

“I helped someone have a child, but I am not its mother”: Egg donors' attitudes in Spain towards (improbable) contact with children conceived from their eggs

Title page

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Abstract:

Research question: What are the attitudes of egg donors in Spain towards potential contact with children conceived from their genetic material, should Spanish legislation change to permit this?

Design: Ethnographic research carried out between 2016 and 2019 that included interviews with 38 egg donors from different parts of Spain.

Results: Three distinct groups were identified: egg donors who would not accept establishing contact under any circumstances and would not have donated under non-anonymity (26.3%); those who express their desire, interest or fondness for such contact, and would have donated even if it were not anonymous (26.3%); and those who have no desire or interest in such contact, but would agree to it if the initiative came from the children themselves and/or their families (47.4%).

Conclusions: Spanish egg donors fluctuate between two interpretative registers concerning kinship: one prioritizing genetics and the other experiential and social factors. The results suggest that lifting anonymity would not lead to a significant drop in the number of egg donations.

Keywords: assisted reproductive technology; egg donors; donor-conceived children; reproductive bioeconomies.

Introduction

In Spanish society, recognition of the right of children to contact their donors is only gradually gaining ground.. In fact, the only statement on the matter by a relevant institution in the country has been the report of the Spanish bioethics committee published in 2020, which did not have much impact at the social and political level. Gamete donations remain anonymous in Spain, despite a growing global trend towards non-anonymity, such as evidenced by recent changes in other parts of Europe (such as Portugal and France). The idea prevails in the medical sector that lifting anonymity

would drastically decrease the number of donations due to a fear of donors being identified and contacted (Múñoz et al., 2019). In this context, this paper explores the following question based on ethnographic research: how do egg donors in Spain understand their relationship with the children conceived from their genetic material? And more concretely, what is their attitude towards the possibility of contact with these children, if Spanish legislation were to change so as to allow this? The latter issue has not been studied in Spain; whereas the first one appears in work by Joan Bestard's research team, which examines how egg donors talk about their donation (Orobitg and Salazar, 2005) and their transition from a biogenetic to a gestational discourse when it comes to defining motherhood (Bestard and Orobitg, 2009).

A review of international literature on the attitudes of egg donors towards the possibility of contact with the children born from their donations – a possibility that is more or less foreseeable depending on the country – reveals that there is little scientific literature that focuses on this as a central issue. Such publications are based on research conducted in countries such as Sweden, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Finland or UK (Goedeke et al., 2023; Isaksson et al., 2015; Jadva et al., 2011; Kirkland et al., 1992; Kirkman et al., 2014; Lampic et al., 2014; Miettinen et al., 2019), where legislation has either lifted anonymity or established a mixed system that allows both anonymous and non-anonymous donations. A larger body of work addresses this topic (or aspects related to it) indirectly, interwoven with other issues, such as the psychological characteristics of egg donors or, more specifically, their motivations, attitudes, expectations, feelings or experiences (Blakemore et al., 2019; Borgstrøm et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2016; Jadva et al., 2016; Kalfoglou and Geller, 2000; Kirkman, 2003; Leeton and Harman, 1986; Patrick et al., 2001); their discourses concerning anonymity (De Melo et al., 2018); or the impact the trend towards openness and the lifting of anonymity has on these women (Craft et al., 2005; Frith et al., 2007; Greenfel, 2008).

Among published research, studies varied in sample composition. One set focused solely on egg donors (Bestard and Orobitg, 2009; Blackmore et al., 2019; Blyth et al., 2011; Borgstrøm et al., 2019; Goedeke et al. 2023; Graham et al., 2016; Jadva et al., 2016; Kalfoglou and Geller, 2000; Miettinen et al., 2019). Another group of studies also included other stakeholders, so that the motivations, feelings, attitudes, experiences,

etc. of egg donors could be compared with those of other subjects involved in (or affected by) the gamete donation process, such as donation recipients (Blyth et al., 2011; De Melo et al., 2018; Kirkland et al., 1992), sperm donors (Frith et al., 2007; ; Isaksson et al., 2014; Jadvá et al., 2015; Kirkland et al., 1992; Lampic et al., 2014; Sydsjö et al., 2014), embryo donors (Kirkman, 2003), or donor-conceived children (Greenfeld, 2008).

Some results derived from these comparisons are worth noting. First, the reasons given by donors to justify the anonymity of egg donations (and thus also to rule out any contact with the children born thanks to them) do not differ substantially from those provided by recipient women, with the former commonly embracing the views and interests of the latter (De Melo et al., 2018). This suggests that egg donors place themselves in the background, subordinating their own rights to those of other actors involved in assisted reproduction. This is congruent with the relegation they are subjected to, in terms of rights, agency and visibility, by the fertility industry and society at large (Jociles et al., 2022, p. 34-35). In this regard, donors subject their bodies to a strict regimen involving a series of tasks to be performed rigorously to ensure their eggs are of the highest quality so they can receive the agreed financial compensation. These various actions leave them little room to negotiate the conditions under which they donate. They are constantly under the control and surveillance of gamete bank professionals. At the same time, donors are considered to play a secondary role in assisted reproduction treatments. For example, Ascensión, an interviewed egg donor, speaks of their lack of visibility, exemplified by of the different entrances reserved for egg donors and recipients being made to use different entrances at in certain fertility clinics. Second, reluctance to contact is significantly higher among intended mothers. Around 90% of female recipients, compared to around 50% of egg donors, were opposed in the 1990s to contact between egg donors and donor-conceived adults (Kirkland et al., 1992, p. 355). Although there is growing openness among families regarding the disclosure of their children's genetic origins, some remain doubtful, as evidenced in Great Britain by some authors (Lysons et al., 2023; Macmillan, 2022; Nordqvist, 2014). And third, although gender causes important variations in other aspects of gamete donation (Almeling, 2011), there is no significant difference between the proportion of sperm donors and of oocyte donors who, sometime after having donated, have a positive opinion about

future contact with the offspring conceived thanks to their donations (Frith et al., 2007, p. 1676; Isaksson et al., 2014, p. 1160; Lampic et al., 2014, p. 1978).

One common conclusion emerges from most of these studies that answers, either directly or indirectly, the question of how donors understand their relationship with the children conceived from their eggs: women who donate under a regime of anonymity are not necessarily unwilling to come into contact with the children conceived from their eggs. A significant number of anonymous donors stated either that they would not have objected at the time of their donation if these children could find out their identity and thus have the possibility to contact them in the future, or that they had changed their mind sometime after the donation and had opened up to the possibility of such contact (Craft et al., 2005; Frith et al., 2007; Kirkman, 2003; Leeton and Harman, 1986; Patrick et al., 2001; Purewal and Van den Akker, 2009). Moreover, some have subsequently initiated searches for these offspring using the Donor Sibling Registry (DSR), similar online resources (Jadva et al., 2015; Kirkman et al., 2014), or DNA databases (van den Akker et al., 2015). Predisposition to such contact is naturally more frequent among donors with identity release (Isaksson et al., 2015). However, not all such donors expect people conceived with their eggs to contact them when they reach the age required by law. There are two main reasons for this: parents do not always tell offspring that they have been conceived with donor gametes, and offspring themselves may not find the need to make contact (Graham et al., 2016).

Two areas of research have emerged in recent years in relation to the attitude of anonymous donors towards the possibility of coming into contact with individuals conceived with their eggs. The first concerns the experiences of those who, over time, have decided to break with anonymity and contact these children through online social groups and platforms, be they created by private individuals, such as the DSR (Jadva et al., 2011), or by the state. Countries such as the UK and the Netherlands, as well as the Australian state of Victoria, have opted to both lift anonymity and facilitate searching for the origins of those who were conceived with donated gametes prior to the lifting of anonymity (Crawshaw et al., 2016; Indekeu et al., 2022). This area of research has led to extremely interesting questions about how egg donors (whether anonymous, known, or identity-release) give meaning to biogenetic connections. While not usually considering

them relationships of kinship (at least not in a maternal-filial sense), these links are nonetheless meaningful to them, even in the absence of cultural scripts to guide their development (Gilman, 2020; van Parys et al., 2016).

The second area of enquiry concerns the widespread use of commercial DNA databases, i.e. direct-to-consumer genetic testing (such as Family Tree DNA, 23andMe, AncestryDNA, and My Heritage), and the risk this entails to the privacy and anonymity of gamete donors, as they could be identified even if they have not provided genetic material for such tests (Crawshaw, 2018; Gilman et al., 2024; Hammer and Mahalingaia, 2023; Harper et al., 2016; Ishii and de Miguel, 2022; Mohapatra, 2020; Pennings, 2019; Tsai and Eaton, 2024; Van den Akker et al., 2014; Zadeh, 2024). Some of these studies highlight that the system of anonymous gamete donation is not sustainable in a highly technologised world. Others argue that fertility clinics should inform gamete donors and other concerned parties that anonymity cannot be guaranteed, noting this in informed consent forms and advising that donor-conceived children may potentially contact them. This raises an additional question in this article: are egg donors in Spain aware that direct-to-consumer genetic tests (DTC DNA tests) could lead to donor-conceived children locating them?

This article explores the question: what are the attitudes of egg donors in Spain to the eventuality of contact with children conceived from their genetic material, if Spanish legislation were to change to allow this? This article is relevant in the Spanish social and economic context, where anonymity still governs donations, for this constitutes the first time the issue of the attitudes of donors towards contact with children born with their gametes is addressed.

Materials and methods

To answer the research question, data were collected and analysed between 2016 and 2019 as part of the project 'Families, fertility clinics, and donors: crossed views. Variations according to family models and anonymity/non-anonymity of donations'. The main researchers were Ana María Rivas and Consuelo Álvarez. Interviews with the egg donors were conducted by the following members of the research team: Consuelo Álvarez, Ana María Rivas, María Isabel Jociles, Fernando Lores, José Ignacio Pichardo

(Complutense University of Madrid); Rosa María Frasset (University of Barcelona); and Marta Díez (University of Seville). The analysis of the collected ethnographic material was carried out by the authors of this article to examine donors' views on the potential, although improbable, contact with the children born from their donations.

Ethnographic interviews were conducted with 38 egg donors from various regions of Spain (Madrid, Catalonia, Valencia, Andalusia and Castilla-la-Mancha) who were contacted through various channels. Two fertility clinics provided the contact details of several of their donors. Participant observation in two other clinics led to other donors being contacted. Some of the donors whose practices were observed in the clinics agreed to being interviewed in places outside the clinics. An online discussion forum on egg donation was also used to launch a call for volunteer interviewees. And finally, the 'snowball' method contributed to meeting a few more donors (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Kirchherr and Charles, 2018).

Of the 38 donors interviewed, 30 were from Spain and 8 were foreigners (from Colombia, Poland, Chile, Cape Verde, United States, Portugal, and Romania). In terms of age distribution, 17 of them were 18-25 years old, 14 were 26-33, 4 were 34-41, and 5 were 42-50. 30 of these women were in a couple and most (24) had no children. With regard to their level of education, 16 had higher education, 17 had secondary education, and only 5 had primary education. Meanwhile, 7 of them were unemployed and looking for work, 6 were studying, and the rest were employed, commonly in precarious jobs, such as telemarketers, salespeople, retail clerks, factory workers, childcare workers, waitresses, and kitchen assistants. Finally, 12 had donated eggs once; 8 had done so twice; 2, three times; 4, four times; 8, five times; 3, six times; and 1, seven times.

The use of different recruitment channels gave access to a wide range of donor profiles. The 'snowball' method and the online forum invitation made it possible to recruit women who had donated several years earlier and who at the time were no longer active donors. The interviews took place at locations chosen by the women interviewed. These spaces were mostly public or semi-public places (cafeterias, parks, or university offices) or the women's own homes. Some women preferred to conduct the interviews at the clinics where they were contacted.

These interviews were conducted on the basis of an ethnographic logic (Jociles, 2005; Kimber and Dairon, 2023; Spradley, 1979), so that, although a script was drawn up, organized according to different issues concerning the experience of donating eggs, the questions were *de facto* adapted to the content and pace of the women's testimonies. During the interviews, the following questions, among others, were asked: How do they value anonymity? Would they have donated if the egg donation had not been anonymous? Would they agree to meet or communicate with the children conceived from their eggs if the children could access their identification details? What do they think about the possibility of these children tracing them? Would they like to be contacted? How do they imagine such an encounter? What limits would they set? Their representations of the links existing between themselves and the children born thanks to their donations, as well as their feelings towards these children, were also discussed. To analyse these data, each researcher independently classified the content of the interviews. The resulting classifications were then compared using open coding and axial coding, according to the terminology of Strauss and Corbin (1998). Consensus finding was facilitated through the participation of a researcher from outside the research team. The categories derived from this analysis, referring to how donors envisage their relationship with the offspring conceived with their eggs, were as follows: denial vs. acceptance of a parental link; genetic vs. gestational vs. social links; views on gamete donation and surrogacy; notions of what anonymity is and what it entails, both when in place and when lifted; reactions to the idea of coming into contact with children born thanks to their donations (rejection, desire, or acceptance under certain conditions); and pathways through which they think contacts could be initiated. The results were subsequently grouped according to the main variations found in the second to last category listed above, because the other categories and their properties were largely dependent on it. That is, the coding and categorization outlined above enabled the classification of participants according to their responses to the question about how they viewed the possibility of coming into contact with their offspring.

Ethical concerns were addressed in the Ethics section of the funded research project, which was evaluated and approved by the evaluation committee appointed by the Ministry of Economy and Research. The main ethical concerns of the research team were

the preservation of the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. To this end, an informed consent form was signed by each participant, explaining the objectives of the research project and disclosing the organization financing it. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and data confidentiality and were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time, even retroactively. During the transcription of the interviews, the content was anonymized using pseudonyms, so that, even within the research team, only the researcher who conducted any given interview knew the identity of the interviewee.

Results

This section is divided into two main parts. The first one presents differences that were identified between the donors interviewed, who essentially fall into three different categories depending on their attitudes towards potential contact with offspring. Each category is discussed under its own subheading:

1. Neither desire nor acceptance of contact
2. Desire to know about the children conceived with their donated eggs
3. Acceptance of contact, but without taking the initiative to establish it

The second subsection presents aspects that are common to all three groups of women.

Differing donor positions on possible contact with children conceived from their eggs

In terms of their predisposition to come into contact with the children born thanks to their donations, the 38 egg donors interviewed can be classified into three groups: 26.3% (10 donors) stated they want no contact and would decline if a child requested to have contact (e.g. once having reached a certain age, as stipulated in countries where anonymity has been lifted); another 26.3% said they would like to come into contact and meet the children; and the majority (47.4%, or 18 donors) took an intermediate position, expressing that they did not desire contact and would not take the initiative, but would be willing to accept it if the request came from the children or their parents.

When imagining a situation of coming into contact with such children, all the donors interviewed implicitly took for granted they were the ones being contacted by the

offspring or their families. They did not see themselves as initiating the contact. This may have been induced by how the question was asked: “What would you do if you were contacted by the offspring conceived with your gametes?” The very question evokes this situation. Nonetheless, all the women comprising the second and third groups expressed to a greater or lesser extent a certain curiosity about the individuals conceived with their gametes and an interest in receiving information about them. The difference being that the second group explicitly stated a “desire” to meet their genetic offspring. That is, they expressed they wanted this contact. Meanwhile, the third group, while expressing “curiosity”, emphasized that any contact would not be motivated by a “desire” on their behalf. Instead, contact would have to be initiated by the children or their relatives. In any case, donor positions vary and most span a range between the second and third groups, rather than forming distinct categories.

These three donor groups are further described below, with a focus on the reasons given by each to justify their positions.

“If I donate, I want to know nothing further”: neither desire nor acceptance of contact

The 10 egg donors comprising the first group emphasized their disinterest in meeting the children born from their donated gametes and stated they would refuse such contact if asked. Their lack of desire or curiosity was sometimes expressed as, “I don't even think about who will receive [the eggs] or how the children will develop”.

No way. I surely wouldn't have donated [if the donation had not been anonymous]. There is no way I would contact the children. In other words, if I make a donation, I don't want to know nothing further. For me, it's the same as donating blood. If I donate blood, I don't want to know who the blood goes to, because it puts me in a violent situation: perhaps one day a bag of my blood is used in an emergency room to save a rapist who has been stabbed.

(Ascensión, 23 years old, in a couple, no children, higher education, 2 donations, Catalonia)

The reasons provided are virtually the same as those offered to explain their adherence to the anonymity of gamete donations, to the extent that all but one state flatly that

they would not have donated if it were not anonymous. One of these reasons is implicit in the preceding *verbatim*: anonymity allows them to preserve an idealized image of the recipients of their eggs, which would be at risk if in contact with recipients or their children. This is echoed by a donor interviewed in the USA by Kalfoglou and Geller (2000, p. 662): “because I knew nothing about the recipients, I could fantasize that they would be ‘perfect parents’”. Other reasons given are not far removed from those offered by donors interviewed by De Melo et al. (2018), also in the USA. Among them are sentimental reasons. Anonymity – and, therefore, the impossibility of contacting the child – makes it easier for donors to distance themselves socially and emotionally from the children. It also prevents the children from making claims, not only financially, but also emotionally.

I think it would break my heart to find out that I have a... Because deep down it would be like your child, even if the egg were fertilized in another womb. Wow! I don't know. I'd feel very sorry for having missed eighteen years of the child's life, for not having met them before – if suddenly they come looking for me. I'd have the feeling something was being demanded from me, not only financially, but also emotionally. [...] If it weren't anonymous, I wouldn't do it. I think anonymity is good in the sense that the child grows up with the idea of belonging to a family, instead of feeling abandoned by a mother who didn't love them and sold them to another family.

(Angela, 21 years old, in a couple, no children, university student, 1 donation, Madrid)

The interviewees expressed fear that the children born from their gametes may make financial or emotional demands from them. By “emotional demands” they usually mean two different things. On the one hand, children could ask them to explain why they donated, or even reproach them for having done so, considering it an “abandonment” on behalf of the donor and/or a “purchase” on behalf of the intended parents. On the other hand, they may have expectations of a mother-child relationship with the donors. Donors challenged this relationship with two arguments: that a genetic link does not in itself establish such a relationship, and that when they donated, they were not looking to become mothers, but rather to help other women become mothers and/or to meet an economic need. Therefore, they believe that contact would be of no benefit to the children.

If someone wants to know who the egg donor was, what will that change in their life? What will it offer them? [...] I don't think that it's beneficial for someone born in another person's womb to want to know who gave [the egg]. Nor do I think it's right. Of what use can it be to them? Because I don't think they want me to be their mother.

(Irene, 32 years old, single, no children, higher education, 1 donation 11 years ago, Catalonia)

The very possibility of contact, they argued, would raise expectations in children that they would not be willing to meet and that would not be positive – not only for the children, but also for their families. The donors interviewed do not see these children as their own. However, like those who participated in a study by Jadva et al. (2011), they think that other donors may do so, especially if they end up not having biological children of their own, which would pose a risk to the children's families because contact could interfere with established internal relationships.

I don't see it as a form of motherhood, but rather as donating something from my body. I will not look for [the child]. But if I took it differently – maybe if I didn't have a child and I wanted to have one – then maybe [contact] would be a way to connect with that person.

(Jena, 34 years old, in a couple, no children, higher education, 2 donations, Madrid)

Similarly, some egg donors with children - though not all - explained that they refuse to have contact with the children born from their eggs because they fear it could disrupt their own family life.

If they know my name, maybe in a few years' time someone born from my eggs will come looking for me. And I don't want that. Because I have my family and I don't want this to lead to problems.

(Ainara, 29 years old, married, two children, higher education, 2 donations, Madrid)

***“Others might have a problem, but we want to meet them”:
desire to know about the children conceived with their
donated eggs***

The 10 donors who constitute the second group would, without hesitation, be willing to contact the children if they were asked to do so. Moreover, they would welcome such

contact because they are curious to know “how the children turned out” or, more particularly, whether they resemble them physically and/or psychologically.

I would like to know above all if they resemble me physically, or what they are like, if they resemble my personality, my character. I would like to see what they’re like, both physically and as persons. I would also like to meet the families, the parents. To be able to talk to them.

What kind of relationship do you think you would establish?

I think none. Well, maybe to go for a walk with them one day, sit down, meet their child, you know? But not a relationship, because I don't want to get involved in their lives. Because it's really not my child. Despite carrying my genes, the child is not mine.

(Olivia, 26 years old, in a couple, no children, vocational education, 5 donations, Madrid)

Despite repeating that genetics in itself does not establish kinship, these donors seem to think that resemblances (both physical and psychological) create a connection between them and the children (Becker, Butler and Natchigall, 2005). This causes curiosity, at the very least, which translates into a desire to meet them: donors wonder “what [the children] are like, how they are doing”, and children “sooner or later will become curious”, as stated by another donor. In addition, naming “curiosity” as the motive for wanting to establish contact wards off the fear that such a desire can be perceived as a threat.

I would like to be able to meet the people I have helped (to be born). It's more out of curiosity, to see what the child looks like, how he or she turned out: if good looking or ugly, if resembling me or not at all. There's nothing more to it.

(Vicenta, 27 years old, in a couple, no children, vocational training student, 6 donations, Catalonia)

Their certainty in not being responsible for the motherhood of these children enables them to see no problem in contacting them. As with the previous group, they do not consider themselves their mothers. However, they draw different conclusions from this affirmation. While the former group used this argument to justify their refusal of contact (if there is no parental relationship, what impact could contact have on the child except to weaken the bond with their parents and to harbour false expectations from the donors?), the present group used it to substantiate their claim that there is no need to

be afraid or worried about the possibility of having contact. Nonetheless, some said contact would create a “strange” situation, possibly alluding to the fact that, because it is uncommon, they cannot foresee what could happen.

If the child wanted to meet me, I would sit down for coffee with him or her. But it would be weird. I don't think I'd feel an emotional relationship of any kind. Well, I'd have to see myself in that situation, because if [the child] looks like me, it might move me inside. But I wouldn't mind [having contact].

Did the fact that it is anonymous in Spain encourage you to donate?

No. I didn't really care.

Does it worry you that the law may change?

No, because I don't feel like a mother.

(Concepción, 28 years old, single, no children, service sector worker, higher education, 5 donations, Catalonia)

They stated they do not (and did not, at the time) care whether the donation is anonymous or not, so they would donate (and would have donated) in any case. They have no problem with either anonymous or non-anonymous donations, although they believe that the former may be detrimental to the interests of the children and their desire (rooted in “curiosity” and considered almost “natural”) to know their biological parents. These donors believe it is the intended parents, not themselves, who may feel uncomfortable with the children contacting the donors. In fact, they stated unequivocally that they feel “curious” and would welcome contact, so they would donate without a problem in the absence of anonymity.

How about having your children meet the other children?

I don't see why not. For me it would be nice, yes. Their parents may have a problem, but not us. On the contrary, we want to meet them.

(Débora, 21 years old, in a couple, no children, vocational training, 2 donations, Madrid)

Non-anonymity is sometimes somewhat misunderstood, being taken to simply mean that it is possible for intended parents to know who the donors are and vice versa. In fact, two different figures are being confused: the “known donor” and the “identity-release donor”, as is also the case among recipient parents, among whom there are sometimes misunderstandings about what identity-release egg donation means, as

stated by Lysons et al. (2022) for United Kingdom. In the case of identity-release donation, a donor-conceived child could request identifying information about the donor, only once having reached mature age (as established by the corresponding legislation), yet not the parents. In the case of the known donor, however, the donor and the intended parents know each other from the beginning, as occurs in Canada, Ireland, some US states (or some clinics), and the UK.

If [the donation] hadn't been anonymous in Spain, would you still have been a donor?

I wouldn't have minded at all if the families had met me, known who I am and where I come from. Not at all. In fact, I think it's quite good for it not to be anonymous; to meet the family and for the mother to be able to know where her offspring come from genetically.

(Olivia, 26 years old, in a couple, no children, vocational training, 5 donations 6 years ago, Madrid)

These donors therefore consider that children have the right to know their biological origins; another reason for them to accept and even want to contact them. This does not prevent them from being wary of what these children might think about having been conceived by gamete donation, but at the same time they are intrigued by how the children really think and feel about it. This means that, at times, their thoughts and feelings about the possibility of contact are ambiguous and even contradictory.

I guess if they needed it – really need it – it'd be okay for them to come and contact me. I'd be delighted and I don't know how I'd react, of course. I'd feel very bad if they felt abandoned. Which shouldn't be the case, because if their parents paid that kind of money [to the clinic], it's because they wanted them at all costs. So, that child must have been loved enormously. What's more, emotionally, in order to grow up well, they need to know who their biological parents are. I'd see it as something positive if they came to me. And I'd tell them whatever they wanted.

(Natalia, 32 years old, in a couple, 4 children, secondary education, 1 donation 10 years ago, Catalonia)

***“If asked, I wouldn't mind, but I won't seek them myself”:
acceptance of contact, but without taking the initiative to
establish it***

The majority of donors interviewed (47.4%) comprise the third and last group identified. Although with their differences, they agree on two points. First, they state that they do not have a desire, interest or intention to contact the children – and here they coincide with the first group. On this basis, they emphasized that they would not take the initiative to establish contact.

If it were not anonymous, in the future the child might know your name and ask you to contact them

I mean, if asked, I wouldn't mind, but I won't seek them myself.

(Carolina, 18 years old, in a couple, no children, secondary education, 2 donations, Madrid)

Some expressed they would like to know what the children are like, but indicated that, to satisfy this “curiosity”, they would not necessarily have to contact them directly. They could obtain information from their parents, or see them “from behind a glass wall”, as one donor put it. Others denied wishing to know what the children are like. And yet others, when considering meeting them, stressed that this does not mean they want to have “a relationship” or to “get involved” in the lives of these families.

So you wouldn't want to see them?

I would like to see them. To see who they look like. To see if they look like me. That'd be funny, wouldn't it? But not to establish a relationship, because that would bring suffering in the long run.

(Carlota, 22 years old, single, no children, student university studies, 1 donation 4 years ago, Madrid)

The second point on which these donors agree is that they would only accept establishing contact if the initiative came from the children or their parents. incidentally, the same response was found in a study by Miettinen et al. (2019). Some said that, at the children's request, they would not only accept contact but would be glad to establish it. Here again emerges the idea that this interest stems from the possibility of finding physical or other similarities between themselves and the children, and not from a desire to have a parental relationship with them. These arguments take into account what

donors suspect is important for the intended parents (“that they donate, and that's it!”, in Carlota's words). They thus address the fear that plagues donation recipients, namely that donors might consider the children as their own and thus risk interfering in their family lives. If the initiative comes from the children, this fear would be mitigated, discrediting the idea that the donor's will is to interfere. Consequently, these donors would accept or even welcome establishing contact.

Two points emerge from this. First, their views on the role of genetics in establishing kinship present contradictory aspects, fluctuating between two interpretative repertoires: one that prioritizes genetics, and another, experiential and/or social factors. Second, they harbour doubts, anxiety and uncertainty about what might happen in such an encounter, as evidenced in their discourse, either explicitly or implicitly. The latter is expressed through a range of doubts: What purposes might children harbour in seeking such an encounter? What would they demand of them? How would they see them? What would they propose? How would it affect donors economically, socially or emotionally? What feelings might arise in them? How would intended parents approach the subject? Despite this uncertainty, they would be willing to meet the children if asked to do so, not least because they understand the children's interest or curiosity about their biological origins.

Would you like to meet, at some point in your life, those born thanks to your donation?

No, because I don't think they are related to me. [...] Let's see, on the one hand, if they wanted to contact me, I would understand because I'd do the same in their situation, and I wouldn't stop until I found the donor. If they had the possibility and wanted to contact me, I would be happy to do so, but I wouldn't look for them. I know I wouldn't, because I wouldn't want to disrupt their lives. Nor would I like to find out that a child has had a horrible life, for whatever reason. It wouldn't be my fault, and yet, since it'd be like a child of mine that's not my child, and since it was I who made a decision, it would lead me to question the rest of my decisions.

(Ana, 21 years old, in a couple, no children, university student, 1 donation, Madrid)

Concerns that are common to all three donor groups

Egg donors from all three groups discussed above recognize that, when it comes to considering contact with donor-conceived children, their positions vary depending on which actors they take into account. They have the intuition that intended parents (and clinics) are most wary of such contact, while children are more interested in it, especially as they grow older. They easily put themselves in the shoes of both the children and the intended parents, coming not only to understand why the latter are wary of a possible contact, but sometimes even to share their misgivings. Here again, contradictions arise from employing the same two interpretative registers concerning the role of genetics in the establishment of kinship.

Certainly no. I'm not interested in meeting them, because then I'll get itchy.

What if the children wanted to meet you?

Then OK. No problem, I wouldn't mind. But it's anonymous. Although, if one wants to find someone, one can do it! [Laughs]. I wouldn't have minded if the donation were not anonymous. I don't know how I'd handle it if I were [the intended parents], but as a donor, I wouldn't have minded. I suppose that if you explain to a child how they were conceived, when grown up that person will be curious to know their biological origins.

(Inés, 33 years old, in a couple, 2 children, secondary education, 3 donations, Madrid)

Since donors believe intended parents have the most reason to be wary of their children's contact with them, they would feel more comfortable and reassured if the initiative came from the parents, as well as from their children.

Would you mind meeting the child?

No. But that will upset the parents, I know. "Who will the child like better, the mother who gave the eggs or the mother who raised the child?" That will always be there.

What if the child is older and decides?

Yes, I don't mind.

Why?

It's not because I consider the child related to me. It's not my child. I'm a donor and it will never be mine. I made the donation because I wanted to make another woman happy. So, it'd just be to meet the person, and if they wanted to socialize a bit, well, fine. But, of course, without getting too attached,

because otherwise there's a risk that I'll be liked more than the mother. And I don't want that.

(Irina, 34 years old, in a couple, no children, university student, 2 donations, Madrid)

Similarly, some statements made during the interviews may be intended to ease the concerns of intended mothers by acknowledging their motherhood over the children.

I think that's up to the parents. And I have no right [to meet the children]. “You've had that child, you gave birth to it, you've nurtured it. It's yours, it's of your flesh.” I mean, I lent a hand, which was very important because otherwise this child would not have existed. But she's done everything else. I provided a minute share. That is, it's a very important contribution, but that child is not mine. I haven't had it inside me and I don't feel it's mine.

(Micaela, 26 years old, single, no children, university studies, 3 donations, Andalusia)

Acceptance of contact on behalf of donors depends on the expectations held by the different actors involved. Thus, for Noelia, such contact is admissible when it is driven by “curiosity” – the need to satisfy either the children's or their parents' curiosity – so long as it goes no further.

It would very much depend on the intention of the people who have benefited from my oocytes. If they ask me out of curiosity, I would propose something very superficial, like: “I just want to see the child. We can meet sometime, you introduce us, and we can talk for a while. I can also meet you, and then we never see each other again.” That kind of thing. But if it's about being part of that family, I wouldn't agree. I mean, I did it to help, not for myself, and it's not my life project. But I wouldn't mind them meeting me. [...] And if the child were to say, “I've been told something, I want to know where I come from, and I want to see this person”. Well, I would say the same thing: it depends on the intention. If it were out of curiosity to meet me, yes. If the expectation were that I be part of a life project, I would think long and hard about it.

(Noelia, 24 years old, in a couple, no children, university student, 2 donations 4 years ago, Madrid)

Other donors would condition contact, not so much on the basis of the kind of expectations held by those involved, but rather on certain guidelines being stipulated to safeguard their feelings and guarantee their interests, so as to diminish the risks contact might pose for them.

If the child wanted to meet me, this could jeopardize me. I'm not sure what to say to that. It could be against my interest if they knew [who I was and how to find me]. But under certain guidelines, well, maybe I would. First, the donor should be asked if she wants to be identified. With a set of guidelines in place, then I might say yes.

(Leticia, 42 years old, married, no children, secondary education1 donation 19 years ago, Valencia)

In the absence of such guidelines, donors themselves would make it clear to the children that they are not their mothers.

All three donor groups have in common that they reject the notion of maternity over donor-conceived children. This forms the basis of their arguments and is central in their (imagined) negotiations concerning the possibility of contact with donor-conceived children.

If I were to meet that person at age 18 – a child born from my egg, so to speak – I would say, “I'm not your mother. I mean, I helped your mother have you, but I'm not your mother.” I think this is what we need to be clear about.

(Rosa, 20 years old, single, 1 daughter, primary education1 donation, Madrid)

The need for guidelines, or, in their absence, to make clarifications, is vividly brought home to them when realizing that the social and affective distance they have established with respect to the children could be at risk if contact were established. Among other things, feelings may arise that they have not previously experienced or have kept at bay. They would need guidance on how to act in such circumstances. They would also need certain guarantees that they will not receive demands they are not willing to meet. In addition, they seem to suspect that their manner of viewing donation and their relationship with these children might change as a result of having contact. As if the arguments they have employed to disassociate themselves from the children could collapse. Thus, although predisposed in favour of contact - even if they would not take the first step to establish it - they often expressed hesitation due to these uncertainties.

Would you like to meet the children born from your eggs?

It might make me a bit nervous, but, well, I don't think I'd mind. I'd like to know if any of them look like me.

If you could decide whether to meet them or not, what would be your choice?

I think I'd chose not to; in case I feel sorry or other feeling emerge.

Should these children have the possibility to contact you?

Well, yes. The possibility should be there, although – as I said – I don't see the need for it. But if I were asked to meet them, I'd say, “well, OK, come on!” [laughs].

(Soraya, 29 years old, in a couple, no children, primary education, 2 donations, Andalusia)

Strikingly, the egg donors interviewed never mentioned DTC DNA testing as one of the possible ways in which they could be contacted by the children born from their donations. At no time were they expressly asked about these tests, since the methodological strategy followed during the interviews aimed to uncover the possible means of establishing contact they foresaw or imagined. The possibilities they mentioned instead - although considered improbable - were contact arranged through the clinic or anonymity being lifted in Spain.

How do you think [children] might find you?

I don't know, but I don't trust personal data protection. Films have been made about children finding donors. That possibility exists; there are cases of children suddenly coming to you and finding you. I don't know if it's because there's no oversight or because someone goes to the clinic and says “I'll pay you if you give me the information”.

(Patricia, 24 years old, single, no children, secondary education, 2 donations, Madrid)

Discussion

The interviewed donors discursively distance themselves from motherhood in relation to the children conceived with their donated eggs, which is congruent with the studies reviewed (Almeling, 2011; Blyth et al., 2011; Borgstrøm et al., 2019; Gilman 2020; Goedeke et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2016; ; Kirkman, 2003; Miettinen et al., 2019; Orobigt and Salazar, 2005; Ragoné, 2003; Snowden, 1994). They emphasize that sharing genetic material does not create parental bonds and has no noticeable consequences on the quality of life these children will experience. This means adhering to a conception of motherhood that emphasizes the experience of pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing, and de-emphasizes the importance of genes. By donating eggs, they are not giving away

children of their own, but rather “mere cells”, as stated by some of them. This argument minimizes the role they play in assisted reproduction. They provide a basic element for a family to be formed, but they underscore that the children's identity and life history will be marked by the parents who have wished to have them and raise them, and not so much by the genes they have passed on themselves.

In fact, the denial of kin ties, by downplaying the role of genetics in establishing them - what could be described as ‘strategic denaturalisation’ of shared genes, paraphrasing Thompson (2001) - is one of the strategies egg donors employ to socially and emotionally detach from donor-conceived children. Despite these strategies to distance themselves, donors feel uneasy about possible contact with the children, often expressing uncertainty concerning the children's motivations or expectations: they might reproach them for having donated (children might feel “abandoned”), they may harbour certain social expectations from them to which they would not be able to respond (such as that of establishing a mother-child relationship), or they may make economic or socio-affective demands of them. Surprisingly, despite these fears, the vast majority of the donors who participated in the study (73.7%) say they are willing to accept contact with the children, although most would only do so if the initiative were taken by the children and/or their parents. By this they mean to demonstrate that their intention is not to interfere in the lives of these families.

Furthermore, these women fluctuate between two interpretative repertoires about how kinship ties are constructed: one that gives relevance to genetics and the other that prioritizes the role of experiential and social factors. On the one hand, this enables them to construct arguments with which to justify their decision to become egg donors without being reproached for “propagating children around the world”. On the other hand, they also are aware that either repertoire can be used depending on the circumstances (the actors involved, the interests at stake, the time of their lives, etc.). Although they tend to emphasize that genetics has little importance in the construction of kinship, it is not easy for them to adhere to one of these repertoires and completely discard the other. For example, it is practically impossible for them to find relational terms other than “sons or daughters” to refer to children conceived from their donated eggs, so they are forced to use periphrases or, otherwise, to relativize the meaning they

give to this term with expressions or appendices such as “my child that's not my child”, “deep down it's as if it were my child”, “it's really not my child, even though he or she carries my genetic load”, or “child of my eggs”. Another example occurs when they consider the possibility of these children asking them to be part of a life project or a family configuration that they have not sought. And to give just one more example, they hesitate about what their feelings might be when meeting these children.

Given this, some donors suggest the need to create guidelines for any possible encounters with children. Relevant insights from social studies on the motivations and expectations of individuals conceived through assisted reproduction who seek contact (Indekeu et al., 2021, p. 114) could help allay some of the fears of egg donors. These reasons for contacting their donors are manifold (e.g. obtaining information that helps them to ‘identify and/or evaluate their own defining characteristics and abilities’, learning about their medical history, and expressing gratitude to those who assisted in their coming into the world), but they do not usually include finding ‘a mother’.

In line with the above, egg donors place themselves on the sidelines, generally subordinating their interests and desires in relation to those of other actors involved in the relational ecosystem of assisted reproduction, which includes intended parents, donor-conceived children, gamete banks, and fertility clinics. The discourses on their relationship with resulting children reflect this. In particular, the majority of these women condition possible (albeit unlikely) contact on the initiative coming from these other actors, especially from the children themselves. This implies an internalization of the subordinate role granted to them by Spanish legislation, clinics, and intended parents within these processes of assisted reproduction; an internalization of their relegation in terms of rights, capacity for action, and visibility (Jociles et al., 2022, p. 35).

Donors' acceptance of a subordinate role is also manifested in their belief that they must respect the authority of parents, especially concerning the nature and frequency of contact. They also recognize their limited role and influence over how information is shared and how any eventual contact might be arranged. This aligns with the findings of Goedeke et al. (2023, p.1525) in New Zealand. Nordqvist and Gilman (2022) propose the concept of ‘neutral responsiveness’ to describe a position adopted by donors in the UK,

which is similar to the one observed among donors in Spain. By taking this position, they aim at striking a balance between distancing themselves from the children conceived with their gametes, allowing recipients to be recognized as 'suitable parents', and fulfilling what they see as their responsibility to help children exercise their right and meet their need to know their genetic origins. The present study shows that the adoption of this stance when facing the hypothetical prospect of contact with the children is not exclusive to donors with identity release, as was found in New Zealand and the UK, but is also found among anonymous donors in Spain.

A significant proportion of anonymous egg donors, despite thinking that anonymity protects both them and intended parents, would not mind if the children conceived from their eggs could know their identity and contact them when coming of age. This is congruent with the findings of the studies reviewed in the Introduction (Blyth et al., 2011, De Melo et al., 2018; Kirkland, 1992), which indicate that reluctance to contact is generally greater among intended parents than egg donors. In the face of these results, the idea that lifting anonymity would lead to a drastic decrease in gamete donations and, as a result, to the collapse of the assisted reproduction system in Spain, should be re-examined – an idea spread by fertility clinics (SEF, 2019; CEES, 2019) and assumed by a large part of Spanish society. Research from other countries also challenges this idea (Daniels, 2007; Daniels and Lalos, 1995). Studies conducted in Spain show that donation numbers are more susceptible to change if 'financial compensation' is suppressed or reduced below the minimum wage than if anonymity is lifted (Jociles, 2020; Jociles et al., 2021).

For the most part, egg donors in Spain do not elaborate on how they think they might be contacted by children or their parents, only imagining this could happen if anonymity were lifted—a scenario they consider unlikely. It is striking that they do not mention the possibility of being identified through direct-to-consumer genetic tests, likely because these tests are still uncommon in Spain. Unlike in the USA, genealogical searches are rare among the general population, and few cases of gamete donors or 'half-siblings' being identified in this way are reported in the media or on social networks. As a result, donors continue to believe that legally enforced anonymity protects them. However, these tests are becoming more widespread, particularly among adults who suspect or know they

were conceived through donor gametes, many of whom use online genealogical services. Another factor is that Spanish fertility clinics do not warn gamete donors that they can no longer guarantee their anonymity given the availability of these tests. They thus fail to follow the long-established recommendations of the Working Group on Reproductive Donation of the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology (ESHRE et al., 2022), the Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (Ethics Committee of the ASRM, 2019), and numerous researchers (Harper et al., 2016; Mohapatra, 2020; Hammer and Mahalingaiah, 2023).

To conclude, this study is the first in Spain to examine the attitude of donors towards contact with individuals born from their donations, enabling comparisons with findings from similar research conducted in other countries. One of its strengths is that the diverse socio-demographic characteristics of the sample, achieved through the use of various participant recruitment methods. However, a limitation of this research is the absence of questions about the retrospective removal of anonymity, which could have provided greater insight into donors' attitudes towards potential contact with individuals born from their eggs.

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