

Relative Strangers:

Key messages

In the Relative Strangers research project we explored how heterosexual and lesbian couples make the decision to conceive using donor sperm, eggs or embryos and how they subsequently involved their wider families in matters concerning their children. Wider family is often very important in the context of having a baby and we wanted to investigate how couples felt about sharing information about the conception with their own parents, in-laws, extended families and of course their children. Exploring the significance that families place on genetic connectedness was a crucial element of the study. Here, we outline some of the key messages from our research.

1. The long road to donor conception

We found that for heterosexual couples the road to donor conception was particularly long and arduous. Except where one partner already knew they had a fertility problem, the couples took years to come to the decision to opt for gamete donation. Some couples went through as many as 9 cycles of IVF and when they were advised to think about giving up and going for donor conception, it often took months or even years to come to terms with the decision. A slightly different process unfolded for the lesbian couples. Their choices were between donor conception and adoption but they knew this would be the case from the start of their relationship. However, it often took a long time to find the right donor or the right clinic, and sometimes too they faced infertility problems.

For all the couples we interviewed having a child who was genetically related to at least one of them was seen as more desirable than adoption.

Robert: So we saw having our own family, you know, by 'normal means' as the number one option. So I guess we thought, "Well, if that's not possible, the next best option is to have children that are as near as you can get".



2. The different experiences of heterosexual men and women

We found that men and women had very different experiences of donor conception even though all embarked on the process as a joint project. It was, for example, often clear that it was the women who were driving the process and who sometimes had a stronger commitment to having children. Moreover, the women in heterosexual couples often consoled themselves with the knowledge that they would experience a pregnancy, give birth and hopefully breastfeed. So although, in cases of egg donation, the mothers were not genetically related to their child, they still had a strong biological link. For the men in cases of sperm

donation, it could be much more difficult to adjust and for them the consolation was that their wives had conceived and that, together, they had a baby to raise from 'day one'.

Trevor: I turned to [the counsellor] and I said "Well how do you deal with this stuff?" She said "The truth is you don't, you kind of, you live with it". Which was a nice sort of thing and I think [it] helped me massively, that speech. It means you don't have to come out the other side and everything be okay, you just live with it and you deal with it and you try and let it affect you as little as possible.

Monica: I think it affects your relationship as a couple. I think it affects your self esteem as individuals, I think it affects your relationship with your child, your relationships with other people.

3. The approach of lesbian couples

If heterosexual couples turned to donor conception in a context of grief over infertility, then lesbian couples were more likely to regard donor conception as a positive step. Although some of the lesbian couples we interviewed did encounter fertility problems and had to resort to IVF as well as sperm donation, they saw the whole process in much more optimistic terms. For these couples the ideal scenario was for each partner to take turns in getting pregnant and giving birth. This arrangement offered perfect equality between the partners. It was not always possible to do this of course but even then there was far less grief associated with donor conception than in heterosexual relationships.

Julia: When we married, I thought that [equality] was really important because I felt, you know, they've got my genes, they should have [Molly's] surname.

The one thing that did cause concern for the non-genetic mother however was the fear that a known donor might be treated as the 'real' second parent of a child, thus pushing her into the margins. Some couples overcame this by either using anonymous donations or by arranging donation through a clinic and thus securing the legal parenthood of the non-genetic mother.

Claudia: My real concern was I would feel that Nina and [the donor] had a baby together and I was a spare.

4. Openness in the context of donor conception

It used to be that parents were encouraged to keep donor conception a secret, but in recent years the policy has shifted towards openness; parents are now encouraged to disclose to their children that they are born as a result of a donation. However, this development is very recent and so we found that there is no established way of talking about donor conception in families. Parents were often committed to the idea of being open, and yet found that the process of telling was far from straightforward. For example, they felt uncertain about how to broach the topic with their children, about what age they should start to tell them, and about how to talk of eggs and sperm. Moreover, children could interpret the information in ways that surprised their parents.

Nicholas: [Our son] doesn't ask us about it particularly. But for a long time, he'd play in the mornings when he used to come into bed with us. He used to have this sort of game he played where he was hatching out of an egg. [...]

Martha: He does sometimes still say, "When I hatched out of my egg." I think it was 'my' egg. I mean maybe that's just his way of dealing with it, you know, taking that on board, that there was something unusual about his egg.



Parents also found that they needed to tell close friends or family about the nature of the conception but here too they found the lack of a ready available social script or 'narrative' meant that broaching such conversations could be very difficult. We also found that a consequence of being open was that parents were no longer able to control information about their private lives (e.g. infertility) and this could be very difficult for them.

5. Unknown donors and imaginary relationships

With most heterosexual couples and lesbians using anonymous donors it might be assumed that, after conception, the donors would disappear from their lives. However, we found that they often remained an important figure, albeit in imaginary, elusive and abstract ways. Cathryn, who had two daughters by egg donation, said that she felt the presence of the donor in the family:

The first year I think of [both of my girl's] babyhood [was] where the donor was a bit like a ghost in the room. And there is another person around, but they don't have a face or a shape.

The child could look or be very different from others in the family, and this typically led parents and grandparents to wonder about the donor and whether the child resembled that person. As the donor conceived child grew up, the donor therefore remained present in the life of the family. In this way the donor could haunt the family, even though there was no contact at all.

6. Unknown donors and 'donor siblings'

One thing that concerned many of the parents we interviewed was whether the gametes of the donor they had chosen had given rise to many other children in other families. They felt uneasy at the thought that their child could be related to a large number of unknown children growing up in the same town or even neighbourhood. For example, Molly said:

I find really, it's something just odd about it [donor siblings]. Do you see what I mean? That whole element is so ... [...] I don't know, there's something... dark. [...], there's something quite disturbing about it. That whole kind of unresolved [issue], that's one aspect that will always be unresolved ...

This was another issue that could haunt parents as well as worrying about whether a donor's other children should also be thought of as 'family' in some way.

7. Known donors and conduits of relatedness

When a donor is known, the boundaries that exist between families may become rather blurred. The links between the intended parents, the donor

conceived child, the donor, and the extended family on the donor's side are, potentially, fluid and open. This raises questions for the parents and the donor about 'how much of a family' they all constitute. Do the donor's parents become grandparents of the donor conceived child? Is the donor conceived child a (half) sibling to the donor's other children? We found that each family had to negotiate where the boundaries lay and this could be both challenging and worrying.

Holly: Well, [my known egg donor] is about sixty miles away. If she lived round the corner we'd have to work much more on that one. The clinic would have been asking us about that. I think they were quite pleased that there was this physical distance. We wouldn't have the children all at the same school saying, "Oh, we're brothers," and having to explain it all. So, that, I think it made things easier.

8. Lesbian donation and wider family relationships

Lesbian couples, unlike heterosexual couples, often seek donors outside the clinic route. They also have to manage the fact that their family looks different from the norm. We found that this could be particularly difficult in relation to wider family and especially grandparents who might still be struggling with the idea of their daughter being a lesbian. While many grandparents expressed delight over the birth of a grandchild that they had never anticipated other couples endured fraught relationships with at least one side of their extended family. Examples from our research included grandparents who refused to recognise a couple's children as their grandchildren (regardless of genetic connection), and grandparents who tried to hide their daughter's lesbian relationship from the wider family. On a more positive note however, we found that the birth of a child could help to mend previously difficult relationships as the two generations were able to rekindle their affection and rapport over the new baby.

Priscilla: My Mum was okay. She doesn't like the fact that I'm a lesbian but I think I've redeemed myself by –

Meredith: Being a fifties housewife. (laughter)

9. How grandparents feel

Our interviews with grandparents allowed us to hear directly some of the views and experiences of the older generation. We discovered the ‘rule’ that grandparents should not interfere in the lives and decisions of their adult children was both robust and quite rigidly applied. This meant that grandparents were almost universally loathe to offer their views on donor conception – at least to their adult children. To us they voiced concerns about whether it was wise to introduce a ‘strange’ gene pool into the family, or they were concerned that there may be troubles and complications ahead. With lesbian families, grandparents could worry about discrimination and bullying when the child got to school. But in the main the grandparents were simply glad to be grandparents and wanted to treat their donor-conceived grandchild in exactly the same way as all their other grandchildren.

Sheila: It's fine. I mean when your grandchildren arrive they're just the same as any of the others. They're there, they're babies, you love them, you form a bond with them. How they are made, I consider to be utterly irrelevant. I mean there are practicalities about that, I don't underestimate that, but they're just the same as the other kids, that's all.



10. Do genetic links matter?

Genetic connections play a very complex role in the families of donor conceived children and there is no easy answer to this question. The issue of genes and blood raised a range of often confused and confusing feelings. We found that family members ‘claimed’ the child as their own in different ways. For example, they could emphasise the importance of social relationships over genetic ones in forming family bonds. Erin, a mother of an egg donor-conceived child talked about being her daughter’s mum:

There isn't anybody else who's her mum. Because, it's the hours and hours and days and months and weeks and years of love and time and energy and, you know hard graft at times that you need to give to your child to raise it. To me it's become abundantly clear that that's what makes a mother and not the cell that starts it off. So I don't have any problems with [the question] "Who is [my daughter's] mum"? I'm hundred percent her mum but I'm not the only person that made her, so it's a funny one.

But the genetic bond to the donor was not completely disregarded either. For example, some children looked very different from the rest of the family, or developed tastes or talents that appeared foreign. Moreover, little things, such as talk about family resemblances reminded parents and grandparents that they were not all genetically related.

Delia: And still even now sometimes people say things and there's the traditional comments of, "Oh, she's really starting to look like James now".

James: Like yesterday. "So much like your father."

Delia: (laughter) And that sort of thing that you do struggle with...

James: Which I don't mind, because she's quite pretty.

Delia: (laughter) But you do struggle with comments like that.

It seems that the stranger genes were never forgotten, but continually present in the mind of parents and grandparents.

More information

For more information about the project please contact the research team:

- Professor Carol Smart
(carol.smart@manchester.ac.uk)
- Dr Petra Nordqvist
(petra.nordqvist@manchester.ac.uk)

Funding

The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).
RES-062-23-2810.

