

## QUEERING FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

Chiara Bertone and Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli (editors)

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*Queering Families of Origin* was originally published as a special issue for the *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* in 2014. The book provides a rich and detailed account of the experiences and perceptions of self-identified heterosexual family members of GLBT individuals – and it succeeds admirably by building on and citing the earlier work of gender, sexuality and family studies by scholars, in order to provide a “thick descriptive” (Geertz, 1973) account of marginalised individuals within a heteronormative context. In order to curtail critique of providing a monolithic account of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) individuals in relation to the social institution of the family, the authors have included contributions from America, Australia, Italy, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom.

The first chapter, “The Transparent and Family Closets: Gay Men and Lesbians and Their Families of Origin”, written by Alenka Svab and Roman Kuhar, echoes earlier contributions on the dualism of “the closet” – as both liberating and constrictive. Reporting on how the parents of gay and lesbian youth seek to remain silent about their children’s sexual orientation after disclosure, the authors’ inductive contribution results in the demarcation of a “transparent closet” and “family closet”. The article succeeds in underlining a constructivist focus on familial life as a continuous process.

Erika L. Grafsky, writing from an American perspective on “Becoming the Parent of a GLB Son or Daughter”, bases her work on eight interviews with parents of sexual minorities. She elaborates on the relational aspects associated with the “disclosure-to-family” process and provides a counterargument on the preceding narrative of silence



through engaging more “open” accounts of parents on redefining their relationships with their children. Drawing on a qualitative research design, she soundly comments on the richness of the narrative account associated with continuous process of “becoming” a parent or openly identified sexual minority child.

Using one’s culture, and in particular one’s religious affiliation as part of the renegotiation of familial roles, processes and acceptance, is commented on by Chiara Bertoni and Marina Franchi in “Suffering as the Path to Acceptance: Parents of Gay and Lesbian Young People Negotiating Catholicism in Italy.” Conceding, right at the outset of their contribution, the specificity of their Italian context, the writers aptly draw on Swidler’s (1986; 2001) work on culture as a supposed “toolkit” to convey a particular performance in 46 parents’ action repertoires upon learning (and potentially accepting) their child’s sexual orientation, whilst simultaneously adhering to the principles of Catholicism. In keeping with the first two chapters, the theme of relationality is again foregrounded here. Establishing and/or negotiating one’s relationship is not only restricted to that of the parent-child, but the participants rather establish a link between their personal relationships and views with that of general perceptions and attitudes towards homosexuality, their own position with that of the Catholic Church as well as that of the church with homosexuality. The chapter successfully engages the undeniable existence and influence of hierarchical binary divisions which still potentially inform and underlie the parent-child relationship.

Valerie Q. Glass’s study also adopts a qualitative focus on the experiences of 11 black lesbian couples living in the Southeastern and Midwestern regions of America, in the chapter entitled “‘We are with Family’: Black Lesbian Couples Negotiate Rituals with Extended Families.” Glass effectively engages three forms of rituals through which the participants enact the visibility and/or invisibility of their intersecting identities of race, gender and sexual orientation: those with their family of origin or extended families; their rituals as couple; and weddings. Although primarily informed by Feminist theory, Glass’s emphasis on reflexivity (albeit more subtly), recalls the progressive contributions of George Herbert Mead (1962) on “reflexiveness”.

Janet B. Watson’s chapter, “Bisexuality and Family: Narratives of Silence, Solace, and Strength”, centres on the construction of bisexual identity in, what she terms as “the family closet” which engenders a paradox of protection and prohibition in Australia. Watson focuses on the heterogeneous experiences of those who identify as bisexual in their families of origin. Adopting the principles of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987; 2006) work, Watson judiciously comments on the “ontological messiness” associated with the ongoing process of constructing a sexual and gendered identity informed by continuous dialogues within particular social contexts.

Watson’s focus on what Ken Plummer (1998) would term the “messiness” associated with the heterogeneity of sexuality, is also represented in the chapter of Susan L. Johnson and Kristen E. Benson, “‘It’s Always the Mother’s Fault’: Secondary Stigma of Mothering a Transgender Child.” This chapter centres on the personal narratives

of a single mother raising a six-year-old transgender daughter in a rural American community. Their work echoes previous research on the stigmatisation faced by parents and transgender individuals in American society and the importance to deconstruct heteronormative gendered understandings in favour of a reciprocally beneficial reinforcement of one's personal social and sexual identity.

Commenting on the lack of representation of studies which focus on familial experiences with regard to transgender identity, Raquel (Lucas) Platero continues the previous chapter's focus on the parents and families of gender-nonconforming children through a critical interrogation of trans-youths living in Spain. Directing her critical reflexive zeal towards the medical profession's inability to adequately support trans-individuals, she advocates for a deeper (and non-monolithic) understanding of the pervasive impact of psychology and psychiatry on these individuals and, if necessary, to establish support networks outside the realm of the medicalisation.

Media studies are brought into the foray through the inclusion of two chapters. The first of two, written by Michela Baldo "Familiarising the Gay, Queering the Family: Coming Out and Resilience in '*Mambo Italiano*'", chronicles the way in which two Italian-Canadian families negotiate their coming-out narratives, with a primary focus on their two gay sons in the film *Mambo Italiano*. Adding to Glass's use of rituals, Baldo deftly engages his reference to rituals in order to establish an intersection between ethnicity and sexuality. This is done, according to him, in order to facilitate access to family resilience, particularly on the part of the parents. The author cleverly comments on how gayness may be integrated within an existing "ethnic schema" in order to envision and/or re-envision their family life as continuous process. Through this intersection, the marginalisation of both ethnic and sexual minorities is elucidated excellently.

The second of the media-themed articles, "Queer TV Moments and Family Viewing in Italy", written by Luca Malici, provides a critical focus on the perceptions of both GLBT- and heterosexually-identified participants of queer representations on mainstream television. Malici's work decentres a solely Western perspective on the consumption and interpretation of media messages, especially as it relates to the television audiences' immediate reaction and gradual reflection and discourse on the display of, what he calls, "queer moments" on Italian television. His work, like that of Bertoni and Franchi, also values the role of culture in order to understand and deal with a child's homosexuality.

The final chapter recalls the earlier themes of rituals, familial occasions, the family as process and the contradictions associated with (or rather within) the heteronormative schema of gender and sexual relations. Entitled "Sexual Citizenship in Private and Public Space", writers Valeria Cappellato and Tiziana Mangarella engage the role of parental participation in, amongst others, Pride Parades in "familisation of citizenship rights" for their gay and lesbian children. The latter process seeks to gain equal rights for sexual dissidents in public settings (e.g. during the periods of the parades), but as

the writers rightfully observe, such a process may also engender assimilationist and restrictive control measures over gay men and lesbian women. Such rhetoric underlies the incongruence between the unconditional acceptance of gay and lesbian children, albeit the heteronormative ritualised framework in which it takes place.

In its entirety, this book (as was the special issue) is an excellent compilation of studies which provide a much needed medium for the voices of the families of those labelled as sexual dissidents. On the one hand, it may allow families in similar circumstances with a more personal identification with the narratives of others akin to them and, on the other hand, with resources to address the challenges they experience in this regard. I also recommend the book to academics and students alike. It may serve as an invaluable point of departure and resource for those interested in family, media, cultural and social studies. The editors retain a sense of coherence throughout the compilation through the use of intersecting themes, including the importance of the family as continuous (and “messy” or contestable) process based on reciprocal discourse, critical reflection and the adoption of particular available resources in order to elucidate the pitfalls of binarised rhetoric and heteronormativity. That being said, the editors’ and writers’ work provide a balanced and critical cognisant account of the positive and restrictive factors which either encourage or impede the well-being of such families through an astute integration of seminal literature and theory with that of their own methodologically-sound work.

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