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# What's in a name? Variations in terminology of third-party reproduction




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**Abstract** The terminology used to discuss third-party reproduction, as with other new biomedical processes, can ease or impede communication and even influence behaviour. In an effort to sensitize analysts and stakeholders to variations in terminology and to facilitate communication on issues arising from international surrogacy arrangements, this paper examines variations in terms used. We introduce some of the issues previously raised by scholars concerned with analysis of discourse related to third-party reproduction. We then survey the terms used in English-language discussions to denote specific actors, including 'surrogates,' 'intended parents,' gamete providers and children, as well as terms used to describe 'surrogacy arrangements.' We conclude with a discussion on navigating and negotiating the use of these various and value-laden terms. 

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## Introduction

The terminology used to discuss third-party reproduction has become increasingly contested and diverse as reproductive technologies have proliferated. When Louise Brown, conceived *in vitro*, was born in the UK in 1978, headlines referred to her as the world's first 'test-tube baby.' Soon after

there were other 'firsts.' For example, in 1983, an Australian menopausal woman became pregnant with the help of a younger woman's eggs (Trounson et al., 1983). And, in 1985, a woman without a uterus had one of her own eggs fertilized *in vitro* and then transferred into the uterus of another woman who would gestate it for her (Utian, 1989). These achievements, and others that rapidly followed, opened the

floodgates for a booming fertility industry that drew far more women into the process than those hoping to become parents. The new developments, unlike artificial insemination, which had been practised for nearly a century, both inspired and required new terminology, at times creating debate about which terms were most appropriate for the processes as well as for the participants. Such semantic differences are not surprising given the rapidity of developments in the area and the controversial nature of the subject matter. Yet, one's choice of terms to describe new biomedical processes, often a challenge in the in case of many new technologies, can impede or ease effective communication and even influence behaviour (Beeson and Lippman, 2006; Loike, 2014). This is apparent most recently in the challenges faced by the Hague Conference on Private International Law as it seeks to reconcile differences among national policies regarding cross-border surrogacy practices. To facilitate communication on this topic, the Hague Conference included a glossary in one of its recent official documents on the topic (Permanent Bureau, 2012). This glossary was amended in a subsequent report eliminating the term 'commercial surrogacy,' and replacing it with 'for-profit surrogacy' (Permanent Bureau, 2014). A footnote explains that the change was made following feedback from 'intending parents' who found the word 'commercial' to be offensive. This change, which some may find curious or problematic, provides a good example of the difficulty in establishing consensus regarding terminology.

In an effort to sensitize policy makers, users, providers and researchers to variations in terminology and to facilitate effective communication on issues arising from international surrogacy arrangements, we surveyed key terms used by clinicians, scholars, journalists, advocates and participants, as well as those found in official documents addressing this rapidly expanding area of human reproduction. We present our findings in this paper. We first describe the methods we used to compile relevant terms and follow this with a brief background section highlighting some of the points previously raised by scholars concerned with the analysis of discourse related to third-party reproduction. We then consider the terms used to describe the key participants involved in making these arrangements possible – the various 'who's. Next, we discuss terms used to describe the arrangements themselves – the 'what.' Often, these terms also address the 'how' so we give this some attention as well.

Although all the terms that refer to third-party reproduction, including those that purport to be neutral, scientific, or both, are value laden, our analysis is descriptive, rather than prescriptive. We do, however, point out some usages that are clearly inaccurate or misleading. We conclude with a discussion on negotiating the use of these various and value-laden terms.

## Materials and methods

We began by compiling terms about practices and participants that the three authors had encountered during the three decades in which third-party reproduction has been part of our academic, policy or public interest work. Next, we added terms gleaned from articles recommended to, and written by, participants in the International Forum on International Adoption and Global Surrogacy held in August 2014 in The Hague,

which two of us (DB and MD) attended. In preparation for a co-authored presentation at this forum, all three authors searched anthologies, ethnographies, research reports and other sources cited in these documents.

In addition, we used *PubMed*, *Google* and *Google Scholar* as search tools to locate relevant sources. Together, they yielded tens of thousands of documents, including articles from professional journals in the fields of medicine, nursing, social work, sociology and psychology. Key words such as 'surrogacy' and 'egg donation' alone also identified tens of thousands of documents, making it clear that a thorough search of related terms within each source was impractical, if not impossible. As a result, we simply scanned titles to identify potential sources, reading relevant abstracts, searching through lists of key words, and in some cases reading whole articles. We continued to mine specific sources where it appeared new terms might be found until each line of inquiry reached a point of 'saturation,' that is, failed to yield new terms.

From the discussion of terminology at the 2014 forum, we obtained a few further terms, and, in preparation for this publication, we continued to search for additional news stories, government websites and legal documents related to third-party reproduction that might be of use as well as websites of patient advocacy groups and agencies promoting surrogacy among diverse clientele including single men and women, gay men, and lesbians. We limited our search to English-language terms, although even a cursory consideration of terminology in other languages might have yielded new insights. As well, we have mostly excluded the sometimes colorful albeit frequently offensive metaphors (such as 'angels,' 'buns in the oven' (Berkhout, 2008), 'incubators' (Rothman, 1989, p. 233; Teman, 2010) or 'biological coolies' (Dhillon, 2015) found in more popular, or lay contexts.

Finally, recognizing that potentially relevant new terms are constantly emerging in different social arenas, we consulted by email in June 2015 with a few strategically located scholars and patient advocates with extensive experience working in this field in Australia, Canada, India, Israel, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, the UK and the USA to obtain their feedback on the terms we had found, asking them also to propose any we might have missed (see acknowledgements for their names). This resulted in still further additions to our lists and the tables that we present here.

## Background

The terms used by those writing about third-party reproduction, whether in popular media, or in medical, legal, ethical, social science or policy documents, are typically presented as if they were neutral. They may, nonetheless, reflect an attempt either by proponents to legitimize or promote the practice, or by critics to invoke a particular political position or general opposition to the practice. Many who try to be 'neutral' simply adopt the language they assume is most commonly used and therefore most likely to be understood. Consequently, an author who explicitly rejects one commonly used term as biased, may then use a term for a related topic that is equally problematic. Word choice inevitably, perhaps necessarily, reflects a particular standpoint on an issue: words are rarely, if ever, neutral.

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