Sociological Forum

Polikoff, Nancy D. 2008. *Beyond (Straight and Gay) Marriage: Valuing All Families Under the Law*. Boston: Beacon.
Taylor, Verta, Nella Van Dyke, Katrina Kimport, & Ellen Andersen. 2009. "Culture and Mobilization: Tactical Repertoires, Same-Sex Weddings, and the Impact on Gay Activism." *American Sociological Review* 74: 6: 865–890. doi:10.1177/000312240907400602
Weston, Kath. 1991. *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Modern Families

Katrina Kimport[1]

Modern Families: Stories of Extraordinary Journeys to Kinship. *Joshua Gamson*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

In *Modern Families: Stories of Extraordinary Journeys to Kinship*, Joshua Gamson takes the reader on an intimate journey through some of the many extraordinary pathways to parenthood available in the early twenty-first century. Compellingly written, the book's six substantive chapters each offer a detailed account of how a child or children came to be part of a family—and none of these stories follows the typical path of a married different-sex couple raising their biological children. These are pathways to parenthood on the edge, pathways possible, Gamson persuasively demonstrates, because of the complicated and often interrelated effects of social justice activism, reproductive technologies, war and poverty, globalization, and reproductive-related entrepreneurship. These are stories of people who have charted new models of kinship, sometimes making it up as they go along.

Modern Families is more oral history than typical sociological study. Its method differs from a standard academic monograph: Gamson is telling the origin stories of his own children and those of people in his social network. We read about how Gamson and his husband, Richard, conceived their daughter Reba, relying on an egg from a friend and the uterus of Gamson's college girlfriend to bring Reba into the world, and their daughter Madeleine, using the egg of a different donor and a gestational surrogate matched to them through a surrogacy agency. Gamson tells the story of his childhood friend's failed attempts to become a single mother and ultimate success in adopting a toddler from Ethiopia. He relates the pathway to parenthood of his lesbian neighbors, one of whom contributed the egg and the other of whom carried the pregnancy, choosing a medically complicated route because of the social meanings they attached to genetics and the experience of pregnancy. Then there is the experience of Gamson's husband's best friend, who spearheaded the adoption of one child from Nepal and one from India, who had to falsely present herself as a single mother to avoid discriminatory prohibitions on adoption by gay

[1] Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health (ANSIRH), Bixby Center for Global Reproductive Health, University of California, San Francisco, 1330 Broadway, Suite 1100, Oakland, California 94612; e-mail: Katrina.Kimport@ucsf.edu.

couples and who, instead, is raising the children with three coparents—her lesbian partner and a gay couple. Last, Gamson shares the tale of a woman and her transgender partner, himself the product of a transracial closed adoption, who participated in an open transracial adoption to become parents, after several other avenues to parenthood hit dead ends. In aggregate, the chapters offer a snapshot of extraordinary family formation from Gamson's own proverbial backyard.

This choice to share the stories of intimates does not undercut the scholarly contribution this book makes. At the heart of *Modern Families* is the question of how the personal and the structural operate in and through each other. As Gamson weaves these personal stories, he draws on sociological, scientific, historical, and feminist literatures to situate the personal in the social, arguing, "there is no separation between the ways we make our families and the various social hierarchies in which we all find ourselves. There never has been, and there isn't now" (12). Extraordinary cases like these, where parenthood is deliberately chosen and pursued, where people experience setbacks and must overcome hurdles that sometimes challenge their sense of self and of worth, are exactly the "data" for understanding the complicated relationship between the personal and the social. And Gamson's insider relationships with the people in these chapters likely afforded him deeper access to their complicated feelings. Gently, Gamson attends to both individual decision making and the structural constraints his subjects encountered. The sample is admittedly not representative, but generalizability is beside the point. As an inveterate qualitative researcher, Gamson is interested in what these cases at the margins can tell us about the contemporary landscape of family.

Gamson situates these stories between "Repro Lit," a genre of accounts of atypical family formation that foregrounds a narrative of celebration, destiny, and love, and what he calls "Repro Crit," the body of academic literature that exposes the troubling inequalities (re)produced through nontypical pathways to parenthood. He argues that family formation is both, and that holding together both the personal joys and the messy social complexities is important—and lacking.

In his telling, these parent origin stories go beyond a recitation of technologies used and institutions engaged to examine in detail the formation and evolution of the relationships these pathways to parenthood produce. For example, Gamson candidly interrogates his own experience of using a paid gestational surrogate, Gail. He describes a relationship with no template: just how are you supposed to interact with the woman you pay to carry your fetus? He recognizes the attenuating complications, such as the education and class differences between himself and Gail: he is a college professor; she ended her education after high school. Gail's first plane ride was to meet Gamson and his husband, something that makes Gamson feel both pleased—that he could give her that experience—and troubled—this lack of flight experience making their divergent backgrounds more visible. He offers no neat solution for this discomfort. His is neither a Repro Lit account of the ends (a healthy and loved child) justifying the means (commercialized reproduction) nor a Repro Crit analysis wherein such a relationship is inherently exploitative. By holding both the means and the ends together, Gamson challenges the reader to face the social complexities of family formation head-on.

Also fascinating is the richness of Gamson's stories. Gamson relates the failures, losses, and triumphs of his subjects with sensitivity, revealing their internal logics, even when a plain recitation of the facts makes their choices seem irrational. The story of his neighbors Maureen and Julia is an example. Neither woman experienced infertility, making pregnancy by the relatively straightforward means of artificial insemination a possibility. Yet, they chose a more medically complicated route that included Julia's egg, Maureen's uterus, and in vitro fertilization. It took four tries before they achieved pregnancy, racking up financial and physical costs along the way. To an outsider, these choices may seem strange. By starting their parent origin story in the roots of their own childhoods and story of coupling, however, Gamson shows how this route made sense to Maureen and Julia—indeed, it was the only pathway to parenthood that felt right to them both. In the end, he argues that what all of these nuanced stories reveal

> is not just the powerful drive to make family in the face of institutional blockades but also other, harder things: the structural circumstances of poverty and greed that leave some children without parents and some parents unable to raise their kids; the ways market forces facilitate and commodify the intimate relations of family; the normalizing and status elevation that becoming a parent so often brings, like it or not; the unequal distribution of access to assisted reproduction and adoption by class, nation, gender, race, and sexuality. (210)

In his conclusion, Gamson does some thinking about the process of storytelling itself, noting that the onus of telling an "origin" story about children carries additional weight and concerns. He recognizes, for example, that stories necessarily have silences and are never objective. As the storyteller, Gamson himself participates in shaping the stories of his friends, potentially in ways they might not themselves. (It bears noting that in the robust tradition of feminist methods, Gamson shared drafts of all chapters with the protagonists, allowing them to make determinations about what was included and how.)

Gamson is a beautiful writer, and the book is a joy to read. It is accessibly written, with humor, and incorporates the scholarly analyses seamlessly. It will most certainly find a readership among the general public. It also, I believe, demands to be taught. By this I mean not simply that it would find an appreciated home in undergraduate courses on the family, sexualities, and even intro to sociology. I mean that the incisive contributions of this book will more readily come into relief for a student-reader when accompanied by active teaching. Because it is so accessible, instructors might be tempted to let it stand alone, but I think that the simplicity of these vignettes belies the complexity of the sociological concepts they represent. The book, in other words, is an excellent gateway into deep sociological thinking on family formation, gender, sexuality, parenting, class, race, and perhaps even the social world, broadly.

For example, one teaching moment I spotted related to the idea that family is about children. In the introduction, Gamson cites research finding that while a majority of Americans consider an unmarried same-sex couple with children a family, only around a quarter consider the same couple without children a family. That is, the presence of children is the tipping point to calling something a family. Gamson often describes his subject as about understanding various "pathways to parenthood," but he also slips into the language of "family formation." What do

we make of the way some of Gamson's subjects drew on the language of family formation? What does it tell us that becoming parents solidified some subjects' identification as *family*?

The book offers fewer clear opportunities to think about big-T theory. Gamson does not package a new contribution to, say, gender theory or force us to reexamine of the role of children in society—and he does not claim to either. Sophisticated readers, hoping for a new take on family formation, will not find it here. Instead, *Modern Families* argues that these unconventional stories matter—they are *worth considering*. This is, in many ways, a revolutionary claim in an age where there is a clear normative pathway to parenthood, premised on heterosexuality and a dyadic married relationship. In the face of this norm, Gamson turns his—and our—eye to cases that are atypical pathways to parenthood and insists on their value. Moreover, he requires the reader to think about these stories in complex ways that take into account global social inequalities, gender, sexuality, class, and privilege. I venture that with his persuasive and evocative writing style, most readers will be on board after reading only a few pages—and will have trouble putting the book down.

LGBT Parents Navigate the (Ever-Changing) Law

Mignon R. Moore[1]

Legalizing LGBT Families: How the Law Shapes Parenthood. *Amanda K. Baumle* and *D'Lane R. Compton*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

Over the past 20 years, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) social movements have made great strides in their quest for equality. Nowhere is this perhaps most salient than the law. The landmark 2013 Supreme Court case guaranteeing same-sex couples the fundamental right to marry offered a critical shift in the way lesbian and gay people are understood and recognized in society. The data for Baumle and Compton's exciting new book were collected during the years leading up to this change in federal law, when individual states were grappling over whether and how to recognize the unions of same-sex couples and more generally thinking through local policies and laws that regulated processes of family-building for sexual minorities and their households. In this rapidly changing context, it became important to understand the extent to which LGBT parents consider the law when forming families.

The goal of *Legalizing LGBT Families: How the Law Shapes Parenthood* is to analyze the meanings LGBT parents give to the law and the ways they use, reproduce, or contest those meanings in the process of creating and maintaining

[1] Department of Sociology, Barnard College-Columbia University, 3009 Broadway, New York, New York 10027; e-mail: mmoore@barnard.edu.