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**Risk, trust and sperm donations:  
Lesbian couples negotiating self-  
arranged donor conception**



# Introduction

- Paper explores lesbian couples' experiences of negotiating non-clinical donor conception
- Little knowledge about donor conception processes *outside* reproductive health clinics
- Experiences important to consider
  - Women do not benefit from what the NHS has to offer
  - Health risks
  - The only viable option for some women
  - Legal uncertainties



# Donor conception outside the clinic

- How do women choose and recruit donors?
- How do they know that he is sexually healthy?
- Do women have sexual intercourse with a man?
- How can they gain access to sperm over time?
- Where do they do the insemination?
- How do they negotiate preparing the semen sample, a bodily fluid of a possible stranger?



# The study

- Qualitative interviews with 25 lesbian couples in England and Wales
- Fieldwork Sept 2007 to March 2008
- 12 couples clinical donor conception
  - NHS funded treatment (3)
- 11 couples self-arranged donor conception
- Fluidity between the two groups

# Conceptual frameworks



- Organisation of infertility clinic
  - Charis Thompson (2005) 'ontological choreography'
- Donated sperm and its associated anxieties to do with margins of the body, sexuality and disgust
  - Mary Douglas (1966) the transgression of social and cultural boundaries and dirt/disgust
  - 'Pollution behavior'

# Non-clinical conception - recruiting and selecting donors

- Overriding concern was finding someone who would agree with the couples' vision of parenthood
- Parental agreements not legally binding
- Kim and Nicola - setting up parental arrangements
  - '[I]nitially we just had to have him say, yes, I am interested in theory, and then we set about this rather long, difficult process of hammering out between the four of us [the couple, the donor and his partner] what it might mean and how we might all relate to each other within the set-up.' (Kim, 30, expecting a baby together with Nicola, 41)

# Screening the sperm



## Uncertainties around sexual health

- Screening for STD's only valid on the day
- Donor's sexual practices
- Sexual health risks amplified by lack of legal certainty around parenthood
- Two types of donors:
  - 'Friend' donors
  - 'Stranger' donors



# Risk, trust and distance

- Strategies to manage the contradictory risks of ‘stranger’ donor arrangements
- Managing risks through distance
  - ‘As much as I can say oh he seems really genuinely trustworthy a really honest guy. Otherwise we wouldn’t have used him as a donor but there is always that niggling doubt in the back of your mind. Hence we haven’t given him our personal details, that’s why he knew our first names only.’ (Hannah, 23, mother of one together with Anne, 34)



# Risk, trust and closeness

- But... the couples also had to develop trusting relationships with the donor, not least because of the risks associated with sexual health
- Distance was balanced with closeness and trust
- An **economy of trust** in non-clinical conception

# Economy of trust in donor arrangements



- ‘I felt it was a two-way thing in that they were trusting us that we wouldn’t name them on the birth certificate and we wouldn’t chase them for any payment [through the CSA], so therefore I was prepared to trust them that they didn’t have anything [e.g. an STD].’ (Elaine, 36, mother of one together with Carrie, 36)

# Negotiating place and time



- In 'fresh' donations, the ejaculation and insemination had to take place in quick succession as sperm was only motile for one-two hours after ejaculation
- No designated place for conception
  - 'Friend' donors
  - 'Stranger' donors

# Negotiating place and time

- '[O]ur car is the big black one out there. It's a huge 4x4 and it's got blacked-out windows. So the original theory was, we put the back seats down, you can get a mattress in there if you want, but she could lay down in there with a blanket, no one can see in and I can just drive round a car park or something, nobody would know. No, our car breaks down, so we're left with her mum's very little Nissan Micra, which is open for everyone to see, very low down. So where did we go? Morrison's car park. [laughs] Find the furthest spot away that you can. So I found it. She's only halfway through putting this cup [similar to a diaphragm] in and all of a sudden this trolley bloke comes walking our way. (Sue, 34, trying to conceive with Trish, 31)

# Dealing with sperm



- 'I get the taking [up] and the smell and the putting it up the syringe, and it's gloopy and it's stringy. And also I think because I did live a straight life when I really didn't want to be and I did, that is one thing that's always repulsed me more than any... So I'm there actually close up, syringing it up.' (Sue, 34)

# Dealing with sperm



- 'I think somehow going to the clinic, where there's doctors and there's stirrups and someone goes like that with the plunger and [laughter] and the sperm just goes there, and that somehow that's okay, clean. Whereas a man arriving with a pot and you sucking the sperm into the syringe yourself and putting it into your own vagina, or your partner doing it, and doing that is somehow dirty. And it's like same thing actually.' (Wendy, 36, mother of one together with Penny, 36)

# Dealing with sperm



- 'I think it's been easier to tell people we went to a clinic even if we didn't truth be known. I think it is easier. Even to friends we say yeah we went to a clinic and paid X amount of money, then this happened. That is what I told my parents anyway and that's the story I'm sticking to.' (Hannah, 23, mother of one together with Anne, 34)



# Conclusion

- The parenthood regulations *added* hurdles and *increased* the vulnerabilities and uncertainties in self-arranged conception
- Uncertainties in self-arranged conception are exacerbated by the ‘ontological choreography’ (Thompson 2005) of the infertility clinic
- Self-arranged donor conception experienced as culturally less legitimate
- Distinction is carried into the future by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008