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Abstract

The article discusses the recognition of same-sex partnerships in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF). The main focus is on the experiences of recognition and misrecognition of same-sex couples when the couples have asked for a prayer on behalf of their registered partnership. The findings of this study confirm that the researched experiences of recognition have two dimensions, vertical and horizontal. Vertical recognition deals with institutional recognition and experiences with the sacred. Horizontal recognition entails experiences of interpersonal recognition. Narrated experiences often contained both horizontal and vertical dimensions of (mis)recognition. Recognition is a social phenomenon. Participants of the study had two distinct social contexts for recognition. One is the more loosely defined “rainbow community”, the other the formally authoritative, institutional ELCF. Most of the interviewees had positive experiences of recognition from the informal community but mainly negative experiences of misrecognition from the institutional ELCF. The difficult balancing between the conviction of the equal human dignity of each individual and the understanding of marriage as a social category for heterosexuals only led to same-sex couples’ experience of not being treated as equal members of the church. The study affirmed the importance of experiences and feelings as indicators in identifying a valid struggle for recognition.

Keywords

Experiences of recognition, experiences of misrecognition, same-sex partnership, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, rainbow worship community.

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Introduction

The discussion on LGBTI rights and same-sex partnerships is very timely in Finland. The Finnish parliament passed a law on registered partnerships in 2001 and in March 2017, same-sex marriages became legal. In Finland, as in other Nordic countries, mandated religious communities may officiate a wedding without additional civil registration. This is contrary to the practice in many other European countries.¹ The number of registered partnerships before the change in legislation was relatively small, since only 4500 people lived in a registered partnership in 2013.² The number of registered same-sex couples who are members of the ELCF and who have chosen to have a church ritual for their registered partnerships is, naturally, much smaller. While the question of the right of same-sex couples to marry according to the same church rituals as heterosexual couples became acute after March 2017, a discussion had already taken place within the ELCF after registered partnerships became legal in 2001. This discussion resulted in a specific prayer service “with and for” same-sex couples who had registered their partnership. This specific prayer service is the context within which the experiences of (mis)recognition were studied. The development of a specific prayer service reflects the significant role of the ELCF in Finnish society. The ELCF is the majority religious community and one of the two national churches in Finland, which gives it a central role when same-sex (religious) marriage is discussed in public.

The aim of this paper is to analyse experiences of (mis)recognition of same-sex couples in the ELCF in connection with a prayer service conducted over their registered partnerships. This study does not deal with the experiences of civil registration nor do we discuss the situation after same-sex marriage became legal in Finland in 2017.

¹ David J. Bos, “Equal rites before the law: religious celebrations of same-sex relationships in the Netherlands, 1960s-1990s”, *Theology & Sexuality*, 23, no 3 (2017), 191.

² http://www.stat.fi/artikkelit/2013/art_2013-09-23_001.html?s=0#1 (accessed 25 September 2017).

As a theoretical background for the study we apply modern theories of (religious) recognition, which will be introduced in due course. The aim is reached with the following research questions:

- How do same-sex couples narrate experiences of (mis)recognition?
- Can a prayer service for same-sex partnership be regarded as an act of recognition? If so, who are a) the recognizer (subject), and b) the recognizee (object)?

Relationship of churches and their homosexual members

The relationship between churches and their homosexual members is an ongoing debate in Christianity, both in the global South and in the global North. Homosexuality has become the most central dividing line between so-called liberal and more conservative churches since ordination of women has now become widely accepted. Homosexuality – or more precisely the question of LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) church members – is an issue that also divides churches from within. For example, most of the churches in East Africa are strongly against homosexuality, which is in line with the national legislation forbidding homosexuality in many East African countries. On the other hand, a recent study from the context of Catholic Uganda, has shown that behind the apparent homophobia lies a much more complicated discussion on sexuality. It seems that especially when the national legislation is more progressive, churches may not follow it. This is the case, for example, in South Africa, which was among the first nations to legalize same-sex marriage. The South African churches are still struggling to accept their homosexual members. The Anglican Church of Southern Africa became known as the voice against Apartheid’s racial discrimination, but today it is not promoting the rights of its homosexual members.³

In some contexts, states and churches already have a long history with same-sex marriages. This is the case for example with the Netherlands.⁴ The Nordic context is different: legal same-sex partnerships are a recent phenomenon. The Nordic situation of same-sex partnerships has

³ See, for example, Margaret Brenda Vertue, Bishop’s Charge, the Anglican Diocese of False Bay, 27 August 2017.

⁴ Bos, “Equal rites before the law”, 191; Marco Derks, “Conscientious objectors and the marrying kind: rights and rites in Dutch public discourse on marriage registrars with conscientious objections against conducting same-sex weddings”, *Theology & Sexuality*, 23 no. 3 (2017), 209–228.

not been widely studied so far. A study conducted in Sweden was recently published, but it focuses on the religious opposition to same-sex marriage in Sweden.⁵ A Danish study illustrates the state-church context in Denmark where the state governs the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark. When the state legalized same-sex marriage in 2011, the Danish church was also obliged to conduct marital rituals for same-sex couples.⁶ The Danish situation differs from the Finnish one. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) is not a state church but a “national church” with some privileges in the state legislation. Only the General Synod of the ELCF may alter the church law and therefore changes in national legislation do not affect the ELCF directly.

There is also some research on same-sex partnerships in Finland. These studies are either outdated,⁷ or do not focus on the personal experiences of those concerned.⁸ We have previously published another article based on the same interview data as we use in this one. In that article, we concluded that the church is not willing to recognize same-sex partnerships as equal to marriage, and thus perform a wedding or blessing.⁹

Same-Sex Relationships and the ELCF

Approximately 72% of the population in Finland are members of the ELCF.¹⁰ Even though the membership has decreased in recent years, the ELCF still has a strong influence on religious

⁵ Mariecke van den Berg, “Rings for the rainbow family: religious opposition to the introduction of same-sex marriage in Sweden”, *Theology & Sexuality*, 23:3 (2017), 229-244.

⁶ Kirstine Helboe Johansen & Helene Helboe Pedersen. “The Power over the Marriage Ritual: Positions in the Administrative Consultation prior to the Implementation of Same-Sex Marriages in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark”, *Journal of Church and State*, 4, (2015). DOI: 10.1093/jcs/csv055. First published online: July 5, 2015.

⁷ Vesa Hirvonen, “Samaa sukupuolta olevien parisuhteet ja kirkon oppi” (Same-sex partnerships and the dogma of the church). *Synti vai siunaus: Homoseksuaalit, kirkko ja yhteiskunta*. Nissinen & Tuovinen (eds.). Helsinki: Kirjapaja, 41–58, (2003); Vesa Hirvonen, “Onko homoseksuaalisessa parisuhteessa elävä kelpoinen papinvirkaan?” (Is a person living in a homosexual partnership eligible for the ministry?) *Teologinen Aikakauskirja* 109 (2004), 470–478; Paavo Kettunen, “Homoseksuaalisuus pastoraalisena kysymyksenä” (Homosexuality as a pastoral issue). *Homoseksuaalisuus kristillisessä ihmiskuvassa ja lainsäädännössä*. Saarelna (toim.), KTKJ 105. Porvoo: KTK, 216–232, (2007).

⁸ Björn Vikström, *Monta rakkautta; Seksuaalisuuden, parisuhteen ja avioliiton teologia* (Many Loves; Theology of Sexuality, Partnership and Marriage). Helsinki: Kirjapaja, (2016).

⁹ Elina Hellqvist & Auli Vähäkangas, “Rekisteröidyn parisuhteen tunnustaminen kirkollisen keskustelun ja asianosaisten näkökulmasta” (The recognition of registered partnerships from the point of view of the church debate and the individuals concerned)., *Teologinen Aikakauskirja* no. 2 (2016), 141-155.

¹⁰ <https://evl.fi/tietoa-kirkosta/tilastotietoa> (accessed 25 September 2017).

traditions in the country. The ELCF has a strong, self-governing General Synod, separate from state government, and a Bishops' Conference, both of which make independent decisions.¹¹

The ELCF has participated in an extensive discussion on homosexuality and the role of LGBT church members from the 1990s up to the present day. One intermediate landmark was the Bishops' Conference Report in 2010, approved by the General Synod of the ELCF. This document formulates the church's stand on registered same-sex partnerships.¹² After the 2010 report, the Bishops' Conference issued "Guidelines for Prayer with and for Same-Sex Couples" in 2011 and a second Report in 2016 where it reiterates the principles of the 2010 report. Thus, the principle confirmed in 2010 would also apply in the changed societal context where same-sex marriage was legalized.¹³ The Bishops' Conference issued a new report in October 2016.¹⁴ At the time, many church members and clergy expected more from this report, whereas others were happy that the official stance of the church was unaltered. Since then, individual bishops have publicly stated their personal views and given instructions concerning their own dioceses and pastors.¹⁵

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) prepared guidelines on marriage and human sexuality for member churches in 2007. In that document, the LWF encourages "churches to continue reflecting on their pastoral responsibility in response to a wish expressed by some people for a ritual for their committed partnership, without entering into marriage".¹⁶ The Pastoral

¹¹ Compare to Helboe Johansen & Helboe Pedersen, "The Power over the Marriage Ritual".

¹² *The Consequences of the Law Regarding Same-Sex Relationships in the Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland*. The Report of the Bishops' Conference to the General Synod (2010). Original title in Finnish: Parisuhdelain seuraukset kirkossa. Piispainkokouksen selvitys kirkolliskokoukselle (2010). [http://sakasti.ev1.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/4954C50B429AADE7C225770300438131/\\$FILE/PARISUHDE%202010.pdf](http://sakasti.ev1.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/4954C50B429AADE7C225770300438131/$FILE/PARISUHDE%202010.pdf) (accessed 25 September 2017).

¹⁴ *Report of the Bishops' Conference Concerning the Amendment to the Marriage Act*, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (2016). [http://sakasti.ev1.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/F359F1ED9F897DD0C225770E0034026E/\\$FILE/Report%20of%20the%20Bishops%20Conference%20Concerning%20the%20Amendment%20to%20the%20Marriage%20Act.pdf](http://sakasti.ev1.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/F359F1ED9F897DD0C225770E0034026E/$FILE/Report%20of%20the%20Bishops%20Conference%20Concerning%20the%20Amendment%20to%20the%20Marriage%20Act.pdf) (accessed 25 September 2017). Later on, this document is referred to as Bishops' Conference Report (2016).

¹⁵ See, e.g., Björn Vikström, *Monta rakkautta*. This book by the Bishop of Porvoo, Björn Vikström, has been widely discussed both in church media and secular media. The Report of the Bishops' Conference (2016) was widely discussed in the media in September 2016. On the Internet site close to the ELCF, Kotimaa24, the report provoked a discussion with 56 comments in one day (see, <https://www.kotimaa24.fi/artikkeli/piispainkokous-uusi-avioliittolaki-ei-muuta-kirkon-avioliitto-opetusta-mutta-keskustelu-asiasta-s/comment-page-1/#comments>). It was also debated in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, with several letters to the editor within a fortnight of its publication (e.g., Johanna Korhonen, HS, 2 September 2016; Vilja Alanko, Elina Hellqvist & Teemu Ratinen, HS, 3 September 2016; Pekka Elonheimo, HS, 10 September; Petri Hiltunen, HS, 11 September 2016).

¹⁶ *Proposed Guidelines and Processes for Respectful Dialogue on Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality*, Lutheran World Federation. 2007.

Guidelines of the ELCF follow these instructions of the LWF quite closely and do not give any ready rite to be used during such a ceremony. The Pastoral Guidelines only indicate that the ritual can involve a prayer with the registered couple and for them. Blessing of a partnership or any rituals which could be interpreted as marital rites should not be conducted.¹⁷

The Report from 2010 discusses the specific question of how the church should react, and on what basis, to the new category of registered partnerships. The report underlines two basic theological principles. First, every human being is created as an image of God and, therefore, should be treated with respect and dignity. Second, marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman, based on God's creation of human beings. Thus, the union between partners of the same sex cannot be considered a marriage. The document acknowledges that there are different understandings regarding same-sex unions amongst the church membership as well as within the Bishops' Synod, but the basic focus is on finding the common normative teaching of the church and a consensual solution in a situation of disagreement. The document introduces different alternatives for how the church could recognize either the union or the individuals who have entered such a union. It should be noted that the secular registered partnership was at the time a different category from marriage. The Bishops' Conference did not recommend the blessing of a same-sex union with the same ritual as heterosexual unions or endorse the introduction of a new ritual especially for same-sex couples. Nevertheless, a full rejection of same-sex partnerships was not recommended either. A middle way that the whole church could accept was sought and the solution came in the form of a private prayer with and for the couple.¹⁸

The Bishops' Conference ordered yet another evaluation in 2017. Its original task was to study whether the ELCF should abandon the right to officiate marriages altogether. The

<https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Exhibit%2010%20Report%20Task%20Force%20English.pdf> (accessed 25 January 2018).

¹⁷ *Pastoral Guidelines on the prayer with and for those who have registered their same-sex relationship*, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (2011).

[http://sakasti.ev1.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/A78B3114D64D8273C22577030039EE08/\\$FILE/PASTORAALINEN-OHJE.pdf](http://sakasti.ev1.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/A78B3114D64D8273C22577030039EE08/$FILE/PASTORAALINEN-OHJE.pdf) (accessed 25 January 2018).

¹⁸ *The Consequences of the Law Regarding Same-Sex Relationships in the Church*. The Report of the Bishops' Conference to the General Synod (2010). Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Original title in Finnish: Parisuhdelain seuraukset kirkossa. Piispaikokouksen selvitys kirkolliskokoukselle (2010).

[http://sakasti.ev1.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/4954C50B429AADE7C225770300438131/\\$FILE/PARISUHDE%202010.pdf](http://sakasti.ev1.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/4954C50B429AADE7C225770300438131/$FILE/PARISUHDE%202010.pdf) (accessed 25 September 2017).

conclusion was no; instead the ELCF should finally accept that there are at least two theologically sound options within the church: either to wed or not to wed same-sex couples and both of these options should be made possible.¹⁹

Data and method

The first set of data consists of interviews of ten people, nine of whom have had a prayer ritual over their registered same-sex partnership plus a pastor who has conducted many rituals over same-sex partnerships. Auli Vähäkangas conducted the interviews from May to October 2015. The interviewees' ages are between 30 and 65 years. Three interviewees are men and seven are women, all of them from the greater Helsinki metropolitan area. Most of the interviews were individual, except for two interviews where both partners were present. All the interviewees gave their written consent to the study. In direct quotations from the interviews, pseudonyms are used to refer to the interviewees.

The main channel of recruitment was the so-called rainbow worship services, which are special services for the LGBTI minority in the ELCF. Additional recruitment was done via a closed LGBTI Facebook group. Also, the already interviewed persons invited those who had experienced a prayer ritual over their partnership to participate. All the interviewed persons are members of the ELCF, but two of their partners are non-members. Five of the interviewees were or had been employed by the ELCF and one was a student of theology. Interviews lasted from half an hour to over one hour. The narrated prayer rituals were conducted between the years 2005 and 2015. All of the narrated rituals had been conducted in connection with the official registration of the same-sex partnership by a magistrate. Religious rituals were conducted either the same day or the day following the civil registration.

The second set of data consists of written sources in the form of documents from the ELCF. These are the Bishops' Conference Reports from 2010 and 2016 and the Pastoral Guidelines

¹⁹ Eila Helander, *Study on the question should the ELCF abandon the right to officiate marriages and on the meaning of the marriage to the identity of the church*. (Original title in Finnish: *Selvitys suomen evankelis-luterilaisen kirkon vihkiöikeudesta luopumisesta ja avioliittoon vihkimisen merkityksestä kirkon identiteetille* (2017). ([http://sakasti.evl.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/F359F1ED9F897DD0C225770E0034026E/\\$FILE/Selvitys%20Suomen%20evankelis%20luterilaisen%20kirkon%20vihkiöikeudesta%20luopumisesta%20ja%20avioliittoon%20vihkimisen%20merkityksestä%20kirkon%20identiteetille%2009062017.pdf](http://sakasti.evl.fi/sakasti.nsf/0/F359F1ED9F897DD0C225770E0034026E/$FILE/Selvitys%20Suomen%20evankelis%20luterilaisen%20kirkon%20vihkiöikeudesta%20luopumisesta%20ja%20avioliittoon%20vihkimisen%20merkityksestä%20kirkon%20identiteetille%2009062017.pdf)) (accessed 25 September 2017).

from 2011, which have previously been introduced.²⁰ Theory-based content analysis, also called deductive content analysis, based on previous theoretical knowledge, was used to analyse the data.²¹ Identity discussion of recognition theories was selected as a theoretical tool for theory-based content analysis for this article.

Unlike many who have written on this subject, we are two heterosexual women with no direct experience of minority sexual orientation. Additionally, we are both ordained pastors of the ELCF. We introduced ourselves as researchers from the Faculty of Theology but did not hide our pastoral identities either.

Theories on (mis)recognition

As a theoretical background for this article, we apply the modern recognition theory as presented by writers such as Axel Honneth and Charles Taylor. In his theory, Honneth underlines the importance of social relationships for the development and maintenance of a person's identity. In order to develop into a fully autonomous and individuated person, an individual requires well-developed self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. These three modes of relating to oneself develop in intersubjective relationships of recognition with significant others. These relationships are reciprocal, that is, a person is granted recognition by others whom one also recognizes.²²

The basic form of recognition is a relationship between two persons. In the standard case, A is asking to be recognized as X by B.²³ The personhood of a human being is constituted by a number of reciprocal recognition relationships. In his analysis of religious recognition, Saarinen points out that religious experiences, such as conversion, certainly do contribute to the identity of a person. On a smaller scale, forms of recognition “exemplify social interaction

²⁰ The original Finnish titles of these documents are: Parisuhdelain seuraukset kirkossa. Piispaainkokouksen selvitys kirkolliskokoukselle (2010); Pastoraalinen ohje vapaamuotoisesta rukouksesta parisuhteensa rekisteröineiden kanssa ja heidän puolestaan (2011); and Piispaainkokouksen selonteko avioliittolain muutoksen johdosta (2016). The latest document has also been translated into English, with the title Report of the Bishops' Conference Concerning the Amendment to the Marriage Act.

²¹ Satu Elo & Helvi Kyngäs, “The Qualitative Content Analysis Process”, *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62, no. 1 (2007), 107.

²² Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. [Kampf und Anerkennung], trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), x-xi

²³ For a more sophisticated presentation of “recognition formula”, see Risto Saarinen, *Recognition and Religion: A Historical and Systematic Study*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), esp. 20–26.

or gift transfer”.²⁴ The main model in recognition theories is a person-person relationship, but the present paper also applies the different categories to person-church (ELCF as institution), and couple-church (ELCF as institution) relationships. To clarify these relationships and their influence on the identity of both the individual church members and the ELCF as an institution, we apply two different conceptual distinctions by two different recognition theorists. First, we use the differentiation by Heikki Ikäheimo between horizontal and vertical recognition. According to Ikäheimo’s analysis, recognition entails, among other things, two dimensions: first, interpersonal recognition (horizontal, as Ikäheimo calls it) and second, recognition between an institution (in this case, the ELCF) and individuals (vertical, according to Ikäheimo).²⁵

Second, we apply Anthony Simon Laden’s distinction between recognition as “basic respect” and “fully equal respect”. A group struggling for recognition might have achieved “basic respect”, such as a legal status, but not yet a “fully equal respect”. In that case, a group struggling for recognition is not regarded as a fully co-equal actor in its mutual relationship with the recognizer(s), who hold the power. Recognition thus falls short, and remains a misrecognition.²⁶ According to Taylor, identities are, at least partially, shaped by recognition from others or by the absence of it. By identity, Taylor means “something like a person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being”.²⁷ Taylor links the demand for recognition with modernity.

Recognition entails both a normative and psychological dimension according to Laden. Essentially, normative recognition means that if you recognize someone as a person, then you also need to treat her as a person. For our discussion on recognition of minority sexual identity, the psychological dimension of recognition is very relevant. By psychological dimension of recognition, Laden means that in order for a person to develop a ‘practical identity’, she depends on the feedback of others as well as of the society at large. This

²⁴ Saarinen, *Recognition and Religion*, 24–25. We are also heavily indebted to Minna Hietamäki’s unpublished article manuscript on religious recognition. It is important to note that recognition relationships are reciprocal. B also needs to recognize A as a competent recognizer. It should be noted that reciprocity in recognition relationships does not necessarily mean symmetrical relationships.

²⁵ Heikki Ikäheimo, *Anerkennung* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 53, 63, 70-71. See also the very helpful illustration on p. 169.

²⁶ Anthony Simon Laden, “Reasonable Deliberation, Constructive Power, and the Struggle for Recognition”, in Bert van den Brink & David Owen (eds.), *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 271, 277.

²⁷ Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”, in Amy Gutmann (ed.) *Multiculturalism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25

practical identity places a person in a certain social category. Belonging to a certain social category is sometimes defined by a person herself, sometimes by others. A group has ‘constructive social power’ if it has the capacity to define certain identities as socially relevant. For example, gender might place a person in a certain social category, whereas hair colour does not. Constructive social power is, thus, power to construct identities. This power can be either reciprocal or asymmetrical. If it is reciprocal, then a person has the power to define the identity of those who define hers. In an asymmetrical case, people can impose identities on others.²⁸ A further helpful clarification is presented by Saarinen when he points out that “recognition is a voluntary act that creates rather than assumes a social structure. Also religious recognition creates a social status and reality.”²⁹

Laden additionally points out an important aspect of recognition, that asymmetrical power generates misrecognition even if the powerful define the powerless positively or accurately. Thus, “the imposition of an identity is a form of misrecognition even if the identity imposed would be endorsed by the powerless group”.³⁰ Therefore, misrecognition hinders or destroys a person’s successful relationship with herself. Because misrecognition violates the identity of persons, they engage in a “struggle for recognition.” This struggle for recognition aims for the affirmation of the particular identity, in our case LG(BT) identity. In Charles Taylor’s account, the struggle for recognition of a certain group based on their distinctiveness is labelled as “identity politics”.³¹

Ikäheimo and Laitinen raise a significant point when they discuss the objectivity – in other words, truth – of the recognition relationships. In principle, whether something is appropriate recognition or misrecognition can be objectively judged. Thus, “what B takes as appropriate or adequate recognition of herself by A may in fact, from an ‘objective point of view’, be misrecognition. Similarly, it maintains the intuition that what B takes as misrecognition of herself by A is, from an ‘objective point of view’, not necessarily misrecognition”³². Ikäheimo and Laitinen further point out that a certain minimal sense of objectivism is a necessary presupposition in constant struggles for recognition in different spheres of life. If

²⁸ Laden, “Reasonable Deliberation”, 276-277.

²⁹ Saarinen *Recognition and Religion*, 132.

³⁰ Laden, “Reasonable Deliberation”, 277.

³² Heikki Ikäheimo and Arto Laitinen, “Analyzing Recognition: Identification, Acknowledgement, and Recognitive Attitudes towards Persons,” in Bert van den Brink & David Owen (eds.), *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 54.

that were not the case, there would be no distinction between struggles for recognition and strategic struggles (for power, for instance). At the same time, they do not want to belittle the importance of feelings and emotions as a crucial index for identifying possible cases of misrecognition. However, feelings and emotions are not as such authoritative: their possible normative weight has to be discussed and decided in collective discourses. A prerequisite for the decision-making is that the subjects of those feelings and emotions are seriously respected as communication partners, Ikäheimo and Laitinen underline.³³

One basic feature of recognition theories is that recognition manifests itself as some kind of “act of recognition”. If the intention of recognition does not manifest itself as an act, there is the danger that the recognition remains empty. Further, the act is only a genuine act of recognition when it expresses or is motivated by a genuine attitude of recognition. Ikäheimo makes a distinction between an act of recognition in both the broad sense of the word and in the narrow. Broadly, any act that is partly motivated by a recognitive attitude can be understood as an act of recognition. In the narrow sense, only those actions that are taken explicitly in order to express recognition can be considered acts of recognition.³⁴

Experiences of recognition by the institutional ELCF

The location of the prayer rituals seemed to influence the experiences of recognition from the institutional ELCF. Two of the narrated events had been organized in secular festive locations and one outdoors in a natural setting. Two of the occasions had been organized in the couples’ private homes. Only two of the prayer rituals were held in a sacred space, one in a church and the other in a small chapel connected to a church. One reason why only two of the events had been organized in a sacred space was that the couples were afraid of their local parishes refusing to give same-sex couples sacred spaces, or, in other cases, such a negative decision had already been given.

Those two who had the event in a sacred space were the youngest interviewees and their prayer was conducted most recently. Matilda was not very religious herself but her spouse was an active church member and this is why she also joined the ELCF just before the ritual: “I joined the church just because of this. Religion is not that important to me but the church as a space

³³ Ikäheimo and Laitinen, “Analyzing Recognition”, 56.

³⁴ Ikäheimo and Laitinen, “Analyzing Recognition”, 43–47.

is ceremonious” (Matilda). Henrik, the other interviewee whose prayer was conducted in a sacred space expressed its meaning: “I experience that space to be sacred and just that chapel is a familiar and secure space for me, also because of its history ... In that situation I was in front of God” (Henrik). In Henrik’s case the experience of institutional recognition also included recognition by God himself. In his experience of recognition, the vertical dimension included the explicitly stated feeling of being recognized by God as well. The sacred space was an important part of this recognition. He had previously attended rainbow worship services in the chapel and additionally he is a member of that local parish.

Pekka explains the importance of the home as a space for the ritual: “I have grown up in the Zion hymn tradition in which the home is as important a space as a parish hall or even as important as a church is”. Pekka refers here to a revival movement inside the ELCF that meets regularly in homes to sing their own hymns, called Zion hymns. This discussion on the importance of the home shows that those rituals which were conducted in private homes were also seen to be important experiences of vertical recognition, even though the institutional ELCF was not directly involved in them.

Matilda’s situation differs from the other couples in that she and her wife had been officially married in Canada a few weeks before a blessing of a wedding was organized in Finland in 2015. Matilda still called the religious ritual in Finland a wedding and it most probably followed the rite of a blessing of a wedding; in Matilda’s own words:

It was like a normal wedding ... We came in with both of our parents while the wedding music was on and we did stand on the same wedding *ryijy* of the church. The church warden was really involved, he rang the bells and did everything else as in a normal wedding.

Ryijy is a traditional Finnish woven craftwork, a large wall mat, on which the bridal couple traditionally stands during a religious wedding ceremony. The use of the same *ryijy* as for other bridal couples in the church shows that there was no need to point to the special same-sex elements as in those rituals conducted almost ten years earlier but rather to use the same elements as in a heterosexual wedding.³⁵ Matilda’s narrative shows that the institutional ELCF also showed positive recognition of the same-sex couple, but it is important to note

³⁵ See also Shari Rochelle Lash, “Jewish Same-Sex Weddings in Canada: Rituals of Resistance or Rituals of Conformity?” *Liberating rites*, Eds. Ute Hüsken & Frank Neubert (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 161–176.

that in this case the pastor who conducted the ritual was not from a local parish but was a student pastor who has more freedom to conduct rituals than a parish pastor would have.

Hanna further elaborates the idea of a blessing and human value:

For me it's personally enough to have my faith and the feeling that I was created this way and that I have a purpose and my life has a meaning, as does my relationship, and we are blessed and as valuable as others.

Hanna indicated that the pastor, who was her colleague in the same parish, followed the Pastoral Guidelines too closely and had even discussed with the vicar whether she could include an official blessing of the couple in the ritual. The vicar, who was also Hanna's superior, had advised following the given guidelines and not including a blessing in the ceremony. Hanna's example shows how parish pastors and vicars, who are low in the diocesan hierarchy, want to follow carefully the guidelines of the Bishops' Conference.

The Pastoral Guidelines prohibit the use of symbols and ritual elements used in the heterosexual marriage ceremony.³⁶ Only two of the interviewees, Pekka and Henrik, indicated that it was important to omit certain ritual elements, such as the exchanging of rings, from their own ceremony. Interestingly, both of these interviewees are theologians: Pekka is a pastor working in the ELCF and Henrik a student of theology. They do not openly express the relation between their profession and their choice to have a ceremony that did not greatly resemble a marriage ceremony. However, these two theologians also refer to the ceremony as a blessing of their partnership and not just a prayer with and for them, as it is officially titled.

The most important celebration of their partnership was the religious prayer function, which they found to be personal and an event tailored to suit them. This also seems to indicate the importance of the prayer as an act of recognition. An important part of recognition was thus the public space in which the rituals were performed. A recent study on the legalization process of same-sex marriage in the Netherlands argues that the Christian traditions provided a ritual and symbolic repertoire to LGBT people seeking public display and recognition of

³⁶ Pastoral Guidelines.

their relationships.³⁷ From the point of view of recognition, the prayer, which is distinctively different from a church wedding or blessing of a civil union, underlines its character as a recognition in the sense of “basic respect” rather than as a “fully equal respect”, following Laden’s account.³⁸

Experiences of recognition in the Rainbow community

Rainbow worship services are organized in some church buildings of the ELCF in various parts of the country and they form separate communities inside the ELCF. Some of the participants of this study identified themselves as members of the Rainbow community, others did not discuss it and others said openly that they do not participate in these services even though they are active in the ELCF. One recruitment channel of this study was the Rainbow worship services. This has partly influenced the results on the experiences of recognition in the Rainbow community.

Both of the interviewed female couples, Maja & Ritva and Kirsi & Sari, were actively involved in the Rainbow worship community and in their prayer ritual a special nuptial object, a rainbow-coloured *ryijy* was used. Rochelle Lash indicates the similar use of a rainbow-coloured Jewish nuptial object in Canadian same-sex weddings.³⁹ The rainbow-coloured ritual elements recognized the same-sex nature of the partners in these rituals, acknowledging their inclusion within the Lutheran tradition at the same time.

Maja & Ritva indicated that the presence of rainbow friends was important: “We spent a lot of time in rainbow events and rainbow services and we have our own community within the church”. This female couple also stressed how important a part of their life the Rainbow community was. That was a community in which they felt that they really belonged and in which they were fully accepted. The Rainbow community seems to be partly separate from the official ELCF. This is exemplified by how the pastors who are active in it are called

³⁷ David J. Bos, “Equal rites before the law: religious celebrations of same-sex relationships in the Netherlands, 1960s-1990s”, *Theology & Sexuality*, 23, no. 3 (2017), 188–208; see also the editorial of the special issue Marco Derks, R. Ruard Ganzevoort & Anne-Marie Korte, “Nuptial symbolics beyond the law: constructions of religion and sexuality in debates on the legalization of same-sex marriage”, *Theology & Sexuality*, 23, no. 3 (2017), 183–187.

³⁸ Laden, “Reasonable Deliberation”, 277.

³⁹ Shari Rochelle Lash, “Jewish Same-Sex Weddings in Canada”.

“rainbow pastors”. This clearly distinguishes between the regular pastors of the ELCF and those who are members of the small Rainbow community. Members of this community are either LGBT people themselves, or supporters of LGBT members of the ELCF. As Maarit, a rainbow pastor, explains: “We were operating within the LGBT crowd. We were in the community and it didn’t even occur to us to tell the boss. Even I’ve blessed 14 couples.” The rainbow pastors did not tell the vicars or bishops what was going on. In her interview Maarit also explained how she was later interrogated by her bishop over these ceremonies.

The interviewees indicated that an important part of the preparation was the selection of a pastor. Many asked pastors whom they knew from before partly because they wanted to avoid experiences of misrecognition. Sari & Kirsi selected a pastor who was a close friend of Kirsi’s and had been active in the Students’ Christian movement with her. Maja and Ritva explain how they ended up asking two pastors to conduct their prayer ritual. The first one was a rainbow pastor whom they knew well before and the other pastor came from Maja’s childhood home parish and thus represented Swedish-speaking Christians in Finland. Ritva explains the connection to this pastor: “This Swedish-speaking pastor was such that we had both visited her before. When your mother died it was she who invited you to the grief group ... And she had conducted a blessing of our home as well”. Both of these pastors, one a rainbow pastor and the other from a local parish, showed their recognition of the female couple in various ways and not just during the narrated prayer ritual, but already before that event.

Heikki did not know any pastors personally and he first tried to find one from his local parish but faced difficulties in finding a pastor who would be available to conduct the prayer event:

It took three weeks, four weeks and I had called repeatedly and no response. I did not get any response at all, they just said that they will try to find out. I found this response to be very negative and I was really disappointed. Then I started to search on the internet and found this network called Connection. (Heikki)

Through the Connection network Heikki found a rainbow pastor who soon visited their home and planned the prayer event together with Heikki and his spouse. Connection is an ecumenical network which aims at connecting sexual minorities to the religious institutions in Finland and shows acceptance and recognition of sexual minorities. In his home parish Heikki had experienced misrecognition but through the Rainbow community he had experienced full recognition. Heikki further explains this acceptance that he found through the pastor’s speech: “That speech when she spoke about our life, our home and partnership, work, friends and all

of our life ... So all of our guests were crying and also for me that speech was something that I will remember forever.” Recognition was strongly present in this speech and it was built from small details of the couple’s life. This powerful speech had evoked the emotions of both the couple and the guests attending the prayer ritual. In Heikki’s case it is important to note that he had never attended any Rainbow worship services nor had his spouse, and still his good experience with the Connection network and a rainbow pastor found through it made the religious ritual over their partnership a valuable experience of recognition.

Experiences of recognition by friends and family

Friends and relatives, who formed the gathered community, influenced feelings of horizontal recognition. Some of the couples had only invited relatives to the official ceremony with the magistrate, but others were invited to the religious ceremony as well. Other participants explained that they wanted to invite only those loved ones who accept their partnership. Pekka explains that his family was not invited to the ritual as the family of his spouse, who accepted their partnership fully, was. Pekka’s family is strongly religious and he did not want his elderly mother to worry over his life decisions. Pekka further explains that his partner met Pekka’s siblings for the first time only at the funeral of his mother. The meeting with Pekka’s family happened some years after their partnership had been registered and the religious ritual had been conducted.

Henrik explained that two of his friends did not attend the ritual because of their religious beliefs. One of his friends told Henrik openly that he and his wife would not attend the ritual because they are not in favour of same-sex unions. The other friend did not say it as openly, he just said that he was too busy on that day and could not attend the ceremony. Afterwards Henrik understood that the actual reason was his faith, which did not allow attending a same-sex ceremony. The examples of Henrik’s friends show that not all friends and relatives were very supportive of the same-sex couples but these did not attend the ceremony and thus did not show misrecognition during it. These experiences of Pekka and Henrik show that not all experiences of recognition from family and friends were positive; there were also negative or neglectful experiences from them.

The support and recognition of those present during the spiritual ceremony was important for Pekka, as the following quotation indicates:

And quite a few of the guest were also, let's say, either employees of the church or linked to the church in a way ... and then the fact that the situation communicated a strong sense of a thing that I could straight up call acceptance.

The presence of other church workers and active church members was important to Pekka, who is an ordained pastor himself and to whom recognition by the ELCF and its active members is significant. Many other interviewees also had wide support from family and friends, as Kirsi explains: "Both of our families have been very supportive; we had a lot of family and friends from both sides attending."

When the interviewees discussed experiences of recognition, it was linked to those present at their own prayer ceremony and the acceptance and recognition achieved through that ceremony. Maarit, a rainbow pastor, called this kind of situation a collective recognition: all present at the ceremony recognized the couple together. Marco Derks' recent study on Dutch marriage registrars confirms a similar finding when he purports that marriage is a compensation for the suffering of same-sex couples and a recognition and affirmation of their sexual identity.⁴⁰ Collective recognition is more effective in ceremonial events such as the studied prayer rituals were. It is important to note that participants also had experiences of misrecognition by their friends and family, not only by the official ELCF.

Vertical recognition in the ELCF Documents

In the previous section, we focused on the experiences of (mis)recognition of those same-sex couples who had asked for the blessing of a prayer for their relationship. In this section, our focus is on the official documents of the ELCF: how is the recognition of the same-sex partnership featured in them?

One distinctive feature of the ELCF discussion is the emphasis on the importance of the Book of Worship. In the ELCF, if the Book of Worship is altered or renewed, the change requires a $\frac{3}{4}$ majority in the General Synod. All pastors are expected to conduct each ritual "by the book". Using the existing ritual of blessing of a marriage would, according to the ELCF Bishops' Conference Report (2010) mean recognizing this union as a marriage. Therefore, the ELCF discussion concerning same-sex relationships has been dominated by the questions of whether a new ritual is needed and whether the existing rituals of wedding and blessing of

⁴⁰ Derks, "Conscientious objectors", 209–228.

the marriage could be used in the case of same-sex couples. Both of these options were rejected in 2010. The church was not ready to recognize a same-sex union as marriage, and bishops predicted that getting a ¾ majority in the Church Synod was not likely. Further, the bishops stated that creating a new ritual should be based on the faith of the church and dogma, not on pastoral or ethical needs of the people concerned – the need for recognition. Instead, the ELCF opted for a prayer with and for the couple. That means recognition of the LGBT people as church members with a status equal to all other church members, but not a same-sex union as the equivalent of a marriage.⁴¹

In Finnish public discussions and internal ELCF discussions, many support registered partnerships and same-sex marriages at the societal level. They think that equal rights and responsibilities to all couples in the secular legislation and society add to the common good of everyone. However, the religious dimension is more complicated. Those who strongly oppose same-sex marriages in the ELCF argue that the church should not bless same-sex marriages because in the Bible they are condemned, the church tradition does not support them and, thus, God does not approve of them. The ELCF should only bless those things that God blesses. Those who are for same-sex marriages in the Lutheran church context argue differently. Because each person is equally created as an image of God, full recognition of each individual is mandatory. Sexuality and partnership are basic proponents of a person's identity, and thus they should be recognized and accepted in the ELCF, and also in practice.⁴²

So far, the ELCF has concluded that marriage is not only an ethical question, but also a dogmatic one. This stance is somewhat different from that of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). In 2007, the LWF issued a document called "Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality Proposed Guidelines and Processes for Respectful Dialogue". This document provides here a wider Lutheran context for the issue of same-sex relationships. The document suggests that the doctrine of the two kingdoms would be the most useful theological tool for elaborating human sexuality and marriage. Contrary to some other churches, Lutheran churches consider matters of family, marriage and human sexuality to be civil ones, alongside all ethical questions. The doctrine of the two kingdoms makes a distinction between the spiritual realm of the church and the worldly realm of civil society. The laws of these two kingdoms are

⁴¹ *Bishops' Conference Report* (2010), 118–132.

⁴² For a more detailed discussion of the two viewpoints, see Helander, *Selvitys vihkiöikeudesta luopumisesta*, 2017.

different: in the spiritual realm, it is the Word of God that rules. On the other hand, in the worldly realm the laws are based on the use of reason. Christians are part of both realms, and should therefore respect both secular laws and the laws of God. All this has an effect on the Lutheran teaching on marriage. Most Lutherans would agree that marriage is one of the special callings that God has for most people in the civil realm. Thus, marriage is a good civil order, which God has ordained for those who want to live in a life-long relationship with a significant other. Traditionally, this other person has been of the opposite sex, but now many Lutherans are convinced that a same-sex partner could also be this life-long companion.⁴³

One basic distinction that the ELCF documents make is between the blessing as a theological concept, meaning an action taken by God, and the secular meaning of blessing as a sign of acceptance. The ELCF documents argue that these two separate meanings of the word should be kept clear, although in common language people often associate them with each other.⁴⁴ On the other hand, it is admitted that the couples asking for a blessing are asking for recognition and acceptance.⁴⁵

Discussion

Previous research shows the change which has occurred in the understanding of sexuality over the past few decades. Older people understand their sexuality in a drastically different way than younger generations do. Sexuality is closely linked with marriage. For younger generations, sexuality is a central part of their identity and self-expression. Also, the understanding of the nature of marriage has changed over time. A mere hundred years ago, marriage was understood foremost as a way to organize issues pertaining to social life and the raising of children. Today, marriage is firstly regarded as an intimate, committed love relationship between two persons.⁴⁶

⁴³ Lutheran World Federation (LWF), *Proposed Guidelines and Processes for Respectful Dialogue on Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality*, 2007.

<https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Exhibit%2010%20Report%20Task%20Force%20English.pdf> (accessed 25 September 2017).

⁴⁴ This has been pointed out as well in ELCF, “The Consequences of the Law Regarding Same-Sex Relationships in the Church”. Emma Audas correctly points out that the meaning of blessing is not clear in the ELCF documents either. See Emma Audas, *Vad vi tror oss veta: En analys av de bakomliggande argumenten för och emot vigsel av samkönade par i Evangelisk-lutherska kyrkan i Finland. – Perhe ja avioliitto muutoksessa*. Toim. Maarit Hytönen. Kirkon tutkimuskeskuksen julkaisu 127. (Tampere: Kirkon tutkimuskeskus, 2017), 103–125.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., *Bishops' Conference Report* (2010), 92-100.

⁴⁶ The emergence of sexuality as a separate category of human existence is the main argument in Michel Foucault's four-volume work *The History of Sexuality* (original French title, *L'Histoire de la sexualité*) (1976); see especially Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality* vol. 2. New York: Vintage Books

These shifts might explain why the need for recognition of sexual identity, particularly in the church, has become such an urgent matter. In the context of Finland, both in the wider society and within the ELCF, the question of same-sex marriage has become a symbol of wider acceptance and recognition of LGBT identity. In the scope of this article, it is not possible to elaborate this notion in depth, but we do claim that the ELCF solution of stating that it accepts an LGBT person fully, but does not recognize their partnership fully, i.e., as an equivalent of marriage, is no longer a satisfactory solution.

Before modernity, a person's identity was largely shaped by their position in society, which was determined already at birth. Today, each person has the same dignity as a human being – and thus has a need for equal recognition. When identities are constructed and not given, recognition from significant others becomes even more important. It is not enough that these identities are legally protected; they need to be positively valued as well.⁴⁷

Most of the interviewees discussed their experiences of recognition in connection with the ELCF. In many cases, this was an experience of misrecognition. For some LGBTI people, the registered partnership as a separate category from marriage was a manifestation of exactly this kind of misrecognition. Furthermore, when the ELCF decides to keep the ritual as a private, free prayer, it consciously places the status of same-sex couples below that of married couples.

The interviewees understood the prayer to be a public ceremony and to be similar to other church ceremonies. The understanding of the prayer ceremony as a public act of recognition of the partnership and a positive acknowledgement of its value indicates that the acts of the church belong to the sphere of interpersonal recognition rather than to the institutional sphere. Thus, to its members, the ELCF and its local congregations are not a faceless institution, such as the state or municipality, but rather a community that is formed by intimate relationships with other persons and with God. The experiences of those interviewed confirm that asking for recognition from the church involves many emotions and feelings, including the fear of being rejected. The ELCF solution, recognizing the individuals but not their most intimate relationship, was at the time considered to be the best possible compromise in a difficult situation. The prayer with and for the couple was considered a pastoral decision – but for the

1985. Ratinen builds on Foucault's theory in his study when he demonstrates the change in the perception of sexuality in Finland over the past decades. Teemu Ratinen, *Synnistä Jumalan lahjaksi. Muuttuva seksuaalisuus ja usko* (From Sin to God's gift. Changing sexuality and faith) (Helsinki: Kirjapaja 2015).

⁴⁷ Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 92, 94.

people concerned, it did not appear to be an explicit act of recognition of a partnership. Ikäheimo and Laitinen pointed out that sometimes an experienced recognition might be objectively a misrecognition, and vice versa. This dynamic is in play here: what the couples experienced as a normative recognition of their marriage (i.e., blessing, wedding ceremony equal to a heterosexual couple's rite) was in fact a private prayer and thus misrecognition of their partnership's status as marriage.

The meaning of a formal blessing is analysed in an article on the Episcopal same-sex rite in the USA: "A formal blessing on the part of the church is both thanksgiving for what happens and petition for its continuation, enhancement, and perfection."⁴⁸ This new Episcopal rite was officially called "The Witnessing and blessing of a lifelong covenant" and it changed the theological understanding of same-sex partnerships in the Episcopal Church. Hefling further writes: "It is collaborative participation in the divine purpose that makes the lifelong union of two persons not only blessable in itself but also a blessing to others."⁴⁹ The Finnish Lutheran bishops clearly did not want to make as strong a statement in favour of same-sex unions as their Episcopal colleagues had done in the USA, and decided to restrict the use of formal blessing in same-sex rituals.

An additional aspect, which is essential in order to understand the results of this study, is whether the prayer ritual happened before or after 2011 when the Pastoral Guidelines were given. Those positive experiences of recognition from prayer rituals that had been conducted before 2011 occurred mainly in Rainbow worship communities. The rituals that were conducted right after the Pastoral Guidelines were given followed the restrictions of the guidelines most carefully and the very last ritual, the blessing of the wedding of Matilda and her wife, was clearly a ritual in which the institutional ELCF showed positive recognition to this same-sex couple.

As theological concepts, one should note that blessing and recognition are different things. The church has recognized marriage as a central institution of society, which is not a right of every individual as such, but that has been regulated both by the civil society and the church.⁵⁰ Placing different relationships in different social categories delivers the message of not 'fully equal

⁴⁸ Charles Hefling, "The new Episcopal same-sex rite: It looks like a wedding", *Christian Century*, 10-11, September 2012.

⁴⁹ Hefling, "The new Episcopal", 11.

⁵⁰ Although the right to marry is one of the universal human rights. See, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, §16. <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>. Accessed 15 February 2018.

recognition', using Laden's term. One difficult balancing act has previously been between recognizing an LGBT individual but at the same time not condoning the practice of homosexuality or living in a same-sex sexual relationship as a legitimate way of life. If we want to consider that the identity of a person is dependent on recognition relationships, it can be claimed that recognizing the person, but not her way of life is not an adequate recognition.

Recognition theories argue that a recognitive relationship is one between two persons/parties. In this sort of interaction one party, the subject, holds power over the other, the object. There has been discussion on whether both the object and subject undergo a transformation when recognition takes place.⁵¹ In this case, would the recognition of the status of same-sex marriage change the identity of the church? In her report, Helander discusses the question of the identity of the church (in this case, the ELCF). She describes the two opposing views of same-sex marriage in the ELCF. For those who hold that marriage is a God-given covenant between a man and a woman, marriage belongs primarily to the sphere of faith. Because marriage is part of the created order of God, it cannot be changed even when the society changes. Thus, the sexual minorities' need of recognition cannot be solved by opening the institution of marriage to same-sex couples. The identity of the church is tied to the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. The other view, according to Helander, is that marriage is an institution (or covenant) between a man and a woman, but a same-sex couple can also enter marriage. According to this view, the Bible needs to be interpreted in light of both the tradition of the church and our times. The church has to ask, "What best promotes Christ", using Luther's term. According to this argument, every teaching of the church has to be evaluated in light of Christ – and in this case, recognition of same-sex marriage would be the way that Christ and his mercy can be present in the life of same-sex couples. The Lutheran theology of marriage is not static, but has changed and can change when the understanding of human being changes. According to Helander, it is clear that there are different understandings of marriage within the ELCF. The primary question is whether the ELCF has to have a single unified understanding of marriage to preserve its identity. Or can it be acknowledged that there are different understandings of marriage and this does not threaten the unity of the church?⁵²

Iser points out that there is a valid question of how we know which struggles for recognition are valid and which are not. Obviously, not every feature of human identity can be equally

⁵¹ Saarinen, *Recognition and Religion*.

⁵² Helander 2017, 66–71.

justified. In the wider discussion within the ELCF and Finnish society in general, the question of same-sex marriage has become a symbol of the much wider question of the recognition of LGBTI identities. As Ikäheimo and Laitinen pointed out, what B takes as an appropriate recognition of herself may in fact be misrecognition. Thus, the interlinkage of the recognition or non-recognition of same-sex marriage and the wider and much more complex issue of recognition of sexual minorities complicate the discussion.

Those persons or groups who ask for recognition, of course, consider their claim to be valid. The identity of a person is constructed in relation to the others close to us and their views, and thus there is a need of recognition of that identity. When the recognition of same-sex marriage is seen as a sign of recognition of sexual minorities, the distinction between a struggle for recognition and strategic struggles needs to be carefully considered. The official ELCF view of not granting the same level of recognition to all couples leads, first, to the experience that minority sexual identity as such is not seen as ‘fully equal’ (here we again apply Laden’s term) to the majority sexual identity. Second, this means that the struggle for recognition of sexual minorities has not been seen as valid, but rather, as a strategic struggle.⁵³ Ikäheimo and Laitinen pointed out that emotions and feelings are important indicators of cases of misrecognition. Feelings and emotions as such are not authoritative, but the subjects of those feelings and emotions need to be respected as communication partners. In this study, the experiences of (mis)recognition of same-sex couples in the ELCF illustrate how the religious community, in this case the ELCF, also needs to take into account in a serious manner the experiences of people, not just the rational, written sources, if and when the community wants to grant recognition to a certain group of people as equals to the rest of the community. The affirmation of the importance of experienced (mis)recognition is the contribution of this study to the theoretical discussion on recognition.

The most important groups with which the interviewed same-sex couples identified themselves were the small Rainbow communities inside the ELCF. Additionally, the data reveal that those rainbow members who are additionally employees of the ELCF – and almost half of our interviewees belonged to this group – found it even more important that their sexual identity was recognized both by their colleagues and by the ELCF as an institution.

⁵³ Iser, “Recognition”.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that recognition has two dimensions: vertical and horizontal. The horizontal dimension includes the need to be recognized both as an individual and as a member of a community. Additionally, the communal dimension in this study had two parts, the more informal Rainbow community and the official, institutional ELCF. Most of the interviewees had experiences of recognition from the informal community but not from the institutional church, the ELCF. The vertical dimension, for most interviewees, was manifested as the need to be recognized by God. When the interviewees described their experience of recognition or misrecognition, different dimensions of recognition were involved. For some, the event of misrecognition took place when the local congregation was hesitant to organize the prayer at all. Laden's distinction between recognition as "basic respect" and "fully equal respect" was found to be a helpful conceptual clarification here. For most, the event of recognition was the actual ceremony where the recognition of the gathered community was strongly experienced.

Over a fifteen-year period, the ELCF formulated and analysed various ways in which the church could react if a same-sex couple asked for recognition in the church. This discussion is still ongoing, despite the changes in secular laws. There were two basic convictions outlined. First, the traditional understanding of marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman. Second, every human being has the same value based on creation as God's image. The ELCF did not want to change either of these convictions. The church wanted to recognize the LGBT individuals and their choice of partnership in the sphere of pastoral care and private prayer. However, they were not ready to apply it to the sphere of dogma, which a ritual in the public worship area (i.e., the Book of Worship), would have signified. For the ecclesial identity of the ELCF, it has been very important to maintain consensus regarding marriage on both the legislative level of the church and within the worship life of the church. For the ELCF, it has been more important to keep marriage as a dogmatic question. It has not followed the LWF, which has regarded marriage as an ethical issue. This has led to a situation where Laden's distinction between recognition as basic respect and as fully equal respect becomes relevant. The ELCF has been willing to grant basic respect to its gay members, but unwilling to grant fully equal respect. In the most recent documentation, it has been proposed that the church could maintain different understandings of marriage and still not lose its unity.

This study affirmed the importance of experiences of (mis)recognition for identifying the valid struggles for recognition in societies, in this case the religious community of the ELCF. Although feelings and emotions cannot as such be authoritative, the subjects of those emotions – in this case the people living in a same-sex partnership – need to be respected as communication partners.

The difficult balancing between the conviction of equal human value of each individual and the understanding of marriage as a social category only for heterosexuals led to same-sex couples experiencing misrecognition as not fully equal members of the church. This has been especially difficult for those who also serve the ELCF as pastors or other employees. Our interviewees are all very committed church members and many are also employees of the church. For them, recognition from the institutional ELCF was very important for their identity both as committed Christians and LGBT individuals. The distinctions between the ELCF as a nationwide church body, the Rainbow communities, local congregations and gathered community become apparent in the interviews. The most meaningful communities for the interviewees were the Rainbow community and the gathered community. They identified the recognitive church with these communities, rather than with the ELCF, according to their own experience. The ELCF as a wider institution was not experienced as a recognition-granting community. From the point of view of recognition, this means that the recognition given in this context remains basic respect and not fully equal respect.

The Pastoral Guidelines of 2011 are still the only guidelines given by the ELCF in spite of the legalization of same-sex marriage by the state. However, more and more people believe that same-sex couples should also have the right to marry. From March 2017 onwards, some pastors have started to conduct same-sex marriages and blessings, consciously against the official view of the ELCF. In six months' time, altogether 50 same-sex marriages or blessings have been conducted.⁵⁴ This new situation would make an interesting further study.

⁵⁴ Olli Seppälä, *Sateenkaariparien kirkollisia vihkimisiä ja siunaamisia jo viitisenkymmentä*, 8 September 2017. <https://www.kotimaa24.fi/artikkeli/sateenkaariparien-kirkollisia-vihkimisia-ja-siunaamisia-jo-viitisenkymmentä/> (accessed 25 September 2017).