Who Wants to Be a 'Good Parent'?
Scientific Representations of Lesbian and Gay Parents in the News Media

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1 In this paper, I will be looking at how the news media may be both helpful (‘good’) and a hindrance (‘bad’) to lesbian and gay parents. While I acknowledge the incommensurable differences between the experiences of lesbian parents and gay parents, I do believe that representations of both lesbian and gay parents in the media tend to focus on any similarities that exist between (and within) the two groups, rather than looking at the important differences. I would suggest that this is the result of the hetero-normative assumptions that inform the news media, which take heterosexual parents to be the norm from which all other parents differ. Such normative assumptions thus suggest that it is important to look at how particular moral frameworks are employed in both pro- and anti-gay news media reports of lesbian and gay parents, the implication being that the former may not necessarily be better than the latter. As lesbian and gay parents, we may thus do ourselves a disservice by uncritically accepting that ‘positive’ media accounts are useful in our fight for rights.

‘Good Parents’ and the ‘Rhetoric of Pseudoscience’

2 One of the most central aspects of representations of lesbian and gay parents in the news media is the use of ‘scientific proof’ to legitimate lesbian and gay parenting. Some examples include:

3 Significant, reliable social scientific evidence indicates that lesbian and gay parents are as fit, effective and successful as heterosexual parents (Judith Stacey reported in http://www.lethimstay.com/wrong_socscience_expert.html).

4 Because many beliefs about lesbian and gay parents and their children are open to empirical test, psychological research can evaluate their accuracy (American Psychological Association [APA], 1995, http://www.apa.org/pi/parent.html).

5 Scientific findings debunk the myth that gay men cannot be nurturing parents (http://www.familypride.org/issues/myths.htm).

6 A comprehensive international review of 25 years of research into lesbian and gay parenting... shows convincingly that the children of lesbian and gay parents do not demonstrate any important differences from those of heterosexual parents (Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby, 2002, http://www.girl.org.au/issues/parenting.htm).

7 One particular strategy of legitimation evident in these extracts demonstrates what Kitzinger has termed the ‘rhetoric of pseudoscience’ – disproving your opponents claims to truth by demonstrating their ‘bad science’ (see also Riggs, “Politics”). Thus, in the examples above, ‘significant, reliable social scientific evidence’ is contrasted with ‘debunk[ed]... myth[s]’. Another example of this is provided in Stacey’s claim that:

8 Paul Cameron is the primary disreputable and discredited figure in this [anti-lesbian and gay parenting] literature. He was expelled from the APA... for unethical scholarly practices, such as selective, misleading representations of research and making claims that could not be substantiated (http://www.lethimstay.com/wrong_socscience_expert.html).
9 Here, Stacey uses the authority of ‘good’ social scientific research in order to disprove the claims of ‘bad’ ‘disreputable and discredited figure[s]’. In so doing, while she seeks to support lesbian and gay parents in our fight for rights, she also perpetuates the notion that scientific knowledge is the appropriate arbiter of what counts as ‘good parenting’. This is reinforced in the statement of the APA, which suggests that ‘many beliefs about lesbian and gay parents and their children are open to empirical test’. While this is intended to demonstrate the importance of using psychological research ‘to evaluate [the] accuracy’ of such beliefs, it also demonstrates the risks that we run when using science to determine what will count as ‘truth’ (Clarke; Riggs, “Politics”, “On Whose Terms”). Thus, while psychological knowledge in the extracts above is deployed in support of lesbian and gay parents, we only need to look back 30-odd years to see a vastly different story. It is as recently as that that same-sex attraction was classified as a pathology in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-II). Thus, as Joshua Gamson (76) suggests, that which is considered “‘normal’ is often a synonym for “power”.

10 In this regard, the power that is evoked through the use of scientific discourse in news media may also be used against lesbian and gay parents. For example, Bill Maier, a clinical psychologist and vice president of the (right-wing and, anti-gay) Focus on the Family Institute is reported as saying that:

11 Every responsible psychologist in the APA should be ashamed; the organization is obviously more concerned with appeasing its powerful gay lobby than it is with retaining any semblance of moral and ethical duty (Baptist Press News, http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=18784).

12 Here morality and ethics are constructed as being a priori oriented towards the values of the heterosexual majority. Even if lesbian and gay rights activists are to counter this with ‘proof’ of the normality of lesbians and gay men, this does little to destabilise the hegemony of scientific knowledge and its ability to define what counts as moral and ethical. Indeed, Maier draws attention to a very important point – while organisations such as the APA may seek to use psychological knowledge to refute anti-gay claims, they do so without challenging the ideological assumptions that underpin it. As a result, the APA (and those who use psychological knowledge in pro-accounts more generally) are left open to accusations of bias and wilful ignorance of a system of law that is based upon the values of white, heterosexual, middle-class men (Bernstein).

‘Taking Sides’: Is There Any Difference?

13 This leads me to ask the following question: Do we as lesbians and gay men actually want to be ‘good parents’? How might our location within this position only serve to erase the unique experiences of parenting and families that we share? Eldridge suggests that what appear as debates over social issues may more accurately be described as ‘one-sided debates’, wherein the ‘opposing parties’ are actually arguing very similar points. This is particularly evident in debates over lesbian and gay parenting, as both those for and those against lesbian and gay parents often uncritically accept the notions of ‘science’ that inhere to the debates. For example, in the previous section we saw Stacey claim that anti-gay researchers have questionable ethics, just as Maier suggested that the support for lesbian and gay issues given by the APA represents a crisis in its ‘ethical and moral duty’.

14 While pro-accounts of lesbian and gay parents may be useful in the short term to generate ‘positive’ representations of lesbian and gay parents in the media (which in some cases may be an important aspect of legal challenges in regards to lesbian and gay adoption rights), they do little to challenge the networks of power within which they are located, focused as they are upon stereotypical representations of ‘good’ lesbian and gay parents who are typically white, able-bodied, and financially secure. As a result, these representations further marginalise those lesbians and gay men who do not fit within this category (for example, due to economic or cultural difference from the white, middle-class majority), in addition to those lesbians and gay men who choose not to parent. These points demonstrate how the fight for ‘positive representation’ within the media can lead to the further marginalisation of groups of lesbian and gay men who already have little access to such representation (Gamson).

15 Within this paper, I have demonstrated some of the ways in which ‘good’ representations of lesbian and gay parents may also be ‘bad’—they may render us complicit with discourses of science that have often been used against us, and they also encourage us to conform to a heterosexual model of relationality. In this way, lesbian and gay parents are expected to be ‘as fit, effective and successful as heterosexual parents’ (Stacey). As a result, lesbian and gay parents are encouraged to accept a form of subjectivity that recognises scientific arguments as legitimate, and which thus encourages lesbians and gay men to open their lives to scientific scrutiny, measurement, and objectification. Moreover,
it encourages lesbian and gay parents ‘not [to] demonstrate any important differences from... heterosexual parents’ (Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby) under threat of being declared, by default, unfit parents.

16 The converse effect of news media reports of lesbian and gay parents can also be true: ‘bad’ representations may inadvertently draw attention to the problems that inhere to using science to ‘prove the case’. Thus, as the extract from Maier suggests, naively believing that science is the answer ignores the moral assumptions that shape news media and which further marginalise the often critical moral frameworks of lesbian and gay parents. Obviously, I am not advocating here for more statements like those of Maier. Rather, I am suggesting that as lesbian and gay parents we need to be wary of accepting normative framework when mounting our resistances. In other words, if ‘bad’ is often ‘good’, and ‘good’ is often ‘bad’ in scientific media accounts of lesbian and gay parents, then it would seem important that we develop alternate ways of accounting for our experiences, at the same time as we critique such accounts in order to demonstrate their moral assumptions.

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References


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