

Uncovering The Unexpected

Supporting Families With Surprise DNA Discoveries

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Presenter Background: Clinical Expertise Meets Personal Experience



Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT)

Specialized training in systems theory and relational dynamics, equipped to address complex family disruptions and repair



Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) and Assistant Professor

Advanced clinical psychology credentials with academic position, engaging in both clinical practice and professional education for master's degree candidates



Personal NPE Experience

Direct lived experience with NPE discovery provides unique dual perspective, informing both research approach and clinical understanding with authenticity and depth

The MPE Problem: From Hidden History to DNA-Proven Reality

Throughout Human History

Misattributed parentage has existed across all cultures and eras, but remained hidden and unprovable

Right-to-Know Statistics

Approximately 10% of the testing population discovers unexpected or misattributed parentage (Regalado, 2019; Right to Know, n.d.)

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Commercial DNA Testing Revolution

Consumer genetic testing (23andMe, AncestryDNA) changed the landscape, making biological truth discoverable

Multiple Discovery Contexts

Includes individuals conceived through affairs or sexual assault (NPE), donor conception (DCP), or late discovery adoption (LDA) with undisclosed or falsified origins

Study Findings: Qualitative Study of the Effects of Misattributed Parentage Experiences (2023)

Group 1: 42%

Felt Different Before Discovery

42% of participants reported sensing genealogical difference prior to discovery; this group showed higher rates of relief and more adaptive long-term psychological outcomes despite family disruption.

Group 1

Experienced relief and better long-term adjustment despite family disruption

Group 2: 58%

Felt Normal Before Discovery

58% of participants reported feeling no sense of genealogical difference before discovery; this group experienced greater identity disruption and poorer relational and psychological adjustment over time.

Group 2

Struggled significantly across psychological and relational dimensions

Participants unable to gain any genetic background information and were unable to make contact described their process in the worst terms

Study Findings: Qualitative Study of the Effects of Misattributed Parentage Experiences (2023)



49% Experienced Permanent Changes to Family System

The vast majority of responses described overall negative outcomes including significant tension that seemed irreparable and outright cut-offs



Family Roles Were Amplified or Worsened

MPEs described being encouraged by the known family to adopt a negative identity, thrusting them into a sense of responsibility for causing harm to the family or for their perpetual anger



Parental Response Differed by Gender

When cut-offs were employed, many narratives reported that relationships with their mothers were the primary source of the cut-off, either initiated by the MPE or mother-initiated as a form of control over the secret

MPE Discovery Creates Sudden, Life-Altering Family System Crisis

Sudden Life-Changing Event

Discovery represents an unexpected crisis affecting both the MPE individual and the entire family system simultaneously

Marked Clinical Changes

Results in significant alterations to psychological functioning, emotional regulation, and identity coherence

Family Cohesion Disruption

Established family bonds and relational patterns experience profound destabilization, use of clinical intervention

Identity Reconstruction

Necessitates fundamental reworking of personal identity, family narrative, and sense of belonging

Primary Psychological Effects: Betrayal Trauma and Family Fragmentation

MPE discovery triggers complex emotional and relational responses that vary widely among individuals and families. Critically, these reactions tend to amplify pre-existing family dynamics rather than creating entirely new patterns of interaction.

Common Negative Responses

- Profound sense of betrayal and broken trust that undermines previously held family bonds and security.
- Emotional distancing from family members, leading to prolonged withdrawal and reduced communication over time.
- Anger directed at parents or system, often expressed as sustained resentment, confrontation, or blaming behaviors.
- Complete relational cut-offs in severe cases, where individuals terminate contact to protect themselves from further harm.

Possible Positive Outcomes

- Increased closeness in some relationships emerges when shared processing fosters empathy and mutual support between members.
- Relief from resolving lifelong questions can provide clarity and reduce chronic uncertainty for many affected individuals.
- New meaningful connections with biological family may form, creating additional sources of identity and belonging.
- Deeper authenticity in family communication can develop as members confront truths and realign expectations honestly.

Pattern Exacerbation Dynamic

- Resentment and estrangement increase with increasing outcomes of cut-offs.
- Pre-discovery dynamics predict post-discovery outcomes, with entrenched patterns often determining the trajectory of adjustment.
- Mothers in particular respond with narcissistic perspective, taking the discovery personally.
- Past attachment patterns resurface intensified, shaping expectations, mistrust, or reliance in renewed ways after discovery.

MPE Discovery: A Sudden, Life-Changing Event for Everyone

NPE discovery creates a cascading crisis that simultaneously impacts every member of the family system. Each person experiences profound disruption to their identity, relationships, and understanding of family narrative, though from different vantage points.

The NPE Individual

- Identity crisis: fundamental questions about self, belonging, and biological heritage
- Betrayal trauma: grief over deception and loss of assumed family narrative
- Relationship uncertainty: navigating connections with both families
- Medical and genetic information gaps suddenly filled or newly discovered

The Parents

- Parent who knew: shame, guilt, fear of judgment and family dissolution
- Parent who didn't know: betrayal, anger, questioning entire relationship foundation
- Both face loss of control over family narrative and timing of disclosure
- Anxiety about rejection or damage to parent-child bond
- Complete rejection to retain control of the narrative

Siblings and Extended Family

- Siblings may question their parents' character and family roles in new context
- Disruption to sibling bonds and hierarchy within family structure
- Extended family members face loyalty conflicts and take sides
- Grandparents, aunts, uncles renegotiate relationships and boundaries

Ripple Effects Across System

- Changes cascade through multiple generations and relationships simultaneously
- Family rituals, traditions, and gatherings become complicated or cease
- Previous communication patterns amplify as "family dance" patterns intensify
- Some relationships strengthen while others fracture under the pressure

Understanding Familial Responses: Innocent Fear vs. Malicious Control



Innocent Motivations: Fear-Based Responses & Interventions

- Normalize fear of damaged social reputation and community judgment
- Normalize existential anxiety regarding acceptance by family and spouse
- Place parent's experience within the context of their era and social norms
- Explore and educate regarding maternal concerns about economic stability and security
- Reframe parental choice as a protective instinct to preserve family unit, though misguided
- Coach family to 'listen to learn' and refrain from responding until they can respond with curiosity and compassion



Malicious Responses: Control and Dismissal & Interventions

- Presents with dismissive & minimizing statements: "How dare you do this to me!" or "This has nothing to do with you"
- Challenge active censorship of truth-seeking and information gathering
- Identify punitive family cut-offs used to maintain control - in 50% of participants (Klugman-Rabb, 2023)
- Challenge refusals to acknowledge valid emotional needs of MPE person
- Construct enactments where families practice active listening and responding with curiosity
- Challenge family structural elements that enables manipulation, gaslighting, or punishment
- Teach parents emotional regulation skills and 'new talk' intervention to communicate with totally different words than used previously

Clinical Treatment Framework: Two-Part Integrated Approach



Part 1: Individual Therapy

Addressing Personal Psychological Impact for MPE individual and Parents

- Grief and loss therapy: mourning the loss of assumed identity and family narrative
- Trauma processing: addressing betrayal trauma and fractured trust
- Identity reconstruction: integrating new biological information into coherent self-concept
- Emotional regulation: managing intense affect and relational anxiety



Part 2: Family Systems Therapy

Repairing Relational Bonds

- Trust repair: addressing breach of trust and rebuilding safety; set up group norms and expectations in session and between sessions
- Communication facilitation: creating space for honest dialogue; Gottman's Dreams Within Conflict, Aftermath of a Fight
- Bonding restoration: rebuilding attachment where possible; speaking from personal parts not for them (IFS)
- Boundary setting: establishing healthy limits when repair or agreement is not feasible

Both individual and family components are ideal for comprehensive clinical treatment and optimal long-term outcomes.

Integrated Therapeutic Modalities for Comprehensive NPE/MPE Treatment

Effective MPE clinical treatment uses integration of multiple evidence-based therapeutic modalities to address the complexity of individual trauma and family system disruption simultaneously.



Genograms

Map intergenerational family patterns and dynamics that contribute to current responses to NPE discovery, identifying recurring themes of secrecy, loyalty, or trauma across generations
(McGoldrick et al, 2020)



Object Relations Family Therapy

Explore and understand attachment wounds across two generations, examining how early relational experiences shape current family reactions and individual coping strategies



Basic Communication Skills

Develop safe and effective communication skills for navigating difficult conversations, challenge cognitive distortions, and learning to listen without defense or blame to increase emotional regulation



Gottman Method: Dreams Within Conflict

Help family members understand underlying dreams, aspirations, and values that fuel gridlock, fostering empathy and creating pathways for resolution and reconnection

Conclusions: Closing the Clinical Training Gap for NPE/MPE Treatment

Established Approaches Are Effective

Recognized and trusted therapeutic frameworks (family systems, trauma therapy, grief counseling, CBT, Gottman Method) are well-positioned to provide effective support and facilitate resolution for MPE cases when properly applied

Literature Growing But Still Sparse

Current research and clinical literature remain limited due to the recent acknowledgement of NPE/MPE as a valid clinical issue, though the field is expanding rapidly as more clinicians recognize the need. Evidence-based protocols are in development

Critical Training Gap: The Central Challenge

Many MPE individuals report dismissal by professional clinicians who lack adequate training in family systems theory, grief and trauma treatment, or identity development processes. Clinicians must be educated to recognize the profound validity of MPE impact at both individual and family system levels to provide competent, compassionate care and avoid traumatization through dismissal

References

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