Being homosexual parents through gestational surrogacy

It all began in summer 2007 when we were both lying down under the sun in a Croatian beach – well, I was lying down under the sun and my partner was in the shade: he didn’t like to get sunburnt, I liked it less and less. We were both reading. I was reading *Los girasoles ciegos* by Albert Méndez, in which a story of a heterosexual couple who give birth to a child during the Post-Civil War period (1940) is told. Hidden in a cave where they are hiding from the Nationalists, the mother and the child die. At this point the father starts a brief reflection on his child who is no longer there and what he will miss, etc. It was in this moment that I began to feel that I wanted to be a father. I guess that at the age of 45 I thought that it had to happen then or it would never happen. Also, I didn’t want to miss an opportunity that I denied some time before (in a parallel process when I accepted? my homosexuality: since you can’t

have children, you don’t desire them). I turned around and told my partner: what about if we have a child? That same afternoon we were talking about how we imagined our child, what steps we had to take, where we had to go... I think it was as if we had started to be parents already, to share and build a common dream. The process of paternity had started with all the happiness that it brings to the couple but also with all the discussions, negotiations and re-negotiations about who to share this plan with, whether it was better to be married or not, whether we preferred national or international adoption, what countries to consider, what ages and even what school we would choose.

My partner got down to business immediately: he started looking up all kinds of information on the Internet. However, some days later, something happened which opened up a new channel that we weren’t considering. Some friends from New York e-mailed us the picture of their newborn, which they had through a process of gestational surrogacy. This only nurtured our dream and made the possibility of being parents more feasible. We decided then not to close any door and initiate both channels: adoption and surrogacy.

Through a lesbian couple who had adopted, we made contact with two heterosexual women who were in contact with an orphanage in Cameroon. We met them several times and we started—well, my partner started—to make bureaucratic arrangements with the Catalan government to request the certificate of aptitude to adopt (international adoption is prohibited in the majority of countries for same-sex couples and the only way is being a single man). Today, we are still waiting for an official written answer from the Catalan Government—tthat is, we received a refusal through administrative silence. Informal information suggests that one of the reasons is that we chose a country with which there is no adoption agreement. However, the administration’s failure to even answer our petition reveals grave problems.

In autumn 2007, we contacted the group of homosexual parents who belonged to the FLG association (Asociacion of Gay and Lesbian Families), with which we are currently involved.
They all had children through adoption. Since their experiences were very different, there was no pattern that we could follow. They all agreed that the process was long, expensive and exhausting but it was in the end worth it. Daunted by the complexity and length of the adoption process, in December we contacted some North American agencies that facilitated surrogacy.

We opted for an agency situated in Boston. We had an interview through the Internet with its Director after we had read about the whole process, although we had many doubts about how to start it. In February 2008, we signed the contract with the agency, in which they agreed to manage the process for us. This meant that they should put us in contact with fertility centres, with which we signed a contract, and also with the egg donor, with which we had to sign a contract too. Most importantly, the agency was also responsible for finding a woman who was ready to gestate our child.

This is the toughest and most complicated part of the process. Not all women can do this. The process is regulated by the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) and the women allowed to take part in it must be married, have children and have a paid job. It is a process of mutual acceptance: both the woman who will gestate our child and her husband have to accept us, as well as we have to accept them. Towards June, the agency informed us that there was a woman (together with her husband) who was ready to work with us. Previously, the agency had already sent us a booklet with photographs of their story and ours. We started to get to know each other in a process that lasted around two months. After that, we signed the contract through independent lawyers, by which we agreed on the conditions and details of the process.

We liked each other from the first moment: Myriam (psychologist) and her husband Robert (nurse) were very generous people, close and friendly who had two daughters, Morgan and Devin. Myriam had previously gestated the daughter of one of her best friends, since her friend was unable to have a child after many attempts of in vitro fertilization, and she was willing to do it again. When I asked her why (maybe because I am a sociologist and I have always been interested in understanding the reasons of human behaviour), she answered: giving birth is
always a miracle and one of the best things one could do in this world.

In September, the reproductive cycle of the egg donor and Myriam synchronised, so we travelled to New York at the beginning of October (the fertility centre that we chose is in Connecticut, a one-hour train journey from New York). We stayed at the home of friends who had had a child through the same process one year before. It was a very exciting time when we were staying at their place and sharing the every-day life and the upbringing of their child. It was a future scenario that was getting closer to us.

We also met Myriam, Robert, Devin and Morgan. This time there was no virtual engine involved, so everything started to be more human, more real. There were moments in which I felt like I was in a dream or a movie. We hadn’t explained to our families what we were doing. We only told some friends and colleagues, because we had to ask for permission to leave work for seven to ten days. We were far from home and starting a very intimate and emotional process, in which other people who we absolutely trusted were involved. If everything went well, we would be parents after nine months, that is, it was a point of no return. It went well, we got pregnant at the first attempt and Joan (our son) was born on the 23rd of June, 2009.

Before this, some things happened that I consider relevant to explain in order to clarify what it meant and still means to be a same-sex couple willing to be parents. In our case, two things should be explained that shouldn’t cause any problem but both at the same time are difficult to assimilate by the society that we live in. The first thing is that a couple of men want to be parents, which means that there is no mother figure. The second is that it is not an adoption (which is legal in Spain) but a biological child, gestated by a woman who has her own family.

One of the most common questions (which many people still currently ask us) is why we decided not to adopt if there are many orphans and abandoned children. At the beginning we used to explain how difficult, long and complicated the process of adoption is for a male couple. After a while, I realised that there was often a sort of homophobia hidden behind the question. For example, a colleague from work, who is involved and sympathises with Opus Dei and is a mother of four children, told me that the whole process repelled her and it was better...
to adopt. I response, I asked why she herself wasn’t adopting, since adoption is easier than gestating a child. She said that she was fertile, to which I said “so am I”. I also added that I didn’t know how long it took for her to get pregnant but we managed to do it at the first attempt. This society considers adoptable children to be for infertile couples, probably because they are considered a second choice. That is to say, it is best to have your own biological children; if you can’t, you try all the fertility processes available and if there are no more options, then you can adopt.

Another homophobic reaction was the concern that some of our friends and relatives expressed over the suffering of our child, since he would have two fathers in a society where this is not common. What I find most outrageous is that they tell this to us, who are precisely the ones who have suffered and are still suffering such homophobia. I would like to say to those who have at some point thought about it that I thank them for worrying about our children but the best thing they could do is to worry about the children and teenagers who are currently suffering from bullying in schools. I ask them to look after the children in their own large families, because there are homosexuals suffering every day in every family as their relatives and friends don’t accept them as they are, even if it is generally not a voluntary reaction.

Within my own family, one of the most painful moments that I lived when we were pregnant was my mother’s reaction when I told her that she was going to be a grandmother again, since she was already grandmother of my two nephews, my brother’s children. One week earlier we had already told my partner’s parents, although we informed first his brother and sister-in-law just in case we needed some support with the surprise. All of them, both Jordi’s parents and his brother and sister-in-law, accepted it immediately with some perplexity but also excitement and joy. I told my mother when she was at our place, as she usually comes a couple of times every year to stay with us for three or four weeks. My mother’s first reaction was denial.
The shock was so big that she didn’t even ask me how we were going to do it. At that moment for her it didn’t matter whether we adopted or chose surrogacy (which she didn’t know about). When I asked her if she was happy for me, she answered “no”. It was all very primitive and basic. What was really happening at that moment was that I was obliging my mother to socially accept that she had a homosexual son. For her, like for many other people in this country, what others “may say” is as important as the own happiness and the well-being of their children. After a whole long month with us, she could observe the reactions of the people around us, who lived our pregnancy with joy, but she still needed some more time and her comments implied that she still hadn’t accept it. Just the memory of this period is still painful for me. She went back to our village and went through her own Calvary with the help of two crucial facts. The first was the fact that her cousins and other relatives (my mother is an only child) were happy when she gave them the news and nobody expressed pity. And the other fact was that my sister-in-law, my nephews and later also my brother took part in the joy and eagerness to have a new person in our family. Now she is very happy with her grandson and the progression she experienced is enormous.

In the meantime, during these months I have realised that we were in part responsible for my mother’s reaction and that of many other parents of gays and lesbians that were similar to my mother’s. It is our own inner homophobia that makes us feel guilty to be who we are, so that we protect and tolerate the denial with which our relatives and friends greet of our sexual orientation and our reality as a couple and a family. The rejection of our reality is one of the things that provoke the most suffering; it is a subtle pain,
We lived together during more than twelve years before we decided to become parents (we have been together for seventeen years now). This led us to many situations in which we have seen and felt that our own families have denied the existence of our relationship, through hiding and silence. Meanwhile, we have been silent and coped with the situation: the problem was ours. Since the moment in which we decided not to remain silent and make our reality public, the problem is no longer ours, but of the others, who have to work to overcome their homophobia.

Since we have a child, we are very much involved in the FLG association and also the platform Son nuestros hijos (“They are our children”), who fight for the registration of children of homosexual couples born through surrogacy. For this reason, we have appeared several times in the media: in the press, radio and television. Still today our parents feel some discomfort when we inform them that we will appear on this or that channel. However, when we have appeared in the media for professional reasons—which has happened in fewer occasions than as homosexual parents—our families have felt proud and have shared it with others, without knowing that we are much more satisfied when we appear publically in order to defend our rights rather than the public airing of our small professional achievements.

One of the supports we have had during the whole process has been our friends. Personally, I like to say (as I believe and feel it) that they are our chosen family. Many gays and lesbians, as well as some heterosexuals that have broken with the established rules, have suffered process of separation from their biological families and have had to find their own support networks. We have received from them their support from the first moment. They have encouraged us and some have felt proud of us by expressing with almost unnoticeable. To an extent that most of the times one is not aware of how accustomed one is to the feeling. In my opinion, it is for many people such an old wound that it is very difficult to heal, as it can even become a part of one’s own personality. We have suffered this from both families.
closeness and affection the admiration that they felt for our courage. From our perspective, it feel like courage at all. I guess it is because we have suffered since we were children to defend ourselves from hostile environments in order to accept our affective-sexual orientation. What we find paradoxical is that nobody has ever congratulated us for this, but they do congratulate us for having a child, which is a very normal thing to do.

One of the moments in which I was moved to see the anonymous support of the people who stand by us was in the second Pride Parade that we attended with our son in Barcelona (the first one was in Denver where Joan was born, five days after his birth). We participate in these events through our association, together with a large number of same-sex parenting families. We were in front, right next to the banner, with our baby carriage and Joan inside: people clapped when we passed by. At that moment, I was aware of how necessary it is to feel the recognition of what we are from other people. With tears in my eyes, I could feel how much we need social recognition and acceptance.

INTERESTING LINKS

Two links where one can find information on surrogacy by gay couples. One is from the US and the other is a platform to which the author belongs.

- *Men Having Babies*
- *Son nuestros hijos*. This is a platform that provides support to same-sex parenting families, who become parents through gestational surrogacy.
The book deals with men and their dreams and passions. It includes twelve biographical stories written by their protagonists, who are willing to explain their hopes and fears. These are men that choose to share what they are feeling. Those who participate in this book are excellent examples to examine and evaluate the current different ways of being a man. Through the different stories, one gets to know the masculine experiences of their authors. Every text explains its own universe and builds a narrative unite which is independent from the rest. In this line, the reading is flexible and depends on the order that the reader wants to follow. The stories seek to present the vital practices, strategies and adaptations developed by these men. In every story one can feel the importance of knowledge based on experience and allows creating a theory based on life. The readers will enjoy the texts but, especially, many male readers will recognise themselves in some of them.


*Birthing a Mother* is the first ethnography to probe the intimate experience of gestational surrogate motherhood. In this beautifully written and insightful book, Elly Teman shows how surrogates and intended mothers carefully negotiate their cooperative endeavour. Drawing on anthropological fieldwork among Jewish Israeli women, interspersed with cross-cultural perspectives of surrogacy in the global context, Teman traces the processes by which surrogates relinquish any maternal claim to the baby even as intended mothers accomplish a complicated transition to motherhood. Teman’s groundbreaking analysis reveals that as surrogates psychologically and emotionally disengage from the foetus they carry, they develop a profound and lasting bond with the intended mother.


What do the surrogates, commissioning couples, program directors, and attending professionals think and feel about surrogacy? How and when are the children told of their birth origins? How do surrogate mother programs select a surrogate? What psychological tests are administered? This book examines the phenomenon of surrogate motherhood in depth, through the unique perspective of a cultural anthropologist, providing us with answers to these and other questions in a richly textured ethnography. Included in the book are actual surrogate and couple evaluation forms completed by clinical psychologists, confidential surrogate mother information sheets, and the legal contract used by one of the programs. To date, thousands of surrogate-assisted births have taken place, but never before have the experiences of the participants and program staff been explored in such detail.


**Elsa Pons**

“I was born in Barcelona in 1980. Bachelor of Fine Arts, I am a member of the art collective Firart. I made more than 20 exhibitions in France, Egypt, Spain and Catalonia. My creation starts from the first trip to North Africa, and the subsequent personal need to create a common thread between my work and my memories. I imagine each painting like a window into the life, the imagination.... as a small travels by memory, where colors, shapes and textures are shortcuts to get there”.

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**Vicent Borràs**

Vincent Borràs is homosexual, has been living with his husband since 1996 and they had a son through gestational surrogacy in 2009. He is a Professor in the Department of Sociology at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Since 2008 Borràs has belonged to the Associació de Famílies de Lesbianes i Gais (FLG), where he is responsible for providing information on gestational surrogacy, among other activities. He is also currently the Vice-President of the association.
FUTURE EVENTS

CONFERENCES


2014 Asia-Pacific Social Science Conference. Seoul, South Korea, 8 - 10 January 2014.


CALL FOR PAPERS

Gender and “The Law”: Limits, Contestations and Beyond. Izmir, Turkey, 4 - 6 June 2014. Deadline: 7 December 2013.


CALLS FOR PROPOSALS


NEW BOOKS


Babies are not simply born—they are made through cultural and social practices. Based on rich empirical work, this book examines the everyday experiences that mark pregnancy in the US today, such as reading pregnancy advice books, showing ultrasound “baby pictures” to friends and co-workers, and decorating the nursery in anticipation of the new arrival. These ordinary practices of pregnancy, the author argues, are significant and revealing creative activities that produce babies. They are the activities through which babies are made important and meaningful in the lives of the women and men awaiting the child’s birth. This book brings into focus a topic that has been overlooked in the scholarship on reproduction and will be of interest to professionals and expectant parents alike.

Throughout history, children have been perceived as angelic beings, mini adults, heirs of sin, priceless beings, passive, untouchable jewels, until they were considered social individuals with full rights, a condition established in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1989. The author presents an analysis of historic, social and cultural processes which are the basis of social representation of childhood. The book starts with the Middle Ages, goes through the 16th Century and reaches the religious reformation during the Baroque period and later talks about the Enlightenment, when two philosophers like John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau play an important role in the change of the adults’ mindset with regards to children and childhood. Later on, it deals with the problem of poor children in general and, more especially, the serious situation of girls. It also tackles the 19th and 20th Century, when children change from workers to students and the great importance of feminisms in the new definition of family and the conception of kids. Finally, Vilador considers the current situation of childhood in the 21st Century: the problems, fears and anxieties that generate in adults, the relationship with the current family and the inter-relationship with new technologies.