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THE RIGHT AGE TO TELL? THE INSUFFICIENCY OF THE AGE CRITERIA FOR CHARACTERIZING THE EXPERIENCE OF FRENCH DONOR CONCEIVED FAMILIES IN DISCLOSING TO THEIR OFFSPRING

Anaïs Martin¹, Sophie Carez², Catherine Metzler-Guillemain³ & Agnès Martial⁴

¹ Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), Centre Norbert Elias, Marseille, France ² Centre clinico-biologique d'assistance médicale à la procréation-CECOS, Pôle psychiatrie centre, APHM, hôpital La Conception, Marseille, France ³ Centre clinico-biologique d'assistance médicale à la procréation-CECOS, APHM, hôpital La Conception, Marseille, France ⁴ Centre national pour la recherche scientifique (CNRS), Centre Norbert Elias, Marseille, France



INTRODUCTION

Secrecy was the norm for decades in donor conception, but “openness” has now become the new core value for institutions, professionals and interest groups. Accordingly, in recent years information-sharing practices have shifted in donor conceived families, but a proportion of parents, especially heterosexual couples, still appear to not inform their children about their being donor conceived. Disclosure recommendations seem difficult to apply in practice. A recurring question is: when should children be told? Age is presented as a key criteria: the younger the children are when their conception story is shared, the less of a problem it would create.



Is age a key criteria for characterizing the experience of families in telling donor offspring about the facts of their conception?

METHODS

This qualitative study is part of a multidisciplinary (social anthropology, psychology and medical biology) and cross-methods research project (online survey & interviews). Two sets of semi-directive interviews were conducted with 20 French sperm donor conceived adults and 23 parents by sperm, egg or double donation (April 2019-Feb. 2021).

PARTICIPANTS

Donor conceived participants:

17 women and 3 men conceived in France between the 1960s and the 2000s through anonymous sperm donation in heteroparental families. Aged 21-53 y.o. (average=34 y.o.).

Parent participants:

21 families who used sperm (n=11), egg (n=8) or double donation (n=2), mainly anonymous (n=20), in France (n=10), Spain (n=10) and the Czech Republic (n=1) starting in the 1980s. 18 anonymous sperm donation in heteroparental couples, 2 as solo-mothers-by-choice and 1 as a same-sex couple. First-borns aged 3-35 y.o. (average=15 y.o.).

RESULTS

- Age:** The donor conceived participants were informed about the facts of their conception between 0 and 49 y.o. (average=20 y.o.). The parent participants informed their first-borns about their being donor conceived between 0 and 19 y.o. (average=4 y.o.). 1 family had not informed their offspring. 3 families had partially informed them (talked about fertility issues without mentioning the use of donor conception). When parents have 2 donor offspring (n=11), they informed them around the same age (mostly early childhood) or around the same time (different ages but same time of disclosure).
- Transformation of information-sharing norms and practices:** Secrecy had sometimes been encouraged by clinic professionals at the time of conception, esp. prior to the 1990s. Secrecy has further been prompted by the stigma associated with infertility. As norms and understandings regarding secrecy and infertility progressively changed in the 1990s, supporting material (e.g. children books) started to be available to help parents disclose to young children. These transformations influence the stories gathered in the study. On the one hand, regardless of age, most donor conceived participants were informed from the 1990s onwards (Figure 1). On the other hand, the parents mainly conceived after the 1980s, and more of them disclosed when their offspring were in their infancy, as a strategy agreed upon at the time of conception, with the help of children books.
- Family/biographical context:** Disclosure may be part of an information-sharing strategy agreed upon at the time of conception (mostly to young children, starting when babies or when they ask about reproduction). It may be triggered by personal/family events (illness, divorce, death of a family-member) or by the donor offspring's questions (about origins, their appearance, medical history...) when they are older. On the opposite, difficult events associated with fertility paths (illness, death of a fetus *in utero*) sometimes prevail over the story of donor conception, preventing disclosure.
- Talking:** Even when disclosure has happened early on, some parents (esp. fathers) experience discomfort in talking about donation. While donor offspring highlight the importance of being able to talk freely about donor conception with their parents all through their life (e.g. when they become parents themselves), they may describe the situation as a continuation of secrecy.

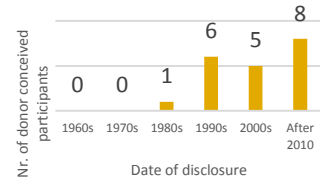


Figure 1. Disclosure in time

CONCLUSION

Age plays a role in information-sharing practices of donor conceived families, but age alone cannot characterize their experience in telling donor offspring about the facts of their conception. Historical contextualization shows that practices are informed by the norms and understandings in place, as well as by the supporting material and narratives available. Disclosure is furthermore embedded within family and personal trajectories, as well as relationships, which condition the way it is both made and received. Finally, beyond disclosure, talking about donor conception proves to be difficult for some parents, which donor offspring may experience as a continuation of secrecy.