Telling Reproductive Stories: Social Scripts, Relationality and Donor Conception

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Abstract
Storytelling is a fundamental part of human interaction; it is also deeply social and political in nature. In this article, I explore reproductive storytelling as a phenomenon of sociological consequence. I do so in the context of donor conception, which used to be managed through secrecy but where children are now perceived ‘to have the right’ to know about their genetic origins. I draw on original qualitative data with families of donor conceived children, and bringing my data into conversation with social script theory and the concept of relationality, I investigate the disjuncture between the value now placed on openness and storytelling, and the absence of an existing social script by which to do so. I show the nuanced ways in which this absence plays out on relational playing-fields, within multidimensional, intergenerational relationships. I suggest that in order to understand sociologically the significance and process of reproductive storytelling, it is vital to keep both the role of social scripts, and embedded relationality, firmly in view.

Keywords
donor conception, grandparenthood, lesbian motherhood, parenthood, relationality, relational script, reproduction, secrecy, social script, storytelling

Introduction
I want to be able to give [my children] a story [about their family] – an answer that isn’t either untrue but also isn’t about sperm and test tubes. (Jessica, parent; lesbian relationship, two children by donation)

When I’m thinking I’m going to tell someone [about the sperm donor], my heart starts racing a bit and it’s a bit hard. (Jennifer, parent; heterosexual relationship, two children by donation)

I prefer not to mention [that my grandchild is donor conceived] to people. (Leonard, grandparent)
It is commonly assumed that a family consists of a mother and a father, and their biological children. This might seem a rather controversial statement, given that family life has opened up to include same sex couples, single parents and step families to an unprecedented degree. But as Carroll (2018) observes, despite this diversification of how people ‘do’ family (Morgan, 1996), it would appear that less has changed in terms of everyday normative understandings of what a family ‘looks like’ (Gamson, 2015). This came across powerfully in our recent study about families where children were born via egg, sperm or embryo donation (outlined below). Family members such as Jessica, Jennifer and Leonard (quoted above) were grappling with the very issue of whether and how to tell the story about how their family came to be. The UK is one of the countries1 where parents of donor conceived children are now encouraged to tell their children about their ‘donor origins’ (Golombok, 2015; Klotz, 2014), which entails embedding the story in personal communities (Nordqvist, 2014a). However, the interview extracts above, which were typical among the study participants, seem to suggest that a disjuncture exists between the importance attached to telling this reproductive story, and the absence of a social script by which to do so. Moreover, they suggest that the issue at stake here – finding a way of talking about donor conception – plays out on a relational playing-field. Of course, the birth of any child concerns the parents and the child itself, but it also concerns wider family. In other words, reproduction – how someone came to be and who it brought into relation – is a deeply relational event. As such, the issue of reproductive storytelling is relational; it is navigated through and by whole family networks (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014a, 2014b).

In this article I investigate the absence of a social script for reproductive storytelling from a relational perspective. My aim in doing so is three-fold; first, I suggest that telling stories about reproduction is a social phenomenon of consequence, and as such a topic that warrants sociological investigation in its own right; second, I use donor conception as an illustrative example to investigate the contemporary disjuncture between the value placed on openness and the absence of an existing social script to assist the narration; third, I suggest that families by donor conception navigate a largely socially unscripted process of storytelling which unfolds on relational playing-fields. I explore the nuanced ways in which the absence of a script takes shape relationally, within multidimensional, intergenerational relationships.

The article begins with an exploration of the social importance of storytelling, the normative parameters of reproductive storytelling and how stories about donor conception and lesbian motherhood emerge against a backdrop of secrecy. I then outline the theoretical framing of the analysis: the article brings social script theory into conversation with the concept of relationality. This is followed by an account of methods, before I move on to exploring reproductive storytelling in the context of donor conception as an (un)scripted process, and how that plays out for different storytellers (parents, children, grandparents and wider kin, in that order) and within different relationships.

**Storytelling, Reproductive Secrecy and the Turn to Openness**

Storytelling is a fundamental part of human interaction; by telling stories about ourselves, our community and even our nation, we define who we are (Plummer, 2019;
Poletta, 2006). Plummer (1995) notes that stories are ever-present within the social world and underscore processes of making sense and making meaning (1995: 20). The process of singling out, marking and creating memories, or allowing things to be forgotten, plays a significant role within personal and family life (Barnwell, 2019; Smart, 2007) and conversely, particular stories about intimate life come to circulate in wider society in specific ways. Plummer’s (1995) consideration of sexual stories shows that the emergence of a particular story about intimacy is context dependent. He suggests that the telling of stories is situated within wider social, political and historical processes; there are social patterns to how and when they are told.

The interview accounts that opened this article show that telling stories is an important dimension to family life, but one that is not necessarily straightforward. Plummer (1995: 26) notes that ‘sexual stories live in [a] flow of power. The power to tell a story, or indeed not tell a story, under the conditions of one’s own choosing, is part of a political process.’ Drawing on Plummer’s insights, and applying them to the telling of reproductive stories, I argue that such stories are also situated in flows of power. The normative reproductive story – the story about the heterosexual married couple with genetically related children – contains aspects that are readily told (and heard), as well as those that are no less fundamental, but operate in silence (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014b). The ‘silent but assumed’ stories of heterosexual partnering and family making include experiences about trying for a baby, conception and sexual intimacy; these are fenced off to the realm of the ‘private’ and tacitly assumed rather than openly shared. Linked to this, is the ‘silent’ assumption that children are the genetic offspring of their parents. This assumption underpins many stories, for example the narrating of family resemblances (Mason, 2018a) – an issue keenly felt for parents of donor conceived children (e.g. Becker et al., 2005; Nordqvist, 2010). Furthermore, and linked to the above, there is a silent but salient assumption that parents are heterosexual; unlike parents in same sex relationships, heterosexual parents do not need to explain their sexuality because they do not diverge from the norm. This is not an exhaustive list, but rather illustrative examples highlighting that the normative reproductive story has within it both explicit and implicit elements.

Importantly, the untold elements operate as a backdrop of normality (Misztal, 2015); they are taken for granted aspects of the story and may seem like ‘nothing’ (Scott, 2018) to talk about. However, this ‘nothing’ becomes ‘something’ when one considers how the prevailing discourses of normative family making also construct ‘family outlaws’ (Calhoun, 2003). In its shadow exists the non-normative family stories, including stories about donor conception, same sex partnering and same sex parenthood. These are in themselves not recent social phenomena; there are accounts of sperm donation from the middle of the 18th century, and by the end of the following century some doctors in France, the USA and Britain were using donor insemination to circumvent infertility (Mohr, 2018). Same sex desire and its various expressions, of course, date back much longer than that. However, what is recent, is openly talking about such issues; for long, same sex relationships and non-genetic parenthood were deeply socially stigmatised and managed through secrecy (Barnwell, 2019; Cohen, 2014; Plummer, 1995). Family forms, and secrecy on certain family matters, have however undergone important changes in recent decades (Smart, 2011). There has been an ‘opening up’ of what family forms are deemed socially (and legally) acceptable; this includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,
questioning/queer, intersex (LGBTQI) partnering and parenting (Silva and Smart, 1999; Weeks, 2007), and parenthood through new reproductive technologies, including third party reproduction. Ideals regarding family relationships have also changed; there is evidence to suggest that ‘openness’ has come to be seen as a self-evident virtue in personal and public life (Cohen, 2014; Klotz, 2014; Smart, 2011). This is not to say that families no longer keep secrets (see, for example, Barnwell, 2019), but it means that the social codes around family secrecy – what is seen to be needed to be hidden from public view – have shifted over time. This shift has been marked in the context of donor conception; as Smart (2007) has shown, secrecy used to be seen to serve the donor conceived child and their parents best, but in the 1980s such secrets became redefined as harmful and problematic. The prevailing wisdom in donor conception communities has become that children should grow up with knowledge of their genetic origins; children are now seen to have the ‘right’ to know ‘who they are’ (Klotz, 2014; Turkmendag, 2012). This means that parents now feel the need to consider the task of openly talking about donor conception, indeed, a growing body of research specifically explores rates of disclosure among parents of donor conceived children (e.g. Blyth et al., 2009; Kovacs et al., 2015, for an overview see Nordqvist, 2014a). While there is now a growing body of research into families formed through donor conception (e.g. Golombok, 2015; Nordqvist and Smart, 2014a) and lesbian motherhood (e.g. Almack, 2007; Nordqvist, 2014b) there has been little sociological exploration and analysis of the issues emerging around reproductive storytelling, especially in a social and cultural context marked by secrecy and a recent shift to openness.

Conceptual Framing: Social Scripts and Relationality

This article brings together ‘social scripts’ theory with the framework of relationality to explore this issue. The concept ‘social scripts’ is mainly associated with the work of Gagnon and Simon (1973) on human sexuality. They suggest that the way in which humans think and work out how to behave in particular situations is socially scripted; that is, it follows codes of conduct. Scripts operate as a kind of grammar (Burke, 1945) for how people make sense of themselves and the relationships in which they are embedded; they are ‘a metaphor for conceptualising the production of behaviour in social life’ (Simon and Gagnon, 1986: 98).

Simon and Gagnon (1986; also, for example, Simon, 1996) argue that scripting occurs on three interrelating levels: the surrounding cultural order, interpersonal interactional situations and intrapsychically in the agentic individual. In terms of the cultural order, scripts exist on the level of collective life; for example, stories from the media do not determine human conduct, but are resources that enable us to make sense of it (Jackson and Scott, 2010). In terms of interactional situations, interpersonal scripting emerges in everyday interaction; the social actor becomes involved in shaping materials within their particular everyday contexts (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). Scripts are thus actively interpreted and negotiated within everyday relationships; conflicts over appropriate behaviour may also emerge. Third, scripts exist on the intrapsychic level within the agentic individual, influencing individual desires, thoughts and the internal processes of the self. Scripting should not be understood as determining human conduct however, but rather as ‘fluid improvisations involving ongoing processes of interpretation and negotiation’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010: 15); it is both dynamic and given (Heaphy, 2014).
Whereas the idea of social script theory has been utilised to develop sociological understandings of sexual identity, relationships and behaviour (e.g. Knapp Whittier and Melendez, 2004; Muruthi et al., 2018), the extent to which it has been used to further knowledge around non-sexual aspects of intimate life, such as family life involving children, is to my knowledge limited. This is with the exception of Heaphy (2014), who draws on script theory to argue that habituated personal scripts are linked to wider cultural discourse and politics surrounding family life, while also being resisted, troubled and changed in everyday interactions. Although not utilising script theory directly and its framework of three interrelated levels, research into family relationships more broadly does however demonstrate that family life is guided by sets of norms and principles operating in the context of specific and interconnected webs of relationships (Finch and Mason, 1993). It is beyond the scope of this article to clarify the exact relationships between social script theory and relational norms theory, and how they compare, but it should be noted that norms of relating (we might call them scripts), operate, for example, in the context of parent–grandparent relationships (Mason et al., 2007) and aunthood (May and Lahad, 2019).

This article explores (the absence of) social scripts from a relational perspective. A relational approach suggests individual practices and identities need to be understood as embedded within webs of relationships (Bengtson et al., 2002; Finch and Mason, 1993; Nordqvist, 2019; Smart, 2007). It holds that relationships as well as processes of relating are sociologically important foci in their own right (Mason, 2004). A relational perspective thus means shifting the sociological gaze from the individual, to the connections, relationships and processes of relating that frames their lives (Mason, 2004).

The Study

The data for this article were produced in the context of an ESRC-funded study 2010–2013 (PI, Carol Smart, Co-I Petra Nordqvist) exploring families formed through egg, sperm and embryo donation in England and Wales. It comprised interviews with 22 heterosexual and 22 lesbian parents of donor conceived children, and an additional 30 interviews with grandparents. A total of 119 individuals took part: we conducted 34 couple and 10 individual interviews with parents (total number of parents 78), and 11 couple and 19 individual interviews with grandparents (total number 41). To mitigate the risk of inadvertently conveying sensitive information to family members, we interviewed parents and grandparents from different families. The project received ethical approval from the University of Manchester; all names, places and identifying details in the data presented here have been anonymised.

Recruitment and fieldwork took place in England and Wales in 2011. The inclusion criteria were that the parents lived in England or Wales, and that they had used donor conception around or after 1995 when the shift towards openness started to gain momentum in the UK. Most of our recruits came through the UK Donor Conception Network and local Lesbian Mums groups. Recruitment was not done on the bases of participants’ sexual self-identity, but the family form in which donor conception was pursued. The grandparents, who were a particularly hard-to-reach sample, were recruited through parents who were not themselves taking part, and through our own networks.
Among the 74 families represented, 54 had children through sperm donation, 16 egg donation, three embryo donation and one through both sperm and embryo donation. The total number of donor conceived children was 111 (this included five pregnancies). The interviews centred on how a couple came to use donor conception; their experience of trying to conceive; views about and experiences of sharing related information in their family and in wider relationships, and perceptions of the donor.

The median parent in the study was born in 1970, with parents’ birth year spanning 1956 to 1986. The median grandparent in the sample was born in 1943, with grandparents’ birth years spanning 1922 to 1953. The median donor conceived child was born in 2007, so was four years old at the time of the interview. The interviewees lived in both rural and urban locations, with particular concentration in Greater London and Manchester. Ninety of the 119 participants were women. Ninety-nine (83%) identified as White Scottish, Welsh and English. Thirteen identified as White European, American or Australian; four as of mixed British origin, and three as Asian. Of those who came forward, over half (53%) identified as atheist or agnostic, but there was also a substantial group of people of different Christian faiths (40%) and a smaller proportion identifying as Jewish (5%). Seventy-eight per cent of the parent generation had gone on to higher education which compared with the general population of women who gave birth in Britain in 2000 (Dex and Joshi, 2004), gives a broad indication that the parent group that we interviewed were disproportionately middle class. The middle-class bias of the sample may also relate to the demographic of people accessing clinical fertility treatment, as it can be very expensive.

The constitution of the sample is a limitation of the study; it is likely to have shaped the data in significant ways; evidence suggests that, for example, religion and ethnicity are factors shaping perceptions of infertility and donation (e.g. Culley and Hudson, 2009). Further relevant limitations include that the data set does not comprise interviews with donor conceived children themselves. What it does provide, however, is insights into parents’ accounts of navigating young children as storytellers. The data are also limited in that almost 10 years have passed since interviews were conducted, but in that time, donor conception has not been subject to new legislation, nor have policies on openness altered. Online direct-to-consumer DNA testing has however soared, impacting on donor conception communities (Harper et al., 2016). In response to this increase, in 2018, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority warned of the risk that such testing might lead to unwelcome uncovering of family secrets (Weaver, 2018). Together this suggests that this exploration into secrecy, relationality, scripts and storytelling still holds relevance.

All the interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed. We conducted a systematic interpretive analysis (Mason, 2018b) and developed a detailed set of categorical and conceptual themes, focusing on meanings, values and processes. NVivo software was used for the purpose of data storage, coding and retrieval. The particular cases discussed here were chosen because they reflect themes typical for the wider sample (as shown in Nordqvist, 2014a; Nordqvist and Smart, 2014a, 2014b), because they illustrate the cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic levels at which (the absence of) social scripting shape meaning and behaviour, and because they show how families navigate this process, including within the research interview. In what follows, I use ‘we’ when referring
to previous collaborative work with Carol Smart, based on the research project, and I shall use ‘I’ when referring to the particular analysis and argument developed here.

Reproductive Storytelling and Family Relationships

Donor Conception, Openness and the Cultural Order

Given the importance of the cultural order for script production (Simon and Gagnon, 1986), this section outlines in more detail how scripting on a cultural level can be understood to have developed, before exploring the themes emerging in the qualitative data.

Parents inhabit a key position in terms of storytelling, because it necessarily starts with them. Not every parent of a donor conceived child chooses to ‘talk’ (e.g. Kovacs et al., 2015), however, the vast majority of the parents within this study were at various stages of sharing information (Nordqvist, 2014a). In doing so they were part of an ‘interpretive community’ (Plummer, 1995) around openness, which has emerged over the last few decades, particularly through the Donor Conception Network (DCN). When the DCN was formed in the 1980s it was over the exact dilemma discussed in this article: how to navigate the perceived need of children to be told the story of being donor conceived in a culture of secrecy. A group of parents set about producing a children’s book called ‘My Story’ to assist parents to tell the story of donor conception to young children (Donor Conception Network, 2019). Our interviews show that ‘My Story’ constitutes an important resource within families, both symbolically and literally.

Nowadays, fertility counsellors, the DCN and the ‘My Story’ book together communicate an emerging script both about openness, and how to ‘do’ it. It holds, first, that parents should make their child aware of their genetic ‘donor’ origins from a very young age. This is in order to avoid the child feeling the shock of ‘finding out’ later in life. Second, being donor conceived is understood as being about identity. This echoes wider cultural understandings of genetic material as intimately linked to, even constituting, the origin of the self (Smart, 2011). For parents, this is taken to mean that the child should be perceived to be the ‘owner’ of ‘their story’, and hence should be told.

From a relational viewpoint, different generations however co-exist in families; different generations may inhabit quite different cultural and experiential ‘worlds’. The emergent script about openness outlined above, figures less dominantly within the general population meaning that other family members may be much less aware of it. Without seeking to paint an exhaustive picture of generational differences, they are likely to matter for how reproductive storytelling is understood, and managed. Grandparents would have lived their formative years at a time when sexuality was shrouded in silence, homosexuality and non-genetic parent–child relationships deeply stigmatised and secrecy seen to be protective. Members of the wider family, for example aunts and uncles, despite perhaps being of a similar generation to the parents, are less likely to have come in contact with the moral messages of ‘openness’ and are more likely to take their cues from wider culture. Children who are on the ‘receiving end’ of openness may have come along to DCN meetings, and read ‘My Story’, but are, at least at a young age, less likely to understand the ideas underpinning these. While I would not seek to suggest that each generation is inflexibly fixed into a set of dominant values (Bertaux and Thompson,
deep-seated understandings and expectations which are historically established as part of a formative process of the self, are likely relevant here. Seen from a relational perspective, the cultural scripts that come into play thus need to be understood as different for different actors.

Parents as Storytellers: Breaking New Ground

The study suggested that parents are much influenced by the idea of openness (Nordqvist, 2014a, 2014b). This did not mean, however, that storytelling was felt to be straightforward. As with the mothers quoted in the introduction, parents’ accounts more generally suggest that telling the story was something that was felt to be both difficult and unusual. Fiona, a heterosexual mother by egg donation, talked about needing to both learn and practise ‘how to tell the story’:

We started telling [child] from a very, very young age. So, as a tiny baby because that’s the counsellor suggested that that would be a good thing to do to get used to the words coming out of your mouth and hearing the words being said, so as I would be changing her nappy or, you know, [. . .]. That helped. [. . .] I told one of my friends [. . .] I think I probably wanted a practice run because I knew that with [. . .] my parents, with my family, I thought that it was going to be a big, deep conversation [. . .] I just said [to this friend] you know, there’s something that I want to tell you about [my child], and I used the wrong language because she was then very concerned, you know, that there was something the matter with [child]. [. . .] I said, you know, [child] was donor conceived and she just said ‘So?’

Fiona’s account illustrates a common finding, which was that parents often felt the need to ‘work out’ how to go about telling this story, down to the level of deciding what words to use and uttering those words. Fiona, and others, referred specifically to following the advice given by the fertility counsellor or the DCN, indicating that these parties play a key role in establishing an emerging cultural script promoting openness. This in itself also suggests that there is little in terms of wider social and cultural discourse to draw on in telling this story. As with Fiona, many heterosexual parents’ stories were marked by hesitancy, confusion, unease and trial-and-error (see also Nordqvist and Smart, 2014a), showing that an established social script to draw on is largely absent, and also the experienced need to navigate this intrapsychically (choosing words, making decisions about telling, needing help) as well as interpersonally (navigating if and how to tell various people). I say largely absent because the heterosexual parents did see themselves as rightfully making decisions about disclosure (by way of contrast, see grandparents’ accounts below) and in doing so, they drew on potent relational norms operating in parent–child relationships specifically, denoting that parents have a special relationship vis-a-vis their children in terms of safeguarding their well-being (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003).

A key difference between the heterosexual and the lesbian parents related to visibility; the heterosexual parents were in a position to choose disclosure, whereas lesbian couples had little choice in the matter: they knew that questions would be raised about their parenthood, from their children and others (Almack, 2007). Normative reproductive stories are inherently heteronormative; a proportion of the lesbian parents, such as Jessica (quoted above), felt both unarmed and alarmed about the prospect of storytelling. Even
when it was viewed with humour or matter-of-fact-ness, as it often was among the lesbian couples, it was nevertheless clear that for them, the issues related to a missing social script were compounded. Telling the story meant breaking new ground, intrapsychically and interpersonally. Alexandra and Karen, for example, saw conversations about the donor and having two mothers as ‘bizarre’ interludes in their everyday lives, suggesting they felt there was something about their family that was weird and curious, rather than normal and unremarkable. This ‘bizarre-ness’ was couched in terms of the unusual repertoire of conversations they had with their two children at any rate: ‘The donor would just be another one in a series of (laughter) bizarre (laughter) [conversations] at some point’ (Alexandra).

Although the lesbians faced particular pressures of storytelling, our study suggested that there were overlaps between them and the heterosexual parents. This was because overwhelmingly, the heterosexual parents felt a moral obligation to talk, which meant that they often experienced that not talking was a non-option (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014b). Paul had struggled with opting for using donor sperm, but had nevertheless gone ahead with treatment; he and his partner Carrie had two donor conceived children. Carrie spoke of the thorny issue of openness:

> From talking to the Counsellor, [we learnt that] it’s about someone’s self-identity and you know [if you do not tell them they are donor conceived you] deprive them of that and then just spring it on in later life [. . .] would be just totally unfair. So it almost felt like Paul was the casualty in all that but I think that’s the way he feels, that he’s the one that’s going to be rejected and hurt one day and they’ll turn round and that’s what he’s worried about.

As with Paul, many of the parents we spoke to told of the deep emotional charge of having children not genetically related to themselves (see also Nordqvist and Smart, 2014a, 2014b) here communicated with words such as ‘casualty’, ‘rejection’ and ‘hurt’, hinting of a deep affective impact. This impact might be understood through Stewart’s (2007) suggestion that big cultural ‘stories’ (genetic parent–child relationship being one) come into view in the way that they are felt and experienced in everyday life; the affective response in ordinary life can be seen as a ‘contact zone’ where events and flows of power take place (Stewart, 2007: 3). Genetic thinking remains a powerful family discourse in society and although not all parents shared Paul’s feelings, all in his position necessarily reflected on the meaning of non-genetic parenthood (Nordqvist, 2017). The above accounts illustrate how, for parents, the three levels of scripting (Simon and Gagnon, 1986) are intimately interconnected, producing a situation where parents do feel the need to tell the story, but their experiences of doing so led them to uncharted waters, and intra-psychic uncertainty, ambivalence and resistance.

**Navigating Conversations with Children, Navigating Children’s Conversations**

Children are social actors and also storytellers in their own right (e.g. Eldén, 2016) but there is to date very little information available about donor conceived children as children (however see, Zadeh et al., 2017). Although children were not interviewed within the study,
we found suggestions that parents felt the need to navigate not just how to share information with them, but how to discuss donor conception with their children, and linked to that, how to support their children navigating using the words and telling the story for themselves. Many parents spoke of using the DCN book to do so, but they also spoke of the book as something that could be picked off the shelf by anyone visiting the home, thus it became a device that could be used, or that sometimes needed managed, because it was telling the story. Fiona, with partner Brian, recounted the following story about a friend coming to visit their house who had not yet been informed about the donor. He and the child had been playing upstairs in the child’s bedroom, when the child, aged four at the time, asked him to read the ‘My Story’ book.

Brian:  [Our friend] went ‘What’s that book up there? I’ve just been reading [your child] a book about sperm and about eggs. What’s going on?’ [. . .] He just thought it was the weirdest kids’ book he’d ever read in his life.

Fiona: And saying, ‘I’m saying the word sperm to a four-year-old.’ [. . .]

Brian:  So it kind of freaked him right out really ’cause he’s like ‘children’s books have changed’ he was thinking ‘since I was there’.

The emotional charge spoken of in this account has in part to do with the fact that this friend was unaware of the donor conception in the first place, but it also has to do with him finding himself in a situation where he was having a conversation with a child about a topic – egg and sperm – that he understood to lie outside the realm of stories normally told to children. Parents of donor conceived children, as well as people around them ‘in the know’, found themselves necessarily navigating on the one hand ideas around ‘children’s innocence’ (Meyer, 2007), as is underpinning this account, and, on the other, reproductive storytelling. These issues were compounded for the lesbians in the sample, who were also necessarily needing to navigate conversations about sexuality. For mothers such as Meredith, the seemingly simple act of a mother telling her five-year-old the story about how he came to be, took her down a path that felt complicated and perplexing:

I explained what [a lesbian] was and he was like ‘oh. . .’ and I said ‘the thing is it’s a grown-ups word, it’s probably not a good word to say at school, because I bet other kids won’t know what a lesbian is they just don’t understand. But you say it to your teacher or any grown-up you like but I don’t think it’s worth saying it to another kid’ and he was like ‘oh grown-ups word’. And I thought ‘oh no it’s not swearing though’ (laughter) ’cause I don’t want him to go to school going on about lesbians. It’s not nice for other parents to have to deal with something they might not have to deal with is it? But at the same time I don’t want him to think it’s a – so it’s just like ‘oh my god how do you deal with it?’ (with Priscilla, two children; donor sperm)

Parents’ accounts indicated that having conversations with children and helping children navigate their knowledge in turn, required much reflection from parents, and could be felt to be very confusing, if not disconcerting, thus demonstrating that a social script was largely missing. The accounts above clearly highlight the power of the story of the heterosexual genetic family (also Heaphy, 2014), because it shines a stark light on the felt implications of this social structure, and the resulting silences it produces around
non-genetic families, egg and sperm but also (non-hetero)sexuality (Stewart, 2007). Talking about such matters is thus, per se, seen to be uncommon and problematic. Brian and Fiona’s account shows how talking to a young child about sperm produces an ‘issue’: a troubled ‘freaked’ feeling ensues. Berlant (2000: 7) argues that ‘intimacy [. . .] [is] a relation associated with tacit fantasies, tacit rules and obligations to remain unproblematic. Meredith’s account shows the tightrope that lesbian mothers are walking in this regard: bringing ‘lesbians’ into view for her child means considering him talking to others (his peers), but this renders lesbianism problematic because it is perceived as something that other (presumed heterosexual) parents do not ‘have to deal with’. This brings to mind Ahmed’s (2017) discussion of how naming a power dynamic as a problem challenges a sense of flow, harmony and togetherness in family life. It is as though normativity did not exist in children’s worlds before children were talking about lesbians, egg and sperm: ‘it is as if pointing them out is what makes them there’ (Ahmed, 2017: 39). Where children grow up in families hearing some version of a family story about donor conception, they also acquire a vocabulary and knowledge about, for example, egg, sperm, sex, fertility, intimacy, sexuality and lesbians; such knowledge does not fit in with cultural expectations of what is ‘normal knowledge’ or ‘normal vocabulary’ for a young child. The confusion, perplexity, conflicted feelings and worry that emerged in these and other accounts, show how unestablished and fresh telling these stories is felt to be, and how doing so is navigated both intrapsychically (in the feelings that ensue), interpersonally (in relationships with others, including supporting children to manage relationships in turn) in ways that link to the cultural order where openness exists in tension with ideas of children’s innocence, and keeping intimacy unproblematic.

Grandparents as (Reluctant) Storytellers

Interviews with parents suggested that their own parents, the donor conceived child’s grandparents, were felt to be important audiences for this reproductive story (Nordqvist, 2015; Nordqvist and Smart, 2014a). Although it was not always the case, a strong theme emerged in interviews with both parents and grandparents, that conversations about donor conception felt both unprecedented and extraordinary within the context of such intergenerational relationships. Storytelling here typically felt challenging and uneasy, and as thorny interludes in relationships (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014a). We have shown previously that although parents may not see grandparents as storytellers in their own right, grandparents’ own accounts suggest that they also feel this to be their story; it is felt to be something that concerns them too (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014b). Their viewpoint, as storytellers, was often different from that of the parents and so the fact that this story was largely unscripted took on a particular nuance for grandparents. For reasons of space, the following two examples are indicative, rather than exhaustive, of the kinds of perspectives that grandparents brought to the issue. The first perspective that emerged was that, for grandparents, reproductive storytelling contravened deeply held moral understandings, laid down on cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic levels, that reproductive stories are private. Irene, a grandmother with two grandchildren through her daughter and same sex partner, indicated that for her, the very act of ‘intimate talking’ was an issue in its own right:
I grew up in the time when everything, sex and everything was very private. [...] I mean my mother never discussed anything personal ever. Well I don’t with my children really, but I expect some people do. [...] I mean, everything was much more private and respectable. [...] And I expect they’ll [daughter and partner] bring their children up, but they will [...] probably talk to the children more about things.

A grandmother such as Irene would have lived her formative years at a time when intimate life was shrouded in profound silence (Szreter and Fisher, 2010). There were clear generational differences between parents and grandparents in the data, with many parents’ and grandparents’ accounts echoing Irene’s, suggesting that grandparents found ‘intimate talk’ challenging in its own right. This reflects Anderson and Brownlie’s (2011: 56) findings that the powerful contemporary script of emotional disclosure being a ‘good thing’ is unlikely to have support among men and women in older age groups.

Important generational differences also emerged in that some (although not all) grandparents were less certain that telling the child in the first place was in the child’s best interest. Joyce, for example, said:

I have to declare my hand here and say, whether this means I’m a bad person or not. I personally think it would be better never even to, why should they need to know? [...] Why go to all this trouble about telling people, when to tell him. [...] I know that she wouldn’t, I couldn’t discuss this. You know if I said to [my daughter] ‘Why bother [telling him]?’ [...] I feel very strongly about that but I could not have that conversation with her. (Joyce, daughter in heterosexual relationship, donor sperm)

Joyce might be seen to be out of step with current ethical thinking – at least this is what she imagines her daughter would say – and so it is key to note that the surrounding cultural script might look quite different from the point of view of older generations. Whether Joyce accepts the moral charge of ‘being a bad person’ or not, her account and actions on an interpersonal level vis-a-vis her daughter and grandchild, is illustrative of the relational social scripts that are brought to bear on the situation in setting out how grandparents should behave and what they should do. The accounts of Joyce and Leonard (quoted in the Introduction), denote a social script around grandparenting which centres on ‘being there’ but ‘not interfering’ in the lives of their adult children (Mason et al., 2007; see also Nordqvist and Smart, 2014b), thus curtailing grandparents’ decision-making powers. However, as indicated by Mason et al. (2007), and also illustrated in Joyce’s accounts, many grandparents can feel ambivalent about following these scripts, not least because they are contradicted by other scripts, a key one being grandparents’ role in safeguarding their grandchildren’s well-being. And this is where Joyce, and others too, voiced their ambivalence: they were not convinced that talking about donor conception was in the child’s best interest. Joyce would have grown up during a time where keeping non-genetic parent–child connections secret was seen as the caring thing to do (Smart, 2007). Many of the grandparents we spoke to voiced their reluctance at talking, and many parents spoke of grandparents’ seeming unwillingness to discuss donor conception (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014a). It is important to note, however, that the unwillingness to discuss donor conception did not as a rule translate into an unwillingness to accept the donor conceived child as a grandchild. There were grandparents who failed to recognise
a non-genetic grandchild as theirs (e.g. Nordqvist, 2015), but additionally, there was a sizeable proportion of grandparents who accepted the child fully, but nevertheless resisted open discussions. Hence, relational social scripts impacted on family relationships on a level of how they are to be conducted, shedding light on storytelling as an issue in its own right, and one that cannot be reduced to issues around inclusion/exclusion in the family.

**Wider Kin: Bringing Multiple Storytellers into the Picture**

I have shown that telling reproductive stories about donor conception is both relational and largely socially unscripted. I have evidenced this by showing how the process of storytelling is one marked by the need to reflect and think carefully, but also a range of feelings, including confusion, perplexity, ambivalence, uncertainty and resistance. I have also shown that whereas the process is largely unscripted, it is not entirely unscripted, but rather weaved through existing principles of relating. These issues all came to a head in Zoe’s account, where she uses the interview to think through how to navigate storytelling in the wider family network. She and her partner Matthew had three children through sperm donation, and Zoe openly deliberated on her relationship to Matthew’s sister and the children’s cousins in terms of openness:

> I think the relationship that we’re struggling – and I say ‘we’, not Matthew, me – I struggle with most about telling is my nieces and nephews. So, the children’s cousins. That’s the hardest bit. [. . .] It’s hardest actually for Matthew’s sister’s children. She’s got two children who are nearly 14 and, um, 11. So, a bit older than [our] eldest one. And I know she has felt a bit of pressure and was uncomfortable and didn’t know what to do [. . .] And we’d had a conversation – I think I said – just said, ‘Oh, do the children know?’ and she said, ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘no. Oh, no. Oh.’ And then I didn’t realise it had set something off because my mum-in-law told me. She said, ‘Oh, [she’s] quite concerned, you know, about telling them and how to do it right.’ [. . .] But I think I have sort of calmed her down about it in saying, ‘Oh, you know, it’s not like you have to tell them. You know, it’s up to you.’ And I don’t really know how to address it because I think that’s a very difficult one because [. . .] It’s kind of less important for my side of the family. I feel it’s more important from Matthew’s side of the family. Because my side of the family, you know, they are cousins, they are blood cousins. You know, do they – do [these cousins] need to know that they’re not blood related? They’re your cousins. But they are still your full cousins because your cousin is your – is your fa’ – Yeah, it’s still the same line; it’s just that the blood isn’t there. It’s the same as you being Dad to the boys. [. . .] I do find it’s a bit strange. I try and put myself in their – in my niece and nephew’s shoes wondering, you know, when you get – you know, when you’re an adult, it’s like ‘well I didn’t know’. But then again, it’s not important. It’s this thing about it being a secret. It’s not a secret, but don’t tell everybody. You know? Um, you don’t want to make too much of a thing of it. Is it a big thing or isn’t it?

Zoe’s account, speaking both of her experience as aunt (and relating to her sister-in-law), and her sister-in-law’s role as aunt (vis-a-vis Zoe’s children), is detailing a process of trying to work out how to proceed with storytelling, and both women appear to find that doing so poses genuinely difficult questions. This might be explained by May and Lahad’s (2019) observation that aunts embody a liminal space vis-a-vis parent–child dyads. Zoe explains her thinking by mapping out the genetic links in the family, because
in her mind they play a role in determining the right course of action. Underpinning her account is a notion that kinship is made up of both social and biological properties, that unusually exist in direct tension here. On the one hand, cousins on Matthew’s side are not genetically related. This sidesteps the rule of the normative genetic nuclear family and so requires clarification and explanation. On the other hand, Matthew’s lack of genetic connection to his children is deemed irrelevant. Zoe’s questions ‘Is it a big thing or isn’t it?’ marks the exact tension in which disclosure and donor conception exists. In the end, Zoe is helped in decision making by Matthew.

Zoe: I would think [the niece and nephew] would probably rather hear it from their mum, and Matthew.

Matthew: Yeah, well I don’t think I would do that. I would let my sister make the decision whether that was right or wrong. [. . .] I’d be more worried about feeling like we’re making them do it which would be totally wrong. Yeah, which is why I wouldn’t tell the children because I’d let my sister do that. When she felt it was right, if she felt it was right. [. . .]

Zoe: [. . .] That’s helped, actually, to sort that out for my head (laughter).

In working out the right course of action, Zoe and Matthew draw on the perceived boundaries of parent–child relationships, assigning a special status to the parent–child relationships and seeing parental authority as non-negotiable (Finch and Mason, 1993; May and Lahad, 2019). The account shows how navigating unscripted storytelling in the wider family throws Zoe into uncharted waters with a series of competing relational norms brought to bear on her thinking. On the one hand, she is considering her role as mother, and the potential responsibility she has vis-a-vis her children’s cousins, and (perhaps) her feeling that they ought ‘to know’; there is something of a script here where Zoe, as mother, has a responsibility to her niece and nephew, her own children, and the cousin relationship. On the other hand, she is unsure whether it would be right of her, in her role as aunt, to sidestep Matthew’s sister. Although we cannot know, it is possible to imagine that Matthew’s sister feels hesitant because she holds a series of interwoven relational principles in her mind. This might include wanting to be loyal to her brother and not bringing into question his place as parent, a sense of responsibility to her own children but also the cousin relationship at large, as well as scripts in relation to her and Matthew’s mother, Zoe, and Matthew’s children. In other words, much is at stake and with the process being unscripted, she is nervous about getting it wrong. As Zoe and Matthew think through how to navigate this process, they draw on established relational social scripts denoting roles within families, and this enables them to work out a course of action. Their accounts show how these issues are worked through intrapsychically (in Zoe especially) and interpersonally (Zoe, Matthew, Matthew’s sister, etc.), with competing cultural frames (openness, family loyalty, etc.) underpinning the process, and how the process of deciding on a course of action is both given and dynamic (Heaphy, 2014).

Conclusions

Plummer (1995) observes that telling sexual stories is a deeply social and cultural process that warrants investigation in its own right. Similarly, my data suggest that there is
a social and cultural life to reproductive storytelling. By using a relational social script lens to view stories about donor conception and lesbian motherhood, I show that telling reproductive stories is a matter of social and cultural consequence, and worthy of sociological investigation. I also demonstrate that telling reproductive stories about how a child came to be cannot be reduced to reproductive practices, or understandings of being family; it needs to be understood as a social practice that carries meaning in its own right.

Using donor conception as an illustrative example of the sociological significance of reproductive storytelling, I have shown that there is a disjuncture between the contemporary importance attached to telling reproductive stories about conception involving donor egg or sperm, and the almost complete absence of an existing social script for narrating such stories. This disjuncture comes through in numerous ways in the data. It is evidenced in parents’ accounts of feeling perplexed, hesitant and conflicted about storytelling as well as in the felt need to practise choosing and even uttering the words used to tell the story. It is further evidenced in parents’ accounts of needing to find their way in talking to their children about donor conception; here the unscripted nature of this pursuit takes the shape of pushing against cultural values, such as that attached to children’s innocence. Further, the absence of a social script emerges in interview data with grandparents: the nuance coming through here is how it collides with a generationed understanding of how to be, and how to best care for and look after children’s best interests. In terms of embedding the story in wider family networks, the process is felt to be deeply confusing, linked to the liminal role inhabited by aunts in family life. Indeed, the liminal space of wider family connections more broadly proves very complicated to navigate, especially as the values that guide individual nuclear families collide. Parents are seen to be rightfully making decisions over their children, and following the same guiding principles, an aunt for her children, but taken together, this raises intricate and challenging questions about who rightfully make decisions about the cousin relationship.

Social script theory offers a useful tool to understanding how storytelling unfolds because it usefully depicts that social scripting operates on three interrelated levels – culturally, interpersonally and intrapsychically. The data show in rich and detailed ways how all these levels come into play as members of families make decisions about storytelling vis-a-vis one another. They also bring to the fore that scripts guiding conduct can vary considerably between different actors, and different generations. For example, an emerging cultural script about openness is clearly strongly in the picture for parents, but this appears much less salient for grandparents and other family members. This may explain why someone like grandmother Joyce feels quite able to resist the idea that openness is necessarily a good thing, but parents cannot, even when they struggle with its consequences, as did Paul. This co-existence of different cultural scripts generates competing ideas about relating, which then play out interpersonally, and intrapsychically. This is linked to the fact that cultural scripts are actively interpreted by individuals, and as Jackson and Scott (2010) note, conflicts may arise. My exploration shed light on how different storytellers are operating from slightly different positions, which is thrown into relief when families navigate storytelling relationally.

This finding leads me to suggest that the absence of a social script in this context needs to be understood to play out on relational playing-fields. Reproduction brings people into relation, and this means that telling stories about donor conception, structured through
normative notions of sexuality and genetic connectedness, must be understood as embedded with relationalities. The outcome of this is complex and multidimensional. First, it means that there is more than one storyteller; many beyond the parents and the child have a stake in donor conception, and are therefore potential storytellers. Second, this means that there are many stories about what donor conception is and means, and what openness is and means. Understandings about who the story is about, who are the characters within it, who can tell the story and who needs to hear it, vary. Third, the fact that the story is unscripted means different things for different storytellers. The nuance and contour of how exactly the disjuncture between telling the story about donor conception but having no script by which to do so comes into play, varies both for the storytellers, and within different relationships. For example, for some it can mean taking relationships into new and uncharted territories, for others it can mean actively contradicting existing deeply held beliefs. And fourth, a relational analysis shows that although talking about donor conception is a largely unscripted process, it is not entirely unscripted. Rather, the way in which people navigate storytelling within families is weaved through existing relational principles, including how to behave in the role as parent, grandparent or aunt. A relational perspective is thus key because it shows that the way in which people ‘work out what to do’ follows already existing relational lines of conduct where they are available.

A quick look further afield suggests that the issue of secrecy and storytelling in the sphere of reproduction may not only be confined to donor conception but applies more broadly. Many reproductive experiences remain commonplace, such as, for example, abortion, miscarriage and pregnancy loss (Kilnshaw and Borg, 2020), and yet research suggests that there are not yet established socials scripts guiding whether and how to talk about them. For example, notwithstanding the number of women who experience abortion over a year (e.g. Oppenheim, 2019) telling stories about such a reproductive process remains an issue laden with stigma and taboo (e.g. Astbury-Ward et al., 2012). The issues discussed here are also echoed in reproductive practices involving third party reproduction, for example surrogacy (e.g. Gamson, 2015). With this article, I hope to have opened up the issue of reproductive storytelling for debate in research communities, and that others might feel inspired to develop and refine the area of investigation.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to a number of people and organisations for their support in this research. I would like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council for funding the project on which this article is based, and for previous research and writing collaborations with Professor Carol Smart, PI on that project. Many thanks also to everyone who participated in research interviews, and agreed to share your stories. I’m also grateful for past conversations, comments and thoughtful engagement from various colleagues on the ideas explored here; in particular Vanessa May, Jennifer Mason and David Morgan. Moreover, thanks to the reviewers for helpful and constructive feedback, and finally, thanks to Lindsay Manning for your ongoing engagement and support.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: this article draws on data from the research project ‘Relative strangers:
Negotiating non-genetic kinship in the context of assisted conception’, led by Professor Carol Smart and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Award ES/I004890/1).

Note
1. Openness is also encouraged through law and policy in, for example, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Victoria, Australia.

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**Date submitted** December 2019

**Date accepted** October 2020