# Exploring the role of Reproductive Technologies in Gay-Parented Families in the United States

## I. Thesis Topic

Over the past few decades, the number of lesbian and gay couples with children in the U.S. has steadily increased, establishing these groups as popular topics of academic inquiry. Many scholars, for instance, have examined constructions of gay familyhood, including divisions of labor and representation of the family in the broader public (Carrington). Others have researched gay individuals and couples without children—an endeavor which invariably illuminates the reality of the social environment in which they exist (Weston, Lewin). Yet while this research alone has been integral to the expanding corpus on gay studies, I intend to augment this literature by exploring how gay parents who utilize various reproductive technologies renegotiate and reconcile themselves among both the homosexual and heterosexual communities, including the values and belief systems inherent to them. My focus on the gay-parented family is important in this context, as I aver that it is within the family that overt intersectionality with hetero-hegemonic values and culture occurs.[1] Specifically, many anthropologists have claimed that traditional hegemonic understandings of family in the U.S. revolve around biogenetic[2] connections and blood (Schneider, 1981). Obviously, many other family structures—including those parented by gay adults—have leveraged vastly different kinds of binding ties, such as love, which I will later explore in more depth. Here, I seek to explore how gay-parented families that utilize reproductive technologies reinforce or resist "heteronormative"[3] formulas, and particularly, how biological ties function in their constituent lives.

Since 1981, when the first successful in-vitro fertilization case in the U.S. occurred, many advances have been made in the science and use of reproductive technologies. Hence, same-sex couples have ever-increasing options for bringing children into the world, including implanting one's sperm into a gestational carrier or planting one's sperm and another individual's egg into a gestational carrier, to name just a few. Cat Cora for one, a chef on the popular TV series Iron Chef, recently became pregnant with her partner's egg and a donor's sperm. Her partner, Jennifer, concurrently became pregnant using Cat's egg and the sperm of the same donor. This procedure was procured so the family could be as biologically linked as possible barring the act of procreative sexual intercourse. Such developing arrangements shed a new and complicated light on the role of biology in the creation of family, and they become rich terrain for

---

[1] This is not meant to suggest that gay individuals or parents otherwise exist in an altogether separate culture, only that the family serves as a significant representation of hegemonic cultural values and belief systems. Thus, this intersection becomes especially poignant.

[2] Biogenetic in this case means the generation of living organisms from other living organisms with a shared, genetic connection.

[3] I place the term "heteronormative" in quotes to note that there exists no normal or normative family, only an understanding of the values, beliefs and structures that should be leveraged in creating it.

understanding such emerging questions as: What are the meanings being placed on reproductive technologies? How do these meanings vary based on different technologies being used and how were the technologies chosen by the families?

## II. Methodology

I propose to answer these questions by:

a)      Reviewing literature to identify what is known about the numbers, experiences and the frameworks of interpretation which already exist

b)      Conducting an in-depth ethnography among six,[4] same-sex couples who have conceived with the use of reproductive technologies in the two socially and politically distinct regions of Houston, TX and Boston, MA (in order to assess if the meanings they place upon them vary regionally). This includes in-depth, in person interviews conducted with the couples together and separately.

c)      Couples will be recruited based on existing contacts, friendship networks and snowball sampling methods. I would like for my sample to be as demographically and ethnically representative as possible, as well as represent couples who have used a range of reproductive technological procedures—from "homemade" to more technologically advanced.

## III. Background Information

To provide a preview of this research, let me give an initial sketch of the issues and findings I have encountered thus far.[5] The political and social contexts in which gay-parented families exist in the U.S. tend to discredit both their solidarity and validity as social entities. Even within this context, however, many gay partnerships and families have embraced marriage (socially if not legally) and family with open-arms, viewing it as a means to release the chains that restrict them to the social margins. In doing so, many critics both within the gay and straight communities have chastised gay-parented families for becoming "heteronormative" in the way they "do" family[6], including division of labor, parenting style, family organization and the types of values they uphold and inculcate into their children.

Even amid allegations of conformity, however, such families are considered an alternative form of kinship. They do not conform to what anthropologist David Schneider suggested is the dominant American model—those families who are based both on shared biogenetic substance and enduring, diffuse solidarity and who hail from a two parent, heterosexual model. Many critics of Schneider's findings claim, however, that this model of family is extremely limited when considering not only different sexualities, but

---

[4] These six couples will be evenly divided between three gay and three lesbian couples in order to dimensionalize the role that gender plays in these processes.

[5] This is in no way a comprehensive overview of literature that touches upon gay families or networks, but merely serves to expose the main issues and concerns that are commonly found in social scientific research around such issues.

[6] "Doing" family stems from Butler's definition of "doing" gender. In this sense, family is an institution that is culturally created and performed according to certain sanctions and proscriptions (Butler, 421).

different ethnicities and social classes to name only a few. Further, different types of kinship systems based on biogenetic ties, including matrilineal and matrilocal[7] exist in several non-U.S. societies, revealing that other configurations are indeed viable. Switching back to the U.S. however, much has changed in the social fabric of America in the time since Schneider wrote his seminal text, but as evidenced by the current social milieu that precludes gay individuals from certain rights available to hegemonic families, it is obvious this dominant model persists as the one that controls legislation and surrogacy rights, among other things.

Many different types of gay families (not necessarily gay-parented families) have generally been approached with this notion of alternative kinship in mind. Kath Weston conducted fieldwork in the San Francisco bay area in the early 90s to understand more clearly "chosen" families—those networks of love and care that gay individuals maintained in their lives, often, but not always, to replace the biological families who often rejected them. "Chosen families," according to the literature, are not imitative or derivative of the dominant model of American kinship, but interestingly, have gained momentum as a term only in the "context of the cultural belief in the power of blood ties" (Hayden, 45). United by choice and love, not by biological ties or the expectation of creating them, these families set themselves apart from the dominant model of American kinship and its often touted maxim that "blood is thicker than water." In this way, chosen families, by their very existence, weaken the traditional "bedrock" of American kinship—the foundation upon which the socio-cultural pillars of heterosexual, procreative relationships and biogenetic ties have been erected. Yet such enervation of the foundation may resemble small cracks more than gaping fault lines. If anything, this traditional foundation is gaining stability through non-traditional means.

While many family arrangements based on homosexual relationships have existed throughout history and gay communities still exist in dense networks, more insular and "traditional" gay family units have become increasingly prevalent. Even more, children conceived in the relationships are becoming more prevalent—an addition which provides arable ground for exploring the presence and implications of dominant familial frameworks. The increasing presence of the gay-parented family is no doubt correlated to more liberalized social climates, including the legalization of gay marriage in the states of Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut and most recently, Iowa and Maine. Interestingly though, as social climates become more open, gay parents appear to be shifting back to more traditional modes. While past literature claims that chosen networks of gay individuals are distinctive, gay parents, specifically, appear to be less distinctive and more similar to heteronormative families both in the way they perceive themselves and in the way they go about doing family.

My previous research has explored constructions and self-perceptions of gay-parented families to understand if they are, in fact, conforming to more dominant modes. What I discovered was that they considered themselves very normal and non-transformative, and indeed, they seemed to be. In fact, in considering themselves quite ordinary, many of them leveraged dominant American values such as love, solidarity and endurance to stake their claims as valid social, political and emotional entities. And while

---

[7] Matrilocal: of or pertaining to residence with the wife's family or tribe; Matrilineal: inheriting or determining descent through the female line.

I agree that they are equally entitled to such common ideas, the way these notions function in broader society makes them unique. Many of the families I spoke to—especially those in more conservative regions—responded with a sense of defensiveness around their particular situation. Others claimed to go about life in a way that simply felt natural to them. When interviewing gay parents, anthropologist Nancy Levine discovered that the language they used varied in different scenarios. For example, when applying for adoption, gay parents claimed that they are likely to voice more conventional family values than they would in other social contexts (Levine, 380). In this way, it could be hypothesized that gay-parented families have learned to "adapt" to power constructs by naturalizing the very structures and identities that oppress them for the purposes of their own liberation. In other words, while they may claim they are acting with a level of agency, there are very limited formulas that they can apply in order to be deemed "normal."

Historically, reactions to this type of restriction has manifested in overt rebellions or in small to large-scale insurrections. Law theorist Brenda Cossman has discussed a different, more unorthodox approach to oppression, however. She has written that in order to gain legitimacy, gay individuals (not necessarily families) must de-eroticize, de-politicize and privatize themselves. This act of assimilation actually functions as resistance against the dominant model as they are emulating it in order to disband power. Hence, theorists claim that while gay-parented families may appear to be doing something very similar to hetero-hegemonic families, the way these similar notions function is distinctively different.

The role of reproductive technologies becomes very compelling within this space. The realm of technology, historically synonymous with authority and hegemonic power, *seems* to be (though further research will tell) yet another node of power that gay parents are leveraging in order to construct themselves as a family. Perhaps most striking is that gay parents, in desiring children, also desire biogenetic connectedness with their children—a characteristic reflective of the hegemonic system that seeks to dissemble them. Given this, it is necessary to understand the meanings and function of reproductive technologies in the lives of gay parents.

For some time, new and increasingly available reproductive technologies have offered hope to gay parents wishing to conceive. The spread and implementation of these technologies, however, have encountered stern opposition from conservative politicians and activists intent on reversing these liberalizing trends. Indeed, the use of reproductive technologies is only one obstacle in the rocky socio-cultural terrain gay parents must navigate daily in their struggle for legitimacy. In the past, many children in gay-parented families were products of heterosexual relationships. Now, however, many couples are making the conscious decision to bring children into the relationship together via reproductive technologies. What is compelling about such practices is not only a desire to have children, but that many of the narratives taking place around having children integrate desires to have a shared, biogenetic connection. Brian, a respondent from my previous research who resides in Houston, TX commented on the fact that he and his partner George would like to have another child, so their daughter Arya, who was conceived by a surrogate carrying George's sperm and a friend's egg could have a biological sibling. When asked why the biological connection was important, Brian claimed it was simply important that Arya has biological links in her life—links that,

according to David Schneider, are exclusively reflective of heteronormative ideals. Certainly, gay parents can leverage such ideals without being conformist or heteronormative. In fact, their utilization of these technologies may on the one hand serve—however unintentionally—to destabilize the link between heterosexuality and parenthood, reinventing traditional kinship structures. On the other hand, they may also reinforce traditional, heteronormative ideals about the imperative to reproduce, as well as the imperative to have "normalized" familial structures. Or there may be something else altogether taking place. In my previous research around family construction, the use of reproductive technologies was often mentioned. Now, I am interesting in further exploring the use and meanings of various reproductive technologies. In doing so, it may also be interesting to explore adoption procedures and understand why parents opt for either adoption or reproductive technologies.

Much literature has already looked at the role reproductive technologies play in the construction of the family from a social perspective. *Queering Reproduction*, written by sociologist Laura Mamo, is one such book that examines  who seek out and use reproductive technologies. Mamo claims that reproduction as an increasingly medicalized procedure in that the people who utlize them are seen as fertility patients not only for their physical conditions, but also because of their sexual identities. In doing so, she discusses how medical technology has the capacity to reconfigure social structures, individual subjectivities and notions of kinship. While similar to my own research inquiries, Mamo focuses more on the legal and ethical issues parents face when using reproductive technologies, as well as how they navigate the medical system and less on how such uses affect traditional kinship structures.  Though written previously to Mamo, Corinne Hayden's argument extends Mamo's take on kinship by focusing on the implications that reproductive technologies have on gay, namely lesbian, family construction.

Research like this has provided a solid framework for exploring the themes I am interested in. Both Mamo and Hayden's work focuses exclusively on lesbian relationships, however, a purview which inevitably leads to a commentary on the role of the women in reproduction, as opposed to understanding how reproductive technologies are functioning in all types of "postmodern" family structures. While such an approach is necessary for operationalizing the role that gender may play in these processes, I seek to examine both genders. The dimension of gender is very important in this context. Beyond simple male and female sex, the meaning of reproductive technologies is most likely affected by gender roles. For example, women, due to their natural reproductive capacities (i.e. a womb), may have more access to less expensive and time-consuming procedures. Men, for example, may face more criticisms in the reproductive arena due to their reproductive incapacity and their role as "mothers."

 In examining what reproductive technologies mean to gay parents, as well as how they function in the lives of gay parents, my research will add to the literature on gay-parented families by:
1. Exploring how genetics continue to construct both individual and familial identities in alternate kinship settings.
2. Understanding how important genetics are to identity construction, and how science and technology, more broadly, aid in the construction of "naturalized" family identities.

3. Offering an important discourse on what constitutes relatedness.
4. Examining the role that not only different sexualities, but also that different genders play in these above processes.

**Bibliography**

Abu-Lughod, Lila. (1990). The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations
       of Power Through Bedouin Women. *American Ethnologist, Vol. 17* ( No. 1),
       pp.41-55.

Allen, Katherine. (1995). The Families of Lesbians and Gay Men: A New Frontier
       in Family Research. *Journal of Marriage and Family. Vol. 57* (No.1), pp. 111-
       127.

Becker, Gay. (2000). *The Elusive Embryo: How Men and Women Approach New
       Reproductive Technologies.* University of California Press.

Benkov, Laura. (1994). *Reinventing The Family: Lesbian and Gay Parents.*
       New York : Crown Publishers

Unlike many others that came before her, Benkov's study was one of the first to explore
gay and lesbian parenthood. As a psychologist, Benkov explores the obstacles, including
navigating antipathetic social contexts, that often ail the gay-parented community. In
doing so, she discusses psychological treatment, social services, legal systems, as well as
adds psychological commentary on the children that exist in such arrangements,
challenging many mainstream assumptions.

Butler, Judith. (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex".* New
       York: Routledge.

       --Is kinship always already heterosexual? *Differ: Journal of Feminist Cultural
       Studies. Vol. 15* (No.1), pp. 14-44.

Calhoun, Cheshire. (2003). *Feminism, The Family and the Politics of the Closet.* Oxford:
       University Press.

Carrington, Christopher. (1999). *No Place Like Home: Relationships and Family Life
       Among Lesbians and Gay Men.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Chodorow, Nancy. (1978). *The Reproduction of Mothering*: *Psychoanalysis and the
       Sociology of Gender.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Conrad, Peter. (1992). Medicalization and Social Control. *Annual Review of
       Sociology, Vol. 18*, pp. 209-232

Cossman, Brenda. (2007). *Sexual Citizens: The Legal and Cultural Regulation of
       Sex and Belonging.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Deakin, Michelle Bates. (2006). *Gay Marriage, Real Life*: *Ten Stories of Love and*

*Family.* Boston, MA: Skinner House Books

Foucault, Michel. (1978). *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: An Introduction*. New York: Random House

Ganong, Lawrence. (2002). Family Resilience in Multiple Contexts. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Vol. 64 (No.2), pp. 346-348.

Geertz, Clifford. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays.* New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Ginsburg, Faye, Rayna Rapp, eds. (1995). *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*. Berkeley University California Press.

Hayden, Corinne. (1995). Gender, Genetics, and Generation: Reformulating Biology in Lesbian Kinship *Cultural Anthropology*. Vol. 10 (No. 1), pp. 41-63.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. (1962). *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Levine, Nancy E. (2008). Alternate Kinship, Marriage and Reproduction. *Annual Review of Anthropology. Vol. 37*, pp. 375-389

In this brief but comprehensive piece, Levine exposes the issues surrounding alternative forms of kinship, including how same-sex marriage and new reproductive technologies shake the traditional frameworks that often define dominant kinship structures. Though she never takes an overt stand regarding how such relationships and technologies function within society, she gives an excellent overview of previous theoretical work as well as documents variant types of kinship practices in other non-U.S. cultures.

Lewin, Ellen. (1993). Lesbian and Gay Kinship: Kath Weston's *Families We Choose* and Contemporary Anthropology. *Signs. Vol. 18* (No. 4), pp.974-979.

Mahmood, Saba. (2001). Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival. *Cultural Anthropology. Vol. 16* (No. 2), pp. 202-230.

Mamo, Laura. (2007). *Queering Reproduction: Achieving Pregnancy in the Age of Technoscience.* Durham, N.C. : Duke University Press.

*Queering Reproduction* is one of the first books to look at the use of reproductive technologies among gay individuals—lesbians specifically—from a sociological perspective. Drawing on in-depth interviews with lesbians who have been or are seeking to become pregnant, Laura Mamo describes how reproduction has become a medicalized process for lesbians, who are, at the time of procedure, turned into fertility patients not (or not only) because of their physical conditions but also because of their sexual

identities. Mamo claims that this medicalization of reproduction has begun to shape queer subjectivities in both productive and troubling ways, both challenging the notion that heterosexuality is at the core of procreation while also reinforcing traditional, heteronormative ideals about motherhood and the social imperative to reproduce.

Markens, Susan. (2007). *Surrogate Motherhood and the Politics of Reproduction.* Berkeley : University of California Press

Patterson, Charlotte. (2000). Family Relationships of Lesbian and Gay Men. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Vol.62* (No. 4), pp. 1052-1069.

Rich, Adrienne. (1994). "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*. Norton Paperback: New York.

Schneider, David. (1968). *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Schudson, Michael. (1989). How Culture Works: Perspectives from media studies on the efficacy of symbols. *Theory and Society. Vol. 18* (No. 2), pp. 153-180.

Shanley, Mary. (2002). *Making Babies, Making Families: What Matters Most in an Age of Reproductive Technologies, Surrogacy, Adoption, and Same-Sex and Unwed Parents.* Beacon Press.

Swidler, Ann. (2001). *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Thompson, Charis. (2005). *Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Thompson's recent book draws upon an interdisciplinary approach—science and technology studies, feminist theory, and historical and ethnographic analyses individuals who have used reproductive technologies—to discuss the meanings of reproductive technologies in the lives of the people who use them. This includes an excursion of the political, technological and personal dimensions of such technologies. In what she calls the "ontological choreography" of reproductive technologies—the dynamics by which technical, scientific, kinship, gender, emotional, legal, political, financial, and other matters are coordinated—she uses the stories of patients to address questions that have generally been relegated to scientific fields only. Reproductive technologies, says Thompson, are part of a greater social tendency to transform social problems into biomedical questions, but that such biomedical phenomena can be used to see the resulting changes in the relations between science and society.

Weston, Kath. (1991). *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship.* New York: Columbia University Press

-- (1993). Lesbian/gay studies in the house of anthropology. Annual Review of Anthropology. Vol. 22, pp. 339-367

**Questions to consider while reviewing:**

Is it clear and readable?

Does it make sense and tell a cohesive story?

Does the research seem compelling?

Is the background relevant and/or pertinent?

What other critiques or feedback do you have?

**Framework for Critique**

Believing: "Try to believe everything I have written, even if you disagree or find it crazy. At least pretend to believe it. Be my friend and ally and give me more evidence, arguments, and ideas to help we make my case better."


Doubting: "Try to doubt everything I have written, even if you love it. Take on the role of enemy and find all the arguments that can be made against me. Pretend to be someone who hates my writing. What would he or she notice?"

WGS.693 Gender, Race, and the Complexities of Science and Technology: A Problem-Based Learning Experiment

Spring 2009