International Journal of Law, Policy and The Family, 2021, 00, 1–6
doi: 10.1093/lawfam/ebab007
Book Review

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***We Are Family: What Really Matters for Parents and Children*, by Golombok Susan, Scribe 2020, 320pp, ISBN 978-1912854370. (In the USA published as *We Are Family: The Modern Transformation of Parents and Children*, Hachette 2020, 320pp, ISBN 978-1541758643)**

In her latest book, *We are Family: What Really Matters for Parents and Children*, Golombok takes us through her 40-year-long research experience in the domain of what she previously called 'modern families'.[1] This book is yet another living proof of the author's outstanding ability to speak cross-discipline, and to substantially contribute to debates ongoing in various settings, including the law. Moreover, her writing style, which combines research findings, statistics, narratives of parents and children who participated in her research and auto-biographical notes, makes the book particularly pleasant to read and appealing also to a general public.

This book is also source of inspiration, especially for young scholars. Although Golombok describes her engagement with new families as accidental, in fact, the very first anecdote shared in the book suggests that it was also her forward-thinking attitude, her commitment to social justice, and her courage to embark on something she felt passionate about, although controversial especially in the 1970s, that eventually made her a leading scholar in the field of family research and developmental psychology. She starts her book reflecting on her very first steps in her career, and tells us that 'it began by chance with a copy of the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, delivered to [her] doorstep in Camden, London in September 1976' (p. 1). This copy contained an article on lesbian mothers who had been separated from their children on the ground that it was against a child's best interests to be raised in a lesbian household. That article included a call for a volunteer to undertake a study on the wellbeing of children in lesbian mother families. Golombok became that volunteer and, as this book demonstrates, that experience was decisive in shaping her future steps and career achievements.

A clear and important question runs through the book: does family structure has an impact on parenting and child development? This question is addressed in relation to a variety of new family forms, each of which is explored in one or more chapters. The structure of the book follows the various steps of Golombok's research engagement with new families, and accordingly the pace at which medical progress, shifts in attitudes and laws made different types of new families increasingly visible

1 S. Golombok, *Modern Families: Parents and Children in New Family Forms* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Chapter 1 is devoted to lesbian mother families, Golombok's first research encounter, as suggested by the above anecdote. Chapters 2–8 explore the lived realities of families created through assisted reproduction, in particular donor conception, surrogacy, single-mothers by choice, gay fathers, and trans parent families. Chapter 9 delves into the experiences of what Golombok calls 'future families'. Compared to the previous ones, this chapter has a larger focus, and encompasses a multiplicity of new ways of forming families, such as egg freezing, uterus transplants, shared biological parenting for lesbian couples, co-parenting arrangements, and single-fathers by choice. What these families share is their recent and only emerging visibility in society, which explains Golombok's initial engagement with their experiences, if compared to those of families explored in previous chapters. Chapter 10 powerfully summarises the findings of four decades of research, and offers some final reflections drawing parallels between the experiences of traditional families, new families and adoptive families.

While confirming—as observed in a previous review[2]—that the book's structure lends itself to repetitive narratives, these repetitions actually play the important role of demonstrating the non-impact of family form on parenting and children's well-being over the entire spectrum of new families. Moreover, the structure is particularly easy-to-follow and intuitive for a legal mind, who is generally used to work and therefore at ease with classifications and typologies. Another aspect to be praised is the combination of older and newer 'modern families'. This element serves to show continuity in many respects. Even if, over a period of 40 years, there has been a huge transformation in attitudes towards, for instance, lesbian mothers, public concern has merely shifted towards other new family forms. Hence, parents who raise children outside of a heterosexual marriage still face significant challenges to be accepted as 'good' parents, able to ensure the realisation of their children's best interests. This is mostly because, in spite of an increasing body of evidence, outmoded assumptions continue, through various ways, to sustain the privilege of the heterosexual marital family to the detriment of new families. Hence, a last aspect of continuity that this book displays is the persisting need to produce evidence against culturally- and, to some extent, legally- ingrained assumptions.

In spite of analysing different types of families separately, some recurring and shared themes emerge throughout the book. One is the child's knowledge about their origins. Travelling through her research on donor conception families, Golombok starts by sharing what she considers 'startling' findings of an early European study: none of the 111 sets of parents who had used donor conception had told their children about their origins by age 6; less than 10 per cent of parents had opted for disclosure by age 12; and, among the British families whom the research team had met again when their children were 18, not one additional set of parents had decided to tell their children they were donor conceived (p. 46). In spite of having positive (sometimes, even more positive) relationships with their children, many parents chose and, albeit to a lesser extent, choose not to disclose the circumstances of conception. Personal stories gathered through interviews shed light on

2 C. Thomas, 'Book Review: We are Family – What really matters for parents and children'. *BioNews* 1071, 9 November 2020.

fear as the reason underlying secrecy surrounding donor insemination: a fear that other people—external to the family—would come to know about their infertility; a fear that grandparents and other relatives would treat their children differently, or less favourably compared to genetically related grandchildren; and, most importantly, a fear that disclosure would upset their children and disrupt their positive relationships (p. 46).

The children involved in this European study had been born in the mid-1980s. By the time Golombok started a new study on donor conception families (in 2000), the use of donated eggs or sperm had become increasingly widespread and, unsurprisingly, parents seemed more inclined to tell children about their origins. Her second study brought to light quite different percentages: 41 per cent of the egg donation parents and 21 per cent of the sperm donation parents had been open with their children about their conception, by the time they were 7. Given these higher rates of disclosure, this study gave Golombok the opportunity to explore how children—who knew about their origins—had been affected. Opposite to the scenarios feared by the parents, children who were told in their pre-school years accepted this information; some were curious, others generally uninterested, but no one was distressed (p. 52).

The longitudinal nature of Golombok's research makes her findings even more compelling. As she explains (p. 51), visiting the same families multiple times, starting when the children are infants, enabled her to analyse the effects of events—e.g. disclosure of donor conception—that happened early in children's life on their later development—e.g. their adjustment in middle childhood and adolescence. When the children were 7 ad 10, the parents had better mental health and more positive relationships with their children in families who had been open about donor conception (p. 52). Children who were first told when they were very young had better relationships with their mothers at age 14 than those who found out later. While acknowledging that each family has its set of circumstances (e.g. religious, ethnic, and cultural background) to consider when making their decision, one of the main conclusions of this study is that early disclosure has long-lasting benefits on children and parents, and their relationships (p. 52).

Another recurring theme is stigmatisation and, more generally, extra-familial challenges. Parenting is challenging for everyone. Yet, stigmatisation adds up to ordinary challenges as a challenge specific to new families with pernicious effects on parents' self-confidence and children's self-esteem and identity. Almost every chapter contains personal accounts of the prejudice and the discrimination (in extreme cases, even hate) faced by parents raising children in a context that is formally different from a heterosexual marriage. Particularly emblematic is the story of Carol and Hilary, who had two children conceived through self-insemination with sperm from a donor, and—in 1998—were victims of a 'campaign of harassment' by their 'homophobic neighbours across the street' and were forced to leave their home and were transferred to a housing association property (pp. 15–16). Even if societal attitudes towards same-sex families and beyond have significantly changed since then, public concerns about children raised in families not conforming to the traditional family model persist. A meaningful account is that offered by Meg and Gail, who had a child, Lottie, conceived using the eggs of Gail and donated sperm, and born to Meg. While feeling supported by their families and close friends, members of their

community had proved judgmental and disapproving. What worried Meg the most was exactly 'other people causing problems for Lottie' by saying inappropriate things about them to their own children, who were then going to repeat these things to Lottie (p. 242). Through these stories, Golombok shows that most difficulties encountered by new families are not intra-familial but rather tend to be external and determined by how they are perceived by the outside world. Therefore, sociocultural factors, more than what happens within families, make a difference for children's wellbeing raised in new families.

The most powerful *trait d'union* among all chapters is their conclusion. Golombok's research cogently demonstrates that who makes a family—i.e. the number of parents, their gender, their gender identity, their sexual orientation and biological (un)relatedness—is less important for children's psychological wellbeing than the quality of family relationships. In her words, 'just because people become parents in non-conventional ways does not make them less capable parents or love their children less' (p. 271). Rather, the contrary: 'those who become parents against the odds become highly involved and committed parents' (p. 271). The children she met are as well-adjusted, happy and emotionally stable as children raised in traditional families—and sometimes even more so. This does not mean that all children born in new families flourish, but rather that they have an equal chance of flourishing because what makes children most likely to thrive are 'warm, supportive, stable families, whatever their structure' (p. 271). That being said, family relationships are not all that matter. However close children feel to their families, the reaction of the outside world—i.e. the support by their wider community and attitudes of the society in which they grow up—plays an important role in determining their well-being.

How can this book be useful to legal scholars and practitioners? At a general level, it inspires reflections on the 'limits' and boundaries of the law, and on its relationship of (mutual) dependence from other disciplines. The book is a concrete manifestation of the practical benefits of social sciences, in this case psychology, to law. The findings collected in the book provide important empirical facts for the legal machinery. Like Golombok tells us (pp. 21–22), she was called as an expert witness in a number of residence cases involving lesbian mothers already in the 1980s. More recently, her research was used as evidence in the US Supreme Court litigation on same-sex marriage in 2015. This is not at all surprising: many of the questions Golombok asks and addresses in the book are indeed questions that, albeit in a different shape and for different purposes, are relevant to legal practice. Judges, in particular, are often called to determine what family arrangement is in the child's best interests and, most fundamentally, what factors have to be taken into consideration to define the best interests of the child involved. This book does not immediately provide *the* answer, also because there is no single answer to these questions. Yet, it provides knowledge that reduces the likelihood of decisions inconsistent with sociocultural realities, and prevents courts—willing to make use of it—from relying on outmoded positions based on unfounded premises.

One of the main contributions Golombok's research brings is therefore to show the untenability of widely held assumptions on new families. Not only the belief that, in lesbian mothers families, children will suffer from the absence of a male figure and will be unsure of whether they were boys or girls, or that the absence of a genetic

link between the child and their parent might jeopardise their relationship, but the more general, basic assumption that a two-parent heterosexual family is the optimal locus for child development. These assumptions navigate not only the public imaginary, but often underlie also the formulation and the application of the law. Legal battles brought by parents deprived of contact or residence rights on the grounds of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity certainly belong to the past, but also to the present. Even if courts today can no longer afford blunt reasoning depicting same-sex or trans parents as unfit to raise a child, the heterosexual matrix continues to quietly exercise a powerful influence on what is considered best for children. Legal frameworks excluding same-sex marriage or reserving adoption and access to specific assisted reproductive to different-sex couples indicate that there is still a long way to go before the traditional family model loses its 'tenacious hold' on the regulation of parent–child relationships.

The book challenges also a range of assumptions concerning more specifically surrogacy. First, the idea that the surrogate forms an emotional bond with the unborn child and will therefore try to keep the baby instead of giving it to the intended parents. Apart from shaping dominant public perceptions of surrogacy, this notion has some resonance in legal provisions regulating the determination of legal parenthood following surrogacy. Most legal frameworks apply the rule *mater semper certa est*, according to which parturition determines legal motherhood, also in case of surrogacy and therefore regardless of the intentions of the parties involved. It follows that, upon birth, the surrogate is the child's legal mother and her consent is necessary for transferring legal parenthood onto the intended parents. The surrogates who took part in Golombok's research shared a different experience: they reported being able to distance themselves from the pregnancy, not seeing the child as their own, and not having second thoughts about giving the child to the intended parents or found it difficult to do so (pp. 109, 119). Moreover, in India, where it is common practice not to allow the surrogate to see the baby after delivery, the few women who had been given the chance to meet the families and the baby were much happier (p. 120).

Through their repeated visits to surrogacy families in the UK, Golombok and her colleagues were also able to look at the relationship between the surrogate and the parents over time. Against the belief that the parents will cut contact with the surrogate once the baby is born, this book offers concrete illustrations of warm, close, genuine and respectful relationships which last in time. In their study, more than 90 per cent of parents remained in touch with the surrogate in the year following birth, and a 'surprising' 60 per cent of families were still in touch when their child was ten (pp. 138–139). Golombok's longitudinal research shows that also children born through surrogacy often maintain contacts and have a positive relationship with the woman who gave birth to them, albeit they do not consider her as their 'real' mothers (p. 140). Of course, these findings have to be read contextually: they mostly refer to the UK, where surrogacy is regulated, there are safeguards and ethical practices in place. In spite of this, they certainly make us see surrogacy in a less conventional light.

To conclude, this book has a great potential to change people's minds about new families and make our attitudes grounded on evidence, as opposed to prejudice

based on a conventional ideology of the family. It has a decisive role to play also in legal practice: it does indeed equip legal practitioners with up-to-date, empirical knowledge thus encouraging them to get rid of outdated and stereotypical notions and to conduct fact-based assessments of the child's best interests, whenever called to make such determinations. By influencing both ordinary and legal minds, Golombok's research has the power to bring practical benefits not only to present, but also to future new families.

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