Beyond sperm cells. A qualitative study on constructed meanings of the sperm donor in lesbian families

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Study question: What meanings do lesbian couples construct regarding their sperm donor?

Summary answer: For some parents, the donor was increasingly presented as a person, whereas for other parents, the donor was seen as an instrument from the moment they received the sperm donation.

What is known already: Few studies specifically focus on how lesbian couples deal with the issue of third-party anonymous gamete donation. It is often assumed that they have fewer difficulties than heterosexual couples with the involvement of a male procreator, since their status as a donor conception family is ‘socially visible’ and there is no social father who fears exclusion.

Study design, size, duration: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 lesbian couples (20 participants), recruited via the Ghent University Hospital. All couples had at least one child, conceived through anonymous donor insemination, between 7 and 10 years old.

Participants/materials, setting, methods: Within the data corpus, a particular data set was analyzed where couples referred to their donor and his position in their family. Step-by-step inductive thematic analysis was performed resulting in themes that are grounded in the data. All phases of the analysis were followed by team discussion.
**Main results and the role of chance:** This study reveals different donor constructs, indicating different ways of dealing with the third-party involvement in the family. Some parents diminish the role of the donor throughout family life and continue to present him as an instrument: something they needed in order to become parents. Others show an increasing interest in the donor as the children mature, which results in a more personalized account of the donor.

**Limitations, reasons for caution:** In our qualitative cross-sectional study, we collected retrospectively constructed stories. Longitudinal qualitative and quantitative research is required to allow for an extrapolation of the conclusions made.

**Wider implications of the findings:** This study shows how the concept of the donor is constructed within lesbian families and how it is challenged by the child’s developing personality and features. When counseling prospective parents, it could therefore be useful to discuss the concept of the anonymous donor beyond the conception phase.

**Study funding/competing interest(s):** The project was funded by the Research Fund of Ghent University, Belgium. There are no competing interests.

Reference: