

# Semen as Gift, Semen as Goods: Reproductive Workers and the Market in Altruism

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U.C. Men, Get Paid for Something You're Already Doing! Call the Sperm Bank of California.  
(Advertisement, *Daily Californian*)

This advertisement, found in a university newspaper, for recruiting semen donors points to several issues central to debates surrounding the commodification of genetic material and the body as a site of labor: (1) the cultural assumptions underlying donor recruitment and screening; (2) the bioethical issues surrounding paid versus 'altruistically given' donations; (3) the role of sexuality in the reproductive industry. The ways in which these issues are addressed and regulated are by no means uniform throughout the sperm-banking industry, and point to the multiple complex ethical issues surrounding the commodification of the body and its products. This article will explore how cultural interpretations of genetic inheritance influence the screening of sperm donors<sup>1</sup> – by sperm banks and their clients – and the market for donor sperm.<sup>2</sup> This article draws on fieldwork in sperm banks, interviews with single women and lesbian couples having children through donor insemination (DI), and interviews with semen donors. →

Mary Douglas (1966) has discussed the parallels between the body and the social hierarchy, and how pollution beliefs – particularly those surrounding the boundaries of the body and exchanges of bodily fluids – are linked to a system of morality. The buying and selling of sperm in many ways violates, yet simultaneously reproduces, this social/moral order. For example, the ability to purchase sperm in order to have children defies traditional notions of family and →

procreation within the bounds of marriage. However, the way in which donors are selected in many ways replicates these values: women typically choose men who are of their same ethnic and educational background – the kind of man they would choose to be with if they were to be with a man. Repositories, too, select donors who fit a particular profile: men who appear intelligent, educated, moderately attractive and ‘altruistic’. Sperm donation, then, provides a window to reproductive values and a social/moral system, as well as the dynamics between culture and biology or ‘biosociality’ (Rabinow, 1992).

The sperm-banking industry and the market for sperm are both heavily influenced by the notion that some traits – social or physical – are more desirable than others, and that these traits reside in the sperm. Semen is a vehicle for the transmission of genetic material; as such, various complex meanings – biological, evolutionary, historical, cultural, political, technological, sexual – intersect at this particular site. The notions of what semen is thought to contain affects how and what (or whose) semen is being transacted. Culturally held perceptions of (and preoccupations with) genetics, with sperm as a transmitter of genetic material, shape the ways in which potential donors are screened and their semen sold.

Indeed, these notions of what semen (or ova, for that matter) contains, coupled with cultural values surrounding the reproduction of certain types of individuals over others, affects the entire market for human gametes.

Technological reproduction is a multi-billion dollar per year industry (US Congress OTA, 1988: 61–71). This industry is not limited to the sale of gametes (semen or ova), but rather includes the entire gamut of conceptive technologies, including a variety of treatments for infertility. Becker (2000) discusses how couples seeking medical treatment for infertility become consumers of these technologies. Kimbrell (1993) provides a commentary on the design and commodification of life, through the sale of body parts, gametes and blood. Here, he demonstrates how the market – through technology – is increasingly encroaching upon the human body, forcing us to redefine life, death, personhood and property, usually at the expense of ethics. On a parallel note, Duster (1990) demonstrates the relationship between genetics and society, documenting shifting notions of heritability and their infiltration into popular discourse. Given the marketability of the human body (and what it produces) and current emphasis on the dubious heritability of a plethora of traits, one can make the argument that these perceived ‘genetic traits’ have economic value – and are marketable. The semen-donor, then, is viewed as the prototype for the child that will be produced by his sperm. For example, one single woman, Sandy, told me how she screened out a particular donor:

There was one guy who had a really high sperm count and he was Mexican, which I thought about because my daughter's dad is Mexican . . . but I read his narrative and he liked to collect

guns and drive cars and I'm like 'No, I don't think so.' I just don't need a little member of the NRA running around. So I'm thinking these things aren't genetically linked, of course they're not. But, I'm thinking to myself, 'Well to some extent, why play with it?'

When this informant imagined the person resulting from the sperm of this particular donor, she envisions ‘a little member of the NRA’, despite her acknowledgment that gun-collecting traits are not genetically linked. She was afraid that to have a child with this man's sperm would result in reproducing a type of person she would not want to see more of in her social world. She finally decided on the sperm of a man who had completed graduate school, someone who was more like herself.

Throughout the sperm-banking industry, as well as among consumers who purchase semen for insemination, certain donor characteristics are thought to be of higher value than others and to reside in the sperm itself. Good physical health is of primary importance; without it, one would not normally pass screening procedures for becoming a donor. Beyond that, the perceived value of a donor becomes more complex: physical traits like height, weight, hair/eye color; social traits like education, ‘personality’, motivation for becoming a donor, willingness to be identified; and more blurry traits like ethnicity, intelligence and altruism have varying values depending upon both the repository doing the screening and consumer demands. The question here is: how do locally held perceptions of what semen is thought to contain affect its exchange value?

Emily Martin has discussed how the reproductive metaphors in scientific language are gendered – sperm is depicted as the aggressor and the egg viewed as the passive recipient – based on stereotypical male–female roles (1991). Similarly, repository employees, as well as recipients, attribute a variety of traits to donor sperm, assigning it a personality, which would presumably be exhibited by the offspring of that sperm, regardless of the biological contributions of the mother or the environmental conditions in which the offspring was to be raised. For example, in the case of Sandy, above, the impact of the imagined traits of the sperm is elevated, whereas the social and biological contributions of the mother are minimized in relation to the eventual personality of the child. Similarly, a lesbian couple told me how they chose a donor:

We wanted someone bright. I wanted someone tall. I think it's an advantage in life. All of them have to be healthy so that sort of goes without saying, but after health came brightness. But, there were certain professions that we thought were smarter than others. Some people seemed too nerdy, you know they played badminton or didn't drink coffee or something. From the information you get on the piece of paper [the donor profile] you just think the doctor who plays basketball and drinks two cups of coffee a day sounds more like our type than the book-keeper who doesn't drink coffee and plays badminton. . . . The donor we finally picked was a doctor, 6 foot 4 inches, played basketball and drank coffee. We felt like if we met him, we could relate to him, and maybe our child would inherit some of his qualities that we liked.

The sperm of the educated man, then, has more social and emotional value than does the sperm of a man who appears less educated and has hobbies of questionable social value. The way in which women choose their donors based on their own interpretations of what are valuable genetic traits to pass on to future offspring is what I have referred to elsewhere, as 'grass roots eugenics' (Tober, 1998), which also has an impact on the emotional and commodity quality of donor sperm.

### Gifts, Commodities and Seminal Value

A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference. (Marx, 1906: 41)

Throughout the anthropological literature, gifts have been discussed in terms of how social relations are formed and solidified through the acts of gift giving. Drawing on Mauss (1954), the gift itself is not considered important; what is significant is the system of complex social relations one enters into through the acts of giving and receiving. Furthermore, gifts are typically distinguished from commodities, items which are bought and sold, where social relations between persons are disguised behind the transfer of money and goods. Appadurai (1986) has critiqued the simplification of gift/commodity distinctions in much of anthropological writing on the subject (e.g. Dumont, 1980; Hyde, 1979; Taussig, 1980), and has offered (along with Bourdieu, 1977) the notion that gift exchange is a particular form of the circulation of commodities. For example, as Mauss (1954: 77) states:

The producer who carries on exchange feels . . . that he is exchanging more than a product of hours of working time, but that he is giving something of himself – his time, his life. Thus he wishes to be rewarded, even if only moderately, for this gift. To refuse him this reward is to make him become idle or less productive.

Here, Mauss does not make a distinction between the gift, and the fact that the labor that goes into the gift is bought and paid for – this is especially true with sperm 'donation'.

Transactions involving the giving, buying and selling of semen conflate the distinction between gift and commodity exchanges. Semen, as a product that is bought and sold, marketed, categorized, screened, etc. appears to be a commodity. The woman purchases the semen, takes her product home, and hopefully gets the desired result – a pregnancy and a child. These transactions, however, though attempting to deny social relations of 'fatherhood', cannot escape them. First, the donor who provides semen for a woman's child becomes the subject of fantasy

and fetish – some sort of social relationship exists at least in the realm of the imagination and certainly at the realm of the biological should a child be conceived. The economic and emotional value of the imagined donor varies depending upon the traits he is thought to possess. Second, the recipient may, at some point, have some sort of contact with the semen 'donor' who often has the option of entering into a social relationship with the offspring as the child's biological father, albeit a limited one. Thus there is the possibility for a delayed gift/counter-gift interaction that is not usually present in the circulation of commodities. Third, the notion of semen as commodity is further confused by the fact that the recipients themselves perceive the donor as having given them a precious 'gift' (a child, or even the potential to have a child), which the women happened to have paid for. Semen transactions, then, further confuse the gift/commodity distinction.

Adoption parallels – and extends – these same issues; only here actual children are the commodities rather than the genetic material that can result in a child. Zelizer (1985) analyzes the interactions between market or price, and personal and moral values in reference to shifting cultural interpretations of childhood since the Industrial Revolution – a time when the economic value of a child's contribution to the household disappeared, but the emotional value of the child increased. In regard to adoption, and a black market in babies, she discusses a contradiction between a cultural system that 'declared children priceless emotional assets, and a social arrangement that treated them as cash commodities' (1985: 201). The social and legal debates surrounding the buying and selling of babies through adoption agencies and independent agents centered on conflicting themes of the market needing to meet consumer demands, and the moral values which emphasize parenting as a gift that should be motivated by the altruism of all parties, not by profit. The child itself – or the potential to create a child – has an economic value that is based solely on the emotional rewards, not on the potential to contribute economically to the family.

In discussing the relative value of commodities in economic exchange, Appadurai argues that politics 'creates the link between exchange and value'. The value of property or objects is not inherent in the thing itself, but rather is determined by the 'judgment made about them by subjects'. He further argues that 'commodities, like persons, have social lives' (1986: 3). But, how is the value of semen as both gift and commodity determined when the product is not only a product, but also is something which comes from a person and aids in creating other persons who will, themselves, be engaged in social relations, and who may at some point enter into a social relationship with the biological donor who sired them? Furthermore, how is the value of semen connected to the judgments

subjects make about what constitutes a quality person? This comes down to the question of what is the *phenomenology of exchange* when the commodity that is purchased enters into and becomes part of one's body, and eventually becomes another person, with his/her own social history. As Marx notes, commodities are transformed through the process of exchange, using the example that wood is transformed into a table by the person who purchases it (1906: 82). With the exchange of semen this is no less true: with seminal exchange the gamete can be transformed by the woman who purchases it into a child. The fact that the product is a child, a person, rather than a material object like a table, makes the significance of social relations in this form of commodity exchange more pronounced.

The significance of social relations in semen exchange is quite complex. Typically, unless it is a woman using a known donor, the exchange of semen is between donor and sperm bank, and sperm bank and recipient. The buyer and the seller of the product are not immediately involved in the act of exchange with one another. Despite the physical distance between the seller and the purchaser, purchased semen is often perceived as a very intimate 'gift' for the women who have bought it, and the donor is perceived as having given the woman the 'gift of life', a child. Women express their unending gratitude for this man whom they have never met because he gave them something they consider precious. Despite the fact that semen transactions are commodity-mediated exchanges, women typically perceive this exchange as a type of gifting, and fantasize about how alliances with the donor could be forged in the future, when the child reaches the age at which a donor's identity may be released. For example, one informant told me how she often had fantasies that she would get pregnant by her donor and would day-dream about standing with her mythical daughter and her mythical donor, together at her mythical daughter's graduation. Thus the possibility for social interaction through gift exchange is both delayed and is the subject of fantasy and fetishism.

Despite the commodity-quality of semen, there exists a strong motivation to emphasize its value as a purely altruistically given gift among individual women who purchase it, as well as among sperm-bank representatives. For women, the altruistic character of the donor is important. It gives them something positive to tell their children about the man who helped to make their lives possible. Being able to tell one's child that their donor wanted to help people have families has much greater emotional value than having to tell them that their donor needed the money. Hence, when women decide on a donor they often look for cues in the donor profiles that will tell them that the donor was motivated – at least partially – by a desire to help others.

The donation/sale of semen by the donor to the repository is on a continuum. Below, I will focus on the perceptions of donor altruism and payment of money for semen in three sperm repositories where I conducted fieldwork: The Sperm Bank of California (SBC), Rainbow Flag Health Services (RF) and Repository for Germinal Choice (RGC).

### Transacting Semen: Three Sperm Repositories

Semen donors receive financial remuneration to varying degrees. Some repositories do not pay their donors at all; some offer very little and define payment in terms of reimbursing donors for their time and trouble; and some pay donors between \$40 and \$50 per semen sample. In all of these repositories – whether donors were paid or not – the idea of financially compensating a donor for providing semen is not neutral. I will now explore the varying degrees to which semen is donated/sold, and how sperm repository representatives interpret the meaning of exchanging money for human gametes.

#### *The Sperm Bank of California*

The Sperm Bank of California (SBC) was founded in 1982 by Barbara Raboy, and was the first to cater to single women and lesbians, as well as to offer donor identity release. Their mission is to 'challenge fundamental prejudices and exclusionary policies of the sperm banking and medical communities' (Sperm Bank of California, 1991 Annual Report). They were founded on the principle of 'reproductive freedom for all individuals regardless of marital status, sexual preferences, age, race, or religion' (SBC, 1991 Annual Report: 2). Their initial fees include a \$400 application fee, plus approximately \$108 per vial.

I originally interviewed Barbara, a feminist, and founder of the Sperm Bank of California (SBC), in 1991. At that time the SBC was housed in Oakland, California, in an office within an old Victorian-style building, with hardwood floors and a community women's clinic ambience. It has since moved to a relatively new office building in Berkeley, with a buzzer for entry. The SBC is also now a subsidiary of 'Reproductive Technologies, Inc.'. The environment now is much more clinical and 'professional-looking', with more distinct offices and private rooms, where women wait to pick up their orders.

Sperm-banking, here, is considered to be a business, which is driven by consumer demand. For example, as Barbara states:

One thing that I find very interesting is the strong influence on how technology gets presented in our society as the people who are using it. Our approach is, you pay attention to your users and they're going to drive the technology.



Barbara addresses a very important point here: that it is the users – the consumers – who ultimately determine the ways in which a technology is going to be utilized. The use of technology is sustained by, and responds to, the market and consumer demand. With sperm-banking, then, even though the original intended market was infertile, heterosexual, married couples, it has become increasingly popular among single women and lesbian couples who don't have regular access to semen.

Like many other sperm repositories, donors here are paid for their time and their 'donations'. A paid sperm bank donor can either be 'unknown anonymous' or 'unknown identity release', which means that the donor agrees to have his identity released to the offspring when the offspring reaches a certain age (usually 18). In fact, SBC was the first sperm bank to offer donor identity release, an option that several other repositories now offer.

The term 'donor', however, is really not accurate in reference to those who are paid for their contributions, because their semen is not donated – it is sold. Paid donors are often recruited through college newspapers. For example, refer again to the ad in a campus newspaper mentioned at the beginning of the article. This advertisement specifically connects monetary reward for one aspect of male sexuality which produces a certain product – semen. Paid donors become part of a market in which their ability to bring themselves to climax produces a commodity which is bought and sold, thereby linking their sexuality to the market for genetic material. In regard to paying donors Barbara explained, during our 1991 interview:

I think most men do this for the money – we have a recession to thank for that. I think all the time the rationale changes, but that is a key piece in this. Still, you get a sense from this process that there are major commitments involved as a donor and that they can't take it lightly as 'just a job'. Because we constantly need updated information from them and ongoing blood tests, so it's pretty involved. They deserve to be compensated for that. We pay donors on a sliding scale. The highest rate is \$40–\$50 for each specimen. It's up to the men how much they want to get paid. Some donors don't want to be paid at all, some want a lot. For some guys, they really have a hard time with the concept of selling sperm – that's not why they're doing it – but many of them still need the money.

Although the paid donor is primarily motivated by cash reward – approximately \$50 per specimen – they typically express other factors in their decision to become donors as well; for example, wanting to help other people have children, a secondary altruism. The donors who express such 'higher reasons' for becoming donors are thought to have more value than those who are 'just in it for the money'. A 'good donor,' according to SBC representatives, is someone who is committed, who has thought the process through, and is doing it for 'altruistic' as well as monetary reasons.

Many donors take on a semi-professional status. That is, they make regular donations (numerous times a month) for usually at least a year-long commitment. These usually enter into a long-term relationship with the sperm bank – keeping them abreast of things that might affect the quality of their semen. Barbara told me she works to gain this kind of trust and commitment from her donors, as well as her clients:

You keep seeing the same donors over and over again. One gentleman, for example, has been with us and he's due for his annual work-up, so he's going to go see our physician for his physical. This is exactly what you want with your donors because you develop this kind of partnership with them over time and you get to know them really well.

This notion of building a partnership or a relationship with the donors was present at all the sperm banks where I conducted interviews. The notion that repository representatives must be able to 'get to know' their donors, to build a relationship with them, to be able to trust them – to have a commitment from them – is considered extremely important to the smooth operation of the repository, as well as in establishing trust in the man providing his semen. Because semen, as a commodity, also contains potential risk, for example of passing on sexually transmitted as well as genetic diseases, the ability to trust donors is of utmost importance. Indeed, one sperm bank, California Cryobank, was recently sued by a recipient couple for providing semen which carried a genetically linked kidney disease which was transmitted to their daughter (*Johnson v. California Cryobank*).

Some in the sperm-banking industry feel that a paid donor has a vested interest in concealing personal information; for example, their health or sexual practices, or family history of genetic diseases. Screening of donors is important to guarantee a lower level of risk for both the recipient and the impending offspring. Among sperm repositories that pay their donors, it is thought that these screening procedures are enough to ensure the product's safety.

#### *Rainbow Flag Health Services*

Housed in an old Victorian building in Oakland, California, Rainbow Flag (RF), founded in 1995, is a sperm bank serving the lesbian/gay community. It has completely open policies regarding donor identity release when the offspring reaches 3 months old, and encourages contact between the donor and his offspring. Their founding goal is to build a 'stronger Lesbian and Gay community by assisting Lesbians and Gay Men to bring children into their families'.

Rainbow Flag provides minimal payment to *voluntary donors*. This form of financial reward is not viewed as payment per se, but is seen as reimbursement for the time, inconvenience and 'labor' expended by the donor to produce the product. As Leland, the founder, explains:

When you pay a donor you get into the whole thing about what is the morality about paying someone for their reproductive tissues. Why is that different than paying someone to donate a kidney, for example? Now I do pay my donors, but it's a very small amount and it's primarily a stipend for their inconvenience in terms of getting here. It's a maximum of \$200 which comes at the end of the program. They come here and they give all these donations and they go through physical exams and have all this blood drawn, they get poked and prodded and six months later they come back and get their blood drawn again and after that then they get their \$200. For a lot of them that travel significant distances they're clearly not in it for the money.

Leland expresses the notion that there is a limit to what a donor can be paid and still not be 'in it for the money' – still be a legitimate donor, rather than someone who exploits his own genetic material for financial gain (although, he fails to point out that he, in not paying his donors, thereby increases his profits from the sale of their semen). Furthermore, this informant mentions that if a donor is getting paid for their product that he has a vested interest in lying about any diseases he may carry. For this repository, financial compensation of donors is considered to undermine the relationship of trust seen as necessary between donors and sperm banks. Furthermore, this informant mentions that to pay donors for their semen is unethical, like selling a kidney.

Leland further makes the connection between financial remuneration and a lack of trust:

Most sperm banks don't have very good controls on their own system because if you're a sperm donor and you're being paid \$50 a shot you have a financial interest. So what if your family is rife with diabetes or heart disease? You lie, you say, 'I have none of that in my family', and no one is ever going to find out. Well, if my guys lie to me, they're going to meet this woman and if they find out that their child has a genetic disorder, and therefore the donor might too, they have been defrauded and that would probably be actionable. So, actually I have better controls on making sure that my guys are honest than the rest of the industry does.

Leland thus equates non-compensation of donors with trust, and having better control over his donors. For him, payment of money for semen makes the entire process suspect. Although, and this is an important point, many men find the genetic payoff – and the opportunity to have children involved in their lives – to be at least equally as important as financial compensation. This desire for social and genetic continuance can also be motivation enough to lie about one's medical history, despite the fact that they will eventually get to know their offspring and his/her mother. When donating, men don't usually think of the possibility that they will pass negative traits on to their children. For example, one informant, who defines himself as bi-polar (manic-depressive), is a known donor. When I asked him if he was concerned about his offspring being bi-polar he stated:

That really wasn't a concern of mine when I agreed to be a donor. I don't even really see being bi-polar as being that much of a problem, or any reason not to have kids. It's pretty much managed with medication. When I'm having an episode, it just makes life more colorful.

For this donor, being bi-polar was not enough of a problem, despite its heritability, to be a reason to not have children. Likewise, sperm bank donors with a variety of disorders in their medical histories – including cancer, diabetes, heart disease, alcoholism, etc. – do not usually perceive these afflictions as having enough of an impact on their lives to warrant not reproducing. Furthermore, many men may be carriers of genetic diseases of which they are not aware, and which are not routinely screened for at sperm repositories, unless they are predisposed to genetic ailments because of their ethnicity (for example Jews and Tay Sachs disease, or African-Americans and Sickle Cell Anemia). Thus, Leland's perception that he has 'better controls' over his donors does not appear to be accurate.

#### *The Hermann J. Mueller Repository for Germinal Choice*

Robert Graham founded Herman J. Mueller Repository for Germinal Choice (RGC) in 1980. RGC was originally a joint effort between Hermann Mueller, a geneticist, and Robert Graham, a businessman. Mueller's initial idea was to positively influence the human gene pool by promoting the reproduction of intelligent, altruistic men, whose semen would be banked until after their death, when it could truly be decided whether or not they had led exceptional lives. Graham was going to provide the funding for the project, but Mueller decided to abandon it because he felt that Graham placed too much emphasis on intelligence and too little emphasis on altruism in the recruitment of semen donors. Mueller died in 1978, and the repository opened its doors for business in 1980, under the founding of Graham, who initially only recruited Nobel Laureate donors. Graham did, however, implement the policy that donors were not to be paid for their donations; for Graham, this was evidence enough of donor altruism.

Robert Graham died in 1997, and for several years the repository was funded by the Society for the Advancement of Man, and run by Gina, whom I interviewed in 1998. The repository has since ceased operation. Since she was not the founder, but rather just worked there, her personal philosophies regarding reproduction were not completely consistent with the founding and operating principles of the repository. Yet she was still well versed in what those principles were. The following is her understanding of how the repository was founded and developed:

They started out with the concept that they wanted the 'best and the brightest' [donors] that they could come up with, and they thought that Nobelists would best fit that category. Then they found that these gentlemen were all older and their sperm was not freezing well, so they spread out and diversified. Now their criteria is 'great health, high IQ, and high achievement'; now, it's pretty open in terms of what that means, but it still means we're recruiting the top 5 percent of our population. Their idea was to encourage the best men in our population to have more offspring than they normally would have and to give those children the best possible start

in life. So they heavily screened both the donors and the clients; although, with the clients we're a little more flexible . . .

This bank stores and sells the sperm of 'men in excellent health who in addition . . . demonstrate great potential. Always these men have high intelligence.' The philosophy of this bank is to 'put more genes from some of our best men into the human gene pool', and to 'give babies the best possible start in life'. As mentioned above, only married couples, where the woman is under 38 and has written consent of her husband, may purchase sperm from this bank. The initial costs at this bank include a \$100 application fee, a \$200 cryogenic tank fee and a \$3000 program fee. These fees include three vials of semen per month for up to six months. This repository does not serve single women and lesbians.

At the RGC, it is a matter of strict policy that donors are to receive no financial compensation. As Robert Graham states in a video-recorded interview:

We absolutely do not pay our donors. That is our policy. Our foundation is trying to find donors who are altruistic, who can be trusted, and who are doing this so they can pass their good genes down to future generations. We are trying to promote altruism, and believe this can be passed down through the gene pool.

For this bank, then, the emphasis on altruism and positively influencing the human gene pool, would be sullied by the exchange of semen for money.

#### *Donor 'Altruism' and Seminal Value*

Sperm repository policies regarding paying donors express conflicting notions of what it 'should' mean to be a donor, and what are the 'right reasons' for donation. In two repositories where I conducted fieldwork (RF and RGC) there was the notion that if a man was a donor 'for the money' then he had a vested interest in lying on the intake forms about his health, sexual practices and other issues. At other repositories, for example the Sperm Bank of California, it was recognized that the man was providing a service at sometimes great personal sacrifice, and should be financially rewarded. Still, the issue between altruism and trust is an important one. These notions of the commercial = bad versus voluntary = good are the topic of Titmuss's treatise on donor blood and are rife in the sperm-banking industry and among recipients.

In *The Gift Relationship* (1997), Richard Titmuss provides a comparative analysis of blood donation in the USA and the United Kingdom, exploring the role of altruism and gifting of blood vs the marketing and commodification of blood. These arguments are extremely relevant to the discussion of semen donation, and the perceived tension between those who give it freely versus those who expect reimbursement for their 'labor'. According to Titmuss, the anonymous gift

of blood is the archetype of a pure gift relationship because the donor does not have any motivation for donating apart from the desire to help others. However, the question remains whether any gift is driven by pure altruism. For example, the 'altruistic' blood donor may feel personal satisfaction that he or she was being a good person by virtue of the fact that they donated blood. Thus, personal satisfaction is the motivation for being a donor, rather than pure altruism. I argue here that, in the case of semen donation, there is always some form of self-interest among donors who give it – even when it is given freely and the donor remains anonymous.

Blood and semen are parallel fluids in many ways: they are both regenerative; they both can be donated and/or sold; they are both perceived and experienced as a 'gift of life'; they can both be stored in 'banks' before they are received by recipients; they can also both transmit HIV/AIDS and other diseases, and are thus subject to numerous testing procedures to ensure 'safety' for their recipient; they both forge some kind of relationship between the donor and recipient – even though they may never actually meet. Because of their regenerative quality, they have not fallen under the same strictures as have the donation and sale of human organs.

In the sperm-banking industry this connection between altruistically donated semen and good, and purchased semen with bad is apparent, but not consistently articulated. At the SBC, for example, semen donors are paid, but someone who is doing this 'just for the money' is not the ideal. The best donors are considered to be those who also have some personal reason – aside from monetary – for donating; for example, if they had a relative who went through infertility or had a baby through donor insemination, and the donor would like to be able to 'give that gift to someone else'. It is realized that most men donate because they are in college and need the money, yet their reasons should have more meaning than just monetary compensation. This is often a trait that women look for when they choose donors as well, as they study the donor profiles.

Other repositories, for example Rainbow Flag, provide a minimal compensation for the donor's 'inconvenience', and the Repository for Germinal Choice has a policy against donor compensation. Both these repositories feel that to compensate donors monetarily would give them a vested interest in lying on their applications and thus make them less trustworthy as donors and their semen more risky in terms of genetic or other diseases.

Two of the above repositories have stated that the purchased sample is 'corrupted', tainted, not trustworthy. At the SBC, money is considered to be the main reason why men donate semen, and is not necessarily thought to detract from the quality of the product; yet, there is still an emphasis on the underlying

reasons men donate – altruism. This emphasis on altruism – or wanting to help others out who can't have children on their own – is perceived to be strongly connected with the quality of person who donates and, by extension, the quality of his semen.

These definitions of altruism are problematic, however – especially since it is genetic material that is being donated. In *The Selfish Gene* Richard Dawkins (1976) argues that there is no true altruism, that all acts that appear altruistic are actually self-serving in terms of maximizing an organism's reproductive potential. Although I find flaws in many of Dawkins's socio-biological arguments – that organisms can be reduced to mere containers attempting to spread their genetic material – with regard to sperm donation, alas, he may be right.

At one sperm repository where donors do receive monetary compensation, donors are asked their reasons for wanting to become a sperm donor on the intake forms. Most of these responses mention the need for money, along with a felt need to pass on one's genetic material (a few also mention the desire to help other families because they know someone who had problems with infertility). Typical responses to this question of 'Why donate?' are: 'To be blunt, because it pays. . . . A far more minor reason is my view on eugenics. I think I have good genes and I want to spread them around as widely as possible.' Another donor states: 'I have excellent genetics and right now I need to pass them on.' And yet another donor provides a message to the recipient(s): 'I hope you enjoy my genes as much as I have.' All of these donors express the desire to spread their genes – to maximize their reproductive fitness, so to speak. The obvious oversight, here, is that this donor is not being cloned, but rather any child produced is merely a combination 50 percent of the donor's genetic material along with the mother's 50 percent. Furthermore, the entire quest for 'altruistically' motivated donors among sperm banks is misplaced: any transaction involving the genetic continuation of an individual through his/her offspring is automatically motivated by a certain degree of egocentrism. Indeed, most of the men I have interviewed have stated that they would still donate even if they were not paid. One man stated: 'Having been a semen donor took the pressure off of me. I never really saw myself parenting children, but now I know I've sort of done my part to keep my genes out there.'

Even if financial incentive is removed from transacting semen, the genetic incentive can still be powerful enough to render the potential donor as untrustworthy, should he be the type of person who would lie about his family medical history, alcohol or drug use, sexual practices and so on. These motivations for financial and genetic payoff are not grounded in altruism. Even donors who do express altruistic motivations such as wanting to help others have children still express secondary motivations of wanting to spread their genetic material.

Furthermore, sperm banks that have policies against paying their donors, or paying them minimal amounts, are also suspect in that the less they pay their donors, the more money they make when they sell the product that they got for a minimal amount of money or no money at all. Consequently, the search for 'altruistic' donors boils down to a search for men who find the genetic incentive to be more significant than financial incentives.

### Transacting Identity

There are essentially two types of voluntary donors: those who donate their sperm at sperm banks with no financial compensation, and 'known' donors that an individual woman (or lesbian couple) may ask to help her have a child. Voluntary sperm bank donors and known donors are very different: at the sperm bank, the donor's identity will usually not be released, so the donor's motivation is more likely to be increase the spread of his genes. Known donors, however, often enter into a social relationship with the woman and her child, but have no legal rights as fathers. Thus the known donor is often motivated by social as well as genetic benefits.

At some sperm repositories donors have the option to have their identity released when the offspring reaches a certain age, usually 18. Two repositories where I conducted fieldwork, Rainbow Flag (RF) and the Sperm Bank of California (SBC), both offer identity release of the donors; although, at RF it is mandatory when the offspring reaches 3 months of age, and at SBC it is optional for donors to have their identity released when the child reaches 18. If a donor agrees to identity release, he cannot change his mind, however. Many other repositories, including the Repository for Germinal Choice, another sperm bank where I conducted fieldwork, prohibit the release of donor identities and do not offer this as an option.

Among the repositories that do offer this option, 'identity release' donors are in much higher demand than those who wish to remain anonymous. Most recipients want their offspring at least to have the opportunity to be able to seek out their donors should they so choose. It is also felt among many women that identity release donors have thought the process through more deeply and have taken greater personal responsibility in regard to the offspring their sperm produces. Whether or not (or how much) a donor is paid has no impact on the decision to become an identity release donor; that is, donors do not receive more money if they agree to have their identity released. However, at one repository in San Francisco identity release semen costs approximately \$25 more per vial than non-identity release because of higher demand. The value of semen, then, is subject to the



laws of supply and demand. Further, identity release becomes a sort of secondary commodity. Women are more likely to purchase the semen of men who leave the option open for future contact.

### 'Ethnic Semen' and Expanding Profits

Donor intelligence, donor altruism and, in some repositories, the willingness to be an identity release donor all affect the perceived value of semen among both clients and sperm bank personnel. Ethnicity can also determine the value of semen for sperm repositories with a consumer profile where ethnic diversity is present. Many repositories in the San Francisco Bay Area desire to appeal to an ethnically diverse market, by expanding the ethnic pool of their donors. It is considered that the more ethnic choices one has represented in the donor pool, the higher the chances for increased profits. The Repository for Germinal Choice is not concerned with having a broad range of ethnic options, promoting instead, the genetic reproduction of primarily Caucasian, upper middle-class, highly educated scientists. Consequently, their donor pool is a comparatively homogeneous group, as are their clients. The SBC and RF, however, feel a need to recruit donors who are ethnically diverse, often relaxing certain standards, for example the minimum height requirement which is usually around 5 foot 9 inches for Caucasian donors, for donors of varying ethnicities. This, again, has to do with the politics, policies and goals of the individual founders of these banks, as well as higher consumer demand in the Bay Area for 'ethnic sperm'.

Leland, founder of Rainbow Flag Health Services, specifically made the connection between 'ethnic sperm' and profit. He states:

We have one Chinese donor, everyone else is white. If I could find African-American or African donors I would be happy as a clam and I'd be making a lot more money. There's a lot of African-American lesbians who are looking for African-American donors, but can't find any. . . . Unfortunately there has been a large number of calls over the years from African-American heterosexual men who are interested in being donors primarily for money, and I turn them away because we don't pay, and some of them ask pretty rude questions like, 'Are there any women there to help you have sex?' . . . We also don't have any Jewish sperm, which is a shame because there are a lot of Jewish lesbians who would love to have Jewish sperm.

It is interesting that there is such a high demand for Jewish sperm donors in Bay Area sperm banks. As Susan Kahn (1996) demonstrates, because of strict prohibitions against masturbation for Jewish men, in Israel non-Jewish sperm is flown from the United States for insemination of Jewish women. Because Jewish identity is matrilineally located, it is the womb that determines the Jewishness of the child. If a child's ethnic/religious identity is traced through the mother, why

would there be such a high demand for Jewish sperm in sperm banks and among Jewish recipients?

All Bay Area sperm bank representatives discussed their desires to recruit greater numbers of ethnic – including Jewish – donors, and have expressed concern and frustration over the lack of ethnic men who are eligible to become donors. This quest for ethnic sperm is in part to better meet consumer demand; women desire children who share their own (or their partner's) ethnic identity. Furthermore, sperm banks with a broader selection of ethnic donors will also potentially enjoy higher profits. Thus ethnicity can be symbolically located (or, as in the case of Israeli Jews, dis-located) within the sperm cell, and is thereby assigned economic and emotional value in reproductive transactions.

What is perceived to reside in the sperm? And, how do these notions of semen affect the ways in which donors are recruited and their products marketed/transacted? I have demonstrated how the social value of altruism is translated as being intrinsic to the donor (and hence his sperm), and therefore how widely shared social values are translated into economic value. The underlying philosophies behind the founding of two of the sperm banks mentioned here are that altruism, or any number of other socially desirable characteristics, are passed from the sperm to the offspring, and that these traits will favorably affect the social world. These fantasies about what sperm is, and about what sperm passes on, are engaged in by both repository personnel and founders, and by the women who purchase semen in order to have a child.

The commodification and gifting of semen – a transmitter of genetic material – is a complex process. Donors who receive financial compensation for their sperm are part of a process of exchange in which semen flows in and out of the sperm banks in exchange for money. This exchange of money for semen appears to be the primary motivation for becoming a donor. Secondary motivations include wanting to pass down their genes and wanting to help other people. Of course, wanting to help others cannot be viewed as pure altruism because of the underlying motivations to enhance one's reproductive fitness. The reward for men involved in these transactions, then, is threefold: money, passing down one's genes and desire to help others.

### Reproductive Workers and the Market in Gametes

Many feminist theorists of the 1970s suggest a link between married, heterosexual sex as a form of reproductive labor, which subordinates women to men in patriarchal societies (Firestone, 1970; Leacock, 1981; Rubin, 1975; Sacks, 1975). Arlie Hochschild's (1983) discussion of 'emotional labor' is a gendered redefinition of

what constitutes work, attempting to demonstrate the 'exchange value' of women's emotional labor in relation to other forms of labor. More recent literature on the sex industry has explored how sex work is an income-generating form of labor for women or men, which is highly globalized and capitalized (Allison, 1994; Kempadoo, 1998).

By focusing primarily on the reproductive work of men, rather than women, I am attempting to provide a different slant on feminist critiques regarding the commodification and objectification of the female body. Here I propose that reproductive technologies have evoked a different form of body work – which may or may not include some form of sex or pleasure – in which the procreative aspects of the male body become commodified in ways that parallel sex for profit. Here, the notion of reproductive labor takes on a new meaning and a different level of monetary value than when traditionally applied to female reproductive and sexual labor.

Men involved in the selling of their semen are involved in a type of work involving the body, in which their ability to bring themselves to climax results in increased financial (or social or genetic) opportunities. Men who work as sperm donors can make enough money to pay their rent or other expenses. Indeed, one paid donor (at a repository not mentioned in this article) told me he was a sperm donor because he 'wanted to buy a motorcycle'. Thus, he was exchanging one type of commodity for another. This donor also stated that being a donor was something he looked forward to every week, and that if he wasn't a sperm donor he would probably be much more interested in finding a girlfriend. Although he experienced sperm donation as clinical – rather than as sexual or erotic – his sexual needs were still taken care of and he received money in exchange for his semen.

'Reproductive work' and 'sex work' are both forms of labor involving the body, where the body and/or what it produces have a market value. I am using this notion of 'reproductive work' as a conceptual category in order to think about the commodification of bodily practices and substances, and possible parallels with the sex industry. Semen donors, to my knowledge, do not refer to themselves as 'reproductive workers' in the sense that prostitutes do often call themselves 'sex workers'. Furthermore, egg donors and surrogate mothers may be even further removed from the concept by virtue of the fact that their donations typically involve medical intrusion rather than any form of sexual pleasure. However, I think the idea is still useful in theorizing the ways in which people's bodies become sites of work, as well as for thinking about new ways in which sex and reproduction are linked, despite the fact that sex is not necessarily procreative and procreation is not necessarily achieved through heterosexual sex.

Like workers in the sex industry, reproductive workers submit their bodies to a variety of intrusions. Men are subjected to various tests of their semen, urine, urethral cultures and blood, and agree to a variety of physical examinations. For women who sell ova, this invasion of bodily boundaries is even more profound. They, too, must agree to physical examinations including pelvic exams, medical tests for sexually transmitted diseases, etc., and, if accepted, are further subject to hormonal regulation and 'follicle stimulation' and extraction. I would now like to turn to a comparison of male and female 'reproductive workers' and how they are presented in particular ways in order to appeal to the consumer.

Information technologies, especially the Internet, provide a forum in which the commodity quality of semen can be viewed directly. This is an example of what Lury calls a 'prosthetic culture' (1998), where visual technologies produce strategic 'techniques of the self' in areas that previously seemed immutable. Web pages for infertility clinics, sperm repositories, egg banks and (what I will call) 'private gamete brokers' provide an interesting tool for analyzing the complexity of American cultural ideologies and practices surrounding individuals who sell their reproductive services. For example, one web page ([www.fertilityoptions.com](http://www.fertilityoptions.com)) offers sample portraits of would-be semen and egg donors, and surrogate mothers.<sup>3</sup> The way in which these reproductive workers are presented provides insight into the values in the market for these gamete providers and laborers, and also shows how different types of people are strategically targeted for specific reproductive tasks. The semen donor – an athletic, sandy-haired, blue-eyed, college graduate; the egg donor – a pretty, young mother of two, with a college education and a personal history of 'wanting to help other people'; the surrogate – a woman in her mid-30s, slightly plump, stay-at-home mother of three, likes to bake cookies, enjoys being pregnant and wants to help infertile couples. The ways in which these individuals are portrayed provide insight into the desired traits for a carrier of the genetic material for one's offspring as opposed to the type of person who would be the carrier of a child but not its genetic parent. Such examples demonstrate the dichotomy between what is thought to be present in the genetic material of the donor versus what properties are required in the mind and body of the woman who is merely the container, or vessel of one's own genetic material.

In all of the profiles provided on these sample reproductive workers, altruism appears as a common theme in terms of the motivation for their work. The physical characteristics were more flexible, but the focus on altruistic motivation for their services was uniform, despite the fact that money was being exchanged for their labor. This focus on altruism is an attempt to remove such 'donations' from the realm of market transactions in order to imbue them with a higher meaning.

This is an example of what Marx calls the transcendent quality of a commodity (1906).

The antithesis of redefining commodity as gift can be found in a rather grotesque example whereby the commodity quality of sperm/ova is intensified. For example, [www.ronsangels.com](http://www.ronsangels.com) presents a forum in which sperm and ova are put up for auction, starting at \$15,000 and going up to \$150,000. Here, the focus is on beauty, where 'models' gifted with 'elite' gametes can sell their products to the highest bidder, because beauty – an 'American cultural value' – comes at a price. In the photographs at this website, sexuality is heightened to the point where it is difficult to tell whether it is sex or gametes that is being sold. This is even further confused by the fact that the photographer/broker for these models and their gametes also provides links to several soft-core pornography sites. This example demonstrates the sometimes blurred divide between the reproductive industry and the sex industry.

The differences in the intensity of male and female reproductive labor are recognized by the gamete industry; hence, ovum donors are typically paid several thousand dollars<sup>4</sup> for a single donation of multiple eggs, with extra financial incentives offered to East Indian and Asian women whose eggs are in high demand. Sperm donors who receive compensation are paid much less for each donation, usually around \$40–\$50 per sample. However, semen donors can donate once or twice a week, potentially earning up to \$400 per month, or \$4800 per year. Again, certain ethnic groups are considered to be in higher demand than others and may receive extra financial incentives. Many repositories will even relax certain minimum standards in order to recruit ethnically diverse donors; for example, dropping the minimum height requirement to 5 foot 5 inches for Asian or Hispanic donors.

The connection between sex work and sperm donation is actually quite complicated. As I was researching sperm banks on the Internet, one site came up that made a rather blatant connection between donor sexuality and the sex industry ([www.masturbationparadise.com/banks.shtml](http://www.masturbationparadise.com/banks.shtml)). This page provided some informational links for semen donors, but primarily furnished links to a variety of pornographic web sites, including 'live females' performing sex acts over the Internet and other sexual fantasies including: teens, black women, Asian women, lesbians, gay men, S & M, etc. This site also included alleged hidden-camera pictures of a man masturbating/working in a 'masturbation room' at a 'sperm bank.' Here, the sperm bank becomes the imagined site of voyeuristic/exhibitionist masturbation fantasies, in which the 'sperm donor' is the eroticized subject. Lower on the page it states: 'Remember, you can help other people by giving sperm!' And, 'If you already have experiences visiting a sperm bank, please

feel free to (anonymously) tell about it.' Thus men's sperm bank stories also become the topic of sexual fantasy, but the hint of altruism, of helping others, is still brought to the fore. I do not know to what degree this web site is accessed by actual semen donors, but here the connection between producing semen and the sex industry is made explicit, focusing both on the more traditional lines of women as the focal point of erotic labor, as well as new forms of fantasy where the process of sperm donation itself is eroticized.

### Conclusion

In regard to the international trade in organs, Nancy Scheper-Hughes has discussed how the poor are exploited, selling organs to the wealthy (2000). With the sale of human gametes, it is the intellectually privileged (that is, usually university educated) that are recruited; generally, this class of individual is temporarily economically disadvantaged and needs to earn extra income to help put themselves through school. Non-compensated donors are usually more privileged, for example the Repository for Germinal Choice's 'scientists'. Surrogates whose bodies are temporarily used, but whose gametes are not involved in the reproduction of children, are typically working class (see Roberts, 1998). This points to a 'class structure' of the reproductive industry, in which individuals are ranked and considered appropriate for different reproductive tasks.

The cultural values of altruism attempt to decommodify the commodity – to remove semen from its exchange as a marketable product and redefine it as gift. However, representations of reproductive workers in businesses involved in selling their services – which accentuate donor sexuality and exchange of money for a product – make the argument that gametes are altruistically given gifts untenable. This rhetoric emphasizing donor altruism is an attempt to imbue sperm donation with a higher moral and emotional value, and to remove these donations from the self-serving commodity culture prevalent in the USA. This is problematic on a deep cultural level, for what is seen as being more self-serving than masturbation – especially for money? Hence, a problem arises in conceptualizing sperm donation: Is it an altruistically given gift standing above commodity culture, or is it a commodity which is bought, sold and fetishized? In sperm donation, I argue, 'altruism' or 'gifting' becomes a selling point, a secondary commodity.

Studying the linkages between cultural values, lay interpretations of genetics and the market for genetic material is essential to an understanding of how sperm repositories recruit and screen potential donors, donor motivations, and how women choose donors for their offspring and construct the identities of the

donors they have chosen. Screening procedures within the sperm-banking industry reflect widely held cultural assumptions surrounding who is and is not suited to reproduce, or, to get more microscopic, which 'genes' – and I use the term loosely here – are/are not suited for replication.

Numerous parallels can be drawn between semen donation and the entire industry in body parts – organs, blood, gametes, etc. – especially in regard to the comparative value assigned to that which is donated, as opposed to that which is sold, as well as the perceptions of what makes a 'good' donor. Medical anthropologists conducting research on organ donation, for example, have pointed out the importance of anonymous altruism among organ donors for recipients and their families, acknowledging the organ as 'gift of life' (Sharp, 1995). This rhetoric of 'altruism' is rife within the sperm-banking industry as well, and affects the selection and screening of donors by both sperm banks and recipients. Similar euphemisms of semen as 'gift of life' abound among women who have borne children of donor sperm.

Although many in the sperm-banking industry contend that men who receive money for sperm are more likely to lie about their health and sexual practices, they fail to recognize that men may have many complicated reasons for donating sperm – that the rewards of genetic continuation and establishing relationships with children without having to assume responsibility can be even more profound than financial compensation. Thus the perceived value and trust in 'altruistically donated' sperm is misplaced. In semen transactions, true altruism cannot exist.

## Notes

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This paper is based on two phases of fieldwork conducted between 1991 and 1998, and 1999 and 2001. During the first phase of fieldwork I interviewed representatives from sperm repositories, collected data from sperm bank files, and interviewed 15 single women and 15 lesbian couples attempting motherhood via donor insemination. From 1999 to 2001, I interviewed 15 donors regarding their motivations and experiences, and re-visited many of my previous informants.

1. This article only addresses transactions involving donor sperm through sperm banks. Women (especially single women and lesbian couples) also often enter into other arrangements with known donors in which there is usually no payment for semen. In these cases, the donor usually sees himself as helping out a friend, with the added benefit of having a child whose life he can be involved in without the responsibilities of traditional fatherhood. Being a known donor is often considered an attractive option for gay men who want to have children in their lives.

2. There is a distinction between sperm and semen. Sperm refers to the actual sperm cells contained within the ejaculate, or semen. Although it is ultimately the sperm cell that is required for fertilizing an egg, and thus producing

a pregnancy, it is semen (a fluid containing millions of sperm cells) that is collected, purchased, frozen, sold, thawed and inserted. The sperm is the cell that passes on the DNA of the biological father to the offspring. Thus, when speaking of donor traits that are perceived to be heritable, I will use the term sperm. When speaking of the transactions involved in the buying or selling of the fluid containing sperm, I will use the term semen.

3. For more on surrogacy and egg donation see Roberts (1998).

4. I actually saw one advertisement in the *Daily Cal* (November 1998), a UC Berkeley student newspaper, offering up to \$25,000 for the donated eggs of a blond-haired, blue-eyed, university-educated woman, under the age of 30. Since then there have been numerous well-publicized advertisements attempting to recruit 'Ivy League Eggs', offering upwards of \$50,000.

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## Excess, Scarcity and Desire among Drug-Using Sex Workers

MARÍA E. EPELE

Fantasies – of excess, lack of control and full satisfaction of bodily desires – are integral to some of the stories heard on the streets. These stories use sexual slavery as the paradigm for understanding how drug-using sex workers who live under marginal conditions are subjected and victimized by men. However, within the street scenario there also exists an opposite model of prostitution. This contradictory image evoked by the speech of street sex workers sees prostitution as a means by which disadvantaged women break traditional gender stereotypes and can re-appropriate their bodies. Although some cases of drug-related sexual slavery do take place, and some women introduce themselves to strangers as liberated by prostitution, both of these opposite models – slavery and liberation – fail to explain the complex everyday reality faced by women on the streets (Rosenbaum, 1981a, 1982; Connors, 1996; Hart, 1998; Phoenix, 1999).

Instead of excess, I suggest that lack and scarcity are the main characteristics of the economy of desire and need when drug abuse intersects with sexual activity. Even though poverty, illegality and marginality define the setting where drug-using women live (Waterston, 1993; Carlson, 1996), this scarcity is not restricted to economic resources. It also applies to the amount of drug-related gratification, bodily well-being, sexual desire and body commitment during sexual practices (Bourgeois et al., 1997; Weeks et al., 1998). While these types of scarcity are shared by men and women, I suggest that the latter suffer a gendered 'artificial scarcity' as a result of the commodification of women involved in street sex work.

It is only by considering men's direct or indirect intervention in the production of this 'artificial scarcity' related to women's drug consumption that it