

Negotiated Families: Power and Resistance at the Intersection of Lesbian Families and Institutions in Southwest Michigan

When Grand Valley State University President Mark Murray proclaims “implementation of domestic partner benefits are not on balance in the best interest of the university, and the accumulated impact of such actions is to weaken family life,” there is an assumed family form implicit in his reference to “Family.” In the United States, even as census information contradicts, the modern heterosexual, male-headed, nuclear family rather than representing one among many family forms accorded equal status, clearly represents a privileged construct. However, as the material conditions of sexuality, maternity and marriage are transformed through socio-political process, kinship has become more overtly politicized (Rapp, 1987). The very concepts of kinship and family are becoming increasingly contested. It is this tension between ideology and everyday life, between old notions and lived realities that is central to understanding the debate regarding Family in twenty-first century America. Based on a three-month ethnographic project of short, edited life stories, this thesis examines the everyday practices and conditions of social and material life of lesbian headed families that are increasingly at odds with the discourse of traditional family in contemporary United States society.

Much of the current debate about lesbian and gay families stems from the threat such families are perceived to pose to the dominant ideologies of family in contemporary Western societies. The threat exists to their very existence which “readily exposes the widening gap between the complex reality of postmodern family forms and simplistic modern family ideology that still undergirds most public rhetoric, policy and law

concerning families (Stacey 1996:108). Terms such as “breakdown of the family” and “loss of family values” are central to American political discourse of Family as a symbol under siege. As the new imaginings of American Family drift away from the normative ideal, they are culturally labeled a “decline” with all the symbols of deviance attached (Rapp, 1987). Yet, in spite of the fact little or no legal status exists for the relationships gay people create, there are institutions – foundations, fertility clinics, schools, churches, adoption agencies - that participate in the construction of that relationship, if not the legitimization of that relationship. This thesis argues that processes that operate in the construction of families can be located at the intersection of institutions and lived experiences. By using the idiom of the Family as the point of entry into cultural analysis, this thesis investigates the complex array of political, economic, cultural, and historical forces that coalesce to, at times marginalize lesbian families, and at other times solidify lesbian families.

By conducting research into the lived experiences of lesbian-headed families, I seek to illuminate the ways ordinary people negotiate the relationship and balance between what is given and what is chosen, in other words, how individuals pursue empowerment. I seek to locate counter discourses and practices of resistance that contest the essentialized notion of family imposed by dominant groups and classes, and to formulate an alternative, expanded conception of the political. Though much scholarship has greatly enhanced our ability to appreciate the vitality of gay and lesbian culture, it has also tended to obscure the extent to which lesbians and gay men actively partake in the wider cultural arena, crossing the boundaries of the gay and lesbian community to interact with other people, and participate in a range of activities, institutions and

programs. By taking note of the rhythm of family activity in small scale, local, household contexts that composes individual lives and stories, the varying degrees of comfort and success, or pain and distress that characterizes the process of movement between these life worlds can be revealed.

Most significantly, instead of theorizing lesbian family experiences as somehow outside of or apart from the processes of the wider culture, this thesis argues that lesbian family experiences and practices are articulated within and in relation to the dominant ideologies that define what it means to be a Family in contemporary United States. Conflict and negotiation are being played out through everyday practices. Today, more than ever, the bridges across the boundaries are built in large part due to the presence of children in same-sex families. This presence creates multiple possibilities for points of intersection with institutions and the society at large that are unavailable to couples without children. As such, the presence of children is important to this research.

Literature Review

My intellectual concern with same sex headed families appears at the intersection of three distinct lines of theory and research. First, my analysis is informed by recent writing on power that has been concerned with dispelling an essentialist and reified notion of power, and with formulating an alternative, expanded conception of the political. Focusing on the question of how domination is accomplished, much of this work has been influenced by Antonio Gramsci's notion of the state as political society plus civil society, in other words, hegemony protected by the shield of coercion (Gramsci, 1971); by Michel Foucault's stress on power's "capillary form of existence" (Foucault, 1980); and by the feminist notion of the personal as political – that the

minutiae of everyday behavior links into wider practice. Rather than seeing rule as resting on constraints, the exercise of power is viewed as productive - of meaning, truths, bodies, selves – in short, of forms of doing, knowing and being. Meaning becomes located in discursive practices, produced, contested, negotiated, and transformed in sociohistorical action rather than in a timeless system of essential categories.

The second line of thought relevant to this study emerges from the feminist critique of the normative ideology of “Family.” Some argue that the Family must be viewed not as a concrete institution designed to fulfill universal human needs, but as an ideological construct associated with the modern state (Collier, Rosaldo, Yanagisako, 1992); in which the “state” must be viewed not as a singular, unitary entity or category, but as a name for a suite of sites, a “constellation of agencies” such as schools, adoption agencies, fertility clinics, where power and dominance – and by the same token, conventions and customs – are not only reproduced and deployed, but also resisted and dismantled (Robertson, 1998). Kath Weston (1991) suggests that the “Family” should be *read* not as an institution, but as a contested concept implicated in the relations of power that permeate societies. The work of Nikolas Rose (1999) informs my understanding of the hegemonic processes that make-up and shape the “family mechanism.” Rose identifies those processes as legal regulation, moral exhortation, fiscal manipulation, and expert intervention. Rayna Rapp (1987) calls for a deconstruction of the Euro-American family form, embodied in the male-headed nuclear family, in order to illuminate the processes operating in the construction of that ideal. By assuming the male-headed nuclear family as the central kinship unit, we miss the contested domain in which symbolic innovation may occur. By deconstructing the classic assumption of family

form, Rapp suggests that “the shifting symbolism, the creativity, and the continuities that people inscribe in the realm of kinship” will be revealed (119). In all of these views “Family” is not so much a thing or reification, as it is a continuing process of negotiation that does not occur on an empty stage, but within specific encounters between individuals and between individuals and institutions differentially positioned in relations of power.

A concern with history is integral to this approach to power and meaning because hegemony is produced and reproduced, challenged and renegotiated in social action, and action is always historically situated (Coontz, 1988; Gillis, 1996; Skolnick, 1991). Ironically, the danger in deploying an expanded concept of the political, in which meaning and power are interpenetrated, is that the dominant forms of control and significance can appear so pervasive as to prohibit the possibility of resistance. Yet, if we view hegemony in historical and processual terms, then the attempt by dominant groups and classes to impose a “discursive regime” on the whole of society can be seen as subject to contestation, negotiation, and as process never fully achieved. Gillis (1996) is particularly informative as he attempts a cultural history of imagined family life, of its inner and symbolic meanings. He succeeds in outlining the ways in which family life has always been historically and socially constructed and demonstrates how individuals construct their own familial relationships and how they imbue them with meaning. All of these notions are important if we are to appreciate the possibility for maneuvering within hegemonic definitions of family and acknowledge that spaces for counter-discourses and for practices of resistance are available. So-called prepolitical discourses of resistance, long dismissed as lacking an ideology, can be interpreted in new ways once we realize

that power is not simply effected through institutional politics and that voices of protest need not be articulated in rational idioms to be political.

Finally, a third line of research and theory influencing my work consists of the cross-disciplinary literature exploring lesbian and gay family life. Some work challenges the rhetoric and politics of “family values” that harm instead of help families (Lehr, 1999); postulates that gay and lesbian families are one among many unique family forms (Lynch, 2000); suggests theorizing lesbian relations as family is contra-beneficial (Robson, 1994); theorizes the role of biology in lesbian kinship (Hayden, 1995; Weston, 1991); evaluates the role of class in lesbian kinship (Ortner, 1998; Weston and Rofel, 1984), and explores the role of narratives in lesbian family self construction (Muzio, 1996).

Judith Stacey (1996) suggests that gay families are neither marginal nor exceptional but representative and illustrative of the “queer” postmodern condition of kinship. As such, gays are seeking to extend social legitimacy and institutional support for the diverse patterns of intimacy that some Americans have already forged. Stacey outlines the different constructions of lesbian families that will frame my research: parents who “come-out” after marriage and child birth; families constructed by fully intentional childbearing through insemination/or sexual impregnation; biological family adoption; non-biological family adoption; and those families with no children.

Perhaps more than any other work impacting my research is that of Kath Weston. *In Families We Choose* (1991) Weston articulates the lived experiences of gays and lesbians as they attempt to create families of choice in response to rejection by biological families. She demonstrates that gay families represent one element in a broader discourse

on family whose meanings are continuously negotiated in everyday situations with relations of power in society at large. She suggests that the processes occurring at the intersection of gay families and institutions today are reflective of the relations of power impacting those negotiations. By demonstrating the resourcefulness of many gay families as they seek to solidify and define what family means to them at a particular place and time, she acknowledges that power is not unidirectional. Her work is not merely theoretical or a cultural/historical analysis, but ethnographic and therefore, evocative of real experiences and of real people as they attempt to negotiate “famliness” in the presence of institutions that both constrain and enable that process.

These and many other scholars will inform the theoretical and practical dimensions of my research. I have been unable to locate qualitative studies that address this specific topic. I believe my work can provide a “bottom-up” rather than a “top-down” view of society, which takes an interest in the routines of everyday life and the ways ordinary people experience the world around them. I suggest that these routines, rather than a series of abstract rules, embody what society is. Though people understand these rules, they manipulate them creatively rather than follow them passively. In so doing they reinforce or alternatively transform the processes that construct meaning itself.

Methodology

Statistics can tell us a great deal about living conditions in a given society, but they paint only part of the picture. They can tell a story with numbers, but they cannot translate those numbers into lived experience. To put flesh and blood on the numbers we must turn to stories about people’s lives. Through the participation in and observation of several non-traditional families, through interviews and short life histories, I will

participate in the construction of data that can demonstrate that meaning, in this case, what it means to be a family, can be located in practices, produced, contested, and negotiated at the intersection of individuals and institutions. The primary source of data for my research will be “human documents,” accounts of individual experiences which reveal the individual’s actions as a human agent and as a participant in social life (Blumer, 1979:2).

Following Plummer (1998) I will seek to employ a methodology of critical humanism, emphasizing human subjectivity and creativity; life practices that flow in, around and out of social, as well as economic organization; intimate familiarity, not “veranda” ethnography; the moral and political role of the researcher, and a radical, pragmatic empiricism. I will emphasize an anthropology of experience that attempts to examine people as they are “in-the-world” and in terms of how they make themselves “in-the-world” (Jackson, 1996). Lived experience will not be sacrificed on the altar of subjectless discourse.

There is a pretense to homogeneity of experience covered by the words gay and family that does not in fact exist. Gay and lesbian family life in contemporary America is not a universal, transhistorical, and cross-cultural category, but rather the creation of a particular time and place, culture and society. However, individual lives can be mined for clues about consciousness and experiences that can illuminate more than one life under examination (Jackson, 1998). This project is a quest for the voices of lesbian families to weave together to create a tapestry of particular experiences in Southwest Michigan.

To draw a sample for this study, I used the following criteria: participants self-identify as lesbian; participants dwell together in the same residence; participants self-

identify as a family; and participants have a history together of two or more years. I used a snowball sampling technique. After identifying a “gatekeeper” (Carrington, 1999), I contacted this individual who in turn facilitated contact with several lesbian families that I could not otherwise contact. I used a snowball sampling technique, asking individuals to provide the names of other potential participants. Within a short time, I made contact with many eager and eloquent participants. Through the participation in and observation of these non-traditional families, through interviews and life histories, I will participate in the construction of data that can speak to the processes involved in the construction of meaning, in this case, what it means to be a family.

The organization of this study reflects a concern with a monolithic representation of what it means to be a lesbian family and to acknowledge what Bravermann (1997) labels “queer heterosociality” – the multiple race, class, gender, generational, and geographical differences among gay and lesbian subjects. To avoid fostering stereotype, I want to be clear that the meaning of family cannot be determined by cultural rules or by enduring social principles, and is neither static, nor a uniform process. Each of these families experiences “famliness” in a different way. Their experiences with institutions may be unique or they may experience them similarly. Some of these families bear additional markers of ethnicity, race, educational status, class distinctions, and age. However, all families considered for this study are lesbian partnered families. Despite efforts to conduct my research in gender inclusive terms, I have been unable to make contact with gay male families. Being a lesbian inhibited my access to, and likely my empathy with the complete range of gay male family experience. My contacts as well as my circle of friends do not include any gay men who identify as “family” as outlined in

this proposal. Still the relative marginality of men in any research is not simply due to methodological deficiencies. It also accurately reflects their more marginal participation in same-sex family life. But that is another project.

All the families I will be working with live within two hours of my home. All are English language speakers. Most, if not all live their lives “out,” at home, work, and in society at large. Those who have children are “out” to their children, and the children are “out” to friends and classmates. There is no danger of my research inadvertently “outing” them, thereby causing any harm to them or their children. All have willingly if not eagerly agreed to participate in my research, due to the perceived need within the community to “get these stories out.” I am aware that this “eagerness” in itself may impact and color the way individuals interact with me during the interview process.

In addition to the individual families I will be directly engaged with, I am conducting additional research to gain a deeper knowledge of the historical and cultural processes at work in the construction of same sex families. I have already begun some background research. I am volunteering at the Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual and Transgendered Resource Center in Kalamazoo, Michigan where I am in contact with many individuals who are actively engaged in the construction of a lesbian family. I have consistent and on-going contact with graduate students at Western Michigan University who are members of Outreach, an organization for gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered graduate students. Through this community I am in contact with young people who are just beginning to think about the active construction of relationships and families. I will be attending regular meetings of PFLAG (Parents, Family, and Friends of

Lesbians and Gays) to gain an understanding of the broad issues confronting chosen and biological families of gays and lesbians.

I will attempt to interview representatives of varying institutions that have significant contact with gay families. I hope to interview judges in family courts in Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids who are currently hearing co-adoption cases. These cases are the latest front lines in the on-going battles for parental rights in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered families. Schools, churches, family services, civic organization, fertility clinics, health providers and health benefit carriers are important institutions that impact the ability to construct a family. Issues of domestic partner benefits, adoption fitness, and family support flow in, out, and around these institutions and greatly impact lesbifamily construction.

Schedule

I am prepared to begin research as soon as the Human Subject Institutional Review Board approves my project. That paper work will be completed as soon as my full committee approves my thesis topic. All facilitators are in place and eager to participate. I will be spending approximately 5 to 6 hours each week interviewing individuals of each of the five families who have agreed to assist me. Most interviews will be conducted within their home or at convenient locations close to their home. Several weekends will be spent in respective homes, design to immerse myself in the family activities. I have been invited to spend my spring break living with one of the families. All interviews, life histories and participant observations should be completed by the end of April 2002.

I am currently attending a meeting of Outreach every Thursday evening, volunteering at the GLBT Resource Center weekly, attending bi-weekly meetings of PFLAG, serving as a mentor in Western Michigan's Safe On Campus Program, and receiving weekly news releases from COLAGE (Children of Lesbian and Gays Everywhere). Each of these encounters brings me into contact with individuals who are actively negotiating the meaning of family as experienced by a wide variety of lesbians and will provide me with an additional perspective beyond that of the 5 families I will be primarily working with.

I am continually analyzing my research as part of the methodology of taking field notes. A section devoted to analysis and methodology accompanies each entry. It is my intention to continue this process thereby not leaving all the analysis until the end of my fieldwork. Analysis should be complete by the end of May 2002 and the writing and revision should be complete by the end of July 2002.

Funding is not an issue at this stage, or for the foreseeable future. I will be applying for a research grant from the Graduate College at Western Michigan University to defray the cost of a tape recorder, transcription services, copy services and for travel and camping expenses I will incur when attending a national convention of COLAGE held in Saugatuck, Michigan in July 2002. Due to the late date of this convention and any relevance it may have for my thesis, a completed thesis is not anticipated until the end of July 2002.

Conclusion

The review of relevant literature reveals that research on lesbian and gay families is quite limited, and family level analysis remains largely unexplored. As Demo and

Allen (1996) suggest, as our knowledge base expands on aspects of lesbian and gay family diversity, it will be important to investigate the links to and consequences of neighborhood, workplace, and community support for family construction and well being. Just as the “coming out” narratives represented a politics of liberation particular to the 1960s and 1970s. The narrative of family is reflective of a politics of inclusion and equality specific to the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Can the role of narrative, of hearing stories spoken in a familiar idiom and rhythm, prove more useful than rhetorical attacks on a monolith called “the family?” Are ethnographically and historically grounded accounts that ask what families mean to people who say they have or want them meaningful?

What conclusions could I possibly draw at this time?

Table of Contents

- I. Introduction (What is my Thesis)
- II. Situating Myself and My Facilitators (Methodology)
- III. Intellectual Traditions (Theory and Family Research)
- IV. Overview
- V. Families and Institutions
- VI. Conclusion
- VII. Suggestion for Further Research

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