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The journey of gestational surrogacy: religion, spirituality and assisted reproductive technologies

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This article discusses the intersection of women's experiences with the assisted reproductive technological practice of gestational surrogacy and spirituality and religion. During the interviews of eight gestational surrogates themes of spirituality-, religion- and faith-based language emerged as these women shared their narratives of assisted reproductive technologies in this Canadian study. Professionals supporting women before, during and after the experience of gestational surrogacy need to be mindful of the significance of spirituality and religion in third party reproduction practices for many women. In discussing these topics with gestational surrogates counsellors, child and youth care practitioners, faith leaders, social workers, and educators need to remain open and attentive to a multiplicity of diverse theological negotiations.

Keywords: gestational surrogacy; surrogate motherhood; assisted reproductive technology; religion; spirituality

That inside the Great Mystery, when any child is born, 'we are born too, changed by the startling, wavering announcement of life.'

Mary Ann Thompson – Former Protestant Minister

Third party reproduction is a family building alternative where assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) are used to help women become parent(s) which may include surrogacy, donated embryos, oocytes, sperm and gestational surrogacy (Hanafin 2006). Surrogacy happens when a woman's egg is fertilised privately or through a clinic with the intent of relinquishing the baby to alternate parents upon birth and is often called traditional surrogacy. Gestational surrogacy occurs when a woman carries an embryo not related to her resulting in the birth of a child for others often called intended or commissioning parent(s). Feminist scholarship suggests that the complexities of ARTs (*in vitro* fertilisation) are linked to medical discourse, patriarchy and hegemonic family formation; yet, little is known about the relationship between discourses of religion, spirituality and gestational surrogacy (Ginsburg and Rapp 1991; Jennings 2010; Twine 2011). Storied experiences of gestational surrogacy with emergent themes related to religion and spirituality are the focus of this study from the women's perspectives. This article will cover historical, global

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and contemporary contexts of gestational surrogacy practices and explore the topics of religion and spirituality from four women's narratives that are part of a larger study. A discussion of how the practice of altruistic surrogacy, which is legislated in Canada, may relate and even foster religious themes and metaphors that women take up in describing their surrogate experiences is analysed. The possibilities from this cursory study are also explored.

For the purpose of this article, the term gestational surrogate is used although various terms describe this role such as, birth other (Ehrenshaft 2007); gestational carrier and host mother (Goldfarb et al. 2000); and surrogate mother. Given the multiple historical and contemporary definitions of the terms religion and spirituality, their distinctiveness, and my limited understanding of these concepts, I use the following basic definitions. Spirituality is defined as emotions related to faith, religions and spiritual coping, and refers more to evolving private internal expressions (Hill and Pargament 2003), which is different from formal public religion. Religion is depicted as structured, rigid and behaviour based with more limiting connotations according to Hill et al. (2000). That said, religion and spirituality overlap conceptually and are multidimensional constructs, which are relevant to personality development and identity formation across the lifespan (Hill et al. 2000).

I was deeply afraid to discuss spirituality and religion because of a fear of offending (Hoskins and Stoltz 2005) the participants and readers of this article due to my lack of knowledge on the topic. However, after some prompting from the Director Dr Daniel Scott of my programme in the School of Child and Youth Care, and more encouragement from amazing delegates at the 12th International Conference on Children's Spirituality I attended, I am taking a leap to write about the often controversial intersection of gestational surrogacy, religion and spirituality.

Historical context

The history of surrogacy starts with the beginning of civilisation, and first narratives date back to biblical times in 1500 B.C. (Brinsden 2003; Sills and Healy 2008). 'Surrogacy is not a new concept, but rather it is believed to be the oldest alternative to a male and female partner conceiving a child by sexual intercourse' (Brown, Willmott, and White 2008, 1). The genesis story from the Old Testament references the insemination of Hagar, Abraham and Sarah's chambermaid, resulting in the birth of Ishmael (Ciccarelli and Beckman 2005; McElroy 2002). McElroy (2002) further suggests Hebrew and African-American power and race relations are embedded in this biblical surrogacy story, although racial tensions are not within the scope of this article on religion, spirituality and reproductive technologies. Religious dissent about gestational surrogacy often stems from standard concern for the effects on marriage, the sacredness of life, and 'the fear that a child will replace God, in a couple's hearts' (Dutton 1997). Twine (2011) confirms that multiple religious laws in many parts of the world revoke the implication of adulterous relations which challenge the sanctity of marriage in the practice of gestational surrogacy.

Global context

How do gestational surrogacy, spirituality and religion intersect? In Iran, religion is the main obstacle confronting assisted reproduction technologies as religious

opinions prohibit certain types of technologies and medical procedures (Aremesh 2009). Islamic religious law views third party reproduction as adultery, by merely introducing a third person to the sanctity of the marriage relationship between a husband and wife (Inhorn 2003). From an Egyptian perspective, which includes Coptic Christian and Muslim religious viewpoints, Christianity in the West is without a 'moral compass' regarding practices of gestational surrogacy (Twine 2011); therefore, it is not practised in Egypt at all. However, in Israel, Jewish law is interpreted alternatively and reproductive technologies are reconciled in this pronatalist nation, which is the only country in the world that offers government subsidy for gestational surrogacy (Twine 2011). Israeli gestational surrogates, in Teman's (2010) research, conclude that they are doing divine work in the act of creation and their spirituality assists in making surrogacy births occur. 'Surrogates flirted with the idea of being godly but later retracted and positioned themselves one rank below G-d, as angel or divine messenger' (271).

In the USA, Thompson (2005) illustrates an US Orthodox Christian (similar to Roman Catholic) couples religious challenges with gestational surrogacy and their creative ways of performing surrogacy with the permission of their priest. For example, one religious obstacle noted by the priest was the idea of fertilisation occurring outside the body. Therefore, a lab technician suggested placing the sperm and egg in a test tube inside the woman's vagina for fertilisation to take place within the body (Thompson 2005). This Euro-Western religious illustration parallels the tensions of religion and gestational surrogacy worldwide, even though surrogacy practices are legal in most US states. As a result of personal illustrations such as this, Thompson (2005) states that reproductive technologies coordinate the ontologies of the self, nature and society, including spirituality and religion, in fertility clinics that practise making children and parents. Ontological choreography is the term she uses to describe this deeply personal, extremely technical and powerfully political practice of assisted reproduction.

Modernity and surrogacy

Contemporary surrogacy has changed due to medical advancements and legislation worldwide (Davis-Floyd and Dumit 1998; Thompson 2005) and documented practices of Euro-Western surrogacy arose in the late 1970s, as a result of these changes (Hanafin 2006). Feminists worldwide have questioned the value of ARTs, and suggest that 'the dazzling nature of the technology should not blind us to the persistent interests of those entrenched in patriarchal institutions such as the Catholic Church and state legal systems, which shape regulation of and access to new reproductive technologies' (Ginsburg and Rapp 1991, 315). Gestational surrogacy is on the rise due to the lack of 'genetic tie' between the birth mother and infant thus representing a sever in this relationship (Davis-Floyd and Dumit 1998; Twine 2011), which is more favourable than traditional surrogacy arrangements. In addition, rates of gestational surrogacy are increasing because of infertility possibly related to delayed family planning, stringent adoption criteria, gay parenting and a desire to maintain family heritage. The World Health Organization approximates that infertility impacts roughly 8–10% of couples during reproduction (Widge 2005).

In Canada, 7% of couples that try to become pregnant experience infertility (Baird 1995). Daniluk (2011) adds, 'by 2003, the percentage of Canadian women

who were 30 years or older at the time they had their first child had jumped to 48%' from 14% in 1983 (40). Only altruistic surrogacy is legal in Canada and requires a woman, who has already birthed a child of her own, to become pregnant through the assisted reproductive practice of *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF), carry the baby to term, birth the infant and relinquish the child to the waiting intended parents. Intended parents also called commissioning parents claim legal parentage of the baby (Richey 2006) as they engage in a contractual agreement with a gestational surrogate to deliver their child through third party reproduction.

International surrogacy is a newer phenomenon in third party reproduction 'which takes place across country borders, typically with prospective parents from wealthier countries and surrogate mothers from poorer countries' (Humbyrd 2009, 112). Global surrogacy practices are mainly commercial, largely unregulated and ethically challenging, and skew Canadian statistical data regarding the frequency of gestational surrogacy. Although international surrogacy is discussed by one of the surrogate participants within the research, this article will remain focused on spirituality, religion and gestational surrogacy.

Method

Eight women living across Canada participated in collaborative in-depth interviews that were one and a half to two hours in length for this study and snowball sampling aided recruitment. According to Weiss (1994), 'if the people you want to interview are likely to know others like themselves, you can ask them for referrals' (25), which is snowball sampling. Relationship building was significant to the recruitment and interview process. 'In qualitative research, in the field of Child and Youth Care, and in other helping professions, there seems to be increasing acknowledgement that the researcher/practitioner plays an active role in the relationship' (Newbury and Hoskins 2008, 231). Interviews were taped and transcribed, and the emergent themes that were discussed by the participants became the focal points in their written narratives, as 'narrative inquiry highlights ethical matters as well as shapes new theoretical understandings of people's experience' (Clandinin and Huber 2010, 436). Given the secrecy and taboo that surround certain aspects of gestational surrogacy, there are limited ways that surrogate stories can be told in our culture. As such, participants' words were used as much as possible in writing up the narratives. Along these same lines, participants were invited to provide a photo of their gestational surrogacy experience that was meaningful for them and six women willingly sent in a picture to accompany their stories.

Themes of religion and spirituality weaved in and out of the gestational surrogates' narratives. Four women's storied excerpts are included in this article as their dialogue openly addressed their experiences with religion and spirituality during surrogacy. Participants answered the question of how spirituality and religion are experienced during gestational surrogacy. An interesting point to note is that nowhere in my research questions did I ask about spirituality and religion. Yet, themes of spirituality and religion emerged in conversation and were often central to women's decisions to become gestational surrogates, accepting medical discourse, negotiating events during their surrogate pregnancy, and within their rational for understanding their surrogacy experiences retrospectively. Identity construction is further connected to religion, spirituality and gestational surrogacy for some participants.

Narrative themes

Cecile

Religious convictions

Religion is a theme that weaves in and out of Cecile's narrative. Religious beliefs surfaced in her understanding of small town culture, other people's values and her values, and in relation to gestational surrogacy and medical discourse. Cecile recalls,

You have to understand the town that I was living [in] had 7000 people now, but the major infrastructure is going to church. The people are so Christian, except for the few of them that were Catholic. Oh my god! The Catholics and infertility treatment, but they were all able to go past their faith. So I even confronted my Catholic friend I said, 'I know the Pope is really strongly opposed to that and you are suppose to go with what he said.' They still have their own personal thoughts, beliefs and values on their religious convictions. I think the Christians would have had a problem if I had had to sleep with the man, maybe if it was my egg it would have been a bit more tricky. But the way it was done they all asked questions and they were satisfied that there was nothing immoral.

Cecile described her understanding that certain behaviours are restricted by religious practices such as procreation, adultery and hedonistic sexuality (Hill et al. 2000; Thompson 2005). Next, Cecile describes a dialogic interlude with a religious male community member in the following excerpt:

One of them did tell me 'oh yeah I am not sure. I think its a bit too much like playing God,' and I am not going to go into that debate with him. I strongly disagree because all medicine is playing God. Heart transplant, anything that's playing God too. Maybe God meant for that person to die, but the Doctor heals it, that's playing God. That's the only slightly negative thing I heard.

Cecile equates the technological and medical advancements of IVF in gestational surrogacy with organ transplant procedures using the metaphor of 'playing God'. Sustaining life through organ transplants (Sharp 1995) or creating a life through gestational surrogacy challenges morals and values while shifting identities, as biomedical practices are equated with religious divinity in the above narrative excerpt.

Meredith

A surrogacy journey

Meredith described the use of social media such as facebook as a beneficial support network for her gestational surrogacy 'journey'. The word journey has become common language used to describe the gestational surrogacy experience, although spiritual underpinnings of this metaphor are not discussed. Meredith added 'surrogates from across Canada write every day on facebook to support each other's journey'. The journey metaphor is often applied as a way to represent and clarify (Bruce, Shields, and Molzhan 2010) the experience of gestational surrogacy.

According to Meredith, others in the community referred to her as an 'angel' and they were surprised by her generosity to birth a baby for someone else. Koenig (2009) states that beliefs about spirits, demons and angels may originate in religion. The photo Meredith chose to characterise her gestational surrogacy experience

evokes an angelic sentiment. Meredith's photo is a metaphor for her gestational surrogacy process as she sees the experience. Bruce, Shields, and Molzhan (2010) state metaphors and metaphoric language use as common structures to provide insight into spirituality and 'helps make sense of complex, emotional, and abstract experience' (44). The angel metaphor is often used to describe a woman who engages in the gestational surrogacy process and is noted in writing about gestational surrogacy (Kirkman and Kirkman 1988; Teman 2010) and by other surrogates in this study, including Cecil above. In Teman's study, some surrogates used the self-description of being an angel as well, as did the intended mothers. Here is one example of a digital sign-off a former gestational surrogate used: 'Once and angel, always an angel' (Teman 2010, 269).

Sabrina

At a cross point of my life

Sabrina openly shared her experience of going through a divorce and feeling bad about herself due to what she refers to as an 'emotionally challenging life event'. As a result of her divorce, she explained how she changed her religion from Pentecostal to Catholic since in her experience the Pentecostal religion did not support divorce. It is important to note that within differing religions, there are congregational, community and interpretive religious differences and practices. Davis-Floyd and Dumit (1998) suggest, 'religious beliefs and practices, and the concrete social resources churches provide, are thus central to many pregnant women's orientation' (156), which is evident in Sabrina's gestational surrogate pregnancy narrative below.

Amongst all of the upheaval in her life, Sabrina said that she decided to become a gestational surrogate. Religious resources enter into the decision-making process of gestational surrogacy (Davis-Floyd and Dumit 1998) as with infertility (Jennings 2010). In the following excerpt, Sabrina explained her gestational surrogacy choice and the impact religion played in this decision:

I'm really proud at having been a surrogate to be honest. It means to me that there's a lot of good that we do in our lives and there's a lot of things that we do that we're not always proud of and I have to be really honest, at the time in my life when I decided to be a surrogate, I was at a cross point of my life. I had been really heavily involved in the born again Evangelical Baptist Pentecostal church for many years; was married into it, taught Sunday school and getting divorced and going out into the world, leaving that kind of faith behind me because it didn't fit anymore they wouldn't accept me as a divorced person. I felt a little bit like not worthy not good. When you've been in that it really becomes a part of who you are and so my sense of who I was under a lot of renovations at that time shall we say and being a surrogate to me was a way to do something that was really awesome in the big picture of life. For myself, it was a way to show my redeeming-ness that I still was a good person.

According to Sabrina, she sees her experience with altruistic surrogacy as a way to privately and publically show her value and worth in this world given that she felt her religion did not recognise her worthiness due to her divorce. Sabrina narrated further about her spiritual identity being challenged by religion and how her gestational surrogate pregnancy was a spiritual journey for her:

Surrogacy had a deeper meaning to me in that way because I got a lot out of it spiritually, cause my spiritual self was at a bit of a crisis. I got a lot out of it in that respect.

Sabrina spoke of her gestational surrogacy experience through a reciprocity lens. In other words, she believes she is giving herself physically, emotionally and mentally in gestating a child for another family. From her perspective, the experience of growing the child fulfilled her spiritually in return.

A way to show my redeeming-ness

In contrast to the dominant story of gestational surrogacy as 'unacceptable' and 'damaging', Sabrina shared how gestational surrogacy actually supported the shifting process of finding the self she was seeking. This coincides with Teman's (2010) finding that 'the surrogate's journey does not make her someone else; instead, it takes her inward on a path of self-discovery and deepened self-knowledge' (263). Through gestational surrogacy, Sabrina experienced self-discovery and constructed her spiritual identity, which she described as an emergent process:

For myself, it was a way to show my redeeming-ness that I still was a good person. I could do something good in the world. I didn't have to be coloring in those lines that people told me I had to. I could go out of those lines and I could do something that was really different, really wonderful, even if it was out of people's comfort zones, which it most certainly was.

From Sabrina's perspective, her identity shifted through her experience of being a gestational surrogate and for her this felt like a spiritual endeavour. Sabrina further shared how the nine months of pregnancy through gestating a surrogate baby provided her with time and space for identity construction:

But it was a very good experience for me as I said, spiritually. I needed that time to pause in life and to reconnect with myself, and that little baby was the perfect excuse to do it. I got a lot out of it for sure though. I'm really thankful for that time that I had.

Allison

Cathartic intention

When questioned about the meaning of gestational surrogacy, Allison thoughtfully replied,

Um (pause), I don't know how to answer that (laughing). That's a first. I think for me it was trying to recapture some experience that I missed out on with my daughter. As much as I physically had a good pregnancy, the marriage I was in at the time was very tumultuous, I didn't get to enjoy my pregnancy. I didn't get to slow down. I didn't get to do any of the things that I wanted to do. I didn't have any maternity photos taken. I didn't get to go to prenatal yoga any of those things and so I wanted the opportunity to do that. I also wanted to know what a pregnancy was like in a supportive relationship. So for me it was very much experiential and very much it had a cathartic intention.

From her perspective, Allison received much from her gestational pregnancy in the form of catharsis and embodied knowledge, which suggests that she drew on spirituality discourse to frame her decision to become a gestational surrogate (Jennings 2010). With much humor, Allison also shared that her biggest risk in the gestational

surrogacy experience was engaging in this private cathartic experience with strangers. Here, she exemplified,

That was probably the biggest risk that I took was going ahead with things with essentially a couple I didn't know before I got into this. There were absolutely no guarantees that that is how it would evolve. That was really my hope but I accepted that maybe it would turn out differently. And who knows, it ain't over until the fat lady sings!

Based on her experience, Allison is referring to her vulnerability in the relationship with the intended parents due to their lack of relationship at the beginning and the shift in their relationship once the baby is born. The catharsis that Allison experienced relates to the intimacy in her relationship with the intended parents via gestational surrogacy. Bosaki and Ota (2000) state that spiritual growth and self-awareness are found in relationship with oneself, others and the world. Notions of spirituality are imbued in Allison's dialogue and her emotional leap in her gestational surrogacy experience.

Discussion

In Canada, the discourse of altruism shapes the narratives within gestational surrogacy, as commercial surrogacy is illegal. According to the Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technology that is headed by Patricia Baird a Catholic activist (Teman 2010), altruistic surrogacy is legally sanctioned in Canada. As a result, altruistic surrogacy seems to cultivate spiritually based language and religious metaphors in gestational surrogacy narratives since altruism is a Judeo-Christian based ethic (Sharp 1995). Baird (1995) suggests in keeping with Canadian values surrogates are not financially rewarded for the pregnancy. Although, all expenses related to the surrogate arrangements including insurance, medical expenses, maternity clothing and other related costs are usually reimbursed by the intended parents. The Canadian values inherent in supporting altruistic surrogacy can be understood through the

... tension between the political benefits the technologies can bring – which are to enable people to have children, a goal important to most men and women – and the potential harms to health and wellbeing they can also bring – to individuals, to groups and social institutions. (Baird 1995, 492)

What is often missing from this discussion on Canadian values is the inherent social privilege of white middle-class intended couples that are able to afford ARTs such as gestational surrogacy. Jennings (2010) adds that class stereotypes work against commercial surrogacy practices, as some fear that lower income women will 'do it for the money' and not take care of their bodies during a surrogate pregnancy (Twine 2011).

Religious and spiritually based language and metaphors emerged in the Canadian narratives as the participants attempted to discuss the meaning of their gestational surrogacy experiences. Descriptions of meaning may also indicate spiritual purpose in the women's gestational surrogacy stories. Davis-Floyd and Dumit (1998) suggest religion provides orienting beacons and metaphors for women experiencing gestational surrogacy. For example, many of the surrogates used spiritually based language in describing their gestational surrogacy experience as a 'journey',

which is noted in Meredith's and Sabrina's narratives above. Hill et al. (2000) suggest that contemporary spirituality emphasises personal spirituality and the search process, which is often characterised as a journey. According to Bosaki and Ota (2000), our search for meaningfulness and purpose in the world, and how we make sense of the universe and ourselves is spirituality. A relational concept of spirituality evokes feelings of connectedness and genuineness with one's self, others and the universe/nature (Bosaki and Ota 2000). Cajete (1994) adds that North American Indigenous learning about the spirit and life is similar as it is manifested through a journey of experience to become complete. This notion of a relational learning journey is apparent in Cecile's narrative during her conversation with a trusted community member, in Allison's dialogue as she described her relationship with the intended parents, and through Sabrina's description of relationship with herself as her identity shifts. All gestational surrogates in this research focus on the meaning of relationships with the intended parents, surrogate baby and family members as significant in their overall experience with gestational surrogacy.

Many of the women in this study described notions of spirituality and religion when faced with crisis, transition and shifting identities that occurred during the gestational surrogacy process. It is interesting to note that none of the participants seemed to push completely away from religion or spirituality throughout the gestational surrogacy experience, but made a shift in their beliefs instead. This shift in religious and spiritual beliefs is described in Jennings' (2010) study on US women struggling with infertility as well. Dr Daniel Scott suggests that this is a similar phenomenon for most people when faced with adversity and crisis, whether elected or not, to turn to ideologies with religious and spiritual underpinnings no matter how confused and unstructured their spiritual and religious backgrounds are (personal communication, April 12, 2012). Koenig (2009) and Bruce, Shields, and Molzhan (2010) concur that spirituality often emerges in situations of crisis. In the same light, Hill et al. (2000) and Koenig (2009) note that religion and spirituality are important resources in coping with differing life events.

On the flip side, Sabrina's illustration of her church's reaction about her decision to become a gestational surrogate was one of the negativities, which is similar to Jennings' (2010) findings that some church congregations may invoke social pressure not to use ARTs. Sabrina openly discussed the tension in which religion had both a positive and negative effect on her coping behaviours within her gestational surrogacy experience, as noted in her dialogue above (Hill et al. 2000; Koenig 2009). That said, the actions of a particular church community and the larger religious group and its doctrine and belief claims do not always align. Gartner (1996, in Hill et al. 2000) adds that a religious 'moral net' may benefit the individual or 'snare one who is progressing in a healthy autonomous way along the path outside the boundaries of what is normally accepted' (203). Sabrina's identity shift and decision to become a gestational surrogate seemed to stretch the boundaries of her religious community leaving her to look for alternative spiritual support.

Participants negotiated public and private religious beliefs and spiritual identity shifts through relationships based on the narrative excerpts above. Some surrogates drew on religious discourse to navigate their way through the gestational surrogacy experience, while others took up a more private, relational spirituality. In sum, the four surrogates in this article describe the spiritual impact of their surrogacy experience with assisted reproduction technologies, self-discovery, religion, intended parent relationships and community.

Possibilities

The narratives presented in this research indicate that a nuanced understanding of how religion and spirituality shape women's experiences of and responses to gestational surrogacy is needed. Even these unexpected findings about the intersection of religion, spirituality and gestational surrogacy have a complex impact on future negotiations, practices and possibilities in the ART, and professional helping fields. The necessity of open conversation about religion and spirituality as part of the gestational surrogacy experience pre and post birth comes to light as a result of this research. Tricky negotiations and intricate choreography (Thompson 2005) of religious beliefs, spirituality, legislation and assisted reproductive medical practices are vital for women and families engaging in gestational surrogacy. Therefore, professionals in the helping field, counsellors, and child and youth care practitioners need to be mindful of the spiritual and religious customs and behaviours that client's may practise (Hanafin 2006; Koenig 2009), and be open to dialogue about them. Hanafin (2006) adds

there has been an increasing awareness among medical and mental health caregivers that spiritual well-being is an important dimension to physical and emotional health, and that there is a generally positive relationship between religious involvement and health outcomes, including mental health. (62)

Spiritual leaders, religion and religious community members may also provide support and sanctuary to gestational surrogates and their families during moments of ambiguity, and uncertainty that often occur in surrogacy (Hanafin 2006).

I argue that any counselling support must acknowledge and discuss religion and spirituality within the context of gestational surrogacy agreements. Not only would discussions about religion and spirituality be beneficial before and during a surrogate pregnancy, post-surrogacy conversations about spiritual beliefs and practices may help prevent possible depression due to issues of grief and loss that may surface for some women. Future studies need to attend to the intersection of religion, spirituality and gestational surrogacy more in depth, and with a wider variety and number of women. More research on how religion and spirituality intersect with ethics and decisions women make related to surrogacy is required. Ongoing research needs to examine how gender regimes, religion and spirituality intersect with the possibilities assisted reproduction technologies offer in family creation.

Notes on contributor

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