

Satisfaction with known, open-identity, or unknown sperm donors: reports from lesbian mothers of 17-year-old adolescents

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Objective: To assess whether lesbian mothers of 17-year-old adolescents conceived through donor insemination are satisfied with their choice of a known, open-identity, or unknown sperm donor and whether the mothers' satisfaction is associated with psychological health problems in the index adolescent offspring.

Design: Mixed-method study.

Setting: Not applicable.

Patient(s): One hundred twenty-nine lesbian mothers and 77 index offspring.

Intervention(s): Semistructured interviews with the mothers conducted by telephone and the State-Trait Personality Inventory (STPI) completed online by the adolescent offspring.

Main Outcome Measure(s): Satisfaction with the type of sperm donor selected was assessed through multiple choice questions, and adolescent psychological health problems by the STPI. The reasons for the mothers' (dis)satisfaction were evaluated through a thematic analysis of transcribed interviews.

Result(s): Overall, 77.5% of mothers were satisfied with the type of donor chosen. There were no significant differences between birth mothers and comothers on (dis)satisfaction. In comparing satisfied with dissatisfied birth mothers by donor type, the only significant differences were that those selecting open-identity donors were more satisfied than dissatisfied and that those using unknown donors were more dissatisfied than satisfied; (dis)satisfaction with donor type was unrelated to offspring psychological health problems. Qualitative analyses revealed six themes concerning all mothers' reasons for (dis)satisfaction.

Conclusion(s): Donor access and custody concerns were the primary themes mentioned by lesbian mothers regarding their (dis)satisfaction with the type of sperm donor they had selected. (Fertil Steril® 2015;103:242–8. ©2015 by American Society for Reproductive Medicine.)

Key Words: Lesbian mothers, donor insemination, known sperm donor, open-identity sperm donor, unknown sperm donor

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Although numerous studies have focused on the transition to parenthood in planned lesbian families (1–3), little is known about the mothers' retrospective feelings concerning the type of sperm donor selected. In the United States, lesbians who wish to become parents through donor insemination (DI) face many decisions regarding donor type (4): they may elect to use the sperm of a known donor (e.g., a friend or in-law), an open-identity donor (i.e., one who

agrees to be contacted by offspring of a certain age, typically ≥ 18 years old), or an unknown donor (i.e., one whose identity will remain concealed from the recipient and offspring) (3, 5). Whereas heterosexual couples using DI services generally choose unknown donors (6), lesbian prospective parents select donors of all three types, depending on their preferences and circumstances (1–3, 5).

The reasons lesbians lean toward known donors include: [1] a desire for the offspring to have a relationship or contact with the donor and his relatives; [2] a wish for information about the donor's biological heritage; and/or [3] a hope to maintain control over the insemination process (1, 5, 7, 8). In considering a known donor, prospective mothers deliberate over which characteristics are most important to them, such as personality, genetics, education, appearance, religion, and interests (3). The choice of a known donor may or may not be associated with a prospective lesbian mother's or couple's plan to share parenting with him (1, 3, 5).

Lesbians who select open-identity or unknown sperm donors often do so out of a desire to raise children within a planned lesbian family, without donor involvement or custody disputes (1, 3). Open-identity or unknown donors are also chosen when prospective mothers do not know a suitable candidate who is willing to donate sperm. In contrast to permanently unknown donors, open-identity donors are typically selected because prospective mothers would like the offspring to have the option of future contact with the donor (1, 2, 5).

The present report is part of an ongoing longitudinal study on planned lesbian families with first-generation offspring conceived through DI. In previous investigations regarding the index adolescent offspring, no differences were found in psychological adjustment or quality of life when those with known, open-identity, and unknown donors were compared (9–11). Also, the 17-year-old adolescents with as yet unknown donors (open-identity and unknown combined) were nearly evenly divided in stating that they did not care about the donor type or that they had no opinion about this issue (39.6% vs. 37.5%), with the remainder indicating that they regretted not knowing their donor (9). However, no prior study has examined their lesbian mothers' retrospective feelings concerning the types of sperm donors selected. The aim of the current study was to explore lesbian mothers' satisfaction with their use of a known, open-identity, or unknown sperm donor 18 years after the conception of the index offspring and to assess whether parental satisfaction with sperm donor selection was associated with psychological health problems in the adolescent offspring. A second goal was to describe the mothers' reasons for (dis)satisfaction with the type of donor chosen. This study will be of special interest to health care professionals, fertility centers, prospective DI recipients, and DI offspring in providing insight into lesbian mothers' long-term assessments of their chosen methods of conception.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Data Collection

During the first decade in which DI was available in the United States to lesbians who wished to become pregnant

(4), participants were recruited through a snowball method in Boston, Washington, DC, and San Francisco for the US National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS) (1). Data were collected in five waves: during insemination or pregnancy (between 1986 and 1992; time 1) and when the children were 2 (time 2), 5 (time 3), 10 (time 4), and 17 years old (time 5; T5). Detailed descriptions of the study purposes, sample, and methodology are available in previous reports (1, 10). The present article is based on the T5 data collection (completed in May 2009) from 78 families (93% retention). The study protocol, consent, and assent forms were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the California Pacific Medical Center.

At T5, the birth mothers and comothers were interviewed independently after they had provided written consent. The 60- to 90-minute in-depth telephone interviews, conducted by members of NLLFS research team trained in interview methodology, were semistructured with open-ended questions. Each mother was asked to specify how the index offspring was conceived—through a known, open-identity, or unknown donor. To measure their satisfaction with the type of donor selected, the mothers were also asked, “If you had to do it all over again, would you make the same choice of donor type?” (1 = yes, 2 = no) and in a follow-up, open-ended question, to explain the reasons for their yes-or-no answer. The responses were transcribed verbatim.

After their mothers consented and the offspring assented, the State-Trait Personality Inventory (STPI) completed by the 17-year-olds was used to measure adolescent psychological health problems (12). A mean score was calculated for psychological health problems based on three 10-item STPI subscales—trait anxiety, anger, and depression. Example items are “I feel nervous and restless” (trait anxiety), “I am quick tempered” (trait anger), and “I feel gloomy” (trait depression), with answers ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much so). Cronbach's alpha for the three combined STPI subscales was 0.92.

Analyses

Two researchers (NKG and NGG) independently conducted multiple readings of all responses to the open-ended question on satisfaction with donor type to derive lists of themes. These two lists were compared to identify common themes and unique codes. A single coding list was finalized after the same two researchers reviewed all transcripts again and no new themes were identified. The final coding list was explained to and discussed with the authors HB and AD, who had already reviewed the transcripts. To increase reliability, all coders were trained by the lead author.

At the next stage, using the final coding list, the above-mentioned authors worked in pairs to double-code 23 transcripts. On average, the Krippendorff's alpha reliability for all double-coded fragments in 46 transcripts was 0.78, indicating a substantial agreement between the coders (13, 14). Any disagreement on the coding of a fragment was discussed to reach consensus on a single code to be used for the thematic content analysis. Subsequently, the remaining 85 transcripts were divided among the four researchers for coding.

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