

A Familiar Experience:

An analysis of the concepts of family and experience through feminist theory



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I would have to say that I can tell the story of my origin and even tell it again and again, in several ways; but the story of my origin I tell is not one for which I am accountable, and it cannot establish my accountability.

- Judith Butler¹

¹ Butler, J. "Giving an Account of Oneself", *Diacritics*, Vol. 31 No. 4, 2001, p. 26

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Prelude

On my left hand I wear a gold and silver ring. This ring actually is a fuse of two rings and it represents my three parents. The silver ring is the wedding ring of Louise and Joost, my mother and dad and the people who conceived me. The golden ring is a small children's ring, the very first piece of jewellery I ever owned and which Ton, my father, helped me pick out in a real jewellery store when I was around six years old. When I graduated for my bachelor degree I asked a goldsmith to merge them into one ring so that I would have one symbol for my three parents. The desire to have one symbol representing my three parents on my hand grew along with the awareness of the abundance of boxes around us. Boxes people use to make sense of the world around them, deduce identities for both themselves as for those who they encounter. Thus far I had always thought that my family is somewhat of a special case because I have three parents. Ton and Joost are both my fathers. There is no distinction to be made, even though I grew up in Ton's house and only saw Joost in the weekends, they are both fathers to me. But society has made rules for the 'familybox'. Who can be part of your family is not only socially ingrained in people's minds and practices, but is also legally determined: "A child can only have two parents"² and a refugee can only apply for family reunification with their partner and minor children.³ No other options allowed, no further questions asked. Even though I considered us to be different for having three adults involved, these laws never seemed to have influenced us directly. We were never really excluded or marginalized for our family construction, as far as I can remember. Whenever in school we had to tell each other what our parents did for a living I would say that my mother was a homeopath, my father was an art teacher and my other father was a sculptor. I always knew that this was *different*, in the sense that all other children I knew only had two parents, or they had divorced parents who got remarried, (which was not the same because I had my two dads from birth, two full dads). As I got older I therefore thought that through the formation of our family my parents really did something that was *different*, that they somehow lived outside of the boxes, flouted the norms of family formation where having two parents is the norm, by going about it in such a different way than most by simply including another parent. That maybe, through this action my parents had showed society that the norms are insufficient,

² Article 1:204 (1)(e) Burgerlijk Wetboek/Civil Code

³ Article 3.14 Vreemdelingenbesluit/Foreigners Decree

excluding and therefore hurtful for some and that we could just as well function outside of them. As an active volunteer in assisting refugees in the Netherlands to settle and start the application for family reunion, my mother has introduced me to many people who were also struggling with the restrictive interpretation of ‘family’ in Dutch migration law for their reunion. And this stings, because look at us! Aren’t we just the example of a Dutch family, living family life without complying with those norms?

Are we?

This conviction of us as a normbreaking family has recently started to collapse. Growing older and starting to see and realize how my parents are also ‘just people’ who can make mistakes and surely aren’t perfect either, small habits and practices suddenly became apparent to me, especially since I started to familiarize myself with feminist theory, which it pays a lot of attention to identity formation, power structures that influence the image and interpretation of self, other, different or same and the politics of every day life choices. Only a couple of years ago I realized how bad I felt for not calling Joost ‘dad’ while I never referred to Ton by using his first name. So I just started calling Joost ‘pa’ and thought that I had solved the issue. Engaging more with feminism I realized how this was only one little sign of how our family maybe wasn’t as normbreaking as I had imagined. For if we were supposed to be a family with three parents, then why were there still only two people who were referred to as mom/dad? I started questioning everything: What is it that makes us different? What impact does that difference have? What can we do to change the urge of thinking in differences? The idea of having a different family had become an important part of how I came to identify myself too, so these questions also impacted my sense of self. But who then determines who I can become? It is therefore that I decided to dedicate this thesis to give an insight in the experience of a family who intended to go about family formation somewhat differently in 1987, and analyse as the child coming from this decision, how this has worked out in practice. But mostly aim to get a firmer grip on where our family narrative pinches. Who are we and what can we become in this world determined by laws, definitions and determinative power structures? It is therefore that in this thesis I will analyse the experiences of my three parents Ton, Louise and Joost by interviewing them and placing their experiences within a bigger feminist debate on experiences, power relations and normativity.

In order to get a good understanding of my parent’s intentions and experiences from then and now I’ve interviewed them and used several feminist theories on experience and power

structures/normativities to get an understanding of how their experiences can also be placed within a broader understanding of where the idea of 'identity', 'self' and 'difference' comes from and how this idea of difference could therefore be resisted. Feminist theories proved to be very helpful in this because it offered a reflection on both practice and experience. Experience in the sense that it shows how someone's personal experience is determined through the social dimension of subjectivity and identification. And practice because it offers the possibility of raising awareness about, and in that way confront that constructed nature of experience and subsequently concretely change women's lives in a material way, through raising consciousness.⁴

I will approach the topic in this thesis in three parts, taking each of my three parents as a starting point. The first part of this thesis will therefore be Louise, my mother, representing the beginning, the driving force behind the whole herstory⁵. In this part I will give a broader background illustration of the story behind my family formation, who are my parents, what drove them to make the decision to shape their family 'differently' and in what setting was this decision taken? What does society, through norms, or the state, through legislation, tell us about what family life should look like?

The second part is Ton, representing the doubt but willingness to understand, in which I will introduce different feminist theories that will help me to understand my parent's experiences, or at least what they have shared with me, and the impact that they've possibly had. These theories will help me to reflect on how I can analyse both 'experience' and all that comes with it, like subjectification, identity, power relations and my position as both researcher and daughter, or bluntly stated the end result of their decisions. And finally, Joost, representing the way out of normativity, where I will try to give an analysis of how one would be able to free themselves from productive powers or norms and how different our family in fact has been, whether they indeed have been able to transcend normative structures by involving more people in their family formation, or whether the power structures that determine the appearance of families in Dutch society are actually still present in and shaping our family.

I will conclude this research with myself, as the result of their arrangement and the conclusion of this research, through which this symbolic circle will be complete again.

⁴ De Lauretis, T., *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 184

⁵ Herstory is coined as a feminist response to history, which is often recounted from a male perspective, ignoring the female experience. Since I attribute the existence of this family in this form to my mother I find it appropriate to talk of 'herstory' instead of history.

Introduction

Reading bell hooks I was inspired to take the knowledge I gained throughout my master's and use it for personal healing. Like no other hooks is capable of explaining how theory has helped her understand her personal life and surroundings through making sense of her "lived experience" through "theorizing".⁶ Theory can help deconstruct meaning that otherwise would be considered 'natural' and therefore understand that difference isn't negative *per se*. This inspiration led me to this very personal thesis topic and introduced me in practice how wonderful theory can be, when it can help you understand how certain structures, habits or relations in your personal surrounding have come about. This, according to hooks is what makes theory so valuable, by truly engaging with critical reflection and in this way engage with feminism, making sense of everyday life and the lives of others is what makes transformations possible.⁷ In the process I nevertheless also found that when conducting research with such a personal subject-matter the process of writing can go two ways, either it is a great opportunity to go in depth into the subject, much more thorough than with any other subject, but it might also be a big pitfall where you lose the foundational division between you as objective researcher and the topic of your research. With this in mind I dove into this topic of my thesis, a topic that has been an important part of my life and identity, which also resonates as a bigger societal problem in the last couple of years.

As the main research question I will use 'to what extend are people capable of anticipating power relations, disregard normativity and have a say in who they can become? Can the decision that my parents took in 1987 be an example of this, in the sense that it has disregarded and therefore exceeded the structures and fixed identities/roles for families that have been in place between then and now?'

I wanted to dedicate my thesis to the recognition of multiparent families and open up the possibility for them to identify and get societal recognition as a legitimate family formation. An important source of information for my research would be distilled from interviews with my three parents, because I, like bell hooks articulated it so well: "I believe that combining

⁶ hooks, b. "Theory as Liberatory Practice", *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*, Vol.4 Nr. 1, 1991-1992, p. 2

⁷ *Idem.*, p. 8

the analytical and the experiential is a richer way of knowing”.⁸ That’s why I chose to base my thesis on the interviews I held with my parents and compare their experiences with what has been determined in law and literature on family life. In law there is solid proof of how the executive legal authorities in the Netherlands hold on to, and in that way reiterate the narrow understanding of ‘family’. In order to be able to understand what this legal practice means for the lives of the people concerned and also to place the information I gathered from the interviews with my parents in the bigger societal picture, I will dive into feminist theories on in- and exclusion, experience, interpretation, identification, self and other. These feminist theories will help me to understand what kind of value is attributed to ideas of self and other, to knowledge based on experience and therefore from people’s lived reality because they can shed a light on the influences of power relations, ideologies and dominant discourses.⁹

The main theories I chose to set my teeth into to try and tackle these issues are poststructuralist theories and standpoint theories. By starting my research with my parent’s experiences I had to take notice of what this starting point means for feminist research. At first I had to be aware that experience is not something that is universally given. Even though traditional scientific research asks for an objective positioning which is not historically specific or particular in any way, feminist research wants to know exactly who said what in which circumstances, because all these aspects actually matter when it comes to the accumulation of knowledge. In fact, Sandra Harding goes as far as stating that “the more value-neutral a conceptual framework appears, the more likely it is to advance the hegemonous interests of dominant groups”.¹⁰ Awareness of your own position therefore is key. And also the interpretation of an experience is influenced and partly determined by someone’s location or situatedness, and this goes for both the person who underwent the experience as the one who hears about that experience. So if I, as a feminist researcher, want to do right to the voices of people in positions outside of the dominant order, I have to be specific of their situatedness. When listening to my parents talking about their experiences I also have to be aware that I would place their narratives in a for me logical and recognizable form, which would mean that by writing down their experiences through my interpretation, I would be rewriting their world, interpreting their reality through mine and thereby imposing

⁸ hooks, b. “Essentialism and Experience”, *American Literary History*, vol 3 no 1, 1991, p. 181

⁹ Cerwonka, A. “What to make of Identity and Experience in Twenty-first-century Feminist Research”, in: Buikema, R. Et al., *Theories and Methodologies in Postgraduate Feminist Research*, Routledge, 2011, p. 61

¹⁰ Harding, S. “Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate”, in: Harding, S., *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, Routledge, 2004, p. 6

my reality onto them. So also in this I had to make sure it was just their story that would be told, or as Cerwonka states it: “Their reality, their varieties of experience must be an unconditional datum”.¹¹

Standpoint theory encourages researchers to start the gathering of knowledge from the positions of the marginalized because from that position only can the discursive power structures that bring and keep them in that position be highlighted. As Sandra Harding quotes: “The social order looks different from the perspective of our lives and our struggles”.¹² But it also gives voice to positions that otherwise aren’t heard much, opening up new perspectives and interpretations. Standpoint theory in this way is able to bring an alternative reading of social structures while also capturing some of the power structure’s weaknesses and contradictions.¹³ Through standpoint theory I will be able to show how people are therefore influenced by these power structures, but how they are also, from the margin, able to tackle and maybe even transcend these power structures. As bell hooks explains it, a standpoint provides marginalized people with a position from which they can critique dominant structures, “a position that gives purpose and meaning to struggle”.¹⁴

With poststructuralist theories I want to contrast that last claim by illustrating how according to poststructuralist thinkers it is impossible for people to stand in clear distinction from the power structures around them, for these power structures actually produce them. As Joan Scott puts it: “It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience”.¹⁵ For poststructuralist thinkers thus, including experience is not solely a question of regarding the situatedness of a person but also an analysis of the terms they use to describe themselves and their experiences, the discourses in which they have taken place to illustrate how all this is in fact produced by those same structures.¹⁶ Because generally we do recognize difference between people, but we don’t recognize those differences as relationally constituted. But if identity is seen as something that is constructed through discourse, then those aspects contributing to this construct must also be analysed and explained in the research to highlight how they “incorporate, reflect, stand in tension with dominant ideologies

¹¹ Cerwonka, A. *Supra note 9*, p. 63

¹² Harding, S. *Supra note 10*, p.3

¹³ Cerwonka, A. *Supra note 9*, p. 65

¹⁴ hooks, b. *Supra note 8*, p. 180

¹⁵ Scott, J. W., “The Evidence of Experience”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol 17, no 4, 1991, p. 779

¹⁶ Cerwonka, A. *Supra note 9*, p. 66

or discourses".¹⁷ Because it are these historical processes that, through discourse, positions subjects and produces their experiences.¹⁸

Experiences are therefore fluid, I would say, because the interrelations of factors that influence the interpretation of an experience shift along with how and where they occur. They are never solid concepts.¹⁹ So in an attempt to situate myself I would say that I have been researching as a daughter, a girlfriend, a sister, a feminist, ideologist, environmentalist, heterosexual, middle class, European, Dutch, urban, woman within the institutions of patriarchy, women's studies, Latin America studies, law and humanities. This influences who I am and how I give meaning or value to what happens around me, but could this maybe also grand me the opportunity to see my parents' actions and desires in a new perspective, analyse them and bring them towards a more political level? Where my parents possibly stranded in the adamant nature of power structures, can I maybe pull them out again?

Of course all these theories also have their impact on the practice of interviewing. Conducting interviews with people who are so close to you, who are factually responsible for the fact I exist and am capable of enjoying this level of education, does influence the process of the interview, both in positive and negative sense. Because we feel comfortable with each other, it is easier to direct the questions to a very personal level, there is no need to build rapport. But at the same time, because we are related and the topic deals with feelings of love, it can also easily be very uncomfortable, for example for my mother to tell me why she has left my father, or for Joost to explain to me how he was still deeply in love with my mother even after she had left him. Having enjoyed a very protected childhood without my parents fighting in front of me, I strongly believe that they are not too comfortable with sharing the painful parts with me.

So before I started the interviews I acquainted myself with feminist theories on how to objective, feminist interviews. One of the main things to keep in mind I took from DeVault and Gross and that is that feminist researchers work reflexively and relationally. So before entering the interviews I took due notice of certain important aspects of myself, my family,

¹⁷ *Idem.*, p. 71

¹⁸ Scott, J. W., *Supra note 15*, p. 779

¹⁹ Cerwonka, A. *Supra note 9*, p. 68

and our situations and how I would be able to get as objective as possible in conducting the interviews.²⁰

Reflexivity requires that I am aware of my positionality concerning gender, race, ethnicity, class, familial status, educational status and that I know how these positionalities can influence the information that I take from the interviews.²¹ As an interviewer with a certain goal you always create a power difference in the sense that you are the ‘authority’ who wants ‘something’ from the other so I wanted to make sure that my parents would feel comfortable, would be certain that whatever they would tell me would be interpreted without judgement or hurt feelings. Because the power division also works in other ways and the other way around, I also wanted to make sure that the stories they would tell would be ‘theirs’ as much as possible. For they are in power of what and how it will be shared and they sure will have their assumptions on how I will take this information they share with me.²² With Louise and Ton living together I knew that they would be talking about it beforehand, but I asked them to keep as close as possible to their personal experiences and in retrospect I believe that they did.

For the interviews I chose to go for an *unstructured* interview²³ because I wanted to prevent that I would create a serious, sterile and professional situation, while I was aiming for a familiar, comfortable and open one. I didn’t want my parents to feel as ‘objects of investigation’, rather I wanted them to feel as subjects, people, who I just wanted to get to know better by hearing and understanding their histories. I wanted the interview therefore really to take the form of a nice and good conversation, with questions just following each other naturally without a specific list or interview guide. In this way I wanted my parents to feel that this was *their* story and that through probing, supporting and encouraging the narratives of my parents I wanted to show them that I didn’t have a specific goal or agenda that they would have to meet, but it really is all about them.²⁴ The importance making sure that my parents felt free to talk is explained by bell hooks, when she talks about sharing experiences in the classroom. She illustrates how “the concept of a privileged voice of

²⁰ DeVault, M. & Gross, G. “Feminist Interviewing: Experience, Talk, Knowledge” in: Hesse-Biber, S., *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, Los Angeles, 2012, p. 173

²¹ Hesse-Biber, S. “The Practice of Feminist In-Depth Interviewing” in: Hesse-Biber, S. & Leavy, P., *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, 2007, p. 143

²² DeVault, M. & Gross, G. *Supra note 20*, p. 180

²³ Hesse-Biber, S., *Supra note 21*, p. 115

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 126

authority is deconstructed by our collective critical practice”, making it easier for the students to talk about their experiences because they don’t have to compete for voice.²⁵

²⁵ hooks, b. *Supra note 8*, p. 177

1. Louise: “I had to do it differently”.

Initiation and background on family normativity in the Netherlands

Meeting the family

This thesis has to start with my mother, because she was the one who instigated the whole situation, even though Joost and Ton also told me that they lived their life searching for a way to organize it differently from how they or their parents had done it, Louise was the one who created the situation of three people, three parents in one family. My mother was the one who saw through the limitations of family creation, by involving three people in the formation of our family instead of the legally recognized two. As a family we never really talked about this, what this meant to us personally or what the consequences were in our daily lives. Due to this thesis, this desire to get to know how different, how norm shattering we've actually been, we've finally come to talk about it.

Family as a concept

To start, let me first focus on the concept of family that I want to address. This concept is what in Dutch would be called your *gezin*, the nuclear family, which nowadays often consists of parents with children, but which comes in many shapes and sizes; one man with one woman and their children would be the most common one, but many variations are clearly visible in Dutch society, ranging from gay couples, grandparents, foster parents or multiparent formations raising children. According to Sarah van Walsum this focus on family in the Netherlands is a product from the period after WWII during the national reconstruction. She explains how through a growing number of social workers monitoring the Dutch family relations and a new and comprehensive system of government provided social insurances, provisions and services supporting these nuclear families, caused that the previous networks of interdependency, mostly consisting of extended families and religious congregations, became superfluous.²⁶ The normative focus was directed towards the male breadwinner with his wife and children, representing the executive unit of the Dutch welfare state and the crucial bolt in the upcoming industrial production, mass consumption and governmental

²⁶ van Walsum, S.K., *The Family and the Nation: Dutch Family Migration Policies in the Context of Changing Family Norms*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008 p. 263

regulation of services and provisions.²⁷ Marianne Hirsch adds to that how just before that period the determination of the concept of motherhood has developed in parallel to the notion of childhood. In the 18th and 19th century the vulnerability of children became more prominent, leading to the prohibition of child labour and compulsory education. In the same development the need for nurturing and protection of the children arose, impacting also the role of the mother in the sense that motherhood became an “instinct” and a “natural role”.²⁸ As Ann Dally describes it so well: “there have always been mothers, but motherhood was invented”.²⁹

From there on the Dutch interpretation and organization of family life changes along with the societal tendencies. Nevertheless, Walsum notes that while Dutch society moves towards more sexual freedom in the 1970's, reflecting also on the Dutch families in single mothers loosing their stigma, the strict family norms were still projected on the admission of migrant families and was there no space for sexual freedom in that regard.³⁰ Overall, family life had become an individual responsibility but it allowed or even required also a form of monitoring by the state. In this way the state has been able to regulate and discipline the behaviour of its citizens.³¹ So, maintaining your family is a personal responsibility, but the people that you come to place under the denominator of family is something the state has regulated: Within the Netherlands the concept of *gezin* is legally established in two legal documents, in the Dutch Civil Code and in the Dutch Aliens Act 2000, who both give an explanation of who can be considered part of a family. Within the Civil Code this definition is enshrined in article 1:204 (1)(e) Burgerlijk Wetboek/Civil Code, which determines that a child can only have a maximum of two parents. The amendment of the Civil Code in 2001 has laid the basis for this and the explanatory memorandum states: “if a child has two parents – a father and a mother, two mothers, or two fathers – the recognition by another, a third, cannot lead to parenthood. Two legal parents is the basic principle and the existing legal protection remains”.³² Irrespective of the composition of the family, no matter how many people were involved in the conception or expected upbringing of the child, only two people will be recognised as legal parents, meaning that a maximum of two people can have an official say in the child's

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ Hirsch, M. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, Indianapolis, 1989, p. 13

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Walsum, S.K., *Supra note 26*, p. 266

³¹ *Idem.*, p. 281

³² Origineel: “Als een kind twee ouders heeft – een vader en een moeder, twee moeders, of twee vaders – kan een erkenning door een ander, een derde, niet leiden tot ouderschap. Twee juridische ouders is het uitgangspunt en de bestaande familierechtelijke betrekkingen worden beschermd”, as found in: Memorie van Toelichting, Kamerstukken II 2011/12, 33032, 3, p. 17. – My translation

upbringing, medical care, emergencies, guardianship, etc. In that strict legal sense, my family therefore falls by the wayside. This means that legally and officially Ton is not considered to be my father and therefore he had no say in anything legal or official that happened in my childhood in for example medical/legal/educational occasions and he wouldn't have been able to take me on a holiday on his own without specific approval from Joost or Louise.

The second legal interpretation of the family can be found in Dutch Alien Act 2000, where there is only a limited interpretation for 'family' allowed in family reunification cases, namely that of the "nuclear family". Who is recognised as 'family' within the parameters of Migration Law is determined in Art. 3.14 Vreemdelingenbesluit/foreigners decree which states that: "A family member can be eligible for family reunification when they are either 21 years or older and married with the applicant before reunification, or 21 years old and who had a sustainable and exclusive relationship, or when they are the minor legal or biological child of the applicant and were de facto part of the family within the country of origin and under the legal custody of the applicant".³³

So in order to be eligible for family reunification the partner of the applicant has to be 21 years old, even though the legal marital age according to Dutch law is 18.³⁴ Also, if they cannot prove that they are married, they have to show that they have been in a sustainable and exclusive relationship, which can be done through pictures and consistent statements by both partners. As for the children, they still have to be minors, under the age of 18, in order to be considered part of the family. They also must have been part of the family within the country of origin and under legal custody of the applicant. They therefore don't necessarily have to be the biological children, they can also be adopted, as long as the applicant can prove that this has been legally established. In other words, there is a whole list of conditions you have to

³³ Original: artikel 3.14 Vreemdelingenbesluit:

De verblijfsvergunning, bedoeld in artikel 3.13, eerste lid, wordt verleend aan:

- a.de vreemdeling van 21 jaar of ouder die met de hoofdpersoon een naar Nederlands internationaal privaatrecht geldig huwelijk of een naar Nederlands internationaal privaatrecht geldig geregistreerd partnerschap is aangegaan;
- b.de vreemdeling van 21 jaar of ouder, die met de hoofdpersoon een naar behoren geattesteerde duurzame en exclusieve relatie onderhoudt, waarin de partners:
 - o 1°.niet tot elkaar in een zodanig nauwe relatie staan dat die naar Nederlands recht een huwelijksbeletsel zou vormen, en
 - o 2°.ongehuwd zijn en geen in Nederland geregistreerd partnerschap zijn aangegaan, tenzij het huwelijk door wettelijke beletselen waarop geen invloed kan worden uitgeoefend, niet is ontbonden; of
- c.het minderjarige biologische of juridische kind van de hoofdpersoon, dat naar het oordeel van Onze Minister feitelijk behoort en reeds in het land van herkomst feitelijk behoorde tot het gezin van die hoofdpersoon en dat onder het rechtmatige gezag van die hoofdpersoon staat.

³⁴ As determined in art. 31 BW/Civil Code

meet before you will be recognised as family. It is not surprising that these conditions have proven to be very excluding; newlyweds from 18 years old will simply have to wait for three years even though their marriage is recognized and legal in the Netherlands. The narrow boxes the family members have to fit into in order to be recognised as family are often inadequate.³⁵ A strong excluding force comes from the formulation, the way in which language is used to create these boxes in practice excludes family formations that don't comply with these rules, which don't fit in these boxes. Which might be the exact goal of these laws, especially in European law wording is chosen in such manner that states often have some wiggle room to play with the application of the law. When it comes to migration law for example even the European Court on Human Rights reiterates in almost every case on migration that "as a matter of well-established international law and subject to its treaty obligations, a State has the right to control the entry of non-nationals into its territory"³⁶, generating a generally recognized right for states that, in principle, they have the right to keep everybody out and only in some cases they will have to make an exception to that. States also have a 'margin of appreciation' in interpreting and applying international law, and generally states happily exercise these rights enabling them to exclude as many "aliens" as possible. But if we take a closer look to what the effects of these laws are we see that these restrictive Dutch laws are indirectly telling the applicants that 'we only let you reunite with people that *we*, Dutch legislators, consider family. The people who fall outside of our interpretations, even though *you* might consider them family are not recognized as such and therefore *are no family* and therefore not allowed to come. So there is a very clear power difference and hierarchy at play; the powerful state places the boundaries and delimitations and the people simply have to follow. Their interpretations remain unrecognized. The law, in this situation, tries to give shape to reality by presenting it as the only possible reality, disregarding the other interpretations or shapes that might be given to it. By categorizing people, recognizing them as something or excluding them from recognition, the paper reality of the law is also in fact shaping society, lived reality. I can't help but wonder what would have happened if my family

³⁵ Because of my mother's engagement in the settlement of new migrant families in the Netherlands, she has introduced me to many examples where the strict theoretical determination of family denied the practical existence of a certain family. Like the family from Tibet; the mother took in the children from her sister after she had disappeared and were living their family life until it became too dangerous for them and they had to flee. First they went to India, where the mother left the children in a monastery and continued her flight to Europe. Once she received her refugee status in the Netherlands she was able to apply for family reunification, but not all children were eligible for this. Because there is no death certificate of the sister, the Dutch government will not allow for the children of the disappeared sister to join the other kids in the reunification. They therefore remain, alone, in the monastery.

³⁶ See for example ECtHR, *Tuquabo-Tekle v the Netherlands*, 60665/00, 1 March 2006, p. 11

would have been in such a situation. I would have lost Joost for sure because applicants can only bring one partner maximum. Dutch law would probably have determined that my nuclear family consists of Ton and Louise. These questions of definition, of family, experience, identity and parenthood are getting more urgency in the perspective of the development of reproductive technologies which enables the construction of multiparent constructions. Both science and law are actively engaged in this upcoming and changing process. Marianne Hirsh poses the question that is of particular interest: “How do these terms relate to bodies which are being transformed through technology, to laws which displace those bodies, to experiences displaced by these laws?”³⁷ Technology is more and more determining who can become a parent, sometimes determining that only one person is needed and sometimes including the bodies of three different individuals. Laws then again take their say in this family creation and give different interpretations to the before mentioned definitions. So what does this mean for parenthood? How does feminism deal with this? With these bodies that are determined by both technology and law in whether or not they can become mother, father or parent?

I started wondering about this also because I never experienced our society to be exclusive towards our family though. We don't fit the boxes that society and the legislators have created, we are different from most families, but nevertheless I personally never encountered a situation where I felt excluded. Except maybe when I had to tell about my parents at school, but then I mostly just felt cool, because I had more parents who loved me and gave me presents for my birthday. So that is why I came to talk to my three parents, to understand why they took the decision and what it did to their sense of self, how come my mother found herself able to make this decision and bring her idea of involving Joost in your family formation into practice. Whether or not she actively tried to be different from the majority of society, how consciously she took that decision. In other words: what is our *story* and what kind of conclusion, or 'plot' as Hirsch would call it can be connected to our story?³⁸ Having spoken to all of them I can now reproduce the following understanding of the course of events. I explicitly say *understanding*, because I am very much aware that as the daughter, the 'result' so to say of this arrangement, they might have omitted certain difficulties or fights that could hurt me in the interviews I had with them. And of course there is the issue of time that might also have influenced their memories. Therefore I cannot state that this is a *true*

³⁷ Hirsch, M. *Supra note 28*, p. 13

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

representation of our history, based on their personal accounts, but it is as how I have understood it from our interviews.

2. Ton: “I wasn’t awake”

Feminist notions on self, identity and experience in the creation of our family

The necessity of theorizing experience

Whenever I have to explain our family situation to new people they are always the most astonished by the position of Ton, that he was just ‘okay’ with giving his partner the space of having a child with another man. Now, after I have talked to all of them about their experiences I am still unable to explain it to people because as it seems, Ton, Louise and Joost have had such different experiences of that period that I can’t make one true story of it, let alone one that it will satisfy the desire to understand or relate to their decisions. This seems to make sense of course, since they are all different individuals who will interpret and see things differently, but these differing conceptions on the arrangements, course of events, personal involvement, and responsibility have a deep influence on how they look back on this period where the decision of creative family formation has been made and how they identify themselves within it. And this difference in experience is also the perfect ground for placing blame. Bluntly stated Ton was under the impression that Joost hasn’t taken his responsibility in my upbringing, where Joost thinks that as the “supplier of goods”, the main part of his job had been fulfilled and Louise actually has no recollection at all of any arrangements that might have been made. This makes it impossible for me to recreate one single story, an explanation that will make people understand what has happened, what this situation happening outside of the regulatory norms on Dutch families has been like. Three different people, with three different interpretations, three different experiences of the same event: the formation of their family. A pretty big deal in a person’s life, I would think. And therefore it made me wondering how these experiences could be so different and what the consequence of this differing meant for the impact they’ve had on family normativity. Because I would think that if you would really want to shatter a certain norm, if you want to get out of rules, regulations, interpretations, this requires conscious steps, you have to be well aware of what it is you want to escape and how you manage to do so, and when your experience differs to such extent, how consciously have you then worked towards change?

First step in this analysis is therefore to get a better understanding of what experience is, can mean, does and how it is formed. As I stated before, I find it difficult to get a *true* understanding of our family formation solely based on the interviews because I suspect my parents to either have unconsciously reformed their memories or consciously decide not to tell me everything. But then, after I heard how their experiences, the memories of that time deviate so much, I realized that there must be more at stake that influences what they are telling me. Therefore, in order for me to analyse the memories my parents shared with me I want to subject them to several feminist theories. I use feminist theory because, in the words of Chandra Talpada Mohanty, feminism is a politics of every day life that deals with “the public sphere of expression, creative practice, displacing aesthetic hierarchies and generic categories”.³⁹ And this is what I am firstly interested in, how the experience of their daily life actions can be placed within the existing dominant structures and what their impact was. Cerwonka for example argues that the use of individual experience is now rather common and has even reached the status of a foundational epistemology and therefore can be used as a way to generate knowledge from people’s accounts of their own understanding of the world they live in.⁴⁰ The way you express yourself, present yourself to your environment is of interest for feminist theory. Individual experience in this sense is therefore of foundational interest for feminist theory, because it is also strongly connected to other topics the women’s movement has been active in such as “subjectivity, sexuality, the body and feminist political practice”.⁴¹ According to De Lauretis “woman/women’s experience” has always been one of the central points within feminist discourse because it is also through a shared experience of oppression that feminists with different political backgrounds argued for unity or identity among women: “The relations of experience to discourse, finally, is what is at issue in the definition of feminism”.⁴² Having a similar experience can therefore be a ground to unite and claim recognition for these experiences. In one aspect my parents definitely did have a shared experience, and in the fact that they had three adults involved in the upbringing of two children, it is mainly how they have personally experienced this formation where they start deviating. So when analysing their experience I must really question what actually *is* at stake: is it the experience of forming a multiparent family or are there other things involved in

³⁹ Mohanty, C.T., “Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience”, in: Barrett, M. & Phillips, A., *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, Stanford, 1992, p. 77

⁴⁰ Cerwonka, A. *Supra note 9*, p. 62

⁴¹ de Lauretis, T., *Supra note 4*, p. 159

⁴² de Lauretis, T. “Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms and Contexts”, in de Lauretis, T. *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, Bloomington, 1986, p. 5

forming their experience into what it is? Due to the foundational value that is attributed to experience in academic feminism, it is unavoidable to also challenge the theorizing of experience. But at the same time there is a huge disagreement on how this theorizing should come about.⁴³

When it comes to the use of personal experience in feminist academic research there are two theoretical streams that are of most relevance. In a nutshell, one comes down to taking (marginalized) people's perceptions, meanings and experiences seriously, give them a platform to be heard and attaches value to them in academic research. The other emphasizes that the knowledge that comes from women's experiences and the meanings that are assigned to them must be understood within a bigger, complex discourse of signification, power structures and construction. The first is one of the best known feminist movements that attributes a considerable amount of value to the use of experience in feminist research and became known as *Standpoint Theory*, which has its roots in Marxist ideas of Marx and Engels who both had argued for a 'proletarian standpoint'. According to them it was impossible to get a good view on how the class system actually worked by only integrating the activities from those who benefitted from that system. By taking the standpoint of the marginalised, the workers in their case, one would get a fairer view.⁴⁴ This was taken up by feminist researchers who argued that personal narratives of women could provide an alternative framework for interpreting society and the dominant narratives such as the functioning and costs of patriarchy, and so standpoint theory was introduced in feminism. The second stream can be found in the arguments of Poststructuralism. For poststructuralist thinkers our world is made up of power structures and relationships, norms and discourses which influence and produce one another. As Foucault describes it: "the exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others".⁴⁵ It is as Simone de Beauvoir's famous quote: "One is not born but rather becomes a woman."⁴⁶ Power thus is everywhere, is conducted by everyone and is influencing everything. Because my parents were so engaged in changing their norms, doing it differently and creating their own society, I expected them to also project these desires and ideas on the outside world, so that these norms and values that bothered and limited them could be broken

⁴³ Mohanty, C.T., *Supra note 39*, p. 71

⁴⁴ Harding, S. "Feminist Standpoints", in: Hesse-Biber, S., *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, Sage Publications, 2012, p. 46

⁴⁵ Foucault, M., "The Subject and Power", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 8. No. 4, 1992, p. 788

⁴⁶ de Beauvoir, S., *The Second Sex*, New York, 2011, p. 293

down and to prevent that others would be limited in their family life in the same way. For considering Foucault's take on power, anyone who would cleverly use their power relationship in the bigger picture, would also possibly be able to influence others and therefore bring change to discursively determined structures. Due to all these mutual influences you can thus become something or someone you weren't or wouldn't have been without the people around you. In order to get a grasp to what extent these influences have been an issue or have played a role for my parents and to analyse to what extent my parents have been able to effectively resist and counter family normativity, I first have to get an idea of their understanding of the society in which they lived and the norms that controlled that life. It can give an insight in the way that my parents have given meaning to themselves, their surroundings and their interpretations, all which is necessary to be able to counter societal meanings of those issues.

Feminist takes on experience

Even though experience has become an important form of epistemology or source for knowledge production in feminism, there is no consensus on how to deal with experience in research nor what it actually is when we talk about it. It is important to give a thorough illustration of this divergent interpretation, but let me first give an example of two different feminist interpretations so that it becomes clear what the extremes of the spectrum are when it comes to the analysis of experience: Raymond Williams firstly states that the value of experience in the twentieth century became related to notions of "subjective testimony as immediate, true and authentic". In this sense experience would only be a reaction to "real" things outside of people, like social conditions, institutions, forms of belief or perception.⁴⁷ Experience is thus a response to people's surrounding. Teresa de Lauretis on the other hand holds a very different interpretation of experience by stating that it is "the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed".⁴⁸ In her definition the social reality plays a big part in the creation of subjectivity. Not in a conscious way, but the material, economic and interpersonal relations are often perceived as subjective, while they are "in fact social, and, in a larger perspective, historical".⁴⁹ For Williams, the subject is complete and is responding in this completeness to their surrounding. The 'real' things Williams refers to are for de Lauretis

⁴⁷ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. 1985, p. 126 as found in: Scott, J. "The Evidence of Experience", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17 No 4, 1991, p. 781

⁴⁸ Scott, J. *Supra note 15*, p. 782

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

part of the social, the constructed and therefore influence subjectivity instead of solely being something that someone can respond to. From this spectrum, this chapter will further illustrate experience from different feminist interpretations, which, like Ton's doubts are not so straightforward as they may seem.

Experience as a direct source of knowledge

The examples where experience is taken as a source for knowledge as it is, without further interpretation because this might influence 'the originality' of the experience are not very common in feminism, but this is what Judith Newton's appeal to experience seems to be when dealing with experience as a foundational ground. Joan Scott describes in her article *the Evidence of Experience* how in the work of Newton the relationship between thought and experience is represented as "transparent ... and so is directly accessible".⁵⁰ She establishes direct links between the personal and the political, making the lived experience of women a direct path to resistance to oppression. So for Judith Newton feminism, politics and resistance to oppression are based on "pre-existing women's experience."⁵¹ Experience is direct knowledge and in that regard it is unnecessary to further analyse these sources of experience, for the researcher is just able to directly use the stories and experiences of their subjects in their aim to understand these issues.

Experience as a site of construction

A whole different view on the use of experience can be found in the poststructuralist analysis of people, power structures and society. Poststructuralist interpretations have been of great influence on feminist thinking on identity, subjectivity and knowledge production and this has also an effect on how they would analyse or use personal experiences. In contrast to Judith Newton's interpretation, poststructural theories on identity emphasize that the subject is formed and produced by the power structures that surround them and that they therefore also influence and colour the experiences the subject undergoes. Michel Foucault and Judith Butler explain the paradox of subjectification in the sense that the structures that subordinate people at the same time also shape the consciousness of these people and therefore their understanding of the possibilities for their identity. Like the earlier mentioned quote from de Beauvoir, through the subordination to institutionalized norms people internalize these

⁵⁰ Scott, J. *Supra note 15*, p. 786

⁵¹ *Idem.*, p. 787

possible identities and start living up to the accompanying expectations and so, they become a woman, a man, a lover, etc... Identity and power are thus highly intertwined which makes that experience, which is closely related to identity, cannot be seen as independent from these social structures. Foucault and Butler thus argue that if we want to understand how social relations can produce identity we have to consider the whole process that is involved in the production of identity, conceptions of self and meaning. This would then not only include an investigation in how subjects would reflect on themselves, but would also place this consideration in a “larger process of practices of power and self”.⁵² This interconnection between subjectivity and knowledge of the self and surroundings on the one side, and the production of meaning within discourses on the other side was first addressed by Foucault. A discourse for Foucault is what determines “what is the correct form of speech, action or word” within its margins. Discourses therefore are for Foucault both a source of regulation, as a source of enabling notions of subjectivity and identity, because this correct form is institutionalized, and therefore ingrained within every norm and value.⁵³ Through this determination discourses play a big role in the production of meaning, subjectivity and knowledge according to Foucault and has therefore also a strong effect on how one would interpret a certain experience because meanings emerge through the interpretation of the correct form of doing which is discursively determined.⁵⁴ The way you see and interpret yourself, the way you give meaning to your identity if also discursively formed. The correct form of doing for being a woman in our Western, Eurocentric, patriarchal society for example is when you are caring, giving birth and act feminine. These characteristics are discursively determined and they can change along with their discourses, like also the example of how the notion and therefore identity of motherhood emerged alongside that of childhood. Identity and experience can therefore in poststructuralist interpretation never be taken as simple ‘givens’, but should always be explained within the processes, discourses and interpretations that influence and form them.

⁵² Cerwonka, A. *Supra note 9*, p. 65

⁵³ McLaughlin, J. “Moving on from Foucault”, in: *Feminist Social and Political Theory: Contemporary Debates and Dialogues*, New York, 2003, p. 115

⁵⁴ *Idem.*, p. 116

2.1 Intermezzo

Before I will further dive into the theory I first want to share the narrative that my parents have told me in the interviews we had in this personal intermezzo.

My understanding of our family, an insight into the formation

To me, talking about my family, means talking about my mother, father, dad and brother. To be clear, when I speak of my dad I mean the man with whom I am biologically related, my father is the one who originally didn't want to have more children but who cared for me as a proper father nonetheless. While talking with my family about how this works for them, what family means to them and how our family composition had contributed to their ideas of family, community or solidarity they all struggled with my questions. Having lived the experience, they had never before been confronted with the why's, the how's or possible meaning or analysis behind their actions. They had always just acted, without making these actions political and thus bigger than our personal family circle.

I wonder how my mother approached my dad with the proposition, because no one seems to be able to recount this specific moment.

“Joost, I have something that I want to ask you”

or

“Joost, do you have a minute?”

or

“Joost, remember when we used to joke around about having a child together?”

No one seems to remember how the conversation went; nevertheless the occurrence of this conversation formed the basis of how my family decided to step out of the normative idea of ‘two parents with their children’ and involve a third parent. This decision and subsequently the conversation that followed therefore also formed the basis of my very existence. To be clear, this was a conversation between my dad, Joost and my mother, Louise. Louise was at that time in a relationship with Ton, who I call and consider to be my father, with whom she had a child of three, Bart, my brother. Joost at that time lived together with Ton and Louise as

an “indoor neighbour”⁵⁵ and was closely involved with the upbringing of my brother Bart. To Joost this involvement was not just practical for a strong, emotional bond developed between them and this is how the situation arose of three adults living together in one house, sharing a household, and sharing the love and upbringing of a small child.

A desire to be different

The desire to do things differently was something that Joost and Louise had been acting upon for years already. They had been together since high school and it was a strong desire to “do it better”⁵⁶ than their parents that had driven them to leave the well-known and strictly defined world and start a small society of their own. Both had their own reasons underlying to this desire: “We wanted to do it *better*. Get out of the suffocating values of our homes and build a society of our own”.⁵⁷ “I just didn’t see myself ending up with a husband working in an office and living in a terraced house, I don’t think I am the type for that. I was always looking for ways to deviate from the beaten path”.⁵⁸ Joost and Louise had the ideal of starting a commune with friends from the art academy. “A couple of us were sculptors so we could build everything our own, we didn’t need much”. Soon after starting the search for a suitable location for this commune, they nevertheless “got stuck in reality”⁵⁹ as Joost explained it and people started to back out: “The idea suddenly seemed less fun and more uncomfortable to them, but your mom and me continued the search”.⁶⁰ To make the immigration to France easier, they decided to get married. But this was only to prevent legal hurdles that they would face as an unmarried couple. Eventually they found a house in *La Majeunie*, a small village in France. There, Joost feels “like a fish in the water”⁶¹. But Louise again is afraid of the image in her mind of what her future there would look like. “She images herself there, doing dishes for the rest of her life”.⁶² Louise decides to leave, so this meant the end of their romantic relationship. This break up is the moment Louise takes as her point of departure when I asked her about the genesis of our family story: “I was married to Joost and we lived in France. At a certain moment I didn’t like it anymore there so I wanted to leave, but he didn’t. Of course it

⁵⁵ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

⁵⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁸ Interview Louise, 2 November 2016

⁵⁹ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁶¹ *Ibidem.*

⁶² *Ibidem.*

was difficult, but I left”.⁶³ Joost explains that she fell in love with David, a Dutch guy who would help with fixing the house every now and then and who lived in Amsterdam. “After she left, their relationship didn’t last long. It was a way for her to get away, otherwise she maybe never would’ve been able to”.⁶⁴ Louise doesn’t mention this David but quickly passes on to the moment where she meets Ton. I take this ommitment as a mother feeling uncomfortable talking to her daughter about her rather painful break up with her daughter’s father. Neither does she tell me about how her parents advised her to squat the vacant floor beneath them at the Amsteldijk, which she does. Because Joost had become lonely in the house in *La Majeunie* he was actually shuttling between France and the Netherlands and he moves in with Louise, as friends. This is how they became “indoor neighbours”; he lived in the front part of the house, she lived in the back. The rooms were separated with sliding doors and they shared their kitchen and bathroom.

Not much later Ton appears in their lives: “The first time we met was really fun. It was in the commune and there was an immediate click. I had never met a woman who came to sit on my lap so pleasantly. She folded her arm around me and it just felt right”⁶⁵, recalls Ton. It didn’t take long before he moved in with her at the Amsteldijk. “I knew of the existence of Joost of course, but it went very smoothly actually. I think he also still had a girlfriend in France where he spent some time”.⁶⁶ None of the three comments on how long this period of the three adults living together really lasted and how this worked out for them. They all indicate that “soon” after Ton moved in he and Louise wanted to have children. Joost only adds that when Ton moved in it wasn’t up to him to say anything about that: “I was just the indoor neighbour, so he moved in. And soon after that they had Bart”.⁶⁷ Even though Joost was not involved in the decision of having a child, he nevertheless was very closely involved with the first pregnancy. “I remember that I had to throw up when I was giving birth and Joost was the one who had to clean it up. I felt so sorry for him, that it was exactly this that he had to do”.⁶⁸ “I was so closely involved during the delivery, with whole my heart and soul, I really felt part of it all, also of the small creature that was born”.⁶⁹

⁶³ Interview Louise, 2 November 2016

⁶⁴ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

⁶⁵ Interview Ton 2 November 2016

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

⁶⁸ Interview Louise, 2 November 2016

⁶⁹ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

Where sense of responsibility, emotions and ego meet

After Bart's birth the three adults in the house were all involved in the upbringing of the young child. "I loved having two fathers available for my child because they were so different and therefore were both able to contribute to his upbringing in a very distinct way".⁷⁰ They talk about it as if it was a natural, logic think to do, to have Joost spend time with Bart and take care of him as if he was his. It came to them as logical but emotionally it wasn't all that simple. Because Ton had been married before and also had two sons from that marriage, the creation of this new family nevertheless also brought some new struggles. "Bart was born and the things just went as they went. Of course there was tension at times. The two boys from my former marriage came to visit every two weeks and I was struggling with this because I felt guilty towards them".⁷¹ All three adults felt this tension but their desire to do it better than the examples they had seen at home made them willing to struggle. An important aspect to be aware of in this respect is that at that time they were all *sannyasin*, disciples of Bhagwan⁷² which almost required them to struggle with their ego emotions and live for the 'better good'. "After our break Louise had gone to India and ended up with Bhagwan there and he had turned her world up side down. When I joined her at the Amsteldijk I was also very interested in what he had to say because I was searching a lot at that time. Ton, or Shivam⁷³ back then, already was a disciple (...) and an important part of that was that there were all kinds of therapy sessions where you were able to discover how you dealt with others around you and with yourself. Where you could find out how to open your heart and how to be open to yourself, with the result that I became completely lost. I didn't know anymore what was up or down, front or back".⁷⁴ So when Bart was born, this search for values, identity or communion played a big role in how they gave shape to his upbringing. For Louise it was simple, "we didn't plan much in life (...) we actually just let life come down on us and dealt with it on the spot. I was happy to have more people around to give input to the child's life, that really is an

⁷⁰ Interview Louise, 2 November 2016

⁷¹ Interview Ton, 2 November 2016

⁷² Also known as Rajneesh Chandra Mohan or Osho, an Indian spiritual leader who preached a message of radical, individual liberation and guided his followers, his *sannyasins*, through meditation, therapy and love towards true knowledge of the self. Letting go of the ego was an important part of that.

⁷³ Sannyasins received a new name from Bhagwan, but this name does not carry too much weight as Bhagwan explains: "A name is just a name. You are nameless. No name confines you, no name can confine you. They are just labels to be used – utilitarian, nothing spiritual in it. But because I pay so much attention to your name and I explain it to you, you get hooked with it. That is just my way of showering my attention on you, nothing else; just my way of showing my love to you, nothing else." – Bhagwan, *The Diamond Sutra*, Watkins, 1977, p. 197

⁷⁴ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

aspect I enjoyed in that time”.⁷⁵ But for the two men this turned out to be another point of struggle.

Ton’s main desire was to do it better than he had been able to do in his earlier marriage. With his children and ex wife still present in his life he was struggling a great deal: “my first marriage was very ... can I call it forced? It was very much framed, measured. You got up, bring the children to school, go to work, get home and that for 5 days a week. I wasn’t conscious of what I did, I wasn’t awake”.⁷⁶ It was actually his ex wife who introduced him to Bhagwan: “that radically changed me and I started to think ‘who am I?’ and ‘what do I want?’ and this eventually gave me the energy to take care of you and Bart”.⁷⁷

With his experiences as a disciple of Bhagwan, having Joost around while raising his newest son was something not uncommon to Ton: “I had the experience of living in the commune. There I’ve learned to live with yourself and not for or with others. There I could make love to a woman in the middle of a room with other people and just be in the moment with her and myself”.⁷⁸ This was an ideal of course, and all three of them have told me how the mantra they lived with in this time was “should be possible”⁷⁹, or “why not”.⁸⁰ Having a new life in this world, symbolized a great opportunity to rethink their values and bring them into practice. Values of freedom, surpassing the ego and solidarity formed the basis.

Practice showed that the opinions of how these values are practiced in daily life differed greatly among the three adults, which caused conflict, especially between the two men: “I remember how Bart was always allowed to do *anything* from Joost and Louise, like rubbing his food in his hair while I thought ‘you can’t do such a thing!’”⁸¹ “Yeah I remember the many conflicts because I just didn’t agree with how Louise and Ton were handling it and how Ton would go about like a boorish guy and I thought ‘but you can’t do such a thing!’”⁸²

Obviously the two men had an incredibly different conception of raising children. And Louise took the benefits of that by enjoying the fact that one man would give one aspect, while the other offered something completely different: “I really thought it would be better to raise children with more people. Because the more input the child would get, the bigger their world

⁷⁵ Interview Louise, 2 November 2016

⁷⁶ Interview Ton 2 November 2016

⁷⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁷⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁷⁹ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

⁸⁰ Interview Ton 2 November 2016 ; Interview Louise, 2 November 2016

⁸¹ Interview Ton 2 November 2016

⁸² Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

would become”.⁸³ In hindsight she realizes that her position in this family composition was probably the most comfortable one. “At that time I lived life with an attitude of ‘we’ll see, it is all fine by me’ without being able, or without actually wanting, to see the consequences of such an attitude and the subsequent actions”.⁸⁴ It was in this same “naïve” attitude that Louise decides to ask Joost to be the father of her second child: “After three years I knew I wanted to have another child, but Ton didn’t. ‘Just my luck’ I thought” Louise laughs. “But from before I knew that Joost wanted to have children, we had talked about that. And that made 1+1 = 2 in my mind. To me it was that simple, really, I thought just *that* simple”.⁸⁵ And for Joost it seemed just as easy: “When Louise came to me with the question whether I wanted to be the biological father of her second child, I immediately had a feeling of ‘yes!’ Because we were both very curious for what a child of us would be like.”⁸⁶ Loudly laughing he continues that they considered that a child of the both of them “well, that just had to be something very special”.⁸⁷

Deviating experiences

From that moment on a new buzzword becomes important in the relationship of the three adults with one child and a child in the making: ‘responsibility’. Having another child was not an option for Ton because he was still in the middle of the very difficult and painful situation with the children from his earlier marriage. “When she brought up the idea of having a second child, my immediate response was ‘hello, not with me!’ I have three sons, I am done”.⁸⁸ He felt a big responsibility towards these three kids “you have to raise them and that is time and money consuming and I really felt very responsible to do this. So when Louise came with the idea that she and Joost would have a child, I said ‘if that is what you want’”.⁸⁹ And that is where the stories start to deviate. For Joost it was clear that Louise and Ton were having the ‘family’ and he was only a ‘supplier of goods’: “I would be the biological father, the supplier of the seed if you like, for them to have their family, and outside of that there was this unclear situation of me claiming some part in your upbringing, bothering Ton at any moment with ‘hey stupid, you’re doing it wrong’”.⁹⁰ But Ton argues that in the conversations the three

⁸³ Interview Louise, 2 November 2016

⁸⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁸⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁸⁶ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

⁸⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁸⁸ Interview Ton 2 November 2016

⁸⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁹⁰ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

adults had at that time it was agreed that Joost would then also take the duty of raising the child, and “not only on an emotional level, but also on a financial one”.⁹¹ Coming to look at it, in first stance both men did not expect to be take up the role of father for this child. It is impossible to ascertain whether the two men have not communicated well enough at that time or whether the memory on the agreements is blurring, but the experience of both are complete opposite. Where Joost was under the impression that all he had to do was provide for the physical means to create this child, Ton expected him to take charge in raising the child as well. With Louise in her rather ‘naïve’ and comfortable position she remembers these conversations ending in a “we’ll see”⁹² when it came to responsibility. The two men determine the story, each in their own way, and Louise remains in the middle. She doesn’t have a concrete story to tell but is this then a neutral or an insignificant stance?

It is nevertheless also this ‘we’ll see’ mentality that seems to echo in all the stories of the three adults when it comes to the bureaucratic part of family life. Joost and Louise never bothered to get an official divorce when they separated. As their marriage was for the sole purpose of being able to live together outside of the Netherlands, and therefore did not contribute anything to their personal relationship. Filing for a divorce therefore didn’t feel necessary either, for it had no real meaning to them. “A little sloppy, maybe”⁹³ as Joost admits, but isn’t this a very clear example of how little the regulatory part of parenthood or other aspects in life means to my parents? Because Louise and Joost were still married at the moment my brother Bart was born, it meant that Joost was automatically registered as the father of this baby. His name was registered on the birth certificate and Bart was given his last name – something that he himself corrected only 12 years later. But to both men this was not at all an issue: “it was just negligence, but I didn’t mind at all. Bart was more than welcome to become part of the ‘de Herder’ family, it’s funny how easily I took that responsibility”.⁹⁴ The three of them did not seem to bother to make sure the family formation was neatly registered as how it biologically or romantically came about. In this carelessness for sticking with the norms or neatly following the rules I am tempted to see a sense of trust towards each other and indifference towards the law can be derived. The law or the workings of bureaucracy did not seem to matter to them and in that sense did not seem to give matter to how they have formed their family. But is this real indifference or more a matter of convenience? As long as

⁹¹ Interview Ton 2 November 2016

⁹² Interview Louise, 2 November 2016

⁹³ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*.

they weren't bothered by the 'wrong' registrations they didn't seem to have an incentive to change it either. Louise now describes this as "naivety"⁹⁵, and Joost as "negligence"⁹⁶ because it could have brought them into trouble in case of death or other emergencies where the state would get involved. The reason for Ton to eventually still ask Louise to marry him was therefore also "purely practical".⁹⁷ For them there was no need for colouring within the lines that are drawn by family law, because in practice, it hasn't bothered them also too much. Ton just wanted Louise to have his pension money in case he would come to pass.

Different but normative

Even though I was born through a misunderstanding between the two men in who would take the emotional or financial responsibility over the two children and didn't consider themselves to be part of the family that would be created around the second child, both now consider the two children as theirs. But at the same time, neither claims 'ownership' over the child they biologically contributed to. Both Joost and Ton have given the other man the space to be present and contribute to the upbringing of both the children. To Joost the father-child relationship is purely a question of love when he talks about his relationship with Bart: "Not in a way that he is 'mine' but just the connection and the enormous amount of love I felt for this little man (...) whenever someone asks me whether I have children I always say I have a son and a daughter. Even though I know it is not true, but what is truth anyway?"⁹⁸

Even though many spaces or roles in our family formation are not 'naturally' filled in, it is only through my interviews that my family members started to question what label they would assign to our relationships. From the moment Louise decided to involve more people in the formation of the family she was creating, the men and children came along in the day to day practice of this formation. Joost because of his "should be possible" mantra, Ton because he lived with a "why not" attitude. To Louise this meant an incredible amount of freedom and an opportunity to give shape to her life in a way she wanted to: "I was very lucky to have these two men in my life and that they were crazy enough to come along with me in my ideas"⁹⁹ Louise admits. "Because if I wouldn't have had the opportunity to give shape to my life in this way, I would definitely have been a catlady, herbalist or a missionary in Ethiopia. I

⁹⁵ Interview Louise, 2 November 2016

⁹⁶ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

⁹⁷ Interview Ton 2 November 2016

⁹⁸ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

⁹⁹ Interview Louise, 2 November 2016

just couldn't have that 'normal' life, I had to do it differently".¹⁰⁰ But she did not act completely consciously at that time. To her, giving shape to her life was 'we'll see' and she went with the flow of what daily life presented to her, even though that turned out to be "terribly inconvenient".¹⁰¹ Even though the only real inconvenience that comes up in our interviews was our family subscription to the zoo: "We often went to Artis, the Amsterdam zoo, so we had a family card. But there was only room for two parents so we always had to buy another single ticket for one of us".¹⁰² Because they didn't care much about registration and the official bureaucracy, they actually acted perfectly within the heteronormative framework of a man and a woman raising their child, which caused that in practice they haven't struggled much with the norms dedicated on societal or bureaucratic level. The way they gave shape to their lives and their daily experience was what mattered to them and how this was registered at the municipality made no difference. As it turned out, the formal registration nevertheless did matter to Bart. To him, growing up in this other family formation has mostly been an enriching experience because "we did so many things with Joost that Ton would never do with us".¹⁰³ Nevertheless, when Bart got older he didn't feel comfortable with his last name: "I thought it would be better to let the things be as they are. Factually I am a child of Ton, so I should have his last name".¹⁰⁴ But also in this 'getting the facts straight', Bart doesn't seem as straightforward as he appears. Through the years, Ton has probably legitimated Bart and he has changed his last name, but no one really knows who currently is registered as his father on his birth certificate. When I ask Bart whether this would make a difference to him he smiles "no one ever confronted me with this!" he repeats my question for himself before he answers: "in principle it doesn't because it is something that comes from your love for someone". What does matter to him is recognition by the bureaucracy: "if something would happen to Ton and his two eldest sons would be the only ones involved because 'I am nothing from him', that would be heartbreaking. Not that I care for the money or anything, but just the involvement and recognition".¹⁰⁵ Recognition, or truth, therefore for Bart does lie with some formal, official sort of registration.

¹⁰⁰ Interview Louise, 2 November 2016

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*.

¹⁰³ Interview Bart, 16 December 2016

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*.

For Ton this lies on a much more personal level and argues that there is a strong connection to responsibility when he explains his relationship with me: “To me, it became crystal clear when I pulled you out of the Dordogne.¹⁰⁶ When we sat on the riverside I suddenly realised ‘my god, I have a daughter’”.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, when I now ask Ton whether he considers the relationship with me the same as the one with Bart, he has doubts: “With Bart I would say that I have a 100% father-child relationship, because I am his biological father, whereas with you I would say we have a 99% relationship”.¹⁰⁸ The basis for this missing 1% is difficult to indicate for Ton, and when I continue on this 1% he starts laughing a bit, indicating that it is “funny” how that works. “When something would happen to you, of course I would be there and do my best to help you. But why is our relationship still not a 100%?”¹⁰⁹, he questions himself. His subsequent question how this feels for me, comes to me as if he feels guilty for missing that 1%, but I explain to him that I can see where our different experiences come from: “I don’t know better than having two men in my life who both act as fathers to me. You both show that you love me, you take care of my well being, help me whenever I ask you to and teach me valuable things about life. To me, it makes no difference who of you slept with my mother 9 months before I was born and whose DNA structures have contributed to my existence. All that counts is that you were and are there for me. But for you, you had a whole life before my birth and you weren’t involved in my conception. So that there is some distance, I can understand. But to me, I don’t feel that distance at all.”¹¹⁰

But Bart clearly does. Even though for him the position of the two men is largely the same, both were present and actively involved in his life from his birth on, he wouldn’t call Joost his father: “I would rather say good friend now. Maybe I am very straightforward in this but the father to me is the one who was biologically involved in conceiving the child”.¹¹¹ Then I ask him about our relationship, because if he attaches certain value to a biological connection between family members, than how far can you actually draw that line? We are only biologically connected through sharing the same mother, but in this he also really seems to be very straightforward: “No, I actually really dislike that ‘half’ stuff, you are simply my sister,

¹⁰⁶ when I was around 3 years old, we went to France for holidays and went canoeing on the river Dordogne. My brother and mother went together and I was in the canoe with Ton and our dog Frederik. When we wanted to stop for a moment to have lunch, the canoe of Ton and me capsized. I couldn’t swim yet so Ton panicked to get me out of the water as soon as possible. Our dog got stuck with his collar under water and drowned.

¹⁰⁷ Interview Ton 2 November 2016

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁰ my response to Ton’s question during Interview Ton 2 November 2016

¹¹¹ Interview Bart, 16 December 2016

that's just how it is".¹¹² Having some biological connection then clearly gets preference above having no biological connection at all, because when I ask him who of his 'half'-family should, according to him, be eligible for family reunification when we would have to flee as refugees, he would take Ton and Louise, his elder brothers (the two sons from Ton's first marriage) and me "and Joost (...) as harsh as it may be, not".¹¹³ Talking a bit more about multiparent arrangements or 'bonusparents' he nevertheless shows he would give Joost a little more credit than simply 'good friend'. Joost married Marian, a woman he has been with since Bart was 9 and I was 5 and we got to talk about why we both wouldn't call her our mother. "To me, you have to earn that title of mother. You can't walk into a child's life and then just receive that title, it doesn't work like that. But I also don't think that the woman necessarily has to be the birth mother to be able to earn that title (...) It is a certain sort of love, which Marian definitely wanted to give us and maybe has given us, but this is just not enough. Joost has succeeded in this, he has been there for us. Maybe Marian just came too late".¹¹⁴ Even though Bart and I had the same experience of growing up with two dads in our lives, we nevertheless give different labels to them. To me this shows exactly the point I want to make with this thesis, that it is practically impossible to give a clear definition of what family is. Because there will always be people who will shape their family outside of the borders and the way they emotionally, or socially label their family members differs again per culture, per situation and even per person.

Eventually, having three adults living together raising children with whom they all feel closely connected, turned out to be too difficult on an emotional level: "I had a lot of difficulties with the ways in which Ton raised you. To what extent the fact that he had stolen my girl played a part in that I cannot say, but it definitely will have, in some way".¹¹⁵ The difficult relationship with the children from his former marriage was the main reason for Ton not to want any more children and adding this to his feeling of still having to take responsibility for me, aggravated the situation: "I felt guilty towards them and when they visited us on the Amsteldijk this caused me a lot of stress"¹¹⁶, "I never actually found out what they thought about me having more children with another woman. I never really felt any envy

¹¹² Interview Bart, 16 December 2016

¹¹³ *Ibidem.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹¹⁵ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

¹¹⁶ additional answers from Ton to the interview per e-mail, send on 8 December 2016

from their side, that all came much later when they said that I spoiled you too much”.¹¹⁷ Because Ton was under the impression that he would not have to bear the responsibility for the second child with Louise, he eventually felt the need to “step up financially” when he thought that Joost did not earn enough to take care of the child: “It might sound cruel, but I was the only one making money so it had to come from me. Joost had some orders for work, but I don’t remember how much he contributed to the household wallet”.¹¹⁸ Joost indicates that this mantra of “should be possible” and the therapy sessions that he participated in at the Bhagwan commune had turned his world upside down and had made him unaware of his own boundaries: “After you were born I would go outside and walk around the city, just walk. I never thought of the reason behind it, I thought it was just something I did. Until one night I ended up in a bar and saw a man sitting by himself. There I heard that this man had to leave his house every night because he was feeling so miserable at home and that opened my eyes. This was exactly what I did, so I knew I had to leave”.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Interview Ton 2 November 2016

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁹ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

2.2 Tempo Primo di Ton

Let's pick up the pace where we left with Ton

Use of experience in knowledge production: Standpoint theory

These different explanations of how we come to an understanding of identity and experience and my search for 'the true story' of my parents make me realize that this research is also closely linked to a search for objectivity. I want to know what happened, how my parents situated themselves in this decision and what it has meant to them and the bigger picture in society. But how objective can you be when you share your personal experience, an experience that you've shared with two other people who nonetheless tell a whole different story of that same experience? Objectivity, together with the desire to include experience in feminist research quickly brings me to standpoint theory. Standpoint theorists reject universal objectivity like the claims from Judith Newton because they argue that claims to knowledge always come from somewhere. If you speak, your location, former experiences, everything that has influenced you, also echoes in your words. As objectivity is of major importance in scientific research, also feminism worked towards shattering the illusion of neutrality and universality in science by reinterpreting it as inherently political and subjective. In this regard McLaughlin saw a strong resemblance in the goals of feminism and standpoint theory.¹²⁰

This academic take on objectivity is reflected in the feminism and standpoint theory of Sandra Harding for example. When conducting academic research objectivity is an important asset in making the research universally valuable. She explains that objectivity as used in the mainstream scientific community has not been "operationalised" yet and therefore cannot "detect sexist and androcentric assumptions that are 'the dominant beliefs of an age'".¹²¹ In that regard she accuses the academic world of actually relying on hurtful and exclusive assumptions and beliefs. Standpoint theory therefore introduces a new method to approach scientific research, which is well aware of these assumptions. In order to avoid using such assumptions and beliefs Harding claims that it is necessary for academic researchers to acquire their knowledge from a socially specific position, outside of the dominant groups because the latter structurally fail to interrogate the advantages of their partial beliefs.¹²² For it

¹²⁰ McLaughlin, J. "Standpoint Theories", in: *Feminist Social and Political Theory: Contemporary Debates and Dialogues*, New York, 2003, p. 58

¹²¹ Harding, S. "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is "Strong Objectivity"?" in: Alcoff, L. & Potter, E., *Feminist Epistemologies*, Routledge, 1993, p. 52

¹²² *Idem.* 1993, p. 54

makes a difference whether you make a claim from a marginalized position or a dominant one, argues Harding. Doing research from a dominant perspective will thus also influence your findings and interpretations.

There have been various feminist writers who have spoken about how to take a standpoint perspective, often working with the earlier mentioned Marxist foundation for their thinking. The way in which they speak about and deal with standpoint theory differs among the various feminists but according to McLaughlin there are two common claims to be found; firstly that “different groups in society will maintain different knowledge about the world” and secondly “some forms of knowledge are better than others”.¹²³ What McLaughlin means with these claims is that for standpoint theory it firstly matters who says something, because everyone, due to their personal location will develop a specific and personal knowledge that is influenced and formed by that location. And secondly, that it matters which knowledge you use when you want to understand something. This resembles the idea of Marx and Engels’ ‘proletarian standpoint’ about using the knowledge of those who don’t benefit from a certain system if you want to really understand the workings and influences of the system for all people involved.

Experience in standpoint theory

Hartsock is one of the best known writers dealing with a feminist engagement of standpoint theory based in Marxism and she also really involves the issue of ‘experience’. She argues that feminist epistemology is, or should be, about finding ways to draw knowledge from experience. “By basing knowledge on experience, difference and agency are acknowledged and become parts of a process of theorizing structures of oppression across different relationships in society”.¹²⁴ Thus, through the use of experience better value and understanding will be attributed to difference and agency and how these also relate to personal relationships and the use and distribution of power in society. The knowledge that subsequently follows from this better attribution of value to experience, is according to Hartsock “good-enough knowledge”, and it is this form of knowledge that is able to provoke social change. Standpoint theory for her is therefore a method to understand social relations that are coming from the diverse locations that experience, difference and agency can take up

¹²³ McLaughlin, J. *Supra note 120*, p. 54

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*.

and produce knowledge that subsequently can generate social and political change. In this way she gives experience a lot of weight as a source of knowledge, and attributes the same worth to it as Judith Newton, while nevertheless stressing the factors of difference and agency and therefore recognizing that there's more to it than William's mere response to the 'real' surroundings. But, even though she does recognize how someone's position might influence someone's experience, she doesn't question the structures that determine this position.

Donna Haraway's *Situated Knowledges*¹²⁵ goes along in this stream of thought in the sense that experiences as source of knowledge should be heard, acknowledged and connected with each other because only then objectivity can be reached. In *Situated Knowledges* she states: "We do need an earth-wide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different – and power-differentiated – communities. We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life. (...) We could use some enforceable, reliable accounts of things that are not reducible to power moves and agonistic, high status games of rhetoric or to scientific, positivist arrogance".¹²⁶ Through this earth-wide network of connections, Haraway aims to achieve a better, fairer understanding of how knowledge comes about, also on a smaller, personal level and at the same time also recognize the meanings and bodies themselves. She therefore doesn't see them as emerging through their 'construction', they are more than mere power moves, but only through seeing them in their position and connecting them, they'll get a chance for life. Because only by understanding how knowledge and therefore meaning is created, a more equal society, with more understanding for each other can be achieved, she claims. Because if one understands where meaning comes from we can also see how this can be wrongly assigned.

In that same way Haraway approaches objectivity. For objectivity, according to Haraway, comes down to "particular and specific embodiment" because "only partial perspective promises objective vision".¹²⁷ Only by being aware of your specific location, you can be accountable for how you perceive the world around you. According to Haraway it is of importance to listen and give due consideration to these partial perspectives, in order to

¹²⁵ Haraway, D. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1988, pp. 575-599

¹²⁶ *Idem.*, p. 580

¹²⁷ *Idem.*, p. 582-583

understand the influence of the power structures on the personal lives and experiences of those undergoing them. Listening to these voices allows us to “become answerable for what we learn how to see”.¹²⁸ Because every person living in this world that is shaped through power structures, dominant narratives and norms is trained or accustomed to see this world in a specific way: “all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building on translations and specific *ways* of seeing, that is, ways of life”.¹²⁹ This is also why Eagleton argues that children make the best theorists, “because they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as “natural” and so insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions, regarding them with a wondering estrangement which we adults have long forgotten”.¹³⁰ Without this conditioning children are able to let go of certain interpretations, views or practices and don’t mind to change course and start doing things differently. They have not yet accustomed to doing/acting/seeing/interpreting in a certain way and therefore can still feel comfortable in going about it differently. But what if you are already accustomed to all the normativities our society indulges us with? How can you *undo/unact/unsee/uninterpret*? As my parents were the children of their time, trying to do things differently, I am a child of theirs. So maybe, through my situatedness, I could reinterpret, ‘resee’ and analyse their actions.

This blame Donna Haraway places to the eyes is also recognized by Joan Scott, who warns for this alluring practice of contributing too much value to knowledge gained through ‘visibility’. The visible becomes privileged in this way because the knowledge is based on the conceptualization of sight, ‘I’ve seen it with my own eyes’ is a sentence just all too familiar to all of us if we want to be seen as truthful.¹³¹ Sight is therefore a theme that also receives plenty of attention in feminist theory. Our eyes seem such innocent tools for information gathering and transmitting a certain ‘truth’ to the brains, but feminist theories will assure you that also this vision is influenced in many ways and the same goes for experiences, I would like to argue. Haraway would argue that as adults, we interpret what we see through what we have learned to see. Having a personal, located, embodied source from which one can recount this vision makes it according to Haraway easier to locate this interpretation, making their account of the world, their ‘truth’ or knowledge more accountable than other “forms of

¹²⁸ *Idem.*, p. 583

¹²⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹³⁰ Eagleton, T. as found in: hooks, b. “Theory as Liberatory Practice”, *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*, Vol.4 Nr. 1, 1991-1992, p. 1

¹³¹ Scott, J. *Supra note 15*, p. 775-776

unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims”.¹³² See how the two common claims McLaughlin addressed in the beginning of this chapter are also represented in Haraway’s arguments?

Haraway doesn’t claim that the situated sources would be “innocent” or excused from deconstruction or interpretation, but they are “least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge”.¹³³ Having people who live the constructed reality can represent or give insight into the practical working of the power structures. Nevertheless this should according to Haraway not lead to the relativist idea that all experiences are solely formed through structures. She argues in favour of “partial, locatable, critical knowledges” which is completely opposed to her understanding of relativism which is “a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally”.¹³⁴ To Haraway it matters from which position you experience, interpret and speak, from which position you have learned to see and understand the world around you. It is therefore that I find Haraway’s standpoint theory of great interest for understanding my parents’ experiences, actions and impact because their childhood, upbringing, confrontations with bureaucracy have influenced their lives and have contributed to their sense of self and the ability to strive for difference, get out of the norm and the restraints of what society expects. To come to such realisation, to see such opportunities you first must be presented or confronted with this option, to know it exists and can be done. If you want change you must act from a conscious, aware position. My parents’ recounting of their history shows how they experienced the power structures that shaped their understandings of family life and how they found their personal way in dealing with them. When Joost describes his relationship with Bart for example he stresses that the father-child relationship to him is merely based on love: “Not in a way that he is ‘mine’ but just the connection and the enormous amount of love I felt for this little man (...) whenever someone asks me whether I have children I always say I have a son and a daughter. Even though I know it is not true, but what is truth anyway?”¹³⁵ He had found a way to feel father even though Dutch family normativity would not credit him as such.

The intersectionality of experience

¹³² Haraway, D. *Supra note 125*, p. 583

¹³³ *Idem.* p. 584

¹³⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹³⁵ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

Where Haraway's situated knowledges gives insight in the advantage of using knowledge that comes from a very specific and located source, standpoint theory is something that according to Harding is more than recognizing that experience comes from a certain position or perspective but rather is something that can be "achieved", something we must work for to grasp it.¹³⁶ In this way Harding comes closer to Mohanty's aim of involving a larger context than solely the particular situatedness, aiming for making the interpretation of experience more intersectional. She illustrates this by taking distance from Marxian based standpoint theorists who initially worked with one homogeneous, ideal knower, oppressed group, set against another homogenized, ideology producing, oppressive group.¹³⁷ Through the work of women of colour, 'intersectionality' became recognized as the notion that oppression comes in many forms through different hierarchical structures of oppression through race, class, gender, religion, etc. reiterating how experience therefore is shaped through several determiners of identity and in no way can there be talked of the one homogenous oppressed group. For Harding, the working of standpoint theory makes it clear for the oppressed group what their distinctive opportunities are relative to the dominant group, and in that way "turn an oppressive feature of the group's conditions into a source of critical insight about how the dominant society thinks and is structured".¹³⁸ In this sense it would be more a tool for the oppressed groups to counter these structures than to gain a general insight in the workings of oppressive structures for outsiders, because experience is determined and influenced individually by so many different factors. Haraway therefore also argues that "standpoint theories map how social and political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemological, scientific and political advantage"¹³⁹ because the marginalized position comes into the picture, they become a possible source for knowledge production and activism.

The productive power of language

A concrete example of how people are constructed in their reality and the power effects that come along with that is reflected in the act of naming. As described earlier, the Dutch legal structure has a clear understanding of what kind of structure is 'allowed' to carry the designation of 'a family' and who can be part of such designation. The law therefore assigns a *name* to a certain structure and through this legally *recognises* and *projects* these structures on

¹³⁶ Harding, S. *Supra note 10*, p. 8

¹³⁷ *Ibidem.*

¹³⁸ *Idem.*, p. 7-8

¹³⁹ *Ibidem.*

the lives of the people defined by virtue of these structures.¹⁴⁰ Through this act of *naming* the law also determines what becomes recognizable, what it is that people can relate to and it gives those in power the tools to let others function within these designated borders of the names. Joan Scott attributes a certain productive power to language in this sense, for as she states that “experience is a linguistic event” which “doesn’t happen outside of established meaning but neither is confined to a fixed order of meaning”.¹⁴¹ Meaning can change, and because experience is described through language, the language also creates the experience, it becomes recognizable and thus ‘real’ to the listener. In that regard, the people who decide to go against that act of naming and also use and recognise that same denomination to be applicable for another form of family for example (or any other legally established norm), in a way challenge, resist and try to transcend the dominant power structures. The way in which my parents have given shape to their family situation discards the legally recognised form of family, does this than also mean that they have *transcended* it? Thinking of the practice of naming and my family makes me realize that, while growing up, whenever Ton and Louise spoke to me about Joost they never referred to him as ‘dad’ or ‘your father’, they always just referred to him as ‘Joost’. Which caused that I also always referred to him or called him Joost, even though I was well aware that he was my actual father. At the same time, I called Ton my father and ‘papa’, while well aware that he was just my social father. It was not until my twenties that I became aware of this rather particular imbalance and that I suddenly felt very guilty towards Joost, talking to him about ‘dad’ when I was referring to Ton. From that moment on I started addressing him in the proper way, which he deserved in my opinion. This form of address matters as Adriana Cavarero describes it strikingly, because “I exist in an important sense for you and by virtue of you. If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no “you” to address, then I have lost “myself”.¹⁴² In this sense I would be able to argue that because Louise and Ton never referred to Joost as dad, and I too always referred to him as “Joost”, I couldn’t fully identify as a daughter to Joost. For without a ‘father’ to address, could I fully be the ‘daughter’ in the encounter between the two of us? Without two fathers to address, our family linguistically solely consisted of one father and one mother, the perfect normative family structure.

¹⁴⁰ hooks, b., *Supra note 6*, p.3

¹⁴¹ Scott, J. *Supra note 15*, p. 793

¹⁴² Butler, J. “Giving an Account of Oneself”, *Diacritics*, Vol. 31 No. 4, 2001, p. 24

To me this shows how Louise possibly hasn't acted fully consciously in that time. Having a clear idea or image in her head of what certain life choices would mean for Louise she chose to step outside of the norms and give shape to her life as she deemed fit: "At that time I lived life with an attitude of 'we'll see, it is all fine by me' without being able, or without actually wanting, to see the consequences of such an attitude and the subsequent actions".¹⁴³ Louise calls herself therefore very simple thinking and naïve and due to this also wouldn't call herself very conscious in the actions she took. After all, when Ton refused to have a second child with her, she asked Joost because she knew he wanted to have children at some point in his life: "And that made $1+1 = 2$ in my mind. To me it was that simple, really, I thought just *that* simple".¹⁴⁴ At first I was a little disappointed because apparently there was no idealistic, radical, activist reasoning behind her actions. The fact that she did not chose deliberately to go against the norms, and in that sense was not intentionally trying to break family normativity, but just live the life that worked out the best for her does not make it less interesting for Haraway. After all, it isn't the identity, or self-identity that produces science, "critical positioning does, that is, objectivity".¹⁴⁵ It is therefore not a question of *being*, but of "splitting"¹⁴⁶, knowing where you stand, where you come from, what has influenced you. All my parents, by being very aware of their backgrounds, knew what they did not want to become. They believed that their identities did not fit in a certain expectations that they saw around them and therefore they chose to take a different route. Haraway and Harding don't deviate too much in their views on the individual sense because also for Haraway situated knowledge is not about isolated individuals, but about individuals within communities. Being "somewhere in particular" is according to Haraway the "only way to find a larger vision".¹⁴⁷ The way to reach objectivity is thus through locating a partial vision as part of a bigger reality, structure or discourse. Haraway's object of knowledge can therefore be seen as both an "actor and agent".¹⁴⁸ She links in this way to Hartsock's explanation of "good-enough knowledge" in which she explains that knowledge, capable of producing social change is not based on something women essentially have, but comes about from a "collective engagement with the experiences of women and the structures in which these experiences exist".¹⁴⁹ If one wants to achieve change, they therefore need to engage with the structures that define the

¹⁴³ Interview Louise, 2 November 2016

¹⁴⁴ Interview Louise, 2 November 2016

¹⁴⁵ Haraway, D. *Supra note 125*, p. 586

¹⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁷ *Idem.*, p. 590

¹⁴⁸ *Idem.*, p. 592

¹⁴⁹ McLaughlin, J. *Supra note 120*, p. 55

interpretation of these experiences. It is obvious that my parents have lacked this engagement by keeping it completely personal and even there they have let dominant structures still determine the available language for our identification.

The manufacturability of concepts

The productive tendencies and power of language has been a point of interest in feminist studies for a long time already, because it offers theorists the opportunity to deconstruct meaning that is given to a certain word. Feminist theory borrows this form of interpretation from linguistics where it has been widely accepted that ‘signs’ (words, letters) and meanings can take up conventional relationships. As Scott illustrates, this is also directly applicable to other signs: “man’ and ‘woman’ are at once empty and overflowing categories”. For linguistics ‘conventional’ means the radical, arbitrary relationship between sign and meaning, the fact that the relationship might seem natural but in fact is *naturalized*, that it might seem necessary but in fact is solely *socially imperative*. We might think that it is natural to call a human being with a vagina a girl at birth, but isn't this just socially agreed upon? So the concept of family also isn't just limited to those two people who conceive you, also this is a deal our society and lawmakers have made, to make things explainable, easier to understand and regulate, but is not something ‘natural’. This arbitrary nature of the relationship nevertheless means that this can be questioned and boggled.¹⁵⁰ It made me think of what Mohanty says in this regard that gender, and therefore also other identities I would argue, are both produced and uncovered in feminist discourse and that definitions of experience are at the basis of this production. It matters in what kind of framework the identification, or differentiation, occurs. For example Mohanty illustrates that when difference is constructed along male/female binaries and female is opposing male you only reinforce “the heterosexual contract”, you fail to acknowledge possibilities for identification outside of the framework and therefore reinforce, reproduce the binary identities.¹⁵¹ In this sense, with my parents referring to Joost as Joost they reproduced the traditional family framework of just Ton and Louise being the parents and Joost just the man we would visit on the weekdays, not my father. Joost was constructed in this sense as ‘Joost’ and Ton as ‘dad’.

Also here Judith Butler’s argument on recognisability resonates. She states that the conditions for someone to become legible, recognisable and as such visible, the encounter with that

¹⁵⁰ Vega, J., “Gender, Politiek, Geschiedenis. Reflecties op een Trias”, *Groniek, Historisch Tijdschrift*, Vol. 35 No.158, p.10

¹⁵¹ Mohanty, C.T., *Supra note 39*, p. 76

person must be framed by a certain language which itself is also part of a bigger system of norms that constitute recognisability.¹⁵² We are able to recognize someone who is unknown because we are able to place them within a bigger system of norms on gender, sexuality, race, class, religion, ability, etc. So if you want to ‘be’ someone, if you want to be seen and recognized by the majority, you will have to fit these norms. Joost explicitly wasn’t placed within that linguistic framework that determines family and therefore also couldn’t be recognized as being part of that.

Use of experience in knowledge production: Poststructuralist perspective

This consciousness of position, or situatedness, is what forms the basis of standpoint theory and Haraway’s situated knowledges. It is exactly this individual positioning that makes the knowledge, or the lived experience interesting according to Haraway. And it is these politics of location that should stand at the basis when being heard.¹⁵³ Haraway formulates that by writing that every person is “never finished” and “stitched together imperfectly”.¹⁵⁴ Everyone has been influenced by others’ interpretations of ‘the right way to do’, power structures that determine ‘the right way to be’. Through this formulation Haraway comes very close to that of poststructuralist feminist theories that focus on the constructedness of society, experience, people, practically; everything. Most inspiring to me in this field is Judith Butler, and especially her article *Giving an Account of Oneself* speaks to what I want to argue in this thesis. She illustrates that if we want to understand the true value of someone’s experience, we have to go beyond the experience *an sich* and also take a look at how the subject formation of the one who had the experience has come about. Especially for this thesis because I want to get an understanding of the impact my parents made with their actions the realisation of the limitations of self-knowledge that Butler addresses is of interest, because these limitations address the idea of “responsibility” and I would argue therefore also accountability.¹⁵⁵ How well do we know who we are, where we come from and where we go? How consciously can you change your impact on normativity? Essentially this comes down to the exercise of power, both of the state or society towards my parents concerning the roles that they can or cannot take on and the possibility of my parents to exercise power over

¹⁵² Butler, J. *Supra note 142*, p. 23-24

¹⁵³ Haraway, D. *Supra note 125*, p. 589

¹⁵⁴ *Idem.*, p. 586

¹⁵⁵ Butler, J. *Supra note 142*, p. 22

society and maybe the state by offering an alternative to these roles. This form of exercising power is foundational, as Michel Foucault has argued because “it is a way in which certain actions modify others”.¹⁵⁶ Through their actions my parents made a power move and presented society with an alternative truth, a fact with which society then would have to deal and possibly incorporate as part of their truth as well. Through power, human beings are made into subjects, on different levels; This subjectivication can either occur internal, by the person themselves or from external powers such as societal norms, traditions or legal determinations, but it is the exercise of power, the options that are presented to you internal and externally that forms your identity. Therefore Butler argues that we have to take another step back and not only look at the situations as they are experienced, but also at the meaning that we attach at factors that we involve in the interpretations of these experiences, like norms and understandings of fundamental factors such as the self and the other (the known, the unknown). Because these understandings are stooled on certain normativities, like fore example in encountering an other, something or someone unknown: “The Other is recognized and confers recognition through a set of norms that govern recognisability”¹⁵⁷, without having the norms governing what I can understand to be ‘other’ I will not be able to do so, unable to recognise it as unrecognisable, as other. So when you recognize something, when you are able to attribute certain meaning to something, it means according to Butler that you “submit to a norm of recognition”.¹⁵⁸ Looking at the concept of family it is like Freud’s *Familienroman* (family romance), which represents an imaginary interrogation of origins, an interrogation that embeds the engenderment of narrative within the experience of family.¹⁵⁹ This family romance describes the experience of familial structures also as discursive: the family romance is the story we tell ourselves about the social and psychological reality of the family in which we find ourselves and about the patterns of desire that motivate the interaction among its members.¹⁶⁰ So even the family is discursively formed and understood. It even goes so far according to Marianne Hirsch that the notion of family romance can actually “accommodate the discrepancies between *social reality* and *fantasy construction* which are basic to the experience and the institution of family”.¹⁶¹ The social reality is based on a certain constructed fantasy, based on the norms and regulation I mentioned before, but because

¹⁵⁶ Foucault, M., *Supra note 45*, p. 788

¹⁵⁷ Butler, J. *Supra note 142*, p. 22

¹⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁹ Hirsch, M. *Supra note 28*, p. 9

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶¹ *Idem.*, p. 10

family love is now considered to be so natural it can obscure the discrepancies between what it real and what is constructed. (If there is a difference between those at all.) And the same consideration between real and constructed goes for the recognition you have for yourself as Butler argues: “I find that the only way to know myself is precisely through a mediation that takes place outside of me, exterior to me, in a convention or a norm that I did not make, in which I cannot discern myself as an author or an agent of its making... The possibility of the “I”, of speaking and knowing the “I”, resides in a perspective that dislocates the first-person perspective whose very condition it supplies”.¹⁶² So in order to understand where you, your perceptions, come from, you have to get a grip on the norms that are external to you but still have a foundational impact on how you internally consider yourself. In other words, you don’t have complete control over how you see your own personality for this is partially determined by exterior influences. This also comes back in the quote from Butler that I mentioned earlier; that you also need this other, this ‘you’ in order to become an ‘I’.

Going back to the creation of normativity and the Dutch law, we have to take notice of what this law actually does. We have to acknowledge the productive power that goes from this legislative definition and the resistance my parents, and others, have offered by not sticking to it. Foucault argues that this power comes from the fact that the state has been a developing, political power that ignores individuals and is “looking only at the interests of the totality” or better said the interests of “a class or a group among the citizens”.¹⁶³ Sure this makes governing easier, for you don’t have to pay attention to those who won’t fit the boxes, but it also implies that those same people are forced to make themselves fit and therefore produce a certain identity that might not match their own interpretation. The productive power that institutions possess should be analysed in order to understand their impact and all theories I have already introduced in this thesis will argue that this must happen from the level of those who are not profiting from the institutions. For standpoint theories that would be the marginalised people, and also Foucault pleads “that one must analyse institutions from the standpoint of power relations, rather than vice versa”.¹⁶⁴

Seen from another perspective and shifting to poststructuralist modes of thinking, it actually isn’t a question of making people fit into boxes but rather of boxes who make people fit into them and some outsiders who fall outside of the determined boxes confirming the shapes and

¹⁶² Butler, J. *Supra note 142*, p. 23

¹⁶³ Foucault, M., *Supra note 45*, p. 782

¹⁶⁴ *Idem.*, p. 791

boundaries of these boxes. In poststructural reasoning, and especially in Foucault's reasoning of discourses and power, power is productive. Power relations can both open up as close off possibilities for certain forms of social relations, positions or experiences that people in those positions have.¹⁶⁵ Because if you don't fit the norm which is set through the discourse, you become marginalised. The bodies who don't meet the dominant social guidelines or norms, are considered to be *abject bodies*. Butler takes this interpretation of the "abject" or "other" from the construction of the subject from Kristeva, who approaches subjectivity and the creation of subjectivity from the perspective of psychoanalysis and the growing child in the mirror stage, the moment in which the child realises that their "I" has boundaries and that their body belongs to them and that the rest is therefore 'other': "The construction of the "not-me" as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject".¹⁶⁶ In that sense these others help define the 'I' in the sense that it is abject to this body that belongs to 'me'. Meijer & Prins take the abject further by explaining it on a more societal level, being: "all kinds of bodies whose lives are not considered to be "lives" and whose materiality is understood not to "matter"". ¹⁶⁷ In stead of projecting the abject on subjectivity, or 'I', they take it up to the ego: those who are abject, are other and are therefore thusfar distanced from the I that they cannot even be considered worthy of life. This distance from the I and the abject who's unworthy of life can according to Kristeva nevertheless also be questioned, for she describes the abjected as "radically excluded, but never banished altogether".¹⁶⁸ Because even though the abjected is radically 'other' it also determines the borders of selfhood for it "hovers at the periphery of one's existence".¹⁶⁹ This difference is important because with Kristeva's interpretation the abject is not solely oppressed and othered but it remains present as a certain determinative power and in that respect forms "both an unconscious and conscious threat to one's own clean and proper self".¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, it doesn't grant these abject bodies any more protection or recognition for being someone. This position at the periphery only confirms their marginalized position and the privileged one of the dominant group.

¹⁶⁵ McLaughlin, J. *Supra note 53*, p. 118

¹⁶⁶ Butler, J. *Gender Trouble*, 1999, Routledge, p. 169

¹⁶⁷ Meijer, I.C. & Prins, B., "How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler", *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1998, p. 281

¹⁶⁸ McAfee, N., *Julia Kristeva*, Routledge, 2004, p. 46

¹⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

The use of experience in knowledge production: A feminist comparative approach

When it comes to the inclusion of experience in academic research standpoint theory and poststructuralism deal with the same issues in slightly different ways, addressing the same issue of identity and experience on a level differing from taking note of the personal account to that of the discursive productive influence. Now that I have covered the basics of the theories I want to address and shared my parents' recount of their experiences I will further discuss the two most important ones side by side to illustrate this subtle but at the same time significant difference in approach while also pointing out where the two streams overlap or inspire each other and how this relates to my topic of interest, my family formation.

Because the views diverge considerably; taking for example the interpretation from Dorothy E Smith who argues that because the lives and experiences of women have always been kept invisible and denied legitimacy in current society, the direct experiences of these women, the practice of daily life, can give ground to formerly unexplored sources of knowledge: "Women are capable of generating alternative frameworks for exploring the significance of their experience in analysing patriarchy, because they lie outside the dominant discourses that provide partial and perverse explanations".¹⁷¹ Smith argues that because women are not included in patriarchal society, their experiences have also not been structured or influenced by its prejudiced viewpoints. By taking the women's every day experiences as the starting point of research, Smith's standpoint theory becomes an empirically-rooted theoretical framework through which she explains oppression and eventually wants to provoke political change.¹⁷² At first Smith thus acknowledges full value to the experience itself to be of value for knowledge production, but as it turned out she later did admit that the experiences have to be interpreted and analysed before they can actually have meaning for political activism.¹⁷³ She therefore makes a move towards a more poststructuralist interpretation by shifting towards the need to place the experience within a bigger framework from which they can be analysed. This is more in line also with what Butler argues for when stating that the I who tells their story "can only tell it according to recognizable norms of life narration", the I can only speak with and through the norms that the I has been in contact with during their life and therefore "it agrees to circuit its narration through an externality and so to disorient itself in

¹⁷¹ McLaughlin, J. *Supra note 120*, p. 57

¹⁷² *Ibidem*.

¹⁷³ *Idem.*, p. 59

the telling”.¹⁷⁴ Having a recounted experience therefore always takes place within a framework of the production and valuation of meaning. Interpretations which are unknown will therefore never be made. It is for this reason that Harding reiterates that is matters from which position you speak and as from poststructuralism will be argued, even though you are marginalized by the system this doesn’t mean that you are excluded from it.

So Harding, Haraway and Foucault in principle all talk about the same essence, all wonder how objects and people become what they are, or at least how they are seen by society and thus become socialized. Foucault articulates this in wondering how human beings are made into subject, or in other words, which structures and processes contribute to the subjectification of someone or maybe even something. By now we know about the stance of Harding and Haraway but also Foucault argues in *the Subject and Power* that for the analysis of power it makes sense to take “the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point”¹⁷⁵ and therefore start the research with those who are not in the privileged, determining position but those who are effected by the ones who are in that determining position. Foucault states that for understanding what power relations are and how they come around it is necessary to research the forms of resistance and the attempts to dismantle those relations.

Harding again, like Haraway, comes close to Butler’s vision on the life narration of the I by stating that “the *activities* of those at the top both organize and set limits on what persons who perform such activities can understand about themselves and the world around them...”¹⁷⁶. In other words, people at the top, such as lawmakers and other people in powerpositions create certain norms that determine how people can consider themselves and their surroundings. And by enshrining these norms in legislation they also oblige people to act accordingly. Harding adds subsequently that “the activities of those at the bottom of such social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought ... from which humans’ relations with each other and the natural world can become visible”.¹⁷⁷ So depending on one’s social situation, the knowledge or understanding of one’s being is determined: “These experiences and lives have been devalued or ignored as a source of objectivity-maximizing questions – the answers to which are not necessarily to be found in those experiences or lives but elsewhere in the beliefs and activities of people at the center who make policies and engage in social practices that

¹⁷⁴ Butler, J. *Supra note 142*, p. 32

¹⁷⁵ Foucault, M., *Supra note 45*, p. 780

¹⁷⁶ Harding, S. *Supra note 121*, p. 54

¹⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

shape marginal lives”.¹⁷⁸ Harding thus places more responsibility at the dominant groups of society to make the marginalized voices heard or to show how the different experiences are shaped and valued. To illustrate this, she takes the example of nature; trees and rocks are also “removed from pure nature” and made into social objects. Due to the “contemporary general cultural meaning” that these objects have in society, and the way in which general people or scientists deal with them, they have gained certain value, certain meaning and as such became these social objects. How we describe and deal with things or people we encounter in our daily lives thus matters in how we see and interpret them. According to Harding the assumptions of the scientific community on what they see are therefore also always “in conversation with scientists of the past”, which is comparable to Haraway’s eyes as “active, perceptual systems” and Foucault’s understanding of power as “reacting to other’s action”: it is through the interaction with other objects/subjects/interpretations, the way in which one approaches someone/something that they contribute to their social construction.¹⁷⁹ You are not solely responsible for your interpretation of what you see, feel or hear around you because you have been influenced by what you have encountered before. You yourself are always in conversation with encounters, interpretations from the past. This is why Butler describes that her life narrative is bound to begin “in media res” because the conditions, the words, concepts, references necessary for your ability to reflect and know your self, have already been determined “to make me and my story in language possible”.¹⁸⁰ Without this prior history or creation of language to talk about the self and the encounters of the self with their surrounding, would not be able to exist. Coming back to linguistics: We need language and prior detached meaning to this language to make sense of our experiences. Because in the use of signs and signifiers we produce “interpretants”, as de Lauretis explains: “Their significate effects must pass through each of us, each body and each consciousness, before they may produce an effect or an action upon the world. *The individual’s habit as a semiotic production is both the result and the conditions of the social production of meaning.*”¹⁸¹ And this production of meaning goes further than solely through language, she also argues; gestures, signs which all influence the relation to their sense of self and I would like to add ‘family’ to that as well, for it takes up an important place in the creation of someone’s identity too. It is therefore that de Lauretis calls experience a “complex of habits resulting from the semiotic interaction of “outer world” and “inner world”, the continuous engagement of a self or subject

¹⁷⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷⁹ *Idem.*, p. 64

¹⁸⁰ Butler, J., *Supra note 142*, p. 27

¹⁸¹ de Lauretis, T., *Supra note 4*, p. 178-179

in social reality”.¹⁸² Before we can recognize something, it therefore already has to exist in social relations, recognizable to us through the various discursive and representational structures.¹⁸³ So before we can recognize a certain structure as family it has to be worked through this interaction of outer world and inner world and in this way it has to conquer a recognized position as a social construction.

Recognition matters and materializes

It is also here that the notion of materialization, previously discussed through Meijer and Prins actually comes back, as originally introduced by Judith Butler. She explains how only those who are recognized by the dominant structures, who comply to the rules that are set for this recognition, in fact materialize, and in that way come to matter. This materialization is dependent of the ruling discourse and the corresponding norms, prejudices, interpretations and valuations. And so legislative acts that shape different forms of political subjectivity also contribute to this, because it is exactly this practice which can turn a notion into matter: “not as a site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter”.¹⁸⁴ Very bluntly stated: the matter of cells that will grow into a baby with a vagina in the womb will be called a girl, far before they will be born. This baby even already was materialized as a baby girl before her development because in current society the discourse determines that people with vaginas are girls and will be women after a life filled with prejudices like preferring the colour pink, being more caring than their penis counterparts and being terrible drivers. It is this framework of interpretations, norms and laws which according to Martin Manalansan turns people into “subjects”: “That individuals, by being subjected to legal/cultural regimes, contexts and interpretations become subjects. These regimes are formed by social institutions and practices that normalize certain practices like marriage, reproduction and family formation. This involves the marginalization of people, practices and institutions that differ from these norms”.¹⁸⁵ By creating these demarcated boxes for identification through law, people will start identifying and acting accordingly, Manalansan thus argues. It is as Conaghan explains it, that these “concepts that law creates (man, woman, husband, wife, family, etc.) “are not simply ‘fictions’ who fail to comply with the ‘reality’” but they contribute to the creation and preservation of that

¹⁸² *Idem.* p. 182

¹⁸³ *Idem.*, p. 165 – Hirsch, M. *Supra note 28*, p. 8

¹⁸⁴ Butler, J., *Bodies that Matter*, Routledge, 1993, p. 9

¹⁸⁵ Manalansan, M., “Queer Intersections: Sexuality and Gender in Migration Studies”, *International Migration Review*, Vol. 40, No. 1, Gender and Migration Revisited, 2006, p. 225

reality”.¹⁸⁶ Because people will take up these identities, will fit themselves in the boxes as they are designated through law, they shape the reality as we experience it in daily life. Because we are presented to it by our outer world, they become internalized in our inner world, as de Lauretis could state it.

Writing all this out of the desire to figure out to what extent my family has disregarded family normativity, I’ve been most interested by discourses and language. And in this process of understanding my family, there is also a large role attributed to language, because, like Butler’s *in media res*, we are only able to recognise words, stories, legal concepts, interpretations when we have heard them before, when they have been given a meaning, when it has become a discourse. The danger of this is as Michel de Certeau describes it: “Discourse gives itself credibility in the name of reality which it is supposed to represent, but this authorized appearance of the “real” serves precisely to camouflage the practice which in fact determines it”.¹⁸⁷ The influence of the outer world on our inner world is naturalized like Hirsch described it earlier, the discrepancies between social reality and fantasy construction are covered. “Representation thus disguises the praxis that organizes it”.¹⁸⁸ In other words, we believe so strongly in how we see this ‘reality’ that discourse represents, it has come to be so natural to us, that we don’t recognize that these concepts were also once just constructed. So when one wants to change the interpretations of certain concepts, like man, woman or family, it makes sense that one works with the concept as it is interpreted in contemporary society and break that one open by showing how this meaning has been constructed. And the performative power that language possesses is a possible tool for that deconstruction. Because if something is socially constructed, language can assist in taking down the different interpretations and valuations that have been attributed to it, and in this way *deconstruct* it. Butler provokes this through performativity, where through the anticipation of a certain (gendered) essence one produces that which it posits as outside of itself. Performativity therefore is not a single act, but a repetition, a tradition and which therefore achieves its effect of becoming materialized.¹⁸⁹ I started calling Joost ‘pa’ and in a way this deconstructs the rather normative structure that Ton and Louise had created by ever only referring to him as Joost. But I was able to spin this habit of calling him Joost, because I have been offered this interpretation also by discourse, as Butler explains: “without the means of discourse there is

¹⁸⁶ Conaghan, J., “Reassessing the Feminist Theoretical Project1 in Law”, *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2000, p. 363

¹⁸⁷ Scott, J. *Supra note 15*, p. 777

¹⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸⁹ Butler, J. *Gender Trouble*, 1999, Routledge, p. xiv-xv

also no prior materiality accessible”.¹⁹⁰ It is through discourse that we are able to give valued meaning to the world around us. For Butler therefore, if we want to be able to circumvent the existent powers that give value and meaning to bodies or families, who give them legitimacy and materialize them, one has to focus on the domain of ontology: “the domain of ontology is a regulated domain: what gets produced inside of it, what gets excluded from it in order for the domain to be constituted is itself an effect of power”.¹⁹¹ Therefore, the abject bodies, those who are excluded, have discursive possibilities and are able to influence what discourse has materialized. But, within the traditional discourse, Joost of course has always been my father, for I carry his DNA and there is no other form of parenthood more recognized in our current family discourse than that one. So by just starting to call him ‘pa’ I haven’t really dodged the system. I have honoured his initial role, but I have not given a new meaning to this role.

Representing the other and work towards change

Having gone through this experience of taking the formation of the family in their own hands and not considering rules, laws or regulations in their decision making makes my parents an interesting voice for representing of this personal resistance, as ‘the Others’, the ones outside the norms of family formation. In contemporary Dutch society there are many families who have gone about their family formation in a different way than the norm would describe, as I briefly touched upon in the beginning of my thesis. Being a minority, their voices and experiences are often unheard, while they sure represent an alternative reality to what the norm would effectuate. Their form of resistance, as Foucault would call it, is therefore an interesting starting point to further analyse their influence. The influence on their personal lives is clear, for them the restricting norms that were drafted at the top had no grip on how they came to understand their own family, as is clearly reflected in the experience of Joost when he talks about his relationship with Bart. Not having contributed to the conception of a child does not mean that you cannot be the father, according to Joost. Even though he wouldn’t call it the “truth” that he sees Bart as his son, for him it sure does feel so, and therefore it becomes *his* truth. Interestingly he nevertheless does identify a difference between what he would consider as true and what is generally considered to be true. His truth, his perception of the world is not true, he states. But what is this then? Is his truth inferior? Alternative? That our personal truth is coloured or influenced by your situation can be

¹⁹⁰ Meijer, I.C. & Prins, B, *Supra note 167*, p. 278

¹⁹¹ *Idem.*, p. 280

illustrated through the relationship I have with Ton. As I explained earlier, I don't know better than having Ton in my life as a father, and therefore I would say that our father-daughter relationship is 100%, whereas for him, deliberately having chosen not to be a father back in 1987, he now considers our relationship 99%. This is a point that Foucault also makes when he asks "What can I become, given the contemporary order of being?" In his understanding it is the 'order', what he therefore would call a regime of truth, that determines the possibilities of becoming, and in this way also defines the boundaries for the truth of the self, by which he can recognize himself, can give an account of himself and in this way become a recognizable human for others.¹⁹² Ton, very much aware of his decision in 1987 *not* to become a father can therefore have difficulties with identifying himself as a father nonetheless. He deliberately chose not to be one, so therefore cannot claim this identity for the full 100%, would my interpretation be in this regard.

Even though my family narrative seems to fit for a case study of giving voice to a marginalized family formation, Haraway also warns against the romanticisation of the location of the marginalised as undoubtedly the best location to generate knowledge from about the 'real' world. Because, she states "the subjugated standpoint is no more innocent than that of the powerful".¹⁹³ Neutrality, or true objectivity, is difficult to achieve. Haraway and Harding therefore both argue that objectivity or neutrality concerning the experiences of a certain marginalized group, cannot be individual, but should be considered collectively. Not as some sort of collective identity which could be attributed to a certain group, but in the sense that an individual's experience is shaped through social and political relations that people have within and amongst each other. In other words: They share common problems, not a common appearance. It is not that individuals as such experience their position as marginalised, but they become this through their relationship to other communities and groups.¹⁹⁴ It is not because they are women for example, that they have such experience but because they relate to society in a similar way because they are shaped by society in that similar way. Our family experiences the same legal issues as a gay multiparent family but our appearance and therefore the acceptance by society is very different.

¹⁹² Butler, J. *Supra note 142*, p. 23-24

¹⁹³ McLaughlin, J. *Supra note 120*, p. 60

¹⁹⁴ *Idem.*, p. 68

The danger of essentializing experience

Through the several theories I've introduced in this research thusfar it becomes clear that all are trying to find ways to include marginalised voices and experiences and be true to what their meaning and impact could be in academic research. As Haraway also warned, the marginalized voice neither isn't innocent and there's a lot of possible influences to take into consideration. Nevertheless, through using the concept of experience there lies a silent but very present danger of tipping into essentialism, because I am describing the experiences of a group of which I think it is worth to be heard. Whichever theory I use, I nevertheless have to make sure that this research won't take their common experiences as a given for that group as a whole and that I strive for an intersectional approach. Because there is not just *one* discursive system, and every individual carries different modes of identification and therefore experiences different forms of oppression. Different repressive systems create different concepts and therefore different subjects with different interpretations. One of the most poignant things I have to take with me is that I cannot essentialize the experience of our family formation for all my parents. As I have stipulated for a couple of times it is especially a whole different experience for Louise, who doesn't seem to have a story to tell of how they have created this family, it just happened.

Thompson further elaborates on the caution: "The unifying aspect of experience excludes whole realms of human activity by simply not counting them as experience, at least not with any consequences for social organization or politics (...). The positions of men and women and their different relationships to politics are taken as reflections of material and social arrangements rather than as products of class politics itself; they are part of the "experience" of capitalism. (...) experience becomes itself cumulative and homogenizing" (...) ¹⁹⁵ Scott uses Thompson's example to illustrate with this how experience comes to represent a whole group using one single denominator with which people could identify. He takes as an example the "working class experience" which came to represent the "working class identity", and the same could go for "women's experience", "black experience", or "homosexual experience" that would come to represent their respective identities. ¹⁹⁶ Thompson indicates with this that class or other subject positions are identities which are rooted in structural relations that preexist politics. But this disregards how something like class itself is also conceptualized and never felt, contested or embraced in the same way by everyone. ¹⁹⁷ Scott warns that also this

¹⁹⁵ Scott, J. *Supra note 15*, p. 785

¹⁹⁶ *Idem.*, p. 786

¹⁹⁷ *Idem.*, p. 785

use works to “solidify the ideological process of subject construction”¹⁹⁸ and in this way these boxes in which people are put are only becoming more ‘natural’ or common in stead of critically analysed. It is the danger of a single story, that one has to make themselves substitutable in order to be recognizable.¹⁹⁹ Making yourself recognizable for the other nevertheless is again essential as Butler argues, for we exist by the recognition by the other. Without addressing the other, there would not be the sense of self. Butler also places a sidenote with this that we do feel “more properly recognized by some people than we do by others”.²⁰⁰ Butler also argues in a similar way when pleading that people should let go of “pursuing satisfaction” when encountering another person and let the question of subjectification, the identification of the “other” remain open so that this other “will not be captured” by ones interpretation of them.²⁰¹ Through not striving for finding the right box to fit this other, you can leave the act of identification open so that the relationship can similarly remain open. Foucault states that “relationships of communication imply finalized activities” which at the same time produces effects of power between the communicating partners.²⁰² So by not finalizing by the act of identification for this other but leaving this open, there is a more equal power distribution between the two communicating people.

Taking notice of individual influences

So we have to pay attention to what is of influence on one’s identity to be able to create some understanding of how one’s experience is formed. The experiences of my parents differ, not only because they come from different backgrounds, because they had seen different examples of how family life can be formed, but also because they hold different positions in society. Louise, uncomfortable in her own family, cis-woman, white, average education, stopped working when she had her first child but always kept practicing homeopathy on the side, Joost, an unwanted child, cis-man, white, visual artist who graduated from a well perceived academy and lived from the little money he earned with his work and Ton, felt “trapped” in his first family and was the black sheep of his childhood family, cis-man, white, highly educated, middle-class was a teacher who in that time got paid very well and all were disciples from Bhagwan. All these influences, and many more, influence the way in which they would perceive the world around them and their position in it as well. First, and

¹⁹⁸ *Idem.* p. 792

¹⁹⁹ Butler, J. *Supra note 142*, p. 26

²⁰⁰ *Idem.*, p. 25

²⁰¹ *Idem.*, p. 28

²⁰² Foucault, M., *Supra note 45*, p. 787

obviously it influenced them in a way that they did not want to be part of the most visual reality, that of the world around them. They wanted to create their own little society, as many people dreamed of from the 1960's on.

Social structures therefore have influenced their identity formation and therefore their choices. So coming from Mohanty, Harding and Haraway, if these social structures and power relations have had a forming effect on my parent's experiences and if I would want to use their experiences for knowledge production, than I should also take into consideration the terms on which their experiences indirectly are based, the discourses in which these experiences were formed, because these experiences will then also in a way reflect the dominant ideologies and discourses, because the experiences my parents had are not *despite* of these structures but *due to*. Conaghan nevertheless illustrates that the influences of discourses is not completely clear: "If, after al, gender is a discursive construct, if our *knowledge* of ourselves as 'women', while generally experienced as 'true/real' is, nevertheless, the product of discursively generated meanings; if, indeed, our very sense of the self is the result of an interpretative process – whereby 'the self' is understood in relation to the meanings which are *available* to *allow* us to make sense of it (us), on what basis can we claim that our experiences are valid and how can they ground our normative and theoretical positions?"²⁰³ If our experiences are shaped/formed/constructed like us, how can we than really analyse and deconstruct them?

Taken then into consideration the identities with which I described my parents, like cis-woman, white, urban, an interesting follow-up question than is to figure how many people will actually exactly fit such a box? When it comes down to family formation many will in fact fit that box, because it asks a man and a woman raising their biological children, but to what extent do this people feel a 100% man or 100% woman? And what in fact determines whether you achieve this 100%? Most certainly not the sexual organs, as trans* demonstrate, nor the level of certain hormones or your hobbies. So what is it then? – this is a whole different discussion, but is does illustrate the danger of practicing such rigid boxes for people to fit into. If it doesn't work for someone's gender or sex than how can it work for other social constructions like 'family'? As Conaghan illustrates it "These boxed identities are mere "imperfect representations of our stumbling perceptions of the 'real'".²⁰⁴ It was an attempt to

²⁰³ Conaghan, J., *Supra note 186*, p. 368

²⁰⁴ *Idem.* p. 372

make sense of all that is happening around us, but under no circumstances can this be regarded as ‘natural’ or the sole truth.

The division of experience and meaning

So to what extent can these experiences, the accounts of people’s lives living in some form of marginality be dissociated from the discourse in which they are situated? Gay families’ experiences are shaped through discourse way differently than ours for example, because not only do they fall outside of family norms but also outside of the heterosexual norms for example. As Harding indicates, it is the activities of “those at the top” who determine the shape of the experiences of those at the bottom. Where can one then, if one can do so at all, draw a line of where someone is speaking out of experience and where this experience is actually shaped through discourse? Is talking from experience without external influence, like Judith Newton and the early Nancy Hartsock described, actually at all possible? Can experience ever be seen separate from meaning production, from discourse? According to John Toews it is indispensable that we separate them: For him, making sense of something that happened, to history, requires a separation of experience and meaning. In the sense that “experience is that reality which demands meaningful response”.²⁰⁵ In other words: the personal needs to be analysed. This insistence on the separation of meaning and experience is crucial for Toews, not only because it seems the only way to account for change, but also because it protects the world from “the hubris of wordmakers who claim to be makers of reality”.²⁰⁶ I love this quote because it illustrates how there is a certain power in the use of words by people, that they through creating the words in a way also create reality, because with the words we have a way to express something and relate to it. This links to what I’ve described before of the lawmakers creating reality and how you need language to be able to express, understand and share your experience. But Toews in this case calls for a clear separation of meaning, or words, and reality. This opposition between “words” and “reality” thus reflects a distinction between language, or meaning, and experience. This opposition provides for a situation in which people both have agency in their action as a common ground on which they communicate and act, which is necessary for using words, meaning and how you act upon them as a form of resistance.

²⁰⁵ Scott, J. *Supra note 15*, p. 788

²⁰⁶ *Ibidem*.

Mohanty then again explains the impossibility of this division of experience and meaning, of the personal and the discourse by illustrating it as a “temporality of struggle”. Because for her, this division would suggest focussing on “an insistent, simultaneous, non-synchronous process characterized by multiple locations, rather than a search of origins and endings which, as Adrienne Rich says, ‘seems a way of stopping time in its tracks’. (...)”.²⁰⁷ Other than how Haraway and Harding argue, Mohanty pleads to let go of just one history and one location, and become aware of other aspects that contribute to the situatedness of experience itself. Not only the people who undergo the experience are situated, but so is the experience. When I want to analyse my parents’ experiences, Mohanty thus argues that I have to see that experience within their temporality. Mohanty concludes in *Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience* that the experience of self, the way in which one sees themselves, is often discontinuous and fragmented and therefore also has to be historicised before it can be generalized into a collective vision. If we want to use experience as a source for feminist solidarity and struggle, it should be “historically interpreted and theorised”.²⁰⁸ According to this reasoning I cannot just take my parents’ experience and say ‘look, this is non-normative and therefore a good source for knowledge production’. Looking at the experience and situatedness of ‘families’ within the Netherlands in 2017 you can see that there is a whole range of different experiences from LGBTQIAP²⁰⁹ families and migration families that give a whole different view on what families are and how ‘the experience of family’ as it is located in the Netherlands in 2017 could be described. The same goes for the time in which my parents made the decision of how they wanted to give shape to their family, in the summer of 1987 in the Netherlands. If we were to use my parents’ experiences as a source for knowledge production, these historical or temporal aspects should according to Mohanty also be taken into consideration. Not only the situatedness as the moment in which they took the decision for their family formation, 1987, but also the situatedness in which they recount this experience and in which I interpret it, in 2016-2017. The spirit of the age is what determines norms and values and what shapes the ruling discourse in a society, and therefore plays a big role in how people come to see themselves and their opportunities.

²⁰⁷ Mohanty, C.T., *Supra note 39*, p. 87

²⁰⁸ *Idem.*, p. 88 - 89

²⁰⁹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersexual, Asexual, Pansexual

3. Joost: “But what is truth anyway?”

The ability to resist, transcend and change normativity

Having considered these feminist theories on what can influence and play a role in the interpretation of one’s experience, I want to further analyse what this does with my family experience and dedicate this to Joost, my biological father, the person who for Louise represented a way to step out of the ‘normal’ family life and start shaping it outside of the expected boundaries. How conscious was my mother’s act? Does the degree of consciousness determine the ability of acting normbreaking? Has she in fact been able to transcend the boundaries or has she still operated within them only on a slightly different manner? What actually determines these boundaries and whether or not you are able to pass them? What does it mean to be a subject within this power structured society, trying to resist and do things differently? Can I use their experiences as a source for resistance to family normative legislation?

According to Foucault resistance that is posed to the power relations can be defined as struggles that are “immediate”, “transversal”, aiming for “power effects”, “question the status of the individual” and “are an opposition to the effects of power which are linked with knowledge, competence, and qualification”.²¹⁰ With this he means that these forms of resistance that he sees in society are not limited to one place and they are generally not focussed on the “chief enemy” but rather on the “immediate enemy”.²¹¹ My ‘resistance’ of calling Joost pa would be an example of this, for the only ‘enemy’ I actually faced was Ton and Louise’s decision of referring to him as Joost. With my decision I haven’t really stood up to Dutch Family normativity, except for the fact that I have two men in my life that I call dad. As most people, according to Foucault, I wanted a quick solution for the problem. He argues that in order to understand fully where their problem comes from we shouldn’t focus too much on the position of the individual, and here he deviates from Haraway and Harding because he states that “on the one hand they [these struggles] underline everything which makes individuals truly individual. On the other hand, they attack everything which separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual

²¹⁰ Foucault, M., *Supra note 45*, p. 780-781

²¹¹ *Idem.*, p. 780

back on himself, and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way”.²¹² In other words, if you focus on the individual story, this will only be a result of an enforced individualization, an identity someone was able to take on through their surroundings and the power relations between them. As Foucault argues, the resistance, the struggle, they all revolve around one and the same question “who are we?”²¹³ Our situatedness, our position in society, the axes of differentiation, the power relations around us all influence how we view ourselves and how we are viewed by those surrounding us, so we cannot be seen as solely individual in that sense. Because people aim their resistance to the “immediate enemy” Foucault claims that the struggles are not aimed at a certain institution of power but “rather a technique, a form of power”.²¹⁴ Alright, I am a obvious culprit in this.

Nevertheless, what Foucault also argues is that there are various dynamics of power present at different levels of society that emerge between different types of actors. It is not only the state or the governing level that has power, but also other layers in society can have or practice power through their speech or actions. Power is therefore “local” according to Foucault and can take place in all levels of society. It is thus something that is part of everyday life for everyone, and cannot be seen as something that is merely “exercised over us”, but we have the ability to also exercise power in a way.²¹⁵ Taking this power to question other effects of power and discourses is thus a form of resistance for Foucault. Also, like my parents did, the “voluntary insubordination” to the legislation trying to structure you.²¹⁶

My parents are an example of firstly taking power in not complying to the norms and rules as enshrined in legislation but then reiterating the power of the state in keeping the normative structure in place in our situation, and I tried to exercise power by going against this structure, even though this exercise was very immediate or locally oriented by me. This form of power is in our speech, our habits, everything we’ve come to see as “normal”. This thesis is yet another form of power execution, because resistance can also lay in the analysis. In trying to understand what has happened, find the story, the structures, the language and analyse them.

Bring change to products of social negotiations

²¹² *Idem.*, p. 781

²¹³ *Ibidem.*

²¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

²¹⁵ McLaughlin, J. *Supra note 53*, p. 118

²¹⁶ Foucault, M. “What is Critique?”, *The Politics of Truth*, Semiotext(e), 1997/2007, p. 47

Coming back to this division we talked earlier about between experience, the personal, and meaning, the discursive, Butler argues there is no division possible between the subject and the power structures that shape or produce it. Power and self-determination are so strongly intertwined that for her it doesn't make sense to make a distinction between the two. Trying to see how social structures work through the authority of experience would assign more "individuated and humanist terms" to it than it would deserve. Instead when researching this, one should focus on the social relations and its effects. This would of course also contain a consideration of how the subject regards themselves, but it would require that this would be placed within the larger process of practices, power and self for Butler.²¹⁷ Identity and experience cannot be taken as givens, they should be interpreted within a larger system and it is in this interpretation where resistance lies.

When it comes to wanting to provoke change for marginalized groups Allaine Cerwonka recognizes a split within this marginality. According to her there is a distinction to be made between the marginality where bodies are assigned to due to oppressive structures and the marginality one can choose "as a site of resistance": "We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical collective space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world".²¹⁸ But, this does not mean that this marginality, this location they can find themselves in as a site of resistance is actually outside of the power structures that socially construct self-understandings. Therefore if one wants to take note of the experiences of those situated in the margin, it doesn't mean that hearing their voices will give an undistorted view on how power structures work. It will represent their understanding of it, but not a factual representation of the terms that created it.²¹⁹ Cerwonka blames this to the fact that in a socially constructed environment concepts like "identity" and "experience" are "unstable, fluid and mainly unconscious products of social negotiations that speak us, rather than things which are easily intelligible to us", due to this intangibility of identity no one is able to give a clear account of what their identity, their experience, in the margin actually means. In that regard you can question to what extent someone would be able to 'choose' to situate themselves in the margin. She argues that their experiences should be looked at as "just one piece of a complex

²¹⁷ Cerwonka, A. *Supra note 9*, p. 65

²¹⁸ *Idem.*, p. 63

²¹⁹ *Idem.*, p. 66

social location”.²²⁰ To be able to do so she suggests that we should look at identity and experience *relationally*, or in other words how they are constructed “in relation to other identities and social categories or experiences”.²²¹ Because not only are identity and experience unstable factors, also the historical and political contexts to which they are subjected are fluid. No category like race, class, sexuality, nationality, or religion can be taken as stable or obvious, she argues.²²² To further explain, she quotes Diane Fuss: “Identification names the entry of history and culture into the subject”.²²³ This fluidity of historical and political contexts is illustrated by a description of an encounter of Nelson in Guatemala. She recounts how she was present at the torturing of a man, which desexualised this person for her. Nevertheless, her *gringa* presence was eroticised by the man who was tortured, as a foreign beauty. She illustrates with this encounter how bodies are produced through complex and contradictory discourses.²²⁴

Relating this back to my parents this would have the rather disappointing result that it is practically impossible to escape the productive power structures, meaning that their personal experiences cannot speak for themselves for they are formed, influenced, filled in by dominant discourses. What they perceived as their choice to go about their family formation differently, was *also still* influenced by dominant ideas, interpretations and structures vastly nestled in their minds. Cerwonka would therefore call their experience but a node of many that must be “read to decipher social power relations”.²²⁵ In order to be able to achieve even a partial understanding of experience, Cerwonka argues that we need to “analyse carefully how any number of other relations have constituted that experience”²²⁶, the sole experience of my parents or the recounting of it is therefore not enough to break through power structures. Careful analysis rather than witnessing is key according to Cerwonka.²²⁷ In that sense their words, the interviews I’ve had with them is nothing more than information for understanding a bigger scheme of power relations. But, at the same time it also offers me the opportunity to take their words and subject them to careful analysis, starting to work towards the change they already have set in motion but which until now lacked bigger societal impact.

²²⁰ *Idem.* p. 67

²²¹ *Idem.*, p. 68

²²² *Ibidem.*

²²³ *Ibidem.*

²²⁴ *Idem.*, p. 69

²²⁵ *Idem.*, p. 70

²²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²²⁷ *Ibidem.*

Joan Scott agrees in this by stating that “When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured – about language (or discourse) and history – are left aside”.²²⁸ It is therefore necessary according to Scott to make marginalised groups visible and actually challenge prevailing notions.²²⁹ The danger of solely recording the experiences of ‘others’ for Scott is that it comfortably remains within the disciplinary framework of history, and therefore doesn’t *really* transcend this.²³⁰ By remaining within this framework, Scott argues, “they take as self evident the identities of those whose experiences are being documented and thus naturalize their difference (...) they reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualizing it.”²³¹ As indicated before, questions can be raised in how far my parents have actually transcended or left the heteronormative, familynormative framework. Because we are still talking of (different combinations of) a man and a woman who conceive and raise their children. Especially from the moment Joost decides to leave the house and become the weekend father, taken together with the fact that he was just “Joost”, the construction from the outside takes the form of a divorced and remarried family – the incorrect conclusion most of the people who heard of my family history would draw. Taking “evidence of experience” as Scott situates it, can therefore also reproduce certain ideological systems. Because certain identities are assumed as facts for example.²³² Like Cerwonka, Scott advocates a critical examination of the workings of the ideological system, the corresponding categories of representation and premises of how these categories can be interpret, or practiced.²³³ Because within the workings of the ideological system, the interrelationship of seemingly opposing meanings like ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ for example have a constitutive force on each other.²³⁴ As argued before; The first gives shape to the second through specifying its negative limits. The boundary between them is also a “shifting one” argues Scott, and they both function within the same “phallic economy”.²³⁵ The workings of this economy are often not considered in studies that try to create space for the

²²⁸ Scott, J., *Supra note 15*, p. 777

²²⁹ *Idem.*, p. 774

²³⁰ *Idem.*, p. 776

²³¹ *Idem.*, p. 777

²³² *Idem.*, p. 778

²³³ *Ibidem.*

²³⁴ *Idem.*, p. 777

²³⁵ *Idem.*, p. 779

homosexual experience and therefore they cannot break through the ideological system that keeps the inequality in place. It is this that Butler also illustrates as ‘the constitutive outside’, the place where all that is cast out as socially unrecognizable or abject and this act of exclusion partly contributes to the constitution of the mainstream majority.²³⁶

Just making the experience of marginalised people visible, giving voice to how they give shape to their lives is no form of resistance according to Scott and Cerwonka because it does not provide an insight in how these lives and experiences have been influenced and constructed by repressive mechanisms. The difference is recognised, it is visible that marginalised people do not fit the norms as they are set by the ruling discourse but we don’t consider how this difference is constructed and, as Scott presents it, how it is “relationally constituted”. In order to do this Scott says that “we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience”.²³⁷ Following this reasoning, the experience cannot work as the origin of an explanation of the lives of marginalised, and their voices are not “authoritative” but it rather becomes the object of research, the source from which the research should commence and which we would seek to explain.²³⁸

Before I dove into these feminist notions of experience I think my personal interpretation of what experiences mean or entail was closest to that of E.P. Thompson. His interpretation of experience combines notions of external influence with subjective feeling, in other words the structural and the psychological, or the general with the individual. For Thompson experience means being social: “the lived realities of social life, especially in the affective domains of family and religion and the symbolic dimensions of expression”.²³⁹ Most importantly to me, he emphasized that people “also experience their own experience as *feeling*”.²⁴⁰ Listening to my parents recounts of that period, it feels as if all three of them especially talk from emotion. Having forgot, I assume, about the arrangements that had been made about raising the children and the differing memories of how this has developed, seems to me that at that time they were, as far as they could tell, purely acting from their emotions and it is that feeling that

²³⁶ Pascoe, C.J. “‘Dude, you’re a Fag’ Adolescent masculinity and the fag discourse”, *Sexualities*, Vol 8, Issue 3, 2005, p. 332

²³⁷ Scott, J. *Supra note 15*, p. 779-780

²³⁸ *Ibidem*.

²³⁹ *Idem.*, p. 784

²⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

now comes back to them and not the concrete arrangements that had been made at the time. Basing their memories on their feelings might not be the best resource for the practical part of memories. But it does give an interesting insight in how they experienced certain societal pressures. There is a gap in this sense in the memories of my parents, which to me shows that in that period they were not fully in control. As Louise describes it as “naïve” or just “simple thinking”, I tend to think that it was something else that guided them through this decision making. How come she feels as if she “just did”, why can’t she find the words to describe what happened, how she acted at that time? Some would describe this as gut feeling, others as discourse, but while trying so hard to let go of the ego, to not fill the expectations of society, they actually just went along, maybe through a different direction, meeting eventually exactly those expectations that were presented by society. The words of Cerwonka also talk to this issue; stating that most people are not fully aware of all aspects of their behaviour and that what they communicate and act upon might be inchoate: “much of what we as humans feel most deeply is beyond our ability to explain or be fully aware of. Thus, our personal narratives and analyses of our experience are at best partial and usually cannot provide a full analytical portrait of the social world or even ourselves”.²⁴¹ Cerwonka therefore seems to advise against attributing too much value to personal narratives or experiences. But, that is what analysis is for I would say.

I would argue that every experience is valuable for knowledge production. Interpreting experience within any discourse seems somehow to deny its status as an unquestionable ground of explanation.²⁴² It is what Bernice Reagon also illustrates when emphasizing that “politics always define and inform experience”.²⁴³ Whatever you do, whatever you choose to do, this decision is always influenced by a certain politics. Nevertheless, Foucault argues that it doesn’t necessarily mean that experience does not have any value or can provoke resistance or change. Because for Foucault, resistance exists within power and power is everywhere. And because power relations create the dominant forms of how things ‘should be’ it gives shape to the spaces and opportunities within which resistance can appear. The use of law and discourses to construct certain forms of life as ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ also creates the language that the resistance has to pick up in order to challenge that same construction.²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Cerwonka, A. *Supra note 9*, p. 67

²⁴² Scott, J. *Supra note 15*, p. 787

²⁴³ Mohanty, C.T., *Supra note 39*, p. 86

²⁴⁴ McLaughlin, J. *Supra note 53*, p. 118

“The development of humanity is a series of interpretations”, claims Foucault.²⁴⁵ So if the appropriation of a system of rules goes through these interpretations it must also be possible to challenge this system of rules through interpretation. Change your interpretation of a concept and you can eventually change the system. It is this also what Mohanty aims for when she states that the individual should be “self-consciously historicized”: through this awareness on their position feminists can go beyond the limited views on individuality and understand the cross-cultural influences on identification, and therefore also see how to challenge them.²⁴⁶

Knowledge as a product of discourse and experience as a process

This is also in line with what Foucault states about knowledge as being positioned as a product of discourse or as McLaughlin describes it: “the acceptance that is given to different kinds of knowledge reveals more about the legitimacy and power of the discourses they sit within, than it does about their inherent quality or truthfulness”.²⁴⁷ The acceptance, the way it is taken on is therefore what counts, not necessarily what is said. Knowledge, through power, has a generative, productive power according to Foucault. So instead that science can generate knowledge on the ‘real’ or ‘natural’ world, instead of science teaching us how to understand what we encounter, it is actually power that gives shape to our surroundings.²⁴⁸

It is especially this sentence which makes the most sense to the experience of my family to me now. They have given shape differently to their personal *understanding* of family but this hasn’t changed the established meaning of family itself. Giving a twist to the construction but in practice fall back to the established structures does not establish *change*. Because experience is so closely connected to discourse, it cannot be solely individual, argues Scott, but it is collective as well.²⁴⁹ Like Haraway also stated; it is the location that influences your knowledge. In this regard experience often confirms that which is already known to us, because we see and thus interpret what we have learned to see, but it might also upset what first had been taken for granted, but in this case people readjust their vision to resolve the arisen conflict.²⁵⁰ The desire to understand will force us to place something we don’t understand within a certain frame to try and make sense of it; placing my family in the frame

²⁴⁵ Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, 1977, pp. 151-152

²⁴⁶ Mohanty, C.T., *Supra note 39*, p. 82 - 83

²⁴⁷ McLaughlin, J. *Supra note 53*, p. 118

²⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁴⁹ Scott, J. *Supra note 15*, p. 793

²⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

of divorced families for example. As Scott illustrates, the process of signification, identification or subjectivication is not a linear one, but rather a complex and contradictory one.²⁵¹ Social categories, language and personal understanding all form part of identity formation but none of them can be seen as “a direct reflection of the others”.²⁵² They are linked because they all influence the possibilities of “thinking of the self” and they are all historically viable.²⁵³ Like the earlier mentioned example of Diane Fuss.

Foucault states that the socially produced (and disciplined) subject is actively involved in this process of subjectivication. Subjects therefore have agency in the creative part of what makes us individuals. This is in line with how de Lauretis interprets experience as well, not as an individualistic thing but as a *process*. And it is a continuing process as well, unending and even daily renewed. “For each person, therefore, subjectivity is an ungoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world. On the contrary; it is the effect of that interaction – which I call experience; and thus it is produced not by external ideas, values or material causes but by one’s personal, subjective engagement in the practices, discourses and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning and affect) to the events of the world”.²⁵⁴ Like Butler also pointed out in *Giving an Account of Oneself*: there is no me, without addressing you, or as she states it: “Recognition becomes the process by which I become other than what I was and, therefore, also, the process by which I cease to be able to return to what I was”.²⁵⁵ What you encounter forms you and you are unable to return to that identity of before that encounter. And these encounters might not even be physical, might even have occurred before you were born. But then again, as Foucault states, it is also an interaction, so there is a certain agency in the working power of subjectivication, because power understood as a relationship between actors also has to operate within a certain context in which both actors hold a space in which they can respond and act. Where the actor is not free to act, it is force and violence – not power – that have given shape to someone identity.²⁵⁶ So this is where the opportunity for resistance lies.

My parents have used this freedom to act, this form of agency while remaining within the family discourse, so to what extent have they contributed to change? But this all had been so

²⁵¹ Scott, J. *Supra note 15*, p. 793-794

²⁵² *Idem.*, p. 794

²⁵³ *Idem.* p. 795

²⁵⁴ de Lauretis, T., *Supra note 4*, p. 159

²⁵⁵ Butler, J., *Supra note 142*, p. 23

²⁵⁶ McLaughlin, J. *Supra note 53*, p. 119

vastly determined already, to what extent can it really change? Like stated before, for Scott, if one really wants to achieve a real understanding of the experience at hand, one has to situate and contextualize the language that historicizes the terms that are used for expressing the experience, to see how this experience has been historicized itself.²⁵⁷ In this sense experience itself is always already interpret by the one who had the experience and is therefore also at the same time something that must *be* interpret in order to understand the true meaning of the experience and the identity production that comes before that. Analysing experience is therefore always political.²⁵⁸ Here lies my job, my opportunity to make the history of my parents political, where they have left it I can pick it up and analyse what has happened and in that way resist the dominant structures that sneaked in their attempt for resistance. Then again, I cannot disregard their personal narrative, the interviews I've conducted with them completely and state that my analysis will eventually do all the work of change. An important part of transmitting experience, what I think should not be set aside too easily is what hooks calls "the passion of experience" or "the passion of remembrance". For it is not only the message that you transmit when recording any experience and should therefore not be seen as solely political. Recounting someone's experience does not have the same effect as when the knowledge is shared by the person who had the experience themselves, because there is a big difference in whether I tell the history of my parents, or that my parents tell it or whether a third party does. Because with me, or the third party, the recounting is missing: "the spirit that orders those words" and the lived reality behind it.²⁵⁹

Maybe I should let go of this urge to understand what we are and how this identity came about, and follow Foucault reasoning in the sense that maybe the target should actually be "to refuse what we are". Because in that way we can get rid of the political "double bind" which individualizes- but totalizes us at the same time. By refusing the individuality that has been imposed on us by state powers through which identities could be taken on, we can create new opportunities, new possibilities for forms of subjectivity.²⁶⁰ We need a habit change, shift the ground of the significations that we have attributed to certain signs so we can also modify consciousness. Through active intervention upon codes, codes of perception and ideological codes, relationships of signs to objects or persons can change.²⁶¹ My parents intervened, but

²⁵⁷ Scott, J. *Supra note 15*, p. 795

²⁵⁸ *Idem.*, p. 797

²⁵⁹ hooks, b. *Supra note 8*, p. 182

²⁶⁰ Foucault, M., *Supra note 45*, p. 785

²⁶¹ de Lauretis, T., *Supra note 4*, p. 178

passively I'd say. May this thesis be the action that can politicize, challenge and resist those structures that they wanted to disregard so badly.

4. Merel: “What have we become?”

Analysing my parents’ experiences and impact concluding remarks

In the house where I grew up we had a special closet where we kept the sweets, needless to say this was my favourite closet. Sometimes, when I knew that I wasn’t allowed to take one of the sweets – which, I must confess, was not often the case – I could also satisfy myself with just standing in front of the closet, holding the door in my left hand, the side of the closet in my right and let my head rest against my right hand, just staring at the profusion of sweets just within reach. I have always been somewhat of a dreamer. It was in one of those moments where I was just enjoying the presence of the sweets that I suddenly realised how according to society Ton, the man who has been caring for me since my birth, who I call dad, but with whom I don’t have a biological connection, *factually* is not my father. And how that meant that Bart also was not fully my brother. I don’t remember whether there had been an incident, or whether it was just my dreamer self who just came to this realization, but I distinctly remember it happening. It was from that moment on that I realized that people differentiate between people, place them in boxes to administer a certain identity and subsequently administer an identity to themselves at the same time. As a child this confused me, because something that was so normal and logic to me, which actually made up an important part of how I came to identify myself suddenly was determined to be ‘untrue’. And this was even determined by other people? Other people can tell me who is part of my family, my gezin? Sensitive as I am for authority (unfortunately) I therefore took this on as true, and I realised that this factor of my identity, the fact that I have three parents, isn’t all that clear and generally recognized nor conveyed by my parents. So with this realisation an important part of my identity was also called into question. Having three parents was something I strongly identified with so realizing that this identity would be questioned by society made me question my personal identity as well. As a child you let this go, but remarkably, the memories of these moments stuck with me. Another situation occurred when I was a little older and spending the weekend at Joost’s. As children, Bart and I would go to Joost every weekend to have another weekend of doing things that we simply wouldn’t do at home in the big city. We would play outside, get dirty, build tree houses and learn how to drive on the quiet country roads of De Beemster. As a child I always had difficulty to sleep somewhere else than at home, but Joost always found ways to make me feel at home – we would simply

build a tree house inside his house where I would sleep and he would read de Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince* to me every time I was there and it would never get old. Whatever we did, he supported me, encouraged and ensured me that I was capable of doing it – he did everything a father would do for his daughter and I loved it. But in the mean time, unconsciously I was always wondering what our relationship was, how my existence came about, because even though I was completely happy with having so many loving people around me, something was differing from other families I knew. One day, I must have been around 11 years old, I had a shocking realization. I was spending the weekend at Joost and Marian and having lunch at their small kitchen table. We had been talking about how Joost and Louise had me when they were actually no longer together, so that Louise still could have the second child that she wanted so dearly. In that time I was still convinced that babies were born out of two happy people, so deeply in love that they wanted to start a family, so I said to Joost: “so, I am actually *not* a ‘love baby’?” I had never seen Joost that angry as after that question. To be honest, I was raised in a very pacifist, conflict-avoiding environment so I am very sensitive to voices that are raised and I know that he wasn't angry with me but rather desperate where I would get this idea from. He ensured me that my conception, and the wish to place me in this world was solely based on love.

Even though my conception happened outside of the regular processes, Joost assured me that this did not affect our sense of family love or the strength of our relationship. Writing this conclusion to my thesis I now understand that all these little moments during my life, the realisation that society wouldn't consider Ton to be my father, the questioning of the loving relationship of Joost and Louise when they conceived me and the merging of two rings representing my three parents into one are all steps in my process of trying to understand who I am, what determines my identity, what my background means to me, how I became to be who I am now. It all ties together in the question Foucault poses: “What can I become, given the contemporary order of being?”²⁶² Due to everything I had been confronted with in life, all the Disney families, commercial families and my own family – they had become my framework from which I would be able to distract an identity of my own.

Thus, the question “who or what can determine what I, or we, can become?” is something that not only has been a question for my thesis, but is something, a question that has been part of

²⁶² Foucault as found in: Taylor, D & Vintges, K., *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, University of Illinois Press, 2004, p. 192

my life for some time now. As I've indicated in the beginning of this thesis I dived into this research while my initial idea that my family has been 'different', that they have tried to do things differently, to give shape to their family lives outside of the normative structures of society by including three parents for the two children, had started to crumble. I started to doubt the ability of my parents to really step outside of the determinative structures we are all subjected to in daily life and therefore I wanted to hear their experiences and analyse these through feminist theories that deal with experience, identity, subject formation and power analysis. I therefore wanted to know who determines whether we had been different or whether we just played within the same norms but only in a slightly different manner, resulting nevertheless in the same normative practice. Of course such an inquiry is a very personal one and has taken me emotionally at times as well. Ranging from disappointment towards Louise that she hasn't really acted fully consciously in wanting to change oppressive norms to blaming both her and Ton for not referring to Joost as 'dad' towards me when I was young because I suddenly felt as if they deprived me from really having two fathers. At times it was difficult to stay aware of my position as both researcher and daughter, but mostly I've realised how lucky I have been that the Netherlands have never been at war between 1988 and 2006 for I would never have been able to have my family all together due to restrictive laws on family reunification for refugees. As I've experienced with this thesis; you can't fully plan your life. You might have a certain image in mind of how you want to give shape to something but in practice, for whatever reason, you will always find yourself constrained, bound to certain expectations or obligations, rules or norms that limit your freedom in making your own creation of life. I had a whole different idea of how I wanted to address this topic for my thesis, but struggling with academic requirements and norms I noticed that I was afraid of stepping out of this institutionalized practice of thesis writing and I feel that I haven't been able to deliver what I had intended.

Regardless of all these emotional aspects I want to start my concluding part with the quote from Judith Butler that I also cited at the beginning of this thesis: "I would have to say that I can tell the story of my origin and even tell it again and again in several ways; but the story of my origin I tell is not one for which I am accountable, and it cannot establish my accountability".²⁶³ In this thesis I have tried to (re)count the story of my origin and I have to come to largely a common conclusion as Butler did. Listening to my parents they have acted

²⁶³ Butler, J., *Supra note 142*, p. 26

mostly consciously in trying to shape their lives without taking too much notice of how ‘it should be done’. I say mostly because their actions followed from an idea of what they didn’t want and not necessarily of what they tried to establish or change for the larger part. This becomes clear in their negligence in registering their marriage or birth certificates ‘right’. But outside of their consciousness so many other factors have been of influence in determining their ability to break through norms that shape your sense of subjectivity and identity. It is therefore that Butler states that your telling of your story of origin is not solely dependent of you, and therefore you cannot be solely accountable for this story. Other factors, structures also play their determinative part. Therefore I had to dive deeper into understanding how their sense of self and therefore their sense of family identity had been shaped in their lives, what aspects had been of influence generally and have worked out on a personal level on the three of them. Because one aspect has been on my mind since the interview with Louise. What first expressed itself as disappointment in her not acting consciously feminist, acting towards change, later turned into a question; why does my mother have the impression that she ‘just did’ what she did? Why does she label her actions as naïve? Marianne Hirsch sparked these questions because she focuses on the ability to narrate your life story and how for women often the language to describe their experiences is lacking. Their experiences, sense of self, have never gotten much attention, and because identity and characteristics we can identify ourselves with are fluid, temporal and subject to change, it of course should have. As Ann Dally had illustrated: “there have always been mothers, but motherhood was invented”²⁶⁴ and Louise describes how she was afraid of ending up as a very stereotypical image of housewife, in a terraced house doing the dishes. If she wouldn’t have had this opportunity of starting a family with two separate fathers, she pictured herself in the opposite stereotypical option for women to have, namely to become a crazy cat lady. And therefore she chose to live this other life, which she cannot bring under words and for which she therefore also does not claim agency. Standpoint theory claims that when one speaks, that your location and former experiences echo in your words and determine how you speak about and frame your experience. Poststructuralists add to that that every concept, even those that now come to us as ‘natural’, has been constructed and that it is only due to this construction that we can incorporate it in our understanding, recognize and give meaning to it. But why would Louise then still cannot find these words to make sense of what her experience in family formation has been? Where Judith Newton claimed that the experience can function as a clear source of

²⁶⁴ Hirsch, M. *Supra note 28*, p. 13

knowledge, she failed to question the structures that determine the position someone is in and I think that Louise is a clear example of the necessity of this questioning. My three parents have a shared experience, for all three have been present in this attempt of creating a family with three parents. Nevertheless when they recount their experiences they have completely different stories to tell. This illustrates how discourses influence and differently forms this experience for different subjectivities. We need a framework to understand and recount what has happened to us, to get a grip on our experience. And if we want this experience to mean anything more than solely the events that overcame us, if we want to bring change and resist norms, prejudices and other malicious frameworks, we have to analyse and politicize the experience. And this is where my parents have missed a big opportunity. By never questioning what they were doing, illustrating the difficulties they encountered and in fact left it for ‘uninteresting’ or ‘unimportant’ they failed in politicizing it and therefore in making it bigger than our own family. Because, as Foucault illustrates, power is in everything, in all daily actions: meaning emerges through the interpretation of the discursively determined correct form of doing.²⁶⁵ This meaning can therefore only change when the discursively determined form of doing is effectively challenged or resisted which my parents, by effectively living within the normative structures failed to do. As de Lauretis said it “...their significate effects must pass through each of us, each body and each consciousness, before they may produce an effect or an action upon the world”.²⁶⁶ Our narrative remained located within our own family and therefore couldn’t produce that effect DeLauretis aims for.

It’s difficult to blame them for this, for it requires such awareness in acting. As Haraway pointed out, as adults we interpret what we see through what we have learned to see. It is so difficult to be aware of what you have learned to see, see the possibilities beyond this and subsequently also act upon this. When you lack the framework or language to grasp what you want to achieve, you will remain within the framework that is presented to you. As Joost said, he was aware that he somehow functioned differently within the framework when he stated that his answer to the question “do you have children” was “not true” because he factually was only my father and not Bart’s, but he did not further act upon it.²⁶⁷ The way he positions himself, is a powermove according to Foucault. The way he presents himself, the choices that he makes can make a difference in the bigger picture. Telling people that he has two children,

²⁶⁵ McLaughlin, J. *Supra note 53*, p. 116

²⁶⁶ de Lauretis, T., *Supra note 4*, p. 41

²⁶⁷ Interview Joost, 11 December 2016

even though he knows he only conceived one, does not withstand dominant structures. His conversation partner will just think that he has conceived two children. When you keep this realisation of acting on ‘another truth’ to yourself while socially acting within the dominant framework, no change can be enforced. In that sense, experience is likely to be a linguistic event, because without the words to describe and analyse it, the experience itself also cannot exist. In this line of thought the conversation partner is also complicit in which truth is maintained, because only if both conversationalists use or at least are familiar with the same meanings or interpretations that can be attributed to words, an experience can be shared, or can evolve into a new meaning or interpretation. It evolves around what linguistics call the ‘conventional’ but in fact arbitrary relationship between sign and meaning, one that seems natural but which in fact is naturalized, it has become natural to our interpretation but is actually socially constructed. My choice of referring to Joost as ‘pa’ is a clear example in this sense for according to social interpretation he would be my father, being the conceiver and all, but because I already had Ton in my daily life he missed out on the label of ‘father’. Nevertheless, within the traditional discourse, Joost of course has always been my father, for I carry his DNA and there is no other form of parenthood more recognized than that one. So by just starting to call him ‘pa’ I haven’t really dodged the system. I have honoured his initial role, but I have not given a new meaning to this role. Still, I think that this fact has also contributed to my decision to start calling Joost ‘pa’, for as Butler describes it: “I exist in an important sense for you and by virtue of you. If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no “you” to address, then I have lost “myself”.²⁶⁸ When it comes to Joost and me this is true in the sense that without him, I wouldn’t exist in the physical sense, but also socially I have to recognize him in this role for me, for the family as I pictured it, with three people who are as much of a parent to me as possible, to exist. If I wouldn’t address him as ‘pa’, I would lose this sense of self as his daughter, which for me, is such a fundamental part of my identity.

Even though, coming back to the initial quote from Judith Butler, I am not solely responsible for this narration of my origin, I am able to bring the political message and hopefully the change that my parents missed. Butler states that an I can only tell their story “according to recognizable norms of life narration”, I am now able to give our life narration that value.²⁶⁹ From my position I can analyse the positions my parents took and what the outcome has been of their decisions. The I can only speak with and through the norms that the I has been in

²⁶⁸ Butler, J. *Supra note 142*, p. 24

²⁶⁹ *Idem.*, p. 32

contact with during their life. Even though my parents haven't acted upon the three-parent composition, they did endow me with a broader understanding of family life, enabling me to make this analysis and in this way complete the resistance they started. Their voluntary non-compliance to the power structures was the first step that I happily complemented with an analysis. My parents have successfully critiqued their subjugation in a Foucauldian interpretation and did their best to not be governed, even though in practice they still acted according specific framework. Nevertheless, as I said, without their first initiative to introduce a third parent within their family structure, I personally wouldn't have been acquainted with the possibility so it brought a change to my awareness which is a first step for achieving change. Because even though Louise at that time still didn't have the language available to narrate her story, she now had me to do so. Because she gave me the experience, in the sense of having to deal with the presence of three adults in my life that take up a certain parenting role, she forced me in a way to start thinking about the relations between them, me and society. In that way she encouraged me to go find the language that lacked her so that I could finish their desire of enabling a different society and life (at least, in their case, different for them). Also here Judith Butler's argument on recognisability resonates. She states that the conditions for someone to become legible, recognisable and as such visible, the encounter with that person must be framed by a certain language which itself is also part of a bigger system of norms that constitute recognisability.²⁷⁰ This can begin as small as presenting your children with an alternative reality by raising them with three parents, even though you present the act as a divorced family, according to the heteronormative framework, it was clear that it was different to us. The *desubjugated* themselves in this way by taking back a part of their self-determination and have proven not fully sensitive to the regimes of truth, as Foucault would present it. So sure, law creates to a certain extent the possible realities, and contribute to creation and preservation of those realities but there is wiggle room, I'd say.

The experiences of my parents won't present a certain truth for multiparent family experiences, nor are the experiences of the three of them representative for the family as a whole. Because they were all acting from their own narrative, background, formation, construction, none of their experiences of our family formation is alike. All experiences are temporal, as Judith Butler argued and the norms with which we try to identify ourselves are

²⁷⁰ Butler, J. *Supra note 142*, p. 23-24

not ours.²⁷¹ How true can we than be to ourselves? Because it is not just ourselves who are responsible for determining our self, our identities, we can also not say that these experiences are completely our own, but that they are in fact dispossessed.²⁷² The factors that shape our sense of self are not born with us, nor do they cease to exist when we die, this is what Judith Butler meant when saying that we are born *in media res*, in the middle of your story. The language to narrate your story after all has already been created and normalized.²⁷³ This interpretation leads up to Joan Scott's conclusion that it in fact is the experience that shapes the subject, who therefore is also not fully in control over their own subjectivity.²⁷⁴

Concluding, I somewhere still blame Ton and Louise for never referring to Joost as papa because feminist theories have made me so much more aware of the power and impact of language, as Butler describes "I am doing something with this telling, and this telling is doing something with me"²⁷⁵, this has influenced my relationship with my parents for a big part while growing up I think and has barred their opportunity to break bigger family normative frameworks. But I also learned that grasping this opportunity, consciously, takes a lot of awareness which I cannot blame my parents for missing. It is only due to the privilege of following this master's degree that I have come across these theories and insight in what determines our understanding and acting in contemporary structures. Bringing change in these structures requires almost a strategic way of thinking and acting and keeping a different approach within your personal familial realm won't do the trick. Changing the social order is a first step, but subsequently changing the symbolical realm is the necessary follow-up to work towards meaningful, societal change. Identifying with the system, or demanding the system to identify with you is not enough to have your problems recognized and addressed, as Kristeva argues.²⁷⁶ It is through language that the construction of representation, the symbolic as Kristeva calls it can be addressed. If we can change "the paradigms in which we think" we might just go beyond the rusted norms and perceptions.²⁷⁷

On my left hand I wear a gold and silver ring. With this thesis I hope that this ring has become more than just a symbol for my family to me, because I have come to understand a

²⁷¹ Butler, J. *Supra note 142*, p. 26

²⁷² *Ibidem*.

²⁷³ *Idem.*, p. 27

²⁷⁴ Scott, J., *Supra note 15*, p. 779

²⁷⁵ Butler, J. *Supra note 142*, p. 32

²⁷⁶ McAfee, N. *Supra note 168*, p. 96

²⁷⁷ Hirsch, M. *Supra note 28*, p. 20

little better who they were and are and have become. With this thesis I hope that my family has become more than just a symbol for a different family to society, and that we have found a proper analysis and place within the symbolic order that might just scrape some of the first layers of the heteronormative, patriarchal, Eurocentric, etc. order that determines contemporary family life in the Netherlands.

Fine

As I have written before, this thesis hasn't become what I planned it to be, but I take that as I take life; nothing comes as planned and you just have to dance along. Regardless of the struggles that came with it, I am forever grateful for my parents for having done what they did, for as a child there is no bigger joy than having more people who care so much about you and it sure made for an interesting thesis topic.

Before ending my thesis I want to give a special thanks to them, but also to others who have been so supportive during these last months of student life. Rosemarie for being my supervisor, mentor and rescuer from a silly job. Eunelda, thank you and your not-so-little brown book for getting me started. Maartje & Nanny, thank you for having faith in me and supporting me with chocolate and tea. Sophie, thank you for being you, for being there when I needed a coffee-, bad movie- or vegan pizza break. And mostly, my dearest Thomas, I don't know where to begin with thanking you. Thank you for supporting my decision to quit my job and pick up studying again. Thank you for keeping our lives easy and fun and never complaining about something being too expensive. Thank you for all the dinners, coffees, small get aways to some exciting place with some less exciting football. Thesis writing was hard sometimes and it took me longer than anticipated. Even so you kept me going, supported and comforted me and for that I am forever grateful. Thank you for supporting my present and enabling my future. I hope that someday, if you need a break from work for whatever reason, I can do the same for you. No lubida cu den mi kurason bo tin un luga hopi dushi. Te amo, habibi.

My dear parents, I will continue in Dutch for you because that is the language you raised me in and of which I am sure that what I want to say to you, ook over zal komen zoals ik het bedoel. Lieve ouders, jullie hebben me niet op alles voorbereid dat ik in mijn leven zal tegenkomen. Jullie hebben me niet laten zien hoe emotioneel uitputtend jaloezie kan zijn als je met drie volwassenen in één gezin samenleeft of hoe flink ruziemaken soms ook de lucht kan klaren. Ik ben nog steeds heel gevoelig voor stemverheffingen en als ik mijn ouders zie huilen dan breekt mijn hart in duizend stukken. Toch hebben jullie mij de best mogelijke basis gegeven die ik ooit had kunnen wensen. Jullie hebben me met zoveel liefde opgevoed (en het spijt me dat ik dat ooit in twijfel heb getrokken) dat ik nu een sterk en onafhankelijk mens

geworden ben dat in staat is om dingen terug te geven aan de wereld waarin we leven. Dankzij deze basis kan ik hopelijk de dromen voor een andere wereld zoals jullie die destijds voor ogen hadden voortzetten en mijn deel daarin bijdragen. Mama, bedankt voor wat jij noemt je ‘naïviteit’ en dat je buiten het gezinshokje hebt durven denken. Papa, dank dat je in eerste instantie je ego opzij hebt kunnen zetten en vervolgens mij ook volledig hebt opgenomen als je eigen dochter. En pa, dankjewel dat je mij je genen, je creativiteit, je plezier en tussendoor belangrijke levenslessen hebt gegeven. Ik had geen van jullie willen missen.²⁷⁸



²⁷⁸ ja Marian, bonusouders gaan in de voetnoten. Alhoewel niet bijgedragen aan mijn ontstaan heb je wel een belangrijk deel bijgedragen aan de persoon die ik geworden ben: dus ook voor jou, veel dank voor alles dat je me meegegeven hebt, voor me hebt gedaan en dat je zoveel om me bent gaan geven dat je niet onder doet aan een andere ouder.

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 Interview Bart, 16 December 2016

Pictures

Drawing on the cover: *Nameless* – Joost de Herder, 2011

Picture of me and my parents taken by Marian in Amsterdam 2012