HOMOPARENTALITY IN ITALY: MYTH OF STIGMATISATION

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This article addresses a widespread argument about "homoparental families" in public discussions in Italy, according to which homosexuals should not be allowed to have children, not just because it is plainly immoral, but also because their offsprings will be subjected to stigmatisation. The argument "for the good of the children" is captious: a possible discrimination due to the parents' sexual orientation (a diversity comparable to being non-white, fat, near-sighted or gender-nonconforming) is used to motivate further discrimination. The same argumentation has found its way also into Italian law; since 2004 it prohibits assisted insemination outside of cohabiting heterosexual couples (l. 40/2004 on artificial procreation). The law was adopted in a social environment with growingly positive attitudes towards open expressions of homosexuality – which is an important change in comparison to the pre-LGBT movement years before the eighties.

Legal issues

From the nineties onwards the surveys in Italy show an oscillating trend regarding the approval of homosexual marriage and a declining one regarding the right of same-sex couples to adopt children. Unfortunately there are no older data available, which would enable long-term comparison of attitudes, and that is because issues such as gay and lesbian families and same-sex marriage were absolutely unthinkable before the contemporary LGBT movement.

In the following tables results from various research measuring attitudes towards different aspects of the legal recognition of same-sex couples and families are presented and, if available, compared with the average result for EU countries. Italy is constantly under the European mean, and has a rather mixed trend in acceptance of same-sex marriage and other forms of legal recognition for same-sex couples, although ultimately the acceptance is growing, except for the right of same-sex cou-

ples to adopt, which is not even on the agenda of the LGBT movement in Italy. At first the support for such adoptions was growing and it is now declining.

Table 1: Support for the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships in Italy (1993–2009).

Item	Percent in favour	Source and year
Marriage for persons of the same sex	47% (57% EU-15)	Gallup 1993[1]
Resolution of E.U. Parliament asking for marriage or an analogous form for persons of the same sex	37%	Doxa 1994[2]
Civil marriage for same-sex partners	51.6%	Eurispes 2003[3]
Homosexual marriage (total)	31.6%	Demos-Eurisko 2004[4]
Homosexual marriage (18 to 24 years)	40.2%	Demos-Eurisko 2004
Homosexual marriage (55 to 64 years)	17%	Demos-Eurisko 2004
Marriage for persons of the same sex	37%	Ipsos 2005 (July)[5]
Registered unions for same-sex partners	31%	Eurisko 2005[6] (September)
Marriage for same-sex partners	29%	Eurisko 2005 (September)
Marriage for same-sex partners	31% (44% EU-25)	Eurobarometer 2006
Any form of recognition of same-sex partners	58.9%	Eurispes 2009[7]
Civil marriage for same-sex partners	40.4%	Eurispes 2009

Source:

(1) See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1651/gay-lesbian-rights.aspx> (8 August 2011).
(2) See <http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/1994/febbraio/10/nozze_fra_gay_forse_figli_co_0_9402104709.shtml> (8 August 2011).
(3) See <http://www.arcigaymilano.org/dosart.asp?ID=3816> (8 August 2011).
(4) See <http://www.repubblica.it/2004/j/sezioni/cronaca/mammegay/sondadem/sondadem.html> (8 August 2011).
(5) See <http://www2.agcom.it/sondaggi/dox/2005/IPSOS_08_07_05.doc> (8 August 2011).
(6) See <http://www.repubblica.it/2005/i/sezioni/politica/prodipacs/itafavo/itafavo.html> (8 August 2011).
(7) See <http://www.eurispes.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=175:gay-pride-orgoglio-e-pregiudizi&catid=40:comunicati-stampa&Itemid=135> (8 August 2011).

Table 2: Social support for the right of same-sex partners to adopt jointly (1993–2009).

Item	Percent in favour	Source and year
Adoption for same-sex partners	25% (42% EU-15)	Gallup 1993
Adoption for same-sex partners (female respondents)	37%	Doxa 1994
Adoption for same-sex partners (male respondents)	23%	Doxa 1994
Adoption for same-sex partners	36.6%	Eurispes 2003
Adoption for same-sex partners	21.2%	Demos-Eurisko 2004
Adoption for same-sex partners	26%	Ipsos 2005 (July)
Adoption for same-sex partners	24% (35% EU-25)	Eurobarometer 2006
Adoption for same-sex partners	19%	Eurispes 2009

The Gallup poll about gay marriage and adoption by homosexuals in 2003 was surprisingly positive, given that the question of gay marriage was not on the political floor at that time, not in Italy nor anywhere else in Europe, except for the Netherlands and Belgium, where same-sex marriage was introduced in 2001 and 2003 respectively. In other European countries where same-sex partnerships were recognised by that time, gays and lesbians were not granted the same rights as heterosexual married couples. Furthermore the institution was not called "marriage". The positive response in 2003 was thus most probably related primarily to the heated debate in the United States.

In this survey, women turned out to be more in favour of the rights of homosexuals than men, and so were the more educated, the leftists and the young in comparison with the opposite categories. The positive result was replicated in the poll conducted by the institute Eurispes[1] in 2003 (N=2000), when the percent in favour of marriage and adoption grew to an absolute majority. It confirmed the trend of growing acceptance of homosexuality among the young traced by the surveys of the Iard institute (Buzzi, Cavalli and De Lillo 2002, 2007).

1 See <http://www.arcigaymilano.org/dosart.asp?ID=3816> (8 August 2011).

Social acceptance

A study on moral attitudes towards homosexuality, conducted among 4500 Italians aged 18–74 by the Catholic University in Milan (Cesareo 1995), showed these results:

Table 3: Answers to the question: "We will present you a series of behaviours that some people consider morally unacceptable. How much do you condemn them?" (Source: Cesareo 1995, 314–316) [4]

	Degree of condemnation (%)	Mean	Female	Male
To have homosexual experiences	None or little	38.2	40.8	35.6
	Fairly	14.8	13.9	15.8
	Much	46.9	45.3	48.6

The Iard study on (15–24 years old) youth has gathered data from 1983 to 2007 in six waves, with quota samples. The questions were threefold: if homosexual experiences were thought to be criticised by society, if the respondent criticises them, and if they could think of having a homosexual experience themselves. The acceptance of homosexual relations by the youth reached the lowest point in the first half of the nineties, probably due to the AIDS crisis, and it now has a positive trend, with the highest level of acceptance expressed in 2007 though with an older sample (15–34 year old). The most recent Iard study was actually conducted in 2007 with a sample not comparable with the others. The results showed that 46% of the respondents found homosexuality morally admissible, and nearly 12% could think of having such an experience themselves (Buzzi, Cavalli and De Lillo 2007).

Table 4: Positive answers by 15–24 years old. (Source: Buzzi, Cavalli and De Lillo 2002)

	1983	1987	1992	1996	2000
Do you think homosexual experiences are criticised by society?	88.2%	91.6%	91.5%	89.9%	82.7%
Do you criticise homosexual experiences?	36.7%	30.9%	40.8%	49.5%	47.3%
Could you think of having a homosexual experience?	10.8%	5.2%	4.4%	7.4%	9.5%

Previous results: minority stress

Despite of changes in the social environment, stigmatisation and discrimination towards children of openly homosexual couples is one of the most quoted arguments in public discourses in Italy about families called "homoparental". In fact there is a declining trend in support for same-sex adoptions, which remain illegal in Italy. Existing homoparental families are constituted by singles and couples where one person is a biological parent of the child. These children were often born in a previous heterosexual union. The politicians and some "experts", cited by media, claimed that these families are isolated and emarginated from society, and children in a "homoparental" family suffer, so much so that legislators have both the obligation to prevent the establishment of new such families and the right not to recognise the existing ones (for a detailed discussion on media representations of homoparentality see Trappolin 2009).

There are some critical points showed by previous research about the relationships of homoparental families with their social environment. These families were exposed to stress, which was also found at workplace and is associated with one's disclosure of sexual orientation and problems with the extended families (Hequembourg and Farrell 1999), though, on the other hand, in the Netherlands Bos et al. (2004a) did not find different use of formal and informal social support in child rearing among two groups of lesbian-planned families and heterosexual families.

Anderssen et al. (2002) in a review of nine studies, conducted between 1978 and 2000 on outcomes for children having lesbian or gay parents, concluded that children of lesbian mothers show low levels of stigmatisation and are generally not more stigmatised than other children, even if children fear they could be, and act in order to prevent teasing. The review includes the comparative study by Golombok et al. (1983) and its follow up (Tasker and Golombok 1997), where some difference was assessed: male offsprings of lesbian mothers were teased more often than offsprings of heterosexuals, with the motive of being gay themselves.

A review of 18 research studies on the health and other outcomes for children born through assisted reproduction into various types of families concluded that: "Despite the significant level of bullying, children in lesbian and gay families develop effective peer relationships. It is also surprising that these children have the same levels of emotional functioning as other children and appear to be in some way resisting the

common negative mental health consequences of being bullied and discriminated against. One possible explanation for this level of resilience is that the bullying is not directly about the children's own identity, but rather about their parents' identity. [...] A more global explanation is that lesbian and gay parents are very effectively assisting their children to deal with bullying at school" (McNair 2004, 63). A more recent study showed equal levels of peer stigmatisation and victimisation in matching groups of 18 children of lesbian and heterosexual couples (not belonging to ethnic minorities) (Rivers et al. 2007).

The critical points found in previous research can be conceptualised as deriving from minority stress (Meyer 1995). In sociological and psychological literature (Bos et al. 2004b) minority stress is defined with these dimensions: (1) rejection, social isolation; (2) stigmatisation; (3) internalised homophobia (or racism, anti-Semitism).

In this article I will present qualitative results about the first two, the social dimensions of the minority stress: (1) rejection and social isolation and (2) stigmatisation. I will put aside the internalised homophobia dimension, which can be more properly explored by psychological research tools. Moreover, the social dimensions are the test variables for the amount of the minority stress which can be allocated to internalised homophobia. In a study of 256 gay and lesbian families in the US, for example, Johnson and O'Connor (2001) found that lesbians and gays becoming parents expect more negative reactions (even in a very high measure) from families of origin and employers than what effectively happens when they become parents.

Composition of the sample

In our research the sample consists of 25 homosexuals,[2] 23 women and 2 men living in a total of 17 families in Central-Northern Italy.[3] They were interviewed with semi-structured interviews.[4] All the respondents are ethnic Italian and were born in Italy.

2 In the research interviews there were no specific questions asked about the self-definition of respondents' identity. I use the term "homosexual" to include both, gay men and lesbian women.

3 Just one woman lived abroad, but was born in Central Italy.

4 Excerpts from interviews, thematically presented, can be read in Italian on www.danieladanna.it, under the title *Fonti della ricerca sulle famiglie omogenitoriali*, edited by Daniela Danna.

The sample is a self-selected sample of people answering to an ad for a research on the experiences of "homoparental" families with the external world. The ad was published in a gay magazine in 2006, it appeared on various web sites and was distributed in mailing lists.

In the interviews the respondents were asked about their experiences and the relationship with their families of origin, with their neighbours, their friends, with the health system, schools, and workplace.

Women and men, who replied to the ad, were in a relationship with a person of the same sex at the time of the interviewing (autumn 2006) or they had such a relationship before they became single. Thus the composition of the families, included in the research, varied very much. Within the sample there are singles and people who have a same-sex relationship, ranging from "just started" to ten years of living together. Some couples wanted their own children, some women raised children on their own, or decided to separate from the biological father of their children at different ages. The age range goes from the very early stage of pregnancy to the child's 14th year. Most children of the lesbian mothers interviewed have a known father.

Six families had children that were born in a previous marriage, among which there is the gay couple interviewed, with a daughter growing up with the father's partner as the "third parent".

Nine families have children born to a lesbian couple, and three of them have since separated, among which are the mothers of a child who had been adopted abroad by her foreign partner. A child has been conceived in a heterosexual union but has grown up with the mother and her partner (in this case the father is the "third parent"), and another child has grown up without the full participation in parenting by the mother's partner. The women with planned families are younger and more urban than those with reconstructed families. We distinguish between "reconstructed families", where the different-sex parents separated and one of them entered into a same-sex family, and "planned families", where the mother(s) were in a lesbian relationship.

The geographic composition of the sample was the following: four families lived in big cities (in Rome or Milan); three in middle-sized cities, seven in small towns, two in the countryside, and one abroad.

In previous research, a decade ago, I interviewed 52 lesbian mothers from all over Italy (Danna 1998). The sample was composed in a very different way. Women were older, in many cases born in the South and having migrated to the North of Italy. Nearly all women decided to be in a relationship with another woman after having had children within a het-

erosexual union, while in the present research this group has become a minority.

The time of "arrival" into a lesbian relationship has shortened compared to ten years ago. Nowadays women living even in small places, or growing up and living in a very traditionalist environment, are able to discover their homosexuality in the context of a more positive light due to mass media reporting on homosexuality and due to the internet. The latter gives the possibility of immediate contact with other homosexuals, as Immacolata (45)[5] pointed out: "The thing [homosexuality] did not have the terrible aspect that my environment and culture had instilled me, so I had the possibility of trying to make contacts with people who could share this kind of experience."

The age of children living with these families varied from 9 months to 18 years, with a mean age of about 7 years. Children born into a lesbian relationship were much younger than those born in a previous heterosexual relationship, and their age varied between 9 months and 7 years. There has been one formal interview and some informal exchanges of opinions with the children themselves.

In the interviews we touched upon issues such as the relationship of each parent with their families of origin, neighbors, medical staff, schools, work and friends. We have also discussed how the parents talk to their children about homosexuality, and if the children are aware that their parents are homosexual. According to previous (foreign) research findings lesbian mothers feel more at ease than heterosexual mothers to talk with their children about sex and are more tolerant towards manifestations of their children's sexual orientation, whatever it be (Tasker, Golombok 1997; Golombok 2000).

As the number of gay fathers in the sample is very small no gender comparison is possible. The small number of gay fathers reflects the low number of fathers that ask for shared or exclusive custody. The two men interviewed were a couple, one had shared custody of his daughter.

In most thematic sections I have not analysed the results according to the different ways of having become a parent: self-insemination, medically assisted insemination, previous marriages, adoption. The reason for this is that these aspects are not particularly important for the object of this study, which explores stigmatisation and discrimination.

5 All the names of the respondents are changed.

Results

Self-presentation strategies

Homosexuals belong to a minority that is not always immediately visible and recognisable. The possibility of "passing" as a heterosexual is always open: the decision of becoming visible as a gay or a lesbian (parent) is taken in very conscious way, and in many situations invisibility can be judged as a better strategy, even for women who are otherwise known as lesbians. It is easy to accept the presumption of heterosexuality that people have.[6]

Do the respondents introduce their family in its real composition, as lesbian and gay parents, especially in the reconstructed families where the same-sex partner is a "third parent"? Does a true self-presentation happen in every circumstance? Answers to these questions are important in order to examine the reactions of various environments to the diversity of the homoparental families. The research showed that the distinction between the nine "planned families" and the six "reconstructed families" (including the family with the gay fathers) is important as it influences the strategies of self-presentation. Furthermore this distinction also reflects the age differences and the urban/rural differences in the place of birth.

Only very few respondents never talk about their homosexuality to anyone. However, the research showed that the mothers and their partners in reconstructed families are more reticent in introducing their family as "homoparental". In planned families the visibility is bigger, especially with the extended family and at the workplace. In casual social interactions, both groups do not generally care about presenting their true family composition, and do not correct the "heterosexuality presumption". The effectiveness of this strategy is nevertheless doubted by a couple of new mothers who still practice it, but intend to come out more frequently. They do not want their kids to have a "double life": "Now that we have kids we must be more courageous" (Filippa, 37). But they do not plan to be out in every circumstance: "There are some people with whom I am not sure that this kind of communication could be helpful, so I am embarrassed, torn between the feeling that I need to come out and the need to protect my kids" (Marta, 44).

Most respondents expressed a strong rejection of a self-presentation as "*lesbica*" (lesbian): "I certainly do not introduce myself like: 'Good

6 Of course, multiple diversities are possible, but they were not present in my sample.

morning, I am a lesbian.'" (Assunta, 37); "I am not going around putting it on a flag, but I do not hide it either" (Veronica, 42). On the other hand, they reported talking with ease about the relationship with their partner. The solution they have employed was not to use the word "lesbica", which reflects a social stigma (though it is also used in the lesbian community), but rather to correct the presumption of heterosexuality by saying "la mia compagna" ("my partner", feminine in Italian): "It always comes naturally, when you speak you say *la mia compagna* instead of *il mio compagno*, there is no further need to declare it" (Gina, 40).

Others talked about some kind of a training that one needs in order to get used to presenting the same-sex relationship as something natural. The training is needed in order to unlearn the internalised homophobia. "What I present as natural, is accepted as such also by the others" (Renzo, 36).

Reactions to coming out

Positive reactions to coming out were prevalent. Respondents are conscious that people can show a façade of social convenience, under which they do not truly accept homoparental families:

> Probably there is an answer which is collective, cultural, ideological, then there is an answer based on the personal relationship, which is different. I would not be surprised if the same people who attend our centre, our friends, if asked by a journalist about what they think about homosexual families, would doubt our capacity to be good parents, or they would say that this is not a good thing. Because the levels are different: on one level there is the relationship, the contact, and the certainty that this person is a friend, and you know that she is behaving well. This is something different from the abstract 'homosexual family' (Angelica, 38).

This diffused façade of social acceptance is nevertheless enough to guarantee a quiet life: no respondents reported serious episodes of discrimination. The worst thing reported in our research was one case of aggression (which will be discussed in detail later) and a couple of incidents which included mocking by peers during early adolescence: "He was targeted by his cousins because the story of the mother together with another woman had come out, and he was mocked" (Immacolata, 45). Discomfort was expressed about two children: a boy in primary school is at unease because he does not know his father, and a teenage girl (personally interviewed) felt isolated because she could not freely talk about her family with her peers, judging them too prejudiced and aggressive against all forms of diversity.

What is homosexuality?

Nearly all the respondents talked about homosexuality to their children, but not everyone talked about homophobia, probably since it is difficult to talk about dangers and bad experiences. Contrary to expectations, all the respondents – not only those with a longer history of same-sex relationships – felt at ease with answering the questions about homosexuality that children sooner or later ask in different forms, such as: what is the meaning of the word that they have heard for the first time (lesbian, gay, homosexual ...), why are there gender-non-conforming people (for example, the singer Elton John dressing as a woman), whether only a man and a woman can get married or two women or two men can get married, too, and so on.

Nearly all respondents reported having presented homosexuality in a positive light. Especially in the reconstructed families, where children are older, the positive consideration of homosexuality sometimes clashed with the prejudice, expressed by, for example, the separated father.

In the interviews the respondents expressed a strongly felt dilemma how to convey to children the reality of homophobia:

> We were aware that the only way to help her was to show her our homosexuality in a positive way. Sooner or later, there will be somebody who'll call her the daughter of a *rotto in culo* [an offensive Italian term for gay man], and we wanted to come to that moment knowing that she would have all the elements to face the thing. We did not say anything to her, because to talk about it was to mark it as an abnormality. We lived the thing in front of her without hiding, and leaving her the time to absorb it (Carmelo, 36).

In the case of a woman having a "long coming out" in the place where she lived as a heterosexual married woman, the dilemma was especially difficult, as it was connected with what the couple would say or hide to the outside world: "How can my son introduce my partner to the outside world, if I don't do it? He lives not really like a double life ... but he has two realities" (Immacolata, 45).

Some of these children became defenders of homosexuality, fighters against homophobia: three of them defended schoolmates from accusations of being effeminate, and six had a positive stance towards homosexuals. Only one boy, growing up with two women and recognised by the father when he was three years old, had a negative stance about homosexuality at the time of the interview (10 years old, more details later). In five families children were too small to have a proper judgment on the question.

The family of origin

The respondents reported a great variety of experiences – from very problematic to idyllic – about their relationship with the family of origin. However this issue is neither particularly meaningful nor important, since the respondents do not depend on the family of origin any longer, and in cases of conflicts a certain *modus vivendi* can be established over time.

Relationships with the family of origin can be modified by births of grandchildren/nephews both in a positive and in a negative way. The positive stories were prevalent: the grandfathers and grandmothers helped out with the children, who also spent holidays and other memorable moments with their grandparents.

Eight families had a good relationship with their families of origin: the parents of the mothers recognised the family as such. Three families were in a somewhat good relationship with them; in one case the relationship was bad, and the birth of a child had worsened it; in three cases the respondents could not answer the question (in one the parents had passed away). In two cases relationships were different depending on the particular member of the family of origin; in one case the relationship improved with the birth of a child.

The neighbours

The reported reactions from neighbours were positive or indifferent. As written above, the strategies of self-presentation varied: many left it to the imagination and intelligence of their neighbours to figure out that they are lesbians with children. The neighbours' children are generally positively impressed by seeing a family of two mothers. Also heterosexual mothers befriended with the respondents expressed positive judgments, noticing the advantages of a situation where two women share the care work: "They envy us, and they tell us: 'My husband, that *coglione* [Italian derogatory word for a stupid person], is always stuck to the sofa'" (Giannina, 50); "We are receiving all the vents of the heterosexual mothers" (Elena, 48).

Interestingly enough the most frequently reported atmosphere in small villages was a welcoming one, despite the presumption that people in rural areas hold more negative attitudes towards homosexuals than in the anonymity of big cities:

> The three of us, we always went out and many times we took our daughters by the hand. The province can give you these unexpected gifts … I am convinced that it is like

> that because these small centres have a centuries-long habit of self-protection, and they encompass everything that comes from the outside (Carmelo, 36).

The sense of common belonging to the local dimension, the reciprocal acknowledgement among inhabitants of the same small place, often with family ties, seems stronger than homophobia.

Other interviewed women, living in a working class neighborhood of a big town, had a painful notion of their diversity, and how dangerous it was to express it:

> Yes, you live in freedom, but some times you are very restrained, there are many consequences, you cannot be free as you like. We are free at home, even in front of him [the son] if we want to hug, we do not hide (respecting our intimacy). At the campsite [which was attended by members of the extended family and neighbours] I must always pay attention to how I position myself: not to close to her… I do not feel free (Nicoletta, 30).

On the other hand, a working class neighborhood of another big city positively surprised one of the women interviewed, who was also one of the very first to have made recourse to artificial insemination:

> I remember how anxious I was going out of our apartment the day when the belly began to show. We lived in a housing project with 120 apartments and were befriended with one or two people, and did not get along very well with the others, and nobody knew it, maybe just this friend of ours. I was in anguish about what would happen, because it was not just a thing between us anymore, it was becoming a social thing, and I must say that everything went very well, they welcomed us (Carola, 39).

Doctors and other medical personnel

Examining the relationships in this area is more pertinent to couples who decided to have kids together. The response of medical staff to the self-presentation of two mothers has always been positive. Apart from the refusal of a gynecologist to follow the pregnancy of a couple obtained with artificial insemination abroad, all the other gynecologists and nurses, obstetricians, pediatricians that the respondents have professionally met, in most cases did not raise an eyebrow at the self-presentation of the two mothers. One nurse was sincerely sorry for not being able to put both names on the birth certificate of the child.

Among families with children born into the lesbian couple, nearly all were treated as couples, with the partner of the woman in labour reportedly treated the same way as fathers would be – except from one episode, which occurred also due to the fact that the same-sex relationship had

not been presented to the medical staff: "I was hurt by the fact that the obstetricians came out with the twins, and asked: 'Who is the father? We are giving them to the father', and I told them 'You can give them to me'. 'No.' And they kept them, they only showed them to all the members of the family" (Marta, 37).

Psychologists

Maybe it is just a coincidence, but the only two occasions in the interviews when meetings with psychologists were mentioned were both problematic. The children involved were from two different families – both were teenagers born into previous marriage. A school psychologist was contacted by a 16 year old girl herself for a problem not related to her family situation: "Among all the things he asked me, there was the composition of my family, and I saw he was struck. After an hour of counselling he said that my family was sick, that I was a monster, no surprise I was in an existential crisis" (Teresa, 18). The same psychologist also talked in this girl's class about the supposed bad sides of homoparental families. In another case, a girl, who is, according to her parents, somewhat shy, was labelled as problematic, just at the time when the school psychologist and teachers were informed about her family situation.

Schools

The distinction between the reconstructed and planned families turned out to be very meaningful in the context of schools: all the co-mothers in planned families have presented themselves as members of homoparental families, starting with day nursery and at all other levels of schooling attended by their children – except for one woman who presents herself in public as a friend of the mother, with whom she has been raising up a son since he was born (but the child was conceived in a previous heterosexual union). In contrast, none of the women from the reconstructed families presented themselves as members of homoparental families to the school authorities.

Lesbian mothers in planned families want to "enlighten" the teachers, whom they do not expect to have previous experience with this kind of situation: "It is important that in the moment when my child says something like 'My friend has two mothers', the teacher doesn't get embarrassed. He knows perfectly well that he is right, he knows many children with two mothers" (Mimma, 37).

Reactions were not bad in this area either, even if the good intentions of the teachers to include in their teaching different family situations, clashed with the school programmes of the Ministry of Education, presenting "the family" in a very normative way: there are always two parents, male and female, four grandparents, uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters – who can or cannot be present in the daily experiences of the children.

Working places

At work, the great majority of mothers and fathers were open on the subject of their family situation. The majority of people at work knew about their same-sex relationship and about their children, except for the three cases where not everybody at work knew it, and five cases where no colleague knew about it. Among these are two women who have spent together twenty years of parenting, and two who have shared four years of parenting.

In the context of workplace those who have talked about their homosexuality did not encounter negative reactions: "I told my colleagues: 'Look, I am like that'. One confessed to me that he suspected it" (Grazia, 47). Sometimes the issue was not openly talked about: "I knew that everyone knew, but nobody ever asked. It is a situation that I am a bit sorry about, you dodge somehow. You do not ask, I do not tell. They knew, when I had a partner they talked in the plural *voi* ["you", having no gender], and after the kid was born, even more so" (Mimma, 37). The condition of work precariousness pushes towards reticence:

> In my working place, they do not know it. I have a temporary contract, I change workplace often. I tend to be open, I talk about this other person in my life. It is the person I am living with, she is my partner for 10 years. You talk, but you limit yourself. (Marta, 44)

Friends

People we befriend are generally supportive of our choices. Sometimes in the friends' group subtly discriminatory stances can be discovered:

> Nearly always we have had positive stuff [reactions], but I am very cautious, there are many levels where you can say that you are more or less satisfied. This couple of our friends, husband and wife, both very kind, they adore us, love us, defend us and all, told us that the fact that we had a daughter did not give them any problem, absolutely zero, if we just did not make her become a lesbian!" (Carmelo, 36)

Even on the gay and lesbian scene, it must not be taken for granted that the choice to become parents would be met favourably:

> Lesbians are getting used to parenthood. Ten years ago if you got into a lesbian bar with kids, they'd take a hard look. (Simona, 41)

> Sometimes I find more openness in some heterosexual couples than in homosexuals. I don't know, sometimes there is an interior fear… I bring my experience of suffering and I think that you are carrying the same thing and that you'll pass it on… (Renzo, 36)

> We are still stuck with objections of this kind 'if the son of two lesbians must learn how to shave himself, how can he learn?'. Sometimes I have to go back to the abc with gay people, not with heterosexuals. (Carmelo, 36)

Discrimination of children

Only for a few children the parents reported problems, which included the sense of being different for not having a father, being mocked by peers about the family situation, and the sense of isolation for not being able to openly talk about their family (the latter occurred in the context of a reconstructed family).

The serious discriminatory episode that we have briefly mentioned earlier, was a physical attack on the son of a separated mother. However, the child soon got over this violent episode. Moreover, he did not surrender to the attack, as the kid himself proudly affirmed. His mother recalls:

> Many people whom I thought to be my friends turned away [when I got separated from my husband]. Well, you expect it for yourself, you are prepared. But my son, too, has been pointed at by cousins, mocked because people knew the story of the mother together with another woman. This story did not come out at school, nor here where he lives. It came out in a campsite where we had been going for years when I was together with his father. In this campsite there are members of my ex-husband's family, and when the story came out, they thought of telling it to most people on the campsite, not thinking about possible consequences for him. I did not worry about me, because if somebody came to say: 'You left your husband because you are a lesbian' I would have answered that this is my private life and, moreover, it is true. The bad consequences came for him, and he still has some, because the first year this story came out, some children who had learnt from their parents that his mother was a lesbian put him in a circle and threw stones at him, calling him names, telling him 'son of a lesbian'. I saw him coming back to the camper all dirty and crying. 'What did you do?', and he told me about these 'friends' who insulted him.
> I scolded those kids: don't you ever dare anymore! (I just talked with the kids, not with the parents.) Then I told him: 'We do as you please. If you don't want, we do not come here anymore', even if I thought that it was like fleeing. But I would have done it for him.

> Unexpectedly he told me: 'I want to stay, I want to stay on'. He did not have many friends there, he thought that he did not want to run away.
> This has happened 2-3 years ago, and with all this he keeps on going to the campsite and some people are still telling him… and he answers: 'Mind your own business, think about your mother and your father, maybe he is a cuckold'. He wanted to come back. This surprised me because you expect that a kid would go away, that he would choose the easy path, but he decided to stay. […] This year someone attacked him again. I think it is not as easy as living on a happy island … (Immacolata, 45).

The other very problematic case that emerged from the interviews is the negative stance towards homosexuality of a 10-year-old child. This is how his biological mother describes the problem:

> It has come out that [he believes] we are not together, and if we were this would disturb him. I never told him this openly, but I never denied it either, I left open the possibility of things being in this way, and told him that, if it were so, it wouldn't be a bad thing. Yes, I did talk to him about homosexuality, but he evades the issue. He says: 'You are married with dad' 'No, I have never been married to your dad, I was with Gigliola. I love Gigliola, I told you already'. And at this point, he shuts up (Lucia, 40).

In general, as well as in defining parenting roles, reconstructed families encounter more problems than planned families. In reconstructed families the partner of the mother or father acts as a "third parent", and tends to hide her/his parenting role – in this case probably conveying a negative judgment of homosexuality onto the child.

Another important problem parents encounter is how to explain clearly what homophobia is, in order to prepare the child for eventual negative reactions. Sometimes this preparation is not made, and the risk is an emotive impact which is seriously negative at the moment of discovering that the same relationship which at home is lived as normal and laden with positive values, can be a reason for mocking in the outside world.

Conclusion

According to the experiences of parents surveyed in our research the argument that children coming from homoparental families, and the homoparental families themselves, suffer stigmatisation everyday proves to be a myth. Even the lighter concept of discrimination does not really seem to apply to the everyday life of homoparental families in terms of social interactions. The legal framework for them remains nevertheless nonexistent: in Italy there is still no possibility for legal recognition of two

mothers or fathers, as necessary as it is for the well-being of the children – but the discrimination is institutional, not social, because in daily life they do get recognised and respected.

Taken into account the different degree of openness about being homosexual, the environment in which the respondents live has shown itself to be either favourable or indifferent to their choices, both in rural and urban contexts. This confirms the earlier research findings by Danna (1998) about the climate of tolerance for lesbians with children. Since procreation is seen as normal in heterosexual environments, it probably helps homoparental families in building social ties. In fact many respondents felt the homosexual environment, where procreation is not normal, to be less supportive than the heterosexual (consistent with findings of Hare 1994, Gartrell et al. 1999).

The most problematic areas of social interaction of the homoparental families interviewed were the relationship with psychologists working in schools and those with peers, mainly in the teenage years. However, given the very low number (two) of such cases in our sample this can only be a provisional conclusion. This is consistent with research in other countries (see Speziale and Gopalakrishna 2004 for mental health professionals, and, among others, Ray and Gregory 2001, Clarke et al. 2004 for peer relationships), showing also the resilience of these children, who exhibit no more internalising and externalising behavioural problems than children of heterosexual couples (Flaks et al. 1995, Wainright and Patterson 2006), though some studies report lower self-esteem (Gershon et al.1999) and some do not (see Jansen in this volume).

In relation to minority stress my qualitative data correspond with the low level of minority stress measured with quantitative research by Bos, van Balen and van den Boom in the Netherlands. They have interviewed a sample of one hundred lesbian families and one hundred heterosexual families, both groups having had children with artificial insemination. The exploration of the Dutch researchers of minority stress in lesbian families gave the following results:

> The lesbian mothers in this sample generally reported low levels of rejection, perceived stigma, and internalized homophobia. In spite of the low levels of minority stress, higher levels of rejection were, as expected, associated with more sense of parental stress and more sense to justify the quality of the parent–child relationship. Having negative assumptions about straight people's attitudes toward homosexuality, and having higher levels of internalized homophobia, were also associated with more parental justification. Levels of rejection were associated with more emotional/behavioural problems in children (Bos et al. 2004b, 10).

In the present study, conducted with qualitative methods, I could not establish precise correlations, but the experiences gathered bring us to the analogous conclusion that the level of minority stress, as defined only by the social variables of rejection/social isolation and stigmatisation (taking aside the psychological variable of internalised homophobia) is low. This result allows us to define the stigmatisation of homoparental families as a social "myth".

In the respondents' experience there is a high level of acceptance of diversity from those people who have personal acquaintance with gays and lesbians. We must bear in mind though, that not all the respondents lived in a situation of complete openness about their homoparental family, but mostly they selected the people in whom to confide about their family situation, generally avoiding to do so in casual social contacts, taking into account the Italian cultural climate tinged with homophobia.

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