



Conceiving and Negotiating Reproductive Relationships: Lesbians and Gay Men Forming Families with Children

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ABSTRACT

Lesbian and gay parented families are often viewed through the lens of 'families of choice', which assumes they are self-reflexive and innovative in structure. In recent years, some lesbians and gay men have informally negotiated reproductive relationships with friends or acquaintances. The varied kinship assumptions underpinning such relationships are the focus of this article. Three main approaches to family formation are identified: 'standard donor', 'social solidarity' and 'co-parenting'. I argue that a continuum of kinship intentions is evident in these different approaches, and that the degree of innovation and convention needs to be unpacked, particularly with regard to the status of friendship as kinship. I comment on the persistent appeal of co-habiting coupledness as the basis for parenting and the perceived asymmetry between biological motherhood and fatherhood. In conceptualizing and negotiating reproductive relationships, lesbians and gay men may accept or reconfigure the assumptions characteristic of heteronormative clinical assisted reproductive technology (ART) conventions.

KEY WORDS

donor insemination / gay fathers / kinship / lesbian mothers / reproductive decision-making

Introduction

You're not just getting a known donor. You could be getting his stropky sister and granny as well', Virginia Hunter declared. 'You have to be really clear about what all those relationships mean.' At the time of our interview,

Virginia and her partner Mia were in negotiations with a third potential biological father: 'We're talking a minimum two years to find the right person', she sighed. 'It's a really long-term project.' Virginia and Mia were seeking a *reproductive relationship*: a connection made with a person of the other sex necessary for the purposes of having a baby. In recent years, negotiating access to a friend's or acquaintance's sperm or capacity to become pregnant has enabled many lesbians and some gay men to become parents, in the absence of legal access to clinically assisted donor insemination, in-vitro fertilization (IVF) or surrogacy programs in some jurisdictions (see Borthwick and Bloch, 1993; Hogben and Coupland, 2000; McNair et al., 2002; Weeks et al., 2001).

In this article, based on an Australian study of lesbian and gay parents, I explicate the understandings of relatedness informing the negotiation of reproductive relationships beyond the assisted reproductive technology (ART) clinic. I argue that although a broad spectrum of negotiated kinship assumptions is evident, there are also strongly normative assumptions in play, particularly with regard to the status of friendship as the basis for a parental relationship. Strategies such as carefully worded advertisements, face-to-face meetings and written agreements outlining intended parental relationships reveal the persistent appeal of confining parenthood to co-habiting coupledom and the perceived asymmetry between biological motherhood and fatherhood. In conceptualizing and negotiating reproductive relationships, it is apparent that women and men may largely accept or substantially reconfigure the familial and kinship assumptions characteristic of heteronormative clinical ART conventions.

Family and Kinship in the post-Gay Liberation and ART Era

There is a burgeoning sociological literature on cultures of intimacy and care beyond the conventional family: configurations of significant personal relationships that reveal considerable change from western nuclear family models. Such change can be observed within intimate relationships and family formation among heterosexuals and 'non-heterosexuals' alike (e.g. Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Stacey, 1996; Weeks et al., 2001).

The extent to which friendship can sustain enduring relationships of care and support has been one fruitful line of enquiry. In *Families We Choose* (1991), Kath Weston argued that lesbians and gay men reverse the dominant understanding that friendships do not last because they are chosen, while biological or adoptive ties with family of origin are enduring and supportive. Since Weston's pioneering study, Weeks et al. (2001) and Judith Stacey (2004) have reiterated the importance of friendship and choice as defining features of lesbian and gay notions of family, while emphasizing in the process that family as a concept still has purchase in describing relationships of considerable interdependence.

Sociologists have also sought to understand the nature and extent of negotiated commitments to birth families or friends, with a view to questioning the often conservative assumptions of law and policy makers about contemporary care obligations and entitlements. Finch and Mason (1993) found considerable complexity and variation among heterosexual parents and their adult children when it comes to assuming social responsibilities for each other's care and material welfare. Obligations and commitments to care for others were seen as arising as much from the quality of interpersonal relationships and an affinity for the caring role as from a prescriptive concept of duty based on biological ties or gendered assumptions. Weeks et al. (2001) emphasized the reflexivity characteristic of lesbian and gay relationships, commenting that ethical self-scrutiny and more open and explicit processes of negotiating the meaning of relationships apply in the non-heterosexual relational context because of the greater absence of legal and policy support for same-sex relationships. Furthermore, Roseneil and Budgeon (2004) have argued that substantial and enduring negotiated commitments to care can be observed among co-habiting friends who are unpartnered.

Kinship is an anthropological concept that in recent years has been influential in sociological studies of changing family relationships. It is more versatile than 'family' in attending to how people perceive themselves as connected to each other rather than emphasizing the social or institutional forms relationships take (see Mason, 2008; Smart, 2007). In the context of gay and lesbian parents conceiving through IVF, donor insemination or surrogacy, a focus on kinship enables exploration of the meaning of biological and/or genetic ties for social relationships and the entitlements or responsibilities of parenthood, whether or not these ties are understood as 'family' ties. It also encompasses, more broadly, perceptions about what is fixed or given, as opposed to changeable and flexible in relatedness (cf. Carsten, 2004; Edwards, 2000).

Recent anthropological studies have greatly illuminated the creative and dynamic nature of kinship made possible by developments in ART. The use of insemination, IVF and surrogacy, particularly when donated gametes are used, may expose hitherto taken-for-granted assumptions about the relational bases on which family and parental relationships rest, while at the same time adapting, undermining and transforming these (e.g. Carsten, 2004; Edwards, 2000; Franklin 1997; Hayden, 1995; Ragone, 1994; Strathern, 1992; Thompson, 2005). For example, since the development of IVF technology, it has been possible for a woman to supply her ovum to enable another woman to gestate, give birth to and parent a child, without the genetic mother being legally or socially positioned as the child's parent. In a reversal of this configuration, a gestational mother may have a legally and socially ambiguous relationship to social parenthood vis-a-vis the genetic mother, when the genetic mother is the intended parent of the child (see Thompson, 2005).

Anthropological work in the context of parent-child relationships created through ART has also drawn attention to popular understandings of more fixed, unchangeable or non-negotiable elements in kinship. Marilyn Strathern argues

that despite the destabilizing effects ART may have on conventional perceptions of relatedness, the vertical transmission of substance from one generation to another remains a fundamental metaphor of relatedness in the developed West (Strathern, 1992). Through notions of shared biological substance – whether blood or genes – a cultural logic of inheritance is perpetuated, one feature of which is the transmission of identity through descent. Hence the vigorous debate about the purported ‘right to know’ one’s biological origins that often accompanies public and academic discussion about children born from donated eggs and sperm (Anonymous, 2002; Daniels and Taylor, 1993; Dempsey, 2006; Kirkman, 2005; Walker and Broderick, 1999).

The conceptual discussion so far indicates that the formation of reproductive relationships will invariably give rise to some degree of reflexive engagement with the possibilities for chosen, created, negotiated or intended relationships to children, yet these possibilities may ultimately be resolved with reference to quite normative considerations about relatedness such as the strength and meaning of the ‘blood tie’. What is interesting to consider is the degree of innovation people apply to their decision-making process.

Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative study of concepts of family and kinship among Australian lesbian and gay parents and prospective parents. The research explored how participants’ understandings of family and kinship intersected with dominant Australian legal and popular notions of these concepts, the manner in which women and men cooperate and collaborate in having children, and the status of biological relationships in parenting arrangements. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 lesbians and 15 gay men (prospective and current parents, birth mothers and non-birth mothers/co-parents, co-parenting male couples, and sperm donors or ‘donor-dads’ and their partners). Participants’ ages ranged from 23 to 58 and their children’s ages ranged from newborn to 17. At the time of the interviews, all were resident in Melbourne or regional Victoria.

The theoretical sampling strategy (see Strauss and Corbin, 1990) aimed to maximize variation with regard to intended and negotiated family circumstances. I actively sought unpartnered parents, co-parenting couples, and those who were pursuing multi-parent models as well as those predicated on cohabiting couple relationships, in keeping with expectations formed through reading the literature. To facilitate this, participants were recruited in a number of ways. Requests for interviewees were placed in on-line ‘Pink Parenting’ sites, Melbourne-based lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) newspapers, lesbian parenting and health email lists and *Rainbow Families* conference packs. I also snowball sampled from existing participants. When hearing about familial configurations I had not come across

before in interviews, invitations to participate were passed on through the friend or acquaintance already in the study.

The in-depth interviews were designed to elicit what Plummer (2001) calls *short, topical life stories*. I sought subjective meanings and experiences of family and kinship, given my interest in how women and men conceptualized, understood and negotiated procreative and parenting relationships as a politicized and historically new population of parents. Interviews were analysed longitudinally through the writing of detailed thematized case histories (see Dowsett, 1996). The interviews were also coded thematically with the assistance of the NVivo package, to enable cross-sectional analysis.

The discussion that follows is based on analysis of interviews with the 12 women and nine men who were either awaiting the births of children or had children aged five and under. Ten of these participants offered copies of written parenting agreements drafted as part of the pre-conception or birth negotiations and these were thematically analysed.¹ Details such as names, and children's genders and ages have been changed to protect the identities of participants and their children.

Results and Discussion

Finding and Establishing Reproductive Relationships

Finding the right reproductive relationship was the first hurdle confronted by men and women. Experiences with this quest were diverse with regard to how the person was found and the degree of involvement sought, as in the scenarios discussed below.

Tina Gray had only had one person in mind – a work colleague, Brian Stafford – to be the biological father of her and partner Barb's child. Tina initially imagined a relationship where Brian would have social contact 'like a family friend' with her, Barb and the child. She emphasized Brian's assent to 'leaving the parenting up to me and Barb' as an important factor in his selection, and also stressed her 'gut feeling' about the right interpersonal connection in the relationship: 'He was a friend of ours, not a really close friend, but I always just clicked with him and felt a real bond to him and that was the thing', she explained.

Despite an oft-expressed first preference for finding a reproductive relationship among friends and acquaintances, this avenue was often unsuccessful. Placing a 'mating ad' (Hogben and Coupland, 2000) in the classifieds of the local LGBT press proved an acceptable alternative for some. Catriona and Ellen Thomas anticipated jointly raising their child with 'fairly minimal involvement' from the biological father, Jonathon Sumner. Prior to choosing Jonathon, the women had drawn up a 'shortlist' of potential candidates from several men who had replied to their ad for 'a donor with some involvement'. They explained their preference was for someone willing to be known to their children, 'should

the child be interested in knowing about the donor'. In keeping with this, Catriona's explanation of why they selected Jonathon emphasized his potential for responding appropriately to future contact with their child:

We knew that he was interested in having children and was excited by having some sort of a relationship with the child ... So, it was sort of a balance between having a person who was keen and valued their relationship as a donor to the child and we felt that the child might enjoy their company and the way they interacted with the child. It turned out I vaguely knew his brother and had seen him relate to children and thought that seemed like a warm way to relate.

Catriona also appraises the attributes of Jonathon and his brother – the suggestion is, inherited – as a means of assessing his likely future behaviour with a child.

Josh Powell and Marty McArdell also tried advertising before eventually deciding to become parents through a commercial surrogacy agency in the US. Initially, Josh and Marty had hoped to raise a child with a lesbian couple, advertising for 'a lesbian couple with a view to co-parenting' to make this clear. The main criteria they set for selecting the right couple were interpersonal rapport and a desire to share the resident childrearing responsibilities. They also emphasized what they called 'lifestyle issues': comparable financial means, living in an accessible geographic location, and shared values such as a preference for sending children to public or private schools. After meeting over dinner with two different couples, and having decided themselves there was not a great basis of either interpersonal or socio-economic compatibility, the men had received polite letters of rejection from the women: 'We had rejected them in our own discussions as well', Marty laughed, 'but it was a bit confronting to be rejected by them, first'.

Josh and Marty's experiences illustrate a theme recurring in other interviews with men; it was difficult to find what you were looking for in a reproductive relationship if you were hoping to have a substantial role in resident childrearing rather than to just give your sperm or have infrequent non-resident contact. Additionally, there was evidence of a gendered asymmetry with regard to who approached whom and how the approaches were made. While women appeared to feel entitled to initiate requests to men across a spectrum of parental involvement, from none to full co-parenting, it appeared a much graver consideration for men to ask women to have children with them or for them, as in the following examples.

Keith Gower and expectant mother Rowena Merrigan were both single and old friends, and Keith had approached Rowena to ask her if she would like to co-parent a child with him. Keith explained that Rowena was the only person he had considered, but that despite the friendship, he would not have approached her at all had he not heard through a mutual friend she might be interested:

Initially, a friend of Rowena's rang me and said: 'Rowena wants to ask you something'. I drilled a bit further and she said: 'Actually, she'd like to have a child with you [laughs]'. Having a child was something I've always wanted to do but it was

always put in the too-hard basket. When that friend said it was Rowena, it was almost like an instant 'yes' because we were such good friends and I knew that we could actually raise a child together.

Russell and Anthony Sorenson were the only men in this study to have attempted or succeeded in negotiating what could be called an informal surrogacy arrangement, in that the birth mother of their three-year-old child had taken no part in rearing him since birth. Russell's commentary on how he found and established the reproductive relationship with business associate Wendy Hutton clearly illustrates the reservations he had initially. Since their son Ethan's birth, Russell and Anthony have shared his daily care, with occasional visits and phone calls from Wendy who lives interstate. Russell explained that Wendy had offered unexpectedly to have their child, rather than them having approached her. At first, the men were reluctant to accept:

We thanked her politely but said: 'I don't think you really realize what you're saying ... so thanks but no thanks'. Then, she came back and said: 'But, I've actually done this before. I had a little boy when I was younger and gave him up for adoption, and I have absolutely no intention of – I don't want to be a parent.'

The men could only accept Wendy's offer after her disclosure that she had relinquished a child for adoption without ongoing distress or regret.

Despite a degree of diversity in the strategies and intentions expressed above, some strong similarities are also evident. Partnered participants were generally keen to negotiate a reproductive relationship that was to some degree socially and residentially distinct from their cohabiting couple relationship, indicating that nuclear rather communal household living was the preferred option. Although some single and partnered prospective parents envisaged a future of co-parenting the child with the birth mother or man providing sperm, it was usually with a view to maintaining separate households. Also, a desire to find a friend or acquaintance rather than a stranger with whom to embark on this relationship was common, given the level of commitment and responsibility participants attached to having a child. An existing relationship was perceived to have the advantage of having been tested out with regard to the trustworthiness, likely expectations and character of the person concerned.

The scenarios considered above also indicate that reproductive relationships are predicated on a continuum of kinship intentions regarding the relationship between the intended parent or parents, the man giving sperm or the woman giving birth. At one end of the spectrum, the level of social involvement is imagined as very minimal unless the child expresses interest in having contact. Further along the continuum, there is anticipation of a greater degree of social contact that stops short of a resident care and parenting. Still further along are negotiations which assume a substantial caregiving role for a biological mother and father, and acknowledged status as the child's parent. The priorities for the reproductive relationship may accentuate the person's individual character or personality, and the sense of interpersonal rapport or compatibility that characterizes a friendship. Conversely, there may be a more calculated emphasis on the

traits embodied in the reproductive partner that may, in turn, be expressed in the child or influence the relationship with the child in the future. In the next section I consider how this continuum of intentions and preoccupations was also evident in the written agreements supplied by some participants.

Written Agreements and Kinship Intentions

Sample written parenting agreements appear in many of the international lesbian and gay parenting self-help books available in Australia (e.g. Martin, 1993; Pepper, 1999). In order to clearly establish kinship intentions, some participants had consolidated their verbal negotiations with written agreements, based on the recommendation of these books.² Participants who made written agreements were usually well aware of their lack of legal status, emphasizing instead their capacity to encourage a thorough and transparent communication process. The categories of 'standard', 'social solidarity' and 'co-parenting' agreements shed further light on the spectrum of kinship intentions already identified.

Standard donor agreements

Michael has agreed to donate his sperm to enable Avril to become pregnant. Avril and her partner Catherine will be the socially and legally acknowledged parents of any child conceived and Michael will have neither paternal rights, nor responsibilities. He will bear no financial burden ... He will not be legally identified or known as the biological father. He will be known to the child as 'Michael' rather than 'Dad' so as not to cause any confusion or upset.

Michael Meagher is the biological father of two year-old Max, who is being raised by co-habiting couple, Avril and Catherine. Michael lives with his partner Jason, and Michael explained that he and Jason see Max and his mothers 'on Max's birthday and every couple of months'. Michael, Avril and Catherine's standard donor agreement – so-called due to its similar kinship assumptions to those in the parenting manuals – had the impersonal and matter-of-fact tone of a business contract. It sought to make clear Michael's status as a sperm donor rather than a family member of the women and the child. Any social contact that might occur between Michael and the child is perceived as more akin to that of a family friend. Additionally, the expectation is that Michael should keep his paternity confidential. The kinship assumption here is that children should clearly belong to the parents who are raising them, and blurring familial boundaries and expectations (e.g. by knowing Michael as 'Dad') may have detrimental emotional consequences for all parties.

When heterosexual and lesbian couples or single women use clinical donor insemination, the identity of the biological father is not known to the recipients, although provision may exist for the child to find out his identity in the future. The tide of public and policy opinion on this issue in Australia has certainly swung in favour of 'identity-release' provisions for gamete donors to clinics, in

keeping with sentiments in the UK and continental Europe (see Ryan-Flood, 2005). McNair and colleagues found the most popular reason lesbian mothers in the state of Victoria nominated for choosing a known donor rather than going interstate to the legally accessible ART clinics, where identity-release provisions could not be guaranteed, was 'desire for the child to know the identity of all biological parents' (McNair et al., 2002: 43).

In the above agreement between Michael, Avril and Catherine, clinical assumptions about the management of paternity knowledge are maintained, although the principle invoked is confidentiality rather than anonymity. Although there may be social contact between biological father and child, this kind of agreement attempts to replicate the goal donor anonymity achieved in the clinical setting, through a parallel insistence on non-disclosure of the biological father's identity, unless the child begins to ask questions about who the biological father is. This renders a social father invisible and allows the lesbian parents to ensure their family is established as a social entity.

Social solidarity agreements

We Felicity, Fiona, David and Karl are embarking on a new and exciting journey. This document serves to clarify the rights, responsibilities and best wishes we have for the child born of our arrangement ... The child will live with Felicity and Fiona who will be socially and legally acknowledged as primary carers. We intend that David and Karl will be acknowledged as fathers and have the opportunity to develop a non-resident, yet caring relationship with the child. We imagine there will be lots of visits between all four of us and the child, and although our extended families will not have any rights in respect of the child, we value their love in their roles as aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins.

A second kind of written agreement was much less impersonal than the first, and couched in language emphasizing ongoing friendship and mutual support rather than a fixed agreement. I use the term 'social solidarity' to describe this type of agreement because, unlike the standard donor agreement, it confirmed that the biological father's and his partner's relatives would be acknowledged as the child's family members, with the expectation of social contact between the extended families of origin of the biological father and mother, and their respective partners. It featured strong statements about goodwill and friendship between the adults (expressed in the acknowledgement of visits and extended family love), as well as clarifying the status of extended family relationships. The biological father, his partner and their extended families were embraced, not as resident parents or legal custodians, but nonetheless as fathers who are part of the child's social family.

Co-parenting agreements

The details articulated in a third kind of agreement, in this case between two unpartnered friends, constituted an affirmation of mutual desire to fully co-parent in the context of this friendship:

Rowena and Keith have decided to have a child together by insemination. They make this agreement in order to emphasize their intentions that any child born has the right to be known by and cared for by both parents and have contact on a regular basis with any other people significant to his/her care or development, including any future partners Rowena and Keith may have. They acknowledge that the child may reside more with Rowena during early infancy due to care and breastfeeding requirements. Beyond this, provision will be made for the child to reside with each parent on an equal basis ... Rowena and Keith will be motivated in all decisions by what is in the best interests of their child.

At the time of his interview, Keith Gower was very much looking forward to the birth of the child he is intending to raise with his friend Rowena Merrigan. Keith intends to be at the baby's birth and has been accompanying Rowena to ante-natal classes. Keith explained that his and Rowena's written agreement was signed as part of a ceremony conducted with the close friends they hope will play important 'aunt' and 'uncle' roles in the life of their child. This kind of secular ritual or public statement about the status of negotiated relationships may consolidate them. Otherwise, there may be a tendency towards ambiguity or lack of commitment over time in the absence of dominant cultural support. In Keith's story, using the agreement as the basis for a ceremony facilitates shared memories of a significant occasion that may enhance all parties' sense of responsibility and care for each other and the child in the future.

A Continuum of Kinship Intentions

As with the processes and expectations described with regard to finding reproductive relationships, standard donor, social solidarity and co-parenting agreements point to a continuum of understandings about the child's perceived place within a constellation of potential kin. Each kind of agreement draws on some normative notions of Western kinship and family relationships while reformulating or rejecting others.

Standard agreements appear to be modelled very strongly on the conventions of donor insemination characteristic of contemporary clinical practice, where 'identity-release' provisions exist. The child is positioned 'as if born to' (see Modell, 1999, for the use of this phrase in adoption research) the birth mother and her co-parenting partner; the goal of the document is to affirm the child's social place in a reformulated same-sex couple-based nuclear family. In social solidarity agreements, the focus is more on conceiving the child's place within an extended nexus of the biological mother and father's family of origin connections, although the women are still afforded the primary, resident carer role. In the co-parenting agreement, the conventional assumption is that biological motherhood and fatherhood are grounds for parental rights and responsibilities. However, friendship rather than sexual love is the emotional sentiment consolidating the primary parenting relationship and cohabitation is not the only requirement for shared childrearing.

Managing Volatile Attachments

In an earlier section of the article I noted the emotional asymmetry between biological motherhood and fatherhood, in that biological motherhood is afforded greater emotional weight. This is not to say emotional connections between biological fathers and children were deemed inconsequential. An ever-present consideration for women was how emotionally involved they wanted the biological father to be, and what his involvement could mean for future kinship and child-rearing arrangements. Virginia Hunter summed up succinctly a theme often emphasized in interviews with women: 'Everybody talks about the level of contact and the fear that the biological father will suddenly want to become Father of the Year.' It was widely believed that paternal biological connections were capricious or unpredictable in their effects on men's perceptions of relatedness once children were born. The main concern was that an agreement made by men prior to conception or birth to have minimal or no involvement in the child's life could shift to a desire for a more substantial relationship once the child was actually born.

Lesbian prospective parents in this study whose ideal parenting arrangement was to have very little parenting involvement from the biological father managed the perceived emotional unpredictability in two main ways.³ The first was to choose a biological father they liked, trusted and were amenable to having in their personal lives on an ongoing basis, in case the subsequent relationship with him shifted somewhat beyond the initial intentions once children were born. For instance, Tina Gray described it as 'human' or inevitable for men to experience a paternal biological connection as an emotional connection, once the child was born, no matter what kind of parental agreement had been struck beforehand between the adults. This appeared indicative of her belief that more intangible dimensions of kinship could come into play after children were born, which were beyond the initial intentions or negotiations:

As much as you'd like to say that you should be able to exclude [the biological father] from the actual parenting, they're humans. They don't know how they're going to react when they find out that they're going to be a father and they are, biologically. Whether you think that they are or not, for them, they're biologically going to be fathers.

Tina explained that there had been minimal discussion or explicit negotiation prior to conceiving a child with Brian's sperm about the finer details of the parenting arrangements, apart from securing his broad assent to 'be known to the child'. She emphasized: 'there was a trust aspect, I mean, you just know that he's right'. Tina's comments here seem in keeping with this idea that there is more to kinship than the sentiments that can be pinned down in an agreement prior to a child's birth. In this regard, it made more sense to her to put her faith in the quality of the relationship with Brian as much as in any finer detail of the negotiations.

In Tina's and Barb's case, the relationship with Brian did shift somewhat from initial intentions, although not because Brian initiated the change. When their first child, Henry, was born five years ago, Brian came to visit several

weeks after the birth at the women's invitation, then saw him only a couple of times until he was about six months old. During those early months, Tina and Barb came to feel very secure in their parental relationships and over time could see the benefits of introducing Brian into Henry's life in a more substantial way. He subsequently became biological father to their second child, Milly, two, and is now a weekly visitor to the women and children's home:

I knew that I didn't feel threatened by him and Barb certainly didn't and I think that's the big thing. It happened very, very slowly that Brian and the children have a special sort of relationship.

Other women took a contrary stance to Tina – that it was possible to counter potentially less tangible dimensions of kinship in the future with extreme rationality in the present. In this view, by taking considerable care to be explicit, formal and bureaucratic in the pre-conception negotiations, it was possible to screen out men who might want to move beyond the negotiated kinship agreement in the future. Catriona and Ellen Thomas had devoted considerable attention to researching questions that should be asked of prospective biological fathers and devising a standardized list of questions about family medical history, psychological well-being and intended family relationships. Ellen explained:

We did research on what [diseases] were communicable, what were the genetic things that could get passed down in sperm, so there was sort of that checklist of medical health. And then what they wanted, like how much involvement with the child? Do you want to contribute financially? Questions about their family relationships as well.

Catriona continued:

I remember one guy who seemed really great, but one of the things that really worried me was that his relationship with his own family was very estranged and quite violent. I just thought: danger. Maybe he could end up having a whole emotional reaction once there's a child there around his own relationship to his own family.

Evidently, Ellen and Catriona viewed the interview schedule and the extensive research on health and family relationships on which it was based as central to responsible family formation. Notably, emotional attachments to children that may thwart kinship intentions are deemed manageable and predictable. Imputed psychologically aberrant factors, such as a family history of violence, can be anticipated and screened out.

To shore up a sense of certainty in the parental entitlements and responsibilities, Ellen explained that they rounded off their pre-conception negotiations with a series of 'meetings' guided by an 'agenda'. The women emphasized the business-like and (implicitly) fixed status of the arrangements that were to govern familial relationships in the future:

After he got his [medical test] results, we had a meeting. We worked through an actual agenda. That was very specific things like, who's going to be at the birth and on the birth certificate, who the child will live with, what are the day-to-day parenting roles, financial support, what will we all be called by the child. We kind of went through, point by point. (Ellen)

Despite these measures, Catriona's and Ellen's relationship with their child's biological father had soured in the 18 months since their daughter Fleur's birth. Catriona explained they had been unhappy with the extent to which Jonathon continued to try to arrange to see them and Fleur over and above the three agreed visits per year. The women believed, in part, that the year it had taken to become pregnant had produced a false sense on Jonathon's behalf that he had formed a close and ongoing friendship to them, which in his mind constituted grounds to see the child more often and, in effect, change the terms of their initial agreement. Catriona explained the relational dilemma as she saw it:

If you have to see someone because you are ovulating, that's not a really good indication of whether you want to see them or not ... If you're having that kind of constant contact with them, a whole lot of other complications happen ... You feel so grateful for the service they're doing you. You might sort of chat to them because you might want them to feel that you appreciate them sort of thing. Then they might think that you really like them.

Catriona emphasizes her hospitality towards Jonathon during the period of attempting to get pregnant as a kind of necessary duplicity. In hindsight, Catriona believed that Jonathon had misconstrued this hospitality as friendship. Her reflections indicate the complex relational dynamics that may characterize reproductive relationships, and also the potential gap between 'intended' as opposed to 'negotiated' kinship. For instance, left ambiguous in Catriona's account is how Jonathon could have been expected to understand that the gestures of hospitality were performed in the service of maintaining an instrumental relationship that would ensure his ongoing commitment to the task of semen provision, rather than a deepening friendship. Such assumptions could not have been explicitly stated as they might have undermined the goal of his ongoing cooperation.

There may be other explanations for Jonathon's desire for more contact that are more in keeping with Tina Gray's aforementioned belief about the emotional resonance of the paternal connection. Although Jonathon himself was not interviewed, a number of men participating in the study did comment on the unforeseen power of their emotional response to becoming biological fathers, whether due to their growing sense of physical resemblance to the child, or traumatic events in their family of origin, such as the death or serious illness of a parent. Catriona and Ellen's experiences with Jonathon point to the naïveté of thinking that a painstaking and bureaucratic pre-conception negotiation can conclusively fix the meaning of the reproductive relationship for all parties.

Conclusion

As Virginia Hunter's reflections at the very beginning of this article indicated, the social meaning of reproductive relationships is to some degree highly negotiable. Diverse considerations about biological and social connectedness between men, women, their extended families and children are involved in finding and establishing these relationships. The relationship sought may be largely

instrumental and pragmatic, or emotionally close and based on the sentiments more commonly associated with friendship. It may be conceptualized as a 'family' or 'non-family' relationship. It may also shift in meaning over time, depending on the adults' and children's wishes.

Terms such as 'families of choice' suggest that a very individualistic and personal set of considerations could be expected to factor into reproductive relationships, rather than those meaningfully patterned or structured according to conventional categories such as gender or biological relatedness, or cohabiting coupledness. However, the extent to which agreements or negotiations repudiate normative assumptions about how parent–children relationships map onto these conventional categories should not be overstated.

One constant was the gendered nature of the assumptions informing these negotiations. Invariably, the relationship between biological fathers and children was perceived as a much more flexible and negotiable relationship than that between a child and a biological mother. Lesbian couples or single women generally wanted resident parental rights and caregiving responsibilities, with biological fathers assuming more distant non-resident social contact. Informal surrogacy arrangements appear rare, due to considerable concerns on the part of gay men desiring parenthood that birth mothers (with the exception of those acting as commercial surrogates) would have little interest in or will to relinquish a child. Although it is possible that some gay couples and their women friends or acquaintances pursuing this path to family formation remained beyond the reach of this qualitative study, the theoretical sampling strategy utilized meant that considerable effort was expended trying to find people involved in these more marginal family formation practices.

The families of choice literature has often advanced the idea that friendship constitutes kinship in the lives of lesbians and gay men (cf. Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991) without always explicitly unpacking the specific circumstances of how the two relational domains overlap. This study indicates that the status of friendship in reproductive relationships may appear in innovative and also more conventional guises. In standard known donor agreements and negotiations in which the biological father is not considered to be an equivalent parent, there is evidence of an interesting attempt to transform the social relationships between biological fathers and children to those of friendship rather than parenthood, in endeavours to foreground parental responsibilities and entitlements for a single mother or lesbian couple. This constitutes an interesting reconfiguration of the friendship as kinship idea, in which the paternal biological connection is envisaged as a friend-like relationship, until such time as the child invokes a 'right to know' who the biological father is. The status of the connection is shifted to reflect a potentially meaningful relationship in children's lives, yet one distanced legally, socially and emotionally from daily care and nurture. In this regard, the conventional status of a friend as a person of lesser social and emotional status to a child than a parent is evident.

A very different friendship/kinship nexus is in play when reproductive relationships also constitute parenting partnerships that are founded on friendship

and biological relatedness. This appears to be happening in what seem to be rarer situations where the biological mother and father are unpartnered co-parents, or when two same-sex couples enter co-parenting relationships. For single men and women, co-parenting friendships are strengthened and consolidated by the sense of social connectedness assumed to follow from biological relationships with children. In three or four parent models, biological relatedness, friendship and couple-based intimacy are woven together in complex fashion to create the affinity and social solidarity supportive of raising children. It appears, however, that friendship in and of itself is not widely regarded as sufficient to create the conditions for or entitlements to parental relationships and responsibilities. Although this is somewhat speculative, it may be that underpinning this is the very conventional preoccupation that as a chosen relationship it cannot sustain the required levels of obligation and commitment needed for infant childrearing without some extra scaffolding supplied by either a biogenetic tie or couple relationship.

Perceptions regarding the volatility of the paternal connection reinforce Jennifer Mason's recent argument that the conceptual terrain of kinship studies needs to be expanded beyond the current emphasis on chosen, fixed or negotiated affinities (2008). To this end, Mason argues that more attention needs to be paid to what she calls 'ethereal' and 'sensory' dimensions of kinship; for example, the fascination with, and emotional power of, perceived physical resemblances between parents and children. Whereas the concepts of negotiated or intended or chosen kinship bring to mind highly cognitive perspectives and processes that can be brought to bear on kinship matters, the notion of ethereal kinship potentially belongs to a much more intangible, emotional domain of experience. This ethereal domain of experience is certainly worthy of more exploration in the context of lesbian and gay planned parenthood.

Although a study of this kind cannot make claims to whether standard, social solidarity or co-parenting assumptions about relatedness are more successful for family relationships further down the track, the evidence was that all configurations can prove amicable and feasible once children are born, despite their continuing legal uncertainty. Although there is certainly potential for these relationships to go terribly wrong in the absence of legal support, as evidenced internationally by several high profile and acrimonious family court cases between lesbian parents and gay donors in recent years (Arnup and Boyd, 1995; Dempsey, 2004; Kelly, 2005), most of the people who took part in this study were satisfied with the relationships they had developed. It seems that when things do go wrong, it is often because the lesbian couple or single mother is more disposed toward the kinship assumptions of the standard donor agreement, which closely follow the clinical conventions for 'identity-release' sperm, whereas the biological father prefers (or believes he consented to) a social solidarity agreement, in which his identity as a biological father will be openly acknowledged from the time of the child's birth. The indications from this study were that gay men would sometimes like a greater degree of social involvement with children, including acknowledgement of their paternity to the child, than women are prepared to contemplate.

One question left begging is the extent to which children of different ages experience and understand these reproductive relationships as based on normative or negotiable kinship assumptions, particularly once they know the identity of their non-parental biological mothers or fathers. For instance, how do children's wishes for contact align with those of their resident parents, and how is conflict between adults and children's wishes managed? Are some children more interested in these matters than others, and what appears to influence their interest? These are important if difficult and sensitive questions to flag here. No matter whether the agreed reproductive relationships are socially distant or assuming regular care and interaction, exchanges resulting in the birth of a child would appear to necessitate some acknowledgement of ongoing connectedness between all of the adults who are party to these arrangements. Otherwise, how else can children perceive they have genuine space to exercise their purported right-to-know?

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Notes

- 1 Participants whose interviews did not inform the discussion in this article were excluded for several reasons. Six women were attempting to conceive or had conceived through sperm banks and extra-clinical reproductive negotiations were not relevant. In four interviews, participants had yet to attempt forming or finding a reproductive relationship. In two interviews with parents of children over 10, the detail of the reproductive negotiations could not be recalled. In two other interviews reproductive negotiations were not discussed.
- 2 At the time these interviews were conducted, only the woman giving birth had a clear legal entitlement to parentage in Australian family law in cases where the children were conceived through insemination, and the birth mother and biological father were not in a heterosexual relationship. Since 1 July 2009, this has changed. Same-sex couples can now be recognized as parents in Australian family law when they meet the requirements of sections 60H and 60HB of the Family Law Act, for example, in cases where a child is born through an assisted conception procedure or following an approved surrogacy arrangement. Although written parenting agreements such as those discussed above have no binding status in Australian law, the intentions of parties to reproductive negotiations in the event of a parentage dispute may be taken into account in the Family Court and assessed in accordance with the paramount principle 'the best interests of the child'.
- 3 Short (2007) suggests a third possibility in that a number of the women in her study chose known donors who lived interstate or overseas.

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