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# 'Of course he's our child': transitions in social parenthood in donor sperm recipient families




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Astrid Indekeu has Masters in Clinical Psychology and in Family and Sexuality Sciences (2008, KU Leuven Belgium). For 10 years she specialized in the field of medical psychology. She is currently working on a PhD thesis on psychological aspects of third-party reproduction. A central focus of her research is the process of selective disclosure of the donor conception to the offspring in the context of genetic and social parenthood. The research is a multidisciplinary project and involves collaboration of the Leuven University Fertility Centre, the Institute of Family and Sexuality Sciences and the Centre for Biomedical Ethics and Law.

**Abstract** This study examines transitions and consistencies in the views of donor sperm recipients on 'parenthood' and 'family' over time. A longitudinal qualitative study was carried out with 19 donor sperm recipients. Interviews took place during pregnancy, at birth and 1.5–2 years after birth and were analysed using a grounded theory approach. Participants intending to disclose the donor conception to their offspring (13/19) exhibited a transition from feeling anxious prior to birth to feeling more confident during the toddler stage about their parenthood. Previous anxieties about the lack of biological ties decreased as emerging social ties became more significant. Following birth, these participants (13/19) felt acknowledged by others as parents, which elicited feelings of normalization. Being able to engage in parenting and develop parental relations enhanced their confidence in their parental position. This confidence empowered donor sperm recipients to tackle future challenges and made them more convinced about their disclosure intention. Participants intending not to disclose the donor conception (6/19) reported viewing their parenthood as no different from parenthood experienced by naturally conceiving parents, no transitions were observed and insecurity about physical traits that could reveal the donor conception remained. These findings have implications for counselling throughout specific stages in parenthood. 

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**KEYWORDS:** gamete donation, parenthood, sperm donation, transition

## Introduction

Although social and genetic parenthood are 'core' aspects of third-party reproduction, until now little research has focused on how donor-conceiving couples manage challenges related to social and genetic parenthood and how their processing of

these issues relates to whether they choose to share information about the donor conception with others and the offspring.

Reproduction technologies by means of a donor seem to have arguably done more than anything else to challenge the traditional understanding of family and kinship (Blank, 1990; Finkler, 2001). With such technologies, concepts of

paternity, maternity and siblingship take on new meanings. Despite increasing societal acceptance of diversity in family compositions (e.g. single-parent households, blended, adoptive and same-sex families) where families may be a group established more on the basis of choice than on the basis of biogenetic ties (Finkler, 2001), anthropologists and psychologists point out that family ties based on biogenetic connections continue to be more highly valued cross-culturally than those based on non-biogenetic social ties (Edwards et al., 1999; Finkler, 2001; Strathern, 1992a,b). What makes a family in post-modern society has shifted, both theoretically and at the individual level, but within the broader social culture the ethos is still largely on the man, the woman and their biological offspring (van den Akker, 2001). Procreating a genetically related child is considered a basic human drive (Halman et al., 1992; Isaksson et al., 2011; Purewal and van den Akker, 2007; Skoog Svanberg et al., 2003) and a socialized drive (van den Akker, 2001). In terms of Belgium, the Belgian Advisory Committee of Bio-Ethics (2004) has stated that 'in our society, the opinion that the biological parent is the "real" parent is still too present, and this would be even more explicit for the role of the man than the woman'. Subsequently, building a family outside of these parameters is therefore deemed 'alternative' (van den Akker, 2001) and runs the risk of being stigmatized (Thorn, 2006). Yet, it should be noted that knowledge regarding public understanding of and specific attitudes towards gamete donation is still very limited (Hudson et al., 2009). Moreover, Finkler (2001) has pointed out that the medicalization of family and kinship through advances in contemporary biomedicine and genetics, along with the hegemony of the genes, adds to the challenges faced by donor sperm recipients. Recipients will also be challenged to cope with the importance of genes in genetic and non-genetic kinship connectedness for donor-conceived offspring (Blyth, 2012; Jadva et al., 2010). In such a cultural context, couples who rely on donor insemination are challenged to review and possibly revise their own views on the significance of genetic and social connectedness and what constitutes a 'family' and 'parenthood' in the absence of 'full' genetic connections (Grace et al., 2008; Grace and Daniels, 2007; Hargreaves, 2006; Kirkman, 2004). They manage these challenges through a discourse about physical resemblance and by re-examining the nature/culture dichotomy and either blurring the boundaries between them or privileging social ties and nurture over nature (Becker et al., 2005; Grace et al., 2008; Grace and Daniels, 2007; Hargreaves, 2006; Kirkman, 2004). However, considering the incongruence between the real and the 'ideal' family, as defined by society, research has demonstrated unease or cognitive dissonance among people opting for alternative reproductive choices and disclosing the reproductive choice to others (van den Akker, 2001). The experience or fear of stigmatization in donor sperm recipient couples has been shown to decrease the likelihood of disclosure (Daniels et al., 2007; Nachtigall et al., 1997). In this context, research on how donor sperm recipients give meaning to the concepts of 'family' and 'parenthood' not only adds valuable knowledge to understanding recipients' experiences of and approaches to reproduction by means of a sperm donor, but it might also provide insight on how the disclosure process concerning the use of a donor is managed.

It has been suggested that the impact of the offspring's origin lessens over time as social bonds are formed (Hargreaves, 2006). This could be especially relevant during the life stages of pregnancy and birth, as this initial transition to parenthood arguably brings about more profound changes than any other developmental stage of the family life cycle. The process of giving birth has been described as 'transformative' by oocyte recipient mothers (Stuart-Smith et al., 2012): having a real baby, as opposed to a desired baby, gave rise to a marked shift in the mothers' perspectives. Moreover, the transition to the parenthood stage has important implications for parents, the child-parent relationship and the child's development (Barclay et al., 1996; Deave and Johnson, 2008). Despite the fact that researchers (Blyth et al., 2010; Daniels et al., 1995, 2011; Klock and Greenfeld, 2004; MacCallum and Golombok, 2007; Salter-Ling et al., 2001; Söderström-Anttila et al., 2010; Stuart-Smith et al., 2012) often suggest that the way donor sperm recipients cope with their donor conception might change over time, most studies in the field of donor gamete fertility treatments are cross-sectional, retrospective explorations of one point in time (Indekeu et al., 2013; Stuart-Smith et al., 2012). In order to reliably record transitions over time, there is a pressing need to conduct long-term prospective studies (Indekeu et al., 2013).

The aim of this study is to provide insight into how donor sperm recipients construct, negotiate and experience meanings of 'parenthood' and 'family' given their 'alternative' context and how their meanings might evolve (or not) over three different stages in the family life cycle (pregnancy, birth and toddler stage). These findings have implications for counselling during these specific stages in parenthood.

## Materials and methods

### Participants

Heterosexual couples who relied on sperm donation to achieve a pregnancy were recruited through the Leuven University Fertility Centre (LUFC) and through advertisement in a women's magazine (*Libelle*). Participants were recruited regardless of their disclosure stance. Couples were contacted by the first author (AI) after they had given consent to the midwife of LUFC to be contacted or after they had responded to the advertisement. Information about the study was given orally and in written form during home visits. This made it possible to address both partners equally and allowed the eligible candidates to become familiar with the researcher. No financial compensation was given for participation. This study was approved by the Commission for Medical Ethics of the University Hospital of Leuven (reference no. B32220108778, approved 17 May 2010). Informed consents were signed prior to participation. Interviews took place between July 2010 and September 2012. For information concerning the Belgian legal context on third-party reproduction, readers are referred to Indekeu et al. (2012).

Out of 14 eligible couples who were approached through the LUFC, seven agreed to participate (one without her husband) and seven declined. Therefore, a response rate of 50% resulted from LUFC recruitment, a figure consistent with

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