The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between adult offspring’s perception of family functioning and of parental use of topic avoidance to maintain secrecy regarding the use of donor assistance to conceive. A cross-sectional design was used to study a convenience sample of 69 young adult donor offspring who completed a demographic questionnaire, a topic avoidance scale relative to each of their rearing parents, and the Beavers Self Report Family Instrument. Findings indicated that participants perceived both parents as avoiding the topic of donor assistance more than other topics, mothers as avoiding all topics less than fathers, and topic avoidance was negatively associated with family functioning. Mothers’ general topic avoidance was the strongest predictor of family functioning. Parents’ disclosing together was predictive of higher family functioning. Implications for practice and future research are suggested.

Keywords: Family secrets; Family functioning; Topic avoidance

With the development of novel reproductive technologies, the number of families created with donor assistance is increasing. Donor inseminations in the United States are estimated to result in approximately 60,000 births annually, producing a minimum of one million children since the 1950s (Institute for Science, Law & Technology Working Group, 1998; Zoldbrod & Covington, 2000). Egg donation is also on the rise, since its introduction in 1984, with the most recent estimate of 5,764 live birth deliveries producing a total of 8,044 live born children (due to multiples) in 2003 (Center for Disease Control, 2006). Parents in these families face a dilemma whether...
to share with their offspring the information about the circumstances of their conception or keep it a secret.

Historically, the policy of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine supported secrecy (Daniels, 1988; The Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine [ASRM], 2004). However, in 2004 ASRM revised its policy to embrace openness but acknowledged the need for further research on its effects (The Ethics Committee of the ASRM, 2004). Accordingly, this study examined topic avoidance as a measure of disclosure and functioning in families that conceived with donor assistance.

Secrecy within families involves the intentional concealment of information by one or more family members from others who may be impacted by it (Bok, 1982). It is important to differentiate between privacy and secrecy. The distinction lies in the relevance of the information concealed for those who are unaware of it (Karpel, 1980). “What is truly private doesn’t impact our physical or emotional health” (Imber-Black, 1998, p. 21), whereas secrets such as information of biological parentage may have negative effects, for example a limited ability to maximize preventive healthcare.

Even secrets made with the best intentions (e.g., to protect young children) may affect family relationships and interactions (Imber-Coppersmith, 1985). Maintaining secrets in families creates barriers between secret holders and those who do not know the information and affects the family system and individual family members (Imber-Black, 1998; Karpel, 1980). On the systemic level, secrecy may lead to psychological distancing, creation of “cliques,” compromised family communication, reduced trust, and dissatisfaction (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). On the individual level, secret holders may experience tension, loneliness, behavior impulsiveness, and stress-related physical health problems (Kelly, 2002; Lane & Wegner, 1995; Pennebaker, 1989, 1990). Those kept unaware of a secret may develop self-doubt, suspicion, fear and anxiety, eating disorders, and negative psychological functioning later in life (Danzell, 2000; Imber-Black, 1998; Jahn, 1995). Clinical family practice has demonstrated that secrets often gather strength during adolescence due to the increased possibility of discovery (Cain, 2006; Imber-Black, 1998; Karpel, 1980).

Theoretical, empirical, and clinical knowledge has focused on the motivation and mechanisms for keeping secrets. Three categories of motivation have been identified. Relationship-based motivation is intended to maintain relational harmony and intimacy or shield a family member. Individual-based motivation serves to maintain one’s autonomy, ego boundaries, individual identity, and self-esteem. Information-based motivation is guided by a desire to convey information in a clear and relevant way (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Galvin & Brommel, 1982; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995).

A significant mechanism for keeping secrets is topic avoidance, that is, withdrawing from a conversation or omitting certain content (Christensen & Heavey, 1993; Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Redmon, 1983). It is typically used to avoid disclosure of failures, negative past experiences, and content that carries social stigma or taboo (Cain, 2006; Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Kadushin, 2000; Major & Granzow, 1999). It is also used to avoid disclosure of information relative to deviation from the norm such as infertility and adoption (Paul & Berger, 2007), for example, parents’ decision not to disclose to children information regarding their conception with donor assistance because of embarrassment, shame, humiliation, and fear of rejection (Cook, Golombok, Bish, & Murray, 1995; Daniels, Lewis, & Gillett, 1995).
Topic avoidance has been found to be negatively associated with individuals’ relational satisfaction in diverse family contexts (e.g., stepfamilies, adoptive families), with respect to many topics (e.g., dating and sexual experiences, drugs, money, religion) and for individuals of all ages (Baran & Pannor, 1990; Cushman, Kalmuss, & Namerow, 1997; Etter, 1993; Golish, 2000; Gross, 1997; Lifton, 1988; Winkler, Brown, Van Keppel, & Blanchard, 1988; Wrobel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy, & Friedrick, 1996; Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 1998).

Findings regarding secrecy and disclosure in families formed with donor assistance are inconsistent. Nachtigall, Tschann, Quiroga, Pitcher, and Becker (1997) found no relationship between disclosure and parenting, parental strictness, involvement with the child, or marital satisfaction and intimacy. However, Golombok, MacCallum, Goodman, and Rutter (2002) and Lycett, Daniels, Curson, Chir, and Golombok (2004) found disclosing parents to report less severe and frequent disputes with their children and more relational satisfaction than nondisclosing parents. Scheib, Riordan, and Rubin (2003, 2005) found positive and nondefensive family communication style between parents and adolescents when parents have disclosed to children at a young age. A European study that followed a single family over time documented reduction of anxiety symptoms in both child and parents as well as improved family communication following parental disclosure (Bonney, 2002). Qualitative studies and testimonials of adolescent, young adult, and adult donor offspring have suggested an association between later life and accidental disclosures and strained relationships and/or mistrust within rearing families (Hewitt, 2002; Turner & Coyle, 2000).

The current study expands on existing knowledge by exploring the relationship between topic avoidance and family competence as a measure of family functioning. Family competence defines how well a family performs its necessary life tasks, that is, providing shelter, safety, and physical and psychological nurturance to family members. It is largely determined by the family’s structure, leadership, parental alliance, clear boundaries, individual members’ autonomy, clear and direct communication, families’ abilities to tolerate differences, members’ ability for spontaneity, expression of a full range of emotions, and an overall sense of optimism (Beavers & Hampson, 2000). This definition reflects western values (e.g., many cultures do not appreciate emotional expressiveness); however, it is compatible with the cultural composition of consumers of assisted reproduction who tend to be from western backgrounds as well (Nachtigall, 2006).

Although the few studies on disclosure and family dynamics in donor assisted families yielded inconclusive results, they tended to favor disclosure. Limitations of these studies include lack of representation of families through the life cycle, unclear distinction between plans to disclose and actual disclosure, and conceptualization of disclosure as a one-time event rather than as a process occurring over time. This study expands on prior research by examining the relationship between topic avoidance and family functioning in families that have conceived with donor assistance and in which offspring have reached early adulthood. Its findings are anticipated to broaden our understanding of the relationship between secrecy and family dynamics and offer clinical guidelines to inform practice with families struggling with the sharing of information as well as directions for future research.
METHOD

Participants
Sixty-nine young adults reported about their perception of their family of origin’s level of functioning and use of topic avoidance. Participants were recruited through advertisements on relevant discussion boards (e.g., donorsiblingregistry@yahoo-groups.com, donornisconception@yahoo-groups.com, PCVAI@yahoo-groups.com, infertilitynetwork@yahoo-groups.com) and associated websites, advertisements with sperm banks and the media (e.g., The New York Times), and snowballing. Inclusion criteria were age 21–34; ability to speak, read, and write English; and self-reported absence of current or recent-past crises (e.g., death, serious psychological, or mental illness in family). Respondents were mostly female (85%), in their mid-20s ($M = 25.88$, $SD = 4.1$), educated, single, and Caucasian (97.1%). Therefore, this is a highly self-selected group, reflective of a typical gender bias in survey research and of consumers of assisted reproduction who tend to be of upper and middle class (Nachtigall, 2006). Four fifths of the respondents were born into two-parent families, of which half were divorced at the time of the study, reflecting current United States census statistics (Raley & Bumpass, 2003). Over half of the participants did not learn about the circumstances of their conception until they were adolescents (age 16 or older), while 18% stated that they were told at or before age 5. In 71%, the informer was the mother, 4% the father, and in 20% both parents informed the offspring. In the remaining 5% offspring learned of their donor conception by accident (e.g., medical records) or from another family member.

Procedure
A research packet that included three self-report instruments, instructions, a consent form, and a stamped return envelope was mailed to eligible participants who responded to recruitment invitation.

Measures
Three measures were used in this study: the Topic Avoidance Scale, the Beavers Self Report Family Instrument (SFI) Version II, and a Demographic Survey.

Topic Avoidance Scale
This is a 22-item scale that includes the original 16 items developed by Guerrero and Afifi (1995) and revised by Caughlin and Afifi (2004), which measures respondents’ perception of their family’s topic avoidance in general. Six additional items were designed for this study to measure specifically topic avoidance relative to donor assistance. Participants were requested to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale the degree to which each statement reflected their experience regarding their mother and their other rearing parent (e.g., social father, i.e., the man who was married to their mother at the time of their conception and birth, stepfather, other mother, grandmother) separately. Because other rearing parent was the social father in 82% of the cases, further reference to other rearing parent will be father. Fourteen participants completed the questionnaire only relative to their mother because there was no other rearing parent (due to divorce, death, or single parent family configuration). Chron-
bach’s $\alpha$ reliability for the Topic Avoidance Scale for mother was .95, and for father .97.

**Beavers SFI Version II**

This 36-item 5-point Likert-type scale was used to measure participants’ perceptions of their family’s level of functioning because it has been demonstrated to be a good indicator of family competence (Beavers & Hampson, 1990). It has a high internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Chronbach’s $\alpha$ .84–.93 and .85 respectively), as well as good concurrent validity with other self-report family scales and discriminant validity demonstrated by its capacity to discriminate between groups of psychiatric patients with differing diagnoses (Beavers & Hampson, 1990, 2000; Hampson, Beavers, & Hulgus, 1989). Chronbach’s $\alpha$ reliability for the SFI in this study was .96.

**Demographic Survey**

This instrument contained 12 questions about participants’ personal and family background including age, gender, marital status, education, occupation, ethnicity, family of origin configuration, parents’ current marital status, age at time of disclosure, and discler.

**Limitations**

This study looked at the relationship between topic avoidance and family functioning in one type of family regarding one type of secret from the perspective of one family member. Findings therefore cannot be generalized to other types of families and secrets without further research. While the perception of the young adults who were the product of donor assisted pregnancies may be affected by participants’ personality and subjective life experience, the importance of understanding such subjective perspective has been increasingly recognized in contemporary social research (Padgett, 1998). Because there is no way to gather information from offspring where there has been no disclosure of donor assistance, it remains impossible to make a statement on the relative benefits of disclosure versus nondisclosure. Additional sample-related limitations include the infeasibility to recruit a traditional representative sample of donor offspring due to privacy policies regarding medical information, the self selected nature of the sample, and a potential selection bias caused by recruitment from support organizations for people conceived with donor assistance. All these limitations may affect the outcomes.

Additionally, the cross-sectional correlational nature of the design allows for conclusions regarding association rather than causation. Thus the nature of the process that connects topic avoidance to family functioning remains unclear and the analysis is not able to highlight fully the processes in which disclosure does or does not occur. Finally, some of the research concepts are limited in their application to diverse cultures, and therefore findings cannot be generalized to non-western contexts.

**RESULTS**

Participants perceived both parents as avoiding donor assistance topics more than general topics with mothers avoiding less than fathers both general topics ($M = 39.26$; $SD = 20.15$; $M = 56.56$, $SD = 27.44$, respectively out of a possible range of 16–112) and

*Fam. Proc., Vol. 47, December, 2008*
donor assistance related topics ($M = 20.63$, $SD = 13.51$; $M = 30.33$, $SD = 13.39$, respectively, out of a possible range of 6–42). See Table 1.

While mothers’ and fathers’ general and donor assistance-related topic avoidance were moderately correlated ($r = .44$, $r = .57$, respectively, $p \leq .001$), the differences between the two were significant ($t = -4.89$, and $-6.09$, respectively, $p \leq .001$). Therefore, using a mean parents’ topic avoidance score would have muted individual gender-based differences between parents and was contraindicated (Ransom, Fisher, Phillips, Kokes, & Weiss, 1990). Furthermore, while each parent’s avoidance of general and of donor assistance-related topics were moderately correlated ($r = .60$ for mothers, $r = .61$ for fathers $p \leq .001$), they were significantly different ($t = -9.48$ for mothers, $t = -8.40$ for fathers $p \leq .001$). It appears that in families that use the strategy of avoiding topics, they tend to do so more relative to sensitive themes such as reproduction.

SFI scores were reverse coded to facilitate interpretation of findings because in its original form low scores represent high family functioning and high scores represent low family functioning. Family functioning was perceived by participants as moderately high ($M = 117.02$, $SD = 31.47$ of possible range 36-180). As Table 2 shows, for both fathers and mothers family functioning was negatively correlated with general as well as donor assistance-related topic avoidance ($r = -.53$ and $-.50$, respectively, for fathers; $r = -.55$ and $-.40$, respectively, for mothers, $p \leq .01$). See Table 3.

Regression analysis using a general linear model with family functioning as the dependent variable and four categories of topic avoidance as the independent variables explained 50% of the variance in family functioning. Within the model, mothers’ general topic avoidance was the only significant predictor of family functioning, with an effect size of $\beta .468$. The findings reveal a predicted .739 decrease in family functioning score for each unit increase in mothers’ general topic avoidance score, when all other categories of topic avoidance were held constant. Within this model, coefficients for the other three topic avoidance categories were not significant.

Regression analysis using GLM with family functioning as the dependent variable and background variables (gender, age at disclosure, identity of discloser) as well as each parent’s degree of general and donor assistance-related topic avoidance as independent variables (see Table 4, models 1–4) indicated that an increase in mothers’ general, fathers’ general, and fathers’ donor assistance-related topic avoidance were significantly predictive of a decrease in family functioning when all other independent variables were held constant.

An additional regression model (Table 4, model 5) was used to identify the “net” contribution of the aforementioned background variables to family functioning and determined that 24% of the variance is explained by these variables.

The five models indicated that the variable topic avoidance explained family functioning in the following way: Twenty percent of variance in family functioning was

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>General and Donor Assistance-Related Topic Avoidance in Mothers and Fathers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General topic avoidance</td>
<td>$M = 39.26$ ($SD = 20.15$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donor related topic avoidance</td>
<td>$M = 20.63$ ($SD = 13.51$)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$p \leq .001$.
explained by mothers’ general topic avoidance, 12% by fathers’ general topic avoidance, 9% by fathers’ donor assistance-related topic avoidance, and 5% by mothers’ donor assistance-related topic avoidance. This model also determined that parents disclosing together was predictive of family functioning (57 point increase in family functioning score). Offspring’s gender, age at disclosure, and mother as discloser were not significant predictors of family functioning.

Regression analysis with topic avoidance as the dependent variable and the aforementioned background variables as the independent variables indicated that age at time of disclosure and joint disclosure by both parents predicted mothers’, \( R^2 = .295, F(6, 61) = 4.26, p < .001 \), but not fathers’ donor assistance-related topic avoidance score.

**DISCUSSION**

The main finding of this study, that is, that an inverse relationship exists between topic avoidance and family functioning, supports the idea that secrecy in families may compromise family functioning whereas when family members communicate more openly with each other, families may function better. However, because the study design did not allow for testing causality, the results may also be interpreted such that better functioning families may be more able to disclose and handle sensitive information. This idea has long been held in family communication theory (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006) and in clinical practice with families (Karpel, 1980) and validated by previous family research (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Negative associations have been documented between maintaining secrecy, particularly by using topic avoidance and relational satisfaction in a wide range of family situations (e.g., stepfamilies), topics (e.g., dating and sexual experiences, drugs, money, religion), and ages (Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Golish, 2000; 2004).

**TABLE 2**

*Correlation Between Topic Avoidance and Family Functioning*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Topic Avoidance</th>
<th>Donor Topic Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family functioning</td>
<td>- .55* ( p &lt;= .01 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 58)</td>
<td>- .53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 58)</td>
<td>- .50* ( p &lt;= .01 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 47)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 3**

*Multiple Linear Regression with Topic Avoidance (TA), and SFI as Dependent Variable*

\[ R^2 = .50, F(4, 39) = 9.76, p = .000 \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>174.12</td>
<td>17.60</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers’ general TA</td>
<td>-0.739</td>
<td>-3.39</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers’ general TA</td>
<td>-0.262</td>
<td>-1.55</td>
<td>.129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers’ donor TA</td>
<td>0.321</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>.431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers’ donor TA</td>
<td>-0.657</td>
<td>-1.56</td>
<td>.127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 4
Family Functioning, Background Variables, and Parents’ Topic Avoidance

Model 1
Family Functioning as Dependent Variable and Background Variables + Mothers’ Donor Assistance-related Topic Avoidance as Independent

$R^2 = .29, \ F(5, 52) = 4.24, \ p = .003$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>99.91</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>.0003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents disclose</td>
<td>45.24</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother discloses</td>
<td>21.04</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers’ donor-related topic avoidance</td>
<td>−0.592</td>
<td>−1.89</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model 2
Family Functioning as Dependent Variable and Background Variables + Fathers’ Donor Assistance-related Topic Avoidance as Independent

$R^2 = .34, \ F(5, 41) = 4.15, \ p = .004$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>122.23</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents disclose</td>
<td>29.65</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers’ donor-related topic avoidance</td>
<td>−0.755</td>
<td>−2.22</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model 3
Family Functioning as Dependent Variable and Background Variables + Mothers’ General Topic Avoidance (TA) as Independent

$R^2 = .44, \ F(5, 52) = 8.18, \ p = .0001$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>129.8</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents disclose</td>
<td>41.33</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother discloses</td>
<td>19.08</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers’ general TA</td>
<td>−0.759</td>
<td>−4.30</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model 4
Family Functioning as Dependent Variable and Background Variables + Fathers’ General Topic Avoidance (TA) as Independent

$R^2 = .36, \ F(5, 39) = 4.42, \ p = .003$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>130.18</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>.0002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents disclose</td>
<td>34.27</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers’ general TA</td>
<td>−0.47</td>
<td>−2.93</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vangelisti, 1994). The current study adds credence to the applicability of this association relative to reproduction-related secrets.

In the book *The Secret Life of Families*, Imber-Black (1998) suggested that secrecy by its nature implies lack of trust, which may fuel fear and anxiety that eventually lead to family dysfunction. This has been supported by anecdotal reports from participants in the current study who experienced in association with their parents’ avoidant communication a sense of suspicion that sometimes led to distrust, disengagement, and eventually a compromised perception of their family’s functioning. Specifically, several participants reported that after they learned of their donor conception, they had a better understanding of the detachment they had felt, especially from their social fathers over the course of their lifetime. In fact, some of the participants from divorced families admitted that they had not had contact with their social father for many years. These participants revealed that while they were relieved to now have a way to understand family relationships, they regretted the years of distance, suspicion, and confusion they had experienced and attributed it to the secrecy.

Three categories of topic avoidance (i.e., mothers’ general, fathers’ general, and fathers’ donor assistance-related), were predictive of family functioning; however, mothers’ general topic avoidance emerged as the strongest predictor. While a large variance in fathers’ general topic avoidance scores cannot be ruled out as a possible explanation for this finding, it may reflect the traditional role of mothers as expressive leaders and main carriers of childrearing and family maintenance tasks. Carter and McGoldrick (2005) suggested that even in today’s modern era, women remain in charge of most household responsibilities and are blamed when things go wrong in the family. In the United States a majority of two-parent households are financially supported by both parents’ paid work; yet, the western socialization process continues to support mothers as the primary caretakers of children. This enduring pattern, often established from the time of the child’s birth, may explain why mothers’ perceived general communication with their children would be the driving force of family functioning and why it remains the main predictor of how well the family operates. With the emergence and growth of alternative families, that is, single parent, divorced, gay, and stepfamilies, it will become necessary for more fathers to assume the role of primary caretaker. In gay adoptive families as well as some single parent families, this is already the case.

Feminist theory and biological connectedness may provide additional ways to interpret this finding. With 85% of the participants being females the study may have reflected a bias toward the mother-daughter relationship, consistent with the feminist

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**Model 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Functioning as Dependent Variable and Background Variables as Independent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$R^2 = .24$, $F(4, 53) = 4.21$, $p = .005$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents disclose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother disclose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Berger, Paul / 561

*Fam. Proc., Vol. 47, December, 2008*
claim that women tend to be more invested than men in relationships (Gilligan, 1982). But, since mothers were the only biological parents, an alternative explanation may be the importance of biological connectedness.

The finding that mother’s general topic avoidance was predictive of family functioning while her donor assistance-related avoidance was not may suggest that mothers’ perceived overall openness in communication is more relevant to family functioning than her approach to specific topics. This suggests that if the offspring sees her or his mother as generally open, s/he views the family as better functioning even if the mother is less open about certain topics such as circumstances of reproduction.

Joint parental disclosure, which suggests a strong parental subsystem, was positively associated with family functioning. This supports family functioning theory, which emphasizes the importance of a strong and respectful shared leadership by the parental dyad for optimal family functioning. When parents work well together as a team, the family’s competence is higher and children are offered a sense of predictability, trust, and security (Beavers & Hampson, 1990).

This study failed to find an association between age at time of disclosure and family functioning. However, the finding that offspring’s age at disclosure was positively correlated with mother’s donor assistance-related topic avoidance may suggest that the less comfortable mothers felt about the circumstances of conception, the more they tended to avoid it and to delay revealing it to the child. Because findings indicated that mothers’ donor assistance-related topic avoidance is associated with age at disclosure on one hand and with family functioning on the other hand, the question remains whether there is an indirect relationship between age at disclosure and family functioning moderated by mothers’ donor assistance-related topic avoidance. Furthermore, this pattern was not seen in fathers, which may be reflective of the aforementioned gender-based differences in communication patterns and/or biological connectedness.

The findings of this study offer clinical and research implications. While generally the findings support encouraging couples considering donor assistance to share the information about donor conception with their offspring, the level of functioning of individuals, couples, and families must be evaluated. The experience of infertility often brings with it feelings of guilt and resentment. For individuals and couples considering donor assistance, motivation to conceal the shame, anger, depression, and hurt may close down communication (Diamond, Kezur, Meyers, Scharf, & Weinshel, 1999). Furthermore, there are still major religious groups such as the Roman Catholic Church who strongly oppose noncoital methods of reproduction, rendering the use of donor assistance not fully accepted in some families nor in society in general (Schaffer & Diamond, 1993). Because counseling of donor insemination recipients has never been a required part of the procedure, it remains that many children have been and continue to be conceived with donor assistance in situations where couple and family communication and overall family functioning may be less than adequate. Promoting disclosure in such situations may not be useful.

Even before counseling couples and families, there is a need for public health education about disclosure as an issue in donor-assisted families. The American Society for Reproductive Medicine now supports disclosure (The Ethics Committee of the ASRM, 2004) and recommends that counseling of couples considering collaborative reproduction include the issue of disclosure (Benward, 2005, October). However, this
recommendation often misses recipients of donor insemination since the procedure does not involve advanced technology. Therefore, it is important for family therapists to be knowledgeable about the prevalence of donor assistance and the potential for it to be held secret from the offspring. In family therapy, practitioners can help parents who feel discomfort discussing donor-related issues by enhancing the general openness of communication in the family. At the very least, this may help improve offspring’s perception of family functioning. In preventive counseling, helping couples to achieve an open communication style in general may pave the road for reproduction-specific openness as well as improved family functioning. If supported by future research, this recommendation may be further extrapolated to other types of families such as adoptive and remarried and other types of secrets.

Future research about families using egg donation, perceptions of male offspring conceived with third party reproduction (because of the self-selected mostly female participant group in the current study), and about donor-assisted families with fathers as primary parents (especially from birth) will help us to better understand the relationships among parent and offspring’s gender, social roles, biological connections, communication patterns, and family functioning. Further studies are needed to identify whether there are variables, such as mothers’ donor-related topic avoidance, that moderate a relationship between age at disclosure and family functioning. Furthermore, with growing globalization, the use of donor-assisted reproduction is anticipated to expand outside of western culture, and studies addressing the issue of secrecy and disclosure in diverse cultures will be required. An additional promising line of research may be to use designs that allow identification of factors involved in creating an environment that makes open discussion of the donor-assisted conception a safe topic. For example, qualitative studies will allow for capturing the narratives of recipient parents and offspring, and eliciting common themes in their experiences. Better understanding of these experiences has the potential of deepening our appreciation of the role that topic avoidance plays in the lives of those involved in alternative family dynamics. Daniels (2004) interviewed parents who have used donor insemination to build their families and shared their thoughts and feelings about their experiences. Taking such stories one step further by content analyzing them may enrich our understanding of the issues of secrecy and topic avoidance and further help those who choose to so conceive.

REFERENCES


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