

The value and meaning attached to genetic material amongst Australian sperm donors

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Abstract

Contemporary discourses of kinship within western societies are dominated by notions of genetic relatedness. Whilst the reification of biology has long been challenged within feminist research, recent critics suggest the need for a more nuanced understanding of biology that recognises its contingent deployment. This paper begins this work by exploring the narratives of 30 Australian sperm donors, with a focus on how they account for the value and meaning of their genetic material. Three broad themes are discussed: genetic material as legacy, responsibility for genetic material, and genetic material as a gift to others. The implications of these understandings of genetic material amongst sperm donors are discussed in relation to outcomes for both recipients of donor sperm and donor-conceived children, and suggestions are made for ways of addressing some of the investments that men may have in their genetic material.

Keywords: genetic material, sperm donation, identity, responsibility, altruism, genetic legacy

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Introduction

Through factors such as the push towards genetic counselling prior to pregnancy (Mittman and Downs 2008), the increased demand for paternity testing to establish the ‘fact’ of biological relationships (Turney et al. 2006), and the public outcry that occurs when reproductive health clinics are found to have implanted biologically unrelated embryos into women undertaking IVF (Wiegman 2002), we continue to see the considerable weight accorded to notions of genetics and biology within western societies. This value accorded to genetic relations, and the continued centrality of biological kinship, exemplify some of the ways in which priority is accorded to particular relationships over others, through the privileging of biology as a key determinant of connectedness (Crabb and Augoustinos 2008).

Of course feminist scholars have long critiqued the centrality of biology within western discourses of family and the individual, particularly with reference to the ways in which notions of biology have historically been (and indeed still are in the present) used to legitimise patriarchal rule (Janson-Smith 1980). More recently, feminist critics such as Ahmed (2008) have called for a more nuanced understanding of biology that recognises its contingent deployment and function as a concept. Ahmed suggests that what is required is an understanding of the investments individuals have in making biology matter, and the ends to which biologically-based arguments are put.

This paper takes up Ahmed’s (2008) call by exploring how a range of understandings of genetic material are taken up by Australian men who have acted or intend to act as sperm donors, either in a clinic setting or in private arrangements. Findings from the discourse analysis presented here suggest that the ways in which sperm donors understand the meaning attached to their genetic material will depend upon their own individual circumstances. More specifically, the participants in this study often oriented to issues of biology to construct

intelligible and valued identities for themselves, and to warrant and justify their positions on issues related to sperm donation. This research is important as whilst there now exists a considerable body of research on the experiences, motivations, and beliefs of sperm donors (see Riggs 2008, 2009 for a summary), none of this to date has specifically explored the value and meaning that donors attribute to their genetic material. Considering the value and meaning that sperm donors attribute is important as cases continue to be brought to trial, both in Australia and overseas, where donors seek access to children conceived of their donations once they are born, even if this was not expressly contracted for prior to donation (Dempsey 2004). Such cases can have serious negative outcomes for all parties, and thus it would appear important to better understand the attributions that sperm donors make for their genetic material, and to consider the implications of these for all parties.

Method

Participants

Ethics approval was granted by The University of Adelaide's Human Research and Ethics Committee. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted by the authors with Australian gay and heterosexual men who have acted, or were in the process of acting, as sperm donors. Of the sample, 21 men self-identified as gay (70%) and nine self-identified as heterosexual (30%). Participants were gathered from across four Australian states: South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Tasmania. The average age of participants was 45 years, the range being 25 to 65. Fourteen (46.7%) of the sample self-identified as parents (i.e., they were currently involved in raising children on a custodial basis), whilst 16 (53.3%) of the sample did not. Eight (88.9%) of the heterosexual men identified as parents, whilst only six (28.6%) of the gay men identified as parents. Thirteen participants had donated anonymously

to clinics in states where the identification of donors was not mandatory (eight of these men were heterosexual), and the remaining 17 men had donated through private arrangements to friends or acquaintances who were identified by the participants as lesbians (16 of these men were gay). Of the 17 men who had donated in the context of private arrangements, 12 had donated to a lesbian couple, and five had donated to a single lesbian woman. Four of the men who donated to known lesbian recipients negotiated with the women to donate via clinics so that the sperm could be screened and reproductive technologies employed to ensure fertilisation. The majority of the men identified as white Australians (90%).

Procedure

A semi-structured interview schedule was utilized, with questions focusing on the men's motivations to act as sperm donors, the emotion work involved in sperm donation, and their beliefs around family and children. Interviews lasted on average 30-45 minutes. All 30 interviews were orthographically transcribed for the purpose of thematic analysis with participants being assigned pseudonyms at this stage. An initial thematic analysis of the entire sample found that all of the men spoke on topics outside of the interview schedule. One such topic was the value or meaning accorded to genetic material (this topic was spoken of across all participants for a total of 35 discrete incidences). In order to explore this topic in more detail, portions of the interviews dealing with this topic were then transcribed using Jeffersonian conventions. On subsequent re-readings of the selected data further themes were identified within the overall topic of value or meanings accorded to genetic material. These were genetic material as legacy, responsibility for genetic material, and genetic material as gift to others. These are explained in greater detail in the following analysis, where selected representative extracts from each theme are analysed.

Analytic Approach

The analytic approach used in this paper is informed by a synthetic approach to discourse analysis (Wetherell and Edley 1999), referred to as such as it involves the combination of two different major branches of discursive psychological research: one coming from a focus on specific rhetorical features of talk, and the other being concerned with the broader power structures in which people live. At the level of rhetoric, talk reflects the interactional pragmatics of the specific interactional context in which the talk takes place. A focus on this micro level looks at how people use language to achieve particular outcomes in everyday conversations. At the same time, everyday talk reflects broader, socio-culturally produced patterns of making sense about the world. A focus on the macro level deals with how people use languages in ways that can be understood to be both situated in particular cultural and historical contexts, and constructive of understandings of both the social world and intelligible identities. Of course both of these approaches focus on what is accomplished and constructed by talk; the action-orientation of language (Hepburn 2002). However, as each of these approaches understands language to be action-oriented at different levels, a synthesis of the two approaches allows us to deal with these different levels on which talk operates.

Analysis

Genetic Material as Legacy

The participants who were grouped in this first theme drew upon a notion of ‘genetic legacy’ in talking about their motivations to act as sperm donors. Amongst these participants, genetic material was treated as serving a functional purpose for donors, enabling them to ‘leave their mark’ upon the world. The first example of this comes from an interview with Paul, who was asked about what motivated him to become a sperm donor.

Extract 1

1 **Paul:** umm (0.5) an interesting thing is now that um (.) I am <middle aged> and don't plan
2 to die so:on,
3 **Interviewer:** mhm
4 **Paul:** umm (.) i-i- the interesting question comes up to wher- um who am I going to leave
5 all my worldly ↑goods to.
6 **Interviewer:** mmm
7 **Paul:** you know it seems a strange sort of thing, but when I was young I- I didn't think
8 about those sorts of things.
9 **Interviewer:** m
10 **Paul:** and so (0.5) um (1.0) it is important (0.5) to me (.) um (.) or would be nice to know
11 that um <when I fall off the> ↑perch that um I will leave something behind
12 **Interviewer:** mm
13 **Paul:** or part of me behind, you know
14 **Interviewer:** mm
15 **Paul:** So quite honestly my motives a-a-a- they are up front, whe- you know I want to
16 know I can share the experiences and financial gains that I HAVe,
17 **Interviewer:** mm
18 **Paul:** the knowledge and experience. Aah It would be nice. and give me a nice warm
19 feeling to know that there is PART of me left.
20 **Interviewer:** mm
21 **Paul:** Lots of stuff you READ is about people having th- (0.3) um feeling that the line is
22 continued and you know there's a part of you left behind or continue on.

Paul indicates his investment in an understanding of genetic material as legacy, in his statement that it would be “nice to know that when I fall off the perch I will leave something behind” (lines 10-11). Importantly, however, Paul clearly states that he does not want to leave just *anything* behind, but rather that he wants to know “that there is part of me left” (line 19). Whilst Paul also mentions leaving ‘worldly goods’ (line 5), ‘experience’ (lines 16 and 18), ‘knowledge’ (line 18) and ‘financial gains’ (line 16), his emphasis is upon the “warm feeling” (line 18-19) of leaving a genetic legacy.

In addition to making clear statements as to his own investment in notions of genetic legacy, Paul also makes a consensus warrant to bolster his claims, in the form of “lots of stuff you read is about people having the feeling that the line is continued” (lines 21-22). This

serves to endorse and justify his position as one that is not simply his alone, but rather is one that is widely held and therefore valid according to ‘lots’ of other people.

In the following extract Joe employs a similar argument to that made by Paul, namely that acting as a sperm donor allows him to leave something behind in the world. Different to Paul, however, Joe was explicit in his desire to have a child:

Extract 2

- 1 **Joe:** Doing this means I will be creating a child and I think for me the thing out of it, is
2 not so much the creation of a child which would be- is kind of exciting, of course
- 3 **Interviewer:** [mm]
- 4 **Joe:** but I think for me by the time any child would be (.) u:mm (.) wanting to see me, I
5 will be you know 65
- 6 **Interviewer:** mm
- 7 **Joe:** you know um I would be retired or about to retire I think at that sort of third age of
8 life to have something like that come into it,
- 9 **Interviewer:** yep
- 10 **Joe:** I think it's (.) partly it's partly about giving me ah so::mething(h) heh a little
11 package, a little present.

The first part of this extract presents a view of sperm donation where Joe is placed at the centre. This can be seen in Joe's emphasis upon his role - “I will be creating a child” (line 1) – even though he is just one of the people involved in the creation of the child, and even though he had not negotiated with the recipients of his donation (in a private arrangement) to play any parental role. He then goes on to state, contrarily, that “for [him] the thing out of it is not the creation of a child” (line 2), which appears to indicate that the child is incidental to the situation in Joe's view. In other words, what is important is not the child as a person, but rather what the child will come to represent. This can be seen at the end of the extract, where Joe refers to the child as a “little package, a little present” (line 11). Joe's willingness for contact to occur may of course be a positive outcome for some donor-conceived children,

who increasingly report a desire to know their genetic history (Turner and Coyle 2002). Nonetheless, Joe's emphasis upon sperm donation as providing something for 'him' may have negative implications in the future for the recipients of his sperm.

In the final extract in this theme, Sam (who was in the process of being screened as a donor by a clinic) indicates some of the potentially negative emotional effects that could arise if donors, who are invested in an idea of genetic legacy, are unable to fulfil their desire to leave something behind:

Extract 3

- 1 **Interviewer:** Did you find the experience of sperm donation emotionally taxing?
2 **Sam:** You know it was something that I suppose (0.5) you know you you ah
3 (.) i- it wasn't so much taxing, it was just (.) okay this is: ah serious
4 **Interviewer:** yep
5 **Sam:** um (.) a::nd (.) you know (.) ahh I've still got to get the genetic
6 counseling and I've got a nephew that does have a genetic condition
7 **Interviewer:** ok
8 **Sam:** and I suppose in that sense, ahh if I get knocked out of the ↑ring, (0.5)
9 at this stage, I think that would be ↑I think that would that would be
10 that's something that would be very upsetting to (.) e- you know even
11 in these narrow remote circumstances to be denied that opportunity,
12 u:m that that that would be that would be ha:rd that would be ha:rd

In this extract Sam uses the metaphor of getting "knocked out of the ring" (line 8), a powerful description of donating sperm that compares it to engaging in competitive sports. The use of sporting metaphors for sperm in general has been well documented (Martin 1991, Moore 2002), however in general use reference is made to a man's sperm 'winning' (i.e., 'first one over the line'). Sam's usage of a sporting metaphor, by contrast, references the possibility of 'losing'. Sam's investment in winning is evident in the anxiety we can see in the repetitive

way he talks about the “narrow remote circumstances” (line 11) in which he may have the “opportunity” to leave something behind, and that to be denied this “would be hard”.

The participants reported here within this theme of genetic material as legacy (as broadly indicative of all participants who fell within this theme) would appear clearly invested in sperm donation as a means to leaving something behind in the world, or even having a child. Importantly, none of these men spoke of a desire to raise a child or contribute to parenting, though they were very interested in knowing about children conceived of their donations. From this perspective, to be refused the opportunity to donate sperm (i.e., in the case of Sam) would be a significant blow. Whilst a willingness to be identified by donor-conceived children later in life is increasingly becoming important in Australia as most States now legislate for the release of identifying information (Riggs 2009), it is important to consider how the investments that men may have in their genetic material (or children conceived from it) may not necessarily match with the needs of recipients.

Responsibility for Genetic Material

As Daniels et al. (2005) suggest, an important issue related to the donation of sperm is a notion of ‘responsibility’ for the outcomes of sperm donation. The donors included in this second theme clearly orientated to a notion of responsibility, albeit in a diverse range of ways. In contrast to the previous theme, which emphasized the needs and desires of donors over those of children and recipients, in this second theme donors appeared somewhat more focused on their responsibility to children and recipients and their needs.

This notion of responsibility for genetic material is evident in the following extract, where Tom, a man who had donated sperm anonymously to a clinic, speaks of the representations of sperm donation that he has seen in the media:

Extract 4

1 **Tom:** There has been several documentaries about people who ar- (.) sort of looking for
2 their donors. and um (0.5) I-I-I find that ahh a bit awful really that these people don't
3 know that they don't even record ↑even the hospital didn't really record anything,
4 even if you are not going to tell th- the .hh person who was created which is ↓wrong
5 but even if you weren't you would have thought the hospital would have some kind
6 of record. It is important that donor records should be kept and that kind of thing. I
7 fully agree with that entirely. I think it is foolish to take donations from anywhere
8 and everywhere and then go off and create people because you don't know medical
9 histories o:r who's related to who or anything

In this extract Tom constructs an identity for himself as someone mindful of the rights of donor-conceived children (“It is important that donor records should be kept”, line 7). The account of responsibility that Tom provides, however, is one where hospitals (lines 4 and 6), rather than Tom, are accountable for missing records or inadequate screening. This construction of hospitals as accountable may be seen as a tool used by Tom to manage his identity as a previously unknown donor: it is not he who is accountable for the lack of records, but rather hospitals that must be held to account. Nonetheless, and by advocating for a position of open records (in his suggestion that not telling “the person who was created” about their donor is “wrong”, line 5), Sam recognizes that there is a responsibility to provide donor conceived children with knowledge about their genetic history.

In the following extract Mark advocates for a different understanding of responsibility, one that precedes the conception of children. Mark, who had previously donated anonymously to a clinic, and who was now looking to donate sperm in a private arrangement, was concerned that donors and recipients operating outside of clinics should be responsible in their negotiations of sperm donation:

Extract 5

1 **Mark:** I- I believe (0.5) we should (.) look (.) at having quality donors and not necessarily
2 quantity (.) and one of the things that worries me is if some recipients go wham bam

3 thank you ma'am and do it and they say well fine we've GOT um we've got our
4 sperm, without knowing what the father(.)'s ↑health is like. He could be a drug
5 addict, he could be something else, he could carry genetic things and I see that as
6 irresponsible. and the same. From both sides for a guy that says look you know well
7 here is my sperm just d:o it and take it, and I think that's ahhh (0.7) irresponsible. I
8 think that's yea- (.) um I think we need to get over (.) as a community generally th-
9 that (1.0) whatever and look at what is really imPORTant and that is we want healthy
10 children
11 **Interviewer:** yep
12 **Mark:** and see even encourage people to look after themselves. you know just generally (.)
13 and so those are a concern to me

In this extract Mark clearly constructs himself as a responsible donor through contrast with what he constitutes as 'irresponsible' donors or recipient. The latter are depicted as potentially not mindful of donors who might be "a drug addict" or someone "carrying genetic things" (lines 5-6). Donors themselves are constructed as potentially irresponsible in just handing over their sperm (line 7). In constructing the image of an inappropriate donor Mark implicitly depicts himself as a donor who would, by contrast, act responsibly and acceptably. Interestingly, and as per the previous extract, it is notable that Mark emphasizes an account of responsibility that focuses on others, rather than himself. In other words, by focusing on other people's potential lack of responsibility, he ignores how his previous anonymous donations may be constituted in the present as irresponsible – as failing to consider the future needs of children conceived from his donations.

Another example of donors discussing responsibility only to largely abdicate it appears in the third extract in this theme, where Eric talks about issues of consanguinity. Eric had donated sperm anonymously to a clinic almost three decades ago, and had more recently donated sperm in private arrangements to lesbian couples.

Extract 6

1 **Eric:** The other thing is the consanguinity issue u:m

2 **Interviewer:** mmm

3 **Eric:** because I have children who are now 28 and 29 that I don't know about, they could

4 be having children of their own.

5 **Interviewer:** mhm

6 **Eric:** > at this point in time< So (.) 25 years down the track when I am dead or almost

7 dead, there is a possibility of my grandchildren breeding with my children.

8 **Interviewer:** right

9 **Eric:** and no one has ever addressed this in (.) ah any sort of (0.5) studies hh because no

10 one has looked into the ↑future.

11 **Interviewer:** Mm

12 **Eric:** And (.) I see the statistical probability as zero but (.) h because I don't know how

13 many children I have from '78-79 .hh um sort of extrapolating into darkness hh

14 **Interviewer:** Yeah

15 **Eric:** That is why I am going to quit at the end of this year, when I turn 60 I figure that is

16 enough contribution to the gene pool of Australia

This extract is interesting for the way that Eric raises points about responsibility to donor-conceived children, only to dismiss his own culpability. So whilst Eric recognizes that he has “children who are now 28 and 29 that I don't know about” (line 3), and that this could mean “the possibility of my grandchildren breeding with my children” (line 7), he nonetheless at the time of the interview intended to continue donating sperm until the end of the year. His willingness to continue to doing so, it may be suggested, is similar to a notion of genetic material as legacy as outlined in theme 1, as can be seen in his final statement that he will quit at the end of the year as he has made “enough contribution to the gene pool or Australia” (line 16). Eric manages the dilemmatic nature of donation as a sense of ‘contribution’ versus the potential harm this could cause by abdicating his own responsibility for assessing the likelihood of consanguinity. So in lines 9 and 10 Eric states that “no one has ever addressed this in any sort of studies” and “no one has looked into the future”, thus apportioning responsibility for this lack of consideration to everyone in general, rather than to him as an individual. That Eric has enough information to warrant caution (i.e., that there could be children conceived of his earlier donations that he doesn't know about) is explained away by

claiming the “statistical probability as zero” (line 12), after having just recognized the possibility of consanguinity (which would have significant negative repercussions, even if the likelihood is minimal).

In this theme the participants variously recognized the need to be responsible for genetic material, however this responsibility was typically placed upon the shoulders of others (hospitals, researchers, recipients, other donors), who were at times constructed as irresponsible. Such abdicating of responsibility thus does very little to indicate that donors themselves will concretely engage in what they deem ‘responsible’ practices, and certainly in the case of Eric, it would appear that some donors continue with behaviours that may be seen as irresponsible at the same time as claiming that their awareness of certain issues (i.e., consanguinity) makes them responsible.

Genetic Material as Gift to Others

As a product of men’s bodies, sperm has the potential to be given away to others for its reproductive potential. This third and final theme looks at ways that participants seemed to orient their talk around the desire to help others through giving away their genetic material. For some men sperm donation was spoken of in very pragmatic terms – that they had no use for their sperm, so they may as well give it away to others, as was the case for Andy:

Extract 7

1 **Andy:** I think so I-I-I don't think it is seen as being um a (.) reasonable thing ahh to do, I think it's
2 kind of seen as someone getting their rocks off jerking off and you know o:r still doing it for
3 money o:r I think most people don't get that um somebody might ah have an altruistic
4 d(h)esire to actually say hey I'm not doing, as I say, ‘I am not using my sperm someone may
5 as well do something with it’. I think for a lot of men who donate to clinics they think they are
6 doing good. It is like donating blood. A body fluid to be given to someone else if they need it.

This extract is interesting for the way that Andy constructs sperm donation as an almost banal gift to others. This emphasis on banality may at least in part be a product of the social context in which sperm donation occurs; one where, as Andy states, “it's kind of seen as someone getting their rocks off jerking off and you know o::r still doing it for money” (lines 1-3). In the face of this type of accusation, then, Andy may be seen as invested in depicting sperm donors as “altruistic” (line 3) men who “are doing good” (lines 5-6). It is also interesting that Andy switches in line 5 from speaking in first person to speaking about donors in general. This may be seen as functioning to manage Andy’s own investment in an image of himself as a good person by distancing himself from the situation, by suggesting that his claims pertain not just to himself, but to all men who donate at clinics. Finally, in saying in lines 3-4 that “most people don’t get that somebody might have an altruistic desire” to donate sperm, Andy implicitly identifies himself as one of those who *do* have such altruistic motives and constructs himself as a donor acting in the interests of someone else and giving his genetic material away to others who need it.

In the following extract Rick, a man who had donated sperm in a private arrangement, also constructs an image of himself as giving sperm as a gift to others, and again that what is being given away is clearly marked as something he doesn’t have a use for:

Extract 8

1 **Rick:** I’ve been very much from the beginning not been intere- biology isn’t something that
2 matters to me (.) children my children I am not biologically related to, s:o (0.5) .h I
3 (1.0) don’t put a lot of stock in biology and so for me my line was probably was
4 always from the beginning, I am being a donor for you for you (.)um that is the end
5 of the story. My biological relationship to any child that could be born was largely
6 >irrelevant and I think that is what made those negotiations so much easier because I
7 was very cle:ar< about that. (.) and have no interest in claiming biology (.) further
8 down the track. U::m (0.5) And one of the docos I saw recently, I really liked the idea
9 that what you are giving is potential, you are not giving away a baby, whereas some
10 people say oh if you donate sperm you are giving away your own child but you are

11
12
13

not you are giving away the potential away for someone else to have a baby; you are not giving away your own child. And I really like that idea, >especially in the context of being a parent myself and not wanting to have more kids in that way<

Rick constructs a view of kinship whereby biology does not constitute a family when he talks about his own family and the “children [he is] not biologically related to” (lines 2). With the subsequent sentence on line 3 (“so I don’t put a lot of stock in biology”), Rick is able to label his biological relationship to the children born of his donations as “irrelevant” (line 6), indicating that to him the act of donation has no more meaning for him than him “giving away the potential...for someone else to have a baby”; that it is not like “giving away [his] own child” (line 13). Thus Rick accords no further value to his donation of sperm beyond a genetic contribution given away to someone else, a claim very similar to Andy’s analogy to blood donation. Nonetheless, Rick is clearly aware that it is indeed possible to have a stake in notions of genetic legacy or the claiming of rights on the basis of genetic relatedness. In this sense, and much like the previous extract, Rick does have an investment in depicting sperm as something he does not need, and thus that he can freely give it away to others.

In the following and final extract Kyle talks clearly about his understanding of sperm donation as a gift to others:

Extract 9

1 **Kyle:** Well the first thing I should make clear is that I have been a donor to different
2 couples. Both couples are same sex couples and they live in different states. Both
3 couples I knew as friends and both couples asked me independently if I would help
4 them to conceive a child. It wasn’t my desire to be a father, but it was my desire to
5 help them achieve their goal, to give them the one thing they didn’t have to achieve
6 that, to give them a gift. I knew in both cases that they would be wonderful mothers
7 and that the child would be greatly loved and cared for and have a wonderful
8 childhood. I really didn’t have any reservations about doing it.

In this extract Kyle is clear that what is doing as a donor occurs in the context of friendships, and the desire to help other people “achieve their goal” (line 5). Helping others have “the one thing they didn’t have” (line 5) is constructed as a gift from Kyle to the recipients. Yet, following Ripper’s (2007) work on lesbian recipients of donor sperm, we can nonetheless see that Kyle constructs the women in particular ways as *deserving* recipients of the gift of donor sperm: Kyle states that he knew they would be “wonderful mothers and that the child would be greatly loved and cared for” (lines 6-7). As Ripper suggests, this places pressure on lesbian recipients to ‘display their credentials’ in relation to their capacity to be worthy recipients, and that some women may feel judged on this basis. Finally, it is important also to note, and similar to the previous extract, that Kyle is explicit in his statement that he doesn’t need his sperm (or at least not for reproductive purposes): “It wasn’t my desire to be a father” (line 4). This of course begs the question as to whether or not Kyle would have been as forthcoming as a donor had he desired to have biologically-related children.

The extracts in this theme highlight the relative generosity of men who act as donors, but also draw attention to the fact that such generosity is the product of both some men’s differential relationship to the value of their genetic material (i.e., seeing it as simply ‘potential’ for life or as analogous to blood donation) and some men’s assessment of recipients as worthy (or otherwise) of their donation.

Discussion

In this paper we have explored some of the complex ways in which Australian sperm donors account for the value and meaning of their genetic material. For some men genetic material represented an ‘investment in the future’, whilst for others it required

responsibility, and for yet others it was a gift that could be given away. Yet regardless of the account that each man provided, there was relative similarity in the investment that men had in managing their identity as 'good' people, and as having some opinion about the value and meaning of their sperm. Thus whilst some men were clearly invested in the 'pay offs' of sperm donation (i.e., having offspring or leaving a mark in the world), others were just as invested in depicting themselves as responsible, or as genuinely altruistic people. Recognising this, as we have done in this paper, of course does not undermine the generosity of these men in donating sperm, but it does suggest the need to further consider the implications of the value and meaning of sperm that Australian sperm donors report.

Specifically of concern are the potential differences between the plans of donor and the plans of recipients, and the negative implications of these differences. As indicated in our analysis, some men had a particular investment in the outcomes of their genetic material, namely that a child would be born who at some stage would recognise them. For men whose sperm is not used (i.e., in clinics), this could result in significant feelings of rejection (Riggs 2009). For recipients and donor-conceived children, the expectation of meeting or involvement on the part of donors may be experienced as a considerable demand upon their own desires and options.

It is also important to consider the implications of the value and meanings of genetic material attributed by men who spoke of responsibility. For these men, it often appeared to be the case that there was a significant gap between rhetoric related to

responsibility, and actual responsible practices. Issues of consanguinity, for example, are clearly mandated by reproductive health clinics across Australia, yet some men operating outside of these systems may choose to ‘extrapolate into the darkness’ and continue donating to a large number of women. It is similarly troubling that some men claimed awareness of the rights of children to access information, yet took little or no responsibility for their own role in contributing to the lack of information available in hospitals to children conceived prior to the mandating of identity release. None of these men, for example, spoke of contacting connection services with the aim of providing information about their donation in order to facilitate contact by children conceived of their donations.

Finally, it is noteworthy that even those men who spoke of giving away their genetic material freely as a gift often appeared forced into an engagement with dominant representations of sperm donors as deviant (Thomson 2007). Some men also appeared as though they felt expected to account for why they were acting altruistically, and in so doing demonstrated some of the limitations to generosity amongst sperm donors (i.e., only treating genetic material as a gift if they had no other use for it, only wanting it to go to ‘good homes’ – see Ripper 2009 for more on this). This would suggest not only the need to challenge dominant images of sperm donation, but also to recognise the interrelationships between altruism, values and meaning.

In conclusion, this paper has begun the work called for by Ahmed (2008) in

developing a more nuanced understanding of accounts of biology and genetic material. It has drawn attention to some of the problems that may arise from current configurations of sperm donation in Australia and has suggested some approaches to address this. Continuing to examine both dominant and marginal understandings of reproduction, genetics, and kinship can only help better meet the needs of all parties, and most importantly to ensure the emotional and physical well-being of donor-conceived children.

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Biographical note

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