Title: Elective Co-parenting with Someone Already Known versus Someone Met Online: implications for parent and child psychological functioning

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Abstract

Research Question. What are the psychological outcomes for parents and children in elective co-parenting families and do these differ based on whether or not parents met online?

Design. This cross-sectional study provides novel descriptive quantitative data on the wellbeing of parents and children within 23 elective co-parent families, defined as two or more parents deciding to have and raise children together outside of a romantic partnership or conjugal couple relationship. Standardised questionnaires were administered to assess parent and child psychological adjustment. Bayesian independent t-tests were conducted to compare the parent and child outcomes in 13 families who met online via a connection website with 10 families who were co-parenting with someone known to them.

Results. Elective co-parent scores for depression, anxiety, parenting stress, resilience, perceived social support and couple relationship satisfaction were within the normal range. Children's average competencies, behavioural and emotional problem scores were low risk when compared with population norms. Bayes factors suggest no support for the alternative hypothesis that there were differences in parent or child wellbeing between the families who met via connection sites versus those already known.

Conclusions. Parents and children in elective co-parent families are functioning well regardless of how they were formed, but individuals may require tailored professional advice or support for this growing new route to parenthood. Future longitudinal work with larger samples is required to replicate these findings, explore children's perspectives of their families as well as the support needs of co-parents and their children throughout their parenting journey.

Key words: co-parenting, connection website, parent psychological health, child adjustment, social support, couple relationship, stigma

Introduction

Striking out against convention, there has been a growth in individuals deciding to conceive and raise children together outside of a romantic couple relationship, hereafter referred to as elective co-parenting (Jadva et al., 2015). Parents may also describe themselves as pursuing platonic parenting, parenting partnerships, collaborative co-parenting or parental constellations. Together these terms capture families consisting of two or more parents who are intentionally committing to raise a child together outside of the traditional nuclear family model. They are, therefore, distinct from parents raising a child together after divorce or separation, where the term co-parenting is typically invoked. Elective co-parenting as a family structure is also conceptually distinct from co-parenting within a family-systems perspective (McHale & Sirotkin, 2019), which focuses on the processes between parents collaborating in child-rearing, such as division of labour, agreement, and conflict.

Elective co-parenting family arrangements vary in terms of the number, gender identity, sexual orientation, and partner status of parents. Although elective co-parenting has a long history within the LGBTQ+ community (Dempsey, 2010), there has been an expansion in both who and how elective co-parenting is pursued. Specifically, there has been an increase in both the number of heterosexual prospective parents and routes to meet a co-parent outside of existing social networks, for example, online via connection websites (Harper et al., 2017) and through organisations (Segal-Engelchin et al., 2005). Despite a lack of recognition within legal documentation, precluding official national figures of this family types, figures from websites suggest a substantial minority of prospective parents are interested in co-parenting (i.e., in 2024 11% of Pride Angel's 100,489 members are registered as co-parents in 2024) .

Elective Co-Parent Families

Research to date has largely explored the motivations and experiences of LGBTQ+ elective co-parents (e.g., Dempsey, 2010). For example, in a qualitative study of nine families (four families who were friends prior to co-parenting and five families who met via specific meetings or online connections websites), elective co-parenting was driven by the desire for biological descent, to experience pregnancy (for women), to know the child's background, and to provide the child with a mother and a father (Herbrand, 2018a). In the majority of families the child(ren) lived primarily with their biological mothers who were viewed as having an essential parenting role (Herbrand, 2018b), although there were individual differences in how arrangements and parenting roles were experienced. In Israel, the non-governmental institution, The Alternative Parenting Centre, has been facilitating the formation of 'hetero-gay' families between gay men and heterosexual women (Segal-Engelchin et al., 2005). For the single heterosexual mothers, elective co-parenting was described as having practical advantages over the use of a sperm donor, for example, through the provision of financial assistance and sharing the burdens of parenting (Segal-Engelchin et al., 2012). Interviews with five cisgender heterosexual mothers and five cisgender heterosexual fathers from eight co-parent families highlighted that parents choose and manage co-parenting arrangements by simultaneously reproducing and modernising the traditional family unit (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). Elective co-parenting was seen as a plan B and a means through which to achieve or improve the traditional family via nontraditional means. For some this was achieved, with communication facilitating friendship and new parenting arrangements, but for others family life reproduced gender roles.

Studies with families co-parenting after divorce have typically found that parents and children experience a reduction in wellbeing (Lansford, 2009). However, elective co-parent families are not the product of romantic relationship breakdown and conflict, the latter of which largely explains links between divorce and poor child wellbeing (van Dijk et al., 2020). Furthermore, multi-informant studies with other diverse family types, such as those headed by LGBTQ+ parents, single parents by choice, or parents who have used assisted reproductive technologies, have found parents and children to be functioning well and sometimes better than those in 'traditional' family units (Imrie & Golombok, 2020). These findings challenge theoretical and widely-held assumptions of the importance of traditional family structures, as well as parent gender, genetic and gestational connections for child development and flourishing (Golombok, 2105). That said, parents and children in these modern families sometimes face unique challenges that may have a detrimental impact on their adjustment and experiences, such as stigmatisation and bullying in school (Imrie & Golombok, 2020).

Elective Co-Parenting Through Connection Websites

Connection websites have now opened up alternative paths to parenthood (Harper et al., 2017; Ravelingien et al., 2016). A survey of 102 members seeking to become co-parents via one such website, Pride Angel, highlighted that elective co-parenting was not limited to LGBTQ+ individuals and couples, or single heterosexual women, but that heterosexual single men were also actively searching for someone to conceive and raise a child with (Jadva et al., 2015). The desire to have a child who knew both their biological parents was rated the most important driver by members searching for a co-parent. Women were more likely than men to be motivated by their increasing age and being single, whereas men were more likely than women to be

motivated by a desire to pass on their genes. Heterosexual men and women were more likely than lesbian, bisexual and gay men to search for heterosexual co-parents. Many prospective co-parents reported they were hoping to develop a friendship with their co-parent. Women were more likely than men to express a desire for daily contact with their child and for the child to live predominantly with them. However, the sample were prospective parents thus the experiences and adjustment of parents and children living within elective co-parenting families could not be evaluated.

Some have highlighted potential advantages or risks that may be associated with creating a family through connection websites. On one hand, such sites appear to promote autonomy, enable screening of donor/co-parent health and personal characteristics, and potentially reduce the financial and time burden of clinic involvement (Ravelingien et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2022). However, there are concerns that a lack of, or limited, website regulation, may jeopardise parents medical and legal protection (Harper et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2022), for example, due to insufficient screening or counselling, lack of understanding of medical screening or conflicts arising from unclear or changing expectations of parental involvement. Furthermore, in most countries only two parents can be named on a child's birth certificate. Thus, in families with three or more elective co-parents, non-legal co-parents are not recognised by institutions that are important for children, such as those that provide education and healthcare (Bureau & Rist, 2020) which may inhibit the parental role of the non-legal parent(s). Others note that such sites may serve to reinforce heterosexist and genetic norms of valid family building (Ravelingien et al., 2016). In spite of these concerns, there is a dearth of empirical evidence on whether these

concerns manifest and present a particular challenge to parent and child wellbeing (Ravelingien et al., 2016) within elective co-parent families.

The Current Study

The current multi-method study provides novel empirical evidence on the nature of elective co-parenting family arrangements, and the psychological wellbeing of parents and children within these families. This exploratory design adopted a broad and inclusive definition of elective co-parenting, including heterosexual and LGBTQ+ parents who did and did not use a connection website, in order to ascertain the range of families' experiences of this path to parenthood. The study was open to elective co-parent families with children aged 12 and under. Parents self-identified as elective co-parents and had started their journey to parenthood either in the context of existing friendships, mutual social networks, or online, and planned to raise the child outside of a romantic relationship. There was no restriction of the configurations of families in terms of parent numbers, sexual orientations, and genders.

The first aim of the study was to present novel descriptive evidence on the psychosocial adjustment of the parents and children within these diverse elective co-parenting families. The second aim of the study was to compare the experiences and adjustment of families who started their journey to parenthood via meeting online via a connection website versus those who were previously known to each other. Overall, the study aimed to increase understanding of parents and children in elective co-parenting families, and in doing so provide the first empirical data on the psychological outcomes for parents and children within this new and growing family form

Materials & Methods

Sample

Participants were recruited through parenting connection websites and mailing lists (e.g., Pride Angel, Modamily, Pollentree), social media and snowball sampling. Parents were invited to take part in a study exploring co-parenting families to learn more about their experiences of parenthood, parent-child relationships and children's wellbeing. Parents interested in participating were invited to email the research team and they were then provided with detailed information about the project. Parents were eligible to participate if they had a child aged up to 12 years old within a co-parenting arrangement and self-identified as raising their child with involvement of the child's other biological parent. The parents could live in different households and participation did not require all co-parents within a family to take part. The sexual orientation of the parent and whether or not they had a partner was also irrelevant to the inclusion criteria. A total of 23 elective co-parenting families were recruited, which included 41 parents (24 mothers and 17 fathers; *M*age = 40.05 years old, *SD* = 5.22 years old; range 32 – 55 years old) of 27 children (10 boys, 17 girls) with children aged 3 months to 11 years old (*M*age = 3.5 years old, *SD* = 2.56 years old; range 3 months – 11 years old). Families lived in the United Kingdom, North America and Europe. Parents were predominantly well educated with 12.2% completing secondary education, 39% attaining an undergraduate degree and 48.8% a postgraduate degree. Parents' income varied, with 19.5% earning less than £10, 000, 7.3% £10 – 25, 000, 36.6% between £25-50,000, and 24.3% earning over £50,000 (five participants chose not to disclose this). Family arrangements varied in terms of the number, gender identity, sexual orientation, and partner status of parents. Of the 23 families, nine families had two heterosexual parents, four families were made up of one heterosexual and one LGBTQ+ parent, and 10 families had two or more LGBTQ+ parents (e.g., typically lesbian mothers plus gay father). These three different

family formations were similarly likely to pursue elective co-parenting with someone they met online or someone known, Cramer's V = .20, p = .638, and equally distributed across region (United Kingdom, North America and Europe), Cramer's V = .29, p = .444. From these families, 41 parents completed interviews and 36 parents completed standardised questionnaires.

Procedure

Parents were invited to take part in in-depth semi-structured interviews exploring their paths to, and experiences of, parenthood. Standardised questionnaires administered online collected data on the psychological wellbeing of the parents and the child, as well as parents co-parenting alliance, and, for families where at least one of the biological parents was in a romantic relationship, the quality of the couple relationship. Parents were told they did not have to answer all questions in the interview or the questionnaire if they did not want to. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents. The study received ethical approval from the University of Cambridge Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

Measures

Family Formation and Experiences. Parents were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview which explored their route to elective co-parenting, their experiences of conception, pregnancy and disclosure of this to their family, friends and child(ren).

Parental Psychological Wellbeing

Anxiety. Parents rated their symptoms of anxiety on the 20-item Trait Anxiety Inventory (TAI: Spielberger et al., 1983). The TAI has excellent internal consistency, test re-test reliability, and construct validity. Total scores range from 20 – 80, with high scores reflecting greater levels

of trait anxiety, and scores of 44 or greater are commonly used to indicate at-risk levels (Ercan et al., 2015). Reliability of the scale in the current study was good (Cronbach's alpha = .89).

Depression. Parents rated their symptoms of depression on the 10-item Edinburgh Depression Scale (EPDS: Thorpe, 1993). The EPDS has good sensitivity, specificity and predictive validity. Total scores can range from 0 - 30, with higher scores indicating greater levels of depression, with scores of 13 or more considered the cut off for high risk for depression (Cox et al., 1987). Reliability of the scale in the current study was good (Cronbach's alpha = .83).

Parenting Stress. Parents completed the 36-item Parenting Stress Index short-form (Abidin, 1995) to assess their stress associated with parenting. The PSI has clinical utility, excellent internal consistency, and content and construct validity (Holly et al., 2019). Scores can range from 36 to 180, with high scores reflect greater parenting stress. Based on norms, scores of 90 or higher are indicative of clinically significant levels of stress. Reliability of the scale in the current study was excellent (Cronbach's alpha = .93).

Resilience. Parents completed the 6-item Brief Resilience Scale (BRS: Smith et al., 2008) to assess their ability to bounce back or recover from stress. Psychometric properties tested across four samples show the BRS is reliable and produces a unitary construct associated positively with coping and health, and negatively with poor mental health, controlling for optimism and social support. Scores can range from 6 to 30, with higher scores indicating greater ability to bounce back. Reliability of the scale was good (Cronbach's alpha = .86).

Parental Relational Wellbeing

Social support. Parents were invited to complete the 12-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988). Parents are asked to use a 7-point scale to rate how

far they agree with statements about their support from family, friends and a significant other. Mean scale scores of 1-2.9, 3-5, and 5.1-7 are classified as low, moderate, and high support, respectively. Reliability of the scale in the current study was excellent (Cronbach's alpha = .96).

Couple relationship quality. Those in romantic relationships were invited to complete the 28-item Golombok-Rust Inventory of Marital State (Rust et al., 1986). Scores can range from 0 to 84, with scores of 34 or more indicative of marital dissatisfaction. Reliability of the scale in the current study was acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = .77).

Stigma

Exclusion. Parents completed an adapted version of the Perceived Sexual Orientation-Related Stigma and Exclusion questionnaire (Goldberg & Smith, 2014). Parents were asked to indicate using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all true*, to 5 = *very true*) the extent to which each of eight statements relating to exclusion and mistreatment by teachers, school staff and other parents was true for them. Wording of five of the eight items was adapted for co-parenting, for example, "I have felt that my parenting skills were questioned because I am a parent through a co-parenting arrangement". Higher scores indicate greater experiences of stigma. Reliability of the scale in the current study was acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = .71) and in line with the alpha from the development of the measure.

Acceptance and criticism. During the semi-structured interview parents reflected on any experiences of criticism, prejudice or lack of acceptance from others they had experienced due to their family at a local community level or at a national level. These answers were rated on a 3-point scale (0 = *None*, 1 = *Yes – occasional*, 2 = *Yes – frequent*).

Co-parenting

Alliance. Parents completed the 20-item Parenting Alliance Inventory (PAI: Abidin & Brunner, 1995) which assessed co-parenting processes, such as cooperation, communication and mutual respect, using a 5-point scale. Scores ranged from 20 – 100, with higher scores indicating a stronger and more positive parenting alliance. In the validation study, the PAI had good internal consistency, convergent validity and discriminated between married, separated, and divorced parents; mean scores for parents in married families were higher (women *M* = 84, *SD* = 13.1; men *M* = 86, *SD* = 9) than those in divorced and separated families (women *M* = 67.9, *SD* = 17.6; *M* = 70.1, *SD* = 15) (Abidin & Brunner, 1995). Reliability of the scale in the current study was excellent (Cronbach's alpha = .97).

Experiences of co-parenting. During the semi-structured interview parents reflected on their experiences of co-parenting, including the distribution of childcare, the frequency of contact with co-parents, the financial organisation of the family, the quality of the relationship with their co-parent, the level of disagreement with their co-parent and the extent to which their parenting (e.g., rules, discipline) is coordinated.

Child adjustment.

Parents of infants and toddlers (0 – 2 two years old) completed the Brief Infant-Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment (BITSEA: Briggs-Gowan et al., 2004) to provide an assessment of their child's, competencies (Cronbach's alpha = .79) and problems (Cronbach's alpha = .73). In a representative birth cohort, the BITSEA had excellent test-rest reliability, and criterion, discriminative and predictive validity. Reliability of the scale in the current study was acceptable (competencies Cronbach's alpha = .79; problems Cronbach's alpha = .73).

Parents of children aged three years and over completed the widely-used Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ: Goodman, 1997) to assess children's psychological adjustment. The 25-item SDQ has five subscales each with 5 items: conduct problems, hyperactivity/ inattention, emotional problems, peer problems and prosocial behaviour. The four difficulties subscales are summed to create a total difficulties score (possible range of 0 to 40) whereby higher scores reflect greater problems (Cronbach's alpha = .79). Reliability of the total difficulties and prosocial scores in the current study were acceptable and good respectively (Cronbach's alpha = .79; alpha = .86).

Analysis plan

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were first calculated to provide information on family formation, experiences, and parenting and child functioning. Information on family formation and experience is presented at the parent and family-level where appropriate. Descriptive statistics for the parent self-report questionnaires are provided for all parents who completed the questionnaires (N = 36) and compared against questionnaire norms. The score from the parent who spent the most time with the child (or random selection from parents when they reported equal time with the child) was used to report child adjustment. Mean scores on the questionnaire measures were compared to norms to assess the proportion of parents and children scoring within the average range for the different variables assessed.

Bayesian independent t-tests were conducted in JASP (JASP, 2024) to explore whether there were differences between parents in psychological and relational wellbeing, co-parenting and exclusion, or children's behavioural and emotional difficulties, between families who met via

connection websites or not. Default priors (i.e., how plausible the alternative hypothesis is compared to the null before any data collected) were used given the lack of prior evidence on this phenomenon (van Doorn et al., 2021). The group comparisons were conducted using one parent (the same parent for whom the child adjustment rating was taken) from each family (n = 12 connection website; n = 10 existing relationship). Bayes factors provide a quantifiable measure of the evidence in favour of the alternative (BF_{10}) or null hypothesis (BF_{01}) (Wetzels & Wagenmakers, 2012). Interpretation of these scores is judged on the strength of the evidence required to suggest the alternative hypothesis is true, such that the evidence is considered as weak or 'anecdotal' (1 – 3), moderate (3 – 10), strong (10 – 30) or very strong (30 – 100) (Jeffreys, 1961; van Doorn et al., 2021). Bayes factors are particularly useful in the absence of prior evidence around a phenomenon and are also suitable for small sample sizes (Schönbrodt & Wagenmakers, 2018), with low false positive rates with n = 10 per group in over 99% of cases (Stefan et al., 2019).

Results

Elective Co-Parent Family Formation and Experiences

As can be seen in Table 1, co-parents had met between 0 – 10 (mode = 2) coparents prior to pursuing co-parenting with their current co-parent. Just under half (n = 11, 47.8%) had known their coparent for over a year before trying to conceive, with just under a third (n = 7, 30.4%) knowing them for less than 6 months. The majority of co-parents had undergone medical screening (n = 21, 91.3%) and had drawn up a legal co-parenting agreement (n = 17, 73.9%). Table 1 also presents proportions and frequencies relating to the child's conception within the elective co-parent families (majority not in a clinic setting; n = 17, 73.9%), and parents' reports of

whether they have, or plan to, disclose the nature of their co-parenting relationship with others, including their child. The majority of co-parents had discussed disclosure with each other and with family and friends, and planned to tell the child how they met and how they were conceived (*n* = 19, 82.6%).

Parent Psychological and Relational Wellbeing

Table 2 displays the average scores for parent self-reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, parenting stress and resilience. The mean scores for anxiety, depression, parenting stress and resilience were within the normal range of scores. As shown in Table 2, parents' perceived social support was higher than average. Of the 26 parents with a romantic partner, the average relationship satisfaction score indicated high relationship satisfaction.

Stigma

Table 2 shows the average exclusion score was higher than the overall mean scores reported by lesbian parents (*M* = 1.66, *SD* = .48) and gay parents (*M* = 1.75, *SD* = .81) in the study for which the measure was developed (Goldberg & Smith, 2014), although the mean score still suggests low levels of mistreatment and exclusion based on being in an elective co-parenting family. During the interviews, most parents felt elective co-parenting was perceived as acceptable within their local community (*n* = 25 parents, 61.1%) and partially accepted in wider society (*n* = 24 parents, 58.5%). Around half of parents reported experiencing some level of prejudice (*n* = 20, 50%) and criticism (*n* = 16, 40%) towards them in their local community because of their family.

Co-Parenting

The average co-parenting alliance score (Table 2) was in line with average scores for married parents and better than the scores for divorced parents. As illustrated in Table 2, in most

356 families, child care and financial organisation and responsibilities were more likely to be
357 undertaken by biological mothers (*n* = 17 families, 73.9%). There was variability in the frequency
358 fathers saw their child(ren), with the majority having weekly contact (*n* = 14 families, 60.1%).
359 Most parents described relationships with their co-parent that could be classified as harmonious
360 or close (*n* = 28 parents, 68.3%), reported never having had disagreements (*n* = 22 parents,
361 53.7%), and described a range of coordination over parenting (e.g., discipline).

362 ## Child Adjustment

363 Table 2 also includes average scores for the 11 parents who completed the BITSEA
364 regarding their infant/toddler. Only the under 24-month average competence score was just
365 above the cut-off for risk. Eleven parents (i.e., one parent report per family) completed the SDQ
366 for their child. The overall mean total difficulties score was comparable to average population
367 levels. No children received a raised, high or very high score indicative of risk. The average
368 prosocial score was suggestive of slightly lowered scores.

369 ## Comparisons between Families Created via Connection website versus Existing Relationships

370 As illustrated in Table 3, the Bayes factors (BF_{10}) for the Bayesian independent samples t-
371 tests suggest there is weak evidence of a difference in the questionnaire measures between
372 parents or children from elective co-parenting families who met via connection websites versus
373 those who pursued parenting with someone already in their social network (i.e., friend,
374 acquaintance). That is, meeting a co-parent online was not associated with poorer wellbeing,
375 social support, couple relationship quality, or co-parenting alliance, or greater stigma, child
376 difficulties or reduced competences. The Bayes factor robustness checks suggest the lack of

evidence for any differences between the two groups was stable across a wide range of prior distributions suggesting the analysis is robust.

Discussion

This study presents novel data on family formation, parent psychological and relational wellbeing, co-parenting, and child behavioural and emotional adjustment in 23 elective co-parenting families who met initially online or with someone known. Three key findings emerged from this study. First, elective co-parent families are diverse in their structure and formation. Second, compared to families within the general population, on average, elective co-parents report good psychological wellbeing, high social support, low levels of exclusion in their child's childcare/school, and high quality co-parenting alliances, and those in romantic relationships describe high levels of couple satisfaction. Children's competencies, behavioural and emotional problem scores appear in line with population norms and suggest low clinical risk. Where parents are at risk, they appear to be more anxious than depressed, and many describe experiencing discrimination and criticism within their communities. Finally, there were no group differences in parent and child wellbeing or co-parenting alliance between those who pursued elective co-parenting with someone known to them versus someone they met via a connection website. Below we discuss each of these findings further and reflect on study limitations and future directions.

Diverse family structure and formation

Elective co-parenting is not a new phenomenon (Dempsey, 2010), however in recent years there has been a perceived rise in the numbers of heterosexual adults pursuing this family arrangement, and technological shifts have broadened the routes to co-parenthood via

connection websites. In this sample, both prospective LGBQT+ and heterosexual elective co-parents made use of connection websites to find a co-parent suggesting the pathway to parenthood has diversified and it is not the exclusive route of one particular group of parents.

The transition to parenthood involved preparing co-parenting agreements for the majority of families in this study. These documents may be fruitful starting points to facilitate conversations around both every-day parenting decisions as well as other arrangements, and provide parents with peace of mind, although they do not hold weight in court (Cammu, 2021). Furthermore, some multi-parent families in the study were unaware that only two parents were allowed to be legally recognised on their child's birth certificate. Given that the majority of parents in this study conceived their child outside a clinical setting, and only a small number underwent pre-conception counselling, it is possible that some parents are entering these co-parenting arrangements without the relevant legal knowledge regarding their parental rights and responsibilities (e.g., Bureau & Rist, 2020; Harper et al., 2017). The majority of parents in this study did undergo medical screening prior to conception suggesting they did engage with health services at some point in their journey to parenthood. This period might be a potential window to provide information and support to prospective parents pursuing co-parenting arrangements. Future research is required to explore how parents manage changes in arrangements over time as well as breakdowns within elective co-parent family relationships.

Positive Parent, Child and Family Functioning

Parents in this study had, on average, good psychological and relational wellbeing. Parents reported resilience in the face of adversity and low levels of anxiety, depression, and parenting stress. Elective parents also report feeling well supported by significant others in their lives which

may partly explain the good psychological health in this study (Hughes et al., 2020). However, almost a third of parents appeared at risk of clinical levels of anxiety. Future research exploring the drivers of elective co-parents anxiety and potential barriers to support will help clinicians understand if existing interventions and pathways to support need to be tailored.

Interestingly, co-parents who were in a relationship with a romantic partner had average to above-average couple satisfaction scores. Although the co-parenting and marital/romantic relationship is typically made up of the same individuals within a traditional family, this study provides new evidence that elective co-parenting may not negatively impact parents' other relationships, and is consistent with family systems perspectives that these relational units can operate independently (Cox & Paley, 1997). Previous research exploring the motivations of a subsample of 10 heterosexual elective co-parents from this study highlights that for some this route to parenthood was seen as a plan B and a means through which to achieve the traditional family via nontraditional means (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). Given this desire, further research is required to explore if, and how, additional adults joining ~~within~~ the family impacts parental roles, responsibilities and relationships within the family, as well as how new partners navigate step or blended family relationships. As it stands, however, it seems that the co-parenting processes within elective co-parent families were more similar to cohabiting/married parent families than divorced families. Specifically, in this study co-parenting is, on average, higher in cooperation, communication and mutual respect compared with behaviours exhibited in divorced families (Abidin & Brunner, 1995). Thus, it appears that a romantic relationship between co-parents is not essential for effective co-parenting. Some of the heterosexual elective co-parents in the study reflected that their positive co-parenting experiences are instead due to modernising the

traditional family via developing and maintaining friendships and clear communication patterns (Bower-Brown et al., 2023).

Children in this study appeared to be doing well thereby highlighting that raising children outside of a cohabiting and conjugal family unit is not necessarily associated with negative child outcomes (c.f., divorce: Lansford, 2009). These findings provide further evidence that families who challenge the traditional nuclear family model, either in formation or structure, should not be assumed to have a negative impact on child psychological adjustment (Golombok, 2015). These findings also underscore that it is the processes within separated parent families that may serve to compromise parent and child wellbeing rather than the structure itself. Further research is required to explore the factors that are associated with children's psychological adjustment within elective co-parent families. Identifying whether predictors of child developmental outcomes are distinct from, or similar to, those in other family forms will extend theoretical accounts regarding the universality or specificity of family influences on child development and enable the provision of practical support for elective co-parent families. For example, in the present study all parents reported that they plan to tell their child how they met their co-parent and how they were conceived. However, given that the average age of the children in this study was 3 years old, many had not yet done so. Longitudinal research is required to explore whether parents do disclose and whether how and when this occurs impacts children's psychological health (Golombok et al., 2023). Further work is also required to listen to children's perspectives to understand their experiences of their families.

Another potential challenge that elective co-parents and their children may face is prejudice from their community. In this study, parents reported experiencing low levels of

critique and exclusion. This may be because many families, particularly those with two parents, are 'invisible', passing as heteronormative families during daily life (Segal-Engelchin et al., 2005). However, a substantial minority of parents did not feel that elective co-parenting was accepted within their local or national communities, and over half reported experiencing prejudice. Some parents anticipated their child would in the future experience difficulties at school and did not foresee telling school staff about their co-parenting arrangements. Regularly updating successful school campaigns and materials which highlight diverse family forms may be one avenue to help children and families feel more accepted.

Similarities Between Online versus Known Elective Co-Parent Families

Becoming a parent outside of a romantic relationship with a co-parent met via a connection website generally appears to elicit surprise or alarm (Ravelingien et al., 2016) and has attracted media interest (e.g., 2021 UK television show Strangers Making Babies). However, the current study found that, on average, compared to elective co-parents raising their child with someone known to them, families who met via websites had parents and children who were functioning well. This study provides no evidence for reduced wellbeing, support, co-parenting or child adjustment for co-parenting via a website. The decision to enter into co-parenting arrangements were not taken lightly for these parents. Aside from their initial meeting, there was no difference in the pathways to parenthood between these two groups, for example, they had comparable lengths of time between meeting their prospective co-parent for the first time and trying to conceive, and equal numbers drew up co-parenting agreements and underwent medical screening and counselling, suggesting that parents following either route to parenthood take similar amounts of time to discuss their options, plan and consider the practicalities of daily life.

Unlike families who have experienced divorce or relationship breakdown, elective co-parents are intentionally committing to raise a child together outside of the traditional nuclear family model and the current study provides novel empirical evidence that these individuals are functioning well regardless of how they began. The findings also underscore that it is factors such as conflict or poor co-operation within separated parent families that may serve to compromise parent and child wellbeing (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010).

Limitations and Conclusions

The current findings should be viewed in light of the small and voluntary nature of the sample. Given the lack of visibility of this family form, it may be that only well-functioning families were willing to participate. Parents from a range of countries took part in the study and so it may be that different contextual factors impacted parent and child wellbeing that could not be explored in the present study. Furthermore, there is no sampling frame to draw upon to recruit within and compare to. Thus, the extent to which this sample represents the larger population of elective co-parents within and between each country remains unknown. This cross-sectional study only provides a snapshot into the lives and experiences of a small sample of families at one time point. Bayes factors provided a means through which to statistically compare different groups of elective co-parent families. However, the current study lacked a comparison group to control for asymmetric childcare arrangements or the experience of fertility treatment, for example families co-parenting after divorce or those who had a child through assisted reproduction (e.g., IVF using parents own gametes or sperm donation). Future work with larger samples, comparison groups and longitudinal designs will provide necessary replication tests and test new findings regarding the impact of family structure and processes on trajectories of parent

and child wellbeing and the quality of the co-parenting relationship. Larger samples will also enable tests to explore links between the different familial processes, for example the potential negative impact of experiencing discrimination given previous work with gay fathers demonstrating greater stigmatisation was associated with more child externalising problems (Golombok et al., 2018).

Overall, it appears that parents and children in this 'new' family form are functioning well. In light of the rise of connection websites facilitating elective co-parenting, this exploratory study does not suggest there are differences between elective coparenting families based on how they are formed. It remains to be seen whether online connection sites as a means of creating family will become normalised as a means of establishing romantic relationships. Understanding how children think and feel about being born and raised in this way, as well as the support needs of elective co-parents and their children throughout their parenting journey, is now vital to understand.

Authorship

SF: data collection, data analysis and data interpretation; drafting original article

VJ: funding acquisition; project conceptualisation; data collection, data interpretation; revising original article.

SG: funding acquisition; project conceptualisation; revising original article

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