

Adults from donor-conceived families: some good news (from a longitudinal study)

As many of us scan the *Fertility and Sterility* titles this month, we might go right by “Adult Offspring of Lesbian Parents” (1). Koh and colleagues’ article may seem peripheral to your practice or research, and few of us have time for other reading. But this article’s relevance is understated. If your focus includes donor conception and/or helping people have children, then donor-conceived (DC) adult views and experiences with their sperm donor may be able to tell us something more generally about donor-assisted families.

Koh et al.’s report (1) comes from an almost 35-year longitudinal study. Among human studies, this is the gold standard design for developmental investigations. Rivaling follow-up length and participant retention with the likes of Susan Golombok and her team at Cambridge, the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS; www.nllfs.org) has found similar, mostly reassuring outcomes in sperm donor-assisted families and child well-being, and addresses additional unique aspects of sexual minority parent (SMP) families. This should be reassuring to providers and mental health professionals, as many donor programs are now experiencing a rise in the numbers of recipients planning to form SMP (one or more parents) and non-SMP single-mother families.

Koh et al.’s current study is among the handful that have examined what happens after DC adults contact their sperm donor (1). As increasing numbers of people are now making contact, questions about what happens afterward, including its effects on the DC people and donors, take on as much importance as questions about the effects of growing up with donor origins and how donor type matters. Additionally, a considerable amount is known already about Koh et al.’s study participants, through their status as the (adult) children of parents who were recruited as the original NLLFS participants. These findings may be helpful in anticipating the responses of other DC adults, even from other family types, when they share characteristics with the current participants.

The study participants were asked about their views on their sperm donor and, if identified and contacted, what the relationship was like. A major strength of the NLLFS is having families that varied by donor type. These included donors who were anonymous, those who were open-identity (i.e., DC adults had the option to identify them), and those who were known. The anonymous (i.e., closed-identity; nondirected) and open-identity (i.e., nondirected) donors were from fertility or sperm bank programs and were unknown to the parents and underage children. The known (directed) donors were known to the parents and the children from childhood or earlier. However, unlike previous studies that grouped responses by donor type (e.g., open-identity versus anonymous), or whether the donor was known or anonymous to the family when the child was growing up (2, 3), Koh et al. grouped responses according to whether a participant knew and had contacted their donor by the time of interview.

An initial finding concerned participants who had an unknown anonymous sperm donor—the “permanently unknown” group. None had identified their donor, either through the donor program or by other means. As has been found elsewhere (2), when asked about their comfort with having this kind of donor, DC adult responses varied. The majority were at least neutral, if not comfortable, but about one in four were moderately to very uncomfortable. It is noteworthy that these proportions did not differ dramatically from previous findings (2), despite differences in study populations and possible selectivity for interest in the donor (e.g., other studies that included donor-contact registry members). This suggests that the inability to know one’s donor may be problematic for a small but significant proportion of DC adults, which is a concern that should not be dismissed on the basis of possible study sample bias.

Among the participants who knew and had contacted their donor were adults with known (directed) sperm donors—the “currently known” group. Family building with this type of donor is common among lesbian-parented families, yet less research is focused here than on families with nondirected (program) donors (2, 3). In the current study, participants reported generally positive relationships with their donor, but not all were ongoing. In addition, despite knowing their donor since childhood, just as many considered him an acquaintance as did those who considered him a father, similar to the findings of Goldberg and Allen (3) in their qualitative study. Together, these findings help illustrate the variety of relationships available to known donors and families beyond heteronormative father-child relations.

The participants who had identified their open-identity sperm donor were also included in the “currently known” group, although some questions included a breakdown by donor type. The reason for combining the donor types was unclear as known and open-identity donors typically differ not only in time known, but also in developmental stages potentially experienced together (childhood to adulthood versus adulthood only), parental expectations of them (a relative or father versus an unknown, helpful stranger), and the numbers of families assisted by them (one or a small number versus many families). These and other factors likely contributed to participants’ views and the kinds of relationships that developed between them and their donors.

One-third of participants with an open-identity donor had identified and contacted him (1), matching the rates reported for SMP families in our study at the same U.S. open-identity program (4); to clarify, this program releases donor identifying and last known contact information, but it is up to the DC adult and donor to decide whether contact occurs. In the study by Koh et al., most participants had an ongoing relationship with the donor that more rated as satisfied than dissatisfied (range was not provided). It is interesting that almost all also identified that relationship as being at the level of an acquaintance, rather than anything closer.

These results are less like the anecdotal accounts that have come to public attention that are often extremely positive or extremely negative. The considerable variation in contact and relationship outcomes is as important to

acknowledge as the more extreme cases. Overall, these results should not be surprising – that things are neither catastrophic nor positively world-changing, but instead fall somewhere in the middle.

Finally, knowledge about DC adult views on their origins and donors is not new (2). What Koh et al.'s findings contribute to is the limited information about DC adults' actual contact experiences with their donors. Answers could help programs prepare and support donors for possible future identification or if they have already been identified. They can inform families about what to expect. They can even help parents better and more realistically talk to their children about what it means to have an open-identity donor (e.g., <https://www.thespermbankofca.org/how-talk-your-child-about-identity-release%C2%AE-program>) (4, 5). Koh et al.'s findings provide a basis from which to consider factors from previous studies that may have contributed to DC adult experiences with their donor. For example, it may be informative to open-identity programs to know whether the increased interest (5) and donor identity requesting rates (4) among DC individuals from single-parent compared to two-parent families extend to adult experiences with their donor. Additional exploration into what motivates contact and the relationships between DC adults and their donors is important for contextualizing these findings.

We have yet to learn from DC adults who had not obtained their open-identity donor's identity – one of the study groups for whom no information was presented. If their views were also surveyed, and the findings become available, this will be a first for the field. From them we may be able to better understand DC adults' decisions around identifying (or not) their donor and the processes that contribute. Until then, adult

views and experiences of being able to identify their donor but not doing so remain unknown.

The study by Koh et al. (1) gives us preliminary insight into what happens among DC adults after donor contact. The findings begin to provide information on which to base anticipatory guidance to donors, intended parents, and DC individuals based on real data, not hypotheticals, and not just from what we read in the news. We look forward to learning more.

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