

Disturbed Intimacy in Procreation Without Sexual Relationship

Dr. Despina Naziri

New techniques of Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) as well as the evolution of morals have brought out new modes of parentality and have led to a separation of biological, psychological, legal and social dimensions of paternal and maternal function. One of the major consequences of these changes consists of the dissociation between reproduction and sexuality which has left an enigma for theorists and practitioners of psychoanalysis in its wake. Thus the fundamental concepts- such as the primal scene, Oedipal configurations, psychosexual development- have been placed in question because of the fact that a child can be conceived without a sexual relationship and because a third person (a sperm or egg donor, a surrogate mother) intervenes in this intimate scene of family life (Ehrensaft, 2000).

Given that all of these questions have been asked in a particularly acute way in the case of homoparentality figures, I chose, in the frame of this article a) to use the theory of D. Ehrensaft (2000) who believes that even if we manage to dissociate reproduction from sexuality, it was much more difficult to dissociate sexuality from reproduction b) to examine the psychic defenses that procreation without sexual relation leads to for the involved subjects, following clinical research material with parents engaged in a project of homoparentality.

Homo(co)-parentality and the primal scene

In the frame of this interdisciplinary research on infertility and the use of assisted reproductive technology¹ and following research that I had already led about the question of homoparentality (Naziri, Feld-Elzon, 2012), I had the chance to carry out interviews with four homosexual adults already engaged in a family schema of co-parenting: a male couple (Alexis and Tony) and a female couple (Maria and Lucia) who decided to have a child, resorting to "artisanal" insemination. At the time of the interviews, the biological mother was seven months pregnant and the two couples were imagining shared parenting of the child. More concretely, in order to present this clinical vignette, I will focus on some passages of their accounts which illustrate their representation and their experiences of fertilization attempts as well as their underlying fantasies. In choosing to juxtapose these passages one after the other, I suggest considering their authors as if they were having a dialogue between them:

Alexis, 43, the biological father, is a doctor and met the couple Maria and Lucia, with whom they began a long reflection before deciding to carry out their plans:

[...] The first time, it was like a big party; there was everything, ejaculation, fertilization... A girlfriend had brought us ovulation tests from England; we did everything [...] around Maria. We were all gathered around her pussy [...] The women also were positioned all around... They did everything as if we were parking a truck... "a bit more to the right", "more to the left", "careful, that's uncomfortable"... "not so fast", "go slower", "don't go so deep", "don't put your whole dick in"... It was a bit silly, but really great too, I mean very nice.

Tony, 32, always associated these plans to his origins, a more "atypical" family:

-[...] I know a friend who decided to have a child with her girlfriend; her girlfriend got pregnant with an ad on the internet, I mean they put an ad up, "Looking for a father", they described the relational framework, etc. and they had auditions; the second candidate suited them, they reached an agreement, they had sex a few times, and it worked. I imagine that they had to make a sort of contract concerning the father's rights vis-à-vis this child so that everyone would be covered... Me, I wouldn't have done the same thing.

Maria, 39, the biological mother, is a sociologist and has been involved in the LGBT movement since her youth:

So we were deciding when we were going to do fertilization, in other words we were setting the fertilization dates. [...] These fertilization sessions were a sort of..., how should I put it..., a sort of "event" ... In fact, at first, Alexis and his boyfriend, Tony, came together and they would start by..., you know..., rubbing each other, caressing each other, etc., but in vain; nothing was happening. So we decided that Alexis didn't want any help; he'd rather go in the room next door, to masturbate, etc. Of course, Lucia was also at home. But the very first time we also had a girlfriend there who insisted on setting the mood, music, candles, etc. My roommate at the time, also gay, came too, with his boyfriend, and he brought, artistically, a lily! A lily! [...] Well, that was really funny. But what was interesting was how I felt; because, me, I had to put this thing, you know, the needle, have it penetrate me; and then there was sperm as well as penetration; and I had stopped these types of relations ages ago, when I was 23... [...] Over time... it became simpler; sometimes I was also alone, without anyone else, not even Lucia or with Alexis and Tony who were in the room talking together, while I was laying with my feet in the air...

Lucia, 34, is an engineer and expressed at once that her desire to have a child was her partner's desire first:

[...] The first time, everything was done very carefully, in a really particular way, etc..., but later, after a certain point, it became a bit more mechanical, because, you know, you can't be in the mood all the time. [...] All these body parts involved in this process... the fact that Alexis would go masturbate to stimulate his sperm; it's like, at that time, the sexuality around these body parts disappeared; like the body turned into something else. For me, that was the most interesting part [...] Well, that was it, in fact, there was a kind of desexualization. Even though we could laugh and make a wide variety of jokes, at any given time, the body and the specific process were no longer sexualized...

If we attempt a first psychoanalytic reading of this fragmentary material, we can see that in these accounts a primal scene unfolds which surprises each of the four actors in some way; however each of them seems to rewrite and interpret it in their own way. The accounts seem to condense feelings and diverse, contradictory thoughts, formulated in quasi-provocative language, appearing vulgar and trivial when it designates sexual activity. Moreover, this contrasts with the (self)reflective and questioning attitude they adopted throughout the interviews. On one hand, the mothers alluded to a mechanical procedure, detached from all sexual or erotic dimension, on the other hand, they recognize that it really was an "event" involving "excitement", joy, or even a certain sadness or frustration.

The speech of these two women appears more impregnated with feelings of perplexity, as evidenced by either resorting to the idea of desexualisation or the instrumentalized approach to sexual functions and the body; which we can understand as a defensive posture facing the psychic difficulty that the process in question represents for them. Because this method of fertilization and thus access to

parentality confronts them with not only the transgression of the societal norm, but also - at the level of fantasy - with the perspective of a sexual relationship with a man. This perspective sows confusion with respect to the object choice they make in their sexual lives.

The dimension of pleasure seems much more present in the account of the biological father. From the beginning, he alludes to the "party" organized for the occasion of the first attempt at fertilization: even though he resorted to wording which reveals the presence of defenses (using terms in English when he mentions emotionally charged ideas, humor, provocative or crude expressions: "gathered around her pussy"), this doesn't stop him from mentioning his pleasure. These defensive reactions of the biological father can also be attributed (as the two mothers had previously imagined) to the disturbing emergence of his fantasies of a heterosexual encounter with Maria.

Beyond the specific characteristics of the psychic functioning of each of these protagonists, one can pinpoint an interesting paradox in this coparentality situation: while in other configurations of access to parentality for homosexual couples, a biological third party is inevitable (a sperm or egg donor, a surrogate mother), in this case this third figure is apparently unnecessary while the reference to the third person at the psychic level for organizing the fantasy of the original scene seems indispensable: each of these biological parents must refer to their partner in the romantic couple and try to establish them as a partner in their future parental couple.

Psychic conflict and defense mechanisms

Facing such complexity eventually requires the establishment of defenses by large-scale moments in order to find a way to calm the interior agitation that is produced. This also provokes the establishment of fantasy scenarios of the primal scene which includes a dimension of reification of the other or their reduction to a part object. How will we listen as clinicians to the expression of these fantasies?

One can also notice that it's not just about a "fight to separate sexuality from reproduction" but also a fight to keep psychic integrity faced with these conflicts by acute moments concerning their identity and sexual orientation. Thus homosexuals involved in such parentality configurations must likely compose their heterosexual fantasies in the manner of heterosexuals who can only consciously or unconsciously confront their homosexuality (even their homophobia).

The analysis of this clinical material not only allows us to explore certain defensive mechanisms that are established faced with psychic conflict with which the future parents are confronted, but it also leads us to believe that the mystery of conception and the question of fantasy around the original scene can only remain unresolved in spite of all attempts of rational and technical control of fertilization, such as assisted procreation with or without sexual relations.

In other words, faced with this mystery and this enigma, as clinicians we are as much in question as the people who are involved. If we admit as D. Ehrensaft did (2000) that the formation of a family with atypical configurations exposes both the parents and the children to the risk of "developing a specific set of conflicts of psychological disturbances", we must examine the possibility of remaining kind and open while listening (i.e. non-pathologizing). Such support from our part can allow the exploration of feelings and the emergence of anxieties and subconscious fantasies in order to more serenely approach the disturbance induced by these new and overwhelming possibilities of creating these links of parenthood.

References

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¹ *About the clinical component of the research created in the framework of the international network (IN)FERCIT (from 2012 to 2015): ((In)Fertile Citizens; On the Concepts, Practices, Politics, and Technologies of Assisted Reproduction in Greece. An Interdisciplinary and Comparative Approach)*