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ALTRUISM AND MORALITY IN CONTEMPORARY FAMILY

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Abstract

In this paper we aim to present the new types of families that appeared in the contemporary society and the necessary parental skills that the member of these families should have in order to raise children so they become healthy, functional, happy and independent adults. In many ways the children of the families conceived through assisted reproductive technologies resemble to adopted children. They are raised by mothers and fathers to whom they may miss the genetic link and they are biologically linked to donors of sperm or egg that they have no idea about. Studies show that many of these children don't know how they were conceived and this secrecy could become a problem as they grow up. Also, the society moral rules should change in order to accept and not discriminate the new families because a discriminative attitude could severely affect the social integration of the children coming from these families. We consider that, on the long term the disclosure about the conception through assisted reproductive technologies, the possibility to meet the donors after the age 18 and a tolerant attitude towards the new types of families are important aspects that should be regulated and respected for the best interests of the children. Ultimately, in order for all the children to be properly raised several conditions must be fulfilled: to have altruist loving parents, their parents to not suffer of any mental illness, to have secure parental attachment, to know their life story and to be accepted for what they are.

Keywords

Altruism; philosophy of law; human rights; new families; assisted reproductive technologies; morality.

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1. Introduction

No matter how we look at things and despite all the legal, moral and habitual changes in the society and of the people thinking, family remains the most important reference of any human being. Not being raised in a family damages heavily the chances of a normal, independent and fulfilling life. Being raised in an abusive or careless family does pretty much the same thing. At it has been like this from the beginning of time for human race.

A famous proverb says that “it takes a village to raise a child” and even though the society is permanently changing the saying is still valid. If thousands of years ago the children were raised in small human communities which behaved like one large family, today a child may feel isolated in the small families with one or two working parents, in the big cities. The structure and the concept of family has changed in time and several institutions have taken the place of the large family but, nevertheless, children have the same needs and should receive the same kind of care and attention in order to become functional adults.

As the technology evolved, people that could not have their own biological children due to some unfortunate health conditions or to their sexual orientation, had new opportunities. The biological and psychological need to have and raise a child is very strong and written in our DNA. A hundred years ago those who couldn't have biological children had only one alternative for raising children: to adopt them. Today the situation has changed and even though, through these alternatives given by the assisted reproductive technologies, sometimes, there is a missing genetic link between the child and one or both of the parents, many people use these (expensive) methods to have children.

Today, like in any other époque, “at some point in their lives, most human beings want to have children and they also want these children to grow up healthy, happy and self-confident. For those who succeed, the rewards are great; but those who have children but fail to raise them healthy, happy and self-confident can end up paying a very high price: anxiety, frustration, divergence and probably feelings of shame or guilt. Therefore, being a parent involves an important risk.” (Bowlby, 2011, p. 25).

Several scientists study today the parenting skills that are required in contemporary families: same sex parents families, families that are

formed by assisted reproductive technologies, families headed by single mothers by choice (Golombok, 2017, p. 76) all in order to establish how these new types of families succeed to rise and educate children properly and transform them in functional adults. Their conclusions is that the children raised by these parents have the same chance to live a normal fulfilling life like any other child raised in a traditional or even non traditional family. Their needs are basically the same: mentally healthy parents that love and educate them and a society that doesn't discriminate or makes judgments about the origin, sexual orientation, religion or any other subjective criteria.

2. The Apparition of the New Families

The origins of family are probably as old as the human race and even the species from which it evolved *homo sapiens*. As noted in the literature "the family was formed in prehistory, when written sources were missing and theories of its origin are based only on the studies of contemporary primitive populations, which are supposed to be similar to those in the primitive commune." (Mihăila, 2010, p. 204). Also, recently it has been pointed out that the study of the social behavior of primates, our closest "relatives", may be relevant to identify the basic elements of the social behavior of the primitive human population. It is obvious that some aspects of human life have changed a lot in the last 10,000 years, while others have remained almost the same. Of the constants, the most important are written in the DNA of our species and involve social behavior, reproduction and care for offspring, all of which are absolutely necessary for the perpetuation of the species.

The social changes influenced the way that adults take care of their youngsters but they didn't modify the essence of this care. Human society started from small groups if individuals that lived together hunted together and took care of each others in order to insure their own survival. As agriculture and economy evolved the human groups become larger and larger and, as time went by, the rules of social life have changed. Evolution brought with it a lot of new laws and the population continued to adjust to changes in order to survive. It is one of the most important rules for surviving: adjusting to change.

The traditional nuclear family is formed from the biological parents, mother and father, that are married and have one or several children.

The parents live together and take care of children together for a far larger number of years than any other species that ever lived on earth. Due to our social nature, at the growth and education of children also contributes the larger family (grandparents, aunts and uncles and so on). Today the place of the larger family is often taken by the state through special institutions such as kinder gardens for small children, schools etc.

Statistics show that “the traditional nuclear family, comprising a heterosexual married couple with biologically related children is in decline. Instead, a growing number of children are raised by cohabiting parents, by single parents and step parents, with many children moving in and out of different family structures as they grow up.” (Golombock, 2017, p. 76) These families are known as non-traditional families but, as time went by, the structure of family has changed even more and the so called “new families” appeared. In contemporary societies, the structure of families has modified in ways that seemed unpredictable one or two centuries ago: same sex parents families, families formed by assisted reproductive technologies, families headed by single mothers by choice.

In these diverse circumstances do the children benefit of the same care? Is there any danger that their self image and their future will be affected by these new parenting situations? How will they feel as adults, will they be able to successfully raise children of their own? Will they be happy? Is this against human nature or not? What is different about these new families in comparison with non-traditional families?

The non-traditional families are often the result of traditional marriages that ended in divorce. People that tried to preserve the traditional family values got married, had biological children but, because of the changing of society, the evolution of the statute for women, the awareness of the right of pursuing happiness, the new moral rules, the economical independence of the individuals and many other factors, they could not keep their traditional family structures. One discovered that he or she is not happy with the partner, another which loves somebody else, several others that became independent and able to support themselves and the children by working and so on. Divorce wasn't socially unacceptable anymore. “Inacceptable” got new meaning: it's not ok to not be happy, it's not ok to be abused, it's not ok to be bored in a relationship and so on. As a result, the divorce became the rule instead of the exception and many children began to learn to live with only one

parent, with stepparents, stepsiblings, more than one home, vacations and week-ends in different houses etc.

The new families are even more revolutionary than the non-traditional ones: families with children born throughout assisted reproductive technologies which may or may not have an actual biological link with their mother and fathers (surrogate mothers, in vitro fertilisations), women that get to a certain age and decide that it's time to have a child and have no partner (the child is born due to anonymous donor chosen from catalogue) and same sex partners that decide to have their own children also by alternative reproductive technologies. The parenting skills for raising children in these families must include abilities to explain to the children why and how they were born. Mainly, like any other child, they have to understand that they are loved, they were wanted and they are like any other person on earth; just have a different birth story.

3. Similarities Between the Situation of the Children Born through Assisted Reproductive Technologies and Adopted Children

In 1978 was born the first baby through in-vitro (IFV) technology (Septoe et al, 1978). It was a little girl named Louise Brown. By 2018 the number exceeded 5 million children. "Although IFV procedure has attracted much publicity, assisted reproduction involving reproductive donation that is the donation of gametes (sperm or eggs), embryos, or the hosting of a pregnancy for another woman (surrogacy), has had a more fundamental impact on the family. Children born through egg donation lack genetic link to their mother, whereas children born through sperm donation lack a genetic link with their father. With the embryo donation, both the egg and the sperm are donated and neither parent is genetically related to the child. Surrogacy involves a woman hosting a pregnancy for another woman and the children lack a gestational link with their mother. They also lack a genetic link to their mother if the surrogate's egg was used in their conception." (Golombok, 2017, p. 76).

Unfortunately, in Romania today, the IFV procedure is still not free of payment, and the families that desire to have children this way have to dispose of significant amounts of money to do it. Maybe, in the near

future this procedure will be available for all the women who want to have children and are not able to do it naturally.

The missing genetic link between children born through IFV and their parents was considered to be a problem for the development of these children and the good functioning of their families by several specialists (Cahn et al, 2011). Ultimately, the situation of these children and their families could be compared to that of the adoptive children. The society has a significant experience with adoption and much less with children born through assisted reproductive technology. As it is shown (Cahn et al, 2011, pp. 2-3) there were a lot of problems with the adoption (for the children and also for the adoptive families), the main being secrecy, stigma, shame and the fact that the best interest of the child has been taken into consideration only in the last few decades. Specialists noticed that adoption is governed by very restrictive international and national regulations, it has very severe sanctions for all the parties involved in the process of adoption (agencies, attorneys, parents who give away their children and so on) whereas the assisted reproductive technologies are much less regulated “and in a more patchwork way: physicians must be licensed (state laws), fertility clinics must report success rates, and gametes must be tested for safety (federal law on testing for HIV and other infectious diseases and examining medical records for risk factors). Some states have more extensive regulations than others, however, and there are non on some aspects of practice” (Cahn, 2011, p. 3). For example, regulations don’t include legal limits on how many times an individual can provide gametes. It could happen that a single sperm donor may father hundred of children and these children that do not know about each other could end up in incestuous relations and even have children together (Cahn, 2009). To prevent this kind of situation, the England law stipulates that a donor can provide gametes for maximum 10 families. “In practice, less than 1% of donors create 10 families with most sperm donors creating one or two families, with one or two children in each family. The reason we set limits on the number of families you can help create is that we know through consultation this is the level which donors and donor-conceived people feel comfortable with in terms of the numbers of potential donor-conceived children, half-siblings and families that might be created.” (Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority, *Donor*).

Not all the problems encountered in adoption are relevant for the families with children born through assisted reproductive techniques because there are also important differences between these two procedures. But definitely some of them could be of use for the parents and children involved in AST. The secrecy of the adoption or of the AST could lead to problems as the child grows. For a period of time it was considered that the child should not know that he/she was conceived with sperm from anonymous donor. In USA (and not only there) a lot of children whom were born through such procedure have no idea about it (Cahn, 2011, p. 5). This was the case for adoption also initially. Very little information was kept about the biological parents in the past and the adopted child and the adoptive parents had no way to find out things that might have proved important. Today, the legal regulation and the attitude about adoption are different: several states have decided to unseal the original birth certificate and to be more opened about the information. Since 2004 in United Kingdom was established, after public consultation, “that the donor anonymity will be removed for children born from January 2005 onwards. Thus, in 2023, the first children conceived by gamete donation will have the opportunity to obtain the identity of their donor on reaching the age 18.” (Golombok et al, 2005, p. 286). From a prior study from 1999, resulted that only 5% of the parents have told their children how they were conceived (Golombok et al, 1999).

There is still a certain amount of secrecy involved but the international legal trend is oriented toward more disclosure. On the other hand, the sperm banks are also more opened to collect information about the donor: health, intelligence coefficient and some donors give photos and personal information about them, information that can be accessed by the offspring. The clients of the sperm banks can choose if they want to have information about the donor or if they prefer anonymity. Also, the donor provides the information at the moment of the sperm donation; he has no obligation “to update their medical records or other important information that could affect their offspring in the future” (Cahn, 2011, p. 7).

The situation of the egg donors is even more secretive the of the sperm donor. The egg donor does not know who is donating their egg to and the update about health issues is mere impossible.

The result of researches indicated that the children from the new type of families had a better relationship with their parents than the

children born through natural conception at the preschool age. “It seems, there for, that in spite of concerns to the contrary, the use of assisted conception procedures involving donated gametes does not appear to adversely affect the relationships between mothers and their 2-year-old child but, instead, results in a tendency towards more positive maternal feelings towards the child accompanied by a greater sense of the child vulnerability”. (Golombok et al, 2005).

Later in life, they became aware of their type of conception and of the lack of biological link with the parents, but they didn’t show signs of any other psychological problems different from those of any natural conceived child. The studies showed that several problems appeared at the mothers which weren’t opened with the children in regard to their biological origin (Golombok, 2017, p. 77).

At the adolescent age of the children, most problems were reported at mother with children born throughout egg donation. These mothers had more problems in accepting their children, then the other mothers

But the relations between children and parents are not significantly different for the children born through IFV and the natural conceived children. In some aspects, these children acted like adopted children and, together with their parents, tried to find out the identity of the donors.

Regarding the families with same sex parents, it was first considered that the children of these families are more likely to develop emotional and psychological problems, such as the boys raised by lesbian mothers would be more feminine and less masculine, they would have gender orientation issues and so on. Studies have shown that this is not true and the children of lesbian mothers “are no more likely to show adjustment difficulties, poor performances at school or atypical gender behaviour than are children with heterosexual parents” (Paterson, 2009, 2013). More problems appear with children raised by two homosexual fathers, as it is considered that men lack several nursing and carrying skills which are specific for women.

Single mothers by choice are women who have biological children from prior relationships or appeal at anonymous donors in order to have children. They may be included in the category of the new families if they have children through AST and they don’t have a genetic link with their children or have, but the father is a sperm donor. Due to these factors they can be confronted with the situations described above.

4. Altruism, One of the Main Characteristics of Good Parenting

The most important legal and moral principle taken into consideration in regard to a child's life and education is the child's best interest. This principle involves that the parents should be able to take care and educate the children in a very selfless, loving and altruistic manner. They should be able to create positive attachment and secure relations with their children in order to turn them into self satisfied and functional adults.

There for, a lot of questions were raised in regard to the question of who should be allowed to have children through assisted reproductive technology. Only the people whom are young enough? Or straight? Or married? Or with money? Is it morally correct that a child is grown by two gay parents? Is it moral that a child is conceived through ART with gametes from anonymous donor and never gets to meet the biological mother or father? These are big questions and they all have one answer: yes, if the children are raised with love and care and attention. Otherwise, is not right for abusive parents to have children, for the best interest of the child should always be the first thing when it comes to having a child. No matter who the parents are, no matter their religion, sex orientation and whatever other characteristic.

In 2010, in India, a woman gave birth to a baby girl at age 70. Then she died at 72. It was legal, but the public opinion considered that it was not moral, as the child will was deprived of parental care too early in life, and this would affect her deeply (Crawford, 2012). What was the best interest of that child: having been born by a 70 years old woman or not being born at all? On the other hand, a natural conceived child by, let's say a 25 years old mother, could become an orphan if the mother dies at 27 for whatever cause. It is not likely but very possible.

Also, in Romania, in 2005, Adriana Iliescu, a 66 years old woman gave birth to a baby girl at 62. Now the girl is 15 years old and her mother is still alive and raising her (BBC, Romanian.com, 2005).

If the regulation regarding who should be allowed to have children and who should not, would be very restrictive, this would violate fundamental human rights. It is in our DNA to want to have children. It preserves our specie. No matter if we are of a certain age, or homosexual, or infertile, at one point we will want and need to have children. The latest studies show that a child grown in a new type of

family has the same chances as the child from the traditional family to become a functional adult. If the parent/s do not suffer from mental illness, if they are not abused or heavily neglected. Just like any other child. For the children where the genetic link is missing the situation is similar to the adopted children. It is better for them to know the truth about their conception and even maybe, to know the donor when they are mature enough, if they want to.

The children raised by families formed by same sex parents may face social difficulties if the orientation of the parents is criticised by the society. But so do children from poor families, or from any other discriminated group.

The first instinct of any living creature is to preserve their life and to make sure that its genes and the genes of its specie will continue to survive. So the most important aspect of the process of reproduction is to take good care of the offspring and to make sure they reach adulthood. The child's life becomes more precious than the life of the parent. And in this care lies the most profound altruism. Altruism is defined as "behaviour characterised by a selfless concern for the good of others." (Hands, 2015, p. 442).

But if this is the case, of our own reproduction, how can we explain adoption and the assisted reproductive technologies? There are other scientific opinions regarding the explanation of the care of offspring whom miss a genetic link with their parents than altruism. For example, Richard Dawkins, the famous evolutionist, considered (related to other species not necessarily human) that "in most cases we should view adoption as a failure of a constitutive rule. This is because, taking care of an orphan, the generous female does no good to her genes. [...] It is assumed that such an error occurs too rarely for natural selection to have bothered to change the rule, making the maternal instinct more selective." (Dawkins, 2001, p. 74).

As human being and also parents we consider that raising children requires love, attention and profound altruism. All normal parents put away their desires and needs and make sure that their offspring receive the best food, care and education possible. The children needs may come with an important cost for their parent's income, time and health. But parents seem to think that it is all worth it. And they are probably right. But what moves a person so deeply to make him/her give up so much in order to insure the good of other? Probably genes, DNA and love.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The moral principles of any society are perennial but not eternal. So they change. Technology evolves, the legal regulations modify. The only constant in everything is change. One hundred years ago was not possible to have children through assisted reproductive technology. Today these technologies are the answer of the prayers for many men and women who cannot have their own biological children.

Also today's society is quite different from the one of one hundred years ago. The structure of families and the morals of the society have changed significantly. In most of the civilized country people can legally have same sex partners, single people can adopt children or have children through assisted reproductive technologies, women have children at age that are biological impossible, even natural babies are conceived at more mature age (over 40 years).

So, to remain blocked with the traditional family image is pointless and instead of criticizing the society should be attentive to change, to the new situations and to try to establish regulations adapted to all changer in order for all children to be raised in their best interest: to become healthy, independent, functional adults. The assisted reproductive technologies should be regulated by more precise provisions, all the people involved in these procedures should know their rights and obligations, the situations must be anticipated on the long term and most of all, the children should be well taken care of and properly loved by their parents. That is what they should benefit of: unconditional parental love and care, no matter the parent's sexual orientations, the structure of the family or the genetic link. And society, through adapted regulations, should make sure that they get it.

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