

[Slide 1 – Title]

This presentation is based on my PhD research, which analyses surrogacy practices and discourses among Israeli gay men.

I will discuss today how gay men who become fathers through surrogacy negotiate their family structures and ways of living vis-a-vis existing models of the normative family. I will show how within surrogacy discourses, gay men challenge these norms and re-construct them, simultaneously subverting and revalidating these models.

Through this example, I wish to demonstrate the plasticity and fluidity of norms in general; and family norms particularly. At the same time I would like to maintain the oppressive, subjugating nature of normative ideas.

[Slide 2 – Surrogacy in Israel]

Israel legislated the “Embryo Carrying Agreements Act” in 1996, thus becoming the first state to legislate commercial surrogacy. This Act limits the usage of surrogacy to Israeli heterosexual couples.

Single parents, same-sex couples and others who do not qualify as commissioning parents can do so abroad. When commissioning surrogacy Internationally, the fathers will need to prove genetic connectedness of one of them to the child, upon their return to Israel. This is done via DNA testing. The non-genetic parent (if he/she exists) is able to later become a legally recognized parent through a second-parent adoption process.

The first documented case for international surrogacy performed by Israeli parents was in 2005. The main target countries during the period of 2005 – 2012 were the US and India, and eggs were purchased from women coming from the US, South Africa and Eastern Europe. In these locations the buyers sought after “white eggs”, although in the minority of cases “brown” Indian eggs were purchased (“brown” eggs are much cheaper, and the racialization of gamete commerce is a topic for a whole other discussion)

[Slide 3 – Surrogacy in Israel graph]

As seen in the graph here, this route to parenthood has increased in popularity over the last decade, and according to recent numbers its popularity is still increasing (current estimations are that more than 300 international surrogacy babies were born during 2012).

There are currently no measurement of the percentage of gay parents among these international surrogacy parents, by it is estimated by my informants that gay parents are at least 50% of this population. So it is quite clear that it is a distinctive phenomenon within the gay male population in Israel – it is becoming both more prevalent and more discursively visible.

The question I have posed in my research is why? Why has this route to parenthood become so popular so quickly? And why has it become a focal point to gay political activism, in a way that adoption and co-parenting never achieved within the Israeli gay community?

I would like to claim that normative ideas regarding the “proper” family formation play an important role in the development of this phenomenon.

But before I go on to analyse the father’s narratives, I would like to show you a short clip made by a gay couple, titled “we want a child”.

[Slide 4 – “We want a child”]

[Showing 1 minute from the clip (with subtitles):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwChJIZGxBc>

Liron and Yuval are an Israeli gay couple. They met, fell in love, got married and adopted a dog, and then were ready for their next step in life – having a child.

I would like to point out their linear narrative – each step follows the previous one, drawing on widely established norms of the proper steps to

accomplishing respectable adulthood and family life. Children are both an obvious step and the most desired goal in this narrative.

In the later parts of the video, that we do not have time to see, they tell the story of their surrogacy failures, one miscarriage in the 7th week, and one failed attempt to achieve pregnancy. The clip finishes with a request for financial support for their next surrogacy attempt, since all their life savings were already consumed. So far the couple has been successful in raising 50,000 shekels (roughly £8,000 / above \$13,000).

But why, after so many failures, couples carry on trying specifically this method of surrogacy, and how come this appeal for financial aid receives so much sympathy? As Cohen (2004) claims, sympathy often lies in our ability to imagine ourselves in the shoes of the other, and this imagination is often bound to class, race and the form of socially acceptable desires. This couple is white, affluent, and what they desire is widely accepted in the Jewish Israeli society – a child of their own.

[Slide 5 – Gay men and reproductive choice]

It has been well documented that for same-sex couples the process of becoming parents requires rational thought and decision making. The gay fathers I interviewed described this process as a procedure for weighing the alternatives (adoption, co-parenting and surrogacy) and choosing a way, which they define as “the most appropriate for our needs”. Despite the often depiction of surrogacy as the most suitable way, it is not necessarily the first choice that fathers chose to employ, and many surrogacy narratives are fraught with previous reproductive failures – either due to legislation changes, failed relationships with future mothers or failed medical attempts.

Currently their path to adoption is almost sealed, as most (if not all) countries in the world do not permit adoption for a gay couple, and seldom permit single men to adopt. In Israel gay men could adopt, but they are positioned at the

end of the adoption queue, which means adoption of a young healthy child is not a realistic possibility.

Co-parenting with a lesbian or single heterosexual woman is an option, and the state funds all medical procedures that might be required in this process. However, since the state acknowledges parental status for up to two parents, the existence of two known biological parents means that the partner of the genetic father (and the partner of the genetic mother) will not have any state recognition in their parenthood status.

Within this socio-legal framework, surrogacy is seen as the most achievable choice, depending upon financial means and certain know-how. The parent's desire, the economic cost of surrogacy and the need to have certain proficiency in legal and medical negotiations have proven a fertile ground for the growth of mediation industry, in which agencies provide services of accompanying parents in their "surrogacy journeys", showing them potential paths and serving as mediators in their negotiations with overseas clinics, agents, lawyers and reproduction workers.

Let us now meet Haim, one of the most successful surrogacy agents in Israel.

[Slide 6 – The most natural thing]

Haim is a gay man who became a surrogacy agent after his first surrogacy child was born. He was the first to enter the market of "gay men's surrogacy" and is still a leading player in this market. Our interview took place in a coffee shop next to his office, and one of the things he was pressed to explain to me, as we started talking, was why people choose to use surrogacy:

"I personally feel that this is the option that. I'm not talking about the process, I am talking about the outcome at the moment. This option is much more natural and much more.. I would say it feels right or more adapted. I don't know what's right or not right. But It's more adapted to family units that exist in the world naturally"

Haim was choosing his words very carefully, as you can see through the hesitation and the repetition of certain ideas. I don't believe he was naive or cynical, but there is certain absurdity by his claim to the "naturalness" or surrogacy outcomes – the naturalness of the resulting family formation, by which he refers to a gay nuclear family.

Haim's choice of using nature as the main signifier for the normativity of the practices that he helps orchestrate is situated against a culture in which gay relationships were deemed "against nature" until recently on the one hand. On the other hand, in this culture the desire to parent is often portrayed as an unstoppable natural desire. In using nature as a main justification source for gay parenthood, the gay family is entered into the domain of protected family formations, alongside heterosexual counterparts. The 'other possibility', that of raising a child together with the birth-mother but not as a loving couple is then articulated as "unnatural" despite the fact that this option would typically require much less medical intervention and commercial practices.

[Slide7 –Biologic connection]

But the possibility of generating a child of one's own, as surrogacy and assisted reproduction in general promise, poses question marks on the parenthood status of both partners. How do you negotiate a situation where you both stress the importance of biologic connection with your child, but maintain the parenthood of the non-biologic father?

For many of the couples I interviewed, this was achieved through having more than one child and maintaining biogenetic sibling relationships. This was accompanied by the idea that for the family to be properly balanced, both fathers should have a child who is biologically theirs. As Moshe says:

"Once you have one [child] who belongs to someone genetically then you need to have a child who is genetically related to the other"

Moshe knows of gay couples who negotiate parent-child relationships which are not based on genetic kinship, but he believes that since his partner will have a genetic child soon, he should also have one to keep the family structure on equal terms.

Couples aim at achieving relatedness balance either through twin pregnancy, where one surrogate carries two embryos, one for each parent; or through parallel pregnancies of two surrogates (which could result in having 2 babies or more at once); or through consecutive surrogacy attempts.

Thus, when embracing the nuclear family models, gay couples adapt it and enhance it, imposing additional normative requirements – you need to have at least two children, they should be divided among the fathers, and often it is also suggested that they should have the same egg-donor as their female progenitor. When social norms are reiterated, they are also reinvented and explicated, in a manner that is both dynamic and rigid.

[Slide 8 – extended family]

The development of the 'Gay nuclear families' is not being carried out in vacuum, and is often negotiated with others – friends, colleagues and extended family. I want to use the following example to return to the importance of biologic connection in gay father's eyes, as a form of relating to their family of origin.

Yuval is describing here three pictures, integrated into one. The first picture shows his grandparents as young parents holding their daughter (Yuval's mother). In the second picture his grandparents are 30 years older, and they hold his sister, their granddaughter. At the last picture they pose the same scene, holding Yuval's daughter between them. The picture is shown in order to display the physical similarity between his mother and his daughter. And through aligning the pictures one after the other the family genealogy is created. His daughter enters the family line, and with her Yuval and his partner Allen become the carriers of this family thread.

This form of bio-genetic family relation helps 'naturalize' the gay couple relationship and introduce it into the family through variety of family displays as pictures, story-telling and searching for similarities between ancestors and offspring. In this respect, these new models for gay kinship draw upon 'generations old' models of blood-kinship, whereas their transgressive manner is hidden and silenced.

This example brings us back to the claim that parenting is a social, cultural practice, which is also embedded within ethnic, national and religious directives. For many Jewish Israelis, becoming a parent is an important milestone in becoming a productive adult and citizen, and a carrier of Jewish identity and their specific genealogy.

Surrogacy, in this respect, promises to gay men not only becoming a father, but rather becoming a procreative unit in the family, a parallel to the normative heterosexual couple, and therefore on par with their surrounding family, friends and society at large.

[Slide 9 – take home message]

My claim is not that surrogacy is a "magical solution" for male gay parenting as it is often depicted in public debates, especially in Israel. In my interviews with fathers we often discussed the abusive and exploitative manner in which surrogates and egg-donors are often treated. Gay fathers who chose surrogacy do so against the backdrop of an oppressive society and state, that enforces and encourages this form of family building through an array of legal possibilities and social expectations, which privilege bio-genetic kinship and exclude gay men from adoption and from 'more than a couple' family structures.

In this respect, the normative family still exists with all its enforcing power, both socially and as a model that is encouraged by state legislation. But this normative family model takes on various shapes and forms, and is always practiced and reinvented through the practices I have described here.

Gay men who commission surrogacy do not do so blindly or by simply following a norm, they reinvent their own norms, yet attach them to certain existing discourses, of the couple-based heterosexual reproductive nuclear family. Therefore the norm is a dynamic concept, which could be reshaped in new forms, but within certain directives and certain cultural preferences. As researchers, I believe it is our task to question the underlying assumptions and unstable the practices as they are, providing new forms of enacting 'the norm', if not doing away with it altogether.