

Integrating donor conception into identity development: adolescents in fatherless families

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Objective: To study the processes by which donor-conceived children incorporate donor conception into their subjective sense of identity.

Design: Cross-sectional.

Setting: Family homes.

Patient(s): Nineteen donor-conceived adolescents.

Intervention(s): Administration of an interview and questionnaire.

Main Outcome Measure(s): The mother-child relationship was assessed through the Friends and Family Interview, a semistructured interview designed to assess adolescents' security of attachment in terms of secure-autonomous, insecure-dismissive, insecure-preoccupied, and insecure-disorganized attachment patterns. The Donor Conception Identity Questionnaire assessed adolescents' thoughts and feelings about donor conception, yielding two factors: [1] curiosity about donor conception and [2] avoidance of donor conception.

Result(s): Statistically significant associations were found between the Curiosity scale and the secure-autonomous and insecure-dismissing attachment ratings. Adolescents with secure-autonomous attachment patterns were more interested in exploring donor conception whereas those with insecure-dismissing patterns were less likely to express curiosity. Insecure-disorganized attachment ratings were statistically significantly correlated with the Avoidance scale, indicating higher levels of negative feelings about donor conception.

Conclusion(s): The results of this study of the influence of parent-child relationships on thoughts and feelings about donor conception in adolescence suggest that the valence of the parent-child relationship influences adolescents' appraisal of their donor conception within the context of their growing sense of identity. (Fertil Steril® 2016;106:202–8. ©2016 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Inc. on behalf of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).)

Key Words: Adolescence, attachment, donor conception, identity, sperm donation

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Research on the diverse family forms made possible by donor conception has largely focused on comparisons between family types. These studies have generally shown that donor-conceived families headed

by heterosexual couples, lesbian couples, and single heterosexual mothers do not differ in terms of family functioning or child adjustment from heterosexual two-parent families formed without medical assistance (1, 2).

There is little research on variation within donor-conceived families, particularly in relation to the internal processes by which donor-conceived children incorporate information regarding their donor conception into their developing sense of identity. The question of how a child develops an understanding of donor conception becomes particularly relevant at adolescence when issues surrounding identity formation and individuation become salient (3).

Research on the identity formation of adopted adolescents offers a useful starting point for exploring identity development in donor conception (4, 5). Based

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on Erikson's (6, 7) theory of identity development, which views adolescence as a time of great productivity in identity formation, Grotevant and Cooper (8) examined the process of adolescent identity development within the familial context, particularly in relation to adoptive families. They argued that to develop a secure sense of identity adolescents must feel safe and sufficiently connected to explore their nascent independence. They begin to make active choices, such as selecting a career path, at the same time as making meaning out of those aspects of themselves they did not choose, such as having been adopted (9). As part of this process of "meaning-making," some adopted adolescents seek information about their birth family (10). Similar processes have been reported for families created through donor conception. Some donor-conceived adolescents search for information about their donor and donor siblings out of curiosity and also to enhance their developing sense of identity (11–14).

Adopted adolescents' curiosity about their family of origin can be hindered by perceived barriers (15), such as parents who are thought to be discouraging of the process. However, parents are also uniquely positioned to serve in a facilitating capacity through a willingness to explore adoption-related issues (16, 17). In a longitudinal study of adoptive families from adolescence to early adulthood, Von Korff and Grotevant (18) found that more frequent adoption-related conversations promoted a more coherent adoptive identity narrative. It was concluded that ongoing conversations within adoptive families assist in narrative building, thus helping adopted children make sense of the past.

Given the mutual emphasis on narrative development, attachment theory provides a useful theoretical bridge for extending adoption identity theories to donor conception. According to attachment theory (19, 20), the early relationship with parents underpins the development of internalized mental representations, thus influencing a child's personality development, perceptions, and social interactions throughout the developmental trajectory. Securely attached children conceptualize the parent(s) as a secure base and safe haven available for protection and support should the attachment system be activated, for example, by a threatening situation. These secure internal working models serve as protective factors as the child negotiates developmental challenges (21). Conversely, insecure attachment patterns, often a result of unpredictable or chaotic early experiences with parents, are associated with multiple and diverse negative outcomes ranging from affect regulation difficulties to dissociation (22).

As children enter adolescence, increasingly sophisticated metacognitive abilities allow them to positively and negatively evaluate their attachment figures as they simultaneously develop their own perspective on, or narrative about, their attachment to their parent(s) (23, 24). It is at this point that attachment patterns emerge in autobiographical narratives. These patterns are indicative of a combination of internal working models, reflective functioning, and adaptive functioning skills used to navigate the developmental challenges associated with adolescence, including identity development. Coherence and evidence of an adaptive

response to stressors are critical components of a secure narrative (25). Echoing Grotevant and colleagues' theories of adoptive identity development (8–10, 18), attachment theory suggests that it is not necessarily the quality of one's interpersonal experiences that influences internal working models and attachment patterns, but rather the meaning that one is able to construct out of such experiences.

Although potentially beneficial to the process of meaning-making and identity development, engaging with various aspects of donor conception, such as searching for donor relations and initiating conversations about genetic origins, can be perceived as a threatening and intimidating process by both parents and children in donor-conceived families (13, 26). Given the value of safety within interpersonal relationships (27), it is reasonable to expect that a child who has internalized their parent(s) as consistently supportive, even under stressful or threatening circumstances, is more likely to trust that the parent(s) can scaffold the exploration of their donor conception. It is thus hypothesized that, as donor-conceived adolescents navigate the demands of identity formation, those who have developed secure internal working models of their parental relationship(s) will feel more comfortable with the process of positively integrating donor conception into a coherent sense of identity.

The present study focused on the adolescent children of single mothers and lesbian couples conceived through anonymous sperm donation, as the children in these families are more likely than children in two-parent heterosexual families to have become aware of their donor conception at an early age (11, 12). In addition, studying the children of single mothers and lesbian couples enables the process of donor-conception identity development to be examined in the absence of the potentially confounding influence of a father in the home as donor-conceived adolescents in two-parent heterosexual families are less likely to explore their donor connections in order not to upset their parents (13).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The participants were recruited through the Donor Sibling Registry, a U.S.-based registry that facilitates contact between same-donor offspring, their parents, and donors. In the first instance, an e-mail giving information about the study and requesting assistance was sent to single mothers and partnered lesbian mothers who [1] were living within the tristate area of New York designated for its accessibility to the researchers, [2] had one or more adolescent children conceived by donor insemination, and [3] had found at least one of their child's donor-siblings. Although 146 e-mails were sent out, it was not possible to determine how many mothers actually received or opened the initial e-mail. As the study was designed primarily as an in-depth qualitative study of adolescents' experiences of contact with their donor siblings (reported elsewhere), the aim was to recruit approximately 20 adolescents. The first 28 mothers to give permission for their contact details to be passed on to the researchers were contacted by one of the authors (J.S. or S.P.) to describe the

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