

Sex Cells: The Medical Market for Eggs and Sperm. By Rene Almeling. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, 240 pp., \$60.00 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

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Rene Almeling's new book provides an in-depth examination of the inner workings of the market for gamete donors and the experiences of those who donate. Dealing skillfully with a variety of complex issues, from the gendered cultural logic that differently values sperm and eggs (and not always in predictable ways) to uncovering what levels of exploitation may exist in this new form of body commodification, Almeling significantly contributes to a topic on which sociologists have produced little empirical research thus far.

One of the book's strengths is the way in which it successfully integrates sociological theories of the market and gendered theories of the body. Directly tackling issues of body commodification, Almeling calls for scholars to refine their understanding through taking into account both sociological perspectives and biological processes. She argues that commodification should be seen as an interactive social process occurring between people who occupy specific social locations. Scholars, therefore, need to be attuned to at least two levels of analysis: the organization of the market and the experiences (both physical and social) of those participating in it. It is these two levels of analysis that she uses as a framework for the book, with the first half of the book looking at "Organizing the Market" and the second at "Experiencing the Market."

Almeling finds that while sperm donors think and talk about what they do as "a job," egg donors consider what they do to be "a gift." This appears to be framed by the actions and structure of the gamete programs, as well as cultural associations of women as selfless caregivers who are still more strongly tied to the private sphere. In sperm donor programs, it is acceptable for men to be "donating" for monetary reasons; the recipients are rarely mentioned, and payment is based on bodily performance, with men receiving "wages" each time they produce a "high quality" sample. In contrast, egg donation programs historically grew out of adoption or surrogacy centers, and emphasize the importance of women's altruism. These programs focus on the special connection between the donor and the recipient (e.g., "thank you" cards are common) and the donor is paid a lump sum for the process they undertake—not the resulting number of eggs.

Building on this, a perhaps unexpected finding is that more of the men than women consider themselves to be a parent of any resulting

children. Almeling argues that this is due to the gendered cultural understandings of what paternity versus maternity entails. Many of the sperm donors do not tease apart the concept of social parenthood from biological parenthood, so these men understand themselves to be “the father” or at least a “particular kind” of father to any offspring. In contrast, the egg donors are nearly uniform in their assertion of not being the mother. This is because they see reproduction as composed of a series of contingent stages, and therefore are more aware of the contributions of the egg recipients. Almeling also points out that the women have strong motivations not to claim motherhood with all its cultural expectations, lest they be judged the very worst type of mother.

To form her conclusions, Almeling draws on comprehensive methods consisting of in-depth interviews with egg donors, sperm donors, and staff members at six different donation programs, short-term ethnographic observations at several of the programs, and a content analysis of donor profiles. The triangulation of methods allows Almeling to present the varying viewpoints convincingly and compare the contrasting experiences of egg donors, sperm donors, and staff members. Possibly as a result of her sample, which was largely white (especially the sperm donors), this book touches on some fascinating subjects involving intersectionality and the value placed on racial difference, but does not fully examine the role of race/ethnicity in the experience of gamete donation. Additionally, it is unclear if Almeling explored in detail within the interviews how the donors’ intimate relationships were impacted by their decision to become donors. As a significant number of the donors—especially the egg donors—were married, this topic deserved to be developed in more depth.

Overall this is a theoretically grounded book that looks at a fascinating world not yet well known by scholars. Almeling successfully undertakes the unraveling of apparent contradictions and the balancing of multiple levels of analysis. Scholars interested in issues concerning gender, reproduction, conceptions of family, or body commodification will find this an especially compelling read. As the book is clearly and concisely written, it would also be suitable for upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses.

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