

Family Formation among Transgender Men in Contemporary Japan

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Against the backdrop of the development of medical technology as well as popularization and normalization of fertility treatments, there has been a rise in the number of individuals opting for third-party reproductive technologies (e.g., sperm donation, egg donation, and surrogate conception). While general fertility treatment and anticipatory measure for reproduction such as egg freezing have been popularized in Japan, there is limited academic research and social understanding on reproductive medicine involving third-party individuals.

The circumstances and backgrounds leading up to the choice of this treatment are diverse, and they include infertility (male and female), same-sex partnerships, couples including transgender individuals, and single mothers by choice. Among them, this study focuses on family formation experiences of couples consisting of transgender male and cisgender female individuals, who have opted for sperm donation. Though understanding of their experiences is critical in expanding knowledge about diversification of families, which allows construction of more inclusive policies pertaining to families and reproduction, little is known about their experiences due to paucity of research.

Reproductive medicine using sperm donation has been conducted in Japan since 1948. However, because this procedure was treated in clandestine ways both by medical professionals and recipients, the social awareness of the practice remained limited. Furthermore, there is no legislation regulating third-party assisted reproductive technologies in Japan. With the exception of a few medical facilities accredited by the Japan Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology, third-party reproduction is handled largely by commercial agencies and the actual number of such cases is not known. Sperm donation at medical institutions was initially designed for cisgender heterosexual married couples in need of treatment for azoospermia. While there are a very few clinics which accept transgender married couples as patients today, this option is not accessible for many, and numerous couples seek to receive sperm from private donors either through their own social network or the Internet.

Drawing upon in-depth semi-structured interviews, this project examines how transgender individuals and their partners seek to create a family, the process in which they choose sperm donation, the experiences of undergoing the treatment, and how they inform their children about how they were conceived.

Interviews revealed a number of obstacles experienced by transgender couples in accessing their medical needs as well as social support. The access to medical care is hindered not only by relative dearth of clinics that offer sperm donation services to transgender couples, but also financial hardship many individuals experience due to discrimination in hiring as well as economic burdens associated with gender affirming treatment and surgeries. The research also indicated that discrimination at the societal level made it difficult for them to receive support from family members about their decision, and complicated the ways in which they communicate their children's origin stories to the children themselves. With the growing awareness of the children's right to know their origins, it is now generally considered important for recipient parents to inform their children about the stories of conception. However, for those who have completed the transition and do not share their transgender identity with others, protecting the children's right to know could potentially be experienced as a threat to their emotional safety.

Key words: third-party reproduction; transgender; family diversity