

I was conceived through sperm donation, and my mother was adopted, so the nature and meaning of genetic relationships is something that has long been thought about and felt deeply in my family.

I have never met my donor “father”, and I have no desire to do so. I do not see this lack of contact with my biological father as something missing in my life, and I have no hurt at the fact of my creation.

What does cause me hurt, however, is the idea, constantly repeated by small numbers of donor-conceived children, and in popular media representations of the issue, that there must be something wrong with your life if you do not know your biological father.

Over and over again we hear the phrase that there is “something missing” in the lives of donor-conceived children, some meaning in their life that has been taken from them.

But we all know what it is to question our place in the world. Most people eventually develop a sense of place and personhood, or at least learn to live with feelings of uncertainty.

Yet for people who are adopted or born through donor egg or sperm, society continually reinforces that feeling. We are told repeatedly that yes, there is something missing.

This is a pervasive and cruel cultural myth, this idea that you cannot know who you are unless you know your biological parent.

My whole life I have been subjected to the shocked responses of people who – on learning that I don’t know my donor – could not understand how I could be comfortable with this and believed I must be harbouring hurt about it.

They found it difficult to imagine life without their own father and they did not differentiate between their biological connection and their emotional, familial connection born of shared experiences and values.

But if I ever meet my biological father, I will not find a “father” in him. He had no input into the adult I am today besides his kind gift of the genetic building blocks I needed for my life to begin.

The reality is you - the things that make you really *you* - are not your genes. There is no gene for your love of camping, or the comfort you get from the smell of your mother's perfume.

Knowing your biological parent will never explain why you love the one you do, why you hate early mornings or feel uplifted by classical music. Genes interact with your environment to create you, but they do not give meaning to your life.

Even people who have a very similar genetic make-up can be very different, and science is still far from tracing genetic roots for most illnesses, including those more linked to our personalities such as some mental illnesses.

And the circumstances of our upbringing further pollute our genetic stories. Which genes are expressed in us turns out to be a complex, messy mix of environment, culture, and perhaps even chance.

The idea that on learning about a donor you would somehow be given some important insight into your “self” is, frankly, ridiculous to me.

Of course, this is a trick we play on ourselves every day when we light-heartedly explain our personality traits or those of our siblings as being “inherited” from others in our family. Normally it is completely harmless but in the case of donor-conceived people and adoptees it creates a completely unnecessary and often damaging idea about what being donor-conceived means for their life.

When my mother first met some members of her biological family who lived in the country she came home and said to me “now I know why I love the bush”. Her strong belief in biology meant she couldn’t help overlooking both her history with her adopted family that could have led her to love the bush, and differences with her biological family which did not fit this narrative (such as that she could never bear to kill an animal or really do anything other than coddle it, but her biological relatives who were farmers, by nature of their jobs had a different attitude).

I note with sadness a submission received by your committee from a young woman who had grown up in a Maltese family, but it was not until she discovered her donor was Maltese that she allowed herself to feel a connection to that country.

What a tragic and fruitless search is being pushed onto donor-conceived children by the idea that the only place they can find such personal and cultural meaning is through a biological connection rather than cultural and personal connections.

As a society I believe we should be working towards developing a more mature and meaningful debate about what role biology plays in who we are. Rather than pandering to quasi-religious, biologically determinist beliefs we should be actively challenging such ideas.

As the biologist Stephen J Gould said, each individual has the potential to be and act in many different ways. We have “a brain capable of the full range of human behaviors and predisposed towards none”. This conception of humanity is clearly more nuanced and realistic than a simplistic biologically determinist model where we all have specific genes for our specific behavioural traits.

The idea of genetic determinism traces back to thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and has long been replaced with far more nuanced ideas in the scientific and philosophical literature. It’s high time the rest of us caught up.

Arguing that not allowing donor-conceived children access to their donor violates the *United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child* is based on faulty assumptions about the role of these biological fathers in their lives.

Three of the Articles of the Convention mentioned in the draft report are:

Article 3 (Best interests of the child): The best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them.

Article 7 (Registration, name, nationality, care): All children have the right to a legally registered name, officially recognised by the government. Children have the right to a nationality (to belong to a country). Children also have the right to know and, as far as possible, to be cared for by their parents.

Article 8 (Preservation of identity): Children have the right to an identity – an official record of who they are. Governments should respect children’s right to a name, a nationality and family ties

These Articles should not be used to justify such a change. Propagating these cultural myths is not in the best interests of the affected children. These children ALL have existing rights to names, nationalities, parents, histories and identities. They have families who love them, raised them, and in doing so shaped who they are today.

To think that the very real rights of men who donated anonymously and do not want to be contacted by children could be violated on the basis of cultural mythology that I believe we should be fighting, rather than endorsing, saddens me greatly.

However, I should note that not all donor-conceived children feel the same way I do, and I do not intend to undermine the absolutely real and very strong emotions they feel about not knowing their donor fathers. We as a society have created this mess and we should fix it up. I would support an option of paying for genetic counselling for such children, as well as a mechanism for them to make contact with anonymous donors *IF* the donors also wanted that contact, as this does not place the desires of one of the two people above the other.

In conclusion, I do believe that many donor-conceived people suffer a real and tragic hurt from the knowledge that they do not know their biological father. I think the government should undertake to attempt to contact donors if approached by donor-conceived people, as it will likely cause little individual harm if both donor and child want to meet.

But the hurt felt by donor-conceived children is largely based on misinformation and misunderstanding, and to further compound it by changing the laws and allowing men who identified anonymously to have their identities revealed is the wrong approach. Not least because, if those men have already stated that they do not want to meet, revealing their identities will likely not provide the children the connection they desperately want. These children should be supported with counselling services.

I also hope in writing its final report the Committee will acknowledge that the “genetically determinist” ideas about sperm donation are harmful in and of themselves, and will challenge these ideas rather than accepting them.

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