

## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines how marriage, parenthood and family are negotiated through the media. In the course of three articles I examine three different media debates from a discourse theoretical angle. In the first article, I analyze a controversy regarding attitudes towards the Equal Marriage Act. Thereafter, I delve into a debate on surrogacy. Finally, I turn my attention to discussions in the media on stepfamilies. Each debate illustrates a common aspect: They reveal conflicting understandings and interpretations of how family and parenthood are defined. These perceptions are influenced by official family policy in Norway, under which Norwegian biotechnology acts are among the strictest in Europe. Through the three debates, I examine different counterpublic positions that violate dominant norms attached to family and kinship. The analyses reveal both strengths and weaknesses attached to this form of identity-struggle. A major achievement is that counterpublic actors contribute new language and categories to express emerging social family roles, in which the concept of family is expanded. The main vulnerability disclosed is that the participants of the debates often draw upon victim discourses, risking a reproduction of the inherent hierarchical relationship between minority and majority. The dissertation's most important contribution is its demonstration of how these debates delineate what a family is and can be, despite the normative ideal of nuclear families.

In addition to a lengthy introduction, the thesis consists of three articles, of which two are published in peer-reviewed journals and the final in a peer-reviewed book.

The first article, «Struggle for a counterpublic position», published in *Sosiologi i dag* 4/2010, investigates the massive media debate that took place after the distribution of the Free Speech Prize to Nina Karin Monsen, April 2009. Nina Karin Monsen has repeatedly been referred to as a representative for a marginalized and oppositional voice; a position that rarely achieves acknowledgment in the media. This position has a lot in common with the counterpublic position, which is often placed in conflict relative to the mainstream media. Does Monsen hold such a counterpublic position in the debate about the Equal Marriage Act? What other kinds of groups may inhabit the counterpublic position in this debate? In relation to the debate about marriage institutions in the spring of 2009, this analysis reaches the conclusion that it is difficult to identify a real counterpublic position. The critical voices against marriage, within which a real

counterpublic position could be held, are silenced. The Gay Rights Movement and Monsen both draw upon the powerful victim discourse, a discourse that seems to grasp better advantages, both rhetorically and politically, than the counterpublic position.

The second article, «The victim paradox. Public debate on surrogacy», is published in *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning* 1/2013. The media debate on surrogacy intensified in 2010, when a single mother became stranded in India with her baby twins. The article examines the Norwegian media debate on surrogacy (2010- 2012). The main focus of the article is the types of speech act these counterpublic positions draw upon to gain acceptance and rights, i.e. speech acts enabled and restricted by the biopolitics of the Norwegian state. Since little research is done on surrogacy in Norway, this article aims to place the Norwegian debate in a broader international context, with a focus on Indian and American surrogate mothers. The analysis concludes that Norwegians in the debate concurrently normalize and negotiate dominant discourses regarding parenting, family and kinship. A paradox attached to the media debate is revealed: while Norwegians place themselves in victim positions towards the state to gain rights, Indian and American surrogate mothers hesitate to draw on this victim discourse. Hence the roles of dominant versus dominated within the North–South divide, or from a socioeconomic perspective, are seemingly reversed.

The third and last article «From nuclear families to star families. Cohabitation experts' power and the internet's counter narratives» (*Fra kjernefamilie til stjernefamilie. Samlivsekspertenes makt og nettets motfortellinger*) is published in the book *Å være sammen. Intimitetens nye vilkår*. Here, I investigate the concept of stepfamily and collaborate on a new notion attached to new forms of kinship – star families (stjernefamilier). Star families incorporate the family types analyzed in the two preceding articles of this dissertation; the «surrogate family» and the «homosexual family». Through a comparative analysis of internet forums regarding the topic of family, and relationship columns in the mainstream media, the following questions are explored: Where is the boundary for inclusion in stepfamilies? How are these boundaries defined? The analysis concludes that while experts recreate the perception of traditional nuclear families as being based on biological kinship, online debaters promote new understandings of who can be in a family together.