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Corinna Sabrina Guerzoni

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1. Author information

Corinna Sabrina Guerzoni
Università di Bologna, Italia

2. Author e-mail address

Corinna Sabrina Guerzoni
E-mail: corinna.guerzoni@unibo.it

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Gift Narratives of US Surrogates

Corinna Sabrina Guerzoni*

Corresponding author:
Corinna Sabrina Guerzoni
E-mail: corinna.guerzoni@unibo.it

Abstract

In this paper, I present partial results of two researches conducted on US surrogacy within two different fertility clinics of Southern California (2014-2016; 2017-2020). This paper analyzes the experiences of 50 US surrogates who had a baby (or twins) for international intended parent(s) in where the communication between parties was poor or almost absent and in where the rhetoric of the gift was carried out most by clinics and agencies that arranged the surrogacy journeys observed rather than the interviewees. I will show how the transformations undergone by surrogacy in the United States have changed some axes causing a change in the relationships between international parents and surrogates, and on the language used to refer to this practice as a gift.

Keywords: US surrogacy, surrogates, gift, pregnancy.

1. Introduction

Surrogacy is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is based on three medical technologies: artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization (IVF), and embryo transfer. In 1985, just four years after the first birth via IVF in the United States, the first child was born to a surrogate (Andrews, 1989; Meinke, 1988). At the beginning, the reproductive market developed around traditional surrogacy (TS), using artificial insemination. Progressively, with increased success rates for IVF and embryo transfers, TS has been supplanted by gestational surrogacy (GS). Between the 80s and the early 90s, only fifteen states had specific legislation on surrogacy (Andrews, 1992; Markens, 2007).

* Università di Bologna

Today, there is still no federal legislation of surrogacy contracts. In some states, such as New York, Michigan, and Washington, commercial contracts are penalized. In others, as in Arizona, Indiana, and Nebraska, surrogacy legislation is not clear-cut, and there may be legal hurdles and contracts that may be unenforceable. A few states, such as California, Connecticut, and Oregon are 'surrogacy-friendly', meaning that the law acknowledges intent in determining parenthood and intended parents can acquire a legal document assigning parentage before the birth of the baby ('pre-birth order').

Since its beginnings about 35 years ago, US surrogacy has changed dramatically as some of the meanings related to this practice (Berend, Guerzoni, 2019). International developments, such as changing legislation in India, Thailand, and Mexico, redirected some international traffic to the US increasing surrogates' demand, with the direct consequence of intermediaries' proliferation, including unregulated clinics and agencies (Berend, Guerzoni 2019). Compared to the literature on gift's meanings of US surrogates that will be analyzed in this article (Berend, 2016b; Jacobson, 2016; Ragoné, 1994; 1999), my findings will show a new population of contracted surrogates (more Hispanic and African-American and less White) and some new trends directly connected to changes that surrogacy has undergone in the last decade.

The ethnographic data presented in this article have been collected during two different researches conveyed in two fertility clinics (clinic A and clinic B) of Southern California (2014-2016; 2017-2020). I will answer the following questions: how and for what purposes do surrogates evoke gift-giving categories when they do, and what does it mean when they do not? How will the rhetoric of the gift will be used by the clinics' employees and by the surrogates?

2. Literature on US Surrogacy and Gift

Gift's concept refers to the classical studies of anthropology opened by Marcell Mauss. This category was used to describe practices or social institutions based not on strictly economic values, but more on a complex interweaving of social, cultural, religious and political aspects. According to the gift's theory, the gift is composed by three different aspects that characterized it and, at the same time, it highlights its freedom and obligation. The gift is characterized by a circulation that moves through three different aspects: giving, receiving and reciprocating. At the core of this exchange there is the so called 'spirit of the gift'; the reciprocity is the link that allows a potentially infinite exchange. Within this circulation, the exchange of goods becomes an exchange of social bonds. In other words, giving, receiving and

reciprocating creates bonds and solidifies relationships. In this section, I will pay attention to how the gift rhetoric was analyzed in the literature of US surrogacy.

Although the United States has become one of the privileged destinations for many people looking to have a child via surrogacy (Nelson, 2013), not many studies have paid attention on US surrogates' experiences. For this reason, I will focus on the researches that have been conducted on US surrogacy (Ragoné, 1994, 1999; Berend, 2016a and b; Jacobson, 2016) and that have paid attention to the gift's meanings, the object of my analysis.

Helena Ragoné's (1994) pioneering study on US surrogacy *Surrogate Motherhood. Conception in the heart* analyzed most traditional surrogates' experiences and the way in which the parties represented and understood the surrogacy journey. The surrogates interviewed by Ragoné were mostly motivated by altruistic reasons: it was the love that they felt for their children the principal cause for them becoming surrogates. In this framework: 'Surrogates define the children they carry for couples as gifts' concluded Ragoné in her ethnography. Ragoné expanded her analysis on the meaning of the gift on *The Gift of Life. Surrogate Motherhood, Gamete Donation, and Construction of Altruism* published in 1999. The anthropologist explored the complex meanings related to the gift theme into the context of gamete donation, traditional and gestational surrogacy. According to her findings, the surrogates devaluated the payment received for the surrogacy pregnancy affirming that the money received wasn't enough to compensate them for the whole journey. She sustained that the devaluation of money was a strategy used by surrogates to highlight how the perfect gift should look like: priceless, as children are (Zelizer, 1985). The surrogates self-described themselves as giving people who were donating the gift of love. Ragoné collected numerous exchanges of gifts between surrogates and intended parents that characterized the majority of the journeys she studied. Birth and relinquishment of the baby were seen as 'embodiment of the ultimate act of giving/gifting' (1999:73). According to Ragoné, this distinction could depend on the fact that traditional surrogates gave a 'piece of self' (the egg) compared to gestational surrogates who did not have any genetic connection with the child they carried. She has distinct traditional surrogates' experiences from the gestational ones, noticing that with gestational surrogacy there was a lack of 'gifting language' (Ragoné, 1999: 66). For this reason, she assumed that the gift's rhetoric could be less used in the future by gestational surrogates.

The second research that I analyze is *Labor of Love. Gestational Surrogacy and the Work of Making Babies* written in 2016 by the sociologist Heather Jacobson. She examines the practice of commercial gestational surrogacy in the US through the lens of work. According to Jacobson, gestational surrogates are

reticent to label surrogacy as work and more open to describe it as a sacrifice. As in Ragoné's findings, surrogates downplayed compensation to frame their motivations based on altruism and gift giving rather than being labelled as 'money makers'. US surrogates described the babies carried as 'precious cargo' (2016: 97) and their experiences as a duty and a privilege at the same time. In a similar way of Ragoné's data, Jacobson's surrogates described themselves as altruistic people who give the 'ultimate gift' of a child 'back' to its parents. Surrogacy was described as a gift for the intended parents, but it was also a strategy to help surrogates' children understand surrogacy and links that it may create. The rhetoric behind these thoughts was that surrogacy is not 'labor for profit, but as a labor of love' (2016: 43). Jacobson's thesis is that thinking about surrogacy as sacrifice rather than work makes the reproductive market culturally palatable, while obfuscating women's labor makes this market possible.

The last work that I take into account is the *Online World of Surrogacy* written by the sociologist Zsuzsa Berend. Her book is an ethnographic exploration of the largest online information and support forum for US surrogates: <http://www.surromomsonline.com/> (SMO). SMO, founded in 1997, is a self-regulating group operated by surrogates and a public forum that also wants to educate people about surrogacy. Berend has followed and analyzed the discussion threads in which surrogates have negotiated medical, legal, and relational issues, supporting or criticizing each other. In her book, she has dedicated a whole chapter on gift's meanings. 'In the US context the language of gift is ubiquitous' (Berend 2016: 197). It is generally understood that 'our gift ideology has been built in antithesis with the exchange of the market' (Parry, Bloch 1989: 9). According to Berend, gift rhetoric represents the opposite of pure utility by representing obligations of a different type. In other words, it represents ongoing exchanges of reciprocity rather than purely utilitarian purposes. Berend indeed described surrogacy as an example of an emotional, socio-cultural, and dense network in which all the people involved make creative efforts to establish, maintain, negotiate, and transform interpersonal bonds of intimacy. As in Ragoné and Jacobson's researches, Berend's surrogates described themselves as generous women and she spoke about the 'care ethic' (2016: 187) to describe women engaged in a series of actions aimed to help and support others: giving blood, helping the community, being voluntary, etc. Giving is an act of generosity, a manifestation of helping others. For the sociologist, there is a complex meaning behind the gift rhetoric. It would be very simplistic to think of the baby as the only precious gift, because there is a whole long list of things that surrogates define as gifts. Berend discovered several meanings regarding gift-giving beyond the often-repeated phrase of 'giving the gift of life'. The 'gift of

life' precludes interpretations of 'baby selling' or 'womb renting' that surrogates deny. Moreover, when surrogates talk about the 'gift of life' they refer to having the ability to get pregnant and carry on the pregnancy, and not just to the child itself. Berend also speaks about the 'gift of parenthood', reporting phrases of surrogates who spoke of 'seeing the joy in the eyes of the intended parents'.

I explored these concepts directly with the author of the book, an interview appeared in 'Il lavoro culturale' journal:¹

I think, it would be very simplistic think of the baby like precious gift, because when you actually read all the things that they are talking about, it is a whole long list of things that they include and obviously first of way starts with the willingness to carry for this couple. Because they always say that the money itself it is not enough, so there must be some other good motivations, and some generosity, some compactions, some other elements that goes into to want someone that want to be a surrogate. So, their ability to gestate, of course, it is a kind of a gift in a way because they always think about their own children like a gift, so they don't think that people can own children or can buy children. So, when they talk about their own children as a gift, then you also think about children in general may be gift and the ability to produce them is a gift, and their generosity is a gift to so it for other people. And then it just began to be more and more complicated doing the surrogacy, because then all the bodily involvement, and anything is complicated. And everything during their pregnancy is a gif, the whole bodily involvement in the pregnancy. But then they talk about the gift of the trust that it is very interesting, that they are receiving the gift of trusting, because the intended parents are trusting them to do this and they are honored to do that and this is the very precious thing that everyone else want to do, but their want to be selected to do it for the couple, so it becomes very interesting this kind of mutual gift-giving narrative and practices around to this mutual gift-giving.²

'Gestational surrogates maintained that part of their gift is the embodied endurance (Berend 2016b: 197). The incarnate resistance mentioned by Berend refers to the fatigue that a surrogacy pregnancy entails, such as taking hormone injections daily, carrying on a pregnancy, getting sick, etc. Berend described the gift of commitment since the journey involves an intricate body of steps, physical, relational and 'personal relationships require sacrifice' (2016b: 224); the gift of trust as a mutual aspect of the relationship between

¹ <https://www.lavoroculturale.org/surrogazione-di-gravidanza-zsuzsa-berend/>

² Los Angeles, 10/06/2017.

surrogates and intended parents labeled as intangible gifts. There is also an exchange of tangible gifts during different phases of the journey.

SMO-ers understand surrogacy as a bond of reciprocity. The gifts, as the classic study of Maus's tells us, generate obligations to give and receive, to connect people in a cycle of reciprocity. Through reciprocal giving, people exchange aspects of themselves because gifts, unlike goods, are inalienable and carry the identity of the giver and the relationship between the giver and the recipient. Gifts are freely given in that there is no 'institutional monitoring of performance', unlike in contractual relationships, but gifts give rise to 'expectations and beliefs'. Gift relationships reproduce and reaffirm interdependence and link negotiators to lasting ways. Although gift relationships involve obligations, these obligations neither call for specific counter values nor can be discharged by giving: 'fulfillment of the obligation recreates it by reaffirming the relationship'. (Berend 2016b: 200).

Tangible and intangible gifts govern US surrogacy.

3. Methodology and subjects involved in research projects

The ethnographic materials presented in this article were collected during two different researches conducted in two fertility clinics of Southern California (2014 - 2016; 2017 - in progress). I used semi-structured qualitative interviews and field observations. My interest here is focused on understanding gift narratives of US surrogates.

The article collects the experiences of fifty surrogates aged between 22 and 46 years old, all resident in the state of California (twelve of them described themselves as White, one Asian, twenty Mexican-American, fifteen African-American, nine Hispanic). Forty-three declared themselves heterosexual, five lesbians and two bisexuals. Eighteen had a partner (married or cohabiting at the time of the journey), sixteen singles. Eight women had this experience twice, three of them three times.

To offer a synthetic socio-economic overview, it is appropriate to mention their professions (medical assistants, nurses, counsellors, secretaries, housewives) and their annual income (net of the compensation received from surrogacy); the lowest income collected was \$13,000, the highest was \$110,000; the majority of the surrogates interviewed had an annual income between \$20,000 to \$45,000.

75% of them shared the journey with couples or singles from different countries (China, Korea, Brazil, Italy, Israel, Sweden, Philippines, etc.). 52% of the intended parents were heterosexual, 48% homosexual (this data is

influenced by the first ethnographic research that I conducted since it was exclusively focused on gay parenting).

Clinic A and clinic B were both located in the Los Angeles area. Clinic A mainly collaborated with donor and surrogate agencies and, sporadically, directly recruited women to be involved in surrogacy. Clinic B was mainly based on a recruitment system called 'in house'. They directly recruited donors and surrogates; they had many collaborations with local and international donor agencies and national surrogate agencies.

4. Clinics and Agencies' point of view

In this paragraph, I show how the concept of gift was used by fertility clinics' employees in where I conducted research to show how the gift's rhetoric was ubiquitous and used in different ways according to the circumstances. Clinics and agencies educated the parties regarding the path, describing what to expect, and suggesting exchanging some gifts in order to create a 'perfect and a smooth journey'. For the IPs, the most suggested items were small/personal gifts, presents for surrogates' children, the so called 'push-gift' and gifts for post-birth needs.³ Gifts' exchanges were supported with sentences like: 'Happy surrogates make happy babies', a way to highlight how important it was to create a good connection between parties and have, not only a path without obstacles, but also how to have a 'healthy and happy child'. For the surrogates, the most proposed gifts were related to the pregnancy, as albums of pictures to commemorate the journey or diaries written by the surrogate about what she experienced from the embryo transfer till the delivery. From my point of view, this attitude was strategically used not for downplaying the economic exchange between parties, but to build a more personal relationship between parties and, therefore, to have an 'easier journey'.

From a methodological point of view, I noted an interesting change from the semi-structured interviews and the field's observations. During the interviews, the image of the gift prevailed, and the employees tended to highlight the generosity of women who carried children for others. For example, while I was interviewing a staff member of clinic B, Alina said:

It is not just a business relationship. There is a set of motivations why our surrogates become surrogates, and the money is not the main and only

³ 'Push gift' was an expression used by some surrogates to refer for a gift post-delivery. In some cases, Chinese couples were giving additional monetary gift not regulated by any contract.

reason. Yes, it helps them out, but you need to have an open heart to give this gift to someone else. It is a gift of life they are giving to someone else.

A similar rhetoric was used during marketing campaigns. Clinic A and B, and the agencies that were collaborating with them, proposed a specific image of surrogates, minimizing the economic sphere in favor of altruism and gratitude for others showed by performing specific actions. While during the interviews the proposed main image was related to the gift's rhetoric, during the fieldwork's observation I noticed that the meaning of the gift disappeared to make space to the economic sphere. The way surrogates were recruited in clinic A and B can shed light on how the concept of gift is used in ambiguous ways, emphasizing how the economic part predominated in marketing campaigns. Clinics A and B have been collaborating with some surrogacy and egg donation agencies. Clinic B had also a so-called 'in house' program, i.e., the clinic recruits some surrogates via current and former surrogates, often sisters or friends of contracted surrogates. Clinic B used social platforms (Craigslist, Facebook and Instagram) and organized events for surrogates and their friends (lunches and parties paid by the clinic itself) as part of an internal surrogate referral system. Every week, all the 'in house surrogates' received a computer-generated message reminding them of \$1,000 bonus for each potential surrogate they successfully recruit for the clinic. In the ads shared by clinic B and the agencies that were collaborating with them on the social media, as well as some commercial on the radio or at some malls, the gift rhetoric was often used to attract people i.e. 'What a better gift to give than the gift of life?' or 'Give a gift, get a gift', but behind this rhetoric there was the profit's logic. I observed how the marketing manager of clinic A constructed some campaigns with the agencies he was collaborating with: he was looking for pictures of caring women, writing a sentence with the gift as the centre of the meaning but visually highlighting the compensation surrogates could receive. I collected many informal conversations, like the one below, in where the importance on showing how much money the surrogate could earn was stressed:

We need to add the money on the ads otherwise we are going to die. We have to look on the market and see what our competitors offer. It is a question of demands and resources. Currently in California there is a high demand of surrogates, because we have more and more international clients with their specific requests. The Chinese want only white surrogates, gays want twin pregnancies... it is not easy to satisfy these requests in a so saturated market. No one is going to do it for free; we have to make sure to put the proper amount on the ads since it is a competitive field.

Employees of Clinic A and B firstly explained to recruited potential surrogates from these ads the benefits that they could experience for being gestational carriers: helping people who are desperate to have children, receiving financial help for themselves and their families, being paid to stay home with their kids etc. In these narratives gift and economic benefits were strongly intertwined.

5. From Surrogates' point of view

In the first part of this article I paid attention on the way in which people who worked in the fertility industry used the concept of gift and how their discourses were shaped according to different situations: in the public sphere they highlighted the gift's rhetoric, behind the scenes, marketing campaigns were focused on the economic benefits that surrogates may obtain. In this second part, I analyse surrogates' narratives to show the different ways in which they used the gift rhetoric. Compared to the literature analysed above in where, as Jacobson stated surrogacy in the US is 'largely the terrain of white women' (2016: 48),⁴ the data I have collected show a different trend. The majority of the surrogates interviewed have described themselves as Hispanics and African Americans. Furthermore, compared to Berend's findings, most of the gestational carriers involved in my research manifested a lack of communication and relationship with the IPs during and after the pregnancy. Since it began about 35 years ago, US surrogacy has changed dramatically (Berend, Guerzoni 2019). International developments, such as changing legislation in India, Thailand, and Mexico, redirected some international traffic to the US increasing surrogates' demand, with the direct consequence of intermediaries' proliferation, including unregulated clinics and agencies. Compared to the first research conducted in between 2014 and 2017, the surrogates of the 2nd study have stated that they have (and often do not want) few interactions with the intended parents. During the years, the compensation received by the surrogates has increased, like the search for women willing to carry pregnancies as surrogates. The base compensation that a surrogate receives depends on different factors (first experience, twin pregnancies, etc.) and on the type of agency used. I suppose that these profound transformations that US surrogacy has undergone may have modified some conceptual axes of the practice and have directly caused changes on the relations between parties and, in the same way, varied the gift rhetoric's use.

⁴ Jacobson data: 28 of 31 surrogates identified as non- Hispanic Caucasian.

5.1 Baby as gifts

I agree with Berend when she argued that it would be very simplistic to think about the child as the only gift in a surrogate's journey. I found similar findings on this topic as Berend did: surrogates see all the children as gifts. Some of the women I interviewed used Christian terminologies describing all the children as gifts or blessing from God and the pregnancy as a mission they are doing for people in need. Like Chandra said:

You are giving them a blessing from God. I did a lot of research and I know that women who can't have kids go under depression and they step away from God. I wanted to help them, giving them a gift from the same God. If your heart is open, the miracle is going to come. Babies are gifts from God.⁵

Or like Katie who used a similar Christian narrative to describe the baby she carried as a gift from God and surrogacy as a miracle that God is giving to someone else through her body.

I am blessing the family with the gift of life, and God give them what they need. When you put your faith and when you pray, surrogacy becomes a miracle for you and the family you helped. Put your heart in it, put your soul in it, I am going to give a precious gift to a couple.

Other surrogates used more general sentences to sustain the same idea of children as a gift of life, like Serena and Elizabeth who stated:

Truthfully, I know the pureness of love *gifted* to us all when a birth of a baby enters our life. My first born changed my world from black and white. Now life is in color, there are no words to define it.⁶

We are giving our time, our energy, our body... this is what I could consider as a gift. Not the baby itself, because every child is a gift from God.⁷

In another article (Berend, Guerzoni 2019), it was shown how US surrogates disclaimed motherhood and why they were bringing up this topic. The reason why surrogates talk about motherhood is related to common questions they receive daily such as: 'How can you give up your baby?'

⁵ 38 years old, African-American, self-employed.

⁶ 26 years old, Hispanic, secretary for a law firm.

⁷ 23 years old, Mexican-American, stay-at-home mom.

Berend and I argued that because of the constant questioning, surrogates often preemptively answer other people's concerns. In other words, we considered the shaping of influence of public assumptions and accusations about the role of monetary payment and showed that the surrogates were discussing this topic to prevent frequently asked questions received. A similar logic can be applied for the gift rhetoric in where people expect to hear that giving birth to a baby is like giving a gift to someone (to the newborn itself, to those who gave birth, to the parents, etc.).

For what reasons and in what situations do surrogates who are interviewed use the gift rhetoric and why they don't in other situations? To answer these questions, I have combined the field observations and the data collected during different episodes temporally located at different stages of the pregnancy, starting from the first meeting/interview between intended parents and surrogates, until the delivery and immediately after. During initial interviews, I noted a greater use of gift rhetoric as a way to give a specific representation of the self. Like Leslie's Skype meeting with a Finnish couple who promptly asked her to explain the reasons why she wanted to become a surrogate:

What I want is to give the greatest gift of all to those who need it and for different reasons they cannot have children. My children are the greatest gift that life has given to me. I cannot imagine myself without them. They changed my life. I want to be able to give the same gift to someone else, the joy of becoming parents and growing up with their children.⁸

This trend has already been observed in Jacobson's study (2016) who used Erving Goffman's theory (1959) to highlight the peculiarities of first meetings between intended parents and surrogates. Goffman argued that, in specific social situations, subjects tend to show the best part of themselves or the most attractive part for others. Surrogates and intended parents 'are highly invested in appearing desirable to others' (Jacobson, 2016: 84) and the representation of the surrogacy pregnancy as an act of generosity and as a gift is undoubtedly a winning key during these first exchanges. Having conducted my fieldwork research for over five years, I can confirm that the women I interviewed used gift rhetoric especially during the first meeting or in those situations in where it was asked to explain why they became surrogates. These aspects will be presented in the next section.

⁸ 31 years old, Caucasian, medical assistant.

5.2 Gift, help, work

In other studies, it has been demonstrated that the gift rhetoric is a way to build relationships between the parties (Berend, 2016b). In my researches the majority of the surrogates experienced a lack of communication and relationships with the intended parents. The surrogates interviewed had different experiences: some of them did not receive or exchange any gifts, while others did. In very few cases, especially the surrogates of the 1st research, gave some gifts to the parents, like new-born clothes or albums of pictures collected during the pregnancy. More often, the surrogate claimed difficulties to communicate with the intended parents, and I believe that some objective factors may have disrupted the construction of a relationship between parties: linguistic difficulties, deep cultural misunderstandings, geographical and temporal distances and so on. These aspects obstacle or even prevent the creation of a channel of direct communication between parties, preventing the origination of exchanges and communications that are increasingly being delegated to third parties (translators, often employees of agencies and clinics).

Surrogates who didn't have any interactions with the intended parents, received a lot of questions on how they could carry a pregnancy for strangers. Vicky had a baby boy for a Chinese couple who didn't speak English, she was in contact with them once a month, through WeChat. A Chinese translator, employed by clinic A, created a group in where they were exchanging occasional conversation, especially following Vicky's doctor visits. She explained:

It's like saying you're doing charity and you don't know them. It's the same heart and it doesn't matter if you know them or not. It's about your heart. It is more about what your heart says, where your passion is, that you will help them. It doesn't matter if you know them or not. It's like saying you help the homeless; how can you give them a blanket without knowing them? You can. This is about your heart, your passion and what you love to do.⁹

What I noticed throughout fieldworks was an interesting correlation between the lack of communication/relationship between parties and a lessened use of gift rhetoric. In these cases, I found more sentences like 'helping others, and something good for someone else', like Kail:

⁹ 26 years old, Asian, working for an insurance company.

I'm bringing joy into someone else's life. I help them become a family. It makes me feel good to know that I'm helping them out with something they couldn't have done without people like me.¹⁰

Does the concept of help conflict with economic gain and work? Although the surrogates interviewed often used 'work' to describe the surrogacy pregnancy, they didn't describe surrogacy like a job. From the surrogates' point of view, there are several elements that distinguish surrogacy from work, and one of them is the higher profit you earn at work compared to the compensation they received during the journey. Molly said:

You can take a break from work, you can go on holiday or put a pause on it. With surrogacy no, you are 100% absorbed in this experience, not only you, but also your family: my husband, my children, my father.¹¹

Within a surrogacy agreement, the economic exchange is considered unbalanced compared with the salary someone may earn, due to the totalizing experience lived by surrogates: time, responsibility, suffering, etc. Surrogacy was represented as help and they were receiving a compensation for the time used, the reproductive capacities offered, and for the effort they made.

No one wants to put their lives on hold for a year without receiving a reward for it. It is a refund for time, for emotions and for the body... I have to apply for work permits, I have to find a nanny when I have to make a doctor appointment, I have to arrive at the clinic, and it takes time and gasoline. What I receive is not comparable to a salary, but it serves to cover the living costs and all the expenses that a pregnancy requires.

When surrogates used work's concept it was made to exclude it from what they are doing as surrogates. According to the surrogates interviewed, carrying on a pregnancy for others is not a job because like Juliet said:¹²

¹⁰ 24 years old, Hispanic, real estate agent.

¹¹ 28 years old, Caucasian, secretary.

¹² Julie's interview was taken in 2015, when the compensation received from surrogates of Clinic A was between \$20,000 and \$25,000. A few years later, as reported in the article, the fees have increased, depending on different factors. In 2017, clinic B offered to the so called 'in house surrogates' a basic compensation of \$25,000, increased in early 2019 to \$30,000 (for women at their first surrogacy) to \$35,000/\$40,000 for 'repeat surrogates', raised in 2020 to \$40,000 to \$45,000/\$50,000 for repeat surrogates. Some agencies offer higher basic fees for first-time surrogates than clinics A and B, from \$45,000 up to \$70,000.

If I should receive the correct amount for the nine months of pregnancy, it would be a job. But \$25,000 for all that, not surrogacy no, I'm telling you, it's helping another family. It is not just carrying on a pregnancy. There are also all the previous steps: clinical and psychological check-ups, injections, going back and forth from and to the clinic, gasoline, contracts, no sex with my husband, observing a certain diet....¹³

The surrogates affirmed that the compensation received was not 'sufficient' to include surrogacy within a category of work since the compensation was unanimously considered 'not enough' for all the efforts made during the journey. The interviewees agreed that without monetary compensation they would certainly not have become surrogates; at the same time, however, they stated that the economic benefit wasn't the only reason that was behind their choice of becoming surrogates. These explanations must be considered in relation to the cultural beliefs of the social environment in where the surrogates lived. In the context observed, many behaviours, from favors to spontaneous forms of help, are never exempt from monetary recognition. From my point of view, surrogates set their experiences around a form of help rather than a gift. If surrogacy has been read within the binomial gift-money in literature, I believe that it should be inserted in triangulation: gift/work/help.

Many actions in California are governed by an implicit agreement that behind an action there should be a monetized exchange according to specific logics.¹⁴ When surrogates use the term 'help' rather than other words, they implicitly refer, in my view, to the system that governs relationships based on a mutual support in the socio-economic context and in which they are a part of. They refer to a cultural model that imposes a remuneration even between acquaintances or close friends.

6. Conclusion

In her pioneering ethnography Ragoné (1994) concluded that surrogates define children they carry for couples as gifts. Ragoné's assumption, according to which gestational surrogates would have used less language of the gift

¹³ 26 years old, Hispanic, saleswoman.

¹⁴ Logics may vary depending on the service offered. For example, if someone requests a ride to the airport from a friend, the route will be calculated, and an amount will be agreed for the fuel and time spent. Another practical example of an exchange in California that could require an economic performance is the question used to ask a stranger for a cigarette: 'Can I buy a cigarette from you?'

compared to the traditional ones, have subsequently been denied by the sociologists Jacobson and Berend who have shown how the language of the gift in the US surrogacy industry was omnipresent. Berend's study indicated that the concept of gift is not so simple and exclusively linked to 'giving the gift of life', but it is related to different meanings. As showed throughout this article, surrogacy has changed considerably since the pioneering study of Ragoné, just as it has undergone major changes over the last decade. Traditional surrogacy has been progressively substituted by gestational surrogacy, a growing number of international intended parents have joined surrogacy agreements and a high number of specialized agencies and clinics have offered surrogacy services. I showed how my research surrogates belonged to a different group than those involved in previous researches. Similarly, in contrast to the literature available on the US surrogacy, the surrogates interviewed declared a lack or an absence of relationship with the intended parents. Despite numerous changes that occurred in the surrogacy's arena, also in my researches the language of gift has remained a plot on which narratives are woven concerning surrogacy relationships, but I have shown the negotiations played between clinics and agencies' employees, surrogates and intended parents. Surrogates used the gift rhetoric as suggested by the fertility industry in specific contexts (i.e. during the first meeting with IPs, when they explain their views of surrogacy to strangers, etc.), but after having done deep interviews with them, I suggest that they frame surrogacy more as helping others rather than a gift - a term used to avoid making further explanations rather than central terminology in their daily speeches. This could be related to the absence of interactions or relationships with the IPs; peculiarity has characterized many experiences observed. Surrogates described surrogacy more as helping someone rather than giving a gift to someone else. The thesis that I supported in this article is that, following the progressive changes that surrogacy has undergone over the last decade and as a result of a growing impoverishment of the interactions between surrogates and intended parents, the language of the gift, initially used to represent surrogacy has been partly overcome in favor of another meaning less elusive and more realistic: offering help of people in need.

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