

LGBTIQ Parenthood in Croatia: Experiences and Perceptions

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SITUATING RESEARCH ON LGBTIQ PARENTHOOD: SOCIETAL AND ACADEMIC RELEVANCE

A growing number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ¹) people want to have or already have children (e.g. Goldberg and Allen, 2013; Pew Research survey, 2013). Scientific research published to date, including longitudinal and national probability studies, provides strong evidence that parental sexual orientation is not related to parenting effectiveness (Adams and Light, 2015; Croch et al., 2014; Goldberg and Allen, 2013; Manning, Fetto and Lamidi, 2014; Vučković Juroš, 2017). In other words, children growing up with LGBTIQ parents are similar to children living with heterosexual parents as concerns many relevant outcomes, including children's wellbeing, academic achievement, cognitive development, social skills and mental health.

Although societies differ in levels of formal or informal acknowledgement and in terms of the acceptance of LGBTIQ people, negative reactions are easily provoked when discussing LGBTIQ parenthood (Takács, Szalma and Bartus, 2016). Unlike families with heterosexual parents, families with LGBTIQ parents largely lack legal as well as social recognition and support (Takács and Szalma, 2011). They are also often exposed to stigmatization and discrimination (Takács, 2015). These negative experiences can have a broad negative impact on the wellbeing of LGBTIQ people and their children (Appell, 2003; Bos et al., 2004; Patterson, Fulcher and Wainright, 2002; Weber, 2010).

Since the early 2000s, Croatian society has witnessed significant formal and societal changes in the direction of greater acceptance and acknowledgement of LGBTIQ people and their rights (Jurčić, 2018). Nonetheless, public discussions over the family lives of LGBTIQ people remain mostly negative and frequently do not move beyond expressions of personal attitudes and prejudice (Hođžić and Štulhofer, 2017). In general, public levels of recognition and knowledge about the families of LGBTIQ individuals are low (Kamenov, Huić and Jelić, 2017; Jugović and Ogresta, 2017). Furthermore, scientific studies on sexual orientation and gender identities are very rare within the Croatian context. While there are many in-

¹ The abbreviation LGBTIQ is used as an umbrella term. When referring to specific research, we used abbreviations used by authors that reflect their participants' identities.

ternational studies on LGBTIQ parents and their families, only one such study has been published in Croatia (Maričić et al., 2016). Based on interviews with LGB parents, their partners and children, the study showed that LGB people are creating, maintaining and enjoying family lives. A few additional studies have confirmed that LGBTIQ people have children and that many of them express the desire to become parents (Kamenov et al., 2016; Milković, 2013).

Although the empirical literature on the parenthood of LGBTIQ people in Croatia is very limited, scientific interest in this topic is growing in line with social changes. In recent years, authors from Croatia presented the results from a notable number of studies relating to LGBTIQ parenthood at relevant scientific conferences held in Croatia (e.g. 20th Psychology Days in Zadar, 2016; 25th Annual Conference of Croatian Psychologists – Psychology in the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Social Justice, 2017). Therefore, the main goal of this thematic issue is to provide better insights into the family lives of LGBTIQ people situated in their specific social environments. This issue features six studies on the experiences and needs of LGBTIQ people, their family lives, their roles as parents and their expectations, as well as perceptions and attitudes from their social environment.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE THEMATIC ISSUE

This thematic issue aims to enhance the understanding of LGBTIQ parenthood in Croatia from two perspectives: (1) from within, that is, from the perspective of LGBTIQ people themselves, and (2) from the outside, that is, from the perspective of the heterosexual majority. In order to gain more profound and complete insights, we included both quantitative and qualitative studies, as well as studies based on correlational and experimental designs.

From the perspective of LGBTIQ people themselves, we present studies on motivation for parenthood (Štambuk, Milković and Maričić) and different pathways to becoming a parent (Štambuk et al.). In the quantitative part of their study, Štambuk, Milković and Maričić demonstrated that the main reasons for parenthood among LGBTIQ participants who wanted children were internal – the desire to give love, share knowledge and develop a special bond with the child. Participants who did not want to have children placed the strongest emphasis on a number of internal reasons for not becoming a parent, such as restricted personal freedom, great responsibility and the workload they perceived as being involved in parenthood. This study also provided qualitative data on several additional reasons arguing for and against parenthood. It is important to note that some of the reasons that emerged arguing against parenthood reflected universal issues unrelated to sexual orientation or gender identity (e.g. fear of political and climate changes or of pregnancy

and childbirth), while others conveyed concerns relating to social and legal barriers that LGBTIQ people face when it comes to parenthood (e.g. the social pressure to remain childless, legal barriers to parenthood). These reasons should be considered in the further development of measures regarding parenthood motivation among LGBTIQ people.

In the following paper, Štambuk et al. described pathways to parenthood among LGBTIQ people in Croatia. Their results showed that childless participants who did not want children were on average older in comparison to those who wanted to have children. However, the authors did not find differences in desire for parenthood based on other socio-demographic characteristics of the participants (e.g. education, income or relationship status). Regarding the means through which the participants formed a family, most already had a child from a previous heterosexual relationship, while the most preferred methods for forming a family were adoption and foster care. It is noteworthy that childless participants who wanted to have children perceived receiving more social support from family, friends and their significant others in comparison to those who did not want children.

The results from these two studies indicate that in present day Croatia it should not be assumed, especially among policymakers and health workers, that LGBTIQ people are uninterested in parenthood. In addition, these studies provide novel insights into the decision-making processes that LGBTIQ people have to go through before having a family. They also indicate associations between one's life context (e.g. age, social support) and the desire to become a parent.

Considering a broader perspective, we then present a qualitative study conducted on a sample of LGB people from Central and Eastern Europe who immigrated to Western European countries (Belgium and the Netherlands) that legally recognize and protect same-sex marriage and families (Vučković Juroš). The author offers insights into the very specific perspective of LGB people "caught" between two worlds – an inclusive one in the receiving countries and a restrictive one in the countries of origin. The study describes in detail how the restrictive framework excludes LGB individuals from full citizenship, but also enables the discrimination of non-heterosexual families at the individual level. In contrast, inclusive frameworks facilitate and empower LGB individuals to realize life and family goals, while at the same time discouraging individual-level prejudice. Using this transnational perspective, also applicable to the Croatian context, the study highlighted that in order to ensure the full equality and protection of LGB individuals and their children from stigmatization, an inclusive socio-institutional framework for non-heterosexual families must be created in which individual prejudice is no longer supported.

From the perspective of the heterosexual majority among the general public, we present a quantitative study on attitudes towards same-sex parenting, using

gender identity and attitudes towards gender roles as predictors (Kamenov, Huić and Jelić). Participants with more traditional gender role attitudes, those who are parents themselves and those who are married in comparison to those cohabiting, expressed more negative attitudes toward same-gender parenting. Moreover, the study showed that participants expressed less support for gay than for lesbian parenting, as well as women expressing more positive attitudes towards both gay and lesbian parenting than men.

The perspective of the heterosexual majority was also presented in an experimental between-subjects vignette study on students' evaluations of same-sex vs. different-sex couples' parenting (Štrbić et al.). Although the participants mostly did not evaluate same-sex couples' parenting, the child's behaviour nor the family environment with bias, and even reported less social distance towards same-sex parents than to different-sex parents, they nevertheless favoured different-sex parents when supporting rights regarding marriage and adoption. These results indicate an important mechanism underlying the stability of prejudices – resistance towards generalizing attitudes from individual cases to the group. The strength of this mechanism is especially worrisome as it was observed among students, who are considered a fairly liberal and non-prejudiced social group.

Finally, building on the scientific literature and various approaches to assessing and working with topics relating to sex, gender and sexual orientation, we present recommendations for including different categories of sexual orientations, sex and gender identities in constructing commonly used socio-demographic items in social science studies (Milković and Štambuk). The aim of these recommendations is to encourage researchers to acknowledge the existence of LGBTIQ people in research samples and to use valid measures that can properly explore experiences of different people regardless of their sexual identity. In the Croatian language there is still considerable ambiguity and a lack of knowledge regarding terminology relating to LGBT issues, and so this paper was written in Croatian.

Bearing in mind the lack of research on issues relating to LGBTIQ parenthood in Croatia, we consider this thematic issue to be an important contribution to the body of research on LGBTIQ-related topics in Croatia. One of the key steps to reducing inequality and discrimination is developing strong and effective evidence-based strategies to raise awareness, increase recognition and provide better support to LGBTIQ people and their families at various formal (legal) and social levels. We believe that publishing this thematic issue is an important step towards achieving this goal.

Marina Štambuk and Maja Tadić Vujčić, Guest Editors

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