

Psychosocial Consequences of Discovering Misattributed Paternity in Adulthood: Insider Action Research

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Abstract : Unlike adoption and donor-assisted reproduction, misattributed paternity occurring within the context of spontaneous conception and outside of formally recognised practices of having a child remains largely an understudied phenomenon. In adulthood, to discover misattributed paternity, i.e., that the man you call your father is not related to you genetically, can have profound implications for everyone affected. Until the advent of direct-to-consumer DNA testing 20 years ago, such discoveries were relatively rare. Despite the growing number of individuals uncovering their biogenetic paternity through genetic testing, there is very limited research on misattributed paternity from the perspective of adult children affected by it. No research exists on how to support these individuals through counselling post-discovery. Framed as insider action research, this study aimed to explore the perceived psychosocial consequences of misattributed paternity discoveries and coping strategies used by individuals who discover their misattributed paternity status in adulthood. In total, 12 individuals with misattributed paternity participated in semi-structured interviews in July-August 2022. The collected data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The study's results indicate that discovering misattributed paternity in adulthood can be likened to a watershed moment forever changing the trajectory of one's life. Psychological experiences consistent with trauma, as well as grief and loss, re-evaluation of close family relationships, reestablishment of one's identity, as well as experiencing a profound need to belong are the key themes emerging from the analysis of psychosocial experiences. Post-discovery, individuals with misattributed paternity employ a wide range of emotional and problem-focused coping strategies, amongst which seeking connection with those who understand, searching for information on the new biogenetic family and finding new meanings to life are most prominent. The study contributes both to the academic and practical knowledge of experiences of misattributed paternity and highlights the importance of further research on the topic.

Keywords : discovery of misattributed paternity, misattributed paternity, paternal discrepancy, psychosocial consequences, coping

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