

The Construction of Lesbian and Gay Parenthood in Sociological Research. A Critical Analysis of the International Literature

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Abstract. Sociologists have been investigating lesbian and gay parenthood since the Seventies, and have lately succeeded in including homosexual parents in family studies. Available literature reviews on the topic of homosexual parenthood have focused mainly on how the meanings attached to lesbian and gay parents, their families and kinship have changed. Research has seldom addressed how the variety of experiences described correlates with the narrowing of the analysis down to specific examples. This paper seeks to fill this gap by examining how the forms of parenthood have evolved in qualitative research conducted in the USA and the UK from the Seventies to the present day. This body of research is critically examined in terms of the samples considered (the gender and number of parents involved, how their children were conceived) and how researchers justified their methodological choices. The analysis shows how sociological investigation has gradually constructed and justified a clear separation between heterosexual and homosexual experiences of parenthood.

Keywords: homosexuality, homosexual parents, sociology of family, parenthood.

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Including Lesbian and Gay Families in Research: the Emergence of an Unquestioned Paradox

In an article published in 1995, Katherine Allen and David Demo complained of the ongoing marginality of same-sex families in studies on family transformations. In their words: «much more work needs to be done in order to integrate the family relations of lesbians and gay men into mainstream family studies» (Allen & Demo, 1995, p. 112). The poor visibility of studies on same-sex families particularly concerned the parents' experiences. Up until that time, the stories of the daily lives of lesbian mothers and gay fathers had mainly been told outside the academic world (Beck, 1983; Calhoun, 2000; Clarke, 2002; Mallon, 2004), only entering the peripheral view of institutional researchers in the sphere of psychology, less still in that of sociology.

The situation criticized by Allen and Demo changed completely at the turn of the century. Family formats consisting of openly homosexual people, the meanings they attribute to family and parenthood, how they became parents, and the results of their parenting now firmly occupy a place in books and major journals on family studies. These topics often succeed in emerging even in works that intend to ignore them. For instance, Riitta Jallinoja and Eric Widmer indicate same-sex families as one of the crucial challenges that will «modify the rules and practices» of the family dynamics discussed in a volume they edited- in which such families are not considered (Jallinoja & Widmer, 2011, p. 245).

There has certainly been an evolution, which is particularly evident from the scientific production of the English-speaking countries, where same-sex families first became the object of political mobilization and social conflict (especially in the United States and the United Kingdom). Clear evidence of this evolution can also be found, however, in research conducted in countries where same-sex families have only recently become visible, and where the analysis is often based on concepts, methods and approaches developed elsewhere. Italy, for instance, has seen quite a rapid shift from mere awareness that such families exist (Saraceno, 1988) to their inclusion in the broad debate on family and parenthood (Fruggeri, 1996, 2005; Ruspini & Luciani, 2010; Trappolin, 2006; Trappolin & Tiano, 2015; Zanatta, 1997), to their becoming the object of exclusive attention (Bosisio & Ronfani, 2015; Cavina & Danna, 2009; Ferrari, 2015; Gigli, 2011).

The interest of scholars, be they psychologists or sociologists, has focused on following up particular types of family relations, prompted by the political clamor they arouse. Lesbian and gay families with children have always been the object of strongly conflicting ideas, and the start of

the new century saw the production of research on these families take on all the features of a «rapid growth industry» (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001, p. 159).

One of the consequences of the increasing number of studies available is the emergence of a remarkable, somewhat unexpected variety of social forms of homosexual parenthood. Alongside homosexual couples with children and single-parent families the study samples include men and women who share parenting functions irrespective of their sexual orientation, in «mixed» social formats in which their sexuality is not an important structural element. In dealing with such variety, several—sometimes dissimilar—working definitions have been applied to same-sex families with children. In some cases, researchers have concentrated on specific structural variables to circumscribe the experiences to include in this new category: «lesbian and gay families are defined by the presence of two or more people who share a same-sex orientation (e.g., a couple), or by the presence of at least one lesbian or gay adult rearing a child» (Allen & Demo, 1995, p. 113). Other definitions have placed the accent on the subjective attributions of the individuals involved, and on the type of relationship that ties them together: «groups of individuals who define each other as family and share a strong emotional and/or financial commitment to each other, whether or not they cohabit, are related by blood, law, or adoption, have children, or are recognized by the law» (Bernstein & Reimann, 2001, p. 3).

The existence of «countless variations of lesbian and gay families» (Allen & Demo, 1995, p. 113), and the front stage that *some* of them have occupied explain the selectivity of social research on the topic. To give an example, motherhood for lesbian women has been studied much more than fatherhood for gay men¹. Irrespective of the distinction between lesbian and gay male, researchers preferred to investigate families generated by the departure of lesbian mothers or gay fathers from the networks and commitments of a «heterosexual family». They saw these cases as «natural laboratories» (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001, p. 162) for studying social change. Sociologists were drawn by the opportunity to return to the classic anthropological topic of kinship as a social construction (Dempsey, 2010; Nordqvist, 2014; Smart, 2007), and to discuss it in relation to the conflicts

¹ In 2008, there was already a «sizeable literature across a range of fields such as psychology, sociology, law, social policy, education and nursing» on the topic of lesbian motherhood (Clarke, 2008, p. 118). In 2007, some authors complained that «there is little understanding of how gay men experience the procreative realm in terms of fatherhood motivations and decision making» (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007, p. 366), and in 2009 the whole phenomenon of gay fatherhood was still «relatively neglected» (Ryan-Flood, 2009, p. 183).

triggered by people demanding the recognition of their diversity, and by social changes underway (Phelan, 2001).

A paradox therefore emerges from the body of available research. On the one hand, the variety and fluidity of the social forms of homosexual parenthood are the reasons behind their scientific appeal. On the other, empirical analysis focuses only on the apparently more innovative and socially questioned forms, leaving all the rest in the background. This is a paradox on which scholars have rarely reflected. The various scholars discussing stories of lesbian and gay parenthood have done little to problematize which types of experience to discuss, taking for granted a greater diffusion and significance of some rather than others.

Aim of the Analysis: Toward a Critical Reading of the Sociological Literature on Lesbian and Gay Parenthood

In the following pages, our aim is to suggest some ways to fill the above-described gaps. To do so, we critically analyze some of the most significant sociological research conducted on lesbian and gay parenthood published since the end of the 1970s, largely in the United States and United Kingdom.

First we take a look at the variety of the experiences of parenthood forming the object of the research, concentrating on two characteristics of the samples considered that have a strong bearing on the form of homosexual parenthood. One concerns how the children were conceived (within a heterosexual relationship such as marriage, through adoption, or with the aid of third parties such as sperm donors or the so-called surrogate mothers). The other concerns the gender and number of the individuals serving as parents. Then we look at how researchers justified the simplifications they adopted to cope with the variety of the family formats they intercepted or acknowledged. We relate their arguments to how they interpret the general dynamics of family transformation underway, and to the mobilization of the lesbian and gay organizations.

Choices concerning a study's methods and the interpretation of its results contribute to determining the way in which a given topic is socially perceived. Examining the temporal evolution of these aspects thus enables us to shed light on crucial steps in the social construction of the phenomenon being investigated. These are the typical premises adopted for the purpose of self-reflection in the social sciences, and sociology in particular, but it seems to have proved difficult to put them into practice in critical analyses on the matter of same-sex families with children.

Our effort to break down past studies on lesbian and gay parenthood thus forms part of a debate emerging in this research field. It has been prompted partly by the diffusion of the approach taken in the so-called *queer studies*, which are extremely critical of the *identity politics* developed by the main homosexual organizations, and of any research supporting their claims². The accusation formulated in *queer studies* concerns the ambivalence of the results of *identity politics*, which only offer visibility and citizenship to the more docile gay and lesbian subjectivities that more closely resemble the structures of heterosexuality, while excluding any alternative political and cultural proposals. This criticism has also been aimed at the family-oriented turn taken by the lesbian and gay movements, and particularly concerning the issue of egalitarian marriage (Warner, 1999), and how it predefines lesbian and gay parenthood (Butler, 2002).

These issues were taken up by some researchers studying same-sex families (Bernstein & Reimann, 2001). They often see signs of political motives influencing research, inducing it to focus on the parental figures that were most visible in their struggle for recognition in a given historical period. Take the example of lesbian mothers fighting with their ex-husbands for custody of their children, or of women in lesbian couples whose maternal role, shared with the biological mother, is not legally recognized. It is less common, however, to see reflections on how social research contributes to reproducing the same family hierarchies that become established in the struggle for inclusion.

When they touch on this aspect, researchers tend to choose between two main types of empirical research. Some propose to frame the parents' claims to be seen as normal but also different within the context that makes sense of them. A significant example of this type of research is Stephen Hicks's analysis of the daily lives of lesbian mothers and gay fathers, in which «narratives and images of lesbian/gay parenting (...) are engaged in the work of assertion, claim, counter-claim, and so on, a process that includes my text – this text – as much as any other» (Hicks, 2011, p. 3). Others may focus instead on the experiences of parental figures that depart from the normative reference models (white, economically comfortable, well educated). This may be done to highlight how certain types of study, involving samples recruited exclusively from within the mainstream associative networks, tend to level the results. This is the case

² It is also important not to forget the contribution of the lesbian-feminist debate preceding the *queer studies* in problematizing lesbian motherhood (Calhoun, 2000; Clarke, 2002).

of Jacqui Gabb's work (2004). Analyzing the stories of 13 English lesbian parent families uninvolved in the networks and culture of the lesbian community, she reveals practices and expectations inconsistent with those in which «free choice» prevails over «tradition». She concludes that «while research may concede that not all lesbian parent families are 'progressive', quotation and analyses typically highlight those who are (...). In this way 'stories' of lesbian parent families consolidate an ideal (imaginary) form through a process of repetition; erasing diversity, obscuring the presence of less 'progressive' practices beneath the weight of a 'community narrative'» (Gabb, 2004, p. 174).

It is rare for awareness of the links between social research and the content of homosexual mobilization to have prompted an overall review of how scientific knowledge has been produced over time. The examples that seem most significant to our mind are the works by Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz (2001), and by Victoria Clarke (2008), conducted on the historical evolution of psychological research on lesbian motherhood. The former consists in a re-reading of the main psychological studies comparing the socialization outcomes of lesbian versus heterosexual families³. The demonstration that children brought up by lesbian women have a normal psychosocial development, and that parents' sexual orientations consequently have no influence on the wellbeing of the children they raise, is interpreted as a «defensive stance» taken by the researchers. Their attitude precedes and influences their study, prompting them to consider the part of their findings testifying to the similarities between the children brought up in the two types of family under comparison, and to disregard any differences. In so doing, the authors reiterate a definition of difference in the sense of deficiency, which in turn is founded on the assertion of a heterosexual norm as a unit of measure of psychosocial development. Stacey and Biblarz relate their findings to the socio-cultural constraints of a compulsory heterosexuality that restricts the chances of inclusion. As they say in their conclusions: «if the sexual orientation of parents were to matter less for political rights, it could matter more for social theory» (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001, p. 179).

Victoria Clarke's analysis concentrates instead on deconstructing the way psychological research has sketched the figure of the homosexual mother. The image of the «competent lesbian mother» that emerged during the 1990s gradually replaced those of the incompetent mother or childless lesbian typical of earlier times. But lesbian mothers were only

³ It is worth bearing in mind that, in absolute terms, this is the type of research that has most aroused the psychologists' interest in lesbian and gay parenthood.

acknowledged a functional role in relation to a particular model of motherhood generated by adhering to the heterosexual norm, and in the spaces for recognition achieved by the mobilizations. To put it in Clarke's words: «the 'good gay' conforms to a liberal model of sexual citizenship. This model is based on a politics of tolerance and assimilation and an assumption of heterosexuality as 'natural' and 'normal'; people who deviate from dominant norms have the right to be tolerated as long as they remain in the private sphere» (Clarke, 2008, p. 122).

The above two examples serve as important references for our analysis, but what distinguishes our work is that we consider both a type of research (the sociological) and a type of phenomenon (the social form of lesbian and gay parenthood) that have been little discussed in the critical debate to which we wish to contribute.

We proceed by separating the studies conducted on gay fathers from those focusing on lesbian mothers. This enables us to bring out similarities and differences in the choices made and arguments used by the scholars engaging in two lines of investigation that are juxtaposed but distinct.

Research on Gay Fathers

As mentioned earlier, the sociologists have generally studied gay fathers less thoroughly than lesbian mothers. This does not mean that the former research was undertaken recently. Its origins lie in the same historical period as research on lesbian mothers. The imbalance between the two areas of investigation stems mainly from the different ways in which the two phenomena attracted the sociologists' attention. From the start, lesbian motherhood was studied in terms of the emerging social conflict triggered by wives who, having come out as lesbians and divorced from their husbands, had to fight for custody of the children they had while they were married. The same link between social visibility and political visibility does not hold for gay fathers, whose custody of children born of previous marriages has never become an object of mobilization. This explains why early research on gay fathers focused mainly on demonstrating the existence of the phenomenon per se. This was typically done by emphasizing the far from negligible presence of married men in social settings where men had sex with men, investigated by American sociologists already from the 1950s onwards.

The first studies on gay fathers appeared at the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, and a literature review was already published in 1989 (Bozett, 1989). The works of Brian Miller (1978) and Frederick

Bozett (1981), both conducted in the United States, defined some of the motives that still dominate the sociological approach. We must also thank these two researchers for a conceptual elaboration of how the forms of gay parenthood were evolving from gay men who became fathers within a heterosexual marriage to gay fatherhood undertaken within a homosexual couple.

In the studies conducted by Miller and Bozett, as in the few other works of the same period, gay fathers were considered interesting because of the inter-individual role conflict they experienced rather than the social conflict they triggered. What the researchers wanted to understand was how these men succeeded in integrating their two identities – as fathers and as gay men – that were judged at the time (even by the newborn gay community) to be in opposition. This led to the formulation of a sociological problem typical of research on role conflict and moral careers, making the figure of the gay husband (or ex-husband) with children an appealing case to study. The men studied by Miller and Bozett were recruited from among the gay communities of various cities, sometimes with the help of *gay father support groups* that were becoming established at the time (Stacey, 2004). These men had in common the experiences of a past (or present) heterosexual marriage and of fathering a child, but their living and custody arrangements varied considerably.

In the sample of 30 fathers studied by Miller, 12 still lived with their wives, and consequently with their children. It was not clear how many of the other fathers lived with their children, or whoelse they may have lived with. In the sample of 18 gay fathers collected by Bozett, there were 12 whose children were not part of their various types of family, which could include male or female friends or lovers. Among those whose types of family did include their children, one was married and lived with his wife and child, and in three families the gay father's partner was also involved.

This variety of social forms suited the research question because it enabled ideal types to be identified by referring to the processes and outcomes of the two contrasting male identities being integrated. Brian Miller developed four types of identity integration based on whether or not a man had revealed his homosexuality, and whether or not he continued to live with his wife (or ex-wife). Frederick Bozett identified different types of moral career, based on whether or not a man had revealed his homosexuality, and on the quality of the support he received from his social circles.

The interesting aspect of these and other such analyses lies in that the above-mentioned types were compared with one another, establishing a

hierarchy. The more the fathers were removed from their marriage, and the more they were involved with the growing gay community, the more the integration of their two identities as father and gay was judged to be satisfactory and a source of wellbeing for themselves and their children. Seen from this point of view, the preferable end result of integrating their two identities gave rise to fathers bringing up their children within a gay couple – a relational context that compensated for any persistent diffidence towards their fatherhood within the community.

This conclusion glides over the complexity of the stories collected by the researchers, however. Some accounts concerned fathers who were satisfied with living in situations other than as a gay couple, though these cases stemmed mainly from the men's interpretation of their homosexual attraction as a behavior with no implications for their identity (Miller, 1978). Another aspect that emerged from the interviews concerns the importance of the part played by their ex-wives in the gay fathers' construction of their identity. As Bozett noted: «during marriage many of the men in the study sample reported that their wives provided various sanctioning strategies which ultimately had the effect of promoting the gay father's transition toward integration» (Bozett, 1981, p. 102).

In short, these early studies identified a clear intersection between heterosexuality and homosexuality in the construction of gay parenthood. The analysis tends, however, to consider (heterosexual) marriage as the negative pole along the path towards the emerging figure of the gay father.

If we consider the social status of the participants in Miller's and Bozett's samples, the model of the gay couple with offspring was clearly configured as a goal for a certain class, accessible only to men well placed on the labor market. Up until the mid-1980s, in fact, these men (and their families) accounted for a minority of the samples investigated.

The situation changed in the 1990s when *planned fatherhood* gained social legitimization in the gay community and was included on its political agenda, focusing especially on the possibility of adoption. This prompted the researchers to redefine their attention to the issues of role conflicts and the construction of moral careers. The change of context led scholars to wonder how gay fathers could access the information and material resources they needed to consolidate the identity integration that they had already achieved (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Faith Oswald, 2002). Above all, the interpretation of (heterosexual) marriage as the social frame for homosexual parenthood disappeared almost completely in subsequent studies. It remained only as a symbol of a past from which a new generation of gay fathers was moving away for good. Men were becoming fathers with the aid of surrogate mothers or (where allowable)

through adoption. The core role they acquired in the organizational networks assured them plenty of visibility in research, the majority of which relied on such networks to recruit people to interview. It was towards this «new» subject that sociological research turned to reflect on the changes underway in society at large and in the homosexual community.

The works by Judith Stacey (2004), and Gerald Mallon (2004), again conducted in the United States, are two particularly significant examples. Stacey's study includes 50 gay men resident in the Los Angeles area and born between the late 1960s and early 1970s. This generation is defined as «young enough to be able to contemplate parenthood outside heterosexuality, and mature enough to be in a position to choose or reject it» (Stacey, 2004, p. 184). These fathers' family situations and biographies vary considerably. For instance, 26 out of 50 have «some sort of paternal relationship to children, whether biological, social and/or legal, and whether or not they reside with them» (*Ibid.*, p. 194). But the type of story chosen to contrast the negative stereotypes on male homosexuality is that of a monogamist couple that realizes its dream of fatherhood with the aid of a surrogate mother.

Mallon's work is even more explicit in construing gay fathers by choice as pioneers of radical changes in family structure and sexuality. It is equally explicit in giving priority to one particular form of fatherhood among all the others. To obtain a homogeneous sample of 20 men who became fathers in the 1980s, Mallon deliberately chooses to exclude three types of fathers: «those whose children came from a heterosexual union subsequently ended by divorce; gay men who became parents by fathering a biological child with a surrogate mother; and those who conceived and raised children jointly with a woman or women with whom they were not sexually involved» (Mallon, 2004, p. xiv). In short, the absence of a mother (and of women generally) in the family qualifies the «mature» form of gay parenthood.

The exclusion of forms of parenthood other than the couple or the single gay father has been reinforced in more recent studies, while the scope of the analysis has become broader. It now includes the «reproductive relations» stemming from the «connection made with a person of the other sex necessary for the purpose of having a baby» (Dempsey, 2010, p. 1146). This enriches the investigation into the changes brought about by the «new» generation of gay fathers acting in settings where their mobilizations converge towards the inclusion of their rights, with some success.

The ways in which domestic work is shared (a topic dear to sociological and psychological research, albeit for slightly different

reasons), and self-representation on the public stage are two classic areas in which the influence of the innovation of same-sex families with children has been measured. The attention paid to reproductive relations also entitles us to add to these the construction of kinship networks (Dempsey, 2013). What fascinates researchers is the composition of the kinship that stems from pooling a gay father's homosexual and heterosexual circles. The former include partners (with whom they may be planning to become parents) and friends. The latter include members of the family of origin, and possibly the other parties in the reproductive relations (semen donors and surrogate mothers), depending on the quality of these relationships.

In these studies, the adults forming the gay couple are seen as directors who organize the networks that gravitate around their households. It is this element of agency that distinguishes them from the «old» generation of gay fathers who had children within a heterosexual marriage. They were engaged in similar efforts to develop kinship intersecting heterosexual and homosexual networks, but their *bricolage* was not seen as an expression of self-determination deriving from a community with its own culture.

Research on Lesbian Mothers

The considerable body of studies on lesbian motherhood makes it easier to see how the interpretation of the phenomenon evolved, and how research approached it differently from the topic of gay fatherhood. As already mentioned, a first distinction lies in the way in which lesbian mothers attracted the scholars' attention. At the end of the 1970s, while gay husbands were being investigated in terms of how they coped as individuals with the conflict intrinsic in their role-set, lesbian wives were emerging as a new face of the conflict around the female body. In the eyes of the researchers, the case of divorced lesbian mothers had several characteristic features of an extraordinary season of change: the recognition that women's rights were denied, a political and social mobilization against gender inequalities, and experiments with more symmetrical types of relationship (DiLapi, 1989).

Although the end of a marriage could give rise to various social forms in which to bring up the children in one's custody, research focused on safeguarding the mother-child relationship under threat⁴. Sociologists

⁴ It is worth noting that this type of research, which pays attention to how legal practice damages the rights of homosexual parenthood, has not disappeared in more recent times, though it has changed with time (Rosky, 2009).

were looking here at a topic dear to psychological research –the competence of lesbian mothers– which proved precious in disputes for the custody of their children (Beck, 1983; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). This led to lesbian mothers being seen essentially as mothers who lived alone, constantly battling with the law courts and their ex-husbands to avoid losing rights that they had worked so hard to gain.

The study conducted in England by Susan Golombok and co-workers (Golombok et al., 1983) is a good example of many other works of this period, which illustrate the many possible forms of lesbian motherhood, and the simplifications adopted by researchers. Golombok and colleagues compared 27 «lesbian families» with 27 «heterosexual» single-mother families, and their approach is interesting for several reasons. For a start, the sample they chose reveals the instrumental nature of their proposed comparison. All the heterosexual families consisted of a single mother with her child(ren), whereas the homosexual families were more often couples of women (12/27) than single mothers with their offspring (9/27). Second, the sample includes forms of lesbian motherhood achieved within marriages or heterosexual relationships. For instance, one female couple lived together with the husband of one of the women. Another significant aspect concerns the focus on the mother-child dyad, disregarding both the children's fathers (whatever the quality of their relationship with their ex-wives), and the mothers' partners. In this, as in other research of the time, the other women in the family are mentioned only as regards their relationship with the mother, while their relationship with the children was not considered⁵.

The sociologists' analysis of the mother-child relationship sheds light on broader processes than those intercepted by the psychologists. Lesbian mothers who divorced were discussed as an example of the «escape from tradition» that was seen as a typical feature of all family forms. As Golombok wrote: «far fewer children are growing up in what was at one time the traditional two-parent family» (*Ibid.*, p. 551). At a time when lesbian feminists were developing their cultural and political separation from the institutions of heterosexuality (Calhoun, 2000), the link between marriage and lesbian motherhood posed a problem that aroused the sociologists' interest. They thus saw an opportunity to approach another aspect of the transformation underway within the lesbian community, where the most visible forms of motherhood were gradually being separated from relationships with the male world.

⁵ At the end of the 1970s, labels such as co-mother or other-mother were still not in use.

The study conducted in the United States by Julie Ainslie and Kathryn Feltey at the end of the 1980s (1991) captures this last aspect extremely well. Their study involved 17 women who had become mothers within heterosexual relationships and – after coming out – they had become fully integrated in lesbian networks. Their stories also covered the parenting role of their partners. Motherhood is analyzed here as an experience shared by the lesbian couple, supported by a community that compensates for the breakaway from the families of origin and protects against any claims advanced by ex-husbands (who are considered neither in this, nor in other similar analyses). The study by Pat Romans (1992) on the experiences of 48 English lesbian mothers is important too. The origin of their children was not specified, but what is significant is how the end of the heterosexual marriage is interpreted as the goal to be achieved – echoing the works of Miller and Bozett discussed in the previous section. For the researcher, the 8 women in the sample who, despite coming out, stayed with their husbands to bring up their children constitute a «tiny minority marginalized by their decision to remain within their heterosexual marriages» (*Ibid.*, p. 102).

The study conducted by Ainslie and Feltey is important also because it mentions (albeit without investigating) a phenomenon that was beginning to emerge: «an increasing number of lesbians are choosing to have children together, and terms such as ‘co-parent’, ‘co-mother’ and ‘other-mother’ are becoming fairly common and widely understood within lesbian communities, if not in society at large» (Ainslie & Feltey, 1991, p. 75-76).

With the arrival of the new century, the form of lesbian motherhood most often discussed by the scholars was to become the case of two women who raise children that they have planned together and conceived thanks to *donor insemination* (Ryan-Flood, 2009; Sullivan, 2004). It is on the experience of this «new generation of lesbians» that efforts focus to shed light on how concepts of family, gender and kinship are changing. It is by analyzing this family format that researchers hope to learn enough to be able to foresee future developments in family structures generally.

We have seen the same phenomenon as in the evolution of studies on gay fatherhood, with the ultimate disappearance of the topic of heterosexual marriage from the analyses. A significant example comes from the English research done by Gillian Dunne (2000). Her sample of 37 lesbian couples with children included 8 couples who were raising children conceived within a previous marriage. The analysis nonetheless focused on the cases of donor insemination, which involved donors being chosen from

among the couple's gayfriends, after lengthy negotiations to decide how to govern the donors' subsequent involvement in bringing up the children. This approach separates lesbian motherhood from heterosexuality, excluding the figures of the ex-husbands and replacing them with gay donors, whose parenting styles are «more appreciated».

There are several differences between studies on lesbian motherhood and those on gay fatherhood. In the former, the analysis on the couples and on the forms of kinship that they create remains strongly linked to a political project to change the gender structures which – even in the less traditional heterosexual couples – address women as the main bearers of domestic work (Sullivan, 2004). Moreover, in studies on lesbian motherhood the analytical separation between social forms of «homosexual» and «heterosexual» parenting shows greater degrees of uncertainty. There is a good example of this in the most important longitudinal study on lesbian mothers conducted in the United States since 1986 (Gartrell et al., 2012). This study followed up 84 families consisting of lesbian women with children and intercepted two cases of mothers who returned to live with heterosexual men.

Final remarks

The analysis developed in the previous pages provides a few indications for charting a story of the social forms of homosexual parenthood in sociological research on the topic. Our aim was to see how this field of research has, over time, constructed its own object of investigation, lending relevance to political motives outside the field, as well as to research questions inside it. Examining the types of experience considered in the most important studies, the researchers' methodologies, and their omissions in interpreting their empirical data sheds light on the variety of these family forms, and the simplifications adopted in analyzing them.

Albeit using different methods, research on lesbian and gay parenthood has gradually come to see it as a separate phenomenon from heterosexual parenthood. While attention had focused during the latter half of the 1970s on the trajectories of lesbian mothers and gay fathers who had divorced, by the end of the 1990s it had turned to the planned parenthood of same-sex couples. More recent studies have also begun to analyze the kinship networks developed by these couples, which include people coming from both homosexual and heterosexual circles. With time, these circles have become interpreted by researchers as distinct and independent social entities.

The path that has led to the current predominance of same-sex couples with children in studies on homosexual parenthood is connected to the formulation of specific questions that aim to explain the social change and conflict triggered by the gay and lesbian communities. The relationship between political mobilization and the production of scientific knowledge is known to be difficult in this field of investigation. There is some debate on how homosexual communities induce scholars to take an interest in changes concerning them, which may deny or lend visibility to specific parenting experiences and expectations.

What is less frequently discussed is how the feedback from research affects the collectivities under study, by describing their hegemonic forms and basic assumptions. The present analysis aims to contribute to this latter discussion. Their commitment to the fight for recognition induces gay and lesbian communities to represent themselves as a cohesive whole centered on a specific aspect of identity – sexuality – regardless of all internal distinctions. Sexual orientation thus defines the boundaries of a quasi-ethnic dimension that distinguishes individuals and collectivities. Studies on same-sex families with children observe how the reference communities evolve through the family demands they express. But we should also reflect (as we propose to do with our analysis) on how these same studies reinforce the assumption of a self-defining identity – the homosexual one – that is adopted for contrasting the exclusion suffered by lesbian and gay people.

From this perspective, the history of the social forms of homosexual parenthood written by research is part of the history of the polarization between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

Notes

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