Transformative Power of Same-Sex Marriage and Non-Heterosexual Reproductivity. How Parents of GLB Offspring Adjust to Their Marriage and Children

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Transformative Power of Same-Sex Marriage and Non-Heterosexual Reproductivity. How Parents of GLB Offspring Adjust to Their Marriage and Children

One of the most notable gaps in the growing field examining parents' adjustments to their offspring's non-heterosexuality concerns parents' responses to same-sex marriage and (grand)children from non-heterosexual relationships. Informed both by the life stories of GLB migrants who are married or raising children with a same-sex partner in Belgium and the Netherlands and by the accounts of their parents living in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries with a constitutional protection of heterosexual marriage, the present study addresses this gap. It also takes the inquiry a step further by situating it within the framework of contrasting normative expectations. This approach identifies how parents' responses and disclosures, though firmly situated in the context of their homonegative CEE environments, also negotiate new expectations formed by their GLB offspring in GLB-friendly Belgian and Dutch environments. In addition, this study highlights both the parents' difficult negotiation of same-sex marriage and the role of children in facilitating the acceptance of same-sex families in the CEE context. The implications of these patterns – particularly the transformative power of same-sex marriage and non-heterosexual reproductivity – are further situated into a wider intimate citizenship debate on the consequences of the inclusion of GLB individuals into the mainstream institutions.

Keywords: parents of GLB offspring; same-sex marriage; children; response; disclosure; migrants

Introduction

> Apparently, his [father's] very first reaction was: 'Also, then we are never gonna have grandkids.' But my mom knew already that we were working on it and said: 'Yeah, you might be surprised there […] He might find a way to solve his problem.' […] It was still […] before the surrogate was pregnant. (Dorian, married with children)

Various studies of parents' initial reaction to their offspring's non-heterosexuality typically report most parents experiencing loss or grief (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998;

Phillips & Ancis, 2008). Among other things, parents mourn their shattered heteronormative expectations, as they see the desired trajectory of their children getting married and giving them grandchildren going up in smoke (Fields, 2001; Kuhar, 2007; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Phillips & Ancis, 2008; Gross, 2011; Biblarz, Carroll, & Burke, 2014). As Dorian's quote above illustrates, this assumption may increasingly be mistaken, for some parents at least. In a growing number of European countries, same-sex couples can marry. Moreover, gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) individuals are increasingly having children in the context of already established non-heterosexual identities and relationships (Patterson & Riskind, 2010). While the path to GLB parenthood is still filled with various societal and legal obstructions (Eggert & Engeli, 2015), in some Western countries, such as Belgium or the Netherlands, GLB-headed families and parental rights of same-sex couples are fully recognized and protected (Eggert & Engeli, 2015; Waaldijk, 2017). Nonetheless, even within the European Union (EU), countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands are exceptional in the scope of recognition they provide for GLB-headed families. Further, these countries are particularly starkly opposed to some other EU members, such as many Central and Eastern European (CEE) states that provide limited or no recognition of same-sex relationships, or even constitutionally define marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Most of these CEE countries also provide a very restrictive environment for GLB parents. Despite these obstacles and largely homophobic public opinion in CEE (Lottes & Alkula, 2011; Bolzendahl & Gracheva, 2018), many CEE GLB individuals still become parents, by braving legal gray zones and societal reaction (e.g. Polášková, 2007; Mizielińska, Abramowicz, & Stasińska, 2015; Maričić, Štambuk, Tadić Vujčić, & Tolić, 2016). However, some CEE GLB individuals find institutional recognition of their same-sex relationships and considerably easier parenthood opportunities with

cross-border mobility, particularly in the context of the EU freedom-of-movement framework.

These new realities of GLB-headed families can create a new context for parental reactions, one in which grandparental desires may be realized, just not within heterosexual relationships or marriages. Nonetheless, such an absence of a heteronormative framework might be difficult to process, both for the parents of the GLB offspring and for the others. Indeed, GLB parenting remains one of the most controversial GLB issues. For example, the acceptance of GLB parenting lags behind both the acceptance of same-sex marriage and homosexuality even in otherwise GLB-accepting societies (Takács, Szalma, & Bartus, 2016; Weissman, 2017). In patriarchal communities that privilege 'heteronormative reproductivity' above all others, which is typical of many CEE countries (Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2015), the acceptance of children of GLB individuals might be even more difficult. This is well demonstrated by the CEE approval rates for gays and lesbians adopting children that are among the lowest in Europe (Takács, et al., 2016). In these communities, therefore, welcoming the (grand)children from the GLB offspring into the family may carry considerable social costs for the parents of GLB individuals. This typically means that even those parents who were previously hiding their offspring's non-heterosexual identity or relationships, and who were asking their offspring to do the same in contact with their extended family and parents' social circles – which is often the case in homonegative communities (e.g. Švab & Kuhar, 2014) – must now accommodate new relationships with both their GLB offspring and their own immediate environment.

Informed both by the life stories of GLB migrants who are married or raising children with a same-sex partner in Belgium and the Netherlands and by the accounts of their parents living in CEE, the present study examines how parents respond to and how

they disclose information about their offspring's same-sex marriages and children born in non-heterosexual relationships. These combined perspectives position this study at the intersections of two contexts – one in which GLB migrants were able to pursue their desires for marriage and children, and one in which such 'conventional' trajectories were not possible or easily imaginable. While parents' adjustments to their offspring's non-heterosexuality are a growing field of inquiry (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Chrisler, 2017), very little is known on parents' processing of same-sex marriages and (grand)children from same-sex parents. This study seeks to fill this gap, but it also takes this inquiry one step further by situating it within the framework of different normative expectations between migrants' receiving countries and their CEE home countries – which is a framework that their parents must accommodate as well in their continuing relationship with the GLB offspring and their families. By highlighting the parents' difficult negotiations of same-sex marriages in the CEE context and the welcome they extend to the (grand)children and their same-sex parents nevertheless, this study further explores the implications of these two patterns for the potential transformation of family norms in the CEE context. Thus, it also situates the findings of this study into a wider intimate/sexual citizenship debate (Plummer, 2003; Weeks, 2007; Richardson, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Most studies still find that the parents' initial reactions to learning of their offspring's non-heterosexuality are negative or that they encompass mixed feelings that may be supportive, but nevertheless include shock, concern or grief for the loss of their child's imagined future (Patterson, 2013; Biblarz, et al., 2014; Grafsky, 2014). In parents' adjustments, these negative or mixed initial reactions develop into final rejection or gradually re-organize into tolerance or full acceptance (Patterson, 2013; Biblarz, et al., 2014; Grafsky, 2014; Chrisler, 2017). Nonetheless, this narrative of gradual change is

often complicated by parents' deliberate silences, such as those stemming from discouragements of explicit disclosure – the so-called 'open secret' situations (Patterson, 2013; Majka-Rostek, 2011; Nordqvist & Smart, 2014; Jhang, 2018). Likewise, parents can also react to their offspring's disclosure of GLB identity by refusing to acknowledge or discuss it further (Švab & Kuhar, 2014; Denes & Afifi, 2014; Jhang, 2018). For these reasons, for example, some GLB individuals come out for the second time (Denes & Afifi, 2014), or they defer the disclosure until they can present it in the framework of a loving same-sex relationship (Gross, 2011; D'Amico, Julien, Tremblay, & Chartrand, 2015; Jhang, 2018) or even same-sex marriage (Lannutti, 2013).

Still, surprisingly little is known on how parents accommodate these possibly unexpected life transitions of their GLB offspring. In an early consideration of this issue in the US context, Fields (2001) suggests that straight parents welcome same-sex weddings as indicators of 'normalcy' of GLB individuals and the similarity of their paths to the heteronormative paths. Smart's study (2007) of the UK 'wedding' (civil partnership) ceremonies presents more diverse reactions – from those where family members celebrate the social legitimacy granted by these ceremonies to the more difficult adjustments or outright rejections, either due to the disapproval of same-sex marriage or to the dismay that there will be no 'turning back' into heterosexuality now. Einarsdóttir (2016), similarly, finds diverse reaction to 'marriages' (civil partnerships) of women in Iceland, from 'marriages' facilitating full acceptance of same-sex partners into the family to situations of little acknowledgement or even no disclosure to the parents. Finally, Lannutti's study (2013) highlights how, following the legalization of same-sex marriage in some US states, married or engaged same-sex couples started expecting they should be treated the same as heterosexual couples by their parents. While this expectation was in some families fulfilled, in others it was not – and some parents

attempted to control or limit the news about same-sex marriage in order to contain the visibility of their association with their offspring's non-heterosexuality (Lannutti, 2013).

While the visibility of same-sex marriages may still be negotiable, children are less easy to hide. Admittedly, some GLB parents, particularly those with children from previous heterosexual relationships, may often choose not to disclose their sexual orientation in certain settings (Danna, 2011; Maričić, et al., 2016; Sobočan, 2013). However, many GLB parents with children from non-heterosexual relationships are often more insistent on disclosing their family structure (Cloughessy, Waniganayake, & Blatterer, 2018), even in more traditional or homonegative societies (Danna, 2011; Maričić, et al., 2016; Sobočan, 2013). Further, particularly in familialistic contexts typical of CEE countries, GLB individuals and their parents are often socially and economically interdependent. In such settings, grandparents are expected to provide support and a safety net in raising children (Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2018; Maričić, et al., 2016).

Yet, the research on how parents of GLB individuals accommodate grandchildren is notably absent from the literature. With the exception of Gross (2011) who interviewed (grand)parents in France in mid-2000s and Almack (2008) who focused on how the UK lesbian couples perceived their parents' reaction to children, (grand)parental reactions are typically a side note to other research focuses (e.g. Danna, 2011; Lustenberger, 2014; Nordqvist & Smart, 2014). Despite these limitations, the existing research suggests that most parents welcome grandchildren from the GLB offspring (Gross, 2011; Danna, 2011), even though Almack's research (2008) also emphasizes negative reactions. The latter is usually linked to the previous lack of acceptance of offspring's non-heterosexuality (Almack, 2008; Gross, 2011; Nordqvist & Smart, 2014), although an opposite pattern has also been noted. Specifically, it is with

the arrival of (grand)children that some parents of GLB offspring become more accepting of their non-heterosexual identities and/or relationships (Gross, 2011; Lustenberger, 2014; Nordqvist & Smart, 2014). Nevertheless, even the (grand)parents who have otherwise fully welcomed children of their GLB offspring into the family may find the non-heterosexual association difficult to negotiate. For example, Almack (2008) notes how some grandparents misrepresent the 'origin' of their grandchildren through, for example, strategic choices of photographs to display in their homes. In contrast, however, some parents actually find it easier to incorporate their offspring's non-heterosexuality or non-heterosexual relationship into the wider celebration of a child's arrival into the family (Gross, 2011; Lustenberger, 2014).

The present study further situates these open questions about how parents respond to and how they disclose information about their offspring's same-sex marriages and children within the framework of contrasting normative expectations. Specifically, this study outlines how the parents of GLB offspring from CEE countries with a constitutional definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman negotiate their understandings of marriage and their desires for grandchildren with two contrasting sets of expectations. On the one side, the parents' reactions and disclosure strategies reflect the perceived reactions of their CEE environment that are based on the presumption of strongly heteronormative expectations. On the other side, the parents must also negotiate the new expectations for family recognition formed by the GLB migrants in the protected and GLB-friendly contexts of their receiving countries, Belgium and the Netherlands.

Data and Methods

The data analyzed in this paper were collected as a part of a larger project examining perceptions and receptions of same-sex families in different institutional contexts

(MSCA project TOFNITW/TransNorm, 2017-2019). In the present study, I focus on the parents' reactions reported in biographical interviews with Central and Eastern European (CEE) GLB migrants who were formally married[1] and/or were raising children with a same-sex partner in Belgium or the Netherlands[2], and on the perspectives of their parents obtained through semi-structured interviews.

Participants

Eleven GLB migrants were recruited through personal contacts and advertisements in social media and the LGBTIQ* and rainbow families' organizations in Belgium and the Netherlands. They were interviewed first, and then they were asked to help recruit their family members. Six mothers and one father consented to participate, and one additional father joined the interview with the mother at the field site. The migrant sample included six cisgender women and five cisgender men between early 30s and early 40s self-identifying as lesbians, gays or bisexuals, and predominantly residing in Belgium. Six migrants were parents and one was a prospective parent; all but two were married. The participating parents of GLB migrants were between early 60s and mid-70s, and they were all residing in migrants' home countries, the CEE EU member-states with a constitutional protection of heterosexual marriage: Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary,

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[1] While others have analyzed civil partnerships under the framework of same-sex marriage (Heaphy, Smart, & Einarsdottir, 2013; Einarsdóttir, 2016), the distinction between 'marriage' and registered partnership remains important in terms of symbolic and practical exclusion, as it is also demonstrated by recent strong mobilizations against same-sex marriage in CEE and elsewhere (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017).

[2] Without denying the many differences between various countries included into this study, for the purpose of this project I focused on two contrasting patterns regarding same-sex marriage and access to children that are shared across Belgium and the Netherlands on the one side, and across the participating CEE countries on the other side. Specifically, Belgium and the Netherlands were the first two countries in the world that recognized same-sex marriage in, respectively, 2003 and 2001, and today both these countries provide full parental rights to same-sex couples (Waaldijk, 2017). In contrast, all included CEE countries have a constitutional definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman and no access to adoption and artificial reproductive technologies (ART) for same-sex partners, although they differ in the level of recognition of same-sex partnerships (ILGA-Europe, 2018).

Poland and Slovakia.

Both the migrants' and the parents' sample are specific in several ways. All migrant participants were well-educated and financially independent. Many of them, in fact, were associated with the European institutions based in Belgium. Although this raises the issues of self-selection, it also situates most of the study participants in a relatively privileged socio-economic position and in the context of arguably the 'best-case' scenarios of protection and recognition of GLB-headed families in Europe. While this might not be the common experience of same-sex familyhood in Europe, it is a critical experience (Patton, 1990) for highlighting the effect of GLB-inclusive policies. Further, most of the participating parents were also well-educated (university degree), though they were mostly retired now. The parents were recruited through their offspring, but the issue of self-selection can be raised here as well, as the more supportive parents were more likely to agree to the interview. However, as most other studies about parental reaction rely on recruiting their participants through parental support organizations (e.g. Phillips & Ancis, 2008; Grafsky, 2014; Cappellato & Mangarella, 2014), the parents in this study are more likely to provide narratives that have not been re-organized through institutional framing (Broad, 2011). In addition, in several cases I was able to gain a perspective on the less supportive parents from several sources (e.g. both their offspring and their spouse).

Interviews

I conducted all the migrants' interviews in English or Croatian, using biographic-narrative interpretative method (BNIM) of interviewing (Wengraf, 2001). The parents' interviews were semi-structured, focusing on the relationship with their offspring and on certain key transitions (coming out, partnership, marriage, children). All the interviews with the parents were conducted in their native language, by myself in

Croatian, and by trained interviewers in other CEE languages. All the interviews were taped and transcribed or translated verbatim. The excerpts presented here were further edited for readability. The study passed the ethical approval process of both my host institution and the funding agency, and I followed a strict protocol to ensure the participants' confidentiality. For this reason also, in this text I identify the participants by the pseudonyms and their family structure only – I do not provide any other identifiable information (such as country of origin) that is not necessary for understanding the data.

Researcher Positionality

I entered the field as an outsider, though an GLBT ally. Identifying as a cisgender heterosexual woman, I shared experiences on many other dimensions with the participants (e.g. being a CEE migrant, class and educational profile, and even national background in some cases, being a parent…), but the particular dimension structuring the focus of my research interest was not one of our shared experiences. Therefore, I kept a detailed research diary to help me identify and keep track of the assumptions and blindspots exposed during the research process. A crucial component of this process – both for identifying the pre-existing assumptions and for shaping my emerging understanding – was the use of biographic-narrative interpretative method (BNIM) of interviewing whose unstructured general character allows the participants to preserve the control over the framework of the shared narrative. In addition, BNIM's rules of structured probing, where the interviewer is bound by the exact words and the exact order of the shared narrative, further work to preserve the participants' perspective and hierarchy of importance (Wengraf, 2001). Although this method, when used in the outsider research, also has certain drawbacks – for example, it is very easy to get 'seduced' by the unfamiliarity of some stories which are not necessarily part of the

research focus, and it is not always easy to find ways to probe into the issues the participant is deliberately not raising – it is, nonetheless, a powerful tool imbuing the participants with the control over the interview process and preventing the researcher's blindspots and misperceptions from shaping the interview material. For example, in such a way, very early in the fieldwork, I became sensitized to the complexity and degrees of 'being out', which was an important perspective for analyzing the data for this study.

In this regard, it were the interviews with the GLB migrants' parents, conducted by the classical semi-structured method of interviewing based on the prepared interview guide, that raised the issues of power differential in a more pronounced manner. Since all the interviews were conducted with a native speaker, there is a greater diversity in the 'fit' between the research participants and the interviewers (including myself) – for example, one of the interviewers was closer in age to the parents, but most were closer to the migrants' age. This diversity notwithstanding, one common trait I identified in my own interviews and in the fieldnotes of other interviewers is a certain delegation of the interviewer into the position of authority – one that is sometimes asked to validate the parents' own experiences or interpretations (e.g. the 'normality' of homosexuality).

Data Analysis

The interview material was managed in Atlas.ti, the qualitative data analysis and research software. In my analysis, I draw both on the narrative summaries of the interviews and on the inductively-driven thematic analysis (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Narrative summaries consisted of two elements for migrants: 'told story' (outline of the migrant's life, as told in the interview) and 'life story' (chronologically re-organized interview material, summarized by the researcher and accompanied by the interview quotes at places of particular theoretical interest). Narrative summaries for

parents of GLBT offspring consisted solely of the chronologically re-organized (as far as that was possible) interview material, also accompanied by relevant quotes. The interview transcripts were further openly coded on segments discussing various disclosures of migrants (sexual identification, same-sex relationship, wedding or the baby…), and reactions and adjustments of parents, both as perceived by migrants and as experienced by parents. These codes were used to inform the main themes preceding the stage of focused coding, which was in particular used to identify the issues related to parental response and disclosure to others. I present the results of this analysis in the next section.

Results

The stories collected in this study reveal diverse parental reactions to learning of their offspring's non-heterosexuality. Despite the small sample, these patterns are consistent with those identified in other studies (e.g. Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Kuhar, 2007; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Phillips & Ancis, 2008; Grafsky, 2014; Chrisler, 2017). Even if they immediately offered their support, most parents initially responded with shock and frequently expressed concern for their children's well-being or for their own reputation in the expectation of a negative reaction from their CEE environment. Nevertheless, except for one rejection and several refusals to acknowledge the offspring's non-heterosexual identity or partnership, primarily by fathers, most parents displayed gradual change from an initially negative or mixed reaction to acceptance, or at least to a tolerance of non-heterosexuality as something they cannot change.

While the life stories of CEE GLB migrants suggest they experienced migration to Belgium or the Netherlands as a deeply transformative moment – as a rupture with previous trajectories and a new beginning – this rupture was not reflected in parental adjustments. With one exception, all migrants in this study who previously hid their

non-heterosexuality from their parents disclosed it after the migration, often simultaneously revealing their non-heterosexual partnerships as well. Nevertheless, I have not noted any remarkable differences in responses of parents who have found out before or after the migration. Their reactions primarily seemed to reflect other factors identified in the literature, such as the previous relationship with the offspring or beliefs about homosexuality. Admittedly, the exposure to 'normality' of openly non-heterosexual lives of their offspring in another country was helpful for adjustments of some parents. Still, this has not pushed parents toward a wider disclosure of their offspring's non-heterosexuality in their CEE communities. Most parents preferred to keep the 'family closet' (Švab & Kuhar, 2014) intact during the migrants' visits back home, and migrants typically complied with this.

Difficult Negotiation of Same-Sex Marriage

Migration to Belgium or the Netherlands gave GLB individuals an opportunity to pursue 'conventional' trajectories of marriage and children that were not possible or imaginable in their CEE home countries. Married GLB migrants constructed their marriages in different ways. Ana, for example, presented her marriage as a pragmatic decision to ensure the equality of her committed partnership. Such an explanation seemed to raise no issues with her mother. Hana, on the other hand, did not disclose her marriage to her parents at all. However, most other migrants approached their marriages through a re-negotiation of their relationship with the parents. Similarly to Lannutti's US participants (2013), many GLB migrants in this study wanted their marriages to bring a deeper acknowledgement of their non-heterosexual lives and partnerships. For this reason, for example, Adam announced his wedding despite the strong misgivings about his parents' expected reaction. Dominika similarly suggests the importance of her parents' reaction when she talks about 'forcing' them to be happy for her joyful news.

Finally, in the case of Agata's son, marriage signified a personal turning point after which he was no longer willing to accept his father's refusals to acknowledge his partner and stopped visiting his family home. Instead, together with his husband, Agata's son started to meet his supportive mother elsewhere.

> Before the got married and they were still partners, [son] would come for Christmas,not necessarily Easter, as they sometimes were going somewhere together. […] hewould usually come for Christmas, alone. […] After they got married, this stopped. As husband and husband they would go together […]. [Son] stopped coming for Christmas because they are together. He wouldn't leave his husband. (Agata, mother of a married GLB son without children)

Therefore, for most parents of GLB migrants in this study, same-sex marriages of their offspring in another country forced a more direct confrontation with the consequences of their non-heterosexuality. Their initial reactions ranged from supportive to outright rejecting. Viktoria (mother of a married GLB daughter with children), for example, reports her daughter's wedding being 'normally' accepted and celebrated. In contrast, Petra's father wrote a letter saying that marriage was 'between a man and a woman. You shouldn't play with such an institution'. Most frequently, however, the reaction was confusion or a stated lack of understanding of the purpose of such a marriage. Even when parents were otherwise supportive of a same-sex relationship, the wedding announcement revealed a difficult negotiation of same-sex marriage. This is particularly evident with Gregor who supports the regulation of same-sex couple's rights, but initially finds the concept of a same-sex wedding problematic.

> (W)hen she told me that she will have a wedding - I looked at her and I said: 'Are you serious? What for? Well, ok, you like each other, you love each other, and, well, what is the problem, why the wedding?' […] If you want, then OK, go to the notary, get married normally the two of you, have a kind of two witnesses or something… Why

> thinking about something special, right? And she said: 'Well, we want to.' Right? So, it was a period, afterwards, when I told myself: 'Hopefully, this will not happen, nothing like this will ever happen.' (Gregor, father of a married GLB daughter with children)

Nonetheless, most parents adjusted to the idea of same-sex marriage in time. For example, despite their initial refusal to attend the wedding and one-year period of no contact, Adam's parents have accepted the marriage and the couple visits them regularly together. Petra's father also did not attend the wedding, but he sent a card of congratulations that Petra received at the ceremony. Gregor attended the wedding and found himself moved deeply by it, and also comforted by the sight of other guests, his daughter's friends, treating the wedding of two women as normal and beautiful. Furthermore, several parents noted that same-sex marriage reinforced the irrevocability of their offspring's non-heterosexual identification (see also Smart, 2007 for similar parental reactions), thus allowing them to proceed further in coming to terms with it.

Despite these personal adjustments to same-sex marriage, parents in this study often remained unwilling to disclose it to others. This unwillingness persisted even when they disclosed other aspects of their offspring's non-heterosexual lives abroad. This is well illustrated by Klara who is open about her daughter's partner and their child but still hides her same-sex marriage. It seems that, from the parents' perspective, the visibility of their offspring's same-sex marriages should be contained to the context of its originating country where it is perceived to be less divisive.

> (T)hese kinds of weddings are absolutely common there. […] Whether you want it or not, only by the fact that the law allows it, it is without any problems. And it does not divide society. Because in [CEE home country] […] the end of the world, or three ends of the world…(Gregor, father of a married GLB daughter with children)

The courtesy stigma or stigma-by-association (Goffman, 1963) that their parents might experience is acknowledged by GLB migrants through their willingness to compromise

on the visibility of their marriages in the CEE context. Although they more strongly demanded that parents personally acknowledged these marriages, most GLB migrants in this study still deferred the management of the information about their same-sex relationships and marriages to their parents, as illustrated by Adam's example below.

> I didn't want to create an uncomfortable situation for them [parents], to have somebody reject them or treat them differently. I wanted to leave that choice to them, with whom they are or aren't going to communicate about this. [...] When myself and [husband] come there, to [CEE home country], I behave differently than here […]. If I am there and somebody, for whom I don't know if or how much they know, comes into the house, then I don't know how to behave. This annoys me a bit […] Because in everything I am doing I am still trying to spare them [the parents] from some types of situations. (Adam, married without children)

However, this willingness to cede control over the flow of information to parents changes with the birth of children.

Children Change Everything

The Belgian and Dutch everyday lives of GLB migrants in this study were openly non-heterosexual. Still, during the visits to their CEE home countries, the GLB migrants typically accommodated their parents' desire for discretion, even after they got married. However, with the birth of children, the GLB migrants were no longer willing to hide their family structure. The GLB parents thus refused for their children to lead double lives, even during their only occasional visits, as emphasized by Dominika:

> Things changed when we had a kid. […] before I said: 'You don't have to tell your friends, you don't have to tell your colleagues if you're not comfortable' […] But I left it up to them until we had [the child]. Then I said: 'Wherever we go, she always has to be comfortable to say 'mama' and 'mommy', and I'm never gonna lie in front of her and

pretend that we are not her parents…' (Dominika, married with children)

Therefore, for most parents of GLB migrants in this study, the birth of (grand)children in non-heterosexual relationships abroad resulted in mostly uncompromisable new visibility of their non-heterosexual association. However, the arrival of (grand)children also seemed to suspend most other (heteronormative) concerns. Thus, most parents describe or are reported to have reacted with happiness to the news of (grand)children, even when they were previously not fully aware of the possibility of non-heterosexual reproductivity. In some cases, the arrival of (grand)children transformed migrants' relationship with the previously unaccepting parents. For example, Laura describes her father's change with the news of pregnancy as dramatic, 'like night and day'. Helena also noted a similar transformation of her ex-husband, even though it occurred some time after the birth of children.

> When he later found out that [daughter] is in such a relationship […] He was so shocked that he didn't think. He was so furious and angry about the situation that he didn't speak to her for three or four months, although they sometimes called each other and talked. It was as if contact had broken. [...] He found out that the boys have a birthday, that they are one year old. My brother, my son, my daughter-in-law and two grandchildren were invited for the birthday. Suddenly they see the grandfather on the plane. Because he found out about it and bought a flight for himself. […] And then, when he went there, he was received enthusiastically by everyone. […] Now, he has such good relations with his daughter again. And when they were here for Easter last year, next when they were here again in autumn, he also came. He comes and takes part in lunches or, for example, goes to an agritourism trip. And children? As if he had seen children for the first time in his life. He is very curious and interested, like an elderly man. But I didn't expect that you can gaze at children like that, as if he's looking for something, literally. (Helena, mother of a GLB daughter in partnership with children)

Although one migrant also reported a father whose reaction to a grandchild was disinterested thus leading the migrant to finally give up on the relationship and break off the contact, for most (grand)parents in this study the arrival of a (grand)child was a cause for celebration.

The children were perceived as the most important bond of the family, one that solidified the GLB-headed family as well. As Gregor (father of a married GLB daughter with children) puts it when explaining the importance of parental love, 'I would mind this most, if they ever told me that in some way I prevented that [possibility for them]'. But, in addition to wishing their offspring to experience the parental fulfilment, the parents also found their own fulfilment in the grandparental role, especially if they had no grandchildren from their other offspring. In these cases, the fact that children were not the product of a heterosexual relationship was put aside, even if there were still lingering issues about the non-heterosexuality or concerns about some aspect of non-heterosexual reproductivity. This is particularly evident in Helena's recounting of the reaction of her 'counterpart', also from CEE, who embraced her grandchildren even though she never fully accepted her daughter's non-heterosexuality.

> They [the children] bring a lot of joy. Because of what happened, their relationship became unimportant, kids come first. [...]. They bring a lot of joy, the whole family is focused on them now. Whatever has been viewed as socially and morally wrong before, it is not important at all now [...] And now, when there are grandchildren, I think that some traumas have passed and she [partner's mother] loves these grandchildren very much. I could see everything was allowed for these children when they went there. […] I think that now the relationship between her daughter and my daughter has faded into the background. Now grandchildren are more important. (Helena, mother of a GLB daughter in partnership with children)

Still, as in the case of same-sex marriage, the parents' personal adjustments to the children of their GLB offspring were not always aligned with their willingness to disclose this fact. Continuing with the example above, Helena's counterpart's display of non-heterosexual association of her grandchildren echoes the misrepresentation by the parents reported in Almack's study (2008) as she 'redacts' her daughter's partner from photos and the narrative she presents to the others. This example notwithstanding, most parents in this study did change their disclosure strategies in response not only to the visibility of the (grand)children, but also in the accommodation of their GLB offspring's demands for the recognition of their families. Therefore, the extended family was typically informed about the birth of children in non-heterosexual relationships, even if they were not previously privy to the information about the migrant's non-heterosexuality. This was, for example, Petra's case, as she insisted that the news about her child and its mothers was shared even with those family members whom she saw only very rarely. Furthermore, the extended family members in this study were generally reported to react positively, or at least without any display of negative judgement, as noted by Helena (mother of a GLB daughter in partnership with children): '(T)hey know about it and accept the fact, they don't get too much into it or judge if it's good or bad. […] when they all meet, they care about small kids.' Similarly, when reflecting on the acceptance of her child even from those family members who were not expected to react positively due to their perceived small-town or educational backgrounds, Petra shares her feeling 'that having a child kind of increases the acceptance or they accept you more because that's something which is valued by society, raising a child'. This would suggest that, despite the possibly stronger privileging of heteronormative reproductivity at the level of CEE societies, the extended family in personal contact with children of same-sex parents seems willing to put any

heteronormative objections aside and to celebrate the value of children themselves. This conclusion is also supported by a very similar pattern Lustenberger (2014) identified in her study of same-sex parents in orthodox Jewish Israeli communities.

Still, the concerns stemming from societal privileging of heteronormative reproductivity remain. These are seen particularly in the increased caution that the parents of GLB offspring display in the interaction with colleagues, causal acquittances and strangers. The typical (grand)parents' strategy is not hiding the 'origin' of their (grand)children, but they are not advertising the non-heterosexual connection either, due to fear of homonegative reactions. This is also the reason why it becomes unimaginable for parents of GLB offspring that their sons and daughters would return to their home countries with their families – they are afraid that their grandchildren would pay the price of such a return.

> (P)eople aren't ready to accept such a family. Where will they go? They'll buy housing, they'll settle these children there. With parents who are, you know… two boys. I think it wouldn't be easy. And after that, in school, it wouldn't be easy. […] You know how cruel children can be sometimes. If they should happen in such a class and at home, the way people talk is something else, children carry everything from home to school. One family starts talking in a rude way at home, this will ricochet and mark these children's psyche for life. So, they will not come back here to live in [CEE country], I'm clear on that and… I accept these things. Let them take care of their children there. Now everything… comes down to the children. Most important are the children. May they be well! (Sofia, mother of a married GLB son with children)

Generally looking, though, when reflecting on the lives that their migrant GLB offspring realized in Belgium or the Netherlands, the parents interviewed in this study expressed happiness that this was possible for them. Despite some lingering feelings of heteronormative regret ('if there was a choice, they would advise on a traditional choice'), within the interpretative framework that homosexuality was not a choice but an

inborn, genetic trait, the parents perceived their offspring's mobility to Belgium or the Netherlands as something that has given both themselves and their offspring the precious gift of a fulfilled family life, even if this was possible only by a removal from the restrictive CEE context.

Discussion

This study focused on how parents accommodate possibly unexpected life transitions of their GLB offspring, such as same-sex marriage and children. These stories were situated in the context of contrasting expectations between parents' CEE countries in which such 'conventional' paths for GLB individuals were impossible or very difficult, and GLB offspring's receiving countries, Belgium and the Netherlands, that recognize and protect same-sex marriage and GLB parenthood. Specifically, in light of their openly non-heterosexual lives and relationships in Belgium and the Netherlands, most GLB migrants in this study more forcibly confronted their parents with the consequences of their non-heterosexuality by demanding a stronger acknowledgement of their same-sex marriages. This pattern was also noted by Lannutti (2013) as a consequence of the legalization of same-sex marriage in some US states. However, while Lannutti's participants often more strongly confronted some parents' attempts at containing visibility of their same-sex marriages, the GLB migrants in this study predominantly deferred the control over the visibility of same-sex marriage in the CEE context to their parents. This preservation of the 'family closets' in homophobic CEE environments (Švab & Kuhar, 2014) reflects the strong social cost that non-heterosexual associations carry for parents of GLB offspring. However, with the birth of children of GLB migrants, this compromise between the parental acknowledgement and the visibility of the same-sex family structure was re-negotiated again. With this transition, the GLB migrants took back the control over the visibility of their family structure even

in the CEE context, thus forcing their parents to address the mostly uncompromisable new visibility of their non-heterosexual association.

The findings of this study further highlight both the difficult negotiation of same-sex marriage in the CEE context and the role of children in facilitating the acceptance of same-sex families. In this paper, I argue that both these developments suggest the potentially transformative power of same-sex marriage and non-heterosexual reproductivity. The 'difficultness' of same-sex marriage stems from the challenge it presents to the previously unquestioned traditional model of heterosexual marriage. In a related way, the family acceptance of children and, by extension, of their same-sex parents, challenges the privilege of heteronormative reproductivity.

The difficult negotiation of same-sex marriage in the CEE context is visible from stories that reveal that parents more easily accommodate all other aspects of non-heterosexuality, including same-sex relationships, than same-sex marriage. While, at a personal level, most parents are eventually able to incorporate their offspring's same-sex marriage into the framework of a committed loving relationship, the visibility of this institution in the CEE context is still deemed as too divisive and as something that should be contained to its originating Belgian and Dutch context. This contrasts strongly with the prevalent stories not only of the parents' acceptance of the children of their GLB offspring, but also of the consequent disclosure of the non-heterosexual association to the extended family and their seemingly easy acceptance of the fact. The birth of children is welcomed not only by the parents of GLB offspring who have thus realized their grandparental desires but their birth also more fully integrates the same-sex couple into the extended family.

In my interpretation, both the visibility of same-sex marriage in the CEE context and the celebration of children facilitating the acceptance of same-sex families testify to

a ground-level transformative power of these new institutions. This argument is somewhat at odds with warnings of many intimate/sexual citizenship scholars (see in Richardson, 2004, 2017) who highlight the dangers of the integration of gays and lesbians into the mainstream institutions. In this perspective, such integration could potentially result in the assimilation into the hegemonic heteronormativity which may further exclude all those gays, lesbians and bisexuals that are too 'queer' – that do not conform to the mainstream norms of the monogamic coupleship and to the traditional trajectories of 'the house, the garden and the dog' (as one Dutch expression goes). By extension, if the parents (and other relations) of GLB individuals are accepting of non-heterosexuality only because it emulates hegemonic heterosexuality, then this feeds into the further reproduction and reification of such a system, instead of challenging it. This is, indeed, Fields' interpretation (2001) of the straight parents celebrating the weddings of their GLB offspring. Fields (2001) claims that parents' approval of the heteronormative rites such as weddings relies on their conventional understandings of gender and sexuality and thus it normalizes non-heterosexuality by emphasizing alignment with the heteronormative models.

However, it is to be expected that the family models closest to their own heteronormative models would be most understandable and acceptable to the straight parents. But it is the vital difference that these are not, in fact, heteronormative models. While the initial acceptance might indeed stem from 'shared moral grounds' (see Plummer, 2003), I argue that this incorporation of the non-heterosexual 'added value' carries an extension of heteronormative frameworks that is ultimately transformative. This argument builds on the work of intimate/sexual citizenship scholars such as Weeks (2007), who emphasized how GLB individuals and couples appropriated mainstream institutions and created new frameworks for 'ordinary' marriage and family life.

Therefore, despite all the dangers of imposing the new normativities and creating new exclusions, the unintended consequences of the full access of GLB individuals and couples to the institutions of marriage and reproductivity are more likely to quietly reshape the existing social order and to provide GLB individuals with more choices on how they want to live their lives, than to preserve the status quo (Weeks, 2007).

This emerging upset is already signaled by the parents' initially negative or troubled reception of same-sex marriage reported here and in other studies (e.g. Smart, 2007), and particularly by the CEE parents' continued reluctance to disclose same-sex marriage to their environment. This suggests that same-sex marriage is not so easily aligned with the hegemonic heteronormativity as suggested by Fields (2001). In my interpretation, the transgressiveness of same-sex marriage in the CEE context stems exactly from its visible disruption of heteronormative societal norms, the same way Pride Parades are rejected for their visibility of difference (interpreted as 'exhibitionism') by otherwise supportive parents of GLB offspring, both in this study and in others (e.g. Cappellato & Mangarella, 2014). The drive to deny this visibility, to reinforce the heteronormativity of marriage testifies that same-sex marriage in greater degree threatens the traditional institution of marriage, than it is assimilated into it. This previously unquestionably heteronormative institution must now enter a dialogue with the newly emerging marriage models, even if, at this point, this dialogue occurs in the act of rejection and attempt at denial.

The strong public rejection of the GLB parenthood in the CEE countries stems from the same principle. While privileging heteronormative reproductivity is common in other countries as well (Weissman, 2017), in most CEE countries this impulse is particularly strong following on the developments of the last 30 years which have been strengthening the intertwining of religious and sexual nationalisms (Sremac &

Ganzevoort, 2015). Such frameworks strongly enforce heteronormative reproductivity, as seen also from the 'defense of the traditional family' rhetoric of anti-gender mobilizations going strong in the region (but not only there) (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). In the eyes of the sexual and gender fundamentalists, the threat to the heterosexual family is indeed real. By rupturing that final barrier, the non-reproductivity of non-heterosexuality, the heterosexual family model has already started its transformation away from the absolute dominance, and these anticipated changes feed the societal resistance to GLB parenthood.

Still, when this principle is confronted directly with the personal link to the children of same-sex parents, the value of children seems to trump heteronormative objections. This was seen not only in this study but, for example, also in Lustenberger's study (2014) which similarly found that children helped their same-sex parents build a place for their family within an Orthodox Jewish Israeli community. By situating further the value accorded to children into the framework of the family survival, the (extended) family tolerance of non-heterosexuality through acceptance of children may be connected to the restoration of the intergenerational reproductive contract, that was previously broken by the assumed non-reproductivity of same-sex couples. Therefore, at the level of personal contact rather than societal climate, the GLB-headed families with children are re-absorbed in the fold of an extended family. In the process, the norms of that family have already been shifted, thus contributing cumulatively to the ground-level transformation of family models in the CEE context.

Conclusion

One of the most notable gaps in the growing field examining parents' adjustments to their offspring's non-heterosexuality concerns parents' responses to same-sex marriage and (grand)children from non-heterosexual relationships. Informed

both by the life stories of GLB migrants who are married or raising children with a same-sex partner in Belgium and the Netherlands and by the accounts of their parents living in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries with a constitutional protection of heterosexual marriage, the present study addressed this gap. It also took this inquiry a step further by situating it within the framework of contrasting normative expectations. This approach identified how parents' responses and disclosures, though firmly situated in the context of their homonegative CEE environments, also negotiated the new expectations formed by their GLB offspring in GLB-friendly Belgian and Dutch environments. It further demonstrated how negotiations between these two sets of expectations depended on the type of non-heterosexual transition in question. Specifically, while their same-sex marriages prompted GLB migrants to demand stronger parental acknowledgement of their non-heterosexual lives, they still compromised on the visibility of their marriages in the CEE context. In contrast, with the birth of children, such compromises stopped, and GLB migrants took control over the visibility of their family structure back from their parents. These findings build on the existing literature on parents' adjustments, but they also further extend it by highlighting, in particular, the necessity of analyzing parents' disclosure strategies in addition to and in combination with their responses to non-heterosexuality and other non-heterosexual transitions of their GLB offspring, such as same-sex marriage and birth of children in non-heterosexual relationships.

This study further highlighted both the parents' difficult negotiation of same-sex marriage and the role the children played in facilitating the acceptance of GLB-headed families. The first pattern suggests the transgressive character of same-sex marriage, which by its very existence in a different but only slightly removed intra-European transnational context challenges the previously unquestioned hegemony of traditional

marriage in the CEE context. The second pattern further testifies to the losing power of the principle of heteronormative reproductivity when it is directly confronted with the family value of children. This suggests that GLB-headed families with children are more easily integrated into their extended families through the restoration of the intergenerational reproductive contract, that was previously broken by the assumed non-reproductivity of same-sex couples. In my interpretation, both these patterns point to the ground-level gradual shifting of family models, and thus they indicate the transformative potential of same-sex marriage and non-heterosexual reproductivity. Building on these findings, the conclusions of this study are also situated into intimate/sexual citizenship debate on the consequences of the inclusion of GLB individuals into the mainstream institution (Plummer, 2003; Weeks, 2007; Richardson, 2017).

The conclusions of this study are limited by its small and specific sample. However, although the experiences of GLB migrants in this study may not be common or typical, they can be interpreted as critical experiences (Patton, 1990). Therefore, their contribution to theoretical generalizability (Gobo, 2008) stems from their very extraordinariness. GLB migrants in this study are situated in normative and institutional contexts that are particularly favorable to families of same-sex partners, but simultaneously they are also embedded in the relationships with the parents situated in GLB-restrictive contexts, where both migrants and their parents must negotiate normative family expectations that are particularly starkly contrasted, and thus more easily identifiable. This study is further limited by partial and likely self-selective participation of parents of GLB migrants. Nonetheless, the participating parents are still likely to be a more varied group than members of the parents' support organization, who are the 'usual suspects' of studies on parents' adjustments (e.g. Phillips & Ancis, 2008;

Grafsky, 2014; Cappellato & Mangarella, 2014). In addition, this study's ability to examine GLB individuals' and parents' interviews side-by-side has exposed certain issues that might have otherwise remained hidden, and was, in fact, one of the main mechanisms responsible for identifying different sets of expectations and different levels of compromise between GLB migrants and their parents at different non-heterosexual transitions (coming out, marriage, children). It is here that the present study makes its strongest contribution to the literature on the parents' adjustments, and it is also, by building from this point, that the contributions of this study are extended into the intimate/sexual citizenship literature.

What remains now is to see in future studies how these patterns hold when situated in different institutional and normative contexts. On a related note, it would also be interesting to explore if in-depth studies situated in different socio-institutional contexts could provide a temporal perspective, where changes in the expectations of both GLB individuals and their parents could be traced to the changes in the legislature. Equally importantly, future research would also benefit from including a more diverse groups of GLB individuals and their parents – most notably, in terms of social class, but also in terms of other structuring experiences that may differ across various national contexts. Nonetheless, the present study, in which the transnational position of one relatively privileged group of GLB migrants was used to highlight the contrasting normative and institutional frameworks of their home countries, already provides one important take-away point for the activists and the policymakers alike. Visibility matters – and legal protection solidifies the visibility and helps the transition towards ‘normalization’ of non-heterosexual families. The everyday relatable stories of weddings and children are an important public reminder of reality of non-heterosexual families – this is the job for the activists. At the same time, providing a safe

environment where such stories are not part of the legal grey zone of uncertainty but are, instead, already validated by the institutional framework, is an important signal for the general public. As can be observed from the accounts of the parents in this study, at some point it becomes difficult to differentiate between what is ‘common’ or ‘not divisive’ and what is ‘legal’. That what is legally and institutionally fully protected, even if it was pushed ‘from above’, just becomes a part of everyday life. Therefore, it is the job for policymakers to make it so – no waiting for the ‘public to become ready’ necessary.

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