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**Learning Activity 2: Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research:  
Religion/Non-Religion and Dignity/Commodity in a Pluralist World  
Stem Cells & Policy: Values & Religion Module**

*by Michael Pettinger & Katayoun Chamany Updated Aug 2017*

The four parts of this learning activity help us consider a variety of values at stake in human embryonic stem cell research (hESCR). The first three Parts (A, B, C) involve reading and discussion centered on the differing definitions of religion, cloning, and commodification, while Part D explores the deliberations of various scholars, theologians, and policy makers within the context of hESCR and policy. Part D also provides a list of videos that explore how various members of society grapple with the ethical issues associated with hESCR, and how they negotiate shifts in their personal value systems when life presents them with difficult challenges. The four parts of this learning activity are:

Part A: Defining Religion and Non-religion

Part B: Defining Reproductive and Therapeutic Cloning

Part C: Defining Dignity and Commodification

Part D: Religion and Non-religion in Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research Policy (hESCR)

**Learning Outcomes**

- Define religion using a content-based approach versus a functional approach
- Explain the difference between the “comparative religions approach” to the study of religion and the “lived religions approach”
- Illustrate how language framed the human cloning debates and determine if reproductive and therapeutic cloning techniques are similar or different
- Distinguish the differences in provision and procurement between extranumerary embryos procured from IVF fertility centers and embryos created for research
- Recognize how the term “commodification” challenges existing or “normative” value systems
- Use the Three-Question Heuristic to challenge the authors of the papers in Part C and to understand the approach of those that provide testimony in Part D.
- Question the role of the “leader” and a single voice for a specific practice-based community

**Part A: Defining Religion and Non-religion Reading and Discussion**

The essay/primer “Defining Religion and Non-Religion in a Plural Society” by Michael Pettinger reframes the religion v. science debate by exploring different ways to define religion and asking what happens when we shift from a content-based definition of the word to one that is function-based. After reading this essay, you will apply the three questions presented in this essay as a heuristic device in your analysis and response to a set of readings presented in Part B, C, and D that continue to explore how definitions and language can be used to promote or hinder productive dialogue. You will bring your thoughts to bear on the subject by crafting a response paper and sharing your views with your peers in class discussion.

**Reading**

1. Pettinger, M. 2013. Defining Religion and Non-religion. Stem Cells Across the Curriculum. [Link](#)

## Discussion Questions

1. Why does the essay begin with an incident from Tony Kushner's play, *Angels in America*? What is the point that it tries to make with this episode?
2. Be prepared to explain the difference between content-based and functional definitions of the word "religion."
3. Be prepared to explain the difference between the comparative religions approach to the study of religion and the lived religions approach.
4. What is your reaction to Clifford Geertz's definition of the word "religion"? Based on that definition do you consider yourself "religious" or "non-religious"?
5. What three questions does the essay suggest you ask when anyone makes a statement regarding the value or rightness of human embryonic stem cell research (hESCR)?

## Part B: Defining Reproductive and Therapeutic Cloning Reading and Discussion

Using the **three-question heuristic** presented in "Defining Religion and Non-Religion in a Plural Society" by Michael Pettinger, engage with the two short opinion-editorial articles to explore how a redefining, or renaming, approach to "human cloning" influences the direction of stem cell research policy. The **Genetically Altered Embryo SCNT ZoomGraphic** and **Embryonic Sources of Stem Cells Slide Set** provides a brief overview of the biotechnology and protocols involved in somatic cell nuclear transfer. You may want to view the video clips listed in the bibliography of "Defining Religion and Non-Religion in a Plural Society" in addition to those below.

**Article:** Vogelstein, B. et al. Feb 12, 2002. Please, don't call it cloning. *Science*. 295(5558):1237. [Link](#)  
*Author suggests new nomenclature that does not invoke the concept of reproductive clones.*

**Article:** O'Mathuna, D. 2002. What to call human cloning? *EMBO Reports*. 3 (6): 502-505. [Link](#) *This article is in response to the Vogelstein et al. article and declares that ethical issues cannot be skirted by changing vocabulary.*

**Article:** Loike, J. 2014. Loaded words. *The Scientist.com*. [Link](#).

**Infographic:** Chamany, K. et al. 2013. Genetically Altered Embryo. Somatic Cell Nuclear Transfer ZoomGraphic. Infographics. Stem Cells Across the Curriculum. [Link](#)

**Video Microscopy:** HHMI. Somatic Cell Nuclear Cloning. [Link](#) *Real time and videomicroscopic overview of somatic cell nuclear cloning.*

**Animation:** University of Michigan. Nuclear Transfer Animation. Stem Cell Explained. [Link](#) *Animation of the process of somatic cell nuclear transfer in the context of stem cell research.*

**Short Video Excerpt:** Hafer, J. & Lahl, J. (Producers). Godawa, B. (Director). 2009. Lines that Divide: The Great Stem Cell Debate. Boulevard Pictures. [Movie Link](#). 1:39 min trailer at IMDB. [Trailer Link](#).

## Discussion Questions

1. Who is the intended audience of the op-eds, and what sorts of religious and/or cultural background do they share? Did the authors intend to create concentric circles of audiences, such that there is a primary reader, but that the reader then shares with another audience? What evidence can you use to support your answers to these questions?
2. Does the statement come from someone who claims to speak from within a specific religious or cultural system? Do the authors of the two articles share the same experience with the systems? Are they concerned with "inside" system perceptions or "outside" system perceptions?
3. Would others who claim to participate in the religious or cultural system of the authors recognize the statements as being consistent with the beliefs and practices of the group?
4. What, if any, is the difference between therapeutic cloning and reproductive cloning and why does it matter and for whom?

## Part C: Defining Dignity and Commodification Reading and Discussion

You will extend word play and definition using the Pettinger **three-question heuristic** to evaluate the effectiveness of arguments presented in two articles addressing the term “commodification” as it relates to human dignity associated with embryos as well egg providers for human cloning and other reproductive technologies. The **Embryo.IVF.Extranumerary ZoomGraphic** and the **Embryo.IVF.Research ZoomGraphic** provide brief overviews of the biotechnology and protocols involved in oocyte procurement for stem cell research.

**Article:** Caulfield, T. & Ogbogu, U. 2012. Stem cell research, scientific freedom and the commodification concern. *EMBO Reports*. 13(1): 12-16. [Link](#)

**Article:** Rao, R. June 2006. Coercion, commercialization, and commodification: The ethics of compensation for egg donors in stem cell research. *Berkeley Technology Law Journal*. 21(3): 1055-1066. [Link](#)

**Article:** Almeling, R. 2009. Gender and the value of bodily goods: commodification in egg and sperm donation. *Law and Contemporary Problems*.72:37-58. [Link](#)

**Article:** Holm, S. 2015. Biobanking human embryonic stem cell lines: policy, ethics and efficiency. *Monash Bioethics Review*. 22 (4): 265-76. [Link](#)

**Book Chapter:** McLeod, C. 2007. For Dignity or Money: Feminists on the Commodification of Women’s Reproductive Labour. In *The Oxford Handbook of Bioethics*. Edited by Bonnie Steinbeck. 258-281. Oxford University Press. NY, NY. [Link](#)

**Infographic:** Chamany, K. et al. 2013. Sources of Stem Cells Radial Infographic. Stem Cells Across the Curriculum. [Link](#) *An information design that integrates the biological, ethical, legal, and social dimensions of embryonic, genetically engineered embryonic, and adult stem cell sources using a jpg which can be magnified and a downloadable pdf that has hyperlinks to text and video clips.*

**Infographic:** Chamany, K., et al. 2013. Embryo.IVF.Extranumerary ZoomGraphic. Infographics. Stem Cells Across the Curriculum. [Link](#)

**Infographic:** Chamany, K. et al. 2013. Embryo.IVF.Research ZoomGraphic. Infographics. Stem Cells Across the Curriculum. [Link](#)

**IVF Animation:** Vidali, A. April 3 2011. IVF Procedure. A Simple Explanation of the In Vitro Fertilization Cycle. [Link](#)

**News Video:** March 9, 2009. Rep DeGette on MSNBC’s Hardball with Chris Matthews (11:34 min) [Link](#)

### Discussion Questions

1. Who is the intended audience of these bioethics pieces, and what sorts of religious and/or cultural background do they share? Did the authors intend to create concentric circles of audiences, such that there is a primary reader, but that the reader then shares with another audience? What evidence can you use to support your answers to these questions?
2. Does the statement come from someone who claims to speak from within a specific religious or cultural system? Do the authors of the two articles share the same experience with the systems? Are they concerned with “inside” system perceptions or “outside” system perceptions?
3. Would others who claim to participate in the religious or cultural system of the authors recognize the statements as being consistent with the beliefs and practices of the group?

4. Caulfield and Ogbogu argue that the “definitional baggage” and “imprecise content or scope” of the term “commodification” obscures the real issues associated with payment for bodily goods, such as exploitation of particular persons or communities. Provide evidence for this statement and consider whether you are in agreement and, if so, what is the proposed alternative?
5. With “commodification” of human tissues and cells, ethical concerns have been raised about equity, diversity, access, and exploitation. What evidence do Caulfield and Ogbogu provide to address these concerns while protecting scientific freedom? Whose voice or perspective is missing in their address? What would McLeod’s response be? What of Almeling and Rao’s positions?
6. Question the dignity/money construction as presented by McLeod. Consider past and current debates in feminism that used the language of “dignity” to justify position i.e. porn wars and sex worker’s rights. Apply a critique to the language as it is used in this context. Do Rao and Almeling use a similar or different set of arguments?
7. In these short reviews, the notion of “inalienability” is raised, to what does this term refer? Consider whether current US policy regarding bodily goods is consistent with the notion of keeping sacred that which is inalienable. Use evidence to address this question by reviewing the US policies regarding compensation for eggs, sperm, and bone marrow stem cells as well as patent law governing genetics research.
8. In Almeling’s research she reveals the inconsistencies in policies and practices regarding gamete donation, compensation, and exchange. How can we explain these discrepancies? Would these practices hold up when it was believed that the sperm carried a preformed embryo?
9. How can we create policies in which the balance between autonomy/protection and benefit /risk is evenly distributed among all members of the community?

#### **Part D: Religion and Non-religion in Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research Policy (hESCR)**

The readings listed below exemplify public statements on the moral significance of hESCR. They come from a variety of religious and cultural perspectives. You will be asked to answer specific questions about these readings, and you should use the **three-question heuristic** from the Pettinger essay to ensure a critical analysis. Your instructor will indicate which testimonies will be assigned, as well as the questions and formats of your answers. Alternatively your instructor may assign a review article that provides a cursory overview of many religious perspectives on hESCR: Walters, L. 2004. Human embryonic stem cell research: An intercultural perspective. *The Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 14(1): 3-38.

**Declaration:** Declaration on the Production and the Scientific and Therapeutic Use of Embryonic Stem Cells (Pontifical Academy for Life). [Link](#)

**Book Chapter:** David Nickel. 2008. “Ethical Issues in Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research.” In Kristen Renwick Monroe, Ronald B. Miller & Jerome Tobis (eds.), *Fundamentals of the Stem Cell Debate: The Scientific, Religious, Ethical & Political Issues*. University of California Press. P 61-95 [Link](#)

**Testimony:** Testimony of experts from various religious traditions presented to the National Bioethical Advisory Committee (NBAC) in September 1999. [Link](#). If link is not working use this URL <https://bioethicsarchive.georgetown.edu/nbac/stemcell3.pdf>

**Videos:** The following videos provide a range of views, both religious and non-religious, on the use of embryos in stem cell research. *Lines That Divide* uses “talking heads” to cover a range of perspectives on hESCR. *Terra Incognita*, a documentary film, follows the lives of stem cell scientist Jack Kessler, two graduate students in his lab, and his daughter who lives with spinal cord injury as well as Laurie Zoloth a bioethics and theology scholar at Northwestern University. The last video is a short human interest story about the Trevino family that illustrates the ways in which people may shift their values when confronted with life challenges and reviews the definitions above regarding, religion, cloning, and commodification of human tissue and bodies within the context of creating a savior sibling from whom stem cells can be used as medical treatment.

Hafer, J. & Lahl, J. (Producers). Godawa, B. (Director). 2009. *Lines that Divide: The Great Stem Cell Debate*. Boulevard Pictures. [Movie Link](#). A short 1:39 min trailer can be seen at [IMDB.Trailer Link](#).

Finitzo, M. (Producer and Director). 2007. Terra Incognita: Mapping Stem Cell Research. Kartemquin Films. A short 4:15 minute trailer at this [Link](#).

Religion & Ethics Weekly. Embryonic Stem Cell Controversy. April 2, 2010. (7min) [Link](#)

### Discussion Questions

1. Who is the intended audience of these pieces, and what sorts of religious and/or cultural background do they share? Did the authors intend to create concentric circles of audiences, such that there is a primary reader, but that the reader then shares with another audience? What evidence can you use to support your answers to these questions?
2. Does the statement come from someone who claims to speak from within a specific religious or cultural system?
3. Would others who claim to participate in the religious or cultural system of the authors recognize the statements as being consistent with the beliefs and practices of the group?
4. How do Nickel's statements on the relationship between the blastocyst and the human person compare with the positions on human development outlined by Eliot Dorff and Abulaziz Sachedina in their testimonies to the NBAC?
5. Does the statement of the Pontifical Institute for Life conform to Nickel's description of the divine conferral argument that human embryos have the moral status of a person?
6. How does Nickel's position on the use of embryos initially created for reproductive purposes compare with that of Father Demetrios Demopolos? What amendments need to be made to this position if and when embryos are created with the specific purpose to conduct research rather than for reproduction?
7. As noted above, the Pontifical Academy seems to ground its declaration on facts of biology and common principles of civil law and ethics. Compare its conclusion to the suggestions by Rabbis Dorff and Tendler, as well as Professor Zoloth, that hESC research for the sake of curing disease and saving lives might be not only permissible, but under some circumstances even mandatory for Jews. What dilemma does this present for a religiously plural society? How would those in the disability studies sector react to this claim?
8. All the discussion centers on the status of the embryo. Which testimonies given to NBAC address the question of the just distribution of the benefits of hESC research and what proposals do they make?
9. Can you identify the point in Kevin Wildes' testimony to the NBAC in which he dissents from the biological argument made in the statement of the Pontifical Academy for Life? (Wildes, 1-2)
10. Can you identify any shared themes in the statements of Ronald Cole-Turner and Gilbert Meilaender, who present divergent positions within the Protestant Christian traditions?
11. Can you find such themes in the statements of Eliot Dorff, Moshe Dovid Tendler, and Laurie Zoloth, who present positions from within the Jewish tradition?

*For a list of questions associated with the Terra Incognita Film see the [Disease, Disability & Immortality: Hope & Hype Module in Stem Cells Across the Curriculum](#).*