

Dancing our own steps: A queer families' project

By Kath Reid

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This paper focuses on the key narrative practices that informed the Queer Families project, which sought to co-explore and richly-describe diverse meanings of 'family', and ways of 'living' family. The project explored the history of the skills, practices, hopes, and dreams that family members brought to their versions of 'family', and drew on the metaphor of 'family as a verb', to explore alternatives ways of doing 'families of choice'. The article first contextualises the concept of family, deconstructing dominant 'family' narratives in western cultures, and historicising the notion of 'nuclear family'. It then describes the key narrative practices that informed the project, including re-authoring and re-membering conversations, therapeutic letter-writing, and documenting shared community themes. The article then describes the collective narrative practice of sharing these themes with other people to generate 're-tellings' that were then shared with the initial families in the project.

Keywords: definitional ceremony, narrative practice, narrative therapy, outsider witnesses, queer families, Queer Family project, re-authoring conversations, re-membering conversations, therapeutic documents.

THE PERSONAL/PROFESSIONAL IS POLITICAL: LOCATING MYSELF IN THE PROJECT

My interest in undertaking the Queer Families project had been bubbling away for a number of years, and was connected to a long-standing interest in different ways of 'doing' and 'living' family. It also connected with my partner and I being engaged in conversations/planning/action with some other key people to create our own notion of 'family'. At the time of this writing, our baby son has been a part of our family for four weeks. For me, even the word 'family' is loaded up with associations informed by dominant narratives. In my own experience, these dominant narratives can shape our understandings and even our experience of family, and can often be exclusionary and disqualifying of alternative ways of understanding, doing, and experiencing family. Along our own journey, we have struggled to find the words to describe these new sets of relationships. One hope I share with many of the families in this project is to find the words to describe these alternative relationships within my own family, and co-explore skills, intentions, and dreams of living 'family', to create a foundation from which we can celebrate our family, 'dance our own steps' of family¹, to live family by living community.

THE DOMINANT NARRATIVES OF 'FAMILY'

Before exploring queer families' practices, knowledges, and intentions of 'doing' family², I feel it is important to locate the concept of 'family' in a cultural context, and identify popular 'family' narratives in western society. Most of these popular narratives of 'family' construct the nuclear family as 'natural', as if these families express what they are naturally and essentially meant to do. According to these narratives, the marriage of the heterosexual couple to create 'family' is in keeping with the 'natural order' and human nature. Implicit in these narratives is an assumption that 'the nuclear family is simply the pattern in which humans in modern societies, if left to follow their natural inclinations, will choose to live' (Carrington, 1998, p.32) because it is keeping with their 'true' and 'essential' selves. These narratives that naturalise the 'nuclear family' are often drawn from 'the model presented by God and recreated in Adam and Eve' (Carrington, 1998, p.56). This model is represented as 'the

natural human formation, consolidating a belief in the universality and unchanging nature of this family across time' (Carrington, 1998, p.56). Consequently, such narratives that naturalise the 'nuclear family' are also linked with narratives of morality that construct the 'nuclear family' as maintaining a 'moral order'.

Other narratives of 'family' construct the 'nuclear family' to be normal. After the Second World War, the field of psychology developed a 'systems approach' to family therapy. Such an approach identified 'normal' functioning characteristics of 'healthy' families. These characteristics for 'healthy', 'normal' families were 'referenced against the norms of the nuclear family' (Carrington, 1998, p.47).

HISTORICISING THE 'NUCLEAR FAMILY' IN WESTERN SOCIETY

While in recent western culture, the nuclear family occupies a taken-for-granted status, the 'nuclear family' as a general phenomenon has not always existed. In fact, various anthropologists point to the development of the nuclear family as a concept and family model that came about due to the changes of the economy, church, and technology. There are varying claims as to when this development took place, but most state it occurred sometime during the 16th to 19th centuries. As MacFarlane (1976) states:

The modern 'individualistic' system, with its stress on the nuclear family, is spread throughout England and North America, but is generally held to be both peculiar and of recent in origin, a reflex reaction to the dislocation caused by the growth of capitalism, industrialization and urbanization. (p.270)

In addition, Aries (1962) argues that the emergence of the concept of the nuclear family coincides with the concept of childhood, both born out of the 16th and 17th centuries. Aries also links the emergence of the nuclear family to changes to housing situations. He explains how the 'nuclear family' was at first restricted to nobility but has extended to other social classes in a way that it has assumed a taken-for-granted status 'to such an extent that people have forgotten its aristocratic and middle class origins' (1962, p.404).

DOMINANT NARRATIVES OF 'FAMILY' AND SCALES OF MEASUREMENT

These narratives of 'family' can create a hierarchy. In current western societies, notions of 'family' can be embedded with dominant narratives that privilege and legitimise some forms of family, while marginalising other ways of doing family that sit outside of these 'taken-for-granted' ways. These narratives can operate to narrow legitimate forms of relationships within the concept of 'family' and these trends can also be seen in 'the narrowing relational forms' generally:

In recent history of western culture, it has been the heterosexual married couple that is privileged as over all other relational forms. Not only is this privileged as the ideal relational form, but many other relational forms have been consistently downgraded, discouraged, marginalised, disqualified and punished. (White, 2004, p.8)

Various narratives construct the 'nuclear family', consisting of the heterosexual married couple and child/ren, as the 'ideal and legitimate' form of 'family', while other narratives construct the nuclear family as 'natural', 'holy', and 'normal'. These narratives construct and reinforce taken-for-granted scales of measurement from which other families who don't fit the ideal form can be measured in terms of their 'lack', 'deficit', 'illegitimacy', 'dysfunction', and even 'abnormality'.

By historicising 'family' narratives, we can begin to explore and understand them as concepts – as cultural phenomena that have developed due to specific historical, political, economic and technological conditions. By historicising these narratives, we can loosen their 'truth' status. We can deconstruct these ideas to understand their histories. We can explore the cultural conditions that gave rise to them. We can explore the effects of these concepts, their limitations, and potential hazards.

MAKING ALTERNATIVE MEANINGS OF 'FAMILY'

It is within these contexts that queer families negotiate and create their own meanings of 'family' and preferred ways of 'doing' family. For queer families, there aren't usually pre-existing 'social

scripts' or alternative narratives legitimised by the church, legislation, or government policy. This has made me curious about the ways queer families negotiate the dominant narratives of 'family' to make their own meanings of 'family' – to do family in their own diverse ways.

In the following pages, I describe attempts to richly describe and document the local particularities of queer families' ways of living and doing family, I hope these writings offer a counter-claim that stands against narratives that naturalise 'heterosexual nuclear family structures'.

As Ralfs states: '... it is not just who is in my family but rather the practices of family that changes the concept' (2001, p.38). Because of this, I have tried to make visible the skills, practices, hopes, and dreams for family, and the histories of these in my conversations with the families involved in the Queer Families project. I have tried to explore the people who have supported these hopes or dreams – people from family of choice and family of origin³. In doing this, I wish to show how the meaning-making of 'family' has been drawn from the social contexts of the queer family members. In this way, the meaning-making of 'family', like 'identity', can be seen as a social achievement.

THE PROCESS OF THE PROJECT

The first stage of the project involved meeting with mostly same-sex couples of women and their children in their homes over numerous cups of tea, to speak with (mainly) parents engaged with creating, maintaining, and 'doing' families. If I had more time available, I would have also spoken with a broader range of alternative families and their members. Such members could have included known donors who are playing a key role in contributing to family, same-sex couples of men parenting children, and other significant people contributing to 'family'. In these initial interviews, I also had the pleasure of meeting and playing with a number of children who so generously included me in their day.

These conversations used 're-authoring' practices (White, 1995; Russell & Carey, 2004) to interview parents about key skills, intentions, commitments, and hopes they brought to doing

family. These conversations were an opportunity to re-engage with history, to uncover alternative stories that may not have been so visible in the shadow of the dominant stories. I often spent time asking questions to trace the histories of key skills, to 're-member' other people in the parents' lives who significantly influenced the ways they 'do' family. In offering re-membering conversations (Russell & Carey, 2004), I hoped that queer families could be linked with other significant people in their lives around shared knowledges, purposes, and intentions. After these initial conversations, I wrote and sent therapeutic letters that summarised our conversation and offered further questions and acknowledgements or taking-it-back practices (White, 1997).

The second stage of the project involved drawing out key themes from my notes of these conversations, which I hoped would resonate for project participants and their experiences and knowledge of family – and which would form a collective therapeutic document (see Denborough, Freedman & White, 2008). After crafting some draft themes, I asked project participants if there were other themes that I had missed, and if I had documented the themes in a way that resonated and spoke to their own experiences and stories of 'family'.

After these drafting and consulting stages, with the permission of all project participants I then shared these themes with other people who are also doing and thinking about family in alternative ways. I invited these people to offer reflections and 're-tellings' (White, 1999). When these re-tellings were given orally, I documented them and, when they were in written form, I gathered them together to offer them back to the project participants.

The final stage of the project involved interviewing some of the original participants about these 're-tellings'. After I read out the 're-telling', I asked questions to explore what stood out for them, and what it left them thinking about, or where it took them.

THE KEY COMMUNITY THEMES

I found the process of crafting key community themes to be fun! This involved flicking through the many pages of my notes written during initial conversations I had with eight different community

members. In choosing the four themes, I had to identify what key ideas might be most relevant for community members. Once I had chosen the four themes, I wanted to write them in a way that was highly resonant for community members. That is, I wanted community members to read them and hear their own expressions in them. Therefore, the crafting involved sorting through the many pages of notes to catch key phrases, words, and expressions a number of participants used. In this way, I hoped that these themes could be multi-voiced. The four community themes crafted are featured below.

Shared commitments: Making visible our family connections

In making the decisions to have children and make family, many of us have made a shared commitment to family. Even though only one of us can be the birth parent, it has been important to include us both by saying things like, 'We are pregnant'. We have both have been involved in joint decision-making right from the start, and both of us have played a role in parenting. It can be a lot messier because you have both people's input, but we want our contributions to family to be recognised.

This shared commitment is made in the face of heterosexism and the privileging of biological connections. We have found the moments when heterosexism is around, it can make invisible or minimise the contributions of the 'non-biological' parent. It is like we don't fit people's frames of reference. We don't have the language to account for all of our parenting roles. For example, a child might say 'Izzy [our daughter] has two mums, but Sue is the real mum'. In these situations, biological and genetic connections are what are meant by 'real'.

We continue to find ways to recognise, value, and honour all our contributions to make visible our family connections despite the operations of heterosexism. For those of us who are the non-birthing parent, we have found ways of creating our own special bond and connection to our children regardless. For those of us who are the birthing parent, we can handle this in lots of different ways. One way is when friends, family, or people ask only the birthing parent about things to do with our child, we try to open up the conversations to include us both or we might try to educate people to assist

them to recognise all our family connections. We have also at times decided to just let it go. We might just observe it or even laugh about it. We do all of these things because we want people to see and respect the relationships in our families.

Being proud and 'out' as families of choice

We have found that creating families has brought opportunities for another level of 'outness', even in our families of origin. Initially, some of us may have experienced some sense of fear or guilt, and asked ourselves questions like, 'Are we doing the right thing?' For some of us, these voices might be echoes of our parents saying things like, 'What will society say?' or 'I am okay with your relationship as long as you don't have children'. This chorus of voices can get us reconnected with old internalised 'non-acceptance' stuff.

We have created 'growing times' for ourselves, to further create a foundation of self-acceptance. These times have enabled us to feel comfortable in our own skins, with who we are, to feel proud as a family to be able to feed this self-assurance to our kids. During these growing times, we have learnt what family means for us. We want to demonstrate confidence when we are talking to other people about our family in front of our children. We want them to see that we are proud of our family. This theme relates to hopes we have about our children, hopes for them to feel comfortable in their own skin, for them to know it is okay to be different.

Some of the skills we have developed in reducing the influence of fear and guilt, and to choose to be out and proud, might include recognising the negative stuff and choosing not to 'walk in front of it', refocusing our energy to create a stress-free environment for ourselves and our children. It might include connecting with supportive people, or to not need particular people's approval. The effect of the growing times for some of us has meant that we can take risks to be out in certain situations like work, so people can accept us for who we are as families. It can also include a 'tell-it-like-it-is' approach, if anyone asks about our family, or to not avoid the pronoun 'she' when talking about our partners. We want to keep things real in our relationships. We want to create changes in our communities through our interactions, to create more acceptance and understanding.

Dancing our own unpredictable steps: Doing family in diverse ways

For a lot of us, we may have experienced or received messages from family or friends about the 'right' way to do family. We are surrounded with lots of messages about traditional, nuclear family, 'white picket fence', mainstream ways of doing family. There can be lots of judgements about the right way to do family. This can be about trying to keep things predictable.

We want to be able to dance our own unpredictable steps, to sometimes challenge the expected way. We hope to do family in unique and diverse ways, even if they might be a bit daggy at times! For some of us, this is about living a life that is authentic, to live purposefully and with integrity. By dancing our own steps, we hope to open up a space where we can look at things differently. These hopes for many of us have a long history of an interest in adventure and difference, to live perhaps with a rainbow fence with many gateways leading to myriad of possibilities for living family.

It can be about just giving things a go, to make 'family' up as we go along, in the face of 'the right way' of doing family. For some of us, it is about having an interest in a variety and diversity of people and ideas in our lives and in our children's lives. We hope to do family in ways that make sense and fit for us. It can be about putting into practice the things that are important to us like justice, fairness, mutual respect, love, and gentleness. For some of us, it can be about experimenting with parenting and doing family, to create environments where our children can also experiment and play, so our children can also be who they want to be. This connects with hopes we have for our children to choose a life that makes them happy.

Doing family by living community

For some of us, creating family has been like travelling through new territories. We may have faced many challenges along the way of making family. At times, we have felt isolated in our experience of parenting and doing 'family'.

It has been so important for us to come together with other people creating and doing families to talk, to share our stories of unique challenges and

common issues as queer families, and to learn from others. We want people around us who will support, nourish, and honour what we are doing and understand some of the tricky bits. For many of us, this theme is about wanting a diversity of people in our lives and our children's lives. This desire for community has been long-held by many of us and has a history to it.

Similar to 'family', for us 'community' is also a verb, not a noun. It can involve connecting with other queer families, so our children can meet each other so they can feel like they are not the only ones with two mums. It is about getting resources from a variety of places and from different people, to have a support network. There are many questions that continue to come up for us because we are making up family as we go along. It is like there is no script for 'family' for us. Creating family doesn't just happen; we have found it to be a constant negotiation. That is why community is so important to be able to talk about our options, and how to respond to our children's questions, to get clearer about what is important for all of us.

THE ROLE OF OUTSIDER-WITNESS PRACTICES

There are many processes through which queer families can experience a sense of invisibility or non-recognition. Because of this, I felt using outsider-witness practices (see White, 1999) was important to offer participants a sense of recognition. I used these practices in informal and at times virtual ways. In recruiting an appropriate audience to bear witness to the key themes that had been documented, I shared them with key people I knew would have some insider-knowledge and an embodied interest in the themes, and then proceeded to engage them in a re-telling by interviewing the person using key categories of enquiry. Some of the questions included:

- What stood out for you from the theme?
What expression caught your attention?
- Of all the expressions, why did these catch your attention?
- What images of people's lives and relationships were evoked for you?
What might these images say about that the person's life and identity?

- What do these images touch on in the history of your life, and in your experiences, hopes, and dreams for family?
- What's it been like to be transported in these ways? What effect might this have for you, and future possibilities of action?

In these interviews, like Behan,

I see my role as providing a scaffold. My primary role during the retellings is to act as an interviewer to assure that the reflections are linked back to the life of the person the centre, to deconstruct comments with the aim of further linking lives, and to unpack unquestioned assumptions. (1999, p.28)

I used this definitional ceremony map (White, 1999) to ensure that the 're-tellings' were offered in a way that were not judgements, homilies, or applause but embodied acknowledgements that assisted the rich description of participants' lives and identities. I wanted these re-tellings to:

... encapsulate aspects of the original telling. But more than this – the retellings of the outsider-witness group routinely exceed the boundaries of the original telling in significant ways, in ways that contribute to the rich description of the personal and relational identities of the persons whose lives are at the centre of the ceremony. In part, these retellings achieve this through the linking of the stories of the lives of these persons with the stories of the lives of others, around shared themes, values, purposes and commitments. (White, 1999, p.60)

To give a flavour of this, I will share one of the re-tellings of the theme 'Being proud and 'out' as families of choice':

Dear parents of the project,

It has been wonderful to read your stories of being out and proud as families. It has got me appreciating how sharing your stories is continuing to create change and more acceptance in our communities. I would love

to hear these stories in more mainstream places. Thank you for sharing them with me. It has me dreaming up projects to bring more love and acceptance in society, like alternative books in schools.

This theme stood out for me the most. Being comfortable in your own skin and being happy with who you are as a family caught my attention about this theme. Initially, this stood out for me because of my experiences of growing up with my mum and her female partner. I was reminded of the religious frameworks that were alive in our lives, and in our church. These frameworks had convinced my mum and I for a time when I was growing up to think of our family was somehow bad and evil. So we denied that we were a family to the outside world. But it has also reminded me of a longing I have had for many years, a longing for acceptance of family regardless of difference, and an ongoing passion for changing community understandings.

Another expression that caught my attention was 'we want to create changes in our communities through our interactions'. I am reminded of my early twenties when I had moved into a share house with some gorgeous, very accepting folksy women. I can remember spending a week alone in the house. It was a beautiful time. It was the first week I had to myself in my entire life. I did lots of reflection. I made a decision to change my name. It was a really empowering space to be in, to be in my own space, to feel comfortable with my self, to say, 'Hey this is who I am'. I changed my name to include my mum's maiden name, and to have my mum's partner's name, Viv, to be my middle name. I wanted to make these relationships that were my family, more visible to the world, to show people that these relationships and this history was a part of who I am and where I am from. The time led to me being proud and out in my life.

It has been wonderful to read about parents in Brisbane consciously trying to create pride, and for their children to feel

supported. There were many images of these parents that were evoked for me. It got me thinking that these parents may stand firmly for acceptance for themselves and who they are, that they are respecting of themselves. I get this image of their love for their children that family is important for them, to not be afraid of creating change in the face of a society that might struggle with their relationships.

It has been transporting for me to reconnect to all of this, to hear of people creating community, of loving in different ways. It has given me hope. Reading stories like this helps me see that things are changing, that people can create families in the ways they want. It gets me appreciating that love is the same though, and that the people who may not have recognised these family relationships may see them in the future. This theme has reconnected me to my passion of changing the ideas of mum and dad and the 2.4 kids being the only way to do family.

In offering these re-tellings to project participants, to invite a 're-telling of the re-telling', I wanted the re-tellings to act as 'reflecting surfaces' to render visible actual and desired understandings of the project participants, and the significance of their existence as families (Myerhoff, 1978, p.222). These 're-tellings' could also serve to magnify, richly describe, and honour the local particularities and subjugated knowledges of queer families, in the face of various disqualifying societal discourses and practices. In this way, participants could also be invited to link with other people around shared hopes, intentions, and dreams in a process of 'collective social weaving' (Hoffman, 1998, p.7).

In offering the re-telling of this re-telling, one participant said:

This re-telling stood out for me. I take messages of hope and love from it, and the message that 'love is the thing'. To emerge from the silence, to reconstruct life, this stands out for me. It takes me to considering

the possibilities of what family could mean in the future. It is encouraging for me to hear this story. It reconnects me to my hopes and dreams, of how delightful it will be for Lilla, my daughter, to feel okay in her skin. This story takes me to a place of hope, that Lilla could have this stuff to feel okay and that we will be able to be strong and out, to provide her with the tools to lead to a peaceful and happy life.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have described key post-structuralist and narrative ideas, and practices that informed the Queer Families project. It has provided me the opportunity to critically reflect on specific questions, categories of enquiry, and practices to generate rich descriptions of alternative stories, and themes of 'living family' for queer family members. In documenting key themes of 'family' and inviting other people locally and internationally to offer re-tellings to be delivered to the initial project members, I have enjoyed being part of a process of creating a 'collective social weaving' – a weaving of many colours, many meanings, many different storylines.

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NOTES

- ¹ This was an expression initially used by a project participant, Pauline Coffey, when describing what she gives value to.
- ² I first discovered this expression in Suzy Stiles' article 'Family as a verb' (2001).
- ³ 'Families of choice' may differ from families of origin in which connection is often defined by genetic/biological connections.