

# I Introduction

## I.1 JOURNEYS TO THE PROJECT

As is fitting for a book on parenthood, this book has undergone a long gestation period. In order to understand the genesis of our project focusing on heterosexual couples' pathways to parenthood, it is important to map the work that Damien, in particular, has conducted on parenting and kinship in many forms. Over fifteen years ago, Damien started a programme of research involving two interrelated studies. The first focused on foster parenting, and the second focused on lesbian and gay parents. The study on foster parenting sought to examine how people create kinship with people to whom they are not genetically related (e.g., Riggs, Augoustinos & Delfabbro, 2007). It examined kinship through the lens of chosen families, explicitly challenging what Finkler (2000) refers to as the 'hegemony of the gene'. Yet this study was not without its challenges. A key challenge was the imperative to balance out chosen families in the context of foster care with the relationships that children in foster care continue to have with their birth families (Riggs, Delfabbro, & Augoustinos, 2009). In other words, the challenge was to be mindful and respectful of genetic relationships without discounting the forms of kinship engaged in by foster families. Doing this required a close examination of how genetic relationships are treated as sacrosanct within child protection laws, and, at the same time, why birth families are treated as inadequate in the context of child protection. Similarly, it required close attention to the exaltation of foster parents as 'saints' and, at the same time, why such parents are often viewed as second best.

The second study focused on lesbian and gay parents and occurred at a time in both the Australian and global contexts where significant change was taking place in terms of the rights of this

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group of parents. As part of that shift, there was a move within academic research to challenge the idea that the only way to support the rights of lesbian and gay parents was to claim that such parents were ‘just like’ heterosexual parents (e.g., Clarke, 2002). The research that Damien undertook was part of this critical movement to emphasise the unique experiences of lesbian and gay parents and to refuse forms of homonormativity (defined as the insistence that lesbian and gay lives mirror those of heterosexual lives, especially with regard to marriage and parenting; Duggan, 2012). Similar to the study on foster parenting, this study was certainly not without tensions. As much as lesbian and gay parents themselves have often recognised and celebrated their unique experiences, the push for equal rights very much rested on assumptions of equality, often requiring the reinstatement of normative comparisons (Riggs, 2010). This can be seen in an oft-repeated phrase of the time, namely that children of lesbian and gay parents do *at least as good as* children of heterosexual parents (e.g., Gartrell & Bos, 2010).

These two projects led Damien to additional research areas. In a series of studies undertaken with Clemence Due, Damien explored families formed through commercial surrogacy (i.e., surrogacy where the woman who carries the child is paid), families formed through adoption, and the experiences of refugee families in Australia. The research that Damien and Clemence undertook on commercial surrogacy was just as fraught as were the two earlier studies by Damien. At the time of this study, significant debates were occurring both within Australia and internationally about the ethics of commercial surrogacy, with a number of countries that had previously allowed citizens of other countries to commission surrogacy arrangements (e.g., India and Thailand), closing their borders to foreign nationals. Media stories about commercial surrogacy emphasised the ethical precarity of women who act as surrogates, focusing on the commercial aspects of such surrogacy arrangements (Riggs & Due, 2013). In the face of this, Clemence and Damien sought to balance out a feminist critique of the commodification of women’s bodies, with

the precarity experienced by people who felt the injunction to have children but who perceived no other way to have children to whom they were genetically related (primarily cisgender gay men and heterosexual couples experiencing infertility) than to enter into a commercial surrogacy arrangement.

Clemence and Damien's research on adoption took up the topic of genetics and birth families raised in Damien's previous research on foster parents, and it added an additional layer to this by looking at transnational adoptions. In this context, the topic of cultural differences was especially salient, and this study examined how white adoptive parents speak about and navigate cultural differences, whilst at the same time trying to lay claim to legitimacy for their adoptive families (Riggs & Due, 2015). Clemence and Damien's research on adoption sat within a broader tradition of research on transnational adoption, starting with adoptions that occurred within the context of the Vietnam War (e.g., Willing, 2004), spanning to events happening at the time Clemence and Damien undertook their research, including those involving celebrities such as Madonna and Angelina Jolie adopting children from the African continent. Woven across these diverse topic areas is a consistent thread of the relative privilege of adoptive parents, and the relative disadvantage experienced by both birth parents (for whom war or famine often means that their capacity to care for their children is diminished) and adopted children (who often report experiencing racism in their adoptive countries). In a similar vein, the research that Clemence and Damien undertook on refugee families in Australia explored how transnational movement draws attention to binaries of privilege and disadvantage, and how both are shaped by cultural norms within host countries that serve to emphasise narratives of benevolence (on the part of host countries) at the expense of critical attention to the social and political factors that lead to (in this case forced) migration (Due & Riggs, 2009).

Across these research projects, we drew on previous research on predominately white, middle-class heterosexual couples who had children via heterosex to explore how families whose form or

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reproductive journeys differ from the norm are shaped by the norm itself. Using Turner's (2001) work on reproductive citizenship, we examined how the injunction to reproduce is widely felt, even if its effects are differentially distributed. Yet, time and time again, reviewers of this work asked how we can truly 'know' if heterosexual couples really are part of a norm. Reviewers pointed out that there are clear inequalities among heterosexual couples, specifically when it comes to socio-economic status and cultural background. To suggest that heterosexual couples constitute a norm against which all others are compared, it was suggested, was thus problematic, especially as our own research was not comparative. In other words, some of our reviewers suggested that it did not suffice to make recourse to other research about heterosexual couples to make a case for a norm against which our own research samples could be compared.

Of course, Damien's concerns about the injunction placed on lesbian and gay parents to be 'just like' heterosexual parents were amplified when it came to the expectation that only comparative research could adequately examine a norm. Clemence and Damien typically made the argument that examining a norm is about examining how a norm functions: as much as to whose disbenefit and as much as to whose benefit. Having a heterosexual 'control group' is not necessary in order to examine the norms experienced by, for example, lesbian and gay parents or parents who have their children via commercial surrogacy. Norms are evident in media stories about families, in public debates, in legislation, and of course in the stories of those families positioned as outside of the norm. An opportunity arose, however, for Clemence and Damien, in collaboration with Clare, to make a direct comparison between families formed through fostering, intercountry adoption, surrogacy, and reproductive heterosex. We took up this opportunity by drawing on some interviews we had done with the latter group and comparing them with our other samples.

What we found in this comparative research was a continuum on which families were located, depending on the degree to which

their lives were treated as either a public or private matter (Riggs, Bartholomaeus, & Due, 2016). Drawing on our interviews, we found that families formed through reproductive heterosex were those who were most likely to perceive little scrutiny from their community and little negative impact of government policy on their lives (though for some, there was a benefit, such as government subsidies for new parents). Families formed through commercial surrogacy reported a mix of feelings both private and public. They were very much aware that their families were a topic of public debate, but they largely found that – because at least one of the parents had a genetic relationship to their children – government bodies largely left them alone, and sometimes were instrumental in providing support (such as issuing passports for children born overseas). Foster families reported a perception of being ‘public families’, subject to scrutiny by the media, by government agencies, and without the legal protection afforded by genetic relations. In utilising a comparative approach, we were able to speak to the effects of a number of norms, specifically genetic relatedness, government intervention, and public scrutiny of families. We also explored the meaning of family to participants, finding similarities and differences within and between the samples, with an overall privileging of genetic relatedness and cohabitation (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017b). Again, this analysis highlighted the relative privileging of some samples (families formed through reproductive heterosex) over others (e.g., families formed through fostering).

Yet as much as these earlier studies allowed us to explore the differential effects of social norms about kinship, we were left with a keen interest in what it means for families formed via reproductive heterosex to live in relation to a norm of which they are a part. How, in other words, do such families understand the norm of which they are notionally a part? How does it shape their lives, and indeed do they have an awareness of their normative (and privileged) status? In particular, we were interested in how people imagine for themselves a place within a norm that may largely be invisible to them

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and the affective dimensions of being part of this norm. Damien and Clare thus devised a study that sought to focus concertedly on heterosexual couples planning for a first child. The *Feeling, Wanting, Having: The Meaning of Children to Heterosexual Couples* study, which is the focus of this book, involved interviews – conducted from 2015 to 2020 – with nine heterosexual couples living in the state of South Australia. In addition, we interviewed 10 parents of these participants to explore their experiences of becoming parents and grandparents. In Chapter 2, we provide a more detailed overview of the study, our approach, and the participants, but here we note that our focus was on the relationship between the expectations and reality of first-time parents, a focus that shapes the later chapters in this book. In order to provide some contexts for our study, we now provide a brief overview of Australian families, drawing on available government data.

### 1.2 AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES IN CONTEXT

Australian families over the past half century have been marked by change as much as they have been marked by significant continuity. In terms of change, there has been a diversification of family forms, as indicated by some of the research studies that we have undertaken, including the one with Clemence Due, outlined earlier. However, there are also significant elements of continuity in the shape of Australian families. This is perhaps not surprising, given that while there are generational changes across the globe, including in regard to attitudes towards differing family forms, in the Australian context specifically, a number of factors have remained relatively constant. These include the availability of social healthcare, including both coverage for fertility-related medical treatment and the availability of welfare payments. Furthermore, although the introduction of no-fault divorce opened up possibilities in regard to the constitution and reconstitution of families, this does not automatically mean that all people will have shifted their views about marriage and families. While Australia is a secular nation, it is certainly comprised of a

significant Christian majority (comprising just over half of the population who responded to an optional Census question about religious beliefs) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). While Christianity encompasses a diversity of views, heterosexual marriage and reproduction remain central to the values of many people who adhere to a Christian faith. Such religious views in the context of a secular nation are reflected in the views of several Australian politicians, including prime ministers, whose views have directly impacted support availability to families, along with support that could arguably be framed as pronatalist (Kevin, 2005).

Pronatalism refers to the injunction placed on people to reproduce. This injunction appears in political messaging, public policy, education and healthcare, through public discourse, and in the values held by individual people. Pronatalism is arguably evident in the Australian context in the form of payments made to people who reproduce. Specifically, a government 'baby bonus' was introduced in 2004, offering a one-off payment of \$5,000 (Australian dollars) for each child born to, or adopted by, parents who were not otherwise eligible for paid parental leave and who had an annual income of under \$75,000 (Klapdor, 2013). A decade later, this payment was reviewed and paid as an initial lump sum of \$560 and then fortnightly payments totalling to \$1,679 (Centrelink, 2019a). The payment is means tested and again is not available for those in receipt of paid parental leave. Government-paid parental leave is available to families with an annual income of under \$150,000, though only where parents were working prior to the birth or adoption of a child (Centrelink, 2019b). This leave is available for up to eighteen weeks for the primary caregiver, and an additional two weeks to the second parent (typically referred to as 'dad and partner pay') is also available (Centrelink, 2019b).

Around the time we started the *Feeling, Wanting, Having* study, we produced a summary of available Australian data on families (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2016a). Our summary documented both changes and continuities in the Australian context between 1960 and

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2015. We noted that the number of single-parent families had consistently risen over the time period; however, the number of couples with or without children remained relatively stable. Specifically, the overwhelming majority of families (almost two-thirds) reported in the Australian Census continue to be comprised of heterosexual couples (who have not separated) and their children. In terms of birth rates, we noted that the total number of births continues to grow each year; however, the fertility rate has decreased, indicating that fewer women are having fewer children each year (as the fertility rate is measured in relation to women). In other words, historically there were fewer women, but each had a relatively high number of children. The population of people who can give birth is now higher, but fewer are having as many children.

Further in terms of change, and specifically focusing on first-time mothers, over a 21-year period of the broader 50-year period we examined, the mean age of such mothers rose sharply. This is related to the drop in women under 20 giving birth to their first child and, simultaneously, the rise in women over 40 giving birth to their first child. Further, we also noted that the number of children born to parents who are not married has increased within a 50-year period, and the number born to parents who are married has decreased. Nonetheless, more children are stillborn in the context of heterosexual marriage than not. This is interesting, given that whilst the number of marriages increased across the same time period, the actual marriage rate decreased. With regard to divorce, whilst there was an initial spike in divorces following the introduction of no-fault divorces in 1976, the number of divorces has fallen in line with the number of marriages. The full impact of COVID-19 has yet to be seen, but early figures suggest that the number of births has remained relatively stable (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Qualitative research, however, indicates that the pandemic may impact on the timing of when people have children, with some people delaying parenthood (Qu, 2021).

As this brief summary would suggest, there have most certainly been changes in the Australian context with regard to



families, specifically in terms of divorce and single-parent families, and the age at which women have a first child. Yet at the same time, the predominance of the heterosexual nuclear family has remained relatively stable. This is perhaps not surprising given that heterosexual people of reproductive age constitute a large proportion of the adult population. Yet as we explore in Section 1.3, where we outline the theoretical frameworks that we use in the analytic chapters of this book, the mere existence of heterosexual people of reproductive age does not explain why it is that this group of people have children.

### 1.3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Given the study reported in this book focuses on a sample of parents notionally located within the norm, it is not surprising that a long tradition of research informs this book, some of which we briefly overview in the following text, noting though that in each of the subsequent chapters, we summarise the relevant literature in more detail. At its broadest, it is fair to say that a great majority of literature in the field of parenting studies focuses on heterosexual parents. Even with the diversification of parenting studies over the past two decades, it remains the case that many studies of 'parents' are actually studies of cisgender heterosexual parents, who are often unmarked as such. At the same time, however, many of the studies that we summarise briefly in the following text, and which have focused specifically on first-time parents, have explicitly oriented to the norms that such parents face. With specific reference to normative assumptions about women and motherhood, and gender imbalances in the division of household labour, the literature on first-time parents has been far from silent on the topic of social norms. Yet as we argue later in this section, often missing from the literature is a focus on how heterosexual first-time parents understand their location within a norm, the potential discrepancies between their positionality within a norm and their actual experiences of first-time parenthood, and the affective dimensions of being situated within the norm.

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Earlier work on the transition to parenthood for heterosexual couples in the 1980s was centrally focused on the normalisation of parenthood for such couples in the context of the United States (e.g., Daniels & Weingarten, 1982). Couples interviewed struggled to account for their desire to have children, resorting to the idea that it is 'natural' or indeed 'normal' to want children. A central focus in these earlier studies was on normative expectations placed on women, the assumption being that all women should want to become mothers, and moreover that mothering comes 'naturally' to women. This early research also introduced a focus on shifts in fatherhood – what in this case Daniels and Weingarten referred to as the 'fatherhood click' (i.e., when some men become 'involved' fathers) – where they identified a move from men solely being breadwinners, to some men at the time being more actively engaged with their children. As they note, the 'fatherhood click' is shaped by 'what the culture asks of its fathers – whether they are expected to be participants or observers at home' (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982, p. 150).

Moving ahead more than two decades, the work of Miller has focused closely on similar themes, whilst also adding new dimensions to how social norms are understood to impact on heterosexual first-time parents. First, in her study of mothers in the United Kingdom, Miller (2005) drew a distinction between mothering as personal experience and motherhood as a product of institutionalised discourses that provide moral dictates about what mothering should look like in practice. As Miller highlighted, for many women, the assumption that mothering is 'natural' for women stands in stark contrast to the experiences of many women who struggle to identify as mothers or to know what is expected of them beyond normative assumptions. Indeed, in her interviews with mothers, Miller found that many of the women in the context of the United Kingdom reported shifting and indeed at times contradictory narratives about what it means to be a mother. As Miller argued, such shifts and contradictions are not a matter for concern. Rather, they demonstrate the disjuncture between motherhood narratives and the actual practices