

# The Gendered Language of Gamete 'Donation'

by Caroline Rubin

Advertisements soliciting gamete donors have become such a ubiquitous fact of university life that for most college students, the brightly colored flyers proclaiming "Egg Donors Wanted!" and "Donate Your Sperm!" are hardly worth a second look. But we should stop to examine these seemingly innocuous pieces of bulletin board clutter, because beneath their glossy surface lie subtle messages about gender roles, sexuality, and morality. Here I wish to examine the public discourse surrounding gamete donation in accordance with the Foucauldian tradition of analyzing discourse as it relates to knowledge/power, a relation that is especially interesting as gamete donation discourse subtly reflects and reinforces the ideologies of wage labor and gender under capitalism, and a sexist sociobiology. I do not wish to make any implications about the motivations and experiences of actual gamete donors (for an ethnography of donor motivations and experiences, see Ragone 1999).

Gamete donation refers to the process by which men or women provide gametes (sperm or eggs, respectively) for the express purpose of creating a baby, often for an infertile couple. The use of the term "donation" to describe what is ostensibly a commercial transaction — the "donor" provides a product, the recipient pays for it, and the transaction is complete — attempts to mask the commodification of human tissue implied by these transactions, in much the same way blood and organ donation are described in terms of giving the "gift of life" to ameliorate societal discomfort with the "commodification of life" (Layne 1999:3). But unlike blood and organ donation, the tissue changing hands in gamete donation is gendered — androgynous donors do not provide generic gametes; men provide sperm to replace the sperm of other men, and women provide eggs to replace the eggs of other women. Emily Martin has shown that the language used to describe sperm and eggs in bioscientific discourse (e.g. in scientific textbooks and papers) is highly gendered (1991), and so it is not surprising to find that the everyday language surrounding sperm and egg donation is highly gendered as well. The types of ads used to recruit gamete donors, the criteria they must meet to donate, and the language surrounding gamete donation are all different for male versus female donors. These differences reflect pervasive societal views about sexuality, morality, and gender roles.

## *Gendered Advertisements: "Supplementing Your Income" versus "Donating Your Heart"*

Sperm and egg donors are targeted through different types of advertisements, and careful examination of these differences reveals their basis in both reflecting and reinforcing differential attitudes towards men and women as sexual beings and as potential parents.

Typically, ads soliciting sperm donors prominently feature the amount of money being offered per "donation," as well as a list of additional donor benefits offered by the particular agency, such as "minimal time commitment," "receive free health and genetic screening," "supplement your income," or "many extras, including movie tickets and gift certificates." These financial benefits are spoken about in terms of "earning" or "making," and correspondingly, a quick internet search of "sperm donation" produces links not just to sperm banks, but to job listings. Sperm donation ads are also typically very illustrative, and often feature decorative cartoon images of sperm intended to be amusing or otherwise attention-grabbing. For example, a recurring MIT campus newspaper advertisement reads "got sperm?" in a large font, but the question mark has been replaced with the image of a sperm with a tail curved into the shape of a question mark. A poster on the T features a large dollar sign being swarmed with sperm on all sides, similar to the way sperm are typically portrayed as swarming an egg (Figure 1).

In contrast, ads soliciting egg donors typically emphasize the philanthropic aspects of egg donation, with phrases such as "Help loving couples who want to have a baby!" or "You're not just donating your eggs, you're donating your heart." Instead of offering commercial incentives such as free medical exams and movie tickets, egg donation agencies offer emotional incentives such as being able to choose the couple

receiving the eggs and whether to be a known or anonymous donor. The monetary offer in egg donation ads is not an "earnings," it is a "compensation," and internet queries for "egg donation" produce many egg donation agencies, but no job listings. Egg donation ads do not feature pithy catchphrases, and they certainly do not feature cartoon eggs in the shape of a dollar sign. If they feature any non-verbal component at all it is a picture of a cooing baby, often accompanied by a portion of a smiling adult female face (Figure 2), a type of familial portrait that is altogether lacking from sperm donation ads.

Why is it that sperm donation ads use amusing cartoons to target men looking to "earn" a little extra spending money, but egg donation ads use photos of babies to target women looking to help infertile couples "realize their dreams", and only incidentally receive monetary "compensation"?

A simplistic explanation is that different procedures are required to donate sperm versus eggs; it is difficult to imagine the necessity of "compensating" a man for the inconvenience of masturbating to produce donor sperm, but easy to imagine why women, who must undergo invasive and unpleasant medical and surgical interventions to produce donor eggs, deserve to be compensated for their efforts. But this difference cannot explain the reverse asymmetry in remuneration language - if men earn money for the sperm they produce, why cannot women earn money for their eggs?

A deeper factor contributing to this difference is rooted in the historical Euro-American ideal of "separate spheres" for men and women, which suggests that commodity exchange and wage labor should occur exclusively in the public sphere of men, while reproduction and family should be located securely in the private sphere of women. While women are no longer confined to the private sphere and men are no longer exempt from it, ideology does not always evolve at the same rate as the behavior it purports to explain. Accordingly, male gamete donors are targeted with advertising techniques similar to those used to market any public sphere commodity, and are told they will earn money based on how much product they produce. Women are targeted with private sphere images of babies and families, and told they will be compensated for their inconvenience, not paid for their product (Ragone 1999). This rhetoric of "compensation", however, is clearly only a superficial attempt to obscure that donated eggs, like donated sperm, are bought and sold on the market like any other commodity. If the remuneration offered to egg donors was only compensation for their inconvenience, we would not see ranges in remuneration offers from \$5,000 for "average" eggs to \$100,00 for the eggs of a woman who is "5'9 or taller, Caucasian, very attractive (modeling experience is a plus)...college educated, [and with] a history of participating in athletics or dance" (<http://www.elitedonors.com/index3.html>), since surely the latter woman is not inconvenienced twenty times more by egg donation than the former. It is also telling that the payment scheme at the first egg donation facilities in the early 1980s was not a flat compensation, but a base fee plus a bonus for every egg that was successfully recovered (Corea 1985). Again, it is difficult to imagine that a woman is proportionately inconvenienced based on how many eggs she produces, given that the procedure she must undergo to produce them is the same if she ends up with zero eggs or with twenty.

The separate spheres argument alone cannot explain the difference in donation language, however, since even if men as workers belong in the public sphere of work, their sperm belongs in the private sphere of reproduction. Yet as we have seen, male gametes can more easily make the transition from private to public sphere than female gametes can. To understand the origin of this difference, it is necessary to examine the screening process male and female gamete donors must go through, and the qualities of what makes a "proper" sperm or egg donor these processes reveal.

#### *Gendered Donation Criteria: Seeking Income versus Accepting Compensation*

As we have seen, ads soliciting gamete donors target the financial interests of men and the humanitarian interests of women. However, this distinction does not stop at recruiting donors; it is also used as a selection criteria for weeding out "appropriate" donors from the sea of "inappropriate" ones. While both egg and sperm donation applications include questions about physical features, college attendance, occupation, and medical history, only egg donor applications include questions such as "Why would you like to become a donor?" ([conceptualoptions.com](http://conceptualoptions.com)), or "Please describe how religion affects your egg

donation" (aplusegg.com). Women's answers to these questions are instrumental to whether or not they will pass the screening (Ragone 1999); women who express any motive besides helping infertile families are routinely not selected as donors, despite the fact that after being accepted as donors, 76 % of women admit that their decision to donate was at least in part financially motivated (ibid.).

Donation agencies are not unique in questioning the motives of egg, but not sperm, donors. The rising "compensation" rates paid to egg donors have led to public concerns about the ethics of paying money for gametes (e.g. Kolata 1998, Irvine 2007), but largely, if not entirely, absent from these discussions is the fact that sperm donors also receive money in exchange for gametes, a practice which both predates and outnumbers egg donation for money. Tellingly, the Wikipedia entry on egg donation includes a subheading on "Donor Motivation" (with "altruism" listed first), while the entry on sperm donation does not.

Why this insistence that egg donation be motivated by altruistic instead of financial interests? A partial explanation can be found in the separate spheres ideology previously discussed, and the resulting "moral threat" of allowing the "invasion of the human and sacralized world of kinship by economic principles deemed appropriate only to the world of things" (Kopytoff 2004: 272). But why then is only selling eggs a moral threat, and not selling sperm? The answer lies in the gendered division of reproductive roles. Motherhood is seen as central to womanhood to a much larger extent than fatherhood is to manhood, and female sexuality is seen as much more directly linked to female reproduction than male sexuality is to male reproduction — hence the difficulty of members of the "voluntary motherhood" movement of the early twentieth century in promoting a female-controlled method of birth control, despite the availability and moral acceptance of male-controlled methods (Gordon 1974). Popular scientific discourse is full of evolutionary accounts that attempt to naturalize this socially created distinction. Many people are by now familiar with the sociobiological narrative of the prolific caveman looking to spread his seed as far and wide as possible evolving into the modern sexually voracious and paternally challenged man, while the cavewoman attempts to save her limited reproductive resources for a powerful mate and evolves into the contemporary sexually choosy and inherently maternal woman (e.g. Rhoads 2004). This narrative, combined with the fact that sperm donations are produced through masturbation and egg donations are not, explains the ease with which sperm can easily leave the private sphere while eggs cannot — men's sperm were already in the public sphere to some extent, or at least their sexuality was, because it is assumed to be too voracious to be satisfied by just one woman, neatly confined within the private sphere. Women's sexuality, on the other hand, is confined within the private sphere (or must be made to appear that way), thereby making the free market availability of their fertility (and the sexuality it is frequently conflated with) morally unacceptable. To further illustrate this point, let us turn to the popular discourse surrounding gamete donation.

#### *Gendered Discourse: "Manly Urges" versus "Prostituted Maternity"*

The conflation of fertility with sexuality pervades the popular discourse of gamete donation, often in quite overt ways. Cartoons depicting the sexual voraciousness of sperm donors and the sexual satisfaction they derive from donation are omnipresent (Figure 3), as is sperm donation-themed pornography. An article on the shortage of sperm donors in the UK is topped with a photograph of an attractive woman wearing a tight-fitting shirt that says "we want your sperm" (Figure 4), and a fake advertisement to recruit sperm donors in the UK features pictures of four women and is titled "These women want to have your babies" (Figure 5). These cartoons and ads "make sense" because they appeal to the notion that sperm donors, as men, are motivated by a primitive urge to impregnate as many (hopefully attractive) women as possible, without having to commit to fatherhood. The caption of the fake advertisement directly appeals to this logic by listing potential reasons for donating sperm: "Maybe you want to become a father with none of the moral or financial responsibilities. It could be because you're a man. And a man's biological imperative is to carry on his legacy." In contrast, cartoons about egg donors, in addition to being less prevalent than cartoons about sperm donors, do not make light of the donors' overactive sexuality and reproductive urges. Instead they ridicule the improper maternity of women who donate eggs, such as one cartoon showing a woman in a hospital bed being presented with a slip of paper by a doctor exclaiming, "Congratulations! It's a cheque" (Figure 6). The clear message here is that women who donate their eggs are prostituting their maternity, which is in line with Helena Ragone's observation that egg donors do occasionally feel "trashy"

and "like a prostitute" after completing the donation cycle, often because of the reaction of their friends and family (1999). So far as I have been able to ascertain, there is no niche market of egg donation pornography, nor any fake egg donor advertisements with pictures of handsome men labeled "These men want to impregnate you." This is not surprising, as such jokes would not make sense within the narrative of women as strict gatekeepers of their reproductivity and men as the invaders trying to break down those gates with a battering ram. Within this cultural logic, women who not only voluntarily provide their reproductive capabilities to strangers, but do so for money, can readily be interpreted as prostitutes (it is surely not accidental that the first woman to serve as a contracted surrogate mother in the UK was indeed an actual prostitute [Corea 1985]). Therefore, egg donors must be "compensated" instead of "paid" not only to avoid allowing the sacred private sphere to leak into the unholy public sphere, but to attempt to minimize the implication that by selling their reproductive ability, egg donors are prostituting themselves.

*Conclusion: Towards a new direction in gamete donation discourse*

Gamete donation is like other types of bodily tissue donation in that it relies heavily on narratives of gift-giving to avoid being associated with the morally distressing idea of commodification of the human body. But unlike organ or blood donation, the tissue exchanged in gamete donation is given in exchange for money, and furthermore, it is sex-specific tissue. Accordingly, the gifting rhetoric used to make gamete donation morally acceptable differs for egg donors versus sperm donors, from the advertisements used to recruit them, to the application process they must go through to be deemed acceptable donors, to the public discourse surrounding their donations. Egg donors are recruited with images of babies and families and appeals to altruism, while sperm donors are recruited with cartoon sperm and promises of high earnings potential and other personal benefits. Egg donors must profess a desire to help infertile couples start a family (even if in reality they are financially motivated) if they are to be accepted into a donation program, whereas sperm donors must simply have their medical history check out. Egg donors receive "compensation" for their inconvenience, despite the logical inconsistency of greater compensations for more desirable egg donors, although they are not actually more inconvenienced by the procedure than less desirable donors. In contrast, sperm donors receive a straightforward payment for a product. These gender differences reflect underlying differences in gender roles and expectations for men and women. Historically men have been the sole members of the public sphere, where business exchanges take place, while women have been confined to the private sphere of reproduction and family — hence the need to prevent the entrance of women's reproductive abilities into the public sphere by narrating egg donors as philanthropists who happen to be compensated for their trouble. But the separate spheres ideology alone cannot account for why men's reproductive abilities can so easily transition to the public sphere. To understand this phenomenon it is necessary to understand the cultural logic which holds that men are driven by primitive urges to spread their seed as far as possible (possibly through sperm donation), while women with similar urges are sexually deviant, and women who do so for money are prostitutes. This cultural logic is pervasive to the point of hegemony, but perhaps one way to start undermining this double standard for men and women is to start questioning the gendered discourse of gamete donation, so that one day women can unabashedly "earn" money for providing their eggs to others just as easily as men currently earn it for providing their sperm.



Earn up to  
**\$ 900**  
per month

Minimal time commitment

Receive free medical and genetic screenings

We offer many extras including movie tickets and gift certificates



**SPERM DONORS NEEDED**  
in **CAMBRIDGE, MA**

Help prospective parents realize the dream of starting a family

Earn up to  
**\$900**  
per month

**APPLY ONLINE**  
**www.SPERMBANK.com**

Applicants must be 18-38 years of age

**Figure 1.** Advertisements recruiting sperm donors. The dollar sign in the ad to the right is surrounded with cartoon sperm.



**EGG DONORS**  
Healthy females  
Donate to infertile  
Starting **COMPENSATION**

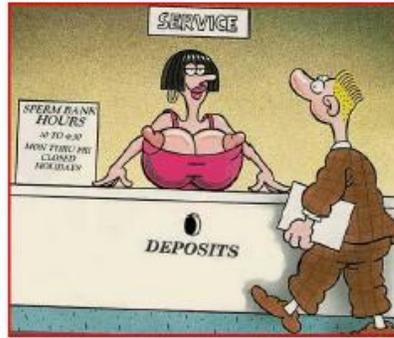
Optional Egg Donors  
\$10-\$15000 for qualified,  
applicants. All Ethnicities  
welcome. Special  
Rates & Packages

**Partnering for Parenthood**  
**SURROGACY & EGG DONATION**

**Conceptual Options**  
*Partnering for Parenthood*

**Figure 2.** Ads aimed at recruiting egg donors.

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**Figure 3.** Cartoons about sperm donation. The caption for the leftmost one reads “Goodness Mr. Melrose... We certainly have been busy, haven’t we?” The sign on the desk in the middle one reads “sperm bank hours,” and the speech bubble in the rightmost one reads “Excuse me, could you show me the way to the sperm bank?”



**Figure 4.** The illustration from an article on the sperm donor shortage in the UK. The woman’s tshirt reads “We Want Your Sperm.” Source: [http://www.benettontalk.com/2007/05/sperm\\_crisis.html](http://www.benettontalk.com/2007/05/sperm_crisis.html)



**Figure 5.** Fake ad soliciting sperm donors. The caption reads “Here in the UK, infertility is on the increase and you have an unlimited amount of sperm. So why not donate? You might already have had the pleasure of watching your own child come into the world. You might want to share this with others, let them experience the joys of parenthood. Maybe you want to become a father with none of the moral or financial responsibilities. It could be because you’re a man. And a man’s biological imperative is to carry on his legacy. You may simply like the idea of “little you” running around out there. Or you might just need the cash. And let’s just say, you won’t come away empty handed.” Source:

[http://bp2.blogger.com/\\_qyPCkmvuyFI/RbSa1NRUP2I/AAAAAAAAAE4/7Gam0zbxMGw/s1600-h/gyskercam\\_paign.jpg](http://bp2.blogger.com/_qyPCkmvuyFI/RbSa1NRUP2I/AAAAAAAAAE4/7Gam0zbxMGw/s1600-h/gyskercam_paign.jpg)



**Figure 6.** Cartoon about egg donation. The sign above the woman’s bed says “egg donation clinic,” and the doctor is saying “Congratulations! It’s a cheque.”

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