

FAMILIES WE CHOOSE



THE CZECH LESBIAN FAMILY STUDY: INVESTIGATING FAMILY PRACTICES

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INTRODUCTION

Families comprising of two people of the same sex seem to oppose the ideal of the “classic heterosexual nuclear family.” Nevertheless, the existence of such families undoubtedly reflects a series of changes which have been shaping different forms of family life, mainly during the last few decades. Homosexual parenting represents a quite recently emerged form of non-heterosexual intimate relationship: gays and lesbians attempt to create family-like unions as a result of two interconnected processes residing in both the developments in the gay and lesbian social world itself and in de-traditionalization of family and intimate relationships in general (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001). So we can talk about simultaneous changes that deconstruct traditional contents of gayness on one hand, and family on the other. Within the gay and lesbian community, the concept of family has been understood mainly as a deliberate and carefully constructed choice of a social network—home that was to replace the net of blood relations disrupted or ruined by coming out. Therefore, the term “family” is being used by gay and lesbian people to denote a broader community than just a family of origin. It represents “an affinity circle, which may or may not involve children, which may or may not include members of the family of origin, but which has cultural and symbolic meaning for the subjects who participate or feel a sense of belonging in it” (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001, 9). Since these elective families are often described as “chosen” and/or “created,” the academic literature reflects the narrative of self-invention and refers to them as “families of choice” (cf. Weston 1991).

LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

After nearly fifteen years of struggle on the part of Czech gay and lesbian activists, the Registered Partnership Act was passed in March 2006. Nonetheless, it is necessary to point out that it was vetoed by the country’s president. The presidential veto was then voted down by a single

vote in Parliament. Act N. 115/2006 Coll.¹ came into force on July 1, 2006 and it represents the first legislative amendment ever granting gay and lesbian couples legal security in the laws of the Czech Republic. During the first three months after its enactment 153 couples decided to get registered as partners. About one third of this number includes couples from the country's capital with the older gays and lesbians prevailing. In the opinion of some representatives of LGBT organizations the total figure by far exceeded their expectations. They had supposed that the initial massive media attention would have discouraged many gay and lesbian people. Those same-sex couples who officially registered their partnerships during this time period referred to the registration as "a symbolic act" or an "attempt for full recognition of their relationship" rather than as an opportunity to gain their full rights as partners. This statement supports the general perception of the law by the LGBT community. The current version of the law is a result of a long-term negotiating process between gay and lesbian minority activists and legislators. Many issues included in the original wording of the law have been reduced or even left out on its way to ratification. The act regulates contracting the partnership, conditions for its nullification or dissolution, joint property ownership relations between the partners, mutual rights and duties to each other, to institutions as well as to the state (GLL 2006). However, the law does not include provisions of any adoption arrangements for the registered couple or individual, in fact it explicitly excludes any individual with the registered status from the child adoption process regardless of other circumstances (i.e., it also applies to a situation when a same-sex partner wants to adopt a biological child of his/her partner). The Czech Family Act enables both married couples and single individuals to adopt children or take them into foster care with the condition that a proper environment for the child's upbringing is provided. The suitability of such an environment is then judged in an administrative process supported by expert evidence which can reflect the social attitudes and human qualities of the people in charge of the decision-making process. As we can see, the right of adoption was radically restricted by the Registered Partnership Act of Same-Sex Persons as it totally excludes all gays and lesbians who chose to get registered. It may be assumed that this provision will serve as a precedent also when judging the convenience of adoption by homosexual persons who are not registered. By doing so, the act indirectly supports discrimination of gays and lesbians (GLL 2006). Nevertheless, there are a few cases, mainly of single lesbian

¹ Czech Legislature Collection.

women, who managed to get a child adopted or plan to do so. Not surprisingly, there are no official figures available since these women opted to conceal their sexual identity in order to improve their chances in the parent evaluation procedure. However, some opponents and defenders of the act predict that its adoption will facilitate the future status of registered partnership of same-sex persons to the same level as common-law marriage, including the possibility of adopting children.

THE STUDY

The issue of non-heterosexual parenthood still remains unexamined in the Czech Republic, and the first and only achievement in this field is a research project carried out by the author of this article and her colleague.² The main objective of the research was to explore the many facets of everyday lives of Czech lesbian families (e.g., variety of forms, motivation factors during transition to parenthood, parenting styles, division of roles, and reproduction of gender roles in the family) and provide a deeper insight into this topic in the national context. An integral part of the research design was the idea of benefiting from an interdisciplinary approach combining the authors' different theoretical backgrounds in sociology and psychology.

The research was conducted as a qualitative ethnographic study. Selecting the qualitative approach was determined by the research aim which was to provide a profound and detailed insight into the personal "life world" of lesbian families. In addition, as lesbian-headed families represent a hard-to-reach social group,³ we were aware that we would not have been able to recruit enough respondents in order to conduct a large-scale study. Unlike the majority of empirical studies about gay and lesbian parenting focused on developmental outcomes for children being raised in such families, we intended to concentrate primarily on the experience of the parenting couple. Therefore, we were looking for lesbian identified same-sex couples sharing a household and rearing a child or children together. Concerning the methods, we employed semi-

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Dr. Kateřina Nedbálková was the co-author of the methodological design and my research fellow during the first year of the project.

³ Throughout the text I use the terms "lesbian family," "lesbian-headed family" and "lesbian-led family" interchangeably. However, the term "lesbian family" can be misleading, since it may suggest that all members of the family are same-sex oriented, including the children. The latter two terms provide a better and more concise description of this particular family structure (cf. Hare 1994).



structured interviews and participant observation. The data was collected between March 2004 and September 2006.

SAMPLE AND METHOD

The research sample included a total of 10 Czech lesbian-led family units consisting of 20 female parents and their 13 children. Six units achieved parenthood via donor-insemination within an already existing lesbian relationship while three other units were blended families with children conceived in previous marriages. One family belonged to both groups combining both of the mentioned means of conception. Out of the 20 women, there were 11 birth mothers and 9 social mothers.⁴ The mothers were aged between 20 and 42. They did not differentiate markedly regarding socioeconomic status, size of hometown and educational level. All the couples resided in the country's urban centres with populations ranging from 100.000 to 1 million and most declared a middle class income. However, half the sample originally came from less populated places and moved to a bigger city at some point in their past. Half of the women had a university degree while the others had secondary (8) and elementary education (1). The length of their relationship ranged from 2 to 13 years. Despite the fact that the Registered Partnership Act was passed during the time our research was being conducted, none of the couples took the advantage of being registered or planned to do so in the near future. The children (6 boys and 7 girls) were aged 1 to 19 years. The sample was gathered almost exclusively via the snowball method. Only one couple responded to an ad that was circulated via lesbian organizations and support groups' e-mail lists. The first couple were two mothers known to us from previous public debates about lesbian mothering that had been organized by the local LGBT organization STUD Brno. After being interviewed themselves they then referred us to other potential participants.

Our research interest was aimed primarily at the parenting experience. All women in the sample underwent joint and individual in-depth interviewing. The joint interview preceded individual dialogues; both were usually conducted during a single visit to the family with the exception of a few families that were visited repeatedly over a period of two and a half years. The semi-structured interview schedule covered

⁴ By the term "social mother" we refer to the non-biological parent in the lesbian couple. Contemporary academic literature lacks a unified terminology for the lesbian birth mother's life partner. The terms such as "non-biological mother" (Tasker 2002), "co-mother" (Gartrell et al. 1996), "co-parent" (Nelson 1996) or "co-parent partner" (Hare and Richards 1993) have been used frequently.



the following main areas: decision-making process during transition to parenthood, distribution of roles, the family's social network, child-rearing strategies and goals. The interviews ranged from one to four hours. All respondents granted consent for the interviews to be audio-recorded and consequently transcribed verbatim. Any identifying data about the respondents was removed. The choice of the place where the interview would be conducted was left to the respondents. However, since we offered to meet the women in their home towns so that they did not have to travel to the university for their appointments, all families were interviewed in their own homes. This arrangement turned out to be an advantage since the home environment was the safest, most convenient, and comfortable place for our participants. At the same time it provided us with a unique opportunity to observe the family dynamics in its habitat, including also the children who were present in a majority of the cases.

The acquired data was processed according to the principles of qualitative methodology. Since our research interest was to grasp the topic from the perspective of the women themselves, we opted for the approach that perfectly serves this purpose: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is designed to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world. Researchers using IPA are looking for meanings that particular life experiences, events, states, etc. hold for participants (Smith and Osborn 2003). Selected themes that emerged from the data are presented in the following section of the chapter.⁵

KEY TOPICS IN EXPERIENCES, COMMUNICATION AND BEHAVIOUR

DIVERSITY OF FAMILY ARRANGEMENTS

There is a wide variety of different parenting arrangements in families led by same-sex couples, which is clearly illustrated by many studies (e.g. Patterson 1992; Patterson and Chan 1999; Golombok 2000). It is crucial to point out the impossibility of speaking about a unified category of gay fathers and lesbian mothers. One of the main sources of variety is the origin of the parenting relationship with the child i.e., how the same-sex couple got their child. Based on this criterion we can distinguish two basic models of gay and lesbian families. Firstly, we can discern families with children born into previous heterosexual relationships of one or both of the parents (blended families). Secondly, there are families

⁵ Due to the character of the data available the Atlas/ti (version 5.0) qualitative software package was used to support the textual analysis.

into which children were born deliberately or were adopted after the parent(s) openly declared their homosexual orientation. In recent years, the trend of family planning based on lesbian/gay cohabitation has intensified; moreover, it inevitably brought along the question of the ways to parenthood (both legal and illegal) offered to gays and lesbians. In general, the chances of lesbian women are higher in this respect; mainly owing to the indispensable fact that taking partial steps such as acquiring gametes of the opposite sex, conception, pregnancy and eventually delivery of the baby requires much less medical or other assistance for women in comparison with men.

There are no official facts or figures referring to the number of children living in *homoparental* families in the Czech Republic. Also, no representative sociological or psychological studies dealing with the phenomenon have been conducted so far, with the only exception of a study by Jaroslava Talandová (1997). She has conducted sociological research within a lesbian community in the country's capital (Prague), in which she combined quantitative and qualitative methods. Talandová reaches the conclusion that motherhood is not a marginal issue in the lesbian community: 37% of women in her sample (N = 111) expressed their desire to raise a child in the future. These women mostly referred to the use of assisted reproduction technologies or sexual intercourse with a man they know. However, the latter option has proved to be fairly rare in our sample, as the respondents have excluded this possibility mainly for the two following reasons. Firstly, the idea of getting intimate with a man was equally unacceptable for both female partners. Secondly, the women feared that the potential interference of biological fathers in their children's upbringing could menace the relationship structure in the already existing family unit. (A summary of means of acquiring the child by lesbian couples in our sample can be found in table 1.) Thus, the second and last legal possibility that remains is self-assisted insemination using sperm from a known or anonymous donor. The chance of acquiring a child through non-biological means, i.e. via adoption or foster care, is negligible for a gay or lesbian individual under the present Czech legal conditions.

TABLE 1
MEANS OF ACQUIRING THE CHILD BY THE LESBIAN COUPLE IN OUR SAMPLE

MEANS OF ACQUIRING THE CHILD	NUMBER OF FAMILIES
Previous heterosexual relationship (marriage)	3
Self-assisted donor insemination (known donor)	1
Anonymous donor insemination at a clinic	4
Co-parenthood with gay couple	2

Anglo-American practice is that lesbian women frequently choose to be inseminated with the sperm of an anonymous donor in assisted reproduction clinics (Daniels 1994; Gartrell et al. 1996). However, Czech legislation does not permit such a solution (women without a male partner are excluded from applying). Czech women who do choose this option, either travel abroad to use a foreign clinic's paid services or, in some cases, manage to get past the standard procedure (illegally). For the four mothers in our sample (see table 1) opting for this method, anonymity of the biological father represented the key criterion in the decision-making process. On the contrary, mothers voting for co-parenthood with a gay couple or those who knew the donor, considered the involvement of the biological father desirable and wished to provide a masculine role model through these means. Mentioning the gay couples we must note that they are in an even worse position. We will leave out the situation when one or both partners are fathers of a child from a previous heterosexual marriage and they are allowed to take part in its upbringing. Gay couples or individuals are then restricted to only play the part of a sperm donor for a lesbian couple that permits, after mutual agreement, their participation in the upbringing, or they can conceive a child with a heterosexual woman—most frequently a friend who longs for a child herself and agrees with the biological father's participation in its rearing.

Well, of course we are somewhat different. You can see right away that we are a different family. Whenever we come anywhere, I realize we are not just a usual family but on the other hand, I live it every day and therefore it's normal for me. I don't feel exceptional in any way, but you will see that we are different when seen from the outside (Helena, 34).⁶

EVERYDAY LIFE EXPERIMENTING—CHOICE OF CHILDREN'S SURNAMES

Decision-making process about choosing a child/children's last name was another theme that emerged repeatedly from data of several families. This procedure was an important matter of discussion before and during pregnancy primarily for donor insemination (DI) couples since their situation requires them to choose a family name for their newly-born.

Out of the 10 couples, we identified four different naming patterns for choosing the children's surnames (see table 2). Seven couples had one child and the remaining three were rearing two children. Out of these three families, two couples had two children born to the same birth

⁶ All the names mentioned here are invented. The number next to the name denotes the age of the respondents.



mother and in one family each woman gave birth to one of their two children.

TABLE 2
NAMING STRATEGIES

APPLIED NAMING STRATEGY	NUMBER OF FAMILIES
Birth mother's surname	4
Biological father's surname	3
Family surname (using the birth mother's surname)	2
Alternative family surname	1

The birth mother's surname strategy applies to four families who decided to name their child after the birth mother i.e., the biological parent and her child had identical surnames, while the social mother retained hers.

The biological father's last name was used only by children coming from their biological mothers' previous marriage. These blended families decided not to undergo any name change in order to protect their children's best interests. The mothers were convinced that changing the children's names would attract undesired attention and could stigmatize them (all children were school aged). For the same reason, unifying the mothers' names (using the social mother's last name) in these couples was not taken into consideration, because the biological mother-child family bond declared to society via the shared name would be broken. In addition, the mothers doubted whether the biological fathers would give their consent.

Parents in two families decided to adopt the biological mother's surname as a new name for all members of their family unit. Social mothers in these families considered the act of re-naming after their partner and accepting a shared name as a demonstration of their commitment to the relationship and family, and also as a way to gain public recognition of their family.

Now we are a real family, with the names everybody can see right away that we belong to each other. And by this Martina can also see that I am serious about the relationship with her and our son. I wasn't attached to my original name anyway which made the decision even easier. It really changed somehow; bearing the same name makes me, Martina and the kid into "us" (Lenka, 32).

The alternative family surname strategy applied to only a single family in our sample resembling the previously described solution: All members changed their current surnames for a completely new one. This new name differed from the original names and was created with the intent to express the family's nature:



We were proud of everything we have accomplished together in the relationship by that time and started planning a family, everything had its time, you know, and we had every little thing figured out in detail in advance. It was the same with the name, we both had our own different last names and we knew long before that we didn't want to use any of them for our future children. So we picked a name that was completely new, we wanted it to express our feelings. The children got the name and we changed ours too in order to be a complete family (Jitka, 34).

In both latter cases stated above, family members registered a name change at the Registry Office. In general, couples planning a second child anticipated giving their second child the same surname as their first-born.

This "family practice" (Morgan 1996) of selecting or even inventing a completely new name represents an illustrative example of what for instance Giddens (1992) refers to as everyday life experiments. The absence of readily available social guidelines (related to naming conventions in this particular case), placed the women in the situation in which they had to actually "create" these rules for themselves. It is also important to note that a majority of the couples lacked previous experience and information about how to "do a lesbian family" (Almack 2005). Only a couple of families from the country's capital sought other lesbian partners with children as role models and sources of information prior to their own conception.

DISTRIBUTION OF ROLES

As we live in a society where we tend to think in "naturally" complementary dichotomies of the masculine and feminine, we project these expectations onto relationships between two men or two women. Hence the wide-spread view that in a homosexual couple "one always represents a woman and the other one a man." Kurdek (2004, 2006) claims that in the everyday reality of gay and lesbian relationships a stereotypical distribution of traditional male and female roles appears rarely. Similarly, the data acquired from our sample also proves that a gendered distribution of roles does not work in that way in the lesbian families we examined. Women regarded the feeling of equal distribution of power within their relationship as an important indicator of its quality and furthermore, it was important to reject explicitly the traditional role distribution patterns while talking about their lives. Yet again, this distinction can arise from the reflection of one's own behaviour and the sense of being different from people following other relationship patterns. At the same time, we must acknowledge that the clear sex-role polarization in society



as a whole—the ideal of the dominant father who is in charge of financing family needs and the empathic mother who provides the family with emotional care—is in decline.

What are you telling me? Gee—we are two girls and we just both do what needs to be done. There is nothing like the function of mother or father. Both of us, all of us at home are doing everything (Lucie, 36).

A more precise role division is preserved in parental roles and the dividing line is distinguished by biological motherhood, which determines primary competencies in childcare, especially at an early age. All biological mothers in our sample stayed on maternity leave with the child while their female partner agreed to accept the role of a social parent.

I give way to Hana to have closer contact with the children. I care about them too, I'm not an aunt who lives with them, we are simply two mothers. But I give way to Hana when the children need someone, the roles are clear then. As for household chores, from taking care of the garden and the cars, who washes the floor and who cooks, it is absolutely equal there (Dora, 30).

The following quotation is somewhat exceptional in its character and illustrates the fact that it is not possible to view stereotypical distribution of male and female roles only as oppressing and restraining; however, it can also contain the aspect of soothing certainty, predictability and protection.

There is no real distribution of roles between us, I guess. And I'm sometimes getting tired of that a bit. Now and then I'd be glad if the roles were divided. From time to time I feel that I don't like being the emancipated and feminist lesbian with no roles. Sometimes I'd like to be able to say: "Well, do this or that, just like a woman can say that." And the guy says: "Why should I do that?" and I say: "Because you are the guy" (Zita, 42).

BIOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL MOTHERHOOD

The majority of the couples consisted of one biological mother who gave birth to all the children being raised in that particular family and a social mother. There was only one exception when both partners decided to give birth to one child each. There were two different ways in which the women in our sample became social mothers: some started a relationship with a partner having a child from a previous marriage, while others had children with their life partner via donor insemination.

In every family, both maternity types (biological and social) were individually defined in a slightly different way. These differences were even



more apparent in the blended families. In general, the non-biological mothers were hesitant to call themselves a “mother” and preferred to be referred to as a “parent.” This finding was consistent with results gained from another method used in the course of individual interviewing. The women were asked to choose one role they perceive to be their most important role in the functioning of the family. A list of several roles was offered (such as partner, parent, economic provider etc.) or they could come up with their own. At the next step they were asked to do the same for their partner. In the majority of the cases social mothers opted for the “parent figure,” while their partners were evaluated primarily as “mothers.” However, the DI couples were much more likely to describe their roles as “mother” and the “other mother” while talking about their everyday tasks and situations. They reported having an equal authority over the children despite the fact that they had no *legal* authority. Perhaps surprisingly, the social mothers did not perceive any significant difficulties caused by the legal barrier they would have to face while for example accompanying the child for a medical check-up or dealing with teachers at school.

It is worth noting how the arrangement of double motherhood was expressed in the language of the family’s everyday life. The way both mothers were being addressed by their children serves as a good example. We identified three different approaches (see table 3).

TABLE 3
MEANS OF ADDRESSING THE PARENTS

WAY OF ADDRESSING THE PARENTS	NUMBER OF FAMILIES
Mum and Mum	1
Mum and Aunt	3
Mum and “Name”	6

The “Mum and Mum” address was unique within the sample and was chosen by a DI lesbian couple that stressed the importance of equality of both parents. Any other address was not viewed as sufficient and appropriate. “I’m not her aunt or anything. I’m her parent and I’m a woman and that makes me her mother” (Tereza, 35).

The “Mum and Aunt” version was preferred by families with children born already within the lesbian relationship. In their opinion, the biological motherhood bond is specific and therefore there should be only one Mother for the child. The address “Aunt” fulfilled their requirements as it indicates both family relations and represents a significant female character.

“Mum and Name” (where name stands for the first name of the non-biological parent) was the most frequent choice. All couples with a child



from their previous heterosexual relationship belong to this group. In their view, the “aunt” address is not specific enough; children are surrounded by several aunt characters in their social lives. In the case of grown up children it was a matter of mutual negotiation.

With this particular example, we can see once again that matters that are self-evident in heterosexual families become a matter of further reflection and negotiation in families led by two people of the same gender.

We kept wondering what we would be. Like two mums or what? Then I remember me standing in the hospital corridor and I picked up Tonda and I put him in front of Dora and I said: “Look, this is your other mum.” And my mother kind of shuddered and said: “Well, it’ll have to be solved somehow.” And Jane felt really unhappy about it and I was kind of passive then, I did not want to have the feeling spoilt and try to settle something and so I didn’t say anything. Jane said later about this that she didn’t feel like a mum anyway, she felt like a parent and not a mother, everyone has just one mother. And so it evolved into an aunt (Daniela, 30).

REPRODUCTION OF GENDER ROLES— “WHO TAUGHT HIM THAT?”

Some of the parents in our sample expressed worries about providing their children with adequate gender role models due to the lack of the complementary masculine and feminine elements of heteronormativity; and they were also concerned about particular aspects of the children’s healthy development, such as their future sexual orientation, gender identity and gender role behaviour.

According to previous empirical studies on conveying adequate gender patterns from parents to children, for example, Kirkpatrick, Smith, and Roy (1981) found that in projective tests there were no differences between children of homo- and heterosexual parents, and that the two groups identified themselves in accordance with their biological sex. Furthermore, children did not differ in choosing favourite TV programmes, TV characters, favourite games or toys: in both groups they were consistent with the conventional preferences (Green 1978; Steckel 1987; Golombok, Tasker, and Murray 1997; Chan, Raboy, and Patterson 1998). Certain subtle differences were traced in families of lesbian mothers, where these mothers seem not to stick to gender-stereotypical games and toys so anxiously; for example, their daughters were playing with toy-cars or tools (Stacey and Biblarz 2001). On the other hand, other parents were confident about sufficient exposure to gender role models via their wider family social network and some findings even show their efforts to break up gender stereotypes through upbringing.



I have *Aspekt*⁷ here, yeah? “We are not born women, we become them” and I have read through that really carefully, just before giving birth I was saying to myself I would read *Aspekt* about that, I really changed my mind then. And just with Tom there are some things considered as male things . . . we didn’t force him into that. He has a toy-kitchen as well, you saw him cooking there. But how he cooks there! And who showed him to hack the plasticine with a hammer? He was a year and a half, he couldn’t talk yet, but he already mumbled for himself. He took a toy-car into the playground and started riding with it right away. I know a girl could do that too, but who taught him to hold a pot lid like a steering wheel and shout: “I’ll smash the car, I’ll smash the car!” Who taught him that? (Lenka, 30).

Other mothers were proud to express their joy over the fact that their three-year-old daughter was trying on high-heeled shoes; in their opinion, it confirmed her healthy development.

Our little Mary, she knows well that there are men and there are women. She knows that men get married to women, she can see her grandpa and grandma, her brother’s got a girlfriend. We have guinea pigs, she can see that one is male and the other is female. She’s definitely not confused—her psychological and sexual development is just fine (Anna, 42).

CONCLUSION

Despite the specificity of the research design and methods employed, we can state that our findings correspond with the results of large-scale studies on homosexual parenting. Many gay men and lesbian women, as well as many heterosexuals, consider parenthood an essential part of their lives. As supported by empirical evidence in foreign studies over the past years, there is a growing number of children raised by same-sex couples in a gay/lesbian lifestyle setting, i.e. these men and women choose to become parents after coming out as gays and lesbians. Although there are no exact figures that could refer to the number of such families in the Czech Republic, we can assume the trend to be very similar. Once again, we consider it necessary to emphasize the fact that same-sex parenting does not represent a unified category and one of its characteristic traits is a diversity of forms. This was clearly illustrated also by our sample with its rich variety of family arrangements in both donor insemination and blended families. By omitting this fact (both intentionally and unconsciously) we can put ourselves, as researchers, in danger of creating a “lesbian family prototype” which would most probably lead to portraying lesbian parenthood in a distorted and therefore unrealistic way.

⁷ Feminist magazine.



We are aware of limitations implied both by the research design (working with a non-representative sample) and also by the limited space provided for this article. All the discussed themes would deserve a more detailed investigation as the examined family practices are tightly interconnected with the wider concepts of family identity and negotiating biological and social parenthood.

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