

# In Vitro Fertilization

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of in vitro fertilization, through the definition and discussion of:

1. In Vitro Fertilization
2. Ethics of In Vitro Fertilization

## 1. IN VITRO FERTILIZATION

**In vitro fertilization** is a process in which a sperm and an egg are united outside the body and subsequently implanted in a uterus. In vitro fertilization gained traction in the 1970s; in fact, the first test baby conceived in vitro was born in 1978. There are many ways and reasons why people make use of in vitro fertilization:

- Donor eggs from a woman will be used and united with a sperm, then implanted in another carrier
- A single woman will decide to have children on her own and go to a sperm bank
- Gay and lesbian couples who want to have children will seek out a carrier or a donor for their child
- Couples dealing with infertility issues can use in vitro fertilization
- A fertilized egg can be frozen and stored for later use

You may be wondering, “What does in vitro have to do with sociology?” It actually has a lot to do with sociology because in vitro fertilization touches upon ideas of cultural lag. It is a new technology, but culturally, how is it used effectively? There are certain ethical concerns that arise with in vitro fertilization, and it is important to culturally devise ways to use it ethically.

One way is to put up limitations on the use of this technology in response to the development of the technology, which is an example of cultural lag.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### In Vitro Fertilization

A process where sperm and egg are united outside of the human body and then implanted into the female uterus.

## 2. ETHICS OF IN VITRO FERTILIZATION

There are several social and cultural effects of in vitro fertilization technology:

- *Profit:* When considering the idea of profiting from in vitro fertilization, to what extent should companies be allowed to make money from in vitro fertilization technology? Should they be able to market their services and operate as a business in the same way that other businesses and corporations do? Or should society erect ethical boundaries around reproduction and try to isolate it from the cash nexus, preventing these companies from profiting from in vitro fertilization?
- *Designer babies:* There are ethical concerns with the idea of designer babies--the notion of selecting, as best you can, the desired traits you want your child to have. Should parents be able to select the traits of their future children?



#### THINK ABOUT IT

What if you decided, "I want my child to be six feet tall. I want a boy. I want him to be blond, with blue eyes." Even though in vitro fertilization makes this possible, designer babies is a hotly debated topic, because to what extent is this an ethically tolerated action? In addition, this process is prohibitively expensive for most people.

### IN CONTEXT

A Ph.D. student who studied sperm banks in California presented a paper at an anthropology conference in which she found that some sperm banks on the cutting edge of the ethical boundaries were profiling the looks of the donors. It was possible for a woman to come in and choose a sperm donor who looked like a certain celebrity, based upon donor profiles. Apparently, the top choices for women were Ben Affleck, Brett Favre, and Orlando Bloom.

This immediately raises a whole host of moral and ethical concerns:

- Should society allow these developments?
- Should this kind of activity be supported?
- Is it ethical that a super-class of babies can be designed by those who have the money to do so?

These are very interesting questions, and are the reasons why this issue is studied sociologically. Technologies like in vitro fertilization are fascinating moral boundary pushers, meaning that first the technologies develop, and in turn society has to develop a response to deal with these technologies and decide how they can be used. This is cultural lag in action, and sociologists have done thought-provoking studies around how the social construction of morality develops around new technologies like in vitro fertilization.



#### DID YOU KNOW

A similar issue involves the market for organs. Society is now deciding if people should be able to bypass a waiting list and purchase an organ. What if you want to sell your kidney to somebody? Why can't you do that? It's your kidney. Yet it's not quite so simple. Society needs to decide how to regulate these activities to ensure they remain within ethical boundaries.



## SUMMARY

Today you learned about **in vitro fertilization** and the ethical concerns surrounding the process.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **In Vitro Fertilization**

A process where sperm and egg are united outside of the human body and then implanted into the female uterus.