

## **Is it time to think about the idea of “family” in a different way? A podcast with Sascha Sistenich on family-friendliness and caregiving from the queer perspective (Transcript)**

Thea Fabian:

Hi Sascha, I'm Thea and I use the pronouns she/her, what about you?

Sascha Sistenich:

My name is Sascha and I use the pronouns he/him.

Thea Fabian:

That is a common way for queer people to greet each other, and in just a moment we will be talking about why, what we can learn from this. We will be talking about how people are feeling who consider themselves part of the queer community, their life stories and the stories they tell themselves, in order either to stand out or not stand out as individuals. Also about what they think about family, and what people can learn from them who do not consider themselves part of the queer community. Such as, how they too might rethink concepts around the family. I am very much looking forward to our talk today. Sascha's research concerns the queer perspective on caregiving. Sascha, do you think at some point it will become common practice that everyone introduces themselves the way we did just now?

Sascha Sistenich:

I sure hope so.

Thea Fabian:

What is it all about?

Sascha Sistenich:

Introducing oneself with one's pronouns underscores how gender cannot be determined by one's looks, showing sensitivity that we wish not to impose a definition on anyone. By introducing myself with my pronouns, I give the other person opportunity or space to introduce themselves likewise, enabling me to properly address them.

Thea Fabian:

How are people in the queer community reacting to today's gendering debates? How much attempt at discussion do they consider productive?

Sascha Sistenich:

I believe that queer communities now are very much on the same page that there needs to be little discussion of how we introduce ourselves, or what spaces gendered language may occupy. My impression instead is that it is political conservatives who are obsessed with talking about this, using the issue disingenuously and manipulatively as a tactic to distract from more important issues.

Thea Fabian:

Certainly. I mentioned that your work concerns the queer perspective on care and caregiving. What all does that refer to, “care and caregiving”? Are we talking about the usual health-related sort of caregiving, or something else?

Sascha Sistenich:

In my doctoral dissertation I employed a broad definition of “caregiving” which spans classic nursing-type care, unpaid caregiving at home and care given to small children, the elderly and sick people in general. The concept can be expanded, adopting a democratic theory perspective, to arrive at an understanding that ultimately everything is caregiving, from the way we treat each other to how we think about each other. There are aspects of caring whenever people treat people, animals or the environment, etc. with care. My research is aimed at exploring ways of realizing a more caring society that is more solidarity-based and more democratic.”

Thea Fabian:

Why is this such an important research topic, in your view?

Sascha Sistenich:

I believe we are seeing strong anti-democratic tendencies manifesting in society right now. The numbers of right-wing political parties are swelling, and right-wing speakers are being given more of a platform to air their views. I think it’s simply important to take another look at practices that could help us develop a more solidarity-based and caring approach to our dealings with one another in society. Especially for people in marginalized groups like the queer community, and for people who are subject to discrimination in everyday life, it is important to look into this, in order to hopefully dismantle discriminatory structures at some point and achieve greater equality for all.

Thea Fabian:

You just touched on how important it is that we exercise greater care toward each other. On a general level, where are we in terms of realizing a caring society? Especially in regard to the queer community.

Sascha Sistenich:

That’s tricky. My research started out during the pandemic, when I got interested in how self-care became such a huge topic, becoming increasingly a commercialized thing embedded in neoliberal capitalist structures. In lockdown many people were alone and had to take care of themselves, fueling interest in self-optimization, working on one’s self. I believe the pandemic to some extent, combined with the pressure to perform that proceeds from the logic of capitalism, made us think more about ourselves and lose sight of others—considering and caring for them and thinking about the relationship we want to have with our fellow human beings and the environment, among other things.

Thea Fabian:

That is always important, especially within families. And queer people often find that challenging. What concrete examples come to mind?

Sascha Sistenich:

I believe the pandemic once again provides an example. The contact restrictions were conceived of primarily with the traditional biological, nuclear family constellation in mind (mother, father, child), ignoring those who have queer or poly relationships with multiple individuals or simply live alone. Queer people are more likely to live alone, have fewer children and so on for apparent reasons, thus they can more easily fall through the cracks in legislation. Including them in planning makes things a bit more complicated, so they were largely went unconsidered in the pandemic regulations, as an example. It is simply not taken into account that friendships play a much larger role as well as 'family-of-choice', i.e. individuals with whom one has a close family-like relationship but are not blood relations—biological family not being seen as having the same importance.

Thea Fabian:

Why do you think blood relations are seen as less important today than in the past?

Sascha Sistenich:

I think more and more people are questioning the significance of blood relations, both in and outside the queer community, though I wouldn't try to speak for all queer people and say that blood relations no longer have any special significance for them. A lot of people I talk to and do research with have extremely good relationships with their parents, grandparents and siblings, even though many of course still experience friction when coming out, due to the persistence of discrimination and stigmatization in our society. Parents are less of a problem today, but there can still be conflicts around differences of opinion and clashing personal values. The longstanding trends are quite clear.

Thea Fabian:

Indeed, differences of opinion and friction at home sometimes mean that queer people are even excluded within their own family, sadly. But that is precisely what leads to shifting ideas about the family and non-traditional constellations. Let's talk a little about family constellations.

Sascha Sistenich:

As I mentioned, family-of-choice is frequently a relevant concept in the queer community. Family-of-choice members may be any person to whom one is close in some way, who may be significant others, friends, or blood relatives with whom one is close. And so for me at any rate, community and relationships are clearly extremely important. For we are social creatures after all, and reliant in some way on the security society affords—people we can turn to when we're in need, not doing too well, and so on. People we can also share the positive things in our life with. And in queer communities I believe there is more fluidity and flexibility around concepts of family.

Thea Fabian:

Would you say that there is greater solidarity among queer people, a greater longing for interpersonal connection?

Sascha Sistenich:

It's hard to generalize, but I believe I observe tendencies, predicated to a large extent upon the common experience of discrimination, that everyday life is often more difficult to cope with for members of the queer community, which gives rise to a greater desire for

collectivity and solidarity in support of each other. Discrimination, in my opinion, is a societal phenomenon, and more solidarity means less discrimination. If everyone displays solidarity toward each other and people care for one another, discrimination will end. That's it.

Thea Fabian:

How important is community for queer people, and in general?

Sascha Sistenich:

It is very important indeed. I have talked about how we need collectives within which we somehow feel a sense of belonging, and that goes for queer people and all people alike. But I believe that the shared framework of experience of marginalized groups means that they have a greater need in this regard. In 'regular' society, I have more things in common with more people, but for people in a marginalized position it is more difficult to talk to people about a life experience which they have had no personal exposure to, which they may be unable to understand to some extent. Belonging to a group of individuals with whom I can identify, a group that has my back, so to speak, means I can feel safe and understood there, not subjected to discrimination. Within this group, as a community of openness, I can feel a much greater sense of security in my life. And of course a greater sense of well-being too.

Thea Fabian:

Definitely. People who identify as LGBTQ+ are more visible today than just a few years ago. What is your take on this development, this increased visibility, is it more of an advantage or disadvantage?

Sascha Sistenich:

Yes, we do see Pride Day events getting bigger and bigger, with attendance rising. And queer people are getting more attention in the media. That is a positive thing, I would say, because visibility means greater public attention, which may translate into a greater sensitivity or awareness toward the issues. When people tell their stories and are allowed to have a voice. Of course, there is often a backlash, like what I see on social media in the comments on queer posts. Now yesterday or so I was reading the *Tagesschau* news and there was another article about queer people that talked about public resentment in some parts about the fact that they have such a big platform. I believe however that people just notice it more because it happens more. I mean it's not because they are over-represented; people tend to notice it because it's not mainstream yet. Like the difference between a queer people walking across the street holding hands and a same-sex couple doing that. The former will always be subject to more attention than a heterosexual couple; the more marginalized people are and more they deviate from the norm, the more they may stand out, being at odds with what is standard in society, and of course this means they suffer more discrimination.

Thea Fabian:

Yes, while it's not yet mainstream, it creates an opportunity for society as a whole to start thinking differently and to reflect on what our societal values are in an all-new way. What do you say about that?

Sascha Sistenich:

I agree entirely. That is a big part of the motivation behind my research, because in marginalized groups like the queer community I see great potential for a different paradigm of social interaction to emerge. For necessity is the mother of invention, as they say, and new ways of thinking are arising as traditions are being reconsidered and challenged—norms around what a family should look like and what kinship means, around the structures of friendships and what sexuality and sexual or romantic relationships “should look like”, in quotation marks. These notions are being challenged, rethought and sometimes abandoned. “Third spaces” are being created for ideas about what a better life could look like, for utopian visions of a nicer, better societal coexistence to be tried out.

Thea Fabian:

Before the interview you had talked about how being in dialogue with others in the community enables queer people to formulate their own narrative of their life. Would you expound on that a little bit?

Sascha Sistenich:

Yes, I believe that these life-story narratives are good for one's self-understanding, having explanatory value for the individual. And a lot of people, queer and otherwise, feel isolation around their identity. In rural areas for example, there typically aren't a lot of queer people around for context, to view one's life in relation to. They may not meet any other queer people for a long time. And when queer people talk to each other about their lives, they realize that they are not so alone after all with their life experiences. And at the same time get a sense of how we are all individuals. Everyone's life is different from anyone else's, although there are similarities and common experiences to one degree or another. Looking at our life story provides indications of why we are the way we are and why we act the way we do.

Thea Fabian:

Coming back now to your focus on care and caregiving, what general impact do you see your work potentially having in terms advancing research? And what would you like to see happen as a result of your work?

Sascha Sistenich:

That's quite a big question, but I hope, or it would make me happy if people who read the monograph at some point would come to think about care and caregiving in a new way, leading to a different approach to how we all get along in society. Care, caregiving and solidarity would be seen differently then, so that we move beyond the heaviness around the issue in current discourse, with so much talk focusing on unpaid caregiving work. Broadening our perspective, we can see that care includes so many things, and that we are all dependent on care in some way. This can help people change their attitudes, realizing that caregiving deserves greater financial rewards, and can be more rewarding to the individual personally than many have believed.

Thea Fabian:

Do you have any final words you'd like to leave us with? A parting shot?

Sascha Sistenich:

Hmmm, well maybe one thing. And as I have often said, it's hard to generalize, but science tends to work through the forming of categories, and we try to grasp things through language, which has its limitations. In my research I emphasize that the life experiences and ways of living we are concerned with are highly individual, so that one needs to be careful in attempting to draw conclusions about one another on the basis of our individual life stories. Our needs are individual, which again is relevant to caregiving.

Thea Fabian:

Thank you very much Sascha for your time, and for our conversation today.

Sascha Sistenich:

Thank you as well for the opportunity.

Thea Fabian:

Sascha is doing research on queerness in relation to care and caregiving for his doctorate degree, which he believes is of increasing importance to queer people, particularly with regard to family-of-choice. Queer people are often closer to chosen family members than to their blood relations, sometimes because the latter still reject queerness and are argumentative about the issue. He believes that the queer community can show non-queer people new ways of looking at our own lives, especially on the social level. And such rethinking of friendship, relationships and societal interaction then allows positive change to occur.