Identity and Kinship in Lesbian-Led Donor Conceived Families

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Introduction

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I will explore interconnections and negotiating transgressions for parents, reinventions of self and negotiating new relational identities. The respondents in my study went through redefinition of themselves, their couple status and family identities and the identities of their children. Lesbian parental couples potentially disrupt normative heterosexual meanings of family and gender and could subvert the meaning of motherhood and gendered parental identities. Evidence from this study indicates that lesbian couples have created joint parented family projects based on egalitarian ideals; however, other definers of identity caused contradictions and tensions. These included culture, disability, ethnicity, class, gender and religious background. Intersections of identities in their negotiated family presented potential sources of tension for the respondents. The respondents embarked upon a new form of motherhood and family which (at the time of interviews) had no frame of reference in tradition or policy frameworks for parenting. Thus a process of change, flux and fluidity began. The problems they faced were both cultural and structural. These processes were underpinned always with the material realities of class differences. Differences of cultural capital and access to social and economic resources shape this experience and deep in the cultural definers of self lies constructions of race and ethnicity. This research included detailed accounts of their internal and external struggles to resolve their own maternal and parental identities in relation to other aspects of self.

Aims

My aim is to explore underlying complexities in new family forms in order to consider the long impacting changes brought to our understanding of family and kinship by new transgressive developments in family formation.

Lesbian parental couples potentially disrupt normative heterosexual meanings of family and gender and could subvert the meaning of motherhood and gendered parental identities. The emergence of lesbian parental couples has occurred during an era of change and diversity of family forms. This has resulted in theoretical paradigm shifts from biologically determinist approaches to family to social construction approaches which have impacted on legal and social structures of families. My work is about interpreting and living with interconnections and negotiating your way through various transgressions, reinventions of self and negotiating new relational identities. The respondents in my study went through redefinition of themselves, their couple status and family identities and the identities of their children.

My aims are to reveal the complexity of intersections of identities in their negotiated family presented and to understand potential sources of tension for the respondents. The respondents embarked upon a new form of motherhood and family which (at the time of interviews) had no frame of reference in tradition or policy frameworks for parenting. Thus a process of change, flux and fluidity began. The problems they faced were both cultural and structural. These processes were underpinned always with the material realities of class differences. Differences of cultural capital and access to social and economic resources shape this experience and deep in the cultural definers of self lies constructions of race and ethnicity. This research included detailed accounts of their internal and external struggles to resolve their own maternal and parental identities in relation to class and other definers

Constructing Kinship

Kinship is about 'belonging' and this is often defined by culture, background and class as well as sexual identity. This is where feelings of belonging, family and process of identification are deep and contested. This is where people seek connectedness and four of respondents chose to establish Bio genetic kinship. The centrality of biology and genetic ties are displaced in the creation of lesbian families, as the new construction of the co mother is social rather than biological. Yet Kate and Jan, Rose and Laura, negotiated 'bio genetic continuity' by choosing blood relatives of the co-parent as sperm donors so it is still important. The importance of biological ties is a central factor for some couples, but the means of achieving bio genetic continuity varies. In her study of gay and lesbian kinship, Weston (1991) defines family as not essentially biological. She argues that family has been constructed in a myriad of ways by lesbian parental couples. Jones (2005:222) for example illustrates various meanings that can be inscribed onto constructions of family:

Rather the concept of bio genetic continuity can be re-inscribed with specific meanings by particular subjects in their construction of familial relations - when using donor insemination (Jones, 2005:222).

I learned through this study that the point of making reproductive choice is just one moment when ethnicity, disability, class and nationality intersect in contradictory and unresolved ways. This was only one moment and the decisions made were part of ongoing and relational constructions of identity not only for the couple but for their children and families of origin. These interconnections were part of transgressions, reinventions of self and negotiating new relational identities. The respondents in my study went through redefinition of themselves, their couple status and family identities and the identities of their children. The couples offered their stories of struggling against the norm, their disappointments, fulfilment of family projects, resistance and triumph in their chosen sexual identities and families. Their respective narratives, hopes and family aspirations contribute to an evolving picture of a new family form. The study produced knowledge of lesbian's reproductive decision making and the significance of other social characteristics /definers of self as they journeyed through reproductive practices of established medicine, adoptive procedures and non-clinical routes to conception.

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