Izvirni znanstveni članek UDK 316.362.34-055.62:373.3

Ana M. Sobočan, Uli Streib-Brzič

"FOR ME IT'S JUST NORMAL" – STRATEGIES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FROM RAINBOW FAMILIES AGAINST DE-NORMALISATION. THE CASE OF SLOVENIA AND GERMANY.

ABSTRACT: The paper presents some findings from an international study called "School is out – Experiences of children from rainbow families in school" which explored how children and young people from rainbow families anticipate, experience and deal with schools as heteronormative spaces. In the research, the term de-normalisation was developed to describe the processes by which children with LGBT-identified parents are perceived and constructed as not normal, as classified beyond the 'hetero-normative normality', which is expressed through 'othering' by others, for example in interaction. To avoid, prevent or reduce the impacts of de-normalisation processes, the interviewed children and youth have developed different strategies which we present in two frames: one involving disclosure and concealment and the other involving verbalisations and justifications. Based on these insights and findings, the article also outlines ideas on the resilience factors against de-normalisation and emphasises the importance of children and youth not standing alone against it.

KEY WORDS: Rainbow families, children in rainbow families, de-normalisation, heteronormativity, school, normality, homophobia, resilience

"Zame je to normalno" - strategije otrok in mladih iz mavričnih družin v spopadanju z de-normalizacijo. Primer Slovenije in Nemčije.

IZVLEČEK: V prispevku avtorici predstavita nekatere ugotovitve mednarodne raziskave School is out – Experiences of children from rainbow families in school, ki je ugotavljala, kako otroci in mladi iz mavričnih družin pričakujejo, doživljajo in ravnajo s šolo kot heteronormativnim okoljem. V raziskovanju smo razvili pojem denormalizacije, ki opisuje procese, v okviru katerih so otroci, katerih starši so (označeni kot) homosek-

sualni, biseksualni ali transseksualni, prepoznani in konstruirani kot »ne-normalni«, kot izven heteronormativne »normalnosti«, kar se izraža npr. v interakciji. Da bi preprečevali ali zmanjšali učinke procesov denormalizacije, so intervjuvani otroci in mladi razvili različne strategije, ki so predstavljene v dveh okvirih: v enem gre za uravnavanje razkritja in prikrivanja, v drugem za verbalizacijo in pojasnjevanja. Temelječ na vpogledih in ugotovitvah raziskave, prispevek oriše tudi ideje o dejavnikih odpornosti pred denormalizacijo in poudari, da se mladi in otroci z njo ne smejo soočati sami.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: mavrične družine, otroci iz mavričnih družin, denormalizacija, heteronormativnost, šola, normalnost, homofobija, odpornost

"For me now actually I don't notice it so much anymore, who, yes when one so often now, that's for me normal. I do not actually notice that often, when one doesn't speak about it, that I, that we, are a rainbow family, so, that can one just say, like that, yes. And, when they have sometimes asked me, then it actually again came into my mind, because it's not so often that one comes to this point, I believe, so, yes it doesn't often come up in life to this point." (Joyce, 10) [1]

"Actually, just normal. Just that there are two women instead of a woman and a man. Completely normal! You could say two parents with children. But I wouldn't qualify it, like "now we're in a same-sex family", it's just a family. Just, there's my mom, and B., and my sister." (Lara, 17) [2]

"It is different, but it is not negative it is not abnormal, it is simply just different from other families and it is not bad, and it is completely normal as it is" (Cristina, 13)[3]

1 Normal lives, normal families

This article will focus on experiences of children growing up with parents who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender[4] in school. Especially it

1. In German:"*mir ist jetzt eigentlich gar nicht mehr aufgefallen[...] das ist ja für mich normal. Mir fällt das eigentlich oft gar nicht auf, wenn man gar nicht darüber redet, dass ich, dass wir 'ne Regenbogenfamilie sind also, das kann man ja auch so sagen. Und wenn die mich dann [...] manchmal so gefragt haben, dann ist es mir erst eigentlich wieder eingefallen, weil's eigentlich gar nicht so oft zur Sache kommt, find' ich, also es kommt ja nicht so oft im Leben zur Sache*"
2. In Slovenian*: "V bistvu čisto normalna. Samo da sta pač dve ženski, namesto ženska in moški. Čisto normalno, ne? Lahko bi rekla dva starša z otrokoma. Ne bi pa kvalificirala "zdaj smo pa v istospolni družini," pač družina. V njej je pač mami pa B. pa moja sestra"*
3. In German: *"es ist **anders**, aber es ist nicht negativ es ist nicht **un**normal, es ist einfach halt anders als andere Familien und es ist nicht schlimm, und es ist ganz normal so"*
4. In this paper, when referring to rainbow families, we will refer principally to father-father-child(ren) and mother-mother-child(ren) families, as these were the families that the research sample consisted of. Moreover, additional and / or different attention needs to be given to the experiences of children in families where parents are bisexual or transgender – because these (can) more often pass as 'normal' families: it is the particular combination of the

will be discussed how children and youth deal with possible homophobic prejudices and which kind of strategies they develop and use to avoid experiences of exclusion and de-normalisation.

The above quotations convey a message that was expressed in the numerous interviews we did with children and youth from rainbow families. With this often clearly and precisely formulated message the children and young people we interviewed might attempt to claim normality, talking about their families that in the eyes of the society don't fit the standard (heteronormative) model. The fact that we encountered these messages in almost every interview – sometimes already at the beginning, before the proper interview had even begun, sometimes it was introduced later on in the interview – lead us to the idea to further investigate how children and young people from rainbow families negotiate normality. We wanted to find out what it means for them to be 'simply normal' and how these meanings influence their desires to belong to it. The interviews were part of a study *School is out – Experiences of children from rainbow families in school*[5]; in this paper we will refer to the findings from two countries involved in the study (Germany and Slovenia). The trajectory of this research was to explore how children and young people from rainbow families anticipate, experience and deal with schools as heteronormative spaces. Rather than asking explicitly about homophobia, we opted to ask more openly about different experiences and strategies in the context of school. With this approach we offered the respondents to decide what they want to share and show what they perceive as unpleasant, threatening or violent, as well as take a de-victimising perspective, which focuses on the participants' agency. For this project, we had a qualitative and comparative approach in order to explore how schools conceptualise families and if there are reasons to expect that children and young people with rainbow families risk discrimination and violence. We relied on queer-feminist critique of the idea of a normative heterosexual family. The comparative view allows us to further investigate the normative workings and resistances toward these norms in both larger and local contexts (Hemmings 2007).

same gender and homosexuality as visible to the environment that we discuss in relation to experiences in this paper (the focus is not the nature of the parents' sexuality or gender identification, but actually the responses to those in their environment).

5. The study, School is out – Experiences of children from rainbow families in school was conducted by the Humboldt-University in Berlin, the University of Ljubljana/ Faculty for Social Work and the University of Lund in 2009-2011 funded by the EU programme Daphne. The authors of this paper were the co-authors of the research (along with five other authors). The qualitative study consists of 124 interviews with children and youth growing up with LGBT-parents, with LGBT identified parents and with pedagogical experts. Altogether 22 children, youngsters, and young adults between 8 and 20 years who grow up in a rainbow family were interviewed in Germany. In Slovenia, four young persons were interviewed, aged 16 to 23. The respondents were invited through social networks (publication of the invitation on internet places) and via personal networks, with the help of snowball methods. With children and youth that were underage, permission of the parents was obtained first. Cf. Streib, Quadflieg 2011 and Zaviršek, Sobočan 2012.

Despite the fact that these are countries with different socio-economic traditions and legal situations[6], the interviews with kids in general expressed that they question the sometimes predominant idea about a certain single normality and are able to develop many understandings of normality / what is normal. As we will explain below, we see this as a competence, as it requires the ability of taking a perspective of another (also empathy), being aware of different conceptions of the world and life models and being aware of one's own emotions. Nevertheless, we recognize that this competence comes at the cost of being de-normalised. We use the term de-normalisation to describe the effects of not complying to (hetero) norms, where persons are seen as abnormal through processes or acts of exclusion that mark them as the 'deviant other' (Hark 1999). In this paper we will discuss how the interviewed children and youth describe their understandings of normality and the different ways of how children and youth from rainbow families deal with de-normalisation. The youth's responses to these processes are different kinds of strategies, which testify of the agency of youth in both resisting exclusion and rewriting the norm.

The above quotations from the interviews with youth demonstrate representatively for our research sample how the young respondents negotiate normality with respect to their families which differ from heteronormative models.

As demonstrated also in the quotations above, the young respondents have, albeit to different degrees and in different ways, narrated about their views on normality and difference in relation to the experiences related to their family realities.

Joyce, a ten year-old Afro-German girl lives together with her younger sister Kaya, her mother Anne and her mother's female partner Leonie in a town in Central Germany. Joyce and her sister Kaya have from time to time contact with their father who has lived in France since his divorce from the girls' mother. As she is a black girl living with two white mothers, it happens often in encounters with other people that they suppose the two sisters are adopted. The family has a very critical view on racist discrimination; the parents discuss this issue with the children and support them in dealing with discrimination. However, the fact of being a rainbow family has been lived in a more hidden way, rather than openly shown to neighbours, teachers, classmates, and relatives. Joyce seems to wonder how this could be changed in the future.

6. In Germany, the partnership of same sex persons has been legally recognized since 2001, second-parent adoption has been legally possible since 2005, in 2013 the possibility of second parent adoption was extended and now allows the adoptive parent to share custody with his/her partner so she/he now can be legally recognized as a parent, nevertheless, joint adoption is still not possible for same-sex-couples; but many gay and lesbian families function as foster families to children and youth; the Federal Constitutional Court ruled in June 2013 to end the financial disadvantage of rainbow families and same-sex partnerships. In Slovenia, the legislation is more evasive – in the cases of the few children who currently have two legal parents of the same-sex, this is the case of some kind of legal 'loopholes' and not targeted legal provisions; same-sex couples have been able to register their partnerships since 2006, but have substantially fewer rights than different-sex couples.

Joyce's statement demonstrates that she recognizes that there are different understandings of what is the norm and what is perceived and labelled as normal. She differentiates between her own, subjective views – "for me it's normal" – which correspond to her lived experience of her own family reality, and others' views of what is or can be named 'family'. Joyce expresses her belief, that if people did not talk about rainbow families at all, they would not actually express the differences and hierarchies between normal and non-normal families: she only 'realizes' that she comes from a 'different' family, when others bring her attention to that. Joyce's experience is *"when one doesn't speak about it*", there is nothing special about it – nor to feel nor to explain. But "*when they have sometimes asked me"* she adds*, "then it actually again came into my mind"*. For example, when her classmates ask why her father doesn't live with the family or whether Leonie is her aunt and she has to think of answers and explanations, she is reminded of being different. This assumption might be connected with the fear, that she is perceived as not belonging to the 'normality'. The formulation *"that I, that we, are a rainbow family, yes one can say so"* we read as a signifier of this fear, but also as an expression of her responsibility and protectiveness towards her family, which might be related to her parents' cautiousness in regard to revealing their family constellation to the outside world. At the same time, while speaking her mind Joyce seems to become more assertive about using the term 'rainbow family' as a suitable expression representing her family and as a 'conceptual standard'. Finally, her conclusion "*it's not so often that one comes to this point (in German: "zur Sache kommen"), I believe, so, yes it doesn't often come up" (in German: "zur Sprache kommen")* can be read as a wish not to get into situations in which she feels the need to speak about her family. On the other hand, this phrase might also convey a wish to talk without fear, openly about her family: her two mothers, her sister and her cat. In that sense "*one comes to this point*" ("*zur Sache kommen")* could be read as "one shows true colours" (in German:. "Farbe bekennen").

Lara is a seventeen year old young teenager living with her mother, her younger sister and her mother's female partner in central Slovenia. She was born in a heterosexual relationship as was also her sister. Her mother has fallen in love with B., a woman, and started living with her a few years ago. Lara emphasizes the parental identification over gender and outlines that everything is actually the same as in an ordinary family (except that there are two women). She speaks as an 'expert': she has experience from both a family with a mother and father, as well as with a family with two mothers. Still, despite this certainty that everything is the same, she is cautious about labeling: she would not say *"now we're in a same-sex family",* but she insists on naming her family simply 'family'. With this she underlines that verbalizing a difference ('same-sex family') implies also that the family will be perceived as inferior or 'not-proper' if it's gender structure will be exposed or emphasised. At the same time she of course admits to a difference - "*Just, there's my mom, and B., and my sister."* – but she wants to eradicate the negative effects of the general perception of this difference by de-emphasising the gendered structure of the family and by normalizing it – "*just family"*.

Cristina is a thirteen year old girl, living with her two mothers and her two year older brother Micha in a town in South Germany. Micha and Christina were both conceived by donor insemination. Similarly to Lara, Cristina chooses a reflective approach in explaining her thoughts about her family *"it's not 'abnormal' it's simply just different, it is not bad, it is completely normal"*. In both phrases she uses double negations which show that she knows about others' biased opinions and devaluations with respect to LGBT identified people and to families in which lesbian mothers chose anonymous donors. She knows very well from her own experience, that others hold these biased opinions and negative attitudes (that they think them and express them) and for her, it is impossible not to contradict them: her narrative in the interview testifies that she is very decisive in opposing and combating prejudices. In her statement "*it is completely normal like it is"* she emphasizes especially the last three words and with this she underlines that to her, it is her family that is the relevant, concrete, and "normal" basis to grow up and where she feels at ease and comfortable.

Nevertheless, moving back and forth between the different understandings of normality - the one within and the other beyond/outside - might indicate a feeling of tension: on the one hand they see their parents as those, who take care of them, by whom they feel loved, protected, understood and as well as sometimes not understood, irritated, and overstrained. On the other hand they are aware that to the outside world their parents' identification has been labelled as something special, something which needs to be explained and justified.

All in all, these three young people, regardless of their age difference, their family history, their different nationalities, cultural backgrounds, even skin color, have very clear conceptions of how difference is constructed and how difference always brings about meanings of inferiority, otherness and non-normality.

2 De-normalisation

With the term de-normalisation, we describe the processes by which the children with LGBT identified parents are perceived and constructed as not normal, as classified beyond the hetero-normative normality, which is expressed through the 'othering' by others, for example in interactions (as we present with the experiences of the interviewed youth in our research sample). The term exposes and emphasises, that the acts of exclusion and labelling others as different not only construct the image of a particular person, but also re-construct the ideas about the perceived normality. Following the concept of normalisation we suggest the term de-normalisation to emphasise the effects of normalisation. Describing those who do not comply with (hetero) norms as abnormal through processes or acts of exclusion marks them as 'deviant other' (Hark 1999). De-normalisation also works to reaffirm existing norms and perceptions of normality (Butler 2009). We use the term de-normalisation to emphasise the regulative power effects of heteronormativity in the context of negotiations of social power, questions of hierarchy and status among peers, and in respect to interpersonal and structural levels in school (teachers and school curriculum) dealing with non-normative formations

such as non-heteronormative families (cf. Streib-Brzič, Quadflieg 2011: 19). In our research we operated with a definition of violence emphasising forms of social aggression expressed not mainly physically, but by verbal and non-verbal attacks on dignity and self-esteem. Such violence included acts of exclusion, insults, and devaluation, as well as evoking feelings of invisibility and of not being symbolically represented, which could be seen as intentional, as well as unintentional forms of discrimination with homophobic connotations. The violence was experienced especially through the social practices of de-normalising within a matrix of heteronormativity[7]

Practices of de-normalisation work precisely through assumptions of certain behaviours, which can silence and make experiences that do not match these assumptions invisible (cf. Streib-Brzič, Quadflieg 2011: 19). In the study, we identified four forms of the de-normalisation processes: a) experience of physical and verbal violence, b) anticipation of violence, c) being asked questions, d) being silenced.[8]

a) Experiences of physical or verbal violence as processes of de-normalisation

None of the children interviewed in our study, neither in Germany, neither in Slovenia, had experienced physical violence which could be related to the fact that they are living in a rainbow family. In Germany three out of 22 children report having experienced verbal violence from other children which they assign to the fact that they are growing up with LGBT parents. Luisa (15) describes a situation of being teased by a girl to whom she had disclosed that her mother loves a woman. This supposedly trustworthy friend went around and spread the news and moreover, she used the information to provoke Luisa, "she made fun of me a bit" as Luisa says. Janne (16) remembers a situation of being picked on by a classmate. Not sure whether her mothers' being lesbian led to the fact that the girl had bullied her, Janne concluded, that nothing but this could have been the reason. This can be read as a sign how fundamentally the knowledge of de-normalisation has been experienced and is hence anticipated. The third interviewee who reported a harmful incident was Lisa, 12. She described an ongoing situation of being constantly asked by another child in school to answer questions about her mothers who had, exactly at that time, split up.

7. In partial reference to Butler's (1990) 'heterosexual matrix', we use the term 'matrix of heteronormativity' as a wider term, taking the focus off sexuality and applying it to a framework including an even more extensive array of practices, as well as relating to the 'family' as a heteronormative construct.
8. All these processes with discriminatory effects might also be categorised as homophobic or transphobic violence. The terms homophobia and transphobia describe negative attitudes against people who identify themselves or are seen as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. However, as Herek (2004) states, homophobic attitudes have been – from a deep psychological perspective - conceptualised as an unconscious fear and thus tend to individualise and pathologise the implied processes of devaluation and exclusion. In such conceptualisations, the aspects of hierarchisation and power relations remain largely neglected. The term 'homophobia' is widely understood and has been used for initiating alliances and measures against this discriminatory behaviour and effects, but in this paper we introduce a new term in order to elucidate other perspectives of experiencing discrimination.

In all three cases reported in Germany the children described the incidents as situations which could be solved with support and intervention of their parents. It was obvious how important sensitive support is, encouragement as well as clear statements and interventions by parents and how these help the children to deal with the difficult situations: these are undoubtedly significant resilience factors.

In Slovenia, the four interviewed young people formulated the experienced events of violent behaviour in the form of hate speech (derogatory and pejorative statements, but these mostly came from people who were not personally close to the respondents) and explicit 'othering'[9]. The 'othering' was experienced in many forms: they were pitied by their peers (the peers were presupposing that kids growing up without parents of both genders or with parents of the same gender were 'suffering' because of that), their behaviour was sometimes interpreted as a consequence of their family form (when peers wanted to present certain behaviours as unacceptable, weird etc.), or they were generally treated and perceived as different and with that also as 'bad'. The sources of discrimination were not only peers, but also adults in the children's lives (such as also grandparents). We studied the school environments especially close-up and also found examples of harassment by teachers. For example, one of the children had to change school because two teachers treated her badly (interrogated her about the absent father, discriminated her with regard to marking etc.) which led to health problems and problems with school performance.

In general, these results confirm former research. Rupp (2009) as well as Golombok (2004), Gartrell (2005), Gartrell, Boss (2010) and others found that just a few children report incidents of being bullied, picked on, excluded or even beaten up by peers because of having LGBT identified parents. Such results show on the one hand that children from rainbow families are well integrated; usually they have good contacts to peers, make friends and teachers appreciate having them in class. The fact that some experience violence, verbally, psychically, or physically leads to the necessity to analyse how bullying functions: a group/majority identifies mostly one single person within the group who – in the eyes of the majority – doesn't match because of certain features. These features are actually arbitrarily selected – it depends on the group's attitudes. What needs to be noted here is that it has been recognised in several studies (Kosciew, Diaz, 2008, Klocke 2012, Magić, Janjevak 2013) that teachers have a key role as possible multipliers of prejudices (for example, by ignoring or not reacting to homophobic remarks or by showing their own homophobic attitude with certain statements) – or as multipliers of an understanding of diversity.

b) Anticipation of violence as experiences of de-normalisation

Almost every interviewed child reported having been affected by the phenomenon of de-normalisation – the anticipation of violence. Many children in both countries confessed often or in certain situations to having fear of being teased, excluded, blackmailed, beaten up or threatened. In Germany the intensity of these fears were connected

9. The process of perceiving or portraying someone or something as fundamentally *different* or *alien*; a hierarchisation is involved in this process.

to the atmosphere in school and obvious forms of psychological violence: most of the participants described experiences of bullying in school, rarely as victims, but often as spectators or even as indirect participants. Their fear was thus induced by their previous experiences or experiences of others that they know about, including their parents' experiences of homophobia. The anticipation of violence is expressed also in the selective choices of whom to tell about the family structure without too great a risk of rejection. The anticipation of rejection, exclusion, name calling or bullying is especially harmful, because it creates a sense of constant threat – which forces children to be continuously aware of the divide between the outside world and the intimacy of their family life.

The fact, that children with whom we conducted interviews in Slovenia had hardly any contacts with peers who live in similar family formations obviously leads to an increasing feeling of insecurity. The scarce sharing of experiences and strategies might have been caused by the lack of disclosure of the LGBT parents / rainbow families, which can now be observed as growing (the younger generations of children have more contact with kids from similar backgrounds). The expectations of negative reactions and violence is such, that some young people would not speak about their family even to their closest friends: one of the respondents in Slovenia shared her story of how long it took her to tell her best friend that she is living with two female carers – only to find out that her best friend also has two mothers and has never talked about that to anyone either. In Slovenia, additionally, out of fourteen interviewed mothers, four also expressed that they fear losing child custody: they expected that if the father would use their sexuality as an argument against the mothers' full custody, he would probably win his case[10]. Also from this perspective (fear of losing custody) the children are coerced into carefully choosing whom they tell – including their own biological parents. Moreover, our study also disclosed an anticipation of negative reactions among school teachers, who would avoid talking about rainbow families (and homosexuality) because they fear being condemned by parents and colleagues as 'promoters' of homosexuality (similar results for Slovenia can also be found in: Magić *et al.* 2011, Magić 2012, Kuhar *et al.* 2012).

Such experienced or anticipated violence is not limited to dimensions of physical violence (Neidhardt 1986), or defined only as an intentional act of power with the effect of physical harm (Popitz 1992); we understand it as referring to concepts with a broader definition (see, for example, Popp 2002). This concept includes psychological violence such as relational violence (where harm is caused to one's relationships or social status). This is a mostly hidden, not an overt, form of violence that can be performed verbally or non-verbally through exclusion, humiliation, damage of reputation (spreading rumours) (Ittel, Salisch 2005), as well as through bullying, which is defined as the systematic mistreating of a person by a single perpetrator or a smaller group over a longer period of time (Schäfer, Herpell 2010).

10. As far as we know, there have been no cases of lost child custody due to a parent's sexuality in Slovenia –there seem to be no cases of parents filing a claim on that basis. Neverthess, the interviewed parents' beliefs about the risks rest on the perceived general attitudes towards homosexuality and the perceived attitudes of social workers, who make the decisions in cases of child custody.

c) Being asked questions

De-normalisation works precisely through assumptions of certain behaviours, which can silence and make invisible experiences that do not match these assumptions. One example of how such assumptions can work is the seemingly innocent strategy of 'just asking' which marks the difference by maintaining a normative position: *"The capacity of ignorance to appear innocent and passive may well be an operation of its power, while the appearance itself of innocence and passivity may be one of its effects."* (Sullivan 2004: 169). Speech practices are especially frequent and apparent in maintaining this normative position, and as education researcher Kevin K. Kumashiro argues: *"Oppression originates in discourse, and, in particular, in the citing of particular discourses, which frame how people think, feel, act, and interact. In other words, oppression is the citing of harmful discourses and there petition of harmful histories."* (Kumashiro 2000: 40). With various speech acts, such as name-calling, asking questions, positioning, insulting, pitying, othering etc. de-normalisation is enacted in interaction and what is 'normal' or 'correct' is reinforced.

Those, growing up in rainbow families seem to be constantly reminded of the uncommonness of their daily reality. One of the ways in which children and youth realise and are again and again faced with the message that they are different is by having to answer questions that are not posed to children from heteronormative families: Do you really have two fathers; how is it possible to have two mums, how does that 'work'; who/where is your father then, etc. Children and youth reported being continuously and without any real interest being asked about their family, were having their biological and social family conditions discredited, were being identified with the sexual orientation of their parents etc. These questions not only involve questioning the authenticity and 'acceptability' of their family reality, but are sometimes or often experienced also as questioning their own personal authenticity, integrity and veracity of their statements. Mona (8), one of the young respondents in Germany, expresses a similar thought. When the interviewers asked her why she thought she is asked the same questions several times, she replied, that the others just cannot believe her answers, *"maybe they think I once would have another answer"* (Mona).

In contrast to adults who sometimes find it surprising that others, such as teachers, show so little interest in their family reality[11], the interviewed youth and children feel that they are often being asked repetitive and sometimes senseless and disinterested questions, which can quickly turn into interrogation and insults and forces them into providing (self-)justifications. Children and youth are happy to answer questions, as long as they express real interest, and as long as they feel they are in control of the

11. The fact of not being asked about their family was described by almost all interviewed parents in both countries. They feel the neighbours and other parents hesitate to ask details about their family constellation (who is the sperm donor, how do they explain their family constellation to their child) and about organizing their everyday family life (who is responsible for housework chores, do both work part time). The missing questions are mostly considered as a lack of interest and less frequently considered as an idea that people are simply uncertain of what and how to ask.

situation and can decide themselves how much and what kind of information they will share, or end the discussion. Some youth, like Vid (17) from Slovenia, also experienced being pitied by others: the message Vid got from some of his peers was that he obviously suffers because he has two mothers and that the others feel sorry for him, for this 'terrible' situation (Zaviršek, Bercht 2012).

d) Being silenced

Often simultaneously with the 'just asking' scenarios, children and youth from rainbow families experience also being silenced, and their family reality remaining invisible in social contexts (for example in school – discussions in the classroom, schoolbooks, at family-events or celebrations such as 'mothers-day'). Especially in Slovenia, the children and youth reported rainbow families, even homosexuality as completely absent in the school curricula (or at least never framed in the context of family life, love, care etc.), which can be seen as systematic structural silencing, contributing to de-normalisation of rainbow families. Youth said they would feel more supported and included if they would be able to see and hear about various kinds of family realities in school, including those, similar to their own. Not that children and youth would want to become or be exposed themselves, but they felt that debates and images of the diversity would also serve as an affirmation of the 'normality' of their own lives and raise acceptance among their peers. At the same time, also at the interpersonal level, some would experience silencing as a hurtful way of their reality being devalued and marginalized.

Najda (21) from Slovenia talked about how all her peers and the community knew that her father was gay, but no one ever talked about it with her: except derogatory remarks, no space was opened for her to talk about her reality, to share her experience and feelings with others (cf. Zaviršek 2012). This ignorance and silencing functioned as a devaluation of a specific, lived reality and contributed to de-normalisation. Amelie in the German study reports, that even the teacher who was informed about her family (her two mothers had introduced themselves to all of the teachers as Amelie's parents) asked her when she painted a family picture, why she wrote on the painting that there are two mums. Amelie explained that this is because she has two moms. "Then", says Amelie "she remembered that I am the one" (in German: "fiel ihr ein, dass ich das ja bin"). Such situations of 'having forgotten' bring the children into a position to repeat and remind others about their family (if they do not want to consent to silencing). In any case such situations evoke the impression of not being seen and recognised. Similar experiences have been reported by other children and youth.

3 Strategies for dealing with de-normalisation

To avoid, prevent, or reduce the impacts of de-normalisation processes the children and youth developed different strategies, which we categorize into two groups: one involving disclosure and concealment and one involving verbalisations and justifications. The strategies we have identified in our study through the analysis of the respondents' narratives in the interviews can be seen as confident acts of self-positioning and agency. This perspective is based on the systemic view and stresses the idea that social inter-

actions and relationships are not fixed but dynamic. Social relations and the therein existing hierarchies are seen as processes which involve continuous negotiations and depend on the interactions between the different actors (Watzlawick *et al*., 1969). The strategies we identified can be categorised as (1) firstly efforts with which the children show that they fit into the normality, (2) secondly variants of reactions and constructive delineation when a child or youth encounters devaluation and (3) thirdly attempts to rewrite and redefine the attribution of 'being different' coming from the outside world.

3.1. *"I don't rub it in everyone's nose" (Janne, 16)* – Strategies of disclosure and concealment

How to speak about their family and explicitly about their parents' LGBT identification in their environment, with peers and friends in school seem to be for the majority of our young respondents in both countries one of the most emotionally charged topics. As discussed above they are well aware of homophobic attitudes and have experiences of de-normalisation in society, and so they think very carefully about processes of disclosure. They consider and with caution check whom they can trust among their classmates, friends, or teachers. They usually spend a considerable amount of time to find out who of these would with great probability accept the information with real interest and respect and – also very importantly – how could one at the same time be sure that those who possibly would devalue their family would not get to know it. Jean-Marie, an eight-year-old boy in the German study describes this balancing act as follows: "*so, one can tell it, but one doesn't need to, so, one can say, for example, when you were on holidays, you don't need to hide it. Except when there is a mean one in class, please don't tell them, because then – you will be picked on or so. And not to the friends of the mean one, because they then tell it to the mean one (laughs)".*

The dilemma of how to choose the right moment, the right situation, the right content and suitable words is expressed also by Mona (8): "*just to tell everything right away is actually not so good"* she says. With stressing "everything" she refers to the fact that she was conceived by donor-insemination. She states clearly that this is an intimate detail of her life which needs to be protected against any disrespectful comments. Leander (11) concludes: "*later one can tell it just to everybody".* When Leander says "*later*" it means that it remains an undetermined and vague point in the future. This can be read as a sign of on the one hand the wanting to be sure that the openness doesn't bring along any risks and on the other hand the wish *"one could just tell"* and how he adds even *"everybody".*

Most children and youth decided only to talk about their special family constellation when they were directly asked. Amelie (11) summarises her strategy in the following way: "*I tell, when someone asks me about it".* Similar statements we found among Slovenian respondents – Vid (17) for example said: "*It is true that it's not the first thing I say when it comes up. If I don't have to tell [them], I don't [tell them]. If it happens to come up, or if someone asks, then of course I tell [them], I don't hide it. [...] Yeah, if someone asks me directly if I have two moms, I'll say yeah, I have two moms. But otherwise I won't."* (quoted also in Zaviršek, Bercht 2012). Children and youth balance on the one side the authenticity and veracity about their family life, while also selectively share

information in order to protect their family and themselves against homophobia. The consent to silencing is actually cautiousness which functions as a coping strategy, and it was most present among very young children and young adults. Among the former possibly because of how developed their self-conceptualisations already are and because of how confident they feel in social interactions, and among the latter possibly because of factors such as how their family was constructed (often, these generations also have a recognized biological father or were even conceived in a heterosexual relationship), how 'out' their parents are to the outside world and how supported they are in disclosing their family reality. In Slovenia, Nadja was remembering how she dealt with disclosure when she was younger, less confident in herself and without support from her parents or other adults. "*I invented a story for myself: 'if you tell [them], they'll be mean', something like that. So that was that fear, and shame. Constantly hiding something wasn't easy, no."* Notably, Nadja minimizes her fear (cf. also Zaviršek, Bercht 2012) and her 'right to be cautious and unsecure' by presenting it as 'invented'.

Children – mostly teenagers – that feel equipped to address uncertainty about dealing with disclosure, have demonstrated that they approach it head on. They were explaining that they feel better being always direct and clear *"right open, making no secret at all out of it"* as Cristina, a 13 year old girl from Germany states. Those who developed and applied such an active strategy, report that they are convinced that the normality they experience inside the family should be identically expressed to the outside. If they would hesitate to talk freely about their parents' being lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer, they conclude, they would support and agree to the de-normalisation processes. Moreover, they formulate that they feel even stronger to take an active initiative role by speaking and telling before others ask instead of waiting for being confronted with questions. In Slovenia, in the recent times, parents are taking such an active role and choose to disclose their family reality immediately (in kindergarten, school and elsewhere): thus it can be expected that in the following years or decade, some of their children might take on the same strategy and discourse, as they will have models to look to, that have not yet really existed until now.

It may seem that only such an active role addresses also structural inequalities on the societal (not only interpersonal) level. Nevertheless, it can be claimed that also the strategy characterised by caution should be recognised and appreciated as an active approach which mirrors the attempt / the desire to protect one's own family. A family in which one feels wanted, loved and supported presents an experience which one does not want to put at risk of being questioned and devalued.

3.2. *"How does this work, two mothers?"* – Strategies of verbalization and justification

All of the interviewed children report that as soon as they disclose their family background (or as soon as someone else discloses it) they are confronted with a lot of questions. Often, they feel that these questions do not express real interest, and that the one asking is actually using / abusing his or her questions as an *"instrument of power*" to use Cristina's word. This happens when the same questions are asked several

times by the same person, when the person doesn't 'understand' or doesn't 'remember' etc. Such interrogations are usually experienced as being questioned as a person (for example, one's 'normality', credibility, etc.) and/or in the familial relationship to their parents and siblings being questioned (for example, one's 'true' relatedness to one's brothers or sisters or one actually having two mothers or two fathers).

The strategies some children and youth have developed and employ for such situations consist of firstly the ability to evaluate whether the person who asks questions actually shows any real interest with his or her questions or uses them as teasing or even humiliating; secondly, a smart, humorous, ironical, or any kind of sharp-tongued reaction which surprises and silences the other person and thirdly, the (inner) permission and courage to end a conversation which ignored/disregarded their boundaries.

Cristina, reports that the most offending and annoying question for her was: "*how were you actually created, how can that be, where is your father?"*. She says that if someone is really interested in that, then of course she likes to talk about it and also to explain how she was conceived by insemination and born to her mothers, but doesn't know her donor. The latter does not matter to her, but causes a lot of questions: *"I tell it to everyone, but [...] well, if they actually have no interest at all in it [...] then I don't say anything about it, then I say, I am there, I am here and it actually doesn't matter now"*. Mona reports that when she talks about her two mothers others might comment *"that's not even possible"* to have two mothers but no father. She explains that she has developed a short but effective answer to it. She just replies: *"that works very well"*. Usually, she reports, this phrase ended the discussion.

Obviously the effectiveness of these strategies (as described in 3.1 and 3.2) depends substantially on the children's attitude, their standing, and self-conception. As the resilience research shows this attitude can to a great extent be influenced and strengthened by parents, relatives, or other attachment figures (Welter-Enderlin, Hildenbrand, 2006; Bos, van Balen, 2008).

Janne describes by whom she feels inspired to deal with difficult situations: *"so somehow I have it from my mum, always I've learned a cool saying and so, because she is herself always like this, she can always say something immediately, and I am always quick to say something [...] and then it is alright."* Again, this statement shows how important it is also for older teenagers to have parents standing behind them and supporting them – and also offering examples or figuring as experts in developing suitable (re)actions.

As the Slovenian research findings show, it is especially difficult for those children and youth, whose parents have decided to silence the issue of sexuality and partnership even inside the family. Nadja's (19) mother, for example, never spoke about the homosexuality of her father or attempted to explain to the children what is actually happening; some of the parents reported that they did not tell the children anything yet. Nevertheless, all stories of 'coming out' of parents to the children were 'successful' ones: children were happy to receive 'explanations' of relationships and behaviours and this would equip them to verbalize and position themselves when confronted with questions. The role and impact of parental input is seen also in Lara's (17) statement:

"*We live by the principle that it's okay, if someone finds out, they should find out, we don't care about their opinion. Okay, if they're cool with it, if they're not cool with it that's their problem. You could say that everybody whom we would like to know already knows, so we don't need to have special talks about whom to tell. Except if there's a kind of problem [...] We told them to tell the person to stop it or something like that" (Lara, 17)* (quoted also in Zaviršek, Bercht 2012). Lara's example shows that own positioning and justifications are based primarily on the family as a collective that is foremost depend on the parents. The children quite often adopt the narrative of the family / parents, which defines the disclosure strategies and verbalisation strategies ('we live by the principle'), as is as well the 'shield' against negative reactions and homophobia ('we tell them to stop').

Lara refers to the collective when talking 'in general' and demonstrates the importance of parental messages and resilience to develop one's own in social interactions. She also presents the reiteration of normality in her own 'peer community': *"I was with my friends at a store and we were complaining about our parents, how they're always bugging us and typical teenager stuff, and then my friend said, "you know, I've got a totally crazy situation, way more totally crazy than you!" And I said, yeah, what could be that crazy? Yeah, my mom has a girlfriend. And I said: "Aha, ok, mine has a girlfriend, too!" And then I looked at the third friend, and she says, "are you serious?" "Yeah, I'm serious!" She was a little afraid of what I was going to say."* (Lara). Among her peers – friends, the normal is actually 'crazy': the more crazy it is, the more 'normal' it actually is. Hence, her friend, who also has two mothers describes her family situation as 'crazy': this makes it 'normal' and 'real'. Even more importantly, the 'coming out' discussion is positioned among the 'normal' issues – 'complaining about parents'. This is, all and all, much more relevant for all children and youth: not the sexuality of their parents, but actually the relationships with their parents, the reality of their family as a unit of people who care for each other, have conflicts and love each other.

4 Conclusions

Research we conducted in Germany and Slovenia with children and youth from rainbow families shows how children and youth are on the one hand – even though none of our respondents reported experiencing physical violence – exposed to de-normalisation processes (for example: being questioned about their family constellation, kinship to their non-biological parent, silencing or devaluing of LGBT identities), but also how they competently deal with it and develop strategies that equip them to do so. As long as there are conflicting views about homosexuality, bi-sexual and transgender identities we can also expect conflicting judgements about rainbow families.[12] Nevertheless, more importantly than that, this research demonstrates that the interviewed children and youth

12. Because we don't talk about the experiences of families with trans parents in this paper, we also don't discuss the trans identities in the framework of rainbow families, but refer to what is socially most visible – clear messages of the parents' homosexual relationship.

are resilient to the processes of de-normalisation (as to other forms of 'othering'). As children and youth have an active part in social interactions they are not simply passive recipients of negative or positive responses, inputs or discourses. As agents in social interaction, they are also tied to other agents: and how they are able to develop their resilience and competence is influenced also by others. One important result is that parents play a decisive role in strengthening resilience: when the children experience their family as a safe, caring space and feel their parents standing behind them and providing them with expertise to address de-normalisation not only younger but also older children experience that as relief and support. Secondly, other important adults in their school-lives have an influence on to which extent the children are exposed to de-normalisation: teachers in school, who are vital in the sense of either introducing the images of diverse family life, of responding to homophobia in school and creating school as a safe, inclusive space, or either in ignoring violence and discrimination (and allowing it) and supporting silencing and 'othering' of certain realities. Most of the respondents (both parents and youth) emphasise the importance of giving greater attention to diverse family forms and LGBT identities in the school curriculum. The comparison of the proposed recommendations of the interviewed children and youth, as well as the parents show that there was great consistency in assessing that schools should be more engaged and prepared for the issues concerning rainbow families and their different experiences. This also means that school books and pedagogical materials should include the realities of diverse family formations and sexual identities. Thirdly, peers should not be viewed as only potential threats or dangers (as they are often represented by opponents of rainbow families), but also as a strong source of support and affirmation. An especially important element for feeling supported and secure in their environment for children growing up in rainbow families is when their classmates and friends know other LGBT identified adults or children with same-sex parents. This fundamental finding can be used for developing measures in counteracting prejudices and de-normalisation practices. All in all, children and youth are not as much threatened or vulnerable to de-normalisation; they are vulnerable only if they stand completely alone against it.

In their dealing with de-normalisation, children and youth from rainbow families do not simply 'protect' their own family or defend their own personal rights and authenticity, but are also active agents of social change. In their interactions with others they are actively contributing to a broadening of the conceptualizations of family life that we generally hold and finally contribute to a democratization of our society.

References

Bos, Henny, and van Balen, Frank (2008): Children in planned lesbian families: stigmatisation, psychological adjustment and protective factors. Culture Health & Sexuality, 10(3): 221 – 236.

Butler, Judith (1990): Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith (2004): Undoing Gender. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith (2009): Die Macht der Geschlechternormen. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

Gartrell, Nanette *et al*. (2005): The National Lesbian Family Study: 4. Interviews with the 10-year-old children. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 75(4): 518 – 524

Gartrell, Nanette, and Bos, Henny (2010): US National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study: Psychological adjustment of 17-year-old adolescents. Pediatrics, 126(1): 1 – 9.

Golombok, Susan (2008): Parenting. What really counts?. London: Routhledge.

Hark, Sabine (1999): Deviante Subjekte. Die paradoxe Politik der Identitat. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.

Hemmings, Clare (2007): What's in a name? Bisexuality, transnational sexuality studies and western colonial legacies. The International Journal of Human Rights, 11(1): 13 – 32.

Ittel, Angela, and von Salisch, Maria (eds.) (2005): Lügen, Lästern, Leiden lassen. Aggressives Verhalten von Kindern und Jugendlichen. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer. [Lies, annoyances, tortures. Childrens' and youths' aggressive behaviour. Frankfurt/Main: Brandes & Apsel.

Klocke, Ulrich (2012): Akzeptanz sexueller Vielfalt an Berliner Schulen. Berlin: Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Wissenschaft. [Acceptance of sexual diversity at Berlin schools.] Frankfurt/Main: Brandes & Apsel.

Kosciw, Joseph G., and Diaz, Elizabeth M. (2008): Involved, Invisible, Ignored. The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Parents and Their Children in Our Nation's K-12 Schools. New York: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

Kuhar Roman, Humer, Živa, and Maljevac, Simon (2012): Integrated, but Not Too Much: Homophobia and Homosexuality in Slovenia. In L. Trappolin, A. Gasparini and R. Wintemute (eds.): Confronting Homophobia in Europe: 51 – 78. Social and Legal Perspectives. Oxford: Hart Publishing.

Kumashiro, Kevin (2002): Troubling Education. Queer Activism and Antioppressive Pedagogy. New York: Routledge.

Magić Jasna, Janjevak, Ana, and Kuhar, Roman (2011): *Oprostite, gospa učiteljica, ali ste lezbijka? – Raziskovalno poročilo o položaju LGBT učiteljev v slovenskem izobraževalnem sistemu.* Ljubljana: Legebitra. [Excuse me, miss, are you a lesbian? Research report about the situation of LGBT teachers in Slovenian education system]

Magić, Jasna (2012): *Homofobija na naši šoli?: Poročilo.* Ljubljana: Legebitra. [Homophobia at our school? : Report.]

Neidhardt, Friedhelm (1986): Gewalt. Soziale Bedeutungen und sozialwissenschaftliche Bestimmungen des Begriffs. In Bundeskriminalamt (ed.): Was ist Gewalt ? Auseinandersetzungen mit einem Begriff: 109 – 147. Wiesbaden: Bundeskriminalamt. [Violence. Social meanings and social scientific definitions of the phenomenon.]

Popitz, Heinrich (1992): Phänomene der Gewalt. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. [Phenomena of violence.]

Popp, Ulrike (2002): Geschlechtersozialisation und schulische Gewalt. Geschlechtstypische Ausdrucksformen und konflikthafte Interaktionen von Schülerinnen und Schülern. Weinheim: Juventa. [Gender socialization and violence in school. Gender specific forms and conflict interactions of pupils.]

Rupp, Marina (ed.) (2009): Die Lebenssituation von Kindern in gleichgeschlechtlichen Lebenspartnerschaften. Köln: Bundesanzeiger Verlag. [Life-situation of children in same-sex partnerships.]

Schäfer, Mechthild, and Herpell, Gabriela (2010): Du Opfer! Wenn Kinder Kinder fertig machen. Frankfurt/ Main: Rowohlt. [You poor thing! When kids torture kids.]

Sullivan, Maureen (2004): The Family of Woman. Lesbian Mothers, Their Children, and the Undoing of Gender. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Streib-Brzič, Uli, and Quadflieg, Christiane (eds.). (2011): *School is out?! : comparative study "Experiences of children from rainbow families in school" conducted in Germany, Sweden and Slovenia*. Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Zentrum für transdisziplinäre Geschlechterstudien. [authors: Uli Streib-Brzič, Christiane Quadflieg, Malena Gustavson, Irina Schmitt, Ana M. Sobočan, Darja Zaviršek, Silke Bercht, Maja Pan]

Watzlawick, Paul et al. (1967): Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes. New York: Norton.

Welter-Enderlin, Rosemarie and Hildenbrand, Bruno (2006): Resilienz - Gedeihen trotz widriger Umstände. Heidelberg: Carl Auer. [Resilience – Thriving despite disagreeable conditions.]

Zaviršek, Darja, and Sobočan, Ana Marija (eds.) (2012): *Mavrične družine grejo v šolo : perspektive otrok, staršev in učiteljic*, (Zbirka Socialno vključevanje in pravičnost). Ljubljana: Fakulteta za socialno delo, 2012. [Rainbow families go to school: perspectives of children, parents and teachers.]

Zaviršek, Darja, and Bercht, Silke (2012): Izkušnje otrok in mladih iz mavričnih družin v Sloveniji. In Zaviršek, Darja and Sobočan, Ana Marija (eds.): *Mavrične družine grejo v šolo : perspektive otrok, staršev in učiteljic*, (Zbirka Socialno vključevanje in pravičnost): 51 – 83. Ljubljana: Fakulteta za socialno delo [Experiences of children and youth in rainbow families in Slovenia.]

Authors' data:

Dr. Ana M. Sobočan
Univerza v Ljubljani, Falkulteta za socialno delo
Topniška 31, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija
e-mail: *ana-marija.sobocan@guest.arnes.si*

Mag. Uli Streib-Brzič
Institut für gender Gewaltprävention
Mainzer Straße 45, 12053 Berlin, Germany
e-mail: *ulistreibbrzic@gmx.de*