

Shots and Surgery vs. Scheduled Sexuality: Egg and Sperm Donation in Daily Life

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Dissertation Abstract

In my dissertation, I compare how eggs and sperm, and the women and men who donate them, are valued in the medical marketplace. Eggs and sperm are symmetrical bodily goods in that each contributes half of the reproductive material needed to create life, but these cells are produced by differently sexed bodies. This allows for an analysis of whether and how bodily commodification varies by sex and gender. Drawing primarily on interviews and observation with staff and donors at six programs in the United States, I trace the historical development of the medical market in genetic material, compare how contemporary egg agencies and sperm banks organize the donation process, and examine how variation in the social process of bodily commodification shapes donors' daily experiences. In medicalized donation programs, cultural and economic understandings of the reproductive body combine to produce a market in which women are more highly valued than men. I find that egg donors are both paid more and praised more than sperm donors, and I argue that this is due less to biological supply and demand than to gendered norms of caring motherhood and distant fatherhood. I conclude the dissertation by discussing the implications of these findings for debates in sociology of gender about the relationship between biological sex differences and the cultural norms attributed to those differences, debates in economic sociology about how social and biological factors shape market expansion, especially in the realm of human goods, and debates in medical sociology about how market processes influence medical practice.

Chapter Abstract

In this chapter, I examine how individual experiences of biological processes, specifically those of in vitro fertilization (IVF) and masturbation, are profoundly shaped by social context. I compare infertile women with egg donors to examine how the experience of IVF is different if women are doing it for pregnancy or for profit. Analogously, I analyze how men experience masturbation if they are doing so for pleasure or for profit. I find that the physical experiences of these biological processes are different when they occur in the context of egg agencies and sperm banks: egg donors are much less affected by the physical demands of IVF than are infertile women, and sperm donors approach the extensive bodily discipline needed for routine masturbation as a job. In making donation a part of daily life, egg and sperm donors manage their own bodies, women through shots and surgery and men through scheduled sexuality. While sociologists have been content to cede the study of biology to other disciplines, these findings demonstrate the need to examine how experiences of biological processes are shaped by social context.