

Conceiving Contemporary Parenthood: Imagining, Achieving and Accounting for Parenthood in New Family Forms

Introduction

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This year, as the world celebrates the 40th anniversary of the first IVF birth – of Louise Brown, born in Oldham, UK in 1978 – we find ourselves in a reproductive milieu that has been dramatically transformed by the introduction, global expansion, and endless development of reproductive technologies. Initially developed as a means to aid the reproduction of married heterosexual couples facing medical infertility (specifically, blocked fallopian tubes), reproductive technologies have since multiplied and diversified, to include gamete donation, gestational surrogacy, fertility preservation, and myriad genetic technologies. Correspondingly, there has been a proliferation in the types of family forms made possible by these technologies, whether or not such possibilities have been legally permitted in specific jurisdictions. For example, in addition to IVF, reproductive technologies are increasingly being used by single women and same-sex couples, as well as by men and women in heterosexual relationships who need the “third party assistance” of egg donors, sperm donors or surrogates to conceive the babies they imagine and desire. If these forms of reproductive assistance are not allowed in their home countries, or are not readily available due to resource shortages, intending parents often resort to cross-border reproductive care to access them (Inhorn and Gurtin, 2011). We are thus confronting a global landscape of reproduction that enables a variety of new family arrangements, including solo parenthood “by choice”, same-sex parenting, co-parenting, donor-conceived families, and families created following fertility preservation. It is, of course, however, crucial to note that this landscape remains troublingly uneven, particularly along economic lines (Franklin, 2011). This special issue is dedicated to exploring how parenthood is imagined, achieved and accounted for in some of these new family forms, both at the point of their conception, as well as in the practice of daily life.

Such an endeavor, we feel, needs to be informed not only by the well-established scholarship on reproductive technologies but also that on family life, and specifically the emergent body of work known as *Parenting Culture Studies*. This has called attention to the ‘intensification’ of parenting, specifically in Anglophone contexts (but in a globalised world, also beyond), during precisely the same period as the ‘explosion’ of technologies of assisted reproduction. Certainly, the way raising children is talked about in these contexts has shifted dramatically in the space of a generation. Far from being common-sense, ‘parenting’ is now a much more concerted activity, requiring that parents are fully informed and ‘ready’ before embarking on this important life stage, fuelling a multi-million pound industry of expertise and advice. (Hays 1996, Lee et al 2014). Elsewhere, we have made the case that these two bodies of scholarship across the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and social work benefit from greater dialogue with each other (Faircloth and Gurtin, 2017). The papers

brought together here continue that discussion, focusing specifically on how intentions, expectations and the burgeoning technologies of reproductive “assistance” contribute to changing and enduring conceptions of parenthood – in particular of *good parenthood* – in the 21st Century. They therefore examine how women and men activate their intentions, reflect on their expectations, account for their choices and narrate their journeys to parenthood (or non-parenthood).

Each of the papers explores a “new family form” – including solo motherhood using donor sperm; conception with donor eggs; surrogacy; co-parenting arrangements between gay men and lesbian women; and trans parenthood. As the papers discuss, these families have not only been enabled by technological possibilities and global commercial developments, but also by changing social mores around what makes a good parent, and thus who can make claims and gain access to parenthood, though tensions often continue to exist when there remains a gap between normative reproduction or parenthood and an individual’s own experience. The men and women in these arrangements must first conceive of themselves as (good) parents, then advocate for their reproductive rights and account for their parenting decisions and choices.

The papers highlight with clarity both the expanding opportunities and the increasing demands and challenges that (intending) parents face, particularly when they must seek reproductive assistance, in their “quests for conception” (Inhorn, 1994), and document some of the complex entanglements between culture, commerce and medicine in contemporary men and women’s (assisted) journeys to parenthood. Indeed, the ontological choreographies (Thompson, 2005) described in these papers, as men and women seek to become parents involve not only seeking biomedical assistance, but also economic exchanges, international travel, relational agreements, emotional discussions, personal deliberations, and the negotiation of ideological claims to good parenthood. Whether as single mothers, non-genetically related parents, trans persons, repro travellers, or men and women in family arrangements with non-conjugal partners, their actions simultaneously replicate and revolutionise normative reproduction and parenting ideologies. In *Conceiving the New World Order*, Ginsberg and Rapp write that “cultures are produced (or contested) as people imagine and enable the creation of the next generation [...] regardless of its popular associations with notions of continuity, reproduction also provides a terrain for imaging new cultural futures and transformations” (Ginsberg and Rapp, 1995: 1-2). As such, the collection addresses fundamental issues, not only around the changing possibilities of reproduction, but also around the changing normative discourses around (good) parenting, family formation and gender.

The papers maintain a strong grounding in anthropological and social theory and methods, and employ the qualitative methods of ethnography and interviewing to develop deep insights into emerging phenomenon. These findings are particularly timely, not least in the context of the proliferation of assisted reproductive technologies and ongoing ethical and

policy debates regarding their regulation, but also the rapidly changing norms regarding the routes men and women may now pursue to parenthood, and some have a direct policy and practice relevance (with particular emphasis on the provision of fertility treatment).

Overview of Papers

Being a 'good' parent: single women reflecting upon 'selfishness' and 'risk' when pursuing motherhood through sperm donation

Susanna Graham, *Centre for Family Research, University of Cambridge*

The first paper in our collection, by Susanna Graham, focuses on single heterosexual women's experiences of thinking about or pursuing solo motherhood through sperm donation. Based on interviews with 23 women in the UK, Graham unpacks the ways in which the women felt solo motherhood to be a departure from their imagined lives of having a child within the context of a stable relationship, and brings to light their negotiations with the risks of becoming a mother in this way, "with no rule book to follow". It is particularly interesting that, as Graham notes, "Although the participants feared others would judge their decision to become a solo mother, many were aware that this judgement was largely coming from themselves."

The role of normative ideologies of motherhood in intended mothers' experiences of egg donation in Canada

Kathleen Hammond, *ReproSoc, University of Cambridge*

In the second paper, Kathleen Hammond turns our attention to a different group of women battling with the gap between their imagined or assumed routes to parenthood and their lived realities, this time drawing on interviews with 18 Canadian women who used donor eggs to conceive. Examining in particular how these (intending) mothers' talk about and relate to their donors, Hammond proposes a 'relational spectrum' along which mothers' relationships with their egg donors can be conceptualized. "Intended mothers' reactions to the news that they would have to use donor eggs are replete with references to a normative ideology of motherhood," Hammond tells us, but she goes on to show how these women, in the long run, "are likely to alter cultural attitudes and conceptions of 'normality' when it comes to reproduction and motherhood."

Accounting for the money-made parenthood of transnational surrogacy

Ingvill Stuvøy, *Department of Sociology and Political Science, NTNU, Norway*

The third and fourth paper in this issue focus on the practices of surrogacy, but from opposing lenses. Ingvill Stuvoy, based on her research with 21 Norwegian heterosexual and same-sex couples and single men and women seeking surrogacy abroad, asks in particular how money is accounted for in particular ways to confirm parenthood in surrogacy arrangements. Focusing our attention on two of the most contentious aspects of assisted reproduction in the 21st Century, Stuvoy adds much-needed nuance and the voices of intending parents to debates over commercialization and reproductive travel. Using an in-depth exploration of three case studies, Stuvoy shows the ways in which men and women

make sense of both money and parenthood in specific ways, depending on the specificity of their surrogacy journeys, showing that “different transnational arrangements [surrogacy] arrangements make different kinds of monetized parenthood”.

Surrogate non-motherhood: Israeli and US surrogates speak about kinship and parenthood
Elly Teman, *Dept. of Behavioral Sciences, Ruppin Academic Center* and **Zsuzsa Berend**,
Department of Sociology, UCLA

Shifting our perspective from the intending parents pursuing surrogacy to surrogates themselves, Elly Teman and Zsuzsa Berend offer us an illuminating insight into how non-parenthood is also negotiated. Based on Teman’s research with Israeli and Zsuzsa’s with US surrogates, the authors create not only a comparison of the thoughts, feelings and accounts of surrogates in these two global hubs of surrogacy, but also between the assumed and experienced realities of being a surrogate. The paper challenges commonly held myths about surrogacy, showing that surrogates create “non-motherhood” while simultaneously engaging in “a labour of love”, delineating clear boundaries between their families and those of the intending parents. As the authors conclude, “The two studies together show that both Israeli and US surrogates consider surrogacy as a morally meaningful undertaking that creates families; surrogates ‘nurture parents’, not just ‘their babies.’”

Ideals, negotiations and gender roles in gay and lesbian co-parenting arrangements
Cathy Herbrand, *Centre for Reproduction Research, De Montfort University*

The fifth paper in the special issue explores an understudied ‘new family form’ – co-parenting, a set-up typically involving individuals who are not committed conjugal partners agreeing to conceiving and raise a child together, such that the child typically has two biologically and sexually differentiated parental figures. Herbrand’s research, based on research with lesbian and gay couples who have formed co-parenting arrangements in Belgium, at once shows the revolutionary and liberatory potential of such set-ups, not least because of the 4-to-1 adult to child ratio, but also points to the persistence of gendered norms around the importance of intensive embodied motherhood in particular. These set ups therefore have the potential to challenge and reinscribe contemporary ideologies of ‘good parenting’.

Conceptions of transgender parenthood in fertility care and family planning in Sweden:
From reproductive rights to concrete practices
Jenny Gunnarsson Payne & Theo Erbenius, *School of Historical and Contemporary Studies, Södertörn University*

The final paper brings together several of the themes of the special issue, in looking at how non-cis parenting. Taking a historical perspective on Sweden’s treatment of transgender patients vis-à-vis fertility preservation in the process of transitioning, Gunnarsson Payne and Erbenius explore the question of the ‘right’ to parenthood, tracing the emergence of this in conjunction with wider historical shifts in parenting culture and the availability of assisted reproductive technologies. They end with a call for renewed political debate around the

forms of stratification and inequalities in access to reproductive support, in which transgender status is often a neglected category.

We hope that these papers will be of interest to an international readership of medical anthropologists, medical sociologists, social anthropologists and scholars of gender, reproduction and parenting, and invite contact from those with an interest in pursuing similar lines of enquiry.

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