
Donor-Shared Siblings or Genetic Strangers: New Families, Clans, and the Internet

Journal of Family Issues


XX(X) 1–27

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DOI: 10.1177/0192513X11404345

<http://jfi.sagepub.com>

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Abstract

Donor-shared sibling families have recently emerged. Families who conceived using the same anonymous donor are locating one another through websites designed to match children with their biogenetic half-siblings. Based on a survey of 587 parents with donor-conceived children, we discovered that a growing number of unrelated parents whose children are genetically related are organizing into durable groups. These groups mainly exist on the Internet where members can choose their level of participation. A smaller group has met offline, but most select one or two families they especially connect with. Overall, these families illustrate that genetics cannot be ignored. Whereas some respondents view donor-siblings as a latent affiliation—an insurance policy for future questions by their children—others have used the Internet as a social arena to connect and form relationships. In this new world, the Internet is altering how kinship is discovered and formed.

Keywords

donor siblings, donor insemination, kinship, Internet, social networks

Sperm banks never foresaw the possibility that children from the same donor would discover one another as a by-product of the Internet. The Internet has

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made the detective work to locate paternal kin, once a search in the dark, a hopeful reality for women who thought that when they decided to conceive through an anonymous donor they also signed on to the fact that their children would never know their paternal family. Websites, independent of the sperm banks, became the hosts to matching children (and their families) with one another. These families who conceived with the use of anonymous donors had no idea that they had the right to search for their child's genetic half-siblings. The genius of "people finding sites" coupled with continuous media coverage in the early years of this decade became the seed for locating genetic paternal members.

Donor-created families, especially those that are composed of donor-shared siblings, are part of a new world that falls outside conventional reproductive narratives. Donor siblings are biogenetically linked individuals who share the same anonymous donor. Their unrelated parents unknowingly ordered the same donor gametes from a sperm bank, thus making their offspring genetically half-siblings. These children, biogenetically related by happenstance, and their families, add a new contour to the definition of kinship.

The family "is not a concrete 'thing' that fulfills concrete 'needs' but an ideological construct with moral implications . . ." (Collier, Rosaldo, & Yanagisako, 1982, p. 37). Sperm banks decided that economic markets overrode paternal genetic kinship, a traditional belief that individuals have maternal and paternal kin. Yet, when websites trumped a pure market system by offering the option to search for other donor-shared siblings, this raised questions for those who have children conceived from donor gametes: whether to search for their child's donor siblings? And if found, what kind of relationship, if any, do these strangers initiate? In short, donor-shared children offer a look at a twist on kinship inclusion: how is blood kin turned into a social relationship, especially when these children and their parents have no legal, functional, or emotional obligation to one another?

Prompted by those questions, we undertook an exploratory study into dynamics of donor-shared sibling families. Among the most interesting of our discoveries is evidence to suggest that rather than a latent network devoid of mutual obligations (Riley, 1983), there is a growing number of unrelated parents who share biogenetically related children who have begun to organize into more or less durable clans. The Internet provides them with the means with which to chronicle their children's activities and the clan offers the opportunity of socioemotional ties. Clans, which are large groups composed of several smaller families, enable all parents to monitor donor siblings and their families without obligation to one another. However, parents are also aware that should the need arise—for example, a child raises identity

questions or a hereditary disease is detected—they can activate the network as a source of information, aid, and emotional support.

In contrast to conventional kin networks, donor sib clans are not fixed entities with long histories and traditions. They are, by nature, more inclusive because new members can appear at any time; new branches can be discovered as a by-product of the largely undetectable distribution of common sperm. There is a strong element of voluntarism to these clans—unlike conventional kin networks, members can choose to enter or exit the web of social ties without a sense of betrayal to a long-established institution. However, like conventional kin networks, clans are not always successful in providing satisfying and reciprocating relationships. Finally, a limited subset of the broader clan may become more exclusive and even form social ties that feel close.

Literature Review

The past two decades have witnessed an irreversible trend toward diversity in contemporary parenting and family life. Single mothers who are economically self-sufficient represent the first cohort of women who are no longer willing to forgo motherhood when their romantic lives do not lead to marriage or parenting partners. Some, never expecting to meet paternal kin, gave birth with the use of anonymous donor sperm; that did not stop these women, however, from inventing identities for fathers with the aid of paper profiles (Hertz, 2002, 2006). Lesbian couples having children have also received sociological attention (Sullivan, 2004), and the media is following the “baby boomlet” of these couples especially since the passage of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts in 2004. Heterosexual couples, once the primary users of sperm donation, now are only part of the market using male gametes (Spar, 2006).

Children conceived by single mothers and lesbian couples through anonymous donors have become “big business” with the rise of sperm banks (Spar, 2006). As Spar (2006, pp. 36-37) argues, the commercial market initially grew slowly but by 1999 there were more than 100 sperm banks in the United States selling their products to customers—single women, lesbian couples, and heterosexual couples for a fixed fee. There are no U.S. Federal guidelines that regulate the industry. For instance, each bank has the freedom to determine the number of vials of sperm it will sell from a given donor. Banks do try to keep track of the number of children resulting from a donor, but there is a great deal of slippage in reporting births to banks who are not required to follow-up on their clients successes or failures. Until recently, individuals and couples who successfully birth an anonymous donor child thought that

anonymity meant never meeting the donor. Moreover, donor siblings were not even part of our lexicon and opening a family's boundaries to these blood relatives Hertz (2009) argues, has raised questions about the meaning of kinship and obligations to these strangers.

In March 2005, a segment that aired on television about Wendy Kramer's website (the Donor Sibling Registry) captured the attention of individuals who had conceived using anonymous donor sperm. They signed up on this website to find donor siblings and also donors. Since that time matches have been found between children who share the same donor (termed *donor siblings*) and some donors who initially planned to remain anonymous have also registered on these new "people finding" websites.

Unfortunately—and despite the press attention paid to nontraditional families—the literature on donor sibling relationships is extremely limited. It is, however, suggestive. For example, using the Donor Sibling Registry to locate participants for their research, Freeman, Jadvá, Kramer, and Golombok (2009) argue that the primary motivation for meeting donor siblings is curiosity (see also Scheib & Ruby, 2008). Locating these new kin members is important for the child's self-identity, and most families have had positive experiences with these meetings. Similarly, though in a study with a smaller sample (14 families), Scheib and Ruby (2008, p. 37) found evidence of positive contact with donor shared families. Contact, in general, was a way to create family for their children—"to gain a sense of kinship" that could be further developed as their children grew older (p. 37). However, they report an important, though unexplored uneasiness, from the families in their study, about the overlay of "ordinary" kinship meaning in this rare circumstance. Jadvá, Freeman, Kramer, and Golombok (2010) provide the first survey whose respondents are donor conceived children. And although the authors are cautious to draw conclusions, they suggest that motivation for searching changes with the age at which one learned about their conception. In these three studies searching for paternal kin—donors and donor siblings—varies by family type. Single mothers (followed by lesbian couples) are more likely to initiate searches than heterosexual couples because as Freeman et al. (2009) suggest "parents in households without fathers have a higher level of curiosity about their child's origins . . ." (p. 514). Yet family type does not seem to produce difference with experience of finding, contacting, and meeting their child's donor kin.

The data reported in our study come from an online questionnaire using a population of single mothers by choice who are demographically similar to the single or lone mothers reported in these earlier studies. Since single

mothers are more likely to search and have contact (Freeman et al., 2009; Scheib & Ruby, 2008), we reasoned that by using an organization of single mothers we would gain insight not only about why they searched but about the next stages—the creation of “clans,” including the various kinds of communication, frequency and involvement between members in donor sibling networks as well as the structure and meaning of these relationships. Single Mothers by Choice (SMC) is the oldest national organization for single women choosing to become mothers. (SMC has been in existence for 29 years with chapters in more than 20 cities in the United States. Jane Mattes, a coauthor on this article, is the founder.¹) Women who join the organization are in various stages of exploring the possibility of motherhood: some are thinkers, others are trying to become pregnant or adopt, still others have children. We sent an invitation to participate in the survey to only the 900 women who had children.

The primary aim of the survey was to gain insight into how these donor siblings engage (and disengage) with one another. The quantitative findings we present are illuminated by the hundreds of qualitative comments participants wrote as part of the questionnaire. As much as single mothers may be more likely to search for donors (than other family types) we were surprised by the large percentage who presently were not willing to open up the boundaries of their families to these strangers. This may be an artifact of the organization we selected for data collection, which has a different purpose than the Donor Sibling Registry (the basis of the articles by Freeman et al., 2009 and Jadva et al., 2010). However, in all of these first studies of difficult-to-reach populations, such as donor siblings, understanding the nuances of how these “new” kinds of families are interacting and maintaining contact is worthwhile despite the limitations of the data.

After describing the methods we provide a detailed analysis of our survey results and raise questions about this “new” kinship through this exploratory study.

Method

Participants were all members, in 2009, of the SMC organization. Using email addresses, we sent a note via email with a survey link to a database of women who are present members of the SMC organization. The organization hosts email groups for the members on the Internet as well as local meetings in many areas. Therefore, when we sent our email invitation to participate in the donor sibling survey we sent it to the current 900 members

with children without knowing how many of these members had donor-conceived children at this time. Also, even though this is a single women's group we gave permission to SMC members to forward our request to other non-SMC members who might be interested in participating in our survey. Six members asked to do so and these individuals noted on the survey that they were not SMC members. Participants had to log in to access the questionnaire and they could stop and return to the survey. The survey was not open to the public. Participants were informed in the initial email that we planned to publish scholarly articles and their consent was requested in the online survey. The survey was live for the month of June 2009.

We received responses from 596 respondents. Assuming that all 900 members had anonymous donor-conceived children (which they do not) we would have a 66% response rate. All but two of the respondents are women. A total of 76% are single, never married² and 92% are White. Overall, 84% of the respondents are between the ages of 30 and 49 years (only 4% are younger than 30 years). In total 60% of the respondents have a first (or only) child younger than 4 years; 27% are between 5 and 9 years of age and 13% are older than 10 years. A total of 444 people reported one donor-sperm child and 143 reported between two and four donor-sperm children. In all, 587 respondents make up the findings reported in this article. The 9 respondents without donor-sperm children are dropped from the rest of the analyses. Sixty-one percent (356 of 587) of those with at least one donor-sperm child have taken steps to locate shared-donor siblings. Eighty-four percent (289 of 345) had found at least one shared-donor family. In total, 64% keep in touch with at least one shared-donor family and 33% have met at least one shared-donor family.

The online survey consisted of both close-ended and open-ended questions to attain both quantitative and qualitative answers. The questionnaire was concerned with the parent's decisions to search or not, the reasons they searched, the number of donor sibs they located, the kinds and frequency of contact they had and the kinds of relationships that are developing both through technology and face-to-face. Since the parents, for the most part had young children, they facilitated these relationships. We wanted to know about their experiences with the other families, the involvement in their lives (and the ways of engaging with the other families) and the kind of familial relations or intimacy they felt toward these social groups. Qualitative write-in answers were also coded using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to present the range of responses and to flesh out the descriptive quantitative data. We are using the quantitative data in conjunction with the qualitative data to derive themes about the interior workings of these donor-shared sibling families.

Results and Discussion

Why Search for Donor Siblings?

In the United States, there is a shared cultural belief that both biological parents (even anonymous ones) contribute equal genetic matter to the creation of a child (Schneider, 1980). However, parents who turned to sperm donor banks to conceive a child made a trade that the sperm bank required.³ By guaranteeing donors anonymity in exchange for their seminal fluid, the sperm bank renders the genetic father into a nonperson.⁴ He has signed away his parental rights and been guaranteed anonymity, but may or may not have given permission for the offspring to get more information about him once they have reached age 18 years.

Individuals register their donor's number on a website, such as the "Donor Sibling Registry" whose purpose is to locate donor-shared siblings. In this new world, the donor's number, assigned by the sperm bank, becomes the locator of others who share the same donor. Sperm banks, an unregulated industry, may know the number of vials of sperm they sell per donor; however, their records are spotty on the number of children born. In an ironic twist, the identification numbers that disassociated men from their gametes are being used to connect the children conceived from their gametes. As these new websites break down the system of genetic anonymity, they are facilitating new kinds of voluntary relationships if families choose to participate.⁵

Table I. Reason for Wanting to Meet Families With Same Donor (Percentage Responding Extremely Important or Important)

Reason	Percentage	Valid N
I was curious about the other children and what qualities they share with my child.	67.4	347
I wanted my child to have the possibility of a larger extended family.	64.9	348
I wanted to know who they are in case of medical necessity.	55.8	346
I wanted relationships of some kind with the donor's other genetic children.	50.9	346
I wanted to know more about my child's paternal side.	39.7	343
My child was asking questions about his/her paternal side.	10.3	339
I was looking for more vials of sperm from the same donor to have a second child.	9.0	344

Note. Universe: Respondents with donor children who have taken steps to locate donor siblings (Q12 = 1, N = 356). Case counts in Table I fall below 356 because of missing responses.

Participants who wanted to connect with others who shared the same donor were careful to control the level of their involvement with other families. Genetically related individuals might provide more information about their common (missing) parent, for example, shedding light on shared characteristics, such as physical traits, talents, likes, and dislikes. Curiosity (e.g., similarities in appearance and personality), therefore, is the main reason respondents searched (Table 1).

As their responses indicate, they often thought that these children *could* become part of their kinship system, which is an important reason participants gave for why they searched (though when they registered, exactly how involved or what form the relationships might take was not clear). See also Scheib and Ruby (2008) who found kin creation the most important reason for searching. Each move that escalated involvement caused parents (and children old enough to be involved) to experience unexpected emotional reactions—sometimes catching them off-guard (Hertz, 2009). They did not really know what they would do until that moment came (go forward and meet, take a breather and wait, or lurk instead of posting on the Internet). Still, posting their donor's number was an acknowledgment that kin relations could come from this new source.

A smaller number of respondents sought donor sibs as a genetic backup system. Since the sperm banks only provide a medical account at one point in time, donor sibs are blood relatives who might provide vital health information.⁶ In this way, knowledge of the other donor children becomes a medical insurance policy.

Only a small number of women indicated that they registered to facilitate their own search for more vials to create full-siblings. Even these women had discovered a way to thwart the sperm bank who no longer had “their donor” available for gamete purchase. Internet websites made it possible to contact other offspring from the same donor (and those children's parents) in a controlled fashion. When people signed up at a donor website they did not yet fully know what options for “family” they would have with these newly discovered strangers (should they be found); neither did they have to commit to anything in advance.

“How Many Other Families Share My Curiosity?”

The majority of respondents who signed up have found other donor siblings (84%). While popular media have featured the discovery of at least 8 donor siblings (*Today Show*, Matt Lauer, March 2, 2006), the typical respondent has

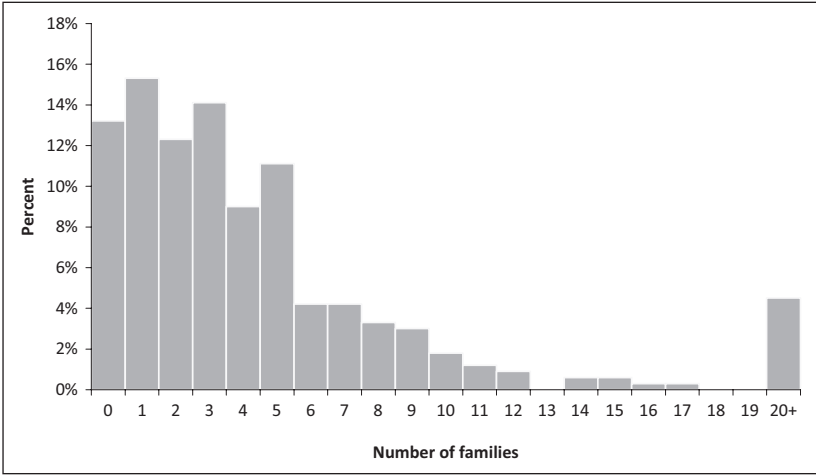


Figure 1. Number of shared donor families found
Note. Universe: See Table 1. Valid N = 333.

found 4.4 donor families (median = 3.0 donor families), which is the same median number of donor siblings found by Freeman et al. (2009). Approximately 50% of those responding to our survey had found three donor families or fewer, whereas the remaining 50% had found four or more donor families (Figure 1). At the other extreme, 4.5% found 20 or more donor families.⁷

The majority of respondents found one another through Internet registries. Locating one family on one registry often led to other families. As one woman wrote, “I used the SMC Sibling Registry. The first family I found had already found more on an Internet based registry and forwarded my information to them.” Multiple registries have created situations where one relies on others to forward the contact information for other families they have found. This is how another savvy Internet user used her “street sense” and located the broader group of nine families:

I had known the donor dna-in-law’s (that is what we call each other) name from a free viewing of the registry, looking up the donor number. I then Googled the dna-in-law’s name and found an advertisement for a twin car seat on Craigslist. I knew it would be her so I emailed her from the Craiglist contact email. From there, she guided me to the Yahoo email list of all the other dna-in-laws who were already in contact with each other . . .

The sperm banks, even if they now provide sibling registries, do not reveal who the other donor sibling families are.⁸ Similar to an underground network, but one that exists on the Internet, women become each other's links to help those who are searching to discover more members of the same clan.

Who are we to one another? Children conceived through anonymous donor sperm are not born into recognized paternal kinship groups. But curiosity about the possibility of genetic kin is a powerful motivation to search. These children do not have any legal rights with one another, just as they have no legal claim to membership in the anonymous donor's legal family. This sets them apart from other types of "kin claiming" one can make in a social kinship system. Even though the law does not recognize these individuals as connected (a basis for kin claiming), these biogenetic kin ironically base their ties to one another on blood—the legal basis of staking a claim to family.

Since there is no separate nomenclature for discussing the other children who are the offspring of one's sperm donor, *donor sibs* is a colloquial term.⁹ Not everyone uses this term. Sibling presumes a relationship that in the case of donor siblings is problematic. In genetic terms, children who share the same donor are half-siblings; yet in this case half-sibling is a blood relationship that may or may not become a social one as well. Finally, locating other donor-conceived children who share the same donor does not make them kin. This discovery only has the potential for establishing more information about their child's paternity. For these respondents, the Internet has become precisely the portal that they needed to connect a few more pieces about their donor for their child and themselves.

Turning Strangers Into Relationships: Semi-Kin

Registering on a website signals the desire for further information about children conceived through a particular anonymous donor. Usually, individuals exchanged emails and agreed to exchange photos of the children at least once (Figure 2). For some, this exchange of photos is a stopping point; they are satisfied and no further exchanges (e.g., talking on the phone) take place. This might satisfy everyone's curiosity and it is usually risk free.

A total of 27% of respondents knew about other families through Internet groups only (Yahoo, Facebook, etc.). They joined on to already existing groups, like the Craigslist woman above, and they can view each other's posted photos and notes and may leave their own. As much as an online connection might feel intimate, posting pictures or notes to a group carries relatively few risks. Parents with young children can now observe the others who are biogenetically related to their child. In fact, the Internet is a buffer and a facilitator that allows for brief snippets of the other families' lives.

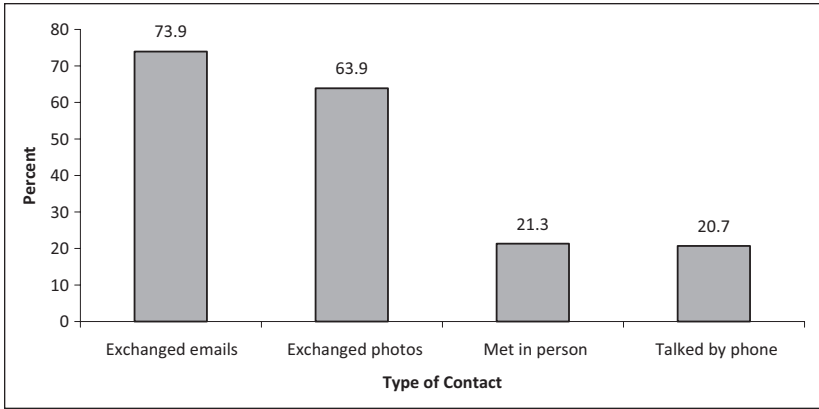


Figure 2. Percentage of families found with whom the respondent has exchanged emails, exchanged photos, met in person, or talked by phone
Note. Universe: Respondents who have found one or more donor families (N = 289).

One woman wrote, “Convenience is the main reason I keep in touch with the 5 families that I do. We’re all on Facebook so it’s easy to see when someone has uploaded new pics or has written about a new experience.” Another woman added,

On Facebook it’s interesting to see photos and videos of the kids. I’ve shown my son, age 2, video clips of his half-sibs and asked him who they are and he thinks it’s him . . . I’m closest to two families whose kids are close in age and look strikingly similar to my son.

Siblings provide glimpses of the donor’s genetic imprint—something respondents often report is immediately recognizable in the children’s photos. Photos are instrumental; but these groups also want a limited way to feel attached to the other half of their child’s genetic make-up. The people on the computer screen remind them that their child does have this murky connection that begins to take shape immediately by a “visceral” response to the photo. They are overcome with raw emotion that this child is their child’s brother or sister. In this way, families form the beginnings of social ties to others—through a moment of awe in which each family feels an enigmatic bond.

These families can lurk, disappear, and reappear or feel emotionally close through technological exchanges. Although the majority of families may have directly exchanged emails and photos with most of the families they located, they remain in contact with far fewer families. Parents with young children may watch these sites; and, in the case of the above-mentioned

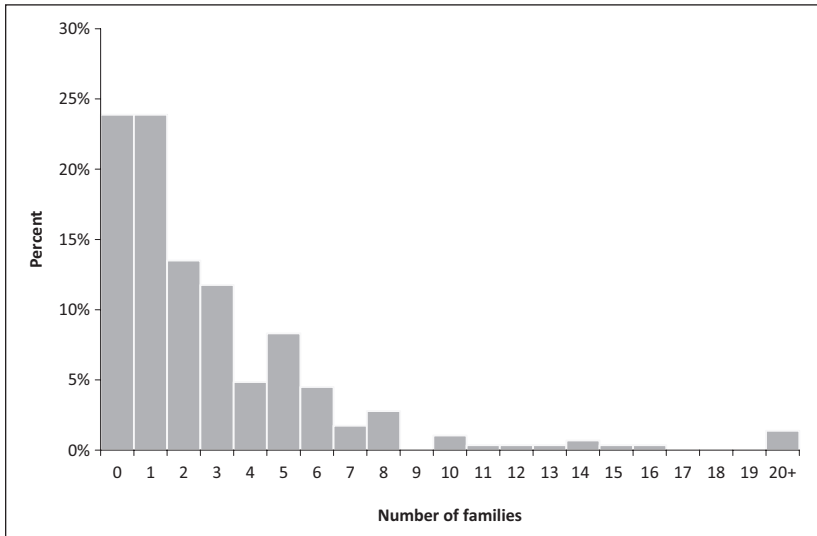


Figure 3. Number of donor families with whom respondent remains in contact
Note. Universe: Respondents who have found one or more donor families ($N = 289$).

parent she has also shown her young child these other children, even if he does not really understand their relationship to him. The child sees himself in the other children. When he grows older, his siblings may reinforce his self-identity and his siblings might be able to fill in some of the blanks for an absent father.¹⁰ In short, it is striking that the Internet has become a place in which these biogenetic families can maintain contact, feel a sense of belonging, and yet have limited or no obligations to one another.

The typical respondent stays in touch with an average of 2.8 families (median = 2.0; Figure 3). In total, 24% of respondents report no continuing contact with donor families they have found. The typical respondent who has found donor families reports maintaining contact with a little more than half (56.6%) of those families. The rest are satisfied for now but may have tucked away an address for the future when their children ask other questions.

Donor siblings are part of a “latent web” (Riley, 1983) of loose linkages that could shift and have the potential for intensifying into close relationships—even close kin members. Although they all maintained a loose connection through the Internet, this respondent describes meeting one family offline and explains why they have not physically met the other families:

We have the most involvement with one family because they live near my family and it was easier to meet them. My older daughter and their

daughter really hit it off. They make a concerted effort to get the girls together. They have really reached out to us. The other two families we keep in touch with are in California and my family is not as well off as the other families, so we do not travel as much. We do keep in touch via email and Yahoo group. We keep in touch more now that we are all on Facebook. The last two families made the choice not to be involved themselves.

Unprecedented in our understanding of the traditional boundaries of the family system, mothers and anonymous donor children are navigating complex and continuously shifting relationships, with a series of other families, whose only link is a shared donor (Hertz, 2009). Latent ties are ones that may be monitored, kept at a distance and often exist as part of a group. In effect, they were willing to become participants in a loose latent web that could cradle their child (in a satisfying way). Often just the knowledge that these donor siblings exist provides comfort that there are others “out there” with the same paternal genes: “I have not gone beyond checking the donor registry for the existence of half-siblings. There are 4 registered. My child, age 7, hasn’t asked yet but if she wants to find them I know how to contact them.” Members within the same donor group could initiate a different form of communication or a closer relationship with a member at a later date. They could be activated or transformed into kin who have reciprocal obligations toward one another; but there would have to be a social reason or a desire “such as wanting to expand one’s family” to make these children citizens in an ongoing kinship system. One woman wrote that she had an important instrumental reason for maintaining contact; her child was conceived by a donor who had agreed to meet the children at 18 years of age. Since her child was a few years younger than the oldest child conceived from this donor, she hoped that the oldest child in their clan would share information about the donor with the entire group (nine shared donor sibs and their parents).

Table 2. Average Number of Contacts per Year With Donor Families

Mode of Contact	Average No. of Contacts/Year
Internet group	14.2
Email to individuals	10.2
Email to group	5.9
Phone	2.3
Total	32.6

Note. Universe: Respondents who maintain contact with at least one donor family (N = 220).

Table 2 provides important information about the average number of contacts per year. Clans who are part of an Internet group (a web page of their own) have the most contact. The Internet exists across time and space making the local geographic area less relevant for engaging in exchanges. Various forms of Internet communication offer some emotional satisfaction.¹¹ Geography may be a reason why families cannot physically meet, but distance is not a barrier to joining a group. Seven families belong to this woman's clan: "We are very scattered geographically so email/Yahoo makes the most sense (we have a Yahoo group). Some contribute more, some less, it's probably just personal preference." This respondent also writes group emails to six of the families; the seventh family exists only as part of the Yahoo group, making them less engaged with her family.¹² The clan members have no sustainable or reciprocal obligation to the entire group. Therefore, everyone engages in whatever amount of posting suits him or her. As another respondent in a group of seven families wrote, "it depends upon their willingness." In short, the very arbitrariness of who happens to be in any one of these loose knit groups makes the Internet a perfect site for chance encounters to exist: if one feels like looking at posts and posting back one can do that whenever one is so-moved. As we will discuss later on emails to individuals who often become "a special family" is also a common form of contact. However, looking at the average number of contacts per year there is not a daily or weekly exchange between donor sib families.

Table 3. Frequency of Exchange of Particular Types of Information With Donor Families

Reason	Percentage			N
	Always/ Often	Sometimes	Rarely/ Never	
We exchange photos.	49.8	20.8	29.4	289
We exchange information about children's personalities.	47.4	24.6	28.0	289
We exchange information about children's milestones.	42.9	23.2	33.9	289
We exchange information about children's talents and accomplishments.	39.1	26.6	34.3	289
We exchange health information.	36.0	25.6	38.4	289
We exchange news about new donor siblings.	33.2	16.6	50.2	289

Note. Universe: Respondents who have found one or more donor families (N = 289).

Table 3 indicates what respondents told us about the frequency and kind of information exchanged. Almost half of the respondents had posted photos and exchanged information about the aspects of their child that might be shared with a donor sib (such as personality traits). A third or more exchanged milestones, health information, and news about new donor siblings. Again, these exchanges are not daily or weekly contacts but usually average 10.2 contacts per year through email to individuals and 14.2 contacts per year to the Internet group. More activity exists on the Internet than via more personal phone contact.

Some families are presently happy to keep encounters to the Internet. Meeting offline threatens the watertight family (mother-child dyad) (Hertz, 2006) that might be challenged by allowing these donor sibling families closer:

Initially I wanted contact because my son had food allergies. Two families were open to further communication so we kept going. One family stopped communicating when they learned we were very close geographically. I think they were afraid I would suggest play dates!

Like any other group, these donor sibling groups have their own dynamics:

The clique of mothers is it's own phenomenon . . . lots of middle school playground dynamics if you can believe it (who thinks what about whom, who likes whom, who is the leader, who is too aggressive, etc. In fact, there is one mom in our donor group who reportedly told another mom that only one of the other mom's twins as well as her own son were cute babies, and the rest were not cute!!). I have the most contact with the moms who I like.

The Internet groups (and emails) electrify the boundary of kinship because these families agree that biogenetics is sufficient for them to stay in touch in some manner. However, meeting offline is another, larger, step into uncharted territory.

Meeting offline. Donor siblings introduce the potential both to affirm and disrupt the mother and child's construction of the donor father (Hertz, 2009). Parents who decide to meet usually have decided to open the boundaries of their kinships system to include these newcomers. This means making room for new relationships and finding common ground. One in five respondents

(21.3%; see Figure 2) has met at least one family. One respondent, who is in contact with four families on the Internet, explained how she became close to one of them:

The first family I emailed just happened to live about 2 miles from me, and we happened to share several mutual acquaintances, and we really clicked while chatting over email. Since we were so close and the email exchanges felt really comfortable we decided to get together and meet.

“Clicking” is about feeling compatible in terms of values and lifestyles (and usually socioeconomic status.) The emails were a way to search for commonality and screen the other parents. They knew people in common, which meant that they would probably like each other (and they lived close). Geographic proximity is the initial reason she selected this family to meet offline and the reason most often given for why families do not meet. Geography is not always a deterrent. This respondent and her six year old found another technological solution: “We have done Skype video links twice in four years when the other three families got together and we could not join them (we live much further away.)” This means that the other families who physically gather have agreed to participate, at least for a portion of their time together, using live Internet exchanges. Of course, it is not the same as sitting down to dinner at the same table but we can imagine that the family not at the dinner table might be eating parallel to the group (while carrying on a conversation.)

Another particularly important aspect of “clicking” is shared child rearing philosophies. Parents of donor siblings looked for something familiar and affirming to aid them in their wish to meet other parents. This mother felt she had found someone whom she admired,

I like that the mom I met continues to be a nice person and that she’s raising her boys in what appears to be a positive way. I like that I can follow what they’re up to on Facebook occasionally (about once a month) and see how much her son (age 5) looks like my daughter (age 2).

Since they do not live close, these two families met and now have returned to their usual way of observing each other’s lives: on the Internet.

Parents who share similar family structures reported they are more likely to “click.” Single mothers with one or two children reported that they had more in common than those who were in lesbian or heterosexual couples. Some wrote that it was easier for them to “click” since couples had other issues they did not share (from the nonbiological parent not wanting involvement, to

heterosexual couples who had not told their children they were conceived with the help of a donor). These latter issues made meeting offline impossible.

Sometimes they wanted contact and were able to reach an easy consensus about the kind of involvement they would have as families. For some respondents meeting in person was a one-time meeting as distance makes repeat visits difficult (24% of respondents have met donor families only once). Other respondents were willing to establish something more lasting—the addition of kin members who “live” on and off the Internet and share activities in the future.

Table 4. Reason for Continuing Contact With Related Donor Families (Percentage Responding Extremely Important or Important)

Reason	Percentage
The children have a great time together.	67.5
I hope they will have a meaningful part in our lives as our children grow up.	64.0
I discovered we have a lot in common (same values etc.)	53.5
The children felt a special connection.	50.9
I realized we have a bond because of biology.	50.9
We like doing the same kinds of activities.	45.6
I would like to expand the size of our potential extended family.	45.6
My child(ren) asked to get together again.	33.3
I am more tolerant than if there were no biological link.	30.7

Note. Universe: Respondents who have met “related” donor families (*n* = 114).

Table 4 presents other reasons families continued contact after meeting. The quantitative data reveal the multiple ways in which these families feel a social tie to one another. The social reasons gave them the greatest rationale for continued contact, even though their biogenetic roots are still salient. If the children enjoyed spending time together their families hope for a future where these children can have meaningful relationships. On average, a respondent meets another donor family 2.3 times a year.

Not all families hit it off. Perhaps, they are emotionally not prepared to embrace other families as part of their kinship system:

After the initial contact, which all took place within a few months, a few families dropped out of touch. Two of the families (also single mothers) kept in contact with us and we have all gotten together several times. We let the other families know there was no obligation and we’d be here if and when they decided to reach out.

They do not know why these other families left. Perhaps, they were satisfied with the minimal contact or perhaps they did not share anything more in common. However, the three remaining families, all single mothers, are happy to continue to meet and would also welcome the other families back. This is a consequence of both the circumstances of being thrown-together as a clan, and also trying to figure out the newness of what it means to be blood kin. These single mothers described themselves as “close acquaintances” partly to indicate they are unclear whether and how to revise their relationship—to open the borders of their families and become inclusive. They also accepted that some blood kin may remain dormant indefinitely but the willingness to include them in the future is important.

Not all families found common ground: “Unfortunately I have cut back communications because although I like the children and want them to know my child, I do not like the mother.” Wanting to keep everyone in the same web, one couple became the go-between: “Sometimes you click better with one mom—better than the other, etc. It just turns out that we like both families great. They didn’t click with each other, but get updated through us.” Both these respondents indicated that these families do not automatically embrace and that extended kinship status to all donor siblings and their parents is difficult.

As big a thrill as the Internet may be as a source to locate potential paternal kin, it also has the possibility for disappointment. Not all families are willing to make the leap to meeting offline. One mother with a 4-year-old wrote, “It is interesting, there is another SMC family very nearby. We have exchanged emails and both indicated a desire to meet but neither of us seems to have the gumption to take the next step by herself.” They hesitate. They are unsure about the emotional labor (Hochschild, 1979) it might take to create an extended biogenetic family. Without a way to frame donor siblings in the traditional categories they are familiar with (such as the characteristics that make for good friends), they remain at an impasse.

Finally, there are those families whose reason for connecting, from the moment they registered their donor’s number, is to extend their family. These two families believe that by openly embracing their children as siblings, a broader kinship system is cemented,

It is my intention and that of the other family to continue to give the children the opportunity to get together and to get to know each other. We agree that the children will make their own way as they get older with respect to their relationship but we will provide them with a basis for such. We will also give them memories (and photos) of time spent together as children. (Writer’s children are age 5 and age 3.)

Yet not all families in one's clan want communication offline. The first family the next woman identified, just after her daughter was born, refused involvement. However, the second family reacted very differently. She wrote,

Second family—natural and easy “meeting of minds” with exchange of emails, then photos and then a short meeting (twice in NY where they are—and my daughters and I are in Florida). Now we're talking about perhaps taking a short family vacation together. The parents are very, very warm and wonderful people and their son, who is 2½ and my daughter share a strong resemblance. I felt a kinship immediately.

This latter respondent moved with caution taking each step slowly and gradually. The photos left them with no doubt that their children were related and this continues to cement their strong connection to being a part of the same kinship system. Whether this respondent's use of the term kinship carries social obligation and responsibility is unclear. However, as the families get to know one another, other aspects of kinship might develop.

Growing Too Large . . . and Finding a “Special Family”

In the quotes above, some members of the same clan met as pairs; others met initially as an entire group. We asked the write-in question: “How did you decide to have more involvement with some families, and less involvement with other families?” A total of 202 participants wrote answers. Among the respondents few have met more than one family face-to-face. Usually, this one family becomes *the* family that they may develop an offline relationship with independent of continued online activities with the broader group. They still want the group affiliation, which keeps all the families in the loop, but these are sporadic exchanges. Families, in general, fragment when they get too large. It is perhaps difficult, if not impossible, to become intimate with a large number of families. Accordingly, one or two families who find one another early on might become close, and the families who then find their clan later are seen as more distant or less significant. Another mother wrote about her hurt feelings:

One family was willing to meet us. They had met another family, and that family was not willing to have anything to do with us. They had found one sibling and they had not even anticipated that, and they did not “wish to expand our genetic friends.”

If there was no consensus between the two families who already have a social relationship, the new family was ignored. Shared biology was not a good enough reason to widen the boundaries of social kin. It is probable that the other families in the clan have a range of differences in how they might feel about pairs forming more exclusive bonds offline. Yet we know that in each clan there are members who are happy to just connect online. However, those who want more contact may feel hurt.

Involvement with one or two families created an exclusive kinship tie. The woman quoted below signed up on a donor registry with hopes of expanding her family. However, she shares the views of many respondents who wrote that they only embrace one or two families. As one respondent wrote,

We share similar values and similar level of interest/reasons for seeking donor siblings. And they were the first sibling family that we met, and we are both (families) hesitant to have our donor-extended-family grow too large. And finally, because our boys are so strikingly similar, I think we feel a biological, intuitive connection to each other's children. We like each other more, the more we get to know each other. The kids feel closer as they have developed the ability to really communicate with each other. They see themselves in each other, and that is very powerful. I think they are growing into "close family," for my child; they currently feel like special extended family, like "favorite cousins."

Kinship is not automatic. It takes a different kind of work to like people who one is choosing to make into a voluntary partner for the sake of their children. This is why compatibility and liking the other family is so important. It is not the same as one's grandmother saying, "I don't care if you think this or that about your sister; she is your relative and also my granddaughter. Now get along with her." The message from this hypothetical grandmother is that family involvement is not a choice. Parents who share donor-sibling children do have choices. Both wish to ensure that their children are social kin, not simply blood kin. However, the woman quoted above selects "cousins" to describe their social relationship, which is not the same as their genetic one. "Favorite cousins" is an excellent approximation of the kind of relationship their mothers have engineered for now. This pair is probably closer than others. Table 5 describes how those who have met think about their relationships.

Table 5. Respondent’s Description of Relationship With Donor Families

Description	Percentage
Close family	7.8
Distant family	32.0
Close friends	18.4
Acquaintances	32.0
None of the above	9.7
Total	100.0

Note. Universe: Respondents who have met “related” donor families (*n* = 114).

We asked our participants, “For the families you have met and are staying in contact with, which best describes your relationship to them and their children?”

The mothers were more likely to describe their own relationship as “distant” or as “acquaintances.” Often they did not see each frequently and were not engaged in daily life. Yet more than a quarter of the respondents who have met describe their present relationship as “close” either in kin or friendship terms. There are clans whose members invented terms that are rooted in a language of kinship to try to figure out how to refer to one another. “Dna-in-laws,” used in an earlier section, was the agreed-on terminology for one clan. Another woman wrote us this note: “We refer to one another as sister-moms . . . We are close friends who care about one another’s children.” It does capture that the mothers are not blood kin but they feel a socioemotional tie to one another when they meet. They use the family terms to describe their social connection but friendship terms to describe their closeness. We received written comments to this question, which indicate that the respondents selected the family they felt closest to in responding. The majority of responses indicate that the parent felt close to one or two families and distant to a third family. We followed this survey question with an open-ended question: “Have your feelings evolved toward the family(ies) with whom you are in contact?” For those respondents with small children it was too soon to tell. However, this was a typical answer: “The more I get to know the other families, the more that I care about them. I feel as though we have a special connection even though we are not directly related. There is a definite bond and strong friendship.” However, at the core is the concern by the parents for their children’s relationship. One woman with a 5-year-old wrote, “We have a healthy respect for the children’s relationship with each other and we treat the families who are in contact as distant relatives (meaning living far apart).”

Their teenage children do consider themselves “sisters and brothers” their mothers told us. For instance, one mother with a 14-year-old child has located three shared families. She wrote,

They have their own connections, visits, sleep-overs, and they adore one another. The kids talk/text sometimes several times a day . . . sometimes daily . . . sometimes randomly during the month. The Moms do not text/talk. The Moms have only emailed/Facebook, etc., unlike our children who talk constantly.

These siblings are providing one another with socioemotional support similar to siblings born and raised in the same family. In short, as much as this is possible for children who live in the same area to meet frequently more research is needed on the relationships that develop between these donor siblings. Furthermore, whether they offer one another instrumental support or feel obligated to offer care for each others’ parents, as they age, or one to another (such as loans and other forms of reciprocity) will be interesting to follow as they age (see especially Eriksen & Gerstel, 2002; Goetting, 1986).

Table 6. Percentage of Families Found With Whom the Respondent Has Certain Kinds of Exchanges, by Age of Oldest Donor-Sperm Child

Type of Contact	Percentage	
	0-4 Years Old	5-19 Years Old
Exchanged emails	68.7	80.5
Exchanged photos	60.4	69.0
Talked by phone	11.7	32.0
Met in person	14.2	30.3
N	158	126

Note. Universe: Respondents who have found one or more donor families ($N = 289$).

Compared with respondents with younger children, those with older children have exchanged photos and emails with a higher percentage of their donor families (Table 6). The latter group has also talked by phone and met in person a larger percentage of donor families. Respondents with younger children know 34.1% of their donor families by Internet group only. The comparable percentage with older children is 18.6%.

Donor sibs need not meet when they are very young to form ties as teenagers. How donor sibs form their own ties and relationships needs further study. Several respondents wrote that in homes with older children, the kid’s

opinions about the kind of relationships that develop matter as much as, if not more than, the parents'. The few that we have in this survey provide a glimpse. Teens used technology to keep in touch: text/talk "sometimes a few times day . . . sometime randomly during the month." These teens' relationships developed independently of their parents, even though it was the parents who located their siblings. Another mother who has two teens, ages 19 and 17, conceived through two different anonymous donors, wrote that she has found no donor sibs for her older child¹³ who she says is not interested anyway; yet not only was her younger son interested but she located four families with children who live within the same area. She writes,

The 4 teens speak on the phone weekly and are extremely close. They have their own connections, visits, sleep-overs, and they adore one another. It is a blessing for all families involved. Primarily, the kids choose to stay close and the parents thoroughly enjoy one another's friendships.

They also meet with two other families monthly, four other families at least yearly and two other families once a year.

The other respondents, while having met at least one family, interacted mainly through the Internet. While these respondents (and especially their children) might feel differently when they are older, for now they are "latent" webs that are always shifting and in flux. Similarly, relationships may be activated or deactivated (as some of the quotes above indicate).

Table 7. Why Have You Decided Not to Connect With Donor Siblings? (Choose All That Apply)

Reason	Percentage
If my child(ren) want to find them when they are older, I will search for donor siblings then.	53.7
Undecided	40.7
I don't consider them as related to us simply because we used the same donor	33.3
Meeting other families whose children share the same donor is not important to me.	26.8
We have a large extended family already and I don't feel the need to expand it.	14.3
We may not like one another and then it would be awkward.	11.7

Note. Universe: Respondents who have *not* taken steps to locate donor siblings (universe based on Q12, N = 231).

A total of 231 respondents who took this survey decided not to connect with donor siblings. For those who have not taken any steps to locate donor siblings, the most frequently cited reason (54%) is that they will search for donor siblings if their children want to find them when they are older (Table 7). Most important, a large percentage either prefers to ignore biology as the basis for a relationship (33%) or expresses that their own extended kin is sufficient (14%). Still others believe these children are not important for the respondent to meet (27%) or it might be awkward to do so (12%). These respondents indicate that presently traditional social ties form their notion of kinship group. However, 41% remain undecided. We suspect that these respondents will at least consider a search if their children provide motivation. In short, given the opportunity to meet donor siblings not every parent with donor-conceived children is signing up to find matches on Internet websites.

Yet some respondents are curious and have checked Internet registries just to find out if others who share the same donor have signed up. They do not leave their own information, although they may make note of the contact information for the other families. They peek now for future insurance. One woman, who has not registered herself, found that 6 families are registered with her donor's number on a donor sibling registry: "I don't want to have any involvement with anyone, just wanted to know in case the children do. Since the children are twins, I was hoping they could meet their own health needs (god forbid)." Although this woman felt she had enough family and did not want contact, she saw the donor sibs registry as a "back-up plan"; should her young children decide when they are older that they wanted contact. A portion of these families will add to the numbers already in clans whereas others will be the start of a new clan group. Therefore, these latent webs are also in flux with members coming and going.

Conclusion

It is in this context that we come to see that a kinship system built on the randomness of donor-shared siblings still means that blood carries significant meaning and genetics cannot be completely ignored. As the quotes indicate, physical resemblance and shared traits acted to further motivate one to pursue contact. However, one has to see the resemblance and then turn it into a socially meaningful relationship. Those who only exchange photos are acknowledging only biology. Those who join Internet groups are widening the way we think about a kinship system. Even if the majority of these relationships only exist online, they alter how kinship is traditionally formed and they challenge us to understand the Internet as a social arena where individuals can feel connection and locate genetic kin for their child. Everyone

has a vested interest in checking in once in a while to see the members of the clan and to post about their own child to let those in the group know what is going on. The use of the Internet to find genetic kin and form meaningful social bonds is an amazing leap from the anonymity of a vial of sperm with which these families began. The extended biogenetic families that are occurring offer a fascinating window into the redefinition of kin membership, as we know it. Their children may be more comfortable moving offline.

Acknowledgments

We wish to acknowledge Joe Swingle for his generous statistical support. Annick F. Mansfield provided earlier guidance on preliminary analysis. We thank Robert J. Thomas, Alyssa Thomas, and Anita I. Garey for editorial and substantive comments.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Notes

1. SMC organization was founded because Jane Mattes felt a need to give and get support from other 30-something women who had chosen single motherhood and to provide a network of peers for the children who would be growing up in nontraditional families.
2. Women can remain members regardless of marital status. The participants who are no longer single are in other kinds of relationships, including marriage.
3. Spar (2006) writes that in 1980 there were 17 frozen sperm banks in the United States. They provided gametes for 20,000 children that year. Today sperm bank officials, who are reluctant to release information, estimate the number at 30,000 per year, of which 25% to 28% of its clients are single women (Margolies, 2010).
4. The majority of donors select to remain anonymous. A small number agree to reveal their identity to the child when the child turns 18 years old. Other countries, such as the United Kingdom, ban anonymous donors (the United Kingdom did so in 2005). Therefore, in the United Kingdom, all donor-conceived children will be able to meet their sperm donors at 18 years of age.
5. In recent years, the major U.S. sperm banks also have established donor sibling registries and today people who select donors as a route to parenthood do know the potential for connecting with donor-shared siblings.

6. This is beginning to change. Several sperm banks are asking for periodic updates on health, and so on, from the donors.
7. If the sperm banks keep a donor in their catalog until they have at least 10 reported births (and some banks have different maximums), it seems that only a fraction of possible families who conceived through donor sperm have signed up on the registries to date. We deduce from our findings that at the present time other families are unwilling to open up the gates of family life to this unknown world, which has morphed from a need for male gametes to create a child, to now possibly including offspring of this anonymous donor in one's social circle.
8. Sperm banks now provide a donor sibling registry. However, we assume they do not give out the names of the other families to protect everyone's privacy.
9. Scheib and Ruby (2008) also discuss the inability of present kinship terminology to capture the unique relationship of two children whose shared ancestry is connected to a commercial purchase as well as the meaning of "donor"—a genetic term—to insert into the social basis of kinship.
10. See Cooley (1902/1983) on the looking glass self. Shared-donor siblings may become a "looking glass" so that children can see themselves through others.
11. While Giddens (1991, pp. 17-20) argues that the "lifting out" of social relationships is "disembedding," he had in mind the rupturing of local ties. Donor sibling groups are the beneficiaries of his view of modernity.
12. A few respondents read each other's blogs, which are separate from the Yahoo/Facebook sites.
13. This child's gametes came from a medical school donor and not a sperm bank. Doctors, once the procurers, used fresh gametes (not frozen) prior to the rise of sperm banks. It is not likely that this child will find other donor siblings through these registries.

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