

## Surrogacy: The Apotheosis of Control

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### **How to cite**

Viviani, D. (2020). Surrogacy: The Apotheosis of Control. [Italian Sociological Review, 10 (3), 631-654]

Retrieved from [<http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v10i3.373>]

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v10i3.373]

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### **3. Article accepted for publication**

Date: July 2019

Additional information about

**Italian Sociological Review**

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# *Surrogacy: The Apotheosis of Control*

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## **Abstract**

The qualitative study the results of which will be presented in this paper was carried out over the course of 2019 using the snowball sampling method to involve 60 women aged between 30 and 45.

The aim was to gain insights into and better understand the social imaginary around medically assisted reproductive technologies and in particular around the issue of surrogacy; we wanted to find out what the interviewees knew about this matter and what their ideas were about the figure and role of the mother – intended and/or surrogate – and about the use of the surrogate mother’s body in going through with a pregnancy on behalf of others. The aim of the study is to further investigate the results gathered in a quantitative study carried out in 2017 (Di Nicola, Lonardi, Viviani, 2019, 2018) in order to further the considerations made previously.

The data gathered show that surrogacy is characterized by a strong control mechanism implemented by both the intended parents and the surrogate mother, albeit in different forms. This method of procreation highlights how human factors and unforeseen events on a biological, physical and emotional plane become channelled into a process where control has supremacy and constitutes an attempt to bypass the natural processes brought into play by conception and pregnancy.

Keywords: surrogacy, artificial body, surrogate mother.

## **1. Technology and surrogacy**

Previously (Di Nicola, Lonardi, Viviani, 2019, 2018), it has been seen that, out of the various methods of assisted reproductive technology (henceforth, ‘ART’), surrogacy appears to be the process which, in a variety of ways and for

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a variety of reasons, is most characterized by a sort of control manifested in different ways.

The data gathered in 2017 through a study financed by the Human Sciences Department of the University of Verona<sup>1</sup> and aimed at investigating the social imaginary (Taylor, 2005) revolving around ART methods showed that people perceive and acknowledge the dimension of control within ART methods, in particular concerning surrogacy.

The control factor appears to be expressed in a series of ways.

Firstly, the surrogate mother who decides to go through with a pregnancy on behalf of others displays great control over her own body and emotions. Her body becomes fertile ground, an instrument which she willingly makes available to others who wish for a pregnancy that come to an unnatural conclusion (Habermas, 2016; Viviani, 2018; Porcelli, 2019). While, when nature takes its course, at the end of the pregnancy the mother can finally hold her child in her arms, in this case the child is immediately handed over to those who will provide for his or her wellbeing at that moment and in future, as previously agreed.

To this we can add that there is a preliminary element of control in the fact that preimplantation genetic screening is allowed in surrogacy cases (Habermas, 2016).

At the time of choosing the surrogate mother, the intended parents (Di Nicola, Lonardi, Viviani, 2019) may<sup>2</sup> choose the genetic profile they deem most suitable for their desired child (Habermas, 2016). This invites discussion about some major ethical concerns (Rose, 1996; Choudhury, 2015; Jacobson, 2016; Berend 2016a, 2016b; Golombok 2013, 2016; Jonas, 2019, 2019a; Marzano, 2015; Spar, 2006) since it seems to encourage an excessive level of individualist power which could lead to unbridled selfishness, i.e. a person unable to perceive the individuality of others (Jonas, 2019, 2019a; Bonifati, Longo, 2012)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The research team was composed of Paola Di Nicola (who coordinated the study), Cristina Lonardi and myself.

<sup>2</sup> Where foreseen and allowed by the law.

<sup>3</sup> Bonifati and Longo (2012) place medically assisted reproductive technologies on the plane of the posthuman. According to these authors, if by posthuman we mean a process where biology and technology become intertwined, then ART, as it moves away from traditional practices, does not have *reproduction* – the process underlying pregnancy – as its aim, but rather the *production* of a human being, which opens the door to the possibility of truly creating people from scratch. In my opinion, this assertion seems logical in its analysis in terms of content, supported by the idea that in this process the body becomes superfluous (almost to the point of disappearing), similarly to the way simulacra are produced (Viviani, 2017). This issue will be examined later in this paper.

Lastly, as stated previously (Di Nicola, Lonardi, Viviani, 2018; Viviani, 2018), the social imaginary surrounding this issue acknowledges the surrogate mother's incredible control over her feelings.

While the sample involved in the 2017 study perceived that a woman who decides to undergo any form of ART treatment must experience emotions pertaining to the sphere of unhappiness and fear (Cattarinussi, 2006) due to the uncertainty over whether she will obtain the desired outcome or not, they also perceived that the surrogate mother's emotions must be driven by ambition and narcissism. These emotions lead to intense emotional control, demonstrating how this woman takes charge of her own self and the situation as a whole (Viviani, 2020).

In this paper, I will further the considerations resulting from the 2017 study by adding a qualitative study carried out over the course of 2019. The social imaginary revolving around ART was the subject of 60 interviews carried out with women, with a special focus on surrogacy. The topic of surrogacy was investigated by inviting reflection on two factors: the image of the woman/mother and how their bodies are perceived in terms of freedom and control.

## **2. Study design and methodology used**

The heights reached by technology – and the conviction that the bar will continue to be raised – are the result of man's attempt to control and steer the unforeseen events and uncertain situations which may affect him (Viviani, 2018).

In the case of surrogacy (Corradi, Bandelli, 2019), control-exerting procedures appear to be strongly pursued on a number of fronts, since unnatural elements are brought into play, such as an external subject (the surrogate mother), technologies for assisting conception, or – where allowed, at an even earlier stage – genetic selection mechanisms. By becoming carefully crafted choices, conception, pregnancy and children themselves can lose the unique joy of the natural event and become a means of taking control over the whole reproduction process (Viviani, 2017, 2018). The idea of achieving the best possible outcome seduces and manipulates the intentions of the subjects involved to the point where it seems to constitute a celebration of the control mechanism.

The qualitative study presented in this paper investigated the social imaginary surrounding ART methods, in particular regarding surrogacy. Within this framework, we decided to focus our attention on surrogacy because it brings into play many elements which create a feeling that technology is

'defeating' nature by involving figures which, according to nature and to tradition, have nothing to do with the process of bringing a child into the world: surrogate mothers (Corradi, Bandelli, 2019). The path of technology and the possibilities opened up by this type of method invite reflection on the ethical issues surrounding concepts such as freedom of choice, responsibility (Balzano, 2017; Jonas, 2019a), caution, moderation, dignity (Habermas, 2016) and control, uncertainty and performance (Chicchi, Simone, 2017; Jonas, 2019; Habermas, 2016; Sandel, 2007; Viviani, 2018). These reflections begin precisely when we stop talking about therapy and start talking about technology. Therapy is an intervention aimed at helping a subject with a health problem, whereas technology, despite being an intervention designed to improve the individual's health, is no longer subject to nature and indeed overturns its role (Jonas, 2019). The difference between treating and improving implies a moral distinction regarding which the debate is still very much open and no definitive answer has yet been found (Sandel, 2007). Inasmuch as evidence of man's power, like every form of action he takes, the use of technology in human reproduction is scrutinized from ethical and moral standpoints (Jonas, 2019, 2019a). In the case of surrogacy, the person desiring treatment can now take control of the process, with implications concerning responsibility and morals. As Sandel (2017) holds, if it is morally acceptable for an athlete with a torn muscle to undergo genetic therapy, what would be so wrong if they continued the therapy once the wound had healed so that they could get back on the track in better shape than ever and therefore improve their usual unassisted performances?

Moreover, if a pregnancy may be terminated because the unborn child has a genetic defect, could it also be possible to prevent these kinds of problems from arising in the first place by engineering the conception in such a way as to allow genetic selection, for example by involving a third party?

This study was carried out over the course of 2019 by administering a number of semi-structured interviews to women aged between 30-45 residing in the city and province of Verona, recruited using the snowball sampling method. Data saturation was reached after 60 interviews were carried out. Before the interviews were administered, the participants signed a form confirming their informed consent to the interview and to handling of their personal data. The interviews, carried out anonymously, were recorded and then transcribed<sup>4</sup>.

As already mentioned, the women who were interviewed were involved in the study by means of snowball sampling. Most of the sample was made up of

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<sup>4</sup> My thanks to Sofia Bernamonte and Linda Tenca for their work in conducting the interviews and gathering the data.

women who were married with children and with medium-to-high levels of education (high school diploma, degree and postgraduate qualifications).

The study was conceived with the aim of gaining greater insight into the results which had emerged from the 2017 study. ART methods have created a set of beliefs, ideologies and common knowledge within our social context which is interesting to study in order to find out which imaginary (Taylor, 2005) has spread. This is why it was important to deal with the issues broached in the previous study through a qualitative study, attempting to let the subjects involved – in this case, 60 women – ‘speak’ and examining their points of view while guiding them towards critical observation and reflection.

In particular, this qualitative study focused on the issue of surrogacy, structuring the discussion around three core themes:

1. What the subjects knew about surrogacy;
2. The figure of the surrogate mother and the concept of mother;
3. The surrogate mother’s body.

First of all, as in the 2017 study, a number of initial questions were designed to find out what knowledge the interviewees had about surrogacy and what their sources of information were.

The other two core themes arose from the desire to garner and understand the imaginary revolving around the surrogate mother and her body, as a woman’s body which procreates for others.

More specifically, in the first case, the idea was to find out whether the figure of the surrogate mother was seen as coming close to the idea of mother in general, or, conversely, was seen as being limited purely to the biological sphere. Regarding this matter, focus was also placed on the sphere of emotions, as we tried to understand, in the interviewees’ opinions, what emotions drive or are experienced by a woman who decides to go through with a pregnancy on someone else’s behalf.

Finally, analysing the dimension concerning the body meant, above all, finding out what image of the body circulates in the social imaginary. Following the framework of the previous study – in which we forwarded the hypothesis of the construction and use of an instrument outside the body which could bring to a successful conclusion a pregnancy requested by a pair of intended parents without requiring the intervention of another woman –, in this paper we wanted to discover to what extent the interviewees agreed about using this technological instrument. Moreover, we tried to establish what correlation there is in the social imaginary between the surrogate mother and her body, as regards control, freedom and responsibility.

### 3. Analysis of the data

As mentioned above, the study was structured around three different core themes; the data analysis will follow this path.

### 4. Surrogacy: knowledge and sources of information

The majority of the women interviewed had heard talk of the issue of surrogacy; some even declared that it was impossible not to have heard anything about it as it was a 'hot' issue.

As resulted from the 2017 study (Di Nicola, Lonardi, Viviani, 2018, 2019), the most common sources of information for the interviewees were the Internet and television.

*I've heard about this issue on TV – in talk-show debates – or on the Internet. It's not something that goes unnoticed'* (no. 31, 32 yrs old, single, no children).

Indeed, the interviewees stated that they had gathered information about the issue of surrogacy from current affairs programmes, talk shows and social networks, without deliberately searching for it.

*I remember this issue. I've never been affected by it so I haven't gone deeper into it, but people talk about it ... so in any case you know about it and form some ideas'* (no. 36, 45 yrs old, married, children).

*To be honest, I didn't know what it was, now I have some idea, I'm certainly not an expert but I can say I've looked into it – I mean, I'm at an age now where if I was in a relationship I'd probably have difficulty having a child, you know, at 42 a woman knows she might have difficulty with fertility'* (no. 37, 43 yrs old, single, no children).

It is interesting to note that, although most of the women interviewed stated that they were familiar with the issue, the longer the interview went on, the more the interviewees changed their positions and points of view from those they had begun with. This shows that the women involved in the study increased their awareness over the course of the interview, as they were led to reflect more deeply on the issue.

Regarding the term 'surrogacy', it emerged from the interviews that the expression 'womb for rent' was more commonly used, underlining the fact that the biological aspect is what most people tend to have in mind concerning the whole process.

*'what comes to mind is wombs for rent, but I have a general idea of the whole issue'* (no. 30, 32 yrs old, married, children).

*I looked into it a bit a few years ago when there was the political debate about gay couples who wanted to have children – adoption was one option, or in this case use a woman who would lend them her womb'* (no. 37, 43 yrs old, single, no children).



*'but it's also true that we're talking about a woman who rents out her womb in order to give someone else a family. So the fact of becoming a mother doesn't reach a concrete conclusion, in that once the baby is born it'll be handed over to the couple who requested it. So it's not open-ended motherhood, but fixed-term motherhood – it ends when the foetus in the woman's womb is ready to be born'* (no. 33, 30 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

*'what do you mean by surrogacy? Because to my mind it's something to do with needing to rent a womb to have a baby'* (no. 39, 43 yrs old, married, children).

The uniqueness of the surrogacy process emerges not only from the use of the term 'womb for rent', but also from the fact that the women interviewed often spoke about a service a woman provides to a couple with a specific need.

*I've heard about it ... it's a service where a woman gets a baby through another woman'* (no. 49, 30 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

## **5. Conception and gestation: from the intended mother to the surrogate mother**

### ***5.1 The desire to have a child: surrogacy versus adoption***

The cult of Gaea, the Mother-Goddess, dates back to the Neolithic period. Gaea was the divinity governing life, death and rebirth, and was represented by the image of a vase (symbolizing her power to hold and nurture life, to protect, preserve and nourish, all veiled in mystery because her contents cannot be seen from the outside). In the imaginary, the vase represents the essence of femininity: the woman's body is the core of fecundation, gestation and birth.

Although the role of the woman as life-giver has been celebrated from prehistoric times, in the current social imaginary it does not appear to have lost any of its importance. From the interviewees' words, her life-giving capacity and potentiality is one of the aspects determining her fulfilment as a woman.

*If I think about a woman ... I think about her as a mother'* (no. 9, 36 yrs old, married, children)

*Well, being a mother is the main fulfilment for a female'* (no. 33, 30 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

According to the interviewees, this desire, as it is a crucial element of female fulfilment, can be so strong that a woman may attempt any means to achieve her goal.

*the desire for motherhood is maybe stronger than the biological impediments to it'* (no. 33, 30 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

This personal goal also becomes an element of fulfilment for a couple, in the opinion of many of the interviewees.

*I lost my first baby so I understand how difficult it is for a couple ... then I had a couple of friends who had difficulty conceiving and they managed it with in vitro fertilization,*

*so I think that the desire to become parents is so strong, the longing so great that you do anything it takes...*' (no. 5, 33 yrs old, married, children).

This longing for a child can be what drives a woman or a couple to try almost anything in order to have one, even seeking the help of a third party, such as a surrogate mother. According to the interviewees, for a woman and her partner, the desire to have a child can be so extreme that they feel it justifies the use of any means.

*If a couple goes to such lengths, it means that their desire is so great they're willing to do anything, so when they finally get the object of their desire it's the most incredible gift*' (no. 31, 32 yrs old, single, no children).

*I think it's the extreme desire to become parents ... From personal experience, I can say I had a lot of trouble getting pregnant, and I wanted it so badly ... I think it's hard, though, to explain what a woman feels when she longs ... it's the icing on the cake for the couple and the desire to be a mother*' (no. 4, 45 yrs old, married, children).

The interviewees were proposed the idea of facing difficulties conceiving through adoption. Some of the women involved in this study considered adoption as a potential answer to this problem and saw it as a mechanism which could constitute a valid alternative to surrogacy, but which could also present the same problems.

*In any case, I wouldn't rule out adoption when deciding to have a child; I suppose it would also be more justifiable on an ideological level*' (no. 33, 30 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

*I say that people could really find another way to become parents. For me, a process like this would absolutely be the last resort. Because it isn't an option. I mean, it's an option only for those who can afford to go through with it. Adoption's the same. I mean, if someone isn't able to have kids, even with adoption you have to spend a fair bit of money*' (no. 31, 32 yrs old, single, no children).

However, we should underline that there was no consensus among the interviewees as regards adoption as a way of having a child. Some held that adoption was preferable to other options such as surrogacy, but others, conversely, not only recognized how different the two are, but also stressed how surrogacy was preferable to the adoption process.

*if I had to choose, I'd go with surrogacy. Because a woman who has to turn to surrogacy methods has more chance of being able to go through the process with the biological mother and accompany her step by step, go with her to check-ups, stay close to her and know exactly what's happening every step of the way*' (no. 32, 31 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

However, we must admit that a decision of this kind leads the woman and the couple to make mostly selfish choices.

*if I wanted to have a baby and I couldn't manage it, maybe it's selfish but I think I'd make use of another woman's body. You know, I have a fairly stark view of it. If I ended up*

*in the situation of having to choose, rather than having a child who isn't mine – like with adoption – surrogacy is the closest you can get'* (no. 34, 42 yrs old, married, no children).

Others stated the complete opposite.

*I would go for adoption ... because, you know, there are so many children who unfortunately live in difficult conditions and knowing that you could give a child a better life that way ... But as I said before, I would find it a bit scary. I mean, if there was no chance of having a child I don't know ... I think I would feel adoption was the best option'* (no. 35, 32 yrs old, married, children).

*I would choose adoption first, because first of all you're taking care of a baby that's already been born and isn't to blame for its existence, it was just brought into the world and abandoned for no reason; this isn't the time or place to go into the moral issues, but just the thought that there's a child needing someone to look after them for me is enough'* (no. 36, 45 yrs old, married, children).

## **5.2 The mother's motivation and feelings**

As mentioned above, surrogacy is a choice which most of the women interviewed tolerated and found justifiable. In the social imaginary, the intended mother is a woman prepared to go as far as to ask another woman to make up for her own inability to procreate.

According to the interviewees, the main reasons that lead a woman to request – and accept – the intervention of a surrogate mother are those surrounding the desire to have a child in order to reach the highest expression of a woman's fulfilment.

*Unfortunately, when you want to have a baby but can't manage to, you tend to blame yourself, you wonder if there's something wrong with you, if there's something wrong with your body and so on. I can understand a woman who can't manage to have children choosing to have them like this'* (no. 14, 36 yrs old, married, children).

According to the interviewees, this can lead a woman to do whatever it takes and to opt for this method, despite having many fears around it.

*Knowing that another woman has my baby would worry me, to tell the truth. I don't know if it would really feel mine afterwards, well I mean, of course it would because it would have our genes and would be like us, in that sense, yes. The whole thing would pretty much scare me in a lot of ways, but at the end of the day I think I would have gone to any lengths necessary to have a baby'* (no. 35, 32 yrs old, married, children).

This fear revolves around a number of factors.

First of all, the fear comes from not having concrete knowledge about the process. The lack of knowledge about the process as it really takes place on the medical front, not knowing what repercussions there could be for the child from the emotional and/or psychological point of view, are things that could scare the intended mother, according to our interviewees.

*I'd find it really scary! Here and now I'm telling you I'm against it, because you don't know how it works – there should be an experimental stage. Even if we take for granted that this stuff works already, ok, but you don't know on an emotional level what's being transmitted to the child. You don't know anything at the moment it's born, except for what you can see, you don't know anything. Trying to bring up a child in those conditions, I dunno, maybe it'll be the healthiest child in the world and you can say goodbye to the biological mother. But in the meantime, she's transmitted feelings to the baby, even love' (no. 40, 32 yrs old, married, children).*

One purely relational aspect which – according to the social imaginary – scares the intended mother is the possibility of negative comparison with the surrogate mother. Indeed, the women involved in the study generally affirmed that the fact of the intended mother having to ask another woman for help with what, in the social imaginary, is the apotheosis of a woman's fulfilment, places the intended mother in a position of psychological disadvantage. Therefore, the intended mother can feel herself to be in a position of inferiority to the surrogate mother and subject to constant judgment.

*Because you're afraid of having to measure up to a rival, or something' (no. 58, 41 yrs old, married, children).*

Indeed, the relationship which can develop between the surrogate mother and the child can be so strong that it scares the intended mother, who then develops a feeling of inferiority in her relationship with her child.

*'A child growing inside a woman's body builds up a bond with her. I wouldn't do it with my child because I'm scared the separation would be difficult' (no. 7, 30 yrs old, single, no children).*

Conversely, as far as the interviewees are concerned, a mother asks another woman to generate a child for her because she is driven by selfishness. In the imaginary of those interviewed, attempting to go against nature and overcome one's natural potential constitutes a form of selfishness.

*I realise it's kind-of a selfish thing, but if you look at it from a future mother's point of view: the genetic material comes from me and my husband, the other woman – poor thing – gets the short end of the stick but I can keep tabs on her. So in this light, I'd probably choose surrogacy. You can take control of the situation – I know it sounds cold, but that's how I see it' (no. 34, 42 yrs old, married, no children).*

*It just becomes selfishness at a certain point. Where does it say that I have the right to become a parent?' (no. 45, 45 yrs old, in a relationship, no children). This choice appears to be the result of a change which one interviewee links to a different image of the family: 'we're not talking about biological family anymore, like it used to be, but about a broader family, also from a cultural point of view, I mean people who choose whether to become parents or not' (no. 33, 32 yrs old, single, no children).*

Moreover, any choice which attempts to bypass the woman's or the couple's natural potential for conceiving a child could turn out to be wrong.

*When I was trying for a baby without succeeding, I always said adoption, no, because I'm scared one day the child would turn around and say "You're not my mother", then go off and leave. After you've raised them, I could never have gone through with it; it was a decision I made together with my husband, we've always seen eye to eye on that front. On the other hand, I would never have thought of surrogacy, but I don't think so. I mean, I think that if I'd seen that I was never going to have children naturally, in the end I would probably have accepted that was just how it had to be' (no. 54, 43 yrs old, married, children).*

Among the interviewees, there were a number who, although recognising that a woman who turns to a surrogate is likely to feel fear, believed that it was crucial to overcome these worries and accept surrogacy as the product of enhanced technological possibilities.

*Everything new is scary at first, but despite this people kept on developing mobile phones, using them and improving them. Look where we're at now and think how far we can still go... (no. 53, 35 yrs old, married, children).*

### ***5.3 The decision-making and emotional spheres in the surrogate mother***

The study also aimed to examine the reasons behind a woman deciding to bear a child on behalf of other people. It goes without saying that we also explored the imaginary of the women interviewed concerning this aspect.

The motives which caused a split in the sample of women interviewed were of various kinds and can be summarized thus: one group of interviewees saw the surrogate mother as performing a selfless act, while the other group saw her as being driven by selfish – above all financial – motives.

*'hmm, I think you could do it as a selfless act, or, seeing as the contract involves payment for the service – it's a form of earnings – if someone's in financial difficulty maybe they would do it for that reason. That's what I think anyway. But then I don't know, there are probably lots of other reasons, but I think it's mainly because of major selflessness or for financial gain' (no. 44, 30 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).*

In the imaginary, the act performed by the surrogate mother is a highly selfless act because it allows someone who isn't able to have children to see their dream come true; in this light, surrogacy is seen as an instrument which can help someone who is suffering.

*'they must be driven by an extraordinary sense of altruism ... it's not something just any woman would do – I would never be able to give my child away, even if I know it isn't mine really. I don't mean to sound like I'm selfish, but these women have that extra something that triggers a response in them and makes them give over their bodies and souls' (no. 30, 32 yrs old, married, children).*

In order to ensure the emotional survival of the surrogate mother, this selflessness must be accompanied by a healthy dose of rationality, cool-headedness and detachment when the baby is born, if she is to hand it over to

the intended parents. However, the women interviewed did not view this rationality, this cool-headedness, as a negative state of being but rather as a life raft for the surrogate mother. The same cool-headedness and rationality which – as we wrote above – the interviewees saw as driving a couple to seek out a surrogate mother serve the surrogate mother, who needs to create dynamics which will allow her to separate from the child she has carried in her womb and go on happily with the rest of her life.

*'As for emotions, I think a lot of selflessness, and also a bit of coolness at the end of the road when she has to hand over the newborn baby to the intended parents'* (no. 25, 34 yrs old, single, no children).

Conversely, a large number of the women interviewed held that the primary motivation for a woman who decides to bear a child on behalf of others is founded on selfishness. In the words of the interviewees, this selfishness revolves around the money paid to and/or requested by the surrogate mother.

*'There may be some cases of purely selfless acts, because morally and ethically there are people who are convinced they're doing a good thing and giving someone a gift, but I think a much higher percentage is driven by financial motives'* (no. 45, 45 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

*'From what I've heard in the various conferences that have been held, it's pretty much a business decision. It's strange to say that because we're talking about a human life here, but it really seems like a business transaction, where you say give me your sperm and I'll go through with the pregnancy. Afterwards, you pay me and I'll hand over the baby'* (no. 55, 30 yrs old, married, no children).

#### **5.4 Different types of mother: biology and attachment**

As for the analysis of the similarities and differences between the intended mother and the surrogate mother, the comparison of the two figures revolves around the imaginary linked to the very concept of 'mother'.

Is the mother the one who bears the child? Is the mother the one who raises the child?

It is these fundamental questions which assign the role of mother to both the women involved in surrogate motherhood.

In the event that we define as mother the one who gives love, affection and support to and raises the child, then the role is played by the intended mother, but if we define as mother the one who bears the child, then the surrogate also becomes a fully-fledged mother.

For our interviewees, the word 'mother' evoked images of unconditional love towards life and towards one's child, a feeling which becomes a safe haven where the child is reassured and protected. To this we add the element of

upbringing, as the mother is also the authority figure who, with love, effort and patience, works to raise and prepare her child for life.

*If I think of the word mother, what I think of is so much love, desire, devotion and also resilience. Every mother is a resilient woman, a woman who can always go back to how she was before in order to give new life'* (no. 26, 36 yrs old, single, no children).

*'Children, love, sacrifice but in the sense of constructive sacrifice ... a life's dream, so much patience, because what I've seen from my limited experience so far – I've got a 22-month-old daughter – you need a lot of patience ... because when they're born they're already – not exactly grown – but they almost manage to look after themselves already ... it's a wonderful experience that I was able to fulfil this desire at the age of 32 ... it took a while but I would certainly do it again'* (no. 8, 34 yrs old, cohabiting, children).

As for the surrogate mother and the concept of mother in the social imaginary, *'a woman who goes through a pregnancy, carries a child in her womb and who could probably be quite rightly classified as mother – I mean, she's the one who gives it life, nurtures it for 9 months ... Otherwise you're just seen as a box where you put in the fuel and it goes'* (no. 6, 45 yrs old, married, children).

*I don't at all consider her as a mere incubator. Let's say that if she's decided to go through with this thing it's because she knows she can be a good mother at the time of getting pregnant and for the nine months she carries the child in her womb. I mean, she feels a living creature inside her, she feels it, she can't feel nothing as far as I'm concerned. I can't help thinking that she must be a woman who feels a lot of love, as well as respect for life and for what she's doing. Now that I think about it, it's also inevitable that the woman will transmit something to the child, like when you're pregnant and play music to the baby and it perceives your feelings, or when you stroke your belly and it moves. Those are incredible feelings. I think that for those 9 months she acts naturally, like a normal mother, except that she knows she'll have to hand the child over at the end of the nine months'* (no. 28, 30 yrs old, married, children).

However, focusing on the mother's actions and her role in raising the child invites reflection on an image of mother which has moved beyond the act of procreating.

*'the surrogate mother perhaps more than a mother could be considered an aunt! It's not who brings you into the world but who raises you that's your mother, that's how I see it'* (no. 8, 34 yrs old, cohabiting, children).

In any case, whether you are the intended mother or the surrogate mother, being a mother in general, no matter what, *'involves sacrifices ... the real mother is the intended mother because she raises them'* (no. 6, 45 yrs old, married, children).

## **6. Technology in the ‘womb for rent’ method**

In our social context, the imaginary revolving around the concept of health has changed and, as a consequence, so has the concept of therapy. Our view of health has broadened so much that it has become a bright horizon the subject has to aim for (Lipovetsky, 2019) working on, among other things, their body’s performance levels. Every limit, every imperfection has to be eliminated and illness is no longer seen as pathology but part of human experience. Every intervention aimed at improving the body and how it performs becomes therapy; these therapies are often preventive in nature and aimed at avoiding future problems.

ART methods form part of this category, as they work on the body in order to overcome the limits to its capacity to procreate (Viviani, 2018).

This is why part of the interview was designed to investigate the imaginary held by the interviewees regarding the body, a woman’s freedom to decide how to act regarding her own body and the concept of ownership in the field of surrogate motherhood.

As with ART in general, surrogacy implies working in a twofold manner on how the body performs: seeking to overcome the limits currently making conception impossible and also attempting to avoid the onset of difficulties and/or anomalies, including genetic abnormalities<sup>5</sup> (Balzano, 2017).

### ***6.1 Women’s freedom of action***

The idea of working on one’s body, which is currently above all an individual planning task, invites reflection on the topic of a woman’s freedom to act according to her desires, her expectations and her interests in different areas, including her body.

This is one of the topics we attempted to encourage the interviewees to reflect on. We were rather surprised at how they stressed that the issue of a woman’s freedom to decide for herself is very strongly felt by women and extends further than how the female body is viewed.

Indeed, when the interviewees were asked if it was right for a woman to be able to act regarding her own body in total freedom and autonomy – for example, deciding, as a surrogate mother, to make her body available to allow others to procreate – they mainly asserted that women should be free, but that this freedom is limited in a number of fields: sociocultural, professional and, lastly, the field of personal choices.

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the etymology and semantics of performance, see my previous work (Viviani, 2018).



To cite an example, according to the interviewees, social stereotypes lead women to feel they lack freedom in their choices regarding how they look. They stated that the stereotypes promoted by mass media lead women to conform to that standard and that they do not feel free to reveal their true selves or make the choices they want when it comes to how they look.

*But the worst thing that limits our freedom is that forcing us to believe we have to look a certain way if we want to be accepted, to feel right, to be cool, to be truly women. We have to be churned out like identical supermodels and I think that is totally wrong. Because there are so many versions of the female body, just as there are so many versions of the male body' (no. 45, 45 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).*

The women involved in the study stated that they also perceived this lack of freedom in the professional sphere, citing episodes that shed a harsh light on this failing.

*I recently had a female client who told me she had been fired because she was pregnant – these are things that make me really ashamed of my society. Because a woman with professional success who also has a child is a complete woman, a woman who is fulfilled in both spheres, so she's a woman who'll give 100% when she goes back to work' (no. 37, 44 yrs old, single, no children).*

When the interviewees were asked to reflect on women's freedom and the sphere of ART and surrogacy, again they acknowledged women's limited ability to decide what to do with their own bodies, owing to two factors:

- the idea of family, which traditionally identifies women as mothers;
- the influence of religion, which establishes the parameters within which believers can have freedom of choice;

*I'm a Catholic Christian, I believe in and practise my faith. So, if you like, my thoughts are biased, there's an ethical choice behind them, but in my opinion I'm free to do what I like with my body but I have to answer to someone' (no. 48, 32 yrs old, married, no children).*

Concerning a woman's right to decide to bear a child on behalf of others and, therefore, to freely use her body for this purpose, the interviewees did not express a common opinion. From their musings, it emerged that the factors to evaluate in order to respond to this question were varied because the situation appeared to be rather complex. Indeed, despite their allowing women a certain amount of freedom to do what they liked with their own bodies – and therefore to go through a pregnancy on behalf of others – the interviewees struggled to legitimize that choice.

*'so, I respect these people because there's always a reason behind certain choices, because of cause and effect, right? But personally I keep my distance from it, unless a situation arises like the one we talked about before, so I suppose it's an act I understand but not excuse' (no. 37, 47 yrs old, single, no children).*

The interviewees understand how the desire to have children can lead a woman or couple to request the intervention of another woman, but that is not

enough to legitimize the procedure. Despite being a clear example of freedom of action, the thought of a woman bearing a child for others assigns her a role – as ‘mother for 9 months’ – which is not very acceptable for the interviewees. Freedom of action clashes with the relational and emotional aspects presumably tying the child to the surrogate mother.

*I would go for an adoption: I see it as something healthier and more legitimate, rather than doing something so forced and unnatural*’ (no. 49, 30 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

## **6.2 The body as a woman’s property**

The imaginary surrounding ownership of one’s body was investigated by introducing the question of the woman being paid or deciding to loan out her body for free. The underlying idea was that if the surrogate mother is considered the owner of her own body, which she can decide to make available to bear a child on behalf of others, it could be right for her to be paid for this service. The distinction between commercial and voluntary surrogacy is an important topic for discussion, as it emblemizes the distinction between ownership and freedom when it comes to a woman’s body.

The idea of the woman being paid created a rift in the opinions expressed by the interviewees.

‘For love or for money’ is the dichotomy around which revolve the social imaginary and the perception of the surrogate mother in the knowledge and beliefs expressed by the women interviewed.

Some asserted that payment was in fact the real motive behind these women deciding to become surrogate mothers.

*Bearing a child for someone else is something you can’t do out of a pure spirit of selflessness. As I was saying before, there are deeper reasons for someone doing it, I don’t want to say she does it solely for money, but you know ...*’ (no. 21, 30 yrs old, single, no children).

Yet others do not believe it possible that financial concerns can be the only real driving force.

*This woman must be driven not only by money, by financial gain ... I think she’s driven to become a surrogate mother also from a strong sense of wanting to help others ... It’s just not plausible that a woman would go through an experience like pregnancy just for money*’ (no. 22, 42 yrs old, separated, children).

Nevertheless, if the surrogate mother’s involvement is considered merely as a service rendered to the intended parents, then paying her becomes the right thing to do.

*Of course, as it’s a service it should be paid for, so I totally agree with her being paid*’ (no. 21, 30 yrs old, single, no children).

On the other hand, some felt that the surrogate mother should be reimbursed for expenses but not paid a fee. The word fee evokes the sphere of work, while childbearing has nothing to do with contracts for professional services.

*I see it as being more ethical to reimburse her for expenses instead of paying a fee established in a contract*' (no. 36, 45 yrs old, married, children).

Paying a surrogate mother a fee in return for her granting 'use' of her body in order to allow others to have a child could call to mind the mechanisms of prostitution in the imaginary.

*Doing it for money sounds like commodifying the body to me*' (no. 50, 31 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

*In my opinion, it wouldn't really be right for her to be paid ... I mean payment by contract, because that could lead to some form of exploitation or something*' (no. 33, 30 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

In the interviewees' eyes, comparing the image of a surrogate mother who makes her body available in return for money with the image of a prostitute is going too far.

*It's not prostitution. We're talking about creating life*' (no. 14, 36 yrs old, married, children).

*A prostitute gives pleasure, not love. A surrogate mother creates a new life*' (no. 21, 30 yrs old, married, children).

Although when viewed objectively, rationally, the role performed could seem to be the same:

*If the surrogate mother is paid ... in that light ... it's basically like how prostitutes are paid*' (no. 31, 32 yrs old, single, no children),

in actual fact,

*they're two different services. I mean, on one side I'm making a baby so I can help a family. On the other side ... I find it difficult to put the two things on the same playing field. Although, if I think about the body as an instrument, and the transaction aspect of both ... No, placing them on the same plane feels like undermining a woman's intrinsic value*' (no. 34, 42 yrs old, married, no children).

### **6.3 Surrogate mother, womb for rent and baby-making machine**

*As long as it's a freely made choice, I'm fine with that, but when a woman's forced into it because she doesn't have enough money ... in that case, if there was a machine able to do it in her place, then I'd be all for it*' (no. 31, 32 yrs old, single, no children).

The interviewees were asked what their thoughts were about the idea of using a machine to 'grow' a baby instead of the body of a surrogate mother. If the surrogate mother's body could be viewed as a kind of instrument, how would the use of a machine – an actual technological instrument performing

the same role as the surrogate mother's body – be perceived in the social imaginary?

The premise this hypothetical scenario was based on was that the surrogate mother's role is limited purely to carrying a baby to term, which function could be performed by a machine.

This idea had also been put to the subjects involved in the 2017 study. One of the aims was to find what similarities and differences there were in the viewpoints of the women interviewed.

As emerged in the first part of the analysis, the interviewees mainly talked about 'wombs for rent',

*'what I think of is a couple who can't have children so they use a second woman who rents out her womb to them'* (no. 52, 34 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

*'I would define her as a womb-lender...'* (no. 53, 35 yrs old, married, children).

underlining the mechanical, biological function as child-bearer which the surrogate mother's body performs.

*'if only it were possible, but I kind-of get the impression that it becomes a bit like a meat market, because I choose what I fancy, I decide how I want it ... but the wonderful thing about having children is that you don't know how they're going to turn out. But I suppose there's no real difference, I mean there's no difference between what the woman's belly does and what the machine would do'* (no. 31, 32 yrs old, single, no children).

Against this background, the idea takes shape that we could hypothesize the use of a machine outside the woman's body which would perform the function of conceiving and bearing a child; this child would then be handed to the intended parents at the end of the process.

*'If, in future, they managed to create a machine that would mimic the functions of a mother's womb ... it would be a good thing: because it's an instrument without feelings, so there wouldn't be the problem of a woman suffering when she had to say goodbye to her "child"'* (no. 32, 31 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

As the interviewees viewed it, substituting the surrogate mother's body with a machine would have certain advantages. First and foremost, as we have seen, it would avoid the emotional consequences for the surrogate mother connected with having to let go of the child. It would also be useful to make it simpler and more immediate for the intended parents to take and keep control of the process than it is when using a surrogate.

*'in my opinion, when a woman feels the need to become a mother, she prefers surrogacy because she feels like the child belongs more to her. With adoption you'll always have a part of the child's past that you know nothing about, you don't know where they came from or what their life or the life of the mother who gave birth to them was like. If I was in that situation, I'd prefer surrogacy so I could be close to my child from the beginning: for example, when there's an ultrasound, I can see how he or she is growing, follow the whole process. As if it was me doing it but with another body'* (no. 32, 31 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

According to the interviewees, the intended parents are right to do some monitoring, in order to guarantee the best possible childbearing process. By best possible childbearing process, we mean that the surrogate mother adopts a lifestyle which will help the child grow healthy and undergoes all the necessary tests to ensure her health and the unborn child's.

*'They want to find a person who would go through the pregnancy the way they would or have a lifestyle similar to their own. So if this person is doing it for them, she has to do it the way they want'* (no. 31, 32 yrs old, single, no children).

This factor had already been examined in the 2017 study; again in 2019 the interviewees allowed that the fact that the intended parents could monitor and have control over the surrogate mother's pregnancy was an important factor and the exercise of a right.

*'Totally agree! Absolutely: by doing that, you'd cut out the middleman and not have to worry any more about how she's getting on with the pregnancy, or whether she'll turn around and try to keep the child, or that she's only interested in the money. So, yes, absolutely! End of problem'* (no. 38, 40 yrs old, married, no children).

With a machine, control of the emotional plane would also be simplified. There would no longer be a surrogate mother with feelings for the child, just as there would no longer be a child perceiving and inheriting these feelings.

*'So at this point, a machine would be much better. True, a machine's not a person, but to be honest I'd still prefer a machine. Partly because who can say to me that the child, with these feelings acquired in the womb but which are cut off at birth, won't undergo emotional trauma? As far as I'm concerned, it's more of a trauma separating from a mother than from a machine that produces you. Because with a human, feelings can be transmitted but not followed up afterwards, while with a machine no feelings are transmitted so it'll be the intended parents who transmit all the love they're capable of to the child'* (no. 38, 40 yrs old, married, no children).

*'It's a very utopian idea but I pretty much see it as a positive thing, in that you would bypass all the psychological problems that could arise in the child, in the parents, in the surrogate mother ...'* (no. 43, 44 yrs old, single, no children).

*'Of course, the machine would have to have the ability not to create any physical defects in the child, otherwise it would be pointless'* (no. 45, 45 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

If, in the social imaginary, the role performed by the machine in the place of a surrogate mother might not be completely wrong, at this stage we have to ask ourselves what the consequences might be for the child born in this way. Some interviewees stressed the grave lack of affective relationships.

*'Yeah because in the end a machine can't create or transmit feelings. I suppose I see the child as a kind of robot in the end...'* (no. 32, 31 yrs old, in a relationship, no children).

*I'm terrified of seeing a child born that's like a robot. There must be something missing or lacking in the child because, yes, it performs the function of a womb, but a mother's body receives feelings and sensations that a machine can't. Hmmm, you've got me in a twist again ... maybe we should trust in science anyway?* (no. 34, 42 yrs old, married, no children).

## **7. Conclusions: total control in surrogacy**

The overwhelming desire to make her dream come true can lead a woman or a couple to make choices which not only bypass the natural predisposition of her body – for example the inability to have a child – but can appear questionable in the eyes of others.

Being able to bear a child is the primary goal if one wants to have a family, a goal which, in the social imaginary, is considered the outcome that determines the personal and social fulfilment of a woman and of a couple (Di Nicola, Lonardi, Viviani, 2019). For this reason, in the social imaginary of the women interviewed the decision to turn to a surrogate mother is not legitimized but is considered justifiable and understandable. It is understandable to the extent that, according to the women interviewed, it can be preferable to adoption.

Indeed, while adoption has great value from a humanitarian point of view, as it allows a child without a family to find one and to receive the kind of love it needs, surrogacy also has its advantages. First and foremost, it allows a couple to have a child of their own, with their set of genes. While an adopted child is already formed and brings with it the characteristics of those who conceived – and perhaps also partly raised – it, with surrogacy the couple can ‘work on’ the child and its future (Habermas, 2016), not only on a physical level but also in terms of raising it in such a way that it will better respond to their expectations and dreams. If genetic screening is involved in the surrogacy process, this planning aspect is intensified because (in the countries where it is allowed) the couple can choose what they consider to be the best genetic profile for their child.

Secondly, surrogacy allows the couple to exert control during the pregnancy phase because, by maintaining a relationship with the surrogate mother, they can monitor and check that everything is proceeding well, as well as making sure that she leads a healthy lifestyle and makes the best choices for the good of the unborn child (Habermas, 2016; Jadva, Imrie, 2014).

As already mentioned, the decision to attempt surrogacy may be understandable but is difficult to legitimize (Di Nicola, 2016). The results of the study (Di Nicola, Lonardi, Viviani, 2018; Viviani, 2020) underline the fact that, according to the subjects involved in the study, the decision to pursue the surrogacy option is the fruit of selfishness. As highlighted by the 2017 study

(Viviani, 2020), selfishness is one of the emotions associated with the intended mother – or both parents – in the social imaginary. Going against nature, striving to attain something destiny has not set aside for us, is a choice determined by selfishness.

However, it is also a choice (Viviani, 2020) which implies fear for the intended parents. Fear regarding the unforeseen events which can arise in a pregnancy handled by an outsider, but also fear about how the child will turn out. In fact, in the social imaginary, there are many questions about the potential consequences for the child, whether emotional or otherwise. Over its lifetime, when it knows what process led to its birth (surrogacy), how will it react? Will it want to meet its ‘real’ mother? (Lonardi, 2018). At this stage, the intended mother could also have fears around being compared with the surrogate mother, as she will always feel that in the eyes of society she is seen as inferior.

In this case, as in other analyses (Viviani, 2020), selfishness is the most commonly identified emotion because it is also seen in the surrogate mother. The surrogate mother, indeed, is accused of conniving to force natural events and bear a child for someone else. The pregnancy this woman goes through appears to be simply the mechanical implementation of a job that leads to the birth of a child, one she will not look after once born.

The contractual dimension is another element feeding into this perception of the choice as being dictated by selfish motives. While many interviewees held that it was right to pay the surrogate mother, many others felt that it was the real reason for deciding to go through with the process (Spar, 2006; Anleu, 1992, Hochschild, 2006). The surrogate mother agrees to bear a child for financial motives (Hochschild, 2006; Choudhury, 2015; Balzano, 2017; Di Nicola, 2018). We can even go so far as to say that comparing this position to that of a prostitute is not such a huge leap. According to the interviewees, allowing their bodies to be used and receiving payment in return are characteristics which objectively seem to link these two figures (Anleu, 1992; Sandel, 2017; Habermas, 2016; Porcelli 2019).

In the social imaginary, it emerged that one should talk about ‘wombs for rent’ rather than surrogacy, underlining the biological and mechanical function performed by the body of the surrogate mother (Balzano, 2017). For this reason, many women do not recognize the surrogate as ‘mother’. Indeed, if the mother is defined as the woman who bears but also – and above all – raises her child with love, patience and devotion, then the role of the surrogate mother is never fulfilled, as it is relegated to the purely biological sphere. The body performs an action. The body becomes an instrument for attaining a goal which others are unable to attain (Bonifati, Longo, 2012; Habermas, 2016; Jonas, 2019, 2009a; Porcelli, 2019; Sandel, 2007; Teman, 2010).

This would appear to grant the surrogate mother full freedom of choice regarding her body. From a broader perspective, this freedom could be allowed to all women when it comes to their own bodies. The premises are there, and rightly, but, according to the interviewees, this freedom is never fully attained because in many fields and for many reasons, women have to make choices which conform to social expectations and requests.

As in the 2017 study, surrogacy again emerged as the assisted reproductive technology which more than any other was the result of intense control mechanisms. Indeed, with surrogacy, the control mechanism acts on several different fronts and dimensions.

Firstly, both the intended mother and the surrogate mother attempt to implement a process of control over their respective bodies by going against nature (Teman, 2010). The intended mother chooses and decides to become a mother; the surrogate mother decides to go through a pregnancy without giving birth to a child of her own.

As far as the intended mother and/or couple are concerned, through surrogacy it is possible to monitor the pregnancy and exert some control over the surrogate mother's lifestyle. While with adoption, the adopted child already has its own nature – and genetics – as well as a certain imprint in terms of upbringing, with surrogacy everything is made 'from scratch'. Moreover, with genetic selection, the couple increase their control over the process because they can choose and control the physical characteristics, personality traits and possible gifts of the child right from the moment of conception (Habermas, 2016; Jacobson, 2016, Berend, 2016b; Guizzardi, 2018).

From the surrogate mother's perspective – according to the social imaginary – control is exerted on two different fronts. Firstly, as already highlighted elsewhere (Viviani, 2020), the surrogate mother has – and needs to have – the ability to control her emotions in order not to get too involved, not even with the child she is carrying.

Furthermore, the women interviewed believed that the surrogate mother, by drawing up a contract with the intended parents, shows that she is able to handle and control in a rational, calculating and unemotional manner a relationship involving love, fears, expectations, dreams, affection and sharing, which is how conception and pregnancy is and should be experienced. With surrogacy, the human and relational elements and dimensions seem to be channelled into a process where control has total supremacy. Biological, physical and emotional glitches must be avoided. The women interviewed stressed that, with surrogacy, the human dimension falls under the hegemony of technology. Through control, one attempts to bypass the natural processes brought into play by conception and pregnancy, creating an aseptic situation, a



situation which seems to do everything to get past the unpredictability and imperfection of the human condition.

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