



## When the Kids Grow Up and Find out about the Test Tubes

**"...subtle psychological burdens may be placed upon children born from donor sperm as they subjectively struggle with broken or absent relationships, and experience a sense of being a "commodity" or an "object" because of how they were created."**



When I give talks about *in vitro* fertilization, audience members will sometimes inquire whether test tube babies experience psychological problems as they grow up. Although they clearly face elevated health risks for a number of diseases and physical disorders, the psychological effects on these children have not been thoroughly studied. Nevertheless, children born from other, closely related technologies, like anonymous sperm donation, are starting to be tracked, and researchers are finding that these children face significant difficulties in dealing with their feelings and emotions as they grow older. They oftentimes struggle with their own sense of dignity and identity, with their need for a father, and with a desire to understand their family connection.

A recent online article in *Slate Magazine* entitled, "The Sperm Donor Kids Are Not Really Alright" describes one such study and includes some thought-provoking personal testimony from a British writer named Christine Whipp. Ms. Whipp, herself conceived by anonymous sperm donation, expresses the feelings that some donor offspring have of being, in the pointed words of the article, a "freak of nature" or a "lab experiment." She puts it this way:

"My existence owed almost nothing to the serendipitous nature of normal human reproduction, where babies are the natural progression of mutually fulfilling adult relationships, but rather represented a verbal contract, a financial transaction and a cold, clinical harnessing of medical technology."

A growing number of children born this way instinctively sense how that "cold, clinical harnessing of technology" can never quite measure up to the warmth and commitment embodied in the life-giving marital embrace of a mother and a father. The absent father who donates sperm anonymously, the financial exchanges involved, and the de-personalized laboratory environment surrounding their origins imply an element of being "used." It can be difficult for such children to put into words what they are really feeling and experiencing, as a young man named Craig emphasizes in his online comments following the *Slate Magazine* article:

"The confusion I felt growing up was not your normal run of the mill confusion. I

# Making Sense of Bioethics

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didn't even begin to understand the inner turmoil I felt until I found out about my beginnings. My suggestion to you would be that before you start giving suggestions to others about how to live in a mixed family, come to know what it's like to be a child who knows something is wrong but you just don't know why. Know you're different... but you just don't know why. Live with a question mark over your head every day of your life and not be able to put words to that question.”

Another young person in the same situation poignantly comments:

“I am a product of sperm donation and I can tell you that I always hated growing up without a dad. I can't tell my mom how I feel because I said something to her when I was little and she got very hurt and upset and tried to explain to me that a lot of kids grow up without dads and kinda went into all of this women can do this and women can do that and most women really don't need a man and blah blah blah. So I now keep all of my feelings

to myself. I can tell you that for as much as I love her, inwards I still hate her for doing this to me and thinking that she had a right to decide if I needed a dad or not.”

All children deserve to have a mother and a father as they grow up. We should never intentionally choose to set up situations where a child will be conceived in a manner that deprives him or her of a parent. Every child, moreover, is entitled to the full respect of being conceived and brought into the world only through the marital acts of committed parents, through the intimate, loving embrace of husband and wife, not in petri dishes and test tubes.

Because awareness of our own human roots is critical to our sense of personal identity, and because of our vulnerable “sense of self” as humans, we have a particular responsibility to avoid creating a subclass of those who have “different origins” from the rest of us. It ought to come as no surprise that subtle psychological burdens may be placed upon children born from donor sperm as they subjectively struggle with broken or absent relationships, and experience a sense of being a “commodity” or an

“object” because of how they were created. These dark and morally troubling aspects of modern reproductive technologies need to be more fully acknowledged and discussed in our society, as they unleash powerful forces that profoundly affect the future of the human beings who are thereby brought into the world.

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