

# WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

***Friendship has become a cohesive way to organize social structures. People don't lose the ground when their partners leave because they have friends that are also very close to them. People build structures for their lives that make it safer and more secure. This is a way of queering the question of intimacy and to understand new forms of solidarity in the society.***

## **An Interview with Arnfinn Andersen**

November 3, 2009

Arnfinn Andersen's office at the Gender Research Institute, University of Oslo

**Arnfinn Andersen:** My name is Arnfinn Andersen; I am a sociologist working at the *Gender Research Institute* in the University of Oslo. My current project is on friendship; on how friendship has changed in society, on how some people have ten friends and others don't have any friends at all. Previously, I did research on gay sexuality and on friendship amongst gay men. In the past, I also worked on the partnership law for gay and lesbian couples. I have been mostly a researcher but also a bureaucrat, in a way.

**Carlos Motta:** Can you speak about your work regarding issues of gender and sexuality?

**AA:** I have been doing research on the way that gays and lesbians have struggled for citizenship. I did a study on how society has had a more acceptable attitude towards homosexuals since the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1972. I have looked at the types of strategies used by the gay and lesbian movement then and now. One of the main strategies to achieve the Marriage Act law, for instance, was based on the European human rights laws. The gay and lesbian movement could argue that not giving homosexuals the same rights as heterosexuals was a form of discrimination. Norway is a society where the idea of equality is very strong, equality in a social democratic sense. This may help explain why we have equal rights.

**CM:** Could you expand on the notion of citizenship based on sexual orientation within the social democratic system in Norway?

**AA:** When the sexual act between men was criminalized, it was forbidden to have certain forms of sexual identity. In that sense, we had no citizenship because of our way of living. As soon as you are recognized as a citizen, a citizen that has same-sex sex, all other kinds of issues start surfacing: How should I be protected if the person I love dies? How is our situation different from that of other citizens? The struggle to get the same rights as heterosexual married people in this country was a way to get formal citizenship, not only as it pertains to the law, but also as a way of recognizing our status as citizens in equal terms. I would say that the idea of marriage was a good platform to make Norwegians aware of our inequality because everything in the social democratic society is organized around marriage: pension systems, the rights you have when you have a baby, etc.

**CM:** What was your involvement with the Partnership Act? As you say, the idea was to work strategically as a way of getting equal rights. However, there have been discussions within the gay and lesbian movements internationally, but also in Norway, about queer identities and about different ways of living and loving that suggest a more plural understanding of sexuality. How did you relate to these discussions back then?

# WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

**AA:** I worked at the Ministry in 1989 and the question whether or not to make a law for gay and lesbians was pressing to politicians. At first, I was against it because I was thought of marriage as a very conservative way of understanding and organizing sexuality. Sexuality shouldn't be a way to prioritize people's lives; but you get benefits based on whom you are having sex with, since you are legally recognized as a couple. A better way organizing this would be based on the needs that people have when sharing a household. We have family relationships that are more complex, but we are supporting only one type of structure: marriage. Should we replicate the heterosexual model? But at the same time, I saw the benefits of getting this type of law, which really meant recognizing people's similarities regarding sexuality. Over time, I was convinced that was the right way to go. I didn't have the possibility to decide this however; it was the politicians who were making this law happen. I was only working at the Ministry as a bureaucrat giving them advice.

**CM:** Once the law was in place, I imagine that issues of what these families were going to be like, and what it meant to be a homosexual couple, started to come to the foreground. Can you talk about this?

**AA:** I have been doing research both on single heterosexual men that take the main responsibility for the child, but also on gay men that have made an agreement with someone else over having a child together. My PhD is about how they organize their family relationship when they do something like this. It was very interesting for me to see how it was the child that formed the structure for a family and not the household itself. There are, in these cases, many instances of negotiation before the child is born: Who should have the main responsibility? Where should the child live? How will the household be organized, not only inside, but should the parents live together, close by or in the same neighborhood? This social structure around the child, make the child the center of constructing a family. You can say that the child, the idea of a child and the interests of the child drive these types of families.

**CM:** Does this differ from heterosexual families?

**AA:** If heterosexual people divorce, they split up the household, and at least in the first years, many of them have problems co-operating when it comes to the child: What should be my responsibility? What should the mother's responsibility be? These types of negotiations about the interests of the child often create conflicts. For gays and the lesbians on the other hand, the child is the starting point of the relationship; it is main reason why they come together. They don't have couple relationships in the first place. When gays and lesbians decide to have child, they develop other ways of thinking about parenthood in advance. A parenthood that often involves two or four people.

**CM:** This is a new form of parenthood.

**AA:** Yes, it is a different form. You can learn a lot about how to develop families this way because when you are not so concerned about divorce, the anxiety and the conflicts that many heterosexual couples often have, you can see how it is possible to form families together with other people, not without conflict, but based on negotiations that will serve the best interests of the child.

**CM:** A fundamental interest of yours is the well being of the child?

**AA:** Yes.

**CM:** Is that the aim of the research?

**AA:** No, it is not the aim of the project, but in traditionally research on families has always focused on the woman, the man and the fatherhood; and then the child. But for the families that I am now talking about, it is the child that comes first. That changed the way you look at the family. I didn't think about this in these

# WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

terms before I started my research, but when as I was working on those families, I saw the central position that the child actually has.

**CM:** The idea also of home is also reconstituted...

**AA:** You can see that the reality of the home and the household changes. If you have joint custody of a child with another person, you have to discuss with that another person what type of food the child should eat, what they toys he/she should play with, when the child should go to bed, etc. Within these “new” families, all these parental decisions are negotiated before the household is established; this has changed the whole structure of the development of a family.

**CM:** Is this kind of debate also taking place at a governmental level within the institutions that are oversee the development of families?

**AA:** In a society where 50 or 60 percent of all children experience their parent’s divorce before the age of 18, we have made a Child Act law, which actually tries to secure the child’s rights, so that the parents are more aware of the needs of the child instead of their own. In that way, I could say that gays and lesbians are at the forefront of our society, and they are at the forefront front of the legal system as well.

**CM:** I would like to ask you about the notion of masculinity as it pertains fatherhood, is this something that is changing as well? Is this something you are concerned with?

**AA:** My interest is more about the question of destabilization, of queering fatherhood, of queering motherhood and queering identities for families, but also how masculinity is *de-masculinized* because these kinds of family structures make women and men more equal. A totalitarian father does not rule the way parents negotiate children’s needs anymore; that behavior is against the needs of the child.

**CM:** Given the debate about gender equality in Norway, there has also been a shift in terms of that authoritative father also within heterosexual couples, correct? Aren’t duties and responsibilities more balanced?

**AA:** It has been a similar development. You can say that the social and political shift in Norway includes all types of families. For example negotiations around gay masculinity confront ideas of how to be masculine and how to develop new forms of fatherhood. Based on some data I have used for my research, I found that single heterosexual men often have a more authoritarian relation with their children than gay men.

**CM:** I know that queer theory has been a sensitive subject when it comes to the political work of the official gay and lesbian movement in Norway, which has often rejected it. But do you think this is a moment of reconciliation, given that the (inevitable) consequences of the successful political project for equality of rights has lead to the forming and understanding of new forms of (queer) homes, families, spaces, etc.?

**AA:** To use the queer perspective is a productive method to see what is actually going on. If you can’t have a discussion about how fatherhood is constructed, how it is queered in different positions contexts, you wouldn’t be able to see our identities aren’t so stable. This method makes it easier to have a discussion also about politics and how we should we organize social relationships.

**CM:** Can you expand on that?

**AA:** The project I am working on is about friendship. A friendship is quite different from living together as a couple for example. I have been discussing how it is to be a couple and/or to be a friend since ideas of

# WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

intimacy arise from both of these relationships. You should be close to a friend, but you should also be close to your partner. An idea of equality is a part of friendship but is also a part of being a couple. This means that friendship has become a cohesive way to organize social structures. People don't lose the ground when their partners leave because they have friends that are also very close to them. People build structures for their lives that make it safer and more secure. This is a way of queering the question of intimacy and to understand new forms of solidarity in the society.

**CM:** This makes me think of a discussion that takes place amongst LGBTQ communities internationally about what constitutes a family, which is not necessarily a blood link but a link of friendship.

**AA:** Yes, but in this project I am not focusing only on gays and lesbians, but on the whole population. There has been a strong shift from the 1970s to now; friendships have been upgraded and play a very important part in people's lives. The access to new technologies makes it easier to have close friends. Instead of looking at society as an individualistic society, we could say that new forms of information technology and new ways of working, make new forms of social relationships possible. Friendship is more central for Norwegians, both heterosexual and homosexual.

**CM:** From that perspective, what is the relationship between friendship and sexual relations?

**AA:** It is more common today to say that you have had sex with a friend. There was a taboo around that question. I think this shifts an understanding of sexuality as a division between a friend and a partner. It could be other things, such as the way you understand yourself, your ideas in life, etc. that make distinctions between social relationships.

**CM:** This begs to question about the difference between friendship and love. What is the role of love in this discussion?

**AA:** I think that love comes in many different forms and I don't think that love is just one thing. We live in a heteronormative society that wants to organize our feelings in different types of social categories. I think the organization of these social categories will be more open, there will be legitimate ways of having a partner; for example a partner with whom you never have sex with...

**CM:** I just read Edmund White's last book, *City Boy*. It is about his life in New York in the 1960s and 1970s. He says that amongst some gay men, love, friendship and intimacy were completely separate things and were embodied by three different persons. He speaks of having somebody he had sex with, somebody he was a friend with and somebody he was a lover with. He goes on to say that after the AIDS crisis, these figures merged again into one person.

**AA:** If you compare between different societies, I think Scandinavia's relation to friendship is very special. There have been studies that show the different ways of understanding the concept of friendship in European countries. The Scandinavians, and for example, people like the Italians have a different way of placing friendship in their lives; one that is very related to the family structure and the importance of family in your life.

**CM:** Since you are speaking about different cultures, there is a question I wanted to ask about immigration and multiculturalism in Norway. There is an increasing number of immigrants, and new Norwegians with their own cultural backgrounds, ideas of love, friendships, relationships, etc. How does this come into play with the ideas that you have been researching?

**AA:** Unfortunately, we have a very divided society around immigrants in Norway. In many ways we are very separate as cultures. But you could compare friendship among Pakistani men with the social relations of gay men. An anthropologist that I have been reading speaks about how intimate friendship

# WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

between Pakistani men is. At the same time, that culture is also very homophobic, so you can say they are different but they have some similarities in the way they manage friendship. But there is a long way ahead and it will take some time to make these types of connections between the different types of immigrants and the Norwegians.

**CM:** Within the gay and lesbian context, I have learned from some of your colleagues, that there is a growing number of homophobic attacks and bullying within Muslim communities. How can one reconcile this, how can one teach this?

**AA:** You can try to educate people from other countries about how they should manage their own lives.

**CM:** According to your way of living...

**AA:** That is one way Norwegians are discussing about it but I think that is the wrong strategy. It is awful to have discussions around why and how we are organizing the life of immigrants; it is not just a question of belief, but also a question of how they should do it to survive in our society. Many people are coming here with out any education, starting at the bottom of society... How should they grasp and use our ideas of how to organize sexuality, etc. when they have to meet the basic demands of society to survive? It is not just about educating people, but also to give them social possibilities. We have to give them access to a secure job, better income, and education; and in our terms but in their own terms.

**CM:** It seems to me like the questions of gender and sexuality are sore spots in the conversation about immigration in Scandinavia, precisely because the of these countries' liberal attitudes. For example, I have been following the case on a Muslim teenage girl in Sweden that had a baby with her 18 year old it boy friend. He was sentenced to serve in prison because it was considered by the authorities that he had raped the girl, even though they claimed it was consensual relationship, which is approved within their culture.

It seems to me that sometimes within social democracies, there is often a clinging on to a politically correct discourse about gender and sexuality when confronted with the challenges brought forth by immigration and multiculturalism.

**AA:** The right wing and also the Labor Party in Norway, in many ways, are based on specific national ideas about identities, they are using to saying that *those people are different from us*. Their way of thinking about difference is by pointing out that Muslims don't recognize homosexuals. The right wing Party had never been concerned with gay and lesbian rights at all, but they are now mentioning how Pakistani people stigmatize gays and lesbians. They are using this liberal discourse not to give foreigners rights to citizenship. This is very sad because this political situation is more complicated than that, and needs another kind of debate.

**CM:** There seems to be an under layer about religious beliefs and about the threat of difference.

**AA:** The shift that came with Bush about religion in the global world, which is used politically, is also used in Norway to mark differences amongst people and to ignore people's social rights.

**CM:** I would like to return to your research on the queering of families and parenthood from the perspective of ethics and religion. How does your research address traditional beliefs that are supported by the religious institutions in this country?

**AA:** When I was going to present my PhD, a journalist asked me: "Well, this is quite a different way to organize families. Is this a family?" I said told him: "If someone should be happy with this way of organizing families, it should be the Christian Democrats, because these families have very strong family

# WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

values. They organize their families in a different way, but they believe in the family and they do everything to make a good family for themselves and for the children; they are using normative ideas to have a good family life.”

**CM:** The Church would have a different take on this I suppose.

**AA:** Some in the Church in Norway would say that this is a good way of organizing families, but the conservative part of the Church don't want to recognize it.

**CM:** I think this conversation has been quite interesting. When you compare the situation of gays and lesbians in Norway with that of other countries, where the struggle is yet to achieve *any* kind of citizenship. Has having achieved full citizenship provided a healthy platform for someone like you and others to reflect on these new ideas about family structures, alternative households, etc.? Is this ultimately the good thing about advancing a progressive legislation?

**AA:** In our society I would say that the changes in family structures, the changes in the way of looking at sexuality, the changes in thinking about integration, etc.; all these types of change, build the grounds for new forms of citizenship. In Norway and in Scandinavia we have had special conditions that have made this possible. I don't think it would be the same way in other countries, because their conditions are different.

If you look at citizenship, you have to see it as part of the social and mental structure of a nation and the ideas of its people. If you are going to make good politics for your own country you have to look at what the possibilities are, for you to make a change that will actually count in the future.