



MY WORD

THE DIFFERENT DAD DILEMMA



CAROLYN TATE HAS 'MULTIPLE PARTNER FERTILITY'. NOT EVERYONE IS SO FORTUNATE.

"YOU KNOW," she breathed, leaning in like a conspirator over our lattes and lemon meringue, "She's got kids to different dads."

I was having coffee with an old school friend, who wanted me to know *all* the juicy gossip about an old classmate. She sat back, satisfied, as if that were all I needed to know to come to a particular – and not very favourable – conclusion. I tried to look suitably shocked, as the rest of the cafe went quiet and a couple of tumbleweeds rolled on through.

I'm used to dealing with these moments, and must admit I enjoy them a little, so I was quick to gleefully inform her that my two children also have different dads. This is always my favourite part, because then the backpedalling begins as the conversation partner attempts to remove their foot from their mouth with lines like: "Oh, that's different though, isn't it, because you've been to university" Or "But you're married now" (ah, my husband: my saviour) or even "But you're not on welfare".

Bless 'em; they always try to find a loophole that excuses me from being included in such questionable company. But the truth is, we serial breeders are probably much more common now than ever before. Cassandra Dorius, a demographer and postdoctoral fellow at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, analysed data from almost 4000 women over 27 years, with the study ending last April. She found

that – gasp! – 28% of those who had more than one child had them to more than one man.

Let's assume Australian statistics are comparable to those of the US. That means every time someone nods their head meaningfully in the direction of a woman and her kids, and whispers "different dads" from the corner of their mouth, we are judging one quarter of our sisters. Why do we allow people to get away with it? Could it be we are still ashamed of ourselves?

And what about men in the same situation? A middle-aged bloke who remarries to a younger woman (is it ever an older one?) and has his 'second family' is basically high-fived by society. *You landed a younger woman? Way to go! Damn that first wife and her demands for child support!*

In a statement marking her study's release, Dorius wrote she was surprised to find that women having children with different fathers is common at all levels of income and education, and is often associated with marriage and divorce, rather than just single parenthood. "We tend to think of women with multiple partner fertility as being only poor single women with little education and money, but in fact at some point most were married, and working, and going to school, and doing all the things you're supposed to do to live the American dream."

I have to admit, I used to be quick to judge the morals and choices of women

with 'multiple partner fertility' (a contender for euphemism of the year), but now I understand how you can find yourself in a situation not of your own planning. I was with my daughter's father for eight years, but in the end we just couldn't make it work and weren't willing to stay together 'for the sake of the child', as used to be the done thing.

People today are less willing to stick at a relationship simply because it has produced children, and are aware that by doing so they are not setting a great example of how a loving relationship should work. Are we doing our children a favour by cutting, running and seeking a relationship that makes us happy? I suppose time will tell.

When I was getting married – yes, for the second time and with a four-year-old daughter as part of the package – my dear old well-meaning nan, in an attempt to say something nice about my husband-to-be, patted my hand and said, "You're lucky you've found someone to take you on in your situation."

Really, Nan? From where I stand *he* is pretty lucky, too. I am a good cook, a nice person and I have an adorable daughter who comes as part of this awesome package. And, as my husband has since told me, he could see I was good breeding stock before he signed on the dotted line.

Er, thanks...honey.

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