**Book Review**

**Nordqvist, P., & Smart, C. (2014) Relative Strangers: Family Life, Genes and Donor Conception. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-1-137-29766-2**

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The book presents an empirical monograph on the lived reality of being a parent or grandparent of a donor conceived child. Designed to explore intersections with sexuality, the book is based on in-depth interviews with 22 heterosexual couples, 22 lesbian couples and 30 grandparents (15 with a heterosexual son or daughter and 15 with a lesbian daughter). It arrived at my home a month after my donor conceived daughter.

The introduction chapter opens with a story relayed by one of the interviewees to set the scene for some of the dilemmas faced by parents of donor conceived children. The authors go on to outline the range of ways in which ‘families by donation’ are achieved and provides helpful legal and policy context, including the shift from donor anonymity to donor identity release that happened at the time that donor conception was pursued by the interviewed couples.

Chapter one explores what constitutes a ‘proper’ family, considering historical and sociocultural perspectives, describing recent (UK) media portrayals of donor conception and a legal case, before drawing parallels with adoption. Unfortunately, lacking here is a clear picture on funding for access to assisted conception; including how this varies for heterosexual and lesbian couples - and the associated meaning carried by society as to how ‘proper’ families are constructed.

The early chapters each explore an aspect of the study findings (the journey to achieving a pregnancy; wider family; secrecy; openness; relating to the donor; genetic connections). Consequently the book is written to be read in full and it seems unlikely that readers will dip into individual chapters in isolation, although they could potentially be used in this way as directed reading.

The authors offer some powerful insights; the most fascinating being in chapter six which considers how parents and grandparents of donor conceived children relate to the donor, including the phenomenon of an ‘absent presence’ and issues around donor siblings (‘a known “half known” ’). Here, the strengths of the book are most apparent: the way that points are brought to life by quotations; the consideration given to the wider family (specifically, grandparents), so often neglected in research and practice; the consideration of how experiences vary with unknown and known donors, and indeed across heterosexual and lesbian couples. At times, distinctions were oversimplified however; for example, couples using an anonymous ‘unknown’ donor through a clinic may actually have more information about the donor (and the donor's family) than couples using a ‘known’ donor recruited informally through the internet.

Surprising to me was the authors’ key distinction that the heterosexual experience was framed around loss and the lesbian experience around ‘(often unexpected) opportunity’ with grief being ‘virtually absent’ from interviews. This observed stark contrast between groups warranted further exploration and consideration of the limited diversity of views being expressed and/or heard. As acknowledged elsewhere by the authors, sampling was limited by recruited primarily occurring through the Donor Conception Network, a UK-based support network. In addition, for a book entirely devoted to one study, there was a lack of reflexivity about the researchers' roles in interviewing and interpretation, and the nature of the researchers' relationship with the support group organisation.

Disappointingly, the book does not seem to capture the complexity of the experience of lesbian mothers of donor conceived children. Inadequate consideration was given to the differences between the views and experiences of both mothers within lesbian couples - and indeed whereas the overview of heterosexual interviewees offered in the Appendix clarifies which partner is the genetic parent, this cannot be ascertained for the lesbian couples despite its relevance when reading the quotations.

The book is part of a series on the ‘sociological exploration of intimate relationships and family organisation’. As such, it delivers in its aim but for the psychologically-oriented or applied health researcher, there is a lack of stated implications for research or practice; the exception being chapter five where the conclusions include implications around the policy of disclosure. Professionals working with families affected by these issues and indeed families themselves may feel left wanting more - for example in the language that families may need, the lifestory work, the ways to manage information at different ages in an age-appropriate way; in short - some of the tools used in adoption.

The book will doubtless be of interest to the readership of the Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology. Whilst it appears pitched at an academic audience, no previous knowledge on the part of the reader is assumed and the real substance of the book (chapters two to seven inclusive) is largely accessible to an articulate lay audience, including donor conceived families and health and social care professionals. My copy is now doing the rounds amongst family.