

Queer Kinship on the Edge? Families of Choice in Poland

Joanna Mizielińska, 2022

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In *Queer Kinship on the Edge? Families of Choice in Poland*, Joanna Mizielińska ties together years of work on the 'Families of Choice in Poland' project (2013-2016) in a comprehensive exploration of ways in which queer families from Central and Eastern Europe complicate the mainstream picture of queer kinship research, which is mostly set in Anglo-American contexts. The book covers relationships with families of origin and families of choice, queer parenting, and the children of queer parents and their experiences, ultimately showing many configurations of queer families and highlighting their agency. The book is based on a mixed, multi-method study which included both quantitative surveys and a series of qualitative interviews and focus groups with non-heterosexual, Polish people and their families.

Queer Kinship on the Edge is an outstanding addition to the field of queer kinship and family studies. It calls into question the 'assimilation/transgression' debate popular among queer studies scholars, which examines the phenomena of homonormativity. The debate argues that the normalisation of some same-sex relationships and queer identities only includes those who conform to the status quo, like granting access to same-sex marriage instead of dismantling the heteronormative and colonial institution of marriage altogether. This preoccupation with 'assimilation' into hetero-patriarchal norms versus 'rebellion' against socially constructed institutions and building new family structures (following Kath Weston's seminal book *Families of Choice*) reappears in Western-dominated queer studies over the past few decades. Instead of engaging in those debates, Mizielińska examines the reality of daily familial lives, the complexities of 'transparent closets', class and generational differences among queer families in Poland, and the fragile balance of displaying families while mitigating risk to emotional, familial, and social well-being. Mizielińska's Polish queer families do not have an option to assimilate, but they also refuse to be erased or silenced. Instead, they challenge the heteronormativity of kinship and families promoted by the state.

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Mizielińska brilliantly covers the relationships queer people have with their chosen family and family of origin, challenging the idea that the two are polar opposites. She argues that queer people manage to build and maintain complex relationships with their partners, children, and families of origin despite hostility or a lack of acceptance. She then explores the various ways in which queer people become parents in Poland, both through ‘unplanned’ ways (with heterosexual partners) and ‘planned’ ways (adoption, assisted reproduction, reproductive migration, and co-parenting with queer or heterosexual friends). *Queer Kinship on the Edge* shows that despite a lack of state recognition and outright state hostility, queer families find loopholes in the system and mobilise help in inventive ways to secure their parental legitimacy and rights. Lastly, Mizielińska examines perspectives of children born and/or brought up by non-heterosexual parents in Poland. Here, she argues that children are an essential agent within queer families and need to be acknowledged as such.

Throughout the book, Mizielińska argues that the dominant Western/Anglo-American body of research introduces a narrow understanding of the complexities of queer parenthood. It over-represents the less-common routes of becoming queer parents (assisted reproduction procedures or surrogacy) and excludes the majority of experiences of less privileged people. It also biases literature on queer parenthood toward the experiences of white middle- and upper-income, queer people who are sufficiently wealthy to afford costly assisted reproduction procedures and surrogacy. I agree with Mizielińska and add that those problems of ‘skewed’ queer parenting research is also skewed towards the experiences of white, cisgender parents, which brings me to my only critique of *Queer Kinship on the Edge*: its limited view of ‘queerness’ which only includes cisgender individuals. Following Katie L. Acosta’s work on queer stepfamilies, I would argue that it is crucial to challenge the outdated view of queerness as a synonym with ‘homosexuality’ and view queer families as complex constellations with various gender identities and sexualities which shift over time. Mizielińska’s work would have benefited from more trans- and non-binary perspectives, since such parents face multiple layers of discrimination and risk.

Ultimately, *Queer Kinship on the Edge* is an important and timely work, and I hope it paves the way for more vibrant and diverse queer research in the region with a particular focus on queer parenting and families, which lately have become central figures in authoritarian homophobic campaigns like those of Vladimir Putin and Victor Orban.