MAKING SENSE OF DONORS AND DONOR SIBLINGS: A COMPARISON OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF DONOR-CONCEIVED OFFSPRING IN LESBIAN-PARENT AND HETEROSEXUAL-PARENT FAMILIES ☆

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ABSTRACT

Donor-conceived (DC) offspring raised in lesbian-parent and heterosexual-parent families have different historical chronologies, which are clusters of events that provide frameworks for shaping contemporary views

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of sperm donors and donor siblings. Using surveys collected by the Donor Sibling Registry (DSR), the largest U.S. web-based registry, we found that DC offspring from different family forms have somewhat different views about meeting both the donor and donor siblings. In general, all offspring are curious about the donor. All offspring want to know what the donor looks like and they believe that even minimal contact will help them understand themselves better. However, when compared to offspring from heterosexual-parent families, offspring from lesbian-parent families are less likely to want to have contact with the donor. For offspring from lesbian-parent families, donor conception is considered a normal and accepted part of family life and the donor is deemed irrelevant to the family's construction. Especially among those who live with two heterosexual parents (where both parents are often assumed to be genetic relatives), offspring want to know the donor because they believe he holds the key to important information that the legal (or social) father cannot provide. Most DC offspring want to meet donor siblings although the interest is somewhat weaker among the offspring in lesbian-parent families. Offspring regard donor siblings as special relations who will not disrupt the natal family and who might even become part of a new kind of "extended family" network.

Keywords: Children; donor-conceived offspring; donor siblings; sperm donors; lesbian families; heterosexual families; genetics; biological and social fatherhood

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INTRODUCTION

For most heterosexual families baby-making has been an easy and often accidental occurrence. Yet, this is not the case for all heterosexual families, nor, of course, is it the case for new forms of family headed by single mothers by choice, lesbians, and gay men (Gamson, 2011; Hertz, 2006; Sullivan, 2004). Across the spectrum of family types, individuals – both alone and as members of couples – have turned to many different approaches to having a child. Since genetic parenthood usually remains the preferred option for those unable to have their own children, the new array of assisted reproductive technologies offers special promise.

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Married heterosexual couples have long used donor insemination as a backup plan when the husband had a fertility problem (Ehrensaft, 2005;

Greil, 1991; Marsh & Ronner, 1996; Miall, 1986). Their doctors procured sperm, frequently from local medical students (and often from the doctors as well), and inseminated the wife. Often the couple was told to go home and have sex because there was a possibility that it would be the husband's sperm that made their baby. The secrets of donor conception were protected and children were seen "as if" they genetically came from both parents.[1] Offspring who perceived difference from, or felt they did not "belong" in, their families may have wondered about their origins. Yet, since the "real" progenitor was kept secret, parents could believe, and pretend, that the husband was the biological father.

Of course, parents can still believe and pretend, but the growing availability of DNA testing to determine genetic parentage threatens both the belief and the pretense (Davis, 2009). Three additional changes have also helped transform the landscape of secrecy surrounding the uncoupling of procreation from reproduction: the rise of sperm banks in the 1990s[2] (with catalogues of profiles of donors from which prospective parents could make a selection), the emergence of newer forms of reproductive technologies (including variants of IVF such as ICSI, egg transfers, new methods for cryopreserving embryos, and surrogacy), and a more open attitude toward adoption (March, 2000; Wegar, 1997).

For heterosexual families this means that a couple can no longer hide forever the forms of reproduction they now use, producing a transitional historical moment where such secrets can be, and are being, revealed. Since the yardstick against which we continue to measure families has long been the two-parent heterosexual nuclear family with genetic ties to its progeny, families that on the surface resemble this ideal form may choose, at least for some time, to conceal alternative truths (Hargreaves, 2006). Parents can decide at what age (and if at all) to tell their offspring the full range of facts about their conception. However, an offspring can make his or her own inquiry and current psychological counseling urges openness and honesty from day one about donor conception (Grace & Daniels, 2007; Grace, Daniels, & Gillett, 2008) as well as about other issues such as adoption (Modell, 2002; Wegar, 1997).

If the combination of new reproductive technologies, DNA testing, and a more open attitude toward adoption has made it more difficult to keep secrets within the heterosexual family, this combination (conjoined with other shifts in social attitudes) has opened up new possibilities for single parents and for gay and lesbian couples to create families (Ehrensaft, 2005; Lewin, 1993; Shanley, 2001; Sullivan, 2004). Indeed, the "gayby" boom and the increasing visibility of lesbian and gay parents have produced a

major sea change in our vision of who is a family (Garner, 2004; Moore, 2011; Stacey, 2011).[3] In the past, lesbians who had once been part of a married heterosexual couple with children would keep their sexual identity (and their new partners) a secret, for fear that ex-husbands might sue for sole custody; lesbian women with children who were more likely to be "out" were those who had birthed or adopted those children on their own (Lewin, 1993). Lesbian-oriented fertility services coupled with the rise of sperm banks willing to sell to any and all individuals advanced the ability of lesbian couples and single women to have children (Agigian, 2004; Baetens & Brewaeys, 2001). AU:5

Of course, even if sperm banks do not discriminate, much of society still does. Only a handful of states allow same-sex marriage. In addition, in many states the nonbiological parent cannot adopt the child to which her partner has given birth, leaving the "other" mother in an uncertain legal position vis-à-vis that child.[4] Lesbian couples with children have reason to be concerned about, and reason to want to protect their families from, ignorant questions and legal intrusions. Yet concealing the fact that in this family procreation and reproduction have been severed is neither a viable, nor, in many cases, a desirable strategy (any more than it is desirable to keep secrets about donor conception in heterosexual couple families). As a result, today, although discrimination clearly remains (Short & Riggs, 2007), many lesbian couples with children and many single lesbian mothers live in open lesbian households where children are told from birth about their donor-insemination conception. For both sets of families (those with heterosexual parent[s]and those with lesbian parent[s]), issues of offspring knowledge about and attitudes toward the donor represent new – and newly researched – topics of inquiry.

Another set of topics has also arisen recently as a result of a development concurrent with the rise of sperm banks. At first, in the United States, as in other countries, the commercial sperm banks relied on a system of anonymity where little information about the donor was passed along to sperm buyers who seemed more interested in careful screening and quick delivery. Increasingly, however, U.S. clients (as well as clients elsewhere) – from a range of family types – have sought more information about the donors for a variety of reasons: some simply want to be able to tell their children more about their origins; some want to provide their children with biological kin; and some have concerns about health issues that emerge at later times, well after conception and childhood (Hertz, 2006; Spar, 2006). While a known donor (i.e., a private arrangement with a friend or family member) might have solved the problem of information,

individuals from the full array of family types found these arrangements full of potential complications (e.g., a donor could legally ask for participation in a child's life) (Hertz, 2002; Nordqvist, 2011a, 2011b). Using anonymous donors through sperm banks, though not ideal, carried certain significant perceived advantages: couples and individual women thought they could trust the medical information and screening practices of sperm banks.

While other countries have abandoned full anonymity and require all donors to agree to have contact when the child turns 18, the United States still allows anonymous donation and protects the identity of all past donors.[5] A minority of U.S. donors have agreed to become "known" to the child when the child turns 18 but this is voluntary and is not a requirement of becoming a donor in the United States.[6] The U.S. government does not require sperm banks to report the number of donations (or the number of vials) a donor gives, nor are families required to report the birth of a child.[7] In effect, there are no limits to the number of offspring produced per donor (Kramer, forthcoming; Spar, 2006). AU:6

If the identity of donors remains hidden from individuals using donor insemination and their offspring, new opportunities have emerged for making contact with biological kin in the form of other offspring from the same donor. In 2000, Wendy Kramer and her son Ryan launched a website called the Donor Sibling Registry (DSR). The donor number assigned by the sperm bank becomes the means of locating others who share the same donor (which sperm banks did not have the prescience to realize could become a means to locate others with the same shared progenitor); the same procedure is followed at other, similar registries. To date the DSR reports a total of 10,000 sibling matches (a total of 10,000 half-siblings that have matched to each other). (There are also 675 total donor/offspring matches.) Offspring whose parent(s) purchased the same donor's biogenetic matter, often refer to one another as half-siblings or donor siblings, using language borrowed from traditional relationships in family discourse. Donor siblings are a new kind of potential kin member.

In what follows, we ask how new birth narratives (and especially learning that one has a genetic father, distinct from any social father who may be present or imagined to be the progenitor) shape attitudes of offspring from donor insemination, and how such attitudes differ between offspring in families headed by a *heterosexual* parent or parents and offspring in families headed by a *lesbian* parent or parents. More specifically, we ask how this information of donor conception shapes an individual's interest in searching for, making contact with, and learning more about their donor.

And, equally important, we ask how this knowledge might shape an individual's view of his or her natal family and create a possibility whereby that family is refashioned in some way to include the donor. We also seek answers to questions about donor siblings for offspring in both sets of households: do they want to locate potential donor siblings? If so, why? And if not, why not?[8]

In our discussion of these issues, we suggest that the same chronological moment – the emergence of a set of new reproductive technologies, a diminished willingness (and capacity) of families to maintain secrets about reproduction, and a new possibility of locating other offspring of one's donor – produces some similar effects on the donor offspring in heterosexual-parent(s) and lesbian-parent(s) families. At the same time, and more provocatively, we find that the same chronological moment has different meanings in the lives of different family forms, a finding we seek to explain in our conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In our review of the literature, we cover the scholarship on offspring attitudes toward donors and offspring attitudes toward donor siblings with particular attention to how these attitudes are shaped by family form.

Offspring Adjustment and Attitudes toward Donors

Donor-conceived (DC) offspring have been studied for issues of psychological adjustment, especially among young children (Brewaeys, Golombok, Naaktgeboren, de Bruyn, & van Hall, 1997b; Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, & Golombok, 1997a); these studies have found no serious psychological issues resulting from DC origins (Golombok, MacCallum, Goodman, & Rutter, 2002; Golombok & Murray, 1999; Golombok et al., 2004) and no disadvantage to children in lesbian DC families in comparison with those in heterosexual DC families (Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2003). Moreover, studies have also found that taken as a whole, openness about donor conception creates no special problems for family functioning or child adjustment among adolescents (Freeman & Golombok, 2012).

However, the issue of openness is not the only one that affects attitudes. Freeman and Golombok (2012) suggest *age* at disclosure is an important

factor that contributes to the impact of that disclosure (see also Jadva, Freeman, Kramer, & Golombok, 2009). Blyth (2012), for example, reports on eight adults who learned of their DC status as adults. For these adults, donor conception was a "shock" which disrupted their sense of identity. The robust family they thought of as theirs suddenly seemed demoted to "half" relatives (half-brother, etc.) and they felt that they had lost their father.[9]

What some offspring see as loss can also be experienced as potential gain and offspring often express curiosity about the donor and his family. Rodino, Burton, and Sanders (2011) in an Australian study of 23 DC offspring found that the offspring expressed an interest in the donor's own family in addition to an interest in information about his name and health issues. Similarly, in a small study, of 47 donor offspring from a variety of countries, Hewitt (2002) found that medical information was most highly sought, followed by information about physical appearance, family history, personality, and social information. This form of information, Rodino et al. (2011) suggest, is important for personal identity and they cite other authors who have made similar points.

Not surprisingly, family form can affect how comfortable offspring feel about expressing interest in the donor. In Belgium, Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys (2001) interviewed 41 children (aged 7 and 17) born to lesbian, two-parent families. Over half (56%) of these respondents either preferred to have no contact with the donor or to receive no additional information about him. The rest of the children wanted to know more about the sperm donor; some wanted to know his identity but most simply wanted to know about his physical appearance. Vanfraussen et al. argue that the differences in attitudes between the two groups of respondents (all of whom were in lesbian, two-parent families) can be accounted for by the internal dynamics of the family itself, which develops a collective opinion about the donor. Scheib, Riordan, and Rubin (2005) draw on a mail-back questionnaire with youth in 29 households (41% headed by lesbian couples, 38% by single women, and 21% by heterosexual couples) with open-identity sperm donors to identify attitudes toward donors and donor conception among offspring. Most of these youth report that they always knew that they were conceived through donor insemination and that they were "somewhat to very comfortable" with their origins. The greatest interest in the donor is found among children raised by single mothers; children with two parents express less interest in the donor[10] (see also Beeson, Jennings, & Kramer, 2011).

In a longitudinal study of the DC adolescent children of lesbian mothers, Bos and Gartrell (2011) find no difference in psychological well-being between those with known and those with unknown donors. However, psychological well-being is not the only issue. Drawing on 165 questionnaires completed by donor offspring who were members of the DSR, Jadva and colleagues (2010) report that fewer offspring from heterosexual-parent families had told their father about their search for the donor and donor offspring when compared with offspring from lesbian-parent families who had told their co-parent. Beeson, Jennings, and Kramer (2011), relying on online questionnaires completed by 741 DC offspring (recruited via the same registry), also found that offspring raised in heterosexual two-parent families are least comfortable about expressing interest in the donor and a quarter of those respondents feel unable to discuss their origins with their "social father." Both studies suggest a special concern about protecting the present father in heterosexual parent households.

In studies that have explored how DC offspring refer to the donor, it has been found that although the "majority of offspring who talked about their donor in the open-ended responses referred to him as 'donor,' almost one-third used a term that included father or dad (father, biological father, donor father, and dad)" (Jadva et al., 2009, p. 8). Jadva et al. (2010) note that this finding differed from that of Mahlstedt, LaBounty, and Kennedy (2010, p. 2236) who found "that the majority of adult offspring in their study viewed their donor as their 'biological father.'" Here, too, family form seems to make a difference: offspring in one-parent families more often than those from two-parent families drew on terminology "relating to father or dad."

Offspring Attitudes toward Donor Siblings

We know considerably less about offspring attitudes toward donor siblings. With one exception this new literature about siblings has surveyed parents, not donor offspring, focusing on what parents report from searching for other donor-created siblings, what kinds of information is exchanged among families, whether they consider these offspring relatives, and the location (in cyberspace or in person) where encounters take place (Freeman, Jadva, Kramer, & Golombok, 2009; Hertz & Mattes, 2011; Scheib, Riordan, & Rubin, 2003; Scheib & Ruby, 2008).

Jadva et al. (2010) provide the first survey of 165 donor offspring attitudes, drawn from a survey through the DSR which asked offspring age 13

and over about their experiences searching for donors and donor siblings. The major reason donor offspring were searching for their donor siblings was curiosity, but they also wanted a better understanding of their genetic identity. In addition, some offspring stressed that they wanted to know the identity of their donor siblings so as not to form incestuous relationships with them. The authors found that a "triggering event" (often becoming a teenager) prompted the search for donor siblings. Those who had found them (and the average was four donor siblings) reported a "fairly positive" or "very positive" experience. Jadva et al. (2010) also found differences in reasons for searching by family form. They suggest that more offspring in single mother families were searching for their donor siblings to find new family members than were those in families headed by a couple. The authors suggest that this difference occurs because the offspring in two-parent families did not wish to upset their nongenetic parent.

The research we report below reinvestigates some of these findings (e.g., curiosity about the donor and donor siblings; interest in contacting the donor and donor siblings; what offspring call the donor) with a large data set (that has been used only by Beeson et al., 2011) and with a focus on the comparison between offspring from lesbian-parent families and those from heterosexual-parent families. In addition, the research we report here uses the same large data set and the same comparison to extend into new areas of investigation including the advice offspring would give parents about contact with the donor and donor siblings, the advice offspring would give donors about donating, and a comparison of the attitudes toward donors with those toward donor siblings. The findings have relevance for a broad spectrum of possible readers, ranging from practitioners seeking to understand the concrete concerns of DC offspring to social scientists interested in the abstract, theoretical concepts of new family forms, and new ways of understanding kinship.

METHODS

This is a secondary analysis of data collected in two simultaneous surveys of oocyte and sperm donor offspring conducted by the DSR located in the United States under the supervision of the third author who also wrote the surveys. Data for the two surveys were collected during a 15-week period (October 2009 to January 2010) using online questionnaires administered by Survey Monkey, a web-based online software site. The two surveys,

with parallel questions (and often identsical wording), were administered to different kinds of families: donor offspring raised by heterosexual parents and donor offspring raised by lesbian parents. Both surveys included questions about the donor offspring's family structure, knowledge, and feelings about being DC, how parents discussed the donor, and attitudes and advice to parents about both donor conception and searching for donors and donor siblings. The surveys consisted of both multiple choice and open-ended questions.

Links to the surveys were posted on the DSR website inviting DC members (all of whom are over age 18) to complete the survey online. In addition, DSR parents were sent an email inviting them to encourage their DC offspring to participate in this study (and giving parental approval for their minor children). A link to the questionnaire was sent to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered (LGBT) online groups as well as to listserves that might include family members of DCoffspring. Two-fifths (43%) of the respondents to the survey designed for DCoffspring with lesbian parent(s) were DSR members as were half (53%) of the respondents to the survey designed for DC offspring with heterosexual parent(s).

At the time, the DSR had 26,000 online registrants, approximately 15,000 of whom identified themselves as parents of DC children, leaving 11,000 DC offspring, of which 1,000 were over the age of 18. It is not known what proportion of the United States or world's DC offspring and their parents are registered with the DSR, but no similar registries of comparable size exist in the world. Because not all DC children have parents who register on any website (or even tell their children of their donor-insemination conception) and because it is not known how many DC children actually exist (Beeson et al., 2011), it is impossible to calculate a response rate for these surveys. We do not assume these respondents are representative of the total population of DCoffspring. Even so, the two sets of survey findings together offer insight on the perspectives of the largest reported group of DC offspring who constitute a vastly understudied population.

Study Sample

A total of 759 offspring responded to the surveys; we combine the two surveys and treat the resulting population as one group. We exclude from our analysis the offspring conceived via oocyte donation because they were too few; we exclude as well all children under the age of 13 because

they were considered too young to have answered on their own. Finally, we excluded from our analysis those who had a family configuration that differed from either one or two parents because we wanted to be able to compare offspring along this variable. This left a sample of 492 respondents. Among these respondents 74% identified as being female, 25 % identified as being male, and 1% did not answer the question (Table 1). The questions about respondent age and time of learning about DC offered forced choice categories: the respondents ranged from 13 to over 40 (Table 1); while many had always known about their donor conception, a significant minority did not learn until they were over age 18

Table 1. Study Sample by Sex, Age, Age of Learning of DC, and (Current) Number of Parents.

	Entire Sample	Lesbian-Parent Family	Heterosexual-Parent Family
Sex[a]			
Female	74%	65%	78%
Male	25%	35%	21%
Other answer	1%	0%	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%
N=	*492*	*133*	*359*
Current age[a]			
13–21	50%	74%	42%
22–40	42%	19%	49%
41+	8%	7%	10%
Total	100%	100%	101%
N=	*492*	*133*	*359*
Age learned of DC[a]			
Always knew	39%	74%	29%
<11	24%	20%	25%
11–18	15%	6%	18%
>18	22%	0%	29%
Total	100%	100%	101%
N=	*424*	*97*	*327*
Number of parents[a]			
1	36%	27%	40%
2	64%	73%	60%
Total	100%	100%	100%
N=	*492*	*133*	*359*

[a]Probability of Chi-square test of difference between lesbian-Parent(s) families and heterosexual-parent(s) families is significant at the $p < .05$ level.

(Table 1). Almost two-thirds (64%) of the respondents came from two-parent homes (Table 1).

Coding

Much of the survey consisted of closed-answer responses. Respondents were given the opportunity to answer some questions entirely freely and some questions left room for respondents to add information. With the help of a research assistant, the first two authors developed codes for such responses. Each item was coded by two people; when there were disagreements, we coded these responses as "other." We explain our codes as they become relevant. In quoting from respondents, we have corrected spelling and grammar when it is clearly typos or respondents using text-short hand (e.g., u equals you). Otherwise, the responses are as written on the surveys. AU:7

Data Analysis

In the analysis we compare respondents from lesbian-parent families ($N = 133$) with those from heterosexual-parent families ($N = 359$).[11] A greater percent of the respondents from lesbian-parent households identified as male (35%) than did those from heterosexual-parent families (21%). It may be that issues of infertility and donor conception are more difficult for male offspring in heterosexual-parent families to acknowledge and discuss (Table 1). In addition, in general, the population of DC offspring from heterosexual-parent families is considerably older than the population of DC offspring from lesbian-parent families: three quarters (74%) of those in lesbian-parent families are 21 or less in comparison with only two-fifths (42%) of those in heterosexual-parent families (Table 1). The DC offspring raised in lesbian-parent families also learned the "facts" of their conception at a much younger age than did those who are raised in heterosexual-parent families: three quarters (74%) of those from lesbian-parent families have always known of their donor insemination conception in comparison with less than a third (29%) of those from heterosexual-parent families (Table 1). Finally, and surprisingly, lesbian-parent families are more likely to be two-parent families (73%) than are heterosexual-parent families (60%) (Table 1).

In what follows, we do *not* control for the first three of these variables in our comparisons because given the historical changes that have occurred

(as described above) we believe that comfort with discussing DC as either a male or female child, current age, and age at learning the facts of one's conception are integral elements of coming from either a heterosexual-parent family or a lesbian-parent family.[12] However, we do compare respondents from one-parent families and two-parent families separately for every variable (although we do not emphasize this comparison in our discussion).

We use a Pearson Chi-Square test of significance and report all results, indicating those cases where the results have a Chi-Square probability of .05 or less. When we find a difference between the lesbian-parent and heterosexual-parent households (at the .05 level) we further examine the results within the variable of number of parents (one or two) if there is also a relationship between that variable and the item under consideration.

MAKING SENSE OF DONORS AND DONOR SIBLINGS

Making Sense of the Donor

Donor Talk

Respondents were given a range of possible answers to the question, "If conceived via sperm donation, how do you refer to (or describe) the donor?" Not all DC offspring refer to the donor in the same way: among the variety of different terms, some give social/relational status (as well as personhood) to the donor – "biological father" (34%), "donor dad" (9%), and "Father" (8%) – whereas other terms "sperm donor" (36%) and "donor" (34%) ignore any social/relational status but do confer personhood (Table 2). In addition, some respondents added terms that were not offered in the survey: some are other social/relational terms such as "donor father"; some are highly personal terms such as the donor's name (because they know who he is or have met him); some are joking references to the donor in a form that emphasizes impersonality (e.g., frozen pop); and some terms are acutely impersonal (e.g., a vial number). Family form (in terms of the parent's or parents' sexual orientation) makes a difference in the proportion of respondents who refer to the donor as a "donor": this terminology is more common among offspring from lesbian-parent families than from offspring from heterosexual-parent families (41% vs. 31%). Conversely, the use of family terminology is more common among offspring from heterosexual-parent families: the term "biological father" shows up more frequently there. The respondents from heterosexual-parent

Table 2. Offspring Attitudes toward the Donor.

	All respondents (*N*=492)	Family Form		Number of Parents	
		Lesbian-parent family (*N*=133)	Heterosexual-parent family (*N*=359)	One-parent family (*N*=178)	Two-parent family (*N*=314)
How do you refer to the donor?					
Donor[a]	34%	41%	31%	30%	35%
Sperm donor	36%	30%	38%	33%	37%
Biological father[a]	34%	16%	41%	34%	35%
Father	8%	8%	8%	11%	5%
Donor dad	9%	9%	9%	7%	10%
Genetic father	7%	3%	8%	5%	7%
Other	10%	13%	8%	10%	10%
Percent who say they have ever met the donor[a]	2% (492)	8% (133)	.3% (359)	3% (178)	2% (314)
Percent saying they want to contact the donor (among those who have not ever met the donor)[a]	84% (349)	77% (74)	86% (275)	87% (125)	83% (224)

[a]Probability of Chi-square test of difference between lesbian-parent(s) family and heterosexual-parent(s) family is significant at the $p<.05$ level.

families have to distinguish among different types of possible fathers; respondents from lesbian-parent families do not consider the donor a father at all. (The number of parents does not determine any of these responses.)

Meeting the Donor

Only two percent of all respondents have ever met the donor. More offspring from lesbian-parent families have done so than have offspring from heterosexual-parent families (8% vs. .3%) (Table 2). This difference is statistically significant, but even among lesbian-parent families the donor largely remains unknown. Similarly small proportions of respondents from one-parent and two-parent families have met the donor.

Among those who have not met the donor, most DC offspring (84%) say they want to contact him (Table 2). The vast majority of offspring make the leap to the donor as a person, who could have a presence in their lives, and to whom they are somehow connected (and who is somehow connected to them). This interest in contacting the donor, however,

is stronger among those who come from heterosexual-parent families than among those who come from lesbian-parent families (86% vs. 77%). Having one or two parents makes no difference here; the issue is clearly that of the parent(s)' sexual orientation as understood by the offspring.

Reasons for Wanting to Meet the Donor

Among those who want to contact the donor, the most frequently given reasons are to learn about the self (83%), to learn about one's ancestry (81%), and to learn information relevant to one's health (77%) (Table 3). Almost all respondents (91%) also want to see what the donor looks like. Of course, these responses have become normative and accepted reasons why someone would want to meet "biological matter" (Freeman et al., 2009; Hertz & Mattes, 2011; Scheib & Ruby, 2008).

Beyond these normative responses, half the respondents (51%) say that they want to be known by the donor: these respondents are making the

Table 3. Why Respondents Want to Contact the Donor (Among Those Who Want to Contact the Donor Only).

		Family Form		Number of Parents	
	All respondents ($N = 294$)	Lesbian-parent family ($N = 57$)	Heterosexual-parent family ($N = 237$)	One-parent family ($N = 109$)	Two-parent family ($N = 185$)
Why respondents want to contact the donor?					
Learn about myself	83%	87%	82%	81%	85%
Learn medical background[a]	77%	65%	80%	74%	78%
Learn ancestry[a]	81%	72%	87%	80%	81%
See what he looks like	91%	93%	90%	86%	93%
Establish relationship	35%	45%	34%	31%	38%
So that he knows me	51%	58%	50%	50%	52%
Trade photos	7%	7%	7%	8%	7%
Email	6%	5%	6%	9%	4%
"Other" reasons[a]	9%	4%	10%	9%	14%

[a]Probability of Chi-square test of difference between lesbian-parent(s) family and heterosexual-parent(s) family is significant at the $p < .05$ level.

donor a person who could enact his humanity by knowing his offspring (who may now be an adult) exists. Interestingly, however, only a third of all respondents (35%) who want to contact the donor actually want to have a relationship with him. In short, the donor is conceived of as being a person (he can know you; he has looks; he can teach you about yourself) and the donor should act on his humanity (he should know about you). However, the donor might not have a place in one's family (even if the offspring believe they have a genealogical place on *his* family tree). He is both claimed *and* kept at a distance.

Some of the reasons for wanting to contact the donor change with family form: respondents from heterosexual-parent families are more interested in issues concerning health (80% vs. 65%); this is not surprising: these respondents are older and at best have medical information about the donor at the time that he donated; they do not know about age-related issues. Less obvious, however, is that the respondents from heterosexual-parent families are also more interested in knowing about issues of ancestry than are those from lesbian-parent families (87% vs. 72%). The donor is conceived of in a different way in these two sets of families: in heterosexual-parent families, he is viewed as being more important because he holds clues about both one's biology and one's heritage.

In addition, whereas a substantial number of the respondents from heterosexual-parent families offered additional reasons for wanting to meet the donor, very few of those from lesbian-parent families did so. Some of these "other" reasons are revealing. The respondents from heterosexual-parent families express a yearning for any information that they can get: "anything at all"; "any contact would be good." Many of these offspring also assume that they will be able to see similarities between themselves and the donor that extend through physical likenesses to behavioral ones: "[I want to] know who this person is. What he looks like and what similarities we may have. And to learn about my ancestry etc."; "If I did check him out I would want to know medical stuff, his hobbies and interests to see if we have anything in common, and to see if he has the same weird toes as me and my donor sibling."

Advising Parents about Contact with the Donor

An open-ended question, which asked respondents how they would advise parents if their DC offspring wanted to contact the donor, offers additional insight into the broad issue of contact. Two new issues (beyond those discussed in reasons for wanting to contact the donor) emerge in these responses (Table 4). First, for a fifth (27%) of the respondents a salient

Table 4. Advice to Parents about Contact the Donor (Among Those Who Have Not Met the Donor Only).

	All respondents (*N*=265)	Family Form		Number of Parents	
		Lesbian-parent family (*N*=58)	Heterosexual-parent family (*N*=207)	One-parent family (*N*=102)	Two-parent family (*N*=163)
Advice to parents					
Allow contact to learn about offspring *identity*	26%	29%	25%	26%	26%
Allow contact to learn about offspring *medical* history	20%	16%	21%	15%	23%
Offers *reassurance* to parents that contact will not disrupt family[a,b]	28%	36%	25%	19%	33%
Advises parents to be *careful* about offspring contact	9%	14%	8%	9%	10%
Advises parents to be *honest* with offspring	17%	12%	18%	13%	19%
Advises parents to let DC *offspring choose* whether or not to have contact	27%	22%	29%	26%	28%
Allow contact because it will be an *opportunity* for offspring to grow	9%	7%	9%	10%	9%
Advises parents that the specific *timing* is important[a]	7%	2%	8%	6%	8%

[a]Probability of Chi-square test of difference between lesbian-parent(s) family and heterosexual-parent(s) family is significant at the $p<.05$ level.
[b]Probability of Chi-square test of difference between one-parent family and two-parent family is significant at $p<.05$ level.

issue is an insistence on claiming this decision, on being the ones to choose whether or not to have contact with the donor. In the past decisions about reproduction were *always* made by parents who had some sort of relationship with each other; that usual "practice" is being contested by offspring

who say that reproduction is not either "just" a biological act nor an act of joining two parents, but that it is an act that uniquely affects them and they want to control decisions about when, and whether, to contact the donor. To the DC offspring, the donor is a person, a part of their own selves – not a part of their parents' selves (or parents' relationships). As one respondent said, "It's not about you [the parents]; it's about them [the DC offspring]." Another added, "It is the decision of the child whether they want to make contact." And still another said, "Ultimately, it should be your child's decision at the appropriate time; that shouldn't be something you should be able to decide for them."

This central issue of who should be able to control the decision about contact is important in both lesbian-parent and heterosexual-parent families. Family form does not make this issue more salient for some than for others because the donor exists independent of family form. One related concern – that of control over the timing of telling offspring – is of minor importance in all families but is mentioned more among offspring from heterosexual-parent families (8% vs. 2%). As noted above, these are the individuals least likely to have known about the donor from an early age; having been told at a later point in their lives, they are more aware of the impact not just of the information itself, but also of the moment in one's own development when that information is revealed.

Another key issue emerges among respondents. Even as respondents like those just quoted say that they want to control the process of contact, they indicate that they do not want the natal family disrupted. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents spontaneously reassured their parents that contact would not threaten the love or the relationship that existed between a child and her/his parents.

> A donor is not a parent. They provide genetic material. I don't know how that can cause fear.

> Do not feel that if they connect with their donor their love for you will diminish. A child's love is infinite, and the more people to love it will only expand.

This issue of reassurance is somewhat more significant in lesbian-parent families than it is in heterosexual-parent families (36% vs. 25%); it is also, not surprisingly more significant in two-parent families than it is in one-parent families (33% vs. 19 %). Among the four types of families, the highest level of reassurance is found among the two-parent lesbian families (42%, N=42) followed by two-parent families heterosexual (31%, N=121); levels of reassurance are lower in one-parent lesbian families (25%, N=16), and lower still in one-parent heterosexual families (17%, N=86). (The only

statistically significant difference at the .05 level is among the heterosexual-parent families in the comparison of one- and two-parent families.

Among the offspring in lesbian-two-parent families, where the level of reassurance is highest, that reassurance sometimes takes the form of minimizing the significance of a child's search for the donor: "Don't be hesitant. It's not like your kid's just going to run off and not love you anymore – they're probably just curious." The reassurance also acknowledges that the lesbian two-parent household itself is under threat from outside:

> Different kids have different personalities, so you never know how your kid will respond. But, I believe if you are healthy people that provide love, protection, participate in their lives, and listen to your kid, life will be good. If you surround your family with positive supportive people your kids will know no different. Live your life honestly and with dignity and do not allow anyone else to convince you that you are doing something wrong. Because you are not. I am a daughter of two moms, and I wouldn't change it for anything.

Taking the Point of View of the Donor

An interesting perspective on attitudes toward the donor emerges from another open-ended question that asked donor offspring what advice they would give someone who was thinking about donating sperm (Table 5). A substantial minority of respondents reject the donor's attempt to separate his personhood (and potential relational status) from his biology: 39% of respondents say someone should not donate unless he is willing to be known. There is no other single response that is equally common among the respondents. DC offspring do not cloak donating sperm in the language of kindness any more often than they assert the issue of taking responsibility for what they have done (21% vs. 20%). In short, if some see donating as kindness, some also view it as carrying responsibility; they would remind donors that they are not simply ejaculating into a cup, but they are offering up tissue that will produce a child.

As a group, then, the DC offspring appear to reject the notion that the donor can sever the biological act from its social consequences, or put differently, they reject the notion that a donor is detached from personhood and an obligation to reveal himself. The desire to have the donor's humanity enacted and recognized is very clear in the comments of the offspring:

> Accept the responsibility of putting kids out into the world, even if it's just accepting email contact from the children. Be aware that you are creating a life, and that person might want to know you.

Table 5. Advice to Potential Donors.

	All respondents (*N*=274)	Family Form		Number of Parents	
		Lesbian-parent family (*N*=72)	Heterosexual-parent family (*N*=202)	One-parent family (*N*=93)	Two-parent family (*N*=181)
Advice to potential donors (all respondents)					
Donating is kind	21%	19%	22%	22%	21%
Be *known*[a]	39%	29%	43%	36%	41%
Don't do it for the money	11%	11%	11%	9%	12%
Don't mess up the *gene pool*[a]	5%	10%	4%	5%	5%
There are consequences	15%	15%	15%	15%	16%
Take responsibility	20%	21%	20%	17%	21%
You're not a father	4%	3%	4%	2%	4%

[a]Probability of Chi-square test of difference between lesbian-parent(s) family and heterosexual-parent(s) family is significant at the $p<.05$ level.

> It's a bigger deal than you probably realize. And if you do realize that it is a big deal, good. Don't forget.

There are only two significant differences by family form (lesbian-parent families vs. heterosexual-parent families) within these varied responses (and no differences when comparing one- and two-parent families). These two differences are quite telling. Offspring from heterosexual-parent families are more likely to say that they believe it is incumbent on the donor to make himself known (43% vs. 29%).

Second, a small minority of offspring from lesbian-parent families is concerned primarily about genes and this concern is greater than it is among offspring from heterosexual-parent families (10% vs. 4%). We return to a discussion of this issue in the conclusion, but for now it is interesting that the offspring from lesbian-parent families who view the donor as a "donor" more often (rather than with any relational importance) think that the quality of that biological material should matter (at a level of policy) even though they are not necessarily concerned with tracing medical issues or ancestry through that donor. They want "good" genetic material but they do not necessarily want to think further about the source of that material

just as they might want "good" blood without needing to know, or consider, who had been the supplier. Sperm is simply "material" that can be "good" or "bad."

Initial and Current Feelings about Donor Conception

When respondents were asked how they initially felt upon learning that they were DC offspring they gave a range of different answers, no one of which stood out prominently: 16% do not remember, 15% felt special, 16% felt different, 19% say that it made no difference, and 20% felt confused (Table 6).

Family form shapes some of these attitudes: in comparison to their peers from lesbian-parent families, offspring from heterosexual-parent families are more likely to say that they initially felt confused and different but less likely to say that it made no difference in their lives. Two of these attitudes, which differ significantly by family form, also differ significantly by number of parents (respondents from two parent families

Table 6. Initial and Current Concerns about Donor Conception (Respondents Could Give More Than One Response).

		Family Form		Number of Parents	
	All respondents (*N*=492)	Lesbian-parent family (*N*=133)	Heterosexual-parent family (*N*=359)	One-parent family (*N*=178)	Two-parent family (*N*=314)
Initial concerns about donor conception					
Do not recall	16%	21%	15%	20%	14%
Special	15%	11%	17%	16%	15%
Different[a]	16%	11%	19%	17%	17%
Confused[a,b]	20%	5%	24%	12%	23%
No Difference[a,b]	19%	26%	18%	26%	17%
Other response[a,b]	20%	7%	25%	15%	23%
Current concerns about donor conception					
Special[a]	19%	12%	22%	17%	21%
Different	20%	17%	23%	6%	8%
Confused[a]	7%	3%	9%	6%	8%
No Difference	34%	40%	33%	39%	33%
Other response[a]	21%	9%	26%	20%	21%

[a]Probability of Chi-square test of difference between lesbian-parent(s) family and heterosexual-parent(s) family is significant at the $p<.05$ level.

[b]Probability of Chi-square test of difference between one-parent family and two-parent family is significant at $p<.05$ level.

are more likely to say that they felt confused and less likely to say that it made no difference). When we explore these differences within the context of family structure,[13] in both cases, the most distinctive group is the offspring from heterosexual-two-parent families: these are the respondents who are most likely to say that they felt confused and least likely to say that they felt no difference. With respect to the issue of initially feeling confused, among *one-parent* families family form is not important: 6% (N=36) of offspring from lesbian-parent families say they were initially confused in comparison with 13% (N=142) of respondents from heterosexual-parent families. On the other hand, with respect to the same issue, among *two-parent* families family form is significant: 4% (N=97) of offspring from heterosexual-parent families say they were initially confused in comparison with 31% (N=217) of offspring from lesbian families. The same is true of initially feeling different. Among *one-parent* families, family form is not important: 27% (N=36) of offspring from lesbian-parent families say they initially felt different in comparison with 26% (N=142) of respondents from heterosexual-parent families. On the other hand, among *two-parent* families family form is significant: 26% (N=97) of offspring from heterosexual-parent families say they initially felt different in comparison with 13% (N=217) of offspring from lesbian-parent families. In both instances (responding to questions about feeling confused or different from others), among heterosexual-parent families, the differences between one and two parents is *also* statistically significant.

When respondents were asked how they *now* felt about their donor conception, 19% said they felt special, 20% said they felt different, 7% said they felt confused, and 34% said that it made no difference to them (Table 6). A feeling of being special is most common among DC offspring from heterosexual-parent families. These same offspring are most likely (though rarely) to say that they still, currently, feel confused. (Number of parents is not related to any of these *current* attitudes.)

The differences between the two groups extend beyond those in the closed choice categories as the respondents introduced their own notions into an "other" category about their current and initial feelings. Only 7% of the offspring in lesbian-parent families gave an "other" response to the question of initial feelings in contrast with 25% of the respondents from heterosexual-parent families. In addition, more respondents from two-parent families gave an "other" response than did those from one-parent families (23% vs. 15%). Only 9% of the offspring in lesbian-parent families gave an "other" response to the question of current feelings contrast with 26% of the respondents from heterosexual-parent families and the frequency of this

response did not vary by number of parents. Again, both family form and number of parents are significant: respondents from heterosexual two-parent families offered "other" responses most frequently (30%, *N*=217) followed by respondents from heterosexual one-parent families (17%, *N*=142). Respondents from lesbian-parent families were unlikely to add another comment whether they had one parent (6%, *N*=36) or two (7%, *N*=97).

A significant content of the responses from these respondents is a sense of shock and betrayal; they indicate that their worlds were shaken by learning of their donor-insemination conception. When asked how they felt, they give this type of response:

> Angry and upset, but mainly because I was lied to.
>
> Angry that someone who I loved could keep such a secret from me. And that she could not provide "any" further info on the subject.
>
> Hurt that my sister was actually only my "half" sister. I didn't have anyone in my family that was like me.
>
> I felt lied to. I felt a sudden loss of identity. I felt sad.

This sense of a world being unmoored – and the anger they express toward that unmooring – also carries with it a sense that they now believe that the donor carries a key to who they are: "[I felt] a loss of identity"; "I felt" like half of my soul had been ripped out of my chest."

Indeed, the DC offspring from two-parent, heterosexual-parent families (many of whom didn't learn about their donor conception until they were considerably older) suggest, they thought they were one thing – sometimes the child of a social *and* a biological father; sometimes a child with an absent but somehow "real" father – but they have since found out that they are something else. This new knowledge arouses curiosity about the unknown donor. And in this curiosity they claim the donor not just as biology but also as someone who carries ethnicity, heritage, and kinship. The donor is a father, a "real" dad, a family member:

> Angry and frustrated that I can't get information about my heritage, genetics, looks, and medical history. I feel that half of my identity has been stolen by the doctor, and that is unjust.
>
> I'm more aware of the larger ramifications of this outside my personal individual experience. I feel loss at not knowing who my real father is. Not knowing my extended family, history, etc., etc., etc. It makes me angry that I am denied the basic right of knowing who my father was and what ethnicity I am.

By way of contrast, one of the few lesbian-parent family respondents who added a comment to this question, wrote, "I feel we are a family

regardless. I really feel no different, nor do I believe it affects my relationships with men, women or other children. I am me." And in sharp contrast to a respondent from a heterosexual-parent family who said that he felt a sudden loss of identity, a respondent from a lesbian-parent family said, "I think I used to think that most people were DC." And another simply said, "It was normal, just how it is."

Facing the World

One final set of issues about donor conception itself is relevant. Respondents were asked about what has been the hardest thing about talking about being DC (Table 7). Some respondents from both groups say that nothing in particular is hard or difficult. However, those respondents represent a minority.

Table 7. Hardest Part about Talking about Donor Conception (Respondents Could Give More Than One Response).

		Family Form		Number of Parents	
	All respondents (n=354)	Lesbian-parent family (N=80)	Heterosexual-parent family (n=274)	One-parent family (N=126)	Two-parent family (N=228)
Response categories					
Afraid others will *judge* them[a]	15%	25%	12%	17%	14%
Frustrated with having to explain the process of donor insemination[a]	23%	44%	18%	28%	21%
Felt like a *spectacle*	9%	9%	8%	10%	8%
Complicated family relationships[a,b]	9%	0%	11%	2%	12%
Difficult not to know about one's *father*[a]	10%	3%	12%	11%	10%
Nothing is hard or difficult	22%	16%	23%	25%	19%
Felt that there was *Bigotry* toward Family[b]	3%	4%	3%	6%	1%
Experienced *Dissonance* between own feelings and others' perceptions[a,b]	18%	9%	20%	12%	21%

[a]Probability of Chi-square test of difference between lesbian-parent(s) family and heterosexual-parent(s) family is significant at the $p<.05$ level.

[b]Probability of Chi-square test of difference between one-parent family and two-parent family is significant at $p < .05$ level.

An issue that is salient within both groups, albeit significantly more common among the DC offspring from lesbian-parent families (44% vs. 18%) is that many of these DC offspring have learned the "facts" of reproduction far before their peers. They express frustration with having to explain the processes of donor conception to those who do not understand it. They also express frustration with having to talk about intimate matters:

> Because you are talking about making a baby, and I don't usually talk about that with my friends.
>
> When I talked about this in my teens and twenties, people didn't understand or it made them uncomfortable.
>
> It may be an awkward conversation since we mention words such as "Sperm" and "egg" and such.
>
> It is sometimes hard for them to understand and the line between giving them enough information to comprehend the situation and being a little too detailed is hard to find.

If concern about the ignorance of their peers is present within both sets of respondents, the DC offspring from lesbian-parent families face some unique issues. A quarter of these respondents fear that someone will judge them, and from their responses it is clear that some of the offspring in lesbian-parent families have already experienced overt discrimination on the basis of having a lesbian parent or parents (Bos & Van Balen, 2008; Bos, Van Balen, & van den Boom, 2005; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2002). One respondent from a lesbian-parent family imitated what s/he believed was a common scenario on a "middle-school playground":

> Where does your dad work?
>
> Beats me.
>
> You don't know where your own dad works?
>
> Nope. Don't Know him.
>
> Why Not?
>
> He was an anonymous sperm donor.
>
> Can't your parents do it?
>
> I have two moms. They're lesbians.
>
> Sick! I'm going to go tell everyone I know that you're gay and disgusting now.

This respondent went on to explain further,

> The issue is not the sperm donor, but rather the whole gay parents thing. As an adult, I don't really come across the above scenario, but I am still residually very defensive and have trouble differentiating ignorant questions from genuine, curious, nonjudgmental ones.

Another concern faced by offspring in lesbian-parent families is that other people want to put their situation into ordinary family terminology they understand and that other terminology does not work for DC offspring:

> Everyone thinks they know everything! When I tell them I don't have a dad they say "YOU HAVE TO HAVE A DAD! DID HE DIE OR SOMETHING?" then I say "No, I have two moms. They are lesbians," and of course, I'm told "YOU CANT HAVE A KID WITHOUT A BOY AND A GIRL HAVING SEX IT'S IMPOSSIBLE!" I'm so sick of it.
>
> Getting others to understand that you don't have to have a dad to be born.
>
> Kids don't get it … adults are fine! Little kids don't understand how you "don't have a dad." But I'm in middle school, and it's mostly good now.

One interesting response from a respondent belonging to a two-parent, lesbian household indicated worry that everything s/he did would reflect back on attitudes toward gays and lesbians:

> [What's hardest is] understanding my own feelings and trying to convey them truthfully to others. Honestly, I am really very happy for my history, I think that having two moms, and being a donor kid is no problem at all. That being said, there have been some issues, but there are issues with every aspect of people's lives that make them different. I worry that if I share those thoughts with people, they will use them to make a case as to why GLBTQ people shouldn't have kids, or shouldn't marry.

For the offspring in lesbian-parent families the concern is about outward appearances rather than only about what happens within the family. As another person said, "[the hardest part is] how others place labels on parents [using terms like] 'real mom,' etc."

Although that particular concern is less common among respondents from heterosexual-parent families, respondents with a single (heterosexual) mother indicate that they also worry about a particular form of bigotry; their responses indicate that they worry that people will think their mother is a lesbian:

> A lot of people think only gay women choose donor insemination.
>
> I am worried that they will think my mother is homosexual. I do not have a problem with sexual orientation but want others to know that that is not the reason my mother used a sperm donor.
>
> [The hardest part is] that I will be judged, my mother will be judged as weird, cross and a possible lesbian. My mother told me not to tell others when I was 11 and 12, because she thought (and still thinks) others will see her as weird for how she decided to have me.

On the whole, however, respondents from heterosexual-parent families face quite a different set of issues. They are more likely than are those who come from lesbian-parent families to have difficulty talking with other family members, some of who may not know about their DC. This is also more likely among respondents from two-parent families. Indeed, this issue is especially prevalent among respondents from two-parent heterosexual families, 16% (N=166) of whom reported that talking about being a donor offspring complicated relationships in the family in comparison with only 3% (N=108) of respondents from one-parent heterosexual families and none of the respondents from one-parent lesbian families (N=18) or from two-parent lesbian families (N=62). The respondents from two-parent heterosexual families mention the discomfort involved in secrecy and "passing" (and in at least one case of an older DC offspring, it seemed as if the father did not even know about the donor conception).

> At first it was because my family kept it a secret from everyone else (especially me), and then it was just because I wasn't comfortable with it for a long time, especially due to the fact that I didn't know half of my genetic relatives.
>
> It's not difficult with friends (or even acquaintances), although I do feel hesitation when discussing with family.
>
> Keeping it a secret within my own family (dad). I don't think it's hard. Though, my parents' families still don't know, even though all of my friends and even people closer to acquaintances know. I don't think it's a big deal.
>
> [The hardest part is] admitting that I have an interest in knowing the donor, admitting that I'm curious about a bunch of people who are technically my family.

Respondents who have a father they currently live with (or have lived with in the past) express special concern about talking about donor insemination with that individual. Of course, in expressing these concerns, the DC offspring in heterosexual-parent families with a present father are displaying their own anxieties as well as projecting those anxieties on to their fathers – the fear that infertility is emasculating; the worry that the absence of a genetic connection is "sad" for a father; and the concern that the father will feel rejected or "left out" by talk of the donor. These anxieties emerge vividly in their open-ended responses:

> Fear of emasculating my father, of hurting him in all this.
>
> It pains me to think of my father feeling inadequate. I want him to know that I love him even more.
>
> Worrying about my Dad knowing how I talk about it, and him feeling left out.

> Feeling sad for my dad. And being reminded of the lack of genetic connection. To him, and his whole side of the family. None of my aunts/uncles/grandparents/cousins are even related. (None of them know I was donor conceived).

Some respondents – and this is especially those from one-parent heterosexual-parent families – expressed yearning for a father:

> [What's hardest is] expressing the fact that … it hurts so badly to know that I'll never have a father.

> I'll never know anyone that I can call "Dad."

Finally, the offspring from two-parent, heterosexual families (and both variables contribute here) are most likely to say that they experience dissonance between their own feelings (of yearning to know the donor, of shock and dismay) and how they are treated by others. This is the response for 26% of these respondents (N=166) in comparison with only 12% (N=108) of the respondents from one-parent heterosexual families, 11% (N=18) of the respondents from one-parent lesbian families, and 8% (N=62) of the respondents from two-parent lesbian families. Their comments are evocative:

> Discussing it with my mother [is hardest]. She acts like it's no big deal. It's hard when others can't relate because they can look at their mom and their dad (or at least pictures) and at least puzzle together their physical appearance. And there are stories of their parents and they can trigger the same tendencies in themselves. Whoever this donor was was a blessing and I would love to thank him for helping give me life, but it's just hard not being able to know the unknown. If that makes any sense.

> Explaining why a genetic connection is also emotional for me.

> Getting other people to understand the importance of the issue and why I have mixed feelings about it.

Making Sense of Donor Siblings

Meeting Donor Siblings

Almost a third (31%) of the respondents had already connected in some way (e.g., in virtual space; in person) with one or more half-siblings at the time they filled out the questionnaire. Connecting with donor siblings (whether through email communication or in person) is more common among respondents from lesbian-parent families (45%, N=85) than among respondents from heterosexual-parent families (27%, N=307); it is also more common among respondents from one-parent families (41%, N=142) than it is among respondents from two-parent families (26%, N=249).

Both family style and number of parents are relevant variables: among respondents from heterosexual-parent families, having only one parent increases significantly the probably of connecting with a donor sibling; among two-parent families, being from a lesbian household increases significantly the likelihood of connecting with a donor sibling. Taken as a whole, it is the offspring who live in one-parent lesbian families who are most likely to have had this contact (52%, *N*=23) and those from two-parent heterosexual families who are least likely to have done so (20%, *N*=187); the frequency of this contact among offspring from one-parent heterosexual families (38%, *N*=12) and two-parent lesbian families (42%, *N*=62) falls between these two extremes. A broad variety of factors could determine these findings and they are not necessarily shaped by attitudes and interests of offspring alone: access to donor siblings is shaped by one's biography in historical time (since donor sibling registries are a new phenomenon) as well by one's own age (since parents control access for younger children).

Do You Want to Meet Donor Siblings?

When we come to offspring *attitudes* among those who have *not* met siblings, we find that the vast majority of respondents are enthusiastic about this idea: 89% of respondents say they want to do so (in contrast with 84% who want to contact the donor). Respondents from lesbian-parent families are somewhat less interested in meeting siblings (80%, *N*=47) (although the vast majority of them *are* interested in doing so) than are respondents from heterosexual-parent families (91%, *N*=223), just as they are less interested in meeting the donor himself (77% vs. 86%). (Here there is no difference of any significance between respondents from one-parent families and those from two-parent families.)

Advising Parents about Contact with Donor Siblings

When offspring are asked how they would advise parents about having their offspring meet half-siblings, different themes emerge than did when offspring were asked how they would advise parents hesitant about having their offspring meet the donor (Table 8). For the latter question, offspring reassured their parents that meeting the donor would not disrupt the natal family; they suggested parents let the offspring choose whether or not to have contact;they said donors were important because they provided information about identity and possible medical conditions; and they urged parents to be honest with their offspring.

Table 8. Rank Order Comparison of Attitudes toward Donor and Donor Siblings.

	Reasons for Contacting Donor		Reasons for Contacting Donor Siblings	
	% Present as an issue	Rank order of responses	Rank order of responses	% Present as an issue
Advice to parents about contact with donors and donor siblings				
Offers *reassurance* to parents that contact will not disrupt family	28%	1	4	8%
Advises parents to let DC *offspring choose* whether or not to have contact	27%	2	2	24%
Allow contact to learn about offspring *identity*	26%	3	3	16%
Allow contact to learn about offspring *medica*l history	20%	4	6	5%
Advises parents to be *honest* with offspring	17%	5	7	4%
Advises parents to be *careful* about offspring contact	9%	6	5	7%
Allow contact because it will be an *opportunity* for offspring to grow	9%	6	1	31%
Advises parents that the specific *timing* is important	7%	7	8	3%

Most of these issues are both relatively and absolutely less important when the issue is meeting donor siblings than when the issue is meeting donors (Table 9). What remains of significance is that the offspring should be the ones who make this decision (a small drop from present among 27% of respondents for donors to 24% of respondents for siblings, but second in importance in both cases). Even more striking is what happens to the issue of viewing these new contacts as an opportunity: a third of all respondents say that donor siblings represent an opportunity and this is far greater than the mere nine percent who viewed contacting donors as an opportunity.

Individual quotes from respondents help demonstrate what this sense of "opportunity" means. Most clearly, it has to do with the possibility of a connection or relationship with members of an "extended family." A respondent from a heterosexual-parent family said,

> Don't hesitate, it will either go well or not, but you have to take chances in life and it is better to know who is out there than not to know, and you may be missing out on a really great relationship if you never look, I'm really glad my mom encouraged me to look and I'm glad to know I have half sibs out there. It's like having an extended family.

Table 9. Advising Parents about Meeting Donor Siblings. AU:8

	All respondents (*N*=132)	Family Form		Number of Parents	
		Lesbian-parent family (*N*=33)	Heterosexual-parent family (*N*=99)	One-parent family (*N*=60)	Two-parent family (*N*=72)
Advise to parents about having offspring meet with donor siblings					
Allow contact to learn about offspring *identity*	16%	9%	18%	13%	18%
Allow contact to learn about offspring *medical* history	5%	6%	5%	7%	4%
Offers *reassurance* to parents that contact not will disrupt family	8%	9%	7%	7%	8%
Advises parents to be *careful* about offspring contact[a]	7%	9%	6%	5%	8%
Advises parents to be *honest* with offspring[b]	4%	3%	4%	0%	7%
Advises parents to let DC *offspring choose* whether or not to have contact	24%	15%	26%	18%	28%
Allow contact because it will be an *opportunity* for offspring to grow	31%	39%	28%	35%	28%
Advises parents that the specific *timing* is important	3%	3%	3%	2%	4%

[a]Probability of Chi-square test of difference between one-parent family and two-parent family is significant at $p<.05$ level.

[b]Probability of Chi-square test of difference between lesbian-parent(s) family and heterosexual-parent(s) family is significant at the $p<.05$ level.

A respondent from a lesbian-parent family said something quite similar:

> There is no reason why this experience wouldn't be beneficial to your child. In most cases, I'm sure, they will be able to form a strong connection that will be most beneficial to them.

When we look more specifically at how family form shapes these attitudes, what we find is that the same issues are prominent in *both*

lesbian-parent families and heterosexual-parent families; indeed, there are no significant differences between the two groups in these attitudes although there were about donors (and there is only one difference by number of parents – that of honesty – which is more likely to be a concern in two-parent families) (Table 9). Donors might challenge carefully constructed family types; donor siblings are viewed by everyone as an opportunity to enlarge a family. Of course, in a sense it is not surprising that siblings should be viewed so positively in both types of household. After all, these "siblings" do not and cannot compete for a mother's love since the offspring do not share the same mother. And all donor siblings have been equally "rejected" by the father who wants to remain anonymous. To be sure, siblings provide access to, and a glimpse at, paternal kin. But unlike sisters and brothers who grow up together, these siblings are "perfect" – related just to them (and not to their parents) and no immediate threat to parental love, resources, or time. Therefore, they are imagined – or already known – as being "cool," "fun," and "neat"; they are people who "understand them." In short, they are an opportunity for pure joy that gives the child a sense of other family members of the donor to whom they can relate. As one child wrote, "When they told me about my sister, I said, 'Finally someone who understands.'"

SUMMARY

As a group with diverse ages and family backgrounds, DC offspring use a variety of terms to describe the donor. Whatever term they use, *most* DC offspring who have not already had the possibility of contacting the donor do want to contact him. DC offspring are also curious about what the donor looks like and they believe contact can help them understand themselves better. Contact, however, does not mean intimacy or interaction: the DC offspring want to be known by the donor and they want a donor who is known to them, but they do not necessarily want to take the relationship further. Offspring advise donors that they should make themselves known and they insist that they want to be in control of the process of contact (rather than their parents). Significantly, they do not think that this contact will disrupt their natal family.

A fifth of all offspring respondents indicate that they were confused initially to learn of their donor-insemination conception; in most cases, confusion has given way to feelings either that donor-insemination makes no difference or that it accords them some different or special status in the

world. And while almost a quarter of the offspring responding to the survey find that having to explain DC is tedious, especially when their peers don't understand, almost as many say that nothing about talking about being DC is either hard or difficult.

Taken as a whole, among the DC offspring, attitude toward donor siblings is more enthusiastic than the attitude toward donors. Offspring are more interested in meeting donor siblings and they do not believe that they need to reassure parents about such contact (should this be a possibility); clearly they do not believe that donor siblings will disrupt or threaten the natal family. To the contrary, in the absence of having met the donor, the donor siblings are the only thread to their genetic paternal side and the siblings offer them the possibility of doing the very things the donor presently does not: to see if they resemble one another, share the same interests and traits, and exchange medical histories. The donor siblings offer an insurance policy (Hertz & Mattes, 2011) in case the DC offspring needs to know information that chapter profiles do not provide. Further, donor siblings, unlike siblings that live in the same household, come with only a good, or positive, side of siblings relations: they can be enjoyed, but they do not carry jealousy and competition which are almost inevitable among siblings growing up in the same household. In short, they offer a way to expand kinship without altering or placing ongoing demands on one's daily life.

When we turn from the sample as a whole to a comparison between lesbian-parent families and heterosexual-parent families intriguing differences emerge. Offspring from lesbian-parent families are more likely to depersonalize the donor while offspring from heterosexual-parent families are more likely to personalize him. Not having a father at all, the DC offspring from lesbian-parent families seem to see no need to make a distinct kind of father of the donor; he remains a donor. But because the DC offspring from heterosexual-parent families may have a father now, may believe they had one in the past, or might, quite simply, yearn for one, they have to differentiate between that father and the donor. The donor is the *biological* father and he may or may not play a significant role in their lives. The DC offspring from lesbian-parent families also have an "imagined" progenitor in the form of the donor but he does not carry the attributes and "authority" of a father.[14]

Although an interest in the donor is widespread, the DC offspring from lesbian-parent families are somewhat less likely than are those from heterosexual-parent families to say that they actually want to meet the donor. This is in keeping with their thinking about him as a *donor* rather than as someone in a relational capacity. Turning to reasons why one would want to meet the donor, the DC offspring from heterosexual-parent families

believe more often than do donor offspring from lesbian-parent families that the donor carries clues about one's health and one's ancestry; they are also more insistent that the donor be known. Curiously, the offspring in lesbian-parent families are more likely to believe that they have to reassure their parents that the donor will not disrupt their families than are those raised in heterosexual-parent families. In the case of the offspring of a lesbian parent, the donor becomes a threat to the existing family no matter whether there is one parent or two; in the case of the offspring of a heterosexual parent, the donor is only a threat if there is a present father, suggesting that the presence of a man in the household is what makes the donor a threat to heterosexual-parent families. Finally, and not surprisingly, respondents from lesbian-parent families are less likely than are those from heterosexual-parent families initially to believe that being the product of donor conception is a source of confusion or difference (especially if they have two parents) and they are also less likely to continue to feel special and confused in the present. For offspring from lesbian-parent families, donor conception is a normal and accepted part of life and they do not care that they do not know their "father." Of course, they do have some concerns about talking about the issue of donor conception. However, whereas their concerns are focused outward (on how their families are viewed by others), the concerns among offspring from heterosexual-parent families turn to internal family dynamics. They have to deal with complicated relationships among family members who do not know about their donor-conception status.

While offspring from lesbian-parent families are less likely to want to contact the donor when compared to offspring from heterosexual-parent families, they are more likely to have contacted half-siblings (and there is no way to tell whether this contact is initiated by themselves or by their parents). However, among those who have not yet had that contact, most respondents – and especially those from heterosexual-parent families – want to meet donor siblings. And there are no differences between the two family forms in the kind of advice offspring would give parents about having donor siblings meet.

DISCUSSION

We explain these data by locating the two groups of families in their own historical time. As noted in the introduction, a cluster of events (including changes in reproductive technology, the norms surrounding adoption, and the ability of parents to conceal biological parentage) has meant revealing

secrets that were kept in the past and has altered the meaning of family borders within the heterosexual family. Another set of changes in heterosexual family life has amplified this latter effect. These changes include more cohabitation, less marriage (but more divorce), and the growth of stepfamily relationships whether they are "legal" steps or not (Ambert, 1989; McGene & King, 2012; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007). Families based on heterosexuality thus have had to shift from the 1950s closed border, "traditional" nuclear family (which assumed that the current parents were the biological parents [Schneider, 1968] and which assumed that one could negate the biological parents of an adopted child [Modell, 1994]) to a family with more permeable borders that might include step-parents and step-siblings, surrogate carriers, egg and sperm donors, and both biological and adoptive parents.

For lesbians, the new cluster of events is both quite different and similarly complex: it is about their family form (a greater social recognition of, and acceptance of, lesbian couples), recognition of facts which could only be concealed if one's sexual orientation itself was also concealed (that is, if it appeared that any children were the result of a heterosexual encounter), and a variety of new (and old) reproductive technologies. Even with these changes, lesbians couples might well have good "political" reasons for wanting to appear more like the heterosexual family of old (see, e.g., Hequemborug, 2004). By being like "everybody else" they may garner greater sympathy for the causes of same-sex marriage and second parent adoption. And by being like "everybody else" a second parent who has not been able to adopt her child can more easily fly under the radar of threatened loss. So even as that "everybody else" is changing, lesbian parents have reasons to want to look like a "traditional" household with genetic ties to their children (which, in turn, represents a reason for choosing a donor who looks like the nonbiological parent) (Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009): two parents, one or two children with physical resemblance to at least one, if not both parents, a white picket fence, and, perhaps, a dog. As Ryan and Berkowitz (2009, p. 167) say,

> Doing family in a way that minimizes visual difference can grant gay and lesbian families the greatest amount of social legitimacy possible. Fitting as closely into dominant family ideology as possible simultaneously serves as a real strategy to keep families intact and as a symbolic feeling of doing family "correctly."

Other scholars make similar points (Dempsey, 2010, p. 1158). Jones (2005, pp. 233–34), for example, notes that even as lesbians challenge "the (heterosexual) family" norm; they might "normalize genetic relatedness." Nordqvist (2012) emphasizes that these "normalizing practices" among

lesbians are designed "to protect their children from homophobia." Indeed, as we do, Nordqvist suggests locating practices around reproduction within the context of broader social and cultural changes in attitudes toward, and the political location of, gays and lesbians:

> … There are now legally sanctioned locations for conventional domestic relationships among non-heterosexuals. Based on their study conducted in the mid 1990s, Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy (1999) suggested that one of the key reasons why gays and lesbians could form creative family relationships was because they lead intimate lives "outside" society. Since then, we have seen an "opening up" of what it means to be "normal," socially and also legally; a normalization of (some) gay and lesbian identities …. These new locations are likely to bring with them new subject positions in the population. Drawing on the accounts of the lesbian couples in this study, it would appear that among lesbian co-parenting communities we can currently see aspirations and practices, as well as a pressure, to "fit in" and be ordinary. (p. 658)

And finally, in a provocative conclusion, Gabb (2005, p. 600) writing about what happens when lesbian parent families break up suggests that normalization emerges from concern about the lack of legitimacy granted to the "other" mother:

> It may be that the most telling tale about lesbian parent families is that gendered roles are indeed contested, but inequalities do remain. Instead of "the father" being head of the family, the mater familias wields all the power and the nonbiological parent is all but powerless. Thus, ironically, while lesbian-parent family practices disrupt gendered readings, the progenitor categories of parenthood may nevertheless remain intact.

Paradoxically, then, because the facts of their formation are already "out there," lesbian parents not only can be, but have reason to be, more dismissive of those influences (or threats) to their closed borders. They maintain closed borders because the only way to claim legitimacy as a family still appears to be through the two-parents (who are genetically linked to their children) closed border model (and no alternative carries equal, or equally significant, cultural weight).

We are not suggesting that heterosexual-parent families are more progressive in being more open to wanting to meet the donor (and donor siblings) and being more likely to view the donor as a kind of father. What we are suggesting is that when there have been family secrets (as there often have been in the past in heterosexual-parent families), the revelation of those secrets changes family members. This change is all the more likely because, as we have noted, the offspring in heterosexual-parent families are told later in life of their donor-insemination conception; that makes the news all the more important and, often, disturbing. There is no truth to reveal and everyone is altered by the new configuration of information. But those who have never had secrets can create a different kind of

fiction – that the donor is incidental, that he does not matter, that he is just a biological material, a borrowed cell used for the act of creation. Lesbian parents and their offspring do not question the importance of the biological material, but they do question the importance of the donor and especially his importance to the family as it now exists. In fact, research confirms that neither children nor their parents include the donor as part of the family (Tasker & Granville, 2011). In short, he may be seen as something of a threat, especially to the second parent (whose legal claim may be tenuous and whose biological claim does not exist) and he is less likely to be seen as a source of information about ancestry, the past, or the family history.

Both lesbian-parent families and heterosexual-parent families acknowledge the possibility that donor siblings exist out there. And everyone is interested in meeting those donor siblings, although that interest is weaker among the offspring in lesbian-parent families. For the offspring in heterosexual-parent families, whose lives mimic the traditional, heterosexual family model of two parents, each of whom had a genetic link to the children (even though they have been raised without one of their genetic parents and often without that knowledge), the genetic model is significant: both the donor and donor siblings are a necessary part of their lives and of their self understanding; the donor is a "father" of sorts and offspring from the same donor are siblings.

For the offspring in lesbian-parent families, whose lives openly contradict that of heterosexual, genetically linked, two-parent model, donors and donor siblings are somewhat more optional. Genes are both somewhat more important *as biological matter* (do not mess with the gene pool) and somewhat less important as parentage (the donor is merely a donor). Because identity from one's parents is in part freed from biology, donor conception is less troubling for the offspring of lesbians; for them, it is the new normal. Hence the lesbian-parent families can close the borders of the family and care less about genetics as an influence on identity even as they make genetics appear to be an important influence when they choose donors who resemble the "other" parent (and choose not to adopt). Conversely, as the heterosexual-parent families open the family to new influences on identity, they care more about genetics as one of those influences.

The offsprings' views reflect their upbringing in their determinations about who is in and who is out of the family (Minow, 1998). In some ways, in comparison with heterosexual families, the new lesbian families might be smaller, more discrete, and more closed (even if they have broad social networks attached to them) because they reject the donor as being of relational significance (Donovan & Wilson, 2008). Indeed, "normal" families, with one or two heterosexual parents, turn out not to be so normal after all

as they open not only to include donor siblings, but donors too, and the ancestry they carry with them. Heterosexual parents, and their offspring, are now in a position, and may even have the urgent desire, to create "chosen" families (Weston, 1991; Weeks, Donovan & Heaphy, 2001; Weeks et al., 1999;). In short, what we have shown is that the same chronological moment has some surprisingly different effects in "old" and "new" family forms.

NOTES

1. Modell (1994) refers to the "as if begotten" nature of adoptive families when adoption remained secret; families looked and behaved structurally as if the adopted child was their own biological offspring. Children conceived through donor insemination followed the same "as if" pattern with respect to the father.

2. Spar (2006) notes that in the 1980s there were 17 frozen sperm banks in the United States; by 1999 there were over 100 sperm banks in the United States alone.

3. Although we make reference to families headed by both lesbians and gay men, our analysis focuses on the former because we are looking at attitudes toward sperm donors. As we note in our methodology section, the registry from which we obtained our data did not have a sufficient number of egg-donor families to enable us to do this kind of analysis; nor did it have information about surrogacy.

4. See Markens (2007) who examines how state laws have responded differently to issues of surrogate motherhood.

5. Anonymity is presently banned in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Switzerland, Austria, New Zealand, and certain Australian states (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sperm_donation_laws_by_country).

6. Some donors who initially want to be anonymous subsequently change their minds; some of these have signed on to the DSR.

7. Some countries limit the number of children produced from a donor but the exact number varies in those countries that have such legislation or policies (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sperm_donation_laws_by_country).

8. Malone and Cleary (2002, p. 271) critique studies which highlight "differences between gay/lesbian families and traditional families," because, they believe "an emphasis on such differences feeds cultural stereotypes that are damaging to nontraditional families." Although we do discuss differences between the offspring of donor insemination in lesbian parent households and heterosexual parent households, we do so *not* to assume that one is "better" than the other, but to highlight the unique nature of each set of experiences. We might also note that neither set of offspring come from "traditional" households: the offspring who "claim" that their parents are heterosexual have emerged from households where conception relied on donors (and where that conception was often concealed until the offspring were adults); these families may be viewed as if they are "traditional" but they are not any more so than are lesbian-parent families.

9. For a dramatic, personal account, see Lennard Davis (2009).

10. They also note that this finding contrasts with the findings from others who suggest that single women and lesbian couples who rely on sperm donation look more similar to each other than they do to heterosexual couples around issues of openness and privacy concerning donor insemination.

11. We want to stress that the sexual orientation of parent(s) is identified by their children, not by the parents themselves, since it was the children who chose which online survey to answer.

12. For a fuller discussion of the relevance of current age and age of learning of one's donor-insemination conception, see Hertz, Nelson, and Kramer (2013).

13. Reports of percentages of respondents within categories of family form and number of parent simultaneously are represented here without tables but with the number of respondents indicated in parentheses.

14. See the studies by Nordqvist (2011b, 2011a), Suter (2008), Jones (2003), and Hertz et al. (2013) for indications that this is precisely what their mothers wanted.

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