

Book Reviews

Doing Families: Gay and Lesbian Family Practices. Judit Takács and Roman Kuhar (Eds.). Ljubljana, Slovenia: Peace Institute, Institute for Contemporary Social and Political Studies. 2011. 164 pp. ISBN 978-961-6455-71-8. E-book.

The 2011 book *Doing Families: Gay and Lesbian Family Practices* brings together a symposium of voices from European nations on sexual minority family constellations. Beginning with the assumption that family is not so much a noun, but more precisely a verb, the focus of this collection of essays is on how gay men and lesbian women are “doing family” in different Western nations with varying legal restrictions and freedoms. This volume presents six different studies from a 2009 symposium on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) families held in Ljubljana, organized by the Peace Institute in Slovenia and the Hungarian Academy of Science’s Institute of Sociology. Each of these studies presents findings using a wide range of methodologies, from in-depth interviews to surveys, discourse, and textual analysis conducted by a diverse group of European scholars. Aside from one chapter on LGBT youth and sexuality in the United States, this is a collection of articles about the status of sexual minority families in Western European nations, including Spain, Germany, Italy, France, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. Thus, the intent of this book is to bring together Western European academic accounts on the “factors inciting, restricting, straining, training, discouraging, and encouraging gay and lesbian family practices” that contribute to the “*still ongoing* epistemological and moral debates about the meaning(s) of family life” (p. 15).

After a compelling forward by the French social scientist Eric Fassin, the volume editors, Judit Takács and Roman Kuhar, both Eastern European social scientists, introduce the book in an essay that acknowledges the shifting and fluid definition of family. It is noteworthy that, despite the fact that both editors are Eastern European, this is the only time in the text that readers learn the perspectives of scholars from this region, as there is currently very little data on lesbian and gay families in Eastern European nations. The introductory essay establishes a guiding theme of the text—that the global map of recognizing and prohibiting same-sex marriage and parenting is constantly fluctuating and always complex. However, despite many legal and political shifts, the current definitions of family in each of these nations, and consequently, the majority of these nations’ laws, do not reflect the diversity of family forms and practices, specifically with respect to sexual diversity. Each of the subsequent essays in the text tackles the situation of sexual minority families in an individual nation, or in the specific case of the Scandinavian countries, an individual region. This book is particularly attractive to readers in the United States who are interested in learning about the specific legal frameworks and debates in different European nations and the particular national and local mores that influence both the problems and the privileges faced by lesbian and gay families. For example, at the time of this book’s publication, in 2011, access to adoption and fertility treatments was easier than that of marriage for lesbian and gays in the United States, whereas in some European nations, same-sex marriage was legal, but access to adoption and assisted reproductive technologies

proved more difficult. A specific example highlighted in an essay about same-sex parenting in Italy revealed that even though acceptance of same-sex marriage was on the rise among Italian citizens, acceptance of adoption was declining.

The volume poses thought-provoking questions about definitions of personhood, citizenship, families, and relationships. Each of the contributions asks readers to rethink current definitions of *parent*, *child*, and even *grandparent*, and considers how families are constructed through legal, social, and biological relationships. After reading this text in its entirety, readers will be well positioned to reflect on how the state, public policy, and legality constitute familial subjects, selves, and relationships. Another major strength of this text is that it moves beyond current trends of analyzing lesbian and gay families as a monolithic group to understanding these families as varied and diverse, begging scholars to consider differences among these families rather than differences between same-sex families and heterosexual families.

The most prevalent theme in this volume is the way that heteronormativity continues to shape both family lives and family policies. Time and again in the pages of this book, we see the specter of heteronormativity as it pervades discourses on the best interest of the child, the way laws and relationships privilege biogenetics for the construction and recognition of family, and the ways same-sex relationships are more highly valued if they are coupled, monogamous, two-parent families. Thus, despite an array of legal changes in Western nations, varying layers of heterosexism still exist at the political, legal, cultural, and social levels. Nonetheless, the take-home message of this text is the extent to which sexual minority families experience discrimination mostly because of prohibitive laws, not necessarily because of social or cultural stigmatization. Furthermore, the legal hurdles faced by gay and lesbian partners and parents do not necessarily prevent gay men and lesbian women from coupling or having children; to be recognized as family, subjects are required to adapt to legal demands and restrictions. However, in many cases, such obstacles do serve to limit legal marriage and child rearing to only those couples with social and financial capital to navigate such hurdles, thus reproducing social hierarchies based on class inequality.

A dominant theme of the book is how the ubiquitous “for the good of the child” rhetoric

shapes policies restricting lesbian and gay parenting. For example, Elke Jansen’s essay on lesbian and gay parenting in Germany references a quote by the German minister of family affairs: “There is only one thing they [lesbian mothers or gay fathers] cannot offer by nature: The opposite gender. We know it is important for the development of the child to grow up with two genders” (p. 37). As Jansen points out, the results of the first representative study about LGBT families in Germany (conducted 4 full years before the minister of family affairs voiced this position) found that children from LGBT families develop as well in emotional and social functioning and even demonstrate higher levels of self-esteem and autonomy than children living in heterosexual families, single-mother families, or patchwork families. Yet the idea that a child will not develop his or her gender identity fully if he or she is without both a mother and a father as gender role models pervades family rhetoric and policy in Germany. Underlying this assumption is the idea that gay men and lesbian women exhibit nonnormative gender identities themselves and consequently are unable to act as suitable gender role models for their children. Such rhetoric essentializes gendered parenting and is predicated on the assumption that families must contain a mother and a father and that a female and a male must embody these roles. Moreover, as American sociologist Judith Stacey elucidates in the final chapter of this book, children are exposed to various versions of masculinity and femininity both within and outside the families in which they are raised. Furthermore, Stacey cites her 2010 *Journal of Marriage and Family* publication in which she and social demographer Tim Biblarz problematized the consistently repeated claim that children need both a mother and a father to develop “normally.” The authors found that “the gender of the parents is a trivial factor compared to the quality of the parent” (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010, p. 143).

A related component of the “for the good of the child” rhetoric is that children in lesbian and gay families will experience discrimination, stigma, and bullying. However, as multiple authors in this volume point out, such an argument is akin to claiming that children should not be born to any parents with any marginalized statuses that would lead to discrimination, such as those belonging to racial or ethnic minorities, disabled parents, single parents, or low-income parents. Moreover, as both Elke Jansen’s study

in Germany and Daniella Danna's study in Italy shows, the lived experiences of outright bigotry prove a myth, and the reality is such that many children of sexual minorities do not have daily lives plagued by overt discrimination. What is a fact, however, is the extent to which legal discrimination permeates their lives. Specifically, because of the absence of any legal recognition of two mothers or two fathers, as in the case of numerous countries in this volume, including the United States, Italy, France, and Germany, the discrimination of children in sexual minority families is institutional, not social.

Another overarching theme of this book is that same-sex families are more highly valued, both legally and socially, if they are monogamous, coupled, two-parent families. The underlying idea permeating family law in each of these different countries is that there can be only two legally recognized parents. For example, German law allows only two persons for child custody and does not support the needs of multiple-parent arrangements. Moreover, in Sweden, single women are not entitled access to fertility treatments. Similarly, José Ignacio Pichardo Galán's study on lesbian women and gay men in Spain revealed that those in stable intimate and familial relationships with more than two persons felt ostracized by society and often remained "in the closet." Furthermore, being single was identified as a major fear among Galán's sample, and there was no general discourse for lesbian women and gay men in Spain about the ways single life could be considered an enriching or positive lifestyle. Thus, despite a changing legal and social landscape, multiple-parent families, single-parent families, and singlehood continue to be marginalized identities and practices.

Many of these studies expose the peripheral legal and cultural status of the non-biological mother and reveal how, more often than not, the "acknowledgement of the social mother is possible only when her rights do not clash with the rights of a biological father" (p. 78). For example, in their essay "(In)appropriate Mothers," the Nordic authors Maria Carbin, Hannele Harjunen, and Elin Kvist explain how even though Finland, Sweden, and Denmark were among the first to provide legal recognition for same-sex partnerships, lesbian women in these countries did not gain the right to access fertility treatments until recently. Moreover, although lesbian women can seek fertility

treatments in Nordic nations, and these are subsidized by their national health care, the variable policies and requirements often render the identity of the non-biological mother invisible. For example, in Denmark a lesbian non-biological mother was not automatically recognized as a parent, because she could apply for adoption only 3 months after the birth of her child. Such legal obstacles have implications for work-family dynamics and parental equity in families, as this means that, unlike fathers, a lesbian non-biological mother is not eligible for the 2 weeks' paternal leave together with the birth mother. Similarly, the Finnish law on fertility treatment reveals how the importance of the biological father can supersede that of the lesbian comother. If a child is born via fertility treatments to a heterosexual couple, both parents automatically are recognized as legal parents; however, registered lesbian partners do not automatically become parents of the child as a couple, with only the biological mother granted legal parental status upon birth. Even though this law was changed in 2009, it nevertheless reveals how biological ties are considered more legitimate than social ties for the creation and recognition of family under Finnish law.

These studies expose how the power of the heteronormative matrix penetrates family law and family policy. Moreover, both the legal and the cultural privileging of the heteronormative nuclear family frequently makes it difficult to register the legitimacy of a third or fourth parent and even more for extra grandparents. For example, the chapter by Martine Gross, "Grandparenting in French Lesbian and Gay Families," reveals how the more a family resembled a heterosexual nuclear family, the higher the likelihood that grandparents would take on their roles as grandparents. Moreover, because the law is based on biological-genetic ties, grandparents on the social mother's side experienced a lack of legal protection of their social bonds and expressed fear that their grandchild could be taken away from them at any point in the instance of a separation. Similarly, in Spain, if a baby is born to a married lesbian couple, the wife of the biological mother is not automatically recognized as a legal parent, and gay couples in Spain who use surrogacy to have a baby must register their children with the civil registry (as surrogacy is illegal in Spain), which is oftentimes problematic for two male parents.

The strengths of this volume lie in its extensive coverage of inconsistent family policies and laws across Western nations. Scholars and activists interested in learning about how different legalities shape the doing of family will find this book valuable. I, for one, was shocked to learn about the very peculiar case of Germany, where alimony and filiation laws make donor insemination highly difficult for lesbian women. Under German law, biological fathers are required to pay child support, and sperm donors are not exempt from this law. Thus, for a lesbian mother who cannot legally marry her partner, the donor is at risk of having to pay child support. Even more peculiar is that a physician in charge of a sperm bank can be held legally responsible for alimony if the mother takes him to court, as he can be considered the one who caused the pregnancy!

In contrast, the major weakness of this volume is as with many books that are birthed from conference symposiums, there is an absence of a cohesive, intelligible narrative. Many of these authors present similar issues and themes, albeit in different nations. Unfortunately, readers are forced to pull these shared themes together. A final chapter that synthesized, discussed, and analyzed these themes would have been useful, particularly for undergraduate students. In lieu of a final chapter, the editors opted to conclude with an interview with the American sociologist Judith Stacey. While I appreciated an interview with such a prolific scholar, Stacey's position as an American sociologist seemed an unlikely choice, given that it is the voices of European social scientists that constitute the bulk of this book.

Despite the weaknesses of this book, it remains a valuable text that poses important and timely questions for family and legal scholars, students, and activists. It begs us to consider such provocative questions as: What impact does the legalization of same-sex marriage have for the institution of marriage as a whole? What would become of the heterosexual norm if it were no longer the norm? If heterosexuality is no longer required for the construction of family ties, how do such families fracture the normative bedrock of what we currently regard as a family? Even though it is a relatively small number of lesbian women and gay men who are marrying and having children, as compared with the rest of the population, the social and legal changes initiated by sexual minority families will have

an enormous impact on our long-held cultural ideologies and assumptions about sexuality, gender, marriage, parenting, and families. What these are, exactly, has yet to be determined.

REFERENCE

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