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Female-partnered women conceiving kinship: Does sharing a sperm donor mean we are family?

Abbie E. Goldberg^a and Joanna E. Scheib^{b,c}

^aDepartment of Psychology, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA; ^bDepartment of Psychology, University of California, Davis, California, USA; ^cThe Sperm Bank of California, Berkeley, California, USA

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored how 36 initially female-partnered mothers defined their own, and their children's, relationships with families who share their unknown sperm donor (i.e., "linked" families). Shared genetics among children were sometimes sufficient to describe relationships among linked families as familial, especially from the children's perspectives. Most women described their own relationships with linked families as significant but not necessarily in traditional family terms. Family terms were sometimes seen as undermining ties to siblings and genetically unrelated mothers. As shared experiences have come to define "chosen family," definitions of significant relationships must expand to include those defined by shared genetics alone.

KEYWORDS

Donor insemination; donor-linked families; female-partnered; kinship; lesbian

The Standard North American family, which involves heterosexually married adults, dependent children, and other bio-legally related individuals, represents one definition of "family" or "kin" that continues to exert ideological and political influence in North America and beyond (Smith, 1993). But more expansive definitions of family, such as those that acknowledge non-kin as "chosen" family, have also begun to take hold (Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto, 2011). As Cahn (2013) states, "Changes in the structure of the American family... are causing a cultural rethinking of what constitutes a family. The [sperm/egg] donor world helps show that the meaning of family... is changing and becoming more complex" (p. 31).

As assisted reproductive technologies, including donor insemination (DI), enable the formation of families headed by female couples and single women, donor-conceived families have become more visible in society. Such families complicate and challenge traditional notions of family as they remove the supposed requirements of sexual intercourse, biological relatedness, and gendered parenting roles (Hargreaves, 2006). Yet, "the emphasis on the biological bond as forming a

family, which is inherent in the use of donor gametes and in the search by parents for genetic half-siblings related to their offspring through the donor, can be seen as supporting cultural conventions [about what defines family]" (Cahn, 2013, p. 33). Thus, families formed via DI both subvert and reify the centrality of biology to kinship relations.

Of interest is how female-partnered mothers who use DI, and their children, conceptualize relationships with other families who used the same sperm donor. These families are related genetically, but violate other aspects of traditional families (e.g., they do not live together, nor share a cultural or social history). Also, they are partnered with another woman who will not share a genetic relationship with the child, perhaps leading the couple to claim the irrelevance of biology (parent-child relationships are seen as socially constructed; Hargreaves, 2006). At the same time, the couple usually carefully considers the donor's characteristics (Scheib, Riordan, & Shaver, 2000), reifying the significance of genetic inheritance.

How, then, do they view other families with the same sperm donor? Are these families regarded as friends, family, or something else? Some scholars have argued that the boundaries between friendship and kinship are changing. When friendships are characterized by obligation and dependability, companionship, and longevity, these ties are sometimes referred to as family-like in nature, or "families of choice" (Pahl & Spencer, 2004; Weston, 1991). Female same-sex couples—who are vulnerable to rejection by family of origin based on their sexual orientation—may be particularly likely to form chosen families (Allen et al., 2011); although notably, some scholars have critiqued the emphasis on families of choice in gay kinship studies, pointing out the powerful if complex relationships that many sexual minorities have with their families of origin (e.g., Westwood, 2015). Couples who create DI families are defined by and created through deliberate choice: the sometimes difficult choice between two women of who will be the genetic parent, with the other woman taking on the role of social parent. And yet, with the relatively new option of contacting their child's "donor-linked" families, female couples can now choose whether to accept or reject genetic ties as defining interest in and relationships among linked families. This choice may be particularly complex in two-mother families, given their genetic asymmetry, with (typically) only one mother genetically related to the child (Ehrensaft, 2008). The significance and meaning of genetic ties in these families, then, may be a "knotty" and sensitive topic.

Further, little is known about how children's relationships to linked families are conceptualized. To what extent are mothers, and children (according to mothers), drawing from traditional discourses about kinship that treat genetic relatedness as a central feature that defines family? We seek to understand how female-partnered women, and their children, construct the significance of blood ties against dominant ideologies surrounding kinship, and the challenges they encounter when describing relationships with genetically related persons who do not fit within the standard familial lexicon.

Research on donor-linked families and kinship construction

As donor-conceived adults and parents who have used DI to conceive have become more open about their families' origins and their unique needs, donor-linking services have emerged as a means of accessing genetic origins and possibly establishing connections (Goldberg & Scheib, 2015). Primarily quantitative research has examined parents' interests in and constructions of relationships with donor-linked families (e.g., Freeman, Jadva, Kramer, & Golombok, 2009; Scheib & Ruby, 2008), and has not explored, in depth, participants' narratives about why they perceive donor-linked families in any particular way, or themes specific to female-partnered women. Further, studies only sometimes distinguish between parents' and children's relationships to the linked families.

Scheib and Ruby (2008) surveyed 14 of the first parents (including 6 female-partnered) to match in a DI program service that connects families that share a donor. Parents were most likely to regard their own relationship to linked families as "acquaintances," with smaller numbers using the terms "family" or "friends." One woman described the relationship as "other," stating that she considered their linked family to be "friends/family," hinting at the challenges related to defining these relationships and the possibility of merging kinship terms. In contrast, most women described their child's relationship to linked families as family.

Freeman and colleagues (2009) used the Donor Sibling Registry (DSR), an online registry facilitating contact among linked families, to recruit a sample for their online survey of parents ($n = 688$; majority single women and female couples) who had used donor conception (almost all DI). The authors noted that "parents commonly framed the relationships between linked families in terms of 'family' and 'friendship'" (e.g., "we are all one big family"; p. 512). Parents were particularly likely to use family descriptors in characterizing their children's relationships with linked siblings; some children "refer[red] to their donor siblings as 'brothers' and 'sisters'" (p. 512). In contrast, in Hertz and Mattes' (2011) survey of 587 DI mothers on the Single Mothers by Choice listserv, few women described these relationships as close family; most used terms like distant family, close friends, or acquaintances. These difference may be related to whom respondents were referencing—themselves or their families as a whole.

In Millbank's (2014) interviews with five DI mothers who had joined donor-linking registries, some articulated "not consider[ing linked families] to be family members... and struggled to articulate new categories of relation" (p. 29). Millbank's findings point to possible nuance and complexity in how families conceptualize these relationships; such relations may fall outside the box of "family" and "friends" and present new linguistic challenges.

The current study

The current study is grounded in a social constructionist framework, which emphasizes how individuals understand and create meaning out of their

experiences. Individuals' meaning-making processes are necessarily shaped by their everyday interactions and immediate social context, as well as broader historical and ideological contexts (Schwandt, 2000). For example, female-partnered mothers are exposed to, and may internalize, the dominant cultural narrative which emphasizes genetics as a fundamental component of kinship, and treats relatedness as a powerful symbolic thread in parent-child relationships specifically. Yet, they lie outside of the dominant heteronormative model—and are partnered with someone who is not genetically tied to the children that they are raising together—perhaps leading them to construct alternative ideas about family relationships.

This study aims to explore the variability within, and meaning-making processes behind, female-partnered mothers' classifications of donor-linked relationships, within a sample who sought contact with donor-linked others. We are concerned with how women who used DI define and experience kinship in their daily lives; whether and how they draw from existing kinship notions (family, friend) to describe their relationships to linked families; how they navigate the (in)significance of the genetic thread that ties their children to donor-linked siblings; and the challenges they encounter in articulating their own and their children's relationships to these families.

We were specifically interested in the narratives of women who were DI recipients (i.e., conceived and gestated the pregnancy), and partnered with another woman who was not genetically related to their child. In conceptualizing relationships with donor-linked families, we examined: (a) the extent to which female-partnered DI mothers constructed relationships within the traditional family lexicon, (b) whether they struggled in describing these relationship, and (c) how they viewed their children as conceptualizing these relationships.

Method

Recruitment and procedure

In 1997, The Sperm Bank of California established one of the first services that connects families that share the same donor. This U.S. DI program is unique historically in that it has always served large numbers of same-sex couples, who tend to be open with their children regarding the family's donor origins (Scheib et al., 2000). Families register for mutual-consent contact with other linked families. When there is a match, registrants are informed and receive each other's contact information. In 2013, when this study began, just over 25% of all program families had joined the linking service, although not all had matched.

For the study, 406 parents in the DI program's linking service were invited by e-mail to contact the first author if they were interested in being interviewed about their experiences with donor-linked families; the first eligible 55 who responded were interviewed. (Nineteen women were excluded from the current study because they were single mothers or non-gestational parents.) Participants were mailed a

consent form which they returned prior to scheduling a phone interview. Participants were offered \$30.

Interviews lasted about an hour. Interviews were transcribed and pseudonyms were assigned. Data from this study are derived from a variety of open-ended questions (e.g., How do you define family? How do you define your relationship to [child's] donor-linked families?).

Description of the sample

Participants were 36 DI mothers who had conceived and gestated their children. In all cases they were the genetic mother of their oldest child (the focus child in the interview). All 36 were partnered with women at the time they became parents. Seventy-two percent identified as lesbian, 12% as bisexual, 11% as queer, and 5% as gay. Nine women had separated from their partner since becoming parents. Of these nine, six were in relationships with new female partners.

Most women (89%) were of European descent. Their mean age was 43.7 years ($SD = 8.0$), and they reported a mean family income of \$105,414 ($SD = \$68,171$). Forty-seven percent lived on the West Coast of the United States, 37% on the East Coast, 11% in the Midwest, and 5% in the South. All women had at least one child; 23 had two children and three had three children. The average ages for the first, second, and third child were 10.1 ($SD = 7.1$), 8.5 ($SD = 6.4$), and 7.0 ($SD = 3.5$); children's ages ranged from .5 to 20 years. Parents had used the same donor in all but three cases. All but three mothers had used open-identity donors. Fifty-eight percent of children were boys.

Participants reported having been in contact with their first linked family for a median of 4 years ($Mean = 5.40$, range .5–15), having first made contact when their oldest child was a median age of 2 years ($Mean = 4.50$, range .5–15).

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves examining participants' narratives to identify recurrent patterns in their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Both the literature and a social constructionist theoretical framework informed our analysis. Interviews were coded line-by-line. The first author initiated the coding process by focusing primarily on women's descriptions of how they view the matched family, and how they saw their child as constructing these relationships. Attention was paid to women's general ideas about genetics and kinship, and how these intersected with their narratives regarding the formation, navigation, and labeling of relationships. During coding, the author used comparative methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) to establish analytic distinctions by contrasting data across participants to identify similarities and differences (e.g., based on child age and sibling status).

After developing an extensive list of specific codes, focused coding was applied, such that the most substantiated coding categories were created to sort the data.

This led to integrating some codes and discovering new connections among the data. Four rounds of focused coding allowed for refinement of all data. A second coder read selected segments of participant transcripts (i.e., one-quarter) and evaluated the scheme against the data. Having more than one person analyze the data and compare findings ensures that multiple interpretations are considered (Patton, 2002). Initial intercoder reliability ($\frac{\# \text{agreements} - \# \text{disagreements}}{\text{total } \# \text{ of agreements} + \text{disagreements}}$) was .80, above Miles and Huberman's (1994) suggested initial reliability of .70. Based on the discrepancies that emerged, the first author and the second coder met to discuss differences in interpretation. They produced a final refined scheme, which was reapplied to all data. In quoting women, we provide details about relationship status if different than when they conceived, and child age (young children are under 6; school-aged children are 6–17; young adults are 18+ years).

Results

Parents' relationships with donor-linked families

How do parents conceptualize their relationships with families that share their child's donor and with whom they have made contact? We found that 5.6% of women ($n = 2$) described these relationships as that of immediate family; 25% ($n = 9$) as extended family; 13.9% ($n = 5$) as friends; 19.4% ($n = 7$) as acquaintances; and 36.1% ($n = 13$) as “not family or friends, but a unique type of relationship”; “a special bond.” Thus, some categorized the relationships within the traditional kinship lexicon, while others characterized them as having ambiguous or complex boundaries or meanings.

Family

Only two women designated the donor-linked families as members of their own families. They used familial terms (e.g., sisters) when describing their relationships to the mothers of their children's linked siblings, and emphasized (a) their own unique perspective on family and (b) their personal connection to, or personal qualities of, the linked family, in explaining how they came to view them as “family.” Marlene, mother of three school-aged children, considered one of her four linked families to be members of her own family. She did not emphasize genetic relatedness as a key component; rather, she noted that her identity as a lesbian and adopted person, and a distant relationship to her family of origin, led her to establish “families of choice” throughout her life: “I have what I call a ‘family of choice,’ which is not an unusual thing amongst queers. I have a very alternative understanding of what family can be.” This perspective, combined with an “intimate” experience connecting with one of the linked families, led her to view them as “one of our own.” She and her partner even became “the designated people if the parents should die.”

Extended family

Nine women, one of whom had separated and repartnered, described their relationships with the linked families as being similar to “extended family.” They were clear that they did not view them as “immediate family,” or “members of their inner circle”; they placed them in the less-central concentric circle of “extended family.” They often explained this characterization by emphasizing (a) their significance, which allowed them to be named as “family”; but also (b) their physical distance or limited contact, leading them to use the qualifier of “extended.” These relationships were not described as particularly close, which perhaps further argued against naming them as “family” (i.e., traditional or chosen) or “friends.” Ginny, mother of two school-aged sons, said, “I never had cousins growing up [but] it feels like that level of relationship... somebody in your extended family but you don’t see them daily or weekly or even monthly.”

Several women specifically noted that they got along with and had more contact with these families, whom they considered extended family, than their own biological extended family. Allie, mother of two young children, said, “They’re like extended family. They live in a different part of the country, we’ve only met them twice. But I converse with them a lot more than I do with a lot of my other relatives... the fundamentalist Christian ones.”

Friends

In five cases (two separated and repartnered), women were clear that they regarded linked families as friends, but not family. They felt that the category of “friend” best captured their relationships, in that they had regular contact with at least one family (“we do the Facebook thing so we share daily updates and send messages”), but felt that their current level of emotional intimacy did not warrant a family descriptor. Ashley, mother of two young children, said:

I don’t really feel it’s extended family. I feel more as just a—like a friend. Being able to keep in touch and... if she needed to talk about something that’s going on with [donor-linked sister], or even herself, we could talk. As they get older, she emails me [about medical issues], just to see if that’s something [related to] the donor.

Participants like Ashley typically described the relationships with linked families, and the parents specifically, as characterized by a low-to-moderate level of contact that included information exchange and support, particularly when it was related to the donor. They seemed to emphasize the affective components of the relationship over shared genetics to a greater degree than those who considered linked families to be “extended family”—but not to the extent that they would be considered chosen family, at least yet. A few alluded to the possibility for future evolution of these relationships, whereby friends could become family, if a certain level of mutual respect was established (Allen et al., 2011).

Acquaintances

Seven women, two separated and repartnered, designated their relationships with the linked families as “acquaintance-like,” and explained this by stating that (a) they did not know the families well (had minimal contact) and (b) their relationships lacked qualities that defined family and friend relationships (e.g., closeness, trust, shared history). Most noted that these relationships could evolve into something more friend-like, if certain conditions were met: namely, geographic proximity, and/or a good connection between families. Andie, a repartnered woman with a young son, stated: “I don’t consider them my family, even though their kids are related to my son. They’re more of an acquaintance. There could be a friendship in the future, if we’re in the same geographic area. We’d see how the kids get along.” To Andie, a genetic link between her son and these children was not sufficient to consider them family; but, she saw potential for this relationship, contingent on location and connection.

Michelle, mother of a young son, described her relationship with her child’s linked families as “acquaintance-like,” while noting the fluid nature and possible evolution of these relationships. Interestingly, she characterized the other linked families with whom she had interacted—all single mothers—as less interested in such an evolution, which she attributed to clearly delineated boundaries around themselves and their children as “family”: “They are not in a gay community. They are single moms by choice and are like, ‘This is my family, this is my child and me.’” Michelle indicated that she was also sensitive to the need to maintain clear boundaries; but out of respect for her partner, who might be upset by the (over) privileging of genetic ties:

I don’t know if a relationship with these other women that is more family-based ... will happen. I think [maintaining boundaries] protects the trust, privacy, and comfort of our others, our wives, our partners. You don’t want to embrace [a family-like relationship] necessarily unless it’s something that makes sense to do.

In that the genetically unrelated mother’s parental role was based entirely on affective bonds, Michelle and several others were cognizant of the need for sensitivity as they constructed and named their relationships with families who shared their donor—who had genetic, but not social, ties to their children. Gladys noted, “We have created our family intentionally, and the idea that biology would dictate stuff about our family, more than the choices we have made, is something we want to stay away from.” Michelle, Gladys, and two other women explicitly noted that their partners had even less of a connection with these families, and regarded them as “not even acquaintances” (“She probably has even less of a place for them in our lives”).

A unique type of relationship: “A special bond”

Thirteen women (three separated) struggled with describing their relationships with linked families in terms of the traditional family lexicon, or even as friendship, noting that “it’s a unique kind of relationship... not family, not friends” and “we don’t have

the language... to describe these relationships.” These women settled on describing their relationship as having “a special connection” or being part of a “special group.” Lindsey, mother of a young son, stated, “I don’t know if there’s a word that describes it. On the Internet we consider ourselves the [donor number] family. It’s... a special group.” Raven, a separated mother of two school-aged girls, stated:

I think of them as something entirely different [from friends or family]. I don’t know them well enough to consider them friends. But we share a unique experience, so we’re... in some sort of weird club, a great club. But I don’t really consider them family, although I guess the kids sort of are to [each other]... I feel warmly towards them, because... they share a similar experience, [but] I don’t know what to consider them.

Mothers’ constructions of children’s relationships with donor-linked families

How do participants describe their children’s relationships with children in the linked families? We found that 16.7% of women ($n = 6$) described their oldest (and in some cases only) child’s relationship with linked siblings as that of immediate family (siblings or half siblings); 19.4% ($n = 7$) described it as “just” donor siblings (and, in their eyes, similar to extended family); 5.6% ($n = 2$) described the relationship as friends, and 11.1% ($n = 4$) said that their child was aware of these relationships, but was indifferent to or uninterested in them. Just under half ($n = 17$), however, stated that their child was too young or had not had contact with the family, so no substantive relationship existed. If these latter families are excluded, then most mothers (13 of 19) described their children’s relationships to linked others as immediate or extended family.

Notably, although parents were explicitly asked to describe how their *children* regarded their relationships with donor-linked siblings, they sometimes responded with a discussion of how *they* had participated in their children’s construction of these relationships, or, how they had guarded against influencing their children’s narratives. Next, we focus on women’s descriptions of how their oldest child viewed his/her relationship to linked sibling(s).

Family (siblings)

Six mothers, all with only children, described their child’s relationships with at least one child in the linked families as that of “family”—namely, a sibling. Although all of these women described their *children* as conceptualizing linked siblings as siblings, five noted that they personally preferred to classify these relationships as half siblings—a distinction that was not seen as meaningful to their children, who resisted their parent’s narrative: “They grew into wanting to call each other brothers. The adults were like ‘Oh, they’re donor siblings.’ But they were like, ‘We’re brothers!’”

“Just” donor siblings (extended family)

Seven women stated that their children simply regarded their linked siblings as “donor siblings.” This group typically affirmed that they had facilitated this designation, seeing it as the easiest way to describe the relationship. They did not feel

that elaboration of this relationship, or efforts to categorize it within the traditional language of kinship, was necessary. Significantly, although they preferred to *refer* to the linked siblings as “donor siblings,” their descriptions revealed their sense that these relationships were most *similar to* that of extended family, in that the children were genetically related, and had casual contact, but did not share daily experiences: “My son has said that the families end up feeling like cousins; not intimate relationships, but people you like and are glad to get together with.”

Six of these women had multiple children. Thus, it may have been especially important to them, and their children, to delineate linked siblings from “real” siblings (with whom they shared a home, history, but not always the same donor and/or genetically related mother). Some described discomfort with the connotation of familial closeness that would be implied by referring to the linked siblings as family, and encouraged their children to use the qualified language of donor sibling. Sarah, mother of three school-aged daughters, said, “They are connected with us as donor siblings.... Half-siblings tend to grow up with each other. So we’ve distinguished it and refer to them as donor siblings, because we don’t have history... just this biological commonality.” Sarah’s statement both minimizes the significance of genetic relatedness and also emphasizes the role of shared history in familial ties—something that was apparent to her, her partner, and their two children in the context of their “real” sibling ties.

Two women described how their children’s relationships helped them arrive at a definition *other* than sibling or half-sibling to describe relationships with linked siblings—a distinction that validated established kinship ties. Angela, who had two children (Deenie, 18, and Jessa, 16), stated:

When they first met [linked siblings], Deenie said to Jessa, “I’m your real sister.... The others are donor sisters, they aren’t even really”—because Deenie and Jessa are biological half-siblings, so it was almost like, “I don’t want you to call them your half-siblings because that’s not the equivalent of me, right?” They worked that out and agreed that they are each other’s sisters and these other people are more like cousins.

Friends

Two women stated that their children conceptualized linked siblings as friends. In both cases, these children were young, and did not really understand—or their parents had not explained—the nature of these relationships. About her daughter, Lindsey said, “I just think she thinks they’re friends. We haven’t spent a long time trying to explain it... As she gets older, that will morph.” These parents chose to sidestep the language of donor sibling, preferring to introduce the linked families as friends before explaining the possibly complicated nature of these ties.

Children too young or haven’t met them

In 17 cases (three separated, two repartnered), women noted that their children were still young and/or had not yet met their linked siblings, so these relationships had not fully developed— although most expressed openness to their evolution.

Dana noted that although her son was “very young” and “didn’t really understand the whole donor thing,” she believed he would develop a greater appreciation for that connection over time: “I’ll show him pictures and be like, ‘What do you think?’ Once there’s a better understanding that you have two moms... at that point I think he’ll be [interested].” In a few cases, women noted that they had not yet, or had only just, begun to explain “the sperm donor thing” to their child, and it did not make sense to introduce the notion of linked siblings until their child had a grasp of what it meant to have a donor.

Child is indifferent/uninterested (no relationship)

Four mothers—all separated, three repartnered—asserted that their children—all school-aged or young adults—had a good understanding that they were connected to other children via the donor, but were uninterested in developing these relationships. In three instances, this indifference emerged before, and in some ways eclipsed the need for or possibility of, meeting the linked siblings. Lori explained that her young adult daughter had known about her linked siblings for several years, but was uninterested in meeting them: “I think she [feels like], ‘This isn’t really going to have any effect on my daily life, I’m not going to get too excited about these people who I’m not going to have a relationship with.’” One participant described her teenage son as meeting his linked siblings, but displaying little interest in getting to know them: “They’d write to him and he’d kind of blow them off—he was busy, they didn’t have a lot in common, we live [far] away.”

Discussion

This study examined how female-partnered mothers construct relationships with donor-linked families. The findings illustrate how DI families both subvert and reify the centrality of biology to kinship relations in the United States. The genetic tie among children in linked families sometimes served to earn these families “kinship points,” in that the relationship was described as important, even familial, on the basis of shared genetics. In other cases, parents emphasized that this shared biological connection was insufficient to qualify a family as kin. More generally, however, responses were varied, going beyond a kin/not-kin dichotomy, demonstrating that these relationships nonetheless are significant to DI female-partnered mothers and their children. Much as how shared experiences alone define “chosen family,” definitions of significant relationships must expand to incorporate those that are defined by shared genetics alone.

Most mothers and children were described as conceptualizing relationships with linked families as something other than immediate or extended family; about a third of both viewed them as “family.” Interestingly, when considering only children who knew of or had met linked others, the majority considered them family. Some mothers described attempts to qualify their children’s relationships with linked families (e.g., referring to them as “half-” or “donor siblings”), as opposed

to siblings—attempts that were met with increasing resistance as children developed greater agency in their own kin construction. As Goldberg and Allen (2013) note, in a study of young adults' relationships with known sperm donors, adolescents often become more active in managing relationships with donors and linked siblings, as these relationships—previously “overseen” by parents—become theirs to manage.

A quarter of parents described their relationships with linked families as “extended family,” thus validating the significance of genetic ties (i.e., they “upgraded” families to kinship status) but also minimizing them by describing (similarly) weak relationships with their own extended families. Perhaps weak family ties—which may be more common among sexual minorities (Weston, 1991)—shaped their requirements for extended family membership, allowing them to grant this status to persons to whom they were not physically or emotionally close, but who were “blood relatives” to their children. Likewise, one-fifth of women described their children's relationship to linked families as similar to that of extended family: they were “just” donor siblings, occupying a similar status as that of cousins to whom they were related but rarely saw. Such relationship classifications may reflect women's acknowledgment of the relevance of genetics (i.e., DI is valued for enabling a genetic tie between one parent and the child), but also their awareness of not over-privileging genetics, given the need to protect their carefully constructed family of choice (Hargreaves, 2006). It also may reflect their children's reconciliation of these dual realities: they were conceived via a donor who may hold significance to them, highlighting the role of genetics; but, one of their mothers was not genetically related to them, underscoring the primacy of social ties (Ehrensaft, 2008).

Some women did not feel that shared genetics alone was enough to classify donor-linked families even as extended family. One-fifth of women characterized these relationships as “acquaintances.” They showed sensitivity to their partners' perspective in eschewing the notion that their children's genetic ties could possibly warrant a family descriptor (Hayden, 1995). One-sixth of women described these relationships as “friends.” This classification was often used in such a way that friendship implied closer affective ties than that of extended family (Pahl & Spencer, 2004)—yet, these women were unwilling to use the descriptor of family, perhaps because, as some noted, their definition of family involved shared genetics, history, or home (Hayden, 1995). Few women characterized their children's relationship to linked siblings as friends, and those who did acknowledged their own role in constructing them as such (e.g., to “keep things simple,” when their child had minimal knowledge of their donor origins).

Of note was the unwillingness of many women to categorize themselves as anything but a “special bond,” with more than one third describing a lack of language to describe these relationships (Cahn, 2013). To them, shared genetics was seen as an unambiguous thread that defined their children's relationship to linked siblings; in contrast, their own relationships with the parents of these linked siblings were

undefined, lacking genetic or legal ties, leaving unclear the expectations and boundaries of these relations. These relationships lacked the shared-experiences criterion that defines both family and friendships. Yet, similar to how legal marriage ties families together, women viewed these links as significant enough for their children that they were willing to “make it work.” But whereas in marriage, different families relate to each other as “in-laws,” these families are at a loss for words. Relationships among linked families reveal the limitations of terminology to accommodate new connections among families who share the same donor.

A minority of children was seen as disinterested in relationships with linked siblings. That they were all from families that had experienced parental separation suggests that perhaps, rather than motivating these children to seek out additional family-like relationships, such relational transitions prompted them to clarify the meaning and significance of family, and to focus on (re)affirming existing family ties. Or, such relational transitions may have prompted hesitation about developing new family relationships, as such relationships seemed to carry the risk of impermanence.

Almost half of children were seen as too young to have grasped the meaning of sharing a donor, with some feeling that introduction to the concept of linked siblings was premature, and that these relationships would evolve in the future. This notion is also consistent with our finding that many women showed flexibility in their *own* perspectives on kinship, raising the possibility of kin conversion from acquaintances to friends, or friends to family (Allen et al., 2011).

Limitations and conclusions

The sample is small, fairly affluent, and of European descent; thus, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Participants were also recruited from a DI program’s linking service that included only 25% of all program families. Thus, most DI families (75%) at this program were not represented in the sample, and might not see the genetic link as reason enough to contact linked families, let alone construct them as kin. Thus, the number of parents who conceptualize such families as kin should be viewed as even smaller than reported here. Also, while we obtained valuable data on parents’ perceptions of how their children view donor-linked relationships, we do not know whether children would agree with their parents’ assessments. Future work that explores the perspectives of children—and non-genetically related mothers— would shed insight into how different members of same-sex parent families construct these relationships. It would also be informative to explore why other families chose not to join the linking service, and whether or not they even think about donor-linked others.

This study reveals diversity in female-partnered mothers’ views of their own and their children’s construction of kin, reflecting the complex contributions of societal considerations regarding the significance of genes, women’s beliefs about chosen family, and their experiences with donor-linked families. It also reveals the

potential for diversity *within* families (between parent and child; between parents) in terms of relationship construction. As increasing numbers of families join linking services, parents should be advised that other families and even individuals within a family may attribute different levels of significance to linked others (some may see them as unimportant; others, especially children, may more readily embrace them as kin). This asymmetry has the potential to cause tension or confusion, or to challenge the affective ties that bind female-partnered families; but, such issues can be avoided if families can work things out prior to linking (see Goldberg & Scheib, 2015). Linking services offer individuals the chance to create new, unique connections that can support female-partnered mothers as they raise their DI children.

Notes on contributors

Abbie E. Goldberg is an Associate Professor in psychology at Clark University. Her research focuses on diverse families, including families formed through adoption and reproductive technologies.

Joanna E. Scheib is an Associate Adjunct Professor in psychology at the University of California, Davis and Research Director at The Sperm Bank of California. Her research focuses on family-building through donor conception.

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