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Doing Families. Gay and Lesbian Family Practices. by Takács, Judit, & Kuhar, Roman

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Takács, Judit, & Kuhar, Roman. (2011). *Doing Families. Gay and Lesbian Family Practices*. Ljubljana, Slovenia: Peace Institut, 164 pp.

This edited volume explores gay and lesbian families in Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and the United States. The authors focused on the social situation and acceptance of same-sex parenthood, as well as on social reactions toward children raised in gay and lesbian families. The institutionalization of same-sex couples started more than 20 years ago in Europe yet there is a huge lag in the institutionalization of same-sex adoption. The introduction of same-sex adoption provoked fiercer resistance from some segments of society than the institutionalization of same-sex couples did in almost every country in Europe. The reason for this strong opposition is most probably that adoption by same-sex couples would sanction the acceptance of new family types. While to a certain extent partner relationships can be regarded as a private issue, a lot of aspects of family life can overlap with the social sphere.

Same-sex families have begun to move from the extreme margin of society to belong to the recognized family types in some European countries (full joint adoption by same-sex couples is legal in Denmark, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom; while second parent adoption – a form of adoption, when same-sex partners can adopt the biological (or in some cases the adopted) child of their partner – exists in Finland and Germany) and in the United States recently. If they managed to gain visibility and voice, it could change

heteronormative family life by overcoming three main challenges: Ideologically their existence destabilizes fixed sexual roles; structurally they bring change in the family constellation and generate changes in the power relations within the family; and biogenetically reproduction is no longer restricted to fecund different-sex partners (Sobocan, 2011). The six studies in this book and the interview with Judith Stacey by the editors address all three challenges.

In the first chapter José Ignacio Pichardo Galán analyzes what kinds of changes were triggered by the institutionalization of same-sex partnerships on the concepts of family and gender roles in Spain. The study is based on statistical data reviews and qualitative research which was carried out with 63 gay and lesbian couples between June of 2004 and August of 2005. The most important finding is that the institutionalization of same-sex partnership provoked changes in the family concept more broadly: for example, sex was no longer seen as being just linked to reproduction because the majority of gays and lesbians, reproduction has to be achieved without sex. Additionally, gender roles are being reshaped because of the new laws, the division of household duties and chores between the genders is seen to have become more egalitarian by the society. Apart from these changes there are several factors which have remained intact: For example, living together still has a leading role in determining what is or what is not considered to be a family. Another continuous dimension of the family is mutual care for each other.

In the second chapter Elke Jansen analyzes the situation of gay and lesbian couples in Germany where marriage is still not open to same-sex partners but the institution of registered partnership for same-sex couples exists. This institution provides fewer rights than marriage: Areas which influence everyday life, like taxation, adoption and child custody are still linked exclusively to

marriage. The article provides an overview of empirical research, which was carried out in 2005 in the whole country in order to explore whether children raised by same-sex partners suffer any kind of harm compared with children raised by heterosexual couples or single parents. The study includes data of 1,059 same-sex oriented parents whose majority lives in registered partnerships. Additionally 95 children, aged 10–18, were also interviewed within a children study. The results from both the parental and the children studies show that children who grow up with lesbian or gay parents develop just as well as children whose parents are heterosexual.

In the next chapter Maria Carbin and her co-authors examine the process of primarily lesbian couples becoming parents in three Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, and Denmark) by discourse analysis. The authors draw attention to the contradiction that lesbian families are recognized, while their childbearing is restricted. The question is raised about how “appropriate” and “inappropriate mothers” are constructed. The discourse analysis reveals that three major policy discourses have been identified based on the political debates about access to fertility treatment in the three countries: “the well-being of the child”, “the rights of the individual” and “the importance of the father”.

Guillaume March’s study is also based on discourse analysis which was conducted in the United States in order to map the situation of gay and lesbian couples compared with the situation of their European counterparts. There is a significant difference between the two continents. While the institutionalization of same-sex couples can be reached more easily than adoption by same-sex couples, the situation is reversed in the USA. It is due to the fact that marriage is a state regulation, whereas adoption can also be addressed more locally in the U.S.

The next chapter aims to reveal whether children living in same sex families suffer stigmatization in Italy. The results of the research show that discrimination against gay and lesbian families does not seem to occur much in social interactions but rather in institutional interactions. The author, Daniela Danna, conducted interviews with 23 women and two men living in a total of 17 same-sex families in Central-Northern Italy. In daily life families with two mothers or two fathers get the same recognition and respect as heteroparental families. According to the author, the argument that children in homoparental families suffer more stigmatization than their counterparts living in heteroparental families proves to be a myth.

Martine Gross focused on what kinds of relationships grandparents establish with their grandchildren living in same-sex families in France. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 12 gay and 19 lesbian families between September 2007 and February 2008. In case of 15 families the grandparents were also interviewed. The interviews explored how the grandparents accept their child's coming out, what they think about PACS (the French registered partnership arrangement), how they react to the announcement of a parental project by their children and how they approach their own grandparenting roles. Main finding of the research include that there are many similarities between families created by adoption and same-sex families regarding grandparenting: The biological grandparents can more easily assume their grandparenting roles than the non-biological grandparents. In addition, the absence of biological grandparents can facilitate that the non-biological grandparents play a more active part in the family.

The final book chapter is the editors' interview with Judith Stacey, American sociologist and the leading expert on same-sex parents. This interview summarizes the questions of social acceptance and difficulties which gay and lesbian families have to face every day. Judith Stacey considers it a wrong approach if the goal of the empirical research is to decide whether the homoparental or the heteroparental family is better for children. The risk is that those who are sympathetic towards gay and lesbian parenting may tend to minimize the differences, while those who are hostile to gay and lesbian parenting may try to exaggerate the differences between homoparental and heteroparental families. Firstly, there are differences between the two types of families. Children in homosexual-parent families tend to be more tolerant of differences than children in heterosexual-parent families. They are also more accepting of certain levels of gender variation and more comfortable with whatever sexual attractions they come across than those who were raised in heterosexual-parent families. Furthermore it can be observed that lesbian couples are less likely to use corporal punishment than heterosexual couples do (this is may be true for gay male couples as well, but has not been shown yet because of a lack of empirical data). These findings can probably be related to the fact that gay and lesbian couples are all intentional parents. They do not have any unwanted or accidental children in lesbian or gay parent families which give them a certain advantage in their parenting practices and skills (Stacey & Biblarz, 2010; Tasker, 2010). Secondly, there are more similarities than differences between gay and straight parents and their respective children. International studies in the last three decades have showed that "children with same-sex parents turn out to be just as healthy, emotionally developed, socially and cognitively successful as comparable children with heterosexual parents" (p. 139).

One of the limitations of this book is that the papers do not focus on the Eastern European region at all although some significant changes have occurred in that region in the last twenty years. The second one is the lack of the analysis of the environmental and the contextual effects, although it must be said that none of the published research on this topic engages with the context effects so far. The reason for neglecting the environmental and context effects may be that same-sex families are still considered to be a new and rare phenomena, and the aim of the first wave of the research was to describe same-sex families or compare them with heterosexual ones. To focus on the environment and context will be a challenge for the next generation of research on this topic. Goldberg (2010) emphasizes the importance of understanding how gender operates independently of social categories. It is well known that the lesbian mothers follow more egalitarian parenting than heterosexual couples but if the environment doesn't approve of same-sex families they must confront asymmetrical legal, biological and cultural ties that may exacerbate maternal competition (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Besides the contextual effect there is also a gap related to the variables set which describe individual characteristics: the effect of the child's gender was not considered although there is some evidence about the relationship between children's gender development and family type (Tasker, 2010).

In conclusion, this edited volume, rich in comparative empirical information, provides a detailed account of the difficulties gay and lesbian parents have to face in the process of the social construction of institutionalizing their families.

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