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Donor-Conception as a ‘Dangerous Supplement’ to the Nuclear Family

What can we learn from parents’ stories?

David Gurnham¹

Introduction

Parents who conceive using donor sperm or eggs must come to terms with the fact that there is a third party outside of the family to whom their child is genetically related. Although for many such families this is of no consequence at all, there are also parents for whom it seems to cause anxieties that influence their perceptions of themselves in relation to their donor, and their decisions regarding whether, when and how to disclose the genetic facts to their donor-conceived child. In this paper I focus on various empirical studies that have elicited information on the way parents tend to assert a hierarchy between themselves as ‘true’ parents and the donors as external to the idea of parenthood. I suggest here that our understandings of the sorts of things parents say – and don’t say – in this regard can be illuminated by a deconstructive reading. While I accept that there are important positive reasons that explain parents’ choice of words, my interest is in deconstructing the empirically observed narratives in order to draw out a less comfortable reading. Some parents do continue to worry that allowing their own status as parents to be supplemented by the fact of gamete donation in some way endangers the security or stability of their family and their relationship with their child. While actual interference by donors in DC families has only ever happened in practice when *known* donors have been used, I want to argue here that the particular deployments of rhetoric in the parents’ narratives betray a more far reaching anxiety about status.

‘Real’ parents and ‘dangerous supplements’

According to some commentators, we live in a post-modern age in which the proliferation of reproductive technologies has made possible a hitherto unimaginable ‘fragmentation’ of parenthood (Sheldon 2005; Boyd 2007;

Parry and Doan 1994). In such conditions, a concern about the 'reality' of parenthood that seeks to exclude exterior elements seems an old-fashioned essentialist preoccupation with the traditional nuclear family model which should not be 'addressed' so much as simply left behind (Boyd 2007: 71). However, recent legal conflicts between, for example, lesbian parents and their sperm donors, make it clear that for some social parents there are still reasons to fall back onto the idea of the nuclear family in order to assert the legitimacy of the family that either cannot or chooses not to reproduce heterosexually (Lind and Hewitt 2009; Polikoff 2001–2; Kelly 2004–5; Kelly 2008–9; Dempsey 2004; Boyd 2007: 402). The new configurations of the relationship of opposition between the nuclear family and what lies outside of it, as well as more traditional examples, open up opportunities for deconstructive critique and this is the concern of this chapter. The chapter focuses on the rhetorical manoeuvres and metaphorical allusions deployed by parents to assert their priority as distinct from 'mere' gamete donors, whether known or unknown, based on this relationship of opposition. In his critiques of canonical western philosophers such as Rousseau, Derrida showed how such rhetoric is vulnerable to being deconstructed due to the difficulties of fully mastering the linguistic hierarchies of 'internal' over 'external'. Thus chapter will show how such critique also points to the difficulties for social parents in maintaining such a clear distinction between themselves as parents and donors as the external, disconnected supplement.

Although it is often denied that deconstruction offers a critical method as such, Derrida's approach of deconstructing the logic of rhetorical assertions of hierarchy can provide a useful perspective for reading claims about the 'reality' of things, or efforts to put a chosen concept *beyond* the usual problems of linguistic ambiguity and doubt. For example, Rousseau valued certain primal modes of expression such as the pure natural voice particularly highly because they seemed to issue directly from the soul, unlike the more 'cultured' artifices such as harmony, writing and painting that all rely on external marks and secondary interpretation. Rousseau complained that writing – external to spontaneous living expression – could only be a 'supplement' to nature because unlike natural expression it was standardized and repeatable in different contexts disconnected from the original speaker. This indeed is the great advantage of writing, but it also brings with it the dangers of written words being misunderstood, misinterpreted, corrupted, etc. Furthermore, Rousseau saw such cultural additions to natural expression as *dangerous* supplements in the sense that, in falsely appearing to recreate the natural (or 'real') itself, people would mistake them for true expression and thus allow themselves to be misled and misinformed. This simultaneous attraction and danger of the supplement is the quality of 'iterability' that Derrida (1997: 141–164, 165–268) in his critique of Rousseau attributes to *all* forms of expression. Irrespective of whether spoken or written, all words derive meaning from the context of their

use, and since context cannot be fully determined in advance, neither can the meaning of the words (Derrida 1992: 84). As Critchley (1992: 38–9) puts it: ‘In deconstruction, both success and failure of meaning are the effects of the ‘iterability’ of words: that they are repeatable in, and affected by, contexts that cannot be pre-determined.’ This leads to a critical perspective that sees supplementation as a necessary symptom of language-use. Adopting such a view means that assertions of the ‘reality’ of things are always deconstructable as rhetorical strategies for mastering and dominating context. This is how I propose here to approach the parents’ narratives about their status. I want to examine the ways in which this logic of the ‘dangerous supplement’, escaping from its proper place as the subordinated external addition to nature (in our case a supplement to natural fertility), can illuminate our readings of parents’ stories of status and reality.

The place of the genetic in the ‘reality’ of parenthood

The idea that parents have an ethical duty to tell their children that they were donor-conceived is now the orthodox position in many countries. In the UK this is reflected in law by the removal of donor anonymity by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (Disclosure of Donor Information) Regulations 2004. In countries such as the United States and Canada, which have tended to operate on a more *laissez-faire* basis of allowing individual clinics to set their own standards, here too the evidence suggests a move towards open-identity as a norm (Mahlstedt 2010: 2236–7)².

Deciding whether to tell or not to tell

Before we examine the ways in which parents tell their DC children about their genetic parenthood, we ought to first consider the prior question of whether to tell in the first place. Since a child of two lesbian women or a single woman will always know that their family set-up is ‘different’ to that of many of their peers, non-disclosure is generally only an option for heterosexual couples. It is possible that this option not to disclose may continue to cause its own stress and conflict within families, and some studies indicate that men in particular may find the prospect of disclosing particularly difficult (Eisenberg 2008; Applegarth 2010; Mahlstedt 2010: 2243–4). Parents committed to not disclosing the fact of donor conception might feel entitled to argue that, the true meaning of parenthood being fully accounted for in the social bond, it is simply unnecessary to explain the use of donor gametes to the child (Shehab 2008). But parents taking this view must come to terms with the fact that it has become orthodox for both regulatory and advisory bodies to encourage parents to look upon disclosure as an ethical duty, and furthermore that

children benefit from being told as early as possible (Montuschi 2006: 2)³. The thorny legal and ethical questions surrounding family secrets and what rights (if any) a donor-conceived child has to know who his/her genetic parents are, have generated much critical debate which I do not go into here (Gurnham and Miola 2012; Smart 2007: 127–9; Eekelaar 2006: 74). However, this move towards openness about genetics throws up further questions. For example, if the matter of genetic relatedness between parent and child is insignificant when placed against the quality of social parenting, what would be the harm in disclosing it to the child? There are of course many banal truths which do not need to be told, and there are also important truths which not to tell would incur the same moral approbation as telling a lie. The fact that being 'honest and open' according to currently orthodox ethical attitudes requires parents to acknowledge the supplement, necessarily implies that it means *something* and by implication that social parenting means slightly less than everything even within the most loving and devoted families. A British parent is quoted by the Donor Conception Network (DCN) as saying: 'You are the people in the whole world that they should be able to trust most of all, and to me it would be wrong [not to disclose]. In essence, if you are not telling you are lying.' (Montuschi 2006: 1). Thus the discourse of truth in donor-conception demonstrably exceeds social parenthood, and pressures parents to confront the *irrelevant-yet-essential* fact that their child is genetically related to someone outside of the family. It is an idea of the supplement as external yet disruptive that Derrida draws out of Rousseau's disparaging remarks about writing and other 'artful ruses' and that I want to show can also similarly be found in parents' reported experiences of donor conception.

'Scripts' for telling: Problems and solutions in parents' narratives

There are two themes that can be drawn out from the parents' narratives on themselves as parents and on the donor. The first is the ambiguity caused simply by wielding everyday notions such as the 'real', 'true' or 'natural' in order to distinguish oneself in this context. The second, which I address further below, is the use of rhetoric that may offer an escape from these linguistic ambiguities: emphasizing binary hierarchies between the parent and the donor in the form of natural/artificial, present/absent, internal/external.

The ambiguity of the 'real'

Our first concern then is the ambiguity of the 'real'. Society continues to struggle with the idea of separating sex and reproduction (McCandless and Sheldon 2010), and as a result, parents will often lack a satisfactory vocabulary for describing themselves and the relative position of the donor (Diduck 2007). 'Real' is a clumsy and an ambiguous word that is enlisted to express the relative significance of the two roles, and like Derrida's 'supplement', seldom provides a

convincing way to distinguish two ideas, especially when the criteria of judgement is itself in doubt. The Donor Conception Network (DCN) acknowledge this in their advisory literature to parents, warning them not to take too personally or seriously their children's ignorant invocations of the 'real' to refer to the biological/genetic gamete provider (Montuschi 2006; Mac Dougall 2007: 527–8; Kelly 2008–9). And it is not only children who are at risk of confusing themselves in this way. Consider this man speaking at a seminar in Germany:

If I had a child via DI, of course, I would be the father. But the donor is also the father, he is the biological father. But I don't want my child to grow up not knowing who is the 'real' father. So I need to ask myself: who am I and who is he in relationship to our child? And, how do we differentiate (between us) when we talk to our child about this? (Daniels and Thorn 2001: 1794)

We might suggest that the speaker's confusion could be eliminated by a simple change of terminology, i.e. by choosing a word other than 'father' to describe the sperm donor, which would eliminate the need to speak about the 'real' at all (Montuschi 2006: 6). That he seems unwilling or unable to do so may reflect the tenacity of a genetic idea of parenthood in everyday language, which is also reflected in other empirical studies. For example, Fiona Kelly's research in Canada involving forty-nine lesbian mothers found that 'reality' with regards to parenthood in the lesbian mothers' language was marked by doubt and anxiety over the lexicon of father/donor. It is very clear from Kelly's research that a large part of the problem stems from a frustration at a public cultural-linguistic framework in which the heteronormative genetic idea of parenthood is given priority. The references to pauses and hesitations are presumably included by Kelly to give a sense of the difficulties for her subjects in situating themselves and their family within this framework:

'Carey': I'll talk about [my son's] 'dad'. Whereas other time I'll say [my son's] 'donor'. Just [pause], it's [pause], it is [pause], 'cause neither is completely accurate. He's really in between. (Kelly 2008–9: 206)

'Jasmine': As far as Chris goes I mean he knows that Bianca and I are his parents. But if Neil [the donor] comes to something like one of his performances or something and he introduces him as 'father', um, they will defer to him. And that kind of stuff. 'Cause we don't have the right words for it. Yes, he's the biological father and yes he may be important in Chris's life, but [sigh] don't defer to him. (Kelly 2008–9: 206)

Kelly's mothers overwhelmingly feared that, despite the fact that they and not the donor/father undertook the chief parenting role, 'the symbolic weight attached to fatherhood would always prevail' (Kelly 2008–9: 203). We should note here that 'Carey' and 'Jasmine' both opted to use known donors, and thus their remarks about the donors/fathers being involved in the child's life are not directly applicable to regulated donor conception in the UK, in which there is no possibility of contact between the child and the donor until the child is eighteen

and chooses to access identifying information held by the clinic. However, beyond the prosaic questions of access, the *linguistic* ambivalence in these narratives regarding the family life and the symbolic significance reluctantly and resignedly accorded to genetic 'fatherhood' is telling. If references to the 'real' and other related words are invoked in order to get *beyond* text and to circumvent textual ambiguities then these examples would suggest that this strategy may be very difficult. Both the man's efforts in the first passage and the lesbian mothers' in the second in this regard remain hopelessly mired in the very textual treacle from which they are trying to escape.

Overcoming the ambiguity: Narrating the externality of the donor

In stark contrast to the confusions and ambiguities admitted to above, parents also seem to re-assert their status, both through confident statements about the reality of associating parenthood with *parenting*, and also through a judicious choice of language when explaining the truth to their children of their genetic origins. For an example of the first strategy we might look once more to Kelly's Canadian study:

Sylvie: I like to use a term here which, I call myself the front line parent. ... That means that I'm the parent who's there 24 hours. I'm there for the emergencies. I'm there for the heartache and the emotional, whatever. You know, to bear it all. I'm the one who has committed to doing that work and that has little to do with biology. Really little. (Kelly 2008–9: 199)

And what of the language used to explain donor conception to their children? Parents assert the primacy of their own status by stressing the significance of their being physically present to the child and the relative disconnection and distance of the donor. The explanation that the parent gives to the child about the latter's genetic origins asserts and reinforces a linguistic claim: that the *full meaning* of the parent-child relationship is captured in the social relation. Research by Rumball and Adair (1999: 1395) in New Zealand revealed that narratives used by parents to explain to their child his or her genetic origins tended to refer to a 'kind man' that provided 'seeds', or else to a doctor that provided the 'help' needed to complete the family. They emphasize that the baby conceived is the product of the loving relationship between mother and father, with the 'seeds' or 'help' a natural consequence of that relationship, and the gametes provided a component part. Lycett (2005: 816) corroborates this picture, revealing some inventive methods employed by donor conception parents in London for diminishing and drawing attention away from the donor's input. One family emphasized the distance between donor and child by comparing gamete donation to giving blood, similarly anonymous:

They've seen me giving blood so I said it was like that, like it was giving a blood donation but this was cells for someone else to help them make him [child] born and the same was as I didn't know who my blood had gone to, he would never know who had given him cells.

Mac Dougall (2007: 529–531) reveals that in Northern California, while men are especially drawn to metaphors of mechanical breakdown in their explanations, women more commonly use more personal ‘helper’-type stories. Lycett (2005: 816) underlines this: ‘We [father and son] were having a bath together and I was saying to him, “Your [testicles] will get bigger than mine... because mine don’t work very well...” then we told him that we used somebody’s seeds.’ There is some evidence that lesbian accounts may tend to combine the ‘spare parts’ and ‘helper’ techniques in disclosure narratives that are perhaps slightly more complex but are no less directed to the same goal of diminishing the status and significance of the gamete donor. For example, one lesbian mother wrote on the American Donor Sibling Registry discussion forum: ‘We just told him matter-of-factly that he didn’t have a dad. He had two mums. ... We told him that there was a man who helped us have a baby because you need a man part and a woman part to make a baby’ (Montuschi 2006: 15). The Donor Conception Network offers this advice for telling very young children: ‘... you can point this out [the clinic or hospital where they were conceived] as you would any other item of interest like a fire engine or a big crane... “and that’s where she (and Daddy) *needed some help to have you*”’ (Montuschi 2006: 10 emphasis added). The two narratives quoted above combine ‘mechanical breakdown’ and ‘helper’ stories to impress upon the child the status of the ‘real’ (i.e. social) parent, and to underline the relative superficiality of the genetic connection with the gamete donor. The point of the story is that there should arise in the child’s imagination a gulf between him/herself and the donor, in contrast to the proximity of the social parent. The story’s aim is to convey the exteriority and otherness of the ‘supplement’, and to show that if there is any resemblance between it and the loving family it once helped, such resemblance is a dim and distant one. In the DCN advice quoted above, the fertility clinic is imagined as a sort of repair garage, and the ‘help’ that Daddy received there by implication one of the many public amenities of the city, on a level with a school or the fire services, pointed out to the child but barely noticed.

Interpreting the parental narratives

A positive, practical and prosaic reading of the parental narratives

Before offering a deconstructive reading of these narratives, it must first be acknowledged that there are a number of positive and straightforward reasons why parents would want both to assert the full reality of their parenthood status and also to underscore this with ‘disclosure scripts’ that emphasize the externality of the donor. First and arguably most obviously, parents need to acknowledge a young child’s relatively unsophisticated notions of parenthood and also their likely ignorance about sexual reproduction.

Therefore metaphors of 'helpers', 'seeds' and mechanical failure are used to convey what would otherwise be unintelligible biological information. Parents' own narratives will be coloured by many children's simplistic association of the genetic with the social parent. This means that explaining that, for example, their genetic 'father' is someone other than their social father risks implying that they were 'abandoned' by their 'real' father, and this highlights the practicality of metaphors that divert the child from such an impression.

Second, such narratives may be the best way for parents to talk positively about the 'alternative' nature of their family. Dempsey (2004: 81) has argued that the opportunity for women to break away from the traditionally assumed 'compulsory heterosexuality' of reproduction allows for a positive fragmentation of our nuclear concept of family, allowing recognition of a variety of different roles (Rich 1982/2007). In support of such a view, there is evidence that some lesbian couples do use the fact of the donor's genetic relatedness creatively and positively to empower their reproductive choices. Consider this example of the latter type, from an interview with a U.S. lesbian couple whose choice of an anonymous donor seems to have been an imaginative and creative exercise:

Some people seemed too nerdy, you know they played badminton or didn't drink coffee or something... The donor we finally picked was a doctor, 6 foot 4 inches, played basketball and drank coffee. We felt like if we met him, we could relate to him, and maybe our child would inherit some of his qualities that we liked. (Tober 2001: 139)

Such a good-humoured approach to locating the donor in the reproductive narrative suggests that some parents are comfortable exploring the possibilities of parenthood without attempting to negate the idea of the donor as a person or personality in his own right. Other empirical studies reinforce this impression. For example, Landau (2008: 280) recounts how one donor-conception mother she interviewed said that her child had once called her 'Mother-Father'. We might deconstruct this remark as a claim that she as sole parent herself occupied the full meaning of 'parent' with no room within that concept for any supplement. But we could also read it as meaning that the terms we have traditionally used to refer to parents are not as fixed as we once thought, and that they may be turned to new and different purposes to reflect changing social attitudes to a multiplicity of alternative family forms (McGuinness and Alghrani 2008: 282).

Furthermore, research by Scheib and Ruby (2008) on contact between families who share the same donor has suggested that 'alternative' or 'non-traditional' families (for example those headed by single women) may often perceive a positive role for the genetic contribution to a child's life. Scheib and Ruby found not only that these families they interviewed often voluntarily opted for open-identity donation, but also that they were likely to sign up to networks set

up to match children from the same donor. Households headed by a single woman particularly seem to view the genetic relation between their child and the donor positively, often actively seeking out their children's genetic half-siblings in order to extend their own family for the sake of their children (2008: 38). Similarly, interviews conducted in Belgium (operating a system of donor anonymity) by Vanfraussen *et al.* (2001: 2024) with lesbian mothers and their children revealed that the mothers interviewed tended to prefer using the same donor for each of their children, so that despite not having any possibility of a relationship with the donor, the children would show the same physical resemblances as would the children of a traditional heterosexual nuclear family. Again we might read this deconstructively as evidence of an unacknowledged deference to genetic connections as a supplement for social parenthood. However, it is equally possible to read the study as showing a relaxed and confident attitude amongst many lesbian parents towards the possible impact or implication of there being a person outside the family who is genetically related to their child. It suggests that there may well be a place to consider all manner of bases on which to build a family, incorporating biological, social and intentional indicators of what constitutes a parent (Sheldon 2005). These examples show that the broader picture I draw out in below – namely of parents using oppositional rhetoric to draw attention away from the donor as a 'real' person, and thereby to strengthen their own status as parents in their narratives of family – does not necessarily apply to everyone. For families using donor gametes to self-consciously create an 'alternative' family structure it seems that there may be pleasure to be had in bringing the donor 'to life', perhaps even involving the child in this creative process.

Anxiety and confidence together: Deconstructing the narratives

The positive interpretation of the narratives given above is plausible in the context of families that are in fact comfortable with their status as non-genetic (social) parents. However, the strongly oppositional language used by many other parents suggests that further analysis may be warranted. I want to suggest that we can deconstruct the extent to which the metaphors used depersonalize and even dehumanize the donor as provider of spare parts, and that this highlights traditional anxieties amongst parents about a possible loss of status. Mac Dougall (2007) interprets her own research results in this way, pointing out that men are particularly likely to discourage the child even to think of the donor as fully human, encouraging them instead to think of the donor as defined only by their physical contribution. Other studies have also reported a greater level of stress and pessimism about the status of the donor amongst men and heterosexual donor-conception families, than among women (Applegarth 2006; Mahlstedt 2010). It is easy to understand how the widely presumed association between heterosexuality and fertility asserts pressure on infertile

heterosexual couples to do what they can either to cover up or explain their failure to create a family in the 'natural way' (Rich 1982). For example, the DCN advice refers to heterosexuals who must initially 'grieve' their incapacity to beget their own child (Montuschi 2006: 5).

The documented impact of such assumptions on heterosexual parents, and infertile men in particular, is arguably underlined by the reported 'added-value' of forging some other kind of biological bond, such as through gestation, giving birth and breast feeding, all of which are unavailable to non-biological social fathers (Murray *et al.* 2006: 617; Shehab 2008; Landau 2008: 582; *contra* Kelly 2008–9). Within this picture of heterosexual impotence, the depersonalizing metaphors used to downplay the status of the donor betray a lack of confidence in the non-genetic parental bond. On this view, the rhetoric of exteriority highlights a fear amongst parents that the donor may usurp the father's parenting status in the child's estimation simply by virtue of the genetic relation and the donor's imagined relative potency (Lycett 2005: 814). However, we should be wary about being too hasty to settle on a gender reading of the studies. After all, other studies have found that lesbian families, while not 'dehumanizing' the donor, also tend to downplay the donor in such a way that arguably betrays anxieties. For example, the forty-five Belgian mothers interviewed by Vanfraussen *et al.* (2001) for the study cited above, all attested to having always been open and honest about the children's genetic identity. However, three quarters of them were opposed to the removal of donor anonymity, citing their worry that their family unit needed to be protected from 'interference' by a third party (i.e. the sperm donor) (2022–3).

My point here is not to determine whether the characteristics of parents' narratives about themselves or their donor can be explained by gender or sexuality etc. Nor is it to establish whether parents who choose donor conception feel comfortable or anxious about their status or their relationship with their donor. These are empirical questions which, whilst very important, are not central to the linguistic and theoretical concerns of this chapter. What I want to suggest here is that, using strategies of deconstructive reading, it is possible to pursue questions about some of the deeper connections between personal narratives and broader established philosophical and linguistic themes. Derrida's contribution to critical theory has been to reveal ways in which these connections can be analysed at the level of language. As I have very briefly outlined here, oppositional rhetoric in which the 'real' or 'authentic' is asserted against the 'artificial' or 'external', can be analysed as attempts to master the ambiguities that arise when common parlance is challenged by new and emerging social arrangements and/or technological possibilities. Parents struggle to express themselves by relying on talk of the 'real' parent, and may also use forcefully oppositional language to reinforce the externality of the donor. Given what we know about the negative feelings that some parents have about the potential impact that the revelation of donor conception

might have on their family, we may read this rhetoric as revisiting Rousseau's condemnation of nature's 'dangerous supplement'. By being forced to tell a 'truth-about-the-family' that includes a starring role for the donor, parents' narratives may betray a fear amongst some that the supplement they used to make their family possible will succeed in masquerading as an integral part of that family in the minds of others, at their expense.

Conclusion

Donor-conception families show a marked ambivalence about the significance of the genetic relation that is exterior to the family. Of course there are obvious methodological problems in drawing strong implications directly from empirically-elicited narratives without re-inscribing a claim to truth and the reality of parenthood that I have tried to deconstruct. In this short critique, I have attempted to connect the narratives of parenthood emerging from empirical studies to wider concerns about truth and representation. My use of Derrida's logic of the 'dangerous supplement' – by which concepts escape simple dichotomies of presence and absence, truth and falsity, etc – is not intended to assert a further layer of truth-about-parenthood, and much less a prescriptive account of what parents should or should not say to their child. New reproductive technologies and family arrangements are reshaping both ethical and linguistic contours of society. This reshaping brings with it opportunities for positive questioning of traditional nuclear family values and assumptions, but it also creates new anxieties and ambiguities about status and relationship which must be acknowledged and understood.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Anne Quéma, Kerry Macintosh, Joanna Scheib and Paul Hastings, as well as the editors for their very helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts.
- 2 In force from April 2005.
- 3 See also the UK's HFE Authority Code of Practice, Eighth Edition (2009) para 20.8.

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