The Heterogeneity of Family: responses to representational invisibility by LGBTQ parents.

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Project Overview

• Criteria: over 18, self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, intersex, trans*, genderqueer, non-binary, or queer, and a parent living in the UK.

• In total, I spoke with 30 parents in 24 interviews. There were 7 cis-men, 2 trans-men, 19 cis-women, and 2 trans-women.

5 cis-gender people (2 men, 3 women) who identified as bisexual, queer or non-heterosexual in heterogendered relationships

5 cis-men who identified as gay and were in homogendered relationships

12 cis-women who identified as bisexual or lesbian and were in homogendered relationships

4 cis-women who identified as queer, bisexual, or lesbian and were lone or single parents

1 trans-woman who identified as heterosexual and was in a heterogendered relationship

1 trans-man who identified as gay and was in a homogendered relationship

1 trans-woman who identified as lesbian and was in a homogendered relationship

1 trans-woman who identified as lesbian and was in a homogendered relationship

1 trans-man who identified as gay and was a single parent
Project Rationale

“we have become dependent on the media for the conduct of everyday life” (Silverstone, 2007: 5)

“coming out queer is not merely a personal process of identity, but involves a cultural process of reassessing, embracing, refusing, and combining media representations” (Driver, 2007:2)

Queer people are motivated by “the simple need to express in order to survive, to be seen to be believed” (Dyer, 1990: 286)

“cultural productions…limit what can be said but also make saying possible: they both form and deform all expression” (Dyer, 1990: 1)
Who are LGBTQ families?

“family sociology has quite simply made a fundamental mistake in treating everyday commonsense as adequate...theorists have adapted and refined a notion of ‘the family’ without ever asking...whether or not such an institution existed” (Bernades, 1985: 201)

“moves to pluralise the notions of ‘family’, even when they embrace the study of lesbian and gay families...leave unchanged the heteronormativity of the sociological imaginary” (Roseneil, 2005: 243)

There is “reading and reduction of lesbian and gay parented families as [either] transformative or assimilative” (Taylor, 2009: 17)
How are LGBTQ parents represented?

• Proportional over-representation of gay men parenting

“It’s like ‘god...Stephen Fry really? Lesbians? We’re 50% of the population how can we be so [invisible] to you all?’ and you think ‘who is on the production crew? Who are the people supporting this programming?’...but you pull back bigger, it’s the world we live in. **We live in a heterosexual, male dominated, patriarchal society, so being gay and a woman, well yeah! You are pretty invisible.”* (Paige, 2013)

“They said ‘nobody wants to see fat ugly lesbians on the television’, that was basically it; ‘**lesbians are not media friendly**’, but said in the most rude and stereotypical way.”* (William, 2014)
How are LGBTQ parents represented?

- Parenting dyads dominant mode of representation
- Limited scope of these representations creates pockets of invisibility.


“there’s an anti-lesbian thing sometimes [in *Modern Family*], which I think is uncomfortable for me, when I’m watching with the kids. Sometimes it feels like – their Mums are lesbians – so I think interestingly in a supposedly inclusive [show] actually what gets marginalised is lesbian parenthood and lesbians as a group.” (Darren, 2014)

“When the kids started school…there were other lesbian and gay kids, kids of lesbian and gay parents in the school…in both of their classes…I asked my daughter ‘what’s your family most like?’ and it was interesting because…she didn’t say that her family was most like the other child who had lesbian parents, she identified it with a child who had divorced parents and related it to having two homes” (Darren, 2014)
Feelings about invisibility

“Well we’re gay, living in a straight world aren’t we? So every aspect of our lives, every poster, every adverts, most television programmes, every couple you see on television, the majority [are straight] – so this birthing experience is no different from anything I’ve personally been brought up with over my life, so you don’t read it and think ‘oh! I can’t believe they’re not mentioning same-sex couples’ because everything, you know, 90% of the books I’ve ever read have been straight, so it’s just a continuation of that really” (Martha, 2013)

“I think feeling alienated is just a way of life for most gay people. It’s just something you become very used to, you don’t really even realise it.” (Ivy, 2014)
Feelings about invisibility

“the presence of a child obscures [queer] signifiers beneath the opacity of the heterosexual reproductive narrative”. (Gabb, 2005: 422)

"yes [passing] is absolutely a privilege, it means you can, you don't have to always be fighting fire. On the other hand, it sucks! People stick labels on you that are not your labels and without going round with a little banner on, you know, you can't work against that explicitly, which is frustrating." (Mary, 2013)

Parenting makes you invisible in all sorts of ways. I did feel more confident just going out and about and out as a woman who was also a mum, because I quite like that invisibility gave me confidence in a sense that people weren’t going to be looking at me if I was pushing the buggy along. So in some ways you can make it work for you. (Lynne, 2013)
Problems of invisibility

“one of the reasons I became very ill, was that a lot of straight couples are very used to using [NCT classes] for making friends, or making the social contacts that basically keep women sane when they’re at home with young children…they just seemed to be much more comfortable with doing that with each other, not that keen on inviting us…it’s not just that you’re gay, it’s that you’re gay parents, it’s the additional element of bringing children into your family that really throws people off. They’re not sure about it, they’re not particularly comfortable with it, and so therefore they’re not too sure they want to kind of [get involved with you]” (Rose, 2013)
Problems of invisibility

Jelena: “They’ve got the Sylvanians, the little families. When they were playing one day they said ‘oh that’s a Mum, that’s a Dad’ I said ‘where is the Jelena then?’”

Hannah: “Their games are still quite mummy, daddy, baby.”

Jelena: “But I’ve had that conversation with them both and they try, they say ‘ok, this is a Jelena’ and sometimes they say ‘we do! Sometimes we do play Mummy and Jelena’ and I say ‘no. Not often enough!’…again I got upset sometimes and Lexi had done some drawings ‘there’s Mummy, there’s Daddy, and me and my sister gone on holiday’ I said ‘how often has that been the case? Never. There is either just Mummy and Daddy and Joe [Daddy’s partner], or two of you, or all of us’…so again it’s a bit personal.”

Hannah: “It doesn’t get much more personal than that. How you are seen by your kids, how you are valued within the family, it’s highly, highly emotive.” (2014)
Problems of visibility

“to gain that equality there almost had to be a lot of [representation about] the significance of a civil partnerships…but I think one of the secondary effects of that is that it’s almost narrowed the idea of family down to couples. Which in a way kind of, it can be about, but then you try to expand on that or do something that’s leftfield of that, or a bit different and there isn’t any visibility of that…it’s quite deterministic now whereas if you go back before that, the idea of LGBT families…felt like it could be a bit more creative.” (Seb, 2013)

I wouldn’t have pushed the point about putting books into the school because I’d rather people work it out for themselves rather than inflame a situation by putting a book in with a same sex couple which the one person who might object would then have a reason to make a focus to their objection, if that makes sense. Whereas they’re the silent minority if they do have a problem with us, so we haven’t approached [the school], at all. (Sam and Ian, 2014)
“There's a real fear among other non-standard families I know about getting yourself known to social services…So if you're considering putting yourself out there, by blogging, or being interviewed, or writing articles about your experience, you have that to weigh up. Am I putting my family at emotional risk? And if you're poly: do I have the agreement of everyone involved to talk about our family…am I putting them at risk?...I'm really struggling about...whether to write more about queer, bi, poly parenting and what that means to me, or whether I'm going to bring down a shitstorm on my own head and the heads of those I love” (Mary, 2013)
Need for narratives

“I want [representations] for my son, for him not to feel [different] I just want him to feel it’s ok and it’s normal and it’s nothing different”  (Mathilde, 2014)

“I want her to feel that it’s ok to be [whoever she wants to be] by seeing other people who know that it’s ok to be that. [Seeing diversity regularly is] the only way that she can learn that it’s ok for her to be her.” (Julia, 2013)

“it’s not been painless. It’s been a very personal journey to know what to call ourselves in this vacuum, so to be able to have gone to films or gone to something and say, you know, yeah our model is out there look, but we’ve had to create our own model…It would have helped to have, to see some of yourself out there.”  (Hannah, 2013)
Responses to invisibility

“There was one [book] called Hello Sailor which is about a gay couple, there’s one called Tango Makes Three which is about some gay penguins. There’s another called Who’s In My Family and it was interesting because all of these books in a sense I have some problems with so...I ask[ed] the kids who was missing in terms of the families that were represented and [that gave] some quite interesting prompts to discussion” (Darren, 2014)

“you could have a story book about a single parent and they might be bisexual but it’s not stated. I think I would sometimes say those sort of things to Zoë...things like ‘that person, who knows? They might be bisexual, they might have a trans history, we don’t know do we?’ It’s not explicit but it might be in there. So sometimes books were – probably it’s not been in the author’s mind – but I would put it in there.” (Lynne, 2013)

Responses to representation
Inheritances and hopes

“there’s not one way to change the world…the fact [my daughters] will go out and be confident saying ‘I came from a gay family’ will touch upon people that gay activists won’t touch on.” (Harriet, 2013).

“I want him to be familiar with the freedom that comes with being gay because everyone gets so preoccupied with how difficult, and it is difficult…but it’s also freer because…you can kind of have your sexuality as you want it and sexuality is integrated into living and the book stores where you get your intellectual books are the same places you get your sex toys and I like that it’s not puritanical and I like that [it] is very open” (Eva, 2013)

“just being a gay family, there’s a radical act in that really. Being visible in a school, I guess that’s more radical than going out demonstrating” (Hannah, 2013)
Thank you.

For more on the media preferred by LGBTQ parents, see https://queerfamilyphd.wordpress.com/list-of-media/

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Selected Bibliography


