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Editorial

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Parenthood: norms and experiences

Editorial

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The desire to have children is widespread and, for many people, its satisfaction is one of the characteristics of leading a good and fulfilling life. At the same time, normative aspects and social norms mediate the formation of such a desire and the experience of parenthood. For instance, certain conceptions of family making, such as the traditional heterosexual family bound by genetic ties, are considered more socially acceptable and more desirable than other forms of family formation. Despite this, social and biological factors such as age, marital status, physical and cognitive capacities, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and ethnicity play a role in establishing whether individuals are able to live up to presumed parenthood ideals. That such ideals are socially upheld and encouraged does not make them morally good by definition (MacKinnon, 1987). Rather, these beliefs, along with the material conditions that sustain them, should be critically examined and questioned.

The articles that are part of this special issue of the *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies (DiGeSt)* contribute to such a critical reflection. They set out to examine social norms and moral values surrounding the desire to have children and parenting practices and experiences. Each article has been carefully scrutinised by both of us, the guest editors, and has been assigned to two independent reviewers for blind review. Only articles that have been judged to be of excellent quality and to fall within the scope of the special issue have been included. Our special issue, titled *Normative Discourses and Lived Meanings of Parenting*, includes seven papers from scholars working in philosophy, bioethics, social sciences and disabilities studies. The result is a combination of conceptual and empirical research, and a visual paper. This combination of perspectives and methods undergirds our belief that empirical work is an important part of discussing concrete moral issues, without denying that theoretical ethics should put the factual ‘in its proper place’ (Leget, et al., 2009). Reflections on the normative standing of a certain practice cannot be derived from empirical observations alone. In turn, empirical research is particularly valuable in unveiling how normative assumptions play out in social and cultural practices, and how the latter may conceal morally questionable assumptions (Leget, et al., 2009).

In discussing the topic of this special issue, we were reminded of Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift’s (2006) article on the uniqueness of the parent-child relationship and on how it brings about highly valuable and non-replaceable goods to adults’ lives. Our work focuses on normative aspects of assisted reproductive technologies and of the desire to have genetically related children (Cavaliere, 2018; 2020a; Cavaliere & Palacios-González, 2018; Segers, et al., 2019). We are both interested in devising justifications for satisfying people’s desire to have genetically related children, whilst being mindful of the role of social norms in shaping such a desire and of the potentially oppressive nature of these norms (Cavaliere 2020b; Segers & Pennings, 2020; Segers, 2021).

Importantly, if one accepts that the desire to parent and the parent-child relationship uniquely contributes to a valuable life, it should not be ignored that there are various ways to achieve all this. New technologies for assisted reproduction are one of the ways to fulfil people’s desire to parent and to enable the formation of such a relationship. This is a fast-developing field: since the first IVF-baby was born now more than forty years ago, we have witnessed the development of a plethora of reproductive technologies and practices, which enable the satisfaction of people’s desire to have children. For instance, mitochondrial replacement techniques, egg freezing and surrogacy are all techniques and practices that give to single women, men and couples a chance at fulfilling their parenthood projects, one that was hitherto out of (technological) reach. In the future, the production of gametes from stem cells might further expand reproductive options for postmenopausal and premenarche women, same-sex couples, transgenders, and possibly facilitate solo-reproduction and ‘multiplex parenting’ (Palacios-González, et al., 2014; Segers, et al., 2017a; Segers, et al., 2017b; Segers, et al., 2017c).

In this special issue, **Hane Maung**’s paper titled “Parenthood and the Concept of the Biological Tie” raises attention for a more ‘low tech’ pathway towards parenthood: adoption. This practice ‘makes parents’ in a different way from assisted reproductive

technologies and it is too often regarded as a second best in what the author considers a ‘too narrowly genocentric’ normative discourse on parenthood. Maung invites us to consider that genetic information is not unique in affecting children’s development and that other biological ties can form between parents and their (adopted) children. We concur with Maung and note that preconceptions about ‘ideal parenthood’ may devalue family projects that do not meet social norms and expectations about what it means to be a parent. Echoing some of these concerns on social norms and moral theorising in the field of reproductive ethics, **Michiel De Proost**, in his paper “Integrating Intersectionality into Autonomy: Reflections on Feminist Bioethics and Egg Freezing”, employs the example of ‘social’ egg freezing to flesh out the importance of going beyond principlist defences of autonomy. De Proost also contends that a normative discourse on the value of assisted reproductive technologies and parenthood should consider feminist critiques of these technologies as well as the importance of intersectional thinking on these issues.

The emphasis of discourses on assisted reproductive technologies, especially in the case of surrogacy, has often been on women and their experiences. The article by **Christina Weis and Wendy Norton**, titled: “‘My Emotions on the Backseat’. Heterosexually Partnered Men’s Experiences of Becoming Fathers through Surrogacy”, aims to fill this gap and bring to the fore men’s construction of their identity as fathers and parenting expectations. Drawing on the results of their interviews with men involved in the surrogacy process, the authors investigate their transition to fatherhood and the relationships that emerge therein. Similarly concerned with the transition to parenthood is **Mavis Machirori**’s paper “Constructs and Contradictions of Mothering Identities as Experienced by New Mothers in the Postnatal Period in a Contemporary Urban Setting”, which explores these issues in a series of interviews conducted in London. Machirori’s paper, like many others in this special issue, brings to the fore tensions between societal norms and lived experience, and between people’s desire to parent and parenthood ‘on the ground’. Likewise, the article by **Jentel Van Havermaet, Elisabeth De Schauwer and Geert Van Hove**, titled “Unseen? A qualitative study on how mothers and fathers living with a visual impairment experience parenthood”, is a valuable and unique contribution that captures the personal and multi-layered perspectives of parents with a visual impairment and how they deal with views on ‘ideal parenting’.

The paper by **Jenny Krutzinna**, “Breaking the Cycle: Solidarity with Care-Leaver Mothers”, is also in line both with other papers in the special issue and with our commitment as editors to address questions concerning both moral values and social norms pertaining to parenting. Krutzinna argues for the need for state-sponsored efforts to break the cycle and thus enabling care-experienced women to *be parents* rather than just *becoming parents*.

The paper that closes our special issue is “A Visitor in Your House? Letters About Non/Normative Family Lives from Sisters Becoming Mothers” by **Marieke Vandecasteele, Ted Onk, Elisabeth De Schauwer and Geert Van Hove**. This paper moves away from a standard format of academic writing to explore ‘entangled motherhood’, what the authors define as ‘the entanglement of mother-sister-daughter roles and the intergenerational entanglement of the present, past, and future in the context of encounters with difference and care’. These themes are explored within an epistolary exchange between Vandecasteele and Onk, who reflect on their lived experiences of motherhood. The unique presentation of this visual essay allows the reader to come close to the intimate exchange between two of the authors.

This and other papers in this special issue compelled us to go beyond the comfort zone provided by our (shared) academic background in moral and political philosophy. We are very grateful that the submissions we have received featured a combination of normative and empirical work, one that we consider essential to reflect on these issues. Before we draw our editorial to a close, we wish to thank the authors, the reviewers and the general editors at *DiGeSt* for making the publication of this issue possible. Most of the work that has led to the publication of this special issue has been carried out during the very worst months of the

Covid-19 pandemic, which have taken an immense toll on women, parents, children, families and familial relationships. Acknowledging that support for parents and especially for women in the home and at work is still lacking and that the pandemic has once again brought to the fore gender, racial and other kinds of disparities, seems to us very important. There is still a lot of work to do to enable people to led flourishing lives, with or without children.

Declaration

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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