

# Bringing Queer Theory Home To Meet The Parents

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## 2 questions:

1. What could **Queer Theory** offer the study of parents?
2. Is **performativity** taken up in **popular discourses of maternity and paternity**?

# Queer Theory – what is it?

Early 1990s LGBT/feminist studies: associated with Butler, feminist using Foucault & psychoanalysis

## What does it do?

- Shows the cultural nature of 'personal'/subjective identities
  - E.g. sex & gender are culturally assigned & not fixed/ guaranteed by nature; and the gender binary sustains the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990, 1991)
- The performative nature of identity (like Althusser, being hailed X leads to you feeling/being an X)
- Destabilises identity politics & challenges any

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# Focussing on the **doing** of parenting

...might help meet:

- 1.(socialist) feminist demands to recognise the reproductive **labour** involved in parenting;
- 2.LGB campaigns to value parenting by **same-sex couples**;
- 3.feminist, queer & trans- demands **avoid (gender) essentialism.**

# How?

- By eliminating maternal & paternal identities tied to gender, so that mothering is no longer essentially different to fathering (certainly in English, 'fathering' means procreating in some contexts)
- By focussing on the **doing** – labour – not the **being**
- By disregarding **identities** in favour of **relationships**

# Certainly, there is...

- Common recognition of **social** parents as distinct from **biological** parents
  - e.g. schools always say 'Parent/carer' on letters home
  - e.g. popular discourse of **step-parents**, or families comprising children from previous relationships
  - e.g. greater mention of 'Looked After Children' ('in care')
  - e.g. everyday reference to '**dad's girlfriend**' / '**mum's boyfriend**'



# Some background: UK cultural politics

- Class (**social & economic status**)
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Liberal defence of family as **private** (and Nanny State as interfering)

**I HAVE A LOVECHILD  
YOU HAVE A BASTARD,  
YOU ARE FECKLESS  
I AM FOOLISH**



# Blaming lone mothers



**SOME  
PEOPLE  
ARE GAY.  
GET ON  
WITH  
IT!**



**Brunel**  
UNIVERSITY  
LONDON



Patrick Culbert

**Army Captains. Pete Bennett & Adam Harmon after their wedding  
(Huffington Post 1.11.11)**

**WE ARE THE NORMAL PEOPLE**



**WHAT DOES  
THAT MAKE  
YOU??**

## QUESTION 2

Is **performativity** taken up in **popular discourses of maternity**

1. legally
2. in popular discourse
  - a) advice literature
  - b) psychologisation of parenting
  - c) lesbian mothers

# The law (a lay view of)

- 'Parental responsibility'
- Ungendered e.g. 'parent', 'employee', 'cohabitee' 'spouse', 'student', 'child', 'young person'
- Performative (e.g. benefits are increasingly not about need, but are **conditional** on doing something e.g. what used to be 'Unemployment Benefit' became 'Job Seeker's Allowance')



I solemnly vow to care  
for this child as long as I live

Is 'as long as I live'  
LONGER than 'till  
death do us  
part'?



## 2. in popular discourse

### a) advice literature?

- PhD data
- Netmums UK – e.g. Section of site Non Biological Parents’ and Families and Relationships’ so clearly acknowledges social parents’ as against ‘biological parents’
- Today’s ‘Positive parenting’

# 'Positive parenting'

'Criticise the behaviour, not the child'

E.g. [BBC – Health: Children and discipline](#)

'Keep criticisms to a minimum – only **criticise the behaviour, not your child**. e.g. "That was a thoughtless thing to do" rather than "You're always so thoughtless."

E.g. the [BabyCentre.co.uk](#) concurs:

- 'Criticise the behaviour not the child' – for example, 'Pinching is a naughty thing to do' not, 'You are a naughty boy'. The first version leaves self-esteem intact, the second runs it down.

## b) psychologisation of parenting

Yes

Valorised discourses of family and parenting and in fact 'relationship' in general are **psychological** ones and never structural ones (Parsonian family)

So post-identity in that not 'head of household' 'broken family' type definitions and performative in the sense of emotionally meaningful

c) lesbian mothers?

**No**

But why would they draw on any different discourses of parenting to other mothers? In fact, sometimes conservative and mainstream (& sometimes for understandable defensive reasons)

# Parenting Classes

- Government funded, usually **compulsory** set of classes for ‘problem families’
  - an intervention to challenge violence or abuse
- Can be seen as **cultural re-education** of ‘underclass’ families: but this means it is an activity that people can be trained in
- Has strong critics (class pathologisation, government interference, left-libertarian)



# To Conclude

- Do the parents like Queer Theory?
- Does QT pass? Is she seen as acceptable or even 'a good thing'?
- Will they 'grow to appreciate each other'?

**Post-identity Parenting** – a separation of partnership from parental relationships (& distinction between these), a more relationally defined (ie. Subjective/emotional), that focuses on the relevant



- *'Parent' as a performative identity*

- *identification produced through the repetitive doing (acts) that comprise parenting, (whatever the subjective relation/orientation to it i.e. own or others' resistance)*

- *'Post-identity' Parenting*

- *a separation of partnership from parental relationships (& distinction between these), a more relationally defined (i.e. subjective/emotional) orientation that focuses on the relevant matters of relationship over identity. 'It doesn't matter who you are, but what you do (for those children)'*

*The former is a subjective and the latter a sociological phenomenon.*