



The Romance of Surrogacy¹

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This article seeks to demonstrate and analyze the cultural and emotional work surrogate mothers collectively engage in on the largest surrogacy support website, <http://www.surromomsonline.com>. Surrogate mothers' online stories and discussions frame contract surrogacy as a "labor of love." Women often describe their surrogacy as a "journey" of shared love; they hope for a lasting relationship with the couple they carry for. This article explores how the language of love, learned and internalized through online communication with other surrogates, creates both a cultural conceptualization of surrogacy and a ground for action. Love and altruistic giving are consistent with close interpersonal rather than market relationships; surrogates hope for a long-term friendship with their couple. Surrogacy journeys, however, not infrequently end in disappointment; surrogates feel betrayed when couples cut ties. As a result of collective learning, surrogates' discussions increasingly articulate the position that love, even when unreciprocated, can lead to repeated giving; love is noble and ennobling. Surrogates find appreciation and support in their online surrogacy community where they agree that giving life is a moral good. This stance has contributed to a renewed enthusiasm to bear children for others.

KEY WORDS: assisted reproduction; love; motherhood; online communication; online support; surrogacy.

INTRODUCTION

"I LOOOOOOOOOOOOOVE my IPs! We have just recently matched but I already feel SO close to them and am so incredibly excited to be on this journey with them." "It IS an amazing feeling to find the PERFECT COUPLE ... ahhh, the romance, I miss it!"³

Such expressions of love by surrogates for their intended parents (IPs) are striking in the context of "commercial surrogacy" but by no

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³ All quotes are from <http://www.surromomsonline.com> unless otherwise specified.

means uncommon.⁴ The phrases “the perfect couple” and “I fell in love with them right away” recur in surrogate mothers’ online accounts of their “journey” with their IPs. How can we think about this language of love in the context of contract surrogacy, and about surrogacy given the language of its narratives? These questions are particularly intriguing, given that on surrogacy support websites women elaborate and normalize this emotionally laden rendering of surrogacy without organizational intermediaries.⁵

Surrogates’ conceptualization of their “journey” as one of shared love is consistent with the understanding of procreation in U.S. culture (Schneider, 1968). When surrogates evoke their love for the couple, or the couple’s love for them, they are highlighting the moral, private, emotional, and unique nature of the relationship, elevating it above the contractual arrangement yet distinguishing it from family relatedness. The understanding of surrogacy as a “labor of love” counters the stigma of mercenary “baby production”; paradoxically, it has encouraged women to repeatedly carry babies for others.

My concern in this article is with narrative discourse. I analyze “traffic in significant symbols”—in this case written posts on <http://www.surromsonline.com> (SMO)—that “impose meaning upon existence” (Geertz, 1973:45), and the ways these meanings shape decisions and actions. I explore how the language of love helps establish a common ground for the people involved in surrogacy. This language, learned and internalized, creates both a cultural conceptualization of surrogacy and a ground for action. When surrogates talk about their experience, they order that experience and engage in negotiations about its meaning. In the following, I will explore two interrelated developments. First, I will document the hegemonic definition of surrogacy as a “labor of love” ideally in the context of a close relationship with IPs. Second, I will investigate a noticeable collective adjustment to stories of disappointment whereby surrogates uphold that surrogacy is a “job of the heart” even if IPs redefine the relationship after birth. Life-long friendship is a bonus that truly independent and strong women who “love surrogacy” hope for but try not to take for granted.

By probing into the ways women collectively create the meaning of surrogacy I also hope to participate in the larger debate about the workings of culture, understood as both a system of meanings and a practice (Sewell, 1999:48). Human practice entails the utilization of cultural symbols, while the system of meanings—“the semiotic dimension of human social practice”—has no existence apart from the practices that reproduce or transform it (Sewell, 1999:46–48). The “conversational character of culture” (Zelizer, 2004:3), its constant negotiation, and the importance of a shared semiotic code are vividly brought out by my data.

⁴ Commercial surrogacy is an arrangement in which a woman agrees to gestate, give birth to, and relinquish a baby to the people she contracted with and receives compensation.

⁵ Most recently, Almeling (2011) documented how egg banks promote the altruistic framing of donation; Ragone (1994) found the same for surrogacy programs.

MONEY OR LOVE?

Much of the literature on surrogacy, and so much of public debate, has been concerned with the exploitation of women, the commodification of life, and the intrusion of the market into the “sacred” realm (Anderson, 1990; Anleu, 1992; Chase and Rogers, 2001; Corea, 1985; Field, 1988; Ketchum, 1992; Overall, 1987; Rothman, 1987, 1989a,b; Sandel, 2000; Shanley, 2001; Stein, 2011). “Market intrusion” type of analyses, aimed at delineating the permissible scope of the market, are often based on assumptions about the binary nature of the social world, partitioning it into “hostile worlds” of market versus family, money versus love, public versus private domains (Zelizer, 2000a:818). Even as the moral panic about surrogacy has subsided and arguments of commodification have been somewhat muted (Scott, 2009), the binary logic prevails in many areas of public debate (Markens, 2007, 2011a,b).

The binary logic also often informs the questions scholars ask, and one of the most frequently asked questions is about surrogates’ motivation to be pregnant for others (e.g., (Schwartz, 2003). Psychological studies, based on interviews, report that most surrogates have altruistic rather than financial motives (Ciccarelli and Beckman, 2005; Jadvá et al., 2003; van den Akker, 2007). However, in contemporary market societies, the dominant “vocabularies of motives” are individualistic and pecuniary (Mills, 1940:910) and scholarly works are no exception. For example, legal scholar Kimberly Krawiec (2009:45–46) argues that lifting market restrictions would improve the economic bargaining position of surrogates and increase their “share of the profit.”

Legal scholarship often defines mutual advantage in monetary terms, claiming that intended parents obtain a baby who is worth more than the payment to the surrogate, while the money the surrogate receives is more than the risks she takes (Epstein, 1995; Kerian, 1997; McLachlan and Swales, 2009; Schuck, 1987). Epstein (1995:2335) maintains that enforceable contracts are sufficient to guarantee good outcomes between rational actors; the fact that surrogates have to relinquish some freedom is “justified by the promise of greater gains.”

Some legal scholars and free market economists (e.g., Robertson 1994) assume that women are free, rational agents, primarily motivated by financial interest; however, feminists (e.g., Anderson, 1990; Chase and Rogers, 2001; Corea, 1985; Dworkin, 1983; Ketchum, 1992; Oliver, 1992; Overall, 1987; Raymond, 1989; Rothman, 1989; Rowland, 1987) often see surrogacy as a form of patriarchal control of women’s reproduction and the exploitation of financially destitute women. Christine Overall (1987:126, 131) contends that as long as reproduction is “labor performed by women to benefit men” there is going to be room for exploitation as well as surrogacy; she calls surrogate mothering an extreme form of “alienated labor.” Mary Beth Whitehead, the surrogate mother who refused to relinquish Baby M, represents the “proletarian who won’t stay alienated” (Rothman, 1987:314).

Interestingly, Whitehead symbolizes polar opposites for feminists and surrogates: the former typically see her as the quintessential exploited mother, while for the latter she is the aberrant surrogate who gives them a bad name. To understand this discrepancy and gain broader insight into the “social and cultural dynamics” of surrogacy, I adopted the ethnographic approach (Anderson, 1999:11). I set out to uncover and understand *surrogates’* assumptions, how *they* see the world, and the ways these assumptions and meanings are worked out in interactions on SMO and affect surrogates’ decisions. This approach “discourages reified accounts and too-easy generalizations ... highlighting agency rather than deterministic outcomes” (Emerson, 2009:536).

A fruitful feminist approach describes and analyzes “a myriad of micro-practices” (Sawicki, 1991:81) in an attempt to understand and critique reproductive technology as “neither inherently liberating nor repressive,” whose “meaning derives from the social and political context in which it is embedded.” Ethnographically informed studies (Konrad, 2005; Levine, 2003; Pande, 2009; Pashigian, 2009; Ragone, 1994, 1998, 1999, 2000; Roberts, 1998a,b; Teman, 2010) take meanings generated in their local setting seriously. The ways in which participants make sense of assisted reproduction within specific sociocultural contexts is not a simple matter; social actors “can understand an interaction in different, and conflicting, ways” (Radin, 1996:103).

Studies of surrogacy in other countries shed comparative light on the issues. Teman (2010) finds that Israeli gestational surrogates use love metaphors to describe their relationship with their intended mother (IM) even as they talk about needing the money to support their children; unlike in the United States, money and love are not culturally antagonistic, yet like U.S. surrogates, Israeli surrogates maintain that gestational work cannot be fully compensated. Israeli surrogates emphasize genetic relatedness between the fetus and the commissioning couple as the “natural” basis of parenthood, and in the sociocultural context of the pro-natalist state, frame surrogacy as service for the country as well as a loving gift to their IM (Teman, 2010). Pande’s (2009) ethnography of Indian gestational surrogacy reveals that surrogates claim kinship with the baby based on shared blood and gestational work. They lay claims to motherhood while recognizing biological fathers’ “property right” in the child; these conceptualizations both challenge and recognize Indian patriarchal practices.

Israeli surrogates emphasize genetics and Indian surrogates highlight “shared blood” and gestation to make sense of relatedness. In the United States, both gestational and traditional surrogates see intent, the fervent desire for a baby, as the basis of claims to parenthood. Kinship is reconceptualized as intent, love, and nurturing (e.g., Levine, 2003; Peletz, 1995; Ragone, 1994); yearning to be a parent is the “natural” basis of parenthood (Strathern, 1992:178). For U.S. surrogates, intent serves as a focal point for the emotional organization of motivation; it helps crystallize the altruistic endeavor to “make people’s dreams come true.” These diverse meanings of relatedness and relationship shed light on the ways people draw on and combine cultural meanings within specific sociopolitical contexts.

In the U.S. social setting, Ragone (1994) was the first to explore surrogates' rhetoric of love and gift, and their expectations of a life-long friendship with their couple. Surrogates in Roberts's study (1998a:197) also emphasized "how close they felt" to their couple. Ragone (1994:41–43) documented the role of agency-organized counseling and support services in not only reinforcing the notion that surrogacy is "an ultimate act of love" but also providing a forum for "social control," where members exert peer pressure but also "empower themselves" by comparing experiences. Roberts (1998b) also found that surrogates who presented themselves as strong, independent, and altruistic were nevertheless proponents of the group therapy sessions agencies organized for them. These studies point to the importance of both the cultural conceptualization and the social organization of practice.

Since the publication of these U.S. studies, there has been quite a bit of change in the social as well as technological organization of assisted reproduction. IVF technology has become more reliably successful, making gestational surrogacy a much more viable option, which in turn has opened new doors to the proliferation of surrogacy, often involving "donor" gametes. "Donor" gametes broaden the options for heterosexual and gay couples as well as single intended parents and the primacy of intent as the basis of parenthood legitimates their use for IPs and surrogates.

The other technological practice, Internet use, has had a major impact on the social organization of assisted reproduction, with far-reaching implications for the organization of support and motivation; it is indeed "an engine of social change" (Jones, 1999:2). Much of the information that used to be agency monopoly is now easily available online. Surrogates have access to continuous self-organized support online, including vastly more women, with more varied experience than any support group. When the above U.S.-based studies were conducted, agencies organized and mediated the "giving the gift of life." My study extends the social context to influential support websites that create the context for giving (Healy, 2006) and investigates the ways surrogates collectively work out the cultural and emotional meaning of this giving.

METHODS

My data comes from SMO, the largest moderated public surrogacy website in the United States. SMO has close to 6,000 members (surrogates and IPs), up from around 800 in 2002, and contains over 120,000 threads and 1.8 million posts. Founded in 1997 and operated by surrogates, this website is a major source of information and support that guides women's choices and decisions. SMO is also an exceptionally rich source of data for research purposes. Overall, there are close to 30 strictly surrogacy-related⁶ forums where

⁶ There are several forums where women discuss both surrogacy- and nonsurrogacy-related issues (e.g., family- and work-related problems).

women post stories, questions, information, advice, and where they support and criticize one another.

I have immersed myself in this online world of surrogacy, reading posts on SMO Message Boards as well as numerous online surrogacy diaries by SMO members for more than eight years, between 2002 and 2011. Online observational techniques are well suited to focusing on linguistic behavior in “natural” settings, as they occur in the “field” (Mann and Stewart, 2000:85), in my case on SMO.⁷ Online linguistic behavior is a hybrid form, combining the characteristics of both written and oral interactions (Davis and Brewer, 1997); this overlap is favorable for exploring the complexity of meaning, offering the benefits of both interpersonal involvement associated with talk and “the elaboration and expansion of thought associated with writing” (Mann and Stewart, 2000:189).

Logging onto SMO several times a week allowed me to learn to “appreciate local meanings and concerns” and to familiarize myself with “members’ explanations and theories” (Emerson et al., 1995:109, 124); it also enabled me to see consensus as well as change emerge from SMO debates and conversations. Additionally, I posted two requests on SMO, explaining my project and asking surrogates to contact me with stories of their “journeys”; I asked them to tell me about their expectations and what surrogacy means for them, as well as about their matching process and relationships with IPs.⁸ Twenty-five surrogates responded by e-mail, often in several follow-up e-mails, sometimes prompted by my question: “How is your journey going?”⁹ These responses and stories corroborated my reading of the online discourses; women used very similar language and articulated ideas, hopes, and experiences akin to what I have seen in SMO posts. I treat these responses not so much as individual stories but as confirmations and sometimes clarifications of the stances I encountered on the Message Boards. However, I am mindful of the ethics of

⁷ In her study of Internet postings of U.S. parents adopting from China, a project similar in methodology to mine, Ann Anagnost (2004:141) explains that she is “excavating these discussions as a specific discursive frame,” not presuming they represent the sentiments of all adoptive parents. It is the “conjuncture between communicative technologies and the production of affect” (Anagnost 2004:141) that I also explore in this study.

⁸ IRB at UCLA determined that reading posts on this public website “does not involve human subjects since you will not be collecting any data through intervention or interaction with individuals and you will not be accessing or obtaining any identifiable private information about individuals.” Before I posted on the SMO Message Board I contacted IRB again and submitted my questions, which were approved.

⁹ All but three of the surrogates I corresponded with worked full time, mostly in secretarial and support jobs and all said they were middle class; most are married and have two to four children, although some are divorced. The situation on SMO is less clear. There is no overall demographic information about the members. The “signatures” most often indicate women’s family situation and surrogate status (e.g., “Kathy wife to John, mother to four wonderful boys, GSx3”); the majority of women are married with two to three children. Women who post have regular access to computers and spend time on reading, commenting, and advising; many of them have impressive medical and legal knowledge. Their writing style, spelling, grammar, and references to the way they live (work, house, cars, childrearing, etc.) also indicate lower-middle to middle-class status, not financial desperation, as many feminist scholars assumed (Corea, 1985; Ketchum, 1992; Overall, 1987; Raymond, 1993; Shanley, 2001).

identity, and do not want to reveal, however inadvertently, any possible identifiers; I use pseudonyms and do not include URLs for my quotes.

My investigation has been informed by grounded theory, with its focus on building theory from data, and by the Chicago School of sociology, with its emphasis on understanding the actors' viewpoints and on the centrality of the interpretive process in order to grasp social interactions and practices. In the beginning stages of my research, I extensively read posts on SMO Message Boards to see what topics women discussed and how they discussed them. After familiarizing myself with life on SMO, I selected threads that contained substantive responses¹⁰ from areas of discussion that I categorized as follows:¹¹ surrogacy dreams and expectation, descriptions and stories of matching, relationship with intended parents, conceptualization of parenthood and relatedness, money and fees, birth stories, relationship with IPs after birth, disappointments, and topics relating to information sharing and women's thoughts and emotions about SMO. I kept "field notes" of discussions, outlining the issues and positions women articulated, the way the discussion or debate developed, and whatever else "was going on" and saved links to threads.

I wrote memos exploring emerging themes, for example, the connections between surrogates' characterization of their relationship with IPs and others' reactions to these accounts and the stories they offered on SMO. I started with broad themes and developed more specific categories as I read and reread my data and sought answers to my questions (Charmaz, 2001). Memo writing enabled me to make comparisons between various outcomes, for example, between members' reactions to complaints by surrogates who vowed to do another surrogacy and responses to "pure" complaints. Memos helped to keep the data more organized and to raise more questions about the concepts I was developing. Initially, I was happy to find so many similar accounts, but eventually had to confront the issue of "saturation" and turned to "theoretical sampling" (e.g., Corbin and Strauss, 2008) in order to capture more of the variation I was noticing. I focused on some of the central concepts, for example, "love," "journey," "complaint," and "betrayal." SMO's search function enabled me to look for posts based on either keywords or usernames, which greatly facilitated theoretical sampling.

My study is mostly limited to surrogates' discussions on SMO and it is their perspective that I examine. I do not claim to write about all participants, all discussions, or all surrogates. However, I have also read threads on other public surrogacy support websites¹² and found that discussions were similar in style and content, although on some the tone was more "nurturing" and less contentious than on SMO.¹³ I have not done research on intended parents,

¹⁰ Some threads contain almost exclusively congratulatory or commiserating responses; some others offer specific medical or legal advice.

¹¹ The list is much longer for the overall research project but for the purposes of this article, these are the most relevant categories. I cannot do justice to all the themes in this article.

¹² For example, <http://www.allaboutsurrugacy.com> and <http://www.surrugacy.com>.

¹³ SMO members sometimes complain about the sharp tone of some of the criticism but on the whole they pride themselves on being "strong enough to take it."

although I have read posts by them (mostly by intended mothers who post much less extensively). Neither have I researched surrogacy agencies or fertility centers beyond reading many such websites and conducting a few telephone interviews; most of my information comes from surrogates' frequent and detailed discussions of agencies.

In the following, I will first briefly describe SMO both as a site and a community, then present my findings about surrogates' conceptualization of the relationship with their IPs, and the ways they make sense of disappointments while holding onto their definition of surrogacy as a "labor of love."

Setting

SMO transcends geographical distance yet it is overwhelmingly a site for U.S. surrogates and intended parents, allowing easy communication among the interested parties. By communicating directly, surrogates and intended parents also bring about change in the social organization of assisted reproduction. By talking to one other online about the legal, financial, medical, and emotional aspects of surrogacy, surrogates learn not only about what they want to know, they also learn what they *should* want.

Women post extensively about the pros and cons of the professionals (agencies, clinics, doctors, lawyers) they worked with. Mattie, for example, was quick to post her negative experience as well as her solution to the situation. "I have nothing good to say [about the agency]. ... Luckily I was not a newbie that got sucked in. We were matched then we walked away from the agency and continued our journey." Her post generated quite a bit of enthusiasm. "I'm so glad that you are getting the word out and hopefully ... we can eventually get some regulation and lock up all of these shady agencies and REs!"¹⁴

Increasingly, there is self-matching between surrogates and IPs,¹⁵ and those who choose an agency are better informed and not infrequently have specific expectations and requests.¹⁶ More experienced surrogates are more likely to opt for an "indy journey" because they accumulated more knowledge about the process. Many women who use an agency for their first surrogacy think of it as a learning experience: "you learn SO much from letting an agency show you the ropes the first time. It's a great education in surrogacy." They also remind newbies that they do not have to give up all control: "An

¹⁴ A surrogate recently posted a "feedback thread" containing more than 70 agencies and fertility centers women had posted about on SMO. SMO archives contain less comprehensive discussions of agencies even in 2001.

¹⁵ Women often use marriage metaphors to describe the process: "In addition to the background checks, etc. just take time to get to know one another. It is like an engagement period."

¹⁶ Numerous threads provide information about what kinds of freedom agencies allow surrogates (i.e., setting fees, contract items, etc.). In 2008, I conducted telephone interviews with the directors of three large California-based agencies (all three asked not be identified) who told me that potential surrogates often come with clear ideas as to what they want in their contract; they all thought this was the result of Internet-based information.

agency can often honor the requests you mentioned, and will simply tell you it *might* take longer to match. I had similar requests like you. Many agencies are flexible, just ask :-)"

Also, the proliferation of agencies, fertility centers, and even law firms specializing in surrogacy has led to increased competition among them. All this seriously eroded the hegemonic position intermediaries used to have (Ragone, 1994). Surrogates insist that taking charge of the process is a must: "No matter which route you chose, you STILL have to do your own research." Women regularly chastise newbies for asking questions they could have found the answers to through research. Surrogates on SMO have formulated a general principle of individual responsibility. "Know what the normal process and steps are and don't skip a single thing, even if an agency says something is unnecessary. Whether you go indy or not, ultimately your journey is your responsibility to get right."

Online advice transcends simple transmission of information; it is also a ritual sharing, a choice of and commitment to the online community (Jones, 1998). I consider SMO a community because surrogates experience it as such; they orient themselves to it and it is "socially real" and "consequential" for them (Jenkins, 1996:111). As Anthony Cohen (1985:13–14) argued, the "consciousness of community is ... encapsulated in perception of its boundaries, boundaries which are themselves largely constituted by people in interaction" so that community is "essentially enshrined in the concept of boundary."

Surrogates construct and maintain boundaries between themselves and nonsurrogates in two distinctive ways. One way is to claim superiority: "Not everyone can be a surrogate." The other way to draw the line is to claim expertise: "I think most people who are not involved in our 'world' have no idea" about what surrogacy really is; "they are uneducated idiots making comments about something they have no clue about." SMO members also distinguish themselves from other, non-SMO, surrogates; those "others" are often considered to be the ones who "do it for the money." As Jenkins (1996:84) explained, "it is in processes of internal collective definition that, in the first place, a group exists: in being identified by its members, and in the relationships between them."¹⁷ When I followed discussions on SMO I was not observing individuals; rather, I was observing interactions that construct the public online world of surrogacy. Surrogates' online communication interactively builds common experience and shared values; it constructs shared worlds. As I will discuss later, women portray themselves as well-informed, strong, and independent, yet also warm, open, and loving; others on the Message Boards challenge as well as validate these self-definitions.

Surrogates collectively construct what is public by also delineating what is not. "What we choose to share is up to all of us," as members can privately e-mail one another through their "profiles." Choices about what to disclose

¹⁷ After the tabloid coverage of a recent celebrity surrogacy, a woman warned others that "SMO will be overrun" by all kinds of "wannabes and trolls." One member suggested the following solution: "Let's all band together now and put them through a tortuous initiation."

are shaped by somewhat contradictory considerations, such as surrogates' respect for privacy, their desire for broad support, and aspiration of being the public voice of surrogacy. New members discover what it means to be part of SMO by reading discussions and stories, as well as through informative yet at times impatient responses to their posts. Experienced surrogates thus affirm the value of knowledge and newcomers are reminded how much work it is to become a serious candidate. SMO is not simply a gathering place for women interested in surrogacy; it also helps forge interest into determination and action that is consistent with group expectations and norms.

“MAY YOU FIND YOUR PERFECT MATCH”

Countless excited posts about matching with IPs describe feelings of “chemistry” (or even “love at first sight”), and the conviction that the relationship was meant to be. These accounts parallel some of the key defining elements of love narratives: the choice of a unique other based on attraction, sometimes in defiance of the outside world (Ben-Ze’ev, 2000; Solomon, 1988; Swidler, 2001). Women wishing each other the best often end their postings with “May you find your perfect match soon.” Marianne followed the advice to “listen to her heart” and wait for “the perfect couple,” and was happy to report that she found them: “It was just like you all said, when you know you just know”

The language of love prevails in surrogates' description of their first meeting with the couple. “I fell in love with them the first time we met,” Melissa remembers. Rene “was introduced to only one couple and that is where I stopped I loved them from the start” Some women directly compare surrogacy to dating. “I just instantly felt like they were the ‘ones’. Sort of like when you’re dating ... and you realize ... hey ... I think I’m going to marry this guy! It’s the same feeling I think ... YES ... there is a perfect match! Just like in a relationship.” Surrogates enthusiastically post about long telephone conversations and e-mail exchanges with their IPs in the course of which they talk “just about everything.” Self-revelation has been the primary symbol of intimacy since the nineteenth century among middle-class Americans (Lystra, 1989).

Surrogates often describe the match as one that was destined: “We must have talked on the phone for hours. Right then I knew this was meant to be.”¹⁸ When they encounter difficulties, women often express doubts whether they had been destined to be surrogates. “I have been looking for the right IPs for me ... I was losing faith, ... and I started to wonder if this is meant to be or not. Until now ... isn’t it just miraculous when all of a sudden a GREAT couple falls out of the sky?” “I decided that if I didn’t feel a connection right away, it wasn’t meant to be,” explained another woman. When

¹⁸ Kathy, e-mail communication.

surrogates describe the meeting as “clicking” and “hitting it off” and describe their IPs as the “right couple,” they narratively situate the interaction in the intimate sphere, where baby-making belongs according to the modern ideal of companionate marriage.¹⁹

Women are typically defiant when faced with opposition by friends and family and often dismiss it as coming from people who “just don’t understand.” Husbands’ support, however, is essential. Ragone (1994:67) argued that surrogacy enabled women to gain more “domestic power” and freedom from their husbands. I found that surrogates on SMO emphasized the husband’s contribution; the language surrogates use is not the language of “empowerment,” but of companionship and shared goals. “At first my dh [darling husband] was unsure. ... He was right there with me, doing research, reading, learning. As all things in our marriage it was a joint decision.” Not infrequently, husbands are ambivalent at first. “My husband and I went back and forth on my becoming a surro, but in the long run he agreed because it was so important to me. And he did not feel that he should be the one stopping me from fulfilling my dreams.” Surrogates advise one another to involve their husbands: “He felt really included in the whole process because he did my shots [progesterone injections] ... He and I both tried to do this as a partnership.” Women warn newbies not to embark on surrogacy unless their husband is completely on board. As Stephanie poignantly said: “The love of surrogacy is temporary, the love of a partner should be forever.”

Not being understood in surrogacy—other than by husbands—is often taken as proof of the rightness of one’s choice, a choice coming from the innermost feelings of the self and thus not decipherable to outsiders. Kara asserted that “as long as I know what I am doing is right in my heart ... that’s all I care about.”²⁰ The heart symbolizes emotions as well as identity (Teman, 2010:68). Surrogates’ emphasis on “the heart” is consistent with the Western cultural understanding that defines love against calculation (Bellah et al., 1991:89; Schneider, 1968:46).

To be sure, people use love metaphors in a variety of ways, often while engaging in economic transactions. People “fall in love” with houses, cars, and dresses, which they then proceed to buy. Surrogates, however, use love metaphors in relation to people. When surrogates use the language of love on sites that are read by intended parents, this is not simply a statement about feelings; rather, it is an invitation to and an initiation of a reciprocal relationship.²¹ The following poignant articulation directly evokes mutual love: “Most people think you will have trouble giving up the baby ... but the baby isn’t

¹⁹ Elly Teman (2010) also reports that Israeli surrogates and intended mothers use the vocabulary of rightness and destiny, of intuitive connection with one another. She argues that through the language of “intuitive knowledge,” the parties naturalize and decommodify surrogacy. Intuitive knowledge is also a key ingredient of romantic love; in this respect, modern Israel is similar to the United States: ideally, children are born to parents whose marriage is based on mutual attraction and love.

²⁰ Kara, e-mail communication.

²¹ Solomon makes a similar point about love (1988:36–37).

mine from the beginning so that was nothing. But my intended parents were mine ... and I was theirs also.”²² In a letter to her couple she posted on SMO Marianne also emphasized love:

Over the last 7 months whilst I've been nurturing this precious little bundle of yours, I've been extra careful ... What we have done together has given me so much joy and happiness ... The reason that I do care for him is simply because he is yours ... Made with love between the 4 of us.

Surrogates' decisions and actions are both informed by and formulated with reference to powerful cultural symbols of female nature as loving and nurturing, the importance of children, and the taboo of commodifying human life, within the contemporary reality of the market economy.²³ Barbara articulated the dilemma in her advice to newbies to think about one major problem with independent arrangements, namely, discussing money. “It is so hard for me to ask a person who I truly love and care about to pay me anything to carry her baby. It honestly breaks my heart. I have to charge the fee not for me but for my family ... if this were up to me I would say no fee, nothing.” Fellow surrogates agreed: “dealing with money when it's such an emotional and personal thing is very difficult.” Yet, hard as it is, it is also necessary and “in a good relationship [it is] handled respectfully and with maturity.” Most say that charging fees is a must because of the sacrifices the surrogate's family is asked to make; they assert that “every penny is richly earned.”²⁴

As much as surrogates hate to discuss money matters with IPs, they frequently talk about it on SMO. They discuss ways to save money for their IPs but generally insist that surrogates should stand up for themselves and what they need. They talk about “fair compensation,” and the great majority of surrogates prefers the “base comp plus extras” fee structure where the base compensation is defined as “for pain and suffering” or “pre-birth child support” while extra fees for various pregnancy-related contingencies (e.g., multiples, C-section, invasive procedures, lost wages, child-care expenses, etc.) are specified in the contract but paid only if the contingency comes to pass. Women agree that this is generally fairer to the parties and offers more financial protection than all-inclusive compensation even though the latter is typically higher than base compensation precisely because it includes at least some contingencies. The reason most surrogates are not in favor of this type of compensation is twofold: they think it is unfair for IPs to pay more if all goes well but unfair for the surrogate to receive less in case of complications that can be costly.

No one denies the work and contractual aspects of surrogacy, partly because there is no alternative language available. Samantha, for example, used “trust,” “heart,” and “work” in one sentence to capture her “perfect” surrogacy experience: “I found an IM who totally trusted me with all her

²² Miranda, online surrogacy diary.

²³ Yngvesson (2002) makes similar points about adoption.

²⁴ Compensation ranges from around \$10,000 to \$35,000–40,000.

heart and since then I've NEVER regretted my decision to work with them!!!!" Lena similarly combined elements from different realms: "I knew what my 'job' was ... I provided a safe, warm environment for a child." But this is no ordinary job, as she was quick to point out. "Surrogacy is not an 'easy' job. You don't get into it to 'get rich' or to 'make a few bucks.' It's something that's done with every ounce of your heart, soul and life." Women often point out that any important job entails responsibility, and that their emotional involvement reinforces their sense of duty to "do a good job": "Just as it is my 'job' to be a good mother, it is also my 'job' to be a good surrogate."²⁵

Tessa's diary also testifies to the "creative importation of meaning" from one realm of experience to another (Sewell, 1999:51); she used market metaphors to express intimacy and connectedness. After meeting her IPs the first time, she asked the intended father "if I should take myself off the market. He laughed and said I could put a big 'SOLD' sign on my belly cause I was definitely off the market! I really liked him then!" When seven-month pregnant Tessa had her second bleeding episode and was hospitalized, she was lonely and scared. "I certainly do not regret any part of my decision to become a surrogate. But I have to admit it was pretty difficult for me that night. I was miles away from my own children ... and all for a child that's not mine." But as is clear from her narrative, she did it for her couple. "Now I'm truly doing this to bring my dear friends a son."²⁶

Like Tessa, both traditional (TS) and gestational surrogates (GS) emphasize that the child is not theirs and they are not bonded with it. "I am pregnant with my 3rd Surro Baby and all I feel is a sense of obligation to them (to be healthy, etc.), but no maternal feelings at all" is a standard formulation on SMO. Mimi, like some other surrogates, switched to TS after two GS pregnancies, and asserted that "my TS wasn't any more difficult than my GS. It's all a frame of mind." Franny, a two-time TS, advised a newbie who was trying to decide between GS and TS: "we are all the same, doing the same thing, just going about it differently." There are surrogates who highlight the biological/genetic difference between TS and GS yet insist that the child always belongs to the IPs: "we are all carrying someone else's CHILD! No matter how you look at it you are carrying the child for someone else therefor that child IS THEIRS! No amount of biology can change [this fact]." Amy wrote: "I don't ignore the fact that I am the 'biological' mother but I am not a parent or their 'Mom.' A biologic Mother and a 'Mommy' are two very different things." Intent is the unifying feature of surrogacy: "I don't see a difference between GS and TS when you are talking about surrogacy and the TRUE intentions of it."

On SMO, surrogates are in agreement: "we bond more with the couples than the babies!! ... Surrogacy is in no way just about growing a baby it is about ... caring for parents to be ... Our friendship doesn't end at birth." Rothman (1989a:96) argued that "nurturance ... makes our babies ours."

²⁵ Sophie, e-mail communication.

²⁶ Tessa, online surrogacy diary.

Surrogates, however, also care for and nurture their couple. Rothman (1989a,b) articulated the feminist position that motherhood is a social relationship, narrowly defined as the bond between woman and fetus. For surrogates, though, the most important relationship is with their IPs; they form emotional connections either with the couple as a unit or with the IM (Berend, 2010; Ragone, 1994; Roberts, 1998b; Teman, 2010). Given the adulterous connotations of procreation outside of marriage (Ragone, 1994), IFs are the focus of bonding only when they are gay. Most married surrogates involve their husbands and often their children too; the relationship is ideally between the two families, with the women forming the primary bond.²⁷ “I feel very ready to let this little girl go home with her parents, and be a part of her real family. I am NOT ready to lose my IM. I feel bonded to her,” wrote Nicolette. From the surrogates’ point of view, it is the social relationship with their couples, built on the premise of the IPs’ intent to become parents, that defines surrogates’ relationship to the fetus and makes the baby the IPs’ child.

“THE DISTANCE HAS BEGUN”

The emotional connection surrogates feel or wish to feel with their couple is linked to the fact that surrogacy involves a giving of oneself that in the modern Western cultural context is appropriate only in loving personal relationships (Dillman, 1987; Solomon, 1988). Surrogates give themselves because being pregnant affects every aspect of one’s daily life and involves potential risks. Jenna could not imagine “not being friends” with her IPs: “Surrogacy is like dating. It is intimate and deeply personal and at times very invasive.”²⁸ Danielle pointed out that “like in a marriage, we never go into this expecting the relationship to go downhill.”

Many couples send updates as promised, others maintain a lasting friendship with their surrogate. However, as numerous anguished stories indicate, contact with IPs tends to decrease after the birth, and many relationships do go downhill. Surrogates often report a sense of loss and sadness: “I can feel our relationship changing. The calls are less often and shorter. The distance has begun.” Many surrogates are disappointed, even depressed; others are resigned: “There is nothing wrong with feeling pain during or after surrogacy. LOVE is painful, no?” Jess tried to prepare a fellow surrogate to the phase after birth: “I bonded more with my IPs ... I miss my IPs ... the baby ... is NOT the loss that I grieved. Your relationship most certainly does change.” Women often give the couple the benefit of the doubt, saying that IPs are busy with their new baby, “their hands are full,” but it is hard to ignore the

²⁷ Ragone (1994) also found that surrogates and IMs thought of procreation as women’s business. Not infrequently, heterosexual IFs are less enthusiastic about surrogacy than their wives and need to be convinced; the contention that surrogacy benefits men more than women (e.g., Overall, 1987) is not supported by evidence.

²⁸ E-mail communication.

question many women raise: “[I]t took more than a year of my life to give them a baby; how long does it take to shoot me a short e-mail?”

To be sure, continued contact is not primarily a question of time, as some IPs make it clear: “we want to continue to work towards some level of closure with you.” Others are less civil and ask the surrogate not to contact them ever again and some others “drop off from the face of the earth.” There are IPs who change their telephone number and e-mail address or mark the surrogate’s as spam; some “unfriend” their surrogate on Facebook. Surrogates often conclude that “some couples lie and tell the surro what she wants to hear during the journey.”²⁹

It is hard on surrogates when IPs “disappear,” but their expectations are violated the most painfully when IPs reframe the relationship, as the following examples show. Tessa had thought her couple was “everything I’d hoped they’d be”; she lowered her already lower than average compensation for them. The relationship turned to hostility after the premature birth of the baby. The couple refused Tessa’s plea for a visit, saying she did not deserve it. Tessa told them they were unappreciative of the gift she had given them, to which her IF responded that he had “no reason to be appreciative.” After all, Tessa “did not do anything” for them that she “wasn’t paid to do.”³⁰ This was a business transaction, he told her; they paid in full, and had no reason to be grateful. Glenda felt “thrown away ... like literally that minute” when she gave birth; fellow surrogates offered their stories of disappointment in sympathy.

I know how you are feeling. Like your heart is broke forever. My IF did the same thing. ... from the beginning he promised contact. BUT, that didn’t happen ... once the final papers were filed, I got a thank you and you’re no longer needed letter. Saying it was not a gift I gave him but I was paid to do so. It just broke my heart.

After the birth, Lynn got “not a hug or nothing ... I’m so frustrated of all of this I could just scream. ... as soon as the babies were born they got what they wanted.” She was deeply hurt because her IPs made “this whole arrangement into a business deal. I now regret not asking for extras [extra fee for twin pregnancy]....” Her regret highlights the symbolic meaning of money in what surrogates view as intimate relationships: when the relationship soured, the fantasy of charging “extras” meant a redefinition of the relationship to match the couple’s treatment of her “as an employee.” There was an outpouring of sympathy on SMO. “They should not have treated you like a business associate ... surrogacy is about love not money.”

On the face of it, these stories indicate an antagonism between love and money, but on closer scrutiny they actually testify to money’s embeddedness in social relationships and to the social understanding that the definition of the payment should match the definition of the relationship (Zelizer, 1996,

²⁹ In a recent post, a surrogate made the point that by readings posts on SMO IPs are able to figure out what surrogates want to hear and thus successfully deceive them.

³⁰ Tessa, online surrogacy diary.

2000a). From the surrogate's point of view, the payment did not make surrogacy a business deal as long as she thought they had a loving and close relationship. Compensation is for hardship, suffering, and for extra costs incurred; it benefits the surrogate and her family while her pregnancy benefits the IPs. The IPs' subsequent insistence that they had paid in full for services rendered meant the redefinition of the relationship from an ongoing intimate friendship to a terminable business transaction.

IPs' failure to pay what they agreed to, which happens with some frequency, is understood as an act of betrayal; it hurts surrogates both financially and emotionally. Christie, who "put so much time and effort" into making her IPs parents, was "very torn"; she had tried not to mind that some payments were not forthcoming. "Because I love my IPs, I have let a lot of things slide financially, because really ... it wasn't about the money to me ... but now I just feel taken advantage of ... I am hurt." Fellow surrogates understood both the money symbolism and Christie's emotional response. "I'd feel betrayed, too, after doing all you did for them," offered Lori. "Intended parents who were as concerned about their surrogate as the surrogates were for them would remember [to pay] always and not just overlook payments as these IPs have done," wrote Carly. As Zelizer (2000b:9) emphasized, different payments and, in these cases, the redefinition of payments or failure to pay, "do not just symbolize but in fact serve to construct social relations."

Surrogates ask for compensation on the one hand, and give themselves "body and soul" on the other. Contract surrogacy fits the "cultural structure of commoditization" (Kopytoff, 1986:76); surrogates, however, think of monetary compensation in the context of, and not in opposition to, a personal bond. They see the fees as one side of a reciprocal relationship; the IPs help the surrogate and her family, while she is helping them to have a family. This conceptualization of mutual benefit is strikingly different from legal scholars' notion that both sides benefit because they both end up with a net surplus value.

Surrogates are proud of their "achievement," and of the reliability and devotion to the cause they represent, and monetary compensation symbolically acknowledges the value of their effort and contribution.

If you start out having a conflict over the financial side to surrogacy it WILL only get worse ... you felt like you were guilted into lowering your fee or taking whatever the IPs gave you ... You start to feel like an employee. I haven't met a surrogate yet who wants her IPs to think of her as nothing more than a womb for rent, or paid employee, a bargain basement surro.

Women often express ambivalence about charging fees yet they are also keenly aware of the possibility of being "devalued" if they ask for too little. Lillian loved her couple and did not ask for compensation. "I also felt sometimes the IPs didn't get the scope of what I was doing because it "cost" them nothing ... They understood what the Dr. and lawyer did because there was a monetary value attached to it. What I did for 'free' was 'worth' less?" Money is not only a medium of payment but also a measurement of worth.

Even though “business deal” and “employee” always have negative connotation in SMO posts, surrogates do not condemn IPs who explicitly want a “business deal,” pointing out that they may have a hard time finding a surrogate. Most surrogates say they would not want such an arrangement; the only ones who say they may are women whose former IPs went back on their promises. Yet I am not convinced that these women would truly welcome a “business deal.” Their alleged willingness to enter into such an arrangement seems more like a strategy to avoid betrayal: “At least I would know up front what the IPs wanted or did not want, as opposed to lie to me as my IPs did,” explained Margie. “I hate to say it, but if I attempt another surrogacy, it will be very business like. I would rather have a few people think poorly of me than to have my feeling hurt again and again,” wrote Lynn. The “business-like” arrangement these bitter posts refer to would be similar to other surrogacy agreements in that it would involve a detailed contract (often 40+ pages long), but the emotional content would be different; the relationship would be a purely contractual one without any promises for personal concern, friendship, and continued contact. When surrogates say they may consider a business relationship, they most often mean they do not want to be deceived by false promises for more. They could then “take the match or leave it.”

Personal and intimate relationships such as friendship and love have the potential for hypocrisy, dishonesty, and betrayal. Women feel “used” or “ditched” when the couple promises an ongoing friendship but later redefines the arrangement as a terminable exchange.

I think that it would be very hard to find a surrogate who didn't want contact afterward. To go through a year or longer of ... medications, pregnancy and then the birth and then to never hear from the IPs again? It happens all the time, unfortunately. But it's not planned that way. IPs tell the surrogates that they will keep in touch ... Sometimes a journey will go bad ... Other times the IPs just had no intention of updating, they just said they did. It is extremely hurtful to be the surrogate in a situation like that. They feel like they were used and tossed aside.³¹

It is this potential for deception and betrayal that makes surrogates uneasy: “It would be nice if IPs were honest about what they wanted out of a relationship instead of stringing their SM along, but we all know this isn't the case for many people.”

IPs should not make false promises: “All a surrogate wants is what is promised to her in the beginning.” Women want their couple to tell them “their ‘REAL’ plans for our future relationship or lack of ... I need a couple that is genuine when they say that they want to be friends forever.” But as this and many other posts indicate, surrogates want more than simple honesty; they want their couple to have an honest desire to be “friends forever.” This desire is consistent with the framing of surrogacy as a “labor of love” and “the gift of life” (Ragone, 1994). Love and gifts cannot be repaid, and gratitude is the consciousness of this fact (Simmel, 1950:392). Gratitude “establishes the bond of interaction” and “effects the return of a benefit where there

³¹ Jenna, e-mail communication.

is no external necessity for it”; gratitude is continuance (Simmel, 1950:387–389). As one surrogate explained: “I don’t want my IM to feel as she owes me ... I want her to CHOOSE and WANT to keep in contact”

“HONOR THE JOURNEY”

When I started to read posts, surrogates whose “heart got broken” often contemplated giving up on surrogacy and were typically comforted by wishes for a better match in the future. Women still hope for this, but voices asserting that creating life is its own reward even if the IPs are unappreciative have been growing stronger. Surrogates remind one another to think of the “precious life that would not be here without you ... no one will ever take that away from you.”

Alyssa, whose IPs failed to keep in touch, echoed this sentiment when she commemorated the second anniversary of the birth. “Everything became worth it with that cry that filled the room ... No one could take that moment from me ... I was allowed to be involved in this journey in which I brought another human being into this world.”

This approach is the result of two developments: the collective lesson learned from numerous stories of disappointment and the crystallization of the shared definition that the purpose of surrogacy is to create a family. When women “whine” about how the relationship ended, they are reminded that “surrogacy is not about gaining new friends but about creating a family.” To be sure, surrogates most often want to stay friends with their IPs and feel distraught when IPs cut ties, but there has been a distinctive shift toward a collective and vocal affirmation that “it was all worth it.” Paula offered the “mantra” she learned from an experienced surrogate: “[she] reminded me that there was a beautiful little girl in the world ... and that in spite of the pain I was feeling over the way it ended (for me), that I should remember to honor the journey. That became my mantra ... I have it tattooed in kanji on my ankle.” A lot of surrogates struggle to fully adopt this outlook.

I learned the hard way that the idea of something is far more rosy and lovely than the reality. I gave a piece of my soul up to carry these babies and I feel I was taken advantage of. It has taken me two years to even get to the point of being able to talk about it. The thing I try to remember is that there are two little people in this world. Because I opened my heart to them. I just wish my heart hadn’t been crushed in the process.

Yet the most sure way to overcome heartache and receive sympathy and praise, even tangible forms of appreciation such as gifts from fellow surrogates, is to embrace this new “emotional regime” (Reddy, 2001:323) by “letting go of the negative feelings and seeing the positives—you helped bring a child into the world.” The following sympathetic post was meant to console Connie, who felt “ditched” by her couple but was nevertheless thinking of doing another surrogacy: “Surrogacy is hard, trying ... loving ... Surrogacy can make or break a person.” Such responses empathize with as well as

express approval of the surrogate who “had it in her heart” to look for IPs again and thus was not broken by surrogacy.³²

Women are articulating a position that even unreciprocated love can lead to repeated giving. This joint effort to “see the positives” and move on is expressed in attitudes like Janelle’s: “in no way will I allow their selfishness and broken promises to deter me from another journey.” Tasha was equally adamant: “I will not let my former IPs ruin surrogacy for me!” This approach insists that love is noble and ennobling and only “special women” are capable of this kind of giving. As Monica Konrad (2005:74) argued in her work on anonymous egg donors, “feeling special converts the gift into a vehicle of differentiation,” turning the giver into a person of “presumed singularity.” “In the end I know I am the BETTER person” is a sentiment expressed by many women on SMO who felt betrayed. “Feeling special” thus makes it possible to hold onto a sense of uniqueness even when IPs deny the personal and unique nature of the relationship.

In a rare post, a very angry and bitter surrogate confessed regretting “ever meeting this couple.” Others were clearly uncomfortable with this attitude and reminded her to focus on the “precious life” she had created. The emerging consensus on SMO is that no matter what IPs say or do, surrogacy is a gift of the heart and one should not only never regret giving life, but strive to continue to do so even in the face of ingratitude. With this emotional adjustment, lack of reciprocity achieves the same end as reciprocity: both bestow value on surrogates, albeit of different kind. When Olivia publicly refused to make this adjustment and demanded contact with IPs after birth, raising the possibility of a lawsuit, the SMO community was quick to condemn: “You’re trying to blackmail them into an update or contact ... Personally, if I were them, I’d be freaked out and doing all I could to keep you out, too.”

Surrogates, especially experienced ones, present themselves as resourceful, knowledgeable, and loving, yet emotionally independent, wise, and outspoken with a good sense of humor; they have their “big girl panties on.” This term has surfaced very recently and now women reference it in posts and some include it in their “signatures”: “Cathy, working on pregnancy # 6 if my uterus doesn’t fall out. Excuse me if I show my bum. I pulled up my big-girl panties so much the elastic broke.” Given the responses to “whiny” posts about IPs’ betrayal, it is clearly advantageous to put on “big girl panties” if one hopes to receive praise and encouragement. On SMO, surrogates consistently applaud women who suffer the pain of betrayal yet are able to move on: “there are no guarantees in life, surrogacy or otherwise. You need to make the best of whatever situation you are in.” On SMO, women discursively, interactively, and at times competitively perform, negotiate, and delineate emotional responses and realities, and as Goffman (1959:35) observed, these

³² According to an SMO poll, only 13 of the 112 respondents said they did or planned to do only one surrogacy, mostly because of doctor advice; 45 said two, 29 three, 25 said four or more.

performances “incorporate and exemplify officially accredited values” such as empathy, generosity, competence, strength, and autonomy.

CONCLUSION

The assertion that “women’s voices—especially those of ... gestational mothers—are scarcely heard” (Chase and Rogers, 2001:189) is still generally true in the scholarship on surrogacy.³³ I have been listening to surrogates’ voices because their “meaning-making” constitutes “grounds of agency and intentionality” (Ortner, 1997:11). Their “radically differing interpretations” (Roberts, 1998b:108) are an important semiotic dimension of surrogacy practices and have real-life consequences for all involved. I have emphasized that these interpretations are achieved interactively. On SMO, we can catch a glimpse of a “semiotic community,” of women making “use of a semiotic code to do something in the world” (Sewell, 1999:51): to carry babies for others. As Sewell (1999:51) argued, using the semiotic code means attaching “abstractly available symbols to concrete things or circumstances and thereby to posit something about them.” The “journey” is a case in point; it signifies the shared goal-oriented and transformative path that came to symbolize the contractual arrangement between surrogates and intended parents. Over time, the meaning of the “journey” incorporated a more transcendent connotation. These “creative cultural actions” (Sewell, 1999:51) have enabled women to establish as well as retain the moral value and purpose of surrogacy.

Surrogates post about their love for their couple; they discuss, agree, and disagree about the obligations, actions, and emotional reactions that follow from such love. When IPs fail to keep their promise of continued contact, surrogates see it as betrayal—rather than a breach of contract—which is consistent with the conceptualization of the “journey” as one of shared love. Negotiating meanings involves a “collective effort to mold feeling” (Reddy, 2001:59). SMO discussions can be contentious but they generally recognize and validate feelings of disappointment. Yet while these interactive debates acknowledge sadness and anger, they tend to censure purely negative feelings about the “journey” while applauding efforts to overcome disappointments. This way, they effectively advocate and endorse some alternative emotional stances such as feelings of pride, even moral superiority, and thus alternative meanings for the “journey.” William Reddy (2001:324) contended that “communities systematically seek to train emotions, to idealize some, to condemn others.” The online surrogacy community is doing just this. Love of family and children is the common ground for surrogates and intended parents but there is much cultural and emotional work required in order to navigate surrogate “journeys” and gain recognition in the SMO community. Countless posts

³³ It is ironic that the feminists who articulated this problem are not interested in exploring surrogates’ narratives. Roberts’s (1998b:109) contention is to the point: “surrogates themselves have been denied a prominent voice within the debates surrounding surrogacy.”

testify to women's efforts to find IPs they can love and love IPs they match with; these stories are always greeted with enthusiastic support on the Message Boards. Being too dependent on IPs' love is not condoned, however. Just as women are supposed to take charge of their "journey" by doing research on the legal and medical aspects of surrogacy, they are responsible for taking charge emotionally.

My findings indicate that the emotional taking charge is achieved interactively and without institutional support. Emotional expression and control are intimately related to the evolving negotiation of the "standards of behavior" (Reddy, 2001:57) the SMO community upholds: to be a well-informed, responsible, reliable, loving, and yet emotionally independent surrogate.

In formulating these standards, women draw on culturally feminine values, such as empathy and generosity, as well as on the culturally middle-class values of autonomy, intelligence, and self-control. It is hard to live up to these standards but there is much at stake, and the stakes are the same for women involved in surrogacy. They may feel "ditched" and emotionally crushed when IPs do not stay in touch, or may be able to salvage their self-respect, even claim moral superiority. They may gain authority, recognition, and admiration on SMO, or may be chastised and criticized by the very group that is supposed to understand and support them. Most importantly, by insisting on the transcendent value of carrying babies for people who are not able to, they also collectively gain validation for their own life choices that prioritized children and family. The emotional monitoring and adjusting surrogates interactively engage in are tied to shared goals and the collective nature of surrogates' "feminine power" (Roberts, 1998b:93). SMO offers a considerably larger forum for self-organized social control and "self-empowerment" than agency-organized support groups did (Ragone, 1994:42).

It is to a large extent in the discursive framework of Internet sites like SMO that the cultural meaning of surrogacy and the relationships it involves are being worked out. Geertz (1973) emphasized the importance of particular symbolic vehicles such as stories in the creation of a shared outlook. This study has explored how shared emotional experience and outlook are achieved through stories and discussions and the consequences this has for practice. Surrogates' online discussions, birth stories, blogs, and diaries are vehicles for meaning-making. The message they most often carry is of a journey of ultimate meaning and purpose; a journey that is a test of character and validation of personal worth. Ideally, the romance of surrogacy is lived in a "perfect match." However, the framework of love does not have to be threatened by lack of reciprocation from intended parents. By acknowledging pain while constructing and intensifying emotions of pride, women work out new emotional reactions and courses of action: disappointments do not have to discredit the love or undercut the purpose as long as women "honor the journey." The "heart" symbolically stands not only for emotions but also for strength and stability (Teman, 2010:68).

SMO members readily share their stories of anguish because they believe that these stories both instruct and comfort others. "I think we all here have our share of [pain] ... All we can do is honor the journey and try to move on and know that we did the BEST we could as surrogates." This emotional regime strengthens autonomy as well as resolve; surrogates' collective emotional work has contributed to the enthusiasm to repeatedly bear children for others.

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