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The lies that bind : heteronormative constructions of "family" in social work discourse

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Abstract

The social work profession has a long, enduring history and commitment to American families, and has often led the way in embracing alternative family arrangements. Gay and lesbian families are gaining more political visibility and lobbying for the rights and protections from which they were previously excluded. Therefore, this study is an analysis of social work's contemporary, defining representations of gay and lesbian families. Twelve, gay and lesbian "family" research studies were culled from the database, *Social Work Abstracts,* and subjected to queer discourse analysis in order to illuminate how these alternative family forms are being constructed within the discipline and the ways in which social work potentially relies upon and produces heteronormativity. Queer discourse analysis operates as a mode of textual analysis that examines heteronormative phenomena through the problematization of binary constructions rooted in the notion of fixed or stable identities. This study indicates that gay and lesbian families are ultimately invited to join, but not to change the traditional terms of "family," thus making the social work research less of an exploration of alternative family forms and more of an endorsement of alternative, *nuclear* families. By clinging to normative, nuclear family features, social work misses out on the richness, creativity, and diversity of the queer family laboratory and also fails to validate or make available alternative relationship possibilities for everyone**.**

The Lies that Bind:

Heteronormative Constructions of "Family" in Social Work Discourse

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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The philosophy of one century is the common sense of the next (Anonymous).

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Chapter I

Introduction

We are born into families. We develop, grow, and hopefully die in the context of our families. Our problems are formed by the formative course of our family's past, the present tasks it is trying to master, and the future to which it aspires. (Carter & McGoldrick, 2003, p. 375).

It has been argued that in nearly all societies throughout history, "the family" has been a primary and organizing feature of social, civil, cultural, and economic life **(**Casper & Bianchi 2002; Cowan, Field, Hansen, Skolnick, & Swanson, 1993; Foucault, 1990; Hartman, 1994; Hartman & Laird, 1983; Kagan & Weissbourd, 1994; Laird, 1995; Logan, Rasheed, M., & Rasheed, J., 2008; Parsons & Bales, 1955; Richmond, 1917, 1930; Walsh, 2003; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). Though the family form is dynamically changing from context to context and adopting myriad material and symbolic meanings, it is still traditionally seen "as the very foundation of society" (Weeks et al., 2001, p. 9), the primary unit "of biological and cultural reproduction" (Aerts, 1993, p. 4) that manages procreation and intimate relationships as well as oversees the "socialization of the new members of each generation" (Eisentadt, as quoted in Aerts, 1993, p. 4).

Because of the family's crucial and multifaceted role in society's overarching functioning, ideas about what actually defines a family are a source of tremendous attention and scrutiny. The American family, in particular, is a common site of concern and debate and often exists as a battleground in which the country's ideological tensions tend to manifest (Blau & Abramovitz, 2007; Casper & Bianchi, 2002; Kagan & Weissbourd, 1994; Walsh, 2003). Conservative writers like David Popenoe (1988) are convinced that American families, and society as a whole, are in a state of decline because the country's commitment to "family values" has rapidly disintegrated. What Popenoe refers to as "family values," is a set of nuclear family ideals, implicitly organized around white, middle class, monogamous heterosexual marriage, co-residence, and co-parenting (Aerts, 1993; Blau & Abromovitz, 2007; Hartman & Laird, 1983; Weeks et al., 2001). In contrast, more liberal "family" writers like Judith Stacey (1990) retort that it is not that the "family" is in decline, but that our normative notions about what a family *should* be, are changing.

Recent efforts by LGBTQ families to participate in federally recognized marriage and child rearing practices pose both an affirmation of, and a challenge to, the reign of the nuclear family form. Queer theorist Judith Butler recognizes this complexity and asks, "How does one oppose… homophobia without embracing the marriage norm as the exclusive or most highly valued social arrangement for queer sexual lives?" (Butler, 2004, p. 5). What does it mean if the heteronormative "marriage-and-family paradigm" (Heath, 2005, p. 358) subsumes kinship patterns that have previously been excluded from it? Heteronormativity refers to the process by which heterosexuality "interprets itself as society" (Warner, 1993, p. xxii) and often goes undetected as a "natural," "normal," and "ideal" way to organize and perform social relationships. The heteronormative, nuclear family form has been privileged and protected by

American public policies and practices, and persists as a primary vehicle for persons to be visible and eligible for material benefits under the auspices of the state (Hartman & Laird, 1983). This arrangement is problematic in that individuals and relationships that exist outside the family's designated bounds are at risk of being deemed undesirable, "unworthy of societal support" (Cowan et al., p. 466) and even pathological.

With its long and enduring commitment to the American family, social work has been trying to detect, define, assess, and treat the family for as long as it has existed as a profession (Hartman & Laird, 1983; Logan et al., 2008; Walsh, 2003). The ways that social work chooses to approach and treat families, the practice and pedagogical models that are endorsed, the notions of "normal" and "healthy" family functioning that are privileged, and the kinds of people that are deemed eligible for family-focused services are directly contingent upon the profession's conceptualization of what actually constitutes a family. Thus, social work discourse, interdependently situated within society's "common sense" assumptions about "family," contributes to the knowing and making of "family" by drawing boundaries around it and naming it, both within the discipline itself and for the wider public.

In this way, social work, like all professional, "expert" discourses, participates in truth-making claims that shape human behavior. Social work should, therefore, be critical of its active role in communicating and maintaining messages of normativity (Carabine, 2001) that inevitably privilege some people, while silencing and subjugating others. What is family? Who is included and why? Who is excluded and at what cost? There has been a substantial move within the social work discipline to recognize and normalize "alternative" family forms, however, no matter how inclusive the term becomes, "family" remains "the reification and naturalization of certain forms of belonging" (Weston, 2001, p. 151). Thus, the unavoidable dilemma for a "family practice

profession" (Coates & Sullivan, 2005, p. 90) like social work is that despite its good intentions, attempts to embrace definitions of "family" inevitably exclude or coerce groups of people who are not able or willing to replicate these legible characteristics, but who organize and identify themselves as "families," nonetheless. Therefore, because of social work's powerful role in the production of dominant "family" definitions and practices, the profession has a responsibility to turn a critical gaze upon itself as an authoritative body of knowledge and disciplining force.

Discourse analysis can be a critical means for undertaking these kinds of examinations and is predicated on the poststructural position that language is "not a neutral information-carrying vehicle… rather language is constitutive: it is the site where meanings are created and changed" (Taylor 2001, p 6). The study of discourse is the study of language in use and its psychic and material consequences. Similarly, a *queer* theoretical framework and method is a poststructural mode of analysis and critique, focusing primarily on the reified constructions of gender and sexual identities. There is no particular queer object or subject. Queer is not an essential identity, domain, or dwelling, but is rather "produced as a contrast against which normalcy is established" (Logan et al., 2008, *Theoretical Perspectives* section, para. 2). Hence, queer never *is*, it never fully arrives. It is always, disrupting, refusing, and resisting the ever-shifting power of (hetero)normalcy and dominance.

As such, the queer discourse analytic method that I submit for the purpose of this study is one that problematizes the hetero/homo binary by analyzing the manner in which heterosexuality achieves a naturalized, unquestioned, and privileged position in our cultural texts and practices; (including social work education, theory and practice). Despite its multidisciplinary roots and its resistance to boundaries and limitations, poststructural queer theory can be expressed under a set

of guiding, anti-normative principles. Stein and Plummer (1996) outlined four primary tenets of queer theory:

- An idea that sexual power runs throughout social life and is enforced through boundaries and binary divides

- A problematization of sexual and gender categories as inherently unstable and fluid

- A rejection of civil rights strategies in favor of deconstruction, de-centering, revisionist readings, and anti-assimilation politics

- A willingness to interrogate areas that normally would not be seen as the terrain of sexuality. (p. 134).

By interrogating social work's current constructions of "family," queer theory can offer social work another critical lens from which to examine its own relationship to families. To its credit, "social work has a long tradition of borrowing knowledge from a variety of sources and translating, reworking, and applying this knowledge in ways that enhance practice" (Hartman and Laird, 1983, p. viii) and thus an integration of queer theory into contemporary social work discourse is a beneficially expansive and potentially illuminating enterprise. This attempt to integrate new or "different" epistemological frameworks is similar to the ways that critical feminist theory has contributed to social work's conceptualizations and treatments of family (McGoldrick, Anderson, & Walsh, 1989) by highlighting the ways that families are organized by differentiated gender roles, and enact "gender-based constraints" (Haddock, Zimmerman, &

Lyness, 2003, p. 304) and unequal power dynamics based on gender. Similarly, critical race theories have illuminated the ways that families of color are often oppressively held to the same set of norms or standards as those related to the construction of the nuclear family ideal, without adequate attention to race, racism, immigration, varying kinship patterns, and social work's own shameful and sullied history when working with communities of color (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Falicov, 1998; Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995; McGoldrick, Giordano, & Pearce, 1996). Critical feminist and race theories have imbued social work with the responsibility to be aware of and to address these particular gendered and racial inequities, as well as challenge us to de-center the primacy of the traditional, nuclear family canon, in an effort to have social work examine and re-narrate the sexist and racist conscriptions embedded in our understandings of family (Walsh, 2003).

With this in mind, it becomes even more evident how this queer discourse analysis is important for social work. This study examines social work's contemporary constructions of "family" in selected texts/accounts that are specifically concerned with LGBTQ alternatives to this structure and identifies the ways in which social work relies upon and reproduces heteronormativity. This study analyzed 12, LGBTQ family-related texts from the database, *Social Work Abstracts,* in an effort to identify the characteristics necessary for a group of people to achieve "family" status, thus qualifying them for a whole host of benefits and catapulting them into a privileged position in society's relationship hierarchy.

A queer perspective is one that calls for "individuals to be the architects of their own relationship constructions, while at the same time employing the most rigorous self-reflexivity so as to avoid various and sundry manifestations of elitism, prejudice, and oppression that are byproducts of sex and relationship hierarchies" (Elia, 2003, p 78). This articulation of the queer

political project is strikingly similar to the explicit values of the NASW Code of Ethics (2006) that aim to "end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2006). Thus, this queer discourse analysis may also point to social work's curricular, pedagogical, and practice decisions as being potentially problematic and complicit in further marginalizing and discounting non-normative "family" experiences while also limiting and policing the sphere of social and relational possibilities for everyone. It is through these close examinations of power that the very dynamic and unstable line between social change and social coercion is revealed, and we as social workers need to keep an eye on this line at all times.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Social Work's *Family* History

Because of its fundamental, yet dynamic role in American society's overall functioning, "the family" is a particularly pressing and perplexing sociopolitical issue, garnering a lot of attention and engagement from social scientists across a wide span of disciplines (Casper & Bianchi, 2002; Cowan et al., 1993; Kagan & Weissbourd, 1994) including social work. Family is so explicitly and implicitly central to the social work's professional identity that it has been called a "family practice profession" (Coates & Sullivan, 2005, p. 90). Family-centered social workers Hartman and Laird (1983) write, "Social work, perhaps more than any other profession, can point to a rich history of volunteer and professional work with and on behalf of families" (p. viii). In its description of "family," *The Encyclopedia of Social Work* (2008) states that social work and the family have a long, enduring history and that social work "continues to renew its commitment to practice with families" (Logan, Rasheed, M., & Rasheed, J., 2008, *Conclusion* section, para. 1). At different moments in social work's history, "the family" has been posited as the single most salient system of focus within the discipline (Hartman & Laird, 1983; Laird, 1995; Logan et al., 2008).

Members of the Charity Organization Societies of the early 1880's, pioneers in the social work field known as "friendly visitors" went into the homes of poor, urban, American families to

assess them, in an effort to help them cope with the myriad stressors associated with immigration and poverty. These "friendly visitors" later became known as caseworkers and more contemporarily, social workers. (Blau & Abramovitz, 2007; Hartman & Laird, 1983, Logan et al., 2008). In her comprehensive social work text, *The Long View* (1930), Mary Richmond, director of the Charity Organization Societies, articulated the unyielding importance of the family as an organizing feature of both society at large and of the burgeoning social work profession. She cited the family as a "pivotal institution around which our human destinies revolve" (Richmond, 1930, as cited in Hartman, 1994, p. 131). Similarly, Jane Addams and other leaders of the American Settlement House Movement, adopted family-focused interventions and perceived family problems as a result of difficult and unjust environmental conditions that needed to be addressed and changed. (Blau & Abramovitz, 2007; Hartman & Laird, 1983; Logan et al, 2008). Moreover, social work's first professional journal was called *The Family* (Hartman, 1994; Hartman & Laird, 1983) and in 1898, early caseworkers initiated an on-going, family-focused summer course that eventually became the Columbia University School of Social Work, the country's first of its kind. (Blau & Abramovitz, 2007).

In the 1920's, social work was heavily influenced by the emerging American psychoanalytic movement, which took the discipline's attention away from the more environmental and systems approach that it had been founded upon and placed it within the context of the individual person's psychological experience. However, later, in the 1960's and 70's, precipitated by a liberal turn in American politics, social workers were at the forefront of the rise of family therapy theories and modalities that once again shifted social work's focus primarily back to the family. This family-centered movement reestablished the family as a central preoccupation in the social work profession and is mirrored by social work's deep

involvement in the development of the child welfare system and family preservation programs and agencies (Blau & Abramovitz, 2007; Hartman, 1994; Hartman & Laird, 1983). Both of social work's national organizing bodies, the National Association of Social Workers and the Council for Social Work Education, make explicit commitments to work with vulnerable individuals and families (NASW, 2008; CWSE, 2001) and most American schools of social work offer "courses and even concentrations in "the family" in an effort to integrate the burgeoning array of interdisciplinary theory into practice approaches" (Hartman & Laird, 1983; p. viii).

The Nuclear Family Legacy

But what *is* family? Historically, in the United States, commonly held definitions of family have typically organized around law, marriage and coupledom, procreation, inheritance, biological relatedness, and co-residence (Aerts, 1993; Butler, 2004; Casper & Bianchi, 2002; Cowan et al, 1993; Hartman and Laird 1983; Parsons & Bales, 1955; Walsh, 2003; Weeks et al., 2001). Additionally, the majority of American family research has derived from a white, middle-class, heterosexual, two-parent-married with-children, family model – representing the nuclear family ideal (Blau & Abramovitz, 2007; Cowan et al., 1993; Elia, 2003; Eng, 2010; Hartman, 1994; Hartman & Laird, 1983; Walsh, 2003). The traditional, nuclear family was at one point the most recognizable American family form as well as a mythical cultural norm and gold standard. The influential American sociologist, Talcott Parsons with colleague Robert Bales (1955) authored, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, existing as a formative text in its investigation and representation of the nuclear family, which they characterized as the "normal family." He cited the family as the primary institution responsible for raising children and for

taking care of individual needs; his position codified and celebrated the traditional nuclear family

form as the perfect vehicle for negotiating the economic, social and psycho-emotional realities of

modern, industrial society. Although there has been a substantial move towards diversifying this

working definition of what constitutes a family, the literature insinuates that Parson and Bales'

reflection and reification of the nuclear family ideal still insidiously persists and influences a

great deal of contemporary, American family discourse. (Cowan et al, 1993; Hartman & Laird,

1983; Walsh, 2003).

These "traditional," nuclear family definitions are still explicitly evident in state-

sanctioned family policies and practices. In her essay, *Bringing the Institution Back In,* Eliane

Aerts (1993) writes,

> Nuclear families remain the point of reference for the assessment of economic progress,
>
> for the definition of compensatory programs, and for the evaluation of members' status…
>
> failure to belong to a nuclear family unit is very likely to entail a lower social ranking (p.
>
> 6).

Accordingly, the Census Bureau, a department in the Federal government, helps to determine

and direct these social "compensatory programs" and resource allocations and does so, in part,

by categorizing individuals within "family" and "nonfamily" designations. The Census Bureau

defines family as "a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by

birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) and a

"nonfamily" is said to consist of, "a householder living alone (a one-person household) or where

the householder shares the home exclusively with people to whom he/she is not related" (U.S.

Census Bureau, 2010). In their concluding chapter in the book, *Family, Self, and Society:*

Toward a new agenda for family research, Cowan and colleagues (1993) comment on the

dangers associated with these kinds of "family" definitions:

> In our tendency to compare the families we study to some, often ill-defined, "ideal" of
>
> family functioning, family research often moves from a descriptive search for
>
> understanding to a prescriptive moral enterprise. Some family forms and functions are
>
> valued while others are regarded not only as dysfunctional but as undesirable and
>
> unworthy of societal support (p. 466).

Therefore, the looming shadow of the nuclear, family ideal is problematic in that it persists as a

primary platform for a person to be recognizable and eligible for material benefits under the

auspices of the state. Individuals and relationships that exist outside the bounds of a "family"

designation are at risk of experiencing marginalization and a "lower social ranking",

characterized by a lack of material, social, symbolic, and psychic capital (Hartman and Laird,

1983; Walsh 2003).

Social Work's discursive definitions of *family* and the politics of inclusion

Despite the pervasiveness of the lingering nuclear family ideal, contemporary notions of

what constitutes a family, as sanctioned by law, social institutions, and public policy and opinion

are expanding every day to include more diverse discourses. Social work, in particular, prides

itself in its commitment to progressive pluralism and thus, is often at the forefront of these

inclusive, "family diversity" endeavors. *The Encyclopedia of Social Work* (2010) proudly states

that the current direction of family-oriented social work research, "continues to be family

diversity" (Logan et al., 2010*, Overview* section, para. 1) and is reflected in the panoply of recent

literature exploring the characteristics and needs of all different "kinds" of families so that social work practitioners can be better informed and more culturally competent (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Falicov, 1998; Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995; Hicks, 2008; Laird & Green, 1996; McGoldrick, Anderson, & Walsh, 1989; McGoldrick, Giordano, & Pearce, 1996; Walsh, 2003).

However, social work has also struggled to negotiate its dual role as both a governing gatekeeper of state-sanctioned "family" benefits, and as a discipline committed to non-exclusionary social justice and anti-oppression practices (Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999; Hartman, 1994). In Froma Walsh's (2003) definitive family practice anthology, *Normal Family Processes*, Joan Laird writes, "Definitions of family are political and ideological, created and re-created in social discourses and shaped in social relations of power" (p. 178). Social work is influenced by and contributes to these overarching social discourses and has been trying to identify, define, assess, and treat the American family for as long as it has existed as a profession. The ways that social work chooses to approach and treat families, the practice and pedagogical models that are endorsed, the notions of "normal" and "healthy" functioning that are privileged, and the kinds of people that are deemed eligible for family-focused services are directly contingent upon the profession's conceptualization of what actually defines a family. Thus, the family arrangements and behaviors which are generally recognized and accepted by the profession profoundly influence the social work discipline unto itself (Walsh, 2003) as well as implicate social work as a primary participant in defining "family" for the society at large.

In *Family-Centered Social Work Practice,* Hartman & Laird (1983) acknowledge the inherent difficulty and risk in social work's attempts to conceptualize the family:

If social work nurtures an ideal conception of the family, those who fail to fit its norms

may be considered divergent or deviant, and consequently, encouraged, regardless of

their own values, to achieve a more socially acceptable adaptation of family living (p.

29).

For instance, "Nontraditional families differ from what is explicitly described as a social norm

and implicitly represented as an ideal; the implication in most family studies is that difference =

deviance = dysfunction" (Cowan et al., 1993, p. 467). Ironically, the "nontraditional family"

currently constitutes the majority of American family forms (Elia, 2003; Fraenkel, 2003; U.S.

Census Bureau, 2010) and yet this designation still occupies a secondary or "different" position

in public discourses about family. But different from what? Social work is invested in gaining

knowledge about these varying, "nontraditional families" -- i.e. adoptive, extended, single-

parent, remarried and blended, and gay & lesbian families, and works diligently to recognize,

legitimize, normalize, and include them into their rightful place within dominant family

discourses. However, this inclusive approach can perpetuate a sense of a marginal "other," while

simultaneously emphasizing an assimilationist agenda whereby "the sphere of legitimate intimate

alliance is established through the producing and intensifying regions of illegitimacy" (Butler,

2004, p. 105). The number of people included in society's "family" fulcrum may increase while

rendering those still outside its boundaries even more illegitimate; a process by which the most

vulnerable or deviant members of the population are further disenfranchised (Butler 2004; Elia,

2003; Eng, 2010; Weeks et al., 2001).

Social work, with all of its good intentions for equality, may be guilty of retaining a

normative concept of family and then slotting people into it, "rather than [actually]

acknowledging or legitimizing alternative ways of socially organizing" (Eng, 2010, p. 3). The book, *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage,* strongly asserts that an inclusive, liberal, equal-rights agenda only fights oppression on a symptomatic level by enlisting people in reform efforts that offer them a conditional home in normative structures, like marriage and family (Conrad 2010). These "symbolic gestures" (Stanley, 2010, p. 17) of inclusion actually "reinforce structures while claiming to reconfigure them" (Stanley, 2010, p. 17) and thus liberal efforts at attaining equality actually manifest as an "endless replication of the status quo"(Nair, 2010, p. 6). Therefore, even as social work continues to make valiant efforts to divest itself of prescriptive family ideals and expand the concept of family to include diverse types of family configurations, and thus more people within its boundaries, it is not immune from assuming and producing particular, "legitimate" relationship forms over others. Therefore, the question for social work must become, what are people being included *in?* And why?

Social Work as a Disciplining Discourse

Representations of "traditional" vs. "alternative" family forms within social work discourse exist as complicated and powerful endeavors because as Penny Powers (2001) writes:

> A discourse generalizes its subject, producing an ideal, a standard, the regular, the normal through its work. Then it functions in a policing role to maintain the range of normal that it has described, by power and control, utilizing appropriately trained social agents who have been educated to think of themselves as participating in the advancement of civilization and the betterment of humankind (p. 59).

In his examinations of modern power, knowledge and social control, French poststructuralist philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault, postulated that the human sciences and the "helping" professions (i.e. medicine, psychiatry, and social work) exert power through their various "technologies of intervention; by observation, measurement, assessment, and administration" (Epstein, 1999, p. 14). These technologies, these "expert" and professional bodies of knowledge or disciplinary discourses, carve out and name reality by "construct[ing] rules designating 'what it' and 'what is not'" (Carabine, 1998, p. 125). In this way, discourses shape behavior by "normaliz[ing] certain practices, habits and routines whilst creating deviations and perversions out of those that they exclude" (Layder, 1994, p. 101).

Social worker and Narrative therapist, Michael White (2002) submits that this kind of modern power effectively:

Recruits people's active participation in the fashioning of their own lives, their relationships, and the identities, according to the constructed norms of culture – we are both a consequence of this power, and a vehicle for it. By this account, this is a system of power that is particularly insidious and pervasive (p. 36).

Modern power is therefore a normalizing and disciplining force (Carabine, 1998; Chambon et al., 1999; Foucault, 1990, 1995; Halperin, 1995; Keenan, 2001; Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983), and has become the predominant system of power in the coercive achievement of social control, by rendering the state's subjects complicit in their own domination. Modern power emerged in the 17th century, when the early, modern state began to concern itself with the wellbeing of its population and became even more pervasive in the 18th century as industry, professionalism, and privatization emerged (Layder, 1994; Peet & Hartwick, 1999). It is a normalizing force in that

"all individuals are compared and differentiated according to a desired norm so producing homogeneity" (Carabine, 1998, p.125). It is disciplining when deviation from these collective norms is punished by state-sanctioned disenfranchisement and exclusion, as well as internalized, psychological verdicts about having an illegitimate identity or experience of self. The modern subject has been conditioned by discourses to surveil, judge, and govern one's self and others (Foucault, 1995).

Judith Butler (1990) reminds us that modern power "inevitably produces what it claims merely to represent" (p. 2), but often masks its own productive quality by "objectively" and authoritatively asserting foundational, and "expert" truths that are interpreted as existing, somewhere "out there" prior to our naming of it as such (Weick, 1993). In this Modernist, epistemological framework, reality is thought to be discovered and comprehended, not constructed or created by the subject or discipline. Modernity espouses a post-Enlightenment, scientifically, rational, objective and empirical position that lays claims to the existence of universal truths and is therefore always at risk of imposing values and morals that are not identified as such, but rather parade as these natural "truths" (Carter, 1998; Jagose, 1996; Parker, 1992; Peet & Hartwick, 1999). In her essay, *Reconstructing Social Work Education*, writer Ann Weick (1993) warns that the inevitable risk associated with social work operating from a Modern, positivist position is that it constructs the profession as an "elite knowledge system" (p. 16) whereby it is imbued with authority and truth-wielding power over the people we are serving. Clients have been "systematically silenced through the development of expert knowledge systems which disqualify and disregard their experiences" (Weick, 1993, p.16) and "others have argued that all the key terms of modernity are premised on the exclusion of women,

of people of color, that they are wrought along class lines and with strong colonial interests"
(Butler, 2004, p 179).

In their book, *Reading Foucault for Social Work*, (1999), Chambon, Irving, & Epstein
further contextualize social work's dual role within these theories of truth, power, knowledge,
and governmentality. This theoretical framework highlights social work's bind as a site of both
social change and social control. "The combination of social science and altruism makes social
work into one of the major instrumentalities though which the state governs and provides for the
welfare of citizens" (Epstein, 1999, p. 4) and does so by both normalizing and disciplining
techniques. Social work provides benefits to the masses and ameliorates social inequities while
also policing the psychology and the behaviors of modern subjects. However, in order for this
kind of governmentality to be effective, it must:

> Influence people, motivate them to adopt the normative views inherent in the intentions
> of social work practice. It must produce an effect without force, without command,
> indirectly. It must not be authoritative. It must enable its clients to be transformed, to
> adopt normative ways and thoughts *voluntarily*." (Epstein, 1999, p. 8)

Hence, social work *governs* by producing and enforcing cultural norms, truths, ethics, and
morality under the guise of bolstering individual's "healthy" mental hygiene, self-determination
and self-actualization.

Social Work and Poststructuralism

In *Finding Meaning for Social Work in Transitional Times: Reflections on Change*, Amy
Rossiter (1996) contends, "postmodernism has brought about a revision of epistemology that

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social work cannot escape" (p. 142). This postmodern turn is characterized by a challenge to the position that knowledge can exist independent from the knower and also illuminates the intrinsic connection between "knowing" and "controlling." These revelations have created a bit of an identity crisis for social work; torn between its longtime allegiance to scientifically-based, positivist discourses like psychiatry and psychology and its definitive commitment to "end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2006). Social work should continue to adapt to postpositivist ways of knowing or it risks being an oppressive anachronism.

In order to be "truly" poised for a postmodern framework or poststructural approach, social work must be willing to be critical of itself as a normalizing and disciplining discourse. It has to make gestures to deconstruct its own embedded biases and assumptions, as well as critically examine its enduring relationship to dominant discourses, the state, and compulsory norms. It is when a discipline does not understand itself as a powerful producer of "truths" that it is perhaps its most culpable of hurting the very people it is trying to study and serve (Chambon et al, 1999; Hartman, 1994; Weick, 1993; White, 1994). In contrast, poststructural philosophy is rooted in a social constructionist epistemology and is a critical rejection of the structural and essentializing reasoning of Modernity (Lyotard, 1984). Postmodernism and poststructuralism are critical of language and discourse, and work to dismantle the monolithic truths that have been deployed over the course of history to coerce, oppress, exclude and *other* people who do not subscribe to or perform the modern state's dominant and consolidating norms of the day (Carter, 1998; Laird, 1993; Peet & Hartwick, 1999). Poststructuralism understands these norms as contextual constructions that are buoyed by the regulating effects of modern power and governmentality. Invariably, a poststructural perspective "in social work education

acknowledges the frailty of "truth" as a standard against which to measure human activity" (Weick, 1993, p. 24) and acknowledges and accepts the multiplicity, plurality and fragmentation of experience as well as our own productive participation in fashioning the realities that we exist in.

Social work does not exist in a vacuum and is not impervious to the dominant public discourses that constitute the world(s). Poststructural perspectives allow for discourses to become aware of themselves and what "truths" they are contributing. It is through these kinds of internal critiques and reflections that social work can achieve greater levels of and reflexivity and accountability to the people that it serves. Reflexivity is a postmodern term/act, that is characterized as "a way of overcoming the gulf between the individual and the social" and is used to establish awareness of power differences, to locate oneself in research and practice and to problematize one's own position as a distanced observer (Parker, 1992). Therefore, adopting a poststructural perspective may help to illuminate some of social work's precarious professional blind spots.

Hegemony, Heteronormativity, and the Family:

One such "blind spot" that plagues most contemporary, dominant discourses is their participation in heteronormativity. Critical theorists Berlant and Warner (1998) define heteronormativity as the process by which:

> A whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness- embedded in things and not just in sex- is what we call heteronormativity (p. 554).

Lesbian feminist writer, Monique Wittig (1992) refers to this assumptive heteronormative model as the "Straight Mind" whereby reality and all social and psychic phenomena are interpreted through a heterosexual lens. Judith Butler (1990) terms this undetected dominance as the "heterosexual matrix" and describes it as a "grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (p. 151). Guillermo Avila-Saavedra (2009) adds that, "heteronormativity is about the maintenance of the status quo, with all its elements of gender, class and race in addition to sexuality" (p. 13). Heteronormativity is present in social institutions, relations, and practices that privilege heterosexuality and it is this "social desirability that gives heterosexuality its hegemonic dimension" (Avila-Saavedra, 2009, p. 7). Laclau and Mouffe (1985) describe hegemony as an imposition of a way of life that is deemed real, natural, neutral, and normal in a way that privileges one group while marginalizing another.

"The family" is a particularly egregious site of heterosexual hegemony. Several studies and analyses, spanning multiple disciplines have "demonstrated the ways in which the heterosexual nuclear family is posited as the prevailing and morally superior version of the family, to the exclusion of others" (Crabb & Augoustinos, 2008, p. 304). Elaine Aerts (1993) writes of the family, "the dominant picture of the ideal family is still that formed by heterosexual partners involve in a stable and caring relationship with each other and with their offspring (p. 12). In their tracing of American conservatism and the evolution of the family, social workers, Blau and Abramovitz (2007) state that much of the country still:

> Regards the two-parent heterosexual family as a natural and unchanging social unit and the bedrock of society. Backed my mainstream social science, this definition of family has provided the foundation for most ideas about the family and gender roles since the end of World War II (p. 162).

The literature indicates that practices of social and relational organization that most often achieve a legitimized and sanctioned "family" designation are still predicated on persistent and unidentified, heteronormative assumptions and conscriptions (Blau and Abramovitz, 2007; Eng, 2010; Hartman, 1994; Hartman & Laird, 1983; Laird & Green, 1996; Walsh, 2003).

Historically embedded in the concept of family is "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980) and several critical queer theorists have cited the entire notion of family as being synonymous with heterosexual hegemony and heteronormativity (Elia, 2003; Eng, 2010; Foucault, 1990; Plummer, 1975; Weeks, 1981). In *The History of Sexuality* (1990), Michel Foucault pointed to the family as being socially constructed in a way that is bound, inseparable, and defined by heterosexuality. He states:

> The family cell, in the form in which it came to be valued in the course of the eighteenth century, made it possible for the main elements of the deployment of sexuality…to develop along its two primary dimensions: the husband-wife axis and the parents-children axis. The family, in its contemporary form, must not be understood as a social, economic, and political structure of alliance that excludes or at least restrains sexuality… On the contrary, its role is to anchor sexuality and provide it with a permanent support (p.108).

The most profound aspect of Foucault's assertion is that heterosexuality may actually depend on the family as vehicle for its very existence. Is there family without heterosexuality and is there heterosexuality without family? He goes on to say that in the 18th century, "normal" sexualities and relationalities were enacted solely through matrimony and procreation; while expressing desire or sexual relationships outside of the family was a clear sign of perversity and deviance.

The reproductive, heterosexual couple became the dominant feature in the family and the family became the dominant feature of society (Foucault, 1990).

In keeping with Foucault's general suspicion of liberalism's rhetoric of inclusion, many contemporary scholars therefore regard attempts to include queer persons and relationships into the heterosexual family model as a potentially problematic and oppressive gesture of governmentality and assimilation. In his new book, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy,* David Eng (2010) writes:

> While in prior decades gays and lesbians sustained a radical critique of family and marriage, today many members of these groups have largely abandoned such critical positions, demanding access to the heteronormative nuclear family and the rights, recognition, and privileges associated with it…Once considered anathema to family and kinship, homosexuality in our current political moment is being legally and ideologically reconciled to its normative mandates, paving over alternative public worlds and social formations that previous generations of gays and lesbians have made (p.27).

In Judith Butler's (2004) *Undoing Gender,* she rhetorically asks, "Is kinship always already heterosexual?" (p. 102) and then avers, "variations on kinship that depart from normative, dyadic heterosexually based family forms secured through the marriage vow are figured not only as dangerous for the child but perilous to the putative natural and cultural laws said to sustain human intelligibility" (p. 104).

In contrast to these positions on family, anthropologist Kath Weston's (1991) formative book, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship,* details the complexities of alternative, queer kinships and explores the ways that gays and lesbians are choosing to organize their

relationships in ways that both replicate and resist the recognizable, heteronormative family model. Similarly, Weeks, Heaphy, & Donavan's, (2001) book, *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments,* presents qualitative accounts of emerging, queer relational forms in an effort to reconstruct, redefine, and reclaim notions of "family." Weeks wants to reconceptualize "family" as a series of everyday practices, rather than a specific relational arrangement.

Cowan and colleagues (1993) surmise that, "*family* is an approved relationship in which one or more adults are formally responsible for socializing children" (p. 467) and that "these relationships are universally privileged and societally underwritten because they insure society's future" (p. 467) But what kind of future is ensured? Whose interests are being elevated and protected? In stark contrast to these child-centric, heteronormative, and future-affirming, liberal ideologies, Lee Edelman's (2004) book, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, further theorizes the primacy of the heteronormative, nuclear family and characterizes it as a kind of *reproductive futurism*. He identifies *reproductive futurism* as a dominant heterosexual temporality, contingent on of a vision of the future that is grounded in the inevitable production of offspring. His critique points to the way that naturalized social arrangements, like the family, that privilege the literal and symbolic "child," are preserved without question, often times manifesting as present-tense, oppressive practices for the sake of future generations. The child comes to represent the future as a "pure," and innocent figure that needs to be protected from the "deviance" of the Other, including the homosexual. To counter these elevated*,* heteronormative, linear notions of time and tense, Edelman posits an anti-normative position of resistance called *queer negativity,* a critical contestation and wholesale rejection of "purity" and child-centric, nuclear family visions of the future. Building upon and responding to Edelman's strategy of

queer negativity, many other queer theorists have explored alternative practices and

relationalities, contra *the family* in both oppositional and imaginative, utopian ways.

What is Queer Theory, anyway?

"No facet of social life is fully comprehensible without an examination of how sexual

meanings intersect with it" (Epstein, S., 1994, p. 156).

In her book, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, Annemarie Jagose (1996) suggests that

queer theory derives from Foucault's (1990) definitive work on sexuality, which emphasized

that, "sexuality is not an essentially personal attribute but an available cultural category – and

that it is the effect of power rather than simply its object" (Jagose, 1996, p. 79). Foucault (1990)

also argued that constructions of sexuality and sexual identities are potentially coercive functions

of the modern state that attempt to repress any behavior that bleeds outside the mandated, ideal

heterosexual form. In this way, queer theory can generally be understood as the

"postmodernization of sexual and gender studies (Plummer, 2005, p.359) and is born of a

poststructural theoretical framework, which refutes the idea of fixed or stable identities and

therefore recognizes the limitations of an identity politic as an effective political intervention

(Butler, 1990, 2004; Dilley, 1999; Elia, 2003; Hammers & Brown, 2004; Jagose 1996; Plummer,

2005; Seidman, 1992, 1993; Berlant & Warner. M., 1998; Warner, D. 2004). John Elia (2003)

adds, "Queer theory becomes separate from past gay and lesbian politics by dismissing "gay"

and "lesbian" as categories containing subjects, for asserting subjects automatically erases those

who do not perfectly match" (p. 35). Queer maintains that once a subject becomes fixed and

quantifiable through "objective" research and representation, it is subjected to normalization and

the ultimate commodification and appropriation of identity, rendering it no longer resistant to hegemonic power structures.

Queer is a political project with an intersectional frame, concerning itself with gender, sexualities, identities, power, heteronormativity and the insidiousness of all systemic inequality and oppression. Queer is not a monolithic, explanatory model, but rather formlessly exists as a set of critical practices and ways of knowing, in an effort to ultimately challenge prescriptive ideologies and practices (Elia, 2003). Patrick Dilley (1999) writes, "Queer can be an adjective, a noun, or a verb. In general use, it is most commonly an adjective, meaning "not normal" or, more specifically, not heterosexual" (p.457). Cherry Smyth also imbues queer with the responsibility of contesting and resisting heternormativity as it specifically manifests in "reproductive sexuality and the family" (Smyth as cited in Plummer, 2005, p. 364). Accordingly, queer can be deployed to detect and analyze heteronormative phenomena within any given discourse, like social work.

Queering Social Work?

Queer theory is willing to investigate and imagine manifestations of sexuality, gender, desire, relationalities, politics, and experiences that are not tethered or prescribed by the idea of having a "real," self-owned, sexual identity, but these queer explorations are conspicuously missing from social work research on sexuality (Hicks 2008; Hicks & Watson, 2003). Queer theory's formidable move primarily occurred in the humanities, leaving the social and applied sciences in a binding limbo between modern and postmodern notions of reality and selfhood; perhaps because it is easier to critique, deconstruct and imagine new ways of knowing and being within the confines of a text, as opposed to contending with the complexity of an individual's lived experience. Sociologists Stein and Plummer (1996) remark on sociology's attachment to

structural understandings of identity and identity politics, as well as its correlating resistance to undo these concretizing models. They ask their discipline to consider, "How can sociologists redress this imbalance, and build upon the work that has already been done, to rethink sexual (and gender) noncomformativity in ways that do not reproduce marginality?" (Stein & Plummer, 1996, p. 130). Social work is in a similar position and perhaps should be asking the same questions. Beverly McPhail (2004) echoes, "Largely missing from the mainstream *social work* literature are the perspectives of postmodern/*queer* theorists, the latest sex research, and the experience of transgendered individuals" (p. 3).

In her essay, *Far from Mundane: Theorizing Heterosexism for Social Work Education*, Julie Fish (2008) reflects upon the problem of heteronormativity within the social work discipline and notes that it is maintained by the absence of scholarship about queer issues, the assumption that LGBTQ people are the same as heterosexuals; and the assumption that they want nothing more than to assimilate to the standards and limitations dictated by heterosexual hegemony. She also adds that even in social work's social justice oriented enterprise, LGBTQ families are often treated as marginal or deficient entities that need to somehow prove their "sameness" and credibility. Dharman Jeyasingham's (2008) article, *Knowledge/Ignorance and the Construction of Sexuality in Social Work Education*, employs discourse analysis to examine the ways that social work constructs gay and lesbian identities in a dialectical and comparative relationship to heterosexuality; as "either visibly different or hidden (but available for identification through sensitive assessment)" (p. 148); as a distinct "service group" (p. 148); defined in terms of their oppression; and as ultimately, fundamentally "normal," just like their heterosexual counterparts.

In his essay, *Queering Relationships: Toward a Paradigmatic Shift,* John Elia (2003) writes:

> Scholarly discourses about romantic and sexual relationships have largely ignored unconventional relationship styles. Indeed, one cannot deny that there is an ever-quickening and growing body of research on gay and lesbian relationships, but much of this employs models and methods used for studying traditional heterosexual unions" (p. 81).

Indeed, there is extensive "diversifying" literature about gay and lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, (LGBT) families, and yet these families are often only included in texts as *families* when they approximate and reflect "proper" heterosexual unions (Fish 2008; Jeyasingham, 2008; Seidman, 1992) or when they are actually empirically compared to heterosexual populations and practices (Laird, 2003). In his article, *Thinking Through Sexuality,* Steven Hicks (2008) submits that social work's attempts to include LGBTQ family research also tends to reify fixed sexual identity typologies, which affirm and entrench the constraints of the hetero/homo binary construction, which "is itself a homophobic production" (Halperin, 1995, p. 44) in that it naturalizes and privileges the unmarked heterosexual position. This essentializing and potentially divisive "anti-discrimination model" (Thompson, 1993 as cited in Hicks & Watson, 2003; Hicks, 2008) acts upon its subjects in a way that renders these families and these sexualities as marginalized, static entities, promoting homogeneity while also producing and perpetuating, unflinching heteronormative dominance (Butler, 1990; Elia, 2003; Fish, 2008; Halperin**,** 1995; Hicks, 2008; Jeyasingham, 2008). According to the "anti-discrimination" framework, "resolution of the 'problem' of homosexuality is to be found through gradual legal and civil change,

resulting in assimilation" (Hicks, 2008, p. 68) – a method which ultimately does not address or contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and biases, but rather upholds and sustains them. Under this heteronormative rubric, social work discourse positions queer people as objects of knowledge, from which the heteronormative center can observe and assess. But the center remains intact and unexamined; though queer people may ultimately gain more civil rights, the "civil" matrix is unequivocally heterosexual. Despite this "equal rights" tactic being the most visible priority of the current gay and lesbian rights movement (i.e. Marriage Equality), social work should be aware that these efforts do not represent or define the political/personal desires for every queer person and that not everyone is looking for inclusion and normalization. Though social work should always side with civil rights, it should also perhaps simultaneously cultivate a more critical stance of current, normalizing social structures in which it is a part and often a defender of.

"Social work and social welfare literature and practice are far from being socially neutral or limited to technical interventions; they are deeply implicated in the construction of power relations in sexuality" (O'Brien, 1999, p. 151), and since it has been illustrated that sexuality is so intrinsic to the construction of family discourse, it can be similarly posited that social work is also "deeply implicated" in the power relations present in contemporary productions of "family." Thus, a social work "family" discourse that is not aware of its embedded assumptions and productive power, maintains the centrality and invisibility of heteronormative power and oppression. In their essay, *Towards a Feminist-Queer Alliance; A paradigmatic shift in the research process,* Hammers and Brown (2004) assert that queer theories/methods are particularly effective for challenging the shortcomings of essentializing and reductionistic approaches of identity-based research, in an effort to rethink social justice issues. However, a review of the

literature indicates that a limited amount of research and analysis has been conducted within the social work discipline using critical queer theories and methods. This gap in a kind of reflexive and interdisciplinary knowledge beckons the need for more research to be done surrounding social work's discursive *family* contributions and their impact within the field and out.

David Eng (2010) asks us, "Why do we have numerous poststructuralist accounts of language but few poststructuralist accounts of kinship?" (p. 15). Let us begin…

Chapter III

Methodology

   Discourses are systems of meaning that construct and make "real" the objects of the world (Carabine, 1998; Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999; Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Foucault, 1972, 1980, 1990, 1995; Layder, 1994; Parker, 1992; Taylor, 2001; Wetherell, 2001; Willig, 2001). Critical theorist Stuart Hall (1997) adds, "physical things and actions exist, but they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse" (p. 73). In this way, discourses carve out and create realities by naming, categorizing, and producing social phenomena, thus providing authoritative frameworks from which to *know* things. As "both an instrument and an effect of power" (Foucault, 1990, p. 101), discourses operate through the language and practices of social institutions, categories, and identities and inform individuals' correlating subjective desires, affects, and experiences of themselves and the world. In other words, "people live their lives through the socially constructed meanings that are available to them" (Layder, 1994, p. 95) through discourses. Like all professional, "expert" discourses, social work participates in the truth-making operations of modern power and should therefore be critical of its active role in communicating and maintaining messages of normativity (Carabine, 2001) that inevitably privilege some people, while subjugating others.

Queer/Queering Discourse Analysis

In contrast to the vast array of essentializing, positivist perspectives found in current gay and lesbian research, this study employs a discursive approach because it is "the task of queer methodology to account for the construction of identity as opposed to its reification" (Hammers & Brown, 2004, p. 95). Grounded in queer theory's position of anti-normativity, queer discourse analysis operates as a mode of textual analysis that examines heteronormative phenomena through the problematization of binary constructions rooted in the notion of notion of fixed or stable identities (Dilley, 1999; Halperin, 1995; Hammers & Brown, 2004; Hicks, 2008; Manning, 2009; Plummer 2005; Warner, D. N., 2004). This contestation, a queering of dominant cultural norms and referents, imbues queer methods with the potential to create the causes and conditions for alternative epistemes to emerge.

In this study, I applied this methodology to examine how normativity is constructed, enforced, and resisted in social work's understandings and practices of and about the family. "While gays and lesbians were once decidedly excluded from the normative structures of family and kinship, today they are re-inhabiting them in growing numbers and in increasingly public and visible ways" (Eng, 2010, p. 3), within the larger social matrix as well as in social work literature on families. My analysis examines what these accounts of "alternative" relationships have to demonstrate and adhere to in order to be included therefore, in the privileged, sanctioned norm of the "family." Do these accounts of LGBTQ families, which can be construed as some of most progressive and challenging assertions of family arrangements within current social work discourse, reinforce, disrupt, or resist the heteronorms embedded in dominant discourses? I interrogated a sample of social work texts to identify and analyze the discourses that guide the

constructions of family within contemporary social work discourse. This analysis was achieved by subjecting each text to this set of questions:

- What are the various ways that the object of "family" is constructed in the text, explicitly and implicitly?

- What wider discourses contribute to the construction of "family" within the text?

- What types of persons (subject positions) are being spoken about? And what are these subjects enabled or constrained to do by the text?

There are myriad ways to analyze the use of "family" within social work discourse, but I chose this particular theoretical and methodological approach, informed by multidisciplinary literature citing "family" as an exclusionary and heteronormative practice. Not only do heteronormative, regulatory practices marginalize and alienate sexual minorities, but they also police the sphere of social and relational possibilities for everyone (Butler, 1990, 2004; Elia, 2003; Halperin, 1995; Jeyasingham, 2008; Namaste, 1996; Stein & Plummer, 1996; Warner, 1993; Weeks et al, 2001) by assuming a flattened, reduced and inaccurate understanding of heterosexuality that also delimits and controls the legitimately, "normal" space available to people who participate in heterosexual relationships and structures. By embracing an intersectional and anti-essentializing frame that is willing to deconstruct the relations of power, the assumptions, and the characteristics of the status quo, queer problematizes the normative social order in an effort to carve out more psychic and material space for everybody.

Sample

I have selected 12 texts from the academic research database, *Social Work Abstracts* to serve as the data set for this queer discourse analysis. *Social Work Abstracts* is an expansive database that "indexes 450 social work and human service journals, covering theory & practice, areas of service and social issues & progress" (Social Work Abstracts, [EBSCO]), which can be understood as an exemplar of the wider social work discourse. In an effort to use material that represents the most relevant aspects of the "LGBTQ family" within contemporary social work research, I selected 12 articles/studies published between 2005-2010. Five initial database searches were conducted, each with the keyword *family* in the "AB Abstract" selection from the dropdown menu along with one of each of these five explicit, keyword designations – AND *queer*; *gay*; *lesbian*; *bisexual*; *transgender*, also located in the "AB Abstract". All the listed articles from these five searches were further filtered by these criteria:

- Each article has been published between the years 2005-2010.

- Each is a published, peer-reviewed article from a scholarly journal, which excludes dissertations, book excerpts, and magazine/newspaper articles.

- Each study/article must reflect an American sample or content, which excludes internationally focused content.

- Texts that explicitly focus on LGBTQ youth and their heterosexual parents were excluded, in favor of accounts of LGBTQ subjects who are potentially creating, determining, and practicing their own, chosen "family" arrangements.

An academic database is dynamic and always in flux depending on the inclusion of new publications. However, at the time of data collection on March 3rd, 2011, after filtering each text through the specified requirements for inclusion in the sample, there was one qualified *family + queer* texts (and it should be noted that only three articles came up in this search, in total); 17 qualified *family + gay* texts; seven qualified *family + lesbian* texts after 14 duplicate texts were subtracted; two total qualified *family + transgender* articles, after one duplicate was subtracted; and zero qualified *family + bisexual* texts because all listed were duplicates from the previous searches. After all duplicate articles from the five searches were eliminated, the remaining 26 total qualified texts were compiled in a master list and then subjected to a random number generator, in an effort to select the 12 sample articles with as little bias as possible. This method is an attempt to capture the breadth of available *family* discourses within LGBTQ social work texts, however, it should be noted that "no discrete sampling of materials, no matter the criteria used to guide the selection, can be proffered as the definitive representation of a disciplinary discourse" (Park, 2006, p. 173).

Chapter IV

Findings

The 12 "family" research texts read through the lens of queer discourse analysis, "which allows for attention to the points of apparent contradiction and variability" (Shepperd, Coyle, & Hegarty, 2010, p. 209), make concerted efforts to distance themselves from the pathologizing, *homosexuality as mental illness,* discourses of yesteryear and are primarily invested in identifying gay and lesbian strengths, normalizing central gay and lesbian characteristics, and understanding the effects of homophobia on gay and lesbian individuals and their families. They work, in other words, to present gay and lesbian families as viable families whose health and well-being are legitimate concerns for social work. Despite their clear intentions to this end, however, the homosexual's redemptive inclusion into a legitimate "family" definition is dependent on his capacity to perform the traditional nuclear family arrangement. In this way, the heterosexual family functions as an idealized gold standard that the homosexual family must approximate in order to achieve "family" status. Moreover, heteronormative nuclear "family" standards are used as a means to determine of the homosexual's psychological health, normalcy, credibility, and social desirability.

The gay and lesbian subjects in the studies were often explicitly compared to heterosexuals. For example, these article titles from the sample illustrate this hetero/homo

comparative, research frame: *Perceptions of social support among heterosexual and homosexual adopters* (Kindle & Erich, 2005, p. 1); *Psychosocial responses to treatment for breast cancer among lesbian and heterosexual women* (Arena, Carver, Antoni, Weiss, Ironson, & Duran, 2006, p. 1). The studies thus treated their subject populations as a distinct group of people whose sexual orientations marked them as having an identifiable, knowable, and shared group identity.

These binary sexual identity constructions rely on the dominant discourse, *Scientia Sexualis* or the science of sexuality (Foucault, 1990) to make meaning of same-sex desires and relationships. Foucault (1990) believed that the deployment of "sexuality" is a primary method for governing the population in that it regulates "appropriate" sexual relations and alliances. He describes the way in which this *sexuality* discourse came to be:

> The nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him…The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species (Foucault, 1990, p. 43).

With the invention of the abject homosexual form to define itself against, so too the unmarked heterosexual came to be, coaxing itself into a "normal" and "natural," existence, and thus concretizing the *sexuality* discourse's binary elements.

In line with this binary logic, all 12 of the research studies focused on *gay* and *lesbian* individuals while none of the samples represented any *bisexual*, *Trans*, or *queer* family members. Perhaps inclusion of these more ambiguous sexual identities would unsettle the opposing binary

assumptions that most of the research studies depend on in their efforts to "accurately" compare homosexual family outcomes to heterosexual family outcomes. As one study noted, "Examining perspectives of individuals who are bisexual, transgender, or polyamorous… would all be important areas for future research" (Kline et al., 2008, p. 617), but for now, they remain *outside* the boundaries of "family" research.

It is through these comparative research studies that contemporary social work discourse purports to be making efforts to de-pathologize, normalize, and include "nontraditional" gay and lesbian families into the realm of social legitimacy. These inclusive attempts manifest in both discourses *of sameness* and discourses *of difference.* Gay and lesbian families are constructed as the same and/or different from their heterosexual counterparts, reinforcing a heteronormative standard from which non-normative sexual identities are compared and assessed. Therefore, gay and lesbian families find themselves in a bit of a double bind in that, "being just like the dominant group means that minorities lose their distinct identities; being different, constructs minorities as inferior" (Fish, 2008, p. 191).

Discourses of *Sameness*

As a means to counter discourses of gay and lesbian pathology, social work employs discourses of sameness to normalize the homosexual, and ultimately include the *healthy homosexual* and the *healthy homosexual family* into a social matrix of intelligibility and legitimacy. Thus, the majority of the sample texts were concerned with assessing partnership and child behavioral outcomes, generally concluding that children raised by gay and lesbian couples demonstrated favorable family functioning. For example, the article, *Gay and lesbian adoptive families: An exploratory study of family functioning, adoptive child's behavior, and familial*

support networks declares, "Gay and lesbian parents do form successful couple relationships, raise healthy children, and garner sufficient support from their environments to promote effective family functioning" (Erich, Leung, Kindle, & Carter, 2005, p. 20). Additionally, the behavioral health outcomes for gay and lesbian families were often compared and contextualized with results from heterosexual families, "[this study] found no significant differences in children's levels of behavioral problems whether they were raised in a gay or lesbian home or heterosexual home" (Erich et al., 2005, p. 28).

When representing gay and lesbian family forms, the bulk of the articles explicitly identified or implicitly assumed "life partnership" as the centerpiece of the family, a naturalized and uncontested feature of the nuclear family ideal. For example, "Lesbian-headed planned families are created when lesbians choose motherhood in the context of a committed lesbian relationship through birth, adoption, or co-parenting" (DeMino, Appleby, & Fisk, 2007, p. 165). Moreover, the term "committed" implicitly functions as a synonym for monogamous in the bulk of the texts. The texts compared these gay and lesbian committed partnerships to heterosexual marriages in an effort to determine ways they are similar and dissimilar, as well as determining the relationship satisfaction for each group. Kline and colleagues (2008) submit that, "satisfaction and stability in gay relationships appear to be related to the same emotional qualities found in heterosexual relationships" (p. 608). Additionally, life partnership is constructed as a universal aspiration and necessary mantelpiece for any kind of family life:

> A life-long, committed, and loving relationship, usually with the context of a marriage between two individuals, has been a model for heterosexual men and women in modern Western culture for hundreds if not thousands of years. Over the last 25 years, a similar concept – which has struggled for a name but has sometimes been called "life

partnership"- has become increasingly important to gay men and lesbians (Kline et al.,

2008, p. 607).

This comparative excerpt depicts gays and lesbians as a group with similar desires and values to their heterosexual counterparts, in that they too have recently started to care about long term, committed "partnerships" despite the lack of a federally recognized marriage right and despite prevalent discourses of the homosexual's preferred "promiscuity."

Not only were long-term relationships often constructed as an aspiration but also, quite often as an index of psychological health. For instance, "As he attempts to reconcile his sexual orientation with his status as a stigmatized person, he could develop a devalued self image that bodes poorly for his mental health and ability to maintain a long-term intimate relationship" (LaSala, 2006, p 182). Similarly, the article *America's changing attitudes toward homosexuality, civil unions, and same-gender marriage: 1977-2004,* postulates that, **"**social workers will face unique challenges in serving their gay and lesbian clients until same-sex marriage is legalized" (Avery, Chase, Johansson, Litvak, Montero, & Wydra, 2007, p. 78), thus constructing the heteronormative institution of marriage as the ultimate solution and corrective experience for the homophobia and structural inequities faced by gay and lesbian populations.

In contrast to monogamous partnerships, "extra dyadic" (LaSala, 2005, p. 68) sexual activity was said to often inspire "jealousy and competition" (LaSala, 2005, p. 67) and when visible in the texts, was often dismissed as a threat to the overall functioning, integrity, and longevity of the committed couple and family. This normative construction of family reaffirms that one partner should ideally fulfill all sexual, emotional, and material needs, over time; a residual nuclear family limitation that functions to marginalize sexual relationships that do not

achieve these particular, long-lasting attributes. In *Defining Life Partnerships: Does Sexual Orientation Matter?,* Kline and colleagues (2008) rationalize their decision to exclude nonmonogamous relationships from their gay and lesbian "family" sample, "For this particular study, we chose to look at life partnerships between two individuals only. Since polyamorous life partnerships, those occurring between three or more individuals, would have more complex dynamic, it was decided those partnerships should be studied separately" (p. 608). While these *other* forms of partnership were acknowledged, they were not however represented in any of the sample "family" texts, thus maintaining a sense of achieved *sameness* between gay/lesbian families and the prescriptions of the heteronormative, nuclear family ideal.

In addition to life partnerships, co-parenting practices were also constructed as a primary, defining feature of the gay and lesbian families within the sample texts. In the article, *Sharing Motherhood: Maternal Jealousy Among Lesbian Co-Mothers,* Suzanne Pelka (2009) asserts, "Like heterosexuals, lesbians might choose to raise children as single mothers or parent as a couple" (p.196) – a seemingly neutral statement that actually delimits the number of careers that are permitted for a parenting endeavor. This negates the experiences of children and carers for whom there are multiple informal "parents" – a trend that is notably prevalent in queer communities across the nation (Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991).

The texts compared homosexual parents to heterosexual parents and deployed dominant psychological and child development discourses that focused heavily on child behavioral outcomes and overall family functioning. The articles intended to *prove* that gay and lesbian families, both adoptive and biological, could indeed exist as healthy, competent families, in the same way that heterosexual families, qua their heterosexuality, are presumed to do. **"**Children with parents who are homosexuals can have the same advantages and the same expectations for

health, adjustment, and development as can children whose parents are heterosexual" (Blackwell, Dziegielwski, & Jacinto, 2006 p. 6). Or, for instance, "[The] research… found no significant differences in children's levels of behavioral problems whether they were raised in a gay or lesbian home or heterosexual home" (Erich, Kindle, & Carter, 2005, p. 28). In a similar fashion, the "Family Life Cycle" construct, a family systems developmental model originally articulated by Betty Carter & Monica McGoldrick (1996) was specifically deployed in this passage, in an effort to normalize the lesbian motherhood experience:

> Lesbian mothers in this study perceived more support from their families of origin…This primary reliance on family for social support after the birth of child is consistent with the normative realignment for heterosexual parents outlined in the stage of the Family Life Cycle (Carter & McGoldrick (1996) citation in DeMino et al., 2007, p.170).

This excerpt compares the lesbian parenting experience to the "normative realignment" of heterosexual parents and thus legitimizes the lesbian mothers' experience in its demonstrated sameness and implied psychological *health*.

Gay and lesbian co-parents have so much psychological *health* that they are even able to give birth to, adopt, and raise normal, heterosexual children! This is an example of a homophobic discourse that gay and lesbian parents often have to endure; the paradoxical assumption "that a child raised by gay parents is more likely to be homosexual in orientation; although, research has supported the fallaciousness of this claim" (Blackwell et al., 2006, p. 7). The "need" to do research in order to prove that homosexual parents primarily turn out heterosexual children is already an egregiously homophobic production and is fueled by a discourse of homosexual pathology, predicated on the assumptive fear that gays and lesbians are ultimately a contagious

threat to the entire social order. Through copious research studies, spanning multiple disciplines, gay and lesbian parents have to continuously prove that their kids have secure, stable, and heteronormative gender and sexual identities in order to ensure legal adoptive and marriage rights.

Social work is particularly preoccupied with normative child development and its notions about what characterizes healthy, formative developmental experiences are heavily influenced by Western psychology's individual development models. Several scholars (Eng, 2010; Mitchell & Black, 1995; Weeks, 1981) argue that individual developmental models derive from Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, which is a child's "necessary" coming of age struggle with sexual desire, within the confines of a nuclear, two parent, heterosexual family. The "universal" Oedipus complex accounts for the development of appropriate "sexual aim and object choice" (Halberstam, 2008, p. 144) and if successfully completed, will result in a happy, healthy, normal, male or female, heterosexual subject. In contrast, non-normative gender expressions, sexual desires and "object choices" that resist heterosexuality or challenge the supposed binary fixedness of sexual identities altogether, run the risk of being pathologized by experts who subscribe to normative psychological discourses. In this way, definitive markers of children's "normal" developmental processes are often predicated on a psychological model that perceives anything outside of a firm heterosexual outcome as the result of something gone awry.

With a similar commitment to linear developmental processes, the article, *Lesbian Mothers with Planned Families: A Comparative Study of Internalized Homophobia and Social Support*, DeMino, Appleby, & Fisk, (2007) trace the particulars of the "lesbian" experience, using a homosexual identity formation model (Cass, 1979; Sophie, 1987). Sexual identity formation models developed as a means to de-pathologize and legitimize homosexual identities

by reinterpreting the traditional psychosexual development models found in dominant psychological and psychoanalytic discourses, to account for same-sex outcomes. Despite their normalizing and corrective power, these models remain tethered to notions of fixed and unchanging sexual identities, while also subscribing to a singular, linear, developmental arc whereby value and notions of normalcy and maturity are attached to a person's successful completion of each "stage." They write:

> One of the buffers against internalized homophobia emerges as a woman moves through the stages of lesbian identity formation and develops social supports in the gay and lesbian community… Contact with lesbian peers becomes important during the middle stages of homosexual identity formation because these social supports offer a new reference group with whom to compare. Social support from lesbian peers and acculturation into the lesbian community validates lesbian identity, normalizes lesbianism as an acceptable lifestyle, and provides a positive reference group and testing ground for disclosing sexual identity (DeMino et al., 2007, p. 166).

This particular excerpt also utilizes the homosexual identity formation model (Cass, 1979; Sophie 1987) to describe the experience of "coming out" as a lesbian and the social supports that are inevitably incurred through community identifications. As evidenced here, homosexual developmental models typically identify "disclosing sexual identity" (DeMino et al., 2007, p.166) or "coming out" as a necessary and inevitable step in healthy homosexual identity formation, without taking into account the myriad other variables that may not make "coming out" a mature, healthy, adaptive, or even relevant choice. By employing the same logic as traditional, heteronormative, developmental models, this reciprocal developmental model also

functions as a consolidating and normalizing tool that assumes a shared, monolithic *lesbian* group identity and experience. Therefore, deviations from the model's prescriptive, *lesbian* developmental trajectory risk being construed by mental health professionals and the wider public as immature, arrested, or even pathological.

In a similarly prescriptive fashion, most of the articles rely on the perceived fixedness of the gender binary as well as entrenched, heteronormative gender roles to describe the experiences of same-sex parents. For example, the article, *Sharing motherhood: Maternal jealousy among lesbian co-mothers* asserts:

> The puzzle then for families headed by two mothers is to psychologically negotiate each woman's learned expectation that she would one day be her child's most central relational object and primary attachment figure (Pelka, 2009, p.197).

This excerpt conflates lesbian parenting with the role of "motherhood" and presumes that all lesbian couples who have children are identifying with the maternal aspects of parenting. It also assumes that all women are conditioned to want and desire a motherhood that entails being their child's "most central relational object;" a "proper" maternal position inscribed by the mandates of the egregiously, heteronormative Oedipus complex.

This queer discourse analysis has highlighted the ways in which the "healthy homosexual" family is constructed by achieving the *same* standards and outcomes as the heterosexual family, most specifically, successful participation in legible, nuclear family characteristics. It is this demonstrated *sameness* that allows the homosexual family to be understood as healthy and "good" and worthy of social work's attention and support.

Discourses of *Difference*

The same "family" sample texts are also underscored by the notion of the identifiable

homosexual species, thus constructing gay and lesbian subjects as having fundamentally *different*

constitutions and lifestyles, stemming both from their same-sex orientations and from the

internalized effects of systemic homophobia. Blackwell and colleagues (2006) exemplify this

irreconcilable difference when they write, "Just as society's definition of family has evolved over

time, the meaning of family remains an important component within the gay community as well"

(p.1). At first glance, this is a simple statement, and yet this excerpt actually works to position

the gay community *outside* of society altogether, while simultaneously constructing "society" as

a monolithic group of heterosexual individuals and families.

Reflecting on these perceived differences, the text, *America's Changing Attitudes Toward*

Homosexuality, Civil Unions, and Same-Gender Marriage: 1977-2004 (Avery, Chase,

Johansson, Litvak, Montero, & Wydra, 2007)*,* present a list of ideological beliefs about

homosexuality that they perceive to be most present in American public opinion, in an effort to

keep social workers abreast of current same-sex related issues, biases, policies and practices.

This article summarizes some of the possible "causes" for the homosexual's unique constitution

by deploying biomedical discourses. For example, "One hypothesis for the biological basis of

homosexuality is the existence of anatomical differences in the size of a part of the

hypothalamus" (Avery et al., 2007, p. 73) and "Premature exposure to atypically high levels of

male hormones "masculinizes" brain structures and influences women's sexual orientation"

(Avery et al., 2007, p. 74). This scientific discourse constructs gays and lesbians as

physiologically different from their heterosexual counterparts and also assumes that heterosexual

people cannot experience same-sex desire because they are not "naturally" or biologically

outfitted for it. These investigations into the physical or biological determinants of homosexuality is reminiscent of a eugenics discourse, that was focused on attaining collective genetic supremacy; while simultaneously offering gays and lesbians the promise of a "natural," scientific reason for their homosexuality.

In further exploration of the potential differences between heterosexual and homosexual partnerships, the article *Queering Ideas: The Descriptive and Theory-Building Potential of Qualitative Research with Lesbian and Gay Families,* asserts, "practitioners need to understand that for some gay men, sexual nonexclusively is an option that might be workable if certain guidelines and conditions are established" (LaSala, 2005, p. 68). Even in this exploration of difference, the "couple" is further naturalized, "With proper safeguards, rules and guidelines in place, perhaps a variety of sexual agreements within couple relationships are possible"(LaSala, 2005, p. 68). These passages position all sexual activity outside of the "normal" primary partnership as risking deviance, but still possible with sufficient rules and guidelines in place. The former passage constructs gay men as being different from heterosexuals by positioning them as the sole proprietors of "workable" nonmonogamy; and therefore giving them permission to stray from nuclear family mandates, so long as they are ultimately contained by appropriate guidelines and rules and regulations that will preserve the primacy of "the romantic couple" as a necessary, "family" element. Additionally, both excerpts construct practitioners as disciplining subjects whose responsibility is to determine and enforce "appropriate" sexual relationships.

Employing a more systemic lens that considers the possible negative effects of homophobia, many of the studies were very concerned with the quantity and quality of "social support" (Arena et al., 2006; Demino et al., 2007; Erich et al., 2005; Kindle & Erich, 2005)

available to gay and lesbian families. In an effort to determine social support for gay and lesbian families, the sample compared sources of support between homosexual and heterosexual families, which again positions these two groups in a distinctive and oppositional, binary relationship to one another. The studies primarily concluded "gay and lesbian parents form social support networks and relationships with friends and family differently than heterosexuals" (Blackwell et al., 2006, p.12). This research frame constructs friends as being separate and distinct from family. For example, "The SSQ Part One [methodological instrument] identifies two mutually exclusive categories of social support persons: friends and family" (Demino et al., 2007, p. 168) and "social support and the relative role of friends versus family appear to function differently for lesbians and heterosexual women," (Arena et al., 2006, p. 84). Because of this noticeable difference in sources of support, Kindle & Erich (2005) conclude, "Future research should investigate the causes of lower perceptions of family support by gay and lesbian adoptive parents. Once identified, appropriate interventions may be developed to strengthen this potential source of support" (p. 545). This excerpt is concerned by the lower perceptions of family of origin support for gay and lesbians and wants to find ways to help them better utilize this potential source of support. This renders the "other" modes of gay and lesbian social support as invisible or as inferior compensatory replacements for the support they *should* get from their own parents. Rather than investigating the ways that gay and lesbian parents *are* getting adequate social support, the research is more interested in helping them gain support in the same ways that heterosexuals traditionally have. Thus, the results of these studies construct gays and lesbians as "lacking" familial support, rather than framing heterosexuals as "lacking" friend support**.** This is a heteronormative deficit model that constructs the biogenetic family of origin as the ideal and primary source of social support.

However, in contrast, some of the same articles noted that for gay and lesbian families, friends might actually be understood *within* the context of "family." For instance, Kindle and Erich (2005) encourage practitioners "to note that gays and lesbians may well include close friends in their operative definition of *family*, and their informal support network may rely more heavily on support networks that are generally considered peripheral in heterosexual families" (p. 545). Additionally, "It is argued that lesbian women frequently have a tenuous relationship with their families of origin, and that it is common for lesbians to select "families of choice" composed of close friends" (Arena et al., 2006, p. 99). However, conspicuously lacking from the social work research on gay and lesbian families are studies that centrally position these, "chosen family" arrangements as the identified family to be explored in the study. More often, "chosen family" arrangements are constructed as a peripheral network of friends parading as a legitimate substitution for "real" family, formalized by law and blood. Reaffirming the distinction between friends and family maintains the primacy of the heteronormative nuclear family in that a friend designation does not warrant the same social privileges and protection. And in general, within dominant public discourses, friendship is treated less seriously than sexual or biological relationships, even when friends share domestic space and material resources.

When assessing available social support, several of the articles in the sample discussed the experiences of gay and lesbians being rejected by their biological parents and families of origin, and the potential impact of these relational rifts on their current same-sex partners and children:

> Lesbians and gay men frequently face parents' disapproval when they come out to them. If one considers the pitfalls of intergenerational conflict on spousal/couple relationships along with the parental antipathy gays and lesbians face, it is reasonable to wonder how

gays and lesbians manage their couple relationships in the potential presence of intergenerational strain" (LaSala, 2005, p. 66).

This deploys a normative psychological discourse that constructs the family of origin as the primary psychological and relational template for all people as they grow into adulthood. It does not account for other possible sources of "outside" support, developmental variables, or protective factors, thus making the family of origin the sole proprietor of their children's ability to "manage" their intimate relationships in the future. The article continues, "Gays intergenerational relationships were characterized by distance, more distance that perhaps what Bowen [Attachment theorist] and others might deem appropriate and functional, yet without any apparent consequences to their relationships" (LaSala, 2005, p. 66). How are gays managing this kind of strain from families of origin without "apparent consequences to their relationships?" It is as if the research can only recognize traditional, heteronormative family relationships, bound by blood or the law, and that protective factors that are not characterized by these attributes are rendered mysterious, unintelligible, and perpetually beyond the scope of the research. Moreover, as strained relationships with families of origin were discussed, it is never proffered that gays and lesbians themselves might initiate distance, reject or cut off their families of origin. Rather, gays and lesbians are constructed solely as victims of disapproving families, with no agency of their own. In this way, it is only the heterosexual who can disprove of or reject the homosexual.

Most of the studies were also interested in exploring the particular affects that systemic homophobia has on gay and lesbian families, particularly aspects of internalized homophobia. For example, "When lesbians and gay men assimilate the prevailing societal bias against homosexuality, they experience internalized homophobia" (Demino et al., 2007, p. 165).

Similarly, when "confronted with difference and unequal treatment in comparison to heterosexual parents, lesbian mothers may be more vulnerable to internalized homophobia" (Demino et al., 2007, p.171). The texts continue to explore how these instances of internalized homophobia "may compromise family functioning" (Erich et al. 2005, p. 25) and "have a damaging impact on sexual identity development" (Demino, 2007, p. 165). Intended to combat homophobia, these causal reckonings about the way that systemic oppression dangerously locates itself within the individual, actually become the very same rationales that institutions deploy to discriminate against gay and lesbian families. Courts of law, adoption agencies, and other social institutions will often take a paradoxical position of not explicitly faulting gays and lesbians for their experiences of oppression, however, it is still not in "the best interest of the child" (Erich et al., 2005, p. 19) to allow them to endure the effects of homophobia. By constructing gay and lesbian families as deficient or disadvantaged because of their experiences of oppression, homophobia becomes the very fuel for more homophobia.

Having to deal with the internalized homophobia epidemic, social workers are explicitly enlisted to "help their clients sort through the damaging impact of internalized homophobia" (Demino et al., 2007, p. 169) and are directed to "assess the role of stigma in their gay clients presenting problems, no matter what complaints they articulate" (LaSala, 2006, p. 188). These excerpts imbue social workers with the authoritative power that it is seemingly required for addressing the internalized oppression and the corresponding "damage" to gay and lesbian clients, but offers no discussion or strategy for contesting the political and structural biases themselves. And finally, as part of their concluding thoughts about assessing the effects internalized homophobia on gay and lesbian families, Kindle and Erich (2005) caution practitioners "to remain cognizant that *difference* does not necessarily imply *deficiency*, and that

assessment of family social support with gay and lesbian adoptive parents may require adjustment to gay and lesbian self-definition and self-understanding" (p. 545). But the question is, when *does* difference necessarily imply deficiency? And who decides? And what will be done about it?

This queer discourse analysis has illustrated how social work employs multiple discourses of *sameness* and *difference,* that work together to construct "family" as a set of heteronormative practices, thus maintaining a heterosexual hegemonic frame from which all relationships are understood and assessed. The family explorations within the social work discourse are bound to a whole host of heteronormative, "legitimizing" features and its attempts to include lesbians and gays into the family fold, materialized in a way that did "not successfully disrupt the standard, monogamous, dyadic relationship construction" (Elia, 2003, p. 74) or the reliance of co-parenting to define a family. Thus, the analyzed texts were less of an exploration of "alternative" family forms, and more of an endorsement of alternative *nuclear* families. This analysis concludes that social work can only imagine "family" relationships through a heteronormative lens – tethered to insidious, nuclear family "truths" about what does and does not make a family - whilst also unaware of its production and continuation of these disciplining norms. This also makes social work culpable of conditionally "including" gay and lesbian subjects in normative structures without truly *queering* or contesting the family structure itself.

Chapter V

Discussion

"To resist is not simply a negation, but a creative process" (Foucault, 1998, p.168).

Stephen Hicks (2005) asserts that social work ought to "confront some of the very limiting and constraining ideas about lesbians, gay men and the family that are currently reinforced through the practices of assessment" (p. 305). This study echoes his sentiment and has specifically analyzed the ways that "family" is achieved within social work discourse, in an effort to bring attention to some of these "limiting and constraining ideas." The findings in this study reaffirm Hick's (2008), Jeyasingham's (2008), and Fish's (2008) assertion that most gay and lesbian social work research relies on fixed sexual identity typologies that construct gays and lesbians and their families as a reified and uniform service group. In this discursive production, gay and lesbian families are also compared to the heterosexual, "ideal" standard from which it deviates, as a means to measure levels of normative behavior and psychological health. The gay and lesbian family's compliance and ability to conform to these dominant markers of (hetero)normalcy determine its inclusion in social recognition and legitimacy.

This study has also illuminated some of the inherent risk in social work, explicitly and implicitly, subscribing to definitions of family in that the working definition inevitably wields

normalizing, disciplining, and exclusive power that works to privilege some and subjugate others. Though social workers have worked to expand Parson and Bales' (1955) defining commitment to the American nuclear family and have been "at the forefront of asking questions about 'the family' and have contributed to a contemporary landscape in which family practices are diverse" (Hicks, 2005, p. 305), this study also reveals the ways that social work remains tethered to traditional, embedded assumptions about what constitutes a real or legitimate family. For example, the only queer "families" that were represented in the sample were specifically, *gay* and *lesbian* relationships that organized around legible, nuclear family characteristics like co-parenting and monogamous, long term, life partnerships; relationships fortified by biogenetic, romantic, and legal ties. The social work research compared *these* homosexual families to heterosexual families and thus relied on a heterosexual, "marriage-and-family paradigm" (Heath, 2005, p. 358) to identify and understand all "family" relationships. Accordingly, gay and lesbian families are invited to join, but not to change the terms of "family," thus making the research less of an exploration of alternative family forms and more of an endorsement of alternative, *nuclear* families. By clinging to normative, nuclear family features, social work misses out on the richness, creativity, and diversity of the LGBTQ family laboratory and also fails to validate or make available alternative relationship possibilities for everyone**.**

The notion of "families of choice" (Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991) was noticeably absent from the social work sample, despite being a well-known social phenomenon with abundant attention from other social science disciplines. Despite the prevalence of these alternative social networks based on varying forms of friendship, non-monogamy/polyamory, and parenting arrangements by more than one or two adults, the social work texts did not explore any of these queer kinship models or centrally position them as "families." This silence, this

absence, makes social work complicit in further legitimizing heteronormative, nuclear family forms while rendering other forms unintelligible, deviant, and continually outside the scope of the state's protected relationships.

Because the nuclear family is the "hegemonic model of social relations" (Avila-Saavedra, 2009, p. 6), alternative family forms have to prove their social worth by approximating the same characteristics and standards of the "normal" family in order to gain state recognition and the benefits associated with full citizenship. In this way, the state-sanctioned "family" consolidates privilege and conditionally enrolls people into it, rather than restructuring the ways that people are able to access material benefits. This "inclusive" process is a function of neoliberal governmentality (Lemke, 2001), which is a dominant discourse that compels marginal subjects to demonstrate a normative "enough" identity to warrant social legitimacy. Neoliberalism inscribes the logic and language of the market (i.e. efficiency, competition, prosperity, improvement, growth, and individualism) onto the state, whereby it is internalized and enacted by its citizen-subjects, resulting in our own compliance and determination to self-regulate and self-govern (Foucault, 1991; Lemke, 2001; Ong, 2006). Through this governing process, social responsibility is cast solely to the domain of the individual, rather than the state or the collective.

A queer political project interrogates this governing process and questions why benefits like health care, tax breaks, immigration rights, and inheritance persist as attachments to marriage and progeny (Conrad, 2010, Eng, 2010). A queer critique maintains that legal marriage functions as a privatized, neoliberal contract that emphasizes individualism and personal gain, inciting subjects to lose sight of larger, collective concerns like universal health care and rampant poverty (Conrad, 2010). Additionally, queer theorist Michael Warner (1999) asserts that the gay and lesbian marriage agenda is a normalizing strategy that will inevitably stigmatize alternative

sexualities and relationalities *within* the LGBTQ community and recapitulate the social hierarchy that values the married over the unmarried. Neoliberal practices predicated on the ultimate assimilative promise of "normalcy" and "inclusion," are divisive operations that can pacify social movements, fracture communities and disrupt potential alliances by keeping subjects separated and attached to their own micro social identities, politics, and civic gains.

Moreover, "a neoliberal state emphasizes issues of identity and family in order to deflect attention away from the attrition of social services and benefits" (Nair, 2010, p. 5). For example, as gay and lesbian subjects across the nation sink their time and money into Marriage Equality, hundreds of independent, grassroots health clinics and nonprofit organizations that serve some of the most marginalized and vulnerable members of the LGBTQ population are shutting down due to gross funding shortages. The most visible (and privileged) facets of the LGBTQ community are constructing marriage as *the* solution to social inequities and thus prioritizing marriage and family benefits over more critical, multi-faceted, anti-oppression pursuits.

Because of its commitment to alterity, intersectionality, coalition, and anti-oppression, as well as its general suspicion of advanced capitalism and neoliberal practices, queer perspectives can have profound implications for social work education and practice. By integrating queer critiques of its current understandings of family, social work has the opportunity to confront its own heteronormative habits as well as consider new kinship potentiality and possibility for everyone. Research indicates that clinging to the idealized nuclear family form is not realistic nor sustainable (Stacey, 1990). What if social work was willing to consider and endorse more creative, more multiple, more sustainable ways to socially organize; bolstering various support networks, rather than putting so much expectation on traditional dyadic, sexual relationships to meet all needs and to raise children? Foucault said,

Imagining a sexual act that does not conform to the law or to nature, that's not what

upsets people. But that individuals might begin to love each other, that's the problem.

That goes against the grain of social institutions… The institutional regulations cannot

approve such relations, with their multiple intensities, variable colorations, imperceptible

movements, and changing forms – relations that produce a short circuit and introduce

love where there ought to be law, regularity, and custom (Foucault as quoted in Halperin,

1995, p. 98).

Foucault is asserting that intimacies outside of "family" conscriptions are the most threatening

to the status quo because of their resistance to regulation and objectification. His quote also

illustrates how alliance and sex and sexuality have all been conflated and formalized, which

inevitably forecloses what kinds of relational experiences are available to us for love, support,

sex, and pleasure. What if social work were willing to untangle, denaturalize, and rethink these

assumptions within its own discipline? What if it were to refuse, "to allow kinship to become

reducible to "family,"… or to allow the field of sexuality to become gauged against the marriage

form" (Butler, 2004, p.129)?

Rethinking family and kinship could have a wide range of concrete effects within social

work's domain. For example, kinship foster homes (when a foster child is placed with extended

family) get less funding and state support than child placements in outside, ready-made nuclear

family homes (Mallon & Hess, 2005); a problematic policy that rewards the nuclear family form

over a blood-related, "alternative" kinship system. Adoption practices could potentially shift as

well, from privileging couples/co-parents to considering multiple parenting arrangements.

Immigration policies are also organized around heteronormative notions of family, which often

dictate who is permitted to enter the country and what they must do when they arrive, including married couples having to prove that they cohabitate, share finances, love each other, and have sex. David Eng (2010) adds that immigration programs predicated on family reunification, attach state benefits solely to the family unit, forcing, "immigrant workers… to depend on family ties for access to room and board, employment, and other services" (Eng, 2010, p. 33). He adds, "The state reconstitutes its power through family reunification laws and its accompanying discourse of family values, it also reinforces heteropatriarchal relations in immigrant communities" (Eng, 2010, p.32).

This queer discourse analysis illustrates the ways that social work does indeed, embrace a heteronormative conception of family. By producing heteronormative families, social work also reflexively produces itself as a heteronormative discipline. The discourses we contribute to the world, form the world, as well as constitute our role within the world. Heteronormative discourses marginalize and alienate non-normative persons, while also limiting the sphere of relational possibility for everyone. In this way, social work has a responsibility to join with queer to disrupt the its own heteronormative power and process and to ultimately question its relationship to the family, the state, liberalism, and the tyranny of global capitalism. By joining with queer, social work may become more willing and better equipped to defy the state and the logic of the market, assume radical political positions, abandon repressive ideals of "health" and "normalcy," and push for social change beyond the boundaries of the status quo.

However, queer resists the rhetoric of inclusion, positions itself "at odds with the normal," (Spargo, 1999, p. 40), and aspires for a collectivity achieved in difference. If it is included and integrated into a professional discourse like social work, perhaps it is drained of its disruptive and resistant power? Queer may always need to operate *outside* of "family" and

perhaps outside of social work, altogether. Perhaps social work's expert discourse and queer's (un)reasoning are forever antithetical, an arranged and incompatible "marriage?"

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