Book Review: *Random Families: Genetic Strangers, Sperm Donor Siblings, and the Creation of New Kin.*

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The traditional model of family formation – man and woman meet, date, marry, have children, and remain together – has diversified significantly since the 1950s. In fact, Hertz has documented this diversification before in her 2006 book, *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice.* In this book, she studied women who deliberately become pregnant or adopt a child without a partner or spouse. She showed that while a single mother may still confront negative assumptions about her circumstances, she can renegotiate these expectations for herself and her family. Cultural scripts regarding the acceptance of single mothers have emerged, reflecting shifting views on non-martial childbearing.

Assisted reproductive technology also confronts and changes cultural scripts. Same-sex couples, heterosexual couples with fertility problems, and singles now have several available options for creating and giving birth to their own children. In *Random Families*, Hertz and Nelson study the emergence of, and dynamics within, donor sibling networks. Donor sibling networks consist of children (and their parents) who have discovered they share a sperm donor in common and decided to "sign up" on a public registry. Networks of donor-conceived children and their families can be maintained through in-person contact, but most current groups stay connected online. Members use Facebook groups and other social media tools to recruit new members, organize and advertise events, and share unused sperm specimens from the same donor. Members choose a name for their group, determine collective expectations, and cultivate a shared identity within these networks. Examining the interactions in different networks provides rich information about the creation, continuity, and change in the shared meanings of donor sibling networks.

One of the book's greatest strengths lies in the execution of the research. The authors are experienced researchers and interviewers and they were able to access a large, diverse sample. There were two-parent families – both married and divorced – and single mothers. There were same-sex and opposite-sex couples. Participants were from different geographic areas, social classes, and time periods. The sample was racially diverse and more educated than the average U.S. population. The variation present in the sample assisted in the collection of thick data. The authors analyzed over 350 interviews and performed a virtual ethnography on many of the online communications of the networks (including emails and Facebook posts). In addition, there is careful attention to privileging the voice of the participants, including the children. Only children over ten were interviewed, and many of them assisted in recruiting other participants and said they enjoyed their involvement in the research. Several layers of data provided longitudinal information about donor sibling networks, allowing Hertz and Nelson to identify cultural and generational changes over time. They were also able to make comparisons within and among networks. The methodological aspects of the research suggest that this will be a foundational work for understanding identity construction and interactional processes with donor-related families, and potentially other emergent family structures.

Random Families extends the sociological literature about diversifying family forms. First, it examines the meaning-making process that is necessary when people create families in non-traditional ways. Donor siblings share

similarities with other types of family (fictive kin and adopted children, for example) but they are unique because they are "genetic strangers" – biologically related but socially unknown to each other. To make sense of these connections, children and parents cannot rely on culturally-approved language to discuss relationships with a donor, donor siblings, and their families. In this situation, children and parents work within donor sibling networks to create normative structures and institutional support for their families. For example, individual participants created new terms to describe their families ('pioneerish') and their donor siblings ('diblings'). The members of donor sibling networks established ground rules for acceptable language, behavior, and even beliefs about the role of genetics.

Kids and parents work together to co-construct the meaning of donor siblings. There are several traditional relationships that may help to explain the connection among donor siblings: familial ones (siblings, cousins), slightly less intimate ones (friends), or something else entirely ('diblings'). Over time, within groups of donor siblings and among them, children and parents moved further away from using traditional understandings of the family to explain their own. Following participation in the donor sibling networks, respondents negotiated the space between the socially-expected family and their own, personally-experienced family in different ways. For example, donor siblings used birth order to organize the social order in the group, much like siblings in a traditional family. However, the birth order within donor sibling networks is not as fixed as it typically would be because there can be newly discovered members of different ages, resulting in changed birth order. In these cases, donor siblings sometimes shifted to taking on anticipated roles within families: someone makes people laugh, someone settles conflicts, and someone else hosts events. In other cases, the network broke up into smaller subsets, with parents and children 'playing favorites' in a way that is frowned upon in the traditional idea of family. In one network that lacked overall cohesion, two donor siblings cultivated an on-going friendship thanks to their experiences as isolated donor kids in rural areas. In another network, two mothers limited their interactions with the larger group but created an intimate connection due to the shared medical diagnosis of their children. These mothers came to call *themselves* sisters.

As families in the U.S. continue to shrink, generations are "thinning" and overlapping to create an even more complex array of family structures. While heterosexual intercourse was previously the cultural gold standard for childbearing, reproductive technologies have expanded the available options. With the increasing use of donor eggs, sperm, gametes, and surrogates, family trees become much more complicated than the neatly branching hierarchies of traditional families. The visual representation of family trees will need to be redesigned to better signify diverse family forms. As Hertz and Nelson suggest, overlapping branches and roots require a different template. These newer, messier family trees better reflect how donor networks can add people (and resources) to the smaller families people tend to create today.

Children and parents often have different motivations for joining donor sibling networks and ultimately come to different understandings about the donor, the network, their families, and themselves. A few parents chose not to join their child's donor network. Some kids were old enough and did not desire their parents' involvement, some parents feared disruption of their own family from an increased focus on genetics, and other parents simply did not define their child's donor siblings and their families as their business. No matter a parent's decision about joining their child's network, it was clear that the parents in this research did everything they could to provide their children with privilege. Some parents said they achieved this with the selection of the "best" sperm based on the donor profile. Other parents recognized, or joined donor sibling networks specifically because of, the potential benefits to involvement. Network benefits for parents include another opportunity for parent-parent interaction and support and an increase in the social diversity of their existing social relationships. Parents ultimately hoped that the donor sibling network would result in the sharing of resources (including social and cultural capital) and the potential for network members to continue to provide these resources in the future. Children thought about the potential benefits of the network in different ways. Many of the kids who were interviewed said they joined their donor sibling networks to gather information about their donor – not because they were seeking a man to act as their "father," but because they were gathering the tools to define their own identity. Often, they found more advantages in the relationships they shared with each other, especially regarding access to social popularity and the identification of the similarities and differences among them. It was clear that children understood they had a "special" connection with their donor siblings, but they would have to define the meaning of that connection for themselves.

Random Families is a valuable examination of donor sibling networks. Although sperm donations have been assisting families to reproduce for many years, an institutionalized cultural script for donor-conceived children and their families has yet to emerge. The research presented in this book examines the meaning-making surrounding donors, donor siblings, and the relationships they share. Discussing the features of these networks, as well as the choices made by both parents and their children in this process, provides an essential addition to our understanding of diverse family forms.

Hertz, Rosanna. 2006. *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women are Choosing Parenthood Without Marriage and Creating the New American Family*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hertz, Rosanna, and Margaret Nelson. 2019. *Random Families: Genetic Strangers, Sperm Donor Siblings, and the Creation of New Kin.* New York: Oxford University Press.