about their experiences of miscarriage, termination for foetal anomaly, or stillbirth with a specific focus on the use of metaphor and figurative language as a means of gaining insight into concepts and experiences which are difficult to express (see Littlemore & Turner 2019, under review). While remaining true to the goals of the project, we realised that we were simply not able to do justice to the analytical richness of the phenomenon of pregnancy loss in the time frame we had. What is more, one of the most recurring themes was that of *ambivalence*, manifesting in a range of tensions and frictions between what happened and what people expected to happen when it came to having a baby, and between personal experiences and social, political or legal norms. Seeing the potential for exploring this ambivalence as a powerful dimension of pregnancy loss, we saw it fit to propose it as a theme for a special issue of Women's Studies International Forum.

Tensions and frictions as analytical lenses

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While developments in biomedical scientific research have advanced our understanding of the physiological aspects of pregnancy losses, these continue to lie at the centre of a web of complex relationships. Tensions inhere in a pregnancy loss at several levels. Physiologically, the foetus or baby is no longer alive but must often be laboured, and breastmilk will still be produced even though there is no baby to feed. Psychologically, the experience of pregnancy loss may have a significant effect on the perceived identities of those concerned, calling into question their status as “parents” and even as “women” in the case of those who carried the foetus. On a practical level, too, the necessity of making decisions regarding post-mortem and disposal of pregnancy remains do not always comfortably complement the grieving process. Frictions can be exposed in a number of areas: a desire to keep a baby close can be incompatible with practical exigencies; a wish for time to stand still clashes with bureaucratic and medical demands that require action; previously welcome comments and questions about the pregnancy become unwanted when the pregnancy is lost.

The current special issue focuses on what we have chosen to articulate as “tensions and frictions” in the context of pregnancy loss. Tensions and frictions appear in moments of ambivalence, such as those between the anticipated scenarios of successful reproduction, and the demoralising pain of unanticipated bereavement. They emerge between the support the bereaved might reasonably desire and expect, and the standards of treatment and care actually received; they stubbornly recur between medical diagnoses and personal narratives, between idealised visions of (“good”) motherhood and mothers whose babies never took a breath. These ambivalences, when used analytically, help us to challenge the oppressive character of what happens in the mainstream, broadening the landscape of human experience to include what is rare, and painful, and still precious. They also mirror the complexities of existence, favouring the blurry nuance over the straightforwardly simple. John Law and Annemarie Mol suggested that “in a complex world there are no simple binaries. Things add up *and* they don’t. They flow in linear time *and* they don’t. And they exist within a single space *and* escape from it. That which is complex cannot be pinned down. To pin it down is to lose it” (2002: 20-21, original emphasis). As the articles in this special issue will show, such a view can be applied to experiences of pregnancy loss. While hinging on the personal par excellence, the tensions and frictions of pregnancy losses relentlessly invoke the political.

From autoethnographies to socio-political histories

In this special issue, we present a number of articles exploring these tensions using a range of theoretical approaches. While each author takes her own unique approach to different facets of the topic, a common theme runs through each paper; each foregrounds the complexity of pregnancy losses, so easily rendered invisible despite the fact that they often linger with those who experience them for a lifetime. Each paper offers a different perspective on the ways in which the complex dynamics of pregnancy loss are played out in different cultural and political contexts. The differences and similarities between practices, strategies, and policies related to pregnancy losses allow us to better understand the underpinning assumptions and

mechanisms of dealing with these often-marginalised aspects of people's reproductive lives, and to grasp the impact of these losses on the lives they affect.

The first three papers take an autoethnographical approach to pregnancy loss. In *Use of the Internet and Griefwork in Perinatal Loss: Motivations, methodologies and meaning making*, Gayle Leatherby and Deborah Davidson provide autobiographical accounts of the ways in which their own experiences of loss affect their work on the role of the Internet in griefwork in the context of perinatal loss. They demonstrate how perinatal loss situates the bereaved in a complex network of conflicting identities and societal stigma and silence, and the role of online communities in supporting the bereaved through these complexities. Through their work, we see that tensions between the personal and the political in the context of pregnancy loss may be reflected in the experiences of researchers investigating the topic; that personal experience of loss can, and should be, brought to bear on academic work and its emotional cost deserves recognition.

Sam Murphy and Maria Verdaguer discuss their experiences of stillbirth and cervical ectopic pregnancy respectively in their papers. Sam Murphy explores the social construction of bereaved motherhood in the context of stillbirth in a UK context, demonstrating how social discourses around pregnancy and motherhood impact upon the experience of loss. Maria Verdaguer, writing from a Catalan context, provides a deeply moving account of her experiences of cervical ectopic pregnancy. These experiences serve to highlight the tensions brought by loss between a range of conflicting identities of the pregnancy/foetus/child, the woman/mother, and the ways in which these conflicts impact on the emotional effects of losing a pregnancy. In both of these papers the reproductive losses are used to question and challenge the social constructs of a child, of motherhood, and even family in powerful ways.

From these autoethnographical accounts, we move to three articles which provide in-depth explorations of the ways in which external political, socio-legal, and historical factors impact upon the experience of pregnancy loss. Iva Šmídová presents an in-depth analysis of the historical and socio-cultural status of death and dying in the Czech Republic. She demonstrates how these broad attitudes towards the end of life have influenced healthcare and social practices in the context of reproductive loss, and how these norms are beginning to change due to a number of initiatives aimed at challenging the status quo. Caroline Lafarge focuses her analysis on termination for foetal abnormality in the UK and French contexts, exploring the ambivalence at the heart of women's experiences and how this ambivalence is shaped by biomedical advances, social attitudes towards disability, and discourses surrounding abortion. We maintain this focus on termination in Leah Eades' paper, in which she explores the diverse constructions of the foetus at 24 weeks' gestation by pro-choice and pro-life activists. She examines the interplay between biological and social discourses, demonstrating how individuals on both sides of the debate draw on these discourses to achieve their aims.

In conclusion, we present this special issue in the hopes of capturing the tensions and frictions inherent in the ambivalent nature of every pregnancy loss. Private as experiences of pregnancy loss may be, these events and the care received throughout the process are very

much framed by interconnected, large-scale socio-cultural processes and structures, such as law, economy, understandings of gender, discourse practices, ethics, and local and national politics, among others. It is at the margins of regulatory imaginations that individual needs clashes with the general provisions offered, uncovering an uncomfortable conflict between necessary practicalities and the experiences of grief. A pregnancy loss thus brings together the private and the public, the individual and the general in a situation characterised by what Anna Tsing called “the sticky materiality of practical encounters” (2004: 1). Paying close attention to individual events such as these allows us to uncover possible incongruities between competing priorities of participants or stakeholders. The analysis of pregnancy loss can thus be used as a starting point to examine larger-scale phenomena in contemporary societies, along with tensions and frictions found at the intersections of different aspects of these trends and concepts.

The stories interwoven in each paper might be heartbreaking, but they also help us think beyond what is obvious about pregnancy loss, challenging our understandings of how things work, showing us the limits of our everyday imagination, and reminding us that social constructs deserve our constant attention.

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