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Creating a family through connection websites and events: ethical and social issues

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In 2006, An Ravelingien obtained a PhD in Philosophy at Ghent University with a dissertation on the ethics of xenotransplantation. Since then, she has published on the ethics of emerging neuroenhancement technology, assisted human reproduction, and other bioethical topics. Between 2011 and 2015, she and the co-authors, as well as other team members, worked on a qualitative research project dedicated to studying the views and experiences (of patients, DI offspring and donors) related to the use of donor gametes. This study is one of the results of that project.

Abstract Over the years, connection websites and speed dating events have increasingly attracted singles and couples who cannot have a child in the 'traditional' way. These initiatives bring together candidate gamete providers and recipients with the promise of offering more freedom of choice than fertility centres or sperm banks currently do. Depending on the level of contact desired, the role of the gamete provider may range from not being involved at all to sharing full parental rights and obligations. In this paper, we take a look at the ethical and social issues that emerge with these new forms of family arrangements. We suggest that, although the private arrangements promote greater autonomy and control for all parties involved, risks and questionable assumptions are also at play. In particular, risks involve insufficient screening of the involved donor or co-parent, particularly in terms of motives and psychological characteristics. One must also be wary of the risk of unregulated commercialization and, more importantly, of disappointments and legal conflicts caused by unclear or changing expectations. We also warn for the risk of reinforcing heterosexist and genetic norms of parenting and valid family building. 

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Introduction

In Amsterdam, the Netherlands, the first 'speed date' for aspiring parents took place in spring 2013. The event was organized to help singles and same-sex couples find someone willing to give sperm or eggs and possibly also be

involved in the future child's life. The candidates held 9-min conversations to gain a first impression. If there was a good rapport, they could exchange contact information and discuss their desires and plans at length later. The initiative was taken by *Meer Dan Gewenst (More Than Wanted)*, an online platform that provides information about this

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alternative route to creating a family and that promotes voluntary associations between people with an unfulfilled child wish (www.meerdangewenst.nl). The speed date meetings generally attract up to a 100 candidates, mostly from the lesbian and gay community, and have recently been organized in other countries (an event took place in Belgium in early 2015). Many participants view this arrangement as the solution to fulfil their wish to parent a biologically related child in case they cannot have a child with a romantic partner.

More Than Wanted is just one of many websites that cater to this desire. Most other websites do not organize speed dates, but enable contact between potential recipients and donors from all over the world through the internet. *Free Sperm Donations Worldwide (FSDW)* (www.free-sperm-donations.com) and *DIY Baby* (www.diy-baby.com) are probably internationally the best known. They were the first (since 2003) to connect sperm donors and lesbian and single women, and to help them make their own arrangements for conception and upbringing. The objectives of *FSDW* advertises its objectives as offering 'choices' to aspiring parents: you can choose your donor, get to know (about) him, and, if desired, arrange self-insemination meetings. Much like a dating site, subscribers can scroll through the donor database and contact valued donor profiles through the public message boards on the websites. The (more than 4000 registered) donors in turn can decide whether or not they wish to donate and to what extent they want to take a supportive role in the child's rearing. Another popular website, the *Known Donor Registry (KDR)*, with more than 20,000 users, also aims to promote 'freedom of choice' (knowndonorregistry.com). Pull-down menus allow the selection of the type of donation (sperm, eggs or embryos), method (artificial insemination, natural insemination, shipped on dry ice, or cryobank deposit) and degree of contact desired (contact after 18, limited contact, frequent contact, uncle, aunt, friend, role, or co-parent). The first co-parenting website, *Co-parent Match*, was created in 2007 (www.co-parentmatch.com). In a similarly attractive and user-friendly format, it addresses single men, women and gay and lesbian couples who wish to have a baby, and offers them an opportunity to find their 'perfect parenting partner' on their social networking site labelled as an 'alternative sperm bank'. *Pride Angel*, one of the most recent websites, offers an introduction service between recipients and both gamete donors and willing co-parents (www.prideangel.com).

Accurate terminology for these private arrangements has not been set yet. In the gamete donation context, one generally distinguishes between a parent and a donor. In the internet setting, the distinction is much more blurred. For one, these arrangements are not always donations: the 'donor' is not necessarily giving the gametes away with the altruistic aim of helping others to create a family. He or she may want to be involved to some extent in that family. Some single men currently already use open-identity donation as an opportunity for a level of parenting (Ripper, 2008). Also, the informal arrangements do not match the donor categories usually referred to within institutional gamete donation: anonymous, known, or open-identity donors. Depending on the level of involvement desired, these participants can be situated on a spectrum, with donors at one end and co-parents at the other end. The 'donors' can be defined as those who just give their gametes and sometimes agree, at one point in the future, to be known to the child. The 'co-parents' are those who decide

to help conceive and take a parenting role in the future child's life (again, with many different levels of involvement conceivable). Jadva et al. (2015) have defined co-parents as 'men and women who are not in a relationship with each other creating and raising a child together'. In between are 'involved donors': they are to some extent involved in the child's upbringing but do not acquire parental rights and obligations. They want some involvement from the very beginning, be it (as listed by KDR) in terms of limited contact, frequent contact or as an uncle, aunt or friend.

To date, little research on this emerging trend has been conducted. Jadva et al. (2015) surveyed 102 male and female candidates who searched for a co-parent online. They found that the main motivation for such searches was to make an arrangement that best resembles a 'conventional' family, where both biological parents are involved in the child's upbringing. They also noted that not only homosexual, but increasingly also heterosexual men and women, are drawn to these elective co-parenting arrangements. Most candidates were highly educated. These findings confirm previous findings by Erera and Segal-Engelchin (2014). Other studies focused on sperm donors' reasons for donating in either informal settings, e.g. via contact through the internet, or formal settings (the clinic). In a study conducted by Bossema et al. (2014), the donors' ($n = 5$) main reasons for preferring informal donation settings included the possibility to choose the recipient, to have contact with the future child and a bond with the recipient. Woestenburg et al. (2015) found that the internet donors they interviewed ($n = 9$) wanted to know the prospective recipients and to follow the progress of the future donor offspring.

In this paper, we outline and analyse the main social and ethical issues underlying the use of connection websites or social events to create a (co-parent) family.

Materials and methods

Connection websites and social events were explored using English (such as 'single' AND 'co-parenting'/'baby'; 'find donor AND co-parent'; 'co-parenting AND arrangements'; 'find known donor'; 'LGB AND donor family' . . .) and Dutch keywords in a Google search. The terms used were selected to mimic a search of potential candidates of connection websites or social events.

Results

Voluntary connections with involved donors and co-parents through websites and speed dates fall outside institutional gamete donation and introduce new family arrangements and parental statutes not previously encountered. The social and ethical analysis of such arrangements is an uncharted domain. A well-known argument in the literature on reproductive liberty is that how one wishes to create a family is a purely private concern. Indeed, there are strong arguments against interference with a person's right to create a family. Nonetheless, the mechanisms through which and the forms in which families are organized are socially and ethically relevant. They have implications for the macro social context and for the way

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