Title
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The Ultimate Job Interview: Institutional Influences on Egg Donor Motivation and Identity

In recent years, reproductive technologies and their usage have proliferated. Since, in vitro fertilization (known as IVF) was first developed in Britain in the 1970s, this technology has paved the way for egg retrieval and donation specifically from a third party, which was first successful in Australia in 1984 (Haimes, 1993; Lessor, 1993). The literature concerning reproductive technologies, and egg donation in particular, has generally addressed the topic from a number of positions. From a cultural-centered perspective, scholars address the iconic symbolism of eggs, cultural ideologies surrounding fertility, notions of motherhood and family, constructions of gender identity, and the social processes that characterize the procedure (Almeling, 2006; Almeling, 2007; Becker, 2000; Haimes, 1993; Lessor, 1993; Orobitg and Salazar, 2005). Whereas, the economic perspective focuses on egg donation as a highly profitable business and employs theories on bodily commodification (Katz Rothman, 2000; Spar, 2006; Sharp, 2000). Scholars in this vein reject the legitimacy of the ‘gift’ language, arguing that it mystifies the market exchange which lies at the basis of the egg ‘donation’ process (Lessor, 1993; Sharp, 2000). Also, feminist scholars in particular have grappled with these issues, asking if reproductive technology gives women more power and control, or if it makes them more susceptible to exploitation at the hands of the medical establishment (Becker, 2000; Cussins, 1998; Katz Rothman, 2000; Lessor, 1993; Lie, 2002).
Although attention has, understandably, been paid to recipients and their level of investment and involvement in the procedure, research has not focused on the donors’ level of involvement and specifically how their motivations may change as they are selected to be donors. The purpose of this paper is to examine donors’ understanding of their experience and how their motivations are impacted by the selection process.

The data collection for this paper was based on in-depth interviews with seven women, six of whom had completed the egg donation process and one of whom was stopped at the selection stage once it was discovered that she is a carrier of a genetic disorder. The ages of the women I interviewed ranged from 22-28, and all but one, who has a high school degree, have some college education. Typically women are able to donate through six cycles. Out of the women that I interviewed, one was unable to complete a donation cycle, four had completed one cycle, and two had completed three cycles, one of whom during the process of my research completed her fourth cycle.ii

Findings

One of the key differences between sperm donation and egg donation is the process of selection. Unlike sperm donors who can donate prior to the presence of a desiring recipient, women who want to donate their eggs must first be selected by a recipient. The selection process allows for donors to conceive of a one-to-one relationship, whereby their eggs are not just going anywhere, but are being donated specifically to one couple or recipient who are attempting to have a child. Although they are directly donating to another woman, once women donate their eggs they lose all rights to those eggs and recipients have the power to decide what to do with remaining eggs after the retrieval. For example, recipients can donate eggs to other couples or for
research purposes. One psychiatrist I spoke with who screens egg donors mentioned that it is concerning to her that donors may not be aware of all the possible options for where their eggs may end up and that beyond the donation to the recipient, it may not register with donors that their eggs could be used for additional purposes which they might not agree with. Based on my interviews, donors seem to have an understanding that their eggs can be used for other purposes or for other recipients, but this doesn’t seem to be a salient realization, as they often frame the donation in terms of a one-to-one process.

When the rights to their eggs and alternative possibilities for their usage do get brought up, it is often in a negative or skeptical light. As one donor stated,

…the first family, they’re allowed to freeze the eggs and use them for brothers or sisters, so if they don’t use them they can donate them to a needy family or something, who can’t afford the eggs and I wasn’t really down with that, you know, I like to know that the family that I gave the eggs to has gone through as rigorous a screening process as I have. And that’s the only time that I kind of got mad about where my eggs were going….

The above quote exemplifies not only the importance of the one-to-one relationship that is imagined by the donor, but it also demonstrates how issues of class status figure into defining appropriate or ‘good’ parents, a topic we will return to later. As Orobitg and Salazar (2006) have found, egg donors need to conceptualize the anonymous recipient as a real person that they have a relationship with, in order to make sense of their ‘donation’.

The one-to-one notion becomes important for donors, as they experience doubt during the process. The following excerpt, which was a response to being asked if she had any doubts throughout the process about being involved, clearly demonstrates the
shift in motivation for one donor as she begins to think of her involvement as being
directly linked to another couple:

No, I was pretty sure about it and actually the further I went into the process, the more sure I became because you know like I said originally it was more about the money than anything and then I think for me even when I first started looking into it and I started thinking about how I might be helping another women it started to kind of increase my reasons for doing it, but then once, I never met the other couple, I never talked to the other couple but just you know hearing that they were excited through the doctors and at one point they did send me a little card that of course had to go through the doctors first before I got it and I think there was a little Easter gift or something and they were just saying thank you and I don’t know they just sounded so excited that it even made it, made my reasons for doing it even better so I think I got more comfortable as it went on.

Though maybe initially about the monetary reward, for many of the donors, donating their eggs became about something else as well once they linked their act to the idea that they were helping one other couple. This was a common theme as donors described how their motivations were not merely economic and how they felt connected to their recipients, who they most often did not meet.

Interestingly, the recipient or person on the other end cannot just be anyone. Egg retrieval and transfer are very expensive procedures on which recipients spend a lot of money, and interestingly, for many of the donors, the willingness to spend a lot of money becomes equated with a guarantee that the recipients will be good parents. As one donor stated about her recipients,

…they’re putting thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars into doing this and it just goes to show that they’re not going to be bad parents to the child, that they obviously want this really bad and they don’t care how
much they have to pay to do it. They’re going to do whatever it takes to have that family and it’s like that’s what made me want to do it even more because they’re not looking at the money situation, you know, they’re looking at really wanting a family and really being able to like love that child and take care of them and all that and that’s like a really good thing.

She continues on to say, “…the amount of money they’re putting into it, they’re going to love that child unconditionally.” Clearly, a class dynamic underlies the egg donation process and, here, the role of money is intimately intertwined with assumptions about who makes a “good” parent.

As presented above, donors emphasize the connection to one recipient or couple to avoid a reduction of the process to a business transaction. In addition, the link between the donors’ identity and their eggs emerges as a salient aspect of the process. Donors see themselves as being embodied in their eggs and they become invested in whether or not the procedure is successful, feeling elated and proud when it is, and being overcome with guilt when it fails. When women talk about why they think they are asked about their g.p.a, hobbies, etc., the topic of nature vs. nurture inevitably gets brought up, and it appears that their sense of self and identity becomes embodied in their eggs. Most of the donors that I interviewed, understood what they were offering as a sort of ‘canvas’ off which recipients can create a child. Although, with the exception of one donor, they leave open uncertainty when it comes to genetic determinism, they all agree that there is a chance that many traits are genetic, and that this possibility leads recipients to search out donors who meet certain characteristics which are important to them. Through this process of selection, based on personal characteristics developed through a lengthy
portfolio, donors understand what they are providing, not simply as eggs, but as a genetic canvas. As one donor stated,

…genetics plays a role, but I felt good I was offering a healthy you know, supposedly going to be a really attractive, you know, seems to be what the ladies at the clinic though, you know healthy, good looking, weight proportionate was a big deal, height-weight proportionate child and then that’s like your canvas right to raising your child maybe your own way…

It is through this understanding that their identity and sense of self is brought into the picture. As this same donor put it, meeting the recipients, would qualify as “the ultimate job interview” because they’re inspecting your genes for approval.

Through the process of selection and connection with the recipient, donors become personally invested in the egg donation process and are emotionally involved in the outcome. Their level of investment is clearly seen in the guilt that they feel if the process fails, and interestingly, the egg donor coordinator comes into the following excerpt in order to manage the donor’s guilt. One donor, when asked how she felt upon hearing that the egg donation failed to result in a pregnancy, responded,

I felt bad for them…. And you know [the egg donor program coordinator] she goes, nothing you did and of course you question yourself and it was like, my boyfriend was like why do you question yourself, and it’s like you just do, you know. No matter how much they say your eggs were as perfect as perfect can be, you still question if your genetics, you know were at fault and stuff like that…

Clearly this woman, as well as many of the others, was emotionally invested in the process. Their identity and sense of self has become embodied in their genes, which they hope to pass along to a deserving recipient. Upon failure they feel guilt, which they
express to the egg donor coordinator, who then steps in to help manage their emotions. One notable and striking deviation from all of the other donors that I interviewed, was the case of one woman who has donated three times. Of these three times, only one cycle resulted in a successful pregnancy. When asked how she felt about the fact that one child may have resulted from her donation, she claims “…actually my sarcastic side was like oh well I got 17,000 dollars and I got away with only having one kid out there.” In this case, although it might seem like this woman was not invested in the process and was only seeking money, she spoke at length about how being chosen made her feel beautiful and how when she was told she could no longer donate, due to questions about the fertility of her eggs, she said there was “definitely rejection” that she felt, specifically towards her body. Clearly, though she did not experience guilt over the failure of the procedures, her sense of self and identity were very much entangled in the process.

Conclusion

In Conclusion, donors’ understanding of their experience cannot be reduced to ‘gift’ language or a purely economic transaction.iii It is clear that throughout the process, most of the donors that I interviewed became linked to the recipient through a one-to-one connection and were invested in the procedure due to the perceived embodiment of their identity within their eggs. Both of these patterns, together, influence donors’ motivations to become more nuanced and more personalized, deemphasizing, for them, the economic compensation and the underlying market structure inherent within the egg donation process. Preliminary findings suggest that as they become integrated into the process, and particularly, as they are selected for donation by a recipient, they become invested in a one-to-one relationship, facilitated by the fertility organization, and many experience
feelings of social desirability and rejection depending on how the screening process goes, how quickly they are chosen, and assumptions that they make about the recipient (who they often do not meet). For future research, in addition to interviewing more women, I hope to further explore the role of the fertility agency staff in managing the egg donation experience.
Works Cited

1 Egg donation is a process whereby, women, typically between the ages of 20-30, go through hormonal treatment to overstimulate follicles within the ovaries to produce a large amount of eggs, which are then retrieved through an outpatient surgical procedure. The entire process lasts on average six weeks (Almeling, 2006).

2 In order to gain insight into how donors are selected both by the organization and by recipients, I had lengthy discussions with key staff at two fertility clinics and an egg donation agency and two psychiatrists who have been screening egg donors for over 10 years. In addition, I have conducted five months of participant observation at a fertility center in the Western United States that screens and matches donors with recipients.

3 A finding also found by Shaw (2008).