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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Birds and the Bees (via the Fertility Clinic)

By ROSS DOUTHAT Published: May 30, 2010

If you want to adopt a child in the United States, you'll face an array of bureaucratic roadblocks and invasive interrogations. Adoption agencies will assess your finances, your relationships, and your fitness as a potential guardian. The interests of the child, not the desires of the would-be parent, will be treated as paramount throughout.



Susan Etheridge for The New York Times

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If you want to procure sperm or eggs, the process is completely different. You can shop for gametes the way you'd go shopping for a house or a car — buying ova from an Ivy League undergraduate, or sperm from a 6-foot-8, athletic, blue-eyed Dane. The person selling you the right to bear and rear their biological offspring can do so anonymously, with no future strings attached at all.

The result is a freewheeling fertility marketplace whose impact on American life keeps increasing. Sperm donations generate between 30,000 and 60,000 conceptions every year, and roughly 6,000 children are conceived through egg donation annually as well. About a million American adults, if not more, are the biological children of sperm donors.

Not surprisingly, these Americans have a complicated relationship to the reproductive marketplace that made their existence possible. Their inner lives are the subject of a fascinating study from the Institute for American Values, based on a survey of younger adults, ages 18 to 45, who were conceived through sperm donation. The authors — Elizabeth Marquardt, Norval Glenn and Karen Clark —

depict a population that's at once grateful to the fertility industry and uneasy about the way they were conceived, supportive of assisted fertility but haunted by the feeling of being a bought-and-paid-for child.

On the one hand, Americans conceived through sperm donation are much more likely than their peers to say that "every person has a right to a child" and to support policies that encourage sperm and egg donations. (Indeed, 20 percent already had made such donations themselves.)

But these libertarian instincts coexist with angst, disquiet and even anger. Large minorities report being troubled both by "the circumstances of my conception" and by the fact "that money was exchanged in order to conceive me." The offspring of sperm donors are more likely to oppose payments for sperm and eggs than most Americans and to say that "it is wrong to deliberately conceive a fatherless/motherless child." And a substantial minority said that if a friend were pondering having a baby by a sperm donor, they "would encourage her not to do it."

Americans conceived through sperm donation also are more likely to feel alienated from their immediate family than either biological or adopted children. They're twice as likely as adoptees to report envying peers who knew their biological parents, twice as likely to worry that their parents "might have lied to me about important matters" and three times as likely to report feeling "confused about who is a member of my family and who is not."

And the realities of commercialized reproduction — in which desirable donors can father dozens of children by different mothers, creating far-flung networks of half-siblings who will never know each other — weigh heavily on them. They are more likely than adoptees to say that "when I see someone who resembles me, I often wonder if we are related," for instance, and much more likely to worry about accidentally falling into a romantic relationship with a relative.

Some of these burdens are inherent to a process that replaces natural conception with scientific technique. But some of them could be eased if the legal system treated sperm and egg donation with the gravity it deserves — as a process that's far closer to adoption (and potentially more traumatic for the child involved) than our culture cares to admit.

Despite their reputation for permissiveness, many European nations have done much more than the supposedly socially conservative America to recognize that children as well as adults have an interest in the way assisted reproduction works. Britain, Sweden, Norway and Switzerland have banned anonymous sperm and egg donation, allowing donor-conceived children access to their family histories once they turn 18. Many countries also have limited the number of children a sperm donor can father to well below the 25 that the American Medical Association recommends.

Such restrictions would reduce the pool of willing donors and create longer waiting times (and greater emotional anguish) for aspiring parents. But they would also untangle some of the webs of secrecy and uncertainty that donor children find themselves born into. And they might diminish, if not completely undo, what one grown-up donor baby quoted in the study describes as the feeling of existing entirely for "other people's purposes, and not my own."

A version of this op-ed appeared in print on May 31, 2010, on page A19 of the New York edition.



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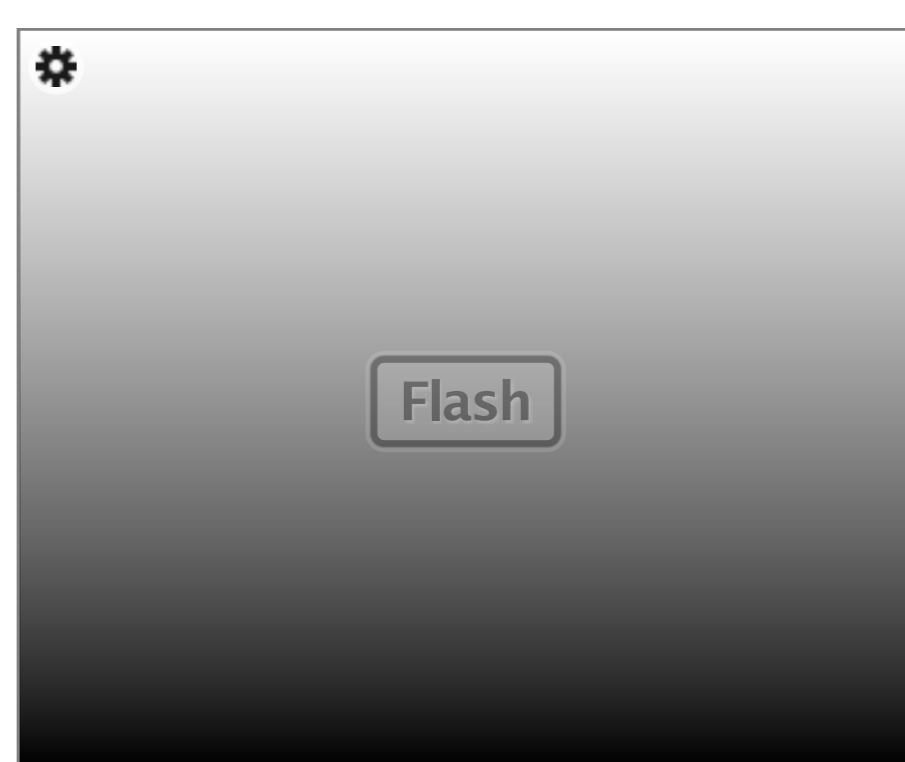
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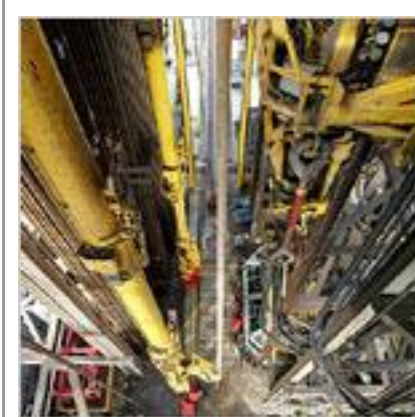
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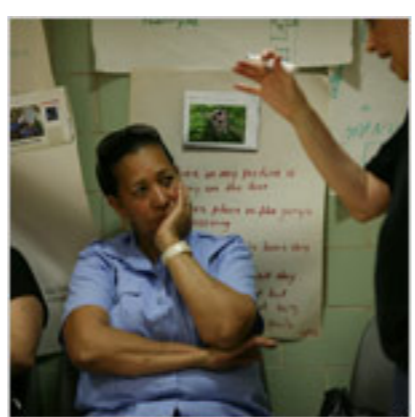
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