# 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?

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# 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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# Queer Theory – what is it?

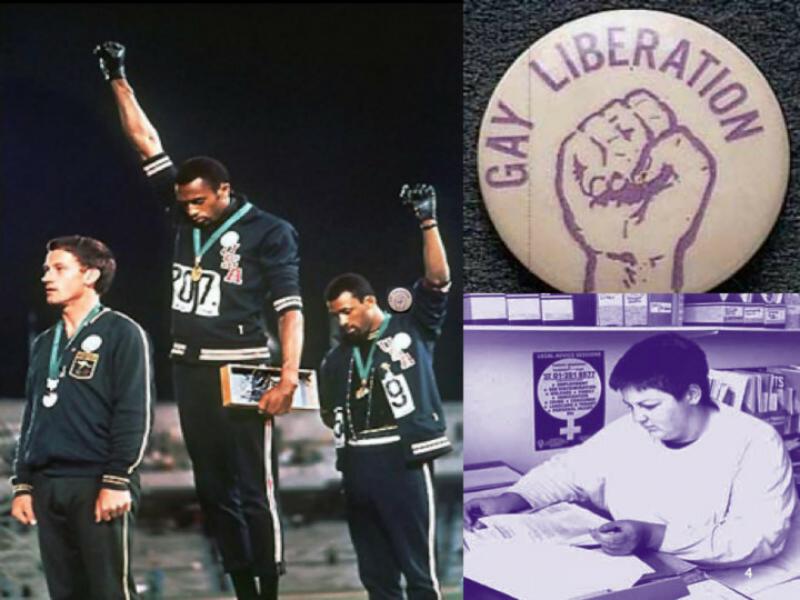Early 1990s LGBT/feminist studies: associated with Butler, feminist using Foucault & psychoanalysis

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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 to avoid (gender) essentialism.

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# 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

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# 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'

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# Some background: UK cultural politics

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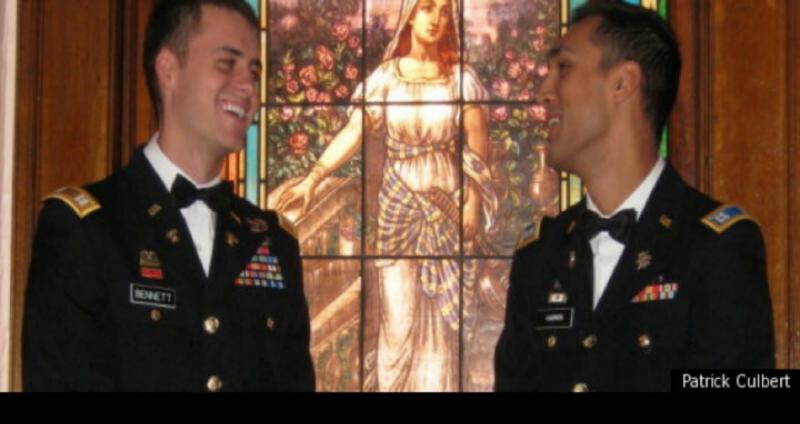- Liberal defence of family as private (and Nanny State as interfering)

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# Blaming lone mothers

Patrick Culbert

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

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12

# 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

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# 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'

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# 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'

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# '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 the self-esteem intact, the second runs it down.

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# 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)

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# 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)

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# 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 relevan

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- **'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 sociolo phenomenon.*