

TITLE: Queerly belonging: sole parents in higher education

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Introduction

This paper argues that a queer analysis of the experiences of sole parents in higher education can enable insights into structural factors that limit equitable access to higher education for diverse students. Queer theory holds to uncertainty and contingency, it disrupts norms and common sense understandings and is therefore useful for research concerned with higher education because it frames a constant questioning of privilege and normative institutional structures. Issues of financial stress, child care-work responsibilities, academic timetabling, scholarship criteria and social welfare provisioning are factors which influence sole parent postgraduates experience in higher education. Queer theories attentiveness to difference illuminates how norms of student subjectivity operate and therefore facilitates a critique of normative institutional structures that may limit equitable and diverse engagement with higher education. Connell (2014) states that ‘Queer-influenced research tries to probe the unmentionable presuppositions of everyday life...that we normally don’t notice’ (Rasmussen, Gowlett & Connell, 2014, p. 10). It is the potential for re-shaping everyday educational norms that queer theory facilitates which is useful for increasing engagement and inclusivity for diverse students in higher education.

Sole parents can be regarded as queer because they are outside heteronormative family constructs. Sara Ahmed (2013) notes that queer theory is ‘not only anti-heteronormative, but [i]s anti-normative’ (p. 426). Drawing from queer theory, I seek to contest and make uneasy the categories of motherhood and fatherhood by considering the ways in which sole parents queer gendered parenting practices. This consideration of female attachment to and responsibility for childcare exposes social norms which sediment social constructions of gendered norms through the operation of motherhood and fatherhood. These (re)productive

norms have clear implications for how childcare impacts on women's engagement with higher education. Morley (2013) suggests a gender bias exists in the academy whereby academics are viewed as 'as zero-load workers, devoid of care responsibilities... Women academics [are] caught between two greedy institutions – the extended family and the university' (p. 122). Queer theory enables my research work to explore and critique how these gendered parenting practices are experienced as enabling constraints for sole parent postgraduates.

Research method

In my research I explore how sole parenting establishes particular conditions in postgraduate education. Drawing from interviews with 10 sole parents, this research is a collective case study which provides for multiple sources of data, including semi-structured interviews and policy documents which I have analysed in strong conversation with theoretical frameworks. I cite Flyvbjerg (2006), to support my methodological choices of case study as being able to produce context-dependent knowledge. Yin (2009) states that case studies are used, 'because you wanted to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth.

This study examines how university policies and practices frame women and parental involvement because 85% of all sole parents in Australia are female/mothers, and each of the postgraduates who participated in this research are female. My research aims to disrupt regulatory regimes associated with gendered parenting and how postgraduate students are constituted which tend to (re)produce a hierarchy of knowledge within the academy. Sole parent postgraduates contest parental binaries established along gender lines and challenge constructions of the unencumbered postgraduate. A queer focus on normative constructs can disrupt the foundational institutional premise that 'women's knowledge is seen to come from their mothering and domestic responsibilities, it is seen to be private and individual, and therefore it becomes structurally excluded from academic thought' (Standing, 1998, p. 198).

Conceptualisation of sole parents in HE literature

Boundary maintenance between parental and academic work is explored by scholars such as Wolf-Wendel and Ward, (2003, 2004), Edwards (1993), Burke (2010), Currie, Thiele and Harris (2002). This paper seeks to extend this work by focusing on sole parents whom often have an intensified level of childcare responsibility whilst also managing home and financial responsibilities. This paper builds on academic research by Tamsin Hinton-Smith (2012) in her book *Lone Parents' experiences as higher education students: Learning to juggle a* longitudinal study of 77 lone mothers studying in UK higher education, as well as Brown & Watson (2010), *Understanding the experiences of female doctoral students*, which included interviews with two sole parents who noted that 'being a single parent was the major determinant in their ability to start a PhD and to make academic progress' (p. 392). I argue that this over-determined level of childcare and household work has material implications for sole parent's time, energy and engagement with postgraduate education.

Usefulness of queer theory

Parenting is a productive place within which to interrogate gender norms which (re)produce feminine mothering and masculine fathering because 'normative gender serves the reproduction of the normative family' (Butler, 1997, p. 272). In this research, I argue that sole parents make the everyday and ordinary practice of parenting queer by rendering the division of mother *or* father strange by moving through and beyond those constructions. Negotiations by sole parents in order to engage with postgraduate education were messy and incomplete which illustrates a grind between personal agency and institutional practices and policies that are critical to understanding access and retention for non-traditional students in higher education.

Participants in this research shared a sense that they were outside the normative unencumbered postgraduate student and that the sole care of their children constrained their

engagement with postgraduate education. However they also articulated that their children motivated and therefore enabled their studies. They articulated a queering manoeuvre by traversing gendered parental boundaries by discussing their sense of providing both financially and emotionally for their children. A queer theoretical framework draws attention to sole parent's contingent autonomy as agential and productive. Decision making in regard to time, money, space to study and the care of children were structured by sole parents specifically to support their engagement with postgraduate education. They shared a sense that it was *because* they were sole parents and 'masters of their own modest means' (Hinton-Smith, 2012, p. 121), that they were able to engage with postgraduate education, in this way sole parenting became conditions of 'enabling constraint' (Butler 1997). By exploring how non-normative students respond and re-work higher education normative policies and practices, queer research is able to draw attention to the existence of these norms and begin to contest and dismantle their inequitable operations.

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