

Undoing Normativities And Creating Family: A Queer Stepfamily's Experience

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Queer Theory

Notes the social construction of sexuality out of social norms and power structures in labeling

- Sexuality
- Gender

Certain expressions of sexualities are labeled as normative (e.g., heterosexual), others as deviant (e.g., gay, lesbian, ect.)

Normative sexuality is **heteronormative**; Deviant sexuality is **queer**

Sexuality, relationships, and family are all considered performances and not something to have

When queers do family in a way that is not heteronormative, they are considered illegitimate and difficult for most who are members of a heteronormative family structure to understand

Unintelligibility

Queer Theory

Undoing- how queers and their families resist heteronormative standards/ counter unintelligibility

“Daily social rituals” that guide sexual and family life (p. 48)

Queers create family life, making their family legitimate, resisting and rejecting a heteronormative culture does not view them as such

Undoing creates and sustains a queer family within the context of heteronormativity itself

Stepfamilies

In 2015, there was at least one step child in approximately 3,700,000 homes (United States Census Bureau, 2015)

The process of becoming a stepfamily has been characterized with:

- conflict
- stress (Petren, Ferraro, Davis, & Pasley, 2017)
- boundary ambiguity (Boss, 2016)
- struggles with co-parenting
- difficulties for the nonresidential father to maintain ties with his biological children (McGene & King, 2012)

Nonresidential stepfamilies may also be more vulnerable to experience boundary ambiguity

(Stewart, 2005)

Stepchildren/ stepparents may struggle if the stepchild feels the stepparent is attempting to discipline them (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011)

Research Question

*What are the experiences of undoing family
for a gay male-headed stepfamily?*

Queer Stepfamilies

Queer stepfamilies have been virtually invisible within the family sciences (Gold, 2017)

Stigmatized as both stepfamilies and queer (Berger, 2000)

- Legal
 - Less legal recognition
 - “Morality” considered when determining custody (Chauveron, Alvarez, & van Eeden Moorfield, 2016; Patterson, 2013)
- Interpersonal
 - Rejection of both queer biological parent and child by peer groups
 - Child being told queer biological parent is immoral by heterosexual biological parent (Titlestad & Pooley, 2014)

Queer Stepfamilies (con't)

There are supports and strengths that make this family form resilient

- Increased support from stepsiblings (Titlestad & Pooley, 2014)
- Men in stepfamily relationships have higher relationship quality than men in their first cohabitating relationship or a repartnership (van Eeden-Moorefield, Pasley, King, & Crosbie-Burnet)
- Positive stepparent to stepchild support (Current-Juretschko & Bigner, 2005)
- Flexible and child-centered in the creation of new family (Lynch, 2000)
- Support from the queer community (Titlestad & Pooley, 2014)

Procedures

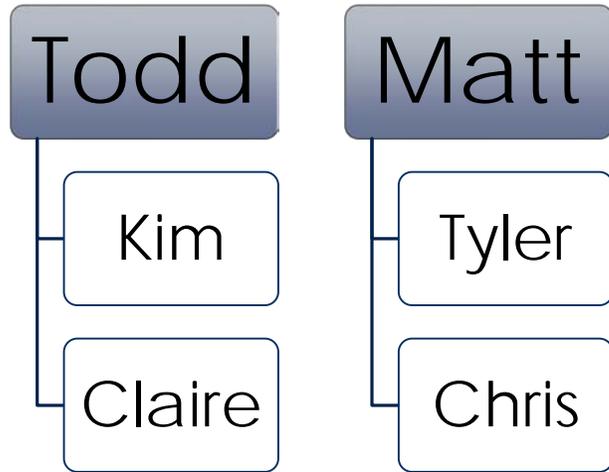
Data came from a larger study on queer stepfamilies in a Midwestern state

Recruitment letters were provided to 12 LGBT organizations

Participation criteria:

- Be a gay/lesbian headed stepfamily
- Been together for at least 5 years
- Have an adolescent (13-17) or young adult who has lived in the home at least some point in their childhood

Participants



Fathers

- Age: 40s
- Race/Ethnicity: White
- Relationship length: 9.5 years

Children

- Age: 13-19 years
- Race/Ethnicity: White

The family was selected because:

Male-headed families, are often under-represented in queer family literature (Biblarz & Savci, 2010)

The assumption is made that gay male headed families do not want children, although a body of research indicates this is not the case (Tornello & Patterson, 2015)

Mothers are often viewed as the default parent; over half of Americans view mothers as a better parent than fathers (Parker & Livingston, 2017)

Case Study Analysis

- Can explore participants' contexts in-depth:
 - Oppression (Gilgun, 2012)
 - Heteronormativity (Oswald et al., 2005)
 - Intersecting contexts (Mendez, Holman, Oswald, & Izenstark, 2016)
- Case was bound to a single family
 - Two different interviews
 - The whole family
 - The fathers
- Using queer theory data was coded for
 - Performativity (actions related to the construction of the family)
 - Interpretation (how family members made meaning of their experiences)
 - Context (What role context played in how family members constructed family)

Results: An Overview

- Context
- “It Wasn’t a Big Deal”
 - Labels
 - New Family
 - Rituals
- “I Never Expected Them To Call Me Dad...But There Are Rules”
- “They Will Always Be Our Kids”

Results

Context

Majority Queer Positive Neighborhood

“ [Our city] is more diverse and in this neighborhood anyway, with the rainbow flags and everything. That’s not as important for us, but that sense of community is important.” -Matt

Predominately Positive Coming Out Experiences

“ My sister actually considers herself transgender...[and]my parents had totally accepted my sister. So I knew I wouldn’t have any trouble with it.” -Todd

Legal Context/Custody Determination System In Their County

“When we went to court to decide custody, the decision had already been made and well ‘you cannot provide for your children’ ” -Matt

Results

“It Wasn’t a Big Deal”

Labels

“I don’t see why there is really a need to have “step” in there. **We are just a family**...it is just the fact that we are all together.” -Chris

New Family

“All of us [kids] started hanging out more and... now **I still think of them more as sisters** than I do as Todd’s kids.” -Tyler

Rituals

“We have never really done Christmas [with our biological mom] ...and you guys go full out Christmas.... **it makes us actually look forward to coming.**” -Chris

Results

“I Never Thought They Would Call Me Dad...But There Are Rules”

“It was always important to me when we had the kids... we would always have meals around the table... everything else **it is part of the family atmosphere**. It was important for me to do that.” – Todd

“**There are certain things that we expect** when the kids come here. We expect them to clean up after themselves, take care of their dirty dishes, keep the rooms clean.” -Matt

“You ask and **we have respect for you.**” -Kim

Results

“They Will Always Be Our Kids”

“ [The custody decision was] ‘[here is the child support you will have to pay](#)’ ...And whether that is a gay thing or a straight thing I don’t think that really matters.” -Matt

“ [We] both tried to be very amicable [with our ex-wives] and very accepting and bend over backwards because [we don’t want it to be ‘well you don’t get the kids.’](#)” -Todd

“ [The children] are coming to the realization that ‘[okay, regardless of what mom says about gay relationships,](#) you know, here is the reality.’ ” -Matt

Discussion

Due to feelings of "*just a family*" instead of a stepfamily or a queer stepfamily, they were able to do family without the focus of deviancy based on heteronormativity

Heteronormative standards indicate only certain forms of family are legitimate (Halberstam, 2012), but that it is also more widely viewed for women to be caretakers even among queers (Biblarz & Savci, 2010)

- Blending was viewed by the family as being a positive process
- Performing family was also important for both the fathers, which undid heteronormative stereotypes about gay fatherhood (Biblarz & Savci, 2010)
- The fathers valued the inclusion of not only their children, but also their stepchildren as paramount to family

Discussion

The legal system within the larger community in which they divorced did not grant them such legitimacy in that they did not favor fathers, which resulted in less time with their children

The mothers held power through social norms (heteronormativity) by attempting to call into question the legitimacy of the fathers' family (Lynch, 2000; Titlestad & Pooley, 2014)

- Through children's discussions of their family

Fathers recognized themselves as not having the same legal rights to their children as did the mothers, which is consistent with a queer lens (Butler, 2004)

Other studies have found similar results for lesbian stepmothers have attributed this to heteronormativity (Goldberg & Allen, 2013); our fathers also described laws in place that made it difficult to be with their children as fathers in general

Thank You,
Matt, Todd, Tyler, Chris, Kim, & Claire for
their time and letting us into their family
life

A decorative graphic consisting of several parallel white lines of varying lengths, slanted upwards from left to right, located in the bottom right corner of the slide.

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