

## Two dads / two moms: Defying and affirming the mom-dad family. The case of same-gender families in Slovenia

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'F'amily' remains a site of ideological struggles. What constitutes a family and who can become/have/define a family is a matter of ongoing political and other debates and discourses. These become evident in the programmes of political parties, for example, as well as in the agendas in family legislation and social welfare policies, even in the changes in sociological textbooks, and so forth. Families where two male or female partners are parenting together are simultaneously gaining visibility in the public space (and legislation in certain countries) and their children are becoming central in different discursive practices, where their presumed interests are used in argumentations of (mostly) the opponents and advocates of equal rights for all family constellations. A vast research body of studies about lesbian and gay families (begun in the 1970s) contributes to the visibility and understanding of a variety of forms in which families are created. As Malmquist and Zetterqvist Nelson write, it is 'important to understand "family" as something that is continuously performed – "doing family" – rather than a specific

structure – “the family”.<sup>1</sup> Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan claim<sup>2</sup> that it is exactly non-heterosexuals who are at the forefront of wider changes to family life, and Haimés and Weiner,<sup>3</sup> for example, write how non-heteronormative family models present an important challenge to the heteronormative model.

The times of transitions and transformations are usually the most interesting because the dynamics of resistance and empowerment in relation to change are most visible. In regard to families where both parents are of the same gender and are in a partnership relationship,<sup>4</sup> Slovenia is one of the countries in such transformative times. Between the commencement of the struggle for equal rights and, subsequently, for the first time explicit opposition to such equality, parents and children from same-gender families are developing strategies for survival in an environment where conflicting and deficient legislation<sup>5</sup> is set against a background of negative public opinion and often very positive interpersonal experiences. This essay will present some of these strategies, drawing on research on the intersection of same-sex families, their children, and the school environment and

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<sup>1</sup> Malmquist and Zetterqvist Nelson, 2013, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Haimés and Weiner, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> I will use the term *same-gender families* in this essay when referring to families where both parents identify with the same gender and are recognized as individuals with the same sex in their environment. Because of their gender identification, parents in these families are also recognized as homosexual (names such as gay, lesbian, rainbow, etc., families are also used elsewhere). Recognizing the vast array of human experience and identities, I will nevertheless in this essay not address, problematize, or discuss these different experiences and identities (and will hence not refer to queer, intersex, transgender, bisexual, etc., identifications), because I will not be interested primarily in the adults' sexuality practices, gender practices, or other practices and identities, but in the experiences and strategies of children whose families don't pass as 'normal' (mom-dad families), because the parents have a recognized same gender.

<sup>5</sup> Parents from same-gender families do not have by far the same rights as different-gender families; nevertheless, there are some children in Slovenia who have two same-gender parents in a legal sense.

homophobia.<sup>6</sup> I will use this research, which aimed at elucidating the school experiences of children from same-gender families (denormalization,<sup>7</sup> homophobia, and the strategies to deal with it), to focus on how parents in same-gender families face and deal with their children's school environment, and I will present the wider context of the struggle for equality and responses to it in Slovenia. I will thus shed light on the current debates relevant for same-gender families in Slovenia and discuss the phenomenon of the moral homophobe, both of which will serve as a framework for understanding the parents' strategies to deal with their children's school environment. Another aim of this essay is to reflect on the research production in relation to children in same-gender families. To frame these discussions, I will first refer to the existing research and research interest related to same-gender families, as well as try to bring attention to how the classic research actually frames the family debates with heteronormativity.

## Researching life in same-gender families

A vast collection of research on non-heterosexual parenting has been growing since the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, the majority of this research grounds in, reconfirms, or does not at all challenge the dominant ideas about gender, gender roles, and sexual identity. It is exactly by referring to the mainstream ideas about

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<sup>6</sup> Zaviršek and Sobočan, 2012. The research taking place in Slovenia was part of an EU (Daphne II) funded research study involving researchers from Germany, Sweden, and Slovenia who explored the intersections between society, school, rainbow families, and children from these families (see Streib Brzič and Quadflieg, 2011). The complete research study involved interviews with 34 children from rainbow families, 63 parents from rainbow families, and 30 expert interviews.

<sup>7</sup> Streib and Quadflieg, 2011; Sobočan and Streib, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> For meta-analyses of the research, see, for example, Anderssen et al., 2002; Gartrell and Bos, 2010; Lesbian and Gay Parenting, 2005; Perrin, 2002; Parks, 1998; Stacey and Biblarz, 2001; Tasker, 1999.

‘normality’ that these studies aim to show that empirical data and findings do not confirm the general stereotypes, prejudices, or negative claims about life in families where both parents are of the same sex or/and are not heterosexual. Such research nevertheless has been valuable to an extent in securing more equality and ‘acceptance’ for same-gender families. The research has suggested that children in same-gender families are not experiencing more crises or emotional/mental health troubles than those who grow up in different-sex families,<sup>9</sup> that they are not experiencing more peer violence compared to other children,<sup>10</sup> that their sexual identity is not more often homosexual than in the general population, and that their gender roles (as adequate to the normative model) are clearly defined.<sup>11</sup> Some studies speak of more equal and quality relationships between parents and children in same-gender families in comparison to the ‘average’ different-sex family,<sup>12</sup> and of the quality of the relationship between children and non-biological parents as comparable to relationships between children and biological parents.<sup>13</sup> The research has shown that sexual orientation or identity is not relevant to the benefits and interests of children in their development<sup>14</sup> and that the processes inside the family (for example, the quality of parenting and attachment) importantly influence the child’s development, whereas the structure of the family (for example, the number of parents and their gender and sexual identity) does not. This has been

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<sup>9</sup> For example Chan et al., 1998; Golombok et al., 1983; Patterson, 1994; Tasker and Golombok, 1997; Wainright et al., 2004.

<sup>10</sup> For example Lindsay et al., 2006; Tasker and Golobok, 1997; Vanfraussen et al., 2002.

<sup>11</sup> For example Golombok, 2000; Tasker and Golombok, 1997; Wainright et al., 2004.

<sup>12</sup> For example Brewaeys et al., 1997; Chan et al., 1998a; Flaks et al., 1995; Golombok et al., 1997.

<sup>13</sup> For example Bennett, 2003; Vanfraussen et al., 2002.

<sup>14</sup> For example Ryan-Flood, 2009.

confirmed by various research approaches – research in families where the children and parents are biologically related and in families where children are adopted, as well as research in families where parents identify either as heterosexual or non-heterosexual.<sup>15</sup> One of the more recent research studies that compares families with adoptive and biological parents has shown that the processes in families are more important than the structure of the family: regardless of the sexual identity of parents, the children were prospering the most in families where parents were using effective parenting techniques and were happy in the relationship with their partner.<sup>16</sup>

Hence, all this research production in the field of same-gender families demonstrates the irrelevance of sexual identity in regard to parenting competence and child development. At the same time, it also clearly exhibits a specific research interest in relation to children, childhood, and child development. A larger part of research on non-heteronormative families is focused on researching the anticipated risks for children and the psychosocial consequences for their development and childhoods. The main question that usually seeks to be answered is: is the life with homosexual parents in any way deficient or risky for children? The research interest thus speaks mostly to how scientific epistemologies cannot avoid the demands of heteronormativity.<sup>17</sup> I agree with Hicks that the research interest should actually be distanced from ‘proving the acceptability’ of same-gender

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<sup>15</sup> For example Chan et al., 1998; Erich et al., 2005; Lansford et al., 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Farr et al., 2010.

<sup>17</sup> With heteronormativity I refer to a set of norms, beliefs, and attitudes that prescribe and frame the reality in a way that people belong to either of two genders (male and female; in relation to their biological givens), which involve also ‘natural’ roles in life. In this frame, the appropriate / natural sexual orientation is heterosexuality, and hence the sexual and marital relations are ‘naturally’ between a man and a woman. Heteronormativity thus prescribes alignment of biological sex, gender identity, gender roles, and sexuality.

families towards exploring why certain family forms remain marginalized (socially, legally, etc.) and ostracized, as well as how the discourses of the ‘otherness’ and ‘deficiency’ of these family forms keep being reproduced.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the most valuable research pays attention to the lived experiences of children (and parents), away from comparability and comparisons (and assessments of the behavioural, psychological, social, and sexual ‘appropriateness’) with the norm, and away from building arguments against the background of ‘otherness’. Such research also holds the promise of stepping away from the victim/success narratives, which currently still dominate the research on non-normative families.

Drawing on the available research on same-gender families (for example, the research I refer to in the previous paragraphs), (at least) two kinds of narratives can be observed: the victim narratives and the success narratives. The victim narratives speak of the ‘inherent difference’ of such families and children, which is potentially a cause for discrimination and violence; they call for political action, but can be used at the same time to strengthen the ‘otherness’ discourses. The success narratives speak of such families and children as ‘absolutely the same as everyone else’ and claim the right to equality against the background of ‘sameness’; they potentially delegitimize positive discrimination and political action, and possibly contribute to heteronormative discourses. Nevertheless, even if these two narratives seem to oppose each other (which would hint at the ‘authenticity’ of one narrative and the ‘falseness’ of the other), they do not exclude each other, because different perspectives of the life-world and experiences of families and children can be legitimately and correctly observed and understood from different viewpoints – the difference in the viewpoint creates a different contextualization

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<sup>18</sup> Hicks, 2005; Sobočan, 2011a.

and does not necessarily reduce the veracity of the findings. The first narrative-set usually speaks of the attitudes in the society/environment (school, peers, etc.) as they affect the child's and family's reality; the second is focused on researching the child's development and achievements. Both narratives are relevant, important for understanding family life and social life; nevertheless, to answer some questions, the first narrative victimizes the children, and the second narrative unifies them – erases their specific experiences. Both narratives reinforce heteronormativity: by incorporating an anticipation and inscription of their 'sameness' or 'otherness' in the research instruments itself.

### **Families: Gender and sexual identity trouble**

The concepts of 'otherness' and 'sameness' speak foremost to how both narratives cannot escape heteronormativity and how they hence reinforce it. The norm of heterosexuality with adjacent gender roles and the binary division between what is normative and non-normative are the grounds, a reference pool for the majority of all interactions.<sup>19</sup> Most research studies until now have measured the factors that influence child development and the childhood life-course<sup>20</sup> (social and family factors: the intertwining of interactions between the child, his/her family, and the environment); these studies are inevitably marked by the contextual viewpoint and normativity that is framing both the researcher's view as well as the responses of the researched.

The alignment of these expectations and offered responses is homosexuality. The sexual identity of the parents (self-identified

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<sup>19</sup> For discussions on this see, for example, Fairclough, 1992, 2003; Moore, 1994; Butler, 1990, 2004; Jackson, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> I present these in Sobočan, 2012; see also Hicks, 2005.

or prescribed) is the focus: many children have two carers of the same gender (mother and grandmother, biological father and mother's new male partner, etc.), and many parents do not practice only heterosexuality; nevertheless, concern is raised primarily in one of these combinations – parents of the same gender who practice homosexuality. Why is this combination particularly alarming and disturbing? Two issues seem to be especially provocative: (visible) homosexuality and the question of the gendered division of labour.

Despite the fact that homosexuality, at least in some Western countries, seems to be less and less pathologized in interpersonal relationships and that homosexual individuals and groups may be less demonized and excluded than they used to be, this kind of 'acceptance' and 'tolerance' in most cultures often still necessitates a silencing of sexual identity and even 'way of life'. Smith,<sup>21</sup> drawing on Britain, for example, wrote about how the 'homosexual citizen' is – in exchange for certain rights – coerced into keeping his or her sexuality confined by the socially and legally defined limits of privacy. Ward and Winstanley,<sup>22</sup> in their research on workplaces in the United Kingdom, use the term 'absent presence' to describe the dynamics of forced silencing among sexual minorities; Švab and Kuhar<sup>23</sup> in Slovenia write about the transparent closet and intimate citizenship<sup>24</sup> to explain consenting to invisibility and silencing of one's own (homo)sexual identity. As Švab and Kuhar claim, homosexuality, at least in Slovenia, is accepted, 'permitted' as long as the sexual activity and identity are limited to private spaces and non-heterosexual environments—that is, away from the public

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, 1995 in Richardson, 2000, p. 269.

<sup>22</sup> Ward and Winstanley, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Švab and Kuhar, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Kuhar, 2010.

sphere.<sup>25</sup> Such a tightly closed (even if transparent) bubble, which disables contamination (of the presumably sexually neutral) public space with homosexuality, becomes in the case of same-gender families very fragile and prone to bursting. Even if the majority of the same-gender families involved in the first research study in Slovenia (2006–2008) had positive post-coming out experiences in their interpersonal relationships, the generalized public response was negative.<sup>26</sup> The fear of general visibility and presence of same-gender families, foremost in the legislation, has generated a considerable and loud public opposition against making these citizens/families more equal. The entry of these parents and children into the institution of family (legally and socially) is still unsupported and unwanted in Slovenia.<sup>27</sup>

This ‘interdiction’ is a consequence of not only the negative attitude towards (visible) homosexuality, but also a consequence of the negative attitude towards destabilization of gender roles and division of labour and power. Heimes and Weiner<sup>28</sup> write about three main challenges to the existing social order for same-gender families: ideological (because they are seen to destabilize the fixed gender roles and phantasms about who/what is/can be a mother), structural (because they change the ‘ordinary’ and ‘proper’ family constellation), and biogenetic (reproduction, which used to be exclusively in the domain of the normative family, is no longer limited to heterosexual intercourse, neither to medical interventions). Inclusion of different family forms as legitimate thus signifies foremost a destabilization of the role and the superiority of the image of the normative family – mother

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<sup>25</sup> Švab and Kuhar, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Sobočan, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> In Slovenia, a public referendum about new family legislation was held at the beginning of 2012 and the result was a denial of the proposed legislation. I referred to this further along in the text.

<sup>28</sup> Heimes and Weiner, 2000.

(who nourishes, cares), father (who disciplines, teaches), and their (biological) children. Despite the fact that such family form is actually a novum – at the forefront only a bit longer than the last two centuries – is its exclusivity of grave importance for maintaining the structures and power relations in society (from the perspective of gender, national, economic, etc., interests)?<sup>29</sup>

As can be observed in public reactions to it, when a minority breaches the forced silencing and thus destabilizes the prescribed gender roles, the initial response of the dominant group that we can most surely expect is a general opposition – with an attempt to strengthen and reinforce the power relations that it shook for a moment.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the response to the first wave of public visibility and demands for equal rights of same-gender parents in Slovenia was reactive. If I started this paper saying that lately, same-gender families and their children are becoming more visible in the public sphere, the newly acquired visibility nevertheless does not erase their absence from ‘family’ – this absence seems to be one of the central characteristics of the life of same-gender families in Slovenia. Namely, families build their legitimacy mostly on two pillars: biological and legal ties. In families where both parents are of the same gender, the children are usually biologically tied to only one parent, and Slovenian legislation does not provide the right to marriage or joint adoption to homosexual partners.<sup>31</sup> Legal non-recognition thus both creates and maintains the cultural attitudes towards non-heterosexual partnerships and families. The first research on

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<sup>29</sup> Coontz, 2000; Goody, 1983.

<sup>30</sup> Sobočan, 2013a.

<sup>31</sup> Currently, there are two families where both male partners are legal parents of the child (both adopted the child abroad, and acquired parental rights there), and six families where the female partner of a biological mother adopted the (fatherless) child. The one-parent adoptions actually took place within a legal ‘loophole’, so it cannot be claimed that the rights of social parents are secured.

same-gender families in Slovenia<sup>32</sup> demonstrated that lack of awareness about the existence of non-heteronormative family forms, along with a domination of biological ties, often leads to posing questions, such as: ‘Whose actually is this kid?’ or ‘Who is the kid’s *real* mother?’. The second research study on same-gender families in Slovenia showed that the family life and visibility of same-gender families does pose a challenge to the social concepts about what/who is a family, as well as what/who is a parent, and with this addresses the limits that are set with heterosexuality as well as those that homosexuality seemingly delineates.<sup>33</sup>

## Moral homophobes

When borders are shaken and fences are crossed, the keepers of the borders awaken. The effects of protecting the (presumed) limits and borders of the family definitions were especially visible in Slovenia in early 2012, when there was a possibility for new family legislation to be passed – one where marriage rights of heterosexual citizens would be extended also to homosexual citizens. As a result of a referendum, the legislation was not passed. The public debates about the possible legislative changes involved expressions of intolerance, hate speech, open homophobia, and violence against those who attempted to cross such borders – that is, against homosexual adults. In Slovenia, the topic of homophobia has been discussed (only) in the last decade:<sup>34</sup> The testimonies of young homosexual adults vividly portray the attitudes towards homosexuality in Slovenia. Such attitudes can be expected in all situations connected to

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<sup>32</sup> Sobočan, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Sobočan, 2011a.

<sup>34</sup> Kuhar et al., 2008; Kuhar et al., 2011; Kuhar et al., 2012; Magič, 2008; Magič and Janjevak, 2011; Maljevac and Magič, 2009; Švab and Kuhar, 2005; Tuš Špilak, 2010; Velikonja and Greif, 2001.

homosexuality, because homophobia targets not only persons who openly identify as homosexual, but actually uses 'homosexualization' to legitimate intolerance, hostility, and violence. Homophobia is a mechanism which uses the label of homosexuality as a tool for hostility: homosexuality as a label is used to mark an individual or a group with 'otherness'.<sup>35</sup> A homophobe<sup>36</sup> needs an individual, group, or phenomenon which he/she can label with homosexuality to justify his/her acts: this may be a person's self-identification with homosexuality or homosexuality 'externally' ascribed to a person. Therefore, homophobic responses also can be expected in the case of children from same-gender families, where the sexual identity of their parents is used to 'homosexualize' the children.

What is important in this scenario is the way the main (moral, but not rational) argument against same-gender families or child-rearing in same-gender families is formed. The moral homophobe does not expose himself or herself as violent and intolerant – he/she is someone who claims to defend the rights of the child, who advocates for the child's good and a healthy childhood for her/him, who calls for protecting the (innocent) child against the parents who will supposedly harm the child with their homosexuality – and parents who expose the child to homophobic violence identified in society by such moral homophobe.<sup>37</sup> The moral homophobe himself/herself generates

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<sup>35</sup> See also 'new homophobia': violence and discrimination against different social groups; in Kuhar, Humer, Maljevac, 2012, p. 53; the authors also refer to Rener, 2009; Švab and Kuhar, 2005; Ule, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Homophobia (and a homophobe) does not signify only a violent, discriminatory act or ideas of an individual or a group. As Kuhar, Takacs and Kam-Tuck Yip write, we can talk also of the 'social and cultural norms and values, which explicitly and implicitly construct homosexuality as "the other"', in: Kuhar, Takacs and Kam-Tuck Yip, 2012, p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> The term 'moral homophobe' may sound like an oxymoron; nevertheless, it adequately describes individuals, groups or ideas which can be identified as homophobic, but who present themselves and claim to be moral, against the

intolerance and hostility in the society to which he/she refers; nevertheless, his/her claims and behaviour are effective because they mobilize emotions through forming the victimization of children. The mobilization of emotions is especially effective because the moral homophobe presents the children's rights as opposed by the agendas of adults, who – according to the interpretation of the moral homophobe – fight for equal rights of all families exclusively to gain rights for themselves (and not the children) and answer their own (and not the children's) needs. This perverse shift portrays the parents as violent, as those who sexualize their children with their sexual identity and hence are dangerous to the child. The moral homophobe identifies this sexualization in at least two ways: as symbolic – social sexualization, that is, contamination of the child with the homosexuality of the parents, which will evoke negative responses in the environment (in school, etc.), and as moral – identity sexualization, that is, involving fear that such parents cannot 'teach' their children right, normative sexuality—that is, heterosexuality.

## **Parents in same-gender families in Slovenia**

Attitudes towards homosexuality in Slovenia, which are presented in various research studies (see above) and were confirmed in public debates around possible legislative changes, also provide a background for understanding that parents and children in same-gender families can expect intolerance, discrimination, and negative attitudes, which might be why they have difficulties speaking out about their family reality. Previous

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background of certain societal, cultural, or religious values. I coined this term when I was describing and discussing the public debates around suggested changes in the family legislation in 2010-2012; see Sobočan, 2012.

research studies about same-gender families in Slovenia<sup>38</sup> have been explorative: they opened a space and gave voice to topics and meanings that the interviewees conceptualized as the most important and relevant to their family reality. Thus, the first research presented topics connected to the dynamics inside the family and issues that describe the position of same-gender families in the society.<sup>39</sup> The next research identified a growing awareness about the unequal status and treatment, strategies for establishing legitimacy of family life and potential effects for the conceptualizations of the ‘family’ and homosexuality.<sup>40</sup> The last major research study about same-gender families also involved the narratives of the young people living with two parents of the same gender.<sup>41</sup> The analysis showed that parents (and children) expect homophobic responses from their environments and identified the different behaviours or strategies that the parents developed with the aim of protecting their children from the negative attitudes of others.<sup>42</sup>

Even if every family story is specific, sixteen in-depth interviews with parents from same-gender families provided information on the basis of which an understanding of strategies for dealing with (expected) homophobia could be developed. In Slovenia, 16 parents from 11 families were interviewed: two men, 14 women, 29–54 years old, all except one from urban areas. In these families 15 children are growing up (five aged up to 6 years, six aged 6–14, three aged 14–18, and one older than 18).<sup>43</sup> The composition of the families of the interviewed is quite diverse:

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<sup>38</sup> Sobočan, 2009; Sobočan, 2011a.

<sup>39</sup> Sobočan, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Sobočan, 2011a.

<sup>41</sup> Zaviršek and Sobočan, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Sobočan, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> A detailed description of methodology that was used in this research, along with ethical and other considerations, can be found in: Streib and Quadflieg, 2011 as well as Zaviršek and Sobočan, 2012.

children in five families were born in heterosexual relationships (eight children), and children in four families were born in homosexual relationships (five children), and in one family, one child was born in a heterosexual relationship and one in a homosexual relationship. Ten of these children have (more or less active) fathers and five children were conceived either with assisted donor insemination or donor insemination at home, but the identity of the donors is anonymous. In relation to previous research in Slovenia,<sup>44</sup> in which families of two same-gender partners, families of two same-gender partners who share custody with a previous (different-gender) partner, and families of two same-gender partners who parent together with two other same-gender partners or a gay person, this sample includes families in which children have been conceived in a heterosexual relationship but after the recognition of a parent's homosexual orientation, both parents still take care of the children on a daily basis (possibly also by still living together). In addition, three young persons who grew up in same-gender families were interviewed. Their ages were between 16 and 23 years; all of them were conceived in heterosexual relationships and have two active biological parents of different genders. A boy (17) and a girl (16) are living with two mothers; a young woman (23) has a gay father.

All the interviewed parents expressed the expectation of homophobic responses, even violence, while at the same time they cannot fully control—or protect—the lives of their children; they address and deal with the expected homophobia in ways they feel best. The parents experience constant pressure to ‘justify’ and ‘demonstrate appropriateness’ of their family life and fight for recognition of the parental status of both parents, symbolically as well as legally. ‘Justifying’ along with fighting for equal rights

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<sup>44</sup> Sobočan, 2009, Sobočan, 2011a.

can be very demanding, and the pressures create feelings of uncertainty and fear and encourage silencing and invisibility. Being recognized like ‘all others’ or as ‘normal’, according to the opinion of many parents, still guarantees the most safety for children from same-gender families, especially in an environment where there are no known or recognized models for how parents and children should behave or present their families at school or in a wider environment. The strategies of parents can be classified into three clusters, with different approaches, different levels of understanding what would be best for their families in school, and different ways in which they themselves (re)construct ‘normality’.

### *Family structures and passing strategies*

Passing strategies are a response to societal expectations (in Slovenia) that every child needs to have a father and a mother, because this is how the ‘real’, ‘natural’ family is constructed.<sup>45</sup> It can thus be expected that a child living with two mothers who has a father (i.e., a child born in a heterosexual relationship or a child with a known donor or father) will be perceived and accepted differently than a child who does not have a father or was conceived with anonymous donor cells. Namely, the child whose biological mother and father are both involved in his/her life might more easily answer the pertaining questions (voiced by just anyone in their heteronormative environment)—‘Don’t you have a father?’ ‘Where/who is your father?’—and pass as ‘ordinary’ child, who has the ‘proper’ role models in his/her life. These strategies give a chance for the environment (teachers, etc.) to relate to what they believe is ‘normal’ or ‘right’. The ways in which the interviewed parents ‘normalize’ the situation,

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<sup>45</sup> The term *passing* refers to the theory of Erving Goffman, who wrote about identity management in connection with stigma.

approximate their family to the normative pattern, are through involving both biological parents and through the legitimization of family relationships through biological connections, such as presenting the mother's partner as the child's aunt (mother's sister). The last strategy was explained by one parent:

To make it easier for the child, we decided that in [primary] school, I would function as his aunt. They accepted this completely normally, they even found that we [the biological and the social mother] are visually very similar. (Ina)

As the mother explained, the role functioned well in a suburban school, where these two mothers felt it was too dangerous to disclose themselves as a lesbian couple. They felt this worked well, and it gave the opportunity to the social mother to participate in the school-life of the child (e.g., teachers' meetings, etc.). The child also has an identifiable (but not present) father, which probably cast aside any other 'suspicion' about the 'aunt' being in any other relationship to the mother.

A model also identified in the interviews can be described as a family model where the parents were previously a heterosexual couple but now have new sexual partners, yet remain in a close familial relationship, functioning fully in the child's life on a daily basis without necessarily disclosing information about their sexuality. Thus, the family functions in a way recognizable as a 'proper', as just a 'divorced' family, while other carers of the child (parents' same-gender partners) are not really involved in the child's life in the sense of being recognized, positioned, or (self)-identified as persons who hold a parental/carer role.

In these parents' views, such passing strategies protect the family from 'sexualization' – that is, against being identified as homosexual parents, which produces the 'deficits' of one of the

parents and consequential ‘illegitimacy’ of such family forms and family relations. It needs to be noted also that the respondents have spoken about violence and discrimination against children who have disclosed in school in what kind of a family they live. Rigidity and fixation on the limits of the normative concept of family also constrain the parental status outside the nuclear matrix: legally and symbolically (but not on the level of everyday practices), two parents simultaneously mean the exclusion of the third parent (for example in the mother-mother-father constellation). This also is demonstrated by the imperative of social services in cases of single-parent adoptions – for example, in cases where the non-biological, social mother wants to adopt the child, the father needs to be excluded from the relationship with the child, not only legally, but also physically and symbolically.<sup>46</sup> Not only does the strategy of passing protect the family against homophobic responses; exclusion of the social parent is coerces the family into choosing which of the parents will be invisible in the public space – and the parents rarely choose the exclusion of the other biological parent (especially in cases when the child was born in a heterosexual relationship).

Such strategy simultaneously perpetuates the invisibility of same-gender families in society: invisibility is thus both an experience of same-gender families (invisibility in the legal and symbolic sense, invisibility in public representations – schoolbooks, advertising, and the like) as well as their strategy: the parents consent to invisibility or maintain it because of the expected negative attitudes and intolerance for a non-normative family reality. The passing strategies where the presence of both

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<sup>46</sup> The praxis in this field is developing only now, because of the low number of cases they are dealing with. As testified in the conversations with those who are in the process of second-parent adoption of the child, the absence of the other biological parent (father) is necessary for a successful adoption. See also Sobočan, 2011b.

biological parents (sometimes or often at the cost of the social parent) is important involve selecting who will get to know the family situation and when; the strategies of protecting are connected with a (full) invisibility of the partnership relationship between the adults, whereby the partners do not assume a visible parental relationship with the child.

### *Invisibility and strategies of protecting*

Certain parents understand that the invisibility of their sexual relationship protects the child from becoming himself or herself sexualized, which is a part of these strategies; that is, some parents do not even disclose their (same)-sexual relationship to the child – which they justify by their wish to protect the child. This invisibility seems to be restricted not only to the school (public) life, but it sometimes or often overarches the family sphere. Many parents who were previously living in a heterosexual relationship felt reluctant to speak about their (new) sexuality to the children, even if they were, for example, already living with a partner of the same gender. One of the parents explained that she is reserved about coming out to her children (aged 10 and 13) because she believes she has to protect them from the burden of (their) coming out in a non-urban homophobic environment – if the children knew their mother was a lesbian, they would have to be open about it when someone asked them questions. This kind of behaviour is often connected to the issues of custody: parents fear that the other biological parent (usually the former partner) will demand full custody of the child and would be successful. Some parents said that they believe that their children already ‘suspect’ their homosexuality, that they ‘understand what is going on’, but that they have not yet gathered enough courage to speak about it with them — again, not because of their personal relationship with the child, but because of the anticipated consequences for the child in

his/her environment. In this way, parents perceive the secrecy of their sexuality as actually protecting the children from being part of it.

One of the gay fathers spoke of the mother of his child confronting a schoolteacher when the pupils were supposed to speak about their families in school: she claimed these were personal issues which should not be addressed. Such assertiveness protects the family by preventing an ‘information leak’. Much effort is invested in the information not leaking – one of the mothers spoke about her daughter confiding in her best friend only after they had been friends for almost ten years (and the family obviously managed to remain invisible).

Nevertheless, parents recognize that there are two sides to the coin of invisibility. One of the mothers presented a case of abuse of her daughter in school after she told in class that she lives with two women: bad marking and bullying from teachers led to deteriorating health conditions, while her mother was constantly confronted by two teachers who claimed ‘that the reason for that was that her daughter terribly misses her father’. The mother transferred her daughter to another school, but only after recognizing that the reasons for her daughter’s bad school outcomes and hospitalizations actually lay in the attitudes of two homophobic teachers. Her family appealed to her that she should report to the police what was happening and sue the school, but she decided against it, concluding that because they were not officially ‘out’ at school, she would not be able to claim discrimination on that basis. When signing out of this school, the mother said:

The headmaster agreed immediately as she wanted to be out of this matter as soon as possible. All she was actually interested in was

whether anyone would ‘pay for it’: if we would report them – she was afraid of that. (Irina)

### *Activism and positioning strategies*

The parents who are less reluctant to out themselves as a family in school or in public space are those who jointly planned the family and where the child was born in their (same-gender) relationship. It is more frequent in such cases that both the biological parent as well as the social parent present themselves as parents in school and elsewhere, partly because of the absence of the threat of custody issues. Nevertheless, social parents who are out to the child’s teachers as ‘parents – partners of biological parents’ report that this is often a struggle: they have to be active in the relationship with the school, which they report is often cold and distanced. Some teachers have a hard time getting used to the equal parental role of the same-gender social parent, but in time and with persistence, they become used to it and accept it. Nevertheless, these parents often find the active role really important because, as one mother explained, it is likely that the teachers would ‘discover’ the family structure through the children’s narratives, essays, and the like. Some parents report that they believe the teachers know they are a same-gender family, but do not feel like discussing it with them yet. On the other hand, one mother said:

My partner didn’t agree that we tell them that the kids live with two women; she said, it’s not their business, who is sleeping with whom. But I told the teacher. She never said anything to me about it afterwards. But when they were drawing families in school, there were no comments anymore. With the first kid, when she drew two grown female figures, the teacher said: ‘today we are drawing family, not friends.’ Now, there were no more comments. (Ela)

Some parents also feel that it is important that they are out as a same-gender family in school, but would themselves not be out in some other spheres of life (such as their work environment and the like).

Recently, more and more families purposefully speak or plan to speak about their family to kindergarten and schoolteachers in what they conceive and describe as a truly activist manner. They see the importance of ‘educating’ teachers – so that the children would be able to talk about their family reality freely, without any confusion, secrecy, or doubts. Especially the very young families in the research sample, where children were born with the aid of donor insemination, feel that what is important is immediate confrontation of the teacher with their family form and parental roles, as well as clear demands for introduction of images of various family structures in the learning materials. These mothers would all agree that what is important is how one positions oneself: as a ‘potential victim of homophobia’ or as an ‘equal parent, who just wants the best for his/her child, as most parents do’. They see this open position as an opportunity to demand equal recognition and participation. At the same time, it is of crucial importance for them to raise their child in a self-confident, empowered way and to equip her/him with the strength needed for an ongoing social battle.

### *Young people from same-gender families*

The young people who were interviewed in the framework of the same research study have not yet developed such ‘family pride’ as the activist parents. For these young people, the main strategy was silence and secrecy about the family reality.<sup>47</sup> The young people’s experiences show that their environment (peers,

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<sup>47</sup> Zaviršek and Bercht, 2012.

teachers, extended families) often implicitly demands and rewards silencing.<sup>48</sup> The strategy of silencing partly protects the children and young people against violence while at the same time has its consequences for the young people's perceptions of themselves and their relationships with others. The concept of 'normality' is very important for young people: their strategies of dealing with the environment and the expected homophobia are tightly connected to the feelings of denormalization<sup>49</sup> and a desire to be accepted, to have their families recognized as 'normal'. Belonging is equally important in both cases – loyalty and belonging to one's family as well as to one's peer group and other non-family contexts, which creates a conflict. How heavy this conflict is depends on the severity of expectations and pressures of the heteronormative environment.

### *Summary: Same-gender families in Slovenia*

All the strategies that parents employ are directed towards protecting their children from anticipated homophobia in school and relate to the different approaches and understandings of what might be beneficial for their families and school and the different levels of what the parents perceive as being open as well as how they (re)construct 'normality'. These strategies were identified as: passing strategies (father figure strategy, biological relative strategy), protective strategies (strategy of invisibility in the family, strategy of the invisibility of the family), and positioning strategies (active parent strategy, activist parent strategy).

All of the participating parents anticipate a danger of homophobic attitudes or even violence, but the school life of their

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Streib Brzič and Quadflieg, 2011.

children is to some extent uncontrollable, so they approach this anticipated danger in different ways. What is characteristic is that there are no models, even to some extent no culture of families where both parents are of the same sex, which surely is a consequence of the fact that same-gender partners in Slovenia are only recently really embracing and claiming their right to become parents. Nevertheless, in the current social climate, the parents seem to have experienced pressures and demands connected to their family life, which result in insecurity, fear, and secrecy on many levels. The feeling and appearance of 'sameness' or 'normality' seem still to be the most promising and safe place for children in the view of their gay and lesbian parents, who are only now developing models of how to approach schools, talk with children, and deal with their environment.<sup>50</sup>

## Concluding remarks

Children in same-gender families surely have some specific experience linked to their family reality. Gustavson and Schmitt, for example, use the expression by Stefen Lynch, 'culturally queer', to describe their particular situation: an experience of associative stigma, that is, stigma that is acquired on the basis of their parents' sexual orientation and at the same time through association with the LGBTQ community.<sup>51</sup>

To better understand and give recognition to the role of their experiences, new research in the field of childhood and family life should be encouraged, research that conceptualizes children and childhood outside of the matrix of adaptability, success, and victimization. Critical research should address and present the

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<sup>50</sup> As one of the reviewers of this paper remarked, 'it is a paradoxical tragedy that safe space means remaining in homophobic normality'.

<sup>51</sup> Gustavson and Schmitt, 2011, p. 161.

experiences of children and youth through a perspective relevant to them. Children and youth are recognized today as social agents, who are not simple copies, victims, or rebels in relation to their environment or parents but actively co-create meanings in the society.<sup>52</sup> Such perspectives may hold a promise to defy the discourses of moral homophobes and abuse of children that suit their different agendas. These approaches might also be important for trying to confront the heteronormative discourses in which the two-dad or two-mom families can present only a challenge (sometimes presented as threatening) or an affirmation (sometimes presented as heteronormative conformity) of the mom-dad families.

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<sup>52</sup> Sobočan, 2012.

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