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Human Embryo Research: Who Donates the Eggs?



In [headline news](#) today, scientists have announced a breakthrough in human cloning. Human skin cells and a woman's egg were used to create an early stage embryo that is a copy of the original skin cell. The news is being celebrated largely because of the possibility for this process to develop therapy or cures for many afflictions.

There is also concern however over other implications of the process - principally the spectre of cloning humans themselves. Most [responses I've heard](#) on this point so far, have focused on the strict [regulation of human cloning](#)

for reproduction, and the severe legal penalties for breach.

This is a complex enough issue - weighing the obvious therapeutic benefits for those suffering debilitating diseases and the concerns attendant on the technology taking us down the path of human cloning. However there is another aspect that I've not seen mentioned in the media so far: namely the origin of the 'donated' eggs.

Eggs and Assisted Reproduction

In the celebration of life and the attendant elevation of reproduction to almost sacred status, our Western society places an enormous weight of expectation on women to bear children. Those who remain childless either by choice or necessity face scrutiny for challenging the norm of fecundity. The role of [woman as mother](#) resonates powerfully throughout society and affects the way in which womanhood is constructed and measured by others, and by women themselves.

The importance of motherhood for so many women is reflected in the [growing prevalence of assisted reproduction](#). While media frequently reports on the [happy outcomes of assisted reproduction](#), there are costs to many individual women who undergo the process including, according to [Janice Raymond](#), for some for whom the procedure results in a live birth.

The process of 'harvesting' eggs from a woman is, apparently, arduous. It involves hyperstimulation via hormonal treatments and an invasive procedure to extract the eggs from the woman. This process is not free of side effects. Raymond asks what it is that would prompt women to voluntarily undergo such a harmful process and concludes that it is the salesmanship of the IVF industry and societal expectations of motherhood. Others have also [critiqued](#) the industry.

About Me



Kate Galloway

I lecture in land law at James Cook University and I write and think about the nature of

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IVF Processes as a Source of Eggs

The industry is, I assume, the source of the 'donated' eggs for embryonic research: those eggs harvested but unused in assisted reproduction. In the same way, unused [human embryos may under licence](#) and subject to conditions, be used for research. Having undergone an invasive and unpleasant procedure, I can imagine that it would be good for many women to know that their unused eggs are being used to help find cures for disease.

If one accepts Raymond's argument about the profit (not patient-focussed) orientation of the assisted reproduction industry, there is in my view, an ethical issue about egg harvesting - whether for assisted reproduction or its by-product, scientific experimentation. The ethics is made more complex by our essentialist expectation of each woman to bear a child. This expectation is structural and therefore so pervasive as to be invisible. It places an imperative on women to reproduce that may induce them to undergo such processes in spite of the possible but real harm.


I am probably not as convinced by Raymond's argument that assisted reproduction is bad of itself. I still see a place for women's agency in making reproductive choices. However to be a truly free choice, there does, I think, need to be more scrutiny of the IVF industry and the offshoot of scientific research. We also need a wider debate about culture, women, family and reproduction that serves to uncover and to challenge essentialist and patriarchal assumptions of what it is to be a woman.

Human Dignity - Embryos and Women Donors

I am excited by the prospect of medical advances in the treatment of debilitating illness and the obvious benefits we will derive from them; but let's remember also that biomedical companies stand to make a lot of money from these discoveries. Either way, how these discoveries are made is important. We seem to accept without question that women's eggs are available to support this research. We are rightly concerned about the possible generation and destruction of new life through these techniques, and so too should we be concerned about the possibility of exploitation. It is not only new life that is deserving of dignity, but also the women whose eggs are essential to these experiments.

*Photo courtesy <http://flickr.com/photos/renwest/436827618>

Posted by [Kate Galloway](#) at 10:30

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