

The ties that bind: same-sex parent families in a modern world

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IN MODERN AUSTRALIA there is a rich tapestry of family types that has been weaved from the social and cultural diversity that makes this country a privileged place to live. When viewed in contrast to the chaotic diaspora in which many families around the world strive to live, nay exist in a struggle for freedom and opportunity, this embroidered tableau of variety richly serves the cultural milieu in which Australian families can thrive. At times, the numerous family threads can clash, becoming knotted in difference and frayed by misuse. No more does the traditional nuclear family of married parents, mum and dad, raising 1.9 well-adjusted children take centre stage. Migrants, both new and old, have infused society with a colourful array of family types: sometimes sprawling family communities, sometimes smaller tight-knit units. Unmarried partners, single parents, grandparents, those who foster and adopt, all play vital roles in raising children and are increasingly accepted as part of the larger picture. This chapter will examine same-sex parent families, one particular strand of the family tapestry that is modern day Australia, and trace them back to their origins, before following their journey as they weave their way through a more accepting society to find their place in the world.

We live in a heterocentric society where almost all aspects of life are built around the assumption that the inevitable union will be between a man and a woman, and that this procreative coupling is essentially about continued population. Out of this restrictive view comes an over-reliance on gender categories and stereotypes, which in and of themselves can leave many same-sex attracted people feeling ostracised and alone. In fact, heterocentrism plays a key role in the way that society constructs its perspective on same-sex parent families. An understanding of non-traditional ways to 'do family' plays an important role in establishing the path that same-sex parents and their children have trod as they have sought acceptance and equality. This path is perhaps best signposted by tracing the developing understanding of child health and wellbeing in this context.

It was in the 1960s and 70s that families with same-sex attracted parents began to emerge both in Australia and across the developed world. Of course, gay men and lesbian women throughout history have had children — it just was not recognised or talked about until the growth of liberalism in the second half of the last century. In these early years, as same-sex parent families became more visible, many traditionalists did not want gay men and lesbian women to procreate. They thought it would not be good for children, and even worse, it would create a new generation of homosexuals. Children were often removed from same-sex attracted parents, their sexuality being reason enough for the courts to award custody to the heterosexual parent. After all, this was a time when homosexuality was still considered a psychiatric illness in almost all corners of the globe. Religion was, and still is, an integral driving force in the development of this perspective. It was out of these traditional Judeo-Christian ideals that ardent heterocentrism thrived and an agenda quickly emerged that would aim to quash any non-traditional family. At the forefront of this perspective was a presumption that children require both a

mother and a father in order to thrive; however, there was little in the way of evidence to either support or disprove this hypothesis. So, as it stood, a mainstream principal of restricting same-sex parenting remained in force and left same-sex parent families feeling excluded and isolated.

What followed was a period of enlightenment where the active gay community, along with sympathetic researchers, sought to disprove some of the alarmist attitudes of the traditionalists. Bailey, Golombok, Tasker, Bos, Gartrell and others worked across two continents, and as the millennium neared its end, they began to provide a small but convincing body of evidence to suggest that children with same-sex attracted parents are actually doing quite well. More and more, the establishment struggled to deny that same-sex attracted people make good parents, but continued loud dissension from influential pockets in society meant that a constant ideal of the traditional family would persist. As the evidence to support same-sex families has grown it has taken time for it to be fully accepted. This is in part due to unavoidable limitations in the research. Sample sizes remained small, the focus was largely on lesbian parents, and much of the work relied on convenience samples where representativeness could be questioned. In order to completely silence the naysayers, further evidence would be required.

The integration of same-sex parent families into the complex pattern of Australian society is only now beginning to be understood. The Australian Study of Child Health in Same-Sex Families (ACHESS) has bolstered earlier work, suggesting that children with same-sex attracted parents score well on many measures of health and wellbeing; in fact, in some areas they score better than the average Australian child. This is particularly the case when looking at how well families get along. In deconstructing the traditional nuclear family it is possible to free parents from the shackles of gender-constrained roles. This is the case for same-sex parent families who are no longer

bound by the heterocentric norms that for so long stifled their very existence. In this context, parents are able to share work and home duties in ways that are compatible with their personality and skill sets rather than adhere to preconceived gender ideals. The result is an environment that is more conducive to cohesion and less liable to create conflict, which in turn supports children to realise their health and wellbeing potential.

The ACHESSE brings a degree of robustness to the previous research. It is less open to questioning, given its overall sample size and representative nature. These new findings, which build on earlier foundations, have already received community support through positive media reporting and political engagement, but there is still a kink in the threads that tie this community to the wider society, preventing same-sex families from fully integrating. The ACHESSE has identified that child health and wellbeing in this non-traditional context is dependent on the degree of stigma that families might experience. Stigma can come in many forms. It might be overt discrimination, such as excluding children from a particular school based on religious grounds. Or it may be subtler, such as the negative rhetoric that surrounds the contemporary marriage equality debate.

We live in a more progressive era here in Australia, but legislated discrimination still persists. In addition to the outdated wording of the *Marriage Act*, which defines marriage as being between a man and a woman, we still have some states that do not allow same-sex couples to adopt. Furthermore, antidiscrimination laws allow publicly funded religious organisations that deliver essential services, such as health care and education, to willfully discriminate, based on nothing more than sexual orientation. Although equality is in sight, government-sanctioned discrimination in the form of oppressive legislation sends a permissive message to society as a whole. It devalues same-sex parent families and it allows others to treat them as different, as lesser.

Despite these last remaining barriers, the complex tapestry of family diversity in Australia is moving rapidly towards an inclusive society. Same-sex attracted people and their families are less fortunate, however, in many corners of the globe. Countries like Australia should be leading by example to ensure that same-sex parent families are a universally accepted prospect in all societies. Despite making inroads in many countries, the carefully constructed place of same-sex parent families can face the risk of unraveling. In the United States, recent Supreme Court rulings have struck down the *Defense of Marriage Act* at a federal level and Proposition 8 in California, its most populous state. Both these rulings have allowed marriage equality to be recognised, but at the same time many sections of American society continue to grasp onto their antiquated morals in an attempt to preserve traditional ideals of the nuclear family. Although in 2013, 13 states and the District of Columbia recognise marriage equality, a further 35 have, through either statutes or changes to their constitutions, insisted on the heterocentric definition of matrimony.

Same-sex families hang by a much more tentative thread in Russia as the government goes further to unpick their place in society. Recent legislation has forbidden any positive discussion of homosexuality in public, while plans are being made to pass laws that would allow for the removal of children from their parents, based solely on sexual orientation. Essentially, it is the traditional nuclear family, or no family at all. And further afield, in many Arab states the situation is even gloomier, as the lives of same-sex attracted people in this part of the world are never really given the opportunity to be fulfilled. Here we have countries where people cannot contemplate being open about their sexual orientation for fear of lashings, imprisonment, or even capital punishment, let alone consider the possibility of starting a family with someone they love, someone of the same sex.

It is the responsibility of countries like Australia to lead by example and demonstrate that a progressive, peaceful world can exist, where same-sex parent families are seen as an important and valued part of society among the growing repertoire of different family structures and contexts. By acting to remove all remaining legislation that discriminates against same-sex parent families, Australia can play its part in weaving all countries into a global unity that embraces same-sex families as one of the many vital family units that play a rich and vibrant part in the ever-evolving human condition.

If the world does not accept that families have moved beyond the heterocentric norm, society will be poorer for it. We are not all cut from the same cloth, and diversity should be celebrated. Children are our future, and through research we can see that they thrive in same-sex parent families, just one of the wonderfully varied contexts in which they are raised. If this realisation can be translated into policy by removing discrimination, then same-sex parent families can finally take their place as an equal and welcome part in the global tapestry of life.

Further reading

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