

What's in a Name, Part 2: Consider "half-siblings"

Posted By [Naomi Cahn](#) On May 10, 2009 @ 2:30 pm In [Bioethics](#), [Family Law](#), [Feminism and Gender](#) | [2 Comments](#)

[Ryan Kramer](#) ^[1] graduated from Colorado University's aerospace engineering program on Friday, a program that is so tough that only about 50% of those who begin ultimately finish it. Before he starts his master's degree in engineering management at USC this fall, one of his big summer plans is to meet two of his half-siblings; he has [at least five others](#) ^[2]. ^[2]

I've met Ryan once, and was incredibly impressed with him – I'm not surprised that he was able to complete his competitive college program nor that he is seeking out half-siblings and the man who anonymously provided the sperm that enabled Ryan to exist. Ryan and I met at a conference on establishing a national donor gamete databank. Ryan and his mother, Wendy Kramer, have started the enormously successful [Donor Sibling Registry](#) ^[3], which is now responsible for connecting more than 6000 people with others who share some of the same genetic origins (disclosure: I have just become a board member of the DSR).

Donor-conceived offspring often – although not always – regret their lack of connection with their entire biological heritage. They want to know more about the often anonymous individual[s] who helped create them. As the secrecy around using "donor" sperm and eggs dissolves – in the past, parents frequently did not tell their children that they had been created by donor gametes – offspring and their parents are increasingly trying to get additional information and are advocating for disclosure of "donor" identities. Many have begun to use the internet to create an extended family that includes others who have used the same donor. Almost 150,000 people visited the DSR website in 2008, and more than 24,000 people have registered on it. It maintains an extremely active blog and message group.

The language in the donor world shows how these families are constructed. Offspring who share the same donor are typically labelled "half-siblings." ["Accidental incest"](#) ^[4] is a concern. The word "donor" is itself a misnomer; gametes are typically sold rather than provided altruistically.

Biological connection is, of course, only one of the many methods of forming a family. Yet the genetic ties between their children cause many women to feel strong family-like connections to each other. Consider Gwentyth Jackaway, who, according to a story in [Q Magazine](#) ^[5] searched for genetic relatives for her son, Dylan, because she wanted him to be "part of a larger community," and refers to the other children she found as "Dylan's siblings." Then there's [Mike Rubino](#) ^[6], who was Donor 929 at California Cryobank. He was inspired to find what happened to the sperm he had provided to the Cryobank, and, through the DSR, discovered that Rachael McGhee had written a thank you message to Donor 929. McGhee had given birth to 2 children using sperm from Donor 929, and, on Father's Day, she'd remind the children to think about their donor and send him hugs. Rubino and McGhee, along with her 2 children, ultimately spent a week together, getting to know one another. For Ryan, finding his donor led to a feeling of "immediate peacefulness," his mother explained to the Denver Post. As [I have argued](#) ^[7] in the context of both adoption and the donor world, the United States should establish a national donor gamete registry, similar to that in place in numerous other countries such as Great Britain. The registry should keep track of children both through donor egg, embryo, and sperm, including the identities of the gamete providers. Federal law already requires that fertility clinics provide information on the number of children born through donor eggs and embryos, although the procedures for collecting this additional information are not in place and would take some time to develop. Participation in such a registry would be mandatory for anyone involved in supplying donor gametes. When donor-conceived offspring reach a certain age, they should be able to receive identifying information about their donor (the donor could file a statement indicating his/her lack of interest in being contacted). While mandatory limits on donor anonymity constitute a radical change in existing practices, there are multiple reasons supporting this change – including a goal of helping other offspring find the "immediate peacefulness" that

Ryan found.

2 Comments To "What's in a Name, Part 2: Consider "half-siblings""

#1 Comment By [Marcia Zug](#) On May 11, 2009 @ 7:48 am

Great post but I am curious as to your thoughts regarding what effect this change will have on the willingness of donors to make donations. I believe other countries, such as Great Britain, which have decreased the anonymity of their sperm donations have seen a corresponding decrease in the willingness of donors to make such donations.

#2 Comment By [Naomi Cahn](#) On May 11, 2009 @ 8:16 am

Thanks so much for your response. I've written about this concern when it comes to deciding to allow for limited disclosure (in *Test Tube Families* (^[8]) and other places). What appears to happen as countries change practices surrounding anonymity is that the type of donor changes, and recruitment practices change as well.

By the way, I am hoping that my next writing project – after *Red Families v. Blue Families* and a book on post-conflict and gender, etc. — will involve a series of articles and a book on donor-conceived families.

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URLs in this post:

[1] Ryan Kramer : http://www.denverpost.com/ci_12281979.

[2] at least five others:

<http://www.colorado.edu/news/r/02a2c9080fdae570c06d9ec1c8385ffe.html>

[3] Donor Sibling Registry: <http://www.donorsiblingregistry.com/>,

[4] Accidental incest: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1263980

[5] O Magazine : http://www.oprah.com/article/omagazine/200804_omag_donor,

[6] Mike Rubino: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/15/AR2005061501885.html>,

[7] have argued : http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1120389,

[8] : http://www.nyupress.org/books/Test_Tube_Families-products_id-7934.html

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