Egg and Embryo Donation
and the Meaning of Motherhood

Maggie Kirkman, PhD, MAPS

ABSTRACT. As part of a larger study on donor-assisted conception, this paper reports research which explored the ways in which women who have donated or received eggs or embryos interpret such donations in the context of motherhood. Narrative analysis of women’s accounts revealed that egg and embryo donations are not interpreted as incompatible with motherhood; that they may be explained as contributing to the significance of motherhood through the desire to assist some women to whom motherhood has been denied; and that the welfare of offspring of donated eggs and embryos is considered by donors. Differences were found between the meanings of egg donation and embryo donation, including likening eggs to cells and embryos to children, and in donors the expression of stronger maternal connection to the offspring of donated embryos. These accounts reveal individual variation, complexity, and

Maggie Kirkman is affiliated with the Key Centre for Women’s Health in Society, The University of Melbourne 3010, Australia (E-mail: m.kirkman@unimelb.edu.au).

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change, reflecting (among other things) the dynamic process of narrative revision. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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The donation of eggs and embryos attracts controversy. There is debate over payment to donors, the exploitation of women, the age of potential recipients, disclosure of the donation, and the welfare of resulting offspring, among other things (Cohen, 2001; Marcus & Marcus, 1999; Shenfield et al., 2002; Söderström-Anttila, Foudila, & Hovatta, 2001). A constant undercurrent is the meaning of motherhood in relation to egg and embryo donation. This paper reports research which explored how women who have donated or received eggs or embryos interpret such donations in the context of motherhood. The meanings of motherhood in general and as applied to themselves by individual women arise from the historical and ideological context (see Phoenix, Woollett, & Lloyd, 1991). Women participating in egg and embryo donation not only situate themselves within contemporary discourses of motherhood but also contribute to their modification.

Egg and embryo donation became a feature of assisted reproduction after the successful cryopreservation of embryos, in Australia, in 1983 (Trounson, Leeton, Besanka, Wood, & Conti, 1983). Donations were desired by women experiencing premature ovarian failure or whose own eggs were considered to be of poor quality; more recently, menopausal women have sought egg and embryo donations (Paulson et al., 2002). Donors may be known to the woman and volunteer to donate specifically to her (Leeton & Harman, 1987), or they may donate anonymously; the latter may be recruited among women undergoing assisted reproduction (‘egg sharing’) (Ahuja, Simons, & Mostyn, 1997). Embryos are donated from those remaining after IVF procedures, although only a small percentage of couples are prepared to donate (Kovacs, Breheny, & Dear, 2003; Van Voorhis, Grinstead, Sparks, Gerard, & Weir, 1999).

A comparison with the historically more familiar (and medically simpler) practice of sperm donation suggests that there is a cultural association between eggs (and, by extension, embryos) and motherhood that does not apply to sperm and fatherhood. (Paternity and inheritance are separate issues: Smart, 1987.) The gendered assumptions behind the practice of gamete donation were demonstrated by Haines (1993) in her analysis of the UK Warnock Report: egg donation is associated with altruism and takes for granted a family in
which the mother is central. When sperm donors but not egg donors are paid (Braverman, 1993; Murray & Golombok, 2000) it is implied that women should have a maternal attachment to gametes (which cannot be sold) whereas men are not assumed to be parentally linked to their gametes in the same way. Women are sometimes paid less than men for considerably more effort (Schover, Rothmann, & Collins, 1992). Motherhood is implicated in the tension between the expectation that women will be generous and the pressure for women not to be as profligate with their gametes as men (see the discussion in Taub, 1989). Although men are said to have greater investment than women in genetic connection (Scutt, 1988), it can still be seen as a threat to motherhood if women disengage themselves from genetic continuity.

Results from research on egg donation tend to support these gendered assumptions. It has been found, for example, that egg donors are more interested in the outcome of their donation than semen donors (Fielding, Handley, Duqueno, Weaver, & Lui, 1998), and that egg donors are motivated by an appreciation of motherhood (Lessor, Balmaceda, Cervantes, Asch, & O’Connor, 1993). The tendency for sperm donors to be anonymous and egg donors known (Braverman, 1993; Murray & Golombok, 2000) matches the difference in public attitudes to egg and sperm donation (Bolton, Golombok, Cook, & Rust, 1991) and reinforces the connection between women and their donated genetic material. Altruism is frequently given as the main reason women donate eggs (Klock, Braverman, & Rausch, 1998; Sauer & Paulson, 1992). The language of gift-giving may be used by egg donors, both known and anonymous (Becker, 2000, Ch. 8; Lessor, 1993; Maggs-Rapport, 1999).

To undercut the gendered interpretations of gamete donation, however, Tong (1996, p. 148) argues persuasively from a variety of evidence that ‘both men and women have interests in separation and connection, taking and giving’ when it comes to gamete donation (see also Kirkman, under review b).

In other research, it has been found that women who donate eggs and embryos do so for a range of reasons and adopt diverse attitudes to donating. Payment may be a significant motivating factor for egg donors (Partrick, Smith, Meyer, & Bashford, 2001), although one US study reported that post-donation satisfaction among egg donors was negatively correlated with financial motivation (Klock et al., 1998). Egg donors with their own children have been found in one study to be less motivated by financial reward (Partrick et al., 2001) and in another not to be significantly different on various measures from childless college women (Rosenberg & Epstein, 1995). Egg donors’ need for information is varied, as is their preference for the disposition of surplus embryos created from their donated eggs (Kalfoglou & Geller, 2000). Egg donors and recipients may see pregnancy and subsequent care as crucial to mothering; genetic connection is not privileged in defining the mother-child relationship (Snowdon, 1994).
Three years after the first successful egg donation, most women who had donated preferred to be anonymous to the recipients but half would not mind should the offspring contact them in the future (Leeton & Harman, 1986). A later study of anonymous egg donors in the UK revealed that more than 80 per cent would still choose to donate if records were open (Power et al., 1990).

The demand for donated eggs far exceeds the supply of donors (Murray & Golombok, 2000; Söderström-Anttila et al., 2001). A survey of clinics in the UK revealed that three-quarters of potential egg donors withdrew after being told about the procedures involved (Murray & Golombok, 2000). The physical and emotional demands made by the process of egg donation may discourage some women from donating more than once (Partrick et al., 2001), although others, while acknowledging the difficulties involved, may be willing to volunteer again (Sauer & Paulson, 1992).

One study of egg donation between sisters described the intricate psychological ramifications, including difficulty in integrating negative emotions into the sibling relationship and the challenge of coordinating the needs of other family members (Lessor, 1993). Marshall (1998) discusses the complex web of family relationships arising from inter-generational gamete donation.

Although it has been suggested that donation is an efficient way of using the thousands of excess embryos created during IVF procedures (Lindheim & Sauer, 1999), embryo donation (like egg donation) is performed less often than it is contemplated (Kingsberg, Applegarth, & Janata, 2000). Embryo donors tend to think of their embryos as potential children whereas egg donors say that they are donating a cell, not a child (Söderström-Anttila, 1995). Although there is debate about whether the term embryo adoption is preferable to the term donation (because the embryo has no genetic connection with either recipient parent), it has been argued that, as a non-person, an embryo cannot be adopted (Robertson, 1995). I employ donation in order to indicate that this paper concerns the act of donating rather than receiving.

The research reported in this paper is part of a larger project on psychosocial aspects of donor-assisted conception. This segment was designed to learn from donors and recipients how they understood the process of egg and embryo donation in relation to motherhood. To discover ‘how the things that people do make sense from their perspective’ (Ezzy, 2002, p. xii), I employed narrative theory (Kirkman, 2002c; McAdams, 2001) which allowed me to look for explanation and meaning, and to acknowledge complexity in the experience of donor-assisted conception.
METHOD

Participants

An announcement seeking donors of sperm, eggs, and embryos; those who had become or were attempting to become parents as a result of such donations; and adult donor offspring was placed in newsletters (Infertility Network Canada, Australian Donor Conception Support Group, IVF Friends Australia, ACCESS Australia’s Infertility Network), distributed among infertility clinics in Australia, and published in the Australian Woman’s Day magazine and The Age newspaper (Victoria, Australia). The announcement stated that the researcher was a psychologist who had a child as a result of donor insemination.

Volunteers were recruited without restricting their cultural context, both to expand the range of sources of meaning and because the literature suggests that similar debates and concerns occur in all countries in which donor-assisted conception is practiced. Furthermore, modern communication means that research results and opinions are transmitted rapidly around the world. The shared meanings among the interviews supported this approach.

Among the 87 volunteers, 36 women who had donated and/or received eggs or embryos; are the focus of this paper.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted between September 2000 and May 2002 by the author: 18 in person, 7 by email, 7 written, 3 audio-taped, and 1 by telephone. All began with the general question, ‘Please tell me your story of donating/using eggs or embryos.’ More specific but similarly open-ended questions followed as required. Demographic data were collected at the end of each interview.

Data collection and analysis in narrative research are part of an iterative process undertaken by the researcher, usually in consultation with the research participants, and in reference to the literature. The task of interpreting qualitative data such as these begins during data collection, as the researcher seeks further explanations and pursues particular lines of inquiry (Ezzy, 2002). Oral interviews were transcribed; all interviews were edited to follow the conventions of written texts. I sent each participant a draft of her document for amendment and approval, often with additional questions (usually about 12 months after the interview) for ethical reasons and to ensure consistency among narratives gathered from different media; to allow participants to correct any misinterpretation; and to discover new events and narrative revision. Given that the research process itself becomes an instrument in narrative revision, continuing contact with participants both acknowledges and draws on this interaction of the researcher and the researched.
Throughout the process of interviewing, editing, further communication with participants, multiple readings of the approved narratives, and immersion in the literature, I explored various interpretations of egg and embryo donation in relation to motherhood. Because narratives were complex and subject to re-interpretation, specific numbers or percentages have been avoided in the discussion that follows. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Demographic Information**

Most women were resident in Australia (31); the rest in Canada (3) and Argentina (2). Ages ranged from 29 to 59 (median 42). Education ranged from those who had partly or fully completed secondary schooling (9) to PhD (2); the mode was a college or university qualification (15). Most (29) were in female-male partnerships; 6 were single or separated; and 1 was in a female-female partnership. Sixteen women were donors and 21 were recipients (including one woman who was both an egg recipient and embryo donor) (see Table 1). One donor was paid for donating (in the form of reduced IVF costs: ‘egg sharing’); other egg donors were not undergoing assisted reproduction for themselves, although one had previously used donor insemination. According to the recipients, donations were needed because of poor egg quality (14), premature ovarian failure (6), and menopause (1).

**TABLE 1. Role of Participants in Egg and Embryo Donation (N = 36)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DONORS (N = 16)</th>
<th>RECIPIENTS (N = 21)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Egg to/from unknown recipient</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egg to/from sister</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egg to/from friend</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embryo to/from unknown recipient</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embryo to/from friend</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contemplating embryo donation</td>
<td>2</td>
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Notes: The total is more than number of participants because of dual roles. Some donors and recipients were recipients of donor insemination. The population includes three sister pairs (six participants) and one friend pair (two participants). All donated embryos were in excess after in vitro fertilization.
Wasting an Egg Each Month:  
The Meaning of Motherhood Does Not Reside in Eggs

Participants tended to interpret motherhood as more than, and not reliant on, their genetic material. Pam [Australia], for example, said that, ‘What most women don’t think about is that each month that they have a period, an egg is wasted.’ Pam, who has donated eggs to both an unknown and a known recipient, describes herself as having to explain repeatedly that she has no maternal feelings for the offspring of her eggs. Nevertheless, donors are, to varying degrees, interested in the outcome of their donations even in the absence of maternal feelings. Felicity [Canada], for example, said that she was prepared to meet potential offspring ‘if they wish to learn of their medical and social background,’ but added that she did not consider them to be her children: ‘I believe that the experience of pregnancy, delivery, and parenting makes “your child,” not the egg or sperm.’ Felicity had donated eggs to her sister, without success, before having her own children through IVF. To assist with medical expenses she then donated anonymously. Georgina, an egg donor to an unknown recipient, summed up the views of egg donors in general:

I’ve just donated a few cells. As far as I’m concerned, the parents are the people who nurture and love and bring up the child, whether they’ve given birth to them or not . . . Any children that might be born . . . are not my children. . . . I would like to know them and, you know, have sporadic contact, but no way take over the place of their natural mother. [Egg donor, Australia]

Explanations for Donating Eggs

She Needs to Be a Mum

Egg donors explained their donations in terms of the recipients, often describing their sense of empathy for a woman unable to enjoy motherhood. Jasmine was interviewed just before she began hormone treatment to donate eggs to her friend Heidi. She described how Heidi had told her one night that she was planning to go to the US to buy eggs. ‘I was just stunned,’ said Jasmine: I thought, ‘I just can’t let a friend of mine spend something like $30,000 to buy eggs from America when I can just give them to them!’ So that was it. I went to see Heidi the next morning and just said, ‘. . . If you need eggs I’ll give you my eggs.’ [Egg donor, Australia]

Concern need not be for a specific woman. Davina [Australia], for example, saw a program about egg donation on television that ‘profoundly moved’
her. She thought about it for a year, becoming a donor when her own daughter was 16 months old, ‘to help someone experience an event as profound as birth.’ These accounts reveal not so much a discourse that women should be mothers as a sense of empathy for women whose narrative identity includes motherhood (see Kirkman, 2002b). Fiona [Australia] donated eggs to a friend, saying, ‘She’s just a natural mother. She needs to be a mum.’ Fiona was shocked to discover that other people did not agree that ‘it would be a great idea to give someone else a baby.’ She conveyed an aspect of her own narrative identity as a person who gives altruistically: ‘Even though it didn’t work, I still think that it is something very, very special. . . . I’d love to say, “This is what we did.”’

**Being Generous**

Other women clearly positioned themselves within the discourse of women as generous. Pam donated eggs anonymously, then made contact with the recipient family. She is now donating to an acquaintance, with little expectation of future contact with that family. Pam described herself as ‘a very generous and giving person,’ lamenting what she saw as the uncaring society in which she lives, where ‘there is a dollar value placed on everything.’ Although Pam has encountered people who disapprove of egg donation for religious or other reasons, she argues that ‘If the donor and recipient are both comfortable with their situation, then what right does anyone have to be critical?’ Pam said, ‘I donated eggs because I wanted to do something special. I will die knowing I have made a difference to someone else’s life.’

Estelle [Australia] described other women saying that they could never be egg donors, while praising her for being ‘such a special person.’ Like Davina, Estelle volunteered to donate eggs after seeing a television program on the topic; at interview she was in the process of her second donation and ‘planning on donating a few more times.’ Estelle said, ‘It’s hard to find the words for how important this has become for me. It’s almost like this is something I was meant to do. This is a major part of the overall plan for my life.”

Some donors and recipients described the donations as gifts. Diane [egg recipient, Australia] talked, as others did, of delight in the generosity and altruism that they had discovered in the world through the ‘gift’ of an egg, saying that this was how the donor and her husband represented it; Heidi [egg recipient, Australia] was even planning an explanatory book for her child and those of the donor, to be called ‘The Gift.’ (The theory of gift dynamics [e.g., Fox & Swazey, 1992; Layne, 1999] suggests that there are complex ramifications to interpreting egg and embryo donations as gifts; see also Kirkman, under review a.)
Both recipients and donors incorporated generosity and sisterhood in their narratives, intertwined with an appreciation of the powerful desire for motherhood. Gabriella [Argentina], who received eggs from an anonymous donor, said, ‘I would consider it [donating] if I could, because I’d like to help as I was helped.’ Harriet, who had a child from eggs donated by her sister, told a story that illustrates all of these themes:

A woman I know, who I would not necessarily call a friend, . . . has two children by donor sperm. When I recently told her that our remaining five embryos had deteriorated, she offered to donate her remaining embryos to us. Even I was overwhelmed by this offer—but when I thought about it, I would have made the same offer to her if the circumstances were reversed. You just have to know what it feels like to want a baby so much. . . . While I cannot express my appreciation, . . . I have to say no. . . . They should be donated to someone who does not have children. . . . I am lucky enough to have a child and know how wonderful it is to be a mother, and although I would dearly love more children I would like to know that these embryos brought a baby into a childless couple’s life. [Egg recipient, Australia]

Our Biological Children: Embryo Donation

Some donors and recipients interpreted embryo donation in much the same way as egg donation but, on the whole, embryos were seen as something closer to a person. Accounts of embryo donation tended to be constructed in terms of what was right for the embryos rather than concern to help other people become parents, although this often constituted part of the explanation.

Wilma summarized arguments for and against donating excess embryos. Her husband initially rejected donation because he feared demands being made by any offspring as adults; in contrast, Wilma wondered whether she would ‘always ache for them if I knew they were out there somewhere.’ The arguments in favor prevailed; these included the desire to help other infertile couples and the fact that, ‘One embryo became our second child, who is absolutely wonderful. Who were the others? Just as wonderful? They at least deserved a chance at life.’ However:

We would never have done it for a known couple. That would have been way too hard for both my husband and I, knowing those were our biological children. . . . Emotionally, any children will always be part of me, but realistically I will accept that they are not. They are the other couple’s, and should be. . . . I would like to be contacted by our donor children one day. I would always feel affection for them. [Embryo donor, Canada]
Wilma imagined that it would be ‘easier to donate sperm or eggs’ because ‘embryos seem to be a start of life, whereas the others still seem to be just cells.’ She thought of embryo donation in terms of adoption. The decision to have an embryo adopted might be easier than to relinquish a baby (you ‘have more time to think, and can choose not to decide at all by procrastinating or discarding embryos with almost no guilt attached’), but once the decision was made, ‘everything is the same.’

Maternal feelings towards embryos may result in donating them; they may also result in the refusal to donate. Yolanda [Australia] became a mother after an egg donation from her sister. She had contemplated the fate of any remaining embryos if she achieved the two children she wanted, and had decided against donation in spite of ‘what it means to people.’ Yolanda expected to feel ‘guilty and sad’ about disposal ‘in terms of the potential life and also in terms of the potential recipient parents.’ However, Yolanda said, ‘a baby is not an empty vessel; it is born with an inheritance and a corresponding right to know its origins.’ Yolanda also interpreted the donation from her sister as arising from their complex relationship, which would be compounded by passing embryos on to another couple.

Embryo donation may be rejected because potential donors feel that they cannot ensure that the resulting children will grow up in loving homes. This was the reason given by Jasmine, for example, when she asked her friend Heidi not to donate any embryos remaining from the eggs she had donated to her. Similarly, Virginia [Australia], who had donated eggs to her sister Serena, had encouraged her to give the excess embryos for research. She interpreted embryo donation as ‘giving up a child for adoption,’ which she was prepared to do only when she could ensure that ‘those children would always be loved’ even if the recipient parents divorced or died.

Embryo donation also meant adoption to Ursula [Australia] who had used donated semen to become a mother. She equated eggs with sperm, and thought that she would be able to donate an egg, which was ‘not a child’ but ‘a tool to help someone else have a child.’ Ursula would be ‘curious’ about any offspring and willing to meet them, ‘but that is where the feeling and involvement would end.’ However, she would want continuing contact with a child born from her embryo because ‘it would be a product of my egg and my husband’s sperm and would have the potential, more so than an egg, to be a child of ours.’

This sense of ‘a child of ours’ was marked in embryo donors and others who had contemplated embryo donation. It could be explained in terms of the pre-implantation parental feelings known to be experienced by people undergoing IVF who look through a microscope at the dividing cells of their potential children (Becker, 2000, Ch. 9; Greenfeld, Diamond, & DeCherney, 1988). It was more likely to be explained by participants in terms of genetic relationship to their other children. Samantha [Australia] and her husband, for exam-
ple, had two children from donated embryos. She said that they had planned to have only one child and would have happily carried out that plan had no embryos been left over; but the three remaining embryos ‘were related to Stephanie’ and ‘if those embryos had gone to another couple and a child was conceived from them, we would have been devastated.’

Gestation, genetic connection, and parent-child relationships are held in dynamic tension by participants in donor-assisted conception (Kirkman, 2002a). Among egg and embryo donors, concern for other women added to the tension and led to the contemplation of a range of ways to contribute to assisting infertile friends, sisters, and strangers to achieve motherhood, including ‘surrogate motherhood.’ As they imagined what might be possible for them, they also delineated what practices fell within the bounds of their understanding of motherhood. One woman [Australia] had donated eggs to her sister and discussed her donation in the context of having had to relinquish a child for adoption when she was a teenager. She did not interpret the egg donation as giving away a child, ‘Because,’ she said, ‘I wasn’t having to carry. If I was having to be a surrogate, I don’t think I would have been able to hand it over.’ It was the gestation that was meaningful to this donor. In contrast, Virginia, who also donated to her sister, had initially planned to gestate a baby to be conceived using her sister’s egg and her brother-in-law’s sperm, an arrangement that Virginia described as having ‘nothing to do with me.’ These contrasts in what makes a mother or violates motherhood can be put into context by looking at how donors described children born as a result of their donations and ‘their own’ children.

A Different Love: Own Children and Donor Offspring

All donors clearly differentiated ‘their own’ children from offspring of their donations. Where the donation was to a sister, this sometimes evoked surprise in the recipient. Alison [Australia], for example, reported that her sister Harriet ‘is still sometimes amazed, and even a little disappointed, that I don’t feel a stronger link or connection to George,’ Harriet’s son from Alison’s donated egg. But Alison said: ‘To me he is their son completely. I love him very much but it is a different love to that I have for my babies.’ Towards the four children her sister now has as a result of her donations, Virginia says, ‘I feel exactly the way I imagine an aunty would feel…. I don’t look at the boys and Camilla and think, “Well, they’re my eggs.” . . . I have my own children.’ An anecdote from Deirdre [Australia] about the sister who donated eggs to her is revealing: ‘When Charlie was first grabbing things, I said, “Oh, it looks like Charlie’s left handed,” and Joni said, “Well, that’s strange, because you’re right handed and Dave’s right handed.”’ Deirdre had to remind her donor that she was left-handed; Joni responded, ‘I don’t ever think he’s part of me. He’s the same as
my other nephew.’ The reported ‘forgetting’ of a connection between donor and offspring suggests that Joni’s narrative interpretation is of familial relationships, in which her sister’s son is her nephew. Any potential maternal feeling flowing on from her genetic contribution has been subsumed by her role as aunt.

The dominance of the existing relationship between donor and recipient is invariable in egg donors who donate to someone they know: offspring of their donations are understood to occupy the places in their lives dictated by the adult relationship. This seems true even in those few cases where the adult relationship was a difficult one (see Kirkman, under review a). Where the donation was to either an unknown woman or a distant acquaintance, ‘own’ children are also clearly differentiated from donor children, with even greater distance acknowledged from the donor offspring, consistent with the distance in the adult relationships. Pam has come to know the initially anonymous recipient of her first egg donation and is now donating to an acquaintance. She expects no relationship to develop between her and the offspring of her eggs (in the belief that it would be detrimental to the children), although she is interested in ‘how they develop.’ Pam said:

I do have children of my own. There is no comparing them with children from donated eggs. My children grew inside me. I breastfed them, cared for them, loved them. I adore them all and marvel at their differences and similarities. A child from a donated egg is nothing more than just that: an egg. One that would have been wasted during a monthly cycle had it not been donated. On this issue, for me, there is no gray. Just black and white. [Egg donor, Australia]

Estelle similarly had no attachment to her eggs donated to anonymous recipients. Her mothering was enacted through ‘two lovely children of my own.’ Although ‘own children’ are mothered, the offspring of donated eggs are not abandoned: donors interpret recipients as good, committed parents into whose hands the eggs may be safely relinquished.

Embryo donors, too, distinguished donor offspring from their own children. Wilma and her husband have three children; she said that she would love any donor offspring ‘in a different way’ from her own children, even if no less intensely. Elaine [Australia] and her husband had excess embryos after having children through donor insemination. She drew on their experience of parenting children who were not genetically connected to both parents to explain relationships as the source of parent-child connection, saying that her husband’s ‘enjoyment and love does not change at all because they are not his biological children.’ These donors associated mothering with children whom one loved
and cared for, while not emotionally abandoning children born from their donations.

**Knowing Who the Mother Is:**
*Donating to Known and Unknown Recipients*

Further information on the subtleties of the mothering relationship is conveyed by accounts of the boundaries defined for possible recipients. Women who understand themselves as donors only to specific people tend to link their intimacy with the recipient to their desire for the welfare of the offspring of their donation, whether or not they expect to maintain affectionate contact with them. Louise [Australia] donated eggs to her sister, describing herself as ‘just a normal aunty’ to Katrina’s children; the relationship was fundamental to her donation: ‘I couldn’t donate to just anyone.’ According to Louise, it is irrelevant whether or not the children know the source of the eggs; what matters is that she maintains her relationship with them as their aunt. Louise interprets her role as someone who helped her sister, not as ‘a donor.’ Similarly, Virginia said that she could not have donated outside the family, not even to a close friend; she would have ‘hated it’ had her sister Serena donated the embryos elsewhere, ‘because . . . they could’ve gone into a horrible family.’ Jasmine did donate eggs to her close friend Heidi, but said she would judge each case on its merits. She knew some women ‘who had children for the sake of having children’ and who treat them ‘with contempt.’ As a result, said Jasmine ‘I couldn’t give my egg to someone I didn’t know because I wouldn’t know whether they would look after that kid.’ Jasmine was confident that Heidi and Harry would be loving parents, maintaining that she would be content even were they to move out of the country and lose contact with her.

Some egg donors prefer only minimal contact, even when they know the recipient. Others prefer to have no contact until it is sought by adult offspring. Estelle said that she ‘didn’t want to envisage the children; that’s starting to get personal, starting to cross over the line from unattached to attached emotionally.’ Even in this relatively small sample, there are many permutations of what differentiates mothering and donating, and the circumstances that make egg and embryo donation work.

**A Consoling Plot**

Much of the preference expressed by these women—for donating to a sister, friend, or stranger; for having or not having a relationship with donor offspring; or for donating at all—can be understood in narrative theory as a consoling plot (Kermode, 1967; see Kirkman, 2002b). Because we make sense of our lives through stories, the way to lead a satisfactory life may be to interpret what has happened as the best outcome. This is not to deny that careful thought has
contributed to initial decision-making, although that, too, will be influenced by stories about one’s own or other people’s interpretations of experience. Nevertheless, donors who participated in this research tended to show a preference for what they had done, no matter what degree of choice had been involved in the initial decision.

A consoling plot is evident in women who present parallel narratives of donating and receiving. Caroline [Australia] has children from eggs donated anonymously; although she would like information about the donor for the sake of her children, she describes herself as glad that the donor was not a member of the family. However, when she considered the (hypothetical) possibility of becoming a donor, Caroline said, ‘I’d prefer it to be my sister than an anonymous person, then there’d always be some contact there.’ Mariel [Australia] has donated embryos but does not think that she would accept gamete or embryo donation should she need it.

The beneficial acceptance of a consoling plot can be discerned in Heidi’s account. When she first began IVF, she was ‘very clear’ that she could not donate any surplus eggs or embryos. A month later, she discovered that she would need to find an egg donor:

We were really hard on ourselves after that: ‘Why did we say no? And now we’re expecting someone else to do this for us.’ And that’s where Jasmine helped us to understand why we came to that. She said, ‘You need your own dream to come true before you can help somebody else’s dream come true,’ and I think that just about hit the nail on the head. [Egg recipient, Australia]

Furthermore, when Heidi said that she could not buy eggs because of the implications for motherhood, her husband pointed out that she could confidently say that only once it was no longer necessary for them.

**CONCLUSION**

The research reported here has revealed a variety of meanings and explanations associated with egg and embryo donation, along with individual variation, complexity, and change. Because narrative revision is constantly occurring, as a result of both personal and cultural change (see, for example, McAdams, 2001), meaning-making around egg and embryo donation (and its implications for discourses of motherhood) should be recognized as a dynamic process.

This research has demonstrated that such donations are not interpreted as incompatible with motherhood; that egg and embryo donation may be explained as contributing to the significance of motherhood through the desire to
assist some women to whom motherhood has been denied; and that the welfare of offspring of donated eggs and embryos is considered by donors.

Some differences were found between the meanings of egg donation and embryo donation, including likening eggs to cells and embryos to children (as in Söderström-Anttila, 1995), and in donors the expression of stronger maternal connection to the offspring of donated embryos. Embryo donation tends to occur predominantly as the result of having excess embryos after treatment for infertility. Egg donors, on the other hand, may have no previous association with assisted reproductive technology. The different narrative explanations arise, therefore, from the circumstances of donation as well as the degree of genetic connection to gametes and embryos. Both may contribute to justifications for donating, including the desire to allow potential children a chance of life.

In maintaining the integrity of motherhood in relation to donors’ ‘own’ children while expressing concern for offspring of their donations, it is as though donors of eggs and embryos use the mothering of their own children as the key to understanding how mothering will work for the parents of donor offspring. This is not to say that genetic connection is insignificant, although it appears to be less so for donors than for parents among these participants (see Kirkman, 2002a). However, having decided to donate, these donors found the meaning of motherhood in their love and care for the children dependent on them rather than in the product of their genetic material. In this interpretation, motherhood is not dishonored by donating eggs and embryos.

Some donors and recipients used the metaphor of a gift in attempting to explain the donation (see Becker, 2000, Ch. 8; Lessor, 1993; Maggs-Rapport, 1999). Although the notion of gift in this context is controversial (Raymond, 1990), with some commentators equating it with commodification of the biological child of the donor, the metaphor seemed to be employed both in order to differentiate it from baby-selling and also, more particularly, to establish the nature of the relationship between donor and recipient. The gift arose, in significant part, because of the value accorded to motherhood by the donors and their empathy for women unable to experience it unaided.

REFERENCES


Kirkman, M. (Under review a). Being a ‘real’ mum: Narratives from recipients of donated eggs and embryos.


