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BETWEEN SILENCING AND IGNORANCE: “FAMILIES OF CHOICE” IN POLAND

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to show contemporary changes in intimate and family life on the example of “families of choice”. In the first part, I present state-of-the-art concepts of families and argue for the urgent need for their re-definition due to the fact that what we call family nowadays differs drastically from what it used to be. I propose to treat those changes as a natural phenomenon and not as a sign of the crisis of the family, as it is often presented in the Polish conservative discourse. In the second part, I show how “families of choice” have been analyzed so far in Western literature. I contrast those findings with the scarcity of research being conducted on this topic in Poland. This lack of data is quite telling. In the last part, I focus on data gathered during interviews I conducted with Polish lesbian families. I try to answer some of the following questions: How do they blur the boundaries between what counts as family and what does not? How do they cope with the invisibility and exclusions in their daily life? What political agenda could emerge if we take their experiences and needs into account?

Keywords: queer; families of choice; queer families; queer kinship; new configurations of families; lesbian motherhood; transformation of intimacies and family.

The appearance of relationships of non-heterosexual people and their families of choice is a social fact that can no longer be overlooked or covered over with silence.

(Krystyna Slany)

The aim of this text is to describe the most common changes in families and intimate relationships nowadays when the voices about disintegration of communities of all kind in general and the crisis of family in particular are becoming increasingly common. It is an attempt to grasp those changes from the interdisciplinary perspective of gender and queer studies, thus, particularly sensitive

to excluded and marginalized voices. It will also show those changes in a broader perspective of an overall evolution of the concept of family. Those perspectives could help us better to understand these issues and recognize the true values of “families of choice”. I would like to oppose those standpoints that present the occurring changes as a threat to the “nuclear family” seen as the only right and natural model. Fear is not the best way to understand social changes, which cannot be stopped anyway. Seeing them in a broader context could bring, in my opinion, a better understanding and acceptance in the future. In the following parts of this essay I will try to answer some of the most urgent questions regarding new types of families: What is family nowadays? What composes/makes a family? How did it change? How do we conceptualize it? What kinds of changes occur nowadays within families and intimate relationships? Are “families of choice” a sign of the crisis of family or just a proof of its natural development? And is this crisis a contemporary phenomenon, a product of our time or conversely, a complaint as old as the world and family?

From historical point of view family in its contemporary form and hierarchies that accompany it looks not so self-evident. What is now treated as its only natural form happens to be a product of historical changes. Jean-Louis Flandrin in his study on the history of family writes that “it is worth noting that what was once called a family did not imply the triad father-mother-children and that in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries one cannot analyze this triad without taking into account its relation with the kin and house on the one hand and the servants on the other” (Flandrin 1998, 15). Taken as the essence of the family nowadays, “nuclear family” appeared for the first time in the scientific and ideological discourse of the 19th century which gave it universal status and established it as a political ideal. Seen from this perspective, nuclear family is not an everlasting form but a recent historical one, not *the* one but rather one of many stops in the evolution of family.

Relations between husband, wife, and children can be and have been conceptualized differently in other cultures and societies. Hence the conclusion that has appeared at the margins of anthropological work, in Levi-Strauss among others, that a family is not a natural fact (Levi-Strauss 1988). For instance, among the Najar tribe, a big Indian population, marriage was a symbolic ceremony and there were no deep connections between spouses. Even in our culture as we have seen above, the type of the family that dominated till 19th century concentrated around the house and not around marriage. Marriage as a focus/center of the family and a nuclear family as its ideal form were acknowledged as such in consequence of a complicated evolutionary process and the disintegration of composed family. Therefore, we can conclude that family resting on marriage has been a product of evolution and existed as long as it was necessary and economically efficient.

Seeing a family in the historical and intercultural context shows that family has always adapted itself to social changes and new social conditions, therefore

it cannot be considered without taking into account the social and cultural contexts. If we neglect them, we can end up in the trap of idealization and ideologization of its particular form and the concept itself suffers from banality. Giza-Poleszczuk and Marody write that "family deprived of the complexity of relations and dynamics of the process is an abstraction. There is no family as such, there are only its representations". And they add: "only when we leave the omnipresent picture of the triad mother-father-child as a 'natural community' isolated from social environment by the law of privacy do we have a chance to grasp the whole complex reality and the diversity of shapes which historically the family has taken" (Giza-Poleszczuk and Marody 2004, 186, my translation).

Nowadays we deal with a diversity of families that are variously called: patchwork families, blended families, LAT (living apart together), DINKS (double income no kids), families of choice, etc. Nobody is surprised anymore that a child has two fathers when a mother after a divorce gets married for the second time. Also a reproductive revolution forces us to verify anew such concepts as gender, parenthood, and a human being. We hear more and more often about new technologies of reproduction which could in the near future allow two women to have their biological child. What it could be like one can see in the movie *Baby formula* (2009), in which two women become pregnant with each other's genetic material and give birth at almost the same time to two daughters. Even if it is still a fiction, it could be real in the very near future. Also nowadays a mutual support and cooperation among LGBT community results in unwritten and complex network/relations between its members that allow them to have babies. In the British documentary *Pink Parents* one gay man lives nearby a lesbian couple who raise a son and a daughter that have been conceived thanks to his sperm. He gets along with two of his children and their mothers very well, visiting them every day. As one of them states in the movie, he spends more time with his kids than a regular dad might. This case undermines a very common objection about the incompleteness of this kind of family and its lack of sex role model of the opposite gender for the children (see Agacinski 2000). A great example of how the discourse about this kind of family has changed is a speech by Benedict XVI, who stated that nowadays children suffer because they have too many parents (PAP 2009). This diversity of family constellations shows only a small section of the changes in the structure and function of families nowadays. These changes are often resisted in the social mentality or by the law.

FAMILY: REDEFINITION

The changing family forces us to rethink its definition. However, as we could deduce from textbooks and literature about families, this is not an easy task. The best proof of difficulties in defining "family" is a certain helplessness of the theorists when they have to deal with this problem. Paradoxically, the

intuitive formula of the “basic social unit” is more assumptive than a verified object (Giza-Poleszczuk 2005, 10). This means that the category is open to manipulation. Particularly difficult to define is the family in our postmodern/liquid times, when new and diverse forms of intimate relations co-exist alongside the more traditional ones. Reactions to changes can be twofold: one can consider them either a proof of “the end” of family or conversely, an example of its flexibility and adaptability to new human needs. Behind those attitudes one can notice a tacit way of defining “family”. Advocates of “the crisis of family” treat its alternative types with animosity and thus, use a very restrictive and exclusive definition. For them family is only that which consists of a heterosexual couple with children, whether adopted or biological (Slany 2005, 26). Unfortunately, as Slany notices, this type, called by her “classic and universalistic”, is prevalent in the majority of textbooks of sociology of marriage and family in Poland. Simultaneously, in the West there exist more liberal and inclusive ways of defining family and a tendency of writing about family in the plural. In line with this attitude any group of adults and/or children that remain in mutual relation leading to established feelings is a family. As an example of an extreme liberal definition Slany gives one formulated by the Vanier Institute of the Family in Canada, according to which “a family is created by any union of two or more people connected by bonds resulting from mutual agreement, birth or adoption, and which together take responsibility for the realization of basic functions of family” (Slany 2005, 26, my translation). Clearly, one can see a departure from any formal determinants of the family for the benefit of evaluation of individual bonds between its members. Moreover, proponents of such open and liberal definitions perceive its diverse form not as a sign of crisis but rather as an adaptation to contemporary human needs. According to them, family does not vanish but only changes its forms.

Despite all the debates over family in the most classic sociological definitions there remains a stress on its reproductive role. Hence, family has to secure a biological continuity of the society and hand down a cultural heritage to posterity. This occurs even in publications that emphasize historical fluidity, internal complexity and processual character of family. For instance, in the already mentioned piece by Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk, despite repeated emphasis on the difficulties in providing the right definition and despite statements to the effect that “a family is a radical abstraction” and “it is rather a process not a being” (2004, 186), the authors state that “family is indeed a basic unit of human social life within which takes place the basic processes of ‘social metabolism’ (reproduction of population, social, economic and even political order” (op.cit, 189). Similarly, despite his affirmation of diversity of families (e.g., he uses the plural form “families”), Giddens starts the chapter on family in his *Sociology* defining family as a group of directly related people in which its adult members take responsibility for the care of children (Giddens 2005, 194).

The conviction that a family is built around a child also prevails in the public opinion polls in Poland. For instance in the 2006 CBOS poll a question was asked "What kind of relationship between people would you consider as family and which not?" to which all respondents answered that a married couple with children is definable as family. Single parents were family for 89% of respondents, while 71% considered as family people raising children in a non-formal relationship. Married couples without children were family for 67% of respondents, but an unmarried and childless couple constituted family for only 26%. The opinion quickly changes if same sex relations are at stake. A same sex couple raising child/ren was family for 9% people of respondents, and a childless same sex couple for 6%.

It used to be the reproductive function that automatically eliminated same sex relationships from the category of family. However, in the face of family changes as a result, among others, of women's emancipation and the separation of sexuality from reproduction, one should notice that out of roles that defined family in the past—reproductive, socializing/bringing up children, economic and intimate/erotic—the last one, that is, the emotional function related to giving of support, proximity, and mutual communication of one's needs seems to be dominant. Secondly, lots of heterosexual families consciously give up having children while lots of single people decide to have some. Thirdly, among same sex couples people involve themselves in different configurations of relations to have children which marks a next stage of emancipation of reproduction from heterosexual marriage. As Slany argues, "one may suppose that while naming adult homosexual partners a family has a somewhat metaphorical sense, the same is not true of couples raising children because this kind of unit does not differ much from conventional family unit in terms of its functions" (Slany 2005, 36, my translation).

FAMILIES OF CHOICE

Queer families, or—to use Kath Weston's term from her pioneering study on queer kinship—families of choice, started in the 1980's as a result of an open "politicization of kinship." A huge influence on its appearance was exerted by the AIDS crisis when queer people found support and help not in their biological families but within their own community. Earlier, in the 1960 and 1970s, queer communities were built in separation from family and with a sense of pride because of that. Denis Altman summarizes this tendency as follows: "Straight is to gay as family is to no family" (Altman in Weston 1997, p. 193). At that time a community constructed around brotherhood/sisterhood, friendship, and a common sexual identity predominated. In the 1980s we deal with a shift of interest from friendship to kinship and a change in attitude to one's own relationships together with the recognition that they perform in a queer person's life a role that has so far been prescribed to biological unit. Weston starts her

chapter titled "Forever is a long time" by quoting an opponent of calling queer relations a family who states that "if it is real it must last". She counters this argument by showing that homosexual people who came out are very often refused and excluded from their biological family, suggesting that blood ties are very fragile and may be terminated by factors other than death (Weston 1998, 57).

In the contemporary dispute about whether "families of choice" mimic or subvert the dominant heteronormative form of family Weston occupies the middle ground. She writes that new forms of family should not be read either as radically innovative or completely imitative (Weston 1998, 64). She thinks, like Judith Butler (2002), that we need a less binary formulation of kinship nowadays. She notes that within queer families there was no subversion of the relationship's permanence as a marker of its value but at the same time "forever" was understood as having an end, hence "forever is (just) a long time" (Weston 1998). This timing of every relationship suggests a re-evaluation of myths about family in general. Permanence is no longer taken for granted, written into the structure of the relationship (blood is blood) but produced within every relationship anew and lasting as long as partners want to keep it.

Different researchers and theorists show that "families of choice" make up a diversity of family constellations that very often include friends and/or former partners. They are characterized by open membership and blurred boundaries. Lela Lahnemann who runs a Commission for Same Sex Partnership in the Berlin Senate mentions 16 possible configuration among queer families, including single lesbian mothers; gay father, his partner and an adopted child; two lesbian mothers with children that were conceived by anonymous donors; lesbian couples with children from previous marriages; and lesbian and gay couples who together raise children (see Pawlik 2007).

At first, "families of choice" were developed without much emphasis on procreation. In a way, there was common acceptance that reproduction remains in the domain of heterosexual couples as a privilege of marriage. Moreover, a queer person that had a child from the previous heterosexual relation was very often treated with animosity by her/his own community (see Stana 1995). But with the growing tendency to self-identify as family by queer couples the attitude towards having a child has changed as well. Of course it was partly due to the fact of developing reproductive technologies that allowed one to have a biological child without (hetero)sexual intercourse. In the 1980s, the discussion about gay and lesbian parenthood has boomed. This way, the argument of conservative politicians in the U.S. who said that one cannot give the same rights to same-sex couples as heterosexual ones have because only the latter could have children that are beneficial for the state, was refuted.

Much has been written about differences and similarities between the gay and lesbian relationships and the heterosexual ones. Do gays and lesbians build their relationships around different/similar values? How is the work within the

household shared? How satisfied/happy are they with their families? In most studies on division of labor it was demonstrated that both lesbians and gays rejected traditional husband-wife and masculine-feminine role model. For instance, in one of the pioneering comparative studies done by Lawrence Kurdek (1993) who compared the allocation of household labor (i.e. cooking, shopping, cleaning) in cohabiting gay and lesbian couples and in heterosexual married couples (none had children), in the married couples the wives did the bulk of housework, a finding which replicated other research. In comparison, gay and lesbian couples rather split the tasks equally but gay partners tended to specialize in certain tasks whereas lesbians were more likely to share tasks. The same has been shown about lesbian couples raising young children (Peplau and Spalding 2000; Dunne 1999, Sullivan 2004). Also, several studies have replicated the finding that gays and lesbians report as much satisfaction with their relationships as do heterosexuals (Duffy and Rusbult 1986; Kurdek and Schmidt 1986, 1987; Peplau, Padesky and Hamilton 1982 after Peplau and Spalding 2000, 454). It is worth noting that gays and lesbians differ from heterosexual partners in their experience of autonomy and intimacy in the relationships. Lesbians reported greater intimacy than heterosexuals and gay men. Also, both lesbians and gays reported higher autonomy than did heterosexual partners (Kurdek 1998 after Peplau and Spalding 2000, 455).

In *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments* (2001), Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan present their research on same sex intimate relationships in Great Britain. They distinguish three types of patterns around which egalitarian gay and lesbian relationships are built. Firstly, there is much more space for equality because those relationships are not based on socially established division of sex roles. Therefore, partners can make their relationships function in such a way as to avoid injustice and inequality in their household tasks. Secondly, it is very important to negotiate rules and ways of functioning in the relationship. Agreeing upon the division of tasks, mutual expectations, and aims allows one to achieve a higher satisfaction in the relationship. Thirdly, those relationships rely more upon partners' engagement and less upon institutional support which results in emotional proximity and makes the relationship a mutual project in which both sides are equally engaged. As Giddens notes, calling upon the above mentioned research, mutual trust, readiness to actively overcome difficulties, and joint "emotional" work are the distinguishing features of homosexual relationships (Giddens 2005, 213) Similar conclusions can be made about parenthood. Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan call the parenthood of the examined same sex couples "the reflexive project par excellence" because of the permanent negotiations that future parents carry out, taking into account all pros and cons, present and future possible difficulties, and searching for solutions in all possible sources already before the birth of the child.

“FAMILIES OF CHOICE” IN POLAND

When we take into account the richness of studies about same sex relationships and queer families in the West, the limited research available in Poland is quite telling. One of the main problems is the lack of any official data that would allow one to estimate how many of families of choice exist in Poland. In the last census from 2002 the existence of such families was not taken into account and family was defined as “ a couple (married or cohabiting) without children or a couple with one or more children, or a single parent with one or more children” (National Census 2002). One can see that census authors try to include more contemporary forms of families that have not been taken into consideration in the previous censuses such as partners with or without children. However, same sex couples were not included despite the fact that LGBT organizations strongly insisted on recognition and registration of same sex relationships during the time of census. People conducting the census could not register this kind of household as there was no appropriate slot in the questionnaire. According to an unofficial statistic provided by Campaign Against Homophobia and Lambda, several dozen of thousands raise children in homosexual relations. But in this data, only families that have children are counted, whereas those who do not are left out.

Besides lack of official recognition, there is also scarcity of complex research on same sex intimacies in Poland. However, recently there have been some attempts at such studies. An important contribution was a book by Anna Laszuk titled *Dziewczyny, wyjdźcie z szafy* (“Girls, come out of the closet”, 2006). It consists of interviews with lesbians in which they talk about their relationships, also those that involve having children. A more complex study of same sex relationships is Dorota Majka-Rostek’s *Związki homoseksualne. Studium socjologiczne* (“Homosexual Relationships. A Sociological Study”, 2008). In the introduction the author writes about the difficulties of getting in touch with her respondents due to their lack of trust and their reluctance to make their lives an object of research. Finally, she limited the planned number of respondents and finished her research after interviewing 28 couples: 12 lesbian and 16 gay male. None of them raises a child together, two have children from previous relations but were not in touch with them. Two lesbian couples declared a willingness to have children together, and one has unsuccessfully attempted artificial insemination (Majka-Rostek 2008). Her study replicates Western findings about the building of the relationship as a “reflexive project”. Her respondents endlessly negotiated the terms, rules and conditions of their relationships. They were also very flexible and egalitarian in the division of housework.

In my own research I conducted interviews with lesbian mothers who have children either from previous heterosexual relations or with their lesbian part-

ner.¹ The main aim of my study was to check how they manage to create their own families and carry on with their "project" taking into account the complete lack of social support and recognition. How do they cope with their motherhood within the society that refuses all homosexuals the right to have children?²

My study confirms the argument about seeing parenthood and relationship as a reflexive project par excellence. My respondents endlessly talked about how, when, by which methods of insemination and at what cost they could have babies of their own. They considered all pros and cons, and included in this discussion friends and relatives who understood their need of having a child. In one case, for instance, the couple asked their mutual friend to donate his sperm and they succeeded after the first time. They left the question of contacts between the father and the child open to future re-negotiations. As one of them said, "we agreed that depending on what the situation between us looks like when the child is small and between them when it is older between them because the chemistry between people works differently, doesn't it? So we will react very flexibly..." (Ania).

The relationship between lesbian mothers and their children in my study replicates the finding that a child and her/his wellbeing is at the centre of the relationship (see reports of National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study on www.nllfs.or). Lesbian mothers spend a lot of time talking with their children, they treat them as partners, consulting with them important decisions, and discuss the fact of their living together with their lovers. They also try to prepare their children to face the particularity of the family situation in the outer world, leaving up to them how and when they want to disclose their otherness to their friends. Regarding the division of labor in the household and in motherhood tasks, both the biological and the nonbiological mothers reported that household duties and decision making were shared equally. There are no fixed roles and the rules of relationships are constantly re-negotiated. Thus, the division of work is flexible and depends on the changing contexts and partners' needs. Regarding child care activities, sometimes the biological mothers were seen as more predestinated to do some of those tasks.

In their description of the family functioning, my respondents very often pointed to difficulties faced in their daily life that ranged from the very hostile social environs (i.e. meddling, animosity), through the lack of recognition of their relationships by society and the lack of support, ignorance, or even rejection by their biological families, to the lack of accepted terms that they could use in public space to refer to their partners and non-biological children³. There-

¹ I interviewed 8 lesbian mothers altogether. Two of those interviews were with lesbian couples.

² In the CBOS poll from June 2006 the homosexual couple's right to have a child by homosexual couple was supported only by 6% of respondents, while 90% were against it (CBOS 2006).

³ The lack of terminology that could be used to describe the specificity of one's relationship in public was also mentioned by Majka-Rostek who notices that the official language is not suitable

fore, all of them are in favor of legalization of same sex partnership hoping that it could solve some of their problems.

It is worth noting how my respondents defined family. Asked about what counts as family for them, they mentioned a child and a partner, which shows a mixture of blood ties and choice. For most of them family are people with whom they have something more in common than blood ties, people who support their interests and passions, those who support them in daily struggles. Very often let down by their biological families, my respondents have found support and proximity with their friends or former partners. Therefore, their definition of family is rather broad and inclusive, as in the following comment: “family is something you work on and put your energy into, it is something that develops and is prospective. If you understand it like that then parents are not family” (Marta).

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the lack of official recognition, impossibility of the legalization of their partnership, and open homophobia, “families of choice” do exist in Poland. They function on the margin between social refusal of acceptance and existence of other alternative forms of relationships that are becoming popular in Poland (i.e. LAT or DINKS). Also, in their way of building intimacies they do not copy the masculine-feminine model dominant in Poland⁴ but negotiate rules and search for other options. One can even say that they are a true vanguard of changes in thinking about families in Poland, they anticipate their future development in times when the traditional order with its set of rules is becoming non-functional. As Slany rightly writes, “postmodernity discovers that one can successfully live beyond a traditionally defined institution of marriage and family” (Slany 2005, 25), but it does not mean that family becomes unnecessary. As polls show, family is always at the top of the scale of values in Poland. For instance 88% Poles perceive it as the most important human relation. For 92% it is the condition of happiness (CBOS 2009). What has changed, however, and is changing constantly is what we expect from family and how we construct it. Nowadays, family is not a given anymore but is being re-assigned. We build family by creating its meaning on our own.⁵ There is no one way of making it work, so long as we find happiness and self-fulfillment in doing so.

because it privileges biological kinship (2008). It seems that in the private domain there exists a diversity of terms that they use but they cannot be translated into the public probably due to the complete non-recognition of such families/relationships.

⁴ One can see how this model looks like in the complex study by Titkow, Budrowska, Duch-Krzysztofek *Nieodpłatna praca kobiet* (“Women’s unpaid work”, 2004).

⁵ Here I refer to Giddens’ description of postmodern identity. Family, like identity, becomes a reflexive project. It is not what it is but what we make out of it. See Giddens 2006b.

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