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Adult Offspring of Lesbian Parents Reflect on Having Been Donor Conceived: Feelings About Their Sperm Donor and Donor Siblings

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The U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study is the longest prospective study of offspring conceived via donor insemination (DI), beginning in 1986 when DI became possible for lesbian women. The 75 offspring surveyed at Wave 7 were adults in their early thirties ($M = 30.93$, $SD = 0.92$; 49.33% female, 48.00% male and 2.66% gender nonbinary; 90.67% White, 9.33% people of color), well past the early stages of identity development in adolescence and emerging adulthood. This is the first qualitative study focusing on feelings about DI among established adult offspring of lesbian parents. Offspring generally felt positive about their donor conception, realizing that it enabled them to be born into a loving family that very much wanted them. They were grateful that the technology existed to allow lesbian parents to have children in the 1980s. Most agreed that their nontraditional conception had influenced their concept of family, and many indicated willingness to be a gamete donor themselves. Offspring also described childhood challenges with feeling different, challenges with the donor or lack of medical information about him. About half had discovered that they had donor siblings. Because the offspring knew of their DI from an early age, they did not perceive this information as a threat to their personal or family identity. As use of DI increases and donor offspring and their parents may seek therapy, clinicians should be trained to address donor anonymity issues, disclosure to children, parental/offspring concerns, and donor sibling concerns and recommend community resources as needed.

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Public Significance Statement

The U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS), which began in 1986 when donor insemination (DI) became possible for lesbian women, surveyed 75 adult offspring about their DI, sperm donor and donor siblings. Offspring generally felt positive about their donor conception, realizing that it enabled them to be born into a loving family that very much wanted them. At the same time, offspring described challenges in childhood and feeling different, challenges about the donor or lack of medical information.

Keywords: donor insemination, donor siblings, adult children of lesbian parents, sperm donor, donor relationship

An internet search shows at least a dozen picture books for children conceived via sperm donation, including those with lesbian parents, such as *Zak's Safari: A Story About Donor-Conceived Kids of Two-Mom Families* (Tyner, 2014) and *Maisie's Blueprints: A Donor Conception Story for Two-Mom Families* (Leya, 2023). There are also books for young children who have donor siblings conceived from the same sperm donor but grow up in different families, including *I've Got Dibs!: A Donor Sibling Story* (Dorfman, 2017) and *My Extra Special Leaves: A Story About Egg Donation, Surrogacy and Donor Siblings with a Two-Dad Family!* (Wright, 2023).

Given the abundance of resources on alternative reproduction, including for parents with minoritized sexual identities and their children, it is easy to forget how difficult, if not impossible, it was for such parents to have access to these methods before the 1980s. The offspring conceived via donor insemination (DI) by lesbian parents in the first cohort from the 1980s are now adults in their thirties. The purpose of the present study was to ask adult offspring from this era to reflect on their feelings about their DI, including their sperm donor and donor siblings.

The NLLFS is the longest prospective study of offspring conceived by DI of lesbian parents. The study began in 1986 when lesbian women were pregnant or inseminating, and the offspring have been surveyed since they were 10 years old. When the offspring were age 25 (Wave 6), they were of legal age, and some were able to contact their sperm donor (Koh et al., 2020). By the time they were in their early thirties (Wave 7), changes in social media and DNA testing made it possible for more offspring to find donors, even if those donors had been previously anonymous (Koh, Rothblum, et al., 2023). In addition, these same

technological advances made it possible for some offspring to find donor siblings (Koh, Bos, et al., 2023).

The present study is the first qualitative study of what it meant to be donor conceived in the era of direct-to-consumer DNA testing, based on reflections by established adults. We will review societal changes in access to DI along with relevant research. Given the impact that discovery about DI has on offspring sense of identity, we also review the theoretical literature on identity formation.

Societal Changes in DI

Heterosexual parents who use DI often keep this information from their children due to societal stigma or the shame of male infertility (Daar et al., 2018; Tallandini et al., 2016; Turner & Coyle, 2000), and this lack of disclosure is often supported by physicians (e.g., Lampic et al., 2009). Consequently, most early research focused on parents rather than on offspring. Golombok et al. (1999) surveyed 45 families with a child conceived via DI, 41 families with a child conceived by in vitro fertilization and 21 families with a child conceived by egg donation. The DI parents were the least likely to want to tell their child about their conception (82% compared with 38% of the egg donation parents). At the time of the survey, when the children were ages 4–8, none of the DI parents had told their child about the conception.

In one of the few early studies to focus on adult donor offspring, Turner and Coyle (2000) surveyed 16 adults aged 26–55 in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia recruited from DI support networks. At the time of the study, offspring had no legal rights to know the identity of their sperm donor in those

countries. Many participants wrote that they felt shock, confusion and challenges to their identity upon learning of their DI. This discovery disrupted their relationship with their parents and also resulted in some attempts to search for their sperm donor as a way of making a genetic connection.

Beginning in 1982, The Sperm Bank of California (<https://www.thespermbankofca.org>) was the first to offer DI to women who were not married, including lesbian women, and other fertility clinics followed this practice. The Sperm Bank of California was also the first to offer an open-identity option in 1983 so that sperm donors could enter their demographic information (name, address, phone number, driver's license number, date of birth) and offspring could identify their donor upon turning age 18 (Scheib et al., 2003). In 1984, Sweden became the first nation to abolish anonymous sperm donation, followed by Austria, Croatia, Finland, Malta, Portugal and the United Kingdom (Calhaz-Jorge et al., 2020; Lampic et al., 2022).

Lesbian women who wanted to conceive via DI faced a dilemma. Until the early 1980s, lesbian women lost about half of child custody cases to the men with whom they had conceived children biologically (Falk, 1989). Because a heterosexual biological father (the sperm donor) might have more legal rights than a lesbian nonbiological mother or even a lesbian biological mother, many lesbian prospective parents opted for an anonymous donor (cf. Nordqvist, 2012). At the same time, lesbian parents knew that in the absence of a father, their children would ask questions about how they were conceived, would want to know more about the sperm donor and might wish to contact him. Further complicating donor anonymity is the vast growth in direct-to-consumer DNA testing along with social media, so that sperm donors and donor offspring using these sites may intentionally or accidentally come across each other's identities. Many sperm donors who wanted to remain anonymous, lesbian women who wanted an anonymous donor and offspring who had no interest in their donor's identity now have access to this information and/or have been contacted by individuals linked to their donor conception. These lesbian parents and sperm donors in the 1980s would not have predicted the commercialization of at-home DNA testing kits nor the ability to connect with donors and donor offspring via the internet and social media.

Interviews with 10 lesbian couples recruited from a fertility clinic in Belgium found that mothers changed their notion of the role of the donor over time. Women initially thought of him as a means to pregnancy, but as the offspring grew up, mothers referenced the donor to explain their children's physical characteristics and personality traits (Wyverkens et al., 2014). The donor became more significant as the offspring began to ask questions about him so that "children exerted a non-intentional influence on their parents and thus initiated a change in their parents' constructs of the donor" (Wyverkens et al., 2014, pp. 1252–1253). Similar results have also been found interviewing lesbian parents in Italy (Lingiardi et al., 2016) and single mothers in the United Kingdom (Zadeh et al., 2016). Interviews with 11 young adult donor offspring aged 19–29 found the offspring to vary in their level of contact with their sperm donor over time, often with mothers determining the level of contact (Goldberg & Allen, 2013).

The Donor Sibling Registry was created in 2000 (<https://donorsiblingregistry.com/history-and-mission>), and as the name implies, donor-conceived offspring were not only searching for their sperm donor but also for other offspring conceived from the same donor who are their genetic half-siblings. Parents are also finding families with their children's donor siblings on the internet and forming kinship systems even while their offspring are still young (Hertz & Mattes, 2011). Hertz (2022) interviewed 62 adolescents and young adults aged 14–28 about how these kinship relationships are formed. Results indicated that offspring go through stages of anticipation, first contact and relationship building in the new arena of "doing siblinghood without any preparation" (p. 9) with new contacts who are neither just friends nor everyday family members. Frith et al. (2018) surveyed 65 adults aged 21–65 who were searching for DI donors and relatives via a DNA-based registry. Most were older than 11 when they discovered that they were conceived by DI, and this new knowledge affected their sense of kinship and relatedness with the family in which they were raised.

Theories of Personal and Family Identity Formation

Research often mentions challenges to personal identity (e.g., Turner & Coyle, 2000) when

offspring first learn of their donor conception. Psychologists have used identity process theory (Breakwell, 1992, 2015) to understand how individuals construct a sense of personal identity. Some of the principles of this theory include feeling unique or distinct from others, feeling in control of one's life, experiencing continuity across time, having a sense of self-efficacy, sensing closeness and belongingness and finding meaning and purpose in one's life (Breakwell, 1992; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012). In particular, identity process theory has been used to understand threats to identity (Breakwell, 2015), such as when offspring learn that they are not the biological offspring of both of their parents due to adoption (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011) or DI (Turner & Coyle, 2000).

Byrd and Garwick (2004) described family identity as the qualities that make a family unique and differentiate it from other families. This includes assumptions that families use to make sense of the world, ways in which family members relate to each other and to the larger society, family transitions, coping processes and relationships with health care providers, among many other dimensions. Byrd and Garwick specifically focused on family identity among interracial families, but their statement that these families struggled "to make sense of their lives and thrive in the undefined margins of society" (p. 313) could equally apply to families with parents with minoritized sexual identities. Hertz et al. (2013, p. 62) reflected on the role of "ancestry" as a way of locating the self within the family, including one's location on the family tree. In that sense, discovery of DI could be disruptive to family identity.

Kirkman (2003, p. 2231) described narrative identity as family stories of "how our family came to be." It is usually the parents who construct these narratives, although over time their offspring begin to develop their own narratives. Frith et al. (2018) used theories of kinship to understand the ways in which adult offspring integrate knowledge of their DI conception into their sense of identity. Finding sperm donors and donor siblings affects their sense of family and relatedness, a process that can change over their life course. Mamo and Alston-Stepnitz (2015, p. 526) theorized that in families with parents with minoritized sexual identities, "biological ties alone no longer bond who and what constitutes a family and instead, a constellation of bio and social connections form the basis of kinship."

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to ask offspring who were conceived via DI by lesbian women to reflect on the meaning of DI in their own lives. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are times when individuals are still forming their sense of identity (Para, 2008), whereas the NLLFS offspring have reached the period of "established adulthood" (Mehta et al., 2020) in their early thirties.

When the NLLFS offspring were late adolescents or emerging adults, they may have been reluctant to contact the donor and/or their donor siblings at the risk of upsetting their parents. Scheib et al. (2003, p. 1125) have described the "asymmetrical relationship" between the offspring and the biological mother versus the lack of genetic ties between the offspring and the nonbiological mother. Now that the offspring are adults and no longer living with their parents, they may be more likely to contact their donor and donor siblings.

In particular, we were interested in how offspring felt about their own donor conception, including what made them happiest and what was most challenging. Related to this, we were curious if they had considered being a donor gamete themselves. We also wanted to understand their feelings about their donor siblings. Finally, we wondered how the knowledge of their donor conception had influenced their concept of family.

Method

Participants

At Wave 7, the 75 offspring (37 female, 36 male and two gender nonbinary) were all between the ages of 30–33 ($M = 30.93$, $SD = 0.92$). Most respondents identified as White (90.67%, $n = 68$), and 9.33% ($n = 7$) identified as people of color: African American/Black ($n = 3$), Latina/o or Hispanic ($n = 1$) or other/mixed ($n = 3$). Educational level was high; about half (50.7%, $n = 38$) had completed a bachelor's or registered nurse degree, and an additional 40% ($n = 30$) had completed some graduate school or had a graduate degree. All respondents were born in the United States, and over three quarters (78.67%, $n = 59$) were in a current intimate relationship. The majority of respondents identified as heterosexual

(68.00%, $n = 51$), and a smaller number as lesbian/gay (4.00%, $n = 3$) or bisexual plus (28.00%, $n = 21$).

The offspring had a number of donor types by Wave 7 (see Koh, Rothblum, et al., 2023, for descriptive information). Twenty-four (32.00%) had known their donor since childhood. Of the 27 offspring (36.00%) who had formerly anonymous donors, 20 (74.07%) were still unknown, but seven (25.93%) had contacted their donor via a DI registry. Of the 24 offspring (32.00%) with open-identity donors, nine offspring (37.50%) had contacted their donor since age 18, and 15 (62.50%) had not. By Wave 7, about half the offspring had located donor siblings (see Koh, Bos, et al., 2023, for more information about donor sibling relations).

Procedure

The NLLFS started in 1986 when lesbian women were able to obtain DI and has continued for 36 years with a 90% family retention rate (for an extensive description of the principal investigator's reasons for beginning this study and strategies for retaining participants, see Gartrell, 2021). In order to recruit prospective lesbian parents, flyers were posted and announcements were made at lesbian events, community newspapers, and women's bookstores in the cities of Boston, San Francisco and Washington, DC. NLLFS parents were initially interviewed when they were inseminating or pregnant, with an initial cohort of 84 families and 85 index offspring, including one set of twins. The parents were then surveyed again when their offspring were ages 2 (Wave 2), 5 (Wave 3), 10 (Wave 4), 17 (Wave 5), 25 (Wave 6), and 30–33 (Wave 7). NLLFS offspring were also included at Waves 4–7, beginning when they were age 10. The current Wave 7 sample was surveyed between March 2021 and November 2022 and consisted of 75 offspring. Each offspring respondent received a \$60 gift card for compensation. The Sutter Health Institutional Review Board approved the study (No. 20.070-2; IRBNet no. 348911-21).

Measures

The Wave 7 NLLFS offspring survey included subscales about demographic information, gender identity, sexual orientation, relationship status, parenthood, relationship with sperm donor and

donor siblings, life satisfaction, well-being, social support, felt stigma, victimization and discrimination, coping with discrimination, depression and loneliness, stress, COVID-19 stress, general physical and mental health and the Achenbach Adult Self-Report and Adult Behavior Checklist (<https://www.parinc.com/Products/Pkey/13>). Specifically, in order to understand the offspring experiences about being donor-conceived, there were four open-ended items: (1) "How do you feel about DI conception?" (2) "What part of your DI conception makes you happiest?" (3) "What part of your DI conception has been the most challenging?" and (4) "How has your DI conception affected your view of being a gamete donor yourself?"

In addition, there were two items with yes/no answers that had open-ended follow-up questions. The item "Have you found out if you have any donor half-siblings?" (yes/no) included the follow-up question, "Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your feelings about them or the possibility that they exist?" The item "Has your conception through DI influenced your concept of family?" (yes/no) included the follow-up question "If it has, how?" only for respondents who replied "yes."

Data Analysis and Coding of Qualitative Items

We used the qualitative research analysis presented by Magnusson and Marecek (2015), which focuses on understanding the meanings that respondents make in answering specific research questions. The first author (who is relatively new to the NLLFS) and the last author (the principal investigator who founded the NLLFS) read the responses multiple times and broke these responses into codable segments. We then looked for repetitive patterns across respondents' answers to the open-ended questions and met to discuss these patterns and create codable categories. We then each separately coded 30% of the response categories for the first four open-ended items. These codes were independently sent to the second author, who calculated the Krippendorff's α (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007) for each item. Next, the first and last authors discussed any coding discrepancies and agreed on the final codes. Finally, the first author then assigned codes to the remaining 70% of the items.

The last two open-ended items were not coded. Because they were asked in yes/no format, we describe answers from offspring who answered “yes” versus those who answered “no.”

Results

How Offspring Felt About Their DI

Based on the respondents’ answers to the open-ended item “How do you feel about DI conception?”, 73 items were coded. These qualitative items were coded into feelings that were (1) positive (49.32%), (2) mixed (23.29%), (3) neutral or never thought about it (21.92%) and (4) negative (5.48%). The Krippendorff’s α for this item was .87.

Positive feelings were the most frequent response. Thomas (all names are pseudonyms) wrote,

Lucky. I consider myself an anomaly. Born out of the combination of two people which would otherwise never occur naturally. It is something that has crept into the spine of who I am and I have come to see it as perhaps one of my favorite truths about myself that will always set me apart.

Graciela similarly felt,

Positive. I am grateful for the two amazing moms that raised me, and I wouldn’t trade the family I am from for a more ‘conventional’ family. Having two moms has made ME. And, having a donor is an integral part of that, even though he is not a part of my life. I couldn’t be here without him.

Wendy stated, “I feel very grateful. My parents are so loving, and if it weren’t for the donor, I wouldn’t be here!”

Mixed feelings could be both positive and negative, positive and neutral, or negative and neutral. As Amanda explained,

I feel like my story is unique and I’m grateful for that perspective. My relationship with my donor father is nonexistent, so there is some pain associated with my conception. But mostly I’m pretty neutral at this point, it’s something I’ve done work on and accepted.

Joseph wrote,

Well I have mixed feelings. It’s clear to me that genes have substantial effects on personality and other traits. I wish I could have had genes from both moms, but that’s not biologically possible! (Maybe it will be someday). I think I would have been a somewhat more balanced person with somewhat better mental health if I could have had genes from both moms. This is not because my donor is somehow bad—he’s great actually—but some of

his personality traits and my biological mom’s personality traits have combined in me in problematic ways.

Neutral reactions included not caring, as in Jason’s statement: “Completely blasé. It makes no difference to me. My two mothers are the only parents I have known or need to know.” Some respondents explained that they had never thought about DI; for example, Stan wrote, “not really something I’ve ever thought about—doesn’t matter to me either way.” Shoshana stated, “No thoughts really, just a fact of my life. Nothing to compare it to.”

A few respondents had negative feelings. Petra wrote, “I wish I knew more about the health background on that side of the family. I also feel curious about what they look like, act like, etc., but it’s a mild curiosity, not a deep longing or anything serious.” Caitlin felt, “I think it’s unfair and irresponsible to create a for-profit industry around reproduction. Keeping donors anonymous is potentially dangerous and harmful to the health and mental wellbeing of donor-conceived people.”

What Part of Their DI Makes Offspring Happiest

Based on the respondents’ answers to the open-ended item “What part of your DI conception makes you happiest?”, 82 segments were coded. Qualitative analysis of these segments identified four major categories: (1) DI allowed me or my family to exist (50.00%); (2) DI gave me a donor father, donor siblings or extended family (19.51%); (3) DI made me open to social justice (7.32%); and (4) I do not know or I am neutral or I have not experienced happiness due to DI (23.17%). The Krippendorff’s α for this item was .87.

The first category, that DI allowed respondents or their family to exist, was the most frequent response. For example, Geoff wrote, “That the technology exists which allowed me to come into this world and that it allowed my parent to have a child that they otherwise wouldn’t have had.” A number of respondents emphasized that DI meant they were wanted. Alexandra stated,

That my existence was extremely wanted! My mom had to work really hard, both financially and physically, to bring me into this world. That’s a foundational source of love in our relationship that has underpinned the ensuing 30 years of care she’s given me.

Similarly, Jenny replied,

Knowing that I was so wanted is probably what makes me happiest. The knowledge that my moms planned, worked hard for, dreamed of, and went against major challenges and hardships to have me brings me deep happiness. I will never feel unwanted or unloved because of how intentional they were about having a family.

A few other respondents knew that their birth was not the result of unintentional pregnancy; Michael wrote, “My conception was very intentional, and this is beyond doubt.”

The second category consisted of happiness due to having a donor father, donor siblings or extended family. Steve wrote that “It was incredibly validating when I did finally meet my biological father to learn that we’d had really similar career paths, almost like discovering my vocation is woven into my DNA.” Lucia stated, “I get to have three parents! I get to have three different lineages and families to draw from. Also, my donor rocks and I’m happy to be related to him.” Casey replied, “My parents’ friends used the same donor, so I grew up with a half sibling” and Donna wrote, “The fact that my parents were able to use the same donor for me and my sister. It gives us this unique connection that is only ours.”

A few respondents experienced more openness to social justice as the result of DI. For example, Robin stated,

I hope I’d be similarly inclusive if I hadn’t been conceived by DI, but I’m happy that my circumstances worked out the way they did. I’m glad that I have an expansive view of love and family, and happy that my background led to those beliefs.

Jessica felt “That I have natural-born open-mindedness.”

Finally, some respondents were neither happy nor unhappy or had no strong feelings. Frank wrote, “Not sure how to answer this—it was not a choice I made in any regard,” and Timothy stated,

I don’t really think about it. It’s a fact, but I don’t dwell on it. I’m occasionally amused by close friends’ good-natured teasing (getting texted pictures of a turkey baster on Father’s Day), but it really doesn’t come up much.

What Part of DI Has Been Most Challenging for Offspring

Regarding the open-ended item “What part of your DI conception has been the most challenging?”, 81 segments were coded. Qualitative

analysis identified three major categories: (1) challenges about the donor or lack of medical or health information about him (45.68%); (2) challenges in childhood and growing up, or feeling different (40.74%); and (3) nothing has been challenging or have not thought about it (13.58%). The Krippendorff’s α for this item was 1.00.

The first category included challenges about the donor or lack of medical or health information about him, such as Horace’s comment, “Not knowing half of my genetic makeup,” and Oliver’s reply, “Wondering about health issues.” Tamera stated that “I’ve wished that I knew more about my familial history to understand the roots of that part of me. I wished I had more connection and cultural understanding of my biracial identity which is connected to him.” Helena wrote,

It’s really small and I wouldn’t even call it a challenge, but I’m never exactly sure whether to call my donor my dad or uncle. I kind of use them interchangeably when referring to him and just use his first name with him.

The second category focused on challenges in childhood and growing up or feeling different. Christine wrote,

When I was in elementary school, I faced a decent bit of rejection and bullying from other kids about my lesbian moms, although I eventually realized that people who were that narrow-minded weren’t people I wanted to be friends with anyway.

Fiona stated,

Having to occasionally explain it to others. It doesn’t happen very much anymore, but people would get confused. Mostly about the two moms situation and ‘how was I born?’ was a common question I would get as a child in the 90s. I wouldn’t say it was terribly challenging, just a point of confusion for some people.

Mitchell replied,

Another thing that makes me different from other people. Between artificial insemination, only child, lesbian parents, above-average intelligence, I often do feel a difficulty to relate to others. However, articulating this as I get older has helped. Therapy has helped.

Fewer respondents indicated that they had not thought about challenges or that nothing was challenging. Sheila replied,

I don’t think any of it has been challenging. I am super grateful that I have always lived in communities that have supported my family and have never been the recipient of bullying or teasing or disrespect for having two moms. I have always lived in communities and cities that are liberal and progressive, so I have never

stood out in any way that was deemed wrong or less than.

Similarly, Diane stated, "I honestly can't think of anything. I don't think any of the challenges in my life have been related to the way I was conceived."

How DI Has Affected Offspring Views of Being a Gamete Donor Themselves

The question "How has your DI conception affected your view of being a gamete donor yourself?" resulted in 91 segments. Qualitative analysis of these segments identified three major categories: (1) positive reasons (45.05%), (2) negative reasons (37.36%) and (3) neutral or unsure or have not thought about it (17.58%). The Krippendorff's α for this item was 1.00.

Regarding positive reasons, a number of respondents mentioned the ability to help others. Don wrote, "I like the idea of being able to help another non-traditional family have a child," and Harold explained, "Some families can't have children through traditional means and I would be happy to help with that if I can." Some respondents specifically mentioned providing a similar opportunity to the one that was offered to their own parents. Anita stated, "I would be open to it simply because of the opportunity it gave my parents to have a family, and I would want to give that same opportunity to another family." Sondra replied, "I do like the idea of paying it forward in the sense of giving someone the ability to have children in the same way my mothers were." Lucas wrote,

Yes! I have zero interest at this time in having my own children. If being a donor could help another family to solidify their goals of having children, I would be happy to donate. I would prefer to be a donor who knows the child before they reach 18, as I feel that if I had had a chance to meet my donor before adulthood, I would be more comfortable in having a connection with them.

Negative reasons included the relative difficulty of donating eggs versus sperm, as Bethany mentioned: "It hasn't really. My reasons for not considering donating an egg are more about how invasive it is to do so and has nothing to do with my conception." A few respondents mentioned reluctance to be a gamete donor due to health reasons. For example, Maryann wrote, "I only said that I wouldn't be a donor because I believe that I can't for health reasons." Others mentioned inability to stay emotionally unattached, as did Deborah, who stated,

I first considered it in college and just couldn't do it, because the thought of a kid out there from my own body gave me so much longing. Longing to know them, to be there for them. I wanted that kid/kids to be my own.

A number of respondents indicated that they had never thought about being a gamete donor. Alex indicated that "It hasn't really. I have never thought about becoming one." Carlotta wrote, "I am unsure if I should since I cannot accurately and fully describe my medical history on my own donor's side. Therefore, I don't know if I should pass that on to another child."

Whether Offspring Have Found Any Donor Siblings

Forty offspring (53.33%) answered "yes" to the question, "Have you found out if you have any donor half-siblings?" Thirty-five answered "no" (46.67%).

Among those who answered "yes," Jack found the experience positive, stating, "Finding them has been one of the most interesting things about the last year," and Kevin wrote, "I hope to have her continue to think of me as a brother and an asset to have, throughout her life." Similarly, Anita wrote, "We get along wonderfully and have really valued knowing each other as half-sisters who feel more like friends, in a way that feels good for both of us."

Other offspring who answered "yes" were more neutral, such as Renee, who explained,

My sperm donor once excitedly had me meet my 'cousins.' I had absolutely no connection with them and I hope to not use any more of my time meeting people who merely share blood with me, but none of my ethos.

Bart also had a neutral reaction: "Don't think about them/the concept. Couldn't care less. They are not my siblings. Just other results of a donor needing money in his youth." A few offspring had a large number of donor siblings. Shannon wrote,

There was about a 2-year period after I went from knowing I had about 4 siblings to finding out I suddenly had around 30, when I became overwhelmed and stopped talking to them. It felt like too much pressure to keep up with them. I came to terms with it eventually, though, and have been in contact with them since.

The situation was more complicated for some offspring, sometimes due to the donor sibling's family. Margie replied,

I know about her but she doesn't know about me, so it makes me feel like me/my conception was a secret. I'd

like to know her but anticipate it may be complicated/difficult for her when she finds out. I don't want to be the one to tell her.

Gloria wrote,

It was really interesting to hear about how her parents decided to use a donor, which was a very different situation than my family. Her father was sterile so they chose a donor so they could have a family, but decided to not tell the kids.

Offspring who answered “no” sometimes already knew they had no donor siblings, such as Neil, who stated, “Since I know and have known my biological parents my whole life, I know I don't have any half-siblings so I feel that these questions don't really pertain to my situation.” Others indicated that they would rather not know, such as Harry, who wrote, “I would prefer to remain ignorant to their existence.” Martin replied, “I have a few unconfirmed suspicions about their existence. Just leads, but nothing concrete. Haven't decided how to go about it, not a major priority in life right now.”

How DI Influenced Concept of Family

Respondents were asked, “Has your conception through DI influenced your concept of family?” (yes/no). The majority, 73.33%, said yes, and 26.67% said no. Only respondents who answered “yes” got the open-ended follow-up question, “If it has, how?”

Among respondents who answered “yes,” some explained that this is the only form of family they had ever known. Damien wrote, “I'm not sure how to answer this, because the only concept of family I've ever known has included donor conception. It feels impossible to accurately guess how I might feel about family if that wasn't the case.” Emily replied,

This is a difficult question to answer because I only answered yes because how can it not influence my conception of family if this is all I have ever known. But I don't know how I would feel about it otherwise if I hadn't been conceived this way. Probably still positive.

Other respondents mentioned that family is a broad concept and does not only include genetic relatives, such as Edwin, who stated, “Some of the most influential and important people involved with raising me weren't related to me by blood but whether they were or not they all loved me as one family.” Robert too wrote that “Families come in MANY forms. There is no

such thing as a ‘normal’ family. Normal is what you choose it to be.” Tyra felt that her own conception resulted in her being a better parent; she wrote,

I think I value family a great deal. I know that my parents fought to have me, in a time when it wasn't ‘normal’ and because of that I value family above all else. I think it has made me a better parent, because I know what is important in a family, how to fight for those you love.

Carmen replied that her DI conception has also helped to broaden the views of others:

It has expanded my understanding of what family means and helped broaden my ability to share that understanding with others. I am extremely open about my family and because of my confidence in and comfortability with my family configuration, it has allowed me to share my story and views of what ‘family’ means with others around me, which in turn (I like to think) has then broadened their own understanding or definition of what family means.

Discussion

Offspring generally felt positive about their donor conception, realizing that it enabled them to be born into a loving family that very much wanted them. They were grateful that the technology existed to allow parents with minoritized sexual identities to have children back in the 1980s. Most agreed that their nontraditional conception had influenced their concept of family, even positively affecting their own ability to parent. A number of offspring indicated willingness to be a gamete donor themselves as a way of paying forward their own opportunities. At the same time, offspring described challenges in childhood and feeling different. Others listed challenges about the donor or a lack of medical information about him. About half had found out if they had donor siblings.

These results are heartening given that these offspring are the first generation born via DI to lesbian parents in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at a time when society stigmatized their families. They grew up and reached adulthood as civil rights for families with minoritized sexual identities were expanding. Today, there is a plethora of books available for children conceived via DI (e.g., Leya, 2023; Tyner, 2014) and also for those with donor siblings (e.g., Dorfman, 2017; Wright, 2023).

It is important to point out that some offspring wrote that they had never thought about their donor conception, including those who had never thought about challenges or about being a future

gamete donor. Some had never thought about donor siblings, and others were positive that they had none. In this regard, most prior studies used respondents recruited via DI banks or registries, particularly the Donor Sibling Registry (e.g., Hertz et al., 2013; Jadva et al., 2009, 2010; Nelson et al., 2013). This might have biased the results in the direction of offspring who wanted to find their donor, donor siblings or other genetic relatives. For example, Hertz et al. (2013) found that 83% of respondents recruited via the Donor Sibling Registry wanted to contact their nonidentified donor, and that may be higher than rates found in the general donor-conceived population. Therefore, the NLLFS offspring, with a diversity of sperm donor types, are a better indicator of the general population of offspring born to parents with minoritized sexual identities than are offspring using donor registries in order to find donor relatives.

The offspring did not appear to perceive knowledge about their birth through DI as a “threat to identity,” as postulated by identity process theory (Breakwell, 2015). They reflected on their uniqueness but also had a sense of belongingness and self-worth. In their description of family identity theory, Byrd and Garwick (2004, p. 313) stated that “Women in interracial partnerships described their racial identity development in two processes: (a) rejecting constraining narratives and (b) identifying with empowering narratives.” The NLLFS offspring, too, were aware that their conception was atypical but clearly felt empowered in their families. As Mamo and Alston-Stepnitz (2015, pp. 524–525) have stated, “Lesbians, as they negotiated fertility biomedicine, did so in ways that imagined and created kinship ties based on the affinities offered by the technoscientific offerings.” Thus, the offspring grew up among other families with parents with minoritized sexual identities, where the presence of sperm donors and donor siblings was not as unusual as it might have been in heterosexual-parent families.

A strength of this study is that all offspring were established adults in the same age group, so that they were past the early stages of identity development. Also, the NLLFS is a prospective study with a 90% family retention rate that began when the parents were pregnant or inseminating (Gartrell, 2021). Thus, the results are not skewed by overrepresentation of offspring who want to know their donor or donor siblings.

However, the present study is limited by the fact that the offspring and parents are overwhelmingly White and well educated. This is reflected by the expense of DI and the lower incomes of women of color (Carpinello et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2022). Future research should focus on adults conceived via DI who are more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity and socioeconomic class. For example, Mezey (2008) found that lesbian women of color and working-class lesbian women worried that the combination of being lesbian and having children might result in losing connections with their families of origin and their communities compared with White, middle-class lesbian mothers.

The relatively small sample size of male, female and gender nonbinary participants, coupled with 18 subcategories across six open-ended items, did not permit us to analyze offspring DI experiences by gender. Research with larger samples would be needed to examine whether DI is more or less challenging for adult offspring based on gender identity. Despite concerns that males without fathers will have behavioral problems, prior research with the NLLFS offspring at Wave 5 when they were adolescents found that about half had male role models and that the presence or absence of male role models was unrelated to psychological adjustment (Bos et al., 2012).

A few years ago, the NLLFS offspring might have been regarded as a cohort that would never be replicated in the future, thanks to advances in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) civil rights. However, these rights are now being eroded due to anti-LGBTQ legislation in many U.S. states, often directed specifically at children and families (Duarte et al., 2022; King et al., 2024). In that regard, the lived experiences of NLLFS offspring may serve an important function to counteract the current negative political and legal climate for families with minoritized sexual identities.

Clinical Implications and Applications

As the use of DI increases, mental health professionals are likely to encounter donor offspring and their parents in therapy. Clinicians may not have received extensive training in counseling offspring born through reproductive technologies, so it is important that they gain this knowledge via continuing education opportunities. Their understanding needs to encompass

individual, familial and societal factors facing offspring conceived via DI.

There has been little focus on the parent who is not the recipient of DI (i.e., heterosexual fathers and lesbian nonbiological mothers). In a study of 244 nonbiological parents recruited via the U.S. Donor Sibling Registry (Frith et al., 2012), 39.4% of lesbian nonbiological mothers and 57.5% of heterosexual fathers had had counseling in advance of their partner's DI. The majority replied that they had received little advice from the sperm bank, including whether to use an anonymous or open-identity donor and what to tell their child. These parents stated that they would advise new parents to be honest with their children and tell them at a young age. Somers et al. (2017) interviewed nine biological and nine nonbiological lesbian mothers about decision making related to DI and found that being able to participate during DI was important for nonbiological mothers to feel part of the process.

Clinicians should be prepared to discuss issues of donor anonymity and self-disclosure to children, as well as other concerns that parents and offspring may have. Guidelines for clinicians in counseling gamete donors, recipients and DI offspring are detailed by the Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (Daar et al., 2018) and the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology Working Group on Reproductive Donation (ESHRE Working Group on Reproductive Donation et al., 2022). Both organizations strongly encourage openness about DI and sharing information with offspring about their sperm donors. They also recommend that sperm banks should gather health information about donors and store these data in their records.

Clinicians should also be able to recommend community resources for offspring conceived via DI. Support groups for adoptees (e.g., The National Organization for the Counseling of Adoptees and Their Parents) existed before those for DI, but the latter have now been founded. For example, Donor Conceived Community (<https://donorconceivedcommunity.org/>) is free for donor-conceived members and has events for individuals who are LGBTQ, people of color and multiracial, Jewish, parents, LGBTQ parents, sperm donors, egg-donor conceived and looking for sperm donors.

In sum, conversations about DI are an ongoing process for families and will vary with the

developmental stage and curiosity of the offspring. This study is a contribution to the public discourse about lesbian parenting in particular and alternative reproductive methods in general. Large numbers of parents with minoritized sexual identities have used these reproductive methods, and their offspring, now adults, are increasingly able to locate their sperm donor and donor siblings.

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