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Experiences of youth and sperm donors in an open-identity program

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Learning Objectives

At the end of the lecture, participants are expected to gain knowledge in:

- the experiences of adolescents who grew up knowing they had an open-identity donor
- the experiences of men who donated sperm in an open-identity program 10-18 years ago
- the expectations of donors and offspring for donor identity-releases
- preliminaries around actual donor identity-releases

Lecture Summary

A growing number of donor insemination (DI) programs offer the option (e.g., in the USA) or require (e.g., in Sweden, the UK in 2005) recipients to use “open-identity” sperm donors – donors who allow their identity to be given to adult offspring. This contrasts with traditional programs in which the donor is anonymous and only non-identifying information is available (e.g., in the USA and Canada, this often includes medical information, physical descriptors, education, and interests). Currently, most research focuses on families who have used anonymous donors (e.g., Golombok et al., 2002) and little is available about the experiences of families with open-identity donors. In the current presentation, I will discuss the experiences and expectations of DI offspring who have open-identity donors, many of whom are now or will soon be eligible to get their donor’s identity. Discussion will also focus on the experiences and expectations of men who were in The Sperm Bank of California’s open-identity program in the 1980s, and whose offspring can now get their identity.

Background

In 1983, The Sperm Bank of California (TSBC) established the first open-identity DI program in the USA in response to requests from recipients. These recipients were primarily single women and lesbian couples who planned to tell their children about their DI origins and wanted them to be able to get more information about their donor when they became adults. An open-identity system solved the problem of legal threats to their parental rights, while still allowing their children the option of learning more about their donor, should they want or need to. Although this option was established in response to requests from these non-traditional families, some heterosexual couples at TSBC also chose this kind of donor over an anonymous one, primarily because it gave their child the option of being able to get the donor’s identity. Over the last twenty years, single women and lesbian couples have been more likely than heterosexual couples to choose open-identity donors over anonymous ones, but more recently we have not been able to find a difference between the groups (Scheib et al., 2000).

Disclosure to children about their DI origins

One of the factors likely motivating prospective parents to choose open-identity donors, is that they hope to tell their children about their conception origins. Having the option to later identify and possibly contact the donor helps avoid the frustration associated with never being able to learn more about one’s donor. Although research suggest that disclosure rates among DI families is almost non-existent (e.g., Golombok et al., 2002) to only about 20-30% among

families headed by heterosexual couples (Brewaeys, 2001), TSBC families with open-identity donors tend to be more open. This includes families headed by heterosexual couples, as well as those headed by single women and lesbian couples. In a study of TSBC parents who used open-identity, 70% of heterosexually-coupled parents and 100% of single parents and lesbian-coupled parents had told their teenage children about their DI origins (Scheib et al., 2003). Although the disclosure rate was lower for the heterosexual couples than for the other parents, it is nonetheless high for heterosexual couples who use DI. Furthermore, it is the youth from these families who are the focus of this presentation.

Preparations for the first donor identity-releases to adult offspring

In 1997, TSBC established a task force of experts to guide the development of a protocol to release donors' identities, and support services for both the donor and recipient families. Critical to this was learning about the experiences of both TSBC donor and recipient families and obtain their feedback on our preparations. Thus, we conducted three studies; one with parents whose children would be the first to have the opportunity to get their donor's identity (Scheib et al., 2003), one with the children themselves who were now teenagers (Scheib et al., under review), and one with men who had been open-identity donors 10 to 18 years ago (Scheib et al., in preparation). Although I will not discuss the parents' study in the presentation, I provide the findings below as background information.

Findings from the parents

Parents from 45 households completed mail-back questionnaires (75% response rate). Lesbian couples headed 40% of the households, single women 38%, and heterosexual couples 22%. The parents were well-educated with over 80% having completed an undergraduate degree, and over 50% also having a post-graduate degree. Over 80% of households had an income above the national median. At time of study, the children were between the ages of 12 and 17 years, of whom 56% had siblings.

Parents felt that choosing an open-identity donor had been the right choice and were relatively open about using DI. Most parents had told their child about his or her DI conception (100% of single women and lesbian couples, 70% of heterosexual couples), and had done so when the child was quite young (i.e., by age 6). On average, parents felt that disclosure had a neutral to moderately positive impact on their relationship with the child (note that birth mothers and co-parents gave separate evaluations of the impact). A minority of the heterosexual couples had not disclosed any DI information to their child, although all but one planned to tell at some point.

About half of the parents had concerns about their child requesting donor identity-release, trying to contact the donor, and whether or not the donor would be willing to meet their child. Some also expressed curiosity about what the donors expected from identity-release. Nevertheless, many still looked forward to their child meeting the donor, if it were possible. Of note was that although co-parents expressed similar feelings and concerns, they were not as enthusiastic as the birth mothers, with fewer (39% vs. 55%) looking forward to their child meeting the donor. Nevertheless, overall, co-parents remained supportive of their children.

Overall, parents were positive about having chosen an identity-release donor and upcoming identity-releases. Many expressed heart-felt gratitude towards the donor for the opportunity to have their child. Disclosure to the child about his or her conception origins did not appear to have a negative impact on the families, regardless of parental sexual orientation and relationship status. Finally, most parents expected that their child would request the donor's identity, but less thought he or she would do so immediately, at age 18.

Findings from the youth

Mail-back questionnaires were completed by 29 youth with open-identity donors. Youth age ranged from 12 to 17 years. Boys made up the majority (62%) of respondents. Over 40% of youth came from households headed by lesbian couples, 38% came from households headed by single women, and 21% from households headed by heterosexual couples. More than half of youth had siblings, many of whom also had the same donor.

Most youth (76%) said they had always known that they had a donor, with the remainder learning before age 10. On average, they felt somewhat to very comfortable about their origins, and all but one said it had a neutral to positive effect on the relationship with their parents (reported separately for birth mothers and co-parents). Many said it was all they knew, that it made them unique (in a positive way) and who they were, and/or that it made them feel very wanted and loved by their family.

On average, youth were positive about the donor, with all being at least neutral in feeling. The overwhelming sentiment toward the donor was curiosity, with the youth's top two questions being "what is he like?" and "what does he look like?" Following this, almost all youth wanted a photo of the donor at identity-release, and information about his current circumstances (e.g., his occupation, marital status, if he has children). Youth also expressed curiosity about other offspring who shared the same donor, with 90% being at least moderately interested in getting in contact with them.

Almost all youth planned to get their donor's identity, but fewer planned to do so at around age 18. Most also reported being at least moderately likely to try to contact the donor, but they were concerned about whether or not he would be open to contact, and how the youth's parents would feel. The youth hoped they could first contact the donor through TSBC, rather than directly. Few (7%) reported that they might first contact the donor in person, suggesting that the stereotype of offspring showing up on the donor's doorstep is inaccurate. Finally, when asked why they would contact the donor, most reported that it would allow them to get more information about what he was like. Two-thirds also felt that communicating with the donor might help them learn more about themselves.

Overall, reports from the youth closely matched those of the parents. Youth were comfortable about their DI origins and positive about the donors. Almost all planned to get their donor's identity, but not necessarily at age 18. Many youth wanted to contact their donor, but they were also very interested in how the donors felt about being contacted. In the presentation, I will discuss additional details about the findings, as well as differences in the experiences of youth across household types.

Findings from the donors

Telephone interviews were conducted with 27 men who had been TSBC identity-release donors between 1982 and 1990. On average, donors were 40 years old. Two-thirds were in committed relationships, and about half had their own children. Over 80% of the donors had completed an undergraduate degree, and 26% also had a post-graduate degree. As with the parents, over 80% of donor households had an income above the national median.

Overall, donors were positive about their decision to be identity-release. Most said that they wanted the child to have the option to know who they were, with some explaining that they would have wanted to know who their donor was if they had one. Almost all had told their partners about being a donor, and most had also told at least one other family member (e.g., parent, sibling).

Donors were generally positive about upcoming identity-releases. The majority expressed curiosity about how the process would go and about the offspring themselves. Many looked forward to the possibility of meeting adult offspring. Fewer, but still over half, also expressed concerns. These centered around the unknown, such as not knowing what the offspring were like or wanted from them, how they might be contacted, and how identity-release might impact their lives and families.

Most donors expected that the youth were very curious about them and would want to get their identity. Some also expected that the youth would be anxious about identity-releases and possibly contacting them. Interestingly, donors' expectations closely matched what the youth actually reported except in one realm. About a third anticipated that that youth might be angry or resentful about their conception origins and having a donor. In fact, very few offspring actually expressed such negative feelings.

Finally, when we asked whether they regretted their decision to be a donor and that their identity might be released to offspring, only two said that they did (nevertheless, these two remained committed to identity-release). This means that over 90% did not regret their decision, with most saying they felt it was the right decision and many looking forward to meeting offspring.

Overall, donors were positive about their decision to be open-identity and looked forward to identity-releases. Their expectations about the youth were relatively accurate, except that they expected more resentment than the youth actually reported. The donors' concerns mainly focused around the unknown and providing the identity-release study results, as well as factual information about the youth and their families helped to address these issues. It is clear that 10 to 18 years later, the vast majority of donors remain committed to identity-release and do not regret their decision to be donors. In the presentation, I will discuss additional details about the findings, as well as preliminary information from the first actual identity-releases.

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