

## **LGBTQ+ families: building community while extending the boundaries of the LGBTQ+ community**

Eglantine Zatout

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer people are often referred to collectively as the LGBTQ+ community. Thus, members of this group are seen as an “imagined community.” This concept was theorized regarding national communities by the Irish political scientist Benedict Anderson in 1983 and defined as: “[the nation] is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). In other words, a community can exist, people can feel a sense of belonging to it and be considered members of this group even without knowing the other members. The LGBTQ+ community is seen as such because of a common trait, a *sameness* (Brubaker and Cooper 7) shared by members: namely their sexual orientation and/or their gender identity. However, this “imagined community” is not a monolith, it is composed of sub-groups. One of these sub-communities is made up of LGBTQ+ families. In the United States, it is embodied by a non-profit organization founded in 1979 named Family Equality. They cater specifically to LGBTQ+ families: namely LGBTQ+ people who have children or who are in the process of becoming parents. They organize one major event every year called Family Week in Provincetown (MA) which they present as: “the largest annual gathering of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer-identified families in the world. The 2018 fun-filled Family Week will include more opportunities than ever to build community and to get empowered on today’s issues” (Family Equality, “Family Week in Provincetown”). To organize this event, Family Equality hires interns to prepare the week. In the summer 2018, I was one these interns, something which enabled me to conduct participant-observer fieldwork. Through this ten-week internship I came to gauge what they mean by “building community”: how they make people feel part of a tangible community instead of an “imagined” one and why participants want to be part of this sub-community. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with two LGBTQ+ parents who shed light on how they navigate daily life as an LGBTQ+ family.

Despite the unity of the community built by Family Equality, there is a generational gap within this sub-community between the parents of LGBTQ+ families and their offspring. So much so that in 1990, the latter formed their own organisation: COLAGE, which at the time was an acronym for *Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere*. The name remains but it is no longer an acronym in order to be inclusive of people with transgender parents. At its inception, the goal of the group was to have a separate space of expression while remaining linked to their parents’

group. However, in the late 1990s, the two non-profit organizations fully separated even though they still collaborate to organize Family Week together. Some members of COLAGE identify as Queerspawn, a term they coined<sup>1</sup> and defined thus: “An identity term used by youth and adults with one or more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer parents/guardians. It is often used to articulate one’s connection to the queer community and claim a space in it” (Queerspawn Resource Project 1). This label is therefore used to claim membership in the LGBTQ+ community irrespective of individual sexual orientation or gender identity. They are consequently underlining hierarchies within the LGBTQ+ as a whole and redefining its boundaries. I will analyse why they feel that they belong to the LGBTQ+ community and should be recognized as members rather than mere allies.

### **1. Building a sub-subcommunity through internal and external visibility: the case of LGBTQ+ families**

Family Week celebrated its 24<sup>th</sup> edition in 2018.<sup>2</sup> It was organized by Family Equality and COLAGE together. It brought together 1,593 people or 522 LGBTQ+ families: meaning LGBTQ+ people and their biological or adopted children. In other words, to be part of this sub-community, being LGBTQ+ is not enough: people have to be parents or prospective parents as well. This distinction is noticeable from the program of the week. It hosts around forty events, some of which are called “affinity gatherings.” They are made for people to socialize around their identification as parents because it is the most salient form of identification throughout the week: they host the single parents’ gathering, the dads’ gathering, the moms’ gathering, but not the lesbian or gay or bisexual gathering for example (Family Equality, *Family Week 2018 Program Book* 13).

In the United States, being an LGBTQ+ family can be an isolating experience for parents and children alike: fighting that feeling was the impetus behind the foundation of the week in 1994. That year, while vacationing in Provincetown, a gay couple and their two children hosted a dinner for fifteen LGBTQ+ families they had met during their one-week holiday: that was the first Family Week. Here is how one of the founders recalls the night: “It was a magical event,’ Mr. Davenport recalls, ‘at which children of gay parents—many of whom didn’t know other families like theirs—suddenly felt less alone” (Family Equality and COLAGE). This desire to see other families like theirs is still one of the main reasons people attend Family Week. In a Family Equality podcast aimed at encouraging people to attend the event Tonya Agnew, a Family Week veteran, explains what the week means to her family: “The week provides us with confidence.

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<sup>1</sup> The term was coined by Stefan Lynch, the first director of COLAGE (Epstein-Fine and Zook introduction).

<sup>2</sup> The week still exists in 2022. During the pandemic it took place virtually in 2020 but resumed in person, in a limited capacity in 2021 and will be back to a full programming in 2022.

[...]It's a reminder that no matter where we live, we are not alone"(Family Equality, *All About Family Week*).

To ensure this feeling of being surrounded by families like theirs, two major events are a staple of the week: Beach Campfire Night and the Pride Parade (Family Equality, *Family Week 2018 Program Book* 15, 22). According to the surveys<sup>3</sup> conducted after Family Week, these two events were the attendees' favorites in both 2017 and 2018. In 2017, Beach Campfire Night was chosen by 31 people out of 144 and in 2018 by 53 people out of 154. The Pride Parade was selected by 13 people in 2017 and 10 people in 2018. The reasons they mentioned reveal that feeling part of the visible majority for once, part of a tangible community, played a big role in their choice, in particular for Beach Campfire Night:

2017: "It was great to *see* all of the families and meet new friends"; "It was awesome to *see* so many families who are like us, together, enjoying the moment and making lasting friendships. It was something I had never felt before at the beach, a favorite place of mine"; 2018: "Beautiful to *see* so many families in such a wonderful setting"; "So lovely to *see* a crowded beach of our families." (Family Equality, *Changed by Family Week*, emphasis added)

Families are able to recognize each other as part the community of Family Week attendees, thanks to visual markers: the orange bracelets provided upon registration and the T-shirt of the week sold to participants by the organization. Some also sported rainbow beach umbrellas. The same type of comments were made about the Pride Parade from a mom who, in 2019, recalled the first time she had attended Family Week in 2003 with her partner and daughter:

It was just so freeing and then they had the parade, just walking up that street and turning around and *looking* at like hundreds and hundreds of parents and children all like thrilled and waving banners and banging drums, it was just so freeing and so accepting and so, and you felt like normal, you know ? [...] It was just really, really nice. [...] I mean I think that all of us just turned around and started crying. (Family Equality, *Changed by Family Week*, emphasis added)

The emphasis put on sight in these accounts shows that these events enable participants to envision their community, thus moving from an "imagined community" of LGBTQ+ families to a tangible one. It is also a way to visibly reclaim public space in the LGBTQ+ tradition of the annual June Pride Parade which enables them to reject their marginalization by showing pride in their identities. As a result, these events allow participants to see each other and thus feel a

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<sup>3</sup> After each Family Week, Family Equality conducts a survey aimed getting feedback to improve the week. One of the questions related to which event was their favourite and why they had selected it. I took part in the wording and analysis of said survey in 2018 and had access to the 2017 answers as well. These documents are not available to the public.

sense of belonging but also to be seen as a group which is a way to exist and be socially recognized.

Indeed, outside of Family Week, LGBTQ+ families are not always “read as families,” to use their expression. This is also something they appreciate when attending the event: “family week provides us with an opportunity to kind of exhale and be together with others who understand our family. You don’t have to explain. ‘Yes we are married, we are a couple’” (Family Equality, *All About Family Week*). This physical sense of relief comes from a visibility that does not need to be managed. Being perceived as a family is mostly not accidental or automatic for LGBTQ+ families; when a family is in a public space people do not recognize the familial bond between the members and assume that the parents are friends or babysitters. Being seen as a family can even be dangerous in certain cases as it can lead to verbal abuse or harassment,<sup>4</sup> so they have to be careful and sometimes being invisible can be a defense mechanism. Managing visibility is an emotionally draining daily process called “racework” by the American sociologist Amy Steinbugler (xix, 47-49). She studies how interracial same-sex and heterosexual couples navigate visibility in public spaces. She builds on American sociologist Erving Goffman’s work on stigma management. He explains that a stigma is “an attribute that deeply discredits” in certain situations (3). It is a trait that is not negative in itself but rather something that is perceived negatively in some situations. As a result, the person who bears this attribute has to carefully navigate the instances in which this trait might be stigmatized: “the issue is [...] managing information about [the stigma]. To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where” (42). Amy Steinbugler adds that a stigma is not necessarily individual: it can be the connection between the members of a group that is stigmatized itself. She uses this lens to analyze the way same-sex couples are viewed: “it is the interaction, the connection itself between two partners that is the primary object of stigma. [...] It is the same-sex relationship itself—deemed immoral or perverse—that is stigmatized” (47). She then explains why seeing this visibility management as a form of work is conceptually important:

Managing visibility is a form of racework [...]. Whether couples avoid conflict by minimizing public displays of affection or confront potential conflict by using public displays of affection to assert an intimate status, they are attempting to manage how much people know about their relationship. [...] Conceptualizing visibility management as *work* advances the critical analysis of interracial intimacy. [...] By conceiving of partner’s

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<sup>4</sup> The gay father I interviewed, Brad, explained that when he is with his husband and children, strangers who understand that they are a family would come to him to ask “where did you get them?”, implying that he stole his children. We can also mention a study conducted by Family Equality and the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) that documented, in 2008, the verbal abuse LGBTQ+ families were subjected to at school by other parents but also children’s classmates once the LGBTQ+ nature of the family was known. For example, some adults tell children that their parents are going to hell (Kosciw and Diaz 80-84).

responses as a type of work, I highlight the dynamic nature of public space and argue visibility and invisibility are not static states of being. They are statuses that require ongoing management. (Steinbugler 48-49, emphasis in original)

The same could be said for LGBTQ+ families as a unit. They are stigmatized because they do not conform to the ideal of the American family which is heterosexual. They have to incessantly decide whether it is safe to be visible as a family and to correct people who do not see them as a family. It is an interactional form of stigma because it is the relationship between the parents and the child(ren) itself that needs to be managed by every member of the family unit in most social interactions, irrespective of stigma individual members may also be assigned. This sort of daily effort was detailed by parents I interviewed. One mother explained that when they go to restaurants, as a family, waiters will ask whether they want separate checks. She also said that every year in the fall they meet with their two children's teachers to explain their family. Here is what she would say to teachers:

If you ever have any questions, we are more than happy to answer any questions that you have. This is our family this is our dynamic, you know my wife is Mama, I am Mimi this is who [my son] is gonna be talking about. You know, this, this is not, you know, we're married, we've been together for fourteen years, um my wife carried um we're more than happy to answer any questions, so please. (Natasha)

They anticipate potential questions and feel the need to legitimize their family unit through the longevity and stability of their relationship. They feel compelled to share intimate details as a defense mechanism and a way to educate about their family: they consciously decide to be preemptively visible. The same type of narrative was offered by a father (Brad) I interviewed who also anticipates, with his husband, any question a teacher might have. School is the example they provided because it is a space in which they have to be visible, seeing as young children may talk openly about their families, thus opening themselves up to intrusive questions they may not be equipped to deal with yet.

Family Week affords LGBTQ+ families the opportunity to be safely and easily visible as families. They feel secure and seen because the event takes place in Provincetown Massachusetts, a sea resort sometimes dubbed the "gay mecca" since it has welcomed LGBTQ+ people in large numbers since the 1970s (Krahulik 13; New England Historical Society). This is the reason it was chosen and remains the location for the event. This is also why people travelled from thirty-five states, as well as Washington D.C., and six foreign countries to attend Family Week 2018. Attendees mention an overall sense of safety just being in that town: "I used to feel really safe there"(the past tense is used because this person no longer attends the week given that her daughter is now an adult, Family Equality, *Changed by Family Week*). In other words, participants appreciate Family Week because they can shed the need to manage visibility. In

Provincetown some participants have told me that they felt relieved not being asked whether they wanted separate checks during the week.

Outside of Family Week, Family Equality collects stories from families and releases them on its website and through its podcast (Family Equality, *Outspoken Voices: Episode Index*; Family Equality, “Story Library Archive”). The goal is to maintain this sense of belonging by enabling families to hear, see or read about each other and thus make this community tangible to them. Being on a public platform, namely the internet, it also serves to display the community to the world. One of these testimonies illustrates the way they want LGBTQ+ families to be seen: as an average family not defined by the sexual orientation of the parents.

Speechless. Proud. Emotional. That’s how I felt when our 8-year old son turned in his school project in which he was asked to describe what’s unique about his family. When he told us about the project, so many thoughts came to mind: you have two dads, you were a foster kid, we adopted you. I even gave him a little prompting in this area, reminding him that his family is LGBTQ. But in the end, he wrote that what makes our family unique is the following: we’re Steelers fans, we read Harry Potter together at night, and we like to be lazy and cuddle together. (Ramsey)

The author of this account, Matthew Ramsey, foregrounds the idea that despite society defining their families by the sexual orientation of the parents, it does not match reality: they are simply a family. This positive account is a way to prove to people outside the community that children are well adjusted and not harmed by the sexual orientation of their parents, a criticism often voiced by opponents of these families (Eskridge 214).

## **2. Queerspawns: extending the boundaries of the LGBTQ+ community<sup>5</sup>**

While Family Equality enables parents to see each other, COLAGE (1990) plays that role for their offspring. This group is claiming space for its members inside the LGBTQ+ community irrespective of their own sexual orientation or gender identity. For example, Emily McGranachan, an employee of Family Equality, is the adult daughter of a lesbian couple (she used to attend COLAGE programming). This is how she puts her thoughts into words:

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<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to assess the extent to which the term Queerspawn has been adopted outside of COLAGE and Family Equality. The books and articles that use the term reference COLAGE and its members or are written by them. The Queerspawn Project has been created by people who have attended COLAGE programming. However, it can be said that the term is used by non-Americans. For example the Australian filmmaker Maya Newell has given a TEDx talk entitled “I am queerspawn”. Her films document the experience of people who grew up in LGBTQ+ families but their titles use another term to refer to them: *Growing Up Gayby* and *Gayby Baby*. “Gayby” is another word I encountered during my internship in literature provided by COLAGE to explain the lived experience of offspring of LGBTQ+ people. This word was presented as a synonym of Queerspawn. However, I have not met people claiming “gayby” as an identity marker while Queerspawn was used repeatedly hence the focus on this word in this article.

When I'm not standing with my moms, I know that crucial part of me is invisible. [...] While at a drag show in South America [...] I was there with fellow Americans. The emcee asked us what brought us to the show—were we LGBTQ or allies? When one member of the group said she was bisexual, she got a big applause. When I enthusiastically chimed in that I have lesbian moms, there were crickets. Her identity was seen as part of the community and mine was not. (McGranachan 133)

In other words, she considers that she is part of the LGBTQ+ community by virtue of her parentage. She also points to a hierarchy of belonging to said community between “allies” and fully-fledged members. What is the distinction? What, in their opinion, warrants their membership to the LGBTQ+ community? Another account sheds light on these questions from the perspective of an adult who was a member of COLAGE:

I am not an ally. No children of LGBTQ+ parents are. We are too inescapably linked to the orientation and gender identity of our parents to remain at the safe distance that allies can. To label us as “only an ally” in the LGBTQ+ narrative is to erase the roads we have walked hand in hand with our LGBTQ+ parents. [...] One area where I feel that it is important for younger generations to hear from the kids of LGBTQ+ parents is to hear that when they say that kids of LGBTQ+ parents have to quote unquote “earn their allyship,” does untold emotional violence to kids like me. (Jenny Rain qtd. in Lowe 19)

In other words, allies are not fully-fledged members of the community because they are not directly affected by discrimination and have the privilege to choose to ignore discrimination. Moreover, the idea of “earning” one’s allyship means that standing up to discrimination is a choice that must be made, repeatedly, by the ally before they can be considered as such. That is not the case for children of LGBTQ+ individuals: they can be discriminated against because some disapprove of their family so they must respond. For example, they are subject to intrusive questions about their parents’ sexuality, the way they were conceived or how their families were formed. Emily McGranachan describes being subjected to these questions in a podcast. She explains that in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, classmates would ask why she did not have a dad and she would answer that she had a sperm donor. In 4<sup>th</sup> grade they would ask: “do you ever think about how you were made?” and she would answer “and I was like, ‘my mom went to the doctor, do you think about how *you* were made?’ and that ended that because my mom went to the doctor, done” (Family Equality, *Changed by Family Week*). By being so candid about her family to her classmates, Emily in effect “outs” her family (as her mother says in the same episode): she makes it visible. Before being able to provide answers to these intrusive questions, Emily had to discuss these topics with her mothers from a young age. Once more, parents have to anticipate intrusive questions and convey appropriate answers to their children because they are also in charge of visibility management. In some cases, instead of visibility, the children are asked to hide their families: “my mom has always said when my dad came out of the closet, we stepped in” (Perry 1). Natalie Perry was born from a heterosexual couple before her father came out when she was 12 and began a relationship with a man. Throughout her adolescence, she had to lie about her

father's sexual orientation and her relationship to his partner because her father was an elected judge and might have lost re-election if it were to be known.

Learning from a young age the detail of one's conception and how to talk about one's family sets Queerspawns apart from children of heterosexual couples. Queerspawns call that learning process being "raised culturally queer":

It speaks to the feeling shared by many adults with LGBTQIA+ parents/caregivers that they grew up immersed in queer culture, including traditions, celebrations, media and language. Queerspawns are often raised in the queer community and learn about society primarily through a queer lens, and experience heterosexual culture and its norms as a secondary cultural influence. (Queerspawns Resource Project)

In practice, it also refers to the tradition of, for example, attending annual pride parades as a family. Indeed, some parents bring their children to Pride from a young age. I attended the Boston Pride Parade with Family Equality in June 2018 and our group counted several strollers with children sporting rainbow garments. Moreover, one of the podcasts produced by Family Equality also mentions this tradition (Family Equality, *Protest Signs & Strollers*). Another way for children to feel a sense of belonging is attending Family Week with their parents every year: Emily McGranachan has been attending almost every year since 2003 as participant, as a volunteer for COLAGE and now as a Family Equality staff member. Jamie Bergeron has been attending in various capacities for twenty years as of 2019 (Family Equality Council, *Generations of Queerspawns*). Through these events children learn the language of the LGBTQ+ community and develop a sense of belonging to it that is maintained for some in adulthood irrespective of sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

However, the term Queerspawns is not readily accepted by the parent group. Indeed, as interns, we were briefed on what to say if we heard negative comments about the label "Queerspawns" during Family Week. We were supposed to explain that it is a term that some people use and identify with so no one should dictate what people call themselves. Some LGBTQ+ parents reject the term on several grounds: first some see "queer" as a slur and don't want their children to be referred to in that way. Others who have formed their families through adoption resent the use of "spawn" because to them it implies a biological link. This sort of criticism is so pervasive that the Queerspawns Resource Project includes in its code of conduct for "Queerspawns Allies" the following warning: "Resist critiquing or expressing your dislike of "queerspawns" or other identity language unless you have a LGBTQ parent/s" (Queerspawns Resource Project 2). The emphasis on "having an LGBTQ+ parent" is directly addressed to said parents who are the ones criticizing the term. However, it could be argued that what Queerspawns means is not a biological link but a symbolic link: they were spawned from the queer community as a community and not specifically by individuals. The fact that the neologism is an un-hyphenated compound noun



points to that inextricable link they feel with the community. Parents' reluctance to use the word possibly stems from the fact that acknowledging their membership in the LGBTQ+ community is redefining what makes this community cohesive: it would no longer be based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity alone but on a cultural identity.

## **Conclusion**

Family Equality is creating a sense of belonging to a sub-community by putting together a week-long event in which LGBTQ+ families can see each other and be seen. Earning this visibility enables them to fight a feeling of isolation and to dispel the constant stigma management they have to handle on a daily basis that creates emotional fatigue. They are thus making this "imagined community" tangible to members and outsiders alike. Children of LGBTQ+ people are expanding the boundaries of the community and challenging what makes it a cohesive group. They have created a singular self-understanding of themselves that they have named Queerspawn. Being Queerspawn means having grown-up performing the work necessary to manage the stigma society latches on to their parents' and their family's belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. It also means having grown-up familiar with the LGBTQ+ community vernacular and traditions. As a result, they claim full membership to said community, above the status of allies who are considered part of the community once they have earned their stripes. They feel they should not have to prove their membership as adults because they already have as children. They are thus extending the boundaries of the community while also slightly altering what makes the community cohesive, the collective self-understanding of this community: from sexual orientation and gender identity to a distinct culture grounded partly in the defence against the historical prejudice to which this community is still subjected. This foundational modification of understanding of what makes this community cohesive may explain why this claim is not yet fully accepted either within the sub-community of LGBTQ+ parents or outside of it.

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