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How to cite:

Gabb, Jacqui (2018). Unsettling lesbian motherhood: Critical reflections over a generation (1990-2015). *Sexualities*, 21(7) pp. 1002–1020.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/1363460717718510>

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Unsettling lesbian motherhood: Critical reflections over a generation (1990–2015)

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Sexualities
0(0) 1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/1363460717718510

journals.sagepub.com/home/sex



Abstract

This article explores how advancements in equality rights combine with attitudinal changes in UK society and LGBTQ communities to impact on the experience of lesbian mothers over a generation. The author reflects on ordinary moments where sexuality and relationships become meaningful and situate emotions at the heart of analytical enquiry because it is through emotional interactions that micro–macro networks of relations intersect. Autobiography is combined with original data from empirical research to provide analytical entry points, which aims to advance understanding and also facilitate reflection on how we understand and come to know queer parenthood. Whilst there are now many routes into lesbian motherhood and the stigma of queer kinship is diminishing, this article demonstrates the need to problematize the prevailing narratives of coupledness that are emerging and tease apart the conflation of temporal progression, progressive rights and narratives of progress.

Keywords

autoethnography, coupledness, emotions, lesbian motherhood, queer families

Introduction

The international lesbian and gay association (ILGA, 2015) has identified the UK as the most progressive country in Europe for LGBT rights. Over the past 25 years there have indeed been rapid and predominantly positive socio-cultural and legal changes. Social attitudinal data indicate growing tolerance of lesbian and gay relationships (Duncan and Phillips, 2008); key legislative changes underpin and derive from these attitudinal shifts. Parenting opportunities have been advanced through IVF (in vitro fertilization) being made available for lone mothers (2005) and same

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sex couples (2009). Lesbian and gay couples have accrued legal recognition through civil partnership legislation (2005) and same-sex marriage (2014). The impact of these changes on couples who want to celebrate and claim socio-legal status for their relationships remains significant. Parenting possibilities can now feature in the imagined futures of LGBTQ relationships. In this context, this article looks back, to explore how the experience and rhetoric of same-sex parent families, and lesbian motherhood in particular, have shifted over a generation. It examines how LGBTQ rights and progressive shifts in legal and socio-cultural tolerance have impacted individuals' lives across the time period, on both an everyday level and with regards to imagined parental-partnership trajectories. In so doing, it fastens everyday experience to the *materiality* of socio-cultural changes, socio-economic class context and biographical circumstances. It also aims to demonstrate the value of autoethnographic observations and personal reflection, showing how these can identify new and hitherto under-researched analytical entry points into existing sets of qualitative data.

There is a wealth of research that has investigated queer parenthood and family creation (see Berkowitz, 2009; Goldberg, 2010). Recent literature has explored 'families of choice', focusing on elective ties that refashion understandings of kinship (Weeks et al., 1999; Weston, 1997). The practicalities and wherewithal of journeys into queer parenting have been interrogated (Tasker and Bigner, 2007), exploring the ways power and parenthood intersect (Gamson, 2015), through stories of fostering and adoption (Goldberg, 2012; Hicks, 2011) and donor conception (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014), for example. Focusing attention on the impact of heterosexist norms, legislation and familial ideologies, research has shown how queer parenting is discursively conceptualized (Riggs, 2007; Thompson, 2002). Across these accounts, to a lesser or greater extent, differences and inequalities which shape parental 'choice' have been examined, to shine a light on the changing nature of family in contemporary societies (Gamson, 2015). For example, centralizing race in accounts of lesbian motherhood demonstrates how differences cut through this sexuality-defined cohort (Moore, 2011); similarly with class and education (Taylor, 2009). Stories of different relationship and family forms have shown how everyday acts and strategies of resistance may combine to queer lesbian motherhood (Park, 2013).

This article is indebted to and grounded in this rich body of knowledge, but it does not aim to review literature (for an overview 1970–2000, see Clarke, 2005). Like some of the authors cited above (Gamson, 2015; Riggs, 2007; Weston, 1998), the substantive argument advanced draws on a range of sources, including interview data from original empirical studies¹ and autoethnographic 'moments' (Gabb and Fink, 2015b). I use autoethnography to re-situate emotions at the conceptual, methodological and analytical heart of relationship studies. Affect is a core part of political grammar; it is 'key to reading the relationship between the epistemological and the ontological' (Hemmings, 2011: 25). In my analysis, therefore, I focus on the emotionality of experiences because, through this, the patterning of relationships emerges, bringing to light how we relate to and engage with others and the social

world around us (Burkitt, 2014: 8). My experience as a lesbian mother situates me in the psycho-social field of enquiry. Personal extracts that are included here derive from research field notes produced over the past 20 years, and recollection that is enriched through contemporary conversations and shared storytelling with family and friends. These personal moments have served to trigger moments of reflection on and critical re-engagement with empirical data generated over this time period. When participant extracts are presented, the research origin of these data is provided in endnotes; this temporal location of data aims to open up generational readings of same-sex parenthood. Where further demographic information helps to advance the analytical point, this is included in the body of the text.

Writing lesbian motherhood: My own and others' lives

This article, then, aims to provoke reflection from the situated vantage point of lives lived – my own and others. Sociological perspectives on intimacy and relational life are illuminating and varied (see Gabb, 2008), but I agree with queer cultural theorist Lauren Berlant who suggests that it is a timely point to rethink intimacy and how we come to know intimate lives (Berlant, 1998). My decision to combine life writing and empirical investigation keeps experience attached to the visceral – heartfelt – embodiments of those represented. As Berlant says, life writing can be ‘a primary laboratory for theorizing “the event” . . . [intimate publics] are laboratories for imagining and cobbling together alternative construals about how life has appeared and how legitimately it could be better shaped not merely in small modifications of normativity’ (Berlant and Prosser, 2011: 181–182). These intimate public laboratories are dynamic and diversely populated; they facilitate polyvocal storytelling (Plummer, 2003) that resists the analytical compulsion to advance a unitary narrative.

This resonates with the feminist thinking of Laurel Richardson who suggests that bringing together different modes of expressions can be both creative and advance insight. In stitching together this multi-layered textual tapestry, method becomes inquiry: ‘a way of “knowing” – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it’ (Richardson, 2000: 923). This invites us to think not just about *what* we write, but *how* we write and *where* we write from. Our authorial position remains on the page and writing *through* this situated position places us in dynamic relation to the others whose stories we recount; a creative analytic practice (CAP) which simultaneously evokes, represents and deconstructs meaning (Richardson and St Pierre, 2005: 974). My use of everyday moments in lesbian motherhood – both my own and others – is crafted in this vein. It focuses the analytical lens in this way because everyday moments are where people *feel* the immediacy of their intimate connections, and it in these emotional scenarios where micro and macro networks of relations intersect and overlap (Burkitt, 2014: 20).

Focusing attention on the everyday renders the experience of marginalized groups as epistemologically valid (Craven and Davis, 2013: 27). Everyday moments

shift attention away from epiphanal or ‘fateful’ events (Giddens, 1991) onto ‘small’ ordinary interactions that are personally significant and which illuminate understandings of meaning-making (Gabb and Fink, 2015b). These moments provide analytical entry points. In the absence of immediate and recognizable cultural value, we are required to double take; to think again, perhaps from a new point of departure. As such moments are a means of undoing more than revelation (Baraitser, 2009), from this vantage point theoretical understandings can be built from the bottom up.

Me and mine: On 29th December 1990 I gave birth to Liam; a baby who was longed for and cherished from the outset by me, a lesbian lone-parent. Over these past 25 years, my adult relationships have gone through several iterations: the constancy is me and Liam. The mother–child ‘bond’ remains fundamental. My love for Liam is unreserved, and while I’m not certain what unconditional love means, I feel this is it.

Liam’s birth thus represents a pivotal moment in my life story and he has an important voice in this article. His birth is not, however, the only biological factor that is important. Like many of my generation, I am adopted. I have no biological connection to the man and woman who raised me, cared for me, loved me unconditionally: my mum and my dad, both now sadly deceased. My inside–outside status within the field of queer kinship studies therefore starts from multiply-situated positions on the cultural margins. This heritage shapes me: it informs my understanding of family and how I approach the academic field of study. I both decentre biological narratives and embody them. From this situated outside-in position, the familiar is rendered strange. I remain confounded by the cultural fascination with blood ties and genetic lineage: I simply don’t get it. However, as a birth mother, when parents talk to me of the intensity of their love for their children, I understand: I empathize.

Western socio-cultural meanings of biology stubbornly shape kinship ideologies; the floating signifier of birth and death. Genealogical links are rendered immutable and as such their permanence bestows authenticity on the social fabric of the heteronormative reproductive order (Weston, 1998: 77–79). Queer kinship has to some extent joined this genomaniac throng. The queer potentialities of assisted reproductive technologies have, I contest, been invoked to (paradoxically) consolidate the value of ‘blood, genes, inheritance, descent, and reproductive biology’ (Franklin, 2013: 285). How parenthood is contemporarily created and crafted has refocused attention onto conception as the inauguration of parenthood. In analysis of adoptive parenthood and families of choice, it typically signifies the benchmark against which such queer kinship is (favourably) measured (Thompson, 2002). Genealogy remains, therefore, overridingly formative and symbolically significant – even when it is absent from the familial equation. Throughout this article, I seek to probe the origins and meanings of this biogenetic certainty.

Early conceptions of same-sex parenthood (1980s–1990s)

A devastating characteristic of lesbian motherhood during this early period was the prevalence of divorce narratives and ill-fated custody disputes (Hanscombe and Forster, 1981). At its worst, around 90 percent of lesbians in the UK were losing their children in contested custody cases during this time (Rights of Women Lesbian Custody Group, 1986). Heteronormative rhetoric and accompanying duress to ‘do the right thing’ placed the child’s interest in contradistinction to the mother’s own (selfish) sexuality. Recounting her experience of lesbian motherhood during this time, Vicky described unimaginably ‘tough decisions’ that were foisted upon her.

*Vicky:*² It was very difficult. I wanted to take them with me but I didn’t have anywhere to take them to. I knew that there was absolutely no way I could provide the kind of lifestyle that the father could . . . I knew absolutely nothing about being a lesbian, about anything that was available for any help. I didn’t even know anybody else I could talk to about it. And my partner convinced me that if we took them they would be tormented at school and taunted about it and all sorts of things like that. And my husband begged me not to take them. And the other thing was, I couldn’t face going into a court and fighting for them and being told that I was a bad mother. So in the end all of those things made me decide to leave them with their dad . . . it was very difficult.

The emotional pain in Vicky’s interview was palpable and tears freely flowed. She recalls how she didn’t get to tuck her children into bed and read them bedtime stories or be there to comfort them when they cried. Her ‘choices’ are all too reminiscent of those imposed upon my birth mother, some 20 years previously. Only when socio-cultural and legal contexts moved on did Vicky get a chance to parent, re-becoming a ‘hands-on mum’ when her eldest child moved in to live with her in the late 1980s. This distressing account of *childless motherhood* is not simply included here to illustrate the precarity of queer mothers’ position at this time; I use it to also draw attention to factors – beyond sexuality – that differentiate the experience of lesbian motherhood. For women like Vicky, the ‘options’ available were overwhelmingly punitive and restrictive because of the potent intersections of sexuality and class. Indeed, the resilience of such factors arguably continue to shape the experience of LGBTQ parenthood (Taylor, 2009) as I discuss later on. However, before I move on to these boundaries of possibility, I want to acknowledge some of the community contexts that have been arguably pushed aside in the queer narration of contemporary kinship.

Whilst there is now a rich body of work that richly represents the fields of study on queer maternity and same-sex parent–families, in the 1980s and early 90s lesbian separatist rhetoric remained in circulation. Here, lesbian mothers were sometimes characterized as collaborators with the patriarchal order (Robson, 1994) and the derogatory term ‘breeder’ was common currency. Efforts to realize

a different type of childrearing were seen as futile (see Polikoff, 1987). ‘No matter what you do, if you have a boy, he will terrorize and attack girls and later, adult women, and statistically will very likely be a rapist’ (Jo, 1991: 315–317). Lesbian mothers with sons were regularly denied access to women’s events – such as ‘lezzie camp’ and ‘dykes on hikes’ – on the basis of family composition. To be clear, such sentiments and separatism represented a minority opinion; being a lesbian mother during this time was, nevertheless, grounded in and to some extent discursively shaped by such stigmatizing rhetoric which posed motherhood and sexuality as unnatural and politically undesirable bedfellows.

Men and boys: Full of optimism, I move to a new area that is renowned for being lesbian-friendly. A party invitation arrives on the doorstep; I await the date with high expectations.

A couple of drinks consumed and conversations on parenthood emerge. I readily join in:

Me: ‘Yes, my little one loves doing that too.’

‘You have a child?’

‘Liam; he’s at home.’

‘You’ve got a boy; bad luck. Did you not douche with vinegar after inseminating? It’s a good way of getting rid of the male sperm.’

I am dumbfounded – lost for words. I’m guessing I mumbled a reply; I cannot recall. Notwithstanding the implausibility of the advised course of action; the comment is stinging. I am misplaced and undone.

This momentary encounter illustrates how lesbian mothers with sons encountered separatist rhetoric of the time. Self-insemination was lauded as a means to assign feminist autonomy; positive action was required to ensure that the right (gendered) outcome proceeded. The birth of a boy signified failure in this regard, resituating mother and son together in the patriarchal order. Whilst contemporary nuanced understandings of sex, gender and parenthood suggest that such sentiments should have been relegated to the dusty eons of yesteryear, they have not been entirely left behind. Only a few years ago, a woman recounted to me her ‘family story’ in which she described her 30 minutes post-insemination headstand – reasoning that female sperm swim more slowly than male ones, so this would enhance their chances. Nine months later their son was born and both she and her partner are now devoted mothers. Urban myths are hard to displace, and the desire for a child of one sex or the other has retained its stranglehold in this cultural context and many others. The bifurcation of gender invoked here and seamless blurring of men and patriarchy belongs in many ways to a bygone era – albeit recent in terms of generational time. What remains are the structural factors that shape experiences of queer motherhood.

The boundaries of possibility

The impact of sexuality is still largely determined by personal contexts and biography, with what is imaginable and the realms of achievability being filtered through multiple lenses. For those mothers with educational and cultural capital, for example, discriminatory Conservative policies that disavowed education on same-sex relationships (notably Section 28)³ paradoxically afforded personal and political opportunities. The groundswell revolt against such legislation enabled new territory to be carved out through counter-discourses that celebrated alternative reproductive and cultural narratives. These familial vistas were starkly different to those of Vicky, engendering a story of lesbian motherhood as the vanguard of possibility.

*Penny:*⁴ [Prime Minister] Thatcher introduced a residence order . . . to help grandparents; but actually lesbian couples could use it. She was furious apparently . . . We were the second lesbian couple to do that in the country . . . The first with one child each; and we had to go through to the high court, which was ridiculous . . . So we were kind of trying to use the law right from the beginning to strengthen our card . . . It was very much a political thing for us.

Charlotte: Pushing the boundaries.

Penny: We felt like we were going to do it and we would be the ones because we were the oldest of our cohort and all that kind of thing, and just because we could because we're middle class and educated and we have a better chance than other people would . . .

Looking back at their journey into parenthood some 20 years previously, both Charlotte and Penny openly acknowledge the privilege afforded by their class status. It enabled them to *own* the debate, taking it on, challenging it: it was *their time*. Hiding lesbian motherhood in plain sight thus served to provoke and facilitate a counter-discourse. In the 'Stop the Clause' furore that surrounded Section 28, lesbian motherhood in many ways found its voice, and even occupied centre stage. This dynamic period subsequently blossomed into the so-called 'gayby boom'. Self-help pregnancy manuals (such as Saffron, 1987) provided the information that women needed to create families, and keep them, and in so doing conjoined parental and partnership rights.

As a woman in her 20s during this time, with badges on my lapels and placards raised high, my personal journey into lesbian motherhood was filled with zeal and overriding optimism.

Pride in the park: A lovely afternoon chatting and laughing with friends old and new; maternal and sexual belonging coalesce. Liam, toddling around in his element, relishes the attention of well-wishers who compliment his dancing and request pictures of this 'funky little chap'.

I push the buggy across the park, a young man approaches:

‘Do you think this is an appropriate place for a child?’

This remark, deftly aimed, is designed to let me know that he is the responsible adult;

I am the irresponsible parent.

The recollection of this moment is shrouded in mixed emotions. As years passed I have rehearsed my retort to the comment many times: mounted my imaginary robust defence. I understand. In an era dominated by media hysteria around HIV and AIDS, this young man’s desire to protect hitherto discrete sexual spaces is understandable. Pretended families were carving out a cultural space, but geopolitical territory remained contested. The need to be seen as ‘good mothers’ and provide *the best* of familial circumstances (Dunne, 1998) meant that motherhood and sexuality were also in many ways *strategically* kept apart. When *Diva* (1998)⁵ first devoted an issue to the topic of lesbian motherhood, it was tales of familial bliss and images of loving embraces that filled the pages. Wholesome togetherness emphasized the security of our domestic environments for children. Debates on S&M, body piercing and lesbian sex that peppered previous and subsequent issues were absent. Lesbian parenthood was sanitized (Gabb, 2001).⁶ The comment nevertheless smarts and has a familiar sting: lesbian motherhood is misplaced.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the power and ubiquity of heteronormative ideology shaped the boundaries of what was imaginable and permissible in the realms of queer parenthood, making it hard to reconcile parental and sexual identities (Gabb, 2005b). For many, the weight of genealogical and familial ideologies served to contain possibilities.

*Claire:*⁷ I have two different relationships: one with [partner] and one with the boys. And when we’re all together it’s as natural and as calm and polite as possible, but it’s obviously not like a *recreation of a family*, and I wouldn’t try to do that to them ... [The boys] would have accepted it; but I know that they feel more comfortable that this is *their* home. (emphases added)

For Claire, what constitutes family is clearly informed by naturalizing discourses; however, her resistance to ‘recreating family’ also reflects an acknowledgement of the *temporal ties that bind*. Claire’s desire to keep apart her family and partner was motivated in large part by her experience of the fragility of adult–sexual ties. After a series of heterosexual and then lesbian relationships, she accepted that such adult affinities could not be relied upon. It is children who provide the constant and reliable source of love in her life (Beck and Beck-Gersheim, 1995). To safeguard her children, she thus occupies the position of responsible adult: mother and children first.

Claire’s experience of lone motherhood is shared by many. Whilst recent trends in the UK divorce rate indicate a decline, the number of divorces remains nevertheless high (ONS, 2012). There has also been a 20 percent increase in Civil Partnership Dissolution since 2011, albeit this rise in ‘queer divorce’ is more a

consequence of the initial numbers entering into civil partnerships than an upward trend in behaviour (ONS, 2013). The rate of relationship and ‘family breakdown’ means that there are nearly 2 million lone parents living in the UK, and the year-on-year rise over the past decade is more than just statistically significant. Lone parents with dependent children now represent 25 percent of all families and women account for 90 percent of all lone parents (ONS, 2015). The adverse impacts of associated poverty have been strongly linked to poor outcomes for children (Kiernan and Mensah, 2009) and thus lone parenting remains one of the most persistent factors in shaping experiences of motherhood (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) – heterosexual and queer alike (Lewin, 1993). In the 1990s, the obdurate Thatcherite rhetoric of ‘traditional family values’ exacerbated the social stigma attached to the experience of single parenthood and, in the absence of a partner, this often overshadowed other points of sexual identification (Gabb, 2005a):

*Zara:*⁸ Being a single parent, being an unsupported parent, or limited support parent, that’s the hardest thing and I think that’s partly what I’ve been trying to think well what is, what makes my life different...

For mothers like Zara, maternity was not experienced in the context of coupledom and/or the kinship fold. The impact of this was both financial hardship and peer-isolation, with the combination of the two making her life feel hard and at times isolating. Her maternity set her apart from the majority lesbian community. Her lesbianism disconnected her from the institutional spaces of heterosexual motherhood. Her route into parenthood, via a former heterosexual relationship, positioned her outside ‘the vanguard’. Whilst not experienced as damaging, difference shaped Zara’s sense of self, something that was further exacerbated by having a professional job and being an owner–occupier living on a predominantly rented and socio-economically deprived housing estate.

Creating families and family diversity

Robust information on the numbers of children living in LGBTQ-parent households is particularly hard to discern from national population datasets (Aspinall, 2009); establishing an accurate picture of the extent of family diversity is even harder. Sexual diversity did not feature in the Integrated Household Survey (IHS) until 2010, long after Section 28 (1988) and the 1990s ‘gayby boom’. It is, therefore, impossible to know with statistical confidence how the stratification of motherhood impacts on differentiated populations. What is clear, across time and in different socio-cultural contexts, is that the residual meanings of blood, genes and the reproductive narrative retain their purchase and combine with persistent rhetoric on the ‘best interests of the child’ and the ‘need for a father figure’ in shaping the experience of lesbian maternity. This is perhaps one reason why challenges to heteronormativity and familial ideology often come from the bottom up – out of the mouths of babes.

The family twig: I arrive to pick up Liam (aged 10) from school.

Teacher: 'Can we have a word, I'm sorry; I'm worried Liam will be upset.'

She goes on to describe the afternoon lesson where children were asked to draw their family trees. Noticing that Liam is sitting quietly at his desk, not drawing, she inquires:

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing; I've finished.'

'But there are only two people on here.'

'That's because there's only me and my mum.'

Neatly sidestepping the issue of fatherhood, she persevered:

'What about grandparents?'

Liam explained that his nanny had recently died but she couldn't be part of his family tree anyway because his mum was adopted and therefore there were no blood relatives apart from me and him. So, he reasoned:

'I drew a family twig.'

The mortified teacher inquired whether there were other people who he thought of as family. He stated that there were of course many people who were his family, it's just that, by her instructions, they didn't count – there were no blood connections.

She suggested he included everyone he loved.

Showing me his picture she likened it to woodland. All kith and kin were depicted including our three dogs, three goldfish and numerous friends and 'relatives'. The family tree had blossomed.

This moment in Liam's childhood is fondly remembered by us both, albeit the picture itself has been sadly lost amidst several house moves. His unfettered acceptance of our respective embodied family circumstances and their material (in)significance stops me short, still, and fills me with pride. Through this school exchange, the lesson had been learnt (by both pupil and teacher) and the salience of cells and plasma and the cultural meanings afforded to these had been unsettled.

Today, in 2017, social and legislative changes mean that there are more routes to LGBTQ parenthood than ever before and progenitor ancestry is no longer taken-for-granted. Same-sex parenthood has shrugged off its novelty value and queer kin diversity reflects every hue of the family rainbow. Before the bunting is unfurled, however, and notwithstanding positive shifts in socio-cultural attitudes (Duncan and Phillips, 2008), it is important to remember that sex and relationships (SRE) education in England is yet to be compulsory, and the extent to which family diversity is 'taught' in schools is thus patchy at best. Moreover, equality legislation and reproductive opportunities have perhaps simultaneously opened up and closed doors on the intimate lives that are imaginable.

In the UK, equal rights and bio-technological advances have served to reinforce the couple dyad. Settling down, committing to a partner for the long term through civil partnership and/or same-sex marriage, and 'starting a family' are now routine pathways in a queer life trajectory. The academy remains deeply divided on the

issue of same-sex marriage. For some, the rise in same-sex unions query/queer traditional institutions and represent a ‘profoundly symbolic rupture’ between marriage and heterosexuality (Weeks, 2007: 15). Socio-legal scholars offer words of caution, suggesting that without wider recognition of sexual inequalities that problematize the status quo, LGBT entitlements conversely instantiate heterosexuality rather than undo it (Rahman, 2000). For others, same-sex marriage represents assimilation (see Warner, 1993), transforming transgressive queer eros into dull rituals that reproduce ‘normative citizenship’ (Brandzel, 2005: 177). This is to oversimplify the debate and there are many areas of consensus. What is clear though is that the ‘queer wars’ (Warner, 1999) around same-sex unions have overwritten the ‘sex wars’ of yesteryear and in so doing have neatly deposited same-sex parenthood in the inner sanctum of the ‘charmed circle’ (Rubin, 1984).

Coupledness and the reproductive imperative

Early vestiges of radical potentiality that were present in blended bio-social ‘families of choice’ are hard to recuperate when sex radical is pitched against biogenetic imperatives. Whilst there is exciting contemporary research that queers genealogy through socio-legal analysis of queer wills (Harries and De Las Casas, 2013; Johnston and Longhurst, 2010), for example, my point here is that polarized debate has served to discursively obscure the diversity that is present in our lives and loves. Experience is trimmed to neatly fit within a sexual cartography: in–out, this–that, and nowhere in-between. Former radical potentialities of queer parenthood are subsumed beneath the weight of heteronormative relational rights. Concepts of home and family belonging now frame LGBTQ experience more than ever before (Weeks et al., 2001: 77–103), with the permanence of bricks and mortar embedding futurity into the very construct of queer households. The intensification of parenthood (Lee et al., 2014) is mobilized to cement this familial agenda, wherein the neoliberal adult couple relationship is based on parenting responsibilities and ‘priorities are rooted in work, economic self-sufficiency, education and good behaviour’ (Williams, 2004: 244).

Recent research interviews completed with young queer couples revealed how their intimate ambitions now routinely include a commitment to growing up and settling down. The underlying assumption here was parenthood is now something that must be considered: whether, when and how to have children:

*Chloe:*⁹ The initial outlay is what I think, because it’s going to cost a lot of money to get some sperm or to get a baby, isn’t it? Um, and it’s a lot of money, it’s a deposit on a house . . .

Leanne: We have talked about getting a dog, but a dog is, like, a big commitment, like a child, really. The only difference is that you can’t take a dog on the plane.

Chloe: Now you’re comparing dogs to children . . . [raising voice] it’s nothing like a child.

Leanne: No, but I meant in terms of, like, they grow up, whereas a dog, it is always dependent on you, isn't it? It's like having a child, a baby forever.

In the banter between Chloe and Leanne, their commitment to the relationship project is consolidated through children, pets and home ownership. Young LGBTQ people in 21st-century Britain have grown up in the milieu of same-sex marriage. Potential parenthood is their right and most planned – at some point in time, in some shape or form – to exercise these legal rights. Whilst early writings on ‘families we choose’ represented a counter-discourse with elective ties being championed as evidence of the cultural artifice of genealogy (Weston, 1997), today the child and parenthood stand as symbols of permanency that are invoked to instantiate personal commitment. The affective and moral work that is required in fulfilment of our ‘happiness duty’ directs us towards certain life choices and away from others (Ahmed, 2010). Radicalism and dissent are replaced with the affective rewards and social responsibilities of parenthood, secured through the state sanctified intimate union of ‘the couple’.

*Genevieve:*¹⁰ For a long time, we talked about whether we might adopt, and now we're thinking more we might try and have one ourselves. Um, so yeah, I think it is something that we both want, and because that's, sort of, our shared plan for the future, we can, sort of, I mean, hopefully if it happens, it might not, but if it does that's how we, sort of, see things panning out in the future. So, obviously, that's a massive commitment to each other, as well.

Talking to young queers, it was clear that reproduction is now employed as a rite of passage into commitment; a metonym for duration that bestows futurity on the relationship (Preser, 2015). Future plans and ‘family planning’ have become enmeshed. Starting a family *together* facilitates entry into the symbolic realms of authentic reproductive citizenship where biological ties simultaneously solidify the past, present and future of both parental and partner relationships.

Over the past generation (1990–2015) in the UK, there have undoubtedly been significant advancements in equality rights and social attitudinal changes, but in the wake of these gains ‘compulsory coupledness’ (Wilkinson, 2012) renders all non-dyadic configurations transgressive. As Kath Weston (1997) asserts, we have come a long way from the two mummies/two daddies models of lesbian and gay parenthood; however, on the UK statute books it is dyadic same-sex (partner and parental) unions that are being championed. In the first 5 years of civil partnerships (December 2005–2010), over 46,000 same-sex partnerships had been registered (ONS, 2011). Policy interests on families converge around children, parenthood and families (DfCSF, 2010). In political and popular discourses, ‘hard working families’ are the priority. Irrespective of sexual orientation, dual-headed (read dual income) households are characterized as best placed to meet children's emotional and practical needs. Government tax breaks

(Richardson, 2015) for ‘married’ couples reward those who are willing to work at their relationships.

Conclusions

In the new reproductive order, respectability and responsibility are embedded in sexual citizenship rights (Richardson, 2004) in ways that may be ultimately and ‘tragically self-defeating’ (Weeks, 2007: 131). One person’s gain is typically at the expense of another. Over the past generation, family visibility has simultaneously erased the non-familial, the non-dyadic and the queer (Smith, 1992). The rise of the ‘pink pound’ has further accentuated the gap between those with economic resources and those without. Whilst there have been clear advances across much of Europe in terms of LGBTQ rights over the past 25 years, this article demonstrates why we should also be wary of conflating temporal progression and narratives of progress. Narratives of progress are premised on shared understandings: *we* are moving forward (Hemmings, 2011). The collective here is hailed and harnessed into the progressive momentum that propels us onward and upwards. Whilst time moves forward and many contemporary equality rights may be indeed progressive, we should not lose sight of who gets written in and who gets written out of the story of LGBTQ parenthood that gets told. For those who experience their sexuality through ‘the scene’ and/or within vibrant queer communities it may be hard to perceive the isolation and lack of choices experienced by others outside these environs – past and present (Gabb, 2005b); but socio-economic resources and cultural capital remain as salient as ever, perhaps even more so in the current economic climate of ‘austerity Britain’.

Women’s journeys into lesbian motherhood are multiple, so too their subsequent experience of parenthood, but these journeys remain grounded in the materiality of circumstances and result from differential degrees of choice and opportunity that are available and/or imaginable. The Adoption and Children Act (2002) does afford lesbian and gay people the right to adopt (individually and as partners), and the UK is presently one of only 14 countries where such same-sex couple adoption is a legally available option; however, for those who want to conceive a child, the resources required are not insignificant. Donor insemination (DI) costs £500–£1000 for six cycles of treatment. In vitro fertilization (IVF) is available on the NHS but access to this service is tied to strict eligibility criteria, such as previous DI attempts, age and general health indicators (NHS, 2017). Private IVF is prohibitively expensive for most and can cost over £5000 per cycle of treatment. So whilst Britain may be one of the most progressive countries for LGBTQ rights (ILGA, 2015), reproductive possibilities are not cost-neutral. For those without access to financial resources, it all too often remains an either–or choice: homosexuality or parenthood, or unregulated and potentially unsafe routes into parenthood (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014).

The sexual stories that get told both represent and shape experience (Plummer, 1995): narrations are constitutive. As such, in this article I have aimed to paint

a more complex picture of same-sex parenthood over the past generation. To acknowledge and own the contexts that shape experience, including contestations from outside and within the queer community. Being a lesbian mother has not always been easy and it remains deeply stratified. Routes into parenthood are undoubtedly proliferating in contemporary UK society but these are culturally embedded within the discourses and legal rights of the parental couple as the basis of a family unit. This seemingly regressive narrative may not, however, be as normalizing as it may first appear. My recent research¹¹ has shown that couple relationships are not uniform – or even necessarily dyadic; they are as diverse in form and practice as the individuals within them. Relationships are sustained through dynamic networks of friends, relatives, partners, colleagues, children, pets – to name but a few (Gabb and Fink, 2015a). The diverse experience of couples and queer families arguably has the capacity to be more progressive than any advance in reproductive technology or partnership legislation.

In this article, then, I have explored how the experience of same-sex parent families has shifted over a generation and, in so doing, have disrupted straightforward associations between progressive narratives of LGBTQ rights and the everyday lives of lesbian mothers. Locating parental–partnership trajectories in the materiality of their socio-economic, biographical and temporal contexts has demonstrated some of the ways that queer parents and their children encounter the normalizing discourses of family and the reproductive order. These encounters cannot shrug off the vestiges of economic disadvantage, social stigma, or the weight of cultural norms – and pressures are brought to bear from both outside (in heteronormative society) and inside (the LGBTQ community). It also demonstrates the value of autoethnographic observations and personal reflection as a research tools, using these analytical entry points to take a fresh look at qualitative data and fasten experience to the emotionality of relationships. This situates affect at the core of enquiry. It illustrates the analytical rewards of studying queer kinship through the sociological lens of emotions because, by paying close attention to everyday ‘emotional scenarios’, it is possible to see the ways in which micro and macro networks of relations intersect and overlap (Burkitt, 2014: 20). Queer kinship research amply demonstrates how families come in many shapes and sizes; this article has shown how we can provide a more nuanced account that reflects this diversity by focusing on the emotional investments that shape these families, internally and externally. In so doing, ‘pretended families’ are not written anew, instead a more circumspect narrative is advanced including the costs of progressive relational and reproductive rights.

Notes

1. *Imag(in)ing the Queer Lesbian Family* (1995–1996) was a small-scale project that was completed during my postgraduate studies. It explored how we might conceptualize and represent the sexual and the maternal in studies of lesbian motherhood.

Perverting Motherhood? (1998–2002) explored experiences and meanings of sexuality in lesbian parent families. Semi-structured interviews were completed with lesbian

parent families ($n = 13$) who lived in the Yorkshire region of the UK comprising ‘birth mothers’ ($n = 11$), ‘other mothers’ ($n = 7$) and children ($n = 13$). Socio-economic/class range 50:50; parents were in full-time ($n = 18$) and part-time employment ($n = 8$) or received state benefits ($n = 7$). Few respondents held managerial positions at work. The sample was predominantly white/UK ($n = 14$).

Behind Closed Doors (2005–2006) examined experiences and understandings of intimacy and sexuality in families. A combination of different qualitative methods was used comprising diaries, emotion maps, observation, interviews, vignettes, photographs and focus/group interviews to generate data with parents and children living in the north of England. The sample included 10 families, heterosexual ($n = 9$) and same-sex ($n = 1$): comprising mothers ($n = 9$), fathers ($n = 5$) and children ($n = 10$) (ESRC RES-000-220854).

Enduring Love? (2011–2013) explored how couples experience, understand and sustain their long-term relationships, with particular attention to the impact of gender, generation, sexuality and parenthood. This mixed methods study included an online survey ($n = 5445$) and qualitative multiple methods. The qualitative convenience sample comprised 50 couples: women ($n = 56$) and men ($n = 44$) aged 18–65 years old; 50 percent were parents and 70 percent had higher education qualifications and/or were in professional employment. The sample was largely white/UK ($n = 80$); 30 percent were LGBQ; transsexual participants ($n = 4$) variously identified as LGBQ or heterosexual (ESRC RES-062-23-3056).

2. Participant in study 2: *Perverting Motherhood?* (1998–2002).
3. Clause 28 was a Government Bill that became UK law in May 1988. It prohibited any local authority from ‘promoting’ homosexuality and/or ‘pretended family relationships’. It was repealed in 2003.
4. Participant in study 4: *Enduring Love?* (2011–2014).
5. First published in March 1994, *Diva* remains the only monthly mainstream magazine for lesbians and bi women in the UK.
6. Study 1: *Perverting Motherhood?* (1998–2002).
7. Study 2: *Behind Closed Doors* (2005–2006).
8. Study 1: *Perverting Motherhood?* (1998–2002).
9. Study 4: *Enduring Love?* (2011–2014).
10. Study 4: *Enduring Love?* (2011–2014).
11. Study 4 *Enduring Love?* (2011–2014).

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