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**Meeting multiple same-donor offspring:
psychosocial challenges.**

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ABSTRACT

Debates regarding donor-conceived people's rights to genetic information have caused some jurisdictions to abolish donor anonymity. Moreover, voluntary services have been established whose primary focus is providing possibilities to find information about the donor. A less discussed consequence is that donor-conceived people also find information about donor half-siblings: people conceived through the same donor. In the recent climate of openness and online DNA tests, there is an increased chance of finding multiple donor half-siblings. This study explored how donor-conceived people experience meeting multiple same-donor offspring in a group setting. Secondly the study investigated donor-conceived people's need for support when meeting multiple donor half-siblings. A qualitative approach was used. Nineteen donor-conceived offspring who participated in donor half-sibling network meetings were interviewed. Using a grounded theory approach three themes were identified regarding group aspects: (i) defining group membership; (ii) regulating closeness and distance; and (iii) managing group dynamics. Professional support needs in relation to these themes were also analysed. While establishing relationships between donor half-siblings are viewed as generally more beneficial than connecting with a donor, this study showed that these new relationships also come with their challenges, and counselling may need to be refined towards a more specific same donor-offspring relationships' framework.

KEYWORDS: donor conception, group, siblings, counselling, sperm donation, donor-conceived adults

Introduction

The initial debates in the nineties regarding donor-conceived people's interests and rights to genetic information focused on access to information about their genetic ancestors: the donors. This led some jurisdictions to pass laws prohibiting anonymous donation, thereby enabling access to the donor's identity for donor-conceived people born after the law changes. For donor-conceived people born prior to such law changes, several voluntary services have been established so they can seek information about the donor. For example, the Donor-Conceived Register (DCR) in the UK, the Fiom KID-DNA Database in the Netherlands, and the Voluntary Registers in Victoria, Australia are all voluntary services funded by the regulator, government or the state (Crawshaw et al., 2016). However, while the primary focus of those services is on providing the possibility to find information about the donor, a less discussed consequence is that donor-conceived people also discover information about same-donor offspring (i.e., people conceived through the same donor).

Over the last two decades several initiatives have arisen enabling donor-conceived people to specifically find same-donor offspring. Some are offspring and / or parent led organisations, such as Donor Sibling Registry (DSR, founded in 2000) in the USA, while others are provided through a fertility clinic or gamete bank, such as The Family Contact list (established in 1997) at The Sperm Bank of California (TSBC). More recently, online genetic genealogy services (developed for purposes other than donor-linking) such as FamilyTreeDNA (established in 1999), MyHeritage (established in 2003) and 23andMe (established in 2006) are also starting to be used to find donor relatives, with success (Crawshaw et al., 2016). In fact, the interest and need for information about donor relatives is increasingly being recognised by policymakers. Some countries have now legally recognised this interest. In the UK, the entitlement for donor-conceived individuals conceived after April 2005 to access identifying information about the donor at the age of 18 was extended in 2009 to include their right to seek

identifying information about same-donor offspring (Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, 2008). This led to the Donor Sibling Link (DSL, UK), a service established by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority in 2010, enabling donor-conceived people aged 18 or over to exchange contact details with same-donor offspring, after mutual consent. In the Australian state of Victoria, the Voluntary Registers were also created to allow for information exchange between donor-related parties, including same-donor offspring (Infertility Treatment Act, 1995; Johnson et al., 2012). Searching for and finding same-donor offspring has thus not only become increasingly recognised, it has also become possible due to a climate of increasing openness towards donor conception, voluntary registers, direct-to-consumer genetic testing, and the internet. However, research on searching for and meeting same-donor offspring is very limited. Only four studies report on the experiences of donor-conceived people themselves (Blyth, 2012; Hertz & Nelson, 2019; Hertz et al., 2017; Jadva et al., 2010). These studies describe the formation of close bonds between families who share the same donor, with a search that was frequently initiated by curiosity leading to a sense of ‘family connection’ (Freeman et al., 2009). Moreover, Freeman et al. (2014, p. 286) state that “the discovery of same-donor offspring relationships is commonly viewed as more straightforwardly beneficial than connecting with a donor”.

Given that sibling relationships (step-, adoptive- or half-siblings) in general are seen as a source of support in later life (Milevsky, 2016), it is worth investigating same-donor offspring relationships. And with increasing opportunities to find multiple same-donor offspring in the recent climate of openness and online DNA testing, it is imperative to gain more insight in the relationships developed and the challenges and needs that arise.

Drawing on a qualitative study of donor-conceived people who met same donor-offspring, this paper explores their experiences of meeting *multiple* same-donor offspring in a group setting and their support needs. In this paper the term ‘network’ refers merely to ‘multiple

donor-offspring who are genetically connected through the same donor'. We will use the word 'group' in two ways. First, as in 'a group meeting', referring to a gathering whereby members of such a network meet each other in a group setting (as opposed to individual meetings between network members). Secondly, when we talk about how people give meaning to the network, such as feelings of belonging, group forming, and group dynamics. This paper offers insights into how donor-conceived people defined network membership, how they regulated closeness and distance in relation to the network of same-donor offspring to which they are genetically related; how they balanced individual needs and group dynamics and their suggestions for how counsellors could help in managing these challenges. What the biological tie of sharing blood and genes with an uncertain number of same-donor offspring means; and how kinship is made and maintained with 'strangers' who are recently found to be 'relatives' will be analysed in another article (Bolt et al., in progress). The findings in this study contribute to our understanding of the challenges donor-conceived people face when searching for and contacting multiple same-donor offspring. Furthermore, these findings contribute to the discussion around setting a donor offspring quota per donor (PROGAR, 2005). Finally, the present study helps to develop a support model and good practice guidelines that fit the specific psycho-social challenges when meeting multiple same-donor offspring.

A first challenge donor-conceived people face concerns the naming of same-donor offspring. They are usually described by donor-conceived people, parents, and the media within a framework of siblingship, using words such as 'half-sibling', 'brother', 'sister', 'donor sibling'. Parents describe the relation between their child(ren) and same-donor offspring as a 'sibling-relationship' (Goldberg & Scheib, 2016; Hertz & Mattes, 2011; Hertz et al., 2017; Scheib & Ruby, 2008). Also Hertz & Nelson (2019, p. 71) described how donor-conceived children themselves were struggling with the word siblingship and how they used it in different varieties. The motivation for searching for same-donor offspring can be to find kin. While

language can be helpful in the process of giving meaning to and managing these new relationships, it can have various other connotations. Consequently, language can set a scene and create certain expectations that may or may not fit the new context. For example, siblingship is associated with sharing history from birth and across generations, sharing physical space and activities, sharing norms and values and affirmative ideas about how family members interact, such as with love, trust and in harmony (Greif & Woolley, 2015, p. 5; Hertz & Nelson, 2019, p. 195). In the context of same-donor offspring relationships, relationships first unfold in different families and are sometimes activated only in adulthood. In addition, the relationships can go beyond the current cultural family-sibling number and can increase continuously. Considering the differences between same-donor offspring networks and siblings, applying a siblingship framework to the context of same-donor offspring might be challenging and has its limitations.

A second challenge concerns the difference between searching for the donor or same-donor offspring. The search for the donor involves the search for an individual. In contrast, in their search for donor relatives, donor-conceived people can find a network and be confronted with multiple same-donor offspring. This is in fact a not uncommon outcome in donor conception. Blyth (2012) reported on several same-donor offspring networks within the DSR comprising more than 20 same-donor offspring, with the largest known network being a network of 200 same-donor offspring (DSR, personal communication, December 3, 2019). How to manage all these new relations is an unexpected challenge facing donor-conceived people. In addition to the size of the network, donor-conceived people are confronted with the constantly expanding character of same-donor offspring networks as new members gradually join the networks (Blyth, 2012). Moreover, as same-donor offspring belong to different families, they will be challenged to manage being part of ‘donor sibling networks’ (Hertz et al., 2017). These new developments raise debates about the psycho-social consequences of being

part of same-donor offspring networks (Scheib & Ruby, 2009) and whether there is a preferable limit to donor offspring per donor (Janssens et al., 2011; Janssens et al., 2015; Scheib & Ruby, 2009). This is not only of importance for countries with no or high birth limits per donor, but also for people conceived using an international donor, who will be part of a large international network of same-donor offspring. The challenges when meeting a large same-donor offspring network have been well described by donor-conceived people themselves for quite some time (Stevens, 2001), but have yet to be investigated.

Blyth (2012) pointed out that the value of connecting with same-donor offspring lies not so much in the knowledge they gain from each other, but in *the interactions* with each other. However, even when these interactions are valued highly, searching for and meeting donor relatives is also acknowledged as a challenging process. Therefore, most governmental or regulator supported services (Fiom, VARTA, DCR) and some sperm banks (e.g., The Sperm Bank of California (TSBC)) offer mediation support. Good practice guidelines regarding mediation support, usually focus on managing communication (between individuals as well as within families), relationships, setting boundaries and managing expectations. Most of these guidelines draw on the experience of adoption reunions (Blyth, 2012; Crawshaw, 2002; Feast, 2003). While knowledge from adoption reunions can help to outline ‘best practices’ in same-donor offspring reunions, looking to adoption practice has its limitations, leaving us currently with an inadequate support framework for donor-conceived people (Blyth, 2012). While adoption reunions also address kinships questions such as who to include and who to exclude, cases in which people will be connected with multiple others with whom they are genetically related, creating extensive kinship networks, occur infrequently. Up until now, sibling relationships, both in general and within the field of donor conception, are ‘the neglected relationship’ of family relationships by both researchers and counsellors (Milevsky, 2016, p. 4).

In 2010, Fiom, a Dutch organisation that has provided independent information and support in the search for biological origin since 1930, together with Canisius-Wilhelmina Hospital (CWZ), founded a voluntary DNA database for those conceived or who had donated prior to 2004: the Fiom KID-DNA Database. When the Netherlands abolished donor anonymity in 2004, Fiom was assigned to provide a professional support service for donor-conceived people (starting at age 16) when accessing information about the donor. As of November 2020, a total of 1976 donor-conceived people and 769 donors had registered in the Fiom KID-DNA Database. Almost seventy percent (1328; 67%) of the registered donor-conceived people are women, 33% (648) are men. 760 donor-conceived people matched with one or more same-donor offspring. While the focus of the KID-DNA database is on matches between donor-offspring and the donor, the KID-DNA database also revealed several multi same-donor offspring's networks. Currently (November 2020), there are 38 same-donor offspring networks (≥ 4 same-donor offspring) in the Fiom KID-DNA Database of which the group size is still gradually growing (the biggest network exists of 60 people). The donor is known to 25 of these networks. Fiom already had experience with guiding group meetings with for example adopted people. Group meetings were helpful in the recognition and acknowledgment of adoptees experiences and offered support during their acceptance process. Based on this experience, social workers of Fiom offered group meetings to same-donor offspring networks. Group meetings could be organised at the request of the donor-conceived people themselves (for example a network of same-donor offspring with a specific context that caused much emotional turmoil and need of support) or offered to them by the Fiom social worker (for example when multiple same-donor offspring were at the same time identified from the Fiom database). Group meetings at Fiom are generally offered once to each network to introduce members of the network to each other. Subsequently the members can freely decide to continue meeting each other in group settings or not. When new matches are identified with an existing network, Fiom

social workers explore with the donor-offspring if and how they want to be introduced to the same-donor offspring network. Fiom social workers have mainly a facilitating and mediating role in the contact between donor and donor offspring, and between same-donor offspring.

Materials and methods

Data collection

This study adopted a qualitative approach to understand how meeting multiple same-donor offspring as well as the support provided were experienced. Research data were collected through individual qualitative semi-structured interviews. Participants were eligible to participate in the study when they were a member of a same-donor offspring network and took part in a group meeting organised by Fiom counsellors between May 2017 and February 2018. The networks were identified from the Fiom KID-DNA Database. A total of 82 donor-conceived people participated in the meetings (30% male, 70% female). People were contacted by email. An information letter was included in the email enabling potential participants to make an informed choice regarding their participation in the study. People interested in participating could register by email or telephone. We received 22 positive reactions from five different networks. Nineteen people were ultimately interviewed. Two people declined due to illness or a change of mind. Participants were interviewed at home, at a location convenient for them, or at the office of Fiom. Interviews were conducted between April and June 2018 by last author and a research assistant. Before the interview started an informed consent form was signed. The interviews lasted 1.5 to 2 hours and as a token of appreciation the participants received a voucher worth 15€.

Fiom is an independent knowledge centre with no associated committee which can grant ethical approval. This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Helsinki

Declaration. Interviewees were given the opportunity to comment on the article prior to submission to the journal.

Based on literature regarding donor-conceived people searching for donor relatives and clinical experience with guiding same-donor offspring group meetings, a study-specific interview topic list was developed covering the following areas: (i) motives for searching for same-donor offspring; (ii) expectations about contact; (iii) feelings prior to, during and after the group meeting; and (iv) experiences of the support they received. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Sample

Five networks of same-donor offspring each had one group meeting guided by a Fiom counsellor. The networks (n=5) of same-donor offspring consisted of 7-27 donor-offspring at the time of the meetings, extending to 7-34 at the time of recruitment and to 11-60 by November 2020 (See Table 1). Participants were female, 15-42 years old (Mean \pm SD = 30 \pm 8.6), born into a heterosexual (n=13), solo-mother (n=3) or lesbian (n=4) household. Donor-conceived people in the networks in this study did not meet until they were at least adolescents, most were adults.

Data analysis

The transcripts were analysed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Suddaby, 2006). The data were coded, checked and discussed by the first and second author. Firstly, we read and reread the text several times, divided the text into fragments, and coded the content (open coding). Subsequently, we listed all the codes present in the text fragments about notions of *multi* same-donor offspring group meetings, developed categories, and related them by constant comparison (axial coding). Finally, we systematically

identified the core category ‘network aspects’: with subcategories ‘defining network membership’; ‘regulating closeness and distance’; and ‘managing group dynamics’. Subsequently we related professional needs in relation to the core category (selective coding) (Boeije, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Representative quotations were grouped around themes and are presented in this paper. References are made to the interviewee’s age and the network they were part of. Network numbers are added to demonstrate representativeness throughout the sample. Original quotations were translated from Dutch, and checked for accuracy by a native English speaker fluent in Dutch.

Results

Motives for searching for same-donor offspring

Most participants (n=13) had not thought about same-donor offspring when they started searching for the donor, others (n=4) were solely interested in contact with same-donor offspring, or (n=2) wanted to know if their sisters were full-genetic siblings. Three main motivations to search were: curiosity (n=19); the wish to receive medical information (n=11); the wish to extend their family, arising from feeling different (n=5) or missing family (n=7).

Defining group membership: from multiple individuals to becoming a group

Defining the group was often an ongoing process for the participants. ‘What defines the membership of the group?’ and ‘Who is included and excluded?’ were often topics to be negotiated amongst the group members on social media. For some participants the shared characteristic was being donor-conceived and sharing genes, for others their shared characteristic was the medium through which they found each other, via Fiom KID-DNA database, a television programme, or an international online DNA database. Subgroups began to take shape based on shared characteristics, such as physical or personality traits, being raised

in a same-sex household, stage of life, childhood experiences, goals, beliefs, and values. There was a large variety of reasons for deciding whether to belong to a (sub)group, and this could change over time:

In the beginning some people saw it as two separate groups [those who were matched via Fiom KID-DNA Database and those who were matched via an online international DNA database], while it was actually just one unit. There were also 2 separate group apps, ... And I belonged to both groups. That's gone now ... Both groups are together now and it doesn't matter anymore. But at the start it was just hectic; who wanted to be in and who not, who wanted to come along etc. [Network 3, age 17]

The characteristic that people have in common determines who is in or out of the network. In this specific situation where 'sharing genes' was the shared characteristic, an additional dilemma was raised. Given that genes are passed on to subsequent generations, participants were confronted with setting boundaries. How far would network membership go? This was experienced differently by different members. Boundaries were often negotiated and influenced by partners, mothers, and/or siblings with which the participants grew up. The following quote illustrates that the participant considers the same-donor offspring as a kind of family and she wants her children, who are also genetically related to them, to be part of her new network. Her husband, however, thinks otherwise. He experiences the new relatives as "strangers", to whom his children do not relate:

*He [the partner] simply doesn't understand it and wants nothing to do with it.
He also doesn't want me to share pictures of our family [in the group]. He*

doesn't want any of that kind of stuff. So I don't do it. I respect his opinion even though I think it's stupid [Network 1, age 37]

While sharing genes and being offspring of the same donor brought the donor-conceived people together, sharing genes alone was not enough to form a group. To form a group, people need to have a sense of entitativity, that is the perception that the people together are a group (Campbell, 1958; Lickel et al., 2000). Another factor to induce group feeling is frequent interaction and communication with each other (Johnson & Johnson, 2012). Connection and interaction between people are necessary to become a group. For some, the genetic link was sufficient to prompt group interaction, while others did not immediately experience this. For these participants, the group feeling developed over time or remained the same. The following participant describes how she experienced taking a group photo, spontaneously suggested at the end of a group meeting, made her feel uncomfortable:

It might be better to make separate photos of people [instead of a group photo]. You shouldn't be forced into a group of "we belong together". 'Cause obviously that's not the case. Only DNA-technically, but otherwise we are not a group. Personally, I would like pictures of each individual separately, but not in a group together. [Network 2, age 34]

Regulating closeness and distance

When a feeling of relatedness was experienced, participants still had to work out how close or distant they felt, and had to define their position towards other members of the network. Several factors affected this process. Practicalities associated with a large, continuously expanding network influenced feelings of closeness or distance to others. This was especially the case

when the network did not expand gradually but in leaps, with multiple people joining the network simultaneously. While some members spontaneously welcomed every additional member to the group, others found it challenging to readjust the relationships with group members and to find a new balance. They decided it was impossible to be as close with everyone. They felt more closeness to those whom they had met first, maybe due to the fact that it was a more emotional moment for those involved, and subsequent meetings lost that degree of specialness:

More and more people joined. First, we were with 8. Now we're with 40, 45 people. I can't keep count of it any longer. Now that the novelty is over, I've had enough. I have a few contacts with people I really like, and that's enough. It's an illusion to think that you can maintain contact with 45 people. That's impossible. You shouldn't even strive for it. In your own family there are also people you don't like so much. It's the same here. [Network 1, age 37]

The first group [I was matched with] still feels like the closest to me... Every time there was a new match, the relationships changed. I found that very difficult. [Network 4, age 37]

Experiencing similarities or differences regarding more general characteristics such as age, area of residence, or communication style could also determine closeness or distance. This could lead to the formation of subgroups with new negotiations regarding who is in or out of the subgroup. The formation of subgroups could cause tension, jealousy and rivalry:

All kinds of jokes were made, a certain kind of humour that I didn't like. Eventually, you distance yourself from them if you can't relate to their way of communicating. [Network 2, age 34]

When trying to give meaning to these new connections, participants often tried to fit these new relationships into a kinship framework that influenced the feeling of closeness or distance. For some, the same-donor offspring with whom they shared genes felt immediately as (close) kin, and they felt an instant bond. For other participants, 'kin' entailed also having a shared history; a bond that develops by doing and experiencing things together. Participants' words (such as stranger, brother or sister) reflected the closeness or distance they felt (un)comfortable with at a certain point in time:

Others said immediately, "oh, you've got new family", "that will be busy on birthdays," and "dear little sister, dear little brother". But I thought ' I don't know you'. So I didn't like that. I was just curious about who the others were. I was curious to see if we look a bit alike, physically and personally. But I do not immediately see someone as family. We don't have that kind of bond. We're strangers to each other. So I deliberately kept a little aloof from all of that. [Network 1, age 29]

"Some of the group refer to him as my nephew. But the baby in her tummy does not feel like my nephew". [Network 5, age 27]

Finding the right closeness or distance to others was a challenging experience for several participants. Sometimes participants wanted to experience more closeness to the donor relatives

and they realised to achieve this they needed to invest time in these new relationships. However, getting to know such an amount of new people often conflicted with their ongoing family and work life:

“It is new and beautiful but at the same time complicated. After a year I am still figuring out how to deal with this. I want to meet them all but on the other hand there is the reality of my busy everyday life’.” [Network 1, age 42]

Managing group dynamics: balancing individual needs and group dynamics

In the process of linking donor relatives, people are advised by professionals to be aware of their own pace in the process and follow it. This is often already challenging when two people meet. When people meet same-donor offspring in a group-setting, such as in this study, they are confronted with group dynamics. Several processes happened when people interacted in a group, such as conflicts, cohesion, and division as described above in the section on ‘regulating closeness and distance’. Group dynamics risk overpowering individual needs. Additionally, the pace of the group can be different from the pace preferred by individuals.

One participant mentioned that she sometimes heard information about the donor through the group, sooner than she was ready for this information and could cope with it. She felt the only option therefore was to leave the group. The group can also choose a manner of approaching the donor that is different to someone’s personal preference. These group dynamics can conflict with how the donor-conceived person wanted to connect with the donor. For example, the donor can release his identity or he can be traced through DNA online tests:

They [the group] have almost found the donor. I have said all along, and I really mean that, I would like to meet him, but only if he wants to, not because he was found secretly. [Network 4, age 30]

Moreover, sometimes group members had different amounts of donor information, or some had met the donor while for others the donor was still unknown. This was challenging for both parties involved. Those who knew the donor felt uncomfortable about their position in the group and felt puzzled about whether or not to share. Disclosure could be positive because the information might help others prepare themselves for contact with the donor. But disclosing could also interfere with people's personal process and pace. On the other hand, those who had little or no information felt information was held back. Feelings of rivalry were also mentioned. The fear existed that the donor, due to the increasing group size, might withdraw from being contacted.

Finding the 'right' distance or closeness to others is a very personal process. Often participants mentioned how group dynamics interfered in this regulation process. Social media, where someone can be both 'present' (in the sense of registered as member of the group) and 'absent' (in the sense of not being active), made it additionally challenging to manage closeness/distance. This constant balancing act and search for the best distance made people decide to leave the group completely, stay on the side-lines (for example, following posts on social media but not actively responding), or be active at certain times. This searching and balancing was perceived by some as emotional and straining:

I find it annoying when a photo passes on Facebook where people met outside the group. I might have wanted to be there too. But because I have distanced

myself, I just follow it from the sidelines and I don't respond actively. Still it doesn't feel very nice. [Network 2, age 34]

That was annoying. I understand that they say, "You decide what you want and don't want", but when you're dealing with a group, you can't always make that choice objectively. If you don't want anything to do with the group, it's one meeting and you're out. But if you want to stay in contact a little bit, it is very difficult to say what you want and don't want. Either you play along and you do things you may not want to do, or let things happen that you don't like, or you isolate yourself. And I don't think I'm the only one who isolates herself. [Network 4, age 34]

While these situations might also occur in individual encounters, a setting in which one meets several people at the same time might enhance these feelings and requires additional coping mechanisms. However, the group dynamics could vary widely. For example, a donor-conceived brother and sister who grew up together and had different donors belonged to two different same-donor offspring networks and had different group meetings. One of these groups was characterized by tension and conflict, while the other group was very cohesive and open.

Professional support

A great variety was seen in the needs and experiences regarding professional support, between participants and also at different moments in time:

Don't leave such a large group on its own and expect that it will be all right. My mother is a teacher and she assures me that it is about group processes and it

will take time. For me, it feels like Fiom offers support at the beginning but afterwards, nothing. [Network 2, age 34]

Some participants experienced support as beneficial. But it was important that guidance was given by those with experience in the field of donor conception. Support was seen as helpful in preparing for a group meeting, through reflecting on hopes and expectations that existed and feelings that might be triggered. Hearing concrete examples was experienced as helpful in creating realistic expectations. Follow-up calls after the meeting were perceived positively, by giving participants the opportunity to talk things through later on. Participants also expressed needs that were specific to meeting a large multi-sibling group:

I would like someone who could help me with the bigger picture. How do you cope with such a large group? Our group is just as much seeking as I am. We recognize that in each other . We cannot teach each other something or hand on tools in these matters. [Network 1, age 42]

Support could help in making contact with a group, but it was often needed in coping with and managing group dynamics. The following participant describes the frustration she experiences when being confronted with 34 same-donor offspring and figuring out how to get to know them and feel part of the network:

I want to get rid of this feeling of powerlessness. It makes me sad. I don't want that, I want to learn to deal with it. I don't know how. I can just schedule 34 appointments on a Sunday, and that will occupy me for a year, but it doesn't work that way. I don't know who should help me, someone from Fiom, a

psychologist or someone else. It drives me crazy. I want to belong somewhere and I am happy that I have found them. But how do I continue to belong? How do I avoid getting excluded? [Network 1, age 42]

Questions existed on how to cope when you feel very different from what the group feels: 'I feel like a spoilsport'. Or, when people react very differently than expected, how to cope with the fact that the group will not always act cohesively when differences arise:

Maybe it is good to clarify that you aren't obligated to anything. To be told that you don't have to be (best) friends with every half-sibling [Network 3, age 20].

Support was also valued in relation to situations where differences existed in the amount of information members had regarding the donor. Participants were grateful for advice on the use of social media, such as to be aware of respecting each other's privacy, as not everyone might have informed their social network or want to be so open about their experiences.

Overall there is a large variety in the need for support, kind of support and timing of support. Sometimes participants felt no need for professional support because they had a good support system surrounding them. Others experienced professional support during same-donor offspring meetings as too protective. The feeling of having control over the group themselves was important:

Fiom is not responsible for how the group works. You offer the opportunity to meet each other, and then personally I think your work stops. Otherwise it would feel patronizing. After your initial support it is up to the group itself, how they stay in contact etc... I don't think there's a job for Fiom after that. [Network 4, age 30].

Sometimes support was appreciated at the start, but it was felt that at the right time it should be left up to the group. Others did not agree to leave the group to find its own way. For some, support in meeting donor relatives remained ambivalent:

I might have expected that the meeting would be a little more guided ... On the other hand, I didn't want to be taken by the hand, if you get me so again I felt very contradictory. [Network 5, age 27]

Discussion

This paper examined the experiences of donor-conceived people who met multiple same-donor offspring in a group setting and the support that was needed. Themes regarding group aspects (defining group membership; regulating closeness and distance; managing group dynamics) were identified, and professional support needs in relation to these themes were explored.

Earlier findings showed that many parents and donor-conceived people report the formation of *close bonds* when donor relatives meet. These bonds are often described as 'family' connections (Freeman et al., 2009; Hertz et al., 2017). Connections between same-donor offspring challenge conventional notions of familial bonds that are based on factors such as shared upbringing, family history or legal obligations (Freeman et al., 2012; Hertz & Nelson, 2019). Lacking a more adequate language, the kinship language of siblingship underpinned participants' experiences. Although affection and closeness, ambivalence and ambiguity are normal aspects of a siblingship relationship (Greif & Woolley, 2015), being able to accept both positive and negative elements within same-donor offspring relationships was often challenging for participants. Personal experiences of or ideas about sibling relationships might have influenced the expectations regarding same-donor offspring relationships. The absence of a

shared history or life course view might also hamper a more nuanced view on the new relationships. Participants in this study met same-donor offspring in young adulthood. Consequently, they were confronted with a ‘instant-start’ of their relationships. Whereas commonly in sibling relationships a shared history can compensate for feelings of ambivalence and ambiguity, this is lacking in the first contacts same-donor offspring had in this study. This means that experiences can be very different for donor-conceived people who meet same-donor offspring as children. Even if they do not fully understand what it means to share a donor with that other person, they can start earlier to develop a shared history.

Participants described being overwhelmed by the number of same-donor offspring and feeling guilty of not being able to connect with everyone. They wanted to be in closer contact with their donor relatives but did not know how to fit these multiple new relationships into their existing relationships. They realised that establishing (and maintaining) relationships takes effort and time. But job and family demands often intervened. The aspect of time and effort in the creation of kinship has also been described by adoptees (Carsten, 2000) and sperm donors (Crawshaw et al., 2007). Even in siblingships who go back to infancy, it can be difficult to make the effort to maintain the relationship. Some brothers and sisters just drift apart, especially when there are many of them (Greif & Woolley, 2015). Moreover, even in thriving same donor-offspring groups, interpersonal dynamics change constantly for example when values change over time (Hertz & Nelson, 2019, p 201). Based on Greif and Woolley’s work (2015) it might be valuable in counselling to explore how kinship is constructed and what the meaning and importance of a genetic connection, time and effort are, to envision how these relationships could work, and weigh the benefits and costs of reaching out.

Participants often described being challenged by the size of the network and feeling torn between individual needs and the group's focus or pace. In this study donor-conceived people were generally in contact with multiple same-donor offspring (8 to 31) and met frequently in

group settings rather than having individual contacts with some members of the network as described in previous studies (Blyth, 2012; Hertz et al., 2017; Jadva et al., 2010). Participants' geographical closeness also facilitated in-person group meetings. Having meetings in group-settings and in-person can enhance the feeling of group pressure and group dynamics (such as situating oneself in the group, group pace and cohesion) in contrast to more individual meetings with network members or online meetings. Aspects that might influence coping with a group of same-donor offspring are: age (child, adult); stage in life (child, partnered, own children); personal experiences and existing coping strategies; meeting online or in person; meeting individually or in group; and the degree to which people are prepared for group dynamics.

The identified themes included several challenges confronting participants to different degrees. The level and kind of support that was welcomed as well as its timing differed amongst the participants. Some participants wanted to be better prepared for these multiple new relationships, others preferred support to cope with group dynamics and peer pressure, while others needed help afterwards on how to give meaning to these new contacts. Various possibilities already exist to empower donor-conceived people in the context of donor-linking, through online or in-person didactic information on same-donor offspring networks and the possible emotions associated with it, which helps prepare for these new contacts and possible meetings, and through mediation (see the VARTA or DCR website). More specific clarification of group dynamics and information about coping strategies, or actual guidance of group dynamics during meetings, might be added to existing information or mediation. Even when people meet different same-donor offspring individually rather than in a group-setting, or decide not to meet others, this information can help someone to situate themselves in relation to the same-donor offspring network and prepare them for possible (virtual or real) contact so they can regain control of this part of their life.

This study's findings should be considered in light of the following limitations. First, the sample cannot be seen as representative of all donor-conceived people: all respondents were already aware of their donor-conception origins, prepared to search for 'donor relatives', and were open to meet multiple same-donor offspring simultaneously. No information exists on donor-conceived people who have no interest in donor relatives or prefer individual rather than group meetings. Furthermore, all participants were women, reflecting the larger number of women registered with the Fiom KID-DNA Database and gendered participation rates in research involving donor-conceived people more generally (Culley et al., 2013). The sample consisted of donor-conceived young adults (mean age 30) with an anonymous sperm donor. Awareness of and meeting multiple same-donor offspring might be experienced differently by donor-conceived people with an identifiable donor, who (in the Netherlands) can request identifying information at sixteen, or those who are still living at home where family influences are more present. Further research can clarify this and see if additional adaptations in support are needed. Moreover, the donor's own children have shown interest in meeting the half-siblings, who are conceived by their father's donation (Daniels et al., 2012), yet it is unclear how they experience the aspect of having multiple siblings. Finally, given that relationships constantly develop, follow-up research is recommended to see how these relationships further evolve.

Fiom, like other professional organisations (for example the Australian and New Zealand Infertility Counselling Association, ANZICA), has set guidelines for donor-linking in which the counsellor is seen as a mediator rather than a therapeutic counsellor. The focus in these guidelines is on facilitating contact between a donor-conceived person and the donor rather than contact between multiple same-donor offspring. Therefore, some adjustments might be called for, such as the inclusion of reflection on how kinship is constructed, how to balance individual and group needs, and how to manage group dynamics, especially as donors are seen

as possibly challenging carefully constructed family types, and same-donor offspring are generally viewed as an opportunity to enlarge a family (Nelson et al., 2013).

Moreover, it is important to reflect on how professional and clinical discourse around same donor-offspring connections and the socio-legal and cultural context in which this occurs may shape the meaning of these experiences. Is the interest of donor-conceived people in same-donor offspring (legally) acknowledged and made possible? What kind of frameworks are relied on? And how - given these multiple connections - are we creating room for differences that can exist in individual perceptions of who counts as family (Blyth, 2012; Cossar & Neil, 2013)? A framework of sibling relationships might be valuable in acknowledging, understanding and coping with ambivalence and ambiguity in these new relationships. And might help us reflect on differences between same donor-offspring who meet as children or who meet in adulthood. Lastly, implementing knowledge about group dynamics in this field can help to improve support.

It remains important to understand what is distinctive about multiple same donor-offspring contact and relationships as compared to other (siblingship) relationships. Those involved are to some extent 'relationship pioneers' (Grotevant, 2009) with all the uncertainty and creativity that this entails. While the relationships of same-donor offspring are commonly viewed as generally more beneficial than connecting with the donor, this study shows that these new relationships also come with challenges, and that counselling may need to be refined towards a more specific same donor-offspring relationships' framework.

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Table 1. Number of same-donor offspring in each network.

	Network 1 (<i>n</i>)	Network 2 (<i>n</i>)	Network 3 (<i>n</i>)	Network 4 (<i>n</i>)	Network 5 (<i>n</i>)
At time of meeting	18 (May 2017)	19 (June 2017)	12 (June 2017)	27 (October 2017)	7 (February 2018)
At recruitment time (April 2018)	34	19	12	31	7
In November 2020	60	37	19	48	11
Increase group size over 2.5 - 3.5 years	239%	89%	58%	81%	43%