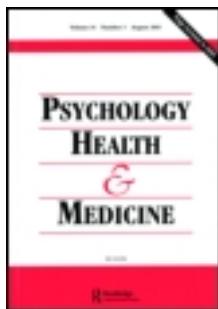


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Giving or giving back: New psychosocial insights from sperm donors in France

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Despite the growing importance of the international scientific literature concerning donor insemination, studies of French samples are rare. We recently had the opportunity to conduct a nationwide study on psychosocial issues related to semen donation in France. In this article, we present the main results of an analysis of the narratives of 33 sperm donors. We examine the meaning they attribute to this experience, their motivations, the social ramifications of their action, and their perspective on the principles of sperm donation in France. We highlight our results by comparing them to those derived from other recent international studies in different legislative contexts. Finally, we suggest a hypothesis regarding donor motivations based on recent literature in social sciences regarding the fundamental role of gift and reciprocity. These issues, particularly the anonymity of gamete donation, are currently at the heart of a national debate related to the expected revision of the French bioethics law.

Keywords: donor insemination; French donors; motivations; gift; social representations

Introduction

Many recent studies in social sciences have focused on the social, bioethical, and psychosocial issues of sperm donor insemination (DI) (Daniels & Haines, 1998), whether on semen providers (Almeling, 2006; Cacioppo & Gardner, 1993), receiving couples (Becker, Butler, & Nachtigal 2005; Grace, Daniels, & Gillett, 2008; Nachtigall, 1997), or offspring-related matters (Brewayes, 2001; Golombok et al., 2002). Nevertheless, despite the growing importance of the international scientific literature regarding this topic, studies on French samples are rare. Moreover, owing to its specific laws on gamete donation, France is set apart from other legislations. In fact, from an institutional point of view, the certified national centers known as “Cecos” (centers for the study and preservation of human ova and sperm), have, since 1973, provided services for freezing and preserving spermatozoon, and ensured anonymous and gratuitous donations, based on French bioethics laws (Novaes, 1985). This specific institutional system has facilitated the birth of approximately 50,000 children in France (Hennebicq, Julliard, & Le Lanno, 2010), this number accounting for heterosexual couples only. Furthermore, the conditions under which

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a man can become a donor within the French context are unique compared to the rest of the world, because, in addition to the anonymity and gratuitousness of the donation, the man must also already be a father. These issues, particularly the anonymity of gamete donation, are currently at the heart of a national debate related to the expected revision of the French bioethics law. Thanks to a research partnership with the French Federation of Cecos, we recently had the rare opportunity to access a sample of the population involved in sperm donations (receiving couples, sperm donors, general population). This allowed us to conduct (from 2006 to 2009) a nationwide study on psychosocial issues related to semen donations in France (Kalampalikis et al., 2009, 2010). In this article we will limit ourselves to presenting the main results of the qualitative analysis of sperm donor narratives.

Background and method

The specificity of sperm donation in France – its social image, the anonymity issues and the secretiveness and lack of information surrounding the issue – do not facilitate contact between donors or meetings within specific groups such as associations. The only way to access donors for our research purposes was therefore through the Cecos centers themselves. In fact, although the overall number of French donors has remained stable in the last five years at 200 per year, very significant discrepancies exist between various donation centers in France (cf. Hennebicq et al., 2010). Furthermore, this experience socially shared only to a very limited extent, if at all, which considerably increases the probability of donor lack of interest or refusal to be interviewed. Regarding donor recruitment, with one exception, the Cecos centers agreed only to disclose information regarding donors who were involved during the year in progress. This decision, aimed at protecting the anonymity of those who had completed their donation, meant that our survey had to be conducted following the same rhythm as the recruitment process, in all its unpredictability.

Finally, 33 donors from 10 different centers agreed to participate in our study. The donors' average age was 40.5 and they were still involved in the process of donating semen at the time. Their socio-demographic profile was similar to the general population of French donors (Hennebicq et al., 2010). While our research results cannot therefore claim to be extended to all French donors, they do have the advantage of offering a qualitative insight into the experience of a population sector rarely exposed to questioning. The research frame, its objectives, as well as the strict respect of professional ethics of research in human and social sciences regarding confidentiality of donors and identity of interviewed participants was specified in the document on the request of interview of the donors that was distributed in the centers, and was also stressed at the beginning of each interview. In accordance with our research design, we used interpretative phenomenological analysis (Willig, 2001) as a framework capable to give us comprehensive access to this sensitive data.

Results

Three different sub-groups of donors were observed in our sample based on: their previous experience of giving, the fact of knowing and having received a direct request from a couple involved in a DI program, or again their own contraceptive

history: (1) groups we refer to respectively as “spontaneous” ($n = 19\text{--}58\%$), (2) “relational” ($n = 9\text{--}27\%$) and (3) “converted” ($n = 5\text{--}15\%$) donors.

“Spontaneous” donors

This group contains donors who have been sensitized by one or more people from their close network who have experienced challenges in procreation and/or by the media. In addition to directly or indirectly knowing individuals involved, they have sometimes themselves experienced similar challenges, or even relate the donation to a personal experience (illnesses in the family, personal difficulties in having children, paternity issues within the family). Therefore, they are generally providing assistance to couples who have requested aid. In fact, their discourse contains spontaneously altruistic, even humanistic elements, referring for example to generosity, to the “innate” character one has (or should have) when helping others.

“Relational” donors

In France, there are around 2000 requesting couples a year and approximately 200 donors. The wait for some of these couples may be long, which is why various centers offer to “recruit” one or more donors for them (for any Cecos center), so that their request may be fast-tracked. We have referred to as “relational” those who take the decision to become donors for the purpose of helping a specific couple. In fact, their donation takes place within an institutional framework that organizes a compensation system. This donation is therefore part of a reciprocal exchange, in which those who solicited the donation are the beneficiaries. This exchange of services, mediated by the institution, is not without its own inherent problems. Even if they know that their donation will not go to that specific couple, it does not detract from the fact that such a donation remains a “direct” donation. For these donors, this is an entirely pragmatic aspect of the donation or, to quote one of them, a “desire to be useful” (E23r¹) for their family or friends. Very few in fact mention a desire to eventually see the child or children born from the donation. Rather, most express a certain amount of reserve regarding what follows: “It really stops here, I make the donation here and that’s where it ends” (E29r).

This gift is tied up with particular links to family or friends, and the relationship is therefore stronger than in the case of more “spontaneous” donors. The question of “debt” is therefore also more explicit. Among these men, such direct assistance thus arouses the question of indebtedness. The fear or question of interference by these donors in the life of couples takes on a specific new light. This aspect is moreover illustrated by some of the “relational” donors who apply to themselves the term “godfather” used by some of the staff at certain Cecos. Without going into the religious or paternal implications of the term, the word demonstrates a certain confusion. Although the help is directly addressed to a specific couple, the gift itself is not. Paradoxically, the men therefore have to come to terms with the more global implications of their donation which are addressed to couples in general, via the institution.

“Converted” donors

Finally, 15% of our sample are sperm donors in a pre-vasectomy situation. We have called them “converted”. In fact, due to the irreversible nature of the vasectomy,

physicians are recommending that patients preserve a quantity of sperm for approximately 10 years. This act is intended to preserve the person in case of a change in their procreative plans in the years following their operation. From a regulatory point of view, the sample and preservation of the sperm are carried out at Cecos centers and an annual fee is charged. The paradox therefore lays in persuading a section of the male population who did not intend to make a sperm donation; an ambiguity exists within the argumentation regarding the proposition of becoming a donor, accompanied, in this specific case, by indirect material “compensation”: if the man agrees to give his sperm to the Cecos centers, the cost of preservation is waived and thus becomes gratuitous. Therefore, one of the two founding principles of sperm donation in the French context finds itself altered by this group. It is by no means our intention to insinuate that the Cecos centers are using them in any way or, conversely, that their decision is based solely on the indirect financial “gain”. However, it is certain that in this case we are dealing with men who would not have spontaneously thought of becoming donors and who find themselves indirectly remunerated for their act. To a certain extent, this is therefore a specific population from the point of view of their motivations.

An anonymous donation? A differentiating principle

This issue of anonymity is that on which opinions vary the most between donors ($n = 16$ –49%) who think that maintaining anonymity is indispensable, because it protects against future invasive and menacing parentality issues, and those who are in two minds ($n = 14$ –42%) or, even in favor of removing it ($n = 3$ –9%) (Figure 1).

With the exception of one, all “converted” donors expressed standpoints in favor of maintaining the principle of anonymity (this proportion is not found in “relational” donors, half of whom expressed divided opinions). We consider this to be logical, inasmuch as these “converted” donors have chosen the path of vasectomy exclusively for contraceptive reasons.

Questioned about a possible change in the French law, a donor who was in favor of anonymity answered that he “hopes that if the law comes to change, [the physician] will be conscientious enough to burn the archives if the law were to become retroactive” (E24r). Others believe that anonymity is an indispensable condition for their donation: “For me it is clear, and for [his spouse] as well, if it hadn’t been anonymous, I wouldn’t have done it” (E4c). The risk of anonymity being lifted also worries some respondents, reflecting that one day they would not be able to resist the call of paternity if an actual meeting with the child were to occur.

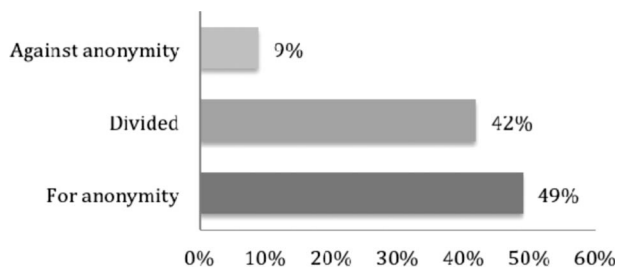


Figure 1. Position of donors regarding anonymity.

Moreover, from the donor's point of view, it prevents paternity-related ambiguity issues for the child born from DI. At least three interviewees mentioned a major ethical issue – that of eugenics – in which they could become implicated if anonymity were not maintained prior to donation.

For donors who have divided opinions regarding anonymity, these latter aspects arise repeatedly in their interviews, which translates into a personal position that is not opposed to a meeting with children born from their donation if these children felt such a “need”. On the other hand, some clearly envisage the potential difficulties this would entail for the child's parents.

When donors are in favor of lifting anonymity, it is “under certain conditions”: either on the initiative of the donor or following a request from the child. Several donors mention the time lapse (around 20 years) between the moment of fertilization and the moment of revelation from the parents, as if this distance, equivalent to a generation, could alleviate the risk, for example, of claims to a father–child relationship or of a late intrusion of a child into the donor's own family.

To a certain extent, some donors do acknowledge the “nice surprise” it would be to one day happen to meet this child born from their own sperm donation. They may imagine what they can leave behind of themselves, such as personal information or letters that the child could be given when they come of age. Thus, regarding the first two concepts of “anonymity time” (before use of the donation, before age of majority/child's maturity), the principle is questioned by only very few donors. In fact, lifting anonymity is most often justified by the necessity of leaving genetic traces, avoiding the deconstruction of family secrets and leaving open the possibility of a meeting between a child searching for their origins and genitor. Moreover, our sample did not express strong views regarding the possibility of sharing general information regarding certain donor characteristics, via a registry that does not reveal identity, with the receiving couple and/or the child born from the donation after s/he is born. Many of these donors would also wish to know what became of their sperm (number of children born from the sperm and their gender).

Gratuitous donations? A uniting principle

A large majority of donors ($n=27-82\%$) are in favor of maintaining the gratuitousness, which provides guarantees not only against commodification and exploitation of poorer persons, but also maintains the purity and generosity of their act. Others ($n=6-18\%$) express divided opinions, no donor expressed a view challenging the concept of gratuitousness (Figure 2).

Several interviewees mentioned personal journeys and the subjective nature of the experience, aspects which would be, in their opinion, ruined in the event of compensation. In other words, the gratuitousness is part of the humanistic or scientific ideal underlying the altruistic approach of the donation. This idea of sperm markets which hark back to the concept of a “sperm bank” and to the idea of compensation, arouses moral and ethical considerations in donors and raises the issue of organ donation in general. In some respects, money corrupts and would corrupt the donation itself. Men wanting to gain profit from their donation would be “willing to do anything” to sell their sperm, including lying about their health. While still supporting the gratuitousness principle, a majority of donors believe that the possibility of financial compensation would increase the number of donors while maintaining that this is not something they had thought about in their own case.

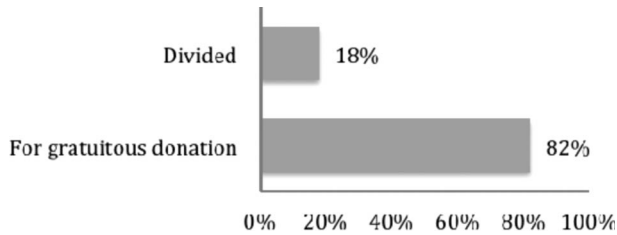


Figure 2. Position of donors regarding gratuitousness.

The unanimity regarding this principle masks a number of subtleties and one major difference: In the case of a vasectomy, the sperm donation is no longer altruistic since it makes it possible for the donor to preserve his sperm without having to pay the usual cost, even though he is not directly compensated. On the other hand, others mention that this approach is costly in time and psychological effort. Financial gratuitousness is thus reaffirmed, but interviews have revealed another method of compensation – narcissistic compensation, expressed in forms which can be summarized as follows: Pride in having quality sperm and a sense of creative power in fertilizing many children; and self-validation in having participated in a scientific endeavor or contributed to medical science.

Discussion

In the anthropological literature, a major observation transcends kinship: The intervention of otherness guaranteeing the passage or transformation, from anonymous fetus to eponymous child (Godelier, 2004). From this point of view, in the process of DI, the third “other” intervenes during the first phase of the conception process as another material, in the form of genetic material coming from another person. The protagonists – parents, child, institution, and donor – form an unusual type of parental configuration. Consequently, how does the classical cyclical trilogy of gifts (giving–receiving–returning) apply to our research?

Take the case of donors. Anonymous, non-differentiated, invisible, often overlooked entirely, donors give their gametes to a community of requesting couples, equally anonymous, non-differentiated and invisible. Their image of this community is built from social representations and experiences (Moscovici, 2000). For them it forms a mosaic of pieces derived from close and distant social networks, media images often using exaggerated mirrors to portray or distort the private realm. Anonymity, coupled with the social invisibility of the sperm donor group, does not promote the creation of personal connections with those receiving and removes, at some point, the need for formal reciprocity, probably creating, as for egg donation, a “relation of non-relation” (Konrad, 2005). Of course none of them gives or receives in an identical manner. Returning a holistic and identical donation would in some ways make it less heuristic. If we recall the sub-groups of donors we identified earlier, we cannot assume that each of the members from these sub-groups “gives” in the same way as the other, based on the simple principle of the *same* donation. The path, motivations and experiences of the donation are therefore not the same and neither are the imaginary recipients of the donation (Figure 3).

The first group (“spontaneous”), make their donation to society as a whole, represented in a prototypical manner as the group of couples for whom male

infertility has removed the possibility of procreation. The second (“relational”), get involved mainly and indirectly in order to help a couple they know, which underlies the request and even the discovery of the donation process. Lastly, “converted” donors operate primarily for their own purposes because access to the donation automatically guarantees the gratuitousness of their self-preservation, despite the fact that this is not presented as the first reason or the ultimate finality of the donation.

“Making” a donation – “Having” a gift

It is now time to ask whether sperm donors do anything more than “give”? This question may at first seem surprising, but it is much less so to those who have shared their experiences with us. Donors believe that they are *making* a donation, but also that they *have* a gift. They “naturally” possess a potential they did not ask for (here the biological merges with the social), but which has enabled them to experience parenthood. If we look at their act from this viewpoint, *donors therefore do not simply give*. They also *return*, they give back, in a compensatory manner, what they believe they have received as a “natural” gift of procreation. Furthermore, the donating couple are thus *returning* what they have received to the community. The community, from the viewpoint of a membership group, expands in this specific case to encompass all humanity. The schema of receivers previously outlined could thus be completed with an indication of the destination of the relation, interaction, exchange and double direction orientation. The various groups of donors give *and* return to society, to couples and to themselves (Figure 4).

Adopting this premise, which entails viewing donors both as people who *give* and *give something back* enables us in part to understand the reactions of those who do not wish, either completely or partially, to receive any type of symbolic ulterior compensation for their donation. Let us remember that, for Mauss (1990), the paradox of donations is to create an obligation in the person accepting and an expectation in the person donating; the social bond created by donations relies on a symmetry of exchanges (Douglas, 1990).

Our results partly confirm those of previous studies (Manuel & Czyba, 1983) conducted on donor samples in France, regarding their motivations. However, our

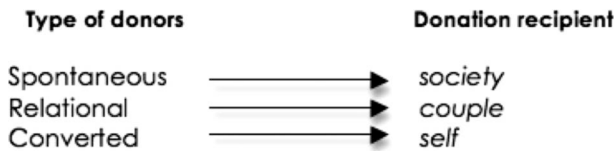


Figure 3. Unilateral exchange between donors and those receiving the donation.

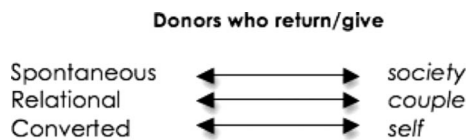


Figure 4. Bilateral exchange between donors and those receiving the donation.

sample also presents notable differences. It is different because, for example, there is the presence of a sub-group composed of “converted” donors, an experience that definitely alters the purely altruistic commitment on account of the indirect material compensation from which they benefit. Another notable difference consists in the role of the donor spouses or companions, certainly present in their narratives, although significantly less than in the results of previous studies, where they held a fundamental position for future donors. Here, we are dealing with a decision that appears to involve the man in a more secure and personal sense.

If we return to the reasons for donation, our results partially confirm the existing scientific literature on this topic. This is partly because the differences in legislative bodies undoubtedly influence the intentions, motivations and donor profiles of the groups studied. Therefore, for countries where sperm donation is remunerated, the desire to help and contribute to the happiness of others is often linked to the financial compensation related to the act. These two sources, altruistic and economic, are considered to be the two main reasons behind sperm donation (Almeling, 2006; Emond & Scheib, 1998). However, it would be illusory to believe that institutional functions (ideology, politics) do not intervene in the profile definition of this population (Daniels, Lewis, & Curson, 1997; Kirkman, 2004). In our sample, motivations are not only related to the method of recruitment. The act of giving is anchored in existing social experience of practical donation, but also in privately lived experience which, despite its variations, co-constructs the favorable context in making the decision. The standpoints on anonymity and gratuitousness principles reflect this complex field of representations and motivations.

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Note

1. The code numbers for the interviews refer to: E (interview), number, s: spontaneous, r: relational, c: converted.

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