

**‘The contented faces of a unique Australian family’: Privilege and
vulnerability in news media reporting of offshore surrogacy
arrangements**

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Introduction

In a paper recently published in *Citizenship Studies* (Riggs and Due 2013), we argued that media accounts of Australian citizens entering into offshore commercial surrogacy arrangements frequently evoke notions of the agentic reproductive citizen in order to represent medical or social infertility as a form of vulnerability that can be overcome through fertility travel. In that paper (and elsewhere, e.g., Riggs and Due 2010) we have also argued that media accounts of offshore commercial surrogacy undertaken by Australian citizens rely upon the depiction of women who act as surrogates as equally agentic in their decisions in regards to entering into surrogacy arrangements.

Central to our argument in these previous papers has been the claim that if discussions about privilege remain at the periphery of media representations of offshore commercial surrogacy, then issues of vulnerability in relation to all parties will all too easily be discounted through a neoliberal narrative of agency. In addition, and following Millbank (2012), we would suggest that media commentary on issues such as surrogacy often shapes policy decisions, and thus it is important to examine how the news media in particular represents surrogacy. As such, in this commentary we extend our previous exploration of media coverage of offshore commercial surrogacy by examining a recent example of Australian news media reporting on the topic. Our aims in doing so are to examine how this example repeats the concerns raised above (thus suggesting something of a script evident in media reporting on the topic of offshore surrogacy), and to suggest some necessary changes to media reporting on offshore surrogacy that may help to engender a more holistic account of the topic.

Australian Gay Men and Offshore Commercial Surrogacy in Thailand

In February 2014 a story (Crouch 2014) documenting the recent birth of two children to a South Australian gay couple who had entered into offshore surrogacy in Thailand was reported in the South Australian newspaper the *Sunday Mail*. The *Sunday Mail* is owned by the mass media company *News Corp*, and can broadly be considered a conservative media outlet within the Australian media landscape. According to its website, the newspaper has an overall circulation of 588, 000 (including online and print), with a circulation of 240, 000 in print alone. (To put this in context, the state of South Australia has an overall population of 1.65 million.) Whilst there has been one commentary published as a response to the original story (Tankard Reist 2014), our focus in this piece is on the original report (given that it documents the surrogacy arrangements as discussed directly by the two men). According to the *Adelaide Now* website (which serves as the online outlet for both South Australian newspapers – *The Advertiser* and the *Sunday Mail*), the article itself has been shared on social media almost 3000 times, though no data is available on the number of page views for the article.

Echoing our previous findings (Riggs and Due 2013), and also broadly those of Millbank (2012), the news report (Crouch 2014) depicts social infertility as a problem to be overcome through agentic reproductive citizenship. In our previous work on the topic we argued that being located outside the norm of reproductive heterosexual positions a growing number of Australians not only as medically or socially infertile, but also renders them vulnerable to that norm. In other words, we argued that not only

is reproduction seen as a hallmark of contemporary neoliberal citizenship (Turner 2001), but also that reproductive heterosex remains valorised as the privileged form of reproduction. Thus whilst an increasing array of possibilities are available for people who are medically or socially infertile to reproduce, these modes of reproduction are still accorded less cultural capital than is reproductive heterosex.

In the news report (Crouch 2014) examined here, the two men are depicted as having been on an

emotional journey costing around \$80, 000... Commercial surrogacy... is illegal in Australia, and adoption by gay couples is not permitted in South Australia... The path to parenthood has taken years and many serious decisions. The men had considered surrogacy in the past but a recent law change in India... banning gay men from commercial surrogacy, and a desire to have children by their 30s, spurred them to action early last year.

This narrative clearly conforms to that which we have previously identified, namely that the men are depicted as having 1) a desire for children, 2) a vulnerability arising from social infertility, and 3) a vulnerability arising from being located outside the norm of reproductive heterosex (specifically in regards to legislation relating to onshore commercial surrogacy and adoption). Subsequent to this depiction of the men as vulnerable, and as per media articles analysed in our previous research (Riggs and Due 2013), the news report then turns to a depiction of the men as agentic reproductive citizens:

[The men undertook] research including checking Facebook surrogacy groups [which] pointed to Thailand as their best option. An agent there arranged for an anonymous egg donor, offering a choice of ethnicities. The men chose Caucasian... Both [men] say they have not experienced discrimination as gay men and expect changing social circumstances will see acceptance of an unconventional family brimming with love. [Matt said] ‘I think we live in a day and age where we don’t face the setbacks people had to put up with not so long ago’.

In these excerpts the men are depicted as overcoming vulnerability through taking up a role as agentic reproductive citizens who are capable of sourcing information and making neoliberal choices, including about the ethnicity of the egg donor. Indeed, their agency is depicted as unimpeded by discrimination or setbacks, leaving them free to fulfill their reproductive desires.

Also similar to what found in our previous research, the report (Crouch 2014) depicts the women who acted as surrogates for the men as agentic citizens choosing to undertake surrogacy arrangements to financially improve their lives. This depiction, we argued in previous analyses (e.g., Riggs and Due 2013), serves a very particular purpose, namely to counter claims that women who act as surrogates in countries such as India are taken advantage of (see Riggs and Due 2010 for an overview of feminist concerns regarding the ethics of surrogacy arrangements and the commercialisation of women’s bodies). A similar depiction appeared in the news report analysed here:

After the eggs were harvested and fertilised... they were implanted in two Thai women who were paid to carry them for the next nine months under a written contract... The Embassy officials last week held a detailed interview with the two surrogates to ensure they were still voluntarily willing to carry out the contract and let the two fathers take over as sole parents.

Whilst this report does not feature the same sorts of personal narratives by or about women who act as surrogates as appeared in media reports we have previously analysed, it nonetheless retains the focus on agency (for example the women are depicted as entering into contracts that they were ‘voluntarily willing’ to carry out, and that they were paid to do so). Thai women are thus depicted as agentic citizens making informed decisions about the ‘work’ they undertake.

Discussion

Before entering into a discussion of our substantive point about privilege, we would first note a concern we have previously raised (Riggs and Due 2013), namely that the depiction of the men contained in the news report as being first vulnerable and then overcoming this vulnerability through their enactment of neoliberal agency (and their claims to having not experienced discrimination) is potentially both a very limited account, and one that discounts what potentially lies ahead. For all parents, raising children often results in multiple forms of vulnerability, some of which may be specific to gay men (i.e., possible discrimination in the future), and some of which is generalised (i.e., children experiencing illness, or the loss of a child). We of course do

not wish any of this upon the two men, but our concern remains as to how a narrative that depicts vulnerability as something to be overcome via agency significantly underplays the ongoing role of vulnerability in regards to parenting in general, and the specific vulnerabilities experienced by parents facing structural disadvantages. This raises our first suggestion in terms of media reporting on the topic of surrogacy, namely that there is a third point to be added to the existing plot narrative of vulnerability overcome by agency--that of ongoing challenges. In making this suggestion our point is that media reporting should at the very least acknowledge the ongoing challenges that all parents face (and how this is differentiated by social location), in addition to the specific challenges potentially facing people who become parents through offshore surrogacy.

In terms of privilege, whilst the news report analysed in this commentary (Crouch 2014) certainly documents instances where the two men enact privilege as white notionally middle-class gay men, it is never framed as such. Thus, for example, we see discussion of the costs of surrogacy, or the choices the men make about not remaining in contact with either the egg donor or the women who acted as surrogates, but we do not see any recognition that these constitute significant privileges held by the men. Whilst we are not per se advocating for the type of (heteronormative) critique of privilege that appeared in a subsequent news report about the two men (Tankard Reist 2014), our second suggestion in terms of media reporting of surrogacy would be to encourage accounts that combine positive and supportive news stories about the experiences of people who become parents through surrogacy with commentary on the ethical complexities of offshore commercial surrogacy,

particularly in relation to women who act as surrogates, and the privileges evoked by white Australians who undertake fertility travel more generally.

As we noted in our previous paper on the topic (Riggs and Due 2013), early Australian news media reporting on the topic of offshore surrogacy arrangements (i.e., in 2009) primarily focused upon the ethics of such arrangements. Since 2011 the focus of news media reporting has been primarily on the redemptive narrative of agency overcoming vulnerability. Whilst this may be unsurprising given 1) the drive to reproduction as a hallmark of western citizenship, and 2) agency as a normative discourse for positive news reporting about the lives of white Australians in general, we would suggest that it is possible to combine a redemptive narrative with both critical commentary on surrogacy practices and an acknowledgement of the ongoing challenges that new parents often face.

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Bio Notes

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