

## **Foreword: It's all about the trousers...**

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In 1996, on the basis of what can only be described as a whim I decided to research lesbian parenting for my (future) PhD in social psychology. I was twenty-two and in the final year of an undergraduate psychology degree and had spent the last year agonizing about my sexuality and my feminist politics. I was contemplating undertaking postgraduate study and also contemplating becoming a lesbian. I had cut my hair short, started reading lesbian magazines and started to become alert for any mention of lesbian and gay issues anywhere. (Although I lived in London, arguably the gay capital of the UK, shyness, intolerance for alcohol and an even greater intolerance for bars and clubs left me with no desire to discover the 'scene'.) I can remember watching a documentary on lesbian parenting, *Child of Mine*, which focused on the agonies of custody cases between lesbian and gay family members. Lesbian parenting struck me as a fascinating, and, more importantly, original topic for my PhD research: 'no one will have looked at this!' I rapidly discovered that I was wrong, very wrong: psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, lesbian feminists and many others had been writing about lesbian parenting since the early 1970s (around the same time that 'affirmative gay' psychology began to develop as a field of inquiry).

I was drawn to the topic because I wasn't sure whether or not I wanted to be a parent (another source of elongated agonizing) and the existence of the category 'lesbian mother', it seems strange to say now, simply had not occurred to me. By potentially choosing to be a lesbian, I was potentially choosing to be a 'lesbian mother'. My motherhood would be 'marked'. Whereas men who are doctors are just 'doctors' or (many) heterosexual women who are mothers are just 'mothers', women who are doctors are (still, to some) 'lady doctors' and lesbians who are mothers are 'lesbian mothers'. The marked term reveals what is normative and what is not. The most relevant thing about a lesbian who is a mother, her 'master' identity (the lens through which all of her other identities and all of her actions are viewed and judged), is that of lesbian. Every act of parenting she performs is as a 'lesbian mother', rather than as just a mother. The notion of a master identity is often resisted by lesbians (and gay men) who are parents: in the media data I collected for my PhD research, the categories 'lesbian mother' and 'gay father' were mocked through claims to not live on planet lesbian or to not make gay breakfast!

I found the idea of potentially, possibly, being a *lesbian* mother both fascinating and unsettling. I am white, middle class and able-bodied, born and raised in London (in the heart of the privileged South of England), and other than the obvious fact of my womanhood, I had, and have, little experience of social marginalization. In choosing to have a relationship with another woman, somehow my right and fitness to parent would be called into question, in a way rarely

done for heterosexual women, unless some other aspect of their identity or status troubles this – such as if they are single, or disabled.

I have since decided that I would very much like to be a parent (although doing my PhD on lesbian and gay parenting didn't help me to make this decision – never do a PhD to help you decide anything!), and I am still unsettled and affronted by the ways in which as a non-heterosexual and a single woman, my parenting would be, and my parenting desires are, subject to intense social scrutiny. But these feelings are informed by my social privilege – I have little experience of being subject to the regulating gaze of social workers, staff in benefit offices, health visitors and so on. I do not have to contend with the discrediting effects of racism, classism and ableism.

Even so, I, like other non-heterosexuals in the UK, face many hurdles on the way to becoming a parent. It is only recently that the laws around adoption have changed to allow lesbian and gay couples to adopt jointly. Even though the law has changed, some experts on lesbian and gay parenting are skeptical about whether lesbian and gay couples will be viewed as anything other than second rate parents (for second rate – disabled, non-white, sick, abused - children). Because of a change in the law relating to sperm donation (sperm donors now have to agree to full disclosure of their identity to any children conceived with their sperm), there is a 'sperm drought' in the UK of late. Conception clinics have responded to this by reserving their limited supply of sperm for heterosexual couples. Moreover, because of a 'welfare clause' in the law governing conception services (this law is currently being revised), clinics are required to consider children's need for a father. This clause allows clinics to refuse to treat lesbian couples and single women. If lesbians are able to overcome these hurdles, they still have to have considerable financial resources to pay for donor insemination or other conception services. They also have to agree to attend and pay for counseling (the counselor writes a report on whether they are suitable candidates for 'treatment').

I have spoken to some clinics over the phone recently and when the nurse has patiently explained the hoops I would have to jump through in order to gain access to 'treatment' I have occasionally felt an overwhelming desire to stomp my feet and shout down the phone: 'but I'm a nice middle class professional, I'm a psychologist, let me be!' The point I am trying to make with this (rather shameful) confession is that even for the most privileged lesbians and gay men becoming, let alone being, a parent is complex. For many heterosexuals, conception is a happy, and, in some cases, unhappy, 'accident' that requires little prior consideration or planning; by contrast, for many lesbian and gay parents becoming a parent can involve considerable planning, emotional and financial cost, and creativity. The complexity of lesbian and gay parenting, and the ways in which it is shaped by intersecting experiences of privilege and oppression, is the focus of *Becoming parent*.

The academic literature on lesbian and gay parenting that I soon located after selecting lesbian parenting as a PhD topic left me cold: endless attempts to 'prove' that we are fit to parent, that we don't swing from chandeliers, or raise our children to be gender terrorists, or (worst of all it would seem) queers, just like us. As Damien discusses in chapter 3 of *Becoming parent*, the most prominent psychological studies on lesbian and gay parenting consist of comparisons between lesbian (and to a lesser extent, gay) families and heterosexual families. Researchers measure and compare lesbians' and gay men's, and heterosexuals' parenting attitudes and competencies and their children's developmental outcomes. Attention is primarily directed towards those aspects of child development that are the focus of 'public' anxiety about lesbian and gay parenting: gender and sexuality (see chapter 2 for more on this). Researchers ask whether children grow up 'normally', that is, do (for example) girls raised in lesbian households wear dresses and play with dolls, rather than wear trousers and play with trucks? It does seem ludicrous that 'successful' child development hinges on a pair of trousers, but I have read more than one paper in which the authors exhibit great anxiety about the high level of trouser wearing among the daughters of lesbian mothers!

When I first read this literature I was, and still am, troubled by the assumption that purely by virtue of our sexuality we are unworthy as parents. I was even more troubled by the fact that psychologists (many of whom are lesbian and gay or lesbian and gay parents) treat this as a reasonable assumption by researching it. By seeking to disconfirm concerns about children's poor developmental outcomes, psychologists pour salve on 'fears' about lesbians and gay men raising children, rather than interrogate the assumption that we are unworthy. However, there is no doubt that psychologists who research lesbian and gay parenting *are* strongly politically motivated: they seek to undermine the prevailing orthodoxy regarding lesbian and gay parenting and bring about a better world for lesbian and gay families. They aim to help lesbians and gay men obtain custody of, or access to, their children or gain entry to adoption, fostering and conception services.

Many popular books on lesbian and gay parenting seek to counter myths by calling in the psychologists:

Myth: children of lesbian and gay parents are confused about their gender.

Fact: psychological research proves that children in lesbian and gay families develop gender identities within the normal range, just like children in heterosexual families.

Myth: children of lesbian and gay parents are more likely to become lesbian or gay.

Fact: psychological research proves children raised in lesbian and gay households are no more likely to be lesbian or gay than children raised in heterosexual households.

Damien invites us to find different ways of responding to myths about lesbian and gay parenting. Rather than soothing anxieties, we need to pose questions about the heterosexist and homophobic assumptions underlying them: why is it taken-for-granted that lesbians and gay men make bad or second rate parents and heterosexual families are the ideal? Why are 'male role models' deemed essential to 'normal' gender development? Why is growing up lesbian or gay assumed to be a bad outcome and evidence of poor parenting? If we opt to counter myths and fears with scientific evidence that 'proves otherwise' about lesbian and gay parenting we end up reinforcing the assumption that lesbians and gay men are unfit to parent. Damien shows us how myths, and psychologists' responses to them, function to uphold dominant values about parenting and families. He provides us with tools to take these myths apart and challenge the fears that drive many public (and private) discussions about our parenting. In this book, most importantly, he offers a language with which to change the conversation about lesbian and gay parenting. Damien, like most psychologists who write about and research lesbian and gay parenting, is concerned with creating a better world, but he asks us to pause and reflect on the strategies we use to bring about a better world and to question what exactly that world might look like. Clearly there are still many lesbians and gay men whose fitness to parent is called into question and some are likely to be helped by interventions that aim to counter myths and misconceptions about lesbian and gay parenting. However, our communities are facing new challenges: as Damien discusses throughout this book, more and more lesbians and gay men are *choosing* to parent as lesbians and gay men. Fostering, adoption, assisted conception and a variety of co-parenting arrangements are becoming increasingly prominent in lesbian and gay communities. The families created through these practices require us to ask new questions such as: 'what is a family?' 'What is a parent?' Such questions lie at the heart of *Becoming parent*.

Damien encourages us to challenge traditional understandings of family and parenting. These understandings include the premium placed on biological connections in the broader social context (and often also in lesbian and gay communities) and the notion that children are the 'property' of their parents, and that parenting is about ownership and entitlements rather than social relationships and processes. Damien encourages us to reject the values, norms and practices of the traditional heterosexual family as our starting point for thinking about and creating families. We have an opportunity to do family and parenting *differently* and Damien calls on us to seize that opportunity with gusto!

In addition to troubling claims to be 'just like' heterosexual parents, Damien also interrogates who is claiming to be 'just like' who. In the media data I collected for my PhD research it is most often white, middle class lesbian and gay parents claiming to be just like white, middle class heterosexual parents. What is nearly always overlooked in most writing on lesbian and gay parenting is the diversity that exists within lesbian and gay communities in

relation to (amongst other things) race, culture, class and ability. As I noted above, my desire to parent is informed by my experiences of privilege as white and middle class, just as much as it is informed by my experiences of oppression as non-heterosexual and as a single woman.

*Becoming parent* provides a vital stimulus for exploring diversity among lesbian and gay parents and for reflecting on the ways in which experiences of privilege and oppression often intersect.

Underpinning all these elements of *Becoming parent* is a conception of 'family' and 'parent' as something we do rather than something we are. Although it often feels like family is something that we are, ultimately we bring family and families into being through our practices. Everyday activities such as making breakfast, supervising homework and putting on a load of washing, however mundane, are the building blocks of family. Damien contends that understanding the words 'family' and 'parent' as verbs (doing words) rather than nouns (naming words) liberates us from restrictive notions of what counts as (good) parenting and who counts as family, and allows us to create and celebrate new ways of doing family and parenting.

In the psychological literature, the voices, meanings and experiences of lesbian and gay parenting are (largely) lost through an emphasis on providing scientific evidence of children's 'correct' gender role behavior or sexual orientation. Complex lives are reduced to points on a psychological scale. By contrast, in the community literature on lesbian and gay parenting – ranging from self-help and guidance books, to glossy, coffee-table medleys of photographs of lesbian and gay families, to collections of essays or personal narratives – our voices, lives and experiences are paramount. What Damien offers us here is something completely unique and much needed: an analysis of the politics and meanings of lesbian and gay parenting (and of representations of queer parenting in contexts ranging from psychological literature, to the law, to mainstream media) that is firmly grounded in and speaks to the lived experiences and realities of lesbian and gay parenting. You may not always share Damien's analysis of lesbian and gay parenting, and his experiences may not always resonate with yours. Nonetheless, *Becoming parent* will provide you with a stimulating, challenging and sophisticated toolkit for taking apart (and putting back together) what it means to parent as a lesbian or a gay man. I hope you enjoy reading the book as much as I have!