

GAYS AND LESBIANS (UN)DOING FAMILY – AN INTRODUCTION

This book is about lesbian and gay families – or more precisely: about specific frameworks within or without which family practices of gays and lesbians can be lived and interpreted in Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the United States.

Following an active and practical approach that sees family “*less of a noun and more of an adjective or, possibly, a verb*” (Morgan 1999:16), the focus is on how lesbians and gays are ‘doing family’ in certain parts of the world, besides doing class, gender and a lot of other things all at the same time. However, the scope of our book is also telling in regard to how gays and lesbians are excluded from doing their own families in most parts of the world as well as in Europe. At the international conference *LGBT Families: The New Minority?*, which took place in Ljubljana, the capital city of Slovenia in the autumn of 2009, where the idea of this book was originally conceived, for instance, Eastern European experiences to be shared were quite scarce. The participant from Ukraine, for example, could report only on the quite limited possibilities and not at all widespread practices of same-sex partners to live together and share a household.¹ In this presentation the proportion of those was also given who would wish to enter into same-sex registered partnership arrangements – given that registration of same-sex partnerships would be allowed, which it is not; and given that one could establish and maintain an enduring same-sex relationship, which is not very likely in the highly homophobic Ukrainian social environment.² Thus the outlook for same-sex partners in Ukraine towards doing their families appears quite hopeless for the time being.

¹ Ponomaryov, S. 2009. *An investigation into the status and needs of same-sex partnerships in Ukraine*. Paper presented at the international conference “LGBT Families: The New Minority?” Ljubljana, October 16–17, 2009.

² According to European Social Survey (ESS) data from 2008, among 26 examined European countries Ukraine manifested the most homophobic views (Takács – Szalma 2011).

Or let's take a Slovenian example (while keeping in mind that Slovenia is one of the most Western style non-Western-European country): in 2009 just a few days before the LGBT Families Conference, the Slovenian Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs publicly announced the presentation of the new Family Code, which would put heterosexual and homosexual couples on an equal legal footing, including the right to second parent and joint adoptions for same-sex couples. Furthermore, the new Family Code would have introduced a new, inclusive family definition, which extends to all types of families and goes beyond the classical biological ties, which used to be the constitutive element of a family. The Secretary General of the Ministry actually joined the conference and gave a very promising speech, where she explained that *"it is important to stress that the new Family Code does not take away any rights from those families and partnerships which have already been recognised by the law. The new Family Code only gives the rights to those who have been deprived of these rights"*.³ However, during the more than two years that have passed since this announcement, these promises have not been kept. Those who have participated in the Slovenian public debate, defending the new Family Code, became tired, hurt and saddened. On the opposition side the "Civil initiative for the family and the rights of children" – being in fact organised and manoeuvred by the Catholic Church, at least according to some – managed to create a moral panic about homosexuals who would adopt "our" children and corrupt "our" institution of marriage. This way they also succeeded in bringing to the surface the downtrodden homophobia, bubbling underneath the Slovenian culture of political correctness, and it seems that, similarly to many other countries, the homophobic incitement based moral panic has worked again.⁴ The Government eventually decided to come up with a "compromised" version of the bill, according to which same-sex couples would not be allowed to marry, but they would be granted the right to "civil partnership", having the same legal consequences as marriage; and joint adoption by same-sex couples is not an option any longer, only second parent adoption would be allowed. To be sure, however, the "Civil initiative for the family and the rights of children" made an application for a public referendum, which might lead to the annulment of the Family Code,

³ Welcome speech by dr. Anja Kopač Mrak given at the international conference "LGBT Families: The New Minority?" Ljubljana, October 16–17, 2009.

⁴ On the history of the debate on and adoption of same-sex legislation in the region (Slovenia and Croatia) see Kuhar 2011.

which has now already been adopted in its moral-panic-beaten, slightly shredded, present form.

The Slovenian episode in the 21st century history of the debates on same-sex marriage and families is not a unique one. Homophobic public debates almost always include an essentialising element of moral expertise on the family: the *one real family*, as ‘we’ know it, based on the union of a man and a woman. Here we can certainly refer to one of the many recent changes introduced in and by the new Hungarian Constitution:⁵ the adoption of such restrictive definition of marriage, which “*clearly shows that Hungary wants to institutionalise homophobia in its supreme law*”.⁶

According to the centuries old strategy of “define and conquer”, the power is always with those who make the definitions in the first place (Weinrich 1987), and in a legal universe it works even more so. The definition of family has been changing over time, and there has been ongoing contention over who has the power to define whether ‘we are family’ or not. However, the family as a main social institution has managed to preserve its value for the majority of people precisely because it has been flexible enough to suit a variety of lifestyles. The main problem with essentialist family definitions is therefore their static denial of the freedom to change – however, these definitions can perfectly fit family policies that are governed by rigid social norms.

Thus the practical question remains: how to frame the issue of LGBT families in policy debates to gain legal and social space for them to bud and bloom. At present politically strategic framing of the issue seems to be too often dictated by the opponents of LGBT families. This is well-reflected in a sarcastic short advertisement produced by ILGA to promote same-sex adoptions, where a young man is shown having dinner with his parents.⁷ During the dinner he comes out as straight – and only at this

⁵ The New Hungarian Constitution will be in force from January 1st, 2012.

⁶ New Hungarian Constitution: ILGA-Europe urges Hungarian parliamentarians to uphold European human rights standards – ILGA-Europe Media Release of 2011 April 14. ILGA-Europe also pointed out that “[w]hile Hungary already has registered partnership legislation for same-sex partners, such constitutional provision, if adopted, will mean that same-sex partners will be deprived from enjoying full legal equality as different sex partners. Additionally, such restrictive definition of marriage would create serious restrictions in terms of the implementation of the EU free movement directive as same-sex partners married in other EU countries would not be recognised as married in Hungary”. See: <http://www.ilga-europe.org/home/news/for_media/media_releases/new_hungarian_constitution_ilga_europe_urges_hungarian_parliamentarians_to_uphold_european_human_rights_standards> (8 November 2011).

⁷ Adoption for same-sex couples (ILGA’s TV advertisement, 2005). See: <<http://ilga.org/ilga/en/article/724>> (8 November 2011).

point can we see that he has been raised by a same-sex couple, and the narrator says: "Children raised by homosexuals do not necessarily become homosexuals". It is clear that this advertisement is successful in targeting the popular fear that homosexuals will raise new generations of homosexuals. While it is important and politically strategic to reject such ideas, it is also important to be sensitive to the unwanted messages that might be communicated when fighting for LGBT rights.

Emphasising that same-sex families (most probably) will not raise new generations of homosexuals can easily contribute to the reproduction of heteronormative assumptions, including that there must be something wrong if a child, raised by gay parents, turns out to be gay. Strategic framing of the issue in mainstream discourse can in this way implicitly push the LGBT community into the reproduction of a normalising discourse with the ultimate unacceptability of homosexuality.

These dilemmas can also characterise local political arenas, especially in countries with limited LGBT rights legislation, when the interests of gay and lesbian families are sacrificed in order to gain at least some rights for same-sex couples. In these contexts it is often believed that the claims for same-sex adoption rights and legal recognition of gay and lesbian families would result in the overall rejection of any proposed 'pro-gay' bill, aiming to provide at least some rights for same-sex couples. This discreet charm of opportunism can create a new minority within a minority, when LGBT family issues are swept aside by saying that there is no need to rush, society is not ready for this, not yet ...

In other countries, where same-sex families can exist as legal entities, other problematic aspects of heteronormative social functioning may emerge. American filmmaker, Johnny Symons, a gay dad himself, said in an interview that one of the most important differences between straight and gay families is that straight parents get much more reinforcement as parents for being parents from society.⁸ Streams of approval and validation come not only from family and friends but also from strangers in public space, from accidental people looking at them, while smiling and commenting: "Oh, your child looks so much like you!" – But what if your child does not look like you? And what if there is no female role model present in a gay family? Being perceived as different, being a queer fish, can create curiosity, which can also feel oppressive, and lead to labelling or stigmatisation. While we can see that legal changes are slowly, or

⁸ Kuhar, R. 2008. Ati in oči: intervju z Johnnyjem Symonsom (Daddy and Papa: An interview with Johnny Symons). *Narobe* 5, 6–9. <<http://www.narobe.si/stevilka-5/intervju-johnny-symons>> (8 November 2011).

sometimes surprisingly swiftly taking place, we cannot expect that social change will follow automatically – not to mention the possibility of legal and social setbacks ...

We hope that this book, by bringing together a variety of academic accounts from mostly European countries on factors inciting, restricting, straining, training, discouraging and encouraging gay and lesbian family practices, and presenting research findings previously not available for English speaking audiences, can contribute to the *still ongoing*⁹ epistemological and moral debates about the meaning(s) of family life. Our hope is that such debates can contribute to the development of a more inclusive society – by worrying less about socially (non-)desired family types and concentrating more on everyday family practices and the lived, sometimes indeed fluid, reality of family relations to be not only legally but also socially recognised, supported and respected.

During at least the last two decades one of the main questions of family sociology has been whether, borrowing Judith Stacey's (1991) term, we are brave enough for doing *brave new families*. The authors of this book certainly believe so.

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⁹ In 1999 Elizabeth B. Silva and Carol Smart noted that “[t]here is ongoing both an epistemological and a moral debate about what the family *is* and what the family *ought* to be” (Silva and Smart 1999:1).

