

## **Pictures of Lesbian and Gay Parenthood in Italian Sociology. A Critical Analysis of 30 Years of Research**

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*Pictures of Lesbian and Gay Parenthood in Italian Sociology.  
A Critical Analysis of 30 Years of Research*

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**Abstract**

The article analyses sociological research on lesbian and gay parenthood conducted in Italy over the past 30 years. By focusing on the typologies of the homosexual households of the participants in research projects, this work discusses how empirical academic and non-academic research has depicted same-sex families with children in the Italian context. An initial mainstream inattention towards lesbian and gay parents by sociological research at the beginning of the Nineties gave way to a particular interest in that experience, focusing on the newest form of homosexual parenthood defined as same-sex couples who are able to access assisted fertilisation technology and surrogacy. The new pattern can be said to have overshadowed the experience of homosexual parents whose children were conceived within heterosexual relationships. This simplification concerns to the relationship between sociological research, LGBT activism and the political debate.

Keywords: same-sex families, homosexual parenthood, Italian sociology.

**1. Introduction**

At international level, sociologists involved in different fields of research – such as family, gender and sexuality – have been investigating lesbian and gay parenthood since the end of the Seventies. Because of the unequal degree of their social visibility, lesbian mothers and gay fathers attracted the researchers' attention in different ways. Lesbian motherhood was initially

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studied as a new conflictual arena around the female body, the one of 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 (Beck, 1983; DiLapi, 1989; Calhoun, 2000). In the same historical period, gay fatherhood was considered appealing in terms of role conflicts and moral careers referred to married men who succeeded or failed in integrating two identities – as fathers and as gay men – that were socially judged to be in opposition (Miller, 1978; Bozett, 1981). In both cases, then, homosexual parenting was studied in its relationship with heterosexual households.

As a consequence of their different social, political and scientific appeal, these two areas of investigation have achieved incomparable levels of development. In 2008, on the topic of lesbian motherhood there was already a 'sizeable literature across a range of fields such as psychology, sociology, law, social policy, education and nursing' (Clarke, 2008: 118). On the contrary, in the same years some authors complained that the whole phenomenon of gay fatherhood was still 'relatively neglected' (Ryan-Flood, 2009: 183). Nevertheless, family formats consisting of openly lesbian and gay people with children, 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.

One of the consequences of the increasing number of studies available is the emergence of a remarkable, and somewhat unexpected, variety of social forms of homosexual parenthood. Researchers have typically analysed this variety through the idea of a 'generational shift' of the parental figures involved. According to this interpretation, homosexual parenthood has evolved from lesbian women and gay men who became mothers and fathers within a heterosexual marriage to parenthood undertaken within a lesbian or gay couple through assisted reproduction techniques and 'reproductive relations'<sup>1</sup>. However, against the 'countless variations of lesbian and gay families' (Allen and Demo, 1995: 113) researchers have only begun to arise the issues on which types of family to include and discuss in their studies, and the effects of their preferences (see Butler, 2002; Gabb, 2004; Bernstein and Reimann, 2001). As a result, their choice to focus on the apparently more innovative and socially debated experiences of homosexual parenthood (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001) – the ones of lesbians and gays who plan to become parents outside any commitment with the 'heterosexual family' – is basically taken for granted.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Deborah Dempsey (2010: 1146), 'reproductive relations' consist of 'connections made with a person of the other sex necessary for the purpose of having a baby'.

We provided elsewhere a critical analysis of the American and British sociological literature from the end of the Seventies to the present day in order to shed light on the simplification adopted by researchers in selecting specific typologies of lesbian and gay parents for their studies (Trappolin, 2016)<sup>2</sup>. What we found was that the focalisation of the analysis on forms of parenthood planned within same-sex couples and managed separately from heterosexual contexts overshadows other forms – however included in the research samples – in which parenting roles and practices are not conditioned by the parents’ sexual orientation. We concluded that this analytical ‘reduction of complexity’ reproduces the idea of a quasi-ethnic distinction (Murray, 1979) between individuals and collectivities based on the polarisation of sexual orientations, the one that is used to support a cohesive homosexual identity in the political strategies to counteract the exclusion suffered by lesbian and gay persons.

It is through this very interpretation that we will develop a critical analysis of the Italian sociological investigation of lesbian and gay parenthood.

## **2. Aims of the analysis**

Italian sociological research on lesbian and gay parenthood is far from being comparable to the one developed in other Western countries. It emerged basically from the ‘sociology of homosexuality’, a field of research that was inaugurated nearly 30 years ago by the survey realised by the ISPES (Italian Institute for the Promotion of Economic and Social Development) in collaboration with Arcigay (one of the most important organisations of gays and lesbians in Italy) and published in 1991 (ISPES, 1991; see also Trappolin, 2006a). Within this field, the subject of lesbian and gay parenting has progressively become one of the prime topics of study. The most significant texts on the ‘sociology of homosexuality’ that are presently available (Barbagli, Colombo, 2001; Trappolin, 2008; Bertone, 2009; Rinaldi, 2012) possess whole sections dedicated to that subject. In addition, the investigation of homosexual parenthood has gone beyond the confines of the field from which it originally emerged. In fact, Italian sociology of the family has witnessed a shift from the vague awareness that non-heterosexual families exist in Western countries (Saraceno, 1988) to their inclusion within the wider debate on family and parenthood (Zanatta 1997; Trappolin, 2006b; Ruspini, Luciani, 2010; Trappolin, Tiano, 2015), and most recently to a specific interest on the topic (Cavina, Danna, 2009; Bosisio, Ronfani, 2015).

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<sup>2</sup> As far as the studies carried out and the results produced are concerned, we direct the reader to the article cited.

The analysis that we propose here traces the history of the sociological research on lesbian mothers and gay fathers in Italy. Our aim is to uncover the manner in which researchers have, over time, constructed their own object of investigation. More specifically, we will concentrate on the social forms of homosexual parenthood intercepted by national studies and defined by the following elements:

- 1) *how* children were conceived: within a heterosexual relationship such as marriage, through adoption, or with the aid of third parties such as sperm donors or so-called surrogate mothers;
- 2) *who* the individuals serving as parents are;
- 3) in *what type* of households the children were being raised.

The aim of our analysis is twofold. On the one hand, we will assess the variety of the experiences of parenthood that researchers intercept or acknowledge in their studies. On the other hand, we will consider if their analysis privileges specific typologies of family formats and leaves all the rest in the background.

As a consequence, available studies conducted by the university and other non-academic organisations will not be discussed here in relation to their research questions, methods of investigation or findings. Rather, they will be examined for what it concerns the composition of the research samples and the way participants were recruited.

### **3. Representing the transformation of lesbian and gay parenthood in Italy in the last 30 years**

Our analysis of the Italian research on homosexual parenthood considers the time period from the emergence of what can be called a ‘sociology of homosexuality’ to the present day. In this period, the social perception of the topic of lesbian and gay parenthood has undergone important changes in Italy. There has certainly been an evolution in the way public opinion and national institutions deal with this phenomenon, but the most crucial transformation can be observed in the expectations of lesbian and gay people themselves.

To represent these cultural and social shifts it is useful to consider the voice of the generation of lesbians and gays born between the end of the Sixties and the beginning of the Seventies. This is the first generation in Italy for which *coming out* is a real possibility, although it is limited to specific contexts. These individuals made the first claims of Italian homosexuals to parenthood rights presenting them to the public opinion and political institutions.

The excerpts that are cited here refer to interviews carried out during the early months of 1998. The protagonists of the first two fragments, Giacomo and Marta, were respectively 31 and 26 years old at that time and were living in the Veneto Region<sup>3</sup>. It is clear from their comments that parenthood was thinkable only within a heterosexual framework (symbolic and relational), making maternity or paternity for lesbians and gays unconceivable:

I have always accepted my homosexuality and my way of life. But there is a great sadness behind it: my inability to be a father. I adore children, I have always adored them. It is something inside of me that I have always had and that defines me. Not being able to be a father is a heavy burden for me. For me having a child in this situation would be an act of great egoism that I would never consider. Because a child needs a family, a father and a mother like the one in which I was raised. [Giacomo, gay, 31 years old]

A family means being able to have children. Even if I were heterosexual and married, I wouldn't say that I had a family until a child was part of it. Sometimes when things happen or when I learn something new, I find myself thinking that I would like to teach them to my child. It only seems natural to me. But I think it would be terribly selfish if I wanted to have a child with my companion. Because I think it is right that a child is born with the right figures, of a dad and a mum. [Marta, lesbian, 26 years old]

The polarisation between parenthood and homosexuality is defined as a painful imposition that is endured, and it is one of the many examples of symbolic violence that have encumbered and still encumbers lesbian and gay individuals. It should not be forgotten that the same polarisation emerged in the lesbian-feminist culture of the Seventies as a conscious choice and a radical criticism of the heterosexual family structure. Lesbian women during the Nineties were closer to this culture and could thus conceive of giving up maternity within a different framework with respect to Marta's.

On the other hand, in (the few) cases in which the desire for parenthood beyond the boundaries of heterosexuality seemed a concrete possibility, it was conditioned by the conviction that Italian society was totally unprepared to sustain it. The comments by Carlo and Cristina clearly portray this conviction:

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<sup>3</sup> Conducted between January and March of 1998, just as the others that will be cited further along, these interviews constitute a part of the material that was analyzed for the writer's thesis entitled: *The pluralization of Family Forms. Homosexuality and Aspirations for Family*. Interviews with 11 gays and 9 lesbians, all resident in the Veneto Region, were registered at that time. None of the interviewees had children. The names are invented and the identifying features mentioned are those used by the subjects themselves.

As far as I am concerned, two persons of the same sex are perfectly able to raise children. It is the external world that does not permit it. The child would be penalised by his/her peers when his father appears with the other father and not the mother. Or when two mothers appear and not the father. The child would have problems in his/her relationship with others, so it is better not to try it. [Carlo, gay, 33 years old]

My companion and I are a couple. We could be a family if there were a good law. But even if we could adopt a child, what social life could we have? I have made my choice and I am aware of its repercussions. If our union were legalised, I might consider it. We are a couple, we could live like a couple and register the union. But adopting is something else. It depends on so many other factors, it is difficult. I don't think it is absolutely necessary to have a man and a woman. But it is difficult as things stand right now. Personally, I don't know if I would make that choice. [Cristina, lesbian, 29 years old]

It is not a question here if Giacomo, Marta, Carlo and Cristina do or do not represent the views of their age peers<sup>4</sup>. Of course, there were many factors which did not favour alternative points of view: the lack of any type of legal recognition of unions between same sex persons; the widely held negative attitudes towards homosexuality; the low level of and accessibility to reproductive technologies. The reason why their opinions are cited here is that they can be interpreted at the same time as source and effect of the limited attention towards homosexual parenthood that characterised the national public debate in those years.

As far as the public debate is concerned, it should be remembered that the first proposals to regulate same-sex cohabitation presented in the Italian Parliament during the Eighties never even reached the discussion phase in the competent commissions. In any case, they did not contemplate access to adoption or to assisted reproductive technologies, or the existence of children born during precedent relationships. Moreover, the first public initiatives of lesbian groups seeking to 'have children without men' were made at the beginning of the Nineties (Danna, 1998; Trappolin, 2006b), a time when the cases of homosexual parents publicised by the mass-media were exceedingly rare. According to a study by Daniela Danna (1998), in only two occasions, one in 1988 and the other in 1994, did newspapers report – in derogatory ways – on lesbians who decided to become parents.

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<sup>4</sup> We can, in fact, only certify that their opinions reflect those that was prevalent in the 20 persons who were interviewed at the beginning of 1998 in the Veneto Region.



A comparison of the interviews held at the end of the Nineties with those of Giulio and Lara that were collected in November 2014 clearly highlights the dramatic transformation that has taken place over that short time period<sup>5</sup>:

I would honestly like to have children. Despite my homosexuality, I am convinced that I could be a good parent. And in any case, regardless of what society thinks, I am convinced that it is possible to create a family. We have seen that it works in other countries, so why shouldn't it work for me? I don't think it is at all important if a child has two male figures or two female figures. I have looked into it because it is not something that one should go into light-heartedly. From what I am able to see, as far as personal growth goes, there shouldn't be any problem. That knowledge has reassured me, and it has made me realise that my desire is not something stupid or unthinkable. It makes me realise that it is possible. [Giulio, gay, 24 years old]

An homosexual union is not an easy thing, especially if the society does not change in the next ten years. So I think the help of other people is necessary if children are born. I think that my family and, in particular, my brother would help me. I think that he would become a special uncle for my future child. The family nucleus would be made up of my companion, myself, and a child that could arrive. But I don't see why my family and myself shouldn't need a grandparent figure who picks up the child from school. In other words, the things that normally happen in a family. [Lara, lesbian, 23 years old]

Several factors have contributed to this turn-around. Some are a direct consequence of the mobilisation of gay and lesbian associations including those formed by parents; others are linked to more generalised de-traditionalising processes taking place in Italian society. Giulio and Lara's self-reflexivity is probably not common among their heterosexual peers, something that would indicate that, despite evidence for change, the topic of parenthood cannot be taken for granted. These considerations are particularly true for the youngest who must learn to reckon with them and modulate their expectations for the future.

On the other hand, young people like Giulio and Lara today dispose of resources that were not available in the Nineties, permitting them to satisfactorily integrate their sexual identity with that of being (future) parents. The publication of non-scientific texts delineating the banality of daily life in

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<sup>5</sup> Interviews with persons living in the Veneto Region collected by Elisa Sommacal during the preparation of her thesis for her first-cycle degree in Sociological Sciences, for which the author was supervisor (*Homosexuality in Italy: Hopes and doubts of young homosexuals*).

same-sex families with children, as in the case of Daniele Scalise (2008), can be considered one of these resources. The arrival in Italy of translations of scientific texts a few years later with respect to the original edition analysing, from numerous points of view, the effects of including homosexual families in the social tissue of other western countries (Cadoret, 2002; Goldberg, 2010) is another one.

Our argument is that the narration of lesbian and gay parenthood produced by Italian sociologists has a bearing on the way that individuals interact with the topic when they are called upon to discuss it in their everyday life contexts as well as in political debates. The premises underlying self-reflection in the social sciences are that choices concerning how a study is designed and implemented and how its results are interpreted contribute to determine the way in which a given topic is socially perceived. Stephen Hick's statement clearly expresses this concept as far as the sociological investigation of lesbian and gay parenthood is concerned: '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, 3).

Examining the temporal evolution of these choices thus sheds light on the steps involved in the social construction of the phenomenon being investigated.

#### **4. Lesbian and gay parenthood in Italian sociological research during the Nineties**

If we examine the totality of the expectations and experiences of parenthood gathered by Italian researchers over the last 30 years, what emerges is the important transformation of both the society itself and the sociologists who are studying it. In this section we will attempt to sharpen the image of homosexual parenthood constructed in the Nineties, the time that Italian sociologists first directed their attention towards homosexuality.

This first step has nevertheless little scientific relevance regarding lesbian and gay parenthood. The existence of same-sex couples was barely taken into consideration in the sociological studies of the family carried out at that time (Saraceno, 1988), and the first ISPES study on the condition of homosexual persons, which was based on questionnaires collected at the end of the Eighties, was published in 1991. Although the study examined the tendency of stable *de facto* cohabitations that was becoming the preferred model, it did not take into consideration the desire for children or the parenthood status of the persons interviewed.

The responses to questions about *coming out* nevertheless indirectly revealed the existence of married men and women as well as of parents amongst the interviewees. In fact, 1.7% of the male sample (approximately 30 out of 1,744) declared that they had disclosed their homosexuality to their wives and 4% of the women (12 out of 300) had revealed their homosexuality to their husbands<sup>6</sup>. We do not know, however, how many (if any) of them had children. What we do know is that 5 men and 3 women declared that they had revealed their homosexuality to their children.

Breaking the silence on the topic of homosexual parenthood fell to a non-scientific text (Bonaccorso, 1994) that offered the Italian reader the results of a psychological research carried out on lesbian mothers mostly in the United States. The first real Italian sociological research on lesbian parenthood was carried out ten years later. In 1998, in fact, Daniela Danna published the results of an investigation carried out in 1996 involving 52 'women who are mothers and who love other women'. With a mean age of 45, those women had become mothers almost exclusively through heterosexual relations<sup>7</sup>. The majority were married, but 6 conceived out of wedlock and 4 as a consequence of relations with men who would later become their husbands.

Besides some homogeneous aspects in the sample studied, Danna's research also highlighted the heterogeneity of the households in which the lesbian mothers were raising their children. Excluding the 8 households that did not include the children of the mothers studied, the most prevalent model was that of a mother alone with one child (17 households out of the 45 examined); the second was that of women couples with one child (7 units). The research also revealed that lesbians were beginning to emancipate maternity from an heterosexual context. As we will see, only a decade later studies will begin to detect a more mature form of this process, one that today is almost taken for granted: couples of women raising children conceived by assisted reproduction techniques or by donor insemination. These techniques certainly existed in Italy during the second half of the Nineties and were being used in particular by younger lesbian women, but research carried out at that time was still unable to intercept them<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The questionnaire did not ask interviewees about their civil status, but the percentages of gay and lesbian married persons were certainly higher than the ones registered. To the one registered, we would also have to add the percentage of those who did not reveal their homosexuality to their husband or wife. The same applies to the percentage of parents.

<sup>7</sup> Only in 2 cases was maternity the part of a plan shared by a lesbian couple foreseeing the use of artificial insemination.

<sup>8</sup> Daniela Danna declared in her text that she was unsuccessful in gaining interviews with younger mothers who had planned to have a child within a same-sex relationship. The author

Daniela Danna's work underlined the lingering relationship between mothers and husbands or companions who were the fathers of the children who were conceived. The study also highlighted the relevance of the mothers' homosexuality in the conflicts leading to the breakup with husbands or partners. Other more collaborative relationships were likewise described, as was the case of 4 mothers who explained that they kept up good relations with their ex-husbands who continued to be involved in the children's care. There were also 5 households with children in which the maternity was without any links with the lesbian community and confined within the walls of more or less sham marriages.

### **5. The beginning of a new century: A step forward in the transition**

The new century opened with the publication of some sociological studies on the lesbian and gay communities which, as opposed to the work by the ISPES, intentionally brought to light some aspects tied to homosexual parenthood. In this sense, the sociological interest for this phenomenon emerged within a more general interest for the social and cultural transformation of lesbian and gay Italian communities.

The text by Marzio Barbagli and Asher Colombo (2001) was essentially based on national surveys carried out by the Carlo Cattaneo Research Institute during the second half of the Nineties, the same period during which Daniela Danna's research was performed. A more recent work by Chiara Bertone, Alessandro Casiccia, Chiara Saraceno and Paola Torrioni (2003), which was based on data gathered from individuals living in Turin at the beginning of the century, was also carried out. Both studies dealt with the topic of parenthood and both took into consideration the male homosexual population, thus enlarging the picture that Danna had begun to paint a few years earlier. Another work that should be added to the list was realised by the Gruppo Soggettività Lesbica<sup>9</sup> and the Libera Università delle Donne di Milano<sup>10</sup> in 2001, which examined only lesbian parenthood (Sonogo, Podio, Benedetti, Pierri, Buonapace, Vismara, Conti, 2005).

We have discussed elsewhere the results of these studies regarding the two dimensions of family life that were investigated, that is, the growing tendency of stable same-sex cohabitations and the emergence of the parenting intentions of homosexual women and men (Trappolin, 2006b). As far as these

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attributed the refusal to the hostile climate towards lesbian women who underwent medically assisted insemination and to the lack of political consciousness of young lesbians.

<sup>9</sup> Group for Lesbian Subjectivity.

<sup>10</sup> Milan Free University of Women.

topics are concerned, the studies listed here confirmed the idea that the process of normalising meanings of parenthood could be considered at an advanced stage in the homosexual community, especially for the youngest generation; this was less true for social practices. In other words, models of family life that were difficult to realise were declared ideal.

Parenthood, which we will examine here in connection to its social forms, exemplifies the divergence between expectations and behaviours more than the ideal of the monogamous couple.

The investigations upon which the work by Barbagli and Colombo is based intercepted 78 gay fathers (out of 2,289) and 41 lesbian mothers (out of 761), with percentages that reached significant levels only in the group of individuals over 35 years old (respectively 10% and 19%). The investigators were dealing exclusively with individuals who became parents within heterosexual alliances and, in the great majority of cases, within marriages (76%). There were only rare cases of children conceived as a consequence of occasional relationships (13%). With the exception of some comments on innovations in homosexual parenting patterns (for the most part referring to mothers), the analysis does not go into the composition of the households in which the children were being raised, nor provides data on the socioeconomic status of parents<sup>11</sup>.

More information is provided by the survey that was led in Turin (Bertone, Casiccia, Saraceno and Torrioni, 2003). In fact, the group from Turin intercepted 20 lesbian mothers (out of 249) and 13 gay fathers (out of 257), corresponding to 8% and 5% of their respective samples. Just as in the national sample conducted by Barbagli and Colombo (2001), the children in the Turin-based study were conceived within heterosexual relationships, especially of the matrimonial type. The other thing that was commented upon was the onset of the 'emancipation from heterosexuality' of the lesbian mothers, a pattern that Daniela Danna had already perceived in 1998. Eighty-three percent of the lesbian mothers living in Turin lived with their children while only 45% of gay fathers did so. Moreover, in view of the fact that they were more frequently separated or divorced with respect to gay fathers, we can assume that a not irrelevant percentage of families created by lesbian mothers did not contemplate the involvement of the children's fathers. No other attempts to interpret the social forms of lesbian and gay parenthood were made. It is probable that a more in-depth analysis of homosexual parenthood was considered inappropriate since the authors themselves defined it as an 'experience regarding only a small minority'. The investigators

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<sup>11</sup> The lack of information about the socioeconomic situation of the parents or the pretended ones involved in the study is a feature of all research considered in this section.

preferred qualitatively analysing the motives behind the choices made. The reflections they gathered are similar to the excerpts coming from Giacomo, Marta, Carlo and Cristina that we included in the third section of this article.

The innovation of the Turin-based work was the identification of what we have defined as ‘the mature form’ of the emancipation of homosexual parenthood from an heterosexual context. The study, in fact, shows that a remarkable percentage of gay men (11%) and of lesbian women (29%) considered parenthood a decision *by and for* the couple. Only a minority thought they would seek parenthood by resorting to an heterosexual relationship, even a stable one such as marriage. As far as the others were concerned, they expected to adopt, in the case of aspiring gay fathers, or to use artificial insemination technologies.

The third study published in the first years of the new century, that is, the one realised by the Gruppo Soggettività Lesbica and the Libera Università delle Donne di Milano (Sonogo, Podio, Benedetti, Pierri, Buonapace, Vismara, Conti, 2005), produced highly interesting results. Out of the three studies considered in this section, it is, in fact, the one that best foresaw the maturation of an interest in a type of lesbian maternity only beginning to be perceived by surveys but considered an index of an important metamorphosis in the national lesbian community and in the types of families found in the country. We are referring, of course, to maternities planned and realised for and by cohabitating lesbians who choose to have recourse to assisted reproduction or to self-insemination.

This transition also accompanied a withdrawal of interest in the conception forms that were then prevalent among lesbian mothers according to research samples. Here we are referring to situations in which children conceived by lesbian mothers within stable relationships with men (for the most part husbands) were raised by their mothers within the context of various types of households. Women-couple parenthood was only one of the possible modalities. Other types of families included women alone, households formed by married couples with children, or other accidental, contingent forms. The study’s authors also highlighted the discrepancy between the most discussed forms of maternity and the most common ones detected by the sample<sup>12</sup>. Here is an outline of its most significant findings.

First of all, the 691 questionnaires gathered throughout the Italian peninsula defined lesbian maternity as a not at all common experience. Several

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<sup>12</sup> This discrepancy could be linked to the 4 years that passed between the time the questionnaires were gathered, that is, 2001 and the year the book was published. As we will see in the following section, the political and scientific sensitivity towards planned maternity underwent a significant transformation over that time period.

interviewees explained this fact by leveraging on the conviction, widespread even amongst lesbians, that auto-identification as a lesbian is incompatible with parenthood. In any case, existing children had been conceived for the most part within a stable heterosexual relationship. Only 6.7% of pregnancies were brought to term during a lesbian relationship, this was particularly true for women younger than 30. Secondly, approximately a third of the women responding to the survey questions did not find the idea of a lesbian couple with children attractive and declared that they did not want their partner to contribute to raising a child.

Generally speaking, little attention was dedicated to the types of families that included minors. An analysis of the questionnaires uncovered only the number of families composed of cohabitating women with children (there were only 3 in the entire sample) and of the single mothers with children (16 in all). It was not specified if any children were present in the 11 households in which the interviewees lived with their husband or companion.

The text does, however, provide an in-depth analysis of qualitative interviews with 'pioneer' women, that is, those who, together with their homosexual partner, realised their dream of having a child. Their families were described as a radical challenge to the heterosexual structure and a social laboratory in which more symmetrical relationships between members are negotiated. In addition, an analysis of these concrete experiences drew attention to the capacity to elaborate 'alternative relational models' involving male parental figures. These male figures correspond exclusively to sperm donors for artificial insemination who, in accordance with an agreement reached with the lesbian couple, went on to perform some type of fatherly role. But nothing was said about the involvement of the ex-husbands of the lesbian mothers who decided to raise their children alone or with their same-sex partner.

Considered together, the three studies outlined here lead us to define the first years of the new century as a period of transition. Although there were no investigations specifically dedicated to the subject of parenthood, the fact-finding work on the lesbian and gay communities prompted interest in the topic. Although in an almost invisible manner (in particular for the gay fathers), the samples detected the first signs of a separation between the heterosexual family (in which the majority of the children of the lesbian mothers and the gay fathers were conceived) and the new homosexual parenting forms.

Few considerations regarding the heterogeneity of the latter were expressed. Interest in analysing the households formed by women who became mothers following negotiation with their cohabitating partner, a family situation which was only then beginning to be intercepted, started to

emerge. As we will see in the next section, the years that followed saw further developments in these patterns.

## 6. The latest developments

The last part of our historical reconstruction, the one that will bring us to present times, began in 2005 in connection to two facts of great importance whose effects can still be seen. The first is *Modi di*, a research project on gay and lesbian lifestyles in Italy that was carried out by Arcigay with the support of the National Health Service which included it in its initiatives to prevent and reduce the risk of AIDS<sup>13</sup>. The second relevant fact is the birth of the first Italian organisation for homosexual parents, which was named Famiglie Arcobaleno<sup>14</sup>. The association rapidly became a reference point for the new generation of lesbian mothers and gay fathers giving voice to their points of view in the public debate and increasing their visibility in sociological research.

The research by Arcigay was carried out in 2005 through the collection of 4,690 questionnaires with non-heterosexual men and 2,084 questionnaires with non-heterosexual women. It was the largest investigation on LGBT communities ever realised in Italy at that time, a record it conserved for a decade until the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights carried out a survey in 2014 involving 10,804 non-heterosexual Italians. The most important point to consider as far as the present analysis is concerned is that the data gathered by Arcigay permitted an autonomous, wide-scale study on non-heterosexual parenting experiences (Lelleri, Prati, Pietrantonio, 2008) that is still being cited by those estimating the number of Italian minors who are being raised by one or more non-heterosexual parents.

Besides its wide extension, the work by Arcigay marked a turning point in Italian research for three principal reasons. The first is that it delineated, in a more accurate manner with respect to previous studies, crucial aspects of the different social forms in which those experiences were realised. The research, moreover, made it possible to reflect on the distinction between lesbian and gay parenting trajectories even though only the conception modalities of the lesbian mothers were examined. Finally, the authors clearly identified the tendency of the new generation of lesbian couples to have children and indicated the variables that facilitated achieving that goal, such as a high socioeconomic status. Here below further considerations about these aspects are outlined.

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<sup>13</sup> The entire report of the research is downloadable at <http://www.arcigay.it/strumenti/dati-e-ricerche/>

<sup>14</sup> Rainbow Families.



The national sample of the Arcigay research included 230 fathers and 98 mothers, approximately 5% of the male and female sub-samples. It refers to men and women who in the majority of cases were (and in many cases continue to be) married. Only one mother out of four and one father out of seven were unmarried. As already explained, how children were conceived was analysed only with regard to the female sub-sample. But in the light of the civil status of all of the parents analysed, it is probable that the absolute prevalence (86%) of conceptions with partners of the other sex, for the most part within stable relationships, can be extended to the fathers as well.

Almost all of the parents within the various types of households lived with their children. For the mothers, the most prevalent family type was the lesbian couple with children (64%). But it is important to point out that the heterosexual couple and the single mother status, that is, the lesbian forms of maternity that were most frequently intercepted by the research carried out during the precedent decade, were equally distributed in 36% of the mothers.

Data regarding the fathers highlighted a very different situation. Less than a third of the sample (29%) was made up of gay couples with children; 31% were single fathers, and 40% of the fathers were raising their children with a partner of the opposite sex. This photograph illustrates significant distinctions in social forms of homosexual parenthood depending on the parent's gender. In 2005, the Arcigay research painted a picture of non-heterosexual mothers who were committed to the process of emancipation from heterosexuality which, however, did not contemplate procreation within the lesbian couple. Instead, a stable relationship with a woman continued to constitute for non-heterosexual fathers a significant environment in which to care for and raise children. Confirming this tendency, the percentage of married fathers was almost double that of mothers (47% against 26%). In addition, paternity but not maternity, was associated to a greater difficulty in considering oneself gay (24%), leading to greater identification as a bisexual (43%). This is an extremely significant characteristic that has also emerged in more recent studies such as the one carried out in 2014 by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (cf. Trappolin, Tiano, 2015), according to which approximately 50% of the sub-sample of bisexual men were fathers (498 out of 996), while only 5% (433 out of 8,668) of the gay men were fathers.

The analysis by Lelleri, Prati and Pietrantoni (2008) did not dedicate particular attention to the males' difficulty in integrating their homosexuality with their identity as parents or to the lingering influence of the heterosexual couple on the maternity choices of lesbian women. The investigators concentrated, instead, on conceptions planned and realised by lesbian couples through assisted reproductive or self-insemination techniques. The study intercepted only 6 mothers (out of 98) who resorted to this possibility; for the

most part, they were young, highly educated, and affluent. Their example was already being followed by other women, regardless of their collocation in the stratification system. A same sex relationship represented, in fact, the preferred model in which neonates could be conceived and raised for almost all of the women who desired children (approximately half of the entire female sample). Recourse to artificial insemination or to auto-insemination constituted the preferred conception method for three quarters of these.

On the basis of these data, the investigators foresaw planned motherhood by lesbian couples as the new frontier of homosexual parenthood, a phenomenon that could contribute to radically modifying the choices of lesbian and gay persons in the near future and the meaning itself of family, parenthood and kinship. It was thus declared the primary objective of national research.

These data anticipated the definition of research programs whose fact-finding questions eclipsed the dynamics of two parenthood forms which, according to studies, had a strong holding in the country: those that did not make a net separation with regard to procreative and parenthood styles depending on the parents' sexual orientation, and those that did not conform themselves to the 'couple with children' model, such as single parents or co-parenting situations involving gay and lesbian couples.

The birth in 2005 of Famiglie Arcobaleno, the first Italian homosexual parent (or aspiring parent) association, contributed in a significant way to reinforcing this approach. In few years, Famiglie Arcobaleno became an important reference point for persons who were already parents and for couples who planned parenthood outside of a heterosexual relationship and were experiencing forms of discrimination different from those suffered by ex-spouses.

According to studies analysing its evolution (Grilli, 2014, 2016; Grilli, Parisi, 2016), 188 families belonged to the association in 2009 and 450 had enrolled by 2015. In the majority of cases, the families were made up of women couples with children born through assisted reproduction techniques. The first cases of gay parenthood through surrogacy were also beginning to come to light.

With the aid of the newly founded Famiglie Arcobaleno, the voices of gay and lesbian parents began to be heard. Just as had taken place in other national contexts (Roseneil, Crowhurst, Hellesund, Santos, Stoilova, 2013), the voices carried political requests that were founded on the hypothesis that the households in which they were raising their children were 'normal' (Trappolin, 2011). Despite the fact that these parents were unable to influence the political choices of the Italian Parliament (cf. Ozzano, 2015), they were nevertheless successful in defining the style and object of the discussions on this topic and

in raising controversial issues such as those pertaining to surrogacy (Di Nicola, 2016).

Famiglie Arcobaleno, moreover, boosted the relevance of new models of parenthood within the homosexual community. The experiences of couples that planned and successfully realised maternity, and perhaps even more importantly paternity, thanks to reproductive and surrogacy technology began to represent 'good practices' for all those who felt the same aspirations. It was the 'intentionality framework' within which aspiring same-sex partners delineated their expectations and homosexual parents described their experience that was widened (cf. Grilli, Parisi, 2016).

The impact of Famiglie Arcobaleno was, above all, decisive in overcoming the polarisation between male homosexuality and parenthood that recent research in Italy continued to highlight (Pacilli, Taurino, Jost, van der Toorn, 2011; Baiocco, Laghi, 2013). This was an effect that had already been highlighted by sociologists who had analysed interviews with gay fathers. As an exemplification, here below is a fragment of a declaration by Enrico, a 36 year-old gay father who participated in the study by Trappolin and Tiano (2015: 54). He expressed his doubts about the desire to become a father and the solutions he had found to the quandary:

I was not entirely convinced about parenthood and so we decided to read up on it. While it is true that you can learn a lot from books and theories, it was also important for us to hear about real situations, to look the children in the eye, to see what they were feeling and to understand if there was something inside of us that was out of step. So we became members of Famiglie Arcobaleno (...). It was such an incredible revelation to me. We saw so many families, so many children and everything was so natural, there weren't any differences (...). The whole thing reassured us and we decided to start out on the path.

One of the most important roles of Famiglie Arcobaleno has been that of promoting the production of knowledge about lesbian and gay parenthood. The contribution of the association's representatives to social science studies narrating the normality of lesbian and gay parenthood experiences has been quite relevant also to the political debate (cf. Gigli, 2011; Everri, 2016).

The assistance provided scholars in enrolling subjects to be interviewed for scientific research projects has, likewise, proven to be extremely important. Since its foundation, Famiglie Arcobaleno has been able to give voice to social and cultural trail blazers who, as we have seen, were not represented in the public debate if not in stigmatised roles. In view of the type of persons it is able to approach and their willingness to talk about personal experiences, the association has become the ideal collaborator for all those who are interested

in important transformations in family practices and parenthood, in particular in those that are most challenging of traditional forms, such as the new generation of lesbian and gay families with children.

Although not done intentionally, the partnership with researchers has nevertheless led to a sub-representation of families with children born during precedent heterosexual relationships, of households composed by single parent, or those based on alternative couple parenting.

Current psychological research on the internal dynamics of lesbian or gay families or on the wellbeing of their children finds itself reflecting on samples made up of lesbian and gay couples with children enrolled with the aid of Famiglie Arcobaleno (Cavina, Carbone, 2009; Baiocco, Santamaria, Ioverno, Petracca, Biondi, Laghi, Mazzoni, 2013; Baiocco, Santamaria, Ioverno, Fontanesi, Baumgartner, Laghi, Lingiardi; 2015). The greater part of recent sociological research has analysed the transformation in the family structures and networks they are a part of using the same types of social formations and the same enrolling strategies as their main reference point (Trappolin, Tiano, 2015; Bosisio, Ronfani, 2016; Guizzardi, 2016).

The samples intercepted by the studies that were unable to rely upon the Famiglie Arcobaleno network or that chose alternative enrolment methods describe a wider framework of parenthood experiences, although almost exclusively referring to female ones (Allegro, 2006; Bottino, 2008; Danna, 2009). Those data help to shed light on some aspects that is difficult to include in the framework within which members of associations such as Famiglie Arcobaleno move about.

We are referring, for example, to the distinction between the strength of the emotional tie and the involvement in care-taking of minors, according to which the partner of a lesbian mother with children born during a precedent heterosexual relationship is not perceived nor does she consider herself as a 'social mother'. This distinction is quite common in any kind of family that forms after separation, but is absent in the frame of planned parenthood provided by Famiglie Arcobaleno. Another example concerns the involvement of ex-husbands or other biological figures and the subsequent blurring of the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality in parental family structures.

## **7. Final remarks**

Even in Italy, gays' and lesbians' declarations that they are 'just like everyone else' are based on the 'normality' of their own family unit or the one they dream of having, or of the parenthood status that they have or dream of

having. The national institutions maintain an ambivalent attitude towards these questions (cf. Trappolin, Tiano, 2015). On the one hand, it is true that same-sex families with children were included for the first time in the last 2011 Census, which gave them a visible position in the overall picture of family forms in today's country (Bosisio, Ronfani, 2016; Guizzardi, 2016). On the other, the law recognising same-sex civil unions that was approved in May 2016 did not recognise the rights of social parents of pretended parents.

We have discussed in this article the modalities by which sociological research has traced the outlines of these families by examining specific population samples. It is our hypothesis that the narrations produced by sociology can contribute to the way lesbian and gay parenthood is socially perceived. This narration has recently become focalised on a parenthood model planned within lesbian and gay couples and realised through reproductive technology. This focalisation overshadows the plurality of social forms in which parenthood is realised by lesbians and gays, reinforcing the idea that lesbian and gay parenthood is something completely separate from heterosexual parenting (Trappolin, 2016).

It would seem wise then to monitor how feedback from research affects the collectivities being studied. Within the Italian context the growing interest on same-sex families with children has followed the pattern of representing these groups as a cohesive whole based on mainstream narratives used to contrast the exclusion suffered by the most affluent parents. The exclusion dynamics that have in turn been produced by this tendency constitute an emerging issue within the international scientific debate.

There are nevertheless also signs of it in Italy. The *Italian Rainbow Families' Census* supported by the International Lesbian Gay Associations (ILGA) and coordinated by the Centro Risorse LGBTI of Turin<sup>15</sup> is perhaps the first example of this self-reflecting attitude among Italian researchers. Data related to the description of the national sample were presented at the University of Verona on 4th May 2017, and a more in-depth analysis is still to be provided.

To facilitate data collection, the research group chose, in fact, to integrate the network of Famiglie Arcobaleno with the one of Genitori Rainbow<sup>16</sup>, an association that was founded in 2011 to sustain lesbian mothers and gay fathers 'with children from precedent heterosexual relationships'. This integration has made it possible to draw from a wide heterogeneous sample of almost 400 households with children. The majority of these families are made up of parent couples, three quarters of which are composed by women. The

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<sup>15</sup> LGBTI Resource Centre of Turin. To read the report, link to <http://www.risorselgbti.eu/contiamoci-famiglie-lgbtqi/>

<sup>16</sup> Rainbow Parents.

sample has also intercepted 66 families of single parents who represent 5% out of the total. Moreover, 20% of all of the sample's children were conceived in previous heterosexual relationships, meaning that regardless of the type of households the parents have formed, a not negligible percentage need to negotiate a satisfying relationship with the parent of the other sex.

Some forms of parenthood that appeared in the Italian research carried out at the dawn of the new century were not intercepted by the *Italian Rainbow Families' Census*. For example, those that were formed in stable relationships with a partner of the other sex or co-parenting experiences involving more than one couple. The parents involved in these households are almost invisible as far as the network of associations is concerned and that is the reason why it is difficult to engage them. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that the sample upon which this study is based is the most heterogeneous that has been collected in recent years. It is the task of the researchers to analyse this sample in an opportune way, for example assessing the influence of socioeconomic factors in expectations and decisions related to parenthood.

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