

Mix and match

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Joshua Gamson

MODERN FAMILIES

Stories of extraordinary journeys to kinship
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In 1954, after a woman, with the explicit consent of her husband, gave birth to a child through donor insemination, the husband was able to convince the Superior Court of Cook County, Illinois, to rule that donor insemination was adultery – grounds for a fault-based divorce – and that the child was illegitimate. I shudder to think what rulings that court might have made regarding the five parent-child constellations profiled in Joshua Gamson's *Modern Families: Stories of extraordinary journeys to kinship*. The book describes the ways in which some contemporary parents have mixed, matched, extended and sometimes completely ignored the conventional links between genetic relationships, gestation and nurturing in order to attain and raise the children they so fervently want.

Gamson is a sociologist, and with his partner Richard he is also the father of two children. One child was conceived with an egg donated by Joshua's former girlfriend, fertilized by Richard's sperm and then carried to term by another female friend. The second child was born to a privately hired surrogate who later entered a similar arrangement with an infertile heterosexual couple. We also meet in this book a single mother who brought home a child from an Ethiopian orphanage. There is a woman who adopted one girl from Nepal and another from India, and is co-parenting them with both her girlfriend and a gay couple who had almost given up on their dream of becoming fathers. Another lesbian couple used a sperm donor to fertilize one woman's egg and then implanted it in the other's womb, making one the biological mother and one the gesta-

tional one. Finally, there is a woman married to a transgender man. Technically they are in a heterosexual marriage but self-identify as "queer". After both sperm donation and in vitro fertilization failed, and after the first birth mother who had agreed to give them her baby allowed someone else to adopt her at the last minute, they were eventually able to adopt.

Gamson's description of the fierce love and determination that drove the creation of these families is candid and moving. As a sociologist, he recognizes the power differentials that come into play in surrogacy arrangements and

the global inequalities that underlie international adoptions. He points out that many of the technologies he describes are available only to the economically privileged and suggests that true reproductive freedom should involve not just equal rights to avoid or terminate a pregnancy, but equal access to the ability to *have* a child. But as a father and a sympathetic observer of other non-traditional families, he wants to remind us that there have been "righteous battles fought here, real happy endings, actual children, and deep love".

Many inequalities and abuses are built into the over-commercialized and under-regulated fertility and adoption industries that exist today, but Gamson describes the human connections that many people manage to forge as they navigate through these inequalities. He emphasizes the rewards and satisfactions as well as the fears, disappointments and losses that come into play for everyone involved in these interactions, whatever their privileges or disadvantages in other realms of life. He shows how careful planning and empathy can allow love and kindness to override, or at least provide a counterweight to, commercial considerations and class inequalities – although he is clearly aware that there are few guarantees that they will always do so in the current system.

The people whose stories he recounts, Gamson insists, "have done beautiful things".

And indeed, the bonds of love and attachment forged between these parents and their children are immensely touching. But the children here are all still young enough to cheerfully accept the origin stories their parents lovingly construct, often with the children's own help. By about the age of ten, children begin to ask harder questions. By adolescence, such questions can turn hostile, providing a ready-made way to seek the distancing or express the rebellion that is the hallmark of adolescence. Will these non-traditional origins pose long-term problems for their adjustment?

We now have many high-quality, long-term studies showing that children raised in homosexual families fare as well as those residing with different-sex parents in terms of academic performance, cognitive development, social development and psychological health. They are no more likely to engage in early sexual activity or substance abuse than children of heterosexual couples. Most become heterosexuals, although they are more likely than children raised by different-sex parents to be open to the possibility of same-sex attraction.

Yet research specifically focused on the psychological adjustment of children and teenagers conceived by assisted reproductive technology (ART) is still sparse. Thus far, children and teenagers conceived through various forms of ART exhibit few differences in adjustment and achievement from those naturally conceived (NC). In several studies, ART parents reported more enjoyment of parenting and their children reported a greater sense that their parents were dependable than in NC families. However, in a few studies, a minority of ART parents were judged to be emotionally over-involved with their children, and one study found that donor-insemination fathers were less involved in disciplining the children than fathers who had conceived naturally.

As they grow older, children conceived with the help of sperm donors often feel that an important part of their history is missing, especially when the donor has not agreed to be identified. And children who find out late or by accident that they were not naturally conceived often react negatively. Early disclosure

seems to cultivate family trust and allows children to incorporate this information into their identity and their own origin stories. Stigmatization and teasing can also be a problem for children in these unconventional families, as is often the case for families that do not conform to a culturally preferred and idealized form, colour or religion.

The truth is that every type of family has distinctive challenges and vulnerabilities, as well as potential resources and unique strengths. And children of ART families have one huge advantage over children born through natural conception: their parents by definition did not conceive them accidentally. In the United States, about half of all "natural" pregnancies among heterosexual women are unintended, and 20 per cent of these are unwanted. But gay and lesbian couples and infertile heterosexuals need to be highly motivated and persistent to build a family. Abundant research confirms that being planned and wanted is a strong predictor of effective parenting and good child outcomes, and Gamson shows here that the story of their parents' quest to create a family can actually become a source of pride for some children.

Midway through this book, the radical sociologist in Gamson emerges long enough to criticize "the pursuit of normalcy" that has marked much of the struggle for the acceptance of same-sex marriage and gay and lesbian parenting. "Seeking to be assimilated into the way-things-are", he comments, "does nothing to change the way things are", but rather perpetuates the privileges of those who conform to an exclusionary norm and the disadvantages of those who do not.

Children and families need to feel normal, but normality needn't mean sameness. It means recognizing that the basic human desire and ability to nurture can take many different forms. Indeed, cross-cultural research reveals that an astonishing variety of family values and parenting arrangements can create well-adjusted children and harmonious communities when they are culturally validated. New family forms are here to stay. Joshua Gamson's compelling book poses an important



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question, though: will we allow – and even
help – them to feel normal without forcing
them all to look the same?