

A Narrative Investigation into Queer Separation

Ruth Preser

Interdisciplinary Studies Unit

Gender Studies Program

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Abstract

A Narrative Investigation of Queer Separation is a PhD research project that explores the intersection of kinship, sexuality and belonging in Jewish Israeli society and asks how lesbian relationship dissolutions are narrated. Based on an empirical study of relationship dissolution stories of 23 Jewish Israeli lesbian women, retrieved through in-depth and open-ended interviews, the research provides a multidisciplinary perspective on kinship and belonging. Asking what is political and social in the production and consumption of separation stories (Plummer 1995), the study examines how lesbian separations and the stories about them penetrate, organize and bear consequences for the public (Warner 2002, Berlant 2008). The contention between heteronormative and subversive discourses and the demarcation of relationship dissolution as yet another deviant property of the already scandalous lesbian identity are the themes that emerge in examining group membership in Israeli society.

This study stands on the threshold of social oddities. The LGBT discourse in Israel deals with couples coming together, whereas empirical studies, shared convictions and mundane experiences of lesbian women point to the pervasiveness of couples coming apart. The LGBT institutional struggle constitutes kinship as the category and the route for belonging. It identifies civil rights with access to heteronormative family rights. It constitutes claims for equal citizenship based on assimilation to the heteronormative model of family and to heteronormative values of kinship (Gross 2001, 2010, 2011). Those values include longevity and endurance, which are among the most prominent values of heteronormative kinship (Schneider 1984, Fogiel-Bijaoui 1999, Weston 1995). Longevity and endurance are values and practices the narrators fall short acquiring and sustaining, at least in the normative sense of enduring within Coupledom. This means, among other things, that the target group of LGBT politics and struggle, its constituency, is at odds with the aims and politics of the LGBT institutional struggle. It also means that these politics contribute to the stigmatization of those that fall short of accomplishing its values and that the promise of partial neoliberal access to institutional belonging is chronically out of reach (Eng 2010).

The dissertation is comprised of seven chapters. The first chapter reviews literature in six fields of knowledge: LGBT relationship dissolution; LGBT families' legal discourse; kinship and belonging; queer liberalism; storytelling and scripts of narrating; and the forms of being in and penetrating the public. The second chapter outlines the methodology. Four chapters of analysis and interpretation follow the methodological chapter, concluded by the seventh chapter that discusses the findings against the backdrop of theory. The third chapter, *The Desire for Kinship*, examines the discourses of kinship employed and reflected in the separation stories, asking what lesbian kinship 'does,' performatively. It elaborates on the desire to 'progress' and be publicly 'recognized' by those witnessing the lesbian relationships; on the alternative discourses of friendships as a meaningful component of lesbian intimate-family-like lives; and on the compartmentalization of lesbian relationality and its accumulating damage. The chapter ends with the question: If lesbian relationships do not fully exist, what is it exactly that one separates from and how can one separate from something that is ambiguous and not 'really' existent? The fourth chapter, *The Desire for Separation*, portrays a discursive map of what 'lesbian separation' is and what it 'does,' performatively. This chapter, which is thematically the richest, elaborates on the lesbian separation, its discursive, ethical and practical practices. Following the question that emerged in the first chapter of how one can separate from something that does not fully exist, the analysis emphasizes how the desire for 'normalcy,' i.e., the desire for kinship and longevity, is complemented by a desire for separation as a complete and clear transformation, instead of the unending separation elaborated by the narrators, turning (the ending) separation into a site of normalcy. Whereas the first two chapters analyzed the contents of the separation stories, the fifth chapter, *Abducted Out of Life/Story*, deals with the form and the act of storytelling, in other words, how are separation stories constructed? What are their narrative building blocks, which, in this study, are examined in terms of genre(s)? What does it mean to talk separation? This chapter elaborates on the public aspect of separations and how separations become public. The sixth chapter, *Separation and the Art of Identity Maintenance*, deals with the implications of separation for identity, and with separations as identity, elaborating how the desire for kinship, the desire for separation and the act of telling separation are worked as effects of lesbian identity, how lesbianism becomes the etiology and indeed, the most powerful explanatory

force and tool to articulate damage, and how this damage and identity are powerful means for belonging.