

# The genetic family in question



Thursday 10 May 2012, Kanaris Theatre, Manchester Museum

This seminar explores the role of genetic connections (or lack thereof) in families, and how issues associated with being or not being genetically related in families is perceived, understood and managed in contemporary society. It brings together scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds such as law, cultural studies and history, health studies and sociology who address this question in their work from a variety of angles. The issues discussed over the day include donor conception, adoption and (non)genetic family relationships as well as genetic relatedness, inheritability, health and illness.

## Programme

10.15	Registration, tea and coffee
10.45	Welcome and introductions
11.00	<p><u>Being related: Blood, genes and gendered relationalities</u></p> <p>‘Her husband will not come home until the little one is adopted’: marriage, adultery and the unsettling presence of the illegitimate child in post-war family lives - Dr Janet Fink (Open University)</p> <p>‘We only did it because he asked us’: Gendered accounts of family participation in a population genetic data collection – Dr Gill Haddow (University of Edinburgh)</p>
13.00	Lunch (vegetarian)
14.00	<p><u>Genetic inheritability and assisted reproduction: The case of mitochondria donation</u></p> <p>‘Relatively (im)material? Genetic relatedness in legal discourse’ – Dr Caroline Jones (University of Southampton)</p> <p>‘Who is the ‘third parent’? Mitochondria donation and implications for identity and kinship’ – Dr Rebecca Dimond (University of Cardiff)</p>
16.00	Tea/Coffee & Close

[www.manchester.ac.uk/morgancentre](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/morgancentre)

## **Registration**

Please contact Victoria Higham to confirm your place (and let us know if you have any allergies or access requirements): [victoria.higham@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:victoria.higham@manchester.ac.uk) or 0161 275 0261.

Directions to Manchester Museum at <http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/yourvisit/travel/>

## **Session outlines**

**‘Her Husband will not come home until the little one is adopted’: marriage, adultery and the unsettling presence of the illegitimate child in post-war family lives – Dr Janet Fink, Open University**

The paper is focused upon the phenomenon of married women who gave birth to an illegitimate child in the 1940s and 1950s and the gendered power dynamics at play in placing such a child for adoption. First it examines the ideology and legal norms around the constitution of parental relationships in this period as these situated the birth of children within monogamous marriage and, in turn, understood husbands to be fathers of children born to their wives. Secondly, by tracing changes introduced by the Childrens Act (1948) and the Adoption Act (1950), the paper highlights how the law defined the ‘parent’ of an illegitimate child and afforded parental rights in adoption legislation. Thirdly, case records from voluntary organisations are drawn upon to illustrate both the dilemmas faced by married women who, by having an illegitimate child, had brought a ‘stranger’ into the family home and the ways in which husbands used adoption as a strategy for excluding these ‘strangers’ from their kin network. This paper thus suggests how adoption of illegitimate children born to married women reveals particular gender insights into the ways in which ‘the [genetic] family’ was understood, experienced and regulated in the post-war years.

**‘We only did it because he asked us’: Gendered accounts of Family participation in a population genetic data collection – Dr Gill Haddow (University of Edinburgh)**

In this presentation, I would like to explore findings from an interview study with twenty-three families about participation in a large-scale population genetic database called “Generation Scotland: The Scottish Family Health Study” (GS: SFHS). The experiences and motivations of those recruited offered a prism in which one can view family relationships and interactions more generally. Little is actually known about why families invited to take part in this type of research do so, especially when a family member is acting as a ‘proxy’ recruiter and recruiting other family members. It would appear from the current interview data that a biological or genetic relationship is not a guarantee of a family connection, but just one possible facet that may contribute to ties between one individual and another. I will go on to suggest the biological (or genetic) relatedness is a choice not a given; 2) yet it can be the basis of family relationships which gives rise to a gendering of recruitment to the clinical study; and 3) therefore women continue to be ‘kin-keepers’.

## **Relatively (im)material? Genetic relatedness in legal discourse – Dr Caroline Jones (University of Southampton)**

Mitochondrial donation poses the latest regulatory challenge for policy-makers in the context of assisted conception. In 2012 the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority are consulting on ethical issues raised by this technique; including the potential relationships created by the use of three parties' genetic material and the associated ramifications (eg whether or not there is a need to establish records of such donations and, if so, to whom should information be provided?) Hence, this technique poses both novel and familiar questions about 'the genetic family'. This paper will explore the construction of the relative (in)significance of mitochondrial DNA in recent parliamentary debates, and current policy and consultation documents, in order to reflect on the ways in which the role of genetic connections – or lack thereof – are mediated in legal discourse and policy formation.

## **Who is the 'third parent'? Mitochondria donation and implications for identity and kinship – Dr Rebecca Dimond (University of Cardiff)**

What is the link between mitochondrial DNA and a person's identity? What relationship does a woman have to a child conceived using her donated mitochondria? These are key questions that the Nuffield Council on Bioethics have asked in exploring the ethical issues surrounding emerging techniques to prevent inherited mitochondrial disorders. There is currently no cure for mitochondrial disease but experimental reproductive technologies have now been developed which can allow women with mitochondrial disease to have children free from the disease. The technique involves replacing faulty mitochondria during an IVF cycle with healthy mitochondria from a donated egg. As the donated mitochondria (which contain a small number of genes) would be inherited by future generations, this technique requires a change in the law in order for it to be offered to patients and this has prompted calls for evidence by the Nuffield Council and HFEA. By drawing on interviews with patients with mitochondrial disease and media representations of the 'three parent embryo', in this presentation I consider how these techniques raise fundamental questions of identity and kinship.