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# It goes without saying

## The privilege of commonplace

*Mette Liv Mertz*

In 1989, Denmark passed the law on same-sex marriage (the so-called “registered partnership”), heralding widespread acceptance of monosexual households. Instead, we have experienced a backlash: so far only doctors are legally prohibited from artificially inseminating lesbians, but a proposal criminalizing *all* “mother’s little helpers” stands a good chance of being passed. [This was written in September 2001. The proposal was renegotiated in the Danish parliament April 4<sup>th</sup>, and – luckily – it was turned down].

While the Danish health care system may still provide this service to heterosexual “involuntarily childless” couples, lesbians are considered to have made a choice; the direction of their sexual desire is deemed incompatible with reproduction. Furthermore, it is a paramount priority with certain legislators and opinion formers alike that – for the sake of the child, allegedly – a biological male and female respectively be the two primary caretakers. Lesbians will be forced to either break the law or resort to a “one night stand” if they want to conceive, thus being put at risk to contract various STDs and at worst even HIV. This solution would never be suggested to a perfectly healthy *straight* woman whose *husband* suffers from poor sperm quality. Homosexual procreation, obviously, does not reduce the number of children born into “normal” families, so why this fierce opposition?

This article will revolve around this enigma: following Judith Butler’s reasoning that gender cannot be so “natural” if it has to be continuously consolidated, it would appear also in this context that much more is at stake than merely “the child’s best interest.” Contesting the definition of this phrase would jeopardize heterosexual (subconscious) identification as righteously normative. Straights would have to rethink the inevitability and indeed desirability of gender complementarity itself. As I see it, this has yet to be problematized, and I believe that such a task is essential to understanding the vigorous attempts to counteract alternative family formations.

Heterosexual nuclear families are of course innocuous, but it should no longer go without saying that this is how “people” live. It is an option, one legitimate *choice* among many.

## **Common propositions in favor of criminalizing non-straight family formations: “It will invariably be in the child’s best interest to have a mother and a father”**

By now, this argument has attained evergreen status. It pops up again and again as a condensation of a number of more elaborate versions that I shall return to, and it is mostly left unchallenged. It also seems to transcend the political affiliation, social class, geographical whereabouts and gender of the people who use it.

One only needs to think of Freud and his neurotic patients, however, to form the opposite opinion of what constitutes “the child’s best interest”. After all, bearing in mind incest and general childhood trauma, the heterosexual nuclear family construction doesn’t seem like such a great idea. Another objection one might venture is the fact that so many children today are actually brought up in households consisting of only one adult. Taken to the extreme, the “mother and father” allegation would necessitate that we ban divorce. Even though there are a lot of dysfunctional individuals out there, and even if their mental health actually *has* been damaged by their parents’ break-up, I believe that the vast majority of Danes agree that prohibiting couples from divorcing is out of the question.

In other words, there seems to be a very conspicuous inconsistency between what people practice and what they preach – between “having both a mother and a father will always be in the child’s best interest” and actually sticking it out with someone you’ve fallen out of love with; someone who might even be violent or unfaithful or whatnot.

Elaborations on the “two parents of opposite sexes” model include “a child growing up different will be subject to more teasing and therefore has tougher odds than your average kid from a wall-to-wall carpet home” and “a child needs both masculine and feminine role models in order to function properly in society.” The first allegation is easy to dismiss: you may as well conclude that a child differing from the majority will have a great opportunity to excel. After all, we like to see for instance artists as ones of a kind – one need only think of van Gogh to get the picture. “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” is another argument in that same vein. What would we do with the physically or mentally challenged, or the ones with a harelip, a tendency to stammer – or even the redheads – if all children were to be protected against the sometimes hostile astonishment of their peers? And wouldn’t it be the dullest kid on the planet, if all unique characteristics had been meticulously erased lest he or she invite harassment in any way? Finally I must refer to Charlotte Gerhauge’s essay, numerous debaters have recourse to *nature* when trying to explain why an opposite-sex couple should be the only kind of union qualifying for assisted

fertilization. *Nature* is inscribed with *intentions* and *laws*, even though it seems absurd that we be able to know anything about nature when we have no olympic viewpoint to contemplate it from. We are always already cultural, and thus we are unable to observe anything in a neutral and detached manner. Politicians and laymen alike, as Charlotte very convincingly demonstrates, use nature as an argument in a variety of ways – many of them conspicuously contradictory – but we must be wary and not fall into the trap of arguing against “what nature really wanted or meant” for us by merely suggesting alternative intentions. The natural is always already subsumed by the cultural. Those in favor of a more inclusive availability of assisted fertilization should be cautious to avoid inadvertently contributing to the validity of nature as an argument.

What’s more important, though, are the many times when the assumption that a mother and a father is the ideal constellation of primary caretakers *goes without saying*. The unsaid is equivalent to the incontestable.

What is at stake here? How can it be in anybody’s interest to prevent total strangers from having a strong wish fulfilled, and an altruistic one at that? Why should it be more selfish of *gay* people to want kids? Human beings seem to thrive when they make a difference. When you have an infant, you make a *big* difference – you literally mean life and death to someone who is a hundred percent dependent on you. Human beings find it amusing to see their genes combined and reproduced, and in itself, this desire is harmless enough. However, it should never legitimate the prohibition of other people’s agency and autonomy.

My audacious assertion is quite simply that alternative family formations threaten the status of traditional ones as default. To put it bluntly, heterosexuality is what happens to you if you don’t resist. If the norm were continuously contested, straights would have to rethink the entire foundation of the structure in which they have become enmeshed.

Another reason why heterosexuals are so reluctant to accept queer families is probably that they fail to distinguish between generic *man* and individual *men*. The prospect that men might actually be dispensable is horrifying to straight men and women alike. Somehow, they feel that it invalidates the foundation of *their* lives. That heteronormative exponents should learn to see their own lifestyle as just one option among many, equally valid, options is another strong argument for calling the direction of sexual desire – the *object choice*, as psychoanalysts would have it – a *preference*. Some homosexuals (and bisexuals, for that matter) have hesitated to embrace this definition – if it’s a simple matter of choice, how can you keep defending to your parents and other disappointed relatives that you haven’t chosen differently, thereby avoiding to hurt them?

When I was 17, I bought a button saying “Born gay!” I wore it on my jacket always and very much identified with the message. It should have become obvious

by now that I don't feel that way anymore, but I can still see the allure. That way, you're off the hook; neither a sinner (in case you have a religious background) nor a stubborn rebel who enjoys the attention concomitant with standing out.

The trouble is, though, that if you ascribe a characteristic that others may deem undesirable to fate, genes, or the Lord above, you participate in the stigmatizing of your peers. You tacitly *admit* that there is something objectionable to queerness. But choosing the road less traveled should never require defending any more than following the mainstream.

The Danish sociologist Henning Bech calls homosexual subcultures *taste tribes* (or "smagsfællesskaber" in Danish). If straights perceived of themselves along a similar line of thought and realized that theirs is just as much of a tribe – with everything that goes with it like certain rituals, etiquette and sense of self – as that of queers, would straights have the nerve to come down so strongly on diversity then? Or would they at least hesitate, even if only because the tables could turn?

So far, my contentions have revolved around issues of *sexuality*. Inseparable criteria for cultural intelligibility as I see the two – and again I borrow this phrase from Judith Butler – I am now going to talk a little about *gender*.

Why do we keep hearing the argument "a child needs a mother and a father?" Why is a whole group of people, that is homosexuals, barred *by definition* from the privilege of insemination, when for instance former alcoholics and drug users can at least be *considered* for assisted fertilization legitimated by the state? Because this is discrimination *both* on the grounds of gender *and* of sexuality! Beneath this injustice lies the assumption that each gender holds certain special characteristics that cannot be embodied by the other, and that are necessary for a child to grow up and become a harmonious adult. Women are seen as inherently disposed for nurturing, while men "play rough" with their offspring, hereby equipping the children with the ability to defend themselves and get along in the world. This goes primarily for boys – girls, it is hoped for, will grow up and find a man to do the defending *for* them – just as the same effort is not put into teaching boys how to cater for and even anticipate other people's needs – a woman will take care of that later in life.

In Denmark, there's a law against companies advertising for persons of a specific gender. At actual job interviews, though, this political correctness is often shed. Recently, there has been a lot of media-hyped concern regarding the relatively small amount of men in Danish kindergartens. Male infants need male role models, it is argued – otherwise they will be confused and fail to develop a true, functional male identity – boys need men to climb trees, wrestle, go fishing and play ball with them.

Strangely, neither the concerned psychologists nor the female employees of

the kindergartens ever simply express the desirability of hiring *any* candidate who specializes in these activities. The predilection for physical exercise is thought to be inherently male, so male applicants are more or less openly favored. Nor does anyone seem to worry that the *girls* may not learn to play soccer, climb trees et cetera. The focus is not on *all* children acquiring a wide spectre of competences – the goal here is to maintain and perpetuate traditional gender roles, and it is accomplished through the very concept of performativity introduced by Judith Butler. Unlike queers, these girls and boys will rarely be required to explain themselves, but when they reach a self-understanding as adults through narrative reconstruction, gender will be the structuring principle of their accounts. Women may not recall ever having played soccer, and sadly this is not necessarily because their memory fails them. But instead of realizing that they were never offered the opportunity – or they were expected to refrain from seizing it – a soccerless childhood is suddenly seen to *consolidate* their female identity.

## Conclusion

At the heart of the paranoia lies, I believe, the concept of *complementarity*. In Plato's *The Symposium*, there's an account of a primeval round human being whose arrogance provoked the gods to bisect it into men and women, who would then perpetually long for reunion. The account can also be found in various myths of origin. Though probably only a few pay homage to Plato today when thinking of gender complementarity, this fable seems to have permeated the concept of self ever since, at least in the Western world. In other words, "dimension two-in-one" still very much applies.

This also explains how gender and sexuality could become so inextricably intertwined. You quite simply don't make sense as a "real" man if you're not attracted to "real" women, and vice versa. Finally, the Freudian version of a normal process of maturation looms large: if a substantial part of becoming an adult means to successfully identify with your mother and search for a father substitute as a partner, in case you're a girl – and identifying with your father but diverting your sexual desire from your mother to a replacement, if you're a boy – homosexuals *will* invariably be seen to exemplify arrested development.

Complementarity has a *dichotomy* as its prerequisite, but as a devoted post structuralist, I would like to do away with this kind of dualistic reasoning. Human beings are capable of taking more than two ideas into consideration in so many other instances; why shouldn't it be the case with regard to gender? I agree with Eve Sedgwick when she states that "an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of

modern homo/heterosexual definition.” However, we must bear in mind that this definition could attain status as *the* differentiating factor only with gender complementarity as its foundation. It is precisely this gender complementarity that is needed to uphold heteronormativity.

Gay people know that it’s possible for two (or more!) individuals to supplement each other in so many other ways than along lines of gender. Otherwise, same-sex relationships would be dysfunctional *per se*.

We need to counter these accusations of parental inadequacy not by merely asking “Where can I find the statistics you’re referring to?”, but by asking “What makes you say that? Are you confusing the child’s best interest with your own?”

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