

The experiences of Greek individuals in families created through gestational surrogacy arrangements: a preliminary study

Papaligoura Z.,¹ Papadatou D.,² Bellali T.³

¹ Department of Psychology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece ² Faculty of Nursing, University of Athens, Greece

³ Department of Nursing, Alexandrio Technological Institute of Thessaloniki, Greece

Abstract

Surrogate motherhood has not been studied in Greece, although gestational non commercial surrogacy is legal since 2005. The aim of this preliminary study was to explore the overall experience of Greek individuals in families created through gestational surrogate arrangements. We were interested to identify how Greeks describe their trajectory through surrogacy and what relationship they develop with the surrogate mother and newborn child. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 women and 1 man (N=8) who had a child conceived through surrogate motherhood, and a qualitative content analysis was performed with data that was collected from participants living in central and northern Greece. Six core themes were identified, each comprising specific sub-themes: a) decision for surrogacy b) perception of surrogate mother, c) a special bond with surrogate through pregnancy, d) contact with the surrogate after birth, e) first encounter with child, and f) disclosure of surrogacy to child. Findings suggest that the decision for surrogacy was perceived as a last resort option to have a child. Seven surrogate mothers were previously unknown to participants who developed a good and nurturing rapport with them. All participants described intense feelings of gratitude for the surrogate, and as "magical" the first moment they met their baby. In all cases but two, contact with the surrogate was discontinued after birth. Most couples openly discussed surrogacy with their child, but were secretive when egg donation was also involved. These preliminary findings help to address the issues regarding surrogacy in Greece.

Objective

The aim of this study was to explore the overall experience of Greek individuals in families created through gestational surrogate arrangements. The research question that guided the study was the following: how do Greeks describe their trajectory through surrogacy and their relationship with the surrogate mother and newborn child?

Materials & Methods

A qualitative design was used and a content analysis was performed with the data, that was collected between 2011-2012 from participants living in central and northern Greece. Ethical approval was obtained by two large Fertility Clinics that treated participants. Participants were approached by professionals of the Fertility Clinics who explained the purpose of the study. All consented, and a semi-structured interview was conducted by one of the researchers. The interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes, were tape recorded, and transcribed. Data was subjected to qualitative content analysis and consensus on identified themes and sub-themes was obtained by three researchers. Through purposeful sampling, 7 women and 1 man (N=8) who had a child conceived through surrogate motherhood, participated in the study. The mean age of participants was 43,8 and children's age ranged from 2 months to 15 years.

Findings

The following 6 themes describing the trajectory through surrogacy were identified, each comprising specific sub-themes.

Theme 1. Decision for surrogacy

Subthemes:

- Rejecting adoption
- The last resort option
- Approving the surrogate

Theme 2. Perception of surrogate mother

Subthemes

- An angel
- A normal person, like us
- A woman motivated by financial and altruistic motives
- A reminder of my inability to procreate

Theme 3. A special bond with the surrogate during pregnancy

Subthemes

- A trusted partnership?
- Ensuring the surrogate's well-being
- A "shared" pregnancy
- Negotiating boundaries

Theme 4. Contact with the surrogate after birth

Subthemes

- Broken contact
- Ongoing communication
- In deep gratitude

Theme 5. First encounters with child

Subthemes

- Whose child is it?
- Love at first sight
- From no feeling to progressive attachment

Theme 6. Disclosure of surrogacy to child

Subthemes

- Open communication
- The secret of egg donation
- In search of answers on what to tell

The present findings shed light into the trajectory of Greek individuals who conceive a child through surrogacy arrangements. The decision for surrogacy follows the rejection of adoption and is often perceived as a last resort option. All but one surrogate mothers were previously unknown to the couple. However, a strong bond was developed between the surrogate and the intended parent during the pregnancy, which was experienced as a shared journey, through which the well-being of the surrogate mother was of paramount importance. Commissioning parents maintained regular contact with the surrogate mother, accompanied her to medical appointments, and were present at childbirth. The majority described as magical the first encounter with their child.

Contrary to previous evidence (MacCallum et al., 2003), most Greek couples discontinued contact with the surrogate mother after the birth of the child with only two mothers maintaining a relationship. All participants expressed feelings of gratitude toward the surrogate, whose motives were not perceived as strictly financial, but also altruistic. These findings are in agreement with previous research (Jadva et al 2003). Child birth through surrogacy was most often disclosed to child and family but egg donation remained a secret. Surrogacy was told as a story to which all children but one, responded by asking only a few questions. Parents of young babies had questions as to when and how to inform their child.

These preliminary findings on surrogacy arrangements in Greece suggest that the process is experienced positively and participants recommend it to other couples.

Background

Very few studies examine the experiences of families created with gestational surrogacy. It has been suggested that the quality of the relationship between the surrogate mother and the commissioning couple is important for all people involved in the surrogacy arrangement. The involvement of the couple during pregnancy and childbirth, as well as the relationship with the surrogate mother after birth, are issues which may create tension between the commissioning couple and the surrogate mother. Research shows that commissioning mothers believe they should be present at childbirth and that the child should be told about the surrogacy. Findings support that some level of contact between the commissioning couple and the surrogate is maintained after the birth of the child (MacCallum et al., 2003). In Greece non commercial gestational surrogacy is legal since 2002. To this day, juridical authorization has been granted in 128 cases (Ravdas, 2012).

Cases / gender	Age	Infertility history	Genetic link	Surrogate mother	Age of child	Gender of child
1 female	37	Hysterectomy	Yes	Previously unknown	Twins 11 years	boys
2 female	49	Unsuccessful IVF	Yes	Known	Twins 3 years	boy & girl
3 female	53	Unsuccessful IVF	Yes	Previously unknown	2 years	boy
4 female	55	Unsuccessful IVF	Yes	Previously unknown	7 years	girl
5 male	38	Single male	Yes	Previously unknown	twins 2 years	girls
6 female	38	Mother with Hodgkin's disease	No	Previously unknown	2 months	girl
7 female	37	First child w/spastic quadriplegia cerebral palsy	Yes	Previously unknown	5 months	boy
8 female	63	Unsuccessful IVF	No	Previously unknown	15 years	boy

References

1. Jadva,V.,Murray,C.,Lycett, E.,MacCallum, F. & Golombok, S. (2003). Surrogacy: the experience of surrogate mothers. *Human Reproduction*, 18,10,2196-2204.
2. MacCallum, F., Lycett, E., Murray, C., Jadva, V. & Golombok, S. (2003). Surrogacy: the experience of commissioning couples. *Human Reproduction*, 18,6,1334-1342
3. Ravdas,P.(2012). Surrogate motherhood: Expectations of the legislator in the ordeal of statistical data. In: Family law in the 21st century from conjunctural to structural changes. Athens, Sakkoulas.

ESHRE 7-10 July 2013