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Donor conceived offspring conceive of the donor: The relevance of age, awareness, and family form

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ABSTRACT

Rarely have donor conceived offspring been studied. Recently, it has become more common for parents to disclose the nature of conception to their offspring. This new development raises questions about the donor's place in the offspring's life and identity. Using surveys collected by the Donor Sibling Registry, the largest U.S. web-based registry, during a 15 week period from October 2009 to January 2010, we found that donor offspring view the donor as a whole person, rather than as simple genetic material (he can know you; he has looks; he can teach you about yourself); they also believe that the donor should act on his humanity (he should know about you and not remain an anonymous genetic contributor). Other new issues that emerge from this research include the findings that offspring may want to control the decision about contacting their sperm donor in order to facilitate a bond between themselves and the donor that is separate from their relationship with their parents. They also wish to assure their parents that their natal families are primary and will not be disrupted. We discuss how the age at which offspring learned about their donor conception and their current age each make a difference in their responses to what they want from contact with their donor. Family form (heterosexual two-parent families and lesbian two-parent families) also affects donor terminology. The role of the genetic father is reconsidered in both types of families. Donor conceived offspring raised in heterosexual families discover that their natal father no longer carries biological information and he is relegated to being "only" a social father. Offspring raised by lesbian couples experience a dissipation of the family narrative that they have no father. The donor, an imagined father, offers clues to the offspring's personal identity. The natal family is no longer the sole keeper of identity or ancestry.

Introduction

Some countries, such as Sweden, Austria, Switzerland, Netherlands, Norway, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Finland and also three territories in Australia, are banning anonymous donor insemination as the rights of the child to their donor's identity have come to the forefront of social policy. The U.S., however, presently has no policies with regard to anonymous donors. Sperm banks, which have become big business worldwide, regulate the donation and selling of gametes deciding the parameters of donor eligibility (Spar, 2006).

Standard practice has been to reduce the donor to a purchased product; the medicalized procedure of insemination diminishes the donor's personhood; any discourse of the donor as a parent (a father), and of the possible significance of a relationship between him and his offspring, is left to the sole domain of the (receiving) family (Spar, 2006). Grace and Daniels (2007) argue that as families move toward more openness about donor use parents are faced with the tension between the "irrelevance" and the "relevance" of the donor. Erasure leaves parents, especially mothers Grace, Daniels, and Gillett (2008, p. 311) find, wondering about and even empathetic toward the donor. It is this interest in him that makes him relevant and gives him personhood (Grace & Daniels, 2007; Grace et al., 2008). He pops up in the imagination of family members who are curious about whether the offspring resembles him in looks, traits and character. He lives in the shadows of the family as an "imagined" person (Hertz, 2002, 2009).

As Grace and Daniels (2007) themselves recognize, this issue of "relevance" or "irrelevance" is not so easily thought of as a straightforward distinction between genes and the environment

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(nature/nurture). Considerable writing within the biological and social sciences has challenged the notion of a simple dichotomy, rendering it no longer a viable conceptualization. Within the social sciences, Marilyn Strathern (1992) was one of the first scholars to demonstrate that the new reproductive technologies make apparent that personal "identity" could come from genetic substance rather than kinship, providing a new twist that left aside legally sanctioned relations (Schneider, 1968). Considering the contribution of genetic substance does not preclude the family's contribution to the offspring's identity (as they raise a child). But that awareness recognizes the donor as someone who contributes something important to the offspring that is external to the natal family.

Although studies have looked at the *parents* engaged in these new forms of reproduction, few studies have explored how donor conceived (DC) offspring wrestle with how to make sense of the contributions of more than one father. Having looked at the parents, Grace et al. (2008, p. 342) pose the question of making sense this way:

> is it really possible for the offspring to conceptualise a genetic donor who is considered significant in terms of biological inheritance, and yet is not a 'social' 'father' in any sense? And equally, can it be said that the 'social' father's role in the offspring's life is solely psychosocial and not involving any element of biology? If the answer is no to these questions, the conclusion follows that the child has two men in his or her life, each of whom represents facets of the paternal figure.

As we explore this question of what these "two men" represent, with a unique dataset from donor conceived offspring, we suggest that these individuals struggle to make meaning about their conception as well as about the ways in which the donor is related to themselves and their natal families. This research also takes the investigation beyond the assumption that all donor conceived offspring will have the same attitudes to explore how family form (meaning, in particular, the difference between heterosexual two-parent families and lesbian two-parent families) affects the set of issues having to do with the degree to which the donor is identified as a distinct individual (a person rather than a cell) and how that individual is located within one's natal family and the broader set of connections DC offspring consider kin. Indeed, some of these – the DC offspring in lesbian two-parent families – are ignored by Grace et al. (2008) when they talk about the "two men" in the life of a donor-conceived individual. In this study, none of these offspring were young children, though many were still adolescents and young adults.

Table 1
Comparison of entire sample and two-parent family sample.

	Entire sample		Sample without two-parent households		Two-parent households	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
1.1 Current age						
13–15	103	20	44	22	59	19
16–18	92	18	42	21	50	16
19–21	65	13	26	13	39	12
22–25	83	16	32	16	51	16
26–30	67	13	25	12	42	13
31–40	60	12	17	8	43	14
41 or older	48	9	18	9	30	10
Total	518	100	204	100	314	100
1.2 Age at which told of DC						
Always knew	189	47	103	61	86	37
Before 5	42	11	18	11	24	10
5–7	29	7	12	7	17	7
8–10	34	9	15	9	19	8
11–14	39	10	10	6	29	13
15–18	29	7	8	5	21	9
19–25	2	1	0	0	2	1
26–35	26	7	3	2	23	10
36 or older	9	2	0	0	9	4
N	399	100	169	100	230	100
1.3 Sex						
Female	384	75	151	75	233	75
Male	129	25	50	25	79	25
Total	513	100	201	99	312	100
1.4 Donor type						
Anonymous	421	89	166	89	255	89
Known	8	2	3	2	5	2
Identity release	33	7	15	8	18	6
Other	10	2	2	1	8	3
Total	472	100	186	100	286	100
1.5 Country of origin						
U.S.	456	93	164	92	292	93
Other	36	7	14	8	22	7
Total	492	100	178	100	314	100

Literature review

Issues of donor anonymity and disclosure provide the context in which DC offspring make sense of their origins and, more particularly, make sense of the donor himself. Whether or not the usual practice in the U.S. of donor anonymity should prevail is now a subject of widespread debate (Daniels, Lalos, Gottlieb, & Lalos, 2005; Garcia-Velasco & Garrido, 2005; Jadva, Freeman, Kramer, & Golombok, 2010). Not surprisingly, different stake holders have different views about this issue ranging from those concerned about supply (Garcia-Velasco & Garrido, 2005) through donors themselves (Rodino, Burton, & Sanders, 2011) and receiving parents (Scheib, Riordan, & Rubin, 2003) to donor conceived offspring (Rodino et al., 2011). Regardless of the attitudes and interests of the various parties, to date however, especially in the U.S. from which the bulk of data for our study is drawn (see below, Table 1.5), the vast majority of donors remain anonymous. Whether or not the donor is anonymous, individuals relying on donor insemination confront the issue of whether or not to disclose DC origins to their children and, if so, the best timing for that disclosure (Daniels & Meadows, 2006; Freeman & Golombok, 2012; Shehab et al., 2008). Informing offspring of the nature of their conception, through donated sperm, is now viewed as desirable by professionals and policy makers (Grace & Daniels, 2007; Grace et al., 2008). However in practice, disclosure is a complex issue (Brewaeys, Golombok, Naaktgeboren, de Bruyn, & van Hall, 1997; Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, & Golombok, 1997; Daniels, Lewis, & Gillett, 1995; Landau & Weissenberg, 2010; Lycett, Curson, & Golombok, 2005; Readings, Blake, Casey, Jadva, & Golombok, 2011). Within lesbian couples disclosure is often considerably earlier than it is within other types of families (Beeson, Jennings, & Kramer, 2011; Jadva, Freeman, Kramer, & Golombok, 2009) and in general, single mothers and lesbian couples are more likely to