

Donor, Dad, or...? Young Adults with Lesbian Parents' Experiences with Known Donors

ABBIE E. GOLDBERG*
KATHERINE R. ALLEN†

In this exploratory qualitative study of 11 young adults, ages 19–29 years, we examine how young people who were raised by lesbian parents make meaning out of and construct their relationships with known donors. In-depth interviews were conducted to examine how participants defined their family composition, how they perceived the role of their donors in their lives, and how they negotiated their relationships with their donors. Findings indicate that mothers typically chose known donors who were family friends, that the majority of participants always knew who their donors were, and that their contact with donors ranged from minimal to involved. Further, participants perceived their donors in one of three ways: as strictly donors and not members of their family; as extended family members but not as parents; and as fathers. The more limited role of donors in participants' construction of family relationships sheds light on how children raised in lesbian, gay, and bisexual families are contributing to the redefinition and reconstruction of complex kinship arrangements. Our findings hold implications for clinicians who work with lesbian-mother families, and suggest that young adulthood is an important developmental phase during which interest in and contact with the donor may shift, warranting a transfer of responsibility from mother to offspring in terms of managing the donor-child relationship.

Keywords: Children; Fatherhood; Known Donors; Lesbian Parents; Young Adults

Fam Proc x:1–13, 2013

A paucity of research exists on how children with lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parents experience and navigate relationships with known donors. A modest body of research has examined lesbian parents' considerations surrounding the selection of a donor, including whether to inseminate using the sperm of a known versus an unknown donor (Chabot & Ames, 2004; Goldberg, 2006; Touroli & Coyle, 2002), and another body of work has explored children's ideas about and desire to meet their unknown donors (Brewaeyns, Ponjaert, Van Halle, & Golombok, 1997; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeyns, 2002). In general, research has given more attention to lesbian-parent families who have used unknown donors than those who have used known donors (Grace, Daniels, & Gillett, 2008), in part because the former are more heavily represented in samples of lesbian mothers (Goldberg, 2010).

Although research on LGB families is beginning to emerge (Gonzalez, Rostosky, Odom, & Riggle, 2012; Gotta et al., 2011), little research has explored the perspectives of young adults with lesbian parents conceived via known donors. In particular, how young

*Department of Psychology, Clark University, Worcester, MA.

†Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Abbie E. Goldberg, Department of Psychology, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610. E-mail: agoldberg@clarku.edu.

This study was supported by a grant-in-aid from the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues and a grant-in-aid from the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, both awarded to the first author.

adults make meaning out of and construct their relationships with known donors is relatively unexplored (but see Tasker & Granville, 2011). Thus, the current exploratory study examines how 11 young adults with lesbian mothers perceive and make sense of their relationships with their known donors. This research provides a backdrop for understanding donors' relationships with young adults in lesbian-mother households, and, more importantly to this article, young adults' perceptions of and ideas about their donors.

Our questions of interest include the following: What type and level of contact do young adults have with their known donors over time? How do they construct donors' roles and relationships? Do they see them as donors, fathers, or something else? When young adults construct their donors as "dads," how do they situate the meaning of "father" within their larger family constellation (e.g., the fact that they have two mothers)?

THE NATURE AND MEANING OF COMPLEX KINSHIP TIES

Our exploratory study of how young adults raised by lesbian parents perceive their known donors coincides with and complements recent research highlighting the complexity of kinship ties in LGB-parent families (e.g., Dempsey, 2010). Recent research on planned lesbian two-mother families formed via donor insemination has found that offspring sometimes express greater closeness to their biological mothers as compared with their nonbiological mothers (Gartrell, Bos, Peyser, Deck, & Rodas, 2011). In cases where their mothers' relationships dissolve, these offspring tend to live with and feel closer to their biological mothers in the long term (Gartrell et al., 2011). At the same time, donors—who provide 50% of children's genetic material—are rarely discussed in studies of lesbian-mother families, in part because they are not always recognized or conceptualized as members of "the family." These findings, taken together, raise important new questions about how socially constructed notions of biological relatedness may shape perceptions of closeness and family relationships, and how social norms may interact with children's sense of the biological importance of their parentage (Ehrensaft, 2005).

According to Dempsey (2010), lesbian mothers who pursue insemination both innovate new forms of kinship as they enact complex reproductive relationships, and also draw from established (hetero)normative dimensions of kinship, including the assumption of greater maternal power in the reproductive contract. For example, Dempsey (2010) points out that lesbians may mix friendship with their reproductive relationships (e.g., by asking a friend to be a known donor), but they do so by privileging what will benefit them in the normative structure—for example, they may ask a known donor to relinquish his parental rights, to ensure the primary parental authority of the two mothers. Furthermore, couplehood is still the primary norm for establishing lesbian-parent family units; indeed, models in which three or more LGB people coparent a child are rare (Goldberg, 2010), in part because of U.S. laws that do not recognize more than two legal parents for a child (Shapiro, 2013). In this way, LGB parents use the basic building blocks of family formation by borrowing, theoretically and practically, from established heteronormative patterns. At the same time, however, they are creating new pathways to parenthood, new familial forms, and new kinship structures, by (re)shaping biological, legal, and chosen kin ties in complex and innovative ways (Biblarz & Savci, 2010).

LESBIAN PARENTS' CHOICE OF AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH KNOWN DONORS

Anxieties about the legal rights and responsibilities of known donors are often quite salient to lesbian mothers as they make decisions about how and with whom to build their families. Women who choose unknown donors often do so because of fears that the donor

would sue for custody, or would want more involvement than the women were comfortable with (Chabot & Ames, 2004; Gartrell et al., 1996; Touroni & Coyle, 2002). Women who choose known donors often do so because they are uncomfortable with the idea of using genetic material from someone they have never met to create their child, or they believe that it is important that their child can ultimately know who their biological father is, however peripheral a social role he might have (Chabot & Ames, 2004; Gartrell et al., 1996; Touroni & Coyle, 2002). In some cases, women wish to secure a known donor so that their child will have at least one good male role model (Goldberg & Allen, 2007). Women, in turn, often select donors with whom they have some preexisting relationship, and who they consider trustworthy; in turn, they tend to value the possibility of future contact (Dempsey, 2010; McNair, Dempsey, Perlesz, & Wise, 2002).

Lesbian mothers who utilize known donors construct a wide range of possibilities for their donor's involvement with the child (Dempsey, 2010; McNair et al., 2002). Desired involvement occurs along a continuum, ranging from a desire for minimal involvement (i.e., the two women wish to be the only parents; the donor is "just a donor"; the donor's name will not appear on the birth certificate); to a preference for some involvement (i.e., the two women wish to be the parents, but want the donor to have some contact with the child); to coparenting, whereby the donor occupies the role of another parent (Chabot & Ames, 2004; Dempsey, 2010; Nordqvist, 2012). Desire to maintain decision-making authority as the child's sole legal parents, as well as anxieties about the legal consequences of using a known donor, often lead lesbians to draw up formal contracts with their donors, to ensure that there are no "surprises" once the child is born (e.g., the donor suddenly wants to be listed as "father" on the birth certificate) (Chabot & Ames, 2004; Nordqvist, 2011).

THE ROLE OF DONORS IN CHILDREN'S LIVES

Compared to heterosexual parents, lesbian parents tend to be more open with their children about using donor insemination to conceive, and they tend to provide more information about their conception circumstances to their children (Brewaeyts, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, Van Steirteghem, & Devroey, 1993; Vanfraussen et al., 2002). Yet little is known about how conversations about and contact with donors unfold across the child's life course. Both lesbian parents and donors may find that their ideas about and expectations for donors' roles change over time, thereby shifting the types of conversations that parents have with their children about the donor, as well as actual contact between the child and the donor. Research suggests that donors who agree to sign away their legal rights as parents, and who expect (and are expected) to have only occasional contact with the child they helped to conceive, may ultimately assume a more familial role with the child, regularly spending time with them and even being called "dad" (Chabot & Ames, 2004; Hertz, 2002; McNair et al., 2002). On the other hand, Touroni and Coyle (2002) found that although some lesbian couples who used known donors had "worked out roles and responsibilities in a generally satisfactory way" (p. 201), a few encountered challenges related to setting boundaries around contact and roles.

Indeed, whereas unknown donors are "out of sight, out of mind" (Nordqvist, 2010) and can thus be "erased" (i.e., deemed unimportant) or "imagined" (i.e., as whomever the parents or child want them to be) (Grace et al., 2008), known donors' presence, or absence, must be negotiated. Lesbian couples who pursue conception with a known donor must negotiate, on an ongoing basis, the nature of the donor's role, and how he fits into the broader lexicon of "kinship" and "family" (Nordqvist, 2012). In her study of lesbian couples pursuing donor insemination, Nordqvist found that six of the 11 couples who were using known donors described the role of the donor as that of an "uncle." They felt that it was

important for their child to know the donor as she/he grew up, and yet “although these couples sought to construct a familial relationship between the child and the donor, this was carefully distinguished from a parent–child relationship” (p. 302). In a study that included five lesbian-mother families that had used known donors, Stevens, Perry, Burston, Golombok, and Golding (2003) found that in two cases, the donors—both of whom were gay—played “full roles as fathers, seeing their children at least twice a week” (p. 355). The authors note that “the mothers in these two cases had placed great importance on structuring the relationship carefully from the beginning” (e.g., they agreed to a regular routine so that all parties knew “exactly what’s going to happen”) (pp. 355–356). The other three donors did not have parental roles: that is, one donor had a “non-parental role as a ‘special friend,’” one saw the child several times a year during holidays, and one saw the child even less frequently (p. 355).

A slim body of research has examined children’s relationships with and views of their known donors (Tasker & Granville, 2011; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2003). In an innovative study by Tasker and Granville (2011), lesbian mothers of 11 children, age 4–11, who were conceived via a known donor, and their children, were interviewed about the donor’s role in the child’s life. Children also completed drawings of their families. Mothers reported that of these 11 children, there were only two cases in which the known donor had played no role in the child’s life at the time of the interview. Of the nine children whose known donors were involved, four were described by parents as “acting like a father” (e.g., providing regular help with child care). Notably, all four children included their donors in their family drawings. In the other five cases, there was greater variability and less agreement between parents and children about the donor’s family membership—perhaps because of uncertainty surrounding the level, significance, and meaning of the donor’s involvement.

Hertz’s (2002) study of single heterosexual and lesbian women who had used known and unknown donors to conceive found that children had a wide range of relationships with their known donors, with some viewing their donor as a family friend and others viewing him as a father. Hertz also found that mothers played a key role in mediating donors’ relationships with children, with some mothers operating as “gatekeepers” who negotiated the boundaries between biological and social fatherhood and “created alternate ‘kin’ terms for their children’s fathers so as not to compete with an eventual partner and coparent” (Hood, 2002, p. 34).

METHOD

Description of the Sample

Eleven individuals, ages 19–29 ($M = 22.87$, $Mdn = 21$), participated in the study. Six participants were age 19–22, and currently in college; three participants were age 23–24; and two participants were age 27–29. The latter five participants had graduated college, and were currently employed at least part-time in four cases and enrolled in graduate school in one case. Given that the participants ranged in age from 19 to 29, the sample reflects the developmental phase of young adulthood (Erikson, 1963), and we therefore refer to our sample as “young adults” throughout the manuscript.

With regard to gender, eight participants identified as female, two as male, and one as gender queer. Eight identified as heterosexual, two as queer, and one as bisexual. Ten participants identified as White and one identified as multiracial. All participants were born in and currently resided in the United States. The demographic characteristics of the sample are similar to prior studies of young adults with lesbian parents: that is, primarily White and well-educated (Goldberg, 2007). This likely reflects, in part, the recruitment methods utilized (see *Procedure*). Although we did not obtain extensive demographic infor-

mation about participants' parents, we did obtain data on their education levels. One mother had a high school diploma, two had completed some college, 10 had a bachelor's degree, five had a master's degree, and four had a doctoral degree. Thus, participants' parents were also well-educated, on average, which is consistent with much of the prior research on lesbian-mother households, but does not reflect the socioeconomic profile of lesbian mothers in the US population as a whole (Goldberg, 2010).

All participants were conceived by lesbian mothers, who inseminated using sperm from a known donor. Ten participants were born to two lesbian mothers who were in a committed relationship, and one participant was born to a single lesbian mother who intentionally coparented the child with a former girlfriend. Ten of the 11 participants stated that their mothers chose their donor because of an existing friendship (one participant did not mention the nature of the relationship). In seven of these 10 cases, the donor was specified as a male friend; in three of these 10 cases, the donor was specified as the husband or male partner of a female friend. Nine of the 11 participants explicitly identified their donors' sexual orientation. In seven cases he was identified as heterosexual, and in two cases he was identified as gay.

Procedure

Young adults (ages 14–29) with LGB parents were invited, primarily via listserv announcements, to participate in a study focused on understanding their perspectives on marriage (in)equality, as well as their experiences growing up in LGB parent-families more generally. For example, calls for participants were placed on listservs maintained by the Safe Schools Coalition, a partnership of organizations that promote tolerance in schools; and COLAGE, an organization run by and for individuals with one or more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) parent(s). LGBTQ centers on university campuses throughout the United States also disseminated information about the study to their students. Finally, several chapters of PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) provided information to their members.

The first author's contact information was included with the study description, and potential participants contacted her for details. Participants were mailed a consent form ensuring confidentiality and detailing the conditions of participation. Parents of participants who were under 18 years of age provided parental consent for participation. Participants then completed a semistructured telephone interview (about one hour) with the first author or a graduate research assistant. Interviews were transcribed and pseudonyms were assigned to participants.

The participants in this study ($n = 11$; ages 19–29) were selected from the larger sample because they had known donors. Our analysis mainly focused on the following interview questions (probes are omitted): What type of family situation were you born/adopted into? Who do you consider your parents? What is the sexual orientation of each of your parents? Of your donor? Tell me about your relationship with each parent, and with the donor.

Data Analysis Process

We conducted a thematic analysis of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), which involves a thorough exploration of recurrent patterns in the data. A primary focus of our analysis was how participants perceived their relationships with their donors. Both authors coded the data, engaging in a process of analytic triangulation. This process involves having multiple persons analyze the same data and compare findings, and ensures that multiple interpretations are considered. First, we engaged in line-by-line analysis to generate initial theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006). Line-by-line coding closely tracked each participant's responses to the interview questions. By combing through each interview,

common and discrepant themes began to emerge. For example, most participants described their mothers' prior relationship with their donor, though the details of their stories varied. We used the thickness of data, supported by the literature, to follow this lead in the initial coding phase.

As we moved to focused coding, we refined the codes. For example, "donor's role" was replaced with three more specific codes: (a) donor only; (b) extended family member; (c) father/parent. We discussed the emerging codes, relationships among codes, and our differences in interpretation throughout the coding process. The final coding scheme was established once we had reached agreement among all the independently coded data. We continued to reapply the scheme to the data and made revisions until all data were accounted for with the codes. The coding scheme was revised seven times. The findings are organized around the final coding scheme.

RESULTS

Parents' Disclosure about Donor Status and Identity

In nine cases, participants "always knew" they were conceived via insemination, and they knew who their donors were. Greta, a 24-year-old woman, explained:

So I was born from donor insemination through my lesbian mom...and I know my donor. He's a straight man and I call him "dad"...but I never lived with him growing up. I consider him to be a parent figure, but I guess not really a parent, even though I call him "dad."

These nine participants reported that their mothers had shared with them that their donors were "friends" that "helped them get pregnant." Although they noted that there was never a time in which they did not know about their paternal heritage, some did emphasize that their mothers' descriptions grew more nuanced and complex as they grew older, a pattern consistent with Ehrensaft's (2005) analysis of the importance of developmentally appropriate communication to children about birth origins.

In two cases, participants' mothers were not entirely transparent with them about the donor—that is, the "outside party who helped make the baby *for* the parents" (Ehrensaft, 2005, p. 171). One of these cases was Briann, a 23-year-old woman. Growing up, her mother had always implied that she had used an anonymous donor, because the donor "asked that I not know for a while, because he felt like it might make things awkward." Briann persisted in questioning her mother about the identity of her donor throughout her childhood: "So do you really not know who it is?" It was not until Briann was 20 years old that her mother finally disclosed the identity of the donor—a male friend:

It was a little strange. I mean, it was kind of nice because it was something that I'd always wondered about...I had wished that I had known earlier but it was also exciting. I think it's something that everybody's always interested in, to kind of know where you come from and what your dad looks like—what your parents look like.

In the other case, Kevin, a 24-year-old man, described how it was not until he was 5 years old that he learned that he had been conceived using a known donor:

[My donor] is kind of a family friend; I just didn't know he was my dad. But then when I was about five, I put my foot down, and I was like, "Hey! I know where kids come from, and this doesn't add up." And so my [mothers] had a behind-closed-doors conversation, and they called [donor] and made sure it was okay [to tell me who he was].

Thus, both Briann and Kevin seemed to sense that their mothers were not being entirely honest with them; their inquiries challenged their mothers to revise their initial strategy of secrecy.

Perceived Patterns in Contact with Donors Over Time

Participants described varied patterns in contact with their donors, from childhood to young adulthood: a stable pattern of minimal contact with their donors ($n = 2$); declining contact over time ($n = 3$); a curvilinear pattern of contact, marked by significant contact with their donor when they were young, followed by a period of lesser contact, then a recent reestablishment of contact ($n = 2$); and increased contact over time ($n = 3$). One participant had never met her donor.

Participants who described minimal contact with their donors, either throughout their lives or at particular points in their lives, described several key barriers to more frequent contact. One major barrier, geographic distance, made it difficult to maintain regular and sustained contact; thus, participants who lived far away from their donors typically only saw them on special occasions like birthdays, or when visiting their donor's state of residence. Andie, a 22-year-old woman, described how she, her two mothers, and her donor used to celebrate Jewish holidays together when she was little. Then she and her mothers moved to a different state, and she no longer saw her donor. "He was much more in my life when I was much younger, but by the time that I was old enough to understand who he actually was, [things had] changed." Likewise, Lenn, a 27-year-old participant who identified as gender queer, explained: "During the first 4 years of my life, my donor was a bit more present because he lived in the same town. But since I was six, I would see him every couple of years and as I got older, that got longer—every 4 years."

Participants also invoked their mothers' roles as "intermediaries" in their relationships with donors in explaining why they had experienced minimal or declining contact with their donors. For example, Dini, a 29-year-old woman, described how when she was under age 5, her donor resided in the same state. During these early years, she frequently visited her donor's house—sometimes alone—to spend time with him. Then, there was a shift toward somewhat less frequent contact, as her mothers began to exhibit "hesitation" and "caution" about too much involvement with him, which Dini understood as grounded in their fears surrounding the possibility that the donor might take them to court "to try to get some type of custody": "They had these two pulls of like, wanting to make sure they protected themselves, but thought that it was only right that he wanted to and I wanted to at least see each other." As a result, Dini was allowed to see her donor, but under her mothers' terms and conditions. After Dini and her mothers moved to another state, contact became even more sporadic; her donor sent her birthday gifts and telephoned occasionally, but they did not see each other again until she was 15.

Dini, as well as the other four participants who described increased contact with their donors during young adulthood, in part attributed this shift to their developmental stage—that is, particularly since being in college, they had become more interested in knowing their donors and had made more of an effort to reach out to them. (Indeed, with the exception of Dini, all of these participants were in college or had just graduated college.) This process of (re)establishing contact was, initially, a bit "strange." Dini described how seeing her donor again was "awkward" at first, which she attributed to the fact that "he didn't really know who I was, because we just didn't talk that often." However, what followed was a period of growing ease, whereby she and her donor began to talk regularly on the phone, rendering their relationship "more enjoyable" as they began to discover shared interests and abilities. Speaking of their relationship now, Dini said:

As the years go on, it just feels more easy, chatting with him. And I think that there's definitely some things that we have in common. There are some ways that we're similar.... I was really into art when I was a kid and then through elementary school and into high school, I was really involved in the art department and specifically ceramics, and I had known that he was an artist

and...does ceramics, but I was never taught by him or had actually seen [his work]. But it was really interesting how strongly—the connection I have with artwork. I got my degree in ceramics...I think it was kind of mind-boggling for him that he has this daughter out there that was studying what he does for a living.

Similarly, Haley, a 19-year-old woman, pointed to how both developmental stage (i.e., entering college) and geographic location had led her to establish greater contact with and connection with her donor over time:

He's my father, but he's not been a huge part of my life. I saw him once a year, every year. But then this past year, I went to college where [he] lives, and I moved in with him...and initially it was odd. But we are so much alike: We're just both very quiet and thoughtful. And [donor's partner], I never really considered him a father, because I'd never met him before, but now I consider him a father. So at first I thought I had two mothers and one father, and now I consider it to be two fathers and two mothers.

Here, Haley alludes to how changes in geography and proximity facilitated stronger relational ties not only with her donor but also with her donor's partner, leading her to gradually reconfigure her understanding of who is in her family—and who she considers her parents.

Participants who currently had little contact with their donors seemed largely content with the status quo, suggesting that participants' lack of interest in more contact can also be viewed as a barrier to greater contact or involvement. Jenna, a 19-year-old woman, for example, expressed satisfaction with the steady but fairly infrequent contact that she had with her donor, noting that growing up: "I didn't see him a ton, but he was always there to support me for the big events." Other participants explicitly emphasized that they did not consider their donor a parent and therefore did not have a strong interest in establishing more of a relationship with him. They often emphasized that the presence of two very active and loving mothers precluded any "need" to connect with the donor. As Andie, 22, asserted, "Having two very engaged moms is absolutely enough....I was definitely not looking for a parent figure or an adult friend. There was, is, kind of no need."

Two participants—one who was currently in college, and one who had recently graduated college—did express a curiosity about, or desire for more contact with, their donors. Faith was a 20-year-old woman who, while maintaining that she had "no need really" to get to know her donor as her two mothers were "great parents" to her, noted that since entering college, she had become more interested in "knowing more just in terms of explaining my nationality and about my genes and such....I mean, I don't really have too much of an interest in knowing who he is as a person." Thus, Faith simultaneously asserts her perception of her mothers as her only "real" parents even as she acknowledges some interest in learning more about and from her donor for "genetic" purposes.

Defining Kinship: Perceptions of Donors' Roles and Relationships

Participants used a variety of terms to describe their donors' roles. First, four participants firmly emphasized that their donors were "just donors" and that they "don't consider him family"; they tended to highlight these men's lack of involvement in their daily lives to differentiate what it is that parents and family *do*—and, in turn, what their donor did *not* do. As Jenna, 19, exclaimed, "I mean, he's my donor. He's not part of my family. He didn't raise me. He didn't do anything except to donate my genes." Jenna went on to emphasize how it was important yet challenging for her to assert to outsiders that she did not consider her donor to be her father: "I keep telling people at [college] about it, and they just don't understand it. I have to be so firm that he's *not my dad*, but they don't get it." Lenn, 27, also emphasized her perception of family membership as based in affectional,

relational ties—not biology or genes: “I grew up with a strong notion that biology is not what makes a family. My brother and my mom, Kathy, have no biological relationship with me, but they were more my family to me than my donor.” Thus, for these participants, genetic relatedness was neither a requirement of nor a precursor to family membership, as evidenced by the fact that they considered their nonbiological mothers to be their parents, but not their donors.

Second, four participants viewed their donors as “family” but “not parents”; these participants specifically designated their donors as “family friends” or “uncles.” For example, Briann, 23, noted that she did not consider her donor to be a parent, but thought of him and his partner as being “uncle figures” and, likewise, saw herself as “kind of like a niece” in relation to them. Like the participants who considered their donors to be “just donors,” and did not confer any type of familial designation upon them, these four participants also tended to contrast their donors’ role with that of their parents, to illustrate how they were family—but not parents. For example, Ethan, a 19-year-old man, noted emphatically that he considered his donor “family, absolutely, but in terms of parents, no. I look at him and I can see similarities, and it’s impossible to deny that that’s genetics. But in terms of actual parents, no; he didn’t raise me.” Interestingly, Greta, 24, noted that she called her donor “dad” but at the same time did not perceive him as a parent, in part because she “never lived with him growing up.” Our participants’ observations illustrate the importance of differentiating between parental labels (e.g., Dad, Bob, Uncle Bob) and meanings (e.g., father, uncle, family, friend).

Third, three participants viewed their donors as “fathers” and described these men as third parents—that is, tertiary to their primary parents, their mothers. As Christi, a 19-year-old woman, said,

My two moms had me with a known donor who they gave the choice of parenting or not to, and he luckily chose to parent, so I’m very close with my dad too....He’s always been a part of my family...but my moms are primary.

Notably, Christi was the only participant whose mothers had allowed her father to be on the birth certificate; thus, he was in fact her legal biological father, although she noted that when her parents filled out medical information or emergency forms, they tended to “cross out ‘father’ and put both of their information and then on the side they put my dad’s name with ‘donor’ in parentheses.” The other two participants did not have a legal relationship with their fathers. In fact, they actually had only recently, as young adults, begun to identify their donors *as* fathers—as in the case of Haley, described earlier, who came to define both her donor and his partner as parents as well.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with prior research (e.g., Stevens et al., 2003), the findings of this exploratory study suggest that, at least from the perspectives of the participants in this study, lesbian mothers tend to be fairly open and honest with children about their origins, sharing information about the “how” and “who” of donor insemination. Further, expanding on prior work on patterns in contact between donors and children across the life course (Hertz, 2002; Stevens et al., 2003), we found that the young adults in our study described a range of patterns in contact with their donors over time. Further, they invoked geographic location, their mothers’ role as intermediaries, developmental stage, and interest (or lack thereof) to explain the level or intensity of contact they had with their donors. Hertz (2002) similarly observed that when the donor lived far away, his involvement

tended to be sporadic or infrequent across the life course. In addition, she found that mothers' perceptions of and desire for donor involvement tended to mediate the level of contact that their children had with their donors.

Most of the participants were satisfied with their current level of contact with their donors. Several participants, however, indicated that they desired more information about or contact with these men. Likewise, several participants had recently begun to (re)establish a connection with their donors. We interpret these participants' subtle, but growing interest in seeing their donors more often than they had when they were younger as indicative of a turning point in their identity, emerging as they were coming of age, in late adolescence or young adulthood. Of note here is a clinical case study by Telingator (2013), which describes a young woman, Melissa, with two lesbian mothers, who desired to clarify the nature of her relationship with her donor, and thus gain permission from her lesbian mothers to call him 'Dad.' As she entered into young adulthood, Melissa increasingly felt that she could navigate her relationship with her donor on her own; and, in turn, she was less reliant on her mothers as mediators of this relationship. Through extensive individual and family therapy, Melissa also developed the ability to negotiate her relationships with her biological mother, her nonbiological mother, her donor, and his partner—whom she defined as her two sets of parents—with more independence and agency, as she developed a greater sense of control over her own life. As this case study suggests, the individuals in our sample may, as they enter young adulthood, be experiencing greater independence (e.g., from their mothers and their family home), which enables them to craft their own relationship with their donors. Indeed, there is evidence that our participants understood and demonstrated much more fluid and expansive constructions of parent-child, family, and kin relationships than contained in the heteronormative model of the strictly two-parent nuclear family.

Most of these young adults—eight of 11—did not think of their donors as dads; nor did they feel like they needed dads, *per se*. Rather, they thought of their donors as “just donors,” or, as extended family members. Such a designation may in part represent an assertion of loyalty to their nonbiological lesbian mothers, whose legal/biological status as parents tends to be tenuous, and who often must defend their role and identity as ‘parent’ (Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2007; Vanfraussen et al., 2003). However, this interpretation is speculative, and future research should further examine the role and consequences of the primacy of biological ties in lesbian two-mother households; indeed, this is an area of LGB-parent families that is receiving increasing attention, particularly in the context of relationship dissolution and stepfamily formation (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Goldberg & Allen, *in press*). Even those participants who counted their donor as a third parent tended to conceptualize him as just that—a third parent, tertiary to their primary mothers. These participants are drawing upon the traditional heterosexual family lexicon to develop useful and appropriate terms to describe and name their donors. In part, they may be borrowing from existing scripts which, although not perfectly reflective of the kinds of complex families in which they live, provide them with language to clarify—for themselves and others—the nature of their relationship with their donors (e.g., he is my biological father, but not my parent) (Ehrensaft, 2005). Yet, the reality is that these young adults have confronted, or will confront, the fact that society tends to perceive donors as fathers, “since the unconscious presumption is that all children have a father, even if absent or dead” (Barrett, 1997, p. 46). Recognizing such assumptions, and gaining the perspectives of young people who experience the reality of defining their donors in ways that are meaningful and true to their particular family constellation, contributes to our understanding of the unconscious hold of the inevitability and superiority of the traditional family model.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CLINICIANS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our findings suggest that therapists should allow all family members to define their relationships to one another; that is, therapists should not presume the nature or meaning of terms like “mother” and “father,” particularly in the context of lesbian-mother families that utilized known donors. Our findings also suggest that both contact with and curiosity about known donors may change over the life course. Thus, therapists should be sensitive to the reality that contact may vary based on factors beyond children’s control, including geographic proximity to the donor, lesbian mothers’ preferences related to contact, and donors’ availability and interest in contact with the child over time. Therapists should also be sensitive to the possibility that young adulthood may represent an important time for further identity exploration, particularly in terms of developing close relationships on one’s own terms with others (Erikson, 1963), and thus, young adults with lesbian mothers may express particular interest in their known donors during this period.

Our findings, consistent with developmental theory on the transition from adolescence to young adulthood (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Erikson, 1963), suggest that one way that offspring of lesbian parents may exercise their desire for increasing independence from primary parental control and the ability to set the terms of their own close relationships is by seeking out contact with their donors, even making geographic changes that facilitate such contact. One aspect of this emerging change in the parent–child relationship that bears further study is how lesbian parents feel about and respond to the challenges of relinquishing some control in their children’s lives, particularly when the parents have no anticipatory socialization for how to navigate their offspring’s desire to increase contact with or knowledge of their paternal heritage. As innovators in new kinship relationships, lesbian mothers and their children may not know what to expect as children mature and wish to branch out in terms of identity, independence, and intimacy. Thus, this is also an area for sensitive clinical intervention, in terms of how to prepare and intervene with lesbian-mother families in navigating developmental changes in their individual and family roles. Clinicians should carefully assess, on an ongoing basis, how family members are managing this potentially significant developmental transition from childhood to young adulthood, which involves considerable shifting of roles and responsibilities for both mothers and children.

This study was limited in that it was cross-sectional, used a small sample, and did not examine the perspectives of the participants’ lesbian mothers or the donors. Future research is needed that longitudinally and qualitatively explores the perspectives of both young adults and their lesbian mothers across the life course, with respect to known donors. How, for example, do the attitudes and perceptions of young adults and their lesbian mothers converge or diverge, with respect to the role of the donor, at various points during the life course? Research is also needed that explores the experiences and perceptions of children of gay men who become parents using “birth others,” such as egg donors and surrogates (Ehrensaft, 2005). How do gay men explain the role of these birth others in the conception process, and how do children and young adults perceive and construct these birth others across the life course?

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study contributes to the emerging literature on how young people with LGB parents define and negotiate their relationships with known donors. Participants were not dismissing or diluting the notion of “father”; rather, they were actively working to make sense of what it means to have lesbian parents by whom they were cared for and lived with (their biological, legal, and social mothers), and then a male “parent” who provided the genetic material, but who otherwise had greater latitude in terms of how they

got to define his place—socially and emotionally—in their family system. This study elaborates understanding of complex kinship arrangements as perceived by the children who are born into such families by highlighting how they come to deal with the potential ambiguities in a quasi-parental relationship. That is, the “father–child” relationship, one that is imbued with tremendous social and emotional significance, is, at the same time, being redefined in LGB-parent families. These findings, by exposing previously unexplored family boundaries and meanings, suggest that the new terrain of chosen families—consisting of child, parent, and donor—deserves attention from researchers, therapists, and other practitioners.

REFERENCES

- Barrett, S. E. (1997). Children of lesbian parents: The what, when, and how of talking about donor identity. *Women & Therapy, 20*, 43–55. doi: 10.1300/J015v20n02_04
- Biblarz, T. J., & Savci, E. (2010). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender families. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 72*, 480–497. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00714.x
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods*. New York: Pearson.
- Bos, H. M., van Balen, F., & van den Boom, D. (2007). Child adjustment and parenting in planned lesbian-parent families. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 77*, 38–48. doi: 10.1037/0002-9432.77.1.38
- Brewaeys, A., Ponjaert, I., Van Halle, E., & Golombok, S. (1997). Donor insemination: Child development and family functioning in lesbian mother families with 4–8-year-old children. *Human Reproduction, 12*, 1349–1359. doi: 10.1093/humrep/12.7.1591
- Brewaeys, A., Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, I., Van Steirteghem, A. C., & Devroey, P. (1993). Children from anonymous donors: An inquiry into homosexual and heterosexual parents' attitudes. *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics & Gynecology, 14*, 23–35.
- Carter, B., & McGoldrick, M. (1999). *The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family and social perspectives* (3rd ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Chabot, J. M., & Ames, B. D. (2004). “It wasn’t ‘let’s get pregnant and go do it’”: Decision-making in lesbian couples planning motherhood via donor insemination. *Family Relations, 53*, 348–356. doi: 10.1111/j.0197-6664.2004.00041.x
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dempsey, D. (2010). Lesbians and gay men forming families with children: Conceiving and negotiating reproductive relationships. *Sociology, 44*, 1145–1162. doi: 10.1177/0038038510381607
- Ehrensaft, D. (2005). *Mommies, daddies, donors, surrogates: Answering tough questions and building strong families*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Erikson, E. H. (1963). *Childhood and society* (2nd ed.). New York: Norton.
- Gartrell, N., Bos, H., Peyser, H., Deck, A., & Rodas, C. (2011). Family characteristics, custody arrangements, and adolescent psychological well-being after lesbian mothers break up. *Family Relations, 60*, 572–585. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3729.2011.00667.x
- Gartrell, N., Hamilton, J., Banks, A., Mosbacher, D., Reed, N., Sparks, C. et al. (1996). The National Lesbian Family Study: 1. Interviews with prospective mothers. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 66*, 272–281. doi: 10.1037/h0080178
- Goldberg, A. E. (2006). The transition to parenthood for lesbian couples. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies, 2*, 13–42. doi: 10.1300/J461v02n01_02
- Goldberg, A. E. (2007). Talking about family: Disclosure practices of adults raised by lesbian, gay, and bisexual parents. *Journal of Family Issues, 28*, 100–131. doi: 10.1177/0192513X06293606
- Goldberg, A. E. (2010). *Lesbian and gay parents and their children: Research on the family life cycle*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. doi: 10.1037/12055-004
- Goldberg, A. E., & Allen, K. R. (2007). Lesbian mothers' ideas and intentions about male involvement across the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 69*, 352–365. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00370.x
- Goldberg, A. E., & Allen, K. R. (in press). Same-sex relationship dissolution and LGB stepfamily formation: Perspectives of young adults with LGB parents. *Family Relations*.
- Gonzalez, K. A., Rostosky, S. S., Odom, R. D., & Riggle, E. D. B. (2012). The positive aspects of being the parent of an LGBTQ child. *Family Process*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1111/famp.12009
- Gotta, G., Green, R. J., Rothblum, E., Solomon, S., Balsam, K., & Schwartz, P. (2011). Heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male relationships: A comparison of couples in 1975 and 2000. *Family Process, 50*, 353–376. doi: 10.1111/j.1545-5300.2011.01365.x

- Grace, V., Daniels, K., & Gillett, W. (2008). The donor, the father, and the imaginary constitution of the family: Parents' constructions in the case of donor insemination. *Social Science & Medicine*, *66*, 301–314. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2007.08.029
- Hertz, R. (2002). The father as an idea: A challenge to kinship boundaries by single mothers. *Symbolic Interaction*, *25*, 1–31. doi: 10.1525/si.2002.25.1.1
- Hood, J. C. (2002). The power of gametes versus the tyranny of master narratives: Commentary. *Symbolic Interaction*, *25*, 33–39. doi: 10.1525/si.2002.25.1.33
- McNair, R., Dempsey, D., Perlesz, A., & Wise, S. (2002). Lesbian parenting: Issues, strengths and challenges. *Family Matters*, *63*, 40–49.
- Nordqvist, P. (2010). Out of sight, out of mind: Family resemblances in lesbian donor insemination. *Sociology*, *44*, 1128–1144. doi: 10.1177/0038038510381616
- Nordqvist, P. (2011). 'Dealing with sperm': Comparing lesbians' clinical and non-clinical donor conception processes. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *33*, 114–129. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9566.2010.01279.x
- Nordqvist, P. (2012). Origins and originators: Lesbian couples negotiating parental identities and sperm donor conception. *Culture, Health, & Sexuality*, *14*, 297–311. doi: 10.1080/13691058.2011.639392
- Shapiro, J. (2013). The law governing LGBT-parent families. In A. E. Goldberg & K. R. Allen (Eds.), *LGBT-parent families: Innovations in research and implications for practice* (pp. 291–304). New York: Springer.
- Stevens, M., Perry, B., Burston, A., Golombok, S., & Golding, J. (2003). Openness in lesbian-mother families regarding mother's sexual orientation and child's conception by donor insemination. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, *21*, 347–362. doi: 10.1080/02646830310001622141
- Tasker, F., & Granville, J. (2011). Children's views of family relationships in lesbian-led families. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, *7*, 182–199. doi: 10.1080/1550428X.2011.540201
- Telingator, C. (2013). Clinical work with children of LGB parents. In A. E. Goldberg & K. R. Allen (Eds.), *LGBT-parent families: Innovations in research and implications for practice* (pp. 261–274). New York: Springer.
- Touroni, E., & Coyle, A. (2002). Decision-making in planned lesbian parenting: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *12*, 194–209. doi: 10.1002/casp.672
- Vanfraussen, K., Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, I., & Brewaeys, A. (2002). What does it mean for a youngster to grow up in a lesbian family created by means of donor insemination? *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, *20*, 237–252. doi: 10.1080/0264683021000033165
- Vanfraussen, K., Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, I., & Brewaeys, A. (2003). Why do children want to know more about the donor? The experiences of youngsters raised in lesbian families. *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics & Gynecology*, *24*, 31–38. doi: 10.3109/01674820309042798