

Donor conception and children's rights: "First, do no harm"

As Tom Ellis, a donor-conceived adult and doctoral candidate, puts it, "The interests of those people created by donor-conception should be paramount." Ethically, he's right. Children's rights and "best interests" must be at the centre of decision-making about donor conception¹ and that requires that we "First, do no harm."

A common strategy used to dismiss arguments against donor conception is that there is no proof donor-conceived persons are harmed in any important way. Their claims of harm are dismissed as anecdotal and "not scientific," and studies carried out on young donor-conceived children, who declare themselves perfectly happy with their parents and families are tendered as evidence that no harm is caused. Donor-conceived people are challenged to prove "scientifically" the harm done to them.

But that is to ask the impossible. Sociology is not hard science. Furthermore, it's impossible to find a large random sample of donor-conceived people, because most don't even know they're donor-conceived. So, phenomenological research can be a valid way to proceed.

I propose that we listen to donor-conceived people to understand the harm to them and we accept what they say as valid evidence of that harm. Studies on young donor-conceived children, do not capture some of the harms that are experienced only later in life, for instance, in early adulthood when knowing their origins and biological family helps them to find and form a mature self-identity,^{2,3} or later, when they are contemplating having their own children and ask, "How can I inflict on my children the pain of the same lack of connection that I have experienced?"

So let's listen to the voices of two donor-conceived adults, who have given me permission to quote them.

Here's Tom Ellis's response to being challenged, by an advocate of donor conception, to prove that donor conception causes any harm:



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The very demand that we should produce "scientific" evidence of the harm done to us is one of the many reasons that the voices of donor-conceived people are so rarely heard. The fact that I have been intentionally separated from my father is the single most important facet of my identity, and the pain this has caused is with me every day of my life. Having my personal experience dismissed as an "anecdote" is more than I can bear. Who wants to be required to produce a scientific paper to justify their right to feel the way they feel?

The debate about whether donor-conception is ethical or not should be conducted on the basis of rational argument, of which the scientific method is one part. However, science is not the whole story, people's emotions are not electrons and science has limited application in this field. The single most important way to understand donor-conception is by listening to the stories of donor-conceived people and understanding why they feel the way they do about their deliberate separation from their biological parents.

Ellis's remarks bring to mind how we have changed our approach to assessing physical pain. Physicians and nurses used to decide whether a person was in pain and, if so, how severe it was. Now we accept the patient's assessment of his pain.

Joanna Rose has just completed a doctoral thesis on the impact of sperm

donation practices on resulting offspring. Faced with the argument that she should not complain about the mode of her conception, because she would not exist otherwise, she responded, "If I were the result of rape, I would still be glad to be alive, but that doesn't mean I or any one else should approve of rape." She explained:

I am saying that many people are conceived in ways that cause them deep and ongoing sadness and distress, and that donor offspring have the right to say how we are affected too.

Many donor offspring, I know, frequently say that they would prefer to be conceived from a one night stand rather than from sperm donation which is a clinical, often commercial conception between strangers, who are your genetic parents. This, along with the intentional alienation of all our associated kinship and cultural heritage on the donor's side, is a source of profound identity loss and burden for us.

I wish others would [take the time to listen and think about what we say]. The message is that donor conception and in particularly anonymous donor conception has a hugely negative impact on our well-being. Can you hear that?

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