

‘My Rainbow Family’

- discomfort and the heteronormative logics

ABSTRACT

Many consider Scandinavian countries to be tolerant and liberal with regard to homosexuality and same-sex parenthood. Nevertheless, heteronormative assumptions of ‘the normal family’ still dominate. The participants in this research project have grown up in rainbow families¹, and this article focuses on how they negotiate and work on heteronormativity and representations of ‘normal’ family life in ways that challenge and alter these assumptions. Their work reveals a continuum of practices ranging from concealment and non-disclosure to being very open and proactive in representing their families. In analyzing the data, I employ Sara Ahmed’s (2004) work on comfort/discomfort, and discuss the discomfort of working on the heteronormative logics. The twenty-five participants in this project come from Denmark and Norway, and range from fifteen to forty-five years of age (most are between twenty and twenty-five). In interviews and written autobiographies, they spoke and wrote about their families, parenthood, and their parents’ sexual orientation.

INTRODUCTION

To me they are just two people loving each other, and so what? They are two people loving each other, and their sex life belongs to their private sphere.

This quotation is an excerpt from an interview with Anette, a sixteen year old participant in this study. Her answer is a response to my question about possible meanings of her mother's sexual orientation² in Anette's daily life. It is quite common for young people to establish a distance to their parents' sex life, but Anette's answer indicates more than distance. Having a lesbian mother has provided her with rich opportunities to reflect upon her own attitudes in relation to her mother's sexual orientation, and consequently to work on the logics of the dominant norms of family and parenthood. Anette's answer calls for an exploration of how the participants negotiate heteronormativity and of their discomfort when working on the heteronormative logics. In doing this work, the participants also challenge the normative representations of family and parenthood that posit heterosexual parents as the preferred.

In both Denmark and Norway lesbian and gays' rights and rainbow families are promoted and made visible by different laws and legislations. Two different survey studies from 2002 and 2007³ also indicate that homosexuality and rainbow families during the last

two decades have acquired greater legitimacy and acceptance both in the Danish and the Norwegian population. However, the rights and existence of rainbow families still spark emotive debates concerning religious, ethical or other normative issues. This indicates that gay and lesbian couples not necessarily are seen as suitable reproducers of the nation (Tuori, 2009).

The implementation of the increasing tolerance within social institutions such as legislation and the labour market varies between Denmark and Norway. In Denmark lesbian couples were given the right to assisted insemination in public hospitals and clinics in January 2007, and in June 2009 the Danish Parliament approved the law that granted heterosexual and homosexual couples the same rights to adopt children. In Norway the politicians took the discussion about equalizing heterosexual and homosexual couples a step further by implementing the Gender Neutral Marriage Act, which came into force on 1 January 2009. It is worth noticing that while the tolerance of homosexual rights and rainbow families seems to be a bit higher in the Danish population, a political decision on implementing a Gender Neutral Marriage Act, does not seem to be a current topic (for further references, see for example Barr, 2009; Gransell and Hansen, 2009; Jakobsen, 2006; Åmås, 2001; Hegna, Kristiansen and Moseng, 1999).

When it comes to studying rainbow families, one of the most recent Nordic reports, '*Regnbågsfamiljers ställning i Norden*' (Rainbow Families in the Nordic countries.), concludes that in Denmark, Norway and Sweden there is not much research on this topic (Barr, 2009:164). In particular, there is no research that combines perspectives of everyday life experiences and historical, cultural and political discourses concerning rainbow families.

This article starts with a presentation of some theories of heteronormativity, and especially focuses on Sara Ahmed's discussions of comfort and discomfort when working on heteronormative logics. I then discuss some previous research on rainbow families, before moving on to describe the methods in my study. Next, I explore two different aspects about the discomfort of working on the heteronorm, in which participants reflect upon their rainbow families. In the concluding section I argue that living a family life that does not fit within dominant norms requires a lot of extra work. However, this work may also bring in new perspectives and new discourses on parenthood and growing up in rainbow families, which points to challenges and possibilities for youth research with regard to addressing the existing implicit heteronormativity in the field.

EXPLORING THE DISCOMFORT OF WORKING ON THE HETERONORMATIVE LOGICS

Heteronormativity and the heteronormative logics describe the promotion of gender conventionality, heterosexuality, and family traditionalism as the correct way for people to be (Ingraham, 1996). This analytical approach emerged from Foucault's arguments that different discourses within science and politics have disciplined and regulated both individuals and populations towards what is considered 'normal' and 'normality' (Foucault, 1980). The ideas of normality are, from a Foucauldian point of view, socially constructed and not given by nature as unchangeable standards. Foucault questions how scientific and apparently neutral descriptions depict historical events as obvious and unquestionable, and as questions about nature rather than culture, which (re)produces their normative status. However, there will always be deviations from 'the normal' and the heteronormative. By determining or categorizing deviation, 'the normal' and 'the normal ideal' are confirmed. Warner (1993) describes how heteronormativity is deeply embedded in a wide range of social institutions and in most standard accounts of the world:

...so much privilege lies in heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as society. Het culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist (Warner, 1993:xxi).

From this perspective, heteronormativity pervades any meaning and behaviour in cultural and social institutions and in notions of 'a normal life'.

The British sociologist and family researcher Bernardes (1997:55) describes the normal life as '... measured in dating, heterosexuality, marriage, reproduction and child rearing', and Wright (2001:279) uses the term heterosexual supremacy when she describes the dominant heterosexual logic: 'In a heterosexual-supremacist society the male / female bond is idealized as superior, - spiritually, morally, physically, emotionally, and intellectually'. Because of this dominant logic, children and young people growing up in rainbow families are frequently reminded of their otherness and incomprehensibility (Corbett, 2001).

Living 'a normal life' may also provide comfort, or in the words of Ahmed (2004): 'Heteronormativity also becomes a form of comforting: one feels better by the warmth of being faced by a world one has already taken in' (*ibid.*:148). We are all shaped by the world we live in, and being queer subjects in the world of the dominant heteronormative logics, may feel as a discomfort. Discomfort is a feeling of disorientation, a sense of one's body's out-of-placeness and a feeling of strangeness. The closer the stranger – or the queer – gets to the

comforting zone of heteronormativity, ‘the more *potential* there is for a reworking of the heteronormative’ (ibid.:152). The potential must not only be recognized as political imperatives, Ahmed claims, but also have to take in the different contours of everyday life such as how rainbow families differently occupy spaces within society. As Ahmed notes; ‘Even when queer families may wish to be recognised as ‘families like other families’, their difference from the ideal script produces disturbances – moments of ‘non-sinking’- that will require active forms of negotiation in different times and places’ (ibid.:153).

Moreover, queer subjects may also be ‘asked’ to not make heterosexuals uncomfortable by for example expressing intimacy in social spaces. However, queer politics may seek the opposite, namely to make heterosexuals feel uncomfortable by making queer bodies more visible (Ahmed, 2004). Yet not all queer subjects are comfortable in making others uncomfortable, and Ahmed explains this latter perspective as; ‘Especially given that ‘families of origin’ are crucial spaces for queer experiences of discomfort, it may be in the name of love, or care, that signs of queerness are concealed’ (ibid.:166).

Those who live in families that do not follow the heterosexual ideal fail to reproduce heteronormative scripts. Nevertheless, Ahmed (2004) emphasizes how this ‘non-fitting’ opens up possibilities for rainbow families to transform what families can do; an opening up which can be both difficult and exciting. Ahmed thus suggests that the effects of ‘non-fitting’ is a discomfort which is generative and productive rather than constraining or negative, and that discomfort is ‘not about assimilation or resistance, *but about inhabiting norms differently*’ (ibid.:155). The failure to be non-normative may therefore provide opportunities to negotiate and work on the heteronorm, and to ‘embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us’ (ibid.:155). Thus Ahmed points to the possibilities of making a meaningful life in spite of this ‘non-fitting’.

The Norwegian sociologist Solvang (2006) refers to some of the same views in his discussion of three different perspectives on how to negotiate and work on norms. In the first perspective, he discusses how normality may be understood as an oppressive structure, and how perceptions of normality and ‘the normal’ suppress differentiation and diversity. In the second perspective, Solvang discusses whether it is possible to identify deviation as a norm within limited fields, and whether it is possible to find representations of deviancy that may represent a norm. The third perspective involves an embracement of normality, where normality and ‘the normal’ is what subjects long for. Solvang defines this latter perspective

not as an attempt to limit the representations of diversity and deviance, but rather as ‘a longing for a social order’ (Solvang, 2006:181).

No one lives outside a system of norms, but no one lives as a simple mechanical reiteration or citation of existing norms. Butler (1993:226) puts it like this: ...’let us remember that reiterations are never simply replicas of the same. And the “act” by which a name authorizes or deauthorizes a set of social or sexual relations, is, of necessity, *a repetition*’. This indicates the possibility of producing norms that include difference and variety. In this sense Butler and Ahmed share the similar perspectives; we inhabit norms and negotiate and work on the heteronorm differently, which means that we do not simply make citations or repetitions of previous sets of practices, moreover that these very practices contain possibilities for changes.

I find the perspectives of Ahmed, Solvang and Butler useful when trying to explore, analyse and discuss the discomfort that participants face when working on the heteronorm and when challenging dominant perspectives of family and parenthood.

LIVING IN RAINBOW FAMILIES

Gays and lesbians are increasingly choosing parenting in a number of ways. Yet there is a difference between being able to choose parenting, and the negotiation of the cultural and political realities involved in being a lesbian or gay parent. One of the main discourses surrounding rainbow families is how the well-being of the children is threatened by their upbringing in these families. The existing studies show that there are no strong indications that lesbian and gay parents produce inferior, superior, or even particularly different kinds of children than heterosexual parents produce. When comparing children growing up in rainbow families to children growing up in heterosexual families, the results show that in general there are no significant differences in school achievement, social adjustment, mental health, gender identity, or sexual orientation between the two groups (see for example Wainright, Russell and Patterson, 2004; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; SOU 2001; Tasker and Golombok, 1997; Flaks, Fischer, Masterpasqua and Joseph, 1995; Tasker and Golombok, 1995; Patterson, 1992). Patterson (1992) concludes that neither sexual orientation nor gender identity among children of lesbian parents is affected by their parents’ sexual orientation. Regarding cognitive and behavioral functioning, Flaks et al. (1995) found that boys and girls being raised by lesbian mothers were equally well-adjusted as children raised by heterosexual parents. Wainright, Russell and Patterson (2004), who did research across a diverse array of assessments, found

that the personal, family and school outcomes of adolescents living in rainbow families did not differ from those living in heterosexual families.

It is worth noting that most of the research on children and youth living in rainbow families concentrates on finding similarities or differences between these children and the children growing up in heterosexual families (Hicks, 2005). This comparison supports perspectives of otherness and appears to assume that due to their sexual orientation gay and lesbian parents are different in negative ways. The research focus creates a hierarchical model which implies that differences indicate deficits, and that places the burden of proof on gay and lesbian parents and their children to demonstrate that they are not less successful or less worthy than heterosexual families (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001). Therefore, it is necessary to ask how the heteronormative logics guides also the research done on rainbow families, since most of the studies try to argue – or almost testify - that these young people will grow up as totally normal; i.e. just like young people growing up with heterosexual parents.

The focus on comparison and differences, on measuring achievements and outcomes, should therefore be complemented by a more pluralist approach to family diversity that asks how heteronormativity maintains the logic that rainbow families are different from heterosexual families. Capturing the voices of children, adolescents, and young adults being raised by same-sex parents is one way to move towards a broader view of family diversity. It is also worth noting that most studies about children and youth living in rainbow families focuses on lesbian families. In a review of twenty-three studies of outcomes for children with lesbian or gay parents, Anderssen, Almlie and Ytterøy (2002) found that only three of the studies were about children of gay fathers. This could be due to the fact that motherhood is generally more debated, problematized and discussed than fatherhood.

Previous studies claim that the most important factor to ensure a positive parent-child relation is the quality of the cooperation and the interaction between the parent and the child, and not the parents' sexual orientation (Wainright and Patterson, 2008; Tasker and Patterson, 2007; Golombok, 2000). The same perspective is emphasized by Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy (1999), who discuss how care and the well-being of the child seems to be the most important responsibility for same-sex parents, even more important than the relationship itself and 'seems to be the common thread across the diversity of parenting practices' (ibid.:96). In her autobiographical article *Growing Up with a Lesbian Mother*, Paechter (2000) discusses how she at the age of fifteen supported her mother when she 'came out' as lesbian and divorced her father. Paechter continued to live with her father after the divorce, but claims that she was then - and still is - 'closer to my mother than to my father' (ibid.:401). She

compares the processes of ‘coming out’ as gay or lesbian to her own process of ‘coming out’ as the teenage daughter of a lesbian. She writes that throughout her teenage years she tended to ‘cover’ her family constellation with occasional lapses into ‘passing’ (*ibid.*:404), and therefore at times deliberately lead others to believe that her parents were heterosexual.

Disclosing sexual orientation – or ‘coming out of the closet’ – only makes sense if there is an idea of homosexuality as a core identity (Seidman, 2002). The closet symbolizes isolation, the individual without society and a stranger even to oneself (Weston, 1997), and ‘coming out’ narratives play a significant role in gay and lesbian historiography and in the lives of many gays and lesbians (Plummer, 1995). The concept of the closet helps us understand the way heteronormativity functions as a system that oppresses gays, lesbians and their children, and the way ‘normality’ acts as an oppressive structure, suppressing differentiation and diversity (Solvang, 2006). However, the closet may also emphasize dynamics of presence and absence; rather than occupying some absolute position ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the closet, gays, lesbians and their children can be out on some occasions and to some people, but not on other occasions and to other people. Ahmed (2006) argues that the closet itself is an orientation device and a way of being at home in the world. She claims that while the closet may seem to be a betrayal of queerness since it means not being ‘out’ in public, it is also possible *‘to queer the closet’* (*ibid.*:176). Ahmed continues: ‘after all, closets still “make room” or clear spaces, in which there are things left for bodies to do’ (*ibid.*:176).

In their research on adults raised in lesbian families, Tasker and Golombok (1995) found that the adults were generally positive to their family life, but that they during adolescence had less positive feelings about their family constellation. This is explained by the worry of being bullied if their peers discovered their mothers’ sexual orientation and anxiety about their family constellation being revealed in public. The Swedish report *Barn i homosexuella familjer* (Children in Homosexual Families) (SOU 2001) supports this finding. The main conclusion in this comprehensive report is that young people in general do not find it problematic to relate to their parents’ sexual orientation, but that some of the youngest find it somewhat difficult to reveal their parents’ sexual orientation to friends and peers. In the report this is explained as a consequence of the many social, psychological and cultural expectations that characterize the adolescent period. Røthing and Svendsen (2010) discuss how on the one hand there appears to have been an increasing tolerance of homosexuality among youths in Norway, but on the other hand, how homonegative⁴ reactions and heterosexual norms remain strong. This ambivalence may be due to young people being tolerant of gays and lesbians as long as same-sex orientations do not affect them directly.

METHODS

Background and process

This study is based on a sample of twenty-five Danish and Norwegian adolescents/young adults living in diverse family constellations⁵. Finding participants was initially very challenging. The Danish participants joined by the snowball method, and the process began by sending e-mails and information about the project to people involved in feminist and gender work at different educational institutions in Denmark. In addition, I sent e-mails and information to different gay and lesbian organizations⁶. This enabled me to establish contact with some key people, who in turn helped me find participants. The Norwegian participants joined the project via my personal networks. Nineteen of the requests first went to the participants' parents and not the participants themselves⁷, and the six remaining participants contacted me after having heard about the project and cleared their participation with their parents.

The participants aged from fifteen to forty-five (most of them between twenty-one and twenty-six), thirteen were girls/women and twelve were boys/men. Although today the majority of the participants live in larger cities, most grew up in small villages or in rural areas. I asked the participants whether they preferred to be interviewed or to write their autobiography. Twenty-one preferred to be interviewed, while the remaining four⁸ wrote an autobiographical text. The first interview was conducted in December 2004 and the last in October 2005. The interviews lasted from approximately 50 minutes to approximately 2 hours, and mainly took place in the homes of the participants.

Semi-structured interviews and autobiographies

In the preparation of this study, I planned to conduct semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is guided by a set of themes and basic questions, but neither the exact wording nor the order of questions is predetermined. The questions are open-ended and few in number, and new questions and themes may emerge during the interview process (Fraser, 2004). An interview is not merely an exchange of words, opinions and attitudes, but largely a social and contextual action where actors construct identities, create social realities and produce meaning (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004).

Instead of being interviewed, five of the participants chose to write their autobiography. An autobiography consists of written accounts where researchers ask the participants to write down their life experiences and/or reflect on specific themes. Autobiographies are highly personalized texts in which the authors tell stories about their own

lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural (Richardson, 2003). According to Hydén (2008:50), the written form allows ‘a more elaborate and formal style and use of imagery, and a refined chronology of events’. It distinguishes itself from the interview and the verbal form in that the researcher does not actively engage with the narrator during the writing process.

The interviews and the autobiographies mainly concentrated on three themes: a) my family then and now, b) stigmatization /problems, and c) how is my life/who am I? During the interviews, my primary concern was to create a context where the participants had the opportunity to talk about what he/she found important in relation to issues of family, parenthood and their parents’ sexual orientation. I tried to reflect on the participants’ perspectives, mirroring their words and listening carefully to their responses. At times, the stories shifted focus and left the themes I considered the most important. However, this gave the participants the opportunity to suggest other themes they considered important.

Analyzing the data

The interviews and the autobiographies form the basis for my analysis. When conducting data analysis, I found that the participants worked quite differently on the heteronormative logics, but that they all talked or wrote about a discomfort when working on the norms. I therefore explore two different aspects that represent most of what the participants were talking or writing about. One aspect discusses how the discomfort became apparent through the narrator’s concealment, covering and restrictions on what his or her parents were allowed to do in public. Approximately half of the participants talked about these aspects of discomfort in their work on the norms. The second aspect discusses how the participants talked about openness and proactive ways of representing their families. However, being open and proactive also indicates a discomfort when working on the norms, by always having to explain and be in the forefront.

THE DISCOMFORT OF WORKING ON THE HETERONORM

There are indications that rainbow families during the last two or three decades have acquired more legitimacy and acceptance in the Scandinavian countries. For example, the participants in this study emphasize that their neighbours have paid little attention to their living in rainbow families, and that they have not been exposed to negative sanctions in their neighbourhood. They have not been bullied or harassed by their schoolmates because of their family constellation. Likewise, any comments they have received have tended to express

curiosity rather than homonegativity, through questions such as ‘what has it been like for you to grow up with same-sex parents?’

Despite this increasing acceptance, the participants’ stories indicate the existence of a dominant heteronormative perspective on parenthood and family-life. The participants talk about constantly having to answer questions about their families, and having to make several clarifications and explanations about living in a rainbow family. It is these clarifications and explanations Cecilie talks about when she describes how she became aware that her family differed from others. Cecilie learned about her mother’s lesbianism when she was 11 – 12 years old, and in the interview she talks about how this made her dwell on one main question: ‘what do I think about it?’ Cecilie explains that she always consciously thought about whether - and eventually how - she would tell her friends about her same-sex family. She puts it like this:

Because, you always have to think through your own opinions and attitudes, - 'is this something I want to tell?', 'How shall I introduce it?' My best friend, who was growing up in a heterosexual family, would never ever have to consider this // ... // She would never ever have to think of whether she would have to tell or not.

Cecilie’s friend, who was living in a heterosexual family, did not have to concern herself with the same questions as Cecilie, as the heterosexual family was taken for granted and did not need any explanation. Thus, due to the dominant heteronormativity, heterosexual families are seen as normal and ‘nothing to talk about’. Cecilie’s story shows how she becomes aware of the notions of family as heteronormal, and how notions of the ‘normal’ and ‘right’ patterns of cohabitation are associated with the ideals of heterosexual parenthood. This produces discomfort in Cecilie’s friendship, a discomfort her friend can avoid.

The vast majority of the participants’ parents are open about their sexual orientation (Hanssen, 2007). The importance of the gay and lesbian parent being open is emphasized in previous research concerning rainbow families (see for example SOU, 2001; Paechter, 2000; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Patterson, 1992; Bozett, 1987). Patterson (1992) found that lesbian mothers who did not conceal their sexual orientation, and who maintained supportive relationships with extended family members and adults in the community, were better able to protect their children from prejudicial experiences. This study suggests that an early disclosure of the parents’ sexual orientation may counteract social stigma, but it also indicates that openness may contribute to new representations of family and parenthood, challenging the dominant heteronorm that claims that heterosexual parents are the preferred caretakers.

Liz, one of the participants in this research who chose to write her autobiography instead of being interviewed, writes that when she told her friends and schoolmates about her family, most of them found it ‘cool’ that she had two mothers and grew up in ‘an alternative social world’. Liz and her parents have always been open about their family constellation, and Liz writes that she is convinced that parents’ openness about their sexual orientation has a tremendous influence on how the child ‘is accepted’. She continues: ‘As long as they openly stand up and talk about the family, the child is less prone to bullying. That is at least what my history tells me’. The quotation shows how parents’ openness may strengthen their children’s work on the heteronorm and on representations of ‘the normal’.

Despite the fact that the majority of the participants in this study stress the importance of their parents being open about their sexual orientation, all of them can recall at least once or twice when they have chosen not to talk openly about their rainbow family. These may be situations where they have avoided saying the name of both parents because they were anxious about homonegative reactions, or they avoided saying it ‘because of all the questions it would raise’ as one of the participants expressed it. In spite of emphasizing openness, they all occasionally chose to ‘stay in the closet’ – at least during some periods in their lives. Rejecting openness or occasionally wanting to keep the family constellation a secret, must always be contextualized and analyzed from the perspective of a person’s everyday life, and sometimes ‘staying in the closet’ might be the most relaxing place to stay. In other words, staying in the closet at times does not necessarily mean assimilation to heteronormativity, but provides opportunities to queer the closet and also to be at home in the world at times (Ahmed, 2006; Paechter, 2000).

Next, I discuss how the participants deal with their parent’s sexual orientation in their everyday lives by exploring two aspects about how participants work on the heteronorm differently, and how their practices appears to be based in the discomfort they feel when doing this work. The first aspect is about concealment, secrecy and the restrictions some of the participants put on their parents’ behaviour in public. The second aspect is about working on openness and proactiveness.

Discomfort and homonegativity

In my study, the participants describe ‘the closet’ as a space where it is possible to literally feel at home; - a space where they occasionally can relax and feel comfortable. This must not be perceived as hiding or denying, however, for some of the participants it seems to have been more important than for others, not to disclose a family life perceived deviant by the dominant

public. These participants are reserved when talking about their parents' sexual orientation and their rainbow families. It may therefore seem like they are striving to be 'normal', in the sense that they are longing for this normal, social order (Solvang, 2006). They do not want to be perceived as deviants or 'outcasts' by their friends or others. Yet, this does not mean that they simply adapt to the norms of what is considered the normal family life. On the contrary, this strategy may be seen as a different way of challenging and working on their own discomfort and the established notions of normality (Ahmed, 2004).

One of the practices participants describe is how they do not disclose their parent's sexual orientation unless they are very confident that it will be safe to talk about it, meaning that the disclosure will be met in a positive way. Participants do this in various ways; for example, by saying that the father's boyfriend or mother's girlfriend is a 'good friend' or 'an uncle' / 'an aunt', or as Anita does; hiding things in the house that can reveal her mother's sexuality. She talks about situations when she covered various personal effects such as buttons and pens, and removed pictures from the walls when friends came to visit as these items could reveal her mother's sexual orientation. These actions are similar to actions described in previous research where lesbians who are not open about their same-sex preference 'de-dyke' their home when having visitors (Johnston and Valentine, 1995). This 'de-dyking' includes hiding pictures of lesbian icons, books and other things that can reveal their sexual orientation, depending on the level of discomfort likely to be expressed by the visitors. Anita was afraid of what her friends or neighbours would think of her, since her mother was 'different and people that are different are not always met in positive ways'. For years, Anita thought that people would see her as weird or a lesbian or 'something like that', as she puts it. When she at the age of sixteen told some of her schoolmates about her family constellation, she was very surprised that her friends' only comment was: 'And so what?'

Anita broke the silence at the age of sixteen. Another participant, Tony, stopped taking friends home and did not tell anyone about his family constellation until he was about 18 or 19 years old. Tony was twelve years old when his mother said she would move in together with a woman, and to him this was a great upheaval. He explains his secrecy with the fear of being perceived as gay if his mother's sexual orientation became known. Anne tells a similar story. During her childhood and early youth, her friends never asked her about her family. 'They never asked me or talked to me about it. Never ever. It was a complete silence', she says in the interview. In her early teens, she was afraid that if she told her friends about her lesbian parents, they would believe she was a lesbian, too. She puts it like this:

Anne: I can remember I was afraid that others would think I was like that, too. If I said that my mom was a lesbian and that I stayed with them, they would think that I was a lesbian too.

I: Was it embarrassing to be a lesbian?

Anne: Yes! It was! It was just something people were telling bad jokes about. Whenever I heard about homosexuality, it was only in connection with the nasty jokes. Never else.

For these participants, the discomfort of working on the dominant heteronorm led them to conceal their parent's sexual orientation due to the anxiety of being perceived as gay or lesbian, especially when they were in their early teens. As they grew older the anxiety appears to have diminished, and each of them chose a moment to come out of the closet as youth living in rainbow families.

Some of the participants choose to be relatively open about their parents' sexual orientation, but also selective in relation to whom they disclose it to and in which situations they find it appropriate to talk about their rainbow family. One of the participants, Susanne, says she is still not sure why she did not put Pernille (her mother's girlfriend) on the invitation list for her celebration when she was a candidate for confirmation: whether this was an expression of being embarrassed because of her mother having a female lover, or if it was just an oversight. Susanne's thoughts are similar to those described in previous studies that emphasize the importance of situating ambivalence about openness within everyday practices (SOU, 2001; Paechter, 2000). One can imagine that having a religious ceremony at the age of 14 – 15 may produce some ambivalence about whether to disclose a parent's sexual orientation.

Anette talks about how she puts restrictions on whether her mother is allowed to express herself as a lesbian. She has told her mother that she does not want her and her girlfriend to make their relationship visible when she joins them in public spaces. She puts it like this:

Anette: So, if I'm going with my mother and her girlfriend to the movies, I do not want them to hold hands or kiss in the street. I don't like that! These things can make people go crazy! That my mother and her girlfriend are showing everyone that they are lesbians; – I don't like that. I don't have a problem with it in private, though.

I: So you think it can be considered provocative in public spaces?

Anette: Yes

On the one hand, Anette expresses concern for what might happen if her mother and her girlfriend's expression of love provoke people. One reading of this concern is that Anette imposes the symbolic violence of heteronormativity on her mother, thereby devaluing her

status as a parent. Yet it may also be read as a genuine fear of homonegative and homophobic reactions from people in the street. Anette says that people ‘may go crazy’ if they see same-sex couples in the street, which might be understood as a concern that it might be dangerous for same-sex couples to show their love in public. On the other hand, Anette also says that she does not mind that her mother and her mother’s girlfriend show their love in the private sphere of the family.

Anette here talks about her different practices regarding how she is *both* handling her mother's same-sex relationship based on what she perceives as the dominant heteronorm and the fear of homonegativism, *and* the way she deals with her own values and positive attitudes to her mother's sexual orientation. Putting restrictions on whether a parent is allowed to express their love in public or not, indicates an awareness of the need to take precautions and is not simply based in shame or in compliance with the dominant heteronorm.

The stories of concealment, secrecy and restricting parental behaviour indicate the participants' fears of homonegative reactions. Further, their concerns that they will be excluded by peers may be expressions of an adaption to the dominant norms. The concerns may also express a longing for normalcy and a striving to be ‘normal’ (Solvang, 2006). However, these practices may also express something else. They certainly indicate an awareness of a dominant heteronorm, but related to the different actions the participants take to make their everyday life liveable, their practices are also indicative of the discomfort of working on heteronormativity. Therefore, their stories are not merely reiterations of the norms, but ways of negotiating the norms differently and orientate towards practices that are not necessarily experienced as constraining or negative (Ahmed, 2004).. In the next section I discuss how some of the participants are choosing openness and a proactive attitude in negotiating established notions of family and parenthood.

Discomfort, openness and proactivity

In this study, approximately half of the participants are very open and proactive in the ways they represent their families. They describe how they take issue with ideas that claim growing up with gay or lesbian parents will do the children harm or create problems. Their stories are about being proud of living in rainbow families, and they speak up if someone talks in a negative manner about homosexuality or gays and lesbians. Despite the risk of being subject to negative sanctions and reactions, they talk very frankly and openly about their families, and do not accept suggestions that they should be ashamed of their families just because they differ from the heterosexual ideal.

Cecilie is one of the participants who talk about how she always has fought against what she describes as ‘prejudices among people’. In the interview, she says that as a twelve year old she did not find it problematic at all when her mother told her that she was a lesbian. Her mother was very open about her sexual orientation, and Cecilie never kept secret about it. She says she used to talk about her mother being a lesbian and about her family constellation, in what she characterizes as a natural way:

I thought; - 'I just speak about it in a natural way'.... If I say it in a natural way; - 'This is Gitte, she is my mother's girlfriend, there is no more to it'. Instead of saying; 'now, listen, my mother is a lesbian', and so on and so on. Then it becomes something *strange*. For years, I said; - 'it is quite natural, there has always been homosexuality, that's it!' I will not discuss this at all. People might think it was a disease or something really weird. It certainly is completely and I can notice all the prejudices that comes with it. I have fought tooth and nail against them.

Cecilie’s way of expressing herself is indicative of her awareness of the dominant heteronorm. She fights it! The discomfort of working on the norm mobilizes a strong proactivity; she takes action and is very open and firm about her family constellation. Her proactive ways of dealing with her unusual family constellation may be compared to the lesbian and gay coming out process, where visibility and openness are some of the main actions that work on the established norms. Cecilie’s work is to fight against prejudice and dominant norms by orienting herself ‘out of the closet’ rather than choosing to stay in or to queer the closet (Ahmed, 2006).

Camilla talks about how she always has been proactive when representing her family. When she started school at seven, the pupils had to present themselves and their families. Camilla walked up to the blackboard and drew lines and arrows to show the relationships between her different family members. These family members were not all related through blood-ties, but to Camilla they were all included in the family. Throughout her years in school, she always represented her family by drawing on the blackboard. When Camilla during the interview reflects on being very active in representing her rainbow family, she puts it like this: ‘I have always been at the forefront and said “this is how it is, this is my life and I am very pleased with it” ’. By doing so she wanted to show the world that she had not ‘suffered any damage’, as she puts it. Camilla is well aware of the ways that heterosexuality dominates society, and has worked against this dominance all her life by presenting a different pattern of parenthood and family life.

Like Cecilie and Camilla, Liz has been very proactive when representing and talking about her family. She writes in her autobiography that the discomfort of working on the

heteronorm has been important to her all her life, and that she always has defended the rights of gays and lesbians, and thus her own childhood:

I remember once during a break a boy was talking a bit patronizing about lesbians. Me and a friend of mine promptly attacked him, and he had to take all of it back. When I look at this situation in retrospect, I do not think the comment was directed towards me or my mothers, but I would by no means accept any criticism of gays and lesbians - it's too close to me - and I can still fly into a rage if anyone criticizes gays and lesbians.

The quote suggests that Liz has been working on the heteronorm not only from the perspective of being a child raised in a same-sex family, but that she has also stood up for gay and lesbian rights all her life. She continues:

My parents have sometimes been worried about me fighting their fight, assuming that I had a sort of responsibility also to fight for their rights, for the rights of gays and lesbians, but I have always felt that it was just as much my fight. My own struggle to be allowed to feel good, to have a great childhood, in spite of my parents' sexual orientation - to feel normal and well-functioning.

The importance of 'being allowed to feel good', or in Ahmed's words 'comfortable' (Ahmed, 2004), is a powerful statement from a young woman growing up in a family considered deviant and marginal. Her remark indicates that heteronormative values may lead to a sense of inferiority and of always having to prove that you are fine (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001). Liz also writes that she finds it very annoying when some politicians express their concern that children and adolescents who have gay or lesbian parents may risk being bullied or socially excluded. She believes this is a ridiculous argument, and argues that politicians instead should speak in positive terms about the gay and lesbian parents' abilities to raise their children into 'healthy and well-functioning people', as she puts it, and continues; 'If this happens, heterosexual parents may be prevented from developing prejudices, which might be transferred to their children who therefore are likely to tease "little Liz" because of her two mothers'. What Liz expresses here is that political discourses that emphasize that a man and a woman are the best parents maintain dominant perceptions on family and parenthood. By changing these discourses, new perspectives may arise, showing a broader diversity of family patterns and the fact that the parents' sexual orientation is not the central issue in bringing up children (Golombok, 2000; Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy, 1999). All the participants in this research project have stated that 'the good parent' does not depend on the man - woman constellation. The most important quality of good parents is that they are 'wise, warm, and sensible people', as one of the participants in the project puts it.

By her actions and practices, Liz, like the other participants, is constantly exposed to the discomfort of working on the heteronorm and its representations of ‘the normal’. They all express a substantiated position and opposition to heteronormative practices that narrow the range of possible family constellations. They do this by emphasizing their positive experience of growing up in rainbow families. They also focus on the fact that what affects their parents, also affects them. In this respect, we may see their practices and actions as ways of defending the right to grow up in rainbow families, and as powerful statements of choosing not to stay in the closet.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The ways the young participants are working on the heteronorm and on representations of ‘the normal’, seem to be based on how they perceive their parents’ sexual orientations and how their families are able to negotiate a place within the dominant norms about sexuality and family life. Despite the existing variety of family patterns and structures, the heterosexual nuclear family is still considered the normal and the ideal. The participants in this study live in families that on the one hand represent family variety and diversity, but on the other hand are seen as representing deviance. Consequently, in many respects, the young participants have to argue, challenge, negotiate, and to some extent defend their parents’ sexual orientations, their rainbow families and in doing so, their own childhood. This is the extra work I have characterised as discomfort. In other words, the ‘extra work’ is the constant exposure to the discomfort of working on the dominant norms and the heteronormative logics that the participants face.

They tell about how they enact and work on the dominant heteronorm, and on what is considered normal or deviant. Some of the participants keep silent about their gay or lesbian parents; they conceal, keep secret or put restrictions on their parents’ behaviour in public spaces. Their practices derive, among other things, from their attempts to avoid homonegative reactions and sanctions, and therefore they choose to stay ‘in the closet’. They may choose to keep silent in their teens as a way of queering the closet and then choosing the right moment to step out of it. This is indicative of the discomfort of working on the heteronorm; not necessarily a discomfort that is constraining or problematic, but can be generative and productive. The participants are not passive subjects or victims of the dominant heteronormativity, but rather actors who choose practices that make their everyday lives liveable.

Others show the discomfort they feel when working on the heteronorm by being open and proactive. They do not accept being considered deviant or different in a negative sense. Their stories focus on how living in rainbow families has provided them with cultural and social strength and meaning. In their proactive ways of representing their families, and in their claims to the right to inclusion and acceptance, their work on the heteronorm and on representations of normality produces arguments, statements and practices that may create new discourses on heteronormativity and the importance of being out of the closet.

The young participants do not cite or reiterate the existing norms; instead they repeat and work on them differently and with variation. However, when moments of making corrections and explanations get repeated over time, they may be experienced as a bodily injury, as moments of positioning oneself as a subject who failed in the attempt to live up to the heterosexual narrative (Ahmed, 2004). In my exploration of the work the young participants do within the heteronormative logics, three topics emerge. *First*, children growing up in rainbow families do not live a 'normal' family life, since – from a heteronormative perspective - living in rainbow families means living outside normality. Not having this possibility requires a lot of extra work, and the participants talk about how this work influences their everyday lives. There is discomfort in doing this work, but not necessarily a constraining discomfort that prevents the participants from being actors and choose the lines, orientations and solutions they consider best. Instead, the participants' work expresses how they inhabit the dominant norms differently. *Secondly*, the discomfort of working on the norms and on representations of 'the normal' bring new perspectives to light and consequently may produce new and vital discourses about parenthood and growing up in rainbow families. The negotiations and work on heteronormativity can be important contributions to these new discourses. *Thirdly*, it also constitutes a challenge to youth research in general. From my point of view you cannot discuss or study young people's lives unless you also frame it within a critical perspective; a perspective which questions the dominant heteronorm. This implies discussions on how heteronormativity is entangled in young people's lives. Heteronormativity means focusing on why certain forms of expressions, practices and relationships are taken for granted, and is hardly questioned. I think Ahmed (2004) pinpoints this in the following example, - an example many young people are expelled to: 'It is no accident that compulsory heterosexuality works powerfully in the most casual modes of conversation. One asks: "Do you have a boyfriend?" (to a girl), or one asks: "Do you have a girlfriend?" to a boy' (ibid.:147). In my opinion, the excerpt is an example on how heteronormativity is enacted in young people's lives, and why the perspective should be

taken more into consideration within the field of youth research, as an attempt to avoid an unconsciously repetition or strengthening of the heteronormative logics.

Learning to live with the effects and affects of a dominant heteronormativity may be crucial to what makes rainbow families different from heterosexual families (Ahmed, 2004). This may have negative effects like pain, anxiety, fear and shame, but this ‘non-fitting’ or discomfort also provides opportunities to choose different lines and orientations towards practices that might challenge and move the dominant heteronormative logics. In other words, the question is how to relate to the heteronormative in ways that opens up for diversity and unusual possibilities of living.

Notes:

¹ The concept ‘rainbow family’ is defined in the report ‘Regnbågsfamiljers ställning i Norden. Politik, rättigheter och vilkor’(Rainbow Families in the Nordic Countries. Politics, rights and conditions) as: ‘family forms in a broad sense, and is used to denote the family types that do not fit into the traditional nuclear family, provided that one or more persons in the family identify as homosexual, bisexual or transsexual’ (Barr, 2009:22).

² My inspiration for using the concept ‘sexual orientation’ comes from the work of Ahmed (2006), and the way she discusses orientation as how we arrive at the places we do; what directions and lines we choose and our orientation towards objects. In Ahmed’s terms, sexual orientation means to follow lines of desire, orientating the subject toward some others by establishing lines or directions and ‘following different lines insofar as the others that desire is directed toward are already constructed as the “same sex” or the “other sex”.....Being directed toward the same sex or the other sex becomes seen as moving along different lines’ (Ahmed, 2006:70).

³ *The Value Survey 2007 [European Values Study / World Values Survey 2007] (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2007)* shows that the support for the heterosexual nuclear families is high in the Norwegian population, but that there has been a slight decline over the past 10 years. While about 85% of the respondents in the 1990s’ believed that children needed both a mother and a father if they were to have a happy childhood, the figure for the Value Survey 2007 was 65%.

The European Social Survey 2002 shows that on the statement, ‘Gays and lesbians should have the freedom to choose to live as they want’, the answers given from the Danish respondents are approx. 4.3 and from the Norwegian respondents approx. 3.8. (1 = strongly disagree 5 = strongly agree). This expresses a greater tolerance for homosexual rights in Denmark than in Norway.

⁴ Homonegativism is explained as ‘cultural and social institutions, norms, and practices that imply that homosexual expression is less desirable than corresponding heterosexual expression’ (Anderssen and Hellesund, 2009:112)

⁵ * Nine participants have during their childhood and adolescence grown up with their biological mothers and fathers. Later their parents divorced and their mothers came out as lesbians. Their mothers later established lesbian relationships.

* Seven participants have grown up with their lesbian mothers or in lesbian relationships where the mothers have chosen assisted reproduction. Some of them know their biological father, while others do not.

* Three participants have grown up with gay fathers and their partners.

* Three have grown up with single mothers and partly in lesbian families, but do not know their biological father (not assisted reproduction)

* Two have grown up with their biological mother and father. Their parents divorced, but they have not lived together with their mothers in rainbow families after the divorce

* One has grown up living half the time with the mother and her lesbian partner, and half the time with the gay father and his partner (one week in each family).

⁶ Some of the organizations were ‘Landsforeningen for bøsser, lesbiske, biseksuelle og transpersoner’ [The National Association for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender liberation (LGBT)], Lambda and Tribaderne.

⁷ This first contact went to their parents for ethical reasons. Some of the participants were so young that the parents had to consent to their participation. However, the main reason for contacting the parents was that they would be a key third part in the research project, and therefore had to be informed.

⁸ One of the participants wanted to be both interviewed and to write the autobiography.

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