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A secret and a myth in the child's origin: assisted reproduction versus adoption

Explaining the “origin’s history” to the child

A complex issue of the in vitro fertilization with gametes donation is how to explain the source of the child conception to the son/daughter.

In vitro fertilization with gametes donation destabilizes one of the pillars of the identity of the child in kinship concepts of the Western culture. The identity of the child, as understood in the kinship culture is related to the biological origins, flesh and blood, in addition to the territorial origins. Telling stories of the origins of child in an international adoption process, the most common these last years in Spain, are explained and, unlike in assisted reproduction, generate a mythical narrative in relation to place of origin. There is a trip to another country, and meeting a child, which is "socially naked," stripped of social relations and supported by the structure of children's homes or orphanages, as noted by the anthropologist Signe Howell. As in the adoption process, the child's origin story is based on an imagery focused on a place, the land, the country of origin, and a mythical story, in the assisted reproduction there is no imaginary -yet- to explain the origins to the son or daughter.



equilibrium. cement 1971 – bronze 1999

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Adoptive parents are presented - and perceived- as heroes after a trip, welcome and reception at the airport. Disseminate photographs of the child, taken between the family and friends via e-mail, and produce relatively large stories on the first link with the child and the trip home. Instead, parents receiving gametes keep a profound silence on the origins of their daughter or son with family and friends and do not know how they deal with the secret.

In vitro fertilization with reception of gametes has thus destabilized one of the pillars of identity, the knowledge of the biological origins that prior to the assisted reproduction it was taken for granted. Who is my genetic father? Who is my genetic mother? These are questions that young people born with this and other reproductive techniques can ask themselves one day, if they have been revealed their origins. In fact, this is already happening with the children adopted from other countries. It is expected that many children, teens, young people and adults, will want to know their biological parents and undertake with their adoptive parents or by themselves, a journey to rediscover the place of mythical origins, and maybe with their native families as well. In contrast, children born through in vitro fertilization with donation, today, the Spanish Law on Assisted Reproduction protects anonymity -one fact already changed in some European assisted reproduction laws- and does not reveal the person who donates nor establish any relationship between donors and recipients, or between donors and products of that donation, with the exception that a genetic disease is manifested.

The anonymity of the person who donates gives parents and social environment peace of mind. Assisted reproduction law guarantees anonymity, but bases a secret about the origins of a child conceived with the donation. Knowledge of the identity of the donor does not determine affiliation, because the affiliation is determined by birth. Currently the donation of gametes is banned in several countries, including Austria, Norway, Sweden, Italy and Germany, which prohibit egg donation. Bioethics committees now discuss the child's right to know their origins in gamete donation as part of their biological identity.

About the disclosure of the origins to the child conceived with IVF two questions are raised: 1) explain the origins of in vitro fertilization, 2) explain that the origin comes from the donation of gametes. Professionals in the world of the applied psychology recommend explaining "the truth" about the origins of the child in all cases, including the donation.

A psychologist explained to me in an interview:

When I've been on forums discussing with doctors ... Some physicians believe that these kids will have it very difficult ... because others understand the issue ... to all forums on whether we do have to say or not the child, I always recommend telling the child. She/He will live forever with this information. When you go to doctor and from an early age, ask for family history. Why have to hide the truth of something that has been highly sought after? On the other hand, at some point they will know. When they grow up the topic of genetics will have evolved ... or they are told the truth or these children will be confused.

What doctors say is that it is not necessary, that there are many adopted children who have never known ... While the information is not necessary, it is not necessary ... But soon early DNA tests will be needed ... When making a DNA test, will know soon ... as we move forward now ... Many children have doubts about their identity and think if they are their parents' children or have been found ... or adopted ... there is more and more information on assisted reproduction and adoption now. We are recommending that it should be explained. What psychological impact will have on the child if she/he knows that her/his father is lying? The child can know at any point ... "(original quote in Catalan).

Before assisted reproduction, the solution to infertility was the adoption. Many children did not know they were adopted. With international adoptions, the situation has changed, and origins of the child are always on the first place in the construction of their identity. The phenotypic characteristics cannot be hidden and the child does not go unnoticed, so that adoptive parents are doing work on the identity of the child in their social environment and society. Instead, the child conceived with IVF and donation has split some of their genetic identity which will not know, and will not produce relationships.

Fears around gamete donation

Fears around the disclosure of receiving gametes are related to the social question about the identity of the child and the child's own questioning about their actual genetic identity, as seen in the explanations of the women interviewed.

Anna, an informant who was pregnant with ICSI and own gamete, talked about explaining to her daughter the in vitro fertilization:

I do not know if I'll never say it... I do not know if I will have this need ... My husband, one of the reasons why he does not want to say it, is that my father ... at the beach where we spend the summer there is a girl who he calls her "test tube baby", she was born many years ago, and then my husband says, "your father will tell me that we have a 'test tube baby' ... in cases of trigeminal, maybe you have to explain it ... If it had been a boy (she is pregnant with a girl), I would have to say it when he had grown up, because maybe he'd have more fertility problems. I would have explained it to him because of this reason but not for anything else... Maybe they can feel more artificial, less loved or more overprotected ... (Original quote in Catalan).



Ana did not see the need to disclose the origins of her daughter, she was afraid she would be called as the "test tube baby" for this difference. Only if it had been a boy she would have explained it, because through the technique of ICSI the male infertility can be transmitted, caused by low concentration or sperm motility. Women who had used IVF with gametes themselves saw no need to explain the origins of the child.

Angels who were treated in vitro fertilization with donor sperm and eggs, said:

I believe that the donation does not have to be explained to the children ... An adoption itself, yes, but the donation ... maybe when they grow up (reflection). I don't know. If it is explained, the psychological problems start, wanting to look for the parents (genetic) ... The child is entitled to know who her/his father is ... but she/he will be shared ... I don't know ... It would be necessary to assess each situation ..

Another informant spoke about the difficulties of explaining the origins of the child in relation to the adoption and the genetic relationship with a sibling who would be hidden:

I have had three brothers ... I was sad to think that he has a sibling and he will not meet him ... And I thought ... Will I have to explain it one day? I cannot imagine explaining to my son, who is the biological son of ours, but he is not a son ... I cannot imagine it ... I don't know ... I'll have a photo album of my son, and there will pictures of the country where we went to look for him ... his pictures. There will be no photos in a hospital bed as most of the children ... My son will have some pictures of a country, a plane ... not with a grandparent in the hospital ... I don't see the problem ... We went to look for him to another country. The donation does not have an easy and simple way to be explained...

Carme: Why?

Sus: Because it is not an easy thing to understand. For example, my mother. My father never asked, but he always listen ... My mother asks, and understands nothing. It is so difficult to understand for an older person, not just my mother ... it's all very scientific, I don't see it easy to be explained ... (Original quote in Catalan).

Josep, the husband of one informant explained:

What will I tell my child? I came to a very simple conclusion. That is, in ten years ... many things can happen ... In fifteen years, maybe in eighteen years, when he will be no longer a teenager or a mature teenager who can understand the whole movie ... I'm not doing something wrong ... At least, that is my basis. (Original quote in Catalan).

Explain to children that gametes from donation have been used to conceive them, is a process, as raised by Josep and by community psychologists, according to what society will accept. To Sus, it seems easy to explain the adoption and the history of the origins, but is not easy to explain to a child "is the biological child, but not a child". In kinship conceptions the genetic unit image is deeply rooted in the flesh and blood. This image bases the origins of the child and its continuity into the future as a descending genealogy, while connecting with the past. It is difficult to explain the genetic break when there are narratives that explain the history of the origins, and it is from this perspective that the reception of gametes challenges the foundations of kinship by genetic link. The same informant said:

What happens is hidden. It will explode one day... Then, the other thing is it is never spoken about what should be done, if you have to say or do not have to say when a child is born after IVF, donation ... Nobody wants to talk about it ... I have not found anyone who wants to talk. What people do, is that once you have it solved, you forget it. They don't think anymore, but Biel is born by egg donation, and I know I have to explain it to him, because his blood type that does not correspond to ours and this can someday come alight. We have to explain it. Imagine that one day, he has a genetic disease and it comes out. He would not forgive us, we would have cheated him ... We could have problems ... I don't like the secrets ... I think you have to explain it ... (Original quote in Catalan).



intercepted landscape. pastel on card. 65 x 50 cm. 1996

Explaining the "biological truth" to the child is seen as necessary due to advances in genetics. If parents do not reveal the biological truth, one day by surprise, the child can get to know it through other ways. Pablo y Lucía had decided to tell the story of their twins conceived with semen donation. There is a fear on the changes in the law to protect the anonymity of the donor and, on the other hand, when there is a secret in the family and someone knows, there is always the risk that it could be revealed. Lucia went on to explain their reasons:

We have friends who know that we have done it through assisted reproduction, but do not get into the detail to explain whether our children were conceived by donation... And if I do not explain it and my mother or my aunt does it ... it would be worse.

Pablo spoke about his fear of the rejection that may feel their children:

Imagine they are eighteen years and they know ... and the two of them begin to refuse me ... they would kill me ... I mean ... because if you are eighteen years and I say I am not their father ... At the end, what is his genetic part? Who is the father? For an inherited sickness, they will end up knowing it ... no ... then the father needs to be discovered ... They force you ... Imagine the kid finds out because the doctor says it ...

Lucía: initially we took the decision to say it.... The honest thing was to say the truth ... but you don't go to the doctors explaining his story It has happened to us to go to oculist with both of them As I have problems with my sight, maybe they have the same problem ... I was told the boy had big eyes ... the doctor said, 'That must from the family' and I said: 'Yes, maybe..... I do not know' As I do not have big eyes....

Pablo: In five years from now, if you conduct another research, we'll say, look, yes! We have had courage to say it ... or not ...

A couple of informants, Carles and Roser, who had a child conceived with egg donation said:

Carles: And Marina, we'll find the best time ... the best way to explain it ... It's about her knowing it ... slowly ... I think that when Marina grows up it will be a very normal thing ... (Original quote in Catalan) .

Roser: Imagine she finds out that she do not have the same DNA as their parents.

Explaining the history of the origins of the children is difficult. There are different models to make possible narratives. The construction of the secret origins of the child born through IVF is done, but first the secret needs to be revealed. Most of the interviewees saw no need to explain the origins of the child in vitro fertilization if they had not used the donation of gametes. When the donation was used, as we have seen, appeared a number of fears regarding the identity of the child: fear that the child is singled out as different, fear that if one day the child knows the identity of the donor, the child can feel torn. One informant said that the donation was not easy to explain, not to their children or to their relatives. Also, parents are afraid of rejection of the child, if one day he meets "the biological truth." But there were parents who were willing to reveal the secret.



about the road 5. graphite and pastel on card. 1984

If couples receiving gametes decide one day to explain to their children "the truth", is due to fears that one day the child can discover the genetic truth because of a disease. Advances in genetic medicine will force in the near future, to explain the "truth" of the origins of their children. As Pablo explains, "They force you ... Imagine the kid learns because the doctor says it." The genetic history would show that the DNA does not match with the father or the mother one, and this could be seen as a deception by the son/daughter, about some untrue genetic parenthood.

The other problem is that if some relatives are informed and there is no absolute certainty that when people know a secret, this may remain so. From an ethical perspective, revealing the fact of gametes reception implies a relationship of honest communication with the child, otherwise, there is the risk of accidental disclosure, made by a doctor or a family member, which would have a strong emotional impact on the child, with the consequent loss of confidence.

Another fear is about the possibility in a near future, of a change in the law on donor anonymity and authorize the children to know their identity. Currently, the adoption law allows adoptees to know, from the age of eighteen years, data on their biological origins.



freudian landscape. cement. 1978

Towards the knowledge of the origins as a right to know the genetic identity.

The tendency of modern legislation is to protect the rights of children to know their genetic father or mother. In England, in 2005 broke the law of donor anonymity in assisted reproduction. When the children of gamete recipients reach the adulthood age, they have the right to know their genetic parents.

The international agreements of the Convention on the Child Rights of the United Nations, proclaims "the right, to the extent of the possible, to know the parents and to be cared by them." This principle of the Rights of the Child has been applied to the Law of Adoption. According to lawyers, undo the anonymity of the genetic parents in the adoption law, can lead to a undo the anonymity of sperm and egg donors, that would change the whole picture of current social donation and secrecy that surrounds it. In the UK, Sweden and in some North American states, it is no secret.



Landscape in explosion. oil. 130 x 100 cm. 1993

REFLEXIONEMOS

Currently, the individual's right to know their genetic origins as an important part of the definition of their identity is posed, and, on the other hand, discoveries in genetics and scientific advances may make it necessary to reveal anonymity because a genetic disease, at some point,. In Spain, the fear to undo the anonymity is that if the donor identity is unveiled, donors disappear, as is happening in England. The donation can be hidden because it does not exist, in the child's phenotype, important differences from the parents, since donors are selected based on the phenotypic characteristics of parents, to avoid some very obvious differences. The interest of the couple that goes to assisted reproduction is to behave "as if" it had all happened within a biological "normality". With the reception of gametes, the genetic affiliation is hidden, "the genetic truth," under the Assisted Reproduction Act 1989, requiring anonymity in the donation. In this situation, the parent is the husband or partner of the woman who gives birth to the child, *mater est semper certa*, but the father is who is supposed to breed, by the virtue of marriage or relationship with the mother. This hides the donation and the child's biological origins, so that the multiparental is split by a secret favored by the law. One respondent highlighted this fact when he said that the child may have a brother who would never know.

International adoption has a very socially acceptable cultural image. It is understood that adopting a child is to make a work of altruism. People often say "this kid won the lottery" and altruism is usually a common argument to justify the adoption. However, assisted reproduction with donor is not accepted socially, and in representations of people who are not involved, appears as "a strange thing," a "child that is not a self child," or "just a half child". Around the donation there is secrecy because it challenges the conventional representations of the family, in the conception of the child has involved a third anonymous person. The society does not have a formula to explain the origins of the child born by IVF, especially in cases of egg and sperm donation.

Couples want a child from their own flesh and blood, a child who is "self", this is reinforced by the weight of biology in kinship. The ideology of kinship is based on two parents, as produced in "natural facts" or the "laws of nature." These laws of nature have a principle of "biological truth" which is contained in the genetic relationship, as revealed the American anthropologist David M. Schneider, and as it appears clear from the points of view of those involved in assisted reproduction that have participated in the investigation. The assumed hegemonic procreation model is the heterosexual couple. In this model, the marriage, sexuality, procreation and parenthood matches, and these facts place the child in the continuity of a lineage. From this model, what is "natural" is "true" is derived. Belonging to the family genealogy provides identity, an identity outside this biological truth, must be built through the body and speech.

The story of the origins of the child is yet to be build and runs away from this ideal model, and also from the representations of adoption and its myths. In the future it will be interesting to see what narratives gamete receptors parents construct on the "origins of the child" to tell the story. I think the pictures of the eggs and sperm in the lab and pictures of fertilization as well as fetal ultrasound images may have a role in explaining the origins of the child, and can help to unlock the secret, but there is still quite taboo to discuss the desirability of explaining the origin. However, at initiative of some fertility center, talking about how to explain the origins of the child conceived with IVF it is started.



landscape in birth. pastel on card. 65 x 50 cm. 1996

...FURTHER VIEWING

- **Maybe Baby** USA, dir. Ben Elton. A biographical comedy about the personal experience of its director with IVF.
- **El niño de Marte** (2007), dir. Menno Meyjes, USA. It's about a writer who after the death of his wife adopted a six years old child.



...FURTHER READING

- Cyrulnik, Boris (2005) *Bajo el signo del vínculo*. Barcelona, Gedisa.
- Fitó, Carme (2010), *Identidad, cuerpo y parentesco. Etnografía sobre la experiencia de la infertilidad y la reproducción asistida en Cataluña*. Barcelona, Bellaterra.
- Veiga, Anna, (2011) *El miracle de la vida*, Barcelona, La Magrana.
- Modell, S. Judith (2002) *A Sealed and Secret Kinship. The Culture of Policies and Practices in American Adoption*. Berghahn Books, United States.
- Marre, Diana, (2005), *La adopción y el acogimiento*. Barcelona, Universitat de Barcelona.

LINKS

- ["Mujeres, no pospongáis tanto: ¡concebid antes!"](#)



- [El Instituto Madrileño de Fertilidad ayuda a explicar la reproducción asistida a los hijos](#)



- [DIEZ AÑOS DE CAMBIOS EN EL MUNDO, EN LA GEOGRAFÍA Y EN LAS CIENCIAS SOCIALES, 1999-2008](#)



- [SOCIEDAD ESPAÑOLA DE FERTILIDAD \(SEF\)](#)

RECENT EVENTS

[6th International Conference on Child and Adolescent Psychopathology](#). Roehampton University, London. 11th-12th July 2011.

The congress was of interest to those who are doing research with young people and to those working within child and adolescent mental health, education, social work and youth justice systems.

Natalia Barcons presented the paper "Social relationships in children from intercountry adoption".

FUTURE EVENTS

- [Monitoring parents: science, evidence, experts and the new parenting culture. Centre for Parenting Culture Studies \(CPCS\)](#), 13-14 September 2011, University of Kent.
- [La Encrucijada de los Acogimientos y las Adopciones en España: Las Adopciones en el Punto de Mira. ¿Una nueva etapa?](#), 1st October 2011, Asturias.
- XX Congreso Nacional de Pediatría Social: [Problemas emergentes en Pediatría Social](#), 6-8 October 2011, Granada.
- [SCCR/SASCI/AAACIG Meeting](#), 22-25 February 2012, Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas, NV.
- [Global Summit on Childhood](#), 28-31 March 2012, Washington, DC
- [International Conference on Children and Youth in a Changing World](#). 26-30 November 2012, KIIT University, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATIONS

[Bibiana Ulanosky](#)

was trained as an architect at the School of Architecture and Urbanism, Buenos Aires, and in parallel as a sculptor in the study of Leo Vinci, in the same city. Currently, and since 1976, she lives in Madrid where she attended drawing studies of the Circle of Fine Arts, and also attended the Contemporary Art Workshops offered by Albert Rafols Casamada, Palazuelo and Antonio Saura.

"The creative work from the internal drives is always positive for a better understanding of the world around us, it has helped me, I hope it helps you too to contemplate"

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carme Fitó

is anthropologist, member of (GEFP) Study Group on Family and Kinship (UB) and AFIN (UAB). She trained as a painter and sculptor at the Massana School of Barcelona, where she got the title of graduate in painting. During her youth she devoted herself to painting and sculpture. She studied art history and, during her recovery from a serious car accident, she studied social anthropology, an area in which she obtained her doctorate from the University of Barcelona.

Currently, she is conducting research in two different subject areas: the relationship built through assisted reproduction, and domestication of animals. In this last area, she works around animal adoption and their inclusion in the family as a form of kinship. She has recently published a book on infertility and assisted reproduction, identity, body and kinship "Ethnography on the experience of infertility and assisted reproduction in Catalonia", based on her doctoral thesis research. She has also published several articles on assisted reproduction and protection and domestication of animals.

AFIN'S NEXT INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS

5th International Congress AFIN

The Triad in Adoption and Foster Care: the place of the biological family

25th and 26th November, 2011

Barcelona, Auditorio Residencia de Investigadores
(C/Hospital, 64)