

Enlightening Ethnography of Danish Sperm Donors

Mohr, Sebastian. 2018. *Being a Sperm Donor: Masculinity, Sexuality, and Biosociality in Denmark*. New York: Berghahn Books. (166 pages)

MEN WILLING TO donate semen have been crucial for the expansion of reproductive technologies in the last few decades, especially donor insemination and in vitro fertilization. However, what is it like to be a sperm donor? This is what Sebastian Mohr sets out to explore in his new ethnography of sperm donors in Denmark.

The case of Denmark is well chosen since the country is at the forefront of reproductive technology: it is the country in Europe that has the most treatment cycles of donor insemination and IVF per capita annually, and reproductive technologies are involved in 8 to 9 percent of all children born each year. As Mohr (2018, 4) points out, it is “hard for people in Denmark not to know someone either conceived with or having used reproductive technologies.”

Being a Sperm Donor builds on ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted between 2011 and 2013. The ethnographic material includes participant observations at three sperm banks, twenty-eight interviews with men donating semen, aged 18 to 39, as well as additional forms of information. The study draws on elements from a range of theoretical traditions, including works by Raewyn Connell, Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, and Gilles Deleuze, the focus being less on po-

tential tensions between perspectives and more on their usefulness in relation to the empirical material. The analysis is focused on how being a sperm donor is lived:

Once men are accepted as sperm donors at Danish sperm banks, all aspects of their lives – their self-images, moral contemplations, intimate experiences, and social relations – become intertwined with the material, social, and political aspects of sperm donation. (153)

The concept of *biosociality* sheds light on these processes, and refers to how subjectivity and social relations are formed in relation to biomedical discourses. The different chapters explore topics such as the men's moral reasoning, their negotiation of kinship, as well as their experiences of masturbation at a sperm bank. We learn that some men are committed to sperm donation because they want to help other people and feel that it is the right thing to do, similar to being a blood and organ donor. Other men are in it for economic reasons, gaining about 40 Euros per occasion, with one man talking about how donating semen was important in moving from a poor financial situation to being able to take his wife on vacation to New York. We learn that being a donor can affect all sorts of everyday activities. It can include changing your diet in order to provide good quality samples, changing to a different kind of underwear, as well as not using the car heater anymore. It can include moral dilemmas in relation to partners or children, where some men are open with their donorship whereas others keep it a secret so that their children will not have to worry about if somebody else at their school could in fact be their biological sibling.

Being a sperm donor also affects one's sex life. The men need to train themselves to masturbate in the right way at the sperm bank, in small rooms specifically used by a number of men for that purpose, and that have a characteristic smell. Moreover, requirements can include a time limit of 48 hours in-between ejaculations, and if donating three times a week, as some men do, this means that sexual activity has to be strictly planned. A man talks about how being a donor affects his thoughts

during sex: “Sometimes, I have money on my mind. You’re thinking: oops, there you go, 300 crowns.” (63)

One of the things I like most about the book is how the author renders visible the ambivalences of the donor experience. For instance, the men can feel embarrassed handing over their semen samples to the sperm bank staff, vulnerable and exposed when going through physical exams, or afraid of telling their social networks. Moreover, they need to comply with rules and regulations since they, in the words of sperm bank staff, are evaluated as donors at all times. However, being a donor can also be a source of masculinized self-confidence. Some men take pride in belonging to an “elite” among men with particularly good sperm quality. As one informant explains:

When I am talking with someone who says something annoying or irritating [...] then you can say (to yourself): I have without doubt sperm quality ten times better than yours. (83)

Throughout the book, Mohr thus stresses that being a sperm donor is not only about being subject to regulation, but also about the enjoyment, or as he puts it, the *enticement* of gender normativity. This concept is created as an allusion to Michel Foucault’s notion of incitement to discourse.

Mohr does a good job in demonstrating that being a sperm donor can be both a source of vulnerability and a resource for normative constructions of gender identity. I am not sure, however, that the conclusion that “sperm donors are men who simply like to be men” (163) really captures the ambivalences that are displayed throughout the book. This made me think that while the idea of enjoying gender normativity is interesting, it could perhaps also be unpacked further: Is there some enjoyment of biosocial subjectivation that does not merely reproduce gender normativity? And are there not other normativities at play also, such as when a donor reports that he would stop donating if the donor-conceived individuals would have disabilities? I also wondered about the expression “bisexual interests” (11), and I was surprised to find out

in the middle of the book (82), without further discussion, that regulations exclude gay men from being sperm donors.

These are minor concerns and overall *Being a Sperm Donor* is a well-written book and an enlightening ethnography. The study is a welcome contribution to knowledge about life as a sperm donor, as well as to research on men's bodies and biosociality more broadly.

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