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Negotiated Families: Power and Agency at the Intersection of Same-Sex Families and Institutions in Southwest Michigan

Project Description:

I propose to undertake a three-month ethnographic project of short, edited life stories that 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. 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 quotidian 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 in the face of oppression. 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 compose individual lives and stories, the processes of movement between these life worlds can be revealed.

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 methodology of participant observation and the collection of life stories of several non-traditional families, 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 accounts of individual experiences, which can reveal the individual’s actions as a human agent and as a participant in social life.

Following Plummer (1998) I will seek to employ a methodology of critical humanism, emphasizing human subjectivity and creativity. 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). Participant Observation is the

standard method employed by all cultural anthropologists and involves informal interviews and spending time with families talking about all features of their lives.

Benefits of Research:

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 model. 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 due to their very existence, which readily exposes the widening gap between the complex reality of postmodern family forms and simplistic family ideology that still undergirds most public rhetoric, policy, and law concerning families. My research can speak to the processes that operate in the construction of “famliness” and help remove the label of “decline,” and the symbols of deviance attached to the new imaginings of “Family” as they drift away from the normative ideal. My research can contribute to an understanding of “Family” not so much as a thing or reification, but as 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.

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 marginalized voices of lesbian families, to weave them together in a tapestry of particular experiences in Southwest Michigan. 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.

Subject Selection:

To draw a sample for this study, I will use the following criteria: participants who self-identify as lesbian; participants who dwell together in the same residence; participants who self-identify as a family; participants who have a history together of two or more years. I will use a snowball sampling technique. After identifying a “gatekeeper” I will contact this individual to secure names of other potential facilitators. All facilitators will be volunteers. Within a short time I anticipate I will have 25-30 eager and eloquent facilitators. As word of this project has spread through the community, families who wish to have their stories told have contacted me expressing a desire to participate.

Risks to Facilitators:

All the families I will be working with live within two hours of my home in Kalamazoo. All are English language speakers. 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.

The methodology of participant/observation requires a degree of trust and openness that is unique. All facilitators will be shown a copy of my thesis proposal so that they may be intimately informed of my research theory, design, and goals. They will be afforded the opportunity to see all copies of my field notes and completed manuscript. The final thesis will use pseudonyms for individuals if so requested.

Protection of Facilitators:

As noted above, participation in my research will be voluntary. All facilitators will be given the option of having a pseudonym assigned in the field notes. I will be the only person who knows the true identity of any facilitator who would use a pseudonym. My advisors will not know the true identity of any facilitator who would use a pseudonym. Facilitators may withdraw from this project at any time. Any field notes particular to any facilitator who withdraws will be destroyed.

Confidentially of Data:

All field notes and follow up questions will be kept in a locked file drawer in my locked office in the Anthropology Department in Moore Hall. I do not use a tape recorder or any other form of audio/video equipment. All data consists of spoken or written words, uttered or written in my presence. These life documents are recorded in a notebook and will be kept for at least ten years. The life documents will be collected in the privacy of the individuals’ home.

Instrumentation:

I use a questionnaire as a follow-up tool to any initial participant observation. That instrument is attached. Otherwise, I do not use any other instrumentation.

Informed Consent Process:

When meeting with a facilitator for the first time, I explain who I am – e.g. that I am a cultural anthropology graduate student at WMU and that I am conducting research into the processes by which non-traditional families attempt to create a notion of family in the presence or absence of certain institutions. I indicate that this research will be used to

complete my Masters Thesis. I then communicate that working with me is completely voluntary and that at any time during the research the facilitator should decide to withdraw, he/she is free to do so. The incidents of withdrawal are very rare as relationships with facilitators are built over a substantial period of time. The consent process in anthropology is oral, as we are not engaged in a situation of a single interview but rather the commencement of a long-term working relationship.

Only children of families that wish their children to participate will be included in the study. These children will be encountered as I participate in the daily lives of these families, as I observe their daily interactions with certain individuals and institutions, and as I collect their stories. Children would only be observed as participants in the larger family and will not be singled out, or observed independently from their parents.

Some of the potential facilitators have expressed a concern with an imposed requirement of a signed consent document. Besides the hypocrisy of issuing pseudonyms for protection in field notes, yet having real names signed on the consent form in the HSIRB office, they view the need for “special consideration” or “protection” yet one more attempt to marginalize their community by assuming that they are in some way emotionally or psychologically less than whole. It is my sincere hope that a compromise favorable to all concerned parties can be reached.

Attachment I: Letter from HSIRB to Dr. Laura Spielvogel.

A condensed version of this project was submitted to HSIRB previously as part of Anthropology 545-HSIRB Project Number 02-01-24. This project was approved at that time.

Attachment II: Letter from Dr. Robert C. Ulin to HSIRB.

Attachment III: American Anthropological Association Code of Ethics.

Attachment IV: Follow up Questionnaire.