

Nothing if not family? Genetic ties beyond the parent/child dyad

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Abstract

Internationally, there is considerable inconsistency in the recognition and regulation of children's genetic connections outside the family. In the context of gamete and embryo donation, challenges for regulation seem endless. In this paper, I review some of the paths that have been taken to manage children' being closely genetically related to people outside their families. I do so against the background of recognising the importance of children's interests as moral status holders. I look at recent qualitative research involving donor-conceived people and borrow their own words to make sense of a purported interest to know (of) their close genetic ties. I also review ways in which gamete donation may have facilitated new kinds of kinship, which are at the same time genetic and chosen. In short, in this paper, I explore what meaning there could be in genetic connections that is not about parenthood. Further, I argue that the focus on parenthood in previous work in this area may be detrimental to appreciating some of the goods that can be derived from close genetic connections.

KEYWORDS

diblings, donor conception, family ethics, genetic connections, moral status

1 | INTRODUCTION

With escalating infertility rates and increasing use of reproductive technologies, often more than two people are involved in the conception of a child. The use of reproductive material from outside the prospective parents' own bodies has been termed 'third-party reproduction'. The tension between children's interest in knowing their close genetic relatives in the context of third-party reproduction and parents' discretion in controlling and even preventing access to this knowledge has received little attention in ethics scholarship. While this is now changing,¹ the focus still tends to be strictly on

knowledge of genetic parents as opposed to, for example, genetic siblings.

Today, children are increasingly seen as adults' moral equals; accordingly, their interests are important in their own right, just as those of adults are. Children's interests may differ from those of their parents, and when they do, we need to give them equal weight. Despite this, there are limited options for conceptualising connections to children outside of the framework of the family. Biological links outside of the family, such as those created by gamete donation, are often framed in terms of potential competition for parenthood status. If biological connections are about parenthood and family, then the existence of biological parents outside the family is a threat to the legal parents; if they are not, then children cannot have a legitimate interest in them, at least not one that trumps

¹see e.g., Groll, D. (2021), *Conceiving people. Genetic knowledge and the ethics of sperm and egg donation*. Oxford University Press.

their parents' better judgement. However, if we look at genetic links specifically, recent studies of donor-conceived people do *not* seem to confirm the expectation that their interest in the donors is exclusively about parenthood, nor that it is a threat to the legal parents' parental status. These insights raise new questions: what is the significance of the relationship between a child and her genetic relatives outside the family? If a child's genetic relatives are *not* her family, what are they to her? Is it problematic for parents not to allow children to know their genetic relatives or to develop relationships with them, and if so, why?

My aims in this paper are twofold: to analyse the meaning of biological relatedness from donor children's perspective and to identify how biological connections can be described meaningfully beyond the exclusive language of family and parenthood. Throughout the paper, I use terminology such as *biological relatives*, *genetic siblings* and *biological parents*. Words such as *relatives*, *siblings* and *parents* are family-related and may contribute to the tensions that I will be exploring. This may indicate a need to develop our terminology further, in order to be able to denote properties and connections to children without recourse to normatively loaded concepts. I will also talk about children having an interest in knowledge of or acquaintance with biological relatives. I do however not here build the case for there being an objective or primary interest in a philosophical sense. Instead, I use the word 'interest' in the looser sense of 'being interested in', in order to explore the meaning that genetic connections may have for donor-conceived individuals from their own perspective.²

The paper is situated at the intersection of the ethics of close personal relationships, family ethics and reproductive ethics. Discussions in reproductive ethics tend to focus on new and prospective reproductive technologies and the challenges they raise. Reproductive ethicists have been concerned primarily with the interests of prospective parents or states and have yet to fully incorporate philosophical conceptualisations of children's interests.³ In this paper, I will draw these areas together: I will address changes brought by new technologies in their societal context and in the context of contemporary philosophical views on the moral status of children, close personal relationships and caring relationships in general.

In a much-cited publication, the philosopher David Velleman refers to gamete donors as the child's parents and deems gamete donation immoral because of its negative effects on self-knowledge and ultimately on the process of identity formation.⁴ Responding to Velleman, Sally Haslanger suggests that knowledge of one's biological relatives 'can be a good thing' but that it is not a basic good such that it would create a duty on others to facilitate it. If anything, parents should work to counter the narrative that presents biology as important for family relations.⁵

According to John Robertson, people have a right to reproduce, which covers specifically *biological* reproduction irrespective of whether

there is an intention to parent the resulting child.⁶ Robertson's account is in line with a core assumption behind the fertility industry: that people wishing to become parents always seek (or should seek) to do so via genetic reproduction, with gamete donation only considered if the goal of genetic reproduction fails. Although Robertson's concept of *reproductive autonomy* is very influential in reproductive ethics, his commitment to the value of genetic reproduction is not. Reproductive ethicists tend to criticise the association of genetic connections with parenthood. Some consider it irrational and caution that we should not encourage people to pursue genetic parenthood.⁷ Even if the desire to have offspring may be benign, it does not warrant medical support, and offering such support reinforces prejudice.⁸ For others, the desire itself is objectionable.⁹ Against this background of representing genetic connections as either indicative of family relations (and especially parenthood), or meaningless and irrational, I specifically look at whether there can be value in such connections that is not about family or (genetic) parenthood.

In order to do so, I will first review where we are now in the recognition and regulation of children's biological connections outside the family. I then centre the paper on the recognition of the moral status of children and the importance of their interests. I then review qualitative research involving donor-conceived people and use their own words to make sense of the purported interest to know (of) their close genetic ties. This part of the paper should also make clear the importance of incorporating their perspective in any discussion of whether there is such an interest and what it requires of whom.

2 | WHERE WE ARE NOW

The issue of how children's interests should be balanced against the interests of adults (parents, extended families, donors, or others) in the area of third-party reproduction is highly contested. Ethicists, social scientists, healthcare professionals, policymakers and donor-conceived people themselves disagree on the significance of genes in third-party reproduction, on whether anonymity and secrecy are justified and on how regulations should change.¹⁰ Regulatory management of children's

⁶Robertson, J. (1994). *Children of choice. Freedom and the new reproductive technologies*. Princeton University Press.

⁷E.g., Mertes, H. (2014). Gamete derivation from stem cells: Revisiting the concept of genetic parenthood. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 40(11), 44–47.

⁸Di Nucci, E. (2016). IVF, same-sex couples and the value of biological ties. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 42, 784–787.

⁹Roache, R. (2016). The value of being biologically related to one's family. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 42(12), 755–756.

¹⁰For example, Pennings, G. (2017). Donor children do not benefit from being told about their conception. *BioNews* 900; Pennings, G. (2017). Disclosure of donor conception, age of disclosure and the well-being of donor offspring. *Human Reproduction*, 32(5), 969–973; versus Blyth, E., Crawshaw, M., Rodino, I., & Thorn, P. (2017). Donor-conceived people do benefit from being told about their conception. *BioNews*, 902; Crawshaw, M., Adams, D., Allan S., Blyth E., Bourne K., Brügge C., Chien, A., Clissa, A., Daniels, K., Glazer, E., Haase, J., Hammarberg, K., van Hooff, H., Hunt, J., Indekeu, A., Johnson, L., Kim, Y., Kirkman, M., Kramer, W., ... Zweifel J. E. (2017). Disclosure and donor-conceived children. *Human Reproduction*, 32(7), 1535–1536. Also Ravitsky, V. (2010). "Knowing where you come from": The rights of donor-conceived individuals and the meaning of genetic relatedness. *Minnesota Journal of Law, Science & Technology*, 11(2), 665–684; Ravitsky, V. (2017). The right to know one's genetic origins and cross-border medically assisted reproduction. *Israel Journal of Health Policy Research*, 6(3), 1–6; De Melo-Martin, I. (2014). The ethics of anonymous gamete donation: Is there a right to know one's genetic origins? *Hastings Center Report*, 44(2), 28–35.

²Groll calls these 'worthwhile significant subjective interests'; In Groll, op. cit. note 1.

³Wiesemann, C. (2006). *Moral equality, bioethics, and the child*. Springer.

⁴Velleman, D. (2005). Family history. *Philosophical Papers*, 34(3), 357–378.

⁵Haslanger, S. (2009). Family, ancestry and self: What is the moral significance of biological ties. *Adoption & Culture*, 2(1), 91–122.

biological connections outside the family varies significantly across Europe and beyond. Egg, sperm and embryo donations are allowed in Sweden; however, surrogate motherhood is forbidden. In Germany, sperm and embryo donations are allowed, but egg donation is not; a recent legislative initiative would have had women 'confess' the names of their past lovers if there were reasons to believe that their husbands were not their children's biological fathers.¹¹

While gamete donation used to be practised in conditions of anonymity and confidentiality, this has been challenged throughout Europe and beyond. Some states enforce anonymity for gamete donors, while others forbid it. In 2015, the state of Victoria in Australia removed anonymity retroactively, to great controversy. In 1985, Sweden was the first country internationally to ban anonymity.¹² Since 2019, in Sweden children who were donor-conceived have (in principle) a legal right to know, and parents 'shall as soon as appropriate inform their children that they were conceived as a result of such a treatment'.¹³ However, according to a Swedish court decision, a sperm donor can be proved '99,999% the child's father' and shall be the child's legal father if the donation did not follow the legal route and unless another man is to be acknowledged as such.¹⁴ Decisions such as these reveal the association that is still made in the law between biological parentage and legal parenthood, outside the nuclear family.

At the same time, internationally, gamete donors and other participants in fertility treatments are often said to provide nothing more than a service or treatment, in a way similar to blood donation.¹⁵ In countries where gamete donation is nonanonymous, children can find out their donors' identity, but only if their parents disclose the donation to them. Often parents do not disclose it, although disclosure rates are increasing.¹⁶ In Sweden, children can only access identifying information about their donor after they are 'sufficiently mature'.¹⁷ In the United Kingdom, they can access it only once they turn 18¹⁸: thus, only when they are no longer children. They will not know that they have this choice unless their parents

have informed them of their donor status. This raises the question of whether children's interests *as children* are served by these policies. As we will see later in this paper, evidence from social science suggests that children can benefit from being allowed to reach out to genetic relatives *as children*—and some of these benefits may no longer be accessible to them if they can only do so as adults.

Lastly, but importantly, these provisions only concern identifying information *about the donor*: not about donor siblings. In several countries, there are databases where donor-conceived children could find each other if they wish. And, of course, donors and other genetic relatives can be found with the help of direct-to-consumer DNA testing. However, it is only identifying information about the donor that is made accessible by law to donor-conceived people in nonanonymous jurisdictions.

3 | THE MORAL STATUS OF CHILDREN AND THEIR PLACE IN THE FAMILY

Not long ago in the Western world, it was considered inappropriate for women to interact with people outside the family without the permission of their husbands. The legitimacy of such expectations came under scrutiny with the acknowledgement of women's moral status and their moral equality with men. Likewise, the recognition of children's moral status has come a long way. In the words of one historian, '[t]he history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken'.¹⁹ Progress in natural and social sciences reveals the endemic underestimation of children's moral and rational properties.²⁰

The idea that children have moral status is a modern development in the Western world. Philosophers referred to children as their fathers' property, and it is only since the 18th century that concern for children as morally worthy independently of the wishes of their parents has taken hold. The development of this conception of the moral status of children really took off during the 19th century²¹ and is reinforced by regulatory instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The convention frames societal concern for children in terms of 'the best interests of the child', which should be 'a primary consideration' in 'all actions concerning children'.²² Philosophical understandings of parental rights and responsibilities have shifted dramatically, from a focus on the parents and their

¹¹Cutas, D., & Smajdor, A. (2020). 'Duped fathers', 'cuckoo children', and the problem of basing fatherhood on biology: A philosophical analysis. In K. Beier, C. Brügge, P. Thorn & C. Wiesemann (Eds.), *Assistierte reproduktion mit Hilfe dritter*. Springer.

¹²Gottlieb C., Lalos O., & Lindblad F. (2000). Disclosure of donor insemination to the child: The impact of Swedish legislation on couples' attitudes. *Human Reproduction*, 15(9), 2052–2056.

¹³Lag. (2018: 1279), update to the Swedish Parental Code 1949: 381, Retrieved July 2023, from www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/foraldrabalk-1949381_sfs-1949-381#K6

¹⁴Hovrätt 2015-T 7895.

¹⁵Fahmy, M. (2013). On procreative responsibility in assisted and collaborative reproduction. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 16, 55–70.

¹⁶Lalos, A., Gottlieb, C., & Lalos, O. (2007). Legislated right for donor-insemination children to know their genetic origin: A study of parental thinking. *Human Reproduction*, 22(6), 1759–1768; Daniels, K., Gillett, W., & Grace, V. (2009). Parental information sharing with donor insemination conceived offspring: A follow-up study. *Human Reproduction*, 24, 1099–1105; Scheib, J., & Hastings, P. (2012). Donor-conceived children raised by lesbian couples. In D. Cutas & S. Chan (Eds.), *Families—Beyond the nuclear ideal*. Bloomsbury Academic; Lampic, C., Skoog Svaneberg, A., Sorjonen, K., & Sydsjö, G. (2021). Understanding parents' intention to disclose the donor conception to their child by application of the theory of planned behaviour. *Human Reproduction*, 36(2), 395–404.

¹⁷Lag 2006: 351, chapter 7.7. Retrieved July 2023, from riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/lag-2006351-om-genetisk-integritet-mm_sfs-2006-351

¹⁸HFEA. Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008. Retrieved July 2023, from legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/22

¹⁹de Mause, L. (1974). *The history of childhood* (vol. 1). Harper and Row.

²⁰see e.g., Clément, F. & Koenig, M. (2019). Epistemology: Knowledge in childhood. In A. Gheaus, G. Calder, & J. de Wispelare, *The Routledge handbook of the philosophy of childhood and children* (pp. 13–22). Routledge; Cain, M. J. (2019). Language and communication: Evidence from studying children. In A. Gheaus, G. Calder, & J. de Wispelare, *The Routledge handbook of the philosophy of childhood and children* (pp. 23–32). Routledge; Choudhury, S., & Ferranti, N. (2019). The science of the adolescent brain and its cultural implications. In A. Gheaus, G. Calder & J. de Wispelare (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of the philosophy of childhood and children* (pp. 33–44). Routledge.

²¹Noggle, R., & Brennan, S. (2007). Taking responsibility for children. In S. Brennan & R. Noggle, *Taking responsibility for children*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press; Archard, D. (2008). *Children: Rights and childhood*. Routledge.

²²United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child*. United Nations, 1989, art. 3. Retrieved July 2023, from <https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/crc/crc.html>

interests to children and *their* interests.²³ Such changes in how the moral status of children is conceptualised impose new obligations for others to behave in ways that promote children's well-being, both as children and as future adults.²⁴

In the Western world, it has been taken as axiomatic that children should be born within wedlock and raised by their (biological) parents.²⁵ But recent work in psychology, sociology and other disciplines now points towards attachment, relationship quality and social support as essential factors for children's well-being²⁶—rather than whether the family unit conforms to a certain form. Children can no longer be relegated to the family *come what may*, and new perspectives on the justification of parental rights have emerged, as grounded partly or entirely in children's interests.²⁷

Practices such as gamete and embryo donation and surrogate motherhood increase the number of people involved in the conception and birth of children. Many children nowadays acquire and lose a number of connections with adults: their genetic, gestational, birth parents, the romantic partners of their parents and actual legal guardians. The question of which of these adults ought to be recognised as a child's legal parents, and how (if at all) the others' relationships with that child should be recognised and protected, has no straightforward answer. Currently, throughout Europe, the legal decision to recognise certain adults as a child's parents enables the exclusion of others who may be connected to the child in some way. Parents can exclude others from their children's lives, regardless of the wishes or interests of anyone involved (with some hard-won exceptions, such as grandparents who obtained contact rights²⁸). This exclusivity renders invisible connections that may be important for children.²⁹ However, if children have legitimate interests in knowledge of their biological ties, then enforcing parental discretion in these matters may not be justified.

Harm to children is an important consideration. Parental responsibility requires that parents protect their children. People outside the family may threaten children's well-being, whatever connection they may have to them, and especially where there are expectations involved. Reaching out towards people with whom they share biological ties may hurt children. They may experience rejection³⁰ or shame. They may uncover

unpleasant, hard-to-cope-with truths: genetic relatives may not be as they imagined them; they may be ill, or they may be deceased.

Yet parents may also have a moral responsibility to allow their children to develop and maintain connections that are meaningful *for them*, even when this is uncomfortable or risky. For example, in the context of surrogate motherhood, researchers have indicated that severing contact between surrogate mothers and the children they give birth to can harm both parties.³¹ As we will see in the next section, there are arguably goods that donor-conceived children can only access if allowed to interact with genetic relatives.

In the following, I will briefly review some findings from qualitative research with donor-conceived people to get an idea of what they may be experiencing, looking for—or finding—in their genetic relatives.

4 | 'I ALSO WANT TO MIRROR MYSELF BACKWARD'

The interest in knowing one's genetic relatives has been construed in several ways. In one categorisation, possible avenues are divided into medical, identity, relational and parental disclosure.³² In this section of the paper and the next, I will look at the latter three of these aspects—with the twist that the interest to seek contact and form a relationship may regard genetic relatives *other than* the donor: namely, genetic siblings.

Historically, qualitative research on children's interests in the knowledge of biological connections has concentrated on family relations.³³ In recent years, however, work has moved towards exploring the meaning of genes in relation to identity.³⁴ Contra Velleman cited above, social science researchers tend to disassociate biological connections from the family and take a view of identity as relational in nature.³⁵

Social scientists have coined new terminologies for biological connections outside of the family: from 'relative strangers'³⁶ to 'genetic strangers'³⁷ to 'curious connections'.³⁸ They note the complexity of donor-conceived people's interest in their donors and 'donor siblings' and the fragility of parents' expectation that they can control their offspring's interest in and knowledge of their genetic connections.³⁹ They also show how, against the background of thinning family branches throughout the Western world,

²³Brennan, S., & Noggle, R. (1997). The moral status of children: Children's rights, parents' rights, and family justice. *Social Theory and Practice*, 23(1), 1–26; Archard, op. cit. note 21; Hannan, S., & Vernon, R. (2008). Parental rights: A role-based approach. *Theory and Research in Education*, 6(2), 173–189; Brighouse, H., & Swift, A. (2014). *Family values. The ethics of parent-child relationships*. Princeton University Press.

²⁴Gheaus, A. (2014). Unfinished adults and defective children: On the nature and value of childhood. *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy*, 9(1), 1–21.

²⁵Cutas & Chan, op. cit. note 16.

²⁶Golombok, S. (2015). *Modern families. Parents and children in new family forms*. Cambridge University Press.

²⁷Brennan & Noggle, op. cit. note 23; Hannan & Vernon, op. cit. note 23; Archard, op. cit. note 21; Brighouse & Swift, op. cit. note 23; Wiesemann, op. cit. note 3.

²⁸Henderson, T. (2005). Grandparent visitation rights: Successful acquisition of court-ordered visitation. *Journal of Family Issues*, 26(1), 107–137.

²⁹Gheaus, A. (2017). Children's vulnerability and legitimate authority over children. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 35(S1), 6075; Bartlett, K. (1984). Rethinking parenthood as an exclusive status: The need for legal alternatives when the premise of the nuclear family has failed. *Virginia Law Review*, 70(5), 879963.

³⁰Ravitsky (2017), op. cit. note 10; Turner, A. J., & Coyle, A. (2000). What does it mean to be a donor offspring? The identity experiences of adults conceived by donor insemination and the implications for counselling and therapy. *Human Reproduction*, 15, 2041–2051.

³¹van Zyl, L. (2002). Intentional parenthood and the nuclear family. *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 23(2), 107–118; Shanley, M., & Jesudason, S. (2012). Surrogacy: Reinscribing or pluralising understandings of family? In Cutas & Sarah Chan, op. cit. note 16.

³²Ravitsky (2010) and (2017), op. cit. note 10.

³³Indekeu, A. (2015). Parents' expectations and experiences of resemblance through donor conception. *New Genetics and Society*, 34(4), 398–416; Kirkman, M. (2004). Genetic connection and relationships in narratives of donor assisted conception. *Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society*, 2, 1–20.

³⁴Turner & Coyle, op. cit. note 30.

³⁵Nordqvist, P., & Smart, C. (2014). *Relative strangers. Family life, genes and donor conception*. Palgrave.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Hertz, R., & Nelson, M. (2019). *Random families. Genetic strangers, sperm donor siblings, and the creation of new kin*. Oxford University Press.

³⁸Nordqvist, P., & Gilman, L. (2022). *Donors: Curious connections in donor conceptions*. Emerald Publishing.

³⁹Nordqvist & Smart, op. cit., note 35.

donor-conceived people forge close relationships with their 'donor siblings' across geographical areas, ages, and social and educational backgrounds.⁴⁰ Many of these close relationships are formed early in children's lives—which requires the involvement and support of their parents.

In one study of genetic siblings conceived with donor embryos being raised in different families, researchers found that all parents supported communication and contact between the children. As they matured, children themselves determined the fate of these inter-familial relationships.⁴¹ Some chose to maintain their bonds into adulthood and state that they were formed in childhood. This may be a good that would not have been achieved had they only been able to seek their donor siblings as adults. If so, then regulations that allow children access to information only once they become adults will prevent them from experiencing this good. Regulations that only provide information about the donor(s) and not about any genetic siblings do not address this interest to relate to donor siblings.

According to one report, sperm donors who have contact with the children they helped create refer to those children as being 'like a family member'.⁴² The donors in Hertz et al.'s study reported that 'establishing boundaries and defining the relationship can be very difficult'.⁴³ Some of them felt they were perceived as a threat by the male parents⁴⁴ (that fathers can feel threatened has also been found by Widbom et al.⁴⁵). They did not see themselves as parents of the donor-conceived children, nor did they see these children as a part of their own family in a narrow sense: but many did see both children and their parents as members of their extended families.⁴⁶ Interestingly, this is not consistent across the reports of this group and especially across generations. One interviewee said 'I went from zero to grandfather faster than anyone ever, and I really enjoy the grandkids. I feel like I hit the jackpot and didn't earn it'.⁴⁷

Donor-conceived adults have referred to donors as 'part of my story'. They claimed that 'those who do share a genetic link with their parents cannot know what it means not to have it'. They wished to do 'away with the mist'.⁴⁸ They experienced analogies made between gamete and blood donation as offensive, and the rejection of the legitimacy of their interest in genetic connections as humiliating:

unlike blood, gametes are 'your starting package for the rest of your life'.

In the words of the interviewees,

"I can mirror myself in the future in my children, but I also want to mirror myself backward, in the past."

"I want to know (...) what makes me 'me,' but a piece of them makes 'me' too."⁴⁹

Indekeu and Hens found that the importance attributed to genes by donor-conceived people varied both between different respondents and in the same participant over time or within a specific context. All those they interviewed thought that genes had some significance. Although they did not see genes as determinative of family relations, they regarded knowledge about their genetic origins as important for their identity and something they were entitled to.⁵⁰ This is in line with findings in other studies.⁵¹ This perspective contrasts both with parents' concerns as captured in previous qualitative studies (e.g., fear that the children will perceive the donors as their 'real' parents⁵²) and with policy-makers' inconsistent attitudes towards the meaning of biological connections.

5 | GENETIC JEALOUSY

The fact that children wish to 'mirror themselves backwards' in strangers to the family can be difficult for parents to cope with. Parents can hope to influence but cannot control how their children will relate to the donor. In one study, researchers found that some donor-conceived children may refer to their donor as their 'father' or 'daddy', against the wishes of their parents.⁵³ Some parents worry that the donors might replace them in the hearts of their children. In another study, one donor-conceived person expressed interest in their genetic background, 'but by talking about it, I hurt people, so in a sense I cannot talk about that part of me'.⁵⁴ This sentence captures the problem of parents' unease with the genetic otherness of their children.

In a study on semiopen embryo adoption, parents who had supported their children's relationships with genetic siblings stated that:

⁴⁰Hertz & Nelson, op. cit., note 37.

⁴¹Frith, L., Blyth, E., & Lui, S. (2019). Family building using embryo adoption: Relationships and contact arrangements between provider and recipient families—A mixed-methods study. *Human Reproduction*, 5(32), 1092–1099; Blyth, E., Lui, S., & Frith, L. (2019). Relationships and boundaries between provider and recipient families following embryo donation. *Family, Relationships and Societies*, 8(2), 267–283.

⁴²Hertz, R., Nelson, M.K., & Nelson, K. (2015). Sperm donors describe the experience of contact with their donor-conceived offspring. *Facts, Views, & Vision in Obgyn*, 7(2), 91–100.

⁴³Ibid: p. 91.

⁴⁴Ibid: p. 96.

⁴⁵Widbom, A., Isaksson, S., Sydsjö, G., Skoog Svanberg, A., & Lampic, C. (2021). Positioning the donor in a new landscape—mothers' and fathers' experiences as their adult children obtained information about the identity-release sperm donor. *Human Reproduction*, 36(8), 2181–2188.

⁴⁶Hertz et al., op. cit. note 42, p. 97.

⁴⁷Ibid: p. 98.

⁴⁸Indekeu, A., & Hens, K. (2018). Part of my story. The meaning and experience of genes for sperm donor-conceived offspring. *New Genetics and Society*, 38(1), 18–37.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹For example, Ravelingien, A., Provoost, V., & Pennings, G. (2015). Open-identity sperm donation: How does offering donor-identifying information relate to donor-conceived offspring's wishes and needs? *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, 12(3), 503–509.

⁵²See, for example, Mac Dougall, K., Becker, G., Scheib, J., & Nachtigall, R. (2007). Strategies for disclosure: How parents approach telling their children that they are conceived with donor gametes. *Fertility and Sterility*, 87(3), 524–533.

⁵³Provoost, V., Baernaert, Van Parys, H., Buysse, A., De Sutter, P., Pennings, P. (2018). 'No daddy', 'a kind of daddy': words used by donor conceived children and (aspiring) parents to refer to the sperm donor. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 20(4), 381–396.

⁵⁴Indekeu & Hens, op. cit. note 48.

"we feel that whatever is in the best interest of our children should come first, regardless if it's awkward or uncomfortable for us";

"we are the adults and should be mature enough to put our children's needs and desires above our own";

"we are all family now.... They are great folks and the girls are sisters which is what is most important to me".⁵⁵

These parents acknowledge their own discomfort but at the same time chose to act in what they believed was in the interest of their children. This study regards specifically relationships between genetic siblings. Interest in donor siblings may be less provocative as siblings cannot as easily be seen as competition for *parenthood* as gamete donors themselves may be. And yet the interest may be just as strong or even stronger.

Genetic siblinghood of this sort does however raise an unfamiliar issue for parents. Ordinarily, children become siblings via their parents, biologically or socially. In the case of donor-conceived genetic siblings raised in different families, the connection is between the children directly: what connects them is their donors' contribution. Any bond between them is generated by exactly that which is external to the family: the donor, the traits that they share because of sharing a donor, and the experience of being donor conceived. What makes them 'siblings' is what the parents could not provide.

For many years, prospective parents availing themselves of gamete donation were encouraged to see it as a one-off event, a microscopic contribution to the creation of the child they longed for. However, minimising the donation can backfire in many ways, depending on how the parents deal with the information: do they hide it? Does the child discover it by accident? It will depend on the child's inclinations: is she interested in knowing more about or even meeting the donor or other genetic relatives? It will also depend on the family environment: are others in the family or surrounding social circle comfortable with the donation? Do *they* invest biological parenthood with special, 'real' parenthood status? Do the families of the donors do so? As noted above, family members of the donors may perceive the donor children as their own family (e.g., their grandchildren). The society in which these events transpire will also influence which relationships are perceived as important, and this may present challenges for the parents. In a world of mixed signals about the meaning of genetic connections, parents have historically been discouraged from reflecting on these complications.⁵⁶ Gamete donors have likewise been discouraged from exploring the long-term consequences of their donation, especially in legislatures promising them anonymity. Too much thinking could discourage them from donating and thus contribute to the shortage of gametes.

Should children be able to form bonds with their donors, the donors and the parents may be thrown together in an uncomfortable intimacy that never goes away. If they already know each other, they may not initially foresee the implications of their arrangement. Whether or not one values genetic links as indicative of family relations, these links are an undercurrent of human connections, and we have limited control over how other parties perceive them. One cannot reliably predict relationships with and expectations of extended families, gamete donors and *their* families.

Some children may come to regard the donors as their parents and prefer them to their rearing parents. Some donors may overstep their boundaries and try to compete with or replace the parents. They may get attached to the children, and the children may get attached to them. As tends to be the case with close personal relationships, it would be surprising if this *never* happened. Interestingly, however, researchers have found statistically significant associations between secure attachment and curiosity on the one hand and insecure-disorganised attachment and negative attitudes about donor-conceived status on the other.⁵⁷ Children who were already comfortable with their parents were more likely to be curious about the donors, while children who had a difficult relationship with their parents were *less* interested in the donors.

The heavy weight that has traditionally been given to genetics in determining parenthood (especially outside the nuclear family) may explain why parents feel anxious about irresistible 'competition' from their children's genetic kin. If these connections are valued but at the same time are not to be described in parenthood and family language, how *can* they be described?

6 | NEW TYPES OF CONNECTIONS?

Family language is normatively loaded and provocative. Some donor-conceived people and their families have forged new terminologies to denote the relationships they are building. In some communities, the terms 'diblings' or 'halfies' have been coined to denote the relationship between donor siblings.⁵⁸ Donor siblings (or diblings) may meet not at family reunions, but at 'network meetings', as they are a 'network' (or a clan), not a family.⁵⁹ Some children see their diblings as their friends, but better ('I like these friends more better than my regular friends.'⁶⁰). This kind of 'networking' is an innovation in close personal and family relationships.

⁵⁷Slutsky, J., Jadva, V., Freeman, T., Persaud, S., Steele, M., Steele, H, Kramer W., & Golombok, S. (2016). Integrating donor conception into identity development: adolescents in fatherless families. *Fertility and Sterility*, 106(1), 202–208.

⁵⁸BBC NEWS. (2015, May 28). 'Diblings': The siblings created from the same donor. Retrieved July 2023, from www.bbc.com/news/av/health-32914087; CBS radio. (2017, September 15). Mothers who used the same sperm donor are forming a family of 'diblings'. Retrieved July 2023, from cbc.ca/radio/outintheopen/modern-family-1.4280608/mothers-who-used-the-same-sperm-donor-are-forming-a-family-of-diblings-1.4280665. Hertz & Nelson, op. cit. note 37.

⁵⁹Hertz & Nelson, op. cit. note 37.

⁶⁰Hertz & Nelson, op. cit. note 37, p. 190.

⁵⁵Frith et al., op. cit. note 41.

⁵⁶Nordqvist & Smart, op. cit. note 35.



To use LaFollette's terminology,⁶¹ in contrast with *rigid* family relationships, *historical* relationships tend to be those that we forge ourselves. You choose your friends and your spouse, but you do not (typically) get to choose your siblings, parents, aunts and uncles and so on. The latter relationships are *rigid* and top-down. However, the relationships that these children forge start with the genetic link and then build personal connections: so they are both *rigid* and *historical*, and at the same time, they are elective and genetic-kinship based. And they are initiated bottom-up: the children themselves forge them, sometimes in spite of the reservations of their parents or donors.

Gamete donation disconnects genetic reproduction from parental responsibilities, enabling some donors to produce very large numbers of offspring: some have donated over the course of decades, in several geographical areas. Additionally, there are some highly publicised cases of fertility doctors using their own gametes to create hundreds of children. Fertility patients receiving donated gametes may have different circumstances, ages, religions and political orientations. So insofar as families tend to pertain to one area, social class, religion and so on, the circumstances of donor siblings raised in different families may vary much more widely. Having dozens or even hundreds of siblings *of all kinds* may short-circuit many of the limitations tied to coming from one kind of family. The 'network' may be more diverse not just than any family, but also than any friend group one is otherwise likely to form.

As the researchers studying these networks put it,

[t]he traits that appear to be common among the donor siblings and between a donor and her offspring merely start a conversation. Sometimes that conversation ends quickly, without creating any new connections. But [it] may lead to the choice to form an entirely new kind of voluntary family.⁶²

Connecting this with other views that emerge from empirical work in this area, we obtain a much more fluid account of kinship than we may have been used to: kinship 'is something that we "do" or "live", rather than something we simply "are"'.⁶³ The shared experience of being donor conceived, *and* with genetic material from the same donor, may itself contribute more substance from the outset to the donor sibling conversation than to the donor-donor-conceived person conversation, even though they share fewer genes between them than they do with their donor. Because of this, donor siblings may be 'like each other' and may occupy 'a unique position' in each other's lives, in ways in which the donors themselves may not.⁶⁴ Much of the literature on the ethics of gamete donation has focused on the interest that there may be or not be to know (of) the donor

and the degree to which this is an expression of genetic essentialism. What genetic siblings share is experiential, not just genetic. They may 'mirror themselves' sideways with others with whom they already have a meaningful (to many) ice breaker.

In the future, children conceived following mitochondrial transfer⁶⁵ might likewise express a desire to meet the mitochondria donor or their 'mitochondrial siblings'. In the case of mitochondrial donation, the explicit effort to minimise the contribution of the mitochondria donor⁶⁶ pulls towards not allowing children to value it. In this view, the mitochondria donor is not a biological parent. Thus, the children conceived with her mitochondria cannot have an interest in knowing (about) her. One of the things that makes this elimination of the mitochondria donor possible is again the scarcity of ways to even express connections to children independently from their parents. The children themselves may wish to know about their mitochondrial ancestry. Unlike autosomal DNA, mitochondria are passed on intact over many generations and thus the maternal or paternal ancestry can be traced over thousands of years. In a sense, then, the mitochondria donor provides something more lasting than someone who 'only' contributes nuclear DNA, which gets shuffled around, mixed up and diluted with every generation. Experiences such as those related above of seeking and forging new kinds of connections suggest some of the ways in which people could seek to place themselves in an ancestral chain.

7 | FINAL THOUGHTS AND WAYS FORWARD

In this paper, I have highlighted the lack of terminology to describe children's connections outside of the family. I have looked at current ambivalence regarding the value of genetic links and resistance to acknowledging children's interests in accessing their personal history. Intervening in families to ensure that children's interests are respected is difficult, and any choice to allow children more agency, especially against their parents' wishes, is fraught with risks of harm. However, a failure to challenge this status quo may be incompatible with the recognition of the moral status of children. It is not straightforwardly acceptable that the parents override children's interests when conflicts arise.

What I have *not* done in this paper is to substantiate how exactly the case in favour of the interest in knowing who one's genetic relatives are can be built. Is it about dignity? Is it about well-being? Is knowledge of one's close genetic connections a basic good—and is it essential that it is, if we expect it to be able to ground a duty onto

⁶¹LaFollette, H. (1996). *Personal relationships. Love, identity, and morality*. Blackwell.

⁶²Hertz & Nelson, op. cit. note 37.

⁶³May, V., & Nordqvist, P. (2019). *Sociology of personal life*. Red Globe Press.

⁶⁴Scheib, J. E., McCormick, E., Benward, J., & Ruby, A. (2020). Finding people like me: Contact among young adults who share an open-identity sperm donor. *Human Reproduction Open*, 4, 1–13.

⁶⁵Mitochondrial transfer involves the removal of an egg's nucleus which is then placed into another egg. The typical reason for this procedure is the presence of mitochondrial disease: by replacing the outer shell of the egg, the risk of the baby being born with mitochondrial disease is removed. The baby resulting from that 'new' egg will inherit the mitochondrial DNA of the egg donor.

⁶⁶Sample, I. (2015, February 2). "Three-parent" babies explained: what are the concerns and are they justified? *The Guardian*. Retrieved July 2003, from [theguardian.com/science/2015/feb/02/three-parent-babies-explained](https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/feb/02/three-parent-babies-explained)

others to support it? As Haslanger pointed out, for there to be such a duty, it may need to be the case that acquaintance with one's biological relatives is a basic good—a good that is necessary for a minimally good life. The same social science researchers who convey knowledge about what donor-conceived people are looking for also understand personal identity as relational rather than anchored in genetic connections. It then seems to be the case that this knowledge is *not* a basic good. But other things that may depend on it might be: being able to trust in one's parents; equal opportunities not to be denied what others seek, have or are offered; respect for one's choices for oneself even when—and maybe especially when—these are uncomfortable for others and so on.

The very fact that throughout this paper I have used terms such as (genetic) *relatives*, (genetic) *kinship*, (genetic) *siblings* or (biological) *parent* is problematic. It assumes that genetic connections *are* a kind of relatedness. The concept 'parent' is used to denote both a child's social parent *and* biological procreators. This vagueness encourages ambivalence between causal and role-based justifications for parental status. Here, philosophers can contribute by identifying the ambiguity and providing input towards both the recognition of different types of contributions to children's lives and the clarification of their respective moral weights.

Our ideas—philosophers or not—about the value of biological connections between people and their relation to the family are shaped by our own experiences and perceptions. Incorporating the experiences of donor-conceived people enables us to move beyond what we can learn from conceptual ethics scholarship or our own experience. Acknowledging that there may be goods in children's knowledge of, and contact with, their biological kin, may well require the re-examination of social practices that include parental discretion in making unilateral decisions about their children's connections outside of their family.

And lastly, to return to the title question of this paper, are people with whom we share close genetic ties our family? Are genetic

connections, instead, nothing? As some of the authors cited above indicate, genetic ties are, at the very least, the start of a conversation. They may be fraught with disproportionate and sometimes hurtful expectations. Nevertheless, genetic relatedness is a connection between individuals that some care about deeply or the significance of which they care about determining for themselves. Therefore, genetic connections are not nothing.

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