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What might the voices of the second generation tell us?

Julie Mooney-Somers, 2006

When I read the first question in the call for contributions for this special issue of *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review* - 'what shapes do queer families take?' - I had an unexpected moment of recognition. I have a queer family of origin (a few years after I was born, my mother and father separated, and my father came out as a gay man). I am also queer (I came out as a lesbian in my teens). I had never thought about my sexuality in intergenerational terms before. I'm second generation queer¹. I had not at that stage read anything about the experiences of a so-called second generation. The little I have read since researching this piece makes me wonder about the silence around the experiences of the lesbian/gay children of lesbian/gay parent(s). One obvious reason for this silence is the desire not to give ammunition to the enemy. That children may grow up to adopt a lesbian/gay subjectivity is a popular argument drawn on by those who oppose lesbian and gay parenting (Clarke, 2001; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004; Hicks, 2003, 2005; Riggs, 2004). I do not want to use this piece to unpick reasons for this silence. Rather, I would like to use this opportunity to reflect on my own experiences as a 2nd gen-ner, to suggest some of the ways in which our experiences may be sufficiently different to 1st gen-ners, as to warrant specific attention and research.

A few years ago I was involved in research on the psychosocial development of children in families headed by lesbian women (Golombok et al., 2003; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). One of the questions often posed in the literature on lesbian/gay parenting concerns the sexual identity, orientation or preference of children raised by lesbian/gay parents. The findings of studies in this area appear to show that children of lesbian/gay parents are not significantly more likely to form same-sex relationships when compared to the children of heterosexual parents (see for example, Anderssen, Amlie, & Ytterøy, 2002; Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe, & Mikach 1995; Tasker, 2005; Wainwright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004); though Stacey and Biblarz (2001) have questioned whether these findings are so unequivocal. Critiques of this research challenge the assumptions underlying these questions about sexual identity. In particular, such critiques ask whether it matters if children grow up to be lesbian/gay, or if they are more likely to do so (Anderssen, 2001; Clarke, 2000, 2002; Riggs, 2004; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Though aware of these critiques, I never wondered about those children who *did* grow up to form same-sex relationships (people like me).

When I was younger, getting to know other queer youth involved sharing your coming out story - the best reactions, the worst reactions, who you told first, when you first knew, and what your

¹ According to the 2nd Gen FAQs published by the Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE Kids), second generation is the term used to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning children who also have gay parents.

parents said. This was an important part of establishing a connection with your peers. When I got to the part about my father being gay the reaction was usually something along the lines of “wow, that is so cool” or “that must have been great”. Yes it was (is) great having a gay parent and yes it did mean my coming out experience was quite different to most people. However, I still had to come out, had to establish an identity for myself, had to find a way to describe myself. I still lived in the same world as everyone else, where heterosexuality is assumed and our experiences are often silenced or denied. I do not deny the advantage I had as a result of the possibility of his support and understanding: my father and I did go to gay venues and events together, we talked about and shared gay literature, we marched together in London Pride. But my identity is not the same as his identity; not only do we have different experiences as a gay man and a lesbian woman, but there are generational differences with us negotiating a queer identity in very different eras.

One of the few explicit references to ‘the second generation’ that I found when researching this piece was in an article in the New York Times (Kirby, 1998). In it, a number of 2nd gen-ners described their experiences. The account of Emily, as told by her lesbian mother, struck a chord with me. She is quoted as saying: “A lot of hard work went into discovering and consolidating her identity, even with gay parents, who you’d think would make it totally easy. Yet people were kind of taking that away from her”. What I think Emily’s mother is talking about is something I feel ambivalent about articulating; sometimes when I come out to people about myself and my father I feel like I lose some claim on being a lesbian. Ken Plummer’s (1995) work has demonstrated the importance and significance of having a personal narrative about your sexuality. I cannot access the accepted shared narrative of establishing a queer sexuality - a struggle against prejudice and intolerance; parental rejection; going it alone; the relief of finding a community, etc. When I tell people that my father is gay too, the story of my sexuality is no longer my story (it becomes ours). I fear this smacks of the “I’m the only gay in the village” mentality satirised by the British comedy series *Little Britain* - do I want to be the only queer in the family? At the same time, being queer is an important point of connection between my father and me. For many, being gay or lesbian is something that is experienced as othering them from their family of origin; it is something that first generation queers do not share with their parents and, in most cases, their siblings. It represents a painful point of difference, and this is not the case for me.

My sexuality is not however, something I share with my mother. How does my father and my own identification as queer affect my relationship with her? Like many children of divorced parents, there are fears around loyalty. I have worried in the past that my adoption of a queer identity may be read by my mother as me taking my father’s side. Or, more painfully, that there may be a resonance for her in our combined rejection of heterosexuality; would this feel like a rejection of her? I consider myself very lucky - not only has my mother been incredibly supportive of my sexuality, she has never been anything but supportive of my father’s sexuality. Given that sexuality was the catalyst for my parents’ relationship breakdown, I think this is quite remarkable and without any doubt it made my coming out far easier. I wonder if others have been so lucky.

A number of my friends with an older queer sibling have been hesitant to come out to parents who’ve already had to deal with it once, who reacted badly, who were disappointed, who’ve only recently come to terms with it. Is the same true for children of queer parents, as is suggested in the New York Times article I mentioned above? What fears do they have about coming out to others? In my own experience, I worried that my extended family would blame my father for my being a lesbian, that we would be used as evidence for the gay gene argument, and that they would speculate about my brother’s sexuality. I’m usually very proud to tell people about my

father being gay, and I'm pretty sure he feels the same about me. Indeed, I've seen the little thrill he gets when he introduces me to people as his daughter and they realise we're both queer. But there are also times when I don't want to tell people or wished I hadn't. I wonder if he feels this too. I feel embarrassed, because most people avoid drawing attention to their parent's sexuality; or exposed because I've given too much personal information about me and him; or like one of those much reviled 'queers' who insist on talking about their sexuality all the time. It is the moments when I realise his heterosexuality is being assumed, when I find myself considering whether to gender his partner, when I begin to feel complicit in the silencing of our experiences, that I find most challenging. I feel guilt and shame when I fail to clarify, allow an assumption to stand, take the easy option, or even hesitate. It's all so complicated and messy, and not ordinary - we require so much explanation.

The issues I have raised in this piece reflect my own experiences: having no narrative with which to tell the story of my sexuality; feeling a lack legitimacy in talking about the struggles and difficulties I faced in negotiating my lesbian subjectivity; an ambivalence around talking about my experiences least they become 'evidence' for those who oppose queer parenting. The research cited earlier suggests that the proportion of children raised in lesbian/gay families who grow up to form same-sex relationships is the same as those raised in heterosexual families. I have never met a lesbian or gay man with a queer parent (though I've met plenty with a queer sibling). Where are their voices? And what are their experiences? I imagine, having never met any, that 2nd gen-ners come from a variety of backgrounds. They may have been raised in a queer household from birth or in both heterosexual and queer households; they may have come out before or after their parent(s); have queer parents or have a heterosexual and a gay parent. How different it would have been for me if it had been my mother, instead of my father, who was queer (I may never have been a denim queen!). How do we examine the diversity of experiences of second generation queers and their families? I would suggest that we begin by constructing a notion of 'queer family' in our own research that extends beyond a single generation. It is only then that we can begin to examine the needs of second generation queers and their families, and consider how we, as psychologists, can support them.

Note. I am grateful to the friends and family who (delicately) provided comments on this piece and to Damien Riggs and Victoria Clarke for their valuable feedback. I would be very interested to hear from other 2nd gen-ners, or of any research that has/is being conducted with them.

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