

# HOMO GENESIS

Techno enthusiasts are marketing extreme reproductive technologies to gay families in a way that could set us on the road to a new chapter in eugenic experimentation.



BY MARCY DARNOVSKY

Assisted reproduction: It's a boon to gay families, right? After all, thousands of lesbians have had kids using alternative insemination, the least complicated of modern technology's baby-making practices. With the more invasive in vitro fertilization, one woman can provide an egg, and her partner can carry the child. And growing numbers of gay men are turning to surrogacy.

And even in our highly charged political climate, the topic of assisted reproduction for LGBT families is less controversial than that of gay marriage. To be sure, some fertility clinics and individual specialists still refuse to offer their services to nonhetero couples and individuals, and conservative legislators in several states have introduced laws to restrict access to fertility clinics. But these legislative efforts have so far failed, and the assisted-reproduction industry's trade organization, the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, asserted in 2006 that "programs should treat

all requests for assisted reproduction equally without regard to marital status or sexual orientation."

But as assisted reproduction becomes ever more high-tech, the issues facing gay families become more complex. Ensuring access to assisted reproduction is one kind of challenge we need to confront. Figuring out how to respond to these new technologies—and deciding what to do about those that are dangerous, ethically sketchy, exploitive, or eugenic—is something else altogether. Two procedures that may be on the horizon pose particular

conundrums for LGBT communities.

The first, which has been discussed for more than a decade now, centers on the so-called gay gene and prenatal genetic screening. If scientists ever find a genetic marker for same-sex orientation, will parents proceed to discard embryos or abort fetuses that have it?

This hypothetical was explored in the 1993 Broadway play *Twilight of the Gods*, adapted in 1997 as a TV movie. The crisis that drives *Twilight* emerges when a pregnant Suzanne Gold-Stein allows her husband, a genetics researcher, to give their fetus a series of gene tests. They learn that their child will carry a gene present in 90 percent of gay men, and conclude that their son, like Suzanne's brother David, will almost certainly grow up gay. Suzanne contemplates an abortion, a move that her parents encourage but that obviously horrifies David. Family angst ensues. Though

the movie received a GLAAD media award, both the theatrical and tv versions of *Twilight* were considered pedantic by most critics; one *New York Times* reviewer called the play “calculatingly topical.”

The fact is, no gay gene has yet been identified—not for lack of trying, of course—and the case that same-sex orientation is genetically determined in any straightforward way remains weak. But the number of traits that genetic testing can detect, or purport to detect, is mushrooming. Gene tests that claim to determine your future child’s predisposition for everything from Alzheimer’s to arthritis to athleticism are now being promoted by celebrities at venues like the Davos World Economic Forum and sold online by dozens of companies including the Google-funded venture 23andMe. If scientists do find genes that they believe correlate with same-sex orientation, would anyone be shocked if significant numbers of real-life Suzanne Gold-Steins choose—or are pressured—to terminate such pregnancies (or, in the case of in vitro, “affected” embryos)?

Some see no problem here. In a 2003 article in the journal *Human Reproduction*, bioethicist Edgar Dahl asks, rhetorically, whether parents should be allowed to use the embryo-screening technology known as pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) “to choose the sexual orientation of their children.” His answer is that this should “clearly” be fine, as long as it’s okay to select for homosexuality as well as heterosexuality. An unabashed proponent of selecting the traits of future children, he’s advocated in numerous articles for using new technologies not just to choose their sexual orientation, but to determine their sex and other characteristics too. His argument for letting parents opt for a gay or straight child can be seen as an evenhanded approach—or, alternatively, as a bid to garner gay support for a designer-baby future.

Which brings us to a second speculative reproductive technique aimed at LGBT communities, one that’s surfaced very recently. A few researchers and pundits say they’ve got a way to undermine the argument currently roiling U.S. politics (that marriage should be reserved for couples with the capacity to produce a child “naturally”)—they propose to develop methods for same-sex procreation with bio-engineered gametes.

These technology enthusiasts are portraying a recent experiment with artificial gametes undertaken by scientists at the UK’s University of Newcastle as a breakthrough that will one day enable gay and lesbian couples to have children who are genetically related to both of them. The Newcastle research team’s success was in coaxing female embryonic stem cells to develop into sperm precursor cells; subsequent experiments will attempt to

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repeat the trick with female bone marrow.

Some media reports have described the step toward “female sperm” as a portent of gay freedom. “Good news for lesbians,” gushed the lead of one story. But is it? Most of the coverage thus far has failed to raise the question of whether equality can be engineered in a test tube, or discrimination solved with a technical fix. Nor does it point out that procreation with artificial gametes is a biologically extreme measure that would pose enormous risks to any resulting children. While the standard disclaimer about transferring the work to humans was issued—“assuming this is shown to be safe”—the far more likely “not safe” option remained unexamined.

In a previous study published in 2006, the same researchers had worked with mice and were able to produce offspring using female mouse sperm. But the results of that experiment are hardly comforting: The researchers got seven live births from 210 attempts. Though laboratory mice usually live for around three years, one of those seven mouse pups died soon after birth, and the other six exhibited “abnormal growth rates” and died within five months.

In human beings, using artificial gametes would be an extraordinarily high-risk gamble. Like reproductive cloning—which has also been promoted to prospective LGBT parents by a few marginal characters as a way to have a child without any “third-party” DNA—it is widely recognized among scientists as beyond the safety pale.

Technological tricks like female sperm and reproductive cloning aren’t just minor variations on IVF. Both would require starting with biological materials not produced by evolutionary dynamics to participate in reproduction. And anything-goes-in-the-name-of-happy-parents attitudes like Dahl’s could quickly make for a world in which children are engineered to specification—not a prospect

that should hold allure for communities that have been targeted by eugenics in the past, or that continue to suffer bigotry in the present.

So what's going on here? Why are speculative, risky, and ethically problematic technologies being held out to lesbians and gay men as tantalizing prospects? Are reproductive methods that amount to dangerous experiments on children really a road to freedom for gay families? Could gene tests that purport to reveal the sexual orientation of a future child really serve the interests of LGBT families and communities? Or is the language of equality and empowerment being used to justify technological escapades that would set us on the road to a new chapter in eugenic experimentation?

Of course, any assisted-reproduction techniques and genetic tests that are safe and ethical for heterosexuals should also be available for LGBT families. But the obverse is also true: Reproductive and genetic procedures that are not acceptable for straight people shouldn't be promoted to gays and lesbians. Gay families and communities should not be made into guinea pigs for techno-enthusiasts interested in extreme forms of human and social experimentation.

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