

Queering Fertility?

Marcin Smietana, October '17



We welcomed autumn 2017 at the [My Future Family Show](#) in London - a key fair, show, conference and community gathering for LGBTQ would-be parents in the UK and their collaborators. The current and increasingly global popularity of such events could not have been foreseen by [Kath Weston](#) when in 1991 she wrote about creative family configurations formed by LGBTQ people in San Francisco - or by [Jeffrey Weeks and colleagues](#) who followed suit in 2001 in the UK.

From the perspective of our 'Timeless' stand, some colleagues and I used the ReproSoc outreach project '[Life in Glass](#)', led by [Lucy van de Wiel](#), to share our research with people present at the show and to collect stories and insights from them.

Attracting people's attention to our fictional perfume brand - 'Timeless,' created in collaboration with the engagement consultancy [The Liminal Space](#) - we engaged in conversations about reproductive decision-making and pathways. Our interlocutors read anonymous quotes from others' reproductive stories, written on our fictional perfume boxes. In response, some of them

wrote or told us about their own reproductive experiences and considerations. They also listened to others' reproductive stories from audio recordings at our stand. Some entered our relaxation pod, equipped with automated massage and guided meditation, where they could also record stories or impressions about their own reproductive pathways.

Queer community?

Many of the people who stopped by at our stand then lingered. They went on chatting. Quite a few stayed for half an hour or more. They talked about their stories, wanted to know about ours, about research on LGBTQ parenting, about what we were doing at the Show... Some of them said they came to the Show to explore their parenting options, and they were still hesitant as to whether, when, or, above all, how to have children. Yet, quite surprisingly, some people's presence at the Show was motivated not only by practical reasons of search for the ways to become parents – some of our interlocutors were already parents or in the process of becoming ones; those just came to hang around – some with their babies – and meet the community. Chatting with some of them at the stand, I felt, and some of my colleagues did too, that there was some sense of queer family community, and of a rather relaxed meeting place rather than only a fertility shopping mall.



This sensation was quite different from how we perceived and what we heard from our interlocutors at some previous fertility shows we had been at, including with the same 'Timeless' stand. One reason for this could have been the manageable size of the 2017 My Future Family Show, which with its 25 [exhibitors](#) and parallel seminars was substantial but not too big. Although most of the exhibitors were commercial fertility companies and solicitors – British and overseas – there were as well quite a few community organisations. And it is also perhaps the spirit of queer family building that has often been celebratory and community-oriented, as noted by the sociologist [Judith Stacey](#). Moreover, in our research on gay fathers, my colleagues and I ([Smietana et al. 2014](#)) found that many gay men had done mourning over the possibility of not having children long before they actually thought they could try to become parents. Conversely, going through infertility treatment for heterosexual women could easily trigger a distressing process of redefining their identity and realising for the first time that perhaps they would not have children – as Sarah Franklin showed in her study of [British IVF](#) (1997). Of course such dependence of *reproductive expectations* on sexual identity may not be the case for everyone who engages in heterosexual or nonheterosexual relationships; many people's stories are much more complex –

yet to the community level, visible at the Show, the celebratory spirit of rainbow family pride may be contributing a specific approach, particularly at the time of the recent politics of gay marriage.

As observed by sociologist [Laura Mamo](#) in her 2007 study of lesbian mothers in the US, many of the initially non-normative or subversive queer community and family building practices have been moulded and normalised by the fertility industry. In this vein, also some of the gay fathers interviewed in the US by [Judith Stacey](#) (2011) nostalgically complained that their former queer family community was becoming fragmented by the market and taken over by agencies and clinics as much as helped by them - as well as by conventional approaches to family building. The alternative and often informal LGBTQ family arrangements first characterised by Kath Weston (1991) may now be getting less popular than families of two dads or two mums with biologically related children; and it is the parents' middle-class status that may help them acquire housing, citizenship, or financial resources necessary for adoption or surrogacy.



Contingent parenthood

This turn to 'normality' may be understandable, given the growing social acceptance of family diversity, as well as the sheer difficulty of having – or raising - children for LGBTQ people, and for all people. Indeed, having children may be quite a puzzle for queer people. It starts from the very first question about whether and why at all to have them. That is why at the My Future Family Show I listened to what my interlocutors had to say about their motivations. Many said searching

parenthood was a natural thing in their life-course, now that they had finished schools and got established at work – just like most of their siblings and friends did. For some, considering parenthood was clearly linked to their search for meaning in life. Others saw their parenting prospects as very contingent, and they were unsure and exploring.



This *contingency of parenthood* seems to be becoming a new norm in countries such as the UK and the US today. Both new parenting options and new difficulties in becoming parents may be some of many facets of the contemporary individualization process as described by sociologists [Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim](#). Parenting is now a challenge for everyone, as productive activities have encroached so much on reproductive ones, welfare state has succumbed to neoliberal business, and little time or energy may be left for family building – as recently shown by [Laura Briggs](#) (2017). Yet having children by LGBTQ people has its own complexities. The award-winning American documentary '[Daddy & Papa](#)' well shows what it may take to have children for a gay would-be parent.

Indeed, at the My Future Family Show I spoke to men who had been networking in the UK altruistic surrogacy community for months now in order to meet a surrogate, and they were in search of an egg donor or provider. Fortunately, they were enjoying the regular community meet-ups, picnics and outings where they were hoping to find a compassionate carrier of their future baby. Others were much less patient, but had instead enough financial resources so as to venture on a transnational surrogacy arrangement in the US. Not always for the same reason though: for instance, a single dad I spoke to and who came to the Show with his smiling baby boy had done commercial overseas surrogacy because in the UK it is not available to single people. Another man I talked to came to the Show to speak to an overseas commercial surrogacy agency because even though he was living and working in the UK, the lack of British citizenship prevented him from adoption or surrogacy here. A couple of two women I chatted with for a good while at the stand were hesitant about sperm donation and IVF due to the treatment's potential medical burden on their bodies and the unavailability of state-funded treatment in the part of England that was home to them.



Apart from fertility clinics and agencies from the UK and abroad, the Show also hosted adoption agencies, parents' associations, and co-parenting organisations. At our stand we all spent a long while chatting to a family of four: a lesbian couple of two women and a gay couple of two men, who were going through IVF together so as to have and raise a child in their four-parent co-parenting arrangement. They were lucky to have been friends for years now, living near each other and with no imminent plans of changing jobs, towns or countries in the foreseeable future – this made them think they could not only have but also raise a child together - a situation hard to imagine in some other communities, such as e.g. the rewarding yet largely nomadic world of early-career scholars, whom most of us at our stand were.



From alternative families to future families

The organisation of the My Future Family Show was inclusive of several different queer family arrangements – even though a collective that may have been somewhat underrepresented or missing were reproductive collaborators of LGBTQ families, such as gamete donors and surrogates. Some of the providers and associations as well as the Show visitors could be said to represent family formation options that were somehow queer whilst not necessarily being LGBTQ. 'Queer' could mean in this sense not only 'LGBTQ' but also 'non-normative' – or even, simply, 'alternative'. If most babies are born following heterosexual sex (and often raised in resulting households), the Show addressed those people who would become parents in other, that is, 'alternative' ways: including those who identify as heterosexual but are, for example, single or have fertility issues. Not without a reason the Show was first called 'Alternative Parenting Show' when it was created 9 years ago by Sarah Garrett and Linda Riley following their own search for information around starting a family. Still today it is part of the [Alternative Parenting Week](#). The change of the name for 'My Future Family Show' seems to adequately reflect not only some vindicatory claims in the LGBTQ and, perhaps particularly gay marriage movement, suggesting that rainbow families are not any 'second-rank' alternative but they exist on their own terms. This change may also be symptomatic of the increasing contingency of pathways to family-making not only for people who identify as LGBTQ but also in broader society.

Yet the 'queer community' spirit – as broadly and loosely defined as such a community may be – was definitely one important element of this Show. It was a key part of the [seminars](#) offered (e.g. 'LGBT Families at School') and associations present, and we could grasp it and write it in our field notebooks very clearly from the conversations we had with the Show attendees at our stand. This sense of a community – as loose as it may have been – did distinguish this Show from some other fertility events. Apart from the LGBTQ element of it, a huge contribution to it may also have been a mixed crowd of [exhibitors](#), including significant presence of both commercial fertility companies and community exhibitors, helping to build both one- or two-parent families as well as co-parenting projects.

