

Bringing Queer Theory Home To Meet The Parents

Dr Pam Alldred

Centre for Youth Work Studies
School of Health Sciences & Social Care,
Brunel University, UK

Pam.Alldred@Brunel.ac.uk

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

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



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)**

Brunel
UNIVERSITY
LONDON

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



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.