



Free to Live Their Lives As They Wish? The Social Well-Being Gap between Persons in Same-Sex and Mixed-Sex Relationships in Europe

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LGB emancipation still needs work

Research by Mirjam Fischer shows that there is a social well-being deficit among lesbians, gay men and bisexuals (LGBs) compared to heterosexuals in European countries where people think conservatively about homosexuality, gender equality and diversity in families. For example, in these countries LGBs report more often than heterosexuals that they do not have many people in their lives to whom they feel closely connected. In the Netherlands, there is no difference in social well-being between LGBs and heterosexuals but the composition of their social networks differs. Fischer: “Generally speaking, the Dutch have a positive attitude towards homosexuality. The fact that social networks differ shows that, despite the tolerant attitude, exclusion still plays a role.

Precarious position of gay men

Particularly gay men have lower social well-being in countries with more conservative attitudes on average. This is not surprising, since earlier research showed that people’s attitudes tend to be more negative towards gay men than towards lesbian women. Fischer shows that men in same-sex relationships in the Netherlands have more women in their social networks compared to heterosexual men. This could be related to the fact that heterosexual men are more often uncomfortable with homosexuality and therefore have fewer friendships with gay men.

Lesbian women have fewer family ties

Women in same-sex relationships in the Netherlands have fewer family members in their social networks than women in mixed-sex relationships. This confirms the so-called families-of-choice hypothesis: lacking ties with the family of origin are compensated with a chosen family. Because of that, women in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships have equally big social networks; they just differ in their composition. This suggests that having a partner of the same sex is still a reason to be excluded from families of origin. Fischer does not find this among men, possibly because men tend to have fewer family ties in their social networks in general.

It’s going well in Amsterdam

Amsterdam has a special status for LGBs in the Netherlands. A large number of LGBs live in Amsterdam compared to the rest of the Netherlands. LGBs are much more visible there. This is one possible explanation why LGBs in Amsterdam are far more integrated into their neighborhoods than heterosexuals are. It certainly also plays a role that LGBs who are looking for social contact are moving to Amsterdam.

Formal equality is not enough

Generally speaking, the situation for LGBs in Europe has improved. There is more legislation that protects and supports LGBs in Europe, LGBs are more visible in politics and the mainstream media and people’s attitudes toward homosexuality seem more favorable than a decade ago. Yet, Fischer cautions not to get complacent. Fischer: “My research shows that there are persistent differences in social well-being and the social networks between LGBs and heterosexuals. Only when we have removed all structural differences – be it in social well-being, social networks or elsewhere - can we consider LGB-emancipation a success.”