

SOCIOLOGY

Beyond blood

Strangers conceived via the same sperm donor reveal the role of choice in how we think about kin

By Sophie Zadeh

In an age of direct-to-consumer DNA tests, conception from donated gametes that have crossed national borders, and connection websites for “genetic strangers,” old questions seek new answers. What is family? What makes kin? And how far can genes alone generate relationships?

Random Families, Rosanna Hertz and Margaret Nelson explain, is a book about new forms of voluntary kinship. Unlike its own (academic) ancestors, it examines what people do with genetic connections that fall both within—and outside of—familiar familial repertoires. Concerned with connections that are created through choice but are genetic in origin, *Random Families* presents a timely sociological exploration of relationships between parents who have chosen the same sperm donor, and their children, who therefore share DNA.

Based on a virtual ethnography of existing online same-donor networks, and interviews conducted with 212 parents and 154 children, the book weaves extensive empirical insights together with compelling case studies that bring to life the diverse experiences of those who form, resist, and break apart from networks on the basis of same-donor status. Examining the networks formed across generations and documenting them over time, Hertz and Nelson’s approach is a welcome addition to the scholarship on searching for genetic relations among donor-conceived people and their parents (1, 2). For individuals conceived in earlier decades, the authors explain, searching for donors has led some to inadvertently discover “donor siblings.” By contrast, the parents of today’s donor-conceived infants may purposely seek out genetic connections on behalf of their children.

Hertz and Nelson’s analysis brings into focus the combined role of personal preferences and intergroup dynamics in the formation and maintenance of same-donor networks. As the authors themselves admit, their findings will leave much to be desired for the reader looking for a straightforward story of how families connected by gametes

relate to one another. Rather, *Random Families* is an intellectually honest account of the complexity, and diversity, of same-donor networks. Throughout the book, the narratives of those who do not ascribe meaning to genetic connections sit beautifully alongside those who emphasize the excitement of meeting individuals conceived using the same donor and of the long-lasting relationships that sometimes result.

Strikingly clear is the fact that these connections remain difficult to define. As the authors acknowledge, there is no rulebook for such relationships and no known nomenclature with which to describe them. Thus, for some participants, there are “families,” “brothers,” “sisters,” or “cousins,” whereas for others, there are “sperm siblings,” “donor siblings,” and “diblings.” Within some networks, there are discrepancies in how individuals refer to one another and perceive their connections. Within others, such connections have nothing whatsoever to do with family.

Hertz and Nelson explain that they have used participants’ terms to describe these connections where possible. Yet in their writing, they refer to one network as being “more like cousins,” and at one point they describe parents who choose to bond with some network members and not others as “upending the hierarchy of nature over artifice.” The researchers being no less immune from a traditional lexicon than their respondents, such examples would seem to

Random Families

Genetic Strangers, Sperm Donor Siblings, and the Creation of New Kin
Rosanna Hertz and Margaret K. Nelson
Oxford University Press, 2018. 312 pp.



suggest that same-donor networks pose as much of a conceptual challenge for the sociologist as they do for their members.

In many ways, the title of the book is a misnomer: Although the families described may be “random” at the outset, there is nothing random about the connections they ultimately make. Rather, Hertz and Nelson’s study indicates just how deliberate the creation and maintenance of same-donor relationships can be. Ostensibly about new forms of voluntary kinship, then, *Random Families* ends up telling a familiar story about identity, intimacy, and choice in the 21st century.

This is not to say that Hertz and Nelson tell us nothing new. In fact, although many commentators have commended legislative moves across the world to make donors identifiable to offspring at the age of 18, few have considered the implications of this legislation in contemporary contexts. Same-donor networks—made up of children of different ages and of relations that may be close or distant and positive or negative—can circumvent these laws in ways that had not been anticipated and that may not be equitable. What becomes of these possibilities remains to be seen, but for bringing them to light, *Random Families* deserves recognition. ■

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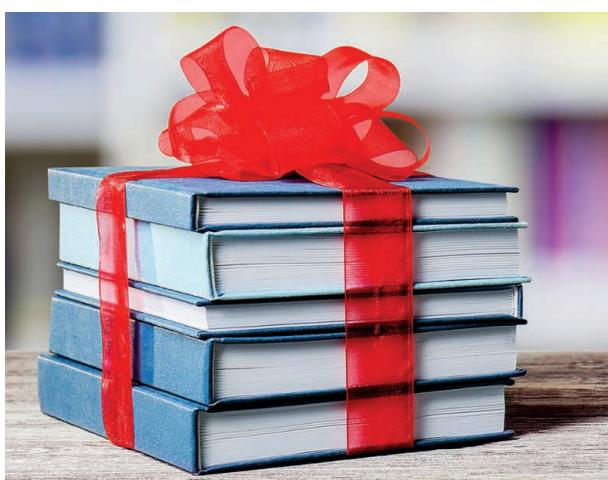
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