

New Ways of Parenting: Fatherhood and Parenthood in Lesbian Families

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The article offers sociological analysis of some aspects of fatherhood and parenthood in the case of lesbian families with the starting idea that essential innovations in the parental identities, roles and practices are going on outside the "classical" (heterosexual and binary) parental roles known in modernity. Lesbian families (together with gay families) count for the most radical challenge to heterosexual norms regarding parental roles and identities as they challenge traditional notions of family and heterosexual monopoly over reproduction. The analysis includes the following aspects: process and reasons for decision-making about un/known father (biological, social and cultural premises of decisions), parenting in everyday life and the role of father, questions regarding upbringing and socialization of children in gay and lesbian families and current discussion on perspectives in researching gay and lesbian parenthood.

Keywords: PARENTHOOD, NEW FATHERHOOD, FATHERING, PARENTING, LESBIAN FAMILIES

"Gay and lesbian families are here; all our families are queer; let's get used to it!"¹

(Judith Stacey, 1996)

1. Introduction

In the context of late modernity trends in family life the phenomenon of the so-called *new fatherhood* has been dealt with very intensely by sociological family theories.² They have most often been analysed in the context of *active fathering* – the more involved and active participation of men in family work in general and specifically in the nursing of and care for their children. Theoretical and empirical analyses mainly focus on a *heterosexual* family either in the context of the existing family consisting of a heterosexual couple with children or in the context of family life and family relationships after a divorce, in single-parent families and in heterosexual reorganised families. This also goes for social and family policies, where we should not overlook the interest of policy makers to encourage fathers to take an active role in the family through measures of equal opportunities, reconciliation of work and family and especially (financial) care for children after a divorce (the so-called "cash and care" debate) (Hobson, 2002).

This article leaves this discussion to one side and focuses on the phenomenon of new fatherhood from a different viewpoint, starting with the idea that the new parenthood has not only been unfolding in the context of the modern nuclear – heterosexual – family (a heterosexual couple with children) but is, in the context of other late modern changes of privacy, also being spread to other

¹ A version of the well-known Queer Nation slogan "We're here. We're queer. Get used to it".

² In this article a distinction is made between two concepts: fatherhood and fathering. Fatherhood refers to caring, educational etc. roles taken on, formed and played by the man as either the biological or social parent (different father identities are related to the fatherhood as a role); while fathering refers to all (caring, educational etc.) practices of the carrying out of the paternal role. From the aspect of the social-constructivist perspective, fatherhood and fathering are considered to be the expression of culturally, socially, historically variable phenomena, practices, roles and identities. Similarly, a distinction is made between motherhood and mothering, and between parenthood and parenting.

family lifestyles. Our thesis here is that rather than in the heterosexual nuclear family itself the essential innovations in paternal identities, roles and practices are happening *outside* of the “classical” paternal role as was identified in the past by modernity. More radical changes are occurring in the development of new, innovative parental practices, fathering outside/beyond the nuclear family, in the formation of diverse paternal identities, and in the development of new meanings of fatherhood and motherhood. We claim it is those families which are not based on the heterosexual organisation of partnership that are redefining modern fatherhood the most radically. In such displacement of meanings of parenthood, fatherhood and motherhood, and in the formation of new parental roles a unique role is played by same-sex couples or individuals who decide on parenthood or forming a family. The process of the redefinition of fatherhood is unfolding under the influence of several factors: decrease of influence of social norms on private life, intimacy and the creation of family life, the development and accessibility of artificial reproductive technologies and legal regulation of their accessibility, the generic restructuring of privacy, family pluralization, changes in values in relation to gender roles along with the growing social acceptance of homosexual people, homosexual partnerships and families.

This paper focuses on a sociological analysis of different aspects of the redefinition of fatherhood and parenthood in the case of *lesbian families*. The main thesis is that it is these forms of family organisation together with gay families³ that are considered a radical challenge to heterosexual norms regarding parental roles and identities as they tear down the traditional understanding of the family and of the heterosexual monopoly over reproduction. Lesbian families are challenging and transforming kinship and family systems which so far have been resting on the heterosexuality and heteronormativity of wider society. The first chapter puts lesbian families in the context of late-modern family trends (the emergence of the so-called families of choice). Further the analysis focuses on several aspects of the phenomenon of fatherhood and fathering in the case of lesbian families. First we focus on the decision-making process and exploring the reasons for deciding for the known or unknown father in the case of lesbian families of origin⁴ (biological, social and cultural premises of the decisions) and the consequences such decisions have for parenting in lesbian families. Deriving from the thesis about radical redefinition of parental and family relations in lesbian families, the third and the fourth chapters discuss various aspects of parenting and fathering in every day life, and questions related to the upbringing of children in lesbian families. The final chapter is devoted to a current discussion on perspectives in research on gay and lesbian parenthood, especially to the debate between the so-called *defensive approach* to interpretation of the emergence of gay and lesbian families and parenthood, which primarily directs attention to the similarities of gay and lesbian parenthood with heterosexual parenthood, and *the difference position*, which sees such social changes as radical change of modern family and parenthood institution. Through this debate, the concluding part of the article attempts to answer the question whether families of choice and new ways of non-heterosexual parenting mean accommodation to or transgression of modern parenthood and family life.

³ Gay families and parents are not the subject of our analysis, however it should be mentioned that they carry out a silent revolution of fatherhood and fathering in practice, perhaps with even more far reaching consequences for the modern perception of family life than lesbian families. Apart from the recreation of parenthood on the axis of sexual orientation, they are also challenging the constitutive role within the modern family – that of motherhood. Gay families structurally displace the family on the axis of the sexual determination of family roles, which traditionally related motherhood with women and femininity. They have thus shaken the modern family institution down to its most ontological foundations.

⁴ With the term “lesbian families of origin” we mean those lesbian families in which the child was born or adopted by a lesbian individual or a lesbian couple (so the child lives in a lesbian family from the birth or early childhood), whereby these families are distinguished from “re-organised lesbian families” in which children come from a past heterosexual relationship of one or both lesbian partners. For the first family type the term “planned lesbian families” is also applied (Golombok, 2000:56).

2. Late modern family trends – *families of choice*⁵

Late-modern trends of the pluralization of family life encompass diverse ways of organising family life and parenthood, including so-called “gayby boom” (Dunn, 2000:12). In Western societies, homosexual couples as well as single gays and lesbians are increasingly deciding on parenthood and family life – and are attributed by some as “postmodern family pioneers” in this respect (Stacey, 2006) – transgressing heterosexual parenthood and forming diverse new ways of family organisation. With their decision on parenthood they not only challenge conventional definitions of masculinity and particularly paternity but also dominant gender and sexual norms of gay culture itself (Stacey, 2006:30).

In the social sciences the term *families of choice* (Weston, 1991; Weeks, Donovan, Heaphy, 1999a; 1999b) has been increasingly used as the designation for all alternative ways of family life which differ from the modern heterosexual nuclear (neo-local) family model. Families of choice do not only represent an alternative or additional types of family form, contributing to the family diversity, but are playing an important role in the transformation of modern family institution, which rests on heterosexual parenthood. In this context, families of choice are changing the institution of the family *structurally* along two key axes, namely on the axis of linking parental roles with sexual roles (binary understanding of parenthood) and on the axis of sexual orientation. The latter means that heterosexuality is no longer the only basis of parenthood, while the re-structuration of family institution along the first axis means a shift from *binary understanding of parenthood* (in the form of *dual parental roles*, parents being the father and the mother) to the notion of *multiple parenting* (including additional social parents – e.g. in the case of lesbian families, two mothers and a father). New relationships “between biological and/or social parent(s), and between the parent(s) and friends, ex-lovers and some or all of their families of origin” (Donovan, 2000:155) are being established that carry out “family practices” (Morgan, 1999) which in the past exclusively belonged to the heterosexual nuclear family. This also means that “as same-sex relationships are constructed and maintained outside conventional institutional and legal support systems and structures, they are less likely than traditional patterns to be characterised by predetermined obligations, duties, and commitments” (Weeks, Heaphy, Donovan, 1999 b:306). Gays and lesbians are also expanding the meanings of a family, e.g. in their understanding of a family, children do not figure as a necessary condition and, at the same time, family relationships are also starting to include friends. The emphasis lies on the possibility of choice, commitment and friendship (Weeks, Donovan, Heaphy, 1999 a).

3. Lesbian families – a redefinition of fatherhood

The possibilities of creating family life brought about by the reduced influence of social conventions on everyday life and privacy also include the expansion of social meanings of fatherhood and parenting, especially in terms of the redefinition of the father role and family relations and in communications after a divorce as well as in cases of a family reorganisation when new forms of social fatherhood and fathering emerge. Here lesbian families are redefining the role of a father, for example, in terms of the actual presence or involvement of the father in family life or in the child’s everyday upbringing and nursing. According to Dunne, the formation of such new parental relations is a reflexive project *par excellence* (2000). In the modern heterosexual nuclear family the role of the father is defined by his responsibility for the family’s material care and by the male role model, however, always also through his absence, distance or at least lower engagement in childcare compared to his female partner or the children’s mother. By including father as an active parent in everyday life, lesbian families are symbolically and practically widening and not narrowing or even abolishing this parental role as often expressed in conservative views on lesbian parenthood (discussed later in this text). Those lesbians who have children from their past heterosexual relation-

⁵ Comp. families of choice, elective families (Weston, 1991; Weeks, Donovan, Heaphy, 1999a; 1999b).

ships, similarly to heterosexual divorced and separated parents, are forming and co-defining (new) parental relations in the context of the process of reorganising the family and family relations.

A more radical redefinition of fatherhood and identification of parental relationships are going on in lesbian families of origin, such as with lesbian couples who decide on a child by using the sperm of either a known or unknown donor. In this case, lesbians or lesbian couples on one hand reflect present dominant discourses on fatherhood which define their decisions about parenthood and fatherhood (e.g. the reasons for choosing known donor may be connected with the importance put on biological/genetic link of a child with the father – discussed further in this text), while on the other hand also playing a subversive role as they are redefining these discourses in the context of lesbian parenthood, creating new meanings and practices of fathering, parenthood and family relations. Ch. Donovan identifies three aspects of the displacement of the meanings of parenthood and fatherhood in lesbian families: the first is the distinction between biological and social fatherhood; the second is the separation of parenting from the dominant social meanings of gender and the third is the separation of mothering and fathering from the idea of common residency (Donovan, 2000:150).⁶ A fourth dimension could be added, namely the displacement of the already mentioned binary conceptualisation of parenthood within modern nuclear family (defined by the two, biologically grounded, roles – that of fatherhood and that of motherhood). Lesbian families (as well as in all forms of re-organised families) made a shift here to multiple parenthood, by including other social parents.

As the role of mother is no longer connected to a sexual relationship with the father as it used to be even with separated couples, the social convention about the family as the (neo)local residence unit is also collapsing. In the case of lesbian families of origin the dividing line between biological and social parenthood has already been created at the level of the decision about whether the child's biological father will be known or not. If the sperm donor is known it can be defined either only in a biological sense – as the biological father who, however, does not adopt his social paternal role and is not included in parenting – or as a known sperm donor who also takes on an active paternal role.

3.1. Known or unknown father – cultural influences and subjective decisions of lesbian couples

The factors that influence the decision making on a known or unknown sperm donor and his further involvement in parenting in everyday life of a lesbian family are several. As noticed by Ryan-Flood, “national social and institutional contexts influence issues important to lesbian parents, such as access to new reproductive technologies and second-parent adoption, in addition to social policy and cultural understandings of what constitutes ‘family’” (Ryan-Flood, 2005:190). A study on lesbian decisions for un/known sperm donor, carried out in Sweden and Ireland, the two countries with different norms about parenthood, shows that decisions on whether lesbians will choose a known or unknown donor (and consequently what the role of the child's father in parenting will be), are not only subjective but also socially and culturally positioned. Differences between the countries are seen in terms of gender equality, sexual equality and family policy (Ryan-Flood, 2005:190). As far as the family and social policies are concerned, Sweden has a well-know tradition of progressive social policy based on gender equality, while social policy in Ireland is defined as “gender distinctive” (Ryan-Flood, 2005:190), based on traditional division of gender roles. In this context Sweden promotes the so called participatory fatherhood.⁷ Differences are seen also in

⁶ Although the latter aspect is not only characteristic of lesbian families but also for single-parent families and reorganised families.

⁷ However, participatory fatherhood is also grounded in biological aspects of fatherhood: “Sweden is exceptional in having a policy of compulsory donor identity disclosure for all children conceived by donor insemination at a clinic” (Ryan-Flood, 2005:191).

legislation that ensures gay and lesbian rights. Sweden was among the first countries which introduced registered partnership (in 1995) and adoption rights were extended to the same-sex couples in 2003. In Ireland, lesbian parenting remains relatively unregulated, for example legislation on assisted reproduction does not prohibit access to insemination or fertility treatment for lesbians, and (due to the shortage of foster carers) fostering is possible also for lesbians and gays, however an adoption is restricted to heterosexual couples (Ryan-Flood, 2005:192).

Lesbians' decisions on un/known donor and his role in parenting reveal at least two things: the importance attributed to the biological aspects of parenthood or the biological connection of the child to its parents and, second, the significance which is in turn assigned to the level of the donor's involvement in parenting. First, Swedish lesbians have decided more often on a known donor than lesbians in Ireland and, second, lesbians in Sweden also considered a known donor as the involved father more often. In Ireland, the decision on a known donor has more often been based on the idea of the biological connection between the parent (father) and the child. In most Irish cases lesbians have decided for a non-involved (but known) donor who agrees that his identity remains unknown to the child and is only revealed later in the child's life if he/she wishes to know who his/her father is or want to get in touch with him. Here the father's role is conditioned by the idea on the genetic origin of the child while the active father role is not developed, therefore only the biological role is pointed out and not also the social one (Ryan-Flood, 2005). Similar data are given by Ch. Donovan for England: in lesbian groups who decide on parenthood through self-insemination fathering is "often understood primarily as a biological relationship that is associated with a sense of history and belongedness for the child" (Donovan, 2000:157). Therefore, also here the biological aspect of fatherhood is emphasised. On the other hand, in lesbian groups in Sweden the social aspects of the father's role in parenting are pointed out since with the lesbians in the mentioned research the known donor was also considered to be the active father (Ryan-Flood, 2005).

Decision making about the sperm donor does not relate only to his un/know identity but also to his sexual orientation. Both, the Swedish-Irish (Ryan-Flood, 2005) and the English researches (Donovan, 2000), show that lesbians often decide for a gay sperm donor, and a consequent co-parenting with another gay or lesbian couple is a frequent and widespread form of parenting among lesbian and gay families. Among the reasons for this decision stated by the respondents was their common history of oppression through homophobic discrimination as well as the belief that gay fathers are more committed to children, more reliable and trustworthy than heterosexual men (Ryan-Flood, 2005:99; Donovan, 2000:158-159). Irish lesbians also expressed their fear of heterosexual men losing interest in their children (Ryan-Flood, 2005:99). Gay fathers were also considered a better role-model of masculinity for children (Donovan, 2000) because they challenge hegemonic notions of masculinity, which was stated as an advantage when it comes to parenting (Ryan-Flood, 2005). On the other hand, according to the Irish lesbian mothers a negative aspect of the choice of a gay person as the sperm donor is their vulnerability in legal procedures regarding custody (Ryan-Flood, 2005:99). Gay donors expressed their belief that their decision to donate sperm is an expression of solidarity with lesbians and a readiness to help them create a family as well as the possibility that they become fathers (Donovan, 2000:158).

3.2. Fathering and parenting in lesbian families

The forms of organising parenthood in the everyday life of lesbian families can be practiced in various ways as "there are few pre-existing assumptions about how the parents will behave and certainly those traditionally attached to the notions of gender have apparently minimal influence" (Donovan, 2000:157). For example, the form or way of organising parenthood depends on how the relationship between the biological and social motherhood is defined. In a lesbian partnership both partners can take on the mother role, mainly because the practices which they both do in everyday life focus on physical and emotional care and responsibility for the child. G. A. Dunne, who car-

ried out research on the division of labour in lesbian families in England, found out that family work is more evenly distributed between lesbian partners than between heterosexual couples. More options seem to be possible here for a radically more flexible approach to shared parenthood because of the absence of expectations regarding gender roles (Dunne, 1999). The very same reason allows for new forms of a parental relationship between the biological mother and father as it no longer rests on the traditional (heterosexually-based) understanding of parental roles as complementing and at the same time opposing each other.

Two main reasons are stated in decisions for a known donor and consequently in the definition of the level of the father's involvement in everyday life of the family. The first is connected to the opinion expressed by some lesbian parents that the father has to be a child's role-model (for the male gender role) and thus has to be present in the child's everyday life (this issue is considered further on in this paper). Although it is often mentioned that this role could be played by any man in the child's life, some lesbians expressed the preference that it is played by the child's biological father because they considered this to be the most feasible way (Ryan-Flood, 2005). The second reason is implied in the respondents' understanding of the decision on a known donor to be practically synonymous to the active parental role.

Among the advantages of including the donor in parenting, lesbian mothers also state others, not directly connected to the child. Some lesbian mothers who decided on the child's father's active role in parenting also considered this to offer some sort of personal advantage, e.g. it allows lesbian couples to spend more time together without the children and so to direct more energy in their partner relationship itself and in other personal interests and activities (Ryan-Flood, 2005:197-198).

However, the active role of the father in parenting in everyday life is not necessarily seen as only positive. The father as the third parent also brings additional complexity to family relationships. The harmonisation of parenting with and the related interests of all involved parents can be very demanding, mainly in terms of the establishment and maintenance of communication and negotiations between the biological father and mother and between the mother and her partner that is between the child's biological and social mothers (Donovan, 2000:155; Ryan-Flood, 2005:198). Some lesbians express their concerns that the donor father would become too involved and would in the case of a claim for custody have bigger legal advantages due to his heterosexuality (Ryan-Flood, 2005:199), and even that he could endanger the partnership of both mothers in favour of his parenthood (Donovan, 2000:158). In this sense all involved parents find themselves in a totally new, socially undefined territory where the creation of new rules of parenting on one hand presents a liberation from the existing rules linked to heterosexual parenting while, on the other hand, the investment of the time and energy needed for the creation of new parental relations is demanding.

It should also be pointed out that the very process of creating new parental patterns, practices and identities in everyday life does not presuppose a total absence of the influence of the traditional understanding and meanings related to heterosexual parenthood. The fear expressed by lesbian mothers that their partnership would be endangered by the child's father's involvement in the parenthood reflects, among other things, the latent assumption of parenthood as a binary adoption of roles which number just two, for two parents (with heterosexual parenthood the father and the mother, and with lesbian parenthood both mothers) or only one parent (a single-parent family). It seems that the already mentioned notion of multiple parenthood, being a relationship of three or more (social) parents (and not only two parents, father and mother), is only an emerging phenomenon⁸.

In the context of lesbian families a radical displacement of the meanings of fatherhood is also shown in the relationship between the father and the child because there are more possibilities that

⁸ Which, however, is becoming ever more frequent also due to the increasing divorce rate and family re-organisations.

they both understand it in a more flexible way. In lesbian families fatherhood is mainly defined by the *practices* of parenting and not only understood as a *role* which the father would have *in opposition* with or *complementarily* to the biological mother that is in the traditional sense of heterosexual parenthood. In those lesbian families where the donor is involved in parenting, the word "father" is only used as an expression by which he is distinguished from both mothers, and not so much in order to separate his role as the father from that of the biological mother. If the father is included in parenting, his caring practices are not carried out in any essential way differently from those of the mother (Donovan, 2000:159).

3.3. Growing up in a lesbian family

Debates on lesbian parenting and families often focus on the questions of up-bringing of children. The arguments of the opponents of lesbian families are most often framed in terms of the presumably negative consequences which growing up in a lesbian family has for the child's psychological development. The starting point of such arguments is the role model theory and within it, the thesis on the need for the presence of a man as the male role model. In this discourse, two kinds of arguments stand out that actually contradict each other. While showing concern over the fact that in lesbian families the child does not have (enough) contacts with the father, such arguments are at the same time claiming that it is damaging for the child if they have too much contact with their father, that is in the case of co-parenting in gay and lesbian families (Stacey, Davenport, 2000:357). Such arguments are not new and occur whenever a family form or lifestyle which is different from the model of the heterosexual nuclear family is considered (Švab, 2001). In the past, similar arguments have also emerged for heterosexual single-parent families of origin, in spite of the fact that empirical data (see Golombok, 2000) show that *relations within the family* and not the *family form* is a factor in the child's psychological development.⁹

Let us first take a look at the results of empirical research on lesbian parenthood. All consecutive studies show that from the aspect of *psychological development* children in lesbian families are in no way different from other children (Golombok, 2000; Wright, 2001), and thus reject the assumptions of the negative influences of parents' homosexual orientation on the child's psychological development (Stacey, Biblarz, 2001). Moreover, differences regarding *family relationships, quality of relationships and communication* between parents and children stated by studies are mostly positive. They are shown in the involvement of the mother's female partner in the everyday care for children which in lesbian families is much more intense than the involvement of fathers in heterosexual families (Golombok, 2000:58). For example, it is sometimes easier for children in lesbian families to accept the mother's new partner than for children in heterosexual reorganised families to accept the mother's new male partner. A new female partner is often considered by the children as an "additional" parent and not as a substitute for the father. In many cases children even develop a closer relationship with the mother's new female partner than with their fathers (Golombok, 2000:45). Positive influences are also seen in children's *views and values*: children in gay and lesbian families develop the ability to accept and enjoy human differences, they are more socially responsible and less prone to prejudice (Wright, 2001; Paechter, 2000).

If comparing the results of studies about children who in their early childhood grew up in heterosexual families and only in their later childhood entered reorganised-lesbian families to those about children born in lesbian families or lived in them since their childhood, then no

⁹ Arguments against single-parent families were more widespread some decades ago within the context of the debates about the crisis of the modern family (e.g. Ch. Lasch, *Heaven in the Heartless World: The Family Besieged*, 1977), when the number of divorces together with the number of single-parent families (mainly mothers with children) started to grow, and when the statistical and demographic indexes clearly perceived radical changes in family organisation. However, this argument is still noticeable today, even with highly cited sociologists (e.g. A. Giddens, *The Third Way*, 1998).

special differences can be noticed (Golombok, 2000:58), except perhaps in that children coming from heterosexual families of origin can face additional stigmatisation due to the separation of their parents beside the stigmatisation due to the homosexual orientation of the parent (Paechter, 2000:400). However, differences can start to show within the *wider family network*, e.g. in the acceptance of the mother's female partner as an equal parent. Here, heteronormative pressure can initially emerge, which is also experienced by the child. For example, it is often the grandparents who do not accept the partner as the child's parent and the respondents report that the wider kinship network is the place where the children of lesbian families first face homophobia (Golombok, 2000:58). Of course, the pressures of heteronormative society are not limited to family or relatives. As gays and lesbians in general are faced with the process of revealing their sexual orientation, their children are also faced with the revelation of the sexual orientation of their parents. In this latter, let us call it *family coming out*, the child walks the path "from silence or deception about the sexual orientation of one's parent to being open and even declarative about it" (Paechter, 2000:398).

The pressures of heteronormative society regarding the expected sexual roles and the ideas that a father as a role model is necessary for the child's successful psychological development are so strong that they also influence gays' and lesbians' viewpoints on children, upbringing and parenthood. Clarke and Kitzinger (2005) identify two, the so-called defensive strategies which lesbians use when encountering arguments on the need for the father's presence in the child's upbringing. The first strategy focuses on the fact that they try to prove the sufficient presence of men in the extended family (relatives), and the second is the argument that homosexual families and their children do not live in isolation from the rest of their social world or that men are present everywhere in their everyday life, and that they therefore do not only live with women. This foregrounding of the presence of men as role models in the wider environment has also been perceived in Slovak research on lesbian families where mothers expressed the belief that their children had enough role models for the adoption of male gender roles within the family social network (Polaskova, 2006). According to Clark and Kitzinger (2005), both strategies are problematic as they do not extend beyond the framework of the defensive argument and are subject to the rhetorical and ideological pitfall of the idea that heterosexual parenthood is the yardstick by which other parenthood and parenting forms are judged (see Stacey, Biblarz, 2001:160).

The defensive position is also present in reproductive preferences and viewpoints on parenthood. In Slovenian research on the everyday life of gays and lesbians (Švab, Kuhar, 2005) some gays and lesbians exposed the issue of how to provide a male and female role models in the child's upbringing similar to that which heterosexual parents allegedly provide as an obstacle when deciding on parenthood. Meanwhile, gays and lesbians with more liberal views of homosexual parenthood have put forward the argument that the presumed lack of gender role models and the fear of a child being discriminated because of the parents' homosexual orientation cannot be the reasons that would hinder gays and lesbians deciding for parenthood since children generally experience diverse forms of discrimination on the basis of other special circumstances (Švab, 2007).

3.4. Lesbian families – accommodation or transgression of parenthood?

The defensive position is not only present in the everyday life of gays and lesbians; it is also used in the form of different conceptual categories in the research of gay and lesbian families and parenthood. In the past few years its problematic aspects have been pointed out by some family theoreticians (Stacey, Biblarz, 2001; Malone, Cleary, 2002). Undoubtedly, the motives of the defensive position's arguments are political and its positive effects in the struggle for gay and lesbian rights in this respect should not be ignored. However, directing attention to the similarities of gay and lesbian parenthood with heterosexual parenthood does have the side effect of reproducing stereotypical and traditional views of the family, parenthood in general and, in turn, of the differ-

ent forms of family life and parenthood which deviate from the heterosexual model. In their analysis of studies on lesbian and gay families Stacey and Biblarz found that the defensive conceptual framework is used by most of them, with the findings highlighting that differences regarding the child's gender and sexual preferences and behaviour in lesbian as opposed to heterosexual families are often underestimated (Stacey, Biblarz, 2001), while similarities between children who grow up in homosexual and those who grow up in heterosexual families are emphasised. In their opinion, the theory of sexuality should instead be taken as the starting point, according to which gays and lesbians are basically different from heterosexuals and these differences are carried on to their children in a positive sense.

Let us consider in which sense the defensive approach is problematic. The research of gay and lesbian families rests on the exclusive binary distinction of "queer" and "straight" and, from the research point of view, by taking "non-reproductive" families as their research subject researchers typically exclude sexuality from the research with the assumption that questions of reproductive sexuality are irrelevant (Malone, Cleary, 2002) or that in this respect there are no differences related to sexual orientation in parenting. In their intention to criticise and challenge the argument on the mother's sexual orientation which, for example, is often used in legal proceedings as an argument against lesbian mothers, the argument which should speak in favour of lesbian mothers claims that lesbian families meet children's needs *like all other families*, or that lesbians are "at least *ordinary* mothers, and therefore likely to be as good as heterosexual mothers in comparable social and economic circumstances" (Lewin, in Malone, Cleary, 2002:279). This argument is problematic because it does not subvert the dominant discourse on motherhood. Another problematic assumption relates to the notion of the "optimal development of children", which was also present in the feminist legal reform. Here "institution of 'Mother' has been transformed [in law], collapsed and merged with 'Father' into the generic concept of 'Parent'. In this process, any distinctive or unique aspects of mothering are erased and the symbolically significant rhetoric is that of 'gender neutrality'" (Fineman, in Malone, Cleary, 2002:279). Third, the ignoring of sexuality does not only refer to the problem of skipping over the question of the specifics of motherhood. As sexuality in the family is closely connected to reproduction, lesbian sexuality is ignored here: lesbian families are supposed to disassemble "exclusively reproductive interpretations of the family" (Weston, 1992)¹⁰; gay and lesbian families uproot the grounding of family in the biological essentialism that secures the hegemony of the traditional heterosexual family (Malone, Cleary, 2002:280). These are seen as the most far-reaching consequences brought by same-sex family forms (Weston, 1992) and some think that families of choice mean the reinvention of the family as a pluralist phenomenon (e.g. Allen, 1997; Weeks, Donovan, Heaphy, 1999a). But, on the other side, can individual families truly also mean major structural changes? Some authors are sceptical of this and think that such enthusiastic interpretations are only the reproduction of the (American or Western) obsession with individualistic voluntarism (Malone, Cleary, 2002:280).

However, theoretically speaking the position of "difference" is in itself not already the solution to the dilemma about either reproduction or the transcendence of existing/prevailing (heterosexual) forms of family organisation and parenthood. It has unwanted outcomes as well. As some authors warn, the position of "difference" does not only promote only the "liberal viewpoint" (gays and lesbians are simply different) or positive outcomes of their difference (as pointed out by e.g. Stacey, Biblarz, 2001), but also the conservative position of difference according to which lesbian and gay parenting is damaging and devastating for the child. If the advocates of gay and lesbian parenthood point out the positive outcomes of "difference" such that the children of gay and lesbian parents have less traditional views of gender roles and they themselves adopt less

¹⁰ Lesbian families do not reproduce themselves as social structures – the children who live in lesbian families are not expected to go on to become lesbian or to form lesbian families of their own.

traditional gender roles, it is from the same position that the opponents of gay and lesbian families warn against the allegedly negative consequences for the child (e.g. children will themselves become gays and lesbians) (Hicks, 2005:154). According to Hicks, both the liberal and conservative arguments understand the categories “lesbian” and “gay” as a specific type of person with specific characteristics which are allegedly transferred to their children. In difference theory “there is, therefore, a number of difference arguments here which are often conflated: the idea that lesbians and gay men are different, that these differences are passed on to children, and that those children exhibit different gender and sexual identity outcomes to those who live with heterosexual parents” (Hicks, 2005: 154). According to Hicks, the research question needs to be turned in another direction and we should first research *how* modern sexual discourses actually create and maintain the ideal of “difference” itself. From this position it becomes clear that the paradigm of difference uses a generalised understanding of genders and sexualities as “measurable outcomes”, as something that the child obtains due to parental, environmental and genetic influences (Hicks, 2005:154).

Besides the controversy of the argument that the children of gays and lesbians are different from the children of heterosexuals, together with the empirical results which reject this thesis (see Golombok, 2000) which we have discussed before, the main weakness of the difference position is actually epistemological. Regardless of whether it is about the conservative or the liberal position of difference, this position assumes *the difference* without questioning in *what ways* gay and lesbian families are supposed to be different from heterosexual families. Instead of dealing with this question at the level of its *origin* (i.e. in what ways and why they are considered to be different; how difference is reproduced through social heteronormativity), the difference position deals with difference at the level of its *consequences* – at the level of the argument on (positive or negative) outcomes of life in a certain type of family in terms of parents’ sexual orientation. From the aspect of end effects this is why the difference position actually finds itself stuck in the same problem as the defensive position, which it attempts to criticise, again reproducing the perception of gays and lesbians as “others”, different from the assumed heterosexual normality (Hicks, 2005:163). Here we face the continual dilemma between the liberal and radical positions which is well-known from feminism and can also be seen in gay and lesbian movement and theory: that is the liberal position requiring tolerance within the existing (heteronormative structures), called “virtual equality” by some (Vaid, in Hicks, 2005:164), while the radical position also demands structural social changes.¹¹ As mentioned before, at the level of family life this means an adaptation to the notion of heterosexual parenthood as the standard for all other forms of parenthood and parenting, while at the same time creating social hierarchies among different family forms.

4. Conclusion

At the level of theoretical debates, we cannot expect a consensus on whether gay and lesbian parenthood is a phenomenon which simply adapts to heterosexual norms or does it bring radical changes to family life. Perhaps it is simply that the question has been posed in a wrong way. The difficulty of such measurement lies in the very fact that also “heterosexual” parenthood is not a monolithic category in itself. What is it then that gay and lesbian families should adapt to? Second, gay and lesbian parenthood is also not something which could be identified in a uniform way.

¹¹ A similar dilemma has also been created around the institution of marriage. As noted by Kuhar, “gay and lesbian community does not hold a unitary answer to that question” (Kuhar, 2006:112). Opinions about the legal regulation of homosexual partnerships or marriage differ among gays and lesbians and also among social scientists who research gender studies and queer studies. Advocates of homosexual marriages have based their arguments within the discourse of human rights and the provision of equality, while their opponents most often draw from the feminist critique of the modern family and the institution of marriage as an oppressive social institution which gays and lesbians should actually disapprove of because of its heterosexist historical basis instead of trying to integrate themselves into it (Švab, Kuhar, 2005).

There are diverse experiences of parenthood which are further defined by a series of other, social and subjective factors and not only through sexual orientation.

Regardless of the listed mutually opposing estimates and arguments, in everyday life, lesbian and gay couples, parents and families are actually creating new narrative forms or stories (Plummer, 1995), which significantly transform our perceptions of partner and family life. “Lesbians and gay men are establishing sophisticated social forms, which we describe as ‘families of choice’, with that sense of involvement, security and continuity over time traditionally associated with the orthodox family, and yet which are deeply rooted in a specific historic experience” (Weeks, Donovan, Heaphy, 1999a:83).

The paper aimed at presenting some aspects of potential transgression the predominant notions of (heterosexual) parenthood/parenting and especially fatherhood/fathering in Western countries, however, it seems that there are various cultural, social and legal constraints that put non-heterosexual parenting in a different light, beside that of perceiving them as “postmodern family pioneers” (Stacey, 2006).

While the phenomenon of the so-called “gayby” boom (Dunne, 2000), is noticeable (especially in the Western countries), it seems that in general non-heterosexual parenthood is still tabooed (Golombok 2001; Švab and Kuhar, 2005) or at least facing in most of the countries cultural, social and legal barriers. Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy (2001), identify three kinds of stories that can be told by gays and lesbians regarding parenting: the first set of stories are those of impossibilities of same-sex parenthood, framed within the predominant heteronormative idea that non-heterosexual identity precludes parenting; the second are stories of opportunities, told by those who became parents in a (past) heterosexual partnership; and the third are the stories told by those who were able to become parents within the context of elective families by negotiating various options available (adoption, artificial insemination, co-parenting etc.). These stories obviously vary in time and place. Cultural and social differences importantly frame the possibilities of non-heterosexual parenthood and parenting, and even in the countries where trends of increasing numbers of non-heterosexual parenting are traced, the researchers report that they are numerically weak and spatially limited, and although there is a widespread tolerance of homosexual relationships, there are lower levels of a more positive acceptance, so gays and lesbians stay an opposed and disapproving minority (Duncan, 2007). In the countries with even higher levels of homophobia and social distance, social conditions for creating families of choice are even less favourable (Švab, Kuhar, 2005; Švab, 2007) and the issues of parenting and children in non-heterosexual families seems to represent the limits of what the majority of heteronormative societies currently tolerates.

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NOVI OBLICI RODITELJSTVA: OČINSTVO I RODITELJSTVO U LEZBIJSKIM OBITELJIMA

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Članak prikazuje sociološku analizu nekih aspekata očinstva i roditeljstva u lezbijskim obiteljima, pri čemu se krenulo od pretpostavke kako temeljne promjene u roditeljskim identitetima, ulogama i praksi nadilaze moderne (heteroseksualne) roditeljske uloge kakve danas poznajemo. Lezbijske obitelji (kao i "gej" obitelji) predstavljaju najveći izazov uobičajenim društvenim normama vezanim uz heteroseksualne roditeljske uloge i identitete jer dovode u pitanje tradicionalno shvaćanje obitelji i reprodukcije kao nečega što je isključivo pravo heteroseksualnih obitelji. Analiza obuhvaća sljedeće aspekte: proces i razloge donošenja odluke o (ne)poznatom ocu (biološke, sociološke i kulturološke osnove odlučivanja), roditeljstvo u svakodnevnom životu i uloga oca, pitanja vezana uz odgoj i socijalizaciju djece u gej i lezbijskim obiteljima, te aktualnu raspravu o budućim smjernicama istraživanja gej i lezbijskog roditeljstva.

Ključne riječi: RODITELJSTVO, NOVO OČINSTVO, BIVANJE OCEM, BIVANJE RODITELJEM, LEZBIJSKE OBITELJI