

## New Family Forms

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## New family forms

Family types that have emerged, or have become visible, since the 1970s

- Families created by assisted reproductive technologies (IVF, donor insemination, egg donation, embryo donation & surrogacy)
- Families with same-sex parents



## Multiple parents

Children can now have 5 parents:

Sperm donor  
Egg donor  
Surrogate mother  
Two social parents – mum and dad  
(or mum and mum)  
(or dad and dad)



## Interesting questions

- How do children born through surrogacy feel about their surrogate mother?
- Whom do they see as their "real" mother?
- Do children need fathers?
- Will children with lesbian or gay parents become lesbian or gay themselves?
- Should children conceived by donated eggs or sperm be told that their mother or father is not their genetic parent?



## Theoretical questions

How important is family structure for children's psychological wellbeing?

- one parent or two?
- father present or not?
- genetic link with parents?
- parents heterosexual or homosexual?

## Family structure and child development

- Family structure is assumed to play an important role in wellbeing of children
- Ideal structure believed to be two heterosexual parents who are genetically related to their children
- Deviations from this pattern thought to be detrimental to the child

## Overview of lecture

- Assisted reproduction families
- Families with same-sex parents

What are the concerns regarding parents and children?

What can we learn from empirical research?

What do findings tell us about the aspects of family life that matter most for children's psychological wellbeing?

## Response to birth of first test-tube baby

"BABY of the century" ran the front-page headline of the *Daily Express* on July 11th, 1978. The paper promised the story of Lesley Brown, who was barricaded inside Oldham and District General Hospital, near Manchester, waiting to give birth. The world's press was camped outside; the front doors locked and staff forced to sneak in and out via a side entrance. Patrick Steptoe and Robert Edwards, the obstetrician and physiologist who had, nine months before, taken an egg from one of Mrs Brown's ovaries under anaesthetic and fertilised it in vitro with her husband's sperm, were in hiding. It had been, said *Time* magazine after Mrs Brown was delivered of a daughter on July 25th, "the most awaited birth in perhaps 2,000 years". **The Economist, July 17<sup>th</sup> 2008.**

### Concerns about ARTs

Over-protective parents

Unrealistic expectations of children

Non-genetic parent may not fully accept child as own child

Secrecy

- Child may be unaware that mum and/or dad is not their genetic parent
- Child may be unaware that "aunt" is genetic parent



### Concerns regarding secrecy

- From adoption – children benefit from knowledge about genetic parents
- From family therapy – secrets create boundaries between those who know (parents) and those who do not (child)



### European Study of Assisted Reproduction Families

- Study of 116 IVF and 111 donor insemination families in comparison with 115 adoptive families and 120 natural conception families
- UK, Spain, Italy & the Netherlands
- Children born in mid-80s
- Families assessed when children aged 6, 12 and 18



### Findings: Age 6

- ART parents showed greater warmth, emotional involvement and interaction with their child than did natural conception parents
- No differences for any of the measures of children's social or emotional development
- Not one set of 111 parents had told child about donor insemination – although most had told someone else



### Reasons for non-disclosure

- Child may stop loving non-genetic parent
- No information to give child about donor (genetic parent)
- Parents don't know what, when or how to tell



### Findings: Age 12

- Good parent-child relationships characterised by affection and appropriate control
- No evidence of emotional or behavioural problems in assisted reproduction children
- Less than 10% of parents had told children about donor conception



### Findings: Age 18

- More positive relationships prevailed between ART mothers and children
- IVF and DI children functioning well
- Less than 10% of parents had told children about donor conception



### Conclusions

- Assisted reproduction parents have good relationships with their children, even where one parent lacks a genetic link with the child
- Children are well-adjusted
- Those conceived by donor insemination unaware that father is genetically unrelated
- Main reason for secrecy is fear that child would no longer love non-genetic parent



## Unanswered questions

- Have attitudes changed as ART has become more widespread?
- What about egg donation and surrogacy?
- What is the effect of telling the child about his or her donor conception?



## Millennium study of ART families

Conducted 15 years later than original study – families where child lacked genetic and/or gestational link with parents

- 42 surrogacy families
- 50 donor insemination families
- 51 egg donation families
- 80 natural conception families

Families assessed when child aged 1, 2, 3 & 7



## Concerns

- Secrecy about child's genetic origins
- Egg donor or surrogate mother may be known to child and remain in contact as child grows up
- Surrogacy disapproved of and can't be hidden
- Children's feelings about being relinquished by surrogate mother



## Findings

- The differences that existed reflected more positive parent-child relationships in assisted reproduction than natural conception families
  - e.g. mothers showed greater pleasure and competence and less anger, guilt and disappointment
- Children did not differ in social, emotional or cognitive development



### Disclosure

- At age 1, 56% of egg donation and 46% of DI parents planned to disclose genetic/gestational origins to child
- By age 7, only 39% of egg donation and 29% of donor insemination parents had actually done so



### Donor Sibling Registry (DSR)

- US website by mother and DI child
- To enable donor offspring to search for donor
- Possible in US since donors have a unique ID number
- 10,000 members and 4000 matches made



### Online survey

Survey of interest for 2 reasons:

1. Allows study of individuals who know about their donor conception
2. Allows study of individuals who make contact with donor relations

Data obtained from 791 parents and 165 offspring (aged 13-61)



### Feelings on disclosure

- Better outcomes for children who had been told when young
- Those told when older more likely to feel upset, angry, shocked and confused.



## Examples of negative feelings

*"I would have appreciated revelation of this information much earlier in my life. Learning of my biological identity at 17 years of age was a traumatic event."*  
30 year old, **found out at age 17**

*"I am angry because I asked about being 'adopted' several times throughout my childhood and adolescence and told that I was being foolish. I knew."*  
**found out at age 50**

*"Either tell your kid from the beginning or don't tell them at all, it was one of the most shocking and upsetting moments of my life. I felt alone."*  
19 year old, **found out at age 12**



## Examples of positive feelings

*"I was so young I don't remember feeling much more than interested and curious."*  
13 year old, found out at age 4

*"...people always ask me, is it weird not having a father, or knowing your father? My response is, how can you miss something you have never had? I am no different than any other person. How we are born, doesn't make us who we are. I do not define myself by that trait. It is more of just how I came to be."*  
17 year old, found out at age 3



## Donor siblings

- Children finding around 5 half-siblings
- Many are finding more than 10
- Maximum number found so far is 55!



## Experiences of contact

- Majority maintained regular contact
- For almost all offspring and donors contact with donor relations has been a positive experience



### New phenomenon exposed

Family relationships based on genetic connections between children are being formed across multiple family units



### Lesbian mother families

- Public awareness of lesbian mothers began in 1978
- “Dr Strangelove” article in London evening newspaper



### Rhodes Boyson MP

“This evil must stop for the sake of the potential children and society, which both have enough problems without the extension of this horrific practice. Children have a right to be born into a natural family with a father and a mother. Anything less will cause lifelong deprivation of the most acute kind for the child.”



### Arguments against

- Children will be teased and rejected by peers and will develop psychological problems as a result
- Children will show atypical gender development, i.e. boys will be less masculine and girls less feminine than boys and girls from heterosexual homes.



### Empirical studies

- Children in lesbian mother families compared with children in heterosexual single mother families
- Focus was on the two key issues in custody disputes – psychological wellbeing and gender development
- Standardised interviews and questionnaires administered to mothers, children and teachers.



### Findings: Psychological adjustment

- Children not at risk for emotional or behavioural problems or difficulties in peer relationships



### Findings: Gender development

- Gender identity – no evidence of gender identity confusion for any of the children studied
- Gender role behaviour – no differences between children in lesbian and heterosexual families for either boys or girls



### Conclusions from early research

- Children in lesbian families did not differ from other children as result of their non-traditional family environment
- Findings replicated by other researchers. For review see Patterson (1992) Child Development, **63**, 1025-1042.



### Critique 1

- Only school-age children studied  
– problems may arise in adulthood



### Follow-up to adulthood

- Follow-up study of children in UK study in mid-20s (Golombok & Tasker, 1996, Developmental Psychology)
- Assessed family relationships, peer relationships, psychological adjustment & sexual orientation
- Small sample size but advantage of study is that children were recruited before sexual orientation was known



### Findings

- No difference in quality of relationship with mother or father in adulthood
- More likely to have been teased about sexuality in adolescence
- No difference in psychological well-being in adulthood
- As adults, most identified as heterosexual



### Critique 2

- To the extent that early experience influences later development we can't generalise to children raised in lesbian family from birth



### Lesbian families from birth

- Studies of lesbian families with children conceived by donor insemination
- Of theoretical interest since they address questions about the importance of early experience e.g. role of fathers in children's gender development



### Findings

- No difference in psychological well-being of children
- No difference in gender development of children
- Co-mothers are more involved with children than fathers



### Critique 3

- Studies have relied on volunteer or convenience samples



### National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health

- 44 adolescents with same-sex parents compared with 44 adolescents with opposite-sex parents
- No differences in psychological adjustment, school outcomes, family relationships, romantic relationships or sexual behavior
- Wainright et al, 2004, J Fam Psychol



### Avon Longitudinal study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC)

- A general population study in west of England of 14,000 mothers and their children beginning in pregnancy
- Lesbian mother families studied when children aged 7 years

Golombok et al (2003) Developmental Psychology



### Avon Longitudinal study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC)

- No difference in quality of mother-child relationships between lesbian and heterosexual families e.g. warmth, emotional involvement, disputes
- No difference in children's psychological adjustment, self-esteem, quality of peer relationships or gender development



### Conclusions from representative samples

- Findings are in line with those of earlier studies – positive mother-child relationships and well-adjusted children
- Even with general population samples children reared by lesbian mothers appear to be functioning well



### Gay fathers

- Much less research
- Most had children while married/cohabiting
- Some father children with lesbian women
- Some become parents through surrogacy
- No studies of children living with gay fathers



### Single mothers by choice

- Concerns stem from existing literature on negative consequences of single parenthood for child development
- Difficulties associated with parental conflict, economic hardship and lack of social support
- Circumstances of solo mothers by donor insemination are different



### Findings from US study

- Online survey of 331 mothers through "Choice Moms" website
- Only 9% were experiencing marked financial difficulties
- 86% had a university degree
- 93% had social support when baby was young
- 82% of children had male role model



### Findings from UK study

- Longitudinal study of children in single mother families from birth or very early childhood
- Followed up to young adulthood
- Found to be highly successful and creative young adults who had a positive relationship with their mother (in spite of turbulent teenage years for some)



### Change in social attitudes

"School was one big nightmare really, because I got picked on so much. I had cigarettes stubbed out on the back of my neck, and high-heeled shoes thrown at me, and bits of hair cut off, and my head chucked down the loo and that sort of thing. They would say to everyone "Oh, your mum's a lesbian." They were just doing it for a laugh. But by the final year people thought it was really cool. They would say "It's great! Your mum's a lesbian! Wow!" It was almost respected by the end of the year. Everyone thought my mum was cool 'cos she was a lesbian, so it worked out alright."



## Policy implications

- Child custody disputes
- Adoption
- Removal of donor anonymity
- Access to assisted reproduction – new Human Fertilisation & Embryology Bill substituted clause on “Need for a father” with “Need for supportive parenting”



## Theoretical implications

Findings have challenged deeply rooted beliefs in child psychology

- presence of a father is not essential for development of sex-role behaviour
- genetic and gestational ties less important than assumed from research on divorce, stepfamilies and adoption



## Parenting: what really counts?

Shape and size of family is less important for the psychological wellbeing of children than is the quality of family life

