

Same, different, or deficient? Constructions of same-gendered families in South African mainstream media

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A. Background

In this paper we report on our research about same-gendered families (SGFs), specifically work that explores the ways that these families have been constructed in the media. Our work is based on a recognition of the potential and importance of media representations for queer politics. Given that lesbian and gay concerns are routinely debated in the media, it is important to investigate how these issues are reported on, because this has implications for our political strategies in relation to sexualities and gender (Clarke & Kitzinger 2004, 2005). Yet very little scholarship that considers this (Landau, 2009). There has been some research on construction of SGFs in British and US talk-shows (e.g. Gamson 1998, 2001; Clarke and Kitzinger, 2004 & 2005) and news media (Landau 2009), as well as news coverage in Australia (Riggs, 2007). Our work adds to this small body of knowledge, and focuses on our unique local context.

Discussion of SGFs in the SA mainstream media has increased since the legalisation of adoption and civil unions by same-gendered partners; although formal recognition of civil and reproductive rights for LGBTI persons is often at odds with public acceptance (Lubbe, 2012). Indeed, like many northern researchers, we identified a tension in South African media reportage between liberal ideology that seeks to promote diversity and conservative ideology that attempts to uphold the heterosexual nuclear family (HNF) (Gamson, 2001). Our interest in this paper is on the transformative potential of resistant discourses that work in support of SGFs, as identified in South African print media.

Previous research on media constructions of SGFs has identified various resistant discourses that counter the usual arguments against queer parenting. These studies show that such discourses frequently collude with heteronormativity and get appropriated into an assimilationist political strategy, rather than a transformative one. In this paper we explore the extent to which resistant discourses in the SA media challenge or collude with heteronormativity. We discuss the findings from our 2 studies of constructions of SGFs and queer parents in in South African mainstream English and Afrikaans newspapers (print and online). in relation to resistant discourses that we identified and the political effects of these. Study 1—a smaller exploratory study—provides some contexts, and study 2—which we focus on here—builds on this work.

Both studies took a discursive approach analysing the rhetorical organisation of talk, the discursive purpose of particular rhetorical strategies, and how these were related to broader power relations. The studies investigate (a) how same-gendered families/lesbian and gay parents and their children are constructed in print news articles and (b) the broader understandings of same-gendered parenting, and sexualities more generally constructed in these articles. The exploratory first study, conducted by Morison & Reddy (2013) was based on an ad hoc collection of 41 print news articles published between 1994 and January 2013, which encompasses a period of significant legal reform. It focused on constructions of same-gendered parenting more generally. The second study, conducted by both of us, aimed to build on the findings of the previous work. It is part of a larger project about gay and bisexual men and fatherhood; we therefore also wanted to consider representations of queer fathers in particular, noting the absence of research on this topic. This 2nd study involved a more systematic search for relevant articles and a somewhat expanded time

period (late 1980s to present) and comprised of 157 articles. Of the entire data corpus only 21% of the articles were about gay men and/or their children. We chose to focus the analysis on these articles and on articles that dealt with LGBTI families in a general way.

Both of our studies, like northern studies on the topic, showed that in terms of the overall framing of the articles, there is an apparent attempt to 'balance' reporting by presenting 'both sides'. However, but this is done in ways that often frames gay and lesbian people's right or fitness to parent as controversial and something to be disputed. The agenda is set in heteronormative terms ("should gays be allowed to adopt?") that represent queer parenting as inherently problematic and even threatening. This framing demands that queer parents respond by demonstrating their normality and sets the terms of the discussion in the oppressor's discourse, that is, that of difference (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004).

In addition to appearing balanced, the overall tone is also generally one of liberal tolerance, with many articles consistently affirming the love between children and their same-gendered parents (Landau, 2009). In fact, even some that argue against queer parents drew on this discourse to frame their arguments. The first study demonstrated that this tolerance or acceptance is only provisional because "gay families may be okay [on condition that] that the children grow up to be appropriately feminine or masculine and, of course, heterosexual" (Lanadu, 2009, p. 95). Most of the reportage in this sample, we argued, reflects the "hegemonic heterosexual gaze [under which]... all relationships will be viewed, validated, or invalidated from an assumed standpoint of (and desire for) normative heterosexuality" (Epstein and Steinberg, 1998, in Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004, p. 197). The findings of this first study usefully map out the discursive context in which discourses that support queer parenting occur. In the second study we understood that this discursive backdrop often facilitated defensive or reactive responses in arguments in favour of SGFs. We therefore concentrated our analysis more closely on these strategies and discourses of resistance. In the remainder of this paper we assess the ways that arguments in support of SGFs resist the heteronorm, or reinforce it. We end then discuss the political limitations of resistant discourses and how we might move past some of these limitations, as part of a project to transform oppressive gender and sexual systems.

B. The political implications of resistant talk

We identified a number of rhetorical strategies used to counter arguments against queer parents, each with different implications for resisting hetero-gendered norms. For instance, talk that makes reference to children's need for stability was often employed to downplay the presumed "difference" of queer parents and emphasise their ability to provide a stable, secure home environment. This often took the form of comments on the long-term character of a gay couple's relationship, or explicit mention of them being "settled" or "happily married". In what follows, we focus on the discursive tactics of resistant ways of talking. We identify 2 common discursive tactics: first, de-gendering parenthood, and second, normalising gay and lesbian parents.

3.1. De-gendering

De-gendering parenthood involves removing the usual gendered assumptions that inform constructions of parenthood so that parental roles and duties are not assigned by gender (Morison & Macleod, forthcoming; Schacher et al., 2005). This discursive manoeuvre calls into question beliefs that men are not able to care for children adequately. This is evident in arguments that in various ways construct the gender of parents as irrelevant or less important to the child's welfare:

Extract 1:

Gay dads do not have maternal instinct and basic parenting skills. They are inferior parents [myth]: Parenting skills are not determined by gender or sexual orientation. All children need **love, stability**, and structure and the ability to give this is not determined by your gender or sexual orientation. Research shows that gay parents do not differ much from heterosexual parents. It also shows that gay fathers are at least equal to heterosexual fathers as far as the quality of parenting concerns. Parents' sexual orientation has a very small impact on children, says Maree. "In fact, the effect is so small that it can be seen as negligible." If **two gay dads** raise their children in a **stable home** in which the children are **loved and feel secure**, there is no reason why the children will suffer any emotional or social damage simply because their parents are gay men." ("Myths about gay dads" Anon, 2008, *Beeld*)

This extract displays the common argument that children need loving families regardless of their configuration. This is a counter-argument that responds directly to claims about the importance of a gendered family structure. Instead, it emphasises parents' ability to meet a child's emotional needs, which caregivers of any gender can do. Love and care are portrayed as "the building blocks of family life, as qualities (which are not necessarily related to sex and gender) that all families should (ideally) possess" (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004, p. #). Children's 'needs' for love and stability were frequently cited together, with stability often constructed as being provided by couples, specifically those who are *married* or at least in marriage-like relationships. As in the quote, there were frequent references to the ideal of *two* parents.

The extract also shows responses to arguments about gay fathers' ability *as men* to care for their children, as well as those countering claims that queer families will negatively impact children's psychological wellbeing. In the first case, arguments in support of gay fathers often drew constructions of the "New father" who is an active caregiver, practically and emotionally involved in his child's life. The discourse of 'new' fatherhood extends traditional constructions of masculinity to allow male participation in the domestic sphere (Finn & Henwood; Henwood & Procter; Morrell). Again, the emphasis is on emotional labour. Fathers were described as being 'tender', emotional and intensive parents who meet children's emotional and psychological needs—attributes usually associated with mothering. They are described as performing tasks that would otherwise be taken for granted if they were women, while there is no mention of the kind of activities that would typically be employed in reference to straight dads (e.g. playing sports, being a guide).

3.2. Normalising

Resistant arguments identified in the data set also serve to normalise queer parenting. This can be seen in talk where queer parents' sameness to straight parents or common humanity are emphasised. This occurs in rhetorical strategies that downplay or deny difference. For instance, gay men claim that their families are just like everyone else's or gay fatherhood is framed in similar terms as the widely familiar heteronormative life course (where having children is regarded as a logical next step in having a happy, fulfilled life, particularly so for couples in a stable long-term relationship). Normalising is illustrated in this quote:

Extract 2:

According to Worsnip it is amazing how "common" it is as gay parents to raise children. "All the things that happened to us [also] happened to heterosexual parents. The babies' nappies should be changed. Their winds should be rubbed out. They say 'goo' and 'dada.' If their fever is 40 in the middle of the night, then gay parents are just as hysterical as straight parents. "And when the children have nightmares or want a hug, it does not matter to them that their parents are gay or straight. Not even a little bit." (Anonymous, 2008, *Beeld*)

In this extract a father constructs parenting as a universal in several ways. He lists various practical caregiving tasks. He emphasises the common concern that all parents have for their children's wellbeing. He implies that all children need love and security, and therefore can argue that parents' sexuality is irrelevant. Notably, the gender-neutral term 'parent' is also used in order to construct a common category, rather than distinguishing according to gender.

As this extract illustrates, normalisation involves portraying "lesbian and gay families in ways that render them familiar and nonthreatening to the heterosexual majority" (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004, p. 205). These arguments are articulated in the voice of liberal tolerance, which encourage the acceptance of 'Others' into mainstream culture (Morison & Reddy, 2013).

C. Assessing the political implications

The rhetorical strategies of de-gendering and normalising do have political benefits. De-gendering parenthood is important for gay fathering in particular; gay men who wish to become parents encounter obstacles related to their sexuality as well as their gender, because of the widespread feminisation of childcare and beliefs that men are unable to be full-time parents. Such talk challenges traditional gender constructions and allows both men and women to perform roles that are not traditionally assigned to them (i.e. women can enter paid employment, while men can participate in the domestic sphere). As Schracher and colleagues (2005) argue, expanding possibilities for caregiving is beneficial not only to queer parents, but may also allow for more equitable heterosexual parenting. The benefits of normalising strategies are that they challenge assumptions about deviant-difference and homosexuality as a master identity in which their sexuality overrides their status as a parent (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004).

However, the major limitation of these strategies is that they are structured around the oppressor's discourse, the discourse of difference. This means that there are limits to their political effectiveness. Both strategies serve to fit queer parents into existing understandings of the family and parenting, without questioning the heteronormative basis of these constructions. This means that "the 'gold standard' of heterosexual parenting therefore goes unchallenged and the normative status of heterosexuality is reinforced" (Morison & Reddy, 2013, p. #).

Though de-gendering strategies counter arguments about the necessity of a certain *gendered* family structure, this is frequently done by mapping queer families onto the heterosexual template. Thus we see arguments in which the two-parent norm as the ideal for a 'stable' home is repeated. For example, arguing that two loving/stable/married parents of any gender are adequate. Not only does this obscure classed and raced values that often underpin the nuclear family ideal, but it also circumvents challenges to the heteronorm. Change is only allowed to occur within the status quo.

Likewise, rhetorical strategies that involve normalisation do not challenge the heterosexual nuclear family as the gold standard against which all other families are measured. Claims to 'sameness' or 'normality' may appear to be positive and may have some positive effects, but they still function to reinforce heteronormativity (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005; Hicks, 2005; Riggs, 2007). Furthermore, claims that gay parents are 'just like' straight parents also obscure the radical differences that shape same-gendered parents' lives; deny the benefits of lesbian and gay parenting; and divert attention from the ways in which institutionalised discrimination oppresses lesbian and gay parents (Riggs, 2007). This means that there is limited scope for transformation and long-term social change that include those who do not measure up so well to the

heteronormative gold standard. The transformation is limited to the (conditional) tolerance of 'alternative' families in hetero-patriarchal society.

Our previous research (Morison & Reddy, 2013) has stopped at this conclusion, saying only that politically effective strategies require us to stop using "straight values" as a benchmark, and for same-gendered families to be constructed and represented on "their own terms". In this work, we want to unpack a bit more what that might mean. What might strategies that disregard "straight values" and operate on their "own terms" look like? Would such strategies even be possible within the current discursive context? We identified instances in our data, where arguments in support of queer parenting are not limited to de-gendering or normalisation strategies, but instead interrogate the heterosexual nuclear family as gold standard and emphasise the benefits of queer parenting for children in terms other than how well they match up to this gold standard. These instances of talk were infrequent, but are discussed here as potentially transformative talk.

Extract 3:

The [green] paper's skewed premise is that "the family" is imbued with qualities that make it inherently "nurturing and supportive". In reality, many families "nurture" unequal social relations between men and women, rich and poor, black and white, queer and straight. ... Women's subordination is reproduced in families where boys are raised to assume masculine dominance and girls are told (most recently by the president) that marriage and child rearing is their primary social role ... The green paper's hallowed "family" is often a pretty unsafe place. (Judge, 2012, City Press)

Extract 4:

Gilbert feels that Maria could even turn out to have an advantage over other children, in terms of being a more **tolerant person**. "If she is exposed to as many people as possible, she could turn out to be an **accommodating and well-adjusted person**. Besides, **how many so-called normal families have raised racists?**" she said. Nhlapho [an activist and lesbian parent] agrees: "We grew up not knowing about other sexual orientations. My child understands my orientation and this is to her advantage." (Mpye, 1999, Sowetan)

This talk targets the unquestioned, "common sense" assumption that the heteronormative nuclear family is the ideal. The premise of this resistant talk is neither an attempt to legitimate queer parenting as being "as good as" heterosexual family configurations, nor to normalise SGFs in relation to a heteronormative gold standard. Instead, as in the 1st quote, assumptions of the HNF as "inherently 'nurturing and supportive'" are challenged, often highlighting it as a potential site of harm caused by inequality, social exclusion and even violence. This, as quote 2 shows, inverts the idea that the heterosexual "normal" family is responsible for producing psychologically healthy children. Rather, HNFs are depicted as being at risk of producing ignorant, inflexible, and potentially prejudiced children. SGFs are, in contrast, constructed as potentially sensitising children to discrimination and exposing them to diversity. Thus, children from SGFs are constructed as being different in positive, socially-desirable ways. Clarke and Kitzinger (2004), however, note that this strategy's transformative potential relies on SGFs embracing a political challenge to oppression and translating this to raising their children "in ways that challenge compulsory heterosexuality and conventional constructions of gender" (p. 211). As discussed earlier, normalising arguments that avoid claiming difference from the heteronorm as beneficial limits the radical potential of this strategy.

Such counter-arguments are not focused on measuring up to the norm, which is construed as problematic for reasons beyond its negative impact on LGBTI persons and families. Rather they demonstrate how the

HNF is a potential site of oppression that extends beyond queer concerns and impacts on multiple marginalised groups. Such resistant talk, and visual representations, can often be found in queer and other non-mainstream media, which arguably limits its ability to disrupt norm. Furthermore, it's worth noting that the resistant voices cited in these final two strategies are largely from gender activists, using an academic framing presented as expert voices, and in more "liberal" press. While this is admittedly a somewhat marginal position, in relation to the mainstream press, it is possible that they hold potential to encourage a slow bending of restrictive hetero-gendered norms (Morison & Macleod, 2013) as they are exercised through exclusionary family models.

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