Questions of kinship and genes: Donors, boundaries and tantalising knowledge

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The Relative Strangers project (2010-2013)

- Explored how donor conception is situated in the everyday lives of families, and how it impacts on family relationships
- Our interest in this project as sociologists of family life was the shift to openness in policy on donor conception in England and Wales
- It used to be that donor conception was managed through secrecy; linked to a history of stigmatisation and illegitimacy
- Never criminalised, but widely socially stigmatised - 1940s, 1950s
- When (sperm) donation became more common in the 70s and 80s, parents were encouraged to keep the donation a secret
Shift towards openness

- With general guidelines shifting in recent years; the UK has moved towards more openness
  - E.g. UK move to end donor anonymity 2005
- This move is shaped by emerging ideas that openness about genetic history is in the best interest of children, inspired from developments in adoption
- With the revised Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008, parents are now strongly encouraged to be open
Openness, donor conception and family life

- Openness a done deal in terms of policy, but may be less straightforward when translated into practice?
- Evidence to suggest that parents might not feel that this is easy (e.g. Fiona’s work)
- Secrecy about donor conception had become well embedded in family life
- The recent turnaround in advice goes against a lot of basic assumptions held by both parent and grandparent generations
- Culturally speaking, there is a gap between the desire to talk openly about donor conception and the practice of doing this in families
Impact on family relationships?

• Knowledge and sensitivities are likely to become issues of negotiation and management between different family members and secrets may grow (Smart 2009; Nordqvist and Smart 2014).

• Contemporary donor conception may introduce questions for whole family networks as well as new ways of relating
The qualitative interview study

• Interview study comprised 74 interviews
  – Lesbian parents (22)
  – Heterosexual parents (22)
  – Grandparents of DC children (30)

• Recruited through communities/organisations
• England and Wales
• Interviewees predominantly middle class white English/British, Christian or Atheist
Relating to donors

• How do parents and grandparents make sense of the child’s genetic connection outside the family to an egg and/or sperm donor?
• Culturally speaking, there is no established script for understanding the place of the donor, or for understanding the kinship connections that the donor relationship gives rise to.
• Raises questions for families
  – Not a parent, but what?
  – How does the donor relate to the child?
  – Which is his/her role in the child’s life?
  – What is the role of other donor relations, e.g. ‘donor siblings’
Unknown and known donor relations

• Unknown donors
  – Absent presence
  – Donor siblings
  – Everyday life and Not Knowing
  – Tantalising knowledge

• Known donors
  – Conduits of relatedness
  – Ambiguous kin relations
  – Getting relationships ‘right’
  – Family boundaries
  – Relationships, time and change
Unknown donors

– Majority of parent participants (70 percent)
– Linked to treatment in licensed clinics
– Donors unknown or anonymous
  • Not identified to the parents as they go through the process of conception
  • Not identified to the child as he/she grows up
– May be assumed that parents can just go home and forget about the donor...
– ...but we found that an ‘enigmatic’ donor relationship forms after conception
An absent presence

• There was a phase [...], the first year I think of [both of my girls’] babyhood where the donor was a bit like a ghost in the room. And there was like another person around, but they don’t have a face or a shape. And you’re looking, a bit like everybody does, looking at babies and go ... “Who are they like?” And with [our eldest], I remember going through a phase where I’d think, because I didn’t know anything about being a parent or what to do or about little kids anyway, she’d do something or behave in a certain way and I’d think ... “Where’s this come from?” almost. And I think if she was mine genetically I’d still think “Where has this come from?” (laughs). (Cathryn, het egg donation, different donors)
A donor waiting in the wings

• I guess her donor then can be identified when she's eighteen. [...] Don't want anything to do with it, is how I feel right now. But we're not there, so anything can change. And that's how I cope with it. I hope that she doesn't feel the need [to seek him out]. [...] You know, we will have had eighteen years of daddy and daughter, and all of a sudden genetic man pops up on the scene. I don't know. I mean, you know, I've always had this feeling that if I met him I'd want to kill him. (James, donor insemination)
Donor siblings

• There’s one element of it all that still slightly freaks me out, which is that there are other children [by the same donor]. [...] There’s something that I kind of suppress all the time, that there are half siblings. [...] There’s something that I feel instinctively is wrong with that. [...] I find really, it’s something just odd about it. [...] That whole element is so ... [...] dark. There’s something really, I can’t find the word, I don’t know what the word is, but there’s something quite disturbing about it. That whole kind of unresolved, that’s one aspect that will always be unresolved ... (Molly, two children, lesbian donor insemination)
Donor siblings and individual specialness

- I don't think she likes the idea of being sort of diluted. Do you know what I mean, almost a sense of -? That she's one of a production line. (Laughs). You know, it's like sort of a limited edition print. You know, how many is it? Are you one of five hundred? Are you one of five thousand or are you one of fifteen. [...] I don't know. Maybe it's just something like that. You know, just sort of churning out children. (Cara, het sperm donation)
• When I was pregnant with [our son] I remember doing a pregnancy yoga, and there was this woman who did pregnancy yoga and we got chatting and it turned out that she also was a lesbian and she had also had used assisted reproduction through the same clinic and her baby was due a few months before [our son], and I remember suddenly having this moment where I just thought, “Oh my God, she might, she might have used the same donor”. And I was like looking at my bump and looking at her bump and thinking, “These guys might be half siblings”, and I never actually, I didn’t have the guts to say to her, “So who’s your donor?” Because I didn’t wanna know, I didn’t want her to say, ‘Oh yeah, it’s this guy, he’s this, he’s this, he’s this”, and I’d go, “Oh my God, that’s our guy. Oh my God, you know, our kids are actually related”. (Julia, with Molly)
Nicholas: The thing that I think probably sticks in our mind more than anything was ... [...] I think it was when you went back in after they put the eggs in. We saw a woman on the other side of the waiting room. And I think you just caught her eye. [...] And there was a sort of, “Click it's you”, [the donor].

Martha: We don't know for sure because you're not supposed to meet, you see. But, of course, you've both got to be there [for fresh egg donation]. On the same day. [...] 

Nicholas: You're both in the same clinic. [...] In fact, they've only really got the one waiting room. So the chances are you're going to be in the same room at the same time. And even though you don't know each other, that little paragraph [you are given about the donor], of all the people in the room, [...] you think, “Oh, that's the kind of picture I have in my mind of what the donor might look like”. And if she fits that description as far as the paragraph goes, there's a fairly high chance that that's who it was.

Martha: [...] We were heading for the water cooler because you have to drink lots of water before [treatment]. She sort of looked at me and I looked at her and I thought, “We probably didn't ought to do this”, (laughter) and we sort of smiled gently and trotted off. It may not have been her. But it might have been. She looked very nice. [...] So, in a way, I don't feel she's that anonymous because I have that picture of her in my mind, which is nice. (egg donation)
Known donors

• Central issue in these stories was the potential for social relationships to develop with both the donor and his/her family relations (children, parents)

• Donors *conduits of relatedness*

• No established custom and practice to help families understand these new forms of relating, or knowing what to expect
Ambiguous kin relations

• [My brother] turned round and said, “Oh, what do you feel about it, Hannah?” I said, “Well look it’s not what I dreamt of but I think it’s a wonderful gift [your daughter] has given us”. And I said, “I’m really quite at ease with it”. And he said, “Well, it’ll be my grandchild, really, won’t it?” I said, “No”. I said, “Not really. You know, it might be biologically but”, I said, “we’ll be doing all the hard work and everything else”. (Hannah, Grandmother het egg donation)
Getting the relationships ‘right’

- I was a bit concerned that she [our donor] had told her son that these two children were brothers. And I said [to her], “Oh, I hadn’t quite seen it like that really”, [...] We talked it through and she’d obviously thought it through afterwards and said, “Yes, you’re right, they’re not”. Because her youngest child has a different father, she divorced with her first husband and she said to me, “Our child is as much a brother to [my eldest children] as their youngest brother [...]. And I said, “Well, [...] there’s social relationships too, you know. Do you then feel that you’re [my son’s] mother?” “Oh, no, I don’t at all.” I said, “Well, then, it’s kind of the same thing. You know, that if you’re not his mother then how would your children be his brother? [...] And I said “I think we should shape for them what this relationship is. At the moment I feel it’s a special connection”. And she thought about it and she said, “You’re right, it is. I feel that with him. He’s not my child and I’m very clear about that but I feel a special connection with him”. [...] That’s what she decided she would say next time [the children asked], “There’s a special connection”. Yes, which kind of feels okay. (Holly, het egg donation)
Negotiating family boundaries

• Abigail: We all have a lovely time together, don’t we? When we all get together it’s such fun. [...] Their children love [our son], don’t they? [...] You know, lots of excitement when we all get together.

• Jonathan: And he’s excited by them. And we have photos of them around. Well, in his room he’s got important people.

• Abigail: In that frame.

• Jonathan: And they’re part of that. Grandparents and everybody.
Relationships, time and change

• Need to bring into view that relationships are not static, but shift over time and with changing circumstances

• Case of Angela and Samantha

• Parents of children with known donors may have to manage the fact that radical changes may be introduced in their family life through the donor
Angela, Samantha, son, donor, donor’s parents...

• Known and uninvolved donor, but...
• ‘He came along and offered [to donate]. His ideal role for him was, ‘I'll donate. I'll just be a friend of the family and I'll be Uncle Jason,’ and that was it. But as soon as I got pregnant and he wanted to come to the scan, and you can imagine the typical, ‘Oh.’
• Father, not donor
• Wanted then to introduce child to his own parents
• Sam and Ang – contend with an extra parent and an extra set of grandparents in the family
• Paternal grandfather now actively involved in offering weekly child care, very loved by the boy,

• Not all easy to include these extra family members

  – It is quite a big thing, you know, when [these grandparents] come [into your house] and you barely know them. It’s still, up to this day, this negotiation of paternal granddad wants us to be a complete part of his family, but we have no blood relation to him. And sometimes he oversteps the mark a little bit. You know, [he will say] ‘Oh, you really ought to do this now,’ and you think ‘oh, hang on a second, who are you?’

• Parents and donors are not in control over how known donor relations evolve within these networks of donor kinship connectedness
Illness and death

• Jason’s mother terminally ill
• Always wanted a grandchild...
• Couple felt compelled to visit with the baby every week
  – Samantha: Her passing away left a big hole for [...] the paternal granddad. [...] And that's been the basis of a real close relationship between them [him and our son].
  – Angela: And he had to promise [the paternal grandmother] on her deathbed that he would really look after [our son]. In fact, after she died, it was what got him out of bed.
Conclusions

• Unknown donors continue to exist in the lives of DC families, and meaningful relationships are ongoing through childhood with both known and unknown donors

• These relationships are framed by genetic thinking, so our kinship thinking (Howell 2001, Strathern 2005)

• Like with adoption, sperm, egg and embryo donation conception creates kinship structures that cut across conventional kinship idioms by blood
• Genetic connection to donor cannot be fully ignored or transcended
• Properties of kinship and relationality are built into the donor relationship
• There is a forever underlying tension in donor relationships: the donor is not family or a parent, but there is a constant potential that the donor/relations could claim to be connected
• Ambiguous relating at the heart of families of DC children
How is this experienced from the point of view of donors?

• A new ESRC funded study starting 2017
• ‘Curious Connections: The Impact on Donating Egg and Sperm on Donors’ Everyday Life and Relationships’
• Explores how the shift from anonymity to traceability impacts on donors and their everyday lives.
  – How they disclose having donated to partners, parents and children?
  – Does the donation ‘linger’ in their lives?
• Interviews with donors, family members, and infertility counsellors