**Time and reproduction**

Given that reproduction involves the literal making of futures, it is unsurprising that a wide body of social science and humanities scholarship has approached reproduction as a site where time and temporality matter. It is impossible to do justice to the diversity of this literature and the range of topics it addresses within one paper, and we do not attempt this here. Indeed, our interest in writing together emerged from our awareness that while we consider ourselves sociologists of time and reproduction, our empirical and conceptual reference points are quite different. This difference reflects time and temporalities scholarship more broadly and its “incredible breadth” (Grabham and Beynon-Jones 2019:3), which has arisen via multiple disciplinary routes. Given this context, we ask: what does it mean to be an empirical sociologist of reproduction who is concerned with time? How does this focus play out in practice, what resources are helpful for thinking with, and what directions might research take in the future?

In what follows, we offer some inevitably partial (Haraway 1988) answers to these questions by looking across our own focal points for engagement with reproduction and time: life course (James) and gestation (Sian). Although we explore these separately, we do not mean to imply that these are siloed research concerns. Instead, in illustrating what it means to be sociologically concerned with time-reproduction-life course and time-gestation, we aim to demonstrate a shared set of commitments to engagement with both reproduction and time. Feminist scholarship has long insisted that it is imperative to refuse reproduction’s categorization within the sphere of the natural or biological, showing how such characterizations are themselves produced through normative gendered practices (for example, Martin 1989). Relatedly, queer scholarship has sought to show how the assumed “normality” of reproduction as a “fact of life” is bound up with heteronormativity. Beginning from these positions, we suggest that sociologically understanding the interrelations of time and reproduction also means questioning the supposed naturalness and neutrality of *time*. Interdisciplinary scholarship on time and temporalities provides ample resources to achieve this aim. Our respective discussions highlight how these have been deployed in thinking about the socio-temporal organization of non-/reproductive lives. We conclude by reflecting on useful resonances between our areas of scholarship and suggest that future interventions in this field could be built around an explicit focus on ‘time and reproduction studies.’

TIME, REPRODUCTION, AND LIFE COURSES

Our relations to reproduction shape how we imagine the future, how lives are periodized, how aging is experienced, and even how death is conceptualized. In this sense, reproduction and its connected power relations play a significant role in the temporal orientation of lives. In their Portugal-based research, Roseneil et al. (2016: 3) refer to a hegemonic “procreative norm”:

[an] assumption, expectation and cultural demand that biological procreation should occupy the center-ground of the social formation, that intimate relationships, sexuality and the wider organization of the social should be driven by, and structured around, a naturalized notion of a primary, fundamental procreative imperative

Such procreative norms vary from one context to another, and these variations reflect different social, political, and economic imperatives, world views, spiritualities, and power dynamics (Degnen, 2018). At the same time, the idea that reproduction is central to living a “normal” life, what Franke (2001) calls “repronormativity,” is a pervasive feature of many, perhaps most, societies and cultures (Andaya and El Kotni 2022). Repronormativity provides a framework of meaning that structures (in part) understandings and experiences of gender, sexuality, subjectivity, and life. Under repronormative culture, reproduction acts as a lynchpin around which experiences of being gendered and sexual subjects are oriented (Alcoff 2012). In this sense, repronormativity produces orientations in time through, for example, the tracking and categorization of bodies vis-à-vis their changing reproductive capacities (van de Weil 2014), anticipations of parenthood and grandparenthood (Ahmed 2006), and the assumed temporal infinity of family as a part of us that “lives on” after death (Cumming 2022). From how children play adulthood by imagining themselves as “mummies” and “daddies” (Änggård 2011) to the importance of grandparenthood as a socially recognizable role for the elderly in otherwise gerontophobic societies (Amado et al. 2020), reproduction tends to have a central and hegemonic function in temporal orderings of life.

These interrelations of reproduction, time, and life course have been the focus of much queer and feminist theory. Freeman (2010) coined the term “chrononormativity” to emphasize the function of time as an axis of patriarchal, heteronormative, and capitalist power. Chrononormativity describes how “normal” life trajectories are established and maintained. From Ahmed’s (2006) queer phenomenological perspective, the “normal” passage of life through time can be envisaged as a “straight line” aligned with dominant discourses and social institutions. In this way, Ahmed expands the notion of sexual orientation beyond its common-sense reference to gendered sexual desires to include differently-oriented timelines of life. A straight life-line progresses through established and supported patterns of periodisation. Queerness, by contrast, entails deviation from such paths of least resistance; queerness is the disorientating struggle (and joy!) of living in opposition to the dominant “sexual arrangement of the time of life” (Luciano 2007:9).

Queer theorizations of time and reproduction have been influenced by Edleman’s polemical book *No Future: Queer Theory and The Death Drive* (2004). Based upon a reading of American popular culture and political discourses, Edleman argues that visions of the future are bound to the image of “the child” and, therefore, to reproduction and heteronormativity; he terms this arrangement “reproductive futurism.” Queerness, which for Edleman is synonymous with non-reproductivity, is therefore not only a threat to dominant gendered and sexual mores but also a more fundamental contravention of life as an orientation towards the future. As such, queerness occupies “the place of the social order’s death drive” (ibid.:3). In James’ own research with gay men in China (specifically, Hainan province), he has extended Edleman’s US-focused and primarily psychoanalytical perspective to show that reproductive futurisms have specific political, cultural and material dimensions (Cummings 2022). Politically, reproductive futurism in China is upheld by state censorship, which limits available resources for imagining non-heterosexual life courses; culturally, the importance of continuing the family line can place immense pressure on children to reproduce, not only as a matter of satisfying their parents’ expectations but also of situating themselves within the transcendent time of lineage; and, materially, the expectation that children care for their elderly parents binds reproduction to supported aging. This tripartite reproductive futurism curtailed the imagination of non-heterosexual futures and shows how time and reproduction can be bound together in ways that sustain heteronormativity and limit practicable life courses. While Edelman (2004) argues that queer liberation must involve a rejection of the future, or else it risks submission to heteronormativity, James has instead suggested that queer politics in China might focus on establishing practical, alternative futures to marriage and reproduction.

Others have explored how alternative ways of being in time are negotiated by refusing reproduction and how time can be queered. For Halberstam (2003: 314), queer subcultures “produce alternative temporalities [...] by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of the conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.”. Queer cultures of time can include valorizations of forgetting, repetition, regression, delay, anti-climax, narrative open-endedness, and extended adolescence (Halberstam 2011; Luo et al. 2024). In opposition to Edleman’s queer anti-futurity, Muñoz (2009) has argued that there is an affinity between queerness and the future as a time yet to come and full of possibilities. As such, the future can be a powerful repository of queer hope, especially when the present seems saturated with hetero- and cis-normativity (Bayramoğlu 2021). Orientations towards the future need not valorize the hegemonic normality of heterosexual reproduction. In the place of family, engagement with the ongoing development and archiving of communities, cultures and movements can afford temporal goals and modes of extension beyond an individual life (Murphy et al. 2022), while intergenerational relations among chosen kin can be sources of guidance, care, belonging and transcendence (Kauner 2016). Such practices and relationships are ways of living time that do not center on reproduction.

Clearly, there is no necessary relationship between futurity and reproduction. Likewise, reproduction should not be viewed as an essentially heteronormative practice. In biological terms, human reproduction currently requires the coming together of sperm, ova, and a body capable of gestation. There is nothing here that connects reproduction to heterosexuality, much less to notions of the “normal” heterosexual couple (Alcoff 2012). Instead, reproduction is rendered heteronormative by biopolitical forces that stymie the imagination and practice of diverse reproductive, kinship, and care arrangements. Such powers are manifest, for example, in state policies that restrict same-sex couples’ and single people’s access to adoption and assisted reproductive technologies (ART; Chan 2024; Nordqvist, 2009), in legal requirements that trans people undergo sterilization before being granted official gender recognition (Lowik 2018) and in conservative discourses that vilify queer and trans people as threats to the “innocence” of children (Butler 2024) and therefore as antithetical to reproduction. These tendencies are part of wider eugenic logics (Lowik 2018) that can also abnormalize reproduction for single, non-monogamous, working-class, disabled, and racialized people. These logics shore-up a fictive ideal of the white (or racially dominant – see Byler 2022), middle-class, able-bodied, monogamous, heterosexual couple and its privileged position in reproductive, future-oriented narratives of nation, civilization, and humanity (Calhoun 2003).

In many contexts, recent decades have seen a decentring of heteronormative reproduction as a dominant life course narrative and a weakening of the eugenic logics that have governed nationalist visions of the future (Butler 2024). The legal recognition of same-sex partnerships and the extension of adoption rights and access to ART in various jurisdictions have expanded possibilities for non-heterosexual reproduction (Coleman-Fountain 2014). These are likely to expand further with the development of ART, which enables genetic material from both parties of a same-sex couple to be passed on to a child and even removes the necessity of both sperm and ova in biological reproduction (Villalba 2024). Increased research, activist, and artistic attention to trans narratives of reproduction have emphasized the reproductive rights of trans men and women (cárdenas 2016; Love 2022). These developments have been critiqued as an assimilation of queer and trans people into conventional, repronormative, and biological essentialist narratives (Garwood 2016). However, conservative resistance to these realities also demonstrates the extent to which they unsettle traditional definitions of reproduction and family. Surrogacy is also increasingly viewed as a non-heterosexual reproductive option, but one that is ethically fraught (Cao and Zhang 2023). Alongside these increasing options for non-heterosexual reproduction, movements around marriage refusal and the value of childless lives have grown (Lee and Jeong 2021). These dynamics point to possible worlds in which reproduction is neither a heteronormative nor compulsory component of diversified life courses. At the same time, such optimism must be tempered with recognition that possibilities for both choosing and refusing reproduction remain curtailed by economic inequalities, for example, between those who can and cannot afford to access ART (Njagi et al. 2023) or to make alternative arrangements to filial care in later life (Cummings 2022; also see Hall 2023 on reproductive decision-making in contexts of austerity).

Queer and feminist analyses of time, reproduction, and life course illustrate that time should be recognized as an axis of biopolitical power, shaping whose reproduction comes to be viewed as “normal” and whose is subject to intervention and marginalization. They also illustrate the possibilities of temporal/reproductive resistance. Below, we continue our exploration of these processes in the context of feminist engagement with “gestational labour” (Chadwick 2022).

TIME(S) AND GESTATIONAL BODIES

By centering the work of preventing, trying to become and/or being pregnant, ending pregnancy, giving birth, and mothering/parenting, feminist scholarship seeks to illuminate the *labour* of gestation and to denaturalize it, illustrating how - like all bodies - gestating bodies are simultaneously social and material (Chadwick, 2022). Black feminist scholarship has long drawn attention to the unequal ways in which gestational labour is valued in support of racist, sexist, and classist imaginaries of the future (Roberts 1997; Collins 1999). Concern with addressing such inequalities underpins scholarship and activism focused on reproductive justice - a term coined by Black feminists to highlight the social conditions that shape the possibilities of reproductive freedoms (see SisterSong, no date). Detailed empirical research (for example, Ginsburg and Rapp 1995) has explored bodies as sites where reproductive inequalities may be perpetuated and/or resisted. Below, we illustrate how time is a particularly central analytic thread within scholarship concerning the disciplining/resistance of pregnant and potentially pregnant bodies.

In this context, the critical interrogation of time has partly been driven by empirical necessity. Clock and calendar time saturate biomedical and popular vocabularies of pregnancy and birth (Simonds 2002; Chadwick 2018). The fusion of clock time with biomedical knowledge of the body creates a powerful epistemic alignment through which it becomes possible to speak of the clock/calendar and their associated measuring devices *as* the body (Bledsoe 2002). For example, pregnancies/pregnant women are described as weeks/days of gestation, and birthing women/cervixes are referenced as centimeters of dilation across hours; both descriptions rest upon socio-material practices that convert bodies into quantifiable temporal units (Thomas 1992; Sänger 2015; Beynon-Jones and Jackson 2024). Moreover, as Adam notes, clock time (minutes, hours, days, months) - while often objectified as “time *per se”* (1995:52)- is itself a cultural and social practice, oriented towards de-contextualization and exact repetition, a time that can potentially be bought and sold. In other words, while both are positioned as universal ways of knowing, clock time and biomedical knowledge are always situated (Haraway 1988) in the contexts of their production.

A growing body of feminist scholarship traces the tensions and ruptures that emerge when normative constructions of body time are lived out in practice. Perhaps the best-known example, and the subject of feminist critique for many decades (Martin 1989), is that biomedicine expects labour and birth to occur within particular time parameters, a model Chadwick (2018) describes as “clockwork birth”. Birthing people whose bodies fall outside these expectations become subject to intervention (e.g. hormone drips, forceps, or Caesarean sections). Consequently, they can experience conflicts between the rhythms of their labouring bodies and the objectifying time-keeping of medical practice (Fox 1989). However, as Chadwick (2018) highlights, the monitoring of birthing bodies is socially uneven and cannot simply be understood in binary terms as clock = bad and body rhythms = good (see also Adam 1995 for critiques of binary approaches to birth and time). In Chadwick’s study of birth in South Africa, white middle-class women birthing at home under the care of private midwives were provided with information they could use to make sense of their embodied experiences in “clockwork” terms. In contrast, Black women using public hospitals described waiting or being sent home, uncared for, and left to try to produce their own temporal understandings of their birthing experiences.

There are multiple ways in which the conflation of clocks and biomedicine have implications for the possibilities of being a person who is, or might become pregnant. As Earle and Letherby (2007) illustrate, clock time resonates with biomedicine’s emphasis on control over bodily processes. This constructs the work of conception and its correct timing as subject to individual choice, with implications for those who can and those who cannot conceive. Moreover, whether a birth is deemed premature or late, and what birthing people are allowed to do as a consequence often rests upon biomedical measurements of time rather than birthing people’s knowledge of the timing of conception (Roberts 2019; Sӓnger 2015). In many contexts, this configuration of biomedical time is further rigidified in abortion laws and practices that specify limits on when women and pregnant people can end a process taking place within their bodies (Beynon-Jones 2012).

Such measurements often bear no resemblance to bodily experiences of pregnancy time. In an exploration of experiences with abortion and time in England, Sian found that stories of becoming pregnant often centered on complex temporal relations involving multiple bodies and things, including technologies of pregnancy *prevention* (Beynon-Jones 2017). Women who participated in the study described having to adapt to the bodily rhythms of using technologies to prevent pregnancy, pointing out that this process was interwoven with the shifting dynamics and timings of sexual relationships with men. “Becoming” pregnant thus required “learned bodily practices of infertility to be transformed into an experience of fertility” (Beynon-Jones 2017:841): this process was often shocking and temporally “dislocating”. In sharing their stories of this temporal dislocation, participants problematized the conflation of clocks/calendars with gestation and the notion that there is a clear or obvious *beginning* to pregnancy. Participants were talking in a context where abortion can generally be accessed (albeit sometimes with difficulty - Purcell et. al 2014) until 24 weeks. Nonetheless, some who became pregnant at later clock/calendar gestations discussed the frightening experience of having a body whose time was “running out”. Their accounts powerfully underscore the punitive and impossible requirements of laws in other contexts that require women to identify and end a pregnancy within 5-6 weeks of biomedical time.

In addition to measuring what the potentially pregnant/pregnant body should be allowed to do, biomedical time is central to constructing what this body *is*. Feminist scholarship has shown how reproductive technologies (e.g. early pregnancy tests, ultrasound imaging) have converged with anti-choice rhetoric to locate the fetus as the central protagonist of pregnancy (Petchesky 1987; Duden 1993). Such moves are temporal as well as spatial (Petchesky, 1987; Beynon-Jones 2012; DiCaglio 2017). As Franklin (1991) illustrates, the biomedical narrative of the fetus as protagonist rests upon a linear, “teleological construction” in which outcomes unfold automatically and are pre-determined by the trajectory of biology following conception. As a result, it becomes possible to speak of the fetus *now* in utero as interchangeable with the future individual they *might* become. This erases the bodily and parenting labour that is part of the gestating, birthing, and raising of individual-and-still-relational people (Franklin 1991).

As scholars of miscarriage (Layne 2003) have highlighted, the bio-medicalized narrative of the future-born baby as the linear and inevitable outcome of conception also deletes the material uncertainties of pregnancy*.* It articulates all experiences of pregnancy in relation to a single narrative of the future (baby as the end goal; a birthing person as the producer of this goal) and imposes the discursive position of “other/failure” on women whose pregnancies materialize in different ways (Dicaglio 2017; Browne 2022). However, as van der Sijpt (2012) illustrates by listening to narratives of pregnancy loss in Cameroon, biomedical accounts of pregnancy time are not the only ones available, and it is possible for women to mobilize this understanding alongside a social and embodied awareness that outcomes of pregnancy can be contingent on social and material relations. Drawing on notions of “suspended time” developed by feminist/queer theorists, Browne (2022) suggests that miscarriage offers an important opportunity to de-center the future child focus of bio-medicalized pregnancy. She argues that this enables dwelling on pregnancy in the present, making it possible to move beyond unhelpful binary framings of pregnancy vs. miscarriage: “if pregnant time is not represented in exclusively future-oriented terms as *being-toward-birth*, or a means to an end, then miscarriage need not be understood as pregnancy’s *undoing*” (Browne 2022:449 – emphasis in original).

Feminist scholarship has also illuminated the temporalities of *pregnant* subjectivityupon which the organization of biomedical time around fetal futures depends. Focusing on the future fetal “outcomes” of pregnancy enlists pregnant (Lupton 2012) - or potentially pregnant (Waggoner 2013)- people as responsible for the work of anticipating the future, through their own bodies, on behalf of others (see also Lowe 2016). As Baird (2006) - mobilizing Cornell - argues, it is precisely the capacity to imagine and enact a future embodied *self* that is at stake when laws attempt to restrict abortion and “prescribe the terms of pregnant women’s imaginaries” (Baird 2006:146). O’Shaughnessy (2024) illustrates how potentially pregnant people previously living under abortion bans in Ireland nonetheless resisted State attempts to limit their imaginaries by making concrete plans about what they would do to end their pregnancies if needed (e.g. traveling). However, what she terms “abortion work,” although subversive, is - as she notes - simultaneously a gendered form of “anticipatory labour” (O’Shaughnessy 2024:75). Moreover, as Kimport (2022) demonstrates, the very possibility of *imagining* abortion or motherhood as the outcome of pregnancy is itself a structurally produced position, dependent on material resources, legal context, embodied experience and available cultural narratives of abortion/motherhood.

While feminist scholarship has thoroughly explored the role of reproductive technologies in the temporal disciplining and resistance of gestational bodies, a growing body of literature raises questions about how new digital technologies may be interwoven with these processes. Such technologies enable new ways of living with body rhythms (Algera 2023) while also monitoring them. Concerns raised about such monitoring highlight potential legal implications for those living under abortion restrictions (Krumbholz et al. 2024). Nonetheless, as highlighted in the example of Chadwick’s (2018) research on birth in South Africa, attending to moments where gestational bodies become disconnected from temporal monitoring turns out to be just as important as recognizing the frenzied temporal activities that proliferate in the presence of particular pregnancies. Moreover, an awareness of the significance of time-gestation relations requires critical interrogation of how scholarship and activism are a *part of* these relations. This interrogation is illustrated very clearly by Nash, who shows how leftwing mobilizations of the stark mortality statistics of Black mothers and their babies in the United States contribute to a framing of perpetual “crisis,” which “renders Black maternal bodies out of time and out of place, as noncitizens, as historical actors that do not fit into the present moment” (Nash 2021:12).

**Timing reproduction: Future interventions**

One of the major strengths of existing interest in time and reproduction is the sheer diversity of its histories and emphases. This has produced a range of critical conceptual tools and perspectives that help render both time and reproduction unfamiliar by insisting on interrogating these taken-for-granted and often essentialized practices. Thus, with some hesitation, we suggest that one useful starting point for future research in this field might be to *name* it as, for example, ‘time and reproduction studies.’

Aware of disciplining and exclusionary practices of classification, we propose that such naming represents an opportunity for (excusing the reproductive metaphor) cross-pollination and flourishing. For example, feminist engagement with the temporal regulation of gestating bodies might gain from greater exploration of the entanglement of these processes with repronormativity and chrononormativity. Relatedly, queer/feminist theorization of time and life course could benefit from detailed engagement with the bodily labour that has been a focus of feminist explorations of temporality and gestation.

Of course, as noted in the introduction, neither of these two areas, as we have characterized them here, were discrete to begin with. Those already working within and across these areas will recognize their overlap. Our aim is simply to highlight opportunities for greater connectivity. Rather than a new field of research, the ‘time and reproduction studies’ we envision would foreground shared concerns across differing methodological, theoretical, and empirical orientations and would draw across these to enrich understandings of both time and reproduction as, at once, material and discursive, abstract and embodied, regulatory and resistant. One issue that emerges as particularly salient across both contexts is how normative constructions of the fetus/child *as* the future impact the possibilities of living and being with time - a dynamic identified in early work by Berlant (1994). We have highlighted the importance of thinking critically about and expanding/disrupting this enactment of the future. For example, we have drawn attention to scholarship that explores the temporalities of non-reproduction.

Gestation- and life course-focused literatures concerned with time also converge in their attention to how projects of racism and colonialism are advanced through reproductive injustices that deny the futures of certain populations (Rudrappa 2024). At the time of writing, this is painfully clear in Israel’s genocidal, US-funded war on Gaza, which has resulted in a 300% increase in miscarriage rates, while children have accounted for 44% of Palestinian deaths and those aged 5-9 years are the largest group amongst those killed in the bombing of residential buildings (ibid.; UNHR 2024). The abhorrent contrast, here, with figurations of the foetus and the child as symbols of the future shows the need for a time and reproduction studies that attends both to the biopolitical valuing of some populations’ reproduction over others’ and the necropolitical (Mbembe 2003) subjection of specific populations to non-reproductivity and premature death.

Whatever its focus, working with reproduction *and* time ultimately involves working towards a better understanding of the interrelations of both practices. Reflecting across our respective areas of research, it is clear that understanding time and reproduction as normatively entangled and co-produced is pivotal in resisting reproductive inequalities and injustices. A particularly important aspect of this process, we suggest, is the ability to engage with empirical findings concerning lived, embodied experiences of temporality and reproduction. Such scholarship enables analysis of reproduction and time as powerful, material, yet contingent practices, which could be done differently.

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