

Overview of Egg Donation in Japan and One Japanese Woman's Life Story of Egg Donation

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Abstract

In this report, the current situation regarding egg donation in Japan is presented as an explanation of the symposium as a whole. Japan does not yet have a law on donor conception and does not guarantee rights, including the right to know one's origin. In addition, the targets and conditions of use of donor conception are not clear and there is no support system. In the overview presentation, the content and issues of the bills that had been submitted to Parliament at the time of the symposium were explained (e.g. insufficient right to know one's origins, limiting the scope to heterosexual couples who are legally married, foreign criminal provisions, etc.). Against this background, a longitudinal follow-up interview with one woman who had a child through egg donations was reported. Long-term life stories revealed that attitudes towards "lack of blood ties" can change. Support systems need to be considered with a view to change.

Keywords: egg donation, Japan, donor conception, right to know one's origins

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Introduction

This report was the first report of a symposium entitled "Third-Party Reproduction in Asia: The Case of Egg Donation in Japan." This symposium examines the nature of reproductive technologies involving third parties in Asia, using egg donation in Japan as a case study.

Symposiasts comprise sociologists, medical anthropologists and STS researchers. By discussing the experiences of parents who have a child conceived using donor eggs, and the political issues related to egg donation, we aim to illuminate the social and cultural context of technology. Family norms, gender, patriarchy, blood relations, views of the body and science in East Asia will be keywords.

As the symposium's positioning and the situation in Japan were explained at the beginning of the symposium, using the time of this report, they are also discussed in this full paper. Finally, the author's own abstract, "One Japanese Woman's Life Story of Egg Donation," is briefly discussed; it will be discussed in detail in a separate paper.

Japan's Overview of Gamete Donation

Japan is currently at a crossroads in terms of whether it can create an environment that provides the basis for ethical donor conception, as a donor conception bill is currently being proposed. (At the time of the conference, the bill was before Parliament. It has since been repealed, but this paper discusses the situation at the time). Therefore, I will argue that ethical donor conception requires not only cultural considerations but also environmental arrangements.

First, I seek to elucidate the interplay between ethical donor conception and the realms of law, society, and culture, using Japan as an illustrative case study, to illuminate the broader social milieu in which ethical donor conception is situated.

Historical Background

As of May 2025, there is no law on third-party reproduction in Japan, and egg donation is neither legal nor illegal. This lack of legislation has compelled professional associations such as the Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology to withhold their stance on the implementation of donor conception, thereby hindering its widespread domestic implementation. This ambiguity in legal status stymies the development of essential psychological, legal, and social support mechanisms for the parties involved.

Let me begin with a historical overview of donor conception in Japan. The first instance of birth through donor conception was announced in 1949, accomplished through artificial insemination using donated sperm. Thereafter, hospitals and clinics operated independently in administering sperm donation. By the late 1990s, the proliferation of the Internet brought to light the existence of private sperm banks, prompting the Japan Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology to establish guidelines in 1997. These guidelines restricted third-party reproduction to anonymous sperm donation and mandated certification and performance reporting to the Society. During this same period, the success and spread of in vitro fertilization in the United States led to the introduction of egg donation, facilitated by reproductive tourism and intermediary agencies. In 1998, the first announcement of a child born from donated eggs occurred in Japan, followed by the initiation of egg donation

programs in private clinics in 2008. These programs, which were non-commercial in nature, required clients to independently secure donors, who were then vetted by screening committees. In 2012, an Non Profit Oorganization, Oocyte Donation NETwork, OD-NET was established in cooperation with this organization to support egg donation without financial compensation. However, the volume of such donations has remained modest, with reports indicating the birth of 12 children in the 10 years leading to 2023.

There have been movements calling for legalization due to the grey area between legal and illegal in terms of third-party reproduction, the complications arising from reproductive tourism, and the growing advocacy for the right of donor-conceived persons (DCPs) to ascertain their origins.

In 1998, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare convened an expert committee, culminating in a 2000 report that advocated for disclosure of non-identifiable donor information. Subsequently, the 2003 report by the Assisted Reproductive Technology Subcommittee of the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare permitted requests for disclosure, including information that might identify individual donors. However, these proposals were never codified into law. In 2005, the support group DI Offspring Group (DOG) was formed to represent individuals born via donor insemination, and their efforts yielded the publication of influential works (DI Offspring Group & Nagaoki, 2014).

Lack of Consensus

There are many reasons why a legal system has not been established, but one obstacle may be the absence of societal consensus on third-party reproduction. For instance, a 2014 survey by the University of Tokyo and the Japan Agency for Medical Research and Development revealed a divided public: 36.2% supported egg and sperm donation, 26.6% opposed it, and the highest percentage, 37.3%, expressed uncertainty (Yamamoto et al., 2018). In Japan, not only was there no consensus, but it could also be said that the actors who wanted to either legalize or outlaw it did not command significant influence in the academic community, the government, or the wider population.

Table 1

2014 Attitude Survey

	Should be approved	Should not be approved	Indecisive
Gamete donation, embryo donation	36.2	26.6	37.3
Gestational Surrogacy	40.9	21.8	37.3

Source. The University of Tokyo and the Japan Agency for Medical Research and Development, 2014 Attitude survey (2,500 men and women aged 20-59 each from the general public)

Ethical Donor Conception

Drawing on global ethical frameworks such as the World Health Organization : WHO, Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority: HFEA, and The International Federation of Fertility Societies: IFFS, ethical donor conception necessitates transparency, autonomy, fairness, responsibility, dignity, non-maleficence, welfare, and care. Specifically, ethical donor conception must safeguard: (1) the rights of donor-conceived individuals (including legal protections regarding the right to know one's origins, proper information management, and

provision of information), (2) the rights and responsibilities of donors (e.g., privacy, respect for decision-making, clarity of responsibility, informed consent, counseling, proper information management), (3) the rights and responsibilities of recipients who will become parents (e.g., education, psychological support, accountability), and (4) the ethical obligations of medical institutions (e.g., safety, information management, donor selection, counseling). Measured against these criteria, Japan's current situation remains gravely deficient.

The absence of a robust legal infrastructure generates multiple challenges: the invisibility of donor conception and DCPs, the lack of psychological, social, and legal support, the scarcity of advisory resources, and inadequate mechanisms for managing and disclosing information.

Secrecy, Pressure for Resemblance: From the Survey

As an example of invisibility, I would like to share the results of a survey I conducted (Shirai, 2016). I asked women who had become mothers through egg donation regarding their openness with medical institutions and their social circles. Only 36.4% disclosed the egg donation to their own parents, 30.0% to their husband's parents, and 36.4% to their siblings. Approximately half (54.5%) informed the medical institution where they gave birth.

Table 2

Announce to the Surrounding (by attribute, %)

	Disclosure before donation	Disclosure immediately after birth	Currently know
Parents	27.3	36.4	36.4
Husband's parents	30.0	30.0	30.0
Siblings	27.3	36.4	36.4
Medical institution	54.5	54.5	54.5
Friends	18.2	18.2	18.2
Other kinship	27.3	27.3	27.3

Source. Shirai (2016)

Secrecy fosters an expectation that parents and children must resemble one another. One respondent confessed that they chose their donor based on physical resemblance:

The criteria I look for in a donor are that she is Japanese, has the same blood type as I do, and has a face and height not too different from mine, so that my child and I will look like parent and child to others as well.

Another respondent stated that she prioritized resemblance more for her child than for herself.

The respondents were also very sensitive to whether or not there were similarities between themselves and their children. In the same survey, 90.0% believed their child did not look like them, and 60.0% had actually been told so by acquaintances. Furthermore, 40.0% sensed a divergence in personality and temperament, and 60.0% noted differences in mannerisms and habits. Rather than delving into the genetic basis of resemblance, I wish to emphasize the high degree of sensitivity to the similarities or lack thereof.

Table 3*On the Similarities Between Self and Child (%)*

1. I think my child looks like me	I think my child doesn't look like me
10.0	90.0
2. People say that I and my child look alike	People say that I and my child doesn't look alike
40.0	60.0
3. I think we have similar personalities and temperaments	I think we don't have similar personalities and temperaments
60.0	40.0
4. I think my child's behavior and habits are similar to mine	I think my child's behavior and habits are not similar to mine
40.0	60.0

Source. Shirai (2016)

For example, one respondent described how she would observe unrelated passersby and remind herself that “even parents and children who are related by blood can look different.” Another shared that in Japan, it is not uncommon for family photos to be printed on New Year postcards. During those occasions, she would select photos wherein she and her child had similar smiles. She realized that, although she intended to build a parent–child relationship independent of genetic ties and to eventually inform her child, she had still chosen photos in which they looked similar. It will reflect the conflict between integrity towards children and social pressure for similarity.

2025 the Special Assisted Reproductive Medicine Bill

There have been several attempts to institutionalize this legal system, yet none have culminated in law. In February 2025, a bill concerning specific assisted reproductive technologies was introduced by a member of the ruling party. According to the bill, a DCP will not be able to obtain information about their origins until they reach adulthood, at which point they will only be able to learn the donor's height, blood type, and age at the time of donation. Furthermore, donor conception is only available to legally married infertile couples; same-sex couples, single individuals, and others cannot use it. The donation must be free of charge. Violations, even if committed abroad, are classified as criminal offenses.

The bill was opposed by DCPs, prospective parents, and advocates for sexual diversity rights. I personally attended a press conference at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan.¹ The demands articulated were: (1) the protection of children's rights to know their origins from early childhood, and (2) safe and equitable access to assisted reproductive medicine for all individuals, regardless of marital status, along with the removal of extraterritorial criminal provisions.

¹ The Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan, PRESS CONFERENCE: Objections to the Assisted Reproductive Medicine Bill, Wednesday, February 26, 2025
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WaByBqUeQqA>

The Rights to Know One's Origins

I will explain the current situation regarding the right to know one's origins, both in Japan and abroad. It is a fundamental right of the child, enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Japan has ratified. This right encompasses two key dimensions of: social information, such as the donor's personality, reasons for donating, and current circumstances, and biological information such as genetic and medical details. Origins are not just a collection of basic facts like a name or height—they are deeply connected to a person's sense of self and their ability to navigate life. Further, simply having access to donor information is not enough. People need options for if, how, and when they learn this information, and the right support systems to help them make informed decisions along the way. That means providing psychological, legal, and social support—all of which are overlooked in the current bill.

In Victoria, Australia, the anonymity of sperm and egg donation has been completely abolished. When the system was reformed, individuals born through donation received a notification upon adulthood, allowing them to decide whether to learn about their origins—regardless of parental disclosure. Later, birth certificates were updated to reflect birth circumstances, and eventually, donor anonymity was fully abolished, enabling access to identifying donor information if desired. Victoria also offers support services for those involved in sperm or egg donation, including help with meeting donors if desired.

Some argue Japan's cultural context differs from Australia's, but Japan's adoption system already recognizes a child's right to know their origins. The family registry records adoptions. In special adoptions, adoptees can obtain court documents with details about their birth parents, while regular adoptions are directly noted in the registry.

Japanese law also mandates long-term support from adoption intermediaries, with systems to help adoptees connect with birth parents and relatives. It's clear that Japan's adoption system for accessing origin information resembles the approach taken in Victoria, Australia. Yet, in stark contrast, the bill on assisted reproduction was far more restrictive and lacks support. Further, the bill would prohibit actions that people have taken until now. That is, people are traveling abroad to ensure a child's right to know their origins exactly because it is hard to attain within Japan. Instead of protecting children's rights, the bill can be regarded as severely restrictive.

The activities surrounding the bill were transmitted by DCPs, sexual minorities and people in non-legal marriages, as the right of DCPs to know their origins and the right to access Donor Conception regardless of marital status were asserted.

Strong Modern Family Model and Signs of Change

In terms of the family system in Japan, same-sex marriage is not legally recognized. In alternative care, institutional care is more central than family care, only about 8 000 of the about 42 000 children in foster care are being fostered by foster parents. It account for only 25.1% of foster care (as of 2023). Similarly, 587 cases of adoption were recorded in 2023. However, single mothers and stepfamilies are gradually gaining visibility, as single-mother and single-father households account for 2.3% and 0.29% of all households, respectively, according to the 2022 national survey. The actual number of step-families is not known, but 25.2% of all marriages in the 2020 demography include remarriages. The archetypal image of

the Japanese family is, therefore, beginning to evolve. In general, Japan is characteristically East Asian, but there are signs of change.

What I have said today about the situation in Japan is not the whole story. Private initiatives like Donor Link Japan have emerged. Donor Link Japan is an organisation that aims to connect DCPs with donors and people born of the same donation. In addition, some prospective parents now shun ethnic restrictions in selecting donors. Single women and lesbian couples are increasingly sharing their stories of having children through sperm donation.

Today, society stands at a critical juncture. What we need is a civil, inclusive discourse on technology, reproduction, and ethics. We must develop a legal framework and establish formal psychological, social, and legal support structures. To this end, it is imperative to convene a forum where experts, stakeholders, and citizens can come together and discuss the issue.

In sum, to achieve ethical donor conception, we must first create an environment that earnestly addresses ethical, legal, and social issues, thereby enabling a just and humane future for all parties involved. To understand the life history of one woman's egg donation, it is necessary to take into account this interaction with the Japanese context.

One Woman's Life Story of Egg Donation

The Need for Longitudinal Studies

The author analyses the changing positioning and impact of egg donation through a follow-up longitudinal qualitative study of one Japanese woman who became a parent through egg donation. This paper provides an overview.

There are many qualitative studies of participants in third party reproduction, many of which are one-off snapshots; however, the experience of egg donation, like any other life experience, is likely to change with the passage of time, the child's development, interactions with the child and other stakeholders, and changing times and institutions.

Therefore, there are limitations in trying to capture the experience of egg donation by piecing together snapshots, and there is utility in capturing life stories. However, retrospective life story research constructs a narrative based on attitudes and evaluations of the experience concerned at the time of the survey, which in itself has significance in understanding how people organically narrate their own processes and environments, but is limited to evaluations at the time of the survey. On the other hand, follow-up longitudinal interviews can capture perceptions at different points in time.

Interview Overview

The case study presented in this report concerns Yui Sato (a pseudonym). This paper analyses changes in attitudes towards “blood relation” based on a follow-up longitudinal qualitative study (follow-up period of 13 years and still ongoing). A research ethics review was completed and approved by Shizuoka University Human Subjects Research Ethics Review Committee.

Result

It found that immediately after becoming a parent through egg donation, she was aware of the “lack” of blood relation, but that in the course of raising her child, she relativized blood relation and shifted to admiration of being born *per se*.

I think that all sperm and eggs are arranged with the aim of being born as life. Human beings have a miraculous probability of being born and coming into the world, so why can't we rejoice in that? People think too much that it is a tragedy that the nurturing mother and the biological mother are different, but I don't understand why that is a tragedy. I want to tell these children not to think of their origins as a tragedy. (Ms. Sato)

By way of creating a picture book, Ms. Sato informed her children that they had been born with another person's egg, one that were not their mother's. While Ms. Sato had thought a lot about breaking this news and felt a lot of pressure concerning it over the years, her children's reaction was less than expected and out of sync with Ms. Sato's expectations. After that, Ms. Sato said that she still wanted her children to grow up to be strong, as she had before, but she also separated her hopes for strong children from her expectations for them to survive the announcement, saying that their strength was not needed just because they had been the result of an egg donation. However, the foundation for celebrating the life force remains the same, and it should be noted that she speaks of “strength” as “the power to live again, no matter what.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, the follow-up longitudinal interviews revealed that the case study woman experienced a complex array of emotions at the outset of the birth of her child with no genetic link, encompassing secrecy, loneliness, responsibility and pressure, along with joy. However, as she progressed through the process, she reported a shift towards more positive sentiments, including growth, environmental control, power, acceptance and other relationships. This suggests that it is indeed possible for individuals to undergo such a process and emerge with a more positive outlook.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the survey contributors.

Author's Note

At the time of the May 2025 conference, the bill had been submitted to Parliament, but was scrapped in June. At the time of writing this full paper, Japan does not yet have legislation on gamete donation. It is necessary to pay attention to the future.

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