Managing absence and presence of child–parent resemblance: a challenge for heterosexual couples following sperm donation

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Abstract This qualitative interview study sought to gather and better understand heterosexual parents’ experiences of managing resemblance and non-resemblance between child and parent in an identity-release donor programme. The study is part of the prospective longitudinal Swedish Study on Gamete Donation (SSGD), including all fertility clinics performing gamete donation in Sweden. A sample of participants in the SSGD, consisting of 30 heterosexual parents with children aged 7–8 years following identity-release sperm donation, participated in individual semi-structured interviews. This study concerns a secondary analysis of the interview data. The results show how donor-conceiving parents experience the presence and absence of child–parent resemblance, and how they navigate between the importance of genetic connectedness and of ‘doing parenthood’ through social interactions. The analysis resulted in three categories: ‘resemblance through nature or nurture’, ‘non-resemblance brings the donor to the front’ and ‘feelings about and coping with resemblance talk’. The first two categories deal with the intrapersonal aspects of physical and non-physical resemblance, while the last category includes aspects of resemblance in relation to persons outside the core family. The presence or absence of parent–child resemblance regarding both physical and non-physical characteristics appears to constitute a considerable challenge for heterosexual couples with school-aged children following sperm donation.

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Introduction

Assisted reproductive technology involving donor gametes has provided opportunities for childless couples and individuals to have children. This has challenged the construction of kinship common in Euro-American cultures, where genetic connectedness is regarded as the basis for family bonds (Becker et al., 2005; Hargreaves, 2006; Nordqvist and Smart, 2014). One essential consequence of this construction of kinship is the assumption that a resemblance exists between parent and offspring. This resemblance may include both physical characteristics (e.g. skin colour and body height) and non-physical traits (e.g. intelligence). Fathers have been found to use physical resemblance as cues for paternity, and facial resemblance to self was reported to predict fathers’ emotional closeness to the child (Alvergne et al., 2010).

In the field of donor conception, matching is performed in order to overcome the lack of resemblance between the non-genetic parent and the child, and through this meet the societal norm of kinship. In heterosexual couples, matching may thus enable concealment of the donor conception. Matching is commonly performed with regard to physical similarities (e.g. skin, eye and hair colour) between the donor and the non-genetic presumptive parent, and donor-conceiving parents have been found to expect the matching to create both physical and non-physical resemblance between the child and the non-genetic parent (Indekeu, 2015).

Comments about physical similarities between a child and their parents often start as soon as a baby is born and serve as a means to link the newborn to the family. Such ‘resemblance talk’ is a common feature of everyday talk, especially when children are young, and is suggested to play an important role in the process of establishing the child’s identity within the family (Becker et al., 2005). Among families created with the help of donor gametes, the topic of resemblance between the child and parents and other family members has been found to be a sensitive issue (Becker et al., 2005; Indekeu, 2015). An interview study of 148 couples who had used gamete donation to conceive showed that comments from others on physical resemblance within the donor-conceived family were very common (Becker et al., 2005). These authors suggested that, as children grow older, resemblance talk might shift to non-physical characteristics such as personality traits, specific talents or interests. While the notion of non-physical aspects coming into greater focus over time was supported in a study of 18 donor-conceiving parents of older children (Indekeu, 2015), comments on physical resemblance persisted and were even given about adult offspring.

In a meta-ethnographic review of qualitative studies of heterosexual donor-conceived families, parents were found to struggle with balancing the importance of genetic and social ties and with normalizing and legitimizing the family (Wyverkens et al., 2015). Dealing with the presence or absence of resemblance between child and parents was reported to be an important part of this process. Resemblance talk had the potential to support and reinforce the sense of being a family, but could also be experienced as challenging the legitimacy of their family. Research in this area has focused more on physical aspects of parent–child resemblance and less on non-physical characteristics, and there is limited knowledge about how donor-conceiving parents manage the issue of resemblance and non-resemblance within the couple. Furthermore, most studies on resemblance in donor-conceived families have been conducted in contexts using predominantly anonymous donors (Becker et al., 2005; Burr, 2009; Hargreaves, 2006; Indekeu, 2015; Shehab et al., 2008; Wyverkens et al., 2017). Becoming parents with the help of a donor whose identity will become accessible to the offspring creates a situation where the donor is unknown to the parents as the child grows up, but is ‘lurking in the future’ (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014, p. 123), which may have an influence on parents’ feelings and thoughts about resemblance. Therefore, the aim of this study was to gather and better understand heterosexual parents’ experiences of managing resemblance and non-resemblance between child and parent in an identity-release donor programme.

Materials and methods

The longitudinal Swedish Study on Gamete Donation (SSGD) is a multicentre study following a cohort of gamete recipients in Sweden since their treatment in 2005–2008. In Sweden, legislation gives persons conceived through gamete donation treatment the right to obtain identifying information about the donor when they reach maturity. Parents of donation offspring do not receive any information about the donor at the time of treatment or at any stage afterwards. The matching is performed by a physician regarding physical attributes such as height, eye and hair colour. The present study is part of the SSGD with a sample from the heterosexual sperm recipient couples (n = 127) that initially agreed to participate in the SSGD with a response rate 81%. Information about inclusion criteria for the multicentre study is given in Isaksson et al. (2012). Inclusion criteria for the present interview study were: (i) being heterosexual recipients of donated sperm that resulted in a child aged 7–8 years; (ii) having participated in the fourth assessment of the longitudinal study before February 2015; and (iii) accepting contact regarding further study participation. Following recruitment [see Isaksson et al., 2016 for detailed information], 30 parents representing sperm recipients from all participating fertility clinics participated in individual interviews.

The interviews were conducted between February 2014 and February 2015 at a time chosen by the participant. The participants were geographically spread over the entire country, and therefore interviews were performed either through face-to-face meetings or by telephone. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on participants’ experiences of parenthood following sperm donation, including reasoning about and experiences of information sharing concerning the donor conception. The topic of resemblance was introduced by a question about their experiences of resemblance talk, but was also mentioned spontaneously by participants. Results concerning the process of information sharing were presented by Isaksson et al. (2016). In the present study, a secondary analysis of the interview data was performed with a focus on the topic of resemblance. The interviews were conducted by either SI or CL, who are trained in qualitative interviewing and have
no professional connection to the clinics where the participants underwent donation treatment.

The Regional Ethics Review Board in Linköping, Sweden approved the study (Dnr 2014/52–31).

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using qualitative thematic content analysis, as described by Burnard et al. (2008). First, the transcripts were read to get a sense of the entire interview. The transcripts were then re-read several times focusing on the aim of the study. Following this, open coding was performed, where key phrases were identified and summarized using notes or short phrases. This was followed by grouping the notes or phrases into categories with subheadings based on their content. Overlapping and similar categories were merged in order to reduce and refine the number of categories. The main analysis was conducted by SI. To check for validity, parts of the analysis were performed separately by SI and AI, and later discussed together with CL. During the analysis process, several meetings were held among co-authors to discuss the different steps of the analysis and the categorizations until consensus was reached. All participants were provided with individual study numbers (1–30). In the Results section, the participant’s gender and number are reported after each quote (e.g. ‘Female 5’).

Results

Nineteen women and 11 men participated in this study. Among the 30 participants, 18 were part of a couple where both parents agreed to participate, while the remaining participants (10 mothers and two fathers) were the sole participants from a parental couple. Five of the participants had separated from the other parent of the donor offspring, and three of these parents were in new relationships. The participants were parents to one to three children each. All interviews were carried out individually, either as face-to-face meetings or by telephone, and lasted between 40 and 120 min. There were no differences between the telephone and face-to-face interviews regarding length and richness of the answers.

The analysis resulted in three categories: ‘resemblance through nature or nurture’, ‘non-resemblance brings the donor to the front’ and ‘feelings about and coping with resemblance talk’. The first two categories deal with the intrapersonal aspects of resemblance, while the last category includes aspects of resemblance in connection with people outside the core family.

Resemblance through nature or nurture

The first category, ‘resemblance through nature or nurture’, implies that resemblance can be present through the genetic bond between parent and child as well as being developed through nurture (i.e. by the bonding between parent and child and by living together in a family). This category includes the subcategories ‘experience of resemblance within the family’ and ‘how non-physical resemblance comes into being’.

Both mothers and fathers predominantly described that the children looked like their mother (i.e. the genetic parent) and her relatives. Physical similarities between child (–ren) and father were acknowledged with astonishment ‘since there shouldn't be any’ (Female 6). Resemblance with regard to non-physical characteristics, such as mimics, gestures and personality, was addressed in relation to one or both parents. Some women mentioned that their children did not share their fathers’ interests in sports or other physical activities, and deliberated on the degree to which this non-resemblance could be attributed to genetics or to the children’s gender, and also how this affected the father. One woman said that her daughters resembled her more than her husband in behaviour and interests, and that both she and her husband had reflected on this non-resemblance as being challenging for the father:

… he is very active, very physical, very sort of fearless. And I am somewhat of his opposite, and the children are too. Sometimes he feels like… at times when he meets the children of his siblings… he feels that they are more like him. /.../ I believe that the thing that is troubling him is that their [the daughters'] personalities are different from his, because he can't help thinking about what it would have been like if he had been their biological father. He would really like them to go canoeing with him…out on all sorts of escapades. And specially the older girl, she is something of a homebody, she really prefers to stay indoors… /.../ Then it's the thing that they are girls, that may be...

[Female 5]

In contrast, one man described that he never thought of the lack of genetic connection between him and his sons, because he saw that they resembled both him and their mother with regard to everyday behaviour. He reflected on how having the same gender and similar experiences during upbringing made it easier for him to identify and bond with his children:

Their manners are probably very similar to mine and A's (the mother). How we walk and stand and eat and talk and... /.../ My boys are exactly the same as I was when I was a little boy, they act the same way as I did. They play the same pranks that I did and it makes everything seem so familiar. /.../ I also think that it is an advantage that I have two sons. It would have been more difficult to connect to two girls. /.../ We live out in the countryside like I did when I was a boy. And I played in the same places and with the same things that they do when I was a little boy. And it makes it easier to identify with the kids. And I believe that in some ways it may have made everything easier.

[Male 20]

Non-physical resemblance was pictured as something that is developed passively as well as actively. Both male and female participants described how non-physical resemblance develops by living together and how children take after their parents in behaviour, gestures, mimics and values:

I do believe that social heritage shapes an individual more than genetic heritage does, so that they... I think that they are like me anyway because their gestures are like mine, they have my way of expressing themselves and... I mean, why shouldn't they be like me?

[Male 12]
Another man described it as a responsibility and important for him to actively bond and build a relationship with his children with the goal to create resemblance through nurture:

But I have also...felt that it is very important to...with paternity leave and such,... it felt that it became more important for me than maybe for someone else that has... that has biological children... to really connect early. /.../ I believe you get some of it for free, though I am not like a geneticist or something, I do believe that you get something for free with the genetic heritage, so you really have to build your relationship.

[Male 4]

An additional way to create resemblance was by choosing the same donor for all children in a family. This was addressed with regard both to the importance of the genetic basis for behavioural aspects and to create resemblance between the siblings. One woman reflected about her and her husband's decision to choose the same donor for their three children:

In one of the internet forums that I visited, someone wrote that they had actively chosen to have different donors, just to show that genetic heritage doesn't matter. Now we are making an assessment in a way, 'You should at least have the same biological heritage', as if it is actually important and maybe you shouldn't deny that it is, it is important, right?

[Female 5]

Some parents expressed that they tried not to take notice of resemblance by thinking of their children as unique individuals with their own personalities. One woman said that she could recognize a resemblance between her and her children when others pointed this out. However, as she and her husband had talked about his feelings and difficulties dealing with the genetic imbalance within the couple, they had chosen a strategy to regard their children as unique individuals, something that she held on to. She reflected that many parents seem to see their children as extensions of themselves, and that 'I can see something very positive in that... our children... are unique individuals and that we see the uniqueness that every child deserves to have' (Female 30). One man in another couple described how his lack of a genetic link made it possible for him to relate to his children in a more objective manner than other parents:

Maybe it is easier for me to value the children as individuals, not as my progeny. They are persons and they have their personality, some positive parts and some negative. /.../ Maybe I can be more objective in a way. Because if there are some complaints, if the children have been involved in some situation at school, or if there is something, you can see it more...from a practical perspective. OK, how do we solve this situation? I don't take it...it is not a direct criticism.

[Male 8]

Non-resemblance brings the donor to the front

The second category, 'non-resemblance brings the donor to the front', includes reflections about a lack of resemblance or perceptions of unfamiliar characteristics in the child that evoked thoughts about the donor and his genetic contribution.

In some cases, non-resemblance with regard to specific physical attributes was reflected upon and attributed to the donor. One woman described how these thoughts came as a surprising reminder of the fact that half of her child's genetic origin is unknown to her:

She really looks like me... except for the hair. Because my hair is very curly and her hair is very straight. So she probably has that from the other side. Sometimes I think... I see that her toes don't look like mine and her hair is totally different from mine and then I think 'oh wow -- yeah, that's it. I have a... I don't know anything about half of her genes'...

[Female 19]

Reflections about the donor and his contribution were not only evoked by non-resemblance of physical aspects but also with regard to behaviour or characteristics that the parents could not attribute to themselves. Noticing an unfamiliar and negative behaviour or trait in one's child could be distressing and result in brooding about what type of person the donor is:

Yes, I was wondering a little about B. She was three... or maybe four, when I thought that she was... not empathetic. God, it's really terrible, but at the time I was thinking a lot and wondered what kind of a donor we have... Is it some kind of a psychopath?

[Female 6]

In contrast, when parents saw specific positive characteristics in their children, such as intelligence, this could evoke curiosity about the donor and thankfulness that he had contributed to the child's capability for academic achievements. However, parents also reflected about how they would have reacted if the situation had been reversed, and their child had learning difficulties:

She is really super smart, then again, so is my sister, so she might as well have her genes. But the donor cannot be a dummy, that's not possible. Sometimes you feel that it can't hurt to have the potential for an easier life, you know. And I can be very grateful for that.

[Female 6]

You know, we have children that have had it easy in school, they are really talented and high performers and so on. And, of course, you probably would ponder more if you had a child with, let's say ADHD, or huge problems in school... then you might wonder a lot about 'Well, what about their origin?'. But now I sense instead 'Well, these kids are really smart!' And then I thought 'Wow, who was this person? It must have been some... medical student or something'.

[Female 27]

Non-resemblance could also be perceived as something positive, for example in relation to certain conditions that were present in the father or his relatives. The avoidance of a genetic risk for mental illness, dyslexia and allergies was appreciated by both women and men,
and complemented with an expectation that donor conception involved picking the ‘best sperm available’ to make a child. A woman living in a loving relationship with her husband described that, despite feelings of grief and loss for not being able to become parents the way they had planned, she could see a possible aspect of using sperm donation since there was no risk of transmitting a hereditary condition:

I am really happy about my children and I am also happy that my husband has no sperm, if I may be totally honest about it.

[Female 9]

Feelings about and coping with resemblance talk

The third category, ‘feelings about and coping with resemblance talk’, concerns parents’ experiences of situations when people outside the core family comment on the existence or lack of resemblance between child and parent.

Parents described that comments and questions about the child’s physical features and whom he or she resembled were very common, and had been particularly frequent when the child was newborn. Interestingly, many participants mentioned comments about physical resemblance between the father and the child; for example, ‘well, there is no doubt that you are the father’ (Female 24). One man reflected how comments about the child’s resemblance to him gave him a positive feeling and served as an acknowledgement of him being a father and a man despite his infertility: ‘a man boost’ (Male 13). One woman described that nobody outside the family remarked on any resemblance between the mother (who had the genetic link) and the child, but many did comment on the child’s resemblance to the father. They had not talked about this within the couple, but she sensed that her husband appreciated these comments:

I have never heard anybody say that they look like me, they only look like K [father]. And I think he likes that. Actually, I think it’s good for him. And we never say anything.

[Female 6]

Resemblance talk that focused on mother and child was mostly perceived as uncomplicated but could also be problematic. One man described how people frequently commented on their child’s close resemblance to the mother. However, he was unprepared for such remarks coming from close relatives whom he had told about the donor conception and asked not to talk about resemblance in his presence. Although he realized that no harm was intended, it still made him feel hurt and excluded. At the same time, he reflected that he probably would have acted in the exact same way if he had been able to have biological children:

But then it is sort of... when the children come, these questions follow ‘Well, who does he look like the most?’ and ‘Look at him, doesn’t he look exactly like mommy?’. And you always say ‘Yes, well, you’re right’. And you are surprised when you hear these comments also from your immediate family. /.../ They mean no harm but it is kind of...it is a tough thing to face... and I wasn’t really prepared for this. I thought ‘Now I have told them, now they know what the situation is’. And then these comments still come... and you are a bit stunned, feeling as if you are standing and watching from the outside.

[Male 18]

There were several different ways of coping with comments about resemblance between child and father, from ignoring or deflecting the comment (e.g. ‘you think so?’) to shocking the person with the truth of donor conception. Sometimes such comments caused amusement and participants would smile and think ‘if you only knew...’. Some men had found a way to meet remarks about resemblance by using certain phrases. For several parents, using a rehearsed wording served as a way of coping with and distancing themselves from resemblance talk and comments from others:

I have reached the conclusion that you must try to keep a certain distance to that and... well, in a way... a bit tongue-in-cheek. ‘Yeah well, it’s mommy’s good looks and daddy’s fine manners’ or something, to take the edge off somewhat so you can... feel that you yourself also are a part of it.

[(Male 18)]

Yeah, it is nice to have some sort of phrase to rely on, something to say instead of trying to... I mean, it is no use saying ‘What, doesn’t he look like me? Don’t you think so?’ that gets weird in a way. Instead, and this is also a way to never go behind the back of N and T, you say ‘He is totally his own person’. /.../ It is important to always keep a slight distance to it in a way, and of course it was tough in the beginning. Especially when they were newborn, ‘Oh they are the spitting image...’ things like that. To me it is... it is important to create some tools, to sort of cope with these situations.

[(Male 4)]

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that resemblance and non-resemblance between parent and child is a challenging theme for heterosexual couples who used sperm donation to become parents, and one that parents still need to ‘work with’ when the children have reached school age. The presence or absence of resemblance with regard to appearance or non-physical traits is not neutral. It has a meaning, evokes emotions and therefore needs to be dealt with by the parents, both within and outside the family.

Donor conception has been argued to both challenge and reinforce the importance of biogenetic relatedness (Frith et al., 2018a) predominant in Euro-American cultures (Becker et al., 2005; Hargreaves, 2006; Nordqvist and Smart, 2014). Having a child with sperm donation creates an inherent genetic ‘imbalance’ within the couple, which may become visible in terms of child–parent resemblance. While parents have been reported to expect that matching of the donor will result in resemblance between the child and the non-
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genetic parent (Indekeu, 2015), physical similarities between the father and the child were still met with surprise by the participants as they were aware that ‘there shouldn’t be any’. Physical resemblance between the mother and the child was acknowledged both by the parents themselves and other people, which may be seen as a strategy to emphasize the mother’s role in the conception and minimizing the contribution of the donor to the creation of the child (Snowden et al., 1983; Zadeh et al., 2016). Another way of dealing with the existing genetic imbalance within the couple was by discounting the significance of genetic linkages, in line with previous reports (Wyverkens et al., 2015; Wyverkens et al., 2017). Some participants described actively choosing to perceive their children as unique individuals with minimal reference to inherited features and traits. While this stance erases the donor from the narrative and makes him an ‘absence’, which has previously been reported for heterosexual donor-conceiving parents (Grace et al., 2008), it also negates the genetic connectedness of the mother. This appears as a challenging approach given that the present study was performed in a socio-cultural context that places high value on genetics, which has been suggested to hinder parental attempts to negate the influence of the donor (Indekeu et al., 2014).

This study did not focus on couple dynamics and the relation within the couple. However, during the analysis, it was observed that women often did not bring up topics related to resemblance out of respect for the father’s feelings. These findings are in line with earlier reports of struggles related to the asymmetric genetic relatedness among heterosexual couples, where genetic mothers felt guilty and felt the need to hide their own joy of genetic connectedness with the child in order to protect the father (Becker et al., 2005; Nordqvist and Smart, 2014). This may be related to the stigmatization of male factor infertility associated with its association to masculinity (Culley et al., 2013; Wischmann and Thorn, 2013). However, avoiding topics related to the donor conception or keeping the donor conception a secret from the child may come at a cost for mothers in heterosexual couples. In families where offspring became aware of their conception with donor sperm relatively late, some mothers were blamed for choosing to favour the father’s wishes for secrecy over the child’s need for openness (Frith et al., 2018b).

Both men and women were found to narratively construct the shifting balance of the significance of genetic connectedness and social relationships, which became evident with regard to resemblance with regard to non-physical characteristics, such as talents and interests. Such traits were commonly brought up in the present study, which confirms earlier suggestions that these would come into greater focus as donor-conceived children grow older (Becker et al., 2005). An absence of father–child resemblance with regard to personality was attributed to the lack of genetic link and was perceived to challenge a father’s ability to bond with his child through social interactions. At the same time, there was an assumption that the lack of a genetic bond between the father and the child could (and potentially needed to) be compensated for by active parenthood. This way of ‘genetic thinking’ influencing the ‘everyday family living’ was described recently by Nordqvist (2017). Non-genetic parents of donor-conceived children can feel particularly vulnerable in their parenthood (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014; Wyverkens et al., 2017), and being able to identify with their children and engage in joint activities seemed important to reinforce fathers in their role as parent, which was also described in a recent study of heterosexual parents following anonymous sperm donation (Wyverkens et al., 2017). In line with this, both female and male participants in the present study described that parenthood is largely socially constructed, ‘resemblance through nurture’, and demonstrated by shared expressions, gestures and activities among family members. This is consistent with the notion that everyday efforts of parenthood make a parent, which was phrases ‘doing parenthood’ in the context of donor conception (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014) as well as in adoptive families (Howell and Marre, 2006; Krusiewicz and Wood, 2001).

Non-resemblance of physical and non-physical characteristics was described to bring the donor to the front in neutral, positive and negative ways. The donor was perceived as a carrier of specific genetic traits and constituted an ‘absent presence’ as described previously in the context of donor-conceiving families (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014; Zadeh et al., 2016). Identification of specific characteristics in the child that the study participants could not explain through the mother’s ‘side’ made the donor ‘present’, and evoked thoughts and curiosity about him. In line with earlier findings (Burr, 2009), participants’ narratives indicated an ambivalence in the construction of the donor, where the donor could be envisioned as an ‘intelligent medical student’ but also as a ‘shadowy’ figure with potentially sinister genetic influence. While participants expressed feeling grateful for the donor’s contribution to positive traits in their children, this could also evoke reflections about how they would have reacted if the child had demonstrated specific negative characteristics. This illustrates how non-resemblance evokes thoughts about genetic linkage, and how parents need to ‘work with’ the fact that they have no information about the donor and his potential contribution to their child. Although parents who conceived with their own gametes can also wonder about unfamiliar traits in their children, donor-conceived parents may be more prone to place such traits outside themselves, with the unknown person who is the donor. This phenomenon may be particularly likely when parents look for an explanation for problematic behaviours in their child (Grace et al., 2008; Indekeu, 2015; Wyverkens et al., 2017). Similarly, adult donor-conceived persons have expressed that having information about the donor could provide a ‘reference point’ to help them clarify which characteristics they had inherited biologically and/or socially (Indekeu and Hens, 2019). It is possible that the donor’s presence becomes particularly pronounced among parents who conceived within a programme using identity-release sperm donors (i.e. where offspring have the right to obtain identifying information about the donor when reaching maturity). As reported previously (Isaksson et al., 2016), some participants in the present study hoped that their child would obtain information and establish contact with the donor, while others had no such interest.

Resemblance talk was, according to the study participants, perceived to be quite common; it was most frequent when the child was newborn and was still present when the child had reached school age. In line with earlier research
(Becker et al., 2005; Indekeu, 2015), remarks about physical resemblance between the parent and child stayed present over time, alongside additional comments on characteristics such as personality, specific talents and interests. In the present study, balancing the importance of genetic connectedness and social relationships was found to be marked by influence from contact with people outside the core family, as reported previously (Wyverkens et al., 2015). Both male and female participants described a wide variety of emotions and reactions to resemblance talk, particularly among fathers of donor-conceived children. In general, comments about physical resemblance between the child and the mother (the genetic parent) were not described to be problematic. Similarly, comments about the child’s resemblance to the father were generally appreciated and appeared to reinforce his sense of manhood and role as father. However, while comments about child–parent resemblance may seem ‘innocuous’ and ‘non-threatening’, they could nevertheless be perceived as hurtful and evoke emotions of loss and grief related to the lack of genetic connectedness (Becker et al., 2005; Wischmann and Thorn, 2013). Thus, to the extent that resemblance talk is perceived as an expression of the significance of genetic linkage, it may act as a painful reminder of the status as non-genetic parent. Drawing on symbolic interactionism theory and the looking glass self, ‘doing parenthood’ can be understood as a role where the parents actively express and construct their self-concept as parents (Cook and Douglas, 1998). However, as parenthood and genes are socially constructed (Indekeu and Hens, 2019), heterosexual couples using sperm donation may perceive an incongruity between their self-concept as parents and how they perceive being perceived and evaluated by others. Participants expressed some surprise that comments about resemblance between the child, the father and paternal relatives also came from family members and other people who knew about the sperm donation. Such remarks have been reported to trigger feelings of anger and shame, as well as a sense of exclusion in the non-genetic parent (Becker et al., 2005; Nordqvist, 2017; Nordqvist and Smart, 2014; Wischmann and Thorn, 2013). From a sociological perspective, this phenomenon has been suggested to be a creative way to integrate the child into the larger family and confirm him or her as a member of the family (Hargreaves, 2006; Indekeu, 2015; Nordqvist, 2017). This way of creatively negotiating affinities (affinity meaning ‘bound by some tie’) between people is also described within Mason’s conceptual framework for understanding kinship as different ways to imagine and practice relatedness (Mason, 2008).

Resemblance talk was perceived as unavoidable by participants of the present study and, at times, irksome as it generally does require some form of response by the parents. In line with earlier reports (Becker et al., 2005), participants described using a variety of strategies ranging from brief comebacks to carefully prepared phrases. Developing tools to handle these situations creates a sense of control for the parents (Becker et al., 2005), and participants perceived these phrases as helpful in handling awkward situations. Most strategies did not involve revealing any information about genetic connectedness, which suggests that the participants in many encounters chose to refrain from bringing up their use of donor conception. This may indicate an effort at normalizing and legitimizing the family (Wyverkens et al., 2015), but could also be related to seeing the child as the principal ‘owner’ of information about his/her genetic origin, with the right to decide with whom to share this information. All study participants planned to share information about the donor conception with their children, and most had started the disclosure process, as reported previously (Isaksson et al., 2016). Parents were found to be at different levels of the process, ranging from general talk about ‘how babies are made’ to information about the child’s future ability to access information about the donor’s identity. These findings are in line with previous reports of parents following donor conception engaging in ‘partial disclosure’, both in relation to the child, the family and other people (Readings et al., 2011). Many heterosexual couples find the information-sharing process difficult, with both adult-centered and child-centered reasons for withholding information about the donor conception (Crawshaw and Daniels, 2018). Fear of stigmatization of the child and/or family is a common concern that hinders openness about the use of donor conception to people outside the family. While one could assume that parental coping with resemblance talk is related to their decision to disclose information about the donor conception to their child, a previous study of 148 couples did not find any qualitative differences in this regard between disclosers and non-disclosers (Becker et al., 2005). Few parents gave out information freely about the donor conception to others, and this decision was primarily based on concerns about the wellbeing of the child. However, comments about child–parent resemblance have been described to put pressure on parents to explain physical similarities or dissimilarities by talking with their children about their conception with donor gametes (Shehab et al., 2008).

In view of the complex and lifelong challenges of becoming parents with donor conception, it is imperative that targeted information and support is provided to those contemplating assisted reproduction involving a third party, and that long-term support is made available to the resulting families as well as to the donors. Recent reports (Crawshaw and Daniels, 2018; Visser et al., 2016a) have highlighted that current psychosocial interventions are not sufficiently adapted to the long-term aspects of donor conception. The aim of the counselling that is provided (sometimes mandatory) to prospective parents is perceived as blurry, including an aspect of ‘gate-keeping’ (Braverman, 2015), and failing to provide enough assistance for disclosure to offspring (Visser et al., 2016b). As donor-conceived families in general have been reported to function as well as other families (Golombok, 2015), a general need for professional counseling is unlikely. Crawshaw and Daniels (2018) advocate an alternative strategy with a psycho-educational approach to prepare and support donor-conceived families for family life with varying genetic connectedness between family members, where this is not hidden. Regarding the issue of resemblance, this could entail acknowledging parents’ emotions and concerns related to genetic linkage that emerged in the interviews, and strengthening their confidence in managing non-resemblance and resemblance talk.

This study followed the criteria for trustworthiness as described by Guba (1981). Informants were recruited from all
fertility clinics in Sweden performing sperm donation treatment at the time of inclusion, which led to variation with regard to informants from different geographical areas, both urban and rural. Also, informants varied regarding their relationship status to the co-parent of the donor-conceived child. Interviews were performed both in face-to-face settings and by telephone. The use of telephone interviews is, on one hand, challenging as no body language or facial expression can be registered, which leads to a greater challenge for the interviewer to notice different facets in the informant. On the other hand, this may contribute to the informant feeling more comfortable and less concerned about being judged (Ward et al., 2015). There were no differences between the telephone and face-to-face interviews regarding length and richness of the answers. In the present study, individual interviews were conducted with all participants. While conjoint interviews with those who constituted a parental couple might have provided insight into couple dynamics and the parents’ shared construction of resemblance issues, this format also has limitations (Frith et al., 2012; Wyverkens et al. 2017). In view of the sensitive topic of donor conception for heterosexual couples, individual interviews were chosen as this enabled free expression of personal views without being restricted by consideration for the partner. In order to reduce the risk of researcher bias, investigator and analysis triangulation were used. To further increase the study’s credibility, representative quotations from the transcribed text were presented. This study was performed in the context of Swedish legislation, with donors that are identifiable for the offspring on reaching maturity, which must be taken into consideration. Also, this study concerns the experiences of heterosexual couples with children following sperm donation, and who planned to share information about the donor conception with their child(ren). Therefore, the extent to which these results are transferable to other recipient groups (e.g. same-sex or single mothers), other types of gamete donation (e.g. double donation, embryo donation) or parents who plan to keep the use of donor gametes a secret is unclear, and research with those groups is needed. Finally, this study was based on a secondary analysis of interview data collected with a broad focus on several aspects of parenthood following donor conception. As the role of resemblance was not the main research objective, it is possible that some aspects of parents’ experiences related to this topic were not covered fully in the interviews. However, resemblance clearly emerged as a dominant theme in the data as an important aspect of parenthood following sperm donation treatment.

In conclusion, the present results show how heterosexual couples with children following sperm donation experience the presence and absence of child–parent resemblance with regard to appearance as well as non-physical traits. Parents navigate between the importance of genetic connectedness and of ‘doing parenthood’ through social interactions both within and outside the family. They construct their self-concept as parents on the basis of their perceptions of how they are perceived and evaluated by others, and this may be particularly challenging for non-genetic parents. Thus, the ‘paradoxes of genetic kinship’ (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014, p. 144) do appear to have an ongoing influence on donor-conceived families, which will continue throughout their lives.

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