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The Father as an Idea: A Challenge to Kinship Boundaries by Single Mothers

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In separating parenthood from partnership, women have created new family forms in which men may be involved but not as traditional fathers. Through in-depth interviews with single middle-class women, I compare families created with anonymous donors to those created with known donors. In the former cases, mothers craft imagined fathers as their children become "looking glasses" into the men they will probably never meet. These children must rely on the mothers' imagination to create a sense of the fathers' view of them. While known donors are not "dads" either, the mothers help these children imagine positive fathers, often through more concrete, personal knowledge, and these fathers often know the children from a distance. In an interesting manner, although children may be created without men as physically present "dads," women contextualize the donors that allowed them to become mothers through acknowledging the social ways that blood kinship creates families. They ultimately reaffirm certain kinds of kinship rather than challenge them.

A major demographic transition in U.S. families is occurring as more women give birth outside of marriage, adopt children, and form families without the presence of marital partners. For more than a decade nonmarital childbearing has risen fastest among women twenty years of age and older, who now account for seven out of ten nonmarital births (DHHS 1995:10). Most U.S. studies of single never-married mothers focus on teen mothers (Furstenberg and Brooks-Gunn 1989; Horowitz 1995; Williams 1991), despite the fact that they account for less than one third of all unmarried mothers (DHHS 1995:11). In short, the focus on teen mothers or single mothers who are dependent on welfare (Edin and Lein 1997) does not capture the full range of women who choose for various reasons to become parents without partners. This study, by contrast, focuses on economically self-sufficient, single women who are over the age of twenty and who have rarely drawn the attention of scholars or policy makers.[1]

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Single motherhood is a logical response to some men's unwillingness or inability to participate in stable family life and make long-term commitments to child rearing (Gerson 1993; Stacey 1990).[2] A few scholars (e.g., Blankenhorn 1995) have even suggested that severing motherhood from marriage may gradually make fatherhood obsolete. However, single mothers do not seem intent on changing the world (even if change is a by-product of the way they go about constructing daily family life). They work diligently on behalf of their children, patching together lives that resemble a middle-class "normal family." Like most mothers, these women strive to raise acceptable children and to organize acceptable family lives. In their eyes, an acceptable child is one who can explain himself or herself and family members to friends, day-care providers, teachers, neighbors, and religious communities. Thus, although these mothers may refashion the family through various routes to motherhood, they end up reaffirming certain kinds of kinship, instead of challenging them. These women are agents in their own lives but lack sufficient power to transform the two-parent heterosexual family by themselves.

However, as they strive to create viable families, single women face one very important challenge—crafting an image and an identity of the father for their children. Although these women have not married the men who fathered their children, fathers occupy a place in family life. The place of the father varies depending on the route women took to motherhood, but, as my interviews demonstrate, most of these mothers try to minimize their differences from a two-parent family.

The challenge these women face is captured by Cooley ([1902] 1983:184) in his concept of the "looking-glass" self: "A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification." Mothers who use anonymous or known donors as fathers for their children need to help children imagine how they appear in the eyes of these fathers. In addition, the mother generally places a positive evaluation on her route to parenthood, including the value of the father as giving her a gift, as we see later on. The mother communicates how these traits she has identified from the father should be valued in the child (e.g., intelligence, physical apperance, talent; in the case of an anonymous donor, information she has gleaned from a paper profile). A woman who uses a known donor also helps the child to imagine the appearance of a positive father through more concrete, personal knowledge. These fathers, as I argue, often appreciate and know the child from a distance. The absence of an "actual" father makes the mother's effort to create a looking-glass self (i.e., how the child sees the father seeing himself or herself) more central to the child's self. In this way, the child must rely on the mother's imagination because the child cannot see herself or himself in the glass. Therefore, in the case of both anonymous and known donors there is an evaluation and imagination of the self that contrasts sharply with the social organization of the ideal type "father-present family."[3]

Although a more processual approach to studying the self (e.g., Mead 1934) would argue that it is important to trace out the interactions leading to role taking

and the growing importance of the "significant other," or father, my aim is to look at the structure of this family rather than the nuances involved. However, I illustrate how the "paper father" and the known donor may enter the daily lives of the mother and child. In the structural relationships of child and mother, the gift of gametes the mother has been given to create the child becomes a token of the child's identity and self (Strauss 1959). Mothers, and then mothers and their children create stories about who those men are to help the children develop self-feelings that help them to "pin down the self" (Strauss 1959:33–34). Like all valued objects, the child's sense of self needs to be constantly reaffirmed through interactions; and, as Strauss (1959:37) argues, "involvements are evolvements" that transform the mother-child relationship as together they imagine the father.

This article examines fatherhood fantasies as well as various arrangements between fathers and their children. I am most interested in the accounts women give to their children about paternal kinship and how those accounts arise. All families tell stories to their children of where they came from as part of the fabric that bonds children to the adults with whom they are close. These early memories are accounts of the self that children love to hear repeated, akin to favorite bedtime stories. An account of the family and each member's story is constantly in progress.

The storytelling is part genetic and part social. The importance of genetics is a contradictory arena from a medical perspective, particularly with regard to how much weight to give genetics in shaping lives over nurture. But from a purely social perspective, genetics is both an idea and a road map of identity. These mothers are searching for a means to "locate" their children based on the information they have. Genetics is one of the few building blocks women have to work with as they tell their children about their fathers; for instance, stories become created from anonymous donor profiles. Even though the women are sometimes confused about the meaning and importance of genes, they use them nonetheless as a road map to instill in their children an identity that assumes two parents are essential to create (though not always to raise) a child.

In this article I argue that fathers are more ghostlike than real. In the first part, I argue that imagining aspects of the child as belonging to the anonymous donor provides a way for the mother to craft a genetic father for the child. She creates an imagined father to affirm the child's sense of self. In the second part of the article, I discuss known donors—where the mother and child has a physically present genetic father who typically remains in the shadows of family life. While father may be constructed in different ways as children grow older, most of the women I interviewed had preadolescent children. Mothers espouse a particular image of the father for these children, and simultaneously they actively affirm certain kinds of kinship ties. Overall, children of known donors typically receive affirmation of who they are from the limited (and mother-controlled) social interaction they have with the fathers. But I also argue that when mothers either have ambivalent relationships with these men or are less tied to "traditional kinship ties," known donors sometimes become "dads," despite preconception contracts that limited genetic father involve-

ment. Throughout, I discuss the myriad definitions of the social ways in which blood kinship creates families despite the rise of other forms of postmodern families.

METHODS AND DATA

This is an in-depth, audiotaped, interview study of fifty-six single mothers who were over the age of twenty when they had their first child and were economically self-sufficient at the time of the interview.[4] Initially, I was interested in the decision-making processes that led "older" women to become single mothers *and* in whether fathers were in fact becoming bystanders to family life. I was also interested in extending my previous research on the relationship between work and family (Hertz 1986, 1997; Hertz and Charlton 1989) to look at how women without partners manage to combine both. Therefore, women were eligible for inclusion in the sample if they were unmarried and not living with either the father of their child or a romantic partner (i.e., someone who is defined by the mother as a co-parent at the time of birth or adoption *and* at the time of the first interview).[5]

National reports of out-of-wedlock births, written primarily by demographers, focus on birth as the outcome of pregnancy (e.g., DHHS 1995). It is not possible from these reports to learn about the process that led to pregnancy. It is my hunch that the vast majority of women become pregnant "accidentally"—a term that misdirects our attention to intent, instead of sexuality and relationships. I wanted to include in this study women who had children through various routes to motherhood in order to look at the fathers' involvement after birth. Initially, I thought that women who became pregnant by anonymous donors would provide an interesting and extreme contrast since the possibility for father involvement in daily life would be nonexistent. There is no national data on the number of women who become pregnant using anonymous donor sperm or known donor sperm.

Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) initially informed my choice of sampling frame. That is, I wanted to compare women who had the possibility for father involvement (e.g., they became accidentally pregnant) with women who did not (e.g., they were artificially inseminated using anonymous donor sperm). As I began the interviews (actually, in the very first interview), I discovered that the use of known donors was a route to motherhood in which the father of the child "fit" neither of my original categories. I later decided that I was missing a fourth route to motherhood: adoption. I struggled with how it compared to the other three possibilities and went back to do more interviews.[6]

Ultimately, I designed a sample that targeted women on the basis of known and unknown fathers.[7] Children of known fathers were conceived either through men recruited as donors by the mother (biological fathers but not social fathers) or in short-term or long-term relationships ("accidentally"). Children with unknown fathers were conceived through anonymous donor insemination or were adopted. Therefore, this is not a randomly drawn sample; it is meant to capture the less visible (and often secretive) ways that women become mothers in order to tease out

various properties of social and sociological concepts, as well as the conditions and limits of their applicability (see Charmaz 2000 for an excellent discussion of grounded theory). Women were recruited through social networks. To avoid the likelihood of drawing on insular social networks, no more than three women were known to each other.

I developed analytic constructs for each of the four categories. Once consistent patterns emerged from the interview narratives I defined a category as analytically saturated. The interviews were hand-coded using both descriptive and analytic codes, which were changed, added, or deleted as I worked with the transcripts. Computer-assisted searches were used only for simple counts (i.e., number of abortions, written wills).

The interviews were open-ended. We collected data on topics ranging from the women's initial decision to parent (i.e., reproductive histories, relationships with friends and lovers in the past and present, views on mothering) to present decisions on how they integrated employment, child rearing, and family life. How the interviewees' children understood their family arrangements (including household kin and fictive kin) and what the interviewees perceive they need to do to provide for their children emotionally, socially, and economically constituted the core in-depth questions. In addition, we included a set of standard demographic questions. The vast majority of women preferred to be interviewed in their homes; the others preferred their workplace or my office. They were asked if they wanted copies of the transcripts, and I have stayed in touch by sending holiday cards yearly. Women asked for copies of published articles from the study; a few have volunteered to read drafts of the eventual book manuscript.

The fifty-six interviews include women from twenty-one communities in eastern Massachusetts conducted between 1995 and 2000 by me, or a former graduate student, Faith I. T. Ferguson. We made a conscious effort to include women of different racial and social class backgrounds. While the majority of women in the study are white, 46 percent of the families are either interracial or families of color. The majority of women are heterosexual; eight are lesbian or bisexual single mothers. The majority of women had children between the ages of two and seven, though one-fourth had children over the age of eight at the time of the first interview. Defining social class as education, occupation, and income, this sample is composed of 24 percent working-class and 76 percent middle-class women. Nearly all the women in the study have at least a community college associate degree. Their incomes range from under $20,000 per year to $130,000. The median wage income is $40,000 per year, which approximates the median income for all families in Massachusetts (U.S. Census 1993).

This article focuses on the twenty-five women who became pregnant through either anonymous or known donors.[8] They are an interesting subset because they represent women who deliberately sought to give birth to children in a "radical" way. They had no expectations that the men who fathered their children would become anything other than gamete donors. Even those who became pregnant

through known donors wrote contracts before pregnancy specifying that these men would relinquish all rights to their biological children. By looking at these cases, we can begin to understand the symbolic ways in which donors' absence forms a presence within families.

RECONSTRUCTING FATHERS: UNDENIABLE IMPRINTS OF ANONYMOUS DONORS

> There were people who came to me and said, "Don't do this. My father deserted my mother and it's always been a life thing for me that I never knew him." And I thought, Well, the mitigating factor is I'm not deserted, I'm not unhappy, I'm not bereft, it's not a tragedy.
>
> . . . And in thinking about it, I said, "But I'm not any of those things. *And* if the choice is between not having a child at all and having a child who's maybe going to have to deal with some of these issues, I chose to have the child." Selfish, but I felt like I would be a good mother, and I think I am. (Kerry, age 43, 4-year-old child)

Although Kerry's acquaintances' opinions gave her momentary pause about having a child without a dad to raise him, she followed her desire to be a mom by using an anonymous donor. She had the foresight to know that having a child with an anonymous donor, who would most likely be forever unknown, was fraught with complexities. Her future, however, was vague and distant. Becoming pregnant, planning for the child's arrival, and giving birth are more likely to preoccupy these women than existential questions of the meaning of gametes and their relationship to an unknown man. Once children arrive, however, the women try to understand what it means to raise a child with only a paper profile of a father.

The women reconstruct the deconstructed father once their children are born. Birth narratives—the stories parents tell children about their histories from conception on—include the anonymous donor. As the child grows, his or her unexplainable traits—from physical attributes to character, behavior, and interests—become attributed to the anonymous donor. The mother crafts a man out of the limited information she has from the donor profile at the sperm bank and her child's traits that she believes are unexplained by the maternal side of the family. That is, "he" must be the source of the child's unexplained traits. In this way, the anonymous donor takes on a persona of his own—a person who may be more fiction than fact. But through this creation the mother and child take comfort in giving this role of father meaning in their lives. The "nice" man who helped them to become a family makes him a worthy human being, if not an idealized one.[9]

Birth Narratives: Crafting a Father

All the children in this study who were conceived from donors know that they have genetic fathers. Mothers tell their children that they have genetic fathers; however, these fathers are not part of their lives. How do children conceived by anony-

mous donors make sense of a father who is not part of their lives? While mothers attempt to explain to the child his or her origin, they also explain ties to other individuals and the meaning of kinship terminology attached to those individuals. Put differently, family life occurs through naming individuals and interacting with them. Mothers report that their children's early questions are about kinship boundaries and formation: who's included, who's not, and who's missing. But the questions are not simply an exercise in taxonomy. They are about identity and place: that is, who *is* my dad and where *is* he?

Children come to understand the social implications of blood kinship (March 1999; Weger 1997) from the language of their births. Melissa, whose twins were born when she was thirty-six years old and were toddlers at the time of the interview, talked of her plans to present the children with an account of their birth:

> I've read some books and things like that [on children with donor fathers.] I mean, they're really young and I guess I'll just tell them the basics, which is, "Your father is in California." I think we're all going to be telling them (because the sperm banks are in California) everybody is going to think their father is in California. Because I guess that's what kids want to know at that young age? And then as they get older, I'll tell them more [from the profile].

Children will learn from this explanation that a human being exists who is their father. He lives in another place but not in their house or even in their town. From this early telling during childhood, women author narratives that construct a father and connect the child to him. They follow professional advice for explaining how children are created, revealing to the child pieces of his or her birth story as requested. In the earliest stories of how they became a family, women mentioned they used the term "donor" to reinforce this concept as an ordinary way to create a family. The inclusion of a "donor" is an imaginary leap: the child learns that someone neither she nor her mother knows helped to create her. Mothers are central agents in creating genetic fathers out of anonymous donors.

Women contextualize the birth stories of their children by identifying the place and events that transpired. They explain the donor as not simply giving them sperm (a product divorced from a person) but as a man who is located some place or who was located through someone. As Cooley ([1902] 1983) would argue, a father exists who values their existence. For example, Nadine was just over forty when she also gave birth to twins. Below, she explains to her preschool child the meaning of the word *donor* as she situates the actors and the action in a medical context. Embedded in her explanation is Nadine's gentle way of connecting the child to his donor through describing the similarities that she guesses they share.

> Very recently, one of my sons has begun to ask me about a [father]— I have told them the story at other times about a doctor who helped me find a man. Now it's sort of dovetailed with the facts of life discussions. And about eggs and hatching. So that mommies have eggs and fathers have seeds. So I went to a doctor who found a very nice man called a donor who gave me his seed. And that is basically how I've discussed it. And he'll say, "What's that word, donor?" And then he

> said, "Will we ever meet him?" And I said, "No, I don't think so. Mommy's never met him." And this was just in the last few weeks. "But he must be very smart and very handsome because look at you," you know? That's been it.

Although the mother may have received his seed (the deconstructed object), she transforms the donor into a man and crafts him in her son's image. The presence of the genetic father is a physical reality experienced by the mother through the children. Yet without a visual image women can only guess at the characteristics of the donor they observe in their children. They piece together the written profiles with the parts of their children they imagine come from the unknown donors. Without a real image to counter the fantasy, the women conjure a wonderful man to tell their children about to buffer the child's feelings of rejection by an unavailable genetic father. As Strauss (1959) noted, the self is fragile and requires affirmation. In this case, affirmation of self occurs through the mother's socially shaped imagination about a man she has never met.

Robin, age thirty-eight when her child (now two years old) was born, claimed that she preferred an anonymous donor to avoid potential legal hassles. But behind this legal veneer she sees the donor's anonymity as a shield against "letting her child down." By protecting him from rejection, she also prevents the donor from embracing him. She will fantasize with her child about the man they will never know, but the fantasy—like writing letters to Santa Claus—is unattainable.

> Bryan's father is the best thing that happened to us. He didn't let Bryan down; he didn't let me down, and he never will. And if it were a known donor, he can let Bryan down. I don't have any expectations of anyone, but Bryan might. But at this point, we can both be sad that we don't know who he is, but we both know that he's the best thing that ever happened to us. Or at least I know that, and hopefully Bryan will know that. We can draw pictures of what we think he looks like, and we can write letters to him in case we ever know who he is, but he hasn't let us down. Because I chose it this way. And if anything, I let Bryan down, but his father didn't.

These deeper comments reveal a cognitive construction of the genetic father on the part of the mother as a way to protect the child and herself from the less than "perfect" way she went about having a child and becoming a mother. Yet the broader cultural values of privacy and anonymity of donors structure the psychological price the child may pay. The child is denied full knowledge of his or her genealogical heritage and the face of the father.[10]

In most of these women's narratives, anonymous donors have not rejected their offspring but have instead given the mothers the most awesome gift of their lives. The anonymous donor is not the "bad" father who walked out (e.g., divorced fathers or birth fathers) but a "good" man who helped the mother and child become a family. These women recast the anonymous donor as doing something positive for them and in turn for their children. The mother and child can fantasize together about the genetic father. In addition, the anonymous donor cannot disappoint the child in ways that dads often do. Creating a visual and idealized image has protective power until the child is an adolescent.

Half-adopted: The Fantasy Father

From the partial information women have about their donors we can see how they construct a notion of a partial human being—the fantasy father. Instead of denying or remaining silent about him, he is present in everyday life and conversation. Often, these mothers think of their children as "half adopted," a term used by one woman. "Half adopted" is a way to explain the traits that the mother cannot identify from her extended family. Differences—both physical characteristics and personality—are tentatively assigned to the genetic father. Nadine added the following comment to the list of traits she was looking for when she selected an anonymous donor: "And I can see more what comes from me. It's hard for me to know what comes from him. That's the mystery part."

But regardless of whether they believe in environment or nurturance as the primary factor shaping their children, most women would still like to know more about the anonymous donors. Melissa explains why she would like to exchange photographs with the donor.

> Their personality, I see their personality as things coming from me, and I think the other things must come from him. Some of their looks come from me definitely; some of their looks must come from this other person. And I think that those things are important. So I think this person is important, I don't think this person is just nobody. . . . So I would not mind exchanging pictures or things like that. . . . To give them a sense of genetic identity, of who this person is, and who they look like.

Before conception, Melissa believed that environment was more important than genes. But her children's unexplained mannerisms have challenged her former beliefs. That is, the social implications of blood kinship arise as a mother notices parts of the child not recognized in herself.

In Mead's (1934) conceptualization, the self is not a thing but a process that is developed, sustained, and transformed through social interaction. Melissa's self-conscious realization of her child's unrecognizable gestures, personality, talents, and physical traits transformed her awareness: she must rethink how to engage characteristics of the child that come from the father's genes. In effect, a profound revelation has occurred. The mother not only perceives the child as containing elements not from her, but also acknowledges that she must socially interact with and embrace those elements in order to affirm the child's sense of unity of self.

Susan, who was thirty-nine when her daughter was born, described how the child's attributes cause her to rethink how to integrate the donor into daily life as an actual person:

> See initially I didn't talk about him much and I sort of put it off and I didn't really want to treat him as a person but just a sperm donor. But as time went on, I began to think of him—I changed my attitude about the whole thing and began to see it more as, she's half adopted. And that she has, there is this person and he is her biological father and she does have a father . . . and so we talked about him more as a real person. If there are certain traits I don't have in my family, or

> myself, I might say, "Well, maybe you get that from your father." But like he was musical and played the piano. And she's musical and he was athletic and she's *very* coordinated. So I just kind of introduced it and then we've talked about him as more of a real person and his different ethnic background and I want her to . . . and then also, he's someone I can talk positively about. He is a physician. I can say he's smart.

Robin indicates that "half-adopted" is a process of normalization for her and her child that occurred as her thinking shifted from denial to acceptance of the donor. "Half-adopted" may legitimate a procedure that carries great stigma—being created by donor sperm.[11] But "half-adopted" may not be sociologically accurate. Robin equates her child's anonymous donor with a birth father. But her child is not adopted. In the case of adoption, the birth father has legal standing until he gives up his legal rights. The anonymous donor has no legal standing. Fatherhood is given meaning at conception through the social act of intercourse that does not occur when artificial insemination has taken place. The body of a father is missing from the creation of the anonymous donor child. What is the psychological status of the father when the father is only a sperm? It is difficult to imagine that the child is an offspring of a mother and a sperm. Because this situation is psychologically problematic, Robin borrows adoption terminology to give meaning to her child's genetic (not birth) father.

The use of adoption terminology allows mother and child to discuss the meaning and implication of genetic heritage and how "pieces" of the child are unexplained and might come from someone else. Children learn to internalize the biological inheritances assigned to them, even if they are fictive. As March (2000) points out, adopted children (who do not live with either a genetic father or a mother) do not have a physical similarity to adoptive family members and, as she states, "this exclusion reaffirms their sense of having no bodily self-reference." Yet the search for birth parents by adopted children, March (2000) argues, is a search to establish their genetic heritage so as to gain a sense of unity over their physical self; that is, the physical traits that they share with other family members are affirmed on meeting genetic kin.

March (2000) and Weger (1997) primarily discuss searching (though there are exceptions) for birth mothers and the relief and realizations that result from their reunions. Partial knowledge or maternal knowledge seems to provide the missing genetic heritage necessary for self-unity. From their research, adopted children find themselves reflected in their biological mothers and this seems to satisfy the self. In contrast, the children of anonymous donors live with their genetic mothers whose physical presence echoes in their sense of self. This is not to suggest that birth fathers are not essential. I am only noting that this issue needs further empirical examination.[12]

Perhaps more important, the mother-child dyad consciously creates a social self for the child that recognizes the father as blood kin in a new way. In this regard, "half-adopted" also represents the idea that the sperm is not simply a "deconstructed part of a man" but is connected to a human being. Therefore, the pieces that the mother regards as unknown become clues to the human being that the

mother and child are trying to put together. This process is similar to solving a puzzle without the accompanying photograph to guide what the completed puzzle looks like. Putting these clues together provides a way for the child to visualize and identify with the self as an object and the father as an object. Strauss (1959:22) claimed, "The naming of an object provides a directive for action, as if the object were forthrightly to announce, 'You say I am this, then act in the appropriate way toward me.' Conversely, if the actor feels he does not know what the object is, then with regard to it his action is blocked." In order for children not to feel blocked, mothers help to define the object—that is, the father. But a certain mystery remains. In addition, since donors have no place in the nomenclature of family, their reality is contingent on this talk between mother and child.

The mothers carefully stored second hand information and passing comments like cherished mementos that were given to them by various medical personnel who actually met the anonymous donor. The mementos would eventually be passed from mother to child. These clues indicative of a man not only became central pieces, but were inflated and conflated as *the* man. Susan continues:

> The receptionist in the doctor's office said he was incredibly handsome, drop dead handsome. So he's handsome, I can describe what he looked like physically, some of his hobbies, things like that

Even though he is not an anonymous "yes" donor (a man who has agreed to have contact with the child when the child is eighteen years old), she and her daughter talk about half siblings and what they would say if they could meet him:

> Yeah. Although what I would think—the likelihood that he's a lot younger than I am. And so by the time he went off and got married and had kids, they will probably be a lot younger than she is. But I've talked to her about the possibility that she might someday meet him and that he might have—there might be a whole extended family, half siblings.

These imaginary conversations reinforce the child's bond to a biological family that extends beyond the mother-child dyad. Below, Susan repeats the fantasy conversation she had with her daughter about what each would say if they could meet the anonymous donor.

> One time she was saying she thought she would like to meet him sometime and I said, "Why?" And she said, "I'd like to see what he looks like and if he's nice and if he likes me and things like that." And I said, "Yeah, me too." So we got into this great conversation and I said, "I'd like to meet him too." And she said, "Oh why? What would you say?" And I said, "I would hug him and kiss him and tell him how much I loved him and how wonderful he was to give me a wonderful daughter and how grateful I was and how I just love this man to pieces even." If I ever met him, I would just thank him and thank him. So she was beaming by the end of the conversation because it made her feel good about him and herself.

The notion of a father whose presence is felt continuously and may be incorporated into conversations is still more ghostlike than real. Mother and child cannot help but notice that the genes of an anonymous man have left unanswered ques-

tions in their lives. Mothers believe that their children want the acknowledgment that all children desire: they are loved not only by those people who raise them but also by the men who provided the gametes. These stories of unknown donors point to the continued importance of blood ties. Having a social dad might mitigate this importance. Yet grown children whose parents used donor sperm and kept it a secret, as the medical profession once advised, often had haunted childhoods. They felt that they did not belong to the families in which they were raised.[13]

When a child starts to ask questions the mother cannot answer accurately, the mother sometimes returns to the sperm bank to ask that her donor be contacted, despite knowing when she became pregnant that she would never have access to the identity of the genetic father. Since the majority of women in this study have young children, they have not actively lobbied the banks for more information.[14] Older children, mothers report, want more information about their genetic fathers than donor profiles give. The women and their children find the present donor system problematic for this reason. However, bureaucratic control over which pieces of information women can receive in personal and genetic profiles means that they will get, at best, only clues to a genetic father. The profile is static. Updates on medical histories do not exist. Personal information is limited to hobbies, interests, and physical traits and any additional comments the anonymous donor might want to add. The woman quoted extensively above has attempted to turn the pain of being unable to answer her child's questions into creating a human being for both herself and her daughter. Robin, Susan, Nadine, and Melissa may never know if attributing the traits and abilities that they cannot find on the maternal side to the genetic fathers is simply a jointly constructed fiction that they and their children have created.

PROVIDING ALTERNATIVE PATHS TO GENETIC KNOWLEDGE AND KIN

Privacy: The Rights of the Anonymous Donor

Politically, these mothers believed that children had the right to meet their genetic fathers, but they only reach this conclusion on realizing that sperm is not just a product but an aspect of a person and a part of their children's identities. Sperm donors do not have to disclose their identity because our culture values the privacy and anonymity of the adult donor. Few donors agree to meet their offspring after they reach the age of eighteen.[15] Therefore, mother and child exchange knowledge and accept anonymity in exchange for a gamete. They trade biological matter for a sketchy medical profile, despite a continued cultural belief in a tight connection among blood, kin, and family. Donors sever their legal, social, and moral obligations to the children their gametes create. However, ultimately the women sought to reconstruct genetic lineage and its relationship to identity and family for their children. Undeniably, the vast majority of women in this study would have liked to be able to contact the donors of their children.

Even those women who believed that nurture triumphed over nature underscored the importance of the donor to a child's identity. No one mentioned future medical issues as a reason for a more open donor system. But, lacking such a system, women tried to devise ways to locate the donors. Some women hoped that leaving paper trails in the donor's file or maintaining contact with clinic personnel would someday lead to the missing person. They treat the information they have like an insurance policy they will use if their children wish to know more or actually meet their genetic fathers. Teresa described how she laid the foundation for future detective work:

> So I talked to this woman, Cindy, in the sperm bank, and she gave me the information about the donors. And I wanted a medical student for two reasons. One, I wanted someone who, when they asked the medical questions, would understand what they were talking about. If I was going to get clean genes, I wanted clean genes.[16] And second, I figured if ever my baby wanted to search, it would be easier narrowing down the profession to that. . . . So anyway, I got all this information about this guy. And then I knew someone who worked at the university. And I said, can you get me a list of graduate students—because I knew when he would graduate from medical school. And I got the list—and maybe I'm wrong, maybe I didn't write it down correctly, but I do believe I have the list of his graduating class and I very nicely wrote out the characteristics of what I had and I took the list that I had and I put it in a safe deposit box.

Another woman, Corina, thought that clinics should be more open to providing information not listed on forms. Because the first clinic she asked had run out of her initial supply of donor sperm, she shifted temporarily to another clinic with an on-site sperm bank. She thought that the odds were against her getting pregnant because she had been unsuccessful on numerous previous tries. But she decided to risk having less information about the donor at this new clinic rather than pass up a chance at conception. She became pregnant that month and now hopes that continued personal connections to staff members will facilitate her ability to get sealed information about the donor if she should need it. For example, each year she gives the staff a letter to put into the donor's file about the child's progress in case he contacts the clinic wanting to know about or meet his genetic offspring:

> One of my things is to leave a passive trail of information in case the donor should wish to be in touch. And I understand that they have files. . . . Also, I suppose I try to just build a connection with the individuals at the clinic. It's probably been a couple years since I've been in touch with them.

In this way, she is like some adoptive parents who hope that certain clues they have will uncover a birth parent in the future.

Other Offspring

The traditional boundaries of "blood" kin and how they are constructed are often threatened and challenged because an individual donor may produce several

children with different women who are unknown to one another. Some women in this study (as well as a large number who are presently listed on national Internet registries) want to meet other children who share the same donor father. They view meeting genetic half siblings and the *other* mothers as providing paternal kin ties and an additional social identity.[17] Although the majority of women in this study report that they did not deliberately pursue strategies whereby they would share donors with other women, often these women would like to meet the other mothers and the children sired by the same anonymous donor. The management at Penny's sperm bank agreed to an unusual request because it had no bureaucratic regulations to the contrary.

> After you pass your first trimester, you can ask for a more in-depth profile of the father. And they sent it and the one thing in it that really caught my eye that I hadn't expected to find out, is they tell you how many other children he has successfully sired. Which meant that my son has at least six, he was the seventh, half brothers or sisters out there. And I was like—whoa, if I were my son, that's who I would want to meet. I would want to know my half brothers and sisters and there are these six other kids running around who may look like Andy. So I called the bank and asked about getting in contact with those families.
>
> (Did you feel like you had any relationship with those other mothers?)
>
> I felt I would like to, even if it was only at some point to let our children meet each other if that's what they wanted. Privacy is absolutely utmost, but . . . No one had ever asked them that before and they were quite taken aback at the request and finally came back to me and said if you want to give us a letter, we will keep it in your file and if any of them—they said, "We won't send it to them, but if any of them also sent in such a request, we would send this letter."

Penny left a letter addressed to the other mothers in her donor's file. She hoped that they would search on their children's behalf for genetic ties to other blood relations. These genetic ties would create a family of vertical lineage wherein half siblings provide the links that children's genetically unrelated mothers foster. The women are "co-mothers" to the genetic offspring of anonymous men.[18]

The masking of a paternal genetic heritage may be further confounded by the presence of a co-parent who is not genetically related. For instance, the paternal side of a family would exist in two-parent heterosexual families when the husband is infertile and the wife is artificially inseminated. Legally, the husband is the father on the birth certificate. His kin are his children's relatives (even though they are socially but not genetically related). According to the women I interviewed, these couples are less likely to register on the Internet and less interested in seeking out half siblings. The women track the marital status of those individuals who do register with the sperm bank where they acquired the sperm and their donor's number.[19] Whether an anonymous donor is important or ignored might also vary for lesbian couples (see Ehrensaft 1998). The social significance of a second parent who is not genetically related confounds the social construction of self and is beyond the purview of this article.

In sum, fathers are significant biologically and socially. Children learn that al-

though men helped to create them, they remain unavailable to them—even a photograph is lacking. They learn through interactions with peers and family members (including their own mothers) that significant people in their lives have deeply formed connections to a father. They are asked to accept as faith that they have genetic fathers who gave their mothers the most important gift of their lives; but ironically these persons do not wish to meet them. Whether children conceived through anonymous donor fathers experience these absent men as missing pieces of their identities similar to adopted children who might wonder about their birth parents remains a question this study cannot answer.

KNOWN DONOR FATHERS: GHOSTS, UNCLES, OR ESCALATING DADS?

> I know when we were doing the contract, you sit there and talk about these things, but everything is so abstract and that's kind of what this feels like. It's so abstract; you're talking about this being that's not even there. And until it actually happens, you just can't really think about what it's really like.
>
> (But you did say that he did in fact agree that he would have a relationship with her, which sounds like that was important to you?)
>
> Well, originally, I didn't know. Mostly, I wanted her to know who her father was and have something—I wanted some kind of history, I wanted her to know who he was. I didn't want some anonymous person. And I don't know what I had in mind in terms of a relationship. Even he says, like when we were talking about this contract thing, "I'd like to see her this many times," like who knows? Neither of us really knew. We were just kind of grabbing at what seemed like it might be good. (Deborah, age 44, 9-year-old child)

Known donor fathers are not simply sperm providers. A physical man to display to her child is critical to the woman's decision to become pregnant with a known donor. Men typically selected as donors are either old friends or former lovers for whom the mothers have a special fondness. All the known donors agreed to contractual arrangements that state they have neither rights nor obligations to the children.[20]

All the children with known donor fathers have met their genetic fathers. At the time of the interviews children and fathers had a range of relationships: some men had minimal contact with the children, and some were considered "dads." In the former case, what is the relationship of the donor to the child? Is he simply a genetic abstraction? Although all the men may have agreed to be bystanders at the time of conception, a few men had become "dad" after the birth. That is, the child had explicit emotional ties to the donor as a "daddy," but he was not a co-parent. What makes a known donor a dad? And under what conditions will a contractual agreement escalate into a different arrangement?

When the mother remains emotionally ambivalent toward the donor father, despite contracts, the relationship between father and child escalates. I argue that such a donor father becomes a "social" dad. That is, he has an independent relationship

with the child who grows up visiting him. By contrast, when the father lives far away or the mother is in a serious new relationship, access and involvement of the donor remain consistently sporadic—a pattern that begins with the birth of the child. The child knows that a particular man is his genetic father, but he is not raised with the man as a social dad. The child is told that the donor is a man who helped mom "make" him; he is not his dad, only a family friend or the equivalent of an uncle who visits on occasion. That is, he remains an interested party but not obligated emotionally, socially, or financially. He is not a provider, a pal, or a male role model—the trifolding of the father described historically by Ralph LaRossa (1997). If women marry or have significant partners, the partners become co-parents. Put differently, when the known donor is also the social dad, his relationship to the child is reconstituted as the same entity. The genetic father and the social dad are synonymous. When the child knows his genetic father only as a donor, the relationship between father and child remains deconstructed. That is, the child is told he is genetically linked to this man, but "dad," a social relationship, does not follow from the genetic relationship. The social arrangement between the donor father and the child is something other than as dad (e.g., known as a good friend by a first name). The sperm is a detached product that helped to create a baby; it does not make the producer of the product, the donor, a dad. In this regard, the known donor remains a deconstructed entity to the child, which Diane Ehrensaft (1998) refers to as the part-object father.

Although there is a range of involvement, no known donors in this study set out to become co-parents from conception. In the three cases in this study in which the children called their genetic fathers "dad," this title and relationship developed gradually. Although the three men (one gay and two straight) routinely visited, none had the financial or social responsibilities that typically come with parenting. Rarely if ever did these men make decisions about the children. In the other cases of known donors, the genetic father may have spent time with the child and mother as someone special to both of them—even someone who had special feelings for the child. But the donor father had no legal claim to the child. And fundamentally the child has no ability to turn this man into a social father if the donor is unwilling because of the inequality in adult-child relationships; adults define and set the boundaries of relationships. Children are powerless in this regard, even though they may try to exert some influence.

Eavesdropping and observation, as Arlie Hochschild (2001) astutely describes, help children to frame an understanding of their social world and the norms that govern the relationships in their worlds. Children absorb both factual information and the affective load attached to that information—who is kin, who is not, and if their mothers are happy with the respective relationships. Children interpret their mothers' affect in the context of what they already know about the structure of their social world. Those children with mothers who are vigilant boundary keepers may sense their mothers' firmness, making it more difficult for them to negotiate time with this "special" man than children whose mothers are ambivalent (and both

mother and child may want more time or emotional investment from the known donor). Young children sensed their mothers' ambivalence and asked their mothers about future plans with "uncle" or "dad"; this is a way young children may facilitate further and even more contact. Even mothers who limited contact know that as their children grow older they might initiate closer relationships with these men. But the men would have to be willing to participate in the children's lives differently, abandoning the vows of limited involvement agreed to in preconception contracts. And the mothers, many of whom hope to find a partner who also wishes to be the child's co-parent, may have to redefine (and this is simply speculative) family to include more than one "dad."

The Deconstructed Father: Ghostly but Present

The known donor becomes a more complicated figure once the child is born. The mother, through her talk and gestures, can construct this Cooley-like formation of the father. However, when a physical role-playing and active person enters and leaves their lives, certain contradictions arise and have to be dealt with by the mothers. These include terms or names used for the donor father (uncle, friend, etc.), the context of the relationship in the past, present, and future between the mother and father, and the potential network of kinship. In short, all of the matters that emerge over time to create a family are mediated through the mother's activities and wishes to include or exclude the known donor and the donor's wishes as well. Thus the idealized version of the father and the everyday reality of the actual man come into tension in various ways.

The known donor's image is as a negative of a photograph. On a negative, light and shadow are the reverse of the positive generated from it. The negative offers a glimpse of a person who is there but missing. The child knows his or her genetic identity, but the man remains in shadow socially. Ironically, the mother knows him as a whole person (the positive print) because of a shared past relationship. The child still must imagine what it would be like to have a dad, even if the mother's history and memory form the basis of talk with the child about her imagined father.

In the first account below, by Lori-Ann, the known donor has a continuous relationship with the mother and child. In the second account, Jennifer's known donor appears sporadically, as a shadow.

Lori-Ann became pregnant by means of insemination with a good friend whose family she had known since childhood. She thought of the known donor as an "uncle" who occupied a parallel relationship to the child as her brother, the child's real uncle. The uncle is more of a constant figure in the child's life with whom some relationship can be shared. However, he too, remains in the "special" category of part-object father. To return to the photographic negative metaphor, the known donor appears visible on the unprinted negative, forming an image for the child but not as the developed self of the dad.

Lori-Ann's son, Andrew, who was four at the time of the interview, had a rela-

tionship with his father but not as a dad who was raising him. Lori-Ann explained how she gradually introduced her child to the concept of father. She knew that the questions from her child would become more difficult and would challenge her to explain why his genetic father remained only a friend and not a dad.

> So they have a very particular relationship. I mean, they have a strong relationship, and Andrew thinks of him as "Pennsylvania Bob" because he lives in Pennsylvania. My brother's name is Bob too. So my brother is Uncle Bob, so this is Pennsylvania Bob. And ever since he was a baby I've said, "Pennsylvania Bob is important because I wanted to have a baby and he helped me have you." And when he was little, that was as much as I said. So he knows that Bob has something to do with him being around.
>
> And more recently, I had a conversation with him where, I was a little more concrete about it. . . . "So Bob gave me sperm and I put it with the egg and that made you." Because we were talking about how some of him looks like me and some of him looks like Bob. But I've never used the word "father" and he hasn't so far made that connection although at some point I'm sure he will. He'll figure out that what a father is, is that person. But I haven't used the word because I feel like it's not the relationship that he has with him. That his relationship is much more like an uncle or something. And I don't want him to have some confusing ideas about what Bob's relationship to him should be. And I imagine at some point he'll have questions like, "Well, if Bob's my father, then how come he doesn't live here?" Or, "Why don't I see him more?" I'm sure that those things will come up. But I feel like it's like he's always known. It's like, This is the story: I wanted to have a kid, and Bob helped me. Bob is important. So he knows that Bob is special in a different way than other people, that Bob has a particular kind of role in his life. And I'm very fortunate because this is exactly what I wanted. I wanted somebody who would be known and who would be important to him but who I wouldn't feel threatened [by] because he would suddenly want custody.

If Lori-Ann's son wanted a deeper, more intimate relationship with his genetic father than her friend was willing to have or could give him, her son might feel cheated and angry. The future concerned her, as she was caught between having to protect her child from being disappointed by his father and having to protect the donor who had no obligations and a contract that freed him from fatherhood. This dilemma underlies the rationale some women gave in the earlier section as to their choice of an anonymous donor as a preferred route to motherhood. Yet, ironically, Lori-Ann's choice of Bob as the donor for her child became the potential for a tangled web of hurt feelings:

> There's something about the father thing—and you know, Bob and I actually haven't talked about this much recently, but part of it is protecting Bob because he really doesn't want to be a father. So I don't want him to feel like Andrew sees him as something that is not what he wants to be. So I think that is all to be worked out, still. Because as he gets older, there are going to be more questions about it.

Lori-Ann wanted Bob to be the donor because she thought that his ambivalence about becoming a dad would keep him at a distance. She also believed that he

would be less likely to claim paternity than another man eager for a child. Lori-Ann and Bob have yet to figure out answers to future questions. Donors have no clear place in kinship systems. But Bob agreed to known donorship and he had a contract with Lori-Ann. It specified parental obligations and rights: he had none. But as Deborah pointed out above, who can predict how the child's presence might alter the contract? For now, the contract remains the guide: Bob has no obligations to become a dad, and Lori-Ann is the sole parent. She hoped that if she found a partner, she would become the co-parent. In this regard, Lori-Ann had no baggage from other parents to feel conflicted about or to compete for the child's affection—even though in her case the co-partner she sought would be another woman.

Bob came to town a few times a year to visit his mother and siblings. He would always make sure to stay a few extra days to visit with Lori-Ann and her child, just enough time for the child to know "Pennsylvania Bob." Lori-Ann saw the distance as important for maintaining boundaries that do not allow the donor to become more involved even if he wanted a different relationship. She said, "It does help that he doesn't live around here, I think. I mean, I don't know, it might be fine if he did, who knows? But it gives the relationship certain kinds of limitations, you know."

This child also had some contact with the donor father's relatives, who know that the child is his biological son. The relatives would like to be treated as "real" kin. But the mother remained ambivalent about these ties because she did not know how to "name" them and could not give them the same weight as ties to her kin. Matrilineal ties determine kinship relations; the donor's family raises too many unanswerable questions. How can he be a friend to his genetic child while his kin become grandparents, aunts, and cousins? Without the father, these relatives exist in the abstract.

Having special feelings about the man who fathered her child was especially important to Jennifer, who had rejected the idea of an anonymous donor because she could not imagine herself having a child with a man she had never met. This concern was critical to Jennifer's account, even though Jennifer and donor Sam had been "ambivalent lovers" who finally decided to end their relationship but tried to have a child anyway. Jennifer could convey intimate knowledge of the father to her child because they had been lovers. Jennifer explained how her feelings about her former lover made him more than a deconstructed father, which is how she saw using an anonymous donor:

> It was real important for me and my issues of control to know. I love that I can tell Zoë about her father. I also love that I have feelings about him as a person. I feel like there's a history I can share with her about him. When he was over here the last time, I asked him to make a genealogy of his family for her, and although there really isn't control, there's the illusion of greater control and I feel like I got good genes for her and that was very important to me. Because I feel like I wanted her to be healthy, I wanted her to be smart, I wanted some of those things that I felt I couldn't get from a written document [from a sperm bank]. And the other very significant thing for me is that I have his support.

During the first interview, Jennifer told me that when Zoë was ten months old, Sam wanted Jennifer and Zoë to celebrate holidays with his new wife and his children from a previous marriage. Jennifer was ambivalent about such kin gatherings. She did not want to be drawn into circumstances that resembled the ties of divorced-linked families (Ambert 1989; Stacey 1990). She set limits on socializing as a way to define kin, deliberately not sustaining the social interaction necessary to establish kin ties. Sam is a deconstructed father to the child: the child has a genetic father but not a social dad. They would meet at a public place a few times a year so that he could see the child, but he was more of a stranger than anything else. While Sam would have liked more contact, Jennifer created a tightly controlled boundary around her daughter, establishing herself as a single mother without a history of social interaction with her child's father that would be a part of a future. She could then present her daughter to the men she dated as "daddy-less," as she put it. These actions set the stage for finding a man who would not have to compete with another man for her child's affections. This known donor lives in the shadows.

Did she hold tight to her strategy? The second interview, two and a half years after the first, revealed that Jennifer was not only engaged, but her future husband planned to adopt the child. She stated that Charles, her fiancé, understood that since she had deliberately left the father's name blank on the birth certificate, he could freely adopt the child. Jennifer and Sam's prebirth contract had specified that he would not contest an adoption. However, Jennifer suspected that the reality of another man becoming *the* dad would hurt Sam's feelings because an adoption would push him farther away from the child. She remained consistent in both interviews in telling me that she had "feelings for Sam as a person," which was an "important history [she could] share with Zoë about him."

However, Jennifer did not wish to erase the known donor from her child's life. Beneath the physical resemblance lay a deeper psychological tie between mother and donor. She hoped he would retain "some spot" of feeling for the child, although reciprocity by the child was not likely in the present. I asked Jennifer how she felt about the known donor, as she was on the verge of getting married to another man:

> I would like him not to be absent from her life. But I really don't want him to be, which he won't be, too in there. I really want Charles to be her father and her daddy. But I would like Sam to have some spot for her. I really do still feel connected to him and she looks like him and me. . . . And there are things about her that remind me of him and I want her to know that they come from him. So I have some investment in him, but I don't know the answers. It feels like a mess to me.

During the first interview, Jennifer remarked, sounding a bit hurt, that Sam had not bought the child a birth gift. But the last time they met he actually had bought the child, then three years old, a few things. She noted this detail in both interviews even though I never asked about gifts. Jennifer never asked Sam why he suddenly bought gifts, but she said to me, "I have no idea what possessed him to do it. He said they looked cute." I suspect that she has never said anything to him about this be-

cause gift giving makes him more like kin. Neither she nor the donor felt comfortable with this designation, even though she felt hurt by the lack of presents, and she did not pursue a deeper meaning behind a first-time gift at age three for their child. The exchange of gifts symbolized a *social* relationship between the participants, the meaning of which is laden with entanglements and intimacy. Yet they share only minimal time in a public place.

Kin is constituted through chosen ties to biological and nonbiological individuals (Weston 1991). Furstenberg's (1995) research on fathering among inner-city African-American families found a social distinction between "fathers" and "daddies"; daddies who are not biological kin frequently have a more important role than biological fathers.[21] But in Jennifer's case, social ties define kin, clarifying the meaning of a donor. Sam, the donor, does not really have a place in the kinship system except as a shadow figure who appears occasionally. Jennifer tried to find language to locate the donor within a socially based kinship system. This is why she spent much of the second interview telling me about other relationships (e.g., the nanny and the ex-wife) in their lives. The donor was a past lover of the mother's. But for Zoë, the child they jointly created, the relationship between father and child is only genetic. The mother made a choice to foster the social kin relationships through her husband-to-be and his kin because they would be the basis of emotional and social interactions. Her child's genetic family remained in the shadows.

THE DONOR AS VAGUE: DAD AT A DISTANCE

Sometimes the known donor's relationship to the child changes over time. I found two such examples. I would describe this as a process wherein the "friend" becomes a "pal" with the potential to become a dad. In one case, the child was old enough to care for herself, allowing her to become more of a companion to him than when she was younger and needed more physical care. In the other case, the known donor lived far away, and although he considered the child his son, he was not likely to become a full-time parent. The status of the father is vague in both cases. Therefore, to demonstrate the potential for escalation of the relationship, I am treating these cases separately.

Although the man Heather selected as a known donor was a good friend and liked having a child in the world created by his genes, he did not want to be a parent himself. This information was told to the interviewer in the context of an ongoing search for someone else to be a known donor to a second child she wished to conceive. Heather, age forty-three, with a ten-year-old daughter, began trying to become pregnant when she was twenty-nine years old:

> But I didn't know he was gonna change his mind. Suddenly on his fortieth birthday, he said, "Wait a minute. I never did want to have kids. Why would I do this again?" And he adores her.

The donor's friendship with the mother precipitated his slowly growing relationship with the child. Although they may appear to strangers as a "traditional" family dur-

ing vacations, the mother characterizes the relationship as that of "pals." It is the friendly part of the dad relationship that has evolved. At ten, the child is old enough to take care of herself on the first solo weekend visit they will spend together.

> He knows her. He visits. We go on vacations every year. Some kind of family vacation thing, where we look like a nuclear family. He is a close friend of mine. When she was very little, he would sort of not know what to do with her. He was just all thumbs. But he and I were friends. We'd go on vacation, the three of us. And slowly he got to know her. And actually this year, for the first time, he's gonna take her for a weekend skiing without me. And now he's just starting to take her by himself, now that she's older and old enough to not be too fragile and they're kind of buddies now.

Even though her child and her good friend had seen each other infrequently over the years, the mother was startled by her observation that the child had grown up to be more like him than her. Remarking on this observation in her search for a second donor via the Internet, she was attuned to the importance of noticing *the man*, not just the availability of his sperm:

> Now that I've had Syd, now that I've had my daughter, she is just like a carbon copy of her father. There's an amazing amount of things that are genetic. She danced exactly like him. But they'd never danced together. She's never even seen him dance. And when she started dancing, I went, "Oh my God, you dance. . . ." All the body movements were the same. There were just so many things. They furrow their brow the same. They look a lot alike. The same school issues. Just an amazing number of things are genetic. And I feel like I'm sort of a case study for what's genetic and what isn't. Because really for the first few years, he had very little impact on her at all. He'd visit two to three times a year. And they weren't close.

In effect, she saw her close friend in her daughter constantly. She could pick out his reflection and imprint. The mother knew the whole man when he became the donor, but the daughter only now was beginning to know the man whose genes she shared. The donor for this child was not a complete father. She knew only pieces of him—the pieces her mother told her about. The children of known donors deconstruct the donor by contractual agreement. The mother, in contrast, shares a history with the known donor, particularly because they are old friends. This knowledge about the donor is asymmetrical. Further, the known donor masks his identity or becomes something other than who he logically is. The child's identity as rooted in familial history is displaced when the genetic father is an external figure in the child's life. Syd and her dad are developing an independent relationship in which Syd can substitute her mother's memories of a man with her own experiences of him.

Barbara knew the relationship between her child and his genetic father would never amount to anything more than sporadic contact until perhaps the child reached adulthood: "So at that point, Josh had pictures of his father, he hasn't heard his voice. But we talked about Ethiopia, he knows his daddy's a doctor there." This child, similar to those whose fathers live far away, has a photograph of his genetic

father. The photograph demonstrates the existence of a father. But images are objects to fantasize about and wish to know. They signify an identity that differs from photographs that allow a child to recall a moment that expands beyond the picture (e.g., a picture of the child with Donald Duck recalls the trip to Disneyland.) When the child was three, his father visited for the first time for a week. She described the moment they met:

> So he did get off the plane, he came over and gave me a big hug and I guess Josh just stood there. And then he picked up Josh and just this look on my son's face—this big smile came out and they hugged each other, and spun around in circles. And it's been love at first sight.

Though the child's half siblings do not know about him, his father told him about them and showed him pictures. Josh and his "dad" grew close as they played together that week. He visited Josh's day-care center and met his playmates and day-care providers. His father provided a momentary but monumental presence:

> I hope that the visit will ease two things: I hope it will ease his mind that *for sure* he has a dad. You know, if he had any questions about "well, is my mother lying to me?" or any of that kind of stuff, hopefully that will be dispelled. And second, I'm hoping that he will not feel like the odd one out when the other kids are talking about their parents or any of that stuff. Again, fortunately (or unfortunately) he's in a day-care center with a lot of creative families anyway. So it's not as though every child there has a father who lives in the house, or even a father. But still, I just figured that it might be a little bit easier for him to say, "My father lives in Ethiopia, I haven't seen him for many years," and that's it.

Having family in another country does alter the donor's ability to visit his son. He acknowledges the child differently than the men presented earlier. But the genetic father considers the child his son—more for his own self-image than for the child's. That is, he knows he has a male progeny. A fading visit from a father in a photo makes Josh like other children in his day-care center who may have fathers but not involved dads.

ESCALATING RELATIONSHIPS: THE DONOR AS DAD

Despite contractual agreements, the relationship between the known donor and the child may escalate. The mother acts as a gatekeeper, regulating the known donor's ability to physically spend time with the child. Sometimes the man might want to be more involved, but the mother does not want more involvement. Other times, agreements made between the known donor and mom-to-be before conception change once the child is born. Two of the three women interviewed were initially ambivalent lovers, involved with the donors but in the past; the third donor wanted to be the woman's lover (he had a common-law wife), but she was gay and their evening together was solely instrumental.[22] In these cases, the genetic father is "dad" to the child. But while he may be emotionally and socially involved in the child's life, he does not pay any child support. The child typically spends time with

him alone. The donor's extended family is socially involved in the child's life as well. In effect, the role of "dad" is not assumed from pregnancy on but evolves over time. The women allow this even though they may be ambivalent about shifting the original terms of the donors' role. As Strauss (1959:26) aptly puts it, "Innovation, in fact, rests upon ambiguous, confused, not wholly defined situations. Out of ambiguity arises challenges and the discovery of new values: 'It is in the areas of ambiguity that transformations take place . . . without such areas transformations would be impossible.' "[23]

Having severe endometriosis, Anna's doctor told her after treatment that if she wanted to have a child she should try to become pregnant soon. She told the doctor that she was not involved with anyone, and the doctor responded by telling her that her practice had many single women. At age thirty-six, she became pregnant with a former lover, a relationship that had ended years before. Anna tells how the donor's feelings toward fatherhood changed.

> That was a surprise because going into it, this donor was not particularly keen on the idea of fatherhood in the sense that he made the statement, "Having a child is just not part of my life plan, it's not something that I'm yearning to do, wanting to do, have always wanted to do and 'Oh, great, now's the chance.' " It just wasn't part of his horizon. But his motivation was because he really cared for me and he could see that this was something that I very much wanted and he wanted to help me out. So he wasn't anticipating that he would glom onto this kid and that it would be all fulfilling and wonderful. But he didn't anticipate that he would fall in love, kind of, that he would be so emotionally bonded. And that's what ended up happening. He got very involved when Ben was born and just through the months and years of parenting, he's not faded into the background. It's like all exciting when the kid's first born, you know? You might sort of expect he'd be around there then. But maybe when it got kind of tough, that he might have disappeared or gotten less interested. But that didn't happen. He just kept getting more and more interested. And at this point, there's not any wavering about it. My son has a dad.

Anna was skeptical that the donor's initial enthusiasm and euphoria about the baby would last. But it did. The donor did not fade into the background as she expected and as they had specified before conception. The first thing she does every morning when she gets to work is leave a message for John about how the child is doing. She describes the weekly routine that resembles cooperative divorced parents:

> We don't have set times. We didn't negotiate it or go to court and sign a document. But it's evolved to a pretty patternized kind of thing which involves one night a week that Ben stays at his house without me, and one night a week, after school like on a Wednesday or something. The overnight I just said happens on a Friday, usually, sometimes Saturday. And then usually Wednesday nights (but sometimes Tuesday and sometimes Thursday) his dad will come over to our house around seven-thirty or so and spend an hour and a half, or however long it takes, to do the visiting and bath and bed routine and put Ben to bed. So that's a time, for those couple of hours if I want to go out, I can also go out because I know that I've got that coverage. So that's what we've evolved to.

> We also spend time usually on Sundays all together the three of us; sometimes on Saturdays too. It depends. Every weekend somebody always has something, whether it's Ben having a birthday party, or me having something, or John has something that he's got to do. So we're very flexible about that. But we certainly do try to have some time in the weekend where we're all three together, because that has become very important for John. He really—that's what keeps him in this is the "family" time. He really likes that a lot, much more than he anticipated.

Whereas the donor particularly likes the time spent as a family, Anna is much more uncertain about its meaning, seeking therapy to sort out her feelings for John and his unexpected reemergence in her life.

> I have kind of mixed feelings. In one sense I do like it that it's a lot easier to take care of a kid when there are two adults around, I won't deny that. The part of it that I don't like is I feel a little bit false in that it's like play-acting, or pretending to be a family when we're not a family. And I feel a little bit like living a falsehood there. What does the world see when they see these people going along with their kid? But I guess I'm not going to worry too much about what the world sees because if that had bothered me a lot I would have never gone this way in the first place.

The child has always gone back and forth between the two apartments. He is used to the differences in how his mom and dad live. I asked her how her son felt, and she told me:

> Well, I haven't asked him how he feels about it. I mean, he seems to go along pretty well with the notion of "OK, we're going over to Daddy's house now, and you're going to stay at Daddy's house tonight." I mean, it's a whole different scene over there, it's a whole different house. Very differently ordered and paced. He's got a different place to sleep there. He doesn't sleep in his own bed at our house, he sleeps at this other bed at Daddy's house. And there are other toys there. And his father has all these entertainments. He has a big, big, big-screen TV, so they are always renting videos. And that's just not something that I do. I have this decrepit old TV that's like twenty years old. I barely get color most of the time, you know? So he has different things that he does there. His father really likes to play baseball with him. And I'll play baseball with him a little bit because I know that he loves it, but I just can't get into it for hours and hours the way a guy can. And his father loves it. So that's a real joy that they share. Hey, I'm all for it.

In addition to checking in by phone in the morning and evening, this dad is concerned on other levels not mentioned by other women whose children were fathered by known donors. For the most part, known donors are brief visitors who play with the children in the mother's presence. John is actively concerned.

> And he is very—oh, how can I say this—he tends to be a little bit hypochondriac. He's very keyed into medical things and kind of takes a gloomier view of things than I might be inclined to otherwise. But it's kind of a stabilizing influence. Because if I'm going to let something go by, he's never going to let it go by. So together we make sure that Ben's welfare is always being taken care of. So if he

> notices something about Ben, he'll always mention it to me. And he likes to get daily reports, basically.

Anna views her relationship with John as platonic, but he would like a romantic involvement with her. He is the father of her child but not her partner. John is the closest example to a co-parent that I found in this study. But as a result of what she called a "nonrelationship relationship," the boundaries are murky. Not setting boundaries and allowing the known donor to become the child's dad has left the mother wondering how men she might meet in the future will view the situation.

CONCLUSION

Even as mothers affirm some important ties—most prominently, kinship by blood—they undermine others by separating reproduction from marriage, intercourse, and love. As Stacey (1990:18) eloquently states, "Rupturing evolutionary models of family history and incorporating both experimental and nostalgic elements, 'the' post-modern family lurches forward and backward into an uncertain future." The intimate accounts I have presented afford glimpses into how these mothers and their children experience the contested terrain over family life, namely, the power of a two-parent family ideology. In part motivated by a cultural ideology that emphasizes the importance of fatherhood and marriage, these women attribute unexplained characteristics of their children to imagined fathers. But ironically, as new reproductive technologies create the possibility for multiple types of fathers (and mothers), these women work hard to protect the boundaries between social and genetic kinship with the belief that only one man can be a child's father. This is an extension of patriarchal beliefs that do not allow for multiple fathers. The women protect these boundaries with the hope that another man (a social dad) will come along, marry them, and adopt their children—the ultimate fantasy. Adoption will then give the child a legal second parent. In the uncertain future, middle-class women may more readily accept multiple fathers for their children, thus acknowledging genetic ties and social ties as distinct dimensions of family life. However, as children grow up they may make their own set of demands and call for anonymous donors to reveal themselves, not unlike adoptees. Children may also negotiate different relationships with known donors than they currently have.

Although we may soon know everything we want to know about our children and ourselves genetically, medical testing cannot produce a man to touch, to hug, or to share the child's deepest fears. The self emerges in relationship to significant others; the search to know them is deep, and as a culture we deny these children a fundamental right by allowing anonymous donors. (Donors who are willing to have future contact with their genetic children, I believe, should be allowed, as in Britain and Australia.) Perhaps we need to rethink anonymous donors in light of the data I have presented on "imagined" fathers.

As medical technology makes possible the ability to uncouple genetic and social parenthood, new forms of families will continue to emerge that challenge kinship boundaries. One of the most fundamental issues is that of self and other within the

family context. In this study I find that biological, social, and sexual sources are distinct but have to be unified in some way, which I have called, after Cooley, "the looking glass," or the imagined father. The interviews show in rich detail the many nuances that anonymous and known donors must cope with in order to sustain the idea of the father for the child and for the mother. There are important distinctions between anonymous donors and known donors. In the former, the crafting of a father is an act of imagination that belies concrete description (smells, sounds, feelings, voice, etc., that are present). A woman must bring to life pieces of information that she feels comfortable loving about this man and, by extension, their child. Their child becomes a looking glass into the man neither will probably ever meet (as do the other offspring sired by the same donor sperm, which is why contact with half siblings becomes an important linkage).

Through deepening love for her child, the mother gradually crafts a man the child believes is a "good" father, and, because the mother created him in this image and mother and child imagine him through this joint image, the child's self is positively reflected. In the case of known donors, an asymmetry exists between the mother's knowledge and experiences of the known donor and the child's firsthand knowledge of this same person. The mother has intimate knowledge of times shared with the man that does not usually become the basis for the development of father-child relationships. Children's expectations of known donors are often limited. But innovation to include these men, even in vague and unspecified ways, may have some transformative value and power within individual kinship systems. Although the child is at a distance from the father for the most part, she sees herself in the man even if he is not a father in the conventional sense.

Donors become relevant to family life in ways the women themselves do not foresee. Both anonymous donors and known donors are deconstructed but in different ways. Anonymous donors are fantasy men who may give their sperm to use without any legal, moral, or social obligation to the product or child it creates. The deconstructed father is reconstructed by the mother-child dyad as they search to give meaning to the donor in their family. Genealogical lineage remains severed from social kinship on the paternal side, even though the mother and child wish they could meet the man who lives as a vague presence in their lives.

Known donors are also deconstructed because their social role as dad is detached from their genetic relationship to their child. In these cases, the metaphor of the photographic negative is critical: the child knows his or her genetic identity, but the man remains in shadow socially. The asymmetrical knowledge of the mother's relationship to the man versus the child's is striking. Her choice of a known donor derives from a former (and often present) relationship with him, yet she remains a gatekeeper determining how and if a relationship between father and child develops. While multiple kinds of relationships exist between donor fathers and their children, in this culture kinship boundaries are tied to particular types of acknowledged paternity that these women and donors prefer to leave legally vague. Kinship that continues to be rooted in traditional marriage will preclude the possibility for expanding the ways in which donor father-child relationships develop in the United

States. However, as I have demonstrated, some of these women have expanded the boundaries of kinship, and their children do have relationships with their genetic fathers as "dads" even if they do not share the same households. Similarly, it is possible that in the future genetic kin may not be left to a shadowland. Policies that guarantee sperm donors' anonymity may change, and other mothers with biological half siblings may come forward. We have yet to label this possibility or discuss it as part of the broadening of kinship through these new family forms.

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NOTES

1. The TV character Murphy Brown is the exception. She decided at age forty to not terminate a pregnancy that resulted from a one-night sexual encounter with her former husband. Then Vice President Dan Quayle attacked Hollywood's moral values, claiming she was a poor role model for teens in the United States. The Dan Quayle attack made the front page of the *New York Times*. In a fascinating moment of postmodern television, Murphy Brown responded to his attack in the episode that aired on September 21, 1992. In character (as a TV news anchor) she made a statement to the vice president that he needed to expand his definition of family beyond its current narrow structure (mother, father, and children) to include all families based on sharing, love, and commitment. Then she stepped out of character and introduced the vice president and the audience to real families (not fictional characters) in order to acknowledge the diversity of families in the United States. By the end of the century it became quite common for TV characters as well as Hollywood actresses to become single mothers. Their routes to motherhood are as diverse as the women in this study.
2. Three changes have had a profound impact on the practice of single motherhood. Advances in reproductive technology have opened a *means* to motherhood for women that does not require marriage or even a man. Increases in labor force participation rates and access to economic independence give women the *opportunity* to choose motherhood before (or instead of) marriage. And finally, relaxed gender roles—combined with the unabated appeal of family and children—have allowed women an option to choose motherhood with or without a partner.
3. From this point on, I am using the term "father" to signify a genetic relationship with the child. There are two types of genetic fathers: sperm donor fathers and birth fathers. However, the social act of intercourse gives birth fathers legal rights and obligations that sperm donors whose gametes are inserted through artificial means do not have. Known sperm donors might also be birth fathers; but in these cases contracts specify the inability of the donor to claim the child. I use the common phrase "dad" to distinguish these "fathers" from men who are socially and emotionally involved with their children (who may be genetically related or socially act in this capacity).

4. I have conducted a few second-round interviews with women I interviewed in the early part of the study to learn how their lives have changed since the first interview. I plan to contact all of the women for second interviews so that eventually I will have longitudinal data about their lives and any changes on the key topics. I also hope that this will give me more systematic information about how the images of fathers change over years and whether the dream of finding a partner who also becomes a co-parent was actualized.
5. Women living with partners who could provide daily assistance with child care and who could become a second parent figure—as father or as another mother—are deliberately left out of my study. I did not want to further confound this study with cohabitors.
6. Research in the 1970s found that an estimated .5 to 4 percent of adopters were single; studies in the 1980s found that from 8 to 34 percent were single (Stolley 1993). These estimates do not include international adoptions.
7. Faith I. T. Ferguson and I discussed how to refine the sampling frame as we conducted the early interviews. I thank her for her involvement with this stage of the research.
8. In the larger study I discuss all four paths to motherhood. Some of the women who adopted children did try to get pregnant with anonymous or known donors. Similarly, some women who became pregnant with an anonymous donor tried to find a known donor before turning to an anonymous donor. A few did inseminate with a known donor and when that route failed turned to an anonymous donor. This article includes only those who gave birth to children through anonymous donor insemination (ADI) or known donors.
9. This can be likened to the transformation ill individuals experience, which, according to Charmaz's (1995) argument, objectifies their bodies less and allows them to admit cues from their bodies about their illness. Once acknowledged they gain control over their lives as they learn how to protect their bodies. When women craft these birth stories about fathers residing in another place, they may master a presentation of conception for the child but mask the acceptance of a man who will never be present in the child's life. Once the donor is acknowledged as being unlike other children's fathers, the mother and child begin to create an imagined man who is a positive yet invisible presence.
10. It is ironic that anonymity of gamete donors remains the norm as more and more states open up adoption records as a moral obligation to the adopted.
11. In another part of this study, I report that these women tell only their most intimate family and friends that they became pregnant using anonymous donors. Charlene Miall (1986, 1987, 1989) has done important work on social stigma among childless couples and among adoptive parents. E-mail correspondence with her concerning my thinking helps to clarify the possible roots of "half-adopted" children. In her preliminary work with ADI married women, they were encouraged during counseling provided as part of the process they underwent "to think of the donor sperm as part of the adoption spectrum—that is, donor ova or sperm were just adoption one step removed. They were all married and they talked at length about the intimations of adultery that had arisen after conception took place using ADI." Since Robin is in the helping profession, she may be borrowing this term from her own work expertise.
12. In the broader study, I address how the mothers select anonymous donors. In general, the mothers match their own physical traits to paper profiles of men (i.e., the majority seek similar traits, with the exception of wanting men to be taller than they are) so that children will resemble the mothers and not be mistaken by her family and friends as genetically unrelated. The mothers want their children to reflect genetic traits they are familiar with and therefore choose men who share their ethnicity, religion, and race in order to mask difference between themselves and their children but also so that the children will not be unknown selves. Yet the women cannot control everything about the genetics of the donor, so gestures and mannerisms become points of dissimilarity that need explanation.
13. See the *New York Times Magazine*, June 18, 1995, cover story titled, "Looking for a Donor to Call Dad," by Peggy Orenstein, for an account of adult donors' views. The publication of this story coincided with Father's Day.
14. The majority of women in this study who became pregnant through using anonymous donors have children under age six. The children are just beginning to ask more questions. I suspect

that as they grow, the father story will become more complicated, but the father-child link will remain embedded in a genetic foundation. Further, acquiring sperm through a bank is a recent occurrence. In the future it is possible that state or federal regulations may require medical updates or disclosure of the father's identity under various petitioned circumstances. Sperm banks currently keep records on the father's identity.

15. In other countries such as Britain and Australia gamete donation is not anonymous. In the United States, among the large sperm banks few donors are willing to reveal their identities. With one exception, women in this study would have preferred such donors. Ultimately, all the women I interviewed decided to purchase "no" donor gametes after being unable to secure the short supply of "yes" donors.
16. I have deliberately left this quote in because in an unpublished manuscript, I discuss the rudimentary genetic engineering that women attempt. The idea of "clean genes" is fascinating because it points to the fantasies that lie behind the women's attempt at genetic selection from paper profiles of men.
17. Without the development of sperm banks this would not be possible. Sperm banks give numbers to each donor. Through Web sites created in the last few years women are registering their donors' numbers. They hope for a match in order to meet these genetic relatives.
18. Interestingly, in the few cases of twins in this study, the issue of searching for other paternal kin was less likely to be raised. Having a fraternal twin who shares physical traits provides satisfactory self-directives because the self of the "missing" paternal side can be authenticated through one's twin. This is not to suggest that twins or genetic siblings (when a woman uses the same donor for a second child) replace the father's affirmation of self, but physical resemblance to a twin may more readily facilitate the internalization process of self that Mead (1934) discusses.
19. Certain sperm banks provide the numbers of children sired by the same donor, which is how women learn that genetic half siblings exist. Each sperm bank regulates how many children an individual donor can sire.
20. These contracts are not legally binding. Although women who selected anonymous donors told stories of potential complications with known donors, no one actually knew anyone who had such experiences. Women used these stories to rationalize their choice of an anonymous donor or to explain their choice of a particular donor who would not interfere with their raising the child with an eventual co-parent. Legally known donors could obtain rights to their offspring. Although I know of no such cases, if any of these women were to experience financial difficulty, a known donor could be asked for financial support. Although the birth certificates of anonymous donors list fathers as unknown, it is unclear whether the state could access the files of sperm banks and request that these men assume financial responsibility.
21. As Margaret Mead and other anthropologists found, genetics do not determine the binding relationship of social relations, nor do they necessarily establish who has authority over children within the family.
22. Women who became pregnant with known donors in this study are just as likely to be artificially inseminated as they are to have sexual intercourse.
23. Strauss is quoting Kenneth Burke, A *Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1945), xix.

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