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The Straight and Narrow?

This chapter introduces key debates, disputes and cultural discourses around conceptualisations of ‘the family’, particularly in relation to the sidelining and disapproval of lesbian and gay families, against the ongoing promotion of heterosexual, two-parented ‘nuclear’ families (‘Familial re-runs’). To some extent the transformation – and continuation – of such debates involves the marking of familial territory beyond ‘the straight and narrow’, even as this descriptor still highlights the endorsement of heteronormative, classed configurations of parenting. Many authors propose that ‘family’ is no longer what it once was, being freed from traditional ties including gendered obligations and biological (im)possibilities. Such ‘freedoms’ are relatedly conceptualised as offering new choices but also new ‘risks’, where ‘what to do’ in relation to familial hopes, formations and responsibilities are no longer straightforward. Instead these are to be negotiated, disrupted and even facilitated, through reproductive technologies, social networks (‘families of choice’) and legislative changes. Who then has the choice to choose ‘brave new families’ – and who will be recognised as legitimate agentic subjects, paving new familial paths, reflexively relating in conditions of ‘postmodern perplexity’? If once taken-for-granted assumptions are being disputed, they are also, however, being re-confirmed, even as legislative changes providing same-sex rights proliferate internationally (‘Different conceptions, same contradictions?’).

This chapter considers who has the ‘choice to choose’, inflecting the ‘families of choice’ literature with a discussion of the significance of class in relation to the ‘difference’ of lesbian and gay parented families. Arguments about parental ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ rarely consider the difference class makes in accessing, claiming and gaining a respectable ‘ordinary’ (homonormative) status. Similarly, the central
focus on lesbian and gay parents’ routes into parenthood often centres reflexive, creative choices, effacing the classed routes into and experiences of ‘alternative’ parenting (‘The best laid plans…’). This chapter is structured into three sections: ‘Familial re-runs’; ‘Different conceptions, same contradictions?’; ‘The best laid plans…’. Chapter 2 ‘Gay Parents, Games Lessons and Gambling with the Future’ will focus upon the concept of social capital, combining a Bourdieusian notion of capital as specifically classed, alongside that developed by Weeks et al. (2001) in studying lesbian and gay ‘families of choice’. Where class and sexuality have often been separated, charting their intersection can be both complex and complicated, frequently drawing upon disparate bodies of research and disconnected projects. These initial two chapters hopefully identify gaps and connections, seeking to go beyond the straight and narrow in conceiving class and sexuality as entwined in lesbian and gay parenting experiences.

Familial re-runs

This section explores the continuities and changes in family formations, where the contemporary plurality of families is variously conceived, from pessimistic views which denounce the end of family, to more optimistic views which credit family changes with a positive, even revolutionary potential. In attempting to trouble such dichotomised stances it asks who, in classed and sexual terms, is likely to be positioned as succeeding or failing family conventions and changes. I explore the ‘individualisation thesis’ where individuals are positioned as necessarily reflexive actors, compelled to choose and create in risky, uncertain times. Here, lesbian and gay families are frequently positioned as post-modern pioneers, paving brave new paths through such perplexity. This is queried as positioning certain classed subjects as simply failing to capitalise on beneficial ‘reflexive relations’.

Definitions and disruptions

The shape and form of ‘the family’ continues to be debated internationally in academic and everyday discourses, whether that be in policies which legitimise ‘new’ family formations through the rights of lesbians and gay men to marry, adopt and access new reproductive technologies, or in measures which supposedly alleviate the gendered burden of combining employment and care (Weston, 1991; Jamieson, 1998; Bernstein and Reimann, 2001; Weeks et al., 2001). Demographic figures provide an administrative gauge on what families are and the ways