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Introduction to the Sociological Case Studies

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This Part consists of five chapters; this introductory chapter and a further four chapters, each based on a sociological case study carried out in one of the four countries covered by the project. Although recognising the legal, historical, socio-cultural and political specificities of these countries in relation to the issues of sexual equality, homosexuality and homophobia—and this is reflected in each study's research design—these case studies collectively aim to produce a more nuanced understanding of homophobia.

Since the authors of these chapters conceptualise homophobia as a multi-faceted and multi-layered phenomenon, they have sought to explore it from the standpoints of heterosexual women and men as well as lesbians and gays, attempting to examine how this term itself is perceived, contested, and used in an everyday context. By giving voices to both the heterosexual majority and the lesbian and gay minority in this respect, the authors hope to illustrate convergences and divergences across sexual orientation, and promote a better understanding of homophobia within the European context.

Of course, understanding is only one side of the story. As the title of our book suggests, equipped with nuanced understandings, the authors also want to confront homophobia through the lens of the lived experiences of the lesbians and gay men who opened their hearts to them. They have examined the diverse strategies lesbians and gay men developed to manage and resist homophobia in various aspects of life. More specifically, the authors locate this exploration within two broad empirical contexts—education (see chapters three, four and five) and ethnic minority communities (see chapter six)—in order to demonstrate the 'lived' nature of this contestation.

These four case studies operated within the qualitative paradigm, using focus groups and individual interviews as the primary data collection tools. In total, 32 focus groups and 55 individual interviews were conducted between March 2010 and January 2011. Two hundred and five individuals participated in the research, comprising 68 heterosexual women, 28 heterosexual men, 32 lesbians, 71 gay

men, and six transexuals. Each of the following chapters provides a more detailed methodological account.

All four studies followed the same three thematic frames, applied to focus groups and interviews, although the UK case study differs from the others in its specific focus on ethnic minorities. The first area of investigation relates to different definitions, interpretations and understandings of homophobia. We wanted to explore how respondents understand the concept of homophobia and how their interpretations can be applied to possible resistance towards homophobia in diverse contexts. We were also interested in the familiarity of this concept in each national context and in representations of lesbians and gays at the national level or—in the UK—at the level of different ethnic communities.

The second thematic field addresses the critical issue of homosexuality and education. We were interested in both the experiences of lesbians and gays with homophobia in school settings, and the suggestions of students of educational studies and trainee teachers on possible strategies to prevent homophobia in schools. We investigated how and where homosexuality is/should be addressed in the school setting and the potential for going beyond the currently heteronormative nature of school curricula.

Our third field of investigation tackles the role of the law in combating homophobia. We focused on respondents' awareness and expectations of equality legislation (where such legislation is in operation). We tried to investigate how the existing legislative framework in the national contexts provides the ground for overcoming homophobia.

Following the focus group and individual interviewing procedures, a standard topic guide was applied with open-ended questions around the main research themes. All potential participants were provided with an explanation of the study, and willing participants provided written informed consent. All interviews were conducted by experienced interviewers. Each respondent was given an assumed name. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and then transformed into national code books.

Methodologically, the study is based on the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which aims at understanding the discursive practices as those which construct the social reality and individuals as social subjects (see Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough and Ruth, 1997). It also helps to investigate power relations and consequent inequalities within given social structures. As such CDA is never non-political as it implies a form of intervention in social practice and social relations. It is directed against social exclusion, through sexism, racism, homophobia and so on. In other words, CDA is aiming at the disclosure and explanation of ideological power relations behind the discourse and implicit elements of the text.

Drawing all these four chapters together, four broad unifying themes could be identified as common traits of the comparison: (1) the uses and limitations of 'homophobia' as a concept; (2) the persistence of heterosexuality as an organising principle of social life; (3) the power of the 'child protection' or 'child welfare'

discourse in militating against sex and relationship education in schools and recognition of same-sex parenting and family life; and (4) the necessity of strategies to confront homophobia engaging with local specificities.

With regard to the understanding of homophobia as a concept, the case studies were conceptually designed to examine homophobia on various levels. Taking their cue from scholars such as Gregory Herek, the authors conceptualised homophobia as not only individual behaviour and acts against lesbians and gays, but also as a cultural ideology that simultaneously stigmatises homosexuality and elevates heterosexuality, as well as institutional and community practices which accentuate the glare of heterosexual lifestyles, making invisible and silencing—however implicitly—lesbians and gays.

As the findings show, the majority of respondents were familiar with the concept of homophobia. Although no clear line can be drawn between lesbians and gay men, and heterosexual respondents in their views of homophobia, the latter tended more often to resort to the interpretation of homophobia as a personal trait of individuals who see homosexuality as abnormal or as an illness. From their standpoint, homophobia implies the fear of lesbians and gays. It can be explained as an emotional reaction to something unknown, a reaction to the threat that lesbian and gay people pose to these individuals. In that sense, homophobia is stripped of its structural elements, because its focus is on the individual's views and attitudes. Lesbians and gays, on the other hand, more often interpreted homophobia outside of its classical psychological definition as a fear of homosexuals. In this context, homophobia was seen as a form of violence or as a discriminatory attitude or act, against homosexuals. Drawing on their own experiences, they see homophobia as an organising principle of social life, which reflects and is connected to broader socio-economic, cultural and political contexts. In their opinion, the traditional definition of homophobia as an individualised cognitive and affective state (that is irrational fear or disgust) is not sufficiently comprehensive in capturing the levels that transcends the individual. Therefore, the invisibility, silence, and at times physical violence that lesbians and gays experience are more than simply outcomes of discriminatory acts by individuals; they are also consequences of social and cultural norms and values that explicitly and implicitly construct homosexuality as the 'other': to be distanced, managed, or even suppressed. Confronting homophobia, then, becomes not only the reformation of individual minds, but also the transformation of social and political structures and practices, so that silence could be broken, invisibility dispelled, and violence stopped.

Whether one thinks that homophobia is still a useful concept in such endeavours—and adopt variant concepts such as 'homonegativity', 'heterosexim' or 'heteronormativity'—is one that academics will continue to debate. On a policy and practice level, however, such commitment could not be over-emphasised. If we apply the results from the focus groups to the classical functionalist analysis of homophobia (see Herek 1984), the non-experiential functions of homophobia, the symbolic (peer pressure, ideology, world views)

and the defensive functions (internalised homophobia, repressed homosexuality) seem to gain special importance. Furthermore, the research findings show that knowledge about the social conditions of lesbians and gays is most often not mediated through educational institutions (homosexuality being a rarely-addressed topic in school curricula), but rather through often stereotypical cultural representations, including representations and homophobic language use (such as homophobic jokes) reflecting a culture of homophobic social exclusions. The latter includes different 'disciplinary systems' (Kimmel 2005) which especially enables men to preserve their social privileges and power positions.

In relation to the above, all four case studies also highlight the powerful and entrenched nature of heterosexuality as the primary organising principle of social life. Evoking the concept of 'heteronormativity', the authors incontrovertibly demonstrate cultural, religious, and social values and practices that legitimise and perpetuate heterosexuality as the norm; namely, the referential framework for life. Heteronormativity underpins the structural context within which the interactional order is suspended. It is a powerful context, because it is everywhere, yet not explicit at all times. It defines, and it delimits.

Many lesbians and gay men in all the case studies reported the challenge of swimming against this current. While legal recourse could be helpful in some cases where discriminatory acts were committed against them, lesbians and gays found it much more challenging and energy-sapping to toe the heterosexist line, in order to benefit from qualified and fragile tolerance. The lack of actual experiences of interacting with lesbian and gay people led some heterosexual respondents to suggest—and perhaps to pretend—greater social visibility of lesbians and gays as a way to greater tolerance. However, as the respondents believe, these images should be normalised to the extent that they do not in any way shock, provoke or interrupt the 'normal life' of society. In other words, while tolerance might be found in some social relations and spaces, there was always a string attached: do not rock the boat; be gay, but do not be too loud or too obvious, or this fragile tolerance might be withdrawn. Tolerance and 'propriety', therefore, are inextricably linked.

Additionally, individualised notions of homosexuality, focusing on specific features of individuals to be kept private, which dominated all focus group sessions with heterosexuals, also seemed to foster the notion at least in some respondents, that social acceptance of lesbian and gay people is in inverse proportion to their social visibility. In this context, social acceptance was interpreted as being tolerated, and equal rights claims were often overshadowed by the convenient application of a 'don't ask—don't tell—don't bother' strategy. For some respondents, the presence of openly lesbian and gay people on the streets, seen as an act of invading public space with the most public form of coming out, constituted an unnecessary extreme or even provocation, reinforcing the view that homosexuality is a private matter and should be kept that way. In this context normal behaviour was equated with keeping the expression of sexual

preferences mostly hidden, creating a new division between 'extreme activists' and ordinary people, replacing the conventional heterosexual–homosexual divide.

In that sense homosexuality was seen as a private matter, which means that even the 'normalised' expressions of homosexual feelings and lifestyles should stay mostly hidden. The latter was not suggested solely by heterosexual respondents, but also by some of the lesbian and gay respondents themselves. All of them argued for human rights of sexual minorities, but they conditioned it by the normalisation of homosexuality. In that sense the classical division between heterosexuals and homosexuals was extended to a new one: good gays versus dirty queers. Here we can see how old binary oppositions are being reconstructed: one is invited into the 'power position club' (we will tolerate you), but has to succumb to the heteronormativity of the club and distance him or herself from 'the Others' (the dirty queers) who are casting a shadow on 'Us' (good, normalised gays and lesbians).

But what exactly does normalisation entail? On the surface the respondents' answers include requests for proper dressing, non-exposition of naked skin (in Pride parades) and the like, but the real content behind these expectations is actually gender conformity. Men should act like men and women should act like women. In this interpretation effeminate men and butch women as well as transsexual and transgender persons, represent the source (and the excuse for) homophobic stands. In other words: homophobia does not start with sexual orientation, it starts with gender.

In parallel with the heteronormative 'corrections' of lesbians and gays are the interpretations of which acts can be classified as homophobic. As the studies have shown, some participants apply the label of homophobia only to those acts which are intentionally harmful. Some ways of thinking and acting are rationalised as not being homophobic when participants consider them as common in the context of their everyday life.

The third unifying theme that unites all the case studies is the power of the 'child protection' and 'child welfare' discourse in militating against sex and relationship education in schools and recognition of same-sex parenting and family. Through the perspectives of heterosexual and lesbian and gay participants, we uncovered the recognition of the expansion of the ripple of tolerance in all four countries studied, albeit to differing extents—with the UK being the most tolerant and Italy, the least—in this respect. However, a closer inspection reveals that the level of tolerance for homosexuality decreases when the 'child protection' or 'child welfare' discourse is evoked. This is clearly demonstrated in the Italian, Slovenian and Hungarian case studies whose heterosexual participants were high school or university students of educational studies and trainee teachers. There was unanimous agreement among all these respondents that homosexuality and homophobia should be included in school curricula and should be discussed in schools. According to the respondents, the purpose of such discussions is in combating homophobia; preventing stereotypical representations of lesbians and

gays; and creating a culture of inclusion and tolerance. However, none of the trainee teacher respondents considered the possibility that lesbian and gay topics could be brought to school by one or more of their students coming out as lesbian or gay: when they were asked what they would do in such a situation, after an initial reaction of astonishment ('this possibility has never occurred to me!'), they started to consider it as a realistic option for which they should be better prepared, even if it did not seem to be part of their professional training. This points to a serious lack in the teacher training programmes that hardly provides guidelines, or helps to develop skills and competence on how to tackle sensitive issues related to ethnic, religious or sexual minorities in their future teaching practice.

Students also stressed that lesbians and gays are 'just like anyone else' and should be presented as normal. One of the best ways to do that is through an example: normality can become visible if pupils (and their parents) can interact with lesbian and gay individuals in classrooms. Although it is possible for such an approach to have a positive effect, lesbians and gays are again created as an 'object of observation', which has to meet certain higher standards in order to be constituted as normal and consequently accepted. The underlying expectation from the lesbian or gay guests is not only to inform pupils about homosexuality, but rather to have a positive effect on their 'heads and minds' about homosexuality. In other words: these guests should be likeable … which means should be 'normal', just like anyone else. The less one can see his/her homosexuality, the better. Furthermore such an approach creates lesbians and gays as the only source of truth about their 'special situation', which cannot be accessed from outside.

The well-meant approach which creates lesbians and gays as a 'special category' to be tolerated and included, can be seen most explicitly in the responses of those students who believed that homosexuality (and other Otherness) should be dealt with in (one) special workshop, as a one-off discussion, and should not be addressed throughout the curricula. However, the majority of respondents believed that the topic should be addressed whenever appropriate throughout the school curricula.

There was a wide interpretation of what is the appropriate context to discuss homosexuality. For some, the most appropriate context is within sex education. This position was challenged by those who believed that a discussion of homosexuality also includes a debate on lesbian and gay families, which cannot be placed into such a context. This issue turned out to be another breaking point, especially for Italian students, who framed the best interest of the child as an insurmountable limitation in the definition of normality of lesbians and gays. In other words: if lesbians and gay men pretend to have children in their own families, that is seen as trespassing on the gender matrix and as such is undesirable. This interpretation, however, was not so typical of Slovenian and Hungarian education students.

For most of the respondents in the study, the question of how to deal with homosexuality and homophobia in schools was something they had not thought

about before. While they did mention that homosexuality (rarely) comes up as a topic of their studies, the majority reported not being at all equipped to discuss these topics in classrooms. It seems that training programs hardly provide any guidelines on how to tackle such sensitive questions. Some respondents also pointed out that homosexuality should be explicitly mentioned in the official curricula in order to avoid possible protests from the parents. Students of education believed that homosexuality and related topics should be addressed, but within a heteronormative framework, which suggests tolerance, but keeps the power relationship unquestioned. Homosexual issues should be presented, but in a 'neutral' way, that is avoiding the suspicion of pursuing 'gay propaganda' or being 'too provocative'; homosexuality must be included but not in a way which would deconstruct the hetero-homo binary opposition and decentralise hetero-sexuality as the main organising principle. It is evident that there was much fear about the 'promotion' of homosexuality that might disrupt the 'normal' psychological, emotional and social development of the child.

Although the British case study focused on ethnic minority communities generally, such concerns were also explicitly articulated whenever the educational context was mentioned. Indeed, the findings suggest that this discourse also underlined many heterosexual participants' attitude towards same-sex parenting and family, citing the welfare of the child to justify their objection. This illustrates a focal point that efforts to confront homophobia need to focus, in order to extend the acceptance of lesbian and gay rights.

The fourth and final unifying theme that the case studies have identified is that the effort to confront homophobia is a multi-faceted endeavour that must engage with local specificities. As this Part of the book shows, the four countries covered by the project occupy different positions in terms of legislative development in relation to sexual equality. This, at least partly, influences the socio-cultural context. While we are not suggesting a unidirectional relationship between legislative progress and attitudinal or social change, we do acknowledge the empowering and liberating potential of the law in enabling subordinated individuals and groups to step out of the darkness of the margin, and embrace the mainstream. This is clearly illustrated in the findings. Most of our respondents knew and acknowledged the advantages provided by the existing legislative framework in their countries. However, for example, Hungarian lesbian respondents who had or wanted to have children expressed their dissatisfaction with the Hungarian legislation and interpreted the lack of equality in the field of family law as a violation of children's rights. On the other hand, some respondents did not want to register their partnership even in those countries where it was a legally available option because it would have meant an 'official coming-out' which they wanted to avoid.

For quite a few lesbian and gay respondents secrecy was still a very important element in maintaining their social integrity and helping them to avoid being stigmatised. At the same time, it was also acknowledged that secrecy can have serious negative consequences, including stress from information management

and leading a double life. Lesbian and gay participants demonstrated acute awareness of local, national and international socio-cultural and political contexts, within which they navigated their lives and constructed resources to confront homophobia in meaningful ways. Nonetheless, while there is evidence of organised and confident efforts among lesbian and gay participants to confront homophobia in various aspects of life, we have also uncovered voices of fear and resignation. These are voices of lesbians and gays who were far from confronting and resisting homophobia, for they did not have the social, cultural, political and emotional capital to do so. Among our respondents, when considering practical ways to combat homophobia, the dominant feeling often seemed to be one of incapacity and powerlessness.

However, resignation cannot be always interpreted as a sign of fear and low social capital. As shown in Slovenian case study, resignation in terms of withdrawal from a homophobic situation can be understood as a proactive behaviour. It contributes to one's personal protection and represents a strategy of actively managing stigma. On an everyday basis, resignation is a strenuous attempt to manage the weight of heteronormativity, often in silence and invisibility. This strategy is meant to offer, however tentatively, a 'safe' space, free from stigma (being lesbian or gay is bad, sinful, disgusting, etc) as well as from totalising categorisation (you are nothing but a lesbian or a gay man), which in effect perpetuated shame and stigma, rather than encouraged the living of holistic and proud lives. Indeed, as Poon and Ho (2008) and Pile and Keith (1997) have reminded us, resistance takes a myriad of forms, with some being institutionalised, visible and political; while others are personal and even invisible.

On the whole, the findings of these four case studies continue to remind us of the uneven and convoluted trajectory of sexual rights acquisition across Europe and within each of its Member States.