When ‘sperm’ becomes ‘a donor’: transitions in parents’ views of the sperm donor.

Astrid Indekeu
KU Leuven (Belgium)
Psychologist - Sexologist
PhD-student in Biomedical Sciences

astrid.indekeu@med.kuleuven.be
Outline

• Introduction
• Research aim & methods
• Results
• Conclusion
• Implications

Introduction

• DI= owe the existence of offspring to a ‘third party’
• How do parents give meaning to the donor?
• How do they manage ‘genitor and pater’?
• Very little research\(^1\)-\(^4\)
• Is it relevant? => choice of donor, disclosure decision, level of donor information, contact with the donor
• Why? General neglect of the donor\(^5\)
Introduction

• What do we know?

AMBIVALENCE
– Negated donor vs. donor who appears as person
– Saviours and satyrs
– Genetics = irrelevant and relevant
– Nuanced = ‘snapshot’ studies

Introduction

• Belgian context
  – Tax-funded general health system, free access to high-medical care (Royal Decree, 2003)
  – Donation sperm, eggs, embryo= allowed
  – Adheres to donor anonymity (Embryo law, 2007)
  – Mandatory to offer counselling (Embryo law, 2007)
  – No existence of national donor conception consumer group
  – Culture: biological parenthood ='real' parenthood (men)
Research aim

- To get insight into change and consistency in parents’ thinking, meanings, feelings about the donor

- Using a qualitative methodology

- Looked at different stages of family cycle:
  - Last trimester of pregnancy
  - 3 months after birth
  - 1.5 - 2 years after birth (toddler age)

Results: Non-Disclosing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6 - 9 Mths pregnant =&gt; 3 Mths after birth =&gt; Toddler</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Awareness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donor = means to create their child, their family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⇒ Involvement &amp; existence stops at birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⇒ Awareness level = consistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-existent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior birth = important for physical appearance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Results: Disclosing

#### 6 - 9 Mths pregnant => 3 Mths after birth => Toddler

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Awareness</th>
<th>Increase: depersonalised - pervasive - part of everyday life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How?</td>
<td>Anxiety (donor, partner, offspring) ⇒ relief/ 'no time'/ 'click'/ 'resemblance remarks' ⇒ offspring’s life/ family-friends-society/ confidence (actual parenting/ attachment)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>'Adultery': intruder in partner relationship ⇒ decreases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Rivalry': for position of the father ⇒ 'threat' – 'distractor'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How?</th>
<th>Adultery: 'birth'=beginning of their baby, their family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rivalry: ⇒ threatening for expecting father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⇒ focus on bonding with child (relief, less donor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⇒ 'actual' parenting: confidence through feeling attachment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results: Disclosing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6 - 9 Mths pregnant =&gt; 3 Mths after birth =&gt; Toddler</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Donor information</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Being important for me as parent’ =&gt; ‘being important to offspring’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecurity and safety about DI/ anonymous donor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=&gt; Relief / Experiencing bond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=&gt; Confidence through actual parenting/ parent’s need second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=&gt; Discomfort with donor anonymity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=&gt; Balance between ‘enough information’ – ‘donor becomes a person’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

**Non-disclosing couples**
- Consistency
- Women-men differences in pace
- Differences in couples

**Disclosing couples**
- Process
  - from ‘negating’ to ‘part of family’,
  - from ‘adultery/threat’ to ‘distractor’,
  - information for parent to offspring
  - Fear-relief-confidence ~ stage of family cycle
- Women-men differences in pace
- Differences in couples
Implications

• Research
  – In light of results on recipients pre-treatment
  – Follow-up research: explore process’ features
  – ! Parent’s views ≠ donor’s view ≠ offspring’s view
  – Differences between men and women
  – DI versus egg recipients
  – Influence of sperm bank profiles

Implications

• Clinical practice
  – Impact on meaning of donor information => donor anonymity
  – ‘normal’ anxiety in transition to fatherhood ~ anxiety triggered by DI
  – Need for follow-up counselling (birth= transformative)
Acknowledgements

- All the participants
- Staff of Leuven University Fertility Centre (LUFC)
- Supervisors:
  - Prof. P. Rober, Context - Institute for Family and Sexuality Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium
  - Prof. T. D’Hooghe, University Hospital Gasthuisberg, Leuven University Fertility Centre, KU Leuven, Belgium
  - Prof. K. Dierickx, Centre for Biomedical Ethics and Law, KU Leuven, Belgium
  - Prof. K. Daniels, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

References

2. Grace V, Daniels K. The (ir)relevance of genetics: engendering parallel worlds of procreation and reproduction. Soc Health Ill 2007;29:692-710