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Science, Media, and Fiction: Mapping out the stakes of parthenogenesis cloning research

ABSTRACT

In this article, I describe the social construction of a new scientific technique for cloning embryos: parthenogenesis or “virgin birth.” Utilizing a qualitative content analysis of 59 scientific journal articles, 61 international newspaper articles, and 3 science fiction books, I map out the emergent stakes of this human cloning technology by situating it within the already defined boundaries of therapeutic cloning research. Findings indicate that scientists specifically claim parthenogenesis as a less controversial cloning technique than the traditional therapeutic cloning procedure of somatic nucleic cell transfer (SNCT), which has been likened to abortion. Further, scientists assert that parthenogenetic embryos, which do not undergo the process of imprinting from both the female and male gametes, are not viable embryos. While global debates continue about the moral and legal status of human embryos and human cloning research, scientists attempt to disassociate parthenogenesis from both reproductive cloning and SNCT. I identify six themes from science fiction about parthenogenesis: reproduction is decoupled from male-female fertilization; reproduction is decoupled from men; reproduction is separated from motherhood, reproduction is separated from (hetero)sexuality; women choose to live in a man-free society; parthenogenetic embryos are legitimate human beings. These six themes contrast with scientists’ renderings that parthenogenesis is an ethical cloning option that produces parthenotes, which are not legitimate forms of human life. However, the six themes are reflected in media and bioethicists’ accounts of parthenogenesis, ostensibly responding to current scientific reports, in the form of backlash against a potential women and/or lesbian-only society. I conclude by deconstructing the implicit illegitimacy of parthenogenetic embryos on the sexist grounds that legitimate embryos are those made through some act of male-female fertilization.

KEYWORDS

Human cloning; parthenogenesis; social construction of science; fertilization; feminist science studies