

The Effect Donor Conception has on Identity

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WITH THE RISE of non-nuclear families, people are looking towards other methods of starting a family. There are many more ways for a family to have children than ever before, thanks to the help of modern technology. One way that is gaining popularity is having donor-conceived children, whether it be by egg or sperm donation. Children born by donor conception are usually raised with one parent they are biologically related to and one they are not biologically related to. Upon finding out that they are donor-conceived, there is a mix of emotions a person can experience. Some have been aware of their genealogy since childhood and have formed their sense of identity with the information. At the same time, most people are unaware that they are donor conceived until adulthood and therefore experience an extreme sense of identity loss. Research studies have examined how being donor-conceived can affect the development of identity within a person.

There are a variety of identities that a donor-conceived person can assume, as seen in “‘It’s Just Who I Am ... I Have Brown Hair. I Have a Mysterious Father’: An Exploration of Donor-Conceived Offspring’s Identity Construction,” a research study published by the *Journal of Family Communication*. Authors Harrigan et al. examine how donor-conceived offspring (DCO)

construct their identities and make sense of their experiences. The study consisted of short interviews with fourteen DCOs and online testimonies from donor-conceived offspring to gain insight into their views on being donor-conceived through network sampling. Researchers were encouraged to share the basis of the experiment with their network in hopes of someone in their network recruiting someone else. All the people interviewed were ages nineteen through fifty-four and were conceived through sperm donation. In their study, Harrigan et al. found that there are five personal identity statements that DCOs relate to. These are often presentations of how one views themselves and how one perceives the world to view them. The five statements found are: I am a victim, wanted, enigmatic, a storyteller, and a process.

The first and most common personal identity statement is “I am a victim.” The DCO feels victimized by their donor, family, and society. DCOs who identify as victims perceive themselves as commodities their parent(s) bought. They often feel as though they were purposely alienated from their sperm donor, the rest of the family, and their genealogy. One online posting is quoted as saying, “Who are you to deny me half of my family tree—Branches rich and strong with stories I may never be told? Who are you to give away my heritage,

knowing it will be replaced with something false?” (Harrigan et al. 82) The next is “I am wanted”. Like the victim, DCOs who identify as wanted view their parent(s) are the choice makers. They view themselves highly as their guardian(s) who chose to conceive them and generally have a more positive outlook on their identity than those conceived by accident. Although the DCO interviewed stressed that they felt loved, their feelings of victimization were not absolved. Some DCOs also identify with the term “I am enigmatic”. They hold uncertainty for their future and past, including family history and whether they are predisposed to developing a particular health condition. DCOs also report believing they are expected to be grateful and are shamed for feeling conflicted regarding their identity. They often do not have anyone they can relate to in their immediate circle, often leading them to feel isolated. Due to this, it can seem as if a DCO is half a person, often stuck between two worlds. This further illuminates how DCOs can construct their self based on their experiences. If a DCO associates themselves with the “I am a storyteller” label, they see themselves as unique and that they have an exciting story to tell. Some may see their experiences as something that sets them apart, becoming an essential aspect of their identity. Growing up, they often made stories about their donor’s identity, although the DCO often do not tell their entire story as it progresses. As they age, a person’s view of themselves will change, and with it the story they choose to portray. Lastly, many DCOs see themselves as a “process” due to the phases of identity development they went through after discovering they were donor-conceived. A DCO may undergo negative feelings from when they first discover they are donor conceived to many years after they have come to terms with their identity. One participant stated, “I have felt differently about being

donor-conceived throughout the nine years I have known. I go through phases where I think about it more or less and phases where it weighs on me more heavily or not” (Harrigan et al. 87). Another explained their view of themselves as a process because, during the different stages of life, they had different views on their conception. For example, a child is not concerned about their identity and is happy to be alive. In contrast, an adult who has recently had children might be more concerned about the identity of their sperm donor. This study shows that DCOs can form multifaceted identities based on their experience. Being donor-conceived affected how the DCOs view themselves and interact with the world.

The article “Establishing identity: how direct-to-consumer genetic testing challenges the assumption of donor anonymity” focuses on the lessening anonymity donors have due to the rise in online genetic testing. More importantly, the authors ask the questions: what are DCOs’ relationship with identity, and why are they likely to seek out their anonymous donors through online genetic tests? Darroch and Smith use a variety of studies from recent years to argue their case. The authors note that DCOs are interested in learning about their genetic identity, whether it is basic medical history or getting in contact with individuals from their donor family. Knowing that one was donor conceived early in life leads to positive feelings regarding their identity. The article comments, “Research suggests that late disclosure (after the age of 3 years) can have a negative impact on adoptees in relation to identity formation; similarly, those who uncover misattributed parentage secrets, including around donor conception, are likely to face significant challenges to their identity.” (Darroch and Smith, 103). Until recently, people using donor conception were advised not to tell their children how

they were conceived. This, in turn, damages a person's psychological and emotional well-being when they find out later in life. When a DCO discovers that they are donor conceived through an online genetic test, they are more likely to develop negative feelings towards their identity. Most DCOs in the United States are unaware that they are not related to one or both of their parents. This is why so many DCOs find out that they are donor conceived later in life through at-home genetic tests such as Ancestry DNA or 23andMe. When their genetic results are revealed, a DCO may feel an extreme loss of identity due to the information they were denied, along with the anonymity of their donor. Some experience a "fracturing" due to their feelings of being betrayed by their not biological parent. They may also experience a fracture as they feel lied to about their identity. With one recreational DNA test, a seemingly ordinary person's sense of self can be destroyed. Some of the feelings one may experience are anger, betrayal, depression, and anxiety. The study by Darroch and Smith exemplifies the need to contact donor parents to determine one's identity.

While the research by Darroch and Smith highlights the desire to contact a DCO's donor parent, a study conducted by Persaud et al. seeks to answer the question: does meeting with one's genetic family influence a donor-conceived offspring's identity? The academic article "Adolescents Conceived through Donor Insemination in Mother-Headed Families: A Qualitative Study of Motivations and Experiences of Contacting and Meeting Same-donor Offspring" suggests that another factor of being donor conceived that may affect one's identity formation is meeting the same donor offspring. Same donor offspring are defined as two donor-conceived offspring who have been raised in separate families but share the same donor parent. This study focuses

on discovering whether meeting with the same donor offspring dramatically impacts how a DCO is likely to view themselves and, thus, how they form their identity after the initial meeting.

The data collection method was a qualitative interview with twenty-three DCOs aged twelve to nineteen. All people interviewed had been aware of their conception status from a young age and had met with at least one half-sibling conceived by the same donor at the time of the interview. Persaud et al. found that knowing people genetically related to them provided DCO with a more nuanced sense of identity. Meeting with half siblings gives the DCO a better idea of what their donor is like and provides them a way to explore their identity. A young man in the study reported cultivating an interest in music after meeting his half-siblings and finding that they also enjoyed creating music. He comments, "It's yeah [meeting my same donor offspring] been great, I mean it's been awesome to meet them, hang out with them, have this new kind of relative, explore like I mean through meeting them I've gotten to know more about myself you know and uh you know who I am, what the donor's like" (Persaud et al. 17). In some cases, DCOs felt curious about meeting their same donor offspring as it would lead to more information about their donor, and therefore, themselves. Due to the fact that they had been aware of their donor conception from a young age, many of the DCOs regarded their donor conception as who they were and heavily identified with it. Persaud et al. highlight the importance of contacting the same donor offspring during adolescence while one still forms their core identity.

The factor that these three studies have in common is that identity is greatly affected by conception status. The identity formation of a DCO will be different in those who have been notified of their conception

status at a young age compared to those who discovered it later. However, a donor-conceived person's identity will always be impacted. Similarly, contacting genetic family members will shape how DCOs view themselves and the world around them. The opportunity to gain knowledge about their genetic identity influences the DCO to incorporate their findings into their personal sense of identity. As stated earlier, many

DCOs are unaware of their conception status later in life. If more qualitative research is conducted, it could save many people the hardship of refiguring their identity later in life after initial identity formation has been completed. Donor conception affects every aspect of a DCO's life, and denying one's genetic identity to them will only cause more difficulties in the future.

WORKS CITED

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