

LESBIAN PARENTING EXPERIENCE: AN EXAMINATION OF CULTURAL SOCIALIZATION PRACTICES AND CHILD REARING STRATEGIES AMONGST LESBIAN MOTHERS IN THAILAND

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Abstract: An increasing number of lesbians in Thailand have entered parenthood, some through the context of formal heterosexual marriage, others through adoption and artificial insemination. As same-sex marriage is illegal in Thailand, accurate statistics have been difficult to acquire on the number of lesbian households. This qualitative study explores the experience of Thai lesbian parents who are within the empty spaces of Thai society, with little or no social and legal support. Seven lesbian parents from six provinces across Thailand were recruited and semi-structured interviews were conducted in this study. Thematic analysis was used to identify emerging themes and critical ethnography was used to expose challenges that resulted from social-political processes of unfairness and injustice. The results indicated that the participants adapt by finding ways to navigate and negotiate these social-political processes. They survive by reinventing, redefining their lives and challenging boundaries and choices that arise from being LGBT. The issues that they struggle with are both specific and non-specific to being LGBT. Through this, Thai lesbian parents continue to celebrate their diverse families which are normal yet different.

Keywords: Thai lesbian families, cultural socialization, same-sex families, children of LGBT families, lesbian parenting experience

Introduction

An increasing number of lesbians in Thailand are entering parenthood through various contexts, some through the context of formal heterosexual marriage, others through adoption and artificial insemination. The researcher's rationale is that it is highly likely that same-sex families exist as a subculture within our society, who live, work, and serve in all communities, even if hidden. These alternative families are likely to face systematic barriers such as rights to health benefits, laws and policies. The goal of this study is to investigate the psychological experiences and socialization practices of lesbian women who

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become parents in Thai society and to gain a better understanding of their existing sub-culture; how the population live and raise children with no social and legal support.

What does it mean to be a Lesbian in Thailand?

In 2002, Thailand announced that homosexuality would no longer be regarded as a mental illness or disorder (USAID, 2014) many years after the American Psychological Association adopted a motion in 1975 to erase homosexuality from its list of mental disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1974). Thailand has a rather open attitude towards sexual orientation and has no laws prohibiting homosexuality. However, Thai society is less accepting in regard to the subject of same-sex laws for family rights and equality thus creating a superficial gay friendly image (Thanthong - Knight, 2015). In the research conducted by Khon Thai Foundation amongst Thai citizens aged 15 to 24 years old, 56% of the participants thought that homosexuality including lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexuals is abnormal (Thanthong - Knight, 2015). In a country where nearly 95% of the people are Buddhists, many believe that gay or transgender people suffer from bad karma for committing adultery in their past lives. Unlike western countries where a lesbian is defined by her sexual orientation, her attraction, and preferences for relationship with other women. In Thailand non-heterosexuals are distinguished by the fact that they are gender non-normative (Hays, 2008). "*Phit-Phet*" in Thai translates to mis-gendered or mis-sexed. However, in English the tone is often interpreted as unnatural or a freak of nature (Supapung, 2013). Despite Thailand's cultural tolerance, women identifying themselves as toms and lesbians are often viewed negatively by Thai society.

Objectives

According to Parke and Buriel (1994) socialization is defined as "the process whereby an individual's standards, skills, motives, attitudes, and behaviors change to conform to those regarded as desirable and appropriate for his or her present and future role in any particular society." Socialization can be influenced by parents, peers, media, teachers, and other agents. The research objective of the study is to explore the experiences and perceptions of lesbian parents in the Thai society in order to gain a better understanding on the existing sub-culture; how the population live and socialize children with no or little social and legal support. This study aims to fill the gaps in literature for this particular marginalized population, i.e. knowing specific experiences, obstacles and perceived discrimination faced by this population.

Literature Review

Definition of Family

In the book *American Kinship (1968): A Cultural Account*, Schneider revolutionized the 1980's research in the anthropology field to examine the cultural origin of kinship. He theorized that bloodlines were not as significant as social and cultural aspects to understanding kinship. In another study Kurotani (2005) stated that young adults form their support network not on blood ties but rather based on mutual affection, these include close friends of both the same and opposite sexes. Therefore, allowing some flexibility to the rules of kinship and marriage, where individuals do not experience family as biological relations but as a signified cultural representation of "love and "support" through meaningful choices (Kurotani, 2005).

Much research has focused on child outcomes rather than family structure; therefore, few studies have focused on ways which parents socialize their children. In most parts of the world, same-sex partners still do not have access to the legal institution of marriage, so most children growing up in same-sex parented households live with unmarried, and many with never-married parents (Patterson, Riskind, & Tornello, 2014).

A Tripartite Model of Parental Socialization

The Tripartite model suggests that children are directly and indirectly influenced by their parents through instruction, education, or consultation. Parents have the ability to educate their children regarding appropriate social norms, rules, culture and more. Parke et al. (1994) state that parents are managers in lives of children, they not only provide access to opportunities of socialization beyond home environment but "parents may serve as coaches, teachers, and supervisors as they provide advice, support, and directions to help or negotiating social challenges or dilemmas" (Parke et al., 1994). Lesbian mothers are shown to have higher concerns about how their children will be treated outside the home and are likely to participate in support groups (Speziale & Gopalakrishna, 2004).

Negative Views on Lesbian Parenting

In 2002, a Christian Institute in UK published an article on same-sex parenting arguing that "same-sex parenting is bad for kids". Morgan, Christian Institute and others take the stance that these differences suggest that lesbian families are inferior, can damage children and are morally wrong (Cameron, 1999, Christian Institute, 2002c; Holloway, 2002; Morgan, 2002) compared to sexuality in the ethnic model (Epstein, 1987). Morgan claims that homosexuality is unnatural, non-generative, and that a child can only exist through "normal reproduction processes". Morgan further states that lesbian

parents have an agenda at the expense of the children, waiting to benefit from the lifestyle copying heterosexuals.

Hicks (2003) amongst many researchers responded to Morgan's (2002) book as "Christian homophobic course" made up of three major strands: the notion of a powerful 'gay research mafia' against which most are afraid to speak; the suggestion that homosexuality is against nature; and the view that lesbians and gay men are both pathological and sexually violent. Hicks (2003) argued that in case of Morgan & Christian Institutes, the debates are based on the limitations mentioned in the studies that claim limited representative sampling. Stacey & Biblarz (2001) study also suggest the differences exhibited by lesbians are stated as not significant just different therefore the course of discrimination cannot be justified.

Positive Impacts of LGBT Parenting

In a study on the children of lesbian mothers, Saffron (1998) questioned the assumption that there are no differences between lesbian and heterosexual parenting in relation to social and moral development. Children of LGBT parents are reported to be more accepting of difference, diversity and are more tolerant (Goldberg, 2007; Saffron, 1998). Children have reported acceptance both of homosexuality and of other forms of difference, as well as feelings of loyalty and pride to the LGBT community, valuing equality in relationships, and a willingness to take responsibility for challenging prejudice (Goldberg, 2007a; Saffron, 1998). Children's acceptance also positively leads to exploring their sexual attractions and discovering their identity (Davies, 2008; Kivalanka & Goldberg, 2008; Saffron, 1998).

Method

The researcher's rationale is that alternative families are minorities who exist within our society as a subculture and that all members of this subculture experience some level of or similar types of inequalities and discrimination under the existing social system that must be addressed critically. Therefore, to uncover the hidden processes a theoretical framework using critical ethnography was employed as theoretical approach to address processes of unfairness or injustice based on moral principles of human freedom and wellbeing (Madison, 2005). Thematic analysis helped to identify themes and to examine particular social, cultural, or organizational settings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Madison (2005) to start a critical ethnography, the researcher must look at the experiences in one's life, both past and present, and who we are as a unique individual that will lead to certain questions about the world and certain problems about why things are the way they are. It is important to honor one's own personal history and the knowledge that has

been accumulated up to this point, as well as the intuition or instincts that draw one toward a particular direction, question, problem, or topic. Ask questions that only one can answer: "What truly interests me?" "What do I really want to know more about?" "What is most disturbing to me about society?" (Madison, 2005, p. 238).

The researcher is a self-identified lesbian and is well informed and to a certain degree involved with the LGBT subculture in Thai Society. Outside of the LGBT culture the researcher often introduces her partner as a friend in fear of creating a hostile atmosphere or receiving negative opinions and also to avoid uncomfortable feelings for others. In many social or professional situations, often facing the awkwardness of having to respond to the question of, "What does your husband do?" or, being cautious about disclosing sexual orientation in the work environment. Not to mention other more important matters such as owning property, while equally contributing to the finances of the property, legally the ownership title does not belong to both. Which draws the question of what would happen should situations arise, such as decision making in case of hospitalization or death of one partner as same-sex marriage is not legal and therefore rights and benefits are not recognized. The researcher believes that other LGBT families face similar challenges to a certain degree, including battling issues of child custody. This serves as a justification for a need to explore the experiences of the existing lesbian parents in our society to further contribute to a transformative change.

Procedure

According to Braun and Clarke (2013) in a small number of interviews, usually around six to ten participants are required before additional data fails to generate new information and reach saturation. The recruitment process took seven months to locate, screen and shortlist the participants who met the criteria as follows: lesbians who are parents either through the context of previous heterosexual marriage and have been in a long-term relationship of a minimum time of one year and raised children with a same-sex partner, lesbians who have adopted and raised children with another same-sex partner, lesbians who have conceived children through assisted reproductive technology and have raised the children in a same-sex relationship, and/or lesbian parents who are raising children of at least two years old. The recruitment channels were advertising through organizations, direct contact, network referrals and snowballing. Seven participants aged between 24 – 40 years old met the criteria and were interviewed. The selected participants living locations are Bangkok, Mahasarakham, Surat Thani (Koh Samui), Nakhon Phanom, Pattani and Ratchaburi. The interviews last between 60 to 150 hours, with occasional follow ups via phone and messaging.

Triangulation of data helps strengthen analytical claims to get a richer story (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Social phenomena are singular; thus, they cannot be reproduced, and it is almost impossible to duplicate similar studies using the same conditions and variables. Therefore, to establish triangulation data credibility the interview transcript was reviewed by the participants to check for any discrepancies. Secondly, to ensure quality in validation of findings, the researcher presented the findings to her advisor for review and comments for the analyses and themes that have emerged.

Findings

Defining the Word Family

Social conservatives will describe a family and its members in terms of structure and roles, for example, a mother, a father and a child. Sociologists, on the other hand, tend to define family more in terms of the manner in which members relate to one another rather than on a strict configuration of roles (Little, & McGivern, 2012). Interestingly, the perspective of both the social conservatives and of the sociologist were reflected in the findings. Family, as described by the participants consisted of fulfilling their role in the family, placing high values on the aspects of couple relationships. Characteristics and personality traits that reflect their values and beliefs are the foundation in establishing a healthy family. These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Parker and Commonford (2014), which address a range of aspects of lasting couple relationships, including commitment, personality traits, transition to parenthood, health, and satisfaction and stability. However, many same-sex parents expressed pressure to be perfect. *“We need better immunity than normal families because we are female families. A female acting as a dad...there is nothing wrong, but we have to be stronger”* Payton (2015) suggests that the pressure to be perfect may result from public skepticism about same-sex parenting such as the misconception that they may have an ulterior motive to recruit children into their alternative lifestyle. This makes the parents in the LGBT community more aware of heightened scrutiny. This is because, if they fail, they will not only fail the LGBT community, but also prove that the false beliefs of their social critics are true. The main traits participants choose to define their families also had a significant connection to their life experiences. In one example, a participant who had earlier provided a detailed account of her failed attempt at married life as a result of her husband's infidelity and betrayal defined the most important aspect of a family as faithfulness and trust. *“The main thing in staying together is faithfulness and trust, other than that it's just depends”*. Because of her experience of her husband cheating, she now values faithfulness and trust as a key family trait. Another participant who lives in

the southern province of Thailand, known to be a dangerous area due to an ongoing political and religious conflict, described safety as being her most important trait for family, “*Someone who is with you and you feel safe ... it depends on people, what your safety means how you live in what form, some people can design their own style that fits with themselves*”. These findings provide a fitting definition of their family, similar to Schneider’s theory of kinship, which states that bloodlines are not a significant aspect in forming a family, but rather the cultural representation of love, affection and support through meaningful choices (Kurotani, 2005).

Navigating around the Social Ideas of “Father”

The dynamics of relationships between the lesbian mothers and the biological fathers or sperm donors in this study varied by different degrees. Some mothers maintained a good relationship with biological fathers and sperm donors of their children, and they allowed involvement of fathers in school family events and other situations that require both parents’ active involvement. On the other hand, some mothers prefer to maintain distance and navigate around family events without the presence of the biological father or sperm donor. According to Lewin (1994), lesbian women often allow the biological father into their children’s lives, but the responses in how to define father and to include, or exclude, that person vary widely. A participant shared her arrangement with her female partner regarding navigation around Father’s Day event at school:

We have discussed about when our son goes to school. For example, on Mother’s Day celebration, [partners name] will go to attend the event at school and what if on Father’s Day I go to the school event. If he feels shy about me then we will have to consider again whether I should attend the school event or not. We talked about this. I said that if it makes him embarrassed then why would I go but if he does not feel embarrassed, we can take turns to go to different events.

Response to Reaction from Public

Same-sex families reported having to be more aware of reactions from people in public places such as prejudice, including heterosexism and homophobia. Subtle forms of discrimination are called microaggressions (Farr, Crain, Oakley, Cashen, & Garber, 2016). Displays of microaggressions may not be malicious or constitute overt bullying or harassment but can come in many forms, from seemingly benign jokes, to verbal insults, to unequal treatment. A participant reported a negative comment made by her tom partner’s friend at their first encounter with the intention of a benign joke:

My tom girlfriend ran into her friend. She said jokingly, “Hey! Your wife is pregnant, did the sperm come out of your fingers? Your fingers can make sperm?” she was kidding but I thought it was rude. I didn't know her that well.

Participants indicated these colorblind ideologies that have come across as ignorant and distasteful created a wide range of feelings which made them feel uncomfortable. However, these reactions did not bother them personally as they have grown accustomed to it. Another participant shared an experience of public reaction during her pregnancy:

I have moved passed this (staring and questioning) a long time ago. It does not bother me anymore. We can tell that they are curious and that becomes amusing for us ... we want to tell them that my partner is a tom, and I am pregnant.

Strategies to Deal with Possible Teasing and Victimization

Children’s socialization behaviors are greatly influenced by parental attitudes (Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, & Gunnar, 2006). Participants reported experiencing some form of stigma and discrimination. All participants expressed concerns that their children may experience possible teasing and victimization when they are older, especially in schools. Oakley, Farr & Scherer, (2016) suggest that parents with older children are more likely to report using preparation for bias. Preparation for bias is the process where children are prepared for experiences of discrimination (Hughes et al., 2006).

[Child’s name] communication skills are not very good yet. I want to wait a little longer so he can communicate what he wants, so we can talk after returning from school. And you hear about so many stories about kids in nursery, they get sick a lot, or fighting, teasing and hurting each other. I want my kids to be able to come home at the end of day and tell me what happened.

Participants are preparing for bias at pre-school age. She felt that it was important for her son to be in an environment that was able to best promote his development. She needed the assurance that her son will be able to communicate to her about his day at school.

Communicating Family Structure

I think she understands. We talk to her every day since she started to understand. Since around two years old I think, she understands that pa (dad) is a tom. We don't hide or anything, we shower together so she sees us. I did not want to “*pook fang*” (instill value) that dad has to be like this but like, we

are natural, this is life. ...she doesn't feel like it's any different and accepts and know who they are.

The age that children find out about their family structure is highly significant. Paul (1987) suggests that children who learn about their mother's sexual identity in their early years are better able to cope and have higher self-esteem than those who are not informed of it until they were adolescents (Higgins, 1989). On the contrary, from a clinical perspective in the study by Bos & Gartrell, (2010) more and more same-sex parents are reporting that they engage with their children in what appears to be age-appropriate and egalitarian messages about having two moms or two dads. The results of this study suggest pro-active parenting that involved both strategies when they are older, the same-sex rights might be a normal thing, we might have more rights than today. I will also not put a five-year-old on the table and say this and that, but I have to look at their development. How much they can handle, I will take their education level into consideration. They will know according to age that there are two moms. They will understand that one is birth mother, the other mom takes care of them. Mom or caregiver can be grandma or my partner anyone that they are close to.

Participants expressed confidence that the positive changes in Thai society will result in a better environment in raising their children. Another example that reflected the pro-active parenting strategies is when participants expressed being supportive of their children's gender expression. Being honest in communication to help them feel fully supported by their family, regardless of the responses from their external environment. By creating a trusting environment their children will be able to express themselves and openly talk about their feelings. Similar to findings of Saffron (1998) and Goldberg (2007), which suggest that children of LGBT parents report higher acceptance of various differences in our society. They value equality in relationships and are willing to challenge prejudice. They will feel confident to explore their sexual attractions and discover their new identity (Davies, 2008; Kivalanka & Goldberg, 2008; Saffron, 1998).

Discussion

This study's purpose is to explore the lived daily experiences of lesbians as parents in Thai society, how different and/or similar are their problems compared to traditional families, how do lesbian parents use their experiences to socialize their children, what strategies do lesbian parents utilize to prepare their children for potential challenges. The critical ethnography approach is notably suitable to gain insights into the social and cultural position of participant's as a suppressed group. The analysis not only presented the

challenging participants' experiences in their daily lives that consisted of social, political and cultural context but also brings to light the underlying psychological patterns.

When reviewing the data critically, the patterns examined in this article reveals three underlying psychological patterns: the need for justification, anticipation for the future and doing things over and around the system. These patterns repeatedly emerged when participants shared their experiences in maintaining their day to day challenges guided by social, political and cultural factors. From how they define the word family, navigating around the social ideas of a father, and engaging in strategies to teach their children in order to prepare them to deal with teasing and victimization. These main themes represent the constant struggle that is central in the lives of lesbian mothers and are issues that heterosexual families do not experience and thus take for granted.

Justification can mean a range of different aspects. Merriam-Webster Dictionary (1999) states that justification means a reason, fact, circumstance, or explanation that justifies or defends. During the interview, when referring to their identity or same-sex family structure, more than one of the participants referred to the term, "*pen young ngee*" meaning "like this", to represent their identity, and "*pen dhammachart, pen prokkati*" meaning: natural and normal, to represent the family structure. To confirm this recurring pattern during the interview, the participants were prompted with further questions about their identity. It is noteworthy that some of the participants took a long pause in order to phrase their words appropriately. There is no better way for the participants to justify being themselves, but to use the term "like this". These responses may reflect a form of internalized homophobia as hearing and seeing negative depictions of their lifestyles can lead members of the minority to internalize, or take in, some of the negative messages. Much research suggests that internalized homophobia is a normal response for LGBT individuals because as children in the heterosexist society they were exposed to these negative attitudes. Therefore, it is not surprising that in their own homosexual identity developmental phase, LGBT individuals embrace the negative attitudes towards homosexuality because heterosexuality is the norm and "correct way to be" (Davies, 1996).

The participants constantly expressed anticipation for a better future. Some of the pressing issues are the legal support for same-sex families both in the form of public awareness and marriage equality. They are within their rights to feel that heterosexual couples take many benefits and normal daily activities for granted. In lesbian headed families the rules are unclear, as one participant

expressed her wishes for the same privileges: If something serious happens, if any legal issues need to be done. I know someone is there to help, like medical matter if someone is there for example representing me for suing, I want her to have right on behalf of me. Insurance, social welfare asset management she (my partner) can deal with these easier.

The lack of relationship recognition by the law also leads to same-sex couples having unequal status compared to heterosexual couples in areas such as, the ability to access social services, spousal insurance and benefits, and joint bank loans.

An international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity, the Yogyakarta Principles 24 titled “The Right to Found a Family”, states that: “Everyone has the right to found a family, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Families exist in diverse forms. No family may be subjected to discrimination on the basis of the sexual orientation or gender identity of any of its members” (The Yogyakarta Principles, 2007). Not having access to same-sex marriage laws, the participants in this study have expressed having to do things over and around the system. Therefore, same-sex parents must face an “empty space” when it comes to the social script and therefore they must define (Hicks, 2006) and construct an alternative method to “doing family” to negotiate what it means to be a family outside the confines of heteronormative value system (Sasnett, 2014).

Lived experiences can provide practical implications from knowledge rather than use “incomplete and fragmented” information to make decisions in policy making and education. Raising awareness to the general public and training school teachers can help in removing gender stereotypes, therefore allowing space for LGBT individuals to imagine the possibilities of becoming mothers, fathers, parents, or guardians.

The findings in this study can make significant contributions to the early studies on alternative families in Thailand addressing issues currently faced by the marginalized population and potential challenges faced by their children in ‘coming out’ about their family structure within their environment. This study is limited by representation of educated middle class and upper middle-class families. In order to verify these results, it is important to continue gathering data using a larger and more diverse sample. The perspective LGBT membership and socializing strategies was described by the mothers, and not by the children themselves. The children’s relationships may provide a different view to the mother’s view of their children’s affiliation. Another key factor that was not explored is the division

of labor in the lesbian headed households. How do the lesbian couples divide the household chores equally, or do they follow the heterosexual examples where in one partner has higher earnings and the other shares greater household chores and childcare. These studies can help validate that roles are not just about gender and that much of society are also affected by single earning families.

In spite of these limitations, the critical ethnographic approach examined in this study uncovered valuable insights to how lesbian mothers live and use their experiences to socialize their children. The findings in this study clearly suggest that lesbian families take pride in their family structure. They use both protective and proactive parenting approaches rather than teaching their children to mistrust outsiders in their environment. The participants hope that by promoting their children's awareness of their diverse family structures, they can prepare their children for potential discrimination, such as teasing and victimization. The findings in this research contribute to earlier findings that new data on alternative families emerges with messages about reinventing and redefining one's own subjectivity, and challenging boundaries and choice (Hicks 2006).

Saffron (1998) firmly argued that lesbian parents model pride in stigmatized identity "which is a more powerful teacher than explanation alone" and thus creates an advantage of learning by example. The result shows children of LGBT parents are open to taking more responsibilities in challenging prejudice, have higher values of equality in a relationship and openness in acceptance of all forms of differences, especially homosexuality. This information can be used to encourage tolerance and acceptance of diversity in family structures and to promote safer environments that the same sex headed families should have.

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