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Tasker, Fiona (2023) Review of "Queer Stepfamilies: The Path to Social and Legal Recognition" By Katie L. Acosta. [Book Review]

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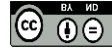
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Accepted copy (22 September 2022) of the following book review:
Fiona Tasker, Review of “Queer Stepfamilies: The Path to Social and Legal Recognition”,
Social Forces, Volume 101, Issue 3, March 2023, Page e13,
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Acosta, Katie L. (2021). *Queer Stepfamilies: the path to social and legal recognition*. New York University Press. 257 pp. ISBN: 9781479800988.

Queer stepfamilies presents findings from a research study of forty-three queer stepfamilies with Acosta’s own reflections on living in a queer stepfamily enriching her interpretations of interview data. Three aspects make this book unique. First, Acosta’s careful consideration of how intersectionality, notably with respect to race, influences how queer stepfamily members accrue social recognition of family relationships, or slip away unrecognized. Second, as the landmark Obergefell judgement (Obergefell v. Hodges, 135 S. Ct. 2071 [2015] fell midway through Acosta’s data collection period 2013-2017, this has enabled Acosta to consider the legal fortunes of queer stepfamilies living under friendly versus hostile state legislatures to make useful points of comparison with potentially useful international implications. Third, Acosta’s in-depth assessment contrasts queer stepfamilies formed after same-gender relationship dissolution and different-gender relationship dissolution providing rich insights into plural parenting under different circumstances.

Around half of Acosta’s interviews were with members of interracial queer stepfamilies highlighting the obstacles that family members faced across race in gaining social recognition for stepfamily relationships. Because of societal assumptions that families share the same racial or ethnic characteristics, interracial queer stepfamilies can go unrecognized as members of the same family unit but under other circumstances can stand

out socially when interacting as a family group. Thus, the everyday concerns of bringing up children as a stepfamily unit might be impeded or facilitated. Using Pfeffer's (2016: *Queering families: the postmodern partnerships of cisgender women and transgender men*, Oxford University Press) conceptualizations of (mis)recognition and inventive pragmatism, Acosta considers how stepfamily relationships perceived through a societal lens of racial differences may not be recognized or acknowledged by others. For example, when a child and their stepparent are perceived as being of a different racial heritage, the stepparent might not be recognized as a family member at the school gate, or even be seen as the 'best' family unit for child subject to a custody dispute. Conversely, queer stepfamilies may sometimes be able to use inventive pragmatism to turn misrecognition to their advantage when a biological connection is socially presumed because of shared racial characteristics. Some families acknowledged differences but knowingly minimized them in selected situations, while others seemed to be unaware of how race operated in a way that might hinder their children's developing awareness of discrimination. Parents and stepparents could also differ in their approach to 'doing' racework as a family, generating couple tension.

In Acosta's study the usefulness of inventive pragmatism became even more apparent in cases where couples in queer stepfamilies were denied the right to marry and had to assert family membership in other ways. For example, societal assumptions of monoracial family relationships worked in conjunction with using a shared surname to foster family recognition. Yet shared naming practices did not always smooth social interactions for interracial stepfamilies.

Most of Acosta's participants exiting a previous heterosexual relationship (PHR) avoided using family courts in reaching a custody settlement. Often the queer parents and stepparents in Acosta's study reported facing a forced choice of compromising over visits and custody or pursuing a court case. For those who did end up in family courts, a judge could

override professional court reports to favor the heteronormative stepfamily environment offered by an ex-partner, despite that ex-partner's poor record as a parent. Thus, in some courts little seemed to have changed from pre-Obergefell accounts and not surprisingly many of Acosta's participants avoided a court case by instead reaching an informal compromise over custody and visits. Sometimes these informal agreements with an ex-partner gradually smoothed plural parenting arrangements for children moving between households, but queer parents and stepparents were often left harboring doubts as to whether an ex-partner might later overturn a queer stepparent's claim to parent the children, say if the child's queer parent died. For Acosta's participants who had dissolved same-gender partnerships, legal recourse was often easier than for PHR participants. Nevertheless, in contested cases a non-biological parent without a second parent adoption order might be vulnerable to the child's legally recognized parent claiming total rights.

Notwithstanding the clear merits of Acosta's book, there are inevitably limitations too. Acosta's queer stepfamilies formed after the dissolution of a same-gender partnership tended to live in states that allowed marriage equality, whereas post-heterosexual relationship queer stepfamilies lived in hostile states. Thus, stepfamily composition was inherently confounded with state legislature categorization. In any in-depth investigation some viewpoints are inevitably left out. Acosta has adeptly considered the family situations of parents and stepparents assigned female at birth, but the experiences of transgender parents or stepparents remain under-explored. Further, the lives of children growing up in queer stepfamilies are only reflected in the views of their parents or stepparents.

In summary, Acosta's easy-to-approach book is a deeply moving testimony to the queer stepfamilies who participated. This inspiring book can be warmly recommended to potential readers within the LGBTQ+ community and beyond. Social policy and legal practitioners can benefit from being informed about the perspectives of queer stepfamily

members. Acosta's appraisal of the field as a whole and meticulous attention to detail in the useful appendices of the book and mean that *Queer Stepfamilies* is on my must-read list for academics and students across the interdisciplinary field of family studies.

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