

From a 'bundle of joy' to a person with sorrow: Disenfranchised grief for the donor-conceived adult

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Introduction

This paper examines the notion of disenfranchised grief for donor-conceived adults. Robinson (2000) describes disenfranchised grief as grief which is:

not recognized and supported by the community.... The mourners whose grief is disenfranchised are, by virtue of this, cut off from the social supports and so have few opportunities to express and resolve their feelings....either the relationship is not recognized, the loss is not recognized or the griever is not recognized...Significant losses can occur even when the object of the loss is still alive (p. 127).

This paper argues that for a variety of reasons, which will be explored, such disenfranchisement is common for many donor-conceived adults. Those adults who grieve as a result of the intentional separation, and loss of nurturing and identity forming relationships with their biological relatives due to their donor conceptions. It is also proposed that though information and contact may become possible for a rare few donor-conceived adults (with their paternal family and siblings), there still are significant losses, which have been 'created', and are most commonly disenfranchised.

Facing the criticism

The British tabloid press, *Sunday People*, contained an article titled "Sperm donor whingers owe debt of gratitude" (Sarler, 2000, p. 33). To my surprise, the article was responding to the impending court case involving my brother and myself. The details of the case will not be addressed here, but briefly, it involves seeking the examination of international human rights standards in light of our request to access information concerning our identities, medical histories, ethnicity, information regarding ourselves which is linked inseparably to our biological fathers. In addressing this, issues of equality and discrimination are paramount. These must be confronted in the context of current adoption legislation and the differing legislations affecting donor-conceived people following the time of our conceptions.

The level of disrespect towards our concerns in this article would, perhaps, be more easily dismissed if there were not similar, more subtle innuendoes elsewhere. Indeed, it is possible that this tabloid reflects what many people really think but do not express in this amplified form: "They are wrong to seek rights.... If they could spare a single unselfish moment, Adam and Joanna might realise that the issue here is not who owes them what, but what they owe and to whom" (Sarler, 2000, p. 33).

On being 'special'

Reassuringly, Robinson (2000, p. 128) illuminates that this type of reprobation is not uncommon. She explains that familial separation as a result of adoption often results in feelings of intense loss, which is commonly misunderstood or invalidated by those outside of this experience. She refers particularly to birth mothers and adoptees. She states that "adopted people often raise issues of their sense of identity and sense of belonging. Because they are told that, by virtue of being adopted, they are 'special', 'chosen', and 'fortunate', their grief at the separation from their mother [father, siblings and entire biological family] is denied, by society and often by their adoptive parents. If they try to express their feelings of grief they

are often labeled 'ungrateful'" (Robinson, 2000, p. 128). In our case, being described as "self-interested...rotten spoilt brats" does appear to fall into the 'ungrateful' category.

Getting real

Lifton (1994, p. 30) also observes this occurrence for adoptees, and notes the consequence as being the repression of feelings of "grief, anger and a sense of powerlessness". Gollancz (2000, p. 38) describes the process of self-expression and exploration as a result of his donor conception as similarly difficult. Between "ages 14-45, I felt I was listening to a babble of voices telling me what I ought to think about DI, what I ought to feel about it" (Gollancz, 2000, p. 38). He then describes a stage in his life where he seeks to start to speak for himself: "[I]t turned out to be an enormously healing step. I think this was for two reasons. First, I was saying I own this. Second, I was 45 and it was one of the first times I really felt like a person" (Gollancz, 2000, p. 38). This reference to ownership and its link to feelings of being a 'true person' are important, and is often the case for adoptees. The following explanation within adoption is equally applicable to donor-conceived adults, and the reflections provided by Gollancz:

Perhaps the urge to talk about their adoption has been an attempt on the part of many adoptees to begin to understand the adopted child within them so that as adults they might learn to know themselves more completely and thereby become more complete. (Verrier, 1993, p. 52)

Indeed, the venom conveyed by Sarler (2000, p. 33) can be interpreted as an attempt to place donor-conceived adults back in a 'mannequin' role, where others can speak on our behalf, or we simply repeat what we are told to say, regardless of incongruity with how we may feel.

Whipp (cited in Norton, 2000, p. 7), also a donor-conceived adult, contributes her description of pressures affecting our freedom to speak about donor insemination:

DI children are subject to various sorts of emotional blackmail. For example, people have told me that I should be grateful that I was born at all. There is also a pressure within the family. If DI children declare an interest in wanting to know their full identity they are, in effect, publicly acknowledging the fact that specific choices made by their parents have caused them genealogical disadvantage, and that they are seeking a remedy for that distress. Of course this risks putting a strain on their family relationships.

Gollancz (2000, p. 38) describes a 'spectacularly dysfunctional' family, which is in sharp contrast to the frequently idealised families who 'wanted a child so much'. However, Gollancz clearly feels a responsibility for and a need to 'protect' his [social] father, conflicting with the eventual quest to make "some sense of myself". It appears that this process is fraught with complexities because, to construct a meaning for ourselves, there is often a need to first recognise and remove the cloak of guilt and suppression.

What is under the cloak?

All of the points raised by these donor-conceived adults deserve recognition: the

pressure regarding our social fathers, or social parents' (those who have them) sensitivities; the projection that we should just be grateful to be alive; the difficulties in stating that the arrangements made by our parents for our identities are inadequate; and the seemingly insurmountable task of redressing this to the best of our abilities.

There are statistics to show that adoptees are experiencing significant life difficulties as compared to the rest of the population. Verrier (1993, p. xv), citing statistics from Parenting Resources of Santa Ana, California, provides one reflection of this sad picture: adopted people make up 2-3% of the population in the USA; they make up 30-40% of the young people in "special schools, juvenile halls and residential treatment centers". Another such

picture in England found that "55% of adoptees had clinically significant problems – four and a half times the rate of non-adopted children" (Holm, 2000, p. 331).

In other papers I have explored the inadequacies in the types of research most commonly conducted *on* donor-conceived children as opposed to *with* donor-conceived adults, though the most obvious research flaw, is the lack of it altogether. Despite this, a few studies do not fall into these categories, and there does seem to be evidence of significant life issues of loss and separation. A good example is the research by Turner and Coyle (2000).

Who's in the mirror?

Telfer's (2000) anthropological analysis of the significance of physical resemblance, particularly in Western societies, has direct implications for experiences of connectedness, family affiliation and identity. Telfer (2000, p. 2) asserts that the grief experienced through such familial disconnection is not often appreciated nor understood by society at large, precisely, and paradoxically because such connection is *so* important and therefore taken for granted.

Telfer (2000) explains that "looking like someone else, or not looking like them, can provide a valuable anchor point.... This is especially so since identity is taken to be a process, rather than a fixed or static state" (p.16). While donor-conceived adults are asking "whose eyes or nose do I have?" and are often estranged by their own reflections in the mirror, it is mainly those who know the answers to the same questions for themselves who consider this question objectionable when asked by us.

Strange textures

However, it is not only donor-conceived people who have reported feeling estranged from ourselves, but this can also occur in the family which raises us. For in reality, we carry the genetic traits of a paternal line consisting of total strangers to them too. Blizzard (1977) explains "I thought our child might turn out to be almost anything" (p. 58). Later, observing how he felt towards the DI child, he states "I was estranged by the texture of Cathy's hair" (pp. 101-102). The consultant psychiatrist, Rickarby (1997) refers to similar types of trait and genetic alienation:

Our suburban Child Mental Health Team was to support scores of adoptive parents desperate for help with developmental crises in children whose temperaments were strange to them, whose capacities were often quite different from their own, and who were struggling with identity and belonging issues. (p. 54)

However, unlike adoption, within donor conception there is a sense in which our biology can intrude on the notion of marital fidelity (if we are conceived within an infertile partnership). Blizzard (1977) describes the effort to "push aside the recollections of stainless steel instruments, numbered semen bottles, and the alien worlds and strange encounters of others' chromosomes, which have intruded too much and too often" (p. 128).

Blizzard (1977) seeks to reconcile the insemination with another man's semen as only requiring a "momentary frame-shift, which may only intrude for one minute, in which the technical endeavour to impregnate [is performed]" (p. 161). Sadly, he finds he was later "stuck with... preoccupations...to dispel the ghosts which haunted me, and which threatened to destroy" (Blizzard, 1977, p.36). The 'monetary frame –shift' becomes jarred, never to return to where it was. The continual expression of our genetic endowments can act as a constant reminder that what was traded as a momentary shift is now a life-long revelation. And by the time we, as donor-conceived adults, state the need to know whom we came from, we are often rubbing salt into the wounds. For many, these wounds have never healed, and may have been aggravated by even the texture of our hair.

Recognition, loss and support

It is not surprising then that donor-conceived adults such as Golancz (2000), and Whipp (cited in Norton, 2000) report difficulty in expressing these issues, and particularly the pressures within the family. As a donor-conceived adult myself, I too have experienced great difficulty in confronting my own loss, let alone receiving consistent support from my family at large. While some families may be more or less well equipped to provide this support, the notion that this could not possibly be a significant issue does a disservice to all the people involved.

Further exploration of the losses experienced by donor-conceived people is necessary. It is acknowledged that adoption is a last resort for children who cannot be raised in their natural family (Rickarby, 1997, p. 57). However, it is also now generally recognised to have a life-long, and often distressing impact, particularly on the child, but also on the adoptive and biological families involved. While the relational dynamics of donor-conceived families are quite different to those of adoptive families, the severing of genetic ties is a common feature in the nurturing of the child.

The following statement regarding how members of the Stolen Generations are faring show these losses to be resonant, deep and reflecting virtually identical sentiments. "Not knowing or remembering what your parents, brothers/sisters look like, sound like, mannerisms, etc. is a disturbing burden our clients have to live with through their lives. How do our clients live through this emotional turmoil – with great difficulty!" (Phair & Johnson, 1997, p. 454).

The need for genetic continuity in physical traits and characteristics has been explored by Telfer (2000). Such studies, along with the experience of adoption, and the stolen generations are helpful in explaining the importance of these connections. The sharing of information between these groups in terms of effective support mechanisms, and experiences has been of great value to the author, and would be a wonderful avenue for further research.

The grief of this type of familial severance also poses difficulties in resolution or closure. This is for many reasons likely to be the case for a large proportion of donor-conceived adults, as many records have been and will be destroyed and/or inaccessible. The intentionality involved in the loss is reported to be a compounding factor (Rubin, 1983), along with the fact that the lost family members are alive but, due to systemic blocks, largely uncontactable.

A fragile legitimacy

Underlying these legitimate human questions regarding those we are related to, for many there may also be a plethora of feelings of illegitimacy. For the arrangements made on our behalf have been expected to be long-standing; the deals forged, forms signed, and there is a range of people who could and often do feel aggrieved when we break the simplicity of this. We have not been expected to want to know, and we are reneging on a deal, regardless of whether we were involved in making it.

The most obviously recognised and socially supported questions regarding our well-being are related to accessing the medical history of our paternal families. However, if face to face with our biological fathers it is questionable whether this would really be the central issue of significance, perhaps every detail would be significant to us: it is hard to imagine. It is, nevertheless, a matter of practical importance, and could even have ramifications for the quality, and longevity of our lives.

However, our biological fathers have never known, touched or loved our mothers. Most have been unaware of our conception or birth, they are likely to now be married and with children that they have raised. We must expect some 'donors' to resent our search for them, for they have been selected on the basis that they do not show an interest in us. Such fear leads to the need for many donor-conceived adults to try to legitimise their access to their biological fathers. The most obvious hook is medical history, but if this became available through the examination of our own DNA, many would have to admit that we are seeking for legitimate questions when we feel like the illegitimate answers to our parents' infertility.

Grief Resolution?

Important insights to grief resolution are found by Parkes (1969). Parkes notes the different components and functions of grief and separation anxiety, an important aspect being to search for the 'lost object', meaning people. Obviously this has the primary function of increasing our chances of finding them. Another important aspect in this grief resolution is found in the symbiotic function of restoration and separation from the lost person. In the case of bereavement, this occurs through forming a strong establishment of a person's appearance, significance and their continuity in the griever's life, regardless of the death.

In the case of donor adults grieving for their relatives, visual and sensual perception of the lost people is absent, plus their importance and relational significance has never been recognised or expressed. It can be seen that under these circumstances the donor-conceived adults are placed in a position of great difficulty. Robinson (2000) describes the difficulty experienced by many birth mothers as they tried to manage their grief. The similarities are striking:

They had no rituals to assist the grief process. They were unable to achieve resolution because of the absence of finality involved in their loss. They were denied social supports. They had no opportunities to express their grief. Their grief was seriously affected by feelings of guilt and shame (p. 134)

What helps?

First, the ability to search is beneficial, as is accessing appropriate assistance, understanding and support. Robinson (2000, p. 135) also details other types of assistance that has been of help to these women, particularly 'breaking the silence' and speaking to others in the same position. For she advises "the central issue with disenfranchised grief is to validate the loss" (Robinson, 1997, p. iii) and it is often those who genuinely know what is being grieved who can best provide comfort and understanding. It is of interest that Robinson also reports this to be of more benefit for many than talking to professionals, for example social workers.

Acknowledging the complications

However, there are other differences for the donor-conceived adult as compared to the adoptee. Westwood (1995, p. 53) explains that it is important for adoptees to know the reasons for their relinquishment, and that this is often helpful to them. In the case of donation, the reasons are often either financial (for the donors) or to help alleviate the pain of infertility.

For many adoptees, the wanting of a child by the adoptive parents was not a deciding factor in their separation from their biological family, but a separate issue. Our losses, on the other hand, are intertwined with the parents who raise us. Recognition and support from those parents can therefore be complicated, as can the abilities of donor-conceived adults to receive this support. For the donor-conceived adult must face the bitter-sweet reality that these are the very people whose own familial continuity appeared to benefit from our losses. Indeed, they were involved in constructing these losses, even if this is now understood and regretted. However, it is likely that such complications need to be acknowledged before they can begin to be surmounted by the family members.

Getting back to what helps

Robinson (2000, p. 134) also provides guidance in stating "perhaps aiming for the resolution of adoption grief is an unrealistic goal and one that will only result in further feelings of failure, should it not be attained". For many DI adults, this advice could be well-heeded. The process of identifying and learning grief management strategies may be more realistic and helpful to

our life-long experiences. For the grief is likely to rise and fall at various times in our lives, particularly for those who never get to meet the relatives that they lost.

Durey (2000) (an adoptee) describes her own unravelling of meaning as an "archaeological journey towards the self...[she explains that] The excavation of silence feeds the project of (re)stor(y)ing" (p. 319). Again, breaking the silence and exploring one's own narrative is a central goal. For the donor-conceived adults who do feel grief, this will also be an intensely personal journey and narrative. While we may share stories and similarities, each will need to name their losses for themselves, to be the author of their own lives.

For some this may involve the channelling of anger: "anger is a common component of grief...[grievors] need to be assured that their anger is justified and encouraged to express it in appropriate and productive ways" (Robinson, 2000, p. 119). Interaction with 'donors' may also be of help, perhaps soothing the absence with stories of men (donors) who care; not all will, but those who do are likely to provide missing components to our narratives, and we to theirs. The research provided by Rowland (1983) may be of interest to many donor-conceived adults:

the data reveal that some stereotypes about the donors are not valid

(p. 249)...and over half would feel a connection [with the person conceived from their donation] ... [This] is a high figure when it is considered that admitting to this feeling was not sanctioned by the technicians running the donor laboratory....60% would not mind if their AID offspring contacted them after the age of 18 years....As one donor commented, 'I made a contract with the couple that we should never meet, but the child made no such contract'. (p. 257)

While this might provide some optimism and help, particularly for those whose donors/fathers respond kindly, there will also be considerable pain for those who do not receive a positive response. However, contact with any understanding past donor may be of help to us.

It is not within the scope of this paper to provide detailed explanations of the results of such grief on the donor conceived-adults. Indeed, for many this is a life-long process of reflection and discovery. There have been no direct studies to add to our understanding in this area but it may be important to be informed of similar griefs affecting adoptees. This has resulted in difficulties in forming relationships, and the heightened difficulties in responding to other separations and losses in the adoptees' lives (Verrier, 1993, pp. 88-90).

In conclusion

It is unfortunate that there has been an assumption that we as donor-conceived people would not feel connection and then loss in regard to our blood relatives. While many of us have developed deep attachments and loyalties towards those who raise us, there are fundamental questions regarding our identities which leave gaping holes. There needs to be recognition of this complex and difficult process, which is hindered by the projections and sensitivities of others.

The process of becoming 'whole' involves the reclaiming of our own voices, meanings, losses, and a complex journey towards the self. This is an individual journey, but shares many similarities with those of others, such as birth mothers, adoptees, members of the stolen generations, and of course with each other. For some, the circumstances of our conceptions lead to the eventual unravelling of the stories that we are told, to the absence of the stories that we are not told. We cannot live our lives for others, and must be recognised as people with losses and voices; we need not be pathologised and repressed, but understood.

The griefs we are expressing are understandable, for those who can afford to hear; for those who cannot and will not listen, there is likely to be a breakdown, or distancing of relationships. For these issues are not peripheral to ourselves, but central to who we are and who we are

not. The process of validation is inseparable from our grief. While it is important not to be consumed by our losses, the best that those concerned for our welfare can offer, is constructive support and awareness that these losses were 'created', and not circumstantial. It is possible that the wounds they leave will never truly heal. They are more likely to be manageable if not hidden to fester, but open to the sunlight, so that when they are touched, we can say where it hurts.

Putting theory into practice

The following poem is the expression of one donor-conceived person's grief. For those who have followed the line of my argument, it would be an interesting exercise to put this theory into practice, to read her words, and to hear her feelings. First, it gives a person the opportunity to explore and represent her own grief. Second, it provides the challenge to others to respect this, and not to try to redirect, or reframe this grief into something more comfortable for themselves, indeed, not to seek to disenfranchise her grief.

THE CENOTAPH (A donor offspring's thoughts on Armistice Day)

Grey November in a distant town
and eyes are drawn to the bloody tide
of poppies lapping all round
the granite monolith of pride.

Here they honour them and name them all;
a testament, to lives dismembered.
Souls set in stone and standing tall,
long gone and only half remembered.

Whole families lost in tragic, needless war;
bloodlines severed by the righteous fight.
Mine was slain by the Devil's whore
who burned their memory with delight.

Where are they now, where were they then?
Which name is mine in gold relief?
I watch, as lone survivor of my race,
and have no niche on which to bear my grief.

by Christine Whipp

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