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COMMENTARY

The social context for surrogates' motivations and satisfaction

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Abstract This Commentary takes up two of the main findings by Imrie and Jadva's study, namely surrogates' satisfaction with the post-surrogacy contact with intended parents and their motivation for surrogacy. It argues that the findings are in keeping with other qualitative research on surrogacy and that this similarity is not the result of the similarity of surrogates' psychological makeup. The Commentary highlights the centrality of social meanings and definitions, and following Howard Becker, insists on taking into account the collective doings that inform and shape individual feelings and behaviour.

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One of the persistent surrogacy-related fears has been that women who carry for others will regret their decision over time (Teman, 2008). Evidence to support this is lacking as are data on longer-term outcomes; however, in this issue of *Reproductive BioMedicine Online*, Imrie and Jadva's study 'the long-term experiences of surrogates' (Imrie and Jadva, 2014) is a first step. They found no negative relationships when contact between the surrogate and the family was continued, and no regrets; most surrogates were satisfied with the relationship they had, and even with the lack of relationship.

These findings are not surprising to those of us who have worked on surrogacy, and they suggest further interesting questions about the meaning of the relationships of surrogacy as well as the meaning of satisfaction. Meanings are social. 'Satisfaction' is a pleasant, content, even happy personal feeling and it always involves an interpretation of the social situation about which one can have feelings of this sort. How do we know if we are satisfied? As social beings, we often have a good sense of the range of reasonable expectations for the situations and relationships we are in; if these expectations are met or exceeded, we are satisfied. But how do we know what to expect in new social relationships such as surrogacy? My own work documents how women collectively define reasonable expectations on the largest US surrogacy support website, http://www.surromomsonline.com (SMO). Surrogates use this forum to post stories; they also debate and discuss what behaviours and expectations are appropriate or wise. In the early 2000s, surrogates often expressed their desire for, and expectations of, ongoing friendship with intended parents, and were sorely disappointed when contact waned or couples cut ties. Over time, expectations have been adjusted in light of the many stories of disappointment. Surrogates have marshalled a variety of socially valid explanations as to why intended parents acted the way they did: they needed time to bond with the new baby, they were busy new parents, they had suffered so much because of their infertility that they had become emotionally guarded – just to list a few. Although most women are disappointed when intended parents do not stay in touch, they have come to refocus on the satisfaction that 'creating life' offers. 'Without you, these children would not exist; no one can take this away from you,' reads a typical articulation of this reassessment. To be sure, my data are quite different in

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nature from Imrie and Jadva's; rather than using interviews and questionnaires, I followed surrogates' own discussions of topics most salient to them (Berend, 2010, 2012). A decade of reading online discussions convinced me that in a new practice like surrogacy, people jointly work out the 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1979) as they go along. Satisfaction is the outcome of an intricate set of considerations about what the relationship is and what it could be, what the participants are capable of, and what surrogacy is about. US surrogates on SMO increasingly assert that surrogacy is about creating babies and families and not about gaining new friends, and advise one another not to have high expectations about contact after the birth. They claim that the lower their expectations about the relationship, the happier they are.

To be sure, it is not as simple as this. Surrogates may say that if they have no expectations any contact is a bonus, yet they acknowledge that 'having no expectation is not humanly possible.' There is a reason why most surrogates expect some post-surrogacy contact, even if it only means periodic email updates. Surrogacy most often is a hybrid of contractual and gift relationship, and gift relationships are not terminated in the same way that contractual relations are: at the last payment. Surrogates generally believe that surrogacy creates a bond that is not dissolved by payment and that intended parents' appreciation and friendship is the best reward for what they have done for the couple. The best way to show appreciation and friendship is to stay in touch. Accordingly, surrogates generally want to know how the family is doing, and that they enjoy the fruit of the surrogate's labour, so to speak. Even though surrogates are paid for carrying babies for others, they call it 'giving the gift of life.' This is not simply a gloss over starker realities; most US and UK surrogates appreciate the money, and most would not do it without the money, but no one thinks that children or pregnancies are commodities to be bought and sold.

Thus, in market societies, people carefully mark the difference between people and things, between gift transactions and market transactions (Carrier, 1991). Israeli surrogates, single and usually low-income mothers, enter into state-regulated surrogate arrangements explicitly for the money and they are not squeamish about it. However, as Elly Teman (2010) documented, they adopt the gift framework for the pregnancy and come to depend emotionally on a continued relationship with the intended mother. Imrie and Jadva's interview data also testifies to the use of the gift rhetoric: 'to be a mother is probably the greatest gift that anybody can give you.' Judging from empirical evidence from these three countries (USA, UK and Israel), 'the payment does not eclipse the gift' (Teman, 2010, 211). This conclusion is reached not primarily because 'the money is simply not enough,' as many US surrogates say, but because, in these advanced post-industrial societies, the boundaries between people and things are vigorously defended as new markets emerge (Healy, 2006).

Surrogates most often do not think of surrogacy as simply a business transaction that ends when the baby is born; rather, they think of it as a joint endeavour that forges a friendship. They want this friendship-like relationship with their former intended parents to be a genuine relationship based on mutual trust and appreciation. Continued contact after birth is proof to surrogates that the relationship with the couple was not simply a business arrangement. For many women, especially when they do not live very close, occasional photographs, cards, emails or telephone calls are satisfying enough. Surrogates almost never insist on contact after the birth when it had been promised but is not forthcoming; they know that 'you cannot force a friendship.' They usually try to account for the intended parents' disappointing behaviour when it happens. My data show that, over time, any contact may become satisfying, even when surrogates had wanted more, especially in the context of bad stories, some of them from their own previous surrogacies (Berend, 2010, 2012).

Empirical findings for the US and Israel also show that surrogates primarily bond with the intended mother; procreation is understood as 'women's work.' This outcome seems to be the case for the UK, too. In Imrie and Jadva's study, surrogates stayed in touch with 85% of mothers, as opposed to 76% of fathers and 77% of children, although it is a curious way of counting, given that it is families rather than individuals that are the meaningful unit. It is well documented both in anthropology and sociology that women often represent the family, and do all kinds of things in the name of family members. Wives and mothers buy Christmas and birthday presents for their in-laws and children's friends, make phone calls, and send cards to relatives and family friends; not only procreation but keeping in contact is women's work, too. It is reasonable to assume that contact with fathers and children is not independent of contact with mothers, and that contact is between two families, not simply between the surrogate and the intended parents. Imrie and Jadva's data do not tell us in detail what 'contact' they measure; all we know is that it is in most cases face-to-face as well as via emails, letters, and photographs. Given that most relationships are a mix of different ways of keeping in touch, it would be more informative to know how often people do what they do. Surrogates may see the family once a year or less and receive email updates more frequently, or they may regularly get together; both scenarios could be categorized as frequent contact yet they are qualitatively very different. Yet, as I have argued before, surrogates may express satisfaction with the arrangement in both cases, depending on their expectations and how these expectations had changed over the years.

The other main question the study asked was about surrogates' motivations. Imrie and Jadva found that most surrogates want to help a childless couple and they love to be pregnant. Repeat surrogates want to carry again because they loved their surrogate experience or their previous surrogacy left them unfulfilled and disappointed. US surrogates say very similar things, and not just to researchers but to each other on support websites. But to understand what these motives really mean, we need to look outside the individual. We often think of motives as the property or characteristic of the person; yet, just as with satisfaction and expectations, a more socially grounded definition is more useful. 'Rather than fixed elements "in" an individual, motives are the terms with which interpretation of conduct by *social actors* proceeds" (Mills, 1940, 904, italics in original).

It would be good to explore 'satisfaction' and 'motivation' further in their social context. Imrie and Jadva found that most surrogates met their intended parents through COTS and other UK surrogacy organizations. On its home page, Childlessness Overcome Through Surrogacy (COTS) defines surrogacy as 'the ultimate gift one woman can give another – a child to love' and states that its 'prime objective is to pass on our collective experience to surrogates and would be parents, helping them to understand the implications of surrogacy before they enter into an arrangement and to deal with any problems that may arise during it.' COTS also has a Message Board where women ask questions and receive advice, although discussions are not as extensive as on SMO. UK surrogates' questions sound very much like ones I have read on SMO. The following example is from the COTS Message Board: 'We have got our agreement meeting coming up very shortly but I'm really concerned about what to expect. Can anyone give me a clue as to what their meeting was like?' The response was also very familiar: 'The meeting is very laidback but does help if you have a sense of humour, surrogacy as a whole you will need humour as it can get very tense at times, which is perfectly normal. I wouldn't worry too much about the meeting, just have fun and think of it as another step closer to what we as surrogates all strive for. . . .to make/complete a family.' When a woman posted that she submitted her application to COTS to become a surrogate, she received about a dozen enthusiastic replies like the following: 'Welcome! You are doing something so amazing, you'll make someone so happy!' Surrogates and agency personnel collectively define what is 'normal' and what 'to strive for.' As Howard Becker (1986) reminded us, people do things together. Therefore, surrogates' motivations are intelligible in the context of shared understandings about the pain of infertility and the importance of family, and in the context of the social coordination of surrogacy, including stories, advice, and discussions. Neither do surrogates feel or articulate satisfaction in a social vacuum. We would understand the social practice of surrogacy better if we knew more about the collective doings that shape motivations, relationships, and expectations.

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