



**+1 Podcast**  
*Season 1: Episode 9*  
*Jan Kabatek*

**Medo Pournader:**

Hello and welcome to the +1 Podcast, where we discuss diversity and inclusion in our workplaces at the University of Melbourne. I'm your host, Dr Medo Pournader, Senior Lecturer in Management and Marketing at the Faculty of Business and Economics, University of Melbourne.

In this episode, we host Jan Kabatek, Senior Research Fellow at the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne. I talk to Jan about his influential work on same-sex parenting and the educational performance of children raised by same-sex parents. We also discuss Jan's aspirations for extending the findings of his research on this topic and the implications of his research for legislation. This episode was recorded on the land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

**Medo Pournader:**

Hello, Jan, how are you?

**Jan Kabatek:**

I've just recently returned from my sabbatical and so I'm catching up on a lot of the events that happened around here and also on the developments of my students and teaching and all that sort of stuff. So it's been diverse and exciting.

**Medo Pournader:**

I love that. It has been diverse, no pun intended. Cool. Where did you go for your sabbatical, if you don't mind me asking?

**Jan Kabatek:**

Not at all. So I started in the Netherlands and I spent about two months there. Then I went to the UK. I was there for another two months, and then I was hopping from one place to another for about a month still. And yeah, that was it. Then I returned back.

**Medo Pournader:**

That's great. Did you enjoy it?

**Jan Kabatek:**

It was good, but I really do not want to travel for the foreseeable future. It's been a little bit too much.

**Medo Pournader:**

Why not?

**Jan Kabatek:**

Well, at some point, you just realise that you do not want to live out of a suitcase anymore. You really want to have your base and you want to have your people around so that you can just let off some steam and not always think about where you're going to be next week.

**Medo Pournader:**

No, I know the feeling. I've been travelling a bit more after COVID compared to what I'm used to usually. So yeah, absolutely. I know the feeling. I agree with you. Hopefully, no travels then for you in the future.

**Jan Kabatek:**

That's right. It's going to be quite limited, and I'm glad.

**Medo Pournader:**

So thanks again for accepting our invitation for the podcast. I understand you were supposed to be our very first guest last year, but then we went through this whole drill and had to reschedule the start of the podcast. Then you went on sabbatical. So overall though, I'm really glad that we have you on the podcast, and I know that the topic today is one that I'm personally very passionate about. So without further ado, can you let myself and the audience know what you are working on and its significance, and we'll take the conversation from there.

**Jan Kabatek:**

Oh, absolutely. So I should probably start by saying that I'm a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne. I've been employed for about eight years at the Melbourne Institute, which is a research centre focused on socioeconomic policy. I'm an economist by training, but my research is also branching out to other disciplines such as sociology, demography, and psychiatry. In general, I like to work with researchers that are interested in empirical research using population-level data.

My focus on sexual minorities started pretty early into my stay in Melbourne. The initial impetus for this whole endeavour was the same-sex marriage postal survey in 2017. I'm sure you remember that the

conversations surrounding that survey were quite heated, and I was just trying to listen to the people around me, my friends, listening to their arguments and also their concerns.

One of these days, it was a genuine argument between two of my friends. One of them was pro same-sex marriage, and the other one was unsure. The topic of same-sex parenting necessarily came about, and there was a little bit of an exchange. And one of my friends, the one who was for same-sex marriage, brought up this report which summarised research on the topic of same-sex parenting.

I went into the report, and of course, being an academic, I actually read the studies that were cited in the report. Even though the report was very positive, basically showing that there was no issue with same-sex parenting, I was not happy with the state of the research that was being done. Largely because I didn't really trust the sampling of the studies. There were a lot of small sample studies which were using what is called convenience samples, where you're basically approaching one person and then that person will point you to some other people that you would like to interview later on. This is called snowball sampling.

The obvious problem with that is that you do not know how representative this sample is of the full population. And as such, the critics can always point to this and say, "Well, we don't really trust this because we do not know how you collected the data and what the data actually represents." That was the starting point, and I realised that we can improve on this. I already had access to population-level data from the Netherlands, which is the country where I did my PhD, and I knew that I could look into it because it was not too much of an issue to identify the people who were same-sex parents and then just look at the educational outcomes of their kids. I did that. I did this in one of the afternoons, and lo and behold, I did see that the kids in same-sex parented families are doing better in terms of their educational outcomes than the reference group of different-sex parented families.

**Medo Pournader:**

That's interesting.

**Jan Kabatek:**

Yeah. So this was really exciting, but at the same time, I was slightly worried about this research because I knew that it wouldn't publish very well when it comes to economic journals. And this is not because economic journals would be against same-sex research, but economists have a very high bar when it comes to causality. So they really want to have all the results being causal. And unfortunately, with same-sex research, what usually happens is that causality is unattainable. Basically, the fundamental question, what would happen to this kid if they were growing up in a same-sex family? You can't answer this because there is a selectivity involved in terms of who becomes parents in same-sex families and who becomes parents in different-sex families. I knew this was going to be an issue. And given that I was a very junior member of the faculty, I also knew that I had to focus on publishing in my discipline.

So I put this result on the back burner and produced some other studies, which would be more economics-friendly. But I always had this itch that this is a research that needs to be out. After I published the studies in economics, I wanted to return to it. Fortunately, I am a member of this wonderful centre of excellence, which is called the Life Course Centre. It's the first centre of excellence funded by the Australian Research Council, which is focused predominantly on social sciences. It is

amazing. It brings you together with people from other disciplines. And I knew that if I wanted to publish this, it would have to be an interdisciplinary publication with sociologists, demographers, and other people who would be more interested in this associational evidence.

Fortunately, I got acquainted with a very gifted researcher, Francisco Perales, who goes by the name Paco. Paco, at that point, was a well-established researcher in sociology and demography who had a beautiful portfolio of work on sexual minorities. I pitched him this project, and he was very excited, and I knew that he would be basically the best person to write it with because we were speaking the same quantitative language. We started working on this project. We secured some funding from the Life Course Centre as well to produce this study and some other follow-up studies. And that's basically how the project came about. We wrote it up. Paco is an extremely gifted researcher, as I said. His writing is poetry, it really is.

**Medo Pournader:**

I love that.

**Jan Kabatek:**

He brought a lot of expertise, a lot of positioning, and also a lot of nuances to the arguments that we were making. So eventually, we managed to publish this study in the journal *Demography*. It's one of my favourite papers. It reads so well, it's beautiful.

**Medo Pournader:**

That's great. I'm so glad that you eventually got to work on it and publish it in a top-tier journal. Can you elaborate on the findings of that paper for us? And then in terms of the children of same-sex parents in the Netherlands doing better, what do we mean by "doing better"? What has been measured, and what has been the time span of the data that you had access to? So all those things, I think, might be of interest to our audience here in Australia.

**Jan Kabatek:**

We started with the population of children living in the Netherlands, and we had access to a variety of their educational outcomes. The most salient outcome were the test scores, which were collected at the end of primary school. We had these test scores for kids who were leaving primary school from 2006 onwards. In total, and now I'm not sure whether I'll be perfectly correct with the numbers, but we had about 2,000 children in same-sex parented families and more than a million children in different-sex parented families. We had these outcomes and we also had a lot of information about the background characteristics of these families. So we knew their socioeconomic background, we knew their education. We even knew how they entered the family to start with, which is something that is very important in same-sex research because many children find themselves in same-sex parented families because of the disruption of their biological different-sex family.

So we could control for this, we could account for it and made sure that we were comparing apples with apples as much as we can. And we showed that indeed, when we looked at these test scores, we saw that the kids are outperforming the control group by about 0.1 to 0.2 standard deviations. This is not a

huge effect, but it was definitely significant, and it was meaningful enough because the previous research was, let's say, inconclusive in terms of the consensus about the outcomes of children in same-sex parented families. There was some research which showed that they are doing just as well as the control group, and there was other research which were claiming that they were actually doing much worse. Unfortunately, the field is very politicised, and often you see that the authors of these studies may not have the best interest of science in mind when they're writing these papers. So we were trying to approach the topic from as neutral angle as we could, and this is what we found.

**Medo Pournader:**

That's great. So those other two studies, the one that you mentioned that didn't find any difference, and the one that showed that the children in same-sex families are doing much worse, are they also in the Netherlands or in other countries?

**Jan Kabatek:**

So this is mostly US-based evidence, and there have been a few very well-publicised cases where people were doing research that showed that the children in same-sex parented families are underperforming. But then other teams of researchers went back to the data and reanalysed those data and found that actually, this was a fluke result, which was driven by a bad design of the research.

**Medo Pournader:**

That's unfortunate in research when it happens, specifically for these types of topics that are very sensitive, they're picked up by the media and they might have really serious implications. For example, adoption of children by same-sex parents and overall the public perception of same-sex parenting. What about Australia? Have you done any research in Australia, and is there anything that shows us what's happening with the children in same-sex parent families here?

**Jan Kabatek:**

There are small-scale studies using these conventional samples, and their results are generally positive, but they come with the caveats that I've already mentioned. We are definitely planning to actually look at this in the population-level data provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. We are hoping that this information will become available next year. There's a lot of developments on the data front when it comes to the ABS, and we are getting very excited because the research is almost feasible.

**Medo Pournader:**

That's fantastic. I'm very actually keen to see what the outcome of that research. But I have a lot of questions from the research that you did on the sample from the Netherlands. Why do you think that the children in families with same-sex parents did better? What can possibly explain that outcome?

**Jan Kabatek:**

In this context, I will have to speculate a little bit because we just do not know. The causality is unclear, but I will mention a few things. First of all, there is a selection into becoming a same-sex parent. The people who decide to become parents in same-sex relationships have to be really committed to this

goal. It's a difficult path to follow, usually involving IVF, it costs money, especially in Australia, and it also costs a lot of effort. So, as such, the people who really follow through, they are committed, they want to be as good parents as possible.

**Medo Pournader:**

Like transaction cost economics kind of a way, like this theory that says the more you invest in a transaction, for example, I don't think it's a good comparison to trial adoption with transaction, but in reality, you are investing your time and money because you want it really, and you are investing in it, and it also causes some endowment effect.

**Jan Kabatek:**

Absolutely. I think the analogy works, even though it's a little bit problematic. There's a constraint, and you either go above the constraint and decide, look, this is for me, or you realise that this is too much hassle and you abandon this endeavour altogether. That's basically the positive selection in the sample of same-sex parents. Of course, the other thing is that there is no such thing as an unintended pregnancy when it comes to same-sex parents, right?

**Medo Pournader:**

Yeah, naturally.

**Jan Kabatek:**

So when we think about the control group of what we call the standard families, many people do not become parents by choice, but just because it happens. And as such, there might be slightly less positive selection in that broader pool. That's basically my interpretation of the positive effects in the study that we found.

**Medo Pournader:**

That's great. And I think that provides an interesting view from the parents' side, but also, I think, maybe a suggestion for future research, or if you have any insights from the children's side. So, as you mentioned earlier, these children that are being adopted or are being born through IVF—being born through IVF is a different thing, but I would assume that some of these children are being adopted, and that means that their family of origin wasn't fully functional or for whatever reason, as you mentioned, some kind of disruption, they were adopted by same-sex parents. And that disruption might have some impact on the child, depending on—there are so many variables—how old is the child, what kind of disruption, what was the background, how was the child affected by that trauma? So, from the child's perspective, have there been any studies on what children say? I'm quite keen to know.

**Jan Kabatek:**

There has been some research. It's mostly qualitative research, which is about testimonies. And yes, there's definitely a lot of heterogeneity. I have to say that adoption is still a very rare outcome relative to the number of kids that enter same-sex families through IVF. This is the case in the Netherlands. This

is also the case in Australia. So for these two countries, we do not really know too much, but in the US, adoption is much more common. And then, yes, you can find these studies which will give you the testimonies of kids in same-sex parented families.

**Medo Pournader:**

Do you have any insights into those studies?

**Jan Kabatek:**

Not much, to be honest. We didn't really engage with that scholarship because, for better or worse, we didn't want to make too strong claims either way.

**Medo Pournader:**

Sure. So what are your plans for extending this study? How would you go about it? What would be the next samples? Are you focusing on Australia? What other aspects are you looking at? Can you let us know?

**Jan Kabatek:**

Yes, I can. So there's one potential research project which will become possible in Australia in the near future. And that's not just the comparison of the population of different-sex and same-sex families, but you can go a little bit one step deeper, if you will, you can tease out of all different-sex families who went for the IVFs, who went for the adoptions. Because by doing that, you are eliminating these pregnancies by chance, these unintended situations. And as such, I believe that these parents would be much more comparable to the same-sex parents.

Now, this is a little bit of a tricky thing to do. We are still not having perfectly comparable samples. You are still comparing people who are same-sex couples with people who potentially have problems with conceiving. And as such, there can be all other problems that are kind of obfuscating the comparability of the two samples.

But at the same time, people seem to be really interested in this comparison, and I think that it's worthwhile to do, but it also kind of comes with a little bit of uncertainty in terms of what you actually find. And the researchers into same-sex issues have to be okay with that. Maybe not all of the results that they find will be positive and contributing to the welfare of the community. And that can be difficult for many. I still feel that it's worthwhile because even if you find negative results, it doesn't mean that something is fundamentally wrong. It's rather pointing to an issue that we might want to address in the future. So that will be the obvious research project to pursue in the Australian context.

**Medo Pournader:**

That sounds great. And one realistic thing to think about, many different-sex families might have a lot of issues in their own households, and I think there is still this heightened level of stigma against same-sex couples and the fact that they need to, not that they have to, but for public perception of same-sex couples and their children, they need to overcome these many hurdles of showing, "No, we are good

parents,” for example. So all I’m saying is that these grounds are not equal. The perception is still not very positive surrounding same-sex couples.

Sounds quite interesting. And with respect to that, I’m going to be very nerdy, the dependent variable that you used, the test score in the Netherlands study that you investigated. What other variables can be considered or should be considered, if any, to give a more holistic picture? I assume that I can do quite well academically, and that might be a result of having psychological safety or not necessarily—it can be a result of so many other things. So I’m thinking, could there be other variables there that might give a 3D image of child well-being in their household?

**Jan Kabatek:**

Absolutely. So in our study, we also looked at other outcomes, but they were only educational. We also looked at high school graduation rates, enrolment into colleges. We also looked at this interesting outcome called grade retention, which means whether the child is repeating a grade or not. This has been quite popular in previous scholarship, especially in the US. And funnily enough, it’s the only outcome for which we didn’t find a positive effect corresponding to those kids in same-sex parented families. Now, this may mean that it’s not really clear whether repeating a grade is a positive or negative situation.

In terms of other outcomes, you can always think of indicators of subjective well-being. The issue with that is that you need a very big sample and you need a survey dataset because when it comes to all these population registers, nobody’s tracking subjective well-being. The best you can do is look at, for example, utilisation of mental health services, prescriptions for depression, and that sort of stuff. But once again, we are not really sure whether the fact that somebody is being treated for depression is a signal that this child is actually suffering relative to the control group, if in the control group the depression is just left untreated. So all these things become pretty tricky because we are kind of in the nexus of either having a big sample but very poor outcomes or having great outcomes, but a very small and potentially non-representative sample.

**Medo Pournader:**

But what about a qualitative study? Because I can totally understand that there are so many unwanted variables in these types of studies that might affect the outcome—but what about, is it possible or do you think it’s a good route to pursue just talking to the parents and the children of those families and then seeing what the sentiments are or not?

**Jan Kabatek:**

I think it’s definitely worthwhile. Now, qualitative research will not solve the issues that I have just outlined. There’s still going to be selectivity, there’s still going to be issues with omitted variables, but it can point us to specific directions. Because if you hear in this qualitative interview that the parents are concerned about this particular outcome, or they’re very happy that the child is doing a specific activity or doing a specific thing in school, then you can try to capture it into more quantitative research as well. So I always think of qualitative research as the guiding light of the quantitative researcher because it can basically tell you where to look.

**Medo Pournader:**

Sounds exciting. I know that, as you mentioned, there isn't much that has been done, especially in Australia, on same-sex parenting and how it's going. And I very much look forward to seeing more research on that. And may I ask if there is any interest for funding this type of research by the government or by any other internal or external bodies on the topic?

**Jan Kabatek:**

I don't think that there are any explicit calls for same-sex research. You can always go through the general grant applications, which do not really have a specific attribute or goal in mind. But yeah, I think that there's definitely a space for it and potentially also an interest, but that still needs to be filled by potential funders.

**Medo Pournader:**

No, fair enough. Hopefully. I'll cross my fingers. And if you wanted to, for this type of research, how can the public be involved? People who are listening to this recording and are interested to get in touch, how and what can be done in order to help your research?

**Jan Kabatek:**

So it depends on what people have in mind. I've been hearing a lot from same-sex families and same-sex parents about their experiences. And I'm always happy to take the call or read an email from a person who's affected by the research that we are doing. And we had some really pleasant interactions. Other than that, if you want to see more research on same-sex topics, then I suppose it might be worthwhile to talk to your representatives and highlight that this is something that needs to be explicitly funded and acknowledged by the Australian Research Council and other institutions.

**Medo Pournader:**

ARC being the Australian Research Council.

**Jan Kabatek:**

So there are multiple ways, and I'm all for it.

**Medo Pournader:**

Great. Fantastic. On diversity and inclusion topics, are there any activities, research, or projects that you are currently working on that you would like to share on the podcast?

**Jan Kabatek:**

So there's a bunch of things. For me right now, diversity and inclusion relate mostly to my engaged research—basically the stuff that I'm doing surrounding the academic studies that I have published.

Recently, we were invited to talk at the parliament of my home country, the Czech Republic, which is currently considering whether to approve same-sex marriage.

**Medo Pournader:**

Fantastic.

**Jan Kabatek:**

So we outlined the state of the research, we presented our results, and the law made it through the first hearing, which is great, but now it still needs to go through the second hearing and then the Senate. And hopefully, at the end of this process, we will have same-sex marriage equality in the Czech Republic.

**Medo Pournader:**

That's awesome. Fingers crossed. And it's great to hear that you are making such a big impact. With everything that's going on in some countries in Europe like Italy, I've heard that they have reversed some conditions of their marriage equality, which is really disappointing. It's great that other countries, at least the Czech Republic, that you have just mentioned—with your help—they're making good progress, and fingers crossed for you to get to the finish line.

**Jan Kabatek:**

As you can imagine, the debate is still very messy, and sometimes it's a little bit upsetting because even our own research can be contorted into something that's absolutely preposterous. So yeah, one of the things that we have to be always mindful of is being in control of the message. And that's why we also do a lot of media pieces and non-technical summaries, engaging the public, engaging the policymakers, because otherwise, you might be just exploited by agents that do not have the best interests of any community in mind.

**Medo Pournader:**

And for such a topic where, for good or bad, there are really extreme views, and some are religious, some are just personal views, and it affects people's lives, it makes it a really sensitive topic. I'm going to ask you my final question, and this is a common question that I ask all the guests in the +1 Podcast Series. How do you think the future looks like?

**Jan Kabatek:**

The future for? Okay, so let me think about, how am I supposed to answer this?

**Medo Pournader:**

Go wild.

**Jan Kabatek:**

I think the future for sexual minorities is bright. It is going to be a long way, but we are, step by step, moving to a situation where sexual minorities are destigmatised and they're accepted as members of the community. I think this has been happening with the gay community already, and we are still waiting for the other parts of the spectrum, including trans people and potentially other members, to be fully acknowledged and respected. But we're going to get there. So I think that the future is bright, but we do have to do this research to point out that ultimately there's no issue. The children growing up in these families are doing fine, there's no societal detriment to this development. And hopefully, people will hear that and understand that.

**Medo Pournader:**

Jan, thank you so much for being our guest today. I hope we get to have you again on the podcast and listening to the fantastic outcomes of your future research. As I mentioned, this topic is close to my heart, and if we can help in any way, let us know. Thank you.

**Jan Kabatek:**

My pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

**Medo Pournader:**

Thank you for listening, and please don't forget to subscribe to the podcast series. Please also reach out, let us know what you think, and whether you'd like to contribute to +1 Podcast Series.