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Queer(y)ing The Family:

An Investigation into Theories of Family

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Abstract

Within society there are many varieties of family arrangements, however some New Zealand social policies overlook any groups which do not reflect the dominant family type. Certain aspects of social policy prevent their recognition, preventing the receipt of state welfare assistance. I argue provision exists for primarily one type of family group: the heterosexual nuclear family.

Beginning with the definition of the New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings (Statistics New Zealand, 1994), I examine the implications that such a narrow definition may hold for alternatives to the dominant heterosexual model.

This discussion develops into an examination of the construction of our social policy and the underlying ideologies which inform such policy. Specifically I examine some of the literature from a sociology of the family and provide an explanation for the disturbing fact that in New Zealand society it would appear that families which do not fit the definition outlined above are rendered invisible.

This research engages with theoretical material to examine both the construction and ideology of New Zealand social policy. Given the current trend towards greater choice for the individual, the important nature of such research is emphasised. I refer to the concern of the New Zealand Income Support Service that a woman who chooses to become pregnant outside of a couple relationship, and then requires income support assistance may be viewed as having become pregnant for financial gain. Alongside this, I examine the ideology of the deserving and undeserving poor which underpins much of New Zealand's welfare history and defines who is deemed worthy of assistance.

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Marti Hartley,

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Introduction

Feminists have called attention to the changing family. "The Family" is not an homogenous institution where the norm is a husband, wife and their biological children. The contemporary family may take a variety of forms, a fact which should be celebrated, not condemned (Marjorie Cohen, 1989:13).

Where my family of origin come from in Lancashire, England, there is a saying *there's nowt as queer as folk* . Taking up this point, in this thesis I build upon that adage somewhat and suggest that there's nowt as queer as families.

In her book *Brave New Families* Judith Stacey (1991) suggests that the nature of families is changing. Stacey's book is American both in focus and content but I agree with her assertion that families are indeed changing. They cannot be considered as static institutions only comprising of two opposite sex, heterosexual parents any longer. Figures from 1991 (Statistics New Zealand, 1994) indicate that less than half of all families in children reflect this model; twenty five years ago these families accounted for two-thirds of all families in New Zealand.

Stacey (1991) argues that women are responsible for bringing the family into the contemporary postmodern age¹. Without beginning a discussion of women's traditional responsibility for the family, or the ideology of domesticity at this juncture, women most certainly do have a role to play in changing the dynamics of the family. Stacey's postmodern families are, however, predominantly heterosexual. I wish to add the

¹ See also Baber and Allen's (1992) discussion of how women are changing families.

variable of sexuality to the equation and contend in this thesis that queer² families are the definitive postmodern³ family.

The specific focus of this research is a text based analysis of some of the theories regarding the construction of heterosexuality, and of how this construction is carried through into the social policy arena to reinforce heterosexuality as the dominant sexuality.

In the first chapter I examine the theories I employ in this research and the research methodology, specifically that it is largely a reflexive project. This discussion takes place in the context of debates about the place of feminism within academic research and I journey through some of the literature of these debates.

The focus of chapter two is an examination of some of the more traditional approaches to the study of the family. Beginning with the theories of Friedrich Engels (1884) about the origins of the family and the role that the family plays in a capitalist society, I draw upon some of the theories of a sociology of the family to argue that these traditional informants are implicated in the continuing marginalisation of families which can be said to be other than heterosexual. Particular attention is given to David Morgan's 1996 text *Family Connections*, which arguably inadequately acknowledges any family other than that of the

² The term queer appears throughout this thesis to refer to both queer as an umbrella term and also queer theory. Each will be explained in their own contexts.

³ I refer here to the challenging of and resistance to boundaries that postmodernism asserts, and also critiques of meta-narratives that may infer a superior position. Given postmodernism's resistance to an hierarchical approach to both theory and the world in general it is ironic to suggest that there is indeed anything definitive about postmodernism at all. I am not suggesting that queer families are either better or worse than other family forms, but rather that they present challenges to existing ideologies, and as such may be considered postmodern. See also Nancy Fraser (1995).

heterosexual nuclear unit. Primarily this discussion will highlight traditional understandings/definitions of family.

Theories of the family from a non-heterosexual foundation are explored in Chapter Three. Specifically Laura Benkov's (1994) work on how lesbian and gay parents have 'reinvented the family'. The challenges lesbian mothers present traditional assumptions about what family constitutes a family will be explored with reference to Peter Nardi's (1992) work on the creation of families within the gay and lesbian communities, and Kath Weston's (1991) book about how gays and lesbians may choose their families, both provide support for an examination of whom can be included as a family member. I consider the work of Maggie French (1992) "Loves, Sexualities, and Marriages: Strategies and Adjustments". French's material is an important consideration of parenting within a heterosexual marriage but with the twist of one or both parents having had homosexual relationships in the past. I expand upon French's (1992) sense that for her the homosexuality of one or both partners was not generally an overt feature of the couples that she researched. I contend that, by marrying, the lesbian or gay partner was assuming a heterosexual identity and thus living a heterosexual existence, in terms of the social perception of the relationship.

The queer families that my research will examine are not anticipated to be living within such an arrangement: their homosexuality is assumed to not have been *closeted*.⁴ The changing nature of what family is and can be defined is integral to this

⁴ The term *closeted* is used as a shorthand term for those who are not open about their sexuality, or their sexual relationships. This can be both internal in the sense that they have not come out to themselves and also external in that they still protect their sexual orientation, and often pass as heterosexual.

section. I conclude with a methodological discussion outlining the reflexive nature of this research and of my role within it.

Also I examine the issue of the choice to have or not have children. Support for this discussion will be drawn from Jean Renvoize (1985) author of *Going Solo: Single Mothers By Choice* and Belinda Trainor's 1988 article "Having or not having babies - what power do women have?" Renvoize (1985) writes of women who choose to become sole parents, and Trainor's (1988) work focused upon who has access to reproductive technology.

In Chapter Four I detail the creation of policy and also of how policy is co-opted to reinforce a dominant model, in this context, heterosexuality. I also present material gathered from visits to the New Zealand Income Support Service (N.Z.I.S.S.) and expand upon the anomalies I detected within aspects of their policies. The heteronormativity⁵ of these policies will be analysed with reference to Carabine (1996) Richardson (1996) and Warner (1993).

In chapter five I provide some policy recommendations and discuss how these may be enacted. I provide the conclusions of this research and reassert my belief that the only families adequately catered for by welfare provisions in New Zealand are those seen to be representing the ideal of the nuclear heterosexual model.

⁵ In using the term heteronormativity I draw upon Michael Warner's (1993) work, and refer to the practice of assuming a heterosexual orientation of those who may be otherwise. Warner (1993) contends that society has only one way to view a man and a woman together, that being as a heterosexual couple. Heterosexuality is taken as the normal form of sexuality, and thus a man and woman who reflect the majority image of couples, are read as a heterosexual couple. That they may both view themselves otherwise is seemingly cancelled out. Should a third party be present the possibility of a relationship between the two of the same-sex is seldom considered.