



Article

Online sperm donors: the impact of family, friends, personality and risk perception on behaviour

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KEY MESSAGE

Understanding the motivations of informal donors is critical in providing effective policy, equitable legislative frameworks and frontline health and psychological support. Our study is the first of its kind to analyse factors such as level and history of donation, risk concerns, number of women to whom donations are informally made and the number offspring generated.

ABSTRACT

As informal sperm donation becomes more prevalent worldwide, understanding donor psychology and interactions is critical in providing effective policy, equitable legislative frameworks and frontline health support to an ever-growing number of global participants. We analyse data of informal sperm donors who were members of the connection website *PrideAngel* to identify the role and effect of several factors, e.g. kinship, social networks, personality, and risk perception, on behaviour. A key strength of the study is the ability to analyse various factors, such as the level and history of informal donation, risk concerns, number of women to whom donations are informally made and the number of offspring. Our results indicate donors who have also been active in formal clinical settings (compared with those who exclusively donate informally), donate to more women in the informal market and realise more offspring. Donor's sexual orientation also affects activity. From a personality perspective, conscientiousness provides comparative advantage. It is possible this characteristic provides positive externalities, as more conscientious men may be more efficient or organised in a market that requires increased cooperation and communication. The importance of kin and social networks seems to affect frequency of donation only, possibly representing a time constraint (or opportunity cost).

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Introduction

The current global climate in sperm donation can best be described as 'one that is in transition' (Daniels, 2007, p. 124). This is because

the internet is facilitating a change in the way women choose the (biological) father of their offspring. The internet and the development of 'connection websites' constitute a new setting in which men and women can increase information flow, reduce financial burdens or barriers to sperm donation, and negotiate their own individual

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donation and parenting arrangements. Sperm donors and the women (and couples) who seek their gametes are no longer bound by logistical or national boundaries (Jadva et al., 2015), by cultural, social, financial, or even sexuality-based barriers that historically have excluded them from donor insemination opportunities (Acker, 2013).

Donors and recipients are stepping away from the (medical and legally) regulated setting of clinical donation, to find each other through connection websites and web forums (Whyte and Torgler, 2015). Yet, the factors driving men to participate in these informal donation processes are not as clear. It is thought that, in many instances, the implementation of donor identity legislation has resulted in a contraction in the number of formal (clinic) donors (Riggs and Russell, 2010), and a movement of men towards informal donation settings (Bossema et al., 2014).

Although the media has recently brought wider social visibility to informal donation (Acker, 2013), it is unclear how many recipients and donors are currently participating globally in the informal market (Woestenburg et al., 2016), or how many offspring are being realized annually. Of the studies to date exploring two of the internet's largest global connection websites (Free Sperm Donors Worldwide (FSDW) and PrideAngel), registered sperm donor web profiles number in excess of 2000 and 5000 men, respectively (Freeman et al., 2016; Riggs and Russell, 2010).

Research has proposed that informal donors are demographically diverse, with primarily altruistic and procreative motivations (Freeman et al., 2016; Riggs and Russell, 2010; Woestenburg et al., 2016; Yee, 2009). Previous research has also found that more successful informal donors tend to exhibit personality traits that are more cooperative (Whyte and Torgler, 2015) and introverted (Whyte and Torgler, 2016a). As behavioural research has only really begun in the past decade, little else is known about informal donors' psychology or behaviour.

Technology (the internet) has facilitated a fundamental change in how men and women choose whom to have children with. Humans are no longer constrained by logistical propinquity in mate choice. In developed economies, online dating, dating apps, social media, and the wider internet is now a socially accepted global platform for meeting a partner (Whyte and Torgler, 2017a). This cyberspace human mating conduit is also being used as a compensatory mechanism for decreases in the availability of the global supply of clinically donated gametes. Beginning in the early 2000s, a global online market has developed for sperm donation outside of regulated donor insemination clinics and sperm banks.

Changes in cultural and social norms, same-sex (lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex and questioning) equality, gender equity, changes in family structure, the increasing delay of fertility decisions, and the breaking down of previous stigmas attached to donation have all been contributing factors in the growth of connection websites, and wider informal donation. Legislative frameworks regarding donor anonymity are also gradually moving towards mandatory identity accessibility for donor-conceived children at 18 years of age. In the UK where PrideAngel is based, the abolition of donor anonymity occurred in 2005. For many men and women, however, private donation arrangements (free of regulatory oversight) are their preferred choice.

For men and women who participate in informal donation practices, significant advantages can be gained. First, formal donation restricts information transfers about, and for both, parties. For women, formal settings mean a reliance on the clinical provider to deliver vital demographic, genetic, aesthetic and personality information on their choice of donor (Nelson and Hertz, 2016). Furthermore, women have

also been constrained by the availability of commercial supply, thus limiting choice (Whyte et al., 2016). Donors, on the other hand, receive limited information on the recipient and any resulting offspring, effectively relinquishing all control of their gametes at the point of donation. The informal donation process reverses this relationship by enabling donor choice and ongoing cooperation. It enables donor and recipient autonomy (from the regulator) through increased information transfers to both parties on demographics, personality, and motivations of both donors and recipients based on their needs and preferences. For women, access to current and ongoing paternal medical information can be a significant factor in deciding on a donor (Acker, 2013). For donors, information on the actual (procreation) outcomes of their donation may be the very impetus for their participation. Informal donation can also provide men with the opportunity for different forms of ongoing contact and bonding with recipient and offspring (Bossema et al., 2014); something that anonymous formal donation cannot.

Formal donation can also be a significant financial burden for women and couples. Clinical donor insemination treatment can cost thousands of dollars with no guarantee or greater probability of success for recipients. Informal interactions incur no such direct treatment costs (Ravelingien et al., 2016). For donors, clinical screening processes based on genetic, demographic, marital status or sexual orientation caveats restrict access to donation markets. Informal donation then normatively creates a more competitive market by increasing the available donor pool (supply), and reducing financial (and opportunity) cost for women and couples seeking donors (increased demand). Most importantly, one-to-one interactions allow men and women to freely negotiate post-partum parenting and interaction arrangements before any resulting offspring. Such arrangements can be more adaptable, appropriate or relevant for donors and recipients than the particular legal framework currently in place in the domestic market in which the donation takes place.

Despite the positive benefits to the individuals involved, non-clinical settings do, however, open donors up to the possibility and risks of 'social disapproval' (Bossema et al., 2014), something that has historically never been an issue for sperm donors, and something that may result in significant psychological harm. Ongoing misalignment of donor/recipient attitudes, objectives, or a lack of positive consequences or outcomes from informal participation, may actually mean some men cease donation all together. Such psychosocial needs of donors are largely neglected in donor insemination research (Daniels, 1998; Van den Broeck et al., 2013). Research into the relationship between male personality traits and the large-scale decision setting that is informal sperm donation is also extremely limited (Bossema et al., 2014; Whyte and Torgler, 2015).

The historical anonymity of sperm donation has meant that research into both formal and informal donors is problematic. Both formal donation by anonymous donors (no demographic information made available for researchers), and informal donation by men in markets with no regulatory oversight (no third party regulator collecting donor information) have made it difficult to assess the practice and scope of the donors in question (Harper et al., 2017). This is reflected in the systematic review by Van den Broeck et al. (2013) of 29 studies into formal sperm donor demographics, attitudes, and motivations, which showed a mean sample size of only 147 participants (range 17–1428), and a median sample of just 52 observations. Studies with larger observations ($n = 1546$) have since been published looking at demographic characteristics of clinical donors favoured by recipients (Whyte et al., 2016), as well as the

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