

February 22, 2008

Daddy's DNA

By **CHRISTINE ROSEN**
February 22, 2008; Page W11

The cultural stereotype of infidelity is well entrenched: The lousy, cheating husband who destroys his family makes frequent appearances in the advice columns of women's magazines and is a stock character (usually played opposite a vulnerable Valerie Bertinelli-type) in made-for-TV movies.


Yet the problem of female infidelity is equally serious, particularly when it results in the birth of a child. When a woman strays, how can a man know if the child is really his? Maury Povich has made paternity testing a staple of his TV show. And while the DNA samples in his "Who's Your Daddy?" segments have revealed the paternity of plenty of guys who had been unwilling to acknowledge their flesh-and-blood offspring, the test results have also shown that the doubts of many other men were fully justified. A surprising number of the women who contacted Maury to prove paternity, in fact, had no clear idea of who their children's father was -- some have appeared on the show countless times trying to solve the mystery. Often a man is so relieved when Maury bellows "You are NOT the father!" that he ecstatically whoops and dances around the stage while Maury attempts to comfort the obviously distraught mother.

But outside the world of daytime television, the "Who's Your Daddy?" problem -- "paternal discrepancy" is the official term for a situation where a man is unknowingly raising another man's child -- has had little impact on the public consciousness unless it involves celebrities. The dueling claims to fatherhood made in the wake of Anna Nicole Smith's death and actor Eddie Murphy's false claim not to have fathered the daughter of Melanie "Scary Spice" Brown come to mind.

That might be about to change, though. In a 2005 article in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, researchers who had studied families in the U.S., Europe, Russia, Canada, South Africa and several other countries wrote that they had found rates of paternal discrepancy of about 4%, on average. Which means that approximately one man in 25 named as the biological father on a child's birth certificate is not the real father -- and may not know it. The authors of the study also noted an apparent increase in public interest in determining paternity: Between 1991 and 2001, the number of people seeking paternity tests more than doubled in the U.S., to 310,490. Although it is difficult to measure whether infidelity is on the rise, these numbers suggest that suspicion about it might be.

For every burgeoning cultural crisis there is a product that offers to solve it: Enter Identigene, a company owned by Sorenson Genomics that is now selling an over-the-counter paternity test. Available in Rite-Aid and Meijer drugstores nationwide (as well as over the Internet), the test has a suggested retail price of \$29.99 (plus an additional \$119 lab fee). The box features a tasteful sketch of mother and child and promises test results "admissible in most courts of law" three to five business days after you send in cheek swabs from the child and "alleged father." As Identigene's Web site promises, "Putting your mind at ease, or making sure that a potential parent acts responsibly, has never been more convenient, confidential, affordable, or accurate."

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit:

www.djreprints.com.

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

The benefits of over-the-counter paternity testing are clear, particularly for men, and Identigene seems subtly to be marketing the test to them. The Web site notes, for example, that "32% of all paternity tests exclude alleged fathers." Inexpensive paternity testing could theoretically level the playing field for men involved in child-support cases; court-ordered tests can cost as much as \$500. Paternity fraud litigation is on the rise; a 2006 study in New Hampshire found that nearly 30% of fathers paying child support were not the biological parent of the child they were helping. Fathers' rights advocates have been working to change state laws that, although well-intentioned in their effort to protect children from the taint of illegitimacy, have long held that married men are legally assumed to be the fathers of children born to the marriage, even in the face of genetic evidence to the contrary.

In fact, the increasing popularity of paternity testing seems to confirm what sociobiologists have been noting for years: From a strictly genetic point of view, it has always been in some women's interest to adopt a "mixed mating" strategy -- acquiring supposedly superior genes from one man but turning to another for the resources to raise the child. Indeed, a recent study in the *Journal of Theoretical Biology* argues that one reason men produce so many defective sperm during any given sexual interaction is that they are required to produce so much so quickly -- as part of a broader evolutionary strategy to try to compensate for the fact of female infidelity.

But paternity testing raises new challenges as well, not least with regard to privacy and consent. Identigene hawks a version of its product called the "Discreet Paternity Test," which encourages consumers to send in "licked stamps, ear wax, fingernail clippings, socks, chewed gum" or a "used razor" to surreptitiously test another person. Although it notes that such test results might not be legally binding in court, the company adds that "sometimes it is important that the DNA test is done without the knowledge of others."

Identigene's trademarked slogan is "For questions only DNA testing can answer." It even offers a "DNA Consultant" via a toll-free number. But it seems unlikely that the perky looking woman pictured with a headset on its Web site will be able to guide you through the emotional mine field that your marriage will become if you find your husband swiping your baby's cheek with a gigantic Q-Tip or surreptitiously searching your handsome male neighbor's garbage for a bit of chewed gum.

There are some questions raised by paternity testing that even the most devoted ethicists (and marriage counselors) might have trouble answering. These tests are really tests of trust. And like many modern technologies of suspicion, such as GPS tracking devices and software that secretly tracks the keystrokes on another person's computer -- they make it very easy, perhaps too easy, to indulge our doubts about our significant others.

Perhaps the growing interest in paternity testing reveals a broader cultural anxiety about fidelity in contemporary society, an anxiety exacerbated by the fact that an increasing number of parents bear and rear children outside the institution of marriage. Adam Phillips, a British psychotherapist who has published a book of pithy observations on monogamy, writes: "Not everyone believes in monogamy, but everyone lives as though they do. . . . Believing in monogamy, in other words, is not unlike believing in God." In the church of monogamy there are many secret heretics. New technologies might help us discover infidelity with more accuracy and convenience, but they are unlikely to solve the more vexing and timeless dilemma of why we stray.

Ms. Rosen is a fellow at the Ethics & Public Policy Center in Washington.

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120364879653285103.html>

Copyright 2008 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.

RELATED ARTICLES AND BLOGS

[More related content](#) *Powered by Sphere* 