Who’s Watching?

Daily Practices of Surveillance among Contemporary Families

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Turning Strangers into Kin
Half Siblings and Anonymous Donors

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The release of my book Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice (2006) prompted me to keep following up on commitments I had made to the women I interviewed.1 I invited them to a party at Wellesley College's bookstore. Sophie was among the women who came that day, and she brought her son, Sam, ten.2 She was anxious to share news about the discovery of her son's half siblings.

Sophie had selected artificial insemination with an unknown donor as a route to motherhood because she believed that this route would minimize the legal entanglements with the father's kin. She therefore presumed that she would not be including her son's biological paternal kin within her sly's boundaries, because they would not be known to her. Her imagination stretched only to the donor and his legal family, however, and not to the child created from his seminal fluid.

When Sam was about seven years old, Sophie learned about a sibling registry website, and a startling possibility arose for locating a new category of paternal blood kin: donor siblings. Knowledge of this sibling registry site presented choices Sophie thought had ended when she selected an anonymous donor. Prior to learning of the website, the borders of Sophie's family were blurred. Now, however, she could decide how to include her son's siblings who traced themselves to the same seminal fluid she had pursued. And if these new kin should turn up, Sophie would have to more carefully patrol the border of family life and decide whether to include these people within it. Moreover, if she chose affirmatively, she would also have to consider the interactions between her family and these new additions. The story of Sophie's response to this new possibility, supplemented by commentary, provides an in-depth case study of the discovery of donor siblings and boundary maintenance from the mother's standpoint.3 I argue that as much as mothers and children may want to embrace "new paternal family," women heighten the security around their watertight mother-child family before deciding to open up the boundaries to the child's discovered donor siblings. Because donor siblings have no precedent in constructing families, mothers and their children are cautious, and there is a lot of lack-of-boundary surveillance of the half siblings and their mothers. I use the information Sophie shared with me in a follow-up interview to illustrate the process that is set into motion as families discover half siblings and their parents. Margaret Nelson (2006) refers to this dynamic of creating social ties while maintaining boundaries as one aspect of "doing family."4 The case under investigation here demonstrates that ties and boundaries emerge through strategic interactions. Mothers and their children, separately and together, try to figure out, first, whether to extend family membership to donor siblings and their relatives and, second, what direction these new relationships will take.

People-Finding Websites

"Shared identity" sites provide a connection for strangers who share something in common. In recent years, an incredible number of such sites have sprung up on the Internet, including identity sites for people who are contemplating single motherhood. In addition to providing information on such hot topics as sperm banks, these sites also encourage chats about common concerns, such as how to tell the prospective grandparents about the process of becoming pregnant, experiences with a particular sperm bank, and the use of known versus unknown donors. "People-finding" websites allow an exchange beyond simple information and foster a sense of intimacy between members. Such sites have developed to help people locate others in virtual space whom they hope to meet in the physical world.5 While bulletin boards in the supermarket or in organization offices (such as the Red Cross) still exist as physical places to post want ads, missing ads, or sales ads, these websites—existing across time, place, and space—allow individuals to search worldwide. The Internet has also expanded the ability of people to search for their genealogical roots and existing family connections—a new technology serving a time-honored activity. Recently, however, the Internet has been used not only to search for family connections that may have been lost but also to find and possibly forge connections with people who share the same anonymous sperm donor, and even to find the donor himself.

The search for a child's donor siblings is an interesting twist on the gen-
eral idea of locating people. To support the goal of finding donor siblings, Wendy Kramer and her son Ryan, age twelve, founded www.donorsiblingregistry.com in 2000. Wendy, like the other individuals who register on her site, gave birth using an anonymous donor after purchasing sperm from a major sperm bank listed on another website. She had no idea that she had the right to search for her son’s half siblings or donor. Wendy learned from the sperm bank that other children were born from the same donor as Ryan. Although Ryan knew that his anonymous donor was not likely to be found, he wanted to meet his half siblings. Wendy, with whom I talked as I wrote this chapter, told me that she wanted to honor her son’s wish:

I told my son, “I can’t guarantee that we will find your donor, but maybe we can find half siblings.” We hatched the idea to try to meet some part of the paternal side of the family. If he could connect to other siblings, he said to me, “at least I could see the invisible side of myself in someone else and that would help answer some of my questions.”

In this new world, a sperm-bank-assigned donor number becomes the means of locating others who share the same donor. Just as new surveillence technologies decrease privacy (e.g., when a workplace monitors behavior such as using e-mail for personal matters [Fox, Anderson, and Rainie 2005]), this use of technology breaks down yet another barrier of privacy: personhood. Assigning people numbers has historically made them less than human, even if the numbers serve as a way to keep track of donors. In an ironic twist, the numbers that dissociate men from their gametes are used to connect the children who were sired from those gametes, and sometimes even to connect those children to the donors themselves. As these new websites break down the system of genetic anonymity, they can forge the most intimate of ties to newly discovered family members.

These new family members are without precedent and constitute an entirely new category of kin. Although half siblings are not new—they exist through extramarital affairs, through remarriage, and through relinquishing a birth child for adoption—another parent is part of the equation in these more conventional situations. These normative models are disrupted, however, when the donor’s personal relationship with various mothers is not the basis for the creation of half siblings. Nor are donor siblings equivalent to long-lost kin. We hold the belief that there is always room in our hearts should someone claiming family membership show up on our doorstep. Such people are welcomed as family because they can trace their own genealogy back to common ancestors with those who are already family members. This is particularly true in the case of family members lost to circumstances bey-

ond the family’s control (e.g., slavery, the Holocaust, or immigrant long-lost person has a place in the family, and he or she claims that showing up as the grandson of my grandmother’s first cousin, the of my uncle’s third wife, or any other relation imaginable.

By contrast, the claim to family membership by donor children is more arbitrary and does not have a social base. It is purely biological. “Long has always been linked to the actions of individuals; donor siblings: biological, and the idea is harder to grasp than the concept of fam include friends who become “aunts and uncles.” While the idea kin (i.e., families we choose) is generally accepted, we have not acc idea of purely biological kin. In short, no cultural paradigm has ex understanding the relationship between donor siblings, in which number serves as a stand-in for a shared relative, a genetic father.

However, the public was soon to learn about this new possibility, and it was about to become a reality for many people. A 60 segment that aired on television in March 2005 heightened the vis Wendy and Ryan’s website. As of December 2006, Wendy reported website had 7,002 members and estimated that one-third were single, one-third were lesbian couples, and one-third were heterosexual. Also as of December 2006, there were 2,764 matches, mainly between siblings. In addition, four hundred donors had registered, and some donors had located their genetic children. The largest match so far, told me, was one donor and fifteen offspring.

Registering on a website is voluntary and does not obligate any re veal his or her identity. However, whether or not registrants follow on contacting their donor siblings, registering signals the wish for information about children conceived through a particular animo Despite the thrill of using the Internet as a source to locate a parental kin, it can also be a risky venture with the possibility for a le “happily ever after” ending.

In this chapter, I discuss how locating a shared donor entails a familial border patrol: Will genetic kin be turned into “real” kin and will they be relegated to a “shadowland,” solely a curiosity satisfied? I these questions using the story of Sophie and Sam.

Earlier Stages: The Watertight Family
Always Included the Donor

Long before the issue of donor siblings arose, Sophie, like other upper class women who choose to conceive using artificial insemination fr
anonymous donor, had engaged in two stages of making choices and intense monitoring. She had selected a donor by carefully studying her options, and she had observed her child closely to craft an image of the donor she had selected. The possibility of meeting her son’s donor siblings threatened to disrupt some of these accomplishments.

**Selecting a Donor**

Having tossed out the rulebook in order to become mothers, women who select an anonymous-donor-assisted route to motherhood do not rely solely on the sperm bank’s selection to decide on a specific donor. Instead, they develop sorting rules to pick among available donors. As part of their selection process they read paper profiles and turn the abstract stranger into a likable character.

Why a woman selects one donor over others is hard to puzzle out. The way a woman evaluates the many aspects of the donor profiles, calculating how the donor addresses her personal taste as well as her needs, means that there’s much more to the choice than just pure, hard facts such as medical history. Almost all women look first to race as a primary determining factor, particularly since the sperm bank has already ruled out men with poor medical histories. Most women choose someone whose appearance is similar to theirs, because they prefer that their child look like them. One woman, Corina Joseph, said, “If my child’s only going to have one parent, he might as well look like that parent.”

Women also look to the answers on the donor questionnaire to try to create a persona to go along with the physical descriptions. The personal taste of the woman determines how she perceives the importance of the various answers. Sophie laughed when she read that one donor was “proficient at playing the tape deck” (his musical talent), and so she decided right then and there that he was the donor for her. Ultimately, then, the women use these bare-bones profiles to turn a stranger into a likable, real person. The social questions anchor the man in the otherwise abstract world of donor profile descriptions.

Women realize that their child will invariably question the absence of a physical father in her or his life, and thus they make their decisions with an eye to positive and enticing information they can pass along to their child. Through the persona gleaned from the paper profile and other information, a woman can offer her child an identity that includes an imagined father figure (Hertz 2002, 2006). The mothers simply want to be able to, as Nadine Margolis said, “tell [their] kids about him, that he was a nice person, which was better than ‘he had blonde hair’ or ‘green eyes.’”

A woman’s selection process thus includes monitoring informal pass onto her children and finding socially acceptable bits of the identity that can be comfortably inserted into the future family. In vague, the donor will thereby “live,” to varying degrees, in the mother-child’s life together.

**Crafting the Donor in a Child’s Image**

A second stage of monitoring emerges once the child is born. Close rations of the child’s gestures, expressions, behaviors, and likes and dis-help women reconstruct the father. As the child grows, his or her reas-able traits—from physical attributes to character, behavior, and interests—become attributed to the anonymous donor. That is, “he” may be the sc of the child’s traits that do not seem to emerge from the maternal In this way, the anonymous donor takes on a persona of his own. Although creation may be more fiction than fact, the mother and child take con in giving this father role some meaning in their lives. Once the donor is knowledge of as being unlike other children’s fathers, the mother and c begin to create an imagined man who is a positive yet invisible pres The “nice” man who helped them to become a family makes him a war human being, if not an idealized one. In short, as the woman examines monts, she also transforms the donor into a man and crafts him in her child’s image. The presence of the genetic father is a physical reexperienced by the mothers through the children. She embraces the donor through embracing her children. Yet without a visual image, women only guess at the characteristics of the donor they observe in their child. As Nadine Margolis told her own toddlers, “Mommy’s never met him. But he must be very smart and very handsome because look at you.” Donor siblings, however, introduce the potential to both affirm and disrupt mother and child’s construction of the donor father.

**Working Through the Idea of Donor Siblings**

Like Ryan, Sophie’s son, Sam, was very curious about his donor. As a precocious seven-year-old, he figured out that his donor’s number was a clue that could lead to his paternal kin. As Sophie explained:

He was very curious about the donor, just the sort of abstract idea that there is a donor, that is very important to him—he hasn’t made him into a person… He said at age seven, “Well, if you went to a sperm bank and go
spare you can't be the only woman who got sperm from this donor." And I said, "You are right." And he said, "So I must have siblings," and he continued, "I want to meet them. How can I meet them?"

Sophie wanted to help her son search for more answers to his paternal identity, which could also confirm the talent, successful paternal line they had crafted. Although she shared Wendy's wish to help her child, Sophie was not sure how she felt about what Sam had figured out. She had created a well-tight family (mother-child dyad) with a particular explanation that might be challenged rather than confirmed by the discovery of half siblings. She knew that trying to locate the donor siblings would set into motion a series of events that would require inspection, control, and possibly the need to rethink paternal kin. Sophie had thought the borders of her family were tightly sealed when she selected donor insemination as a route to parenthood. Now, without even the help of a kinship terminology, Sophie would have to figure out how to "name" children who share only biological heredity with her son, and whose mothers are not part of a socially recognized kinship structure (such as polygamy). Since they do not fit within a cultural paradigm for understanding the social relationships of kinship, Sophie would have to be even more vigilant in how she filled the void of paternal kin. The paternal line would have to measure up to what she had crafted. That is, the donor children would have to share traits that everyone could agree came from the paternal line. Sophie hoped that the fantasy of paternal kin would live up to the reality. However, compared to the possibility of meeting blood relatives who are real and physically available people, the imagined father became a less satisfactory link.

Still, Sophie was not willing to grant these blood relatives automatic family membership. She needed to see whether they were worthy. Although she was not exactly sure what "test" they would need to pass, she knew she would have to restrain herself and Sam from automatically welcoming them as kin. Was a sibling claim based on seminal fluid from the same unknown as a sibling claim based on seminal fluid from the same unknown donor and child? Like siblings, children related to her child. As odd as it might seem, they share common thread: the donor's number gave them a genetic tie that she did not overlook. Slowly, however, Sophie began to apply bits of conventional relationship norms as a basis for kin ties. Doing so also meant that she had change her views on motherhood by coming to terms with the fact that she was not the only woman to have children from her particular donor. Women do not think about other children sired from their donors. Instead, when they purchase seminal fluid, they think about it as theirs alone. A motive decision is to sign up on websites to meet her child's half siblings retails a skeptical that the donor is not exclusively hers and that his act of kinship is commercialized by a sperm bank. It has resulted in producing other children.

Nevertheless, Sophie was curious about these donor siblings and, with trepidation, called the sperm bank she had used:

I thought, "Shoot—this opens up something so unknown, and I don't how to put it in my brain." I called the local bank. They told me to call national bank. It was their catalog that had the donor I had chosen. "If administrator spoke to at this bank said, "Yes, this has become a common question—then that we don't anticipate. We have this sibling registry.

And she told me how could get onto the registry. She was surprised. She was only seven at the time, she asked this question because kids do usually ask until they are twelve or thirteen. So I went to the website a signed up and waited. There was nobody else already registered under a particular donor number and Sam would ask periodically if I checked website—it wasn't actively on my mind.

Sophie registered on the website because of Sam's push to know more a his paternal kin, thickening the stock of information he already had. Donor siblings were more science fiction than reality for her, as they stood out anything she knew. Were they the "real thing" or a substitute for parent kin? Sam legally had no paternal kin; even his birth certificate said "is unknown." However, if individuals who shared the same genetic matter the common donor came forward, would Sam gain a deeper understanding himself and, somewhat like Pinocchio, feel transformed?

You've Got Mail

As much as Sophie wanted to help her son search for paternal siblings, worried about protecting her family's borders from the invasion of stray donor children related to her child. As odd as it might seem, they share common thread: the donor's number gave them a genetic tie that she did not overlook. Slowly, however, Sophie began to apply bits of conventional relationship norms as a basis for kin ties. Doing so also meant that she had change her views on motherhood by coming to terms with the fact that she was not the only woman to have children from her particular donor. Women do not think about other children sired from "their" donor. Instead, when they purchase seminal fluid, they think about it as theirs alone. A motive decision is to sign up on websites to meet her child's half siblings retails a skeptical that the donor is not exclusively hers and that his act of kinship is commercialized by a sperm bank. It has resulted in producing other children.
In rereading motherhood, Sophie was already engaged in a form of monitoring the boundaries of her family since the act of registering the donor’s number could electrify the borders of kinship prior to an e-mail answer. Sophie explained that it took two years to receive an e-mail response:

Two years later we got an e-mail, when Sam was nine. [It said] “Dear Sophie: We have two children by donor number 1360 and we would like to make contact.” The “we” is a lesbian couple who turned out to have two children by the same donor as Sam. I waited a little while because I had to digest the news, and then I told Sam, “I have big news.” He thought it was work-related, and I said, “It is even bigger news: we heard from somebody who has two girls from donor number 1360.” He was ecstatic, jumping up and down. I was more stunned, I was more ambivalent. I had hoped for my sake I never heard from anybody. This was unknown and I was uncomfortable—I didn’t know how I would process the information—there is not a cognitive slot for this kind of relationship.

Sophie wanted to feel the same joy as her son over finding “family,” but she was at a “moment of pinch,” or discrepancy between what she wanted to feel and what she actually felt (Hochschild 1979, 562). She reminded herself that her confusion at that moment was okay, as her situation was uncharted territory. She redoubled her efforts to be cautious since there was much at stake—meeting these people could disappoint her and Sam’s expectations of close kinship or result in the unraveling of her fabrication of her son’s donor family. Indeed, one of the reasons women like Sophie turn to anonymous donors is because it is a way to take control of their lives, after years of feeling that motherhood is dependent on a man and marriage. Women say that an anonymous donor is less “messy” than a known donor because a known donor might change his mind and want more of a relationship with the child than the original contractual agreement specified. Now Sophie, in spite of her previous choice of an unknown donor, had the potential for a messy situation. This possibility made her uncomfortable. She alone was the gatekeeper, patrolling the borders of her small family: “I kept thinking, what if they have one digit off, because then they would mean nothing. This news could mean everything or nothing. It is so abstract. If they have the right number my son has two sisters and if they are one number off my son has nothing. It just seemed so enormous.”

Sophie knew that she had to reframe her thinking if she wanted the possibility of paternal kin for her son. The ideology of “two sides of a family” (maternal and paternal) outweighed her other concerns. Although she never said so directly, the family narrative that “male and female gametes make baby” was the catalyst for responding to the e-mail.13

Sophie was relieved that the e-mail sender was not part of a heterosexual couple. This way none of the three children had a social dad, an important parallel between the siblings. A social dad might trump a genetic donor and make the half siblings less important to some of them. Sophie explained the social importance of a paternal tie with no legal “dad” who could offer up his family as a paternal substitute: “Since neither of our kids has a dad, that seemed to be an important issue. It was important to me in terms of Sam’s comfort or the feeling of Sam feeling comfortable with his sister. Sam’s not having a dad is a significant part of his identity and not necessary bad, but he is fully aware of it. The sisters shared the same position as he did by not having a dad, but also having the same donor.”

This news allowed Sophie to feel more comfortable because both families shared the same circumstances. Rapidly more of Sophie’s fears dissipated: “I sent them a picture of Sam. And then they sent me a picture in the follow-up e-mail. And then it was absolutely unquestionable because the older daughter looked just like Sam. We were all amazed by the resemblance.”

siblings as windows

Sophie immediately realized that Sam’s half siblings were indeed his, as there was no chance of being “one digit off.” She was in awe of the donor’s genetic imprint clearly stamped and immediately recognizable in children’s photos. When I asked specifically what traits they shared, she told me, “They both really look like math, they both are really kind—being nice is really important to them. [The other mother and I] would have phone conversations, and I would go, ‘Oh my God, Sam, too.’” Sophie could not even more similarities in the photos: “The way they hold their bodies, the way they move their bodies, the gestures and facial expressions are absolutely the same. It is remarkable.” The unanswerable gesture that caught a mother’s attention first appears in the half sibling, confirming its belonging to the paternal side.

Sophie could now see the donor through the siblings. Meanwhile, Sam had a revelation of his own: he could see himself in his half sisters. He no longer had to rely only on his mother for assurance and help in imagining how his donor might see him. Now he had sisters who would reinforce his self-identity he wanted. He saw traits in his half siblings that he recognized.
Photos were not enough; however, he wanted to meet the girls to find out firsthand what else they might have in common.

As Wendy, the founder of the donor-sibling website, told me (and as various Internet blogs confirm), some families only exchange photographs, and that is enough. Others decide to extend the relationship to another level of intimacy. Sophie and Sam's decision to meet the other family would disclose even more common ground between the children.

The Frontier of New Families: Opening the Borders

Sophie was initially ambivalent about Sam's having paternal kin, but her son was eager to meet the other family. She didn't want to let him down, but she also wanted to make sure this family passed "the test" before meeting them. Talking on the phone was a way that she could keep a distance while gathering information. Sophie wanted to like the family because these were the people raising the only paternal kin Sam knew. When Sophie picked up the phone to call them, she was nervous about how to proceed, even though she hoped for a genuine connection. The phone conversation was a search for finding commonality so that she could share her son's enthusiasm and reduce her vigilance. Sophie was interested in something that would lead her to incorporate these strangers into her family or at least give her a reason to want to get to know them more. Sophie relayed the conversation to me this way:

She [one of the donor siblings' mothers] seemed to be right on the mark in what was important and interesting, and she spoke about Sam's siblings in ways that I talked about him, emphasizing the same aspects of who is important about him as a person. She asked questions that I thought were interesting, and there were similar values in terms of describing their personalities. We both selected the same traits to explain our children to each other. We were amazed at the same sorts of things about our children. I especially liked that we both approached the issue of having really smart children in the same way—it seemed important to say they were smart but not braggy.

Sophie was intrigued and comforted by the fact that she and Jess and Amanda, the mothers of the half siblings, shared "similar values in terms of describing their personalities." That similarity is part of what excited Sophie to pursue the relationship. She needed something familiar and affirming to help her want to open the borders of her family to include this family. And

Sophie found this affirmation in her new knowledge that the donor was "bright" children. If the donor siblings shared the traits her claim that the donor was a "good man." It would help her comfort the right donor.

Sam and the older daughter (age seven) talked by phone once a month. Once the mothers finished talking, and the children continued to talk by phone weekly. Since both families lived on the East Coast, they decided to meet in a public spot between each family's home. Sophie recalled that day in detail as it gave her clarity on how she felt about her son's newfangled family.

We decided we all really liked each other. I really liked the way they were with their kids (balance between letting them do what they want and putting limits). I loved Sam and the girls together. All three of us [mothers] were very cautious, but we really are in this relationship on behalf of the children. It was to do with our kids, not us. We all had a stake in this relationship between the kids, but as the day went on I realized we [myself, the girls, and the mothers] shared a lot in common, and I thought, "I like these people." At one point I said to Jess, "Oh my God. We are so lucky." And she said, "I know." And she said that she said the same thing to Amanda. They could be friendly with. We all had the same concern: Would we get along and like one another? And how would we negotiate this because we were going to have to have a relationship on behalf of the kids, because they are siblings.

These families bond around their social similarity (e.g., shared values, class, employment status). Of course, the woman who turn to sperm as a route to motherhood often share the same social class position the starr. Still, it is possible that Sophie might not have liked this family that the family might not have liked her and Sam. For instance, if Sophie been homophobic or if Sam's half sisters had a social dad that made Sam jealous. Sophie might have revised her position, deciding after one meeting not to make additional plans. Sam and Sophie also could have disagreed about liking this family.

While finding donor siblings relieves women of the 'emotional la of imagining the paternal donor, at the same time mothers must not these new relationships. Sophie and Sam met Sam's donor sibling in a second time over the summer in Boston at Sophie's home. This time they recognized that they were establishing a level of closeness reserved for members. As much as these families were "choosing" one another to be
(Weston 1991), they were creating the presence of paternity based on socially engineered relationships that have no legal basis or even definitive scientific basis. For instance, no one suggested taking a DNA test or viewing the donor profiles to make sure they matched:

It was really easy and relaxing and the kids were adorable together, really acting like siblings—got into a little fight—they were siblings. The level of comfort and the ongoing relationship is amazing. We all presume the relationships are important, but also intimacy was there immediately. This relationship is very important and the children say they love each other. Sam said, "I don’t miss my father any more now that I have sisters." So, this has been profound for him to discover something about his paternal side and have a connection on that side. It ends what in some ways is a mystery: who is this guy? He can see himself through viewing his sisters.

Sam and Sophie stayed at Jess and Amanda’s house on the third visit together, and it was during that trip that Sophie realized, as she told me, “I have fallen in love with [Jess and Amanda] and their children.” However, Sophie also reminds herself that she needs to be vigilant and delineate between her child’s kin and her own kin:

My family boundaries are very solid and unambiguous. Sam is not their son and they are not my daughters. It does not even feel like they are nieces. They feel like my son’s siblings, and this is a new psychological construct. I do not feel like I am in any way their parent, like I might to an extent if I had stepchildren. I am not a stepmother. These children are none of my business as a stepparent role assumes some degree of responsibility and authority, and I don’t feel like I have either of those... Now, almost a year later, [this situation] feels natural and normal, but for quite a while—I remember the very first time Sam and I spoke with them, and he said, "I am emotionally exhausted," and I said so was I. This is so new that I had to carve a new place in my mind for these relationships to go.

Sophie’s story thus suggests that donor siblings change the interior of family life for single mothers who choose artificial insemination from an anonymous donor. Instead of guessing about paternal traits, other donor kin substantiate (or refute) Sam’s socially constructed paternal identity. Sophie and Sam have formed a new kind of extended family with Jess and Amanda and their two children. Yet they may not be close kin. Donor siblings and their respective mothers may become important to each other, but they may remain distant kin. Even though Sam and his half sisters are close genetic relatives, and even though Sophie does embrace the girls and their mother as family, a year after receiving the initial e-mail, she still locates them as distant cousins. She knows they will stay in touch and visit sporadically, but they will not be family members that routinely tell each other everything, nor will her feelings toward these children be as close or similar. Closeness she has with her best girlfriend’s children. These women are co-mothers to each other’s children, yet Sophie is grateful for their presence in her and her son’s life. In short, Sophie’s monitoring (and Sam’s immune acceptance of the girls) led her to conclude that these are good people they are also “Sam’s siblings and their parents,” not Sophie and Sam’s kids.

Not All Happy Stories

Wendy and Ryan have not been so lucky. All matches are not love-fevered. Twice they heard about potential half siblings, but neither case had result in a meaningful or exploratory family connection, despite a common bond. One teenager figured out she was Ryan’s half sister, but her mother forbade her from further contact with Ryan. For now, that teenager obeyed her mother, who does not want their nuclear family disrupted. Another’s single when she had her daughter, had married, and her husband had adopted Ryan’s half sister, accepting her as his own child. Male infertile patients who become families of two have half siblings who were toddlers at the time of their research. The wife of a man on television and wanted him to know she had birthed two children related to him. She and her husband were not sure when or if they would tell their young children about the use of a donor to create their family. Fathers in these donor-sibling families are vigilant keepers of a certain kind of blood-kin nuclear family, even if that family was created by seminal fluid from a donor. These are examples of tightly woven secrets and legal tests that the adults do not want to alter. Ryan remains hopeful that other siblings someday will appear.

Conclusion: Reimagining Kinship through “Extraordinary Extended Families”

Sophie’s decision to become a single mother may have initially been a choice about a route to motherhood that appeared to give her control over family life and to reduce the amount of monitoring she would have to do. However, even though she engaged in monitoring when she selected a donor and the
again when she noticed behaviors in her child that might be linked to biological paternal traits, it was the surprising possibility of searching for donor siblings that presented Sophie with a new issue of monitoring. Donor siblings might mean that she and her child would open up the borders of their watertight family to a potentially messy situation. Borders are monitored in order to watch the coming and going of people who fall into different categories (e.g., whether temporary or permanent occupants). Activity on the border (such as contact through the Internet) presupposes that some people might want in, and allowing outsiders in can be risky. Donor siblings might reinforce the mother’s or child’s vision of paternal kin; however, real individuals might also provide revisions or alternatives to imagined donors. Donor siblings might also provide additional ways for a child to figure out pieces of his or her self-identity, which previously rested only on the mothers’ assessments; this new information might not be welcome.

Donor siblings share biogenetic matter and nothing else. This is a “pure” case in which blood roots family. This basis of family emerges at a time when other sociological directions (such as fictive kin, chosen kin, etc.) have become a test tube for family inclusion. That is, “social kin” challenge the traditional idea of family relatives as related only by blood or marriage (and adoption). The claim (and obligation) of donor siblings as relatives is without any shared family history or initial consensus as part of a socially chosen group, making this new blood family difficult to grasp. The women, who cleverly traced paternal blood kin through the Internet, have good reasons for worrying about how and in what ways to embrace these strangers as relatives. Donor siblings ended up as genetic kin arbitrarily, a by-product of the rise of reproductive clinics.

It is the children that join these mothers together in a loosely knit family, not as co-parents but as women who share children from the same purchased product. A biological connection might allow donor siblings temporary family membership while they go through a trial period before possible acceptance. However, genetics alone does not make people kin. For example, donor siblings who only exchange photos over the Internet establish shared genes that satisfy curiosity and nothing more. They may say they have found half siblings, but “sibling” is a social relationship as well as a biological one. We have no language for Internet lookers, those individuals who leave after seeing their physical resemblance in another person. Even if these individuals meet, they are still not automatic family. Donor-sibling families gauge each other (as a group and as individuals) as they try to find consensus about how they will be together. The possibility exists that they will not agree. The process of learning about new kin makes family a complicated interplay of genetics, social interaction, and cultural expectations.

So far Sophie’s decisions are in line with the needs and desires others involved. However, the possibility of conflict is huge. Sophie and her husband could have disagreed about liking the new kin. Or if both Sophie and Sam did not like this family, they could have kept their names on the web, hoping another family might click with, who would answer the quest. Sam may want to meet other donor siblings, but his mother in law want the added responsibility of multiple families and relationships to age with more donor-sibling kin. When do the mother and child take names off the list and stop searching for more donor siblings? And Sophie took her name off the list, but Jess and Amanda did not, and the covered more donor siblings? Would Sophie and Sam feel obligated to up the borders of their family to the donor-sibling families discovered donor-sibling family they had already embraced?

Donor children who have met their donors or donor siblings have entered a new world in which social obligations and responsibilities are new. Family citizenship is not automatic. Donor siblings (such as Sam and sisters) have no legal rights or obligations to one another, nor does anonymous donor, should come forward. Further, a sperm donor have a legal birth daughter and donor children. What is their relation? Are they half siblings? Genetically they are, but socially how will these lies determine the boundaries of who qualifies as kin and in what way the donor meets his donor child is he just a genetic father, or will he be something more—a dad? And, if so, will the partner of the donor and the child’s mom weigh in—and what will their relationship be? These become sociological issues that are at the nexus of how blood kin be accepted. Are donor children equal family members, or are they second class citizens only marginally included at the dinner table? The ways in which families develop guidelines for embracing their genetic kin who fall or conventional reproductive narratives will be fascinating to observe over coming years.

Notes

1. Between 1995 and 2004, I interviewed sixty-six women about their families (Hertz 2006). I interviewed each woman, on average, two to three times.
2. Aside from Wendy Kramer, founder of www.donorregistry.org, all names in this chapter are the pseudonyms I used in my book. Fourteen women became pregnant using anonymous sperm donors, and thirteen women be
pregnant using known donors. I only discuss the known donors as a contrast in
limited ways in this chapter.
3. For blog commentary, see, for example, www.mothering.com.
4. See also Naples (2001) on death in her family, a lifecycle event that sets in
motion a rethinking of inclusion and exclusion of family members as boundaries
are redefined and alliances are reworked.
5. In fact, the two strangers who desire a romantic partner or date
register on sites such as eHarmony or JDate. The dating sites offer seekers
an easy way to find a "match" using their desired qualities and from the
comfort of their own home. Slowly, these sites are beginning to replace the local
"looking for" magazine ads for single individuals.
6. Wendy and her husband, who divorced when Ryan was one year old, had
fertility problems. They turned to donor sperm to have a child.
7. Fertility banks code donors using a number tracking system. Buyers purchase
the gametes of a specific donor using this number. Most women buy enough
vials to last through three to six months of fertility treatment. One, however,
knows if they bought out a donor's entire "stock." Since the banks are self-
regulated, they can decide how long a donor can contribute his gametes. Even
if a buyer purchases all the available vials from a specific donor, she has no way
of knowing whether the donor will continue to donate. Women do not know
whether (or how many) other children were born from that same donor.
8. Sometime after 2000, major sperm banks also added donor registries, and
their website policies changed to allow for the possibility that, if both
donor and offspring expressed interest in contact, sperm bank personnel would
try to facilitate this. This is not a guarantee that donors will reveal their identity.
See Spar (2006), who argues that human reproduction has become a $3 billion
annual industry. An estimated 30,000 children are born in this country each
year to mothers who have been artificially inseminated with sperm from an
anonymous donor. This multimillion sperm bank industry, built on anonymity,
is beginning to talk about proposing a national registry.
9. These websites point to the need for U.S. social policies surrounding donor
anonymity. Presently, other countries have established donor registries (such as
Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, and Switzerland)
for anonymous sperm donors. At age eighteen, a child born using donated
gametes can go to the registry, look up his/her donor, and contact the donor.
These registries give children the right to know who their genetic father is,
placing the rights of the children as the priority. The United States needs to
establish a national registry.
10. Sperm banks offer both the men who donate sperm and the women or couples
who purchase the gametes legal protection via "a system of bilateral ignorance of
paternity among donors and recipients" (Sullivan 2004, 53). The donors
leave behind a paper profile and a promise to never lay claim to the children
that result from insemination. The women I interviewed settled for this
arrangement. Sullivan (2004), who studied lesbian couples, observes that the
erasure of paternity easily allows for second-parent adoption among the lesbian
couples she interviewed. The second mother can become the second parent
without another person relinquishing parental rights, as I note about known
donors (Hertz 2002, 2006). However, only a few states allow for adoption by a
second parent. Interestingly, all but one of Sullivan's couples were able to seek
"yes" donors, which meant that these children could someday meet their gay
father. The women I interviewed discovered that these donors were in such high
demand that they were unavailable. Unwilling to wait for "yes" donor gametes,
they ultimately selected donors who would forever remain anonymous.
11. While sperm banks have a large number of white donor profiles, donors of color
are few. At the time of my study, the major bank listed Hispanic, Asian, and
black donor categories, but within each of these broad racial groups there were
only two or three donors. Women of color in my study reported few options,
something they found frustrating because they wanted donors to share their
race.
12. See Hertz (2002) for a conceptualization of Cooley's (1902) "looking glass self
and its importance to these mother-child relationships.
13. I asked Sophie if she asked the girls' moms why they decided to contact her.
Sophie told me they were curious because they had friends who had had a
positive experience meeting other donor siblings.
14. While we have only anecdotal information, the individuals who purchase
gametes are most likely middle- and upper-middle class. They most likely have
medical insurance and are able to afford the cost of the gametes and the medial
procedures (e.g., new reproductive technologies) that may be necessary to
become pregnant.
15. Hochschild (1979) discusses an interactive account of emotional management
beyond the scope of this chapter.
16. On prime time television in 2007, after this chapter was written, Ryan did meet
his half sibling.

References


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Press.
Parents are expected to vigilantly observe their children and those they interact with them; they accept the task of careful monitoring as part of responsible parenting. In turn, others observe parents as they rear their children. Once children are in school, parents have less control over their environments and less ability to see interactions firsthand. Nonetheless, parents continue to monitor and screen people as they construct networks of care.

This chapter explores the ins and outs of this process of monitoring, as parents exercise their prerogative to include and exclude others as part of their children's lives. Simply being related, being a good friend, or being nearby is not sufficient to qualify a person to become a member of the work of care. However, a shared philosophy of child rearing is indispensable. Parents seek to establish a firm basis for trusting the care of their children to adults they know only superficially, if at all. Screening potential kin and non-kin—for networks of care is a long, ongoing, and complex process.

In this chapter, I investigate a specific kind of network: the helping parents care for their school-age children. As a society in which the proportion of mothers with children ages six to seventeen is in the teens and there is an inadequate supply of before- and after-school programs, a "care gap" for elementary school children. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (1998) estimates the difference between school hours and working hours to be as high as twenty to twenty-five hours per week.