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article

Tracing pathways of relatedness: how identity-release gamete donors negotiate biological (non-)parenthood

Leah Gilman, leah.gilman@manchester.ac.uk
University of Manchester, UK

This article draws on an interview study with UK 'identity-release' sperm and egg donors, exploring how, in the context of a new ethic of openness around donor conception, they articulate their role in relation to offspring. I show that participants neither dismissed, nor straightforwardly activated, the relational significance of the 'biological' substance they donated. Instead, they renegotiated its meaning in ways which do not map straightforwardly on to established kinship roles. Building on a conception of personal lives and selves as fundamentally relational (Mason, 2004; Smart, 2007; May, 2013), I show how donors managed the conflicting demands of identity-release donation by tracing their relatedness to offspring along particular pathways (while diminishing others); the inherent connectedness of their own lives and selves enabled them to construct indirect non-parental connections with offspring as the siblings of their own children or the children of their friends or sisters.

Key words sperm donor • egg donor • gamete donation • kinship • family practices • parenthood • relationality

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Introduction

With effect from 1 April 2005, UK regulations were amended enabling donor-conceived offspring to access identifying information about their gamete donor. While previously donor anonymity was the norm, men and women who donate in UK-licensed clinics must now consent to their name and last known address being made available to any donor offspring who request it, after they reach the age of 18. Such people therefore donate with the prospect of future contact with people born from their donation.

Drawing on Smart (2009) and Klotz (2014), I view this legal change as part of a broader shift in cultural attitudes towards the keeping of reproductive secrets. The identity-release amendment both reflects and reproduces the growing belief that openness regarding genetic parentage is necessary for the emotional wellbeing of individuals. According to this new ethic of openness, 'good' donors are those willing to be identified and open to contact (Graham et al, 2016). While the law is clear that donors have no parental rights or responsibilities, their relationship to children conceived from their donation *is* portrayed as socially significant, not something which can, or should, be dismissed by those donating. However, as Klotz (2014) explains, there is no established cultural script for donors or donor offspring to make sense of their relationship to one another. The qualitative interview study I report here began from an interest in the imaginative and relational work that might enable donors to make sense of this unscripted position. What kinds of narratives do they construct about their relationship to potential people conceived from their donation? How do they think they should, or would, feel and behave if they were contacted in the future?

In this article I show that, for donors, the significance of their connection to (potential) persons conceived from their donation is negotiated in the context of webs of personal relationships in which they are embedded (Smart, 2007). While this can give rise to challenges, the inherent relationality of their personal lives, selves and narratives (Mason, 2004; May, 2013) also enables donors to trace indirect connections to donor offspring via multiple pathways. In this study, donors' connections with their own children and with recipients provided an alternative to the 'biological parent' framework for talking about their relationship to donor offspring. 'Parent' was a term they actively rejected and avoided, aware that such terminology risked 'treading on the toes' of recipients; embeddedness therefore provided some donors with a means of constructing positive and meaningful, but crucially non-parental, connections with (potential) donor offspring.¹

Social significance of 'biological' connections

Recent sociological and anthropological studies of the family and kinship highlight creativity and flexibility in the ways people define and enact family. Research has demonstrated the diverse and contingent ways in which kinship connections are constructed through reference to various practices, processes and substances, which may or may not include those defined as 'biological' (Edwards, 2000; Weeks et al, 2001; Nordqvist, 2014). In addition, the processes and substances which are categorised as 'biological' are varied and highly contingent on the means by which people create their families (Thompson, 2001; Bestard, 2009).

However, this does not mean that people are somehow 'free' to construct connections just as they choose. As well as issues of power and inequality (Jamieson, 1999), scholars have argued that discourses of biological or genetic relatedness have particular cultural purchase when it comes to Euro-American definitions of kin (Franklin et al, 2000; Nordqvist, 2017), at least in part because of a culturally specific association between that which is defined as 'natural' and that which is perceived as automatic and enduring (Carsten, 2000). This association with permanency can be challenging for parents who feel unable to construct 'biological' connections with their children. For example, while generally de-emphasising the importance of genetics in their own family relationships, those who become parents through donor

conception often continue to frame their lack of genetic relatedness as something 'missing' (Hargreaves, 2006; Grace and Daniels, 2007) or which they try to 'make up for' in other ways (by being a particularly involved father, for example) (Nordqvist, 2017). In addition, Gabb (2011) argues that an imperative to display as well as enact family life (Finch, 2007) can give rise to difficulties for those, such as non-genetic lesbian mothers, whose familial displays may go unrecognised or be misinterpreted due to cultural assumptions about how 'proper' families are constituted.

My own analysis builds on this body of literature. I do not assume that genetic or biological connections have any intrinsic kinship meaning; what counts as 'biological' and whether such things are made to matter are subject to negotiation in particular social-material contexts. However, I also recognise that a powerful cultural narrative exists which defines connections premised on 'natural' processes or genetics as automatic and enduring and, while this narrative is commonly challenged or rejected by both donors and recipients in the context of gamete donation, it remains something which they have to negotiate in the way they enact and narrate family relationships.

Donors doing non-parenthood

Most social research on reproductive technologies examines the creative ways in which users construct and enact kinship connections (as well as the challenges they face in doing so). However, my own research looks at this process from the opposite perspective, focusing on cases where people actively and deliberately do *not* construct particular kinship connections. Specifically, how do gamete donors do and display *non-parental* relationships with donor offspring in the context of wider cultural narratives that 'biological' ties are automatic and that children have a right to know their genetic parents?

Research with gamete donors has predominantly been conducted in a context where donors were able to remain anonymous. Studies with both egg and sperm donors find that they tend to de-emphasise the significance of their genetic connection to donor offspring, highlighting the importance of intention, gestation and caring practices in defining socially meaningful parenthood (Kirkman, 2004, 2008; Konrad, 2005; Orobitch and Salazar, 2005; Almeling, 2011; Wheatley, 2017). However, many studies have also found that anonymous donors are unable or unwilling to entirely screen out the significance of their connection to donor offspring. Sperm donors have expressed fears of being contacted by their donor offspring, sometimes fearing that they may feel compelled to care for them, emotionally or financially (Speirs, 2012; Wheatley, 2017). Studies with both egg and sperm donors report feelings of responsibility towards those born from their donations (Konrad, 2005; Almeling, 2011; Wheatley, 2017).

In recent years, the legal-ethical context to donor conception has changed. It is now increasingly believed that knowledge about, or contact with, one's genetic relatives can be important to people's sense of self and therefore their emotional wellbeing (Smart, 2009). This belief is evidenced in the argument that donor-conceived people have a 'right to know their biological identity' which led to the introduction of identity-release legislation in the UK and many other Western jurisdictions (Turkmenbag, 2012). In addition, UK clinics and support organisations now advocate disclosure of donor conception to donor-conceived children at a young age (Klotz, 2014; Freeman, 2015). This new ethical climate creates space for new kinship roles that do

not straightforwardly map on to established roles and relationships. Identity-release legislation and an ethic of openness legitimate the view that connections between donors and donor offspring, while not equivalent to parent–child relationships, *are* socially significant. However, as Klotz (2014) has argued, these relationships are ‘wayward’ in the sense that there is, as yet, no established social script to guide how they might be enacted.

Few studies have been published which examine how identity-release donors make sense of these unscripted connections. Those studies which do exist have been conducted in legislative contexts (Denmark and the US) where anonymity is optional (Almeling, 2011; Mohr, 2015; Wheatley, 2017), and where it is therefore likely that the ethic of openness and the ‘rights’ discourse which underpins it are less established than in the UK. Some of these studies have found that identity-release sperm donors make a distinction between ‘biological’ or ‘genetic’ and ‘social’ parenthood (Almeling, 2011; Wheatley 2017). However, Mohr’s (2015) research with Danish identity-release sperm donors found that some envisaged a socially meaningful (but crucially non-parental) relationship with their donor offspring. Despite being encouraged by sperm bank staff to think of their donation in purely contractual terms (that is, as a financial exchange), those who chose to donate non-anonymously were clear that they did, and should, have a role in relation to such people but found it difficult to articulate what this might involve.

Studies with known donors give some indication as to the range of meanings that donors may attach to their connection with donor offspring. While some known egg donors may frame these relationships as ‘just as if’ the donation had not taken place (Winter and Daniluk, 2004), more recent research has found that some known donors (both sperm and egg) view the donor–offspring connection as meaningful while distinguishing it from a parent–child relationship (Dempsey, 2012; van Parys et al, 2016). Such connections may be articulated as ethereal or sensory connections (Dempsey, 2012); non-familial sperm donors may be attributed an ‘uncle role’ (Dempsey, 2012) or egg donors (in this study, all sisters) may be named as godmothers (van Parys et al, 2016). My own study contributes to this body of literature by demonstrating further strategies by which donors articulated a meaningful but non-parental connection to their donor offspring.

Methods

The data reported in this article were produced as part of an exploratory study investigating the views and experiences of identity-release gamete donors, approved by research ethics committees in both the University of Edinburgh and the NHS. I was interested in the ways in which donors made their actions meaningful, to themselves and to others, and how this was shaped by wider cultural discourses and practices. I conducted in-depth interviews with 24 donors as well as ethnographic fieldwork and staff interviews in two fertility clinics. In this article, I focus on the donors’ narratives, and specifically, how they talked about their, often imagined, relationship with (potential) donor offspring.

The majority of donors were recruited via two fertility clinics in Scotland, one NHS ($n=8$) and one private ($n=11$), with the remaining five recruited via the National Gamete Donation Trust (a charity which aims to raise awareness of gamete donation). Between May 2013 and February 2014 I interviewed 8 men and 16

Table 1: Donation types reported

				Number of participants
Donation types reported by participants	Sperm	8	Known	2
			Altruistic	7
	Egg	16	Known	6
			Altruistic	7
			Egg-share	5

Table 2: Profile of donor participants

			Number of participants
Participants' identity and circumstances at time of first donation	Age	25–29	5
		30–34	12
		35–39	6
		40–44	1
	Relationship status	Single	6
		In a relationship	3
		Married/civil partnered or co-habiting	15
	Parental status	Parent	12
		Non-parent	8
		First child born via egg-share donation	4
	Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	21
		Gay/lesbian	3
	Ethnicity	White British	20
		White other European	3
		Black African	1

women, all of whom had donated between 2005 and 2013. As summarised in Table 1, donor participants had taken part in various forms of donation, including known donation to family or friends, egg-share donation (where reduced-cost IVF treatment is offered to women in exchange for donating half their procured eggs) and what clinic staff term ‘altruistic’ donation (meaning donation to an unknown recipient as a non-patient). Three donors had taken part in more than one of these donation types. Table 2 summarises donors’ demographic details and circumstances at the time of their first (usually only) donation. Information about participants’ socioeconomic status was not collected systematically. However, participants reported working in a wide range of occupations, including senior managers, students, a call centre operative and someone recently unemployed.

Interviews lasted approximately two hours and were semi-structured, followed a loosely chronological framework, beginning with a variation on the request, ‘Tell me how you became a donor.’ The interviews then focused on the topics participants considered most relevant, but covered their experiences in the clinic, feelings and

discussions during and since the donation and thoughts about the future, particularly the possibility of contact with donor offspring and their families.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full, omitting or changing any identifying names or places. Assisted by NVivo 10 software, initial coding of the data followed the principles of content analysis, categorising the events, actions, thoughts and feelings which participants described (Robson, 2002) (including those in an imagined future). This article focuses on data coded as 'relationship with donor offspring' and particularly how this intersected with those coded as 'relationship with recipient' and 'donor's own family.' Subsequent readings and analysis of the coded data examined the ways in which participants ordered and framed their thoughts and actions in order to make their donation stories and imagined futures intelligible to me (Riessman, 1993). I do not assume that donors' narratives constitute direct reflections of their experiences or accurate predictions of their futures. These narratives were constructed in the particular context of the research interview with me (a female researcher in her late twenties, with no first-hand experience of donor conception), and their stories may have been told differently if to another researcher or outside of the research context. However, although I therefore present partial and particular accounts of donation, the interview data provide insights into the narrative possibilities and constraints that donors are likely to encounter as they tell their story to others and to themselves.

My particular interest in the way in which donors' personal relationships shaped their donation narratives (what Mason calls the 'relational content' of their narratives; see Mason, 2004) became concrete only during the analysis. Therefore, the views of donors' family members were not discussed in every interview. This is a key limitation of the analysis presented here since it limits my ability to draw comparisons between how different donors talked about this subject, and future research in this area is required. However, it also serves to highlight both the narrative creativity of the participants and the inevitable relationality of their story-telling. Although I was usually asking the donors about their own *personal* views and experiences, they often answered by telling me how they (collectively) imagined things (as a couple or family) or that their feelings on the questions I asked were 'more for' their children or recipients than for themselves.

I'm not their parent but...

All the donors I interviewed were clear that they did not feel, and should not be seen as, a parent to their donor offspring. This was a role they assigned unambiguously to the recipients:

'They're your parents. Okay these are the guys who've changed your nappy and fed you and dressed you for the last 18 years. They're your parents. I just happened to help get you here. I'm not going to tread on your dad's toes. I'm not going to become a father figure. I'm not going to be this magical person that's going to solve anything that's wrong in your life in the world. 'Cos that's your parents that do that.' (John, altruistic sperm donor)

'You come back to the sort of nature and nurture debates and discussions I've had with the children is yes, genetically, she is half my DNA but she's been carried through a pregnancy by somebody else who's given birth to

her, who is her legal mother, who is her, you know, her mum in every way. I'm just the bundle of cells that got in there somewhere.' (Debbie, altruistic egg donor)

As with other studies with both anonymous and identity-release donors (Konrad, 2005; Orobitch and Salazar, 2005; Kirkman, 2008; Almeling, 2011; Wheatley, 2017), participants distinguished genetic parenthood from 'real' or 'social' parenthood. However, these statements also demonstrate an awareness that others might view their connection with children conceived from their donation as parental and that this (and therefore they, the donor) might be a source of anxiety for recipients. Their unsolicited and forceful negation of this role makes sense in the context of research which demonstrates an ideology of 'biological' ties as automatic and enduring (Carsten, 2000).

In addition, these statements imply that if they were to present their relationship to donor offspring as, in any sense, parental, then that would diminish the recipient's status. Such assumptions are premised on a 'sexual' model of families in which there can be a maximum of two 'real' parents (Fineman, 1995; McCandless and Sheldon, 2010). Donors often implied that these two parental positions were gendered, such that John (although he has expressly agreed for his donation to also be used by same-sex couples or single women) explains that he might be perceived to specifically tread on the 'dad's toes'.

What distinguishes these identity-release donors from previous participants in many studies of anonymous donors is that, while they were absolutely clear on their non-parental status, they were, almost unanimously, invested in the idea that donor offspring might one day have a need or desire to contact them. With only two exceptions, they supported the introduction of identity-release legislation, and this was frequently explained in relation to donor-conceived people's 'right to know where they came from':

'I think they should have the right to know where they came from biologically. I am, I'm not their parent but genetically we are linked. And they have a right to know that. And I think that's important.' (Anna, known and anonymous egg donor)

'But I don't think anyone should ever be denied the right to where they come from. If that makes sense? I am in favour of the anonymity being lifted, so to speak.' (Daniel, altruistic sperm donor)

Such pronouncements mirror the ethic of openness now advocated in UK fertility clinics (Klotz, 2014). In the interviews, donors imagined contact with people conceived from their donation could be of benefit (maybe even essential) to such people in the future. Of course, this raises the question as to what kind of relationship they envisaged having with their donor offspring. How would they enact this non-parental but socially significant relationship? The possibility of meeting their donor offspring (and my questions on this topic) led donors to consider and articulate what social significance their connection to donor offspring might have – how could they imagine, name and enact this relationship if they were to make contact or (in the case of the known donors) if and when the recipients disclosed their status as 'the donor' to the donor-conceived child? This imagined relationship was unscripted in the sense that, other than the one they had explicitly rejected (that genetic parents

are the ‘real’ parents), there is no established narrative about the meaning of this relationship and the behaviours, language and emotions that might be appropriate in this context. Many donors specifically commented on the lack of a suitable vocabulary with which to describe their relationship to children conceived from their donation (a problem I am sympathetic to since it is one I have also encountered in writing on this subject). This unscriptedness, as well as the desire to avoid ‘treading on the toes’ of the recipient parents, was likely the reason why many donors found it challenging to articulate why this connection was significant, although nearly all stated that it was (or at least could be, to donor-conceived people).

In the following sections I focus on one narrative approach which some donors used to make sense of this relationship, drawing on their family networks and personal relationships to trace a meaningful and but non-parental connection with donor offspring. In this sense, the embeddedness of their own personal lives (Smart, 2007) provided a resource (as well as sometimes a challenge) to articulate what this relationship was, or could be, and to provide a celebratory but less risky script to make sense of ‘donor (non-)parenthood’.

Tracing connections via their own children: celebrating sibling relationships

While always careful to either avoid or emphatically qualify the terms ‘mother’, ‘father’ or ‘parent’ in relation to donor offspring, donors were often quite comfortable to talk about their own children and donor offspring as siblings or half-siblings. Donors often used the terms ‘brother’, ‘sister’, ‘sibling’ or ‘half-sibling’ without qualification, or thought aloud about an appropriate term for this relationship. In the extracts below, the terms ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ do not seem to be as problematic as ‘mum’, ‘dad’ or ‘parent’ clearly were:

‘I mean I think one of the things for us was I remember them talking about how would you tell your child that there might be a brother or sister? I think for things like that you’d almost be sad for them if they couldn’t get in touch with their brother or sister.’ (Yasmin, egg-share donor)

‘Donor [as in donor sibling] sounds a bit formal and clinic doesn’t it? I think it’s got to involve brother or sister, probably. But something to qualify it.’ (Tom, known sperm donor)

‘And I think, [son] will be maybe quite intrigued when he’s older. You know, to find out he’s maybe got a brother or sister. Maybe he’d want to know if they’re like him.’ (Rachel, altruistic egg donor)

Most donors who had their own children at the time of donating reported writing about their children in their ‘pen portrait’ (the text which donors write in their HFEA [Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority] registration forms and which will be made available to their donor offspring if they request it after the age of 16). Donors generally assumed that donor offspring would be interested in finding out about their own children and vice versa.

Unknown donors often struggled to articulate what it might be like to meet their donor offspring. However, one of the things that parent donors often described was introducing them to their own families, particularly their own children:

'If they knocked on the door and said I've got brothers and sisters and I'm curious. Then it would be a case of right come in and meet them and let's have a talk through why we did it.' (Eve, altruistic egg donor)

'When that kind of question [about contact from donor offspring] crops up, I do think and I always wonder where I'll be in my life at that time. What sort of a person I'll be and how my daughter's grown up, just you know these kinds of thing.... I mean if they want to meet me then they'll likely meet my daughter as well and vice versa.' (Karen, altruistic egg donor)

Like Rachel (above), some donors celebrated the possibility that future contact from donor offspring would enable them (and others) to look for similarities and differences with their own children:

'Stand them next to my children and see if they look alike. Don't know. It would be fun.' (Debbie, altruistic egg donor)

'Yeah one's probably going to talk with a Scottish accent and one's not. Can you imagine if we go back to [home country] and if we did get in touch with them or they get in touch with us, if the child came over for a gap year and he introduced him as his brother, they'd talk completely differently!' (Bridget, egg-share donor)

These descriptions of comparison, and their celebration, are resonant of family practices which reflect and reproduce sibling identities and relationships (Davies, 2015). I suggest that, when struggling to think of appropriate practices for doing 'donor (non-)parenthood', facilitating sibling relationships provided a 'safe' but familiar script to draw on.

Two egg-share donors, neither of whom knew their recipients, talked at greater length about the relationship they imagined between their own children and their donor offspring. Both Olivia and Bridget celebrated the idea that their children and donor offspring might develop a social relationship that would be consistent with a cousin or sibling-like role:

'And I think for Danielle, unless, we've got this other egg, whether we're gonna use it or not I don't know, she's gonna be like an only child. And my brother, he lives [abroad] and he's got two kids but he's [abroad]. So Danielle's got no cousins, no brothers and sisters, you kind of think it would be nice if in years to come there was somebody that she had a wee connection with.' (Olivia, egg-share donor)

Interviewer: 'Would you be interested in knowing about them then? About the recipients? About the child that's born?'

Bridget (egg-share donor): 'Yeah. Absolutely. I mean not that I feel any, I don't feel maternally towards them. More like for [son] 'cos it's someone who's kind of related to him, a little bit.'

Interviewer: 'Half-sibling?'

Bridget: 'Yeah I think a half-sibling, would that be the equivalent of a cousin?'

- Interviewer: 'I'm not sure. I've never thought about it like that but maybe yeah.'
- Bridget: 'The same shared heritability or whatever. Yeah. So it's just, it might be nice for them to know each other growing up. If we go back to [home country], it would be nice to sort of stay in touch. Yeah so [husband] and I both hope that they will get in touch, mainly.'

When Bridget explains, it's "More like for [her son]", she simultaneously distances herself from a parental role in relation to her donor offspring, and asserts this role in relation to her son. In doing so, she emphasises that her keenness to find out about the child is not because she has any inappropriate (that is, maternal) interest in them directly, but because she is a good mother to her own son. I suggest that for those donors who are parents, their relationship to their own children and their identity as mothers and fathers could provide a route through which they could trace a positive and meaningful connection to their donor offspring *indirectly*, and therefore in a way which minimised the threat they presented to recipients.

Connections with recipients

Another key way in which some donors were able to make sense of their relationship to donor offspring was via their relationship with recipients. In these cases, their friendship or kinship with recipients provided a route via which they could trace a link with donor offspring that was non-parental but emotionally significant. Anna perhaps sums this up best:

'He's always going to have a special place in my heart. Not because he's from my egg, just because he's, I was there with her going through all of that as well. You form a bond with somebody who's, do you know what I mean? It must have been so hard for her.' (Anna, known and anonymous egg donor)

Anna's words are reminiscent of Mason's (2008) contention that kinship involves affinities which *feel* fixed, aligning them with the realm of that which is 'given' rather than 'made' (Carsten, 2004). However, as Mason highlights, fixity does not necessarily map directly on to biological connection or shared substance. She argues that children's relationships with their parents' friends can gain a feeling of fixity, and may be claimed as kin, since the child may have been 'born into' these relationships – their parents having chosen for them (Mason, 2008: 35). Anna's claim for permanence (that the donor-conceived child will "always have a special place in [her] heart") can be read as such a kinship claim based on fixed affinity. However, I suggest that Anna was able to say this without threatening the parental status of the recipient precisely because the bond she feels with the child is depicted as a consequence of her relationship with the recipient. The reason she feels close to this little boy is because she knows how much he means to his mother. Her connection with him includes and prioritises the recipient.

For the two sister-to-sister egg donors in my sample, an established kinship relationship with their recipient offered further opportunities to trace indirect connections between themselves and donor offspring. They both defined themselves

as an aunt to their (actual or hypothetical) donor offspring. In doing so, they acknowledged a kinship connection with their donor offspring, but traced this link via their pre-existing relationship to their sibling:

‘I feel like her aunt. I don’t feel like her mother. I feel like her aunt.’ (Grace, known egg donor)

‘[Sister] did say a few times you know, you will be okay with this? If I got pregnant, how would you feel? And I said, I’d be delighted. But I’d be delighted if you got pregnant on your own. I just want a niece or a nephew. I want another child in the family that’s not mine to look after. ’Cos I’ve got my hands full with the two that I’ve got. I’d like a niece or a nephew that I can spoil and look forward to seeing them when you come up or when we come down to visit. That I can phone and speak to on the phone like, and Skype, like you do with the boys. That’s what I would like.’ (Maya, known egg donor)

These connections do not have the same ‘unscripted’ quality as for unknown donors (Klotz, 2014; Mohr, 2015). Because the practices associated with aunthood (spoiling nieces, family visits, talking on Skype) are already established, these donors have a readily available ‘script’ that they can draw on in order to articulate a connection with donor offspring that is both close and meaningful and non-threatening to their recipients.

Sister-to-sister donors could draw on genetic, as well as emotional, closeness with their recipients in order to trace their relationship to donor offspring through their sister:

‘Well the more she [donor offspring] grows, you know, the more she grows up, the older she gets, you can see, you can see some resemblance [with me]. But because I and my sister share the same features anyway you cannot say from where she got it from. Cause it’s the same genes.’ (Grace, known egg donor)

Grace explains that, since she and her sister share ‘the same genes’, her donor offspring’s genetic traits are not necessarily traceable to her. In this way, she was able to include her sister in the genetic connection she acknowledged between herself and her donor offspring. However, rather than presenting the passing on of genes as a direct linear process, she emphasised that they *all* resemble one another, connected through their wider genetic networks (see also van Parys et al, 2016). Like participants in Featherstone et al’s (2006) ethnographic study of genetically inherited conditions, Grace’s articulations of genetic inheritance do not mirror medical models but are attributed meaning in the context of her particular kinship relationships. By emphasising certain paths of inheritance over others, the resemblances between herself and her sister’s daughter become less problematic and she distances herself from a parental role.

Tracing connections through donors: contested kinship claims

The above extracts demonstrate the way in which donors’ connectedness, with recipients and their own children, could provide a means of tracing and expressing

their wayward connections with donor offspring and assigning significance to this relationship without disrupting the status of the recipient parents. However, if I were to conclude here, this would not capture the full complexity entailed in negotiating the meaning of connections with donor offspring. The embeddedness of donors' personal lives could throw up challenges as well as offer narrative resources for navigating this unscripted connection. Just as donors traced connections to their donor offspring via others in their families, family members could also trace their own connections to donor offspring via the donor. There were two occasions in the interviews where such connection-making was described as problematic for donors.

Grace's husband had been opposed to the donation throughout, and it remained a source of tension in their relationship, both with one another and with her sister's family. The couple had been trying for their own baby, without success, since prior to the donation. Since their donor-conceived niece had been born, he had several times described her as rightfully 'their' child and often remarked on the resemblances between Grace and the little girl in a way which made Grace uncomfortable:

'It is jealousy. I'm positive in my mind because there have been times when he's looked at [niece] and said, "she should have been ours". And I'm like, "she's not ours". And you know, the way he does it makes me more resistant to... I love [niece] right but I try to check myself that I don't go beyond the point where you begin to love her as a parent instead of as an aunt.' (Grace, known egg donor; original emphasis)

Grace described monitoring her own behaviour, including her own emotions, to ensure that she does not cross an imagined line from aunt-appropriate to parental practices. However, her husband's definition of her (and therefore his) relationship to her niece presented an ever-present challenge to her own efforts – she not only has to counter his definitions but also redouble her own efforts to do this relationship in what she sees as the correct way.

It was less common for donors to have told their own parents about their donation. However, in Hannah's case, her father and stepmother's response had been experienced as an affront to her own view of the donation and she challenged their use of kinship terms:

'And [father and step-mother] they're older and that was like, I don't know, they were like, "ooh ooh, it's like having another grandchild." And I went, "no it isn't. It isn't at all like having another grandchild."' (Hannah, known egg donor)

Hannah's parents' claim that the birth of a child conceived from her egg was, "like having another grandchild" was not something Hannah could accommodate within her own negotiations, and she describes "shutting that down" very quickly. She suggested that, although her parents might still privately view the child in this way (assumed because of their continued interest in meeting the girl), they now knew not to use such language in front of her.

Discussion and conclusions

The analysis presented above contributes to a growing body of literature which evidences how 'biological' connections can be made socially significant in ways which do not straightforwardly map on to any pre-existing kinship categories (Klotz, 2014; Mohr, 2015). I have shown that, not only are people flexible over whether or not particular aspects of 'biological' processes and substances *matter* in the construction of kinship, but they are also capable of remarkable creativity in relation to *how* such things are made meaningful. Building on Mohr (2015) and Klotz's (2014) work, I have demonstrated one way in which people renegotiate the meaning of 'biological' connection in the context of donor conception. Specifically, I have shown that tracing connections through particular pathways (and not others) shapes their meaning (here in a way which distances the donor from a parental role while retaining a sense that this connection has social significance). Foregrounding their friendship or kinship with the recipient or facilitating sibling relationships with their own children provided a non-threatening and readily accessible vocabulary, as well as repertoires of appropriate practices, through which they could imagine and describe this relationship. As with some recent research with embryo donors and recipients in the context of open adoption, extended family vocabulary can therefore provide a means of anchoring and managing the novel family relationships which are negotiated in the context of donor-assisted conception in an open-identity context (Goedeke et al, 2015; Blyth et al, 2017).

It is illuminating that donors felt able to describe, even celebrate, their children as 'brothers' or 'sisters' to donor offspring yet entirely rejected any conception of themselves as parents. Similarly, it is interesting that Anna felt able to describe a 'special' and emotional connection with donor offspring without apparent fear of 'treading on her recipient's toes' (something all participants were keen to avoid). Not only does this demonstrate the mutable meaning of genetic connections in the context of donor conception, it also tells us something about broader ideologies of parenthood vis-à-vis other forms of relatedness. I suggest that an understanding of parenthood as an exclusive and non-contingent connection with one's child underpins both donors' compulsion to display their non-parental status in relation to donor offspring and also the reason that narrating this connection indirectly could be a means of achieving this. As Melhuus argues, being a parent is defined by having 'a child of one's own' (2012: 25). For her Norwegian participants, exclusivity was a fundamental part of what it meant to be a parent; this was seen as a relationship that others should not, by definition, be privy to. By tracing an indirect connection with donor offspring, participants in my own study made clear that children conceived from their donations are not their 'own child', and so they protected the status of the recipient(s) as the 'real' parent(s). Sibling, aunt and family friend relationships do not have this direct and exclusive character. I argue that they are therefore less risky for donors to talk about and provide a 'safer' route to articulate connections with donor offspring.

Furthermore, I suggest that talking about their relationship to donor offspring through others provided donors with a means of managing power relationships. Legally, donors have very limited power but, in a culture which frequently frames 'biological' relatedness as 'real' relatedness, they have symbolic status which can be perceived as threatening to recipients (Hargreaves, 2006). Tracing connections to donor offspring that included recipients can therefore be viewed as a way of assigning

agency to recipients to define the significance of this relationship. The emphasis on siblingship in some donors' narratives can also be seen as a way of equalising the role of donor and recipient parents; if the relationship between (half) siblings is the focus (rather than that between donor offspring and donors), then, according to social norms, both sets of parents could be expected to have an equal role in negotiating the level and nature of any contact.

I should highlight that tracing indirect connections with donor offspring was not a narrative strategy adopted by all donors in this study. As suggested by my choice of quotations, female participants, particularly known and egg-share donors, were much more likely to talk in this way. In the case of known donation, this is unsurprising since knowing one's recipients might understandably be a significant factor in tracing a path of relatedness to donor offspring that includes that person. The gendered nature of this narrative is therefore partly related to the gendered nature of known donation (there were few known sperm donors at the recruiting clinics). However, this cannot explain the increased tendency for celebratory 'sibling talk' among egg donors compared with sperm donors in this study (six of the eight sperm donors had children of their own at the time of interview, one being a foster father, compared with eleven of the sixteen women). One possible factor may have been the inclusion of five egg-share donors. Drawing on shared experiences of infertility and concurrent treatment, egg-share donor narratives often contained a strong sense of identification with the recipients. This may have facilitated both an interest in the recipient's family generally and in exploring the connection between the two children. Such connection-making could have been challenging for sperm donors due to the possibility that their own children could have 'brothers' or 'sisters' in multiple families (rather than egg donors who usually donate to just one recipient), raising the stigmatised image of 'hordes' of children 'knocking on their door' and large groups of genetic half-siblings (Wheatley, 2017). Further research is needed to explore how different donation contexts facilitate or hinder different pathways of connection-making between donors, donor-conceived people and recipients, and the ways in which these are interrelated.

In this article I have demonstrated the salience of networks of connectedness for donors negotiating the unscripted relationships that identity-release donation gives rise to. Donors are working out the significance of their connection with donor offspring, not only for themselves, but also for others in their personal lives and, because their own sense of self is fundamentally bound up with their relationships to others (May, 2013), the two things are intrinsically linked. More than simply considering how significant others will feel about their donor offspring, donors also relate to their donor offspring *through* these people and the relationships they have with them, as a parent to their own children, as a sister or a friend of the recipient. Underpinning this distinction is Mason's argument that 'relational selves' need to be seen as more than 'selves in relation' (Mason, 2004: 177). That is to say that, identity and agency (here applied to the donors' sense of who they are, would like and ought to be in relation to donor offspring) emerges *through* people's relationships with others, rather than simply taking accounting of others' presumed wants and needs. Even when these relationships are only imagined and their own children too young to comprehend the significance of their parent's donation, the donors' embeddedness within these networks provides a multitude of indirect pathways through which they can relate to donor offspring.

When we consider the donor as embedded in this way, it draws attention to the ways in which the donors' own families and relationships can be a resource (and not only a challenge) for negotiating the unscripted connections identity-release donors face. This is an important dynamic for policy-makers and those who work with donor families and families through donor conception to be aware of. Through currently ongoing research with fertility counsellors, I have found they are often wary of the potential for disruption and distress when donors' family members, particularly partners, are unaware of, or uncomfortable with, the donation. I do not wish to deny that such challenges arise (indeed, I have highlighted two such cases here). However, I have also shown that donors' personal relationships, the complex web in which they make sense of their own lives and selves, can also provide a narrative resource for managing the particular demands of identity-release donation – finding a script for this wayward connection and articulating a positive and non-threatening image of their connection to donor offspring. While it is important that donors are encouraged to think through the implications of donating for those in their own existing (and potential future) families, care should be taken to ensure that these conversations are not framed primarily in terms of risk. In this vein, sharing the stories of previous donors (such as those presented here) with those considering donating may be helpful.

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Note

¹ I use the term 'offspring' or 'donor offspring' to refer to children conceived from a particular donor's donation(s). I opt for this term in order to distinguish from a donor's 'own children' and also to avoid the more emotionally laden terms 'biological child' or 'genetic child'. I recognise that the term 'offspring' retains some implication of a parent-child relationship, which is problematic. However, I consider it to be the most neutral suitable term (the lack of a suitable vocabulary being a key issue raised by this study). A more neutral option would be 'person conceived from their donation'; however, I consider this impractical for the repeated references required in an article with this focus.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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