The psychology of children with same-sex parents

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What does it mean to become parents in a stigmatising political and sociocultural context? Marina Everri discusses her thoughts from her new book on same-sex parents and their children living in Italy.

In most Western European and Scandinavian countries, same-sex couples have been allowed to get married and have or adopt children since the beginning of the twenty-first century (see map below). Southern and Eastern European countries (except for Spain), by contrast, have taken a controversial stance against same-sex marriage legislation and, notably, against allowing gay and lesbian couples to have biological children or to adopt them. Among these countries, Italy has recently been in the eye of the storm.

In 2015, the Italian parliament discussed a bill concerning the recognition of civil partnerships for same-sex couples and the possibility for gays and lesbians to adopt the biological child of his/her partner, known as 'step-child adoption', which was proposed by Monica Cirinnà, a member of the left-leaning political party, Partito Democratico. The bill was initially applauded as Italy's long-awaited first step towards the recognition of gay and lesbian civil rights. Italy was therefore expected to mirror Spain, her 'sister country', which in 2005 pioneered the recognition of same-sex marriages and the right for gay and lesbian couples to conceive and adopt children, thereby affirming its secularism despite its catholic heritage.

'Cirinnà's Law' was eventually approved and ratified this year on 20 th May ('Legge Cirinnà, 20 Maggio 2016, n.76), making Italy the 27th European country acknowledging same-sex civil partnerships. However, the bill went through a stormy and lengthy debate, which provoked major discontent both in parliament and amongst the general public. 'Cirinnà's Law' allows same-sex couples to have civil partnership rights, but not the full set of rights guaranteed by marriage: step-child adoption was removed from the final version of the legislation, and same-sex couples are still not allowed to have or adopt children. Thus, children of same-sex couples remain mostly invisible in terms of Italian legislation. The Italian sociocultural context mirrors this trend: more than half of the Italian population acknowledges civil partnerships, but only 20% agrees that same-sex parents should be allowed to adopt or have children.

The book I have recently edited, titled *Genitori* come *gli altri e* tra *gli altri. Essere genitori omosessuali in Italia* ('Parents *like* others and *among* the others: Being same-sex parents in Italy') situates same-sex parenting in the Italian political and sociocultural context. I addressed the study of same-sex families to provide an in-depth examination of how same-sex couples build relationships, enter parenthood, and deal with daily tasks and routines within a context mainly hostile to them and their children. Research on intimate relationships has long demonstrated that partnership legalisation has a positive impact on psychological wellbeing as it increases a sense of protection and equity. Conversely, *lack* of rights causes distress, legitimises invisibility and homophobic behaviours, and leads to the internalisation of homophobia. I was most interested in focusing on the study of same-sex families in Italy to document how they cope with everyday tasks, considering both internal family dynamics and relationships with external contexts (e.g. schools, social and clinical services, etc.), while living in a country which discriminates against them by not safeguarding their rights.

The title of the book highlights my intention to challenge a prejudicial approach to the study of same-sex families by acknowledging both the similarities of contemporary families regardless of their structure ('*parents like others*'), and the specific needs of the multiple forms that, along with two-parent heterosexual traditional families, characterize today's Italian society *('among the others'*). In short, I argue that same-sex families are one of the possible forms of families in which today's children can be born and brought up.

The book aims to address particular points of interest and concerns in relation to same-sex families, especially with respect to children's adaptive development. The first section comprises recent research that critically examines

these concerns through analyses of parent-child dynamics and children's adjustment. This research confirms the findings on this subject in academic literature over the last forty years:

- Same-sex parents are able to provide care and protection like any other parent.

- Children raised by same-sex parents do not encounter more developmental problems than children raised in traditional heterosexual two-parent families.

- There is no evidence that children with same sex-parents develop any particular sexual orientation, e.g. homosexual.

The key factor that negatively impacts on child adjustment is the prejudice that arises in contexts outside immediate family circles. What, therefore, is the role of institutions, e.g. schools, in this process? Can teachers and practitioners rely on models and intervention programmes that are able to respond to the needs of children and parents of non-traditional families?

The second section of the book addresses these questions to professionals working with families and children; specifically, educators, clinicians, and social workers who have started to challenge existing models of intervention and have developed new approaches attuned to the demands of alternative forms of families present in Italy. The authors acknowledge the need for new models and ongoing training programmes to support practitioners. As is highlighted by previous studies carried out in Italy, professionals tend to respond to the requests of same-sex clients by adopting either a benevolent approach guided by their own 'good sense', or opt to design interventions anchored to their own, largely unconscious, prejudices. This latter approach tends to ignore same-sex clients' specific needs. A number of experimental intervention programmes operating in Italy are also discussed.

The third and concluding section of the book gives voice to politicians, jurists, and representatives of LGBTQI's associations in order to reflect on possible changes at a macro-social level. The contributors argue that Italy is facing rapid social changes and that the demand by same-sex families for greater rights is a particularly prominent example of the call for change in Italian society. The authors propose a vigorous dialogue and collaboration between political/juridical contexts and interest groups, aimed at sustaining this change and navigating the Italian political and sociocultural context towards greater inclusiveness.

The near future will be particularly challenging for researchers and practitioners working in a sociocultural and political context, which is changing at two conflicting paces, such is the case in Italy. On the one hand, there is a rapidly increasing demand for equality from different social minorities, including same-sex families. On the other, there remains a distinct resistance to any revision to the notion of family as traditionally defined within the legacy of Italian catholic culture. This book is an attempt to make researchers and professionals aware of the fact that same-sex families oblige us to face these changes in a responsive and non-ideological way, by developing new perspectives that can be maintained through social institutions. In the introduction, I argue that the development of a 'culture of difference', which entails a willingness to face our prejudices, understand how they originated, and learn and develop a self-reflexive stance, may allow us to become aware of the impact of our research and interventions on families and children, and to envisage the risks of exclusion and discrimination as well as the potential for inclusion.

My hope is that this book will open a path to greater reflection and more flexible models: in short, to socio-cultural transformations that would at least limit iterations of episodes similar to what a ten-year-old girl told me in an interview:

What I am about to tell you is a bit sad. The teacher asked us to draw a genealogical tree and I drew two mums. She insisted that it is not possible to have two mums, so she placed an 'X' on one of my mums and she drew a man with a beard. I was very sorry about that… afterwards I tore the drawing up.

Everri, M. (2016) (ed.) *Genitori* come *gli altri e* tra *gli altri. Essere genitori omosessuali in Italia*. Mimesis, Milano.

For more information about the book please contact Marina Everri: m.everri@lse.ac.uk

A copy of the book can also be found at the LSE library. An English overview is available here.

Marina Everri is a researcher interested in child development, family relations, and children's and families' health. Her works look at the transformations affecting contemporary families in terms of relational and communicative processes specifically during adolescence. She is currently a Marie Curie Research Fellow at the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science, LSE, where she is working at the European project, namely 'AdoDigitFamX, to investigate the implication of digital technologies on adolescents' identity development and parent-children communication. She also collaborates with the University of Parma, Italy, on projects concerned with the study of resilience processes in Italian same-sex families.