



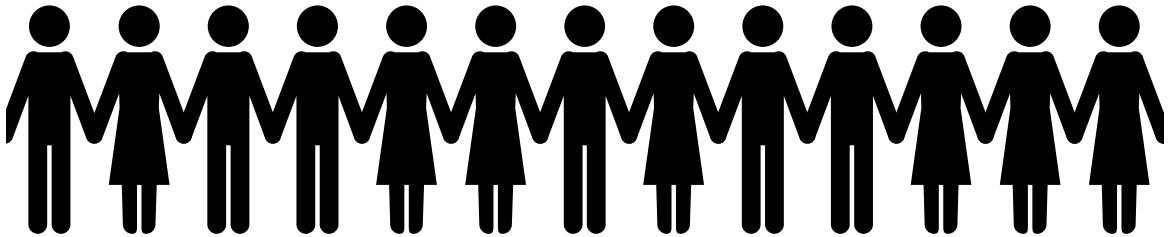


Family Matters

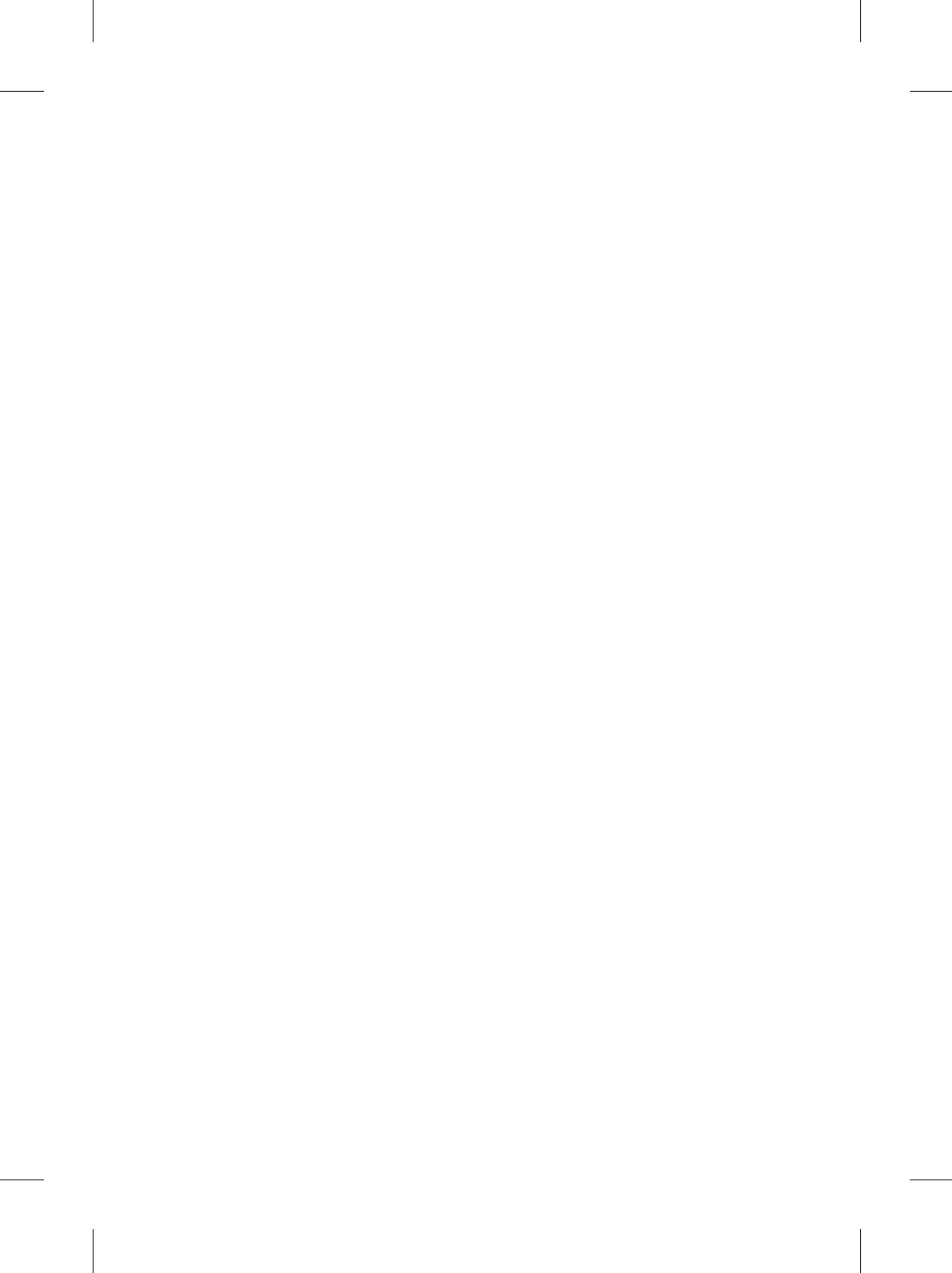
Supporting families
to prevent violence against
gay and lesbian youth

European conference - Florence, June 20th–21st, 2008

Auditorium del Consiglio Regionale della Toscana



Conference Proceedings



Foreword

The project Family Matters. Supporting families to prevent violence against gay and lesbian youth, whose results were presented and discussed during its final Conference in Florence, on June 20th/21st e 21 2008, was made possible by the ideas and the commitment of many people besides those whose contributions are included in these Proceedings.

The president, Jenny Broughton, and the co-founders of Euroflag have long believed in the importance of building a European network of voluntary organisations of families of LGBT people. The pilot research on the experiences of these families, which was promoted by Euroflag and was carried out in different European countries under the coordination of Frances Nicol, has inspired the research within the Family Matters project. A documentary on these experiences, which was at first an idea of Paola Dall'Orto, found in this project the possibility to be filmed. The planning and organisational management of the project was carried out for a great part by Alessandro Galvani.

The contribution of volunteers from Fflag, Ampgil and Agedo proved crucial for all the activities of the project, from research the development of informative material and the planning of actions. Crucial has also been the contribution of those people who have engaged their time and energies in participating in research: the family members that were interviewed in Italy (together with all the LGBT organisations, Arcilesbica, Arcigay and other local organisations) as well as the qualified informants for the research voluntary organisations and public services. Various regional administrations have supported the project (like Regione Toscana and Generalitat de Catalunya); two regional administrations in Italy have supported local extensions of the research (Regione Piemonte and Regione Puglia).

Contributions to discussion in the final conference also came by Deborah Lambillotte (ILGA Europe), Sylvi Paulick (IGLYO), Maria Gigliola Toniollo (Dipartimento Nuovi Diritti CGIL), Angela Nava (Coordinamento Genitori Democratici), Alessio De Giorgi (Task Force LGBT della Regione Toscana), Agostino Fragai (Councillor for institutional reforms, della Regione Toscana), Gianni Salvadori (Councillor for social policies and sport, Regione Toscana), Maria Grazia Donno (for the Department of Solidarity, Regione Puglia), Enzo Cucco (for the Equal Opportunities Department, Regione Piemonte), Daniela Lastrì (Equal Opportunities Councillor, Comune di Firenze).

These proceedings were edited by Chiara Bertone and Marina Franchi.



Note on translations:

*The research report *The experiences of family members of gay and lesbian young people in Italy* and all the comments to the research in Part I are a translation from the Italian version. Equally the report entitled *Public support programmes for families with gay and lesbian children in Spain* by Diego Herrera is translated from Spanish. The research report *The non governmental organisations supporting families and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Europe* by Sarah Hayes and Anita Naoko Pilgrim and the comment *Why families Matter* by Jeffrey Weeks are reported in their original version. Part III consists of translations from Italian with the exception of Brett Shapiro's *Comments on Film*, which the author provides in English to the editors.*

The research reports and the Proceedings in the three official languages of the project (Italian English and Spanish) are available on the website



Introduction

Through the Family Matters project we wanted to give voice, visibility and support to parents and siblings of lesbian and gay young people. Their experiences remain largely invisible both when family issues are debated, and when issues related to gay and lesbian lives are dealt with.

These experiences actually shed light on what remains invisible in the seeming contradiction, which is often assumed in public discourse, between the normal family and homosexuality: lesbians and gay men live in families during their adolescence, when the process of construction of their sexual identity takes place, and, especially in Mediterranean countries like Italy, as young adults, and the relations with the families of origin often remain important later in their life course. Therefore, supporting families proves crucial in order not only to prevent violence within the families, but also because the lack of acceptance by their families of origin makes lesbian and gay young people more vulnerable in their struggle to deal with social stigmatization, homophobia and violence. Despite the importance of these family relations, there is a lack of knowledge, in Europe, both about the experiences of parents and siblings, and about how to develop support for them.

The project

The idea, and the partnership, behind this project come from the experience of some of the voluntary organisations of relatives of gay and lesbian people in Europe building up cooperation within Euroflag. Already in 2002, Euroflag had promoted a pilot research exploring the experiences of family members in various European countries. For the Family Matters project this cooperation was renewed among three organisations of parents and families of gay and lesbian people in Italy (Agedo), Spain (Ampgil) and the UK (FFLAG), together with the Department of Social Research, University of East Piedmont, Italy as the coordinator and scientific supervisor.

The research

The first goal of the project was to analyse which strategies parents and siblings draw upon in tackling difficulties in accepting the sexuality of young gay and lesbian family members, and which resources they mobilise in facing the subsequent redefinition of relationships within the family and with the outside world. In order to explore these experiences, we have chosen to start from Italy, where Agedo is widely spread, with many local branches. The research, with a survey and interviews involving more than

200 parents and siblings, was carried out by the Department of Social Research, University of East Piedmont.

As a second goal, we wanted to investigate the experiences of support for families of gay and lesbian people that have already been realized in Europe within the public and the voluntary sectors, and that show an imbalance between the importance of grassroots activity, which was detected in a monitoring of such activities in Europe, and a general lack of attention to the families of lesbian and gay people in the development of anti-discrimination and anti-homophobic policies and services. A study of activities targeted at family members within the public sector, with a special focus on Spain and a local case study, shows this lack of attention, identifying at the same time some examples of good practice, and discussing their strengths and limits.

The actions

The research activities have provided precious knowledge for developing useful tools targeted both at families and professionals working with them, as well as decision-makers. A fundamental tool to approach parents' and siblings' point of view, their difficulties and the changes they experience, is the documentary film *Parents Reborn*, which its director Claudio Cipelletti realised, together with psychologists and experts in training, and that was made possible thanks to the engagement of Agedo and to the generosity of the family members that took part in it. An introductory Guide targeted at families who are looking for correct information, but also to professionals working with them, was also produced by Ampgil. Like all the other material of the project, the Guide can be found on the website of Euroflag (www.euroflag.net), the network of this kind of organisations of parents and families of lesbian and gay people. The website is conceived, first of all, as a meeting place for exchanging experiences among this kind of organisations in Europe, an open place where families and other people can find contacts, information and support.

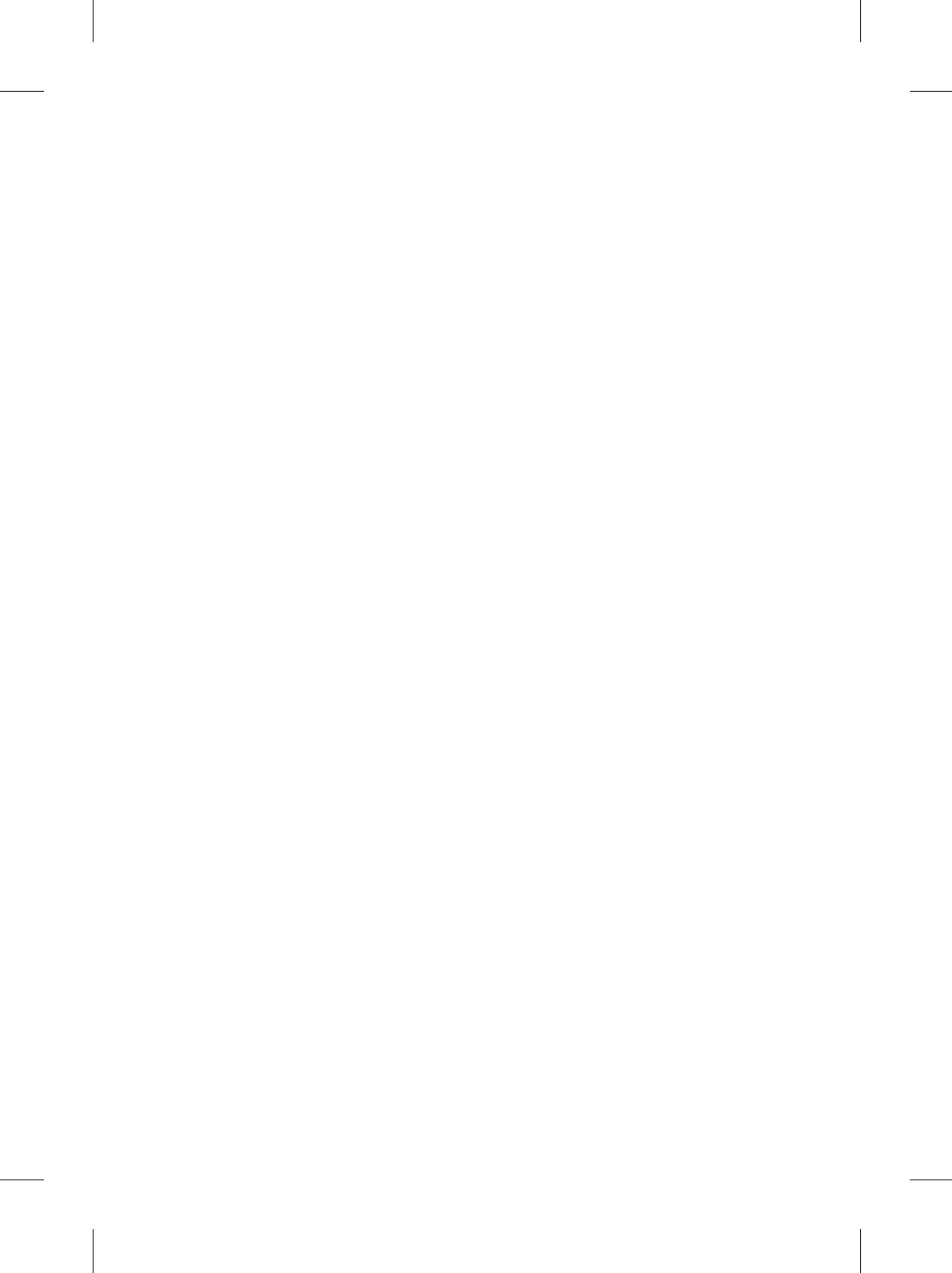
The conference

The final conference, whose proceedings are introduced here, was held in Florence on 20th/21st June 2008. It provided a space for discussing the research outcomes with other experts in an interdisciplinary dialogue showing that not only the experiences of the families are very diverse, but also the perspective through which we read them.

During the conference, the material produced by the project was also presented to the public. In particular, the film showed the possibilities opened by the power of images, when it is accompanied by the generosity of people

telling their stories and by thorough use of the knowledge acquired during the project.

Both the research, and the other activities of the project, tell us about what it means to behave as good parents, brothers, sisters, and at the same time as citizens, when facing unexpected situations that, in the case of homosexuality as in other cases, are sources of discrimination and violence.



Within the family
The challenge of homosexuality



Research report

The experiences of family members of gay and lesbian young people in Italy

by Chiara Bertone and Marina Franchi
Sociologists, University of East Piedmont

Contents

PART I. PROJECT OUTLINE

1. Research objectives and context

1.1 The context: Italy

2. The family members involved

PART II. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3. The discovery

3.1 How the revelation was made

3.2 Warning signs

3.3 Initial reactions

3.4. Significance and consequences of the discovery

4. Family relationships after the discovery

4.1 A desire for normality

4.2 Differences compared

5. Outside the family

5.1 Among relatives

5.2 Among acquaintances

5.3 Confronting an institution: the Catholic Church

6. Mobilisation of resources

Part I. PROJECT OUTLINE

1. Research objectives and context*

Studies on the development of the homosexual identity have emphasised the importance of the experience of 'coming out' as a stage in the process of recognising that one is gay or lesbian. A gay or lesbian person's family of origin represents a very important factor in this¹. A lot of research has been done into the impact of familial reactions to the 'coming out' of a gay or lesbian person, not just on that person's psychological well-being and ability to face up to incidents of homophobic violence, but also on their general standard of living, including the material aspects². The younger the age of the person who is coming out, the greater this impact appears to be.

The studies also generally acknowledge that, despite their importance, the families in question do not have any rules, roles or constructive language at their disposal to help them to deal with the discovery that one of their members is homosexual³. There is no family role for homosexuals to relate to: gays and lesbians, as social constructs, are seen as being extraneous to the family unit⁴. Understanding the resources available to families is an essential stage in the process of developing strategies to support them in understanding and eventually accepting the homosexuality of one of their members, both in terms of supporting that family member in the social context and redefining family relationships in the light of the revelation of their sexuality. Such an understanding can also help in defining possible ways of intervening to prevent homophobic violence within the families themselves. It is not as rare as one might expect to find that homosexual young people have been subjected to physical or psychological violence, had their personal liberties curtailed, or been shut out of the family altogether.

With these objectives in mind, our aim in undertaking the research contained in this report has been to investigate, with a sociological approach, the practices developed by families who are coming to terms with the discovery

1 * This report is the outcome of the common work of the authors. Marina Franchi has written par. 2 and 7 and has carried out the analysis and presentation of survey data. Chiara Bertone has written the remaining paragraphs.

2 De Vine 1984; Robinson, Walters and Skeen 1985; Ben-Ari 1995; Saltzburg 1996; Serovich et al. 1993; Newman Muzzonigro 1993; Strommen 1993; Savin-Williams and Dube 1998; D'Augelli, Hershberger and Pilkington 1998; Waldner and Magruder 1999; Beeler and Di Prova 1999; Oswald 2000a; Savin-Williams 2001; D'Augelli, Grossman Starks 2005.

3 De Vine 1984.

4 Calhoun 2000.

of the sexuality of a gay or lesbian young person, and the significance attached to them. We have questioned to what extent these practices can be interpreted as reaffirming general sexual and heterosexual normative models, and to what extent it is actually possible to identify elements of change to and differentiation of the models.

In carrying out this research, we have distributed questionnaires to and interviewed in depth more than two hundred families of gay and lesbian young people. These young people were all aged between 14 and 22, or were in this age range at the time at which they revealed their sexuality to their families⁵. We tried as far as possible to overcome the methodological limitations of other research projects on these experiences. These projects usually came at the problem from the perspective of the gay and lesbian person, or only canvassed the parents, ignoring the role of other family members, such as brothers or sisters. They also generally only sampled a limited number of families.

1.1 The context: Italy

The research was carried out in Italy, where the relationship of homosexual young people with their families is emerging as being particularly significant⁶. In fact, unlike many other Western countries, in which the homosexual lifestyle is seen as autonomous from the family of origin and as leading to the development of an urban community life, in Italy, gay and lesbian young people, like their heterosexual peers, tend to live at home for an extended period of time, well into their twenties. The parent-child bond often remains strong even after the young person has moved out, and can constitute that young person's principal source of support. Indeed, there are strong economic and cultural barriers to young people leading a life which is independent of that of their parents. Research carried out into the experiences of gays and lesbians in Italy seems to trace the path of an 'Italian way' of adopting a homosexual identity and lifestyle that happens within rather than outside of intergenerational relationships. This path seems to be being taken earlier and earlier and more and more explicitly by large groups of gay and lesbian young people. It is a tendency which, while reducing incidences of negation of the young person's homosexuality by family

5 A pilot research of families, with similar objectives, was carried out in several different European countries in 2003 by Euroflag (a European network of support organisations for the families of gays and lesbians). The Italian part of this survey was managed by Agedo and involved three families from Turin, Rome and Palermo (Bertone, Bonuccelli, Cappotto and Rinaldi 2003).

6 Pietrantonio. 1998; Montano 2000; Saraceno 2003; Bertone 2003; Bertone, Bonuccelli, Cappotto e Rinaldi 2003; Chiari 2006; Barbagli and Colombo 2007.

members⁷, at the same time creates a generation of parents who lack the cultural and psychological tools to confront such a radical challenge to their expectations. Italy has only relatively recently embraced the globalised model of the 'modern homosexual', and it is the older models of sexual and emotional same-sex relationships, characterised by gender inversion and pederasty, that tend to colour parents' opinions of homosexuality the most⁸. Finally, from a legal point of view, Italy is one of the few countries in Europe which does not legally recognise same sex relationships. Only married couples are allowed to adopt, and donor insemination is illegal.

2. The family members involved

The experiences and perceptions of family members were gathered through a survey and in-depth interviews. The survey questionnaire, which was designed to be filled in by family members themselves, was sent to parents who had homosexual children who were either now aged between 14 and 22, or who had been in this age range when they revealed their sexuality to their families. It was not easy to locate such subjects, since they generally kept to themselves and did not communicate with other families in the same situation, except when they came into contact with associations such as Agedo. We were therefore heavily reliant on the efforts of Agedo volunteers who, in numerous local offices, sieved through the parents they came into contact with to find those who were willing to participate in the research, and also co-operated with other LGBT⁹ associations whose supporters and members acted as intermediaries between the research group and the parents. Some parents were also recruited through invitations to participate in the research which were broadcasted via various media, as well as within the personal networks of volunteers and researchers. Not all parents contacted were willing to participate in the research. The parents that we were able to reach were therefore a very specific sample group, who recounted the story of how they came to accept that their son or daughter was homosexual. The very act of participating in the research signified that they recognised that homosexuality formed part of their family life, and was not extraneous to it.

119 mothers and 53 fathers responded to the questionnaire. 83 of the mothers had a gay son and 36 a lesbian daughter, while 42 of the fathers had

7 Cohen 2002.

8 This process is almost always assumed to take place between homosexual males (Barbagli and Colombo 2007).

9 National organisations such as Arcigay, Arcilesbica and many other local organisations.

a gay son and 11 a lesbian daughter. 5 respondents (2 fathers and 3 mothers) stated that they had more than one homosexual child¹⁰.

The sample group was evenly composed of people who had come into contact with LGBTs (mainly Agedo (41%) but also other associations (11%)) and people who had never come into contact with these associations (48%). This distribution reflects the networks which were brought into action to locate the sample group.

Families from many different parts of Italy and many different educational backgrounds proved to be willing to participate in the research; the sample group was therefore quite socially diverse¹¹. 35% of the questionnaires received came from North-Western Italy, 24% from the South and the islands, 27% from the North East and 19% from Central Italy. 50% of respondents lived in large cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants, while 20% lived in medium-sized cities and 29% in smaller towns of fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. The mothers who responded had an average age of 57, and were less well educated than the fathers (32% had obtained the *licenza media*, a certificate awarded upon passing a set of exams at the end of the *scuola media*, at age 13, and 25% had an undergraduate degree). Most of them (46%) were employed, but a good number were homemakers (27%) and retired employees (24%). The fathers had an average age of 59; more than a third of them had an undergraduate degree (36%) and a third was retired employees. The average monthly income was 1,300 Euros. More than a fifth (22%) of the mothers, but very few fathers (8%) were separated at the time of completing the questionnaire.

As far as religious orientation was concerned, 82% of the men and 72% of the women stated that they were Catholic. Of these, 40% were regular practitioners, and 40% occasional practitioners. 4% of respondents stated that they belonged to a religion other than Catholicism, while 23% of the women and 16% of the men did not consider themselves to belong to any religion. Political orientation proved to be the element that most strongly characterised the sample group. 70% of respondents stated that they were left-wing, 4% that they were right-wing, and the remaining 26% was evenly divided between the centre-left and centre-right.

The sample group for the in-depth interviews did not, however, consist exclusively of parents. The 50 family interviews included the brothers and sisters in those families, whether heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual, wherever possible.

10 The way the questionnaire was structured meant that in these cases, the information gathered concerned the child that the parents first discovered to be homosexual.

11 One of the recurring problems with this kind of research has been the homogeneity of the sample group, which has often consisted overwhelmingly of urban families of a similar level of education.

Part II. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3. The discovery

If coming out to their families is considered by gays and lesbians to be a central rite of passage in the process of constructing an “integrated” identity¹² and embarking upon a homosexual lifestyle, it is also usually a major change for other family members, and particularly (but not only) for the parents. The unexpected identity which has just been revealed triggers a redefinition of the relationships between family members and opens up areas of reflection on a large number of aspects of these relationships that were previously taken for granted. The discovery that a child or sibling is homosexual is at once anchored in the moment and a gradual process. However, the stories told by family members and above all by parents almost always recount that they can identify a turning point at which the family passed from not mentioning the discovery to talking about it openly.

3.1 How the revelation was made

As previously stated, the research concerned family members of young people who came out as being lesbian or gay before their 23rd birthday. The average age of the children at the time at which the parents in the families who participated in the research made the discovery was 19. This age was lower for those who were still under 25 years old at the time of the research: most of the children came out before they turned 18.

In almost two thirds of cases (64%), the child explicitly came out to his or her parents by stating that they were gay or lesbian (table 1). In the other cases, the parents either found out from another person, or made the discovery through reading their child’s diary or finding a letter or some material on homosexuality.

The mother has already emerged as a central figure in the stories recounted by gays and lesbians in other research projects of this nature, and proves to be equally important in the stories recounted by the parents in our research. In fact, the majority of the mothers (52%) told us that they were the first family member to find out that their child was homosexual, while most of the fathers told us that they found out either at the same time as the mother, or after her. It was therefore not uncommon for the mother to be assigned, even by her children, a mediating role between child and father: *“help me to tell Dad”*.

12 Troiden 1988; Whitman, Cormier and Boyd 2000; Beaty 1999.

Families where the young person in question had siblings are the 68% of respondents' families. Brothers and sisters also played an important role in the way in which the revelation was made, and when. They were often among the first family members to find out that their brother or sister was homosexual (table 2), and were in any case among the first three people to be told by their parents about the discovery.

Table 1: How the parents found out, with separate values for fathers (n: 49) and mothers (n: 122) (%)

How did you find out that your child was homosexual?			
	<i>Father</i>	<i>Mother</i>	<i>Total</i>
Directly from the child	61	65	64
From another person	25	6	12
In some other way	14	29	24

Table 2: How the brothers and sisters found out (%)

How did you find out that your brother or sister was homosexual*		
		no of cases
Directly from the brother or sister – first in family to find out	30	(34)
Directly from the brother or sister – at the same time as or after the parents	19	(21)
From the parents	19	(22)
No information available	30	(34)
Don't know	2	(2)

* The percentages have been calculated according to information provided by the parents. Refers to respondents with more than one child (total number of parents who stated that they had more than one child = 113).

3.2 Warning signs

The discovery was defined as unforeseen from many parents, more so for fathers (53%) than for mothers (44%), and more for gay sons than for lesbian daughters. In the other cases, the parents stated that they already had suspicions.

Warning signs were pieced together after the event even by parents for whom the discovery had come as more of a surprise and who often blamed themselves for not having realised earlier. Slotting the pieces of the past into place seems to have been a way for the parents to make sense of what had happened since it enabled them to create some continuity in their family history following the discovery that the child was homosexual. As we have seen, the discovery generally fractured the image that the parents had of their child, who now appeared radically different from what they had thought him or her to be. Continuity was re-established by recognising that “*my child is just the same as they always were*” and that all that had changed was the viewpoint of the parents¹³.

Table 3: Parents’ suspicions by sex of their child (%)

<i>sex of child</i>	<i>Father</i>		<i>Mother</i>		totals	no. of cases
	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>		
<i>I started to become suspicious...</i>						
...watching the way that my child behaved with members of their own and the opposite sex	12**	75**	16	30	23	(18)
...watching the mannerisms of my child* (way of speaking...)	44		11	40	25	(20)
...because my child seemed ill at ease and I didn't know why	38	25*	60	20**	42	(34)
...other	6*		13	10	10	(8)

* n = 1

** n < 4

13 Pietrantonio 1998; Beeler and DiProva 1999.

The type of suspicion described was different for male and female children (table 3). For sons in particular, the signals were not so much gestures of affection or attraction towards same sex peers as forms of non conformity to gender stereotypes and unease or isolation from their peers.

These elements were often linked, and could be traced back even to infancy. Typically, the signs included not playing football or preferring girls' toys such as dolls, taking excessive care over their own appearance (one mother recalled that her son *"was 4 or 5 years old when I noticed that he and his playmate would do each others' hair and that kind of thing, and I thought that it was strange"*), or qualities such as sensitivity, an artistic nature or being delicate. Signs of feeling isolated or ill-at-ease that parents remembered and subsequently interpreted as being linked to their child's homosexuality included disliking school, flying into rages, and being silent when in family.

Daughters also showed signs of not conforming to gender stereotypes (the sporty tomboy daughter who plays football), but these signs were less likely connected to uneasiness or lack of interest in boys.

However, warning signs were often found in a relationship between the daughter and another girl, which the parents noticed as being particularly intimate.

It was mainly the mothers who spoke articulately of these warning signs and their worries before the child confirmed their suspicions. The fathers seemed to notice them only after they had spoken with the mother or another person.

3.3 Initial reactions

The parents recalled their initial reactions as a jumble of different and even contradictory emotions and actions. In the questionnaire, they were given a list of possible actions and statements and asked to indicate those which they identified with as being similar to what they did and felt in the immediate aftermath of the discovery. In the interviews we were able to probe the significance of their answers more deeply.

From the background of different reactions nonetheless seemed to emerge a shared conception of family ties as defined by unconditional love and solidarity and unbreakable even by the discovery of homosexuality. They are regulated by the imperative moral absolute: *"s/he is still my child/brother/sister"*¹⁴.

The possibility of rejecting the child was often raised, but for the purposes of allowing the family members to distance themselves from it and reaffirm their imperative. Rejection, also one of the children's fears, is seen as being incompatible with the very idea of family ties: love for a family member is

14 McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2002.

non-negotiable and may not be brought into question. It means taking their side when faced with a hostile world. For parents, this solidarity was expressed as fear and protection, while brothers and sisters felt it as complicity and sharing.

These elements can be found once again in the sentences with which the vast majority of parents identified: *"The important thing is that you're happy"* (88%) and *"I'm sorry that I wasn't there for you when you needed me"* (69%). In contrast to this, just one parent recalled saying *"You're not my child anymore"* (a father to his son), while two mothers recalled to have called their sons perverted. Although the tie to the child was never brought into question, the reaction to the discovery was generally recalled by parents as being a moment of rupture which unleashed strong emotions.

The reactions they most commonly identified with were embarrassment, being lost for words, crying and fear.

These stronger and more immediate emotive reactions were reported more frequently by mothers than fathers. The majority of mothers, but less than a third of fathers, also recalled feeling physically ill. As an immediate reaction a fifth of mothers but virtually no fathers reported that they emotionally blackmailed their son/daughter by saying something like *"Why are you trying to hurt me?"*.

Around half of both mothers and fathers reported that they also felt that they had failed as a parent. Just as common (54%) was an attempt to question the statement made by their son or daughter by saying *"You're still young, you can't be sure that you're homosexual"*. *"Someone has led you astray"* was another response which stated that the child was not capable of recognising their own emotions, and was almost always said to a daughter. A few parents, less than a fifth, felt relieved.

They were relieved because they realised that the reason for their child's uneasiness or silence in family circles was not the much more serious issue they feared, typically drugs. This reaction was reported mainly by parents who had not come into contact with Agedo. Stronger reactions of rejection, such as shame or rage, were infrequent, reported by around a fifth of parents.

For fathers, these reactions were mainly directed against sons.

A similar percentage of parents agreed that they had been worried about other people finding out, and had asked their child never to tell anybody else. 17% told the child that they would have to cure themselves of it.

Only in a small number of cases did the parents react with physical violence such as slapping (3 mothers) or throwing the child out of the house (2 mothers). Nonetheless the fact that these behaviours occurred at all in our sample, which consisted of parents who considered themselves to be

accepting, serves as a reminder that such serious incidents are not as rare as one might think¹⁵.

Negative reactions were more commonly reported by families where the child had come out some time before, either because the respondents had come to accept the child's sexuality over time, or because they recognised with hindsight that their initial reactions had been negative.

One of the parental characteristics that seemed to influence initial reactions the most strongly was religious practice. Those who were regular practitioners were the most likely to be concerned about the family's reputation (being ashamed of the child and asking them not to tell anybody else) but also the most likely to feel that they had failed as parents and to blackmail the child with "Why are you trying to hurt me?". Even more common was a desire for the child's homosexuality to be only temporary, because they thought they were too young, or they needed to cure themselves of it (40% of regular practitioners).

Knowing a homosexual person before discovering the homosexuality of one's child also seems to be an influential factor, albeit a limited one. This was the case for 53% of our sample, who were less likely to be embarrassed and to ask the child not to tell anybody else.

On the other hand, we were able to confirm what has been revealed in research carried out on families in other countries: the level of education of a family member has no effect on whether their reaction is welcoming or negative, or on how they will react¹⁶.

3.4. Significance and consequences of the discovery

The interviews allowed us to probe the significance of the discovery, and the process of redefining family relationships that it triggered, more deeply. A strong consensus seemed to emerge on one aspect of the discovery: that it was a "revelation", something which had an aura of authenticity. The act of *coming out*, the moment at which the family member affirmed, or confirmed, their homosexuality, was about revealing the truth about who they were.

Some parents took their child's word for it. Others wanted to give the final say on the matter to an expert, asking the child to get "tested" by a psychologist

15 In research projects into the experiences of gays and lesbians carried out in Italy, a high percentage of initial familial reactions have emerged as being negative. Gay sons have reported that 40% of their mothers and 35% of their fathers reacted negatively, while the figures were 51% of mothers and 35% of fathers for lesbian daughters. (Barbagli and Colombo 2007). These reactions were only partly openly violent: in a similar research project carried out in the Turin area, similar percentages of negative reactions included 10% of strong reactions of rejection, some of which were violent. (Saraceno 2003).

16 Merighi and Grimes 2000; Savin-Williams 2001.

or even a doctor. Other parents chose to remain uncertain, delaying the time when they would have to face up to the true identity of their child.

In any case, the majority of parents considered that homosexuality was part of the essence of a person. 83% of parents interviewed believed that “homosexuals are born that way”.

Once the revelation had come, the only option was to accept it, and it was considered inevitable that a journey from a homosexual identity to a homosexual lifestyle had begun, since respecting who you really are is the only way to have authentic relationships¹⁷:

“I think that he did it [coming out] when he understood exactly who he was, and that was a good thing, because when you understand what your role is, you can build your life” (father)

Parents tend to display a need to know with certainty “who” their child is. This need also has controlling undertones¹⁸, and can sometimes result in the child being labelled when it was exactly that which they had wanted to avoid. Authenticity also plays a key role in the tales told of the impact that the discovery had on family relationships in the immediate aftermath. Family members described the changes in terms of “liberation”, “greater confidence”, “greater intimacy” and a feeling that they knew each other better.

Once the veil of expected roles had been removed, and it was no longer possible to take each others’ expectations for granted, the family members also found that they had to find a new arena of communication, more authentic and more intimate, in which the shared meanings of what it is to be a family were rebuilt in a more explicit and negotiated way:

“We had to find ourselves again. We are a different family, but still a family nonetheless ... perhaps a real family” (mother)

In these families, which had had to confront an event which fractured daily relationships which they would otherwise largely have taken for granted, there seemed therefore to emerge in a particularly evident way a conception of family relationships which centred around the ideal of intimacy which many academics have identified as being the crucial element in recent transformations of familial experiences¹⁹.

However, there are also contradictory elements and tensions. Concerns arose linked to another model of homosexuality, almost always male, in which homosexual relationships are limited to a hidden life of occasional

17 Swidler 2001

18 Solomon et al. 2002

19 Giddens 1995; Jamieson 1998; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001.

connections. This model is still widely diffused in Italy, which has only started to replace it with the idea of a homosexual person openly adopting their sexuality as a lifestyle choice in the last ten years or so²⁰. It's actually a model which concerns not just homosexuality, but more generally a conception of family relationships, in which the priority is to protect the family reputation and to conform, at least outwardly, to rules and regulations concerning behaviour in order to avoid being excluded from the community²¹. Sometimes the comparison between the two forms of homosexuality is explicit and presented as a choice of camps.

“And so I decided to say it and to defend my daughter and all homosexuals; at least, those who had come out, the ones who had a double life, you know?” (mother).

If finding out and accepting the truth about the family member is considered the only possible option, for parents in particular it was also a source of suffering. This suffering had a number of different components, including the breaking off of the family tree (*“I’ll never be a grandfather”*) and more generally the pain that the expectations previously held about the child’s life would never be realised. It was more likely however to be expressed as empathy or fear for the suffering that they thought their child had come up against, or would have to come up against, in confrontation with a hostile society.

The assumption of a protective role towards the child, who is seen as needing help, is a recurrent phenomenon, with ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, there is the attention paid to the real difficulties of the child, and on the other the parent is reproducing a conception of the homosexual as being destined to undergo necessary suffering²². This latter has been given strong support in Italy from the Catholic Church. A mother describes the mechanism in retrospect:

“At first I thought of his homosexuality as a problem for him, not us. Then as time went on, I realised that it wasn’t a problem, just a different way of being. But at the time, I said: it’s a problem.”

20 Barbagli and Colombo 2007.

21 Gross 2005.

22 Asking homosexuals to adapt to the idea of suffering as a condition for being accepted, which has the effect of producing a gerarchy between heterosexuals who position themselves in the generous role of helper, and victims who are helped, has been analysed with reference to different religious congregations by Moon, 2005.

4. Family relationships after the discovery

How does family life go on in the aftermath of the discovery, once a little time has passed? No longer being able to take for granted one's expectations as to how the family member who has come out will behave triggers a more general blossoming of a period of reflection on family practices²³ and a search for new keys to communication and rules which are not based on the heterosexual model previously taken for granted. Although relationships and rules are constantly being redefined in the course of daily family life, as a result of the differing inclinations and requirements of individual family members, parents often find it particularly difficult to refrain from referring to recognised models. They adopt uncertain solutions and questions remain unanswered.

This can be seen, for example, in the strongly naturalised arena of male sexuality. Communication on this subject between father and son is often founded on being able to take for granted an element of complicity:

“At first I felt that I should be egging on my children, and of course for Francesco that meant in his relationships with the opposite sex. Now it's become something that I just don't know how to handle any more. I don't know what to say, I think it's all very odd. In my heart I believe that a father reflects his own sex life a little in their children, and so when they get older you should be egging on your sons in their conquests.”

4.1 A desire for normality

The integration of the child's homosexuality into family life is accompanied, above all for the parents, by a desire to normalise it²⁴: to imagine a normal life for the child and thereby to redefine themselves as a normal family. Parents just shift the confines of normality to enable them to complete this normalisation process²⁵.

One confine referred to by some parents was gender conformity, especially for sons: *“I'm pleased that my son is normal even though he's gay”* (mother). The inclination is to accept the homosexuality on condition that the child models her or himself according to modern ideas which do not question gender identity, and under no circumstances takes on any traits of the opposite sex²⁶. The latter model has inspired the most denigratory

23 Morgan 1996.

24 Fields 2001.

25 Warner 1999.

26 Barbagli and Colombo 2007.

representations of homosexuality, referring to the degradation of a man who takes on a feminine role.

Another barrier concerns the child's romantic life. The ideal of the stable couple, which seems to be widely prevalent today among homosexual Italians²⁷, is also shared and encouraged by family members:

"if one day she gets together with another woman ... no ... that's less important to me, what matters is that my daughter has a regular life ... it doesn't matter if it's with a man or a woman, it matters that she has a regular life" (mother)

Conversely, casual relationships were linked with fears about diseases, especially Aids.

The third dimension of normalisation concerns the relationship between homosexuality and procreation, which for parents means the possibility of one day having grandchildren. In Italy, most people are not in favour of same sex couples or homosexuals being allowed to adopt, and lesbian and gay parenthood is a largely invisible phenomenon. As far as the experiences of our sample were concerned, only one grandmother emerged from the questionnaire. She was 70 years old and her lesbian daughter had become pregnant through artificial insemination.

Through the questionnaire and interviews, we were nonetheless able to explore what the parents thought about the possibility that their gay son or lesbian daughter might have children. Here are some of the responses:

"Oh, I'd be the happiest person in the world" (mother)

"No, absolutely not, no children, they just don't go together, that's what I've always said" (mother)

"If two men decide to adopt a child, people ask 'But what image does that give of the family?' What image does it give? It gives the image of a family that loves each other." (father)

As these quotations show, it is a controversial argument on which parents have many different opinions, but one common thread emerges. The parents have considered the possibilities, reflected on them and taken up their own position, some less strongly than others, of rigidity or openness. These parents no longer take it for granted that homosexuals cannot have children, and it has become a subject for reflection. This in itself marks the starting point of an important change.

Despite this desire for normality, they do however feel that their children will have to fight against a hostile society in a country which denies them their

27 Barbagli and Colombo 2007; Saraceno 2003.

rights. Many parents think that because of this, their children (above all those who are no longer adolescent) will probably move abroad, and this belief could mean a number of different things. On the one hand, it seems to be the expression of a hope that their children will be able to live their futures somewhere where they will be better accepted and their rights recognised. At the same time, it could be the realistic prediction that their own child will become part of the so-called “homosexual Diaspora”. This is a phenomenon in which homosexuals migrate in search of places where they can live a homosexual lifestyle more freely. A number of young Italians, mostly male, have already moved from country to city, from the South to the North and even to other European countries such as Spain.

Table 4 Expectations about children as held by parents. Separate figures for mothers and fathers (%)

<i>sex of child</i>	<i>Father</i>		<i>Mother</i>		<i>totali</i>	no of cases
	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>		
<i>I think it very likely/likely that...</i>						
... my child will live as a couple with a person of the same sex	95	80	99	94	96	(158)
...my child will marry a person of the same sex	58	25	45	44	47	(67)
...my child will have a child	17	11	20	19	19	(27)
...my child will move abroad to live	34	33	48	20	38	(56)

4.2 Differences compared

The redefinition of the confines of normality also takes place in another direction, where it stimulates reflection on the fact that homosexuality is only one of many differences, situations or behaviours which are outside the dominant norms, and as such may lead to stigmatisation.

“my father’s mother is quite a hardliner, and so ... even if you told her, she’d only pretend you hadn’t, she would behave like she did when my mother and father got married. My father was divorced, you see, and that was a very serious matter for her.” (brother)

As this last quotation shows, there are many other aspects of current transformations to family life that have emerged from the stories told by

parents, brothers and sisters in our research, of which same sex relationships are only one. Many parents also feel the need to reflect on their own conceptions of what a couple is and the idea that romantic choices can be redefined in the name of sincerity and relationship authenticity in the light of their experiences. The variable demarcations between romantic relationships and friendship and the non-institutionalisation that characterises a way of building a couple in small steps are experiences which are also common to brothers and sisters. In this context, integrating the same sex partner of a family member does not necessarily mean a significant disruption to family order. The partner, whether male or female, can be included in the rituals of daily life, even in meetings with relatives, without the need to assign them a definitive role. This is the case even though the spaces of non-definition, which, as we have seen, remain especially in relationships with relatives, have ambivalent meanings.

5. Outside the family

Outside the cohabiting family context, parents can find that they themselves have to make choices about their own “coming out”, or rather, when they want to let it be known that they are parents of a homosexual boy or girl (table 5a,b,c).

Table 5., Percentages of parents who have ‘come out’ by sex of the child (%)

a. TO RELATIVES

	Fathers		Mothers		(n=169)
	M	F	M	F	
sex of child					
All or most know	46	20	30	40	35
Most don't know/I think they know but we have never talked about it	44	40	44	37	43
Nobody knows/ I don't know	10	40	26	23	22

b. TO FRIENDS

	Fathers		Mothers		(n=166)
	M	F	M	F	
sex of child					
All or most know	49	28	39	23	37
Most don't know/I think they know but we have never talked about it	38	36	31	49	37
Nobody knows/ I don't know	13	36	30	28	26

c. TO COLLEAGUES (Percentage of subjects who work)

	Fathers		Mothers		(n=87)
	M	F	M	F	
sex of child					
All or most know	8	12	14	13	37
Most don't know/I think they know but we have never talked about it	56	25	23	50	13
Nobody knows/I don't know	36	63	63	37	50

5.1 Among relatives

"It's not easy to work out who you can tell and who you can't. You have to pay attention with family members" (brother)

A small minority of parents stated that all of their relatives knew about the child's homosexuality, but most believed that at least some relatives knew. The choice is therefore largely selective. The decision to let a relative know is based firstly on the type of relationship held with them, which can vary a lot even for close relations such as adult brothers: some are very intimate, others are at war, or have distanced themselves from each other. Another criterion is the reaction expected. Family members avoid telling relatives who they think "wouldn't understand", or who have demonstrated a negative attitude towards homosexuality, or who are very religious.

In the midst of this variety, there seem nonetheless to be certain constant tendencies. Family members are most likely to open up to and face those of their own generation: brothers, in-laws and cousins. It is much harder to make the decision to speak about it to your own parents, the grandparents, and this is a moment which is often avoided. Many parents believe that they simply would not understand the concept of living openly as a homosexual and being accepted, and so it would be pointless telling them about it. *"They belong to another generation that is respected without ... wanting to know some things. (mother)*. On the other hand, the strength of the expected impact of the discovery that a family member is homosexual can be linked to the associated breaking of the intergenerational line.

The moments spent with the extended family are also those in which the decision to remain silent, to leave things unsaid, to preserve distance in the relationships, seems the most frequent. It is these very things that coming out to the immediate family has brought into question. In relationships with more distant relatives, therefore, authenticity does not seem like the only legitimate choice:

“Their granddad is influenced by his opinions, and so, if he knew, if we told him, he wouldn’t be able to pretend that he didn’t know. Because that’s what the game is here, and if I told my dad he couldn’t pretend any more, it would be such a terrible thing that I’m really afraid to do something that will only hurt my father.” (mother)

Silence does not necessarily mean denial, i.e. the “*unspoken but rigidly observed convention that there are certain things one doesn’t talk about*”, but can also be a state of not knowing how to word what one wants to say, which manifests itself in embarrassment, in “*not knowing the right words*”, indirect or evocative language, or limiting oneself to generic formulae of reassurance:

“there are a couple of people who don’t ask me about my son any more, because they don’t know how.” (mother)

Silence is most common in situations where the partner of the son or daughter is present at the same time as the relatives²⁸. This was the case for Luca, who said of his partner, “*They don’t know that he’s my partner, but they like him a lot, they are always inviting him*”. He admits that they might have guessed what their relationship is, but he understands why they keep quiet: “*Perhaps they are able to accept the situation for what it is, and don’t need to give it a name* .

5.2 Among acquaintances

Even outside the circle of family members and relatives, parents often choose to be selective in who they come out to, whether this be with friends or, as is especially the case, in the workplace, where in the majority of cases none of their colleagues know that their son or daughter was homosexual.

This secrecy becomes a problem which needs to be managed especially at those times when the parents find themselves in a situation or hearing statements which are homophobic. The parents often feel that they have to react, because they see refusing to tolerate offensive statements as a form of solidarity towards the member of their family who is homosexual. But even here, they evaluate the concrete situation before deciding if it is worth reacting. Sometimes they decide that it is better to do nothing, that intervening would not do any good. For the parents, many of whom had never given much thought to homosexuality and homophobia before it began to involve them personally, it is not easy to gear oneself up to go

28 See also the research on family rituals in Oswald, 2000a e 2000b, Oswald e Suter 2004, and Shipman and Smart (2007) on celebrations for civil ceremonies between same sex couples.

against the flow in contexts in which complicity with homophobic statements is often taken for granted. Sometimes these situations lead to them coming out as parents: telling people about their own family's experience becomes a resource with which to impose greater respect.

5.3 Confronting an institution: the Catholic Church

An important context for many believers is that of the religious community, not just as a social environment but also because this very fact poses the problem of how to openly present your own family experience with respect to homosexuality. Religious faith is in itself, for a great number of parents, a system of meanings to give sense to their own experiences, and a source of support in facing difficulties.

For these people, therefore, the confrontation with the Catholic Church is all the more dramatic. The Church is the chief proponent of the discourse of rejection of homosexuality which these parents view as incompatible with their idea of the family, founded on unconditional love, in whose name they are struggling to accept their own gay son or lesbian daughter. Those interviewed perceive the Church as acting according to a rules-based logic which imposes models of normality and excludes from its community those who do not conform. Although the parents had chosen to preserve the ties with their children and to remain welcoming, the Church had chosen the opposite. A mother and father comment that:

“the Church does not really recognise homosexuals and far less the family of a homosexual” ... it has “an attitude of blame”; “fear prevails (...) as to whether you should approve of this situation where there is love, that is whether you should impose limits rather than promote these beautiful things”.

The logic of exclusion is, moreover, experienced in many cases by the parents themselves, as this mother recounts:

“I used to go [to Mass] a lot, even though they shunned me as if I was covered in shit because I had had a civil wedding. I couldn't get married in church because my husband ... my ex-husband was still alive. My husband could, he was a widower, even though he had sinned too by marrying a divorcée.”

Parents usually express very hard-line positions when referring to the statements that the Catholic Church has made about homosexuality. For the Church, the doom-laden consequences go far beyond exclusion from the ecclesiastical community. Parents consider the Church to be one of the main

culprits of the climate of homophobia and discrimination that surrounds their children.

The path that many choose to take is that of distinguishing between faith and institution. They confine the “*great conflict to being with the Church in and of itself, not with religion*” and distance themselves from institutional practices, or participate only selectively. They distinguish between the “*non-official Church*”, individual priests with whom a dialogue is possible, and the “*official Church*”. “*It depends on the priest (...) some are more reasonable and open-minded, more evolved than others, and some are real bigots*” (mother). In other cases, the conflict makes the parent question their whole relationship with the religion, as for the mother who states “*I’m finally starting to lose my faith*”.

6. Mobilisation of resources

In the mobilisation of resources to deal with the crisis situation in which many of the families interviewed found themselves on discovering that their child was homosexual, there are strong gender differences.

It is almost always the mothers who take the lead, in redefining meanings and rules in family relationships, managing relationships with the extended family and taking the initiative in contacting resources outside of the family network. As we have already seen in the initial reactions to the discovery, fathers are less likely to show and share the times when they need to vent their feelings with family members, and tend to manage suffering, fear and difficulties in a more individual way, or to utilize networks which have already been formed rather than weave them themselves. This is the most usual, albeit not the only, way that fathers came into contact with Agedo.

The resources which family members turned to, and those which they indicated as having been of help, are very varied. A fundamental reference point has been the child who revealed themselves as homosexual, when they reassured their parents that they were at peace with their homosexual identity. Often the son or daughter also provided indications to the parents on how to deal with the discovery. In fact, although parents generally arrived at the situation unprepared, even if they had had their suspicions, their children had usually received advice from the homosexual community on how to come out to their family. The more “prepared” children had typically provided hand-outs for their parents with recommendations of books to read, or information on Agedo.

The partner of the child could also be an important source of reassurance. Brothers and sisters, who often knew, or at least suspected, before the parents, often have an important role to play in supporting and being there for their gay brother or lesbian sister, and can take on a fundamental position

of mediator with their parents. The role of a brother or sister is nonetheless complex and variable. In some cases, the variety of problems to be faced when coming out to a family of different brothers and sisters helps to put the issue of homosexuality into perspective, and in others it reinforces criticism of it. There are also cases in which brothers and sisters with hostile attitudes towards homosexuality reinforce the negative reaction of the parents.

An important role is also played by the brothers, sisters and in-laws of the parents, who are often among the first people, or at least the first relatives, to whom the parents talk about their child's homosexuality. In some cases, the gay or lesbian family member is the one to confide in a relative, sometimes even the grandmother, before coming out to their family, either in order to gauge the reaction in a relationship which is not as close as that with the parents, or even to ask for advice or help with mediation.

If there are other homosexuals in the family network, this can open up the possibility of dialogue, or in any case it is actually experienced as a help because it makes one's own experience less unique. Knowing homosexuals, either through existing informal networks, or by searching for them using others, is considered by parents to be another important resource.

Table 6. Percentages of respondents to utilise certain support sources (n=103). (*Response of 'Mostly satisfied' or 'Very satisfied')

<i>Support source used</i>			<i>Were you satisfied?*</i>	
	<i>%</i>	<i>no of cases</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>no of cases</i>
Television	39	(39)	35	(15)
The Internet	31	(32)	93	(27)
Books	79	(33)	88	(70)
Associations	61	(63)	68	(43)
Private professional support	46	(47)	62	(30)
Social and public health services	5	(5)	80	(1)
The child's school	5	(5)	80	(4)
Spiritual support	21	(22)	61	(18)

Outside these informal networks, parents mainly turned first to informative resources. They were seeking more accurate information on homosexuality, less stigmatised representations than those propounded by the mass

media, and reassurance on their own responsibility as parents. In this, books were an important reference point. More specifically, a third of the sample stated that they had read a self-help book for parents and children, *Figli diversi* (Different children), which was written by the founder of Agedo and her son²⁹. This method of making sense of one's own experience was more popular among parents with a higher level of education, while those with lower qualifications tended to refer to expert figures: psychologists, doctors or priests (the latter most especially in the South). Many were disappointed: around half of those who turned to a private support professional, and an even higher proportion of those who sought spiritual support, considered that they were poorly or not at all satisfied by the help received.

Turning to an expert seems to have been less common for those who made the discovery about their child's sexuality quite recently, and therefore had easier access to other sources of information on homosexuality. It was also more common for parents to seek expert advice about their daughters than their sons. From what emerged in the interviews, it seems that other sources of information on how to make sense of the lesbian experience are less easily available, but also that girls are considered less able to choose their sexuality by themselves.

Television is another resource which is often cited, not so much as a source of reliable information, but as a tool for finding other informative resources or getting in touch with associations. The Internet has also proved itself to be an increasingly important resource for parents in recent years for the same purposes.

Finally, the stark scarcity of parents who contacted a public institution (Social Services or the child's school) for information or help is striking (5 cases). There seems to be a general lack of trust in the ability of these institutions to provide help in such circumstances.

29 Dall'Orto and Dall'Orto 2005.

6.1 Contact with associations

More than a half of the parents who responded to the questionnaire had been in contact with an association: 41% with Agedo and 11% with another LGBT association. Similar numbers of mothers and fathers of all levels of education contacted Agedo or another association, but it was much more likely that they would do so in reference to a gay son (57%) than a lesbian daughter (31%). Although it seems as though equal numbers of mothers and fathers participated, it emerges from the parents' stories that it was the mothers who made the initial contact, from which the fathers subsequently also benefited.

It also seems that these contacts were made easier if the parent had already known somebody who was homosexual before they found out that their child was too. Religion had the opposite influence: the majority of Catholics (55% or 63% for practitioners) had not made contact with any association.

Parents were most likely to hear about these associations from their child (37% for Agedo and 63% for other LGBT associations) but informal networks of friends were also useful. Outside of these networks, the main tool today seems to be the Internet.

The more recent the coming out of the child, the shorter the period of time between finding out and contacting the association. In most cases, the initial contact was made by telephone. Some parents went to the association's offices, while others got to know an Agedo volunteer directly through their own personal networks, or sometimes at a public event. Many of these contacts were cries for help, for an opportunity to compare experiences. Only some of them were translated into active participation in the association.

The help received from the association has an informative aspect (access to a non-stigmatising vocabulary for homosexuality with which to communicate with family members and confront the outside world) but, more relevantly, it provided the option to share experiences with other parents. It emerged from the interviews that it was important to be able to compare your own situation with a large number of other people's experiences, from which you could draw inspiration to make sense of your own path:

"There was this woman (...) who was talking about her experience and she said exactly what I had been feeling. So I said "Hang on" and then other parents agreed with me, and I didn't feel alone as a parent any more. In other words, I saw that there were other parents, I wasn't the only one, and that the path we had all taken was the same. Every single one of them had asked themselves 'Where did I go wrong? What did I do?' This was the biggest help I could possibly have had" (mother)

“I got to know a couple of parents (...) who were totally different from the rest of us (...) they told us that they (they were young, very young parents) had a girl of around 15 years old, and the girl had told them that she was homosexual, and for them it was as if ... there wasn't a problem, and so the girl didn't have any problems any more either (...) This really (...) opened my eyes to a world of hope, because I said “So they can change things” (mother)

There was sometimes, although rarely, cause for dissatisfaction, when parents thought of the exchange with association volunteers more as the proposition of a model of a path of acceptance than an open discussion of listening and sharing.

Those who actively volunteer for Agedo express various motivations. As well as wanting to feel like they have helped other parents, they also want to mobilise for rights for gays and lesbians. This tends to be presented as an expression of the tie with one's child, the necessity to be at their side – and therefore at the side of those who share their experience – to contrast the homophobia of the social context and the heterosexism of the institutions.

7. Perceptions of homosexuality

In the questionnaire, the final part was dedicated to collecting information about opinions and attitudes towards homosexuality and the rights of homosexual people (table 7). Since the sample was made up of subjects who considered themselves to be “accepting”, strongly negative statements about homosexuality saw the parents aligning themselves in a very decisive way. The concept of homosexuality as an illness was rejected by almost all respondents (161 out of 168) as was the definition of homosexuality as a perversion (160 respondents out of 170 said that they absolutely did not agree). Other statements, however, did split the sample group³⁰. Some, which related to the inversion model (“gay men are a bit feminine in their manner”, “lesbian women are a bit masculine in their manner”) or to stereotypes connected with homosexuality (“gay men/lesbian women have a more intense sex life than heterosexual men/women”) gained more consensus among Catholics, people with a lower level of education, and older people than non-believers, graduates and younger people³¹.

Parents who had come into contact with Agedo on their journey were even less likely to give credence to stereotypes³²: it seems that such contact also influences the position taken by the respondents on the subject of homosexual rights. The percentage of parents who had come into contact with Agedo who were in favour of homosexual couples being able to adopt was on average higher than the percentage of the sample as a whole. However, such contact didn't seem to provide respondents with a position on assisted reproduction.

Religion seems to be a variable determinant of position for parents on the rights of homosexual people. A higher number of Catholics than non-believers stated that they disagreed slightly or entirely with extending the right to adoption and assisted reproduction to homosexual couples. However, both among the believers and the non-believers, parents were more likely to be in favour of lesbian rather than gay couples adopting.

Where the respondent came from in geographical terms does not seem to affect their opinion to any great degree³³, and nor does their gender. There is

30 We did not gather data which would allow us to provide a definitive explanation, but it was possible to identify some explicative variables. Among these were the respondents' socio-demographic status. We did not take into consideration political affiliation since the sample, as previously stated, was strongly left-wing.

31 These three characteristics tended to go together in our sample group: the oldest people were mostly Catholic and had a lower level of education.

32 66% of those who had come into contact with Agedo disagreed with the statement that lesbian women have a masculine manner (58% of the sample as a whole) and 63% disagreed with the statement that gay men often have a feminine manner (54% of the sample as a whole).

33 The inversion model was rejected by 60% of respondents in the South and islands compared with 53% of respondents in the North.

no difference between mothers and fathers in their attitude towards homosexuality, except in their response to the statement “I don’t like seeing two men kissing”: 45% of fathers agreed, compared with 31% of mothers.

Table 7. Percentage of respondents who agreed/disagreed with various statements on homosexuality and Rights. Separate values for fathers and mothers

	<i>Fathers</i>	<i>Mothers</i>	<i>totals</i>
Homosexuality			
Where sex is concerned, everybody has the right to be themselves and to follow their own inclinations	100	98	98
Homosexuals are born that way	86	82	83
Homosexuals are ill	(1)	0	0
Homosexuality is a perversion	0	(1)	0
Gay men have a more intense sex life than heterosexual men	16	16	16
Lesbian women have a more intense sex life than heterosexual women	16	11	12
Lesbian women are often a bit masculine in their manner	50	40	43
Gay men are often a bit feminine in their manner	44	47	46
I don’t like seeing two men kissing	45	31	35
I don’t like seeing two women kissing	36	32	33
A lesbian teacher could represent a bad role model for children	(1)	2	2
A male coach could represent a bad role model for children	2	2	2
Two people of the same sex can genuinely love each other	87	84	88

	<i>Fathers</i>	<i>Mothers</i>	<i>totals</i>
Rights			
Homosexual couples should have the same rights as heterosexual couples, including the right to marry	86	88	88
A lesbian couple should have access to assisted reproduction so that they can have a child	57	66	64
A gay couple should have access to assisted reproduction so that they can have a child	41	54	51
A gay couple should be able to adopt a child under the same conditions as a heterosexual couple	59	69	66
A lesbian couple should be able to adopt a child under the same conditions as a heterosexual couple	65	75	72
Two same sex parents are just as able to give affection and a good education to a child as a heterosexual couple	82	86	85

References

- Barbagli, M. and Colombo, A. (2007) *Omosessuali moderni. Gay e lesbiche in Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Beaty, L. A. (1999) 'Identity development of homosexual youth and parental and familial influences on the coming out process', *Adolescence*, 34(135), pp. 597-601.
- Beeler, J. and DiProva, V. (1999) 'Family adjustment following disclosure of homosexuality by a member: themes discerned in narrative accounts', *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 25(4), pp. 443-459.
- Ben-Ari, A. (1995) 'The discovery that an offspring is gay: parents', gay men's, and lesbians' perspectives», *Journal of Homosexuality*, 30(1), pp. 89-122.
- Bertone, C., Bonuccelli, L., Cappotto, C., and Rinaldi, C. (2003) 'Relazioni familiari dei giovani omosessuali: la voce delle famiglie», in Cappotto, C. and Rinaldi, C. (eds.) *Fuori dalla città invisibile*, Palermo, Ila Palma.
- Bertone, C. (2003) 'Famiglie a confronto con l'omosessualità», *Inchiesta*, 33 (140), pp. 60-64.
- Calhoun, C. (2000) *Feminism, the family, and the politics of the closet. Lesbian and gay displacements*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Chiari, C. (2006) *Il coming out in famiglia*, in Rizzo, D. (ed.) *Omosapiens*, Rome, Carocci.
- Cohen, S. (2002) *Stati di negazione: la rimozione del dolore nella società contemporanea*, Rome, Carocci.
- D'Augelli, A. R., Grossman, A. H. and Starks, M. T. (2005) 'Parents' Awareness of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youths' Sexual Orientation', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67 (May), pp. 474-482.
- D'Augelli, A. R., Hershberger, S. L. and Pilkington, B. A. (1998) 'Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth and their families: disclosure of sexual orientation and its consequences', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 68(3), pp. 361-375.
- Dall'Orto, G. and Dall'Orto, P. (2005) *Figli diversi. New generation*, Turin, Edizioni Sonda.
- De Vine, J. L. (1984) 'A systemic inspection of affectional preference orientation and the family of origin', *Journal of Social Work and Human Sexuality*, 2(2/3), pp. 9-17.
- Fields, J. (2001) 'Normal Queers: Straight Parents Respond to Their Children's 'Coming Out'', *Symbolic Interaction*, 24(2), pp. 165-187.
- Giddens, A. (1995) *La trasformazione dell'intimità*, Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Gross, N. (2005) 'The Detraditionalization of Intimacy Reconsidered', *Sociological Theory*, 23(3), pp. 286-308.
- Jamieson, L. (1998) *Intimacy. Personal relationships in modern societies*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- McCarthy J.R., Edwards R. and Gillies V. (2002) *Making Families: Moral Tales of Parenting and Step-parenting*, Durham, Sociology Press.
- Merighi, J.R. and Grimes, M.D. (2000) 'Coming out to families in a multicultural context', *Families in Society*, 81(1), pp. 32-41.
- Montano, A. (2000) *Psicoterapia con clienti omosessuali*, Milan, McGraw-Hill.
- Moon, D. (2005) 'Emotion Language and Social Power: Homosexuality and Narratives of Pain in Church', *Qualitative Sociology*, 28(4), pp. 327-349.
- Morgan D.H.J. (1996), *Family Connections. An introduction to family studies*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Newman, B. S. and Muzzonigro, P. G. (1993) 'The effects of traditional family values on the coming out process of gay male adolescents', *Adolescence*, 28(109), pp. 213-226.
- Oswald, R. F. (2000a) 'Family and Friendship Relationships After Young Women Come Out as Bisexual or Lesbian', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 30(3), pp. 65-83.

- Oswald, R. F. (2000b) 'A member of the wedding? Heterosexism and family ritual', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 17(3), pp. 349-368.
- Oswald R. F. and Suter, E. A. (2004) 'Heterosexist Inclusion and Exclusion during Ritual', *Journal of Family Issues*, 25(7), pp. 881-899.
- Pietrantonio, L. (1998) 'La crisi familiare alla conoscenza dell'omosessualità del figlio', *Ecologia della mente*, 21(1), pp. 11-19.
- Robinson, B. E., Walters, L. H. and Skeen P. (1989) 'Response of parents to learning that their child is homosexual and concern over Aids: a national study' in Bozett, F. W. (ed) *Homosexuality and the family*, New York, Harrington Park Press.
- Saltzburg, S. (1996) 'Family therapy and the disclosure of adolescent homosexuality', *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, 7(4).
- Saraceno, C. (ed.) (2003) *Diversi da chi? Gay, lesbiche, transessuali in un'area metropolitana*, Milan, Guerini.
- Savin-Williams, R. (2001) *Mom, Dad. I'm gay. How families negotiate coming out*, Washington D. C., American Psychological Association.
- Savin-Williams, R. and Dube, E. (1998) 'Parental reactions to their child's disclosure of a gay/lesbian identity', *Family relations*, 1(47), pp. 7-13.
- Shipman, B. and Smart, C. (2007) 'It's Made a Huge Difference': Recognition, Rights and the Personal Significance of Civil Partnership', *Sociological Research Online*, 12(1).
- Solomon et al. (2002) 'Intimate Talk Between Parents and Their Teenage Children: Democratic Openness or Covert Control?', *Sociology*, 36(4), pp. 965-983.
- Strommen, E. F. (1993) "You're a What?": Family Member Reactions to the Disclosure of Homosexuality', in Garnets, L. D. and Kimmel, D. C. (eds) *Psychological perspectives on lesbian and gay male experiences*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Swidler, A. (2001) *Talk of love*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Troiden, R. (1988) *Gay and lesbian identity: a sociological analysis*, New York, General Hall.
- Waldner, L. K. and Magruder, B. (1999) 'Coming out to parents: Perceptions of family relations, perceived resources, and identity expression as predictors of identity disclosure for gay and lesbian adolescents', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 27(2), pp. 83-100.
- Warner, M. (1999) *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press.
- Weeks, J., Heaphy, B. and Donovan, C. (2001), *Same Sex Intimacies. Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments*, London and New York, Routledge.
- Whitman, J. S., Cormier, S. and Boyd, C. J. (2000) 'Lesbian identity management at various stages of the coming out process: a qualitative study', *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 5(1), pp. 3-18.

Comments on the research

By Marzio Barbagli*

Sociologist, University of Bologna.

The research that was illustrated here is an important contribution to the understanding of what happens within the families when homosexuality becomes visible, given the existing lack of knowledge on this subject.

In their great effort to reach the parents of lesbian and gay people, Chiara and Marina told us that they could reach a very special sample, even more particular than those which can be reached in studying gay and lesbian people themselves. First, this sample is very particular because voluntary organisations have been used in order to recruit parents, but also for another important reason: you have interviewed, of course, parents who know that they have a gay son or lesbian daughter, while we know from other sources that the size of the phenomenon is under-estimated, and that only 60% of mothers and 33% of fathers of gay and lesbian people know for sure about their children's sexual orientation.

We are therefore facing a double filter. This is not a criticism, but a call for cautiousness in interpretation of the results. When studying this population, as it also happens in surveys targeted at gay and lesbian people, we necessarily face an unwanted selection that gives us a different picture of what is going on, a more optimistic one. This seems to me to be related to an excess of optimism that I perceive in public opinion regarding the changes which are taking place in the homosexual world, although these changes actually exist and are important. I will come back to this point. I would like to comment upon five issues that I deemed very important while reflecting on the impact of this research.

The first one, that surprised me a lot, concerns the question of how parents explain the fact that their own son or daughter is homosexual. The research tells us that 83% of parents think that gay and lesbian people are born that way; it seems that parents use the same interpretative frames that young people, men and women, discovering their homosexuality, usually do use. What strikes me, as something recurring in scientific literature about processes of recognition and definition of lesbian and gay identities and of their coming out, is that in general these children think that they are facing a natural, biological fact, which is absolutely independent from their will. They are not choosing anything, they are facing a fact: this is an old idea which is widespread among those making that discovery, often in a painful way. I remember a quote by a gay writer, Pietro Santi, who, talking about his own experience and, more in general, about the discovery of being gay during the mid-Fifties, said that those who leave the heterosexual world are driven by a fire to which they are not able to offer any

resistance. Thus, it is not a choice for children either: it is like discovering, at worst, an illness, or having blue or black eyes. What gay and lesbian people usually say is that the choice rather concerns whether to tell other people about it, or whether to continue in the hard process of redefining your own identity. Coming back to the case of parents, Chiara and Marina tell us that this idea, however, is accompanied, in what only seems to be a contradiction, with a sense of failure, which of course points to other sides of the issue that are linked to social and cultural factors.

The second point I want to make is again a very important one, although it is neglected by scientific literature and by the media. We are only accustomed to think about the coming out of those discovering their homosexuality, but this research clearly shows that parents as well must do a coming out. This is very important because it helps us understand that we are only dealing with a small part of fathers and mothers, not only because it is difficult to reach them, but also because, by definition, it is only possible to reach those who know, and even among them there is again a strong selection.

I have already talked about my third point: it is the idea that, in all our efforts to study the gay and lesbian population, even the most thorough ones, we only can find those who are willing to be interviewed. Even if we don't look for them through voluntary organisations, but through other meeting sites, we would only reach those who are the most integrated in society or in homosexual communities. Therefore, I am sure that the picture that we have about the enormous difficulties gay and lesbian people face today in our country (and not only here) in defining their identity, and those that their parents face, is optimistic. This picture is strengthened by the widespread belief, which is supported by opinion leaders, that, due to the fact that there have been great changes and that it is an issue which is largely debated by the media and in movies, the changes have been so deep that gay and lesbian people don't face anymore the problems they had before. I am not talking about discriminations, if by discrimination we mean the intentional act of keeping gay and lesbians on the fringe of society, but about the problem of facing their own world, their own values, and their own superego.

Fourth point: at the beginning of the report, in the only case in which a comparison between Italy and other countries is attempted, the research raises an interesting hypothesis. It states that in Italy, even gay and lesbian people stay in their families for a longer time. I believe that this is a reasonable and interesting hypothesis, but it is not supported by available data. We would have to understand whether the differences, that we know about for the rest of the population, between young people in Italy and other Mediterranean countries on the one side, and those from Central and Northern Europe on the other side, actually exist, or whether we can actually find such differences between homosexual and heterosexual young people. This is an important question to

be investigated in further research, but I know, when saying that, that it is almost impossible to provide an answer based on reliable data.

Starting from common sense and from the knowledge we already have, we could think that those who find out that they are gay or lesbian might leave their families earlier than heterosexual people. There is some research, about other Western countries, mainly the USA, showing that young people living in post divorce families tend to leave them earlier, simply because they experience greater problems. We can imagine that this could also be the case for gay and lesbian young people, who leave their hometown more frequently and move from the South to the North, especially to big cities. Still, we don't know if there are any differences between Italy and the rest of Europe.

On the basis of the laws that were passed and of available data about attitudes towards homosexuality, we know that Italy still lags behind as regards this issue, but we know less about the differences between Italy and other countries like France, Germany, the UK. We have some information about the network of voluntary organisations in Italy including (perhaps, this is a question) parents' organisations, being weaker than in other countries, but we can't go much further.

The last point concerns an issue that wasn't discussed here, but which is nevertheless a crucial one, although we again lack reliable data about it. We have good knowledge about attitudes towards homosexuality, but we know much less about changes taking place within the homosexual community. I must say that this is true not only for Italy, but also for other countries, because of the lack of research and of the difficulty in completing it. What we don't know, despite some limited research results, is whether the process of coming out is less difficult, dramatic than before, and whether it takes place at an earlier age. We also don't know whether there are strong changes in the ways parents react to discovering that their child is gay or lesbian, and in the number of parents getting to know. Recently I analysed some scientific work on other countries, and I have studied some Italian sources, including the data about Arcigay membership, and I was surprised about the strong increase in the number of lesbians, which is also confirmed by research carried out in the USA. Besides this, we don't know much, and therefore I consider this research an important contribution.

To conclude, I believe that our country needs to create an independent foundation, including psychologists, sociologists, historians, lawyers, which should promote research, inspire the lazy and uninterested academic world and engage in a dialogue with the gay and lesbian world in a serious and systematic way, with the aim of increasing our knowledge.

* This text has not been revised by the Author. The original version of the speech is available on line at www.euroflag.net

“MODI DI”: Social disclosure

by Margherita Graglia, Raffaele Lelleri and Luca Pietrantonì
Psychologists, University of Bologna

“MODI DI” is the first extensive research on the health of the gay, lesbian and bisexual population in Italy. It was carried out in cooperation with, and with the contribution of, the *Istituto Superiore di Sanità*. Statistically reliable data were collected through a questionnaire on a number of major issues: health status, sexual practices, risk factors and protection against HIV and STD, drug consumption, social visibility and ways of access to institutional resources, prevention and welfare and community life. The questionnaire was distributed through a variety of channels.

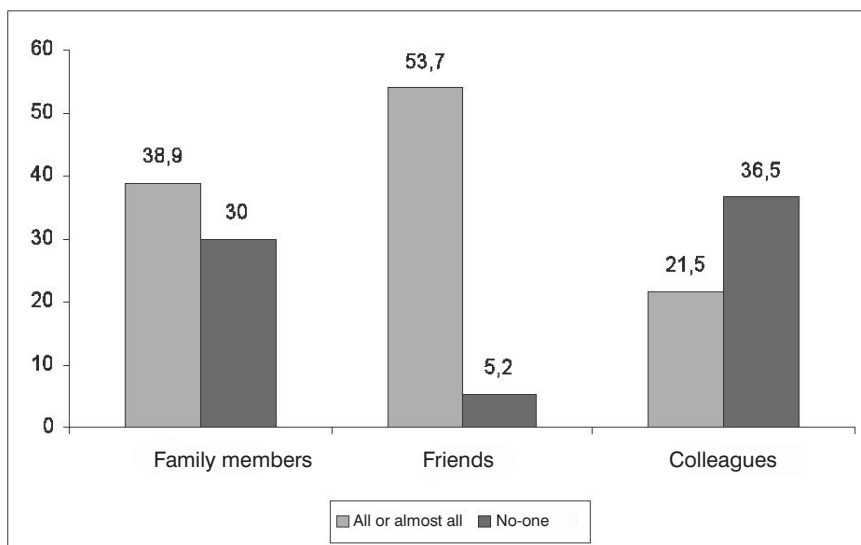
The sample consists of 6774 respondents (4690 males, 2084 females) who define themselves as gays or lesbians or have recently had sexual intercourse with same sex partners. They live for the most part in the North of the country: 31.6% in the North-East, 29.2% in the North-West, 22.3% in the Centre, and 17% in the South and in the islands. The younger cohort is the most numerous one: interviewees under 40 years old amounted to 84.9% of the overall sample. In particular, among all men and women in the sample, 32.7% were under 25 years old, 20.9% were aged between 26 and 30, 31.3% between 31 and 40, 12.2% between 41 and 50, and 2.8% over 50. The percentage of the questionnaires which were filled in online was 78.6%, as opposed to 21.4% which were filled in on paper. The collection of data was coordinated by a scientific team of sociologists, psychologists and statisticians, and was carried out thanks to support received by volunteers throughout the country.

While some data show unexpected results, for instance with regard to parenting (20.5% of lesbians over the age of 40 had at least one child) other data still confirm a difficult situation: it is the case of disclosure to relatives, colleagues and professionals. Indeed, only 16.5% of males and 15% of females in the examined sample are fully “visible”, meaning that they don’t hide their sexual orientation in any social arena: with friends, at home, with colleagues or schoolmates. Instead, nearly one man out of 10 (9.7%) and 4.1% of women have never talked about it to anyone. Most of LGB people live an intermediate situation, avoiding disclosure to the people they usually socialise with.

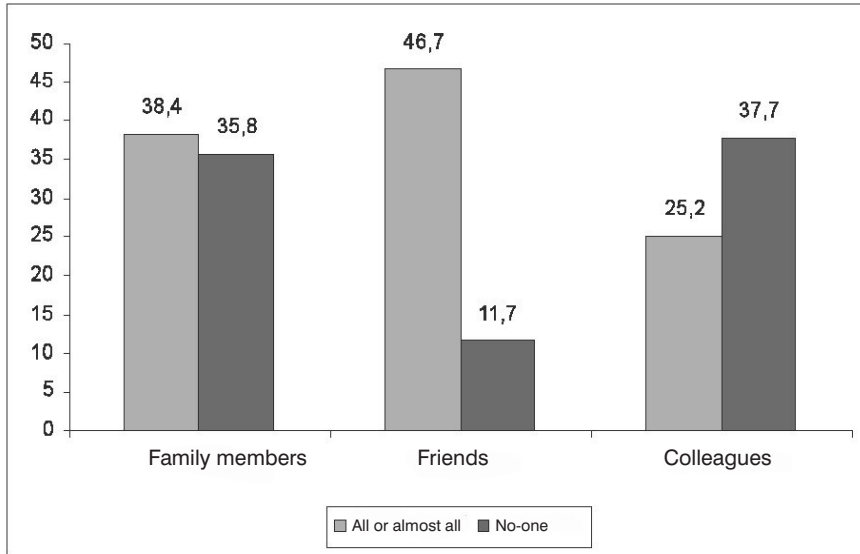
The social arena where it is easier to “come out” is that of friends: in 48.9% of the cases all friends know about the respondent’s sexual orientation. This is in line with international studies that claim that friends are the ones with whom this aspect of identity is most shared; nonetheless, it is true that half of gay men and lesbians hide their sexuality from some of them too. Disclosure

is even more complicated within the family, where only 38.6% of interviewees have talked about their own homosexuality to all or most of their closest relatives (parents, brothers and sisters, partner, children) while 34% have never talked about it to anyone. The workplace seems the environment where “coming out” is most difficult: only a minority (24.1%) of the interviewees do not hide their own homosexuality, as opposed to 37.3% who have never mentioned it. For both gay men and lesbians, it seems to be easier not to hide in Northern and Central Italy than in the South. In the South the percentage of those who have never talked about their homosexuality to relatives and reaches 45%, while those who have never told colleagues about it are 46%. Visibility also seems to be particularly related to age: the younger ones are the less visible.

Social visibility, a comparison:
“How many people know about your sexual orientation?”



Female sample



Male sample

Family affairs: between releases and discriminations

by Cristina Chiari
Psychologist, University of Parma.

FAMILY MATTERS, relatives' experiences of lesbian and gay young people in Italy. It's a very meaningful title that has made me choose to bring today a systemic look at this theme, trying to give some interpretative frames that can be found in family studies.

Studies about the "coming out" in contexts of primary development have always been focused on the moment of disclosure by the gay or lesbian child to his/her heterosexual parents, whether unmarried or married. In particular, they have almost exclusively brought to light the children's story about their own experience of disclosure and their perception about how their relatives reacted to such event. This research shows us the parents' point of view, giving us the chance to think about the connections between the most important family subsystems, the parent and child ones (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson 1971). However, families can be considered like "punctuations" of the subsystems composing them; therefore, they can be considered as the unit of analysis from where we can start in reading and understanding subjective experiences and lives (Fruggeri 2003).

In fact, the family is seen as a whole that every member creates together with the others. Inside, every individual change involves some challenges for each family member and triggers a transformation in all the others and in the working of the whole system. Therefore, we are facing something which is much more complex than the addition of different points of view, a system of relationships tying family members.

Moreover, the family is not static, but it transforms itself while still remaining the first relational context in which individuality and affiliation, continuity and change are combined.

The survival and sustainability of family bonds are guaranteed by two interconnected processes: morphostasis (linked to the stability and the identity of the family) and morphogenesis (linked to transformation) because the chance for the family to remain itself and to preserve its identity is linked to being able to change in relation to the changes of its members.

If anthropological and sociological studies have shown the wide range of forms and structures that families can take, diachronically and

synchronously in one or more social contexts, and psychosocial research has shown how one structure can be associated to different relationships models, the adoption of a complex and dynamic perspective in the analysis of family relationships has shown the variability that characterizes the same family in different moments of its history. Three family development models were created which proved useful for the understanding of this complexity and dynamism (Falicov 1988): the theories of the life cycle (Hill 1977), of micro-transitions (Breulin 1988) and of critical events (McCubbin, Sussman, Patterson 1983). The life cycle model, although it can be considered outdated under in respects, tells us that the family must face its development issues consisting of transiting from an evolutionary stage to the next one. The oscillations (or micro-transitions) model underlines, instead, that the chance for the members of the family to reach their autonomy, while at the same time preserving family unity, are not only determined by family members entering or leaving family life, or by adolescence or old age, but by the fact that in everyday life a family must restructure its interactive models. The critical events model has focused upon the kinds of family development which are connected to sudden, unexpected, disruptive events.

In the end, the family is not and does not live inside its borders, but the processes leading to its constitution start in the social environment, and the social context (women's condition, the labour market, prejudices, racism, career paths...) influences its everyday life and relational dynamics.

A family with adolescent children, when one of the children's homosexual identity is disclosed, has to re-build its own routine interactive models, which up to that moment were based upon a system made of adults and children, moving towards a new system made by adults and teenagers, and face the usual tasks which this transition implies. At the same time, the family must face another evolutionary task, which is an unusual one this time, starting when the child's homosexuality is revealed. This change takes up specific connotations because it happens during a very special time in the family life cycle, namely adolescence, with an opening to experiences which are typical of that phase and could not happen in other phases of the family life cycle¹, concerning how the teenager deals with

1 There are actually other kinds of family disclosures: children revealing their homosexuality as adults, when they form a new couple, when they have children, or parents discovering that they are lesbian or gay only after a heterosexual relationship, and coming out while divorcing or when forming a new couple, or same sex couples who reveal to the children that they have brought up together that they are actually a couple... These forms of coming out imply different processes and feelings, because they are inscribed in different family forms and in different timings of family history.

his/her personal autonomy. Within this frame, the coming out by itself does not imply the break up of family bonds (within and outside the family); instead, the break up can come as a consequence of the process of disclosure. The coming out is rather a crossroad, an event through which one of the family members trigger a change in the homeostatic balance on which the family previously relied and based its own relationships with the external world.

Therefore, the adolescent's coming out poses three contemporary evolutionary challenges for the family system that can be articulated in two different levels:

Intra-family level: the re-organisations created by the fact that children are growing up (challenge linked to the teen-age phase) and that they express a homosexual orientation (challenge linked to a critical event);

Extra-family level: facing social discrimination (by the whole family) (challenge linked to the cultural context).

Challenges within family: "big or little" gay and lesbian young people?

Classical adolescence research describes it as a period bearing a great dilemma, embedded in ambivalence between being independent and rebel persons, claiming for their autonomy, and expressing needs for a deep dependence on the family.

Sharing these assumptions, some authors see the construction of the teenager identity as an ongoing process starting from childhood and continuing well into the adult age (Erikson 1968), others underline the break up and the refusal of identifications referring to parental models and the building of models of their own (Kestenberg 1964). According to these perspectives, homosexuality can be seen as a way to implicitly express emancipation from parents (a different identity, if parents are heterosexual) opening up to a new and unknown future landscape for family life.

Some data from this research show that sometimes this act of growth is hard to manage for parents, who still see their sons/daughters as children; as a consequence, the movements of differentiation and growth expressed by the coming out can unconsciously be read as a transitory identity, which is still to be defined, uncertain, as sentences like "it's just a moment of transition, in the end he/she is heterosexual..." show. Adolescence is certainly above all a moment of discovery and exploration, when identities are being built while many, not just parents, but also professionals working with teenagers, tend to still see adolescents as children, as if their choices or discoveries regarding their

identity were not yet to be taken seriously. While discussing a case, a colleague working as a psychotherapist told me: "It's impossible to be sure of our sexual orientation at 17!". Sometimes the difficulty of recognizing the otherness of our children is expressed through practices of control of their identity; for instance by proposing a therapy aimed at changing sexual orientation, or blaming on others "*you were misled by someone*".² Finally, these movements of differentiation/growth can be experienced as the child attacking parenthood itself: sentences like "why are you trying to hurt me?" may represent a typical example of transition in adolescence, with young people breaking rules and parental orders in their quest for an identity of their own.

These reactions represent not only a lack of acknowledgement of the content of identity, which has been written about extensively in psychology, but also of the development of autonomy and differentiation from parents, a process which is typical of families at that stage of the life cycle.

When such a relational mechanism develops, the homosexual identity easily becomes the excuse, or, to use the language of the pragmatics of human communication (Watzlavich, 1971), the content, for the family to reproduce a dynamic relationship based on dependence which is typical of childhood, showing how difficult it is to recognise the change in one of its members (in this case, the son or daughter). This is actually a physiological and evolutionary process, since the normal teenager in a normal family is different and challenging, while parents are reluctant to read the identities that he/she proposes as elements of growth and not as rebellions or mysteries. If managed in a supportive way, these reactions can therefore represent a first step towards accepting a child's identity differentiation and the development of his/her autonomy. Supporting teenagers and their parents, by helping them perceive themselves in a time of evolution and change, in which homosexuality can become a specific content of an adult-teenager relationship which is under definition, can be useful because it allows each family members to not read the other's behaviour only as possible refusal/provocation or as expression of prejudice, but as signs of growth or of difficulty in letting children grow up. A growth that also involves parents, who begin to perceive themselves as entering late adulthood or old age, with all the implications that this perception involves.³

2 Behind these ideas lay a cultural representation of the child which characterised until the last decades the studies of early childhood: the child was depicted as being empty at birth, and liable to be moulded by experience.

3 Worries about loss of one's biological creative function, about getting old, about re-discovering themselves as masculine and feminine in a body starting to get old (Nicolò-Corigliano, Ferraris

This perspective gives legitimacy even to the most negative reactions, and frees professionals from the risk of classifying and, sometimes, judging parents, dividing them between those accepting and those failing to accept their child's homosexuality, reducing there by also the possibility of creating or amplifying the feelings of guilt that parents inescapably experience. Indeed, feeling and recognizing oneself negative towards one's child must be one of the most painful experiences for those who have made care and support an essential part of their life. The feeling of guilt, often experienced by parents, might hide the feeling of being wrong, not only for having brought up a "wrong child", but also for failing to comply adequately to the parental role, for feeling lost, not knowing what being the parent of a gay son or lesbian daughter means.

Some interview extracts from this research give account of this dynamic. In fact, a parent states: *At first I felt that I should be encouraging my children, and of course for F. that meant in his relationships with the other sex. Now it's become something that I just don't know how to handle any more.* Parents don't know how to handle family life when our their homosexual son or daughter makes a family of his/her own, they don't know how to deal with their daughter-in-law or son-in-law (without a law), they don't know what it means to be grandparents of children growing up in same sex families...they don't know...they don't even know how to name all these relationships.

The disclosure opens up to a future which stills lacks a language for definitions and self-definitions in family relationships, bearing the fear of non existence ⁴.

Coming back to the research which was illustrated by the authors: finding themselves in this situation of great uncertainty and feelings of loss, the families who were interviewed are already developing, or are about to develop, useful coping strategies that may become positive models for others. The coping strategies that this research identifies are indeed diverse. It is important to me to point to one of them in particular: the authors talk about efforts to reconstruct the continuity of family history, as it is shown by sentences like *my child is always the same* or when they say that parents give their child or daughter *the authority to define themselves.*" This process involves a mutual recognition of their

"Famiglia e adolescenza" in M. Malagoli Togliatti e U. Telfner, Dall'individuo al sistema, Bollati boringhieri, Milano (1991)

4 It is not by chance that studies speak about grief in relation to children's disclosure.

differences by both children and parents, and avoids for them the perception of being foreigners in their own house; it stops the isolation circuit and allows every member to be seen; it is the first sign of the child's identity emancipation from his parents, and of its recognition by them.

If this is the case, it means that the system has been able to manage the conflicts which the differences expressed by family members had triggered, and the building of a new family narrative and a new family identity can take place, ensuring homeostasis, a new sense of belonging and a newly found well-being.⁵ Using the terminology proposed by Byng-Hall (1995), we can say that the family system has to face a moment of mourning of familiar *scripts*: the whole family must re-write its own roles, change its myths, build new reference values, and restructure its own interactive models, in a dance made of trivial activities and daily interactions. After this transformational and tiring process made of oscillation and change, we can find a process of balance and homeostasis, characterised by mutual redefinitions and by the whole family finding a new way to deal with the world outside.

The results of the research point to this new identity, when some of the parents tell us that the whole family is *coloured with homosexuality*. Some extracts highlight this, when parents declare to be a different family:

"We had to find ourselves again. We are a different family, but still a family nonetheless ... perhaps a real family" At first I thought of his homosexuality as a problem for him, not us. Then as time went on, I realised that it wasn't a problem, just a different way of being"

To conclude, the therapeutic power of re-narration concerns not only the child and his/her identity development, but the whole family history. Therefore, one of the greatest challenges that parents must face does not consist in accepting their child's homosexuality, but in finding new ways of defining each other, and developing a new family identity by recognizing each other's differences.

5 The ability and possibility of the family system to re-frame its story is a very important resource, more predictive for gay and lesbian people's well-being and adaptation than positive or negative reactions of family members. According to a national research carried out with a sample of more than 1500 people, it seems that parents' negative reactions are not predictive of adolescents' adaptation to different life contexts. What seems to be relevant is rather the process of symbolic and interactive re-negotiation, leading the family to overcome this phase of transition and to find a new balance (Chiari, Fruggeri, 2003, Chiari, Borghi, Bazzoni, 2007).

The third challenge: homosexual families and the social context

Besides these processes, the family system has to face another evolutionary challenge that concerns its definition as a homosexual family towards the external world, which still largely bears stereotypes and prejudices towards this different normality.

It is stressful and painful challenge that might help us to avoid judging some of the reactions by these parents. I refer her, for instance, to those parents who have asked their own son/daughter not to say anything; this behaviour may have the meaning of protecting the whole family and themselves as parents from possible external discrimination, as it has been highlighted in international researches on individuals, LG couples and families of origin (Laird 2003).

However, gay and lesbian young people often experience this reaction as a refusal, the severing of a tie, as a sign of dad or mum being ashamed of me. On their side, parents can associate strong feelings of guilt with to this reaction. The feeling of shame brings all family members together in their failing to comply with the moral standards of society. Shame can mean for parents a refusal of their child's homosexuality, but also their own shame for being a homosexual family.

This dimension is related to a restructuring not only of the family's internal ties, but also of those with the external context. Here, social discrimination plays a powerful role: as we already mentioned, the whole family is coloured with homosexuality. All the members of a family where there is a homosexual person become possible victims of a social discrimination that can take different forms, including the attitudes of pity or the assumptions about a future of suffering that are described in the research.

The experiences of loss that all family members share lead to the normalization anchorage that is so well described in this research. The cultural model that we have - or, better, that we lack - on homosexual families⁶ shows here all its power, leading us to perceive homosexuality as a negative critical event.

In fact, an event is not critical by its nature but for the fact that it is perceived as such. This is the case of the interviewees: nobody defined it as an expected possibility and nobody perceived it as a situation of joy and happiness. Therefore, in this case, the cultural definition that

6 Homosexual families are unusual families, which are neither imagined nor expected, and there is a lack of shared interpretations about their features and functioning.

pictures the fact of having a gay son or a lesbian daughter in a critical and negative way corresponds to the family definition of the situation. The family gives sense to its experience starting from social representations or stereotypes on homosexuality; and this is a very important factor affecting the ways in which the family copes with the event. Therefore, the processes of definition determine the adaptation or coping strategies, as well as the personal, familiar and environmental resources that a family system acknowledges itself as being able to mobilise.

Supporting families in finding a new cultural model is a challenge which is not limited to individuals, parents or families, but implies a collective and social responsibility that has to do with politics and the need for new policies.

When the family doesn't find itself anymore ...

When the family finds itself in trouble in the building of a history including the old and the new, it may happen that it turns to expert knowledge. It might be useful, and therapeutic, then, to inscribe these dynamics within the logic of the unusual characterising adolescence (brought up in this case by the teenager's sexual orientation), trying to open up space for new points of view, rather than just reading reactions and emotions, which are mainly negative, as acts and/or communications of negative attitudes toward homosexuality on the one side (the point of view brought by children about their parents' reactions) or as provocative transgressions (the point of view often brought by parents about their children).

I feel that it is important to introduce this doubt and to add this proposal since the colleagues' results underline that the accepting and/or refusing quality of parental reactions to disclosure does not seem to be related to the parents' educational level or profession. This is even more surprising if we think that almost all of psycho-social literature on prejudice and discrimination underlines a positive correlation between these variables and the levels of prejudice. This result suggests that the relational processes which take place inside families cannot be fully explained by referring to social discrimination, or to stereotypes and prejudices by family members, but they are perhaps involving different logical levels. Keeping this doubt in mind may remind the counsellor, the therapist, the educator working with families, parents and gay and lesbian young people, that it is not only a question of internalised homophobia, but also a relational one, linked to the dynamics of

disentanglement characterising adolescence, and a question related to the experiences of the whole family with the social context.

This last aspect introduces a perspective that exceeds the nuclear family's borders, pointing, to collective responsibilities in the evolutionary dynamics of families, rather than to how families face this problem. It is the perspective of social, cultural and economic policies, focusing upon how social representations of family and homosexuality are changing. This evokes a fundamental issue, concerning the responsibilities of researchers and of professionals proposing activities targeted at families, young people and their parents, which affect the development of collective beliefs and contribute to the reproduction, or change, of the cultural assumptions lying behind some conditions triggering situations of family stress.

References

- Watzlawick P., Beavin J.H. e Jeakson D., (1971), *"Pragmatica della comunicazione umana"*. Astrolabio, Roma.
- Fruggeri L., (1996), *Famiglie*, Carocci, Roma.
- Fruggeri L., (2003), *Famiglia*, In Telfener U., Casadio L., *Sistemica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino.
- Fruggeri L., (2005), *Diverse Normalità*, Carocci, Roma.
- Chiari C.(2006). *"Famiglie attraverso lo svelamento"*, in D.Rizzo *"Omosapiens"*, Annale promosso da Dgay-Project, Carocci, Roma.
- Fruggeri L., Chiari C. (2003) *"Adattamento psicosociale di persone omosessuali: ostacoli e fattori di facilitazione"*, 317- 344, In Corsano P. *Processi di sviluppo nel ciclo di vita*. Unicopli. Milano.
- Borghi L., Chiari C. (2007) *"Coppie gay e la sfida della stigmatizzazione sociale"*. VIII Congresso Nazionale della sezione di Psicologia Sociale (AIP), 24-26 Settembre, Cesena.
- Bazzoni S., (2007) *"Coppie gay: riconoscimento sociale e dinamiche di coppia"*. Tesi di laurea depositata presso il Dipartimento di Psicologia dell'Università degli Studi di Parma.
- Hill R. (1977) *Social Theory and family Development*. In Cuisener, *The family life Cycle in European Society*, Mouton, Paris, pg. 9-39.
- McCubbin H., e coll (1983). *Advances and Developments in Family Stress Theory and Research*, Thomas Publisher, Springfield.

Families, homosexuality and processes of representation. A reflection on dichotomic systems.

by Alessandro Taurino
Psychologist, University of Lecce

The research "Family Matters" undoubtedly represents a very important occasion for study and reflection on questions which have long been on the fringe of official knowledge and only recently, on the basis of a growing scientific significance attributed to queer studies, have begun to play an increasingly important role in the academic world and in other contexts. The conception, implementation and realisation of surveys on the theme of gender difference and above all homosexuality, in its various aspects and the implications inherent in it, opens up fundamental areas of communication which are of crucial importance in a historical-political and cultural period like ours which is witnessing a return to or a strengthening of reactionary positions in terms of sexuality, gender difference, the law concerning sexuality, gender and sexual orientation, etc.

In more general terms, queer studies pertain to the dialectic/rationale resulting from the interconnection between knowledge and power. If, as Foucault states, every form of knowledge corresponds to an ideological power system, it can be said that studies and research like Family Matters are able to produce new "progressive" knowledge which creates "new powers". In terms of sexuality and gender difference culture, society, politics, ideology and science have only formulated negative powers, such as the power of exclusion, of discrimination of situations alternative to the paradigm of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980); the power of dogmatism, of "definition" according to restrictive and labelling/stigmatising criteria; the power of the "natural" which has accustomed us to considering nature as an unavoidable, obvious, linear and foregone criterion for interpreting reality; the power of determinism, reductionism, essentialism; the power of the prescriptive rules and regulations of sexuality. The new powers constructed by this type of study are, on the other hand, the power of the valorisation of differences, the power of inclusion, the power of acceptance, the power of the search for plural/multiple definitions which overcome the stigmatising labels of gender configurations that elude the narrow path of sexual binary; the power of integration, the power of deconstruction, the power of complexity and difference as a resource, the power of anti-prescription, the power of the new gender cultures.

As regards the contents of the research, it can be said that Family Matters enables us to reflect more specifically on the relationship between homosexuality and family, or rather the relationship between young gays

and lesbians and their families of origin, focusing attention above all on what resources families mobilise to understand and accept (where this happens) the homosexuality of one or more of their offspring, at the same time highlighting how relationships are re-defined within family systems after coming out. This specific question is strictly correlated with the particular nature of the topic, since all Italian research on the experience of gays and lesbians highlights, according to the paradigm that points to an “Italian way” in the assumption of a gay and lesbian identity, that the acquisition of a homosexual lifestyle takes place within intergenerational relations and therefore within the family bonds (Barbagli, Colombo, 2007; Saraceno, 2003; Bertone, 2003; Bertone, Bonucelli, Cappotto, Rinaldi, 2003).

In line with this finding, in a recent study conducted by the author at the Università del Salento together with colleagues from other Italian universities (Taurino, Pacilli, Bastianoni, forthcoming), concerning the theme of representation of conjugality and homoparenting in a group of Italian gays and lesbians, one of the interesting findings that emerged was the correlation between representations of homosexuality, homoparenting and homosexual conjugality and the construct of familism, where by familism we mean the complex system of representations and attitudes of attachment which the subjects have vis-à-vis their family of origin. Considering the two dimensions in which the construct of familism can operate - i.e. a) familism as “attachment to the family considered as a system of norms and values” (family norms); b) familism as “attachment to the family understood as a source of emotional support” (family support) - the data obtained by the research confirmed that a high degree of importance attributed to the dimension of the family norms tends to correlate with a negative attitude vis-à-vis homoparenting and homosexual conjugality; this brings into play the correlation between negative attitudes in relation to the two constructs indicated (homosexual conjugality and homoparenting), family norms and interiorised homophobia.

These results allow us to reflect on the consideration that one of the areas of intervention with respect to intergenerational relations in the case of homosexuality is the area relative to redefinition, in terms of work on the parenting representational models, of the normative sphere concerning the systems of belief/representation on the basis of which the family norms are structured and/or, in more complex terms, the family itself as a normative system.

Discussing the results of the “Family Matters” survey in greater detail, the aim of this study is to re-examine the research data, focusing attention on the results of the representational elements obtained by analysis of the questionnaires administered and interviews held, using these elements as fundamental essential tools for understanding the areas to be addressed (in

terms of psychological, sociological intervention etc.) to support families in order to prevent the suffering of young gays and lesbians.

Within this semantic container, the data of the research suggest the need for a hermeneutic/interpretative approach (with a strong empirical-applicative bias) in relation to parents' attitudes to the homosexuality of their offspring, which reflect the contraposition/cohabitation of strongly dichotomic representative models.

Interpreting the results of the survey on the basis of the reference to the constructs underlying the situations that emerged, the first element that can be identified is that the possible difficulty/complexity/crisis affecting intra-family relations concerning coming out is not anchored to specific family dynamics but is configured as the product of a contraposition between two different cultural models of sexuality, sexual practice and sexual orientation (heterosexuality of parents vs. homosexuality of offspring). It therefore follows that the first organiser/activator of the "crisis" in intergenerational relations is the opposition of values that are configured as dichotomically opposed and mutually exclusive. From this point of view, reading of the data provides many elements that would appear to confirm this theory.

The contraposition between the heterosexuality of parents and the homosexuality of their offspring appears to produce in the parents emotional reactions which, when they do not result in attitudes of open and declared rejection and non-acceptance, lead to forms of "adaptation" to the new situation created by the coming out of their offspring. On the basis of what emerged from the interviews held, this adaptation is expressed via acceptance of the other person/son/daughter on the basis of the idea of family bonds defined by unconditional love and solidarity, bonds which cannot be broken by the discovery of homosexuality and which are upheld, as can be read in the research report, by the absolute moral imperative "after all he/she is my son/brother/sister".

From a more careful analysis, however, it can be observed that this reaction conceals in reality ambivalence, since the admission of an unconditional love coexists, in simultaneous, unconscious and symbolic terms, with the admission of a love which has a profound basic condition: love despite homosexuality. This would explain why discovering homosexuality and facing up to the coming out triggers, as indicated by the survey data, crises, suffering or a sense of bewilderment and failure as a parent.

Looking at this aspect in further detail, it is important to consider the outcomes and complex implications of these reactions: for example, what it means for a homosexual son/daughter to deal with a parent reaction of grief, confusion, bewilderment, fear; in addition to producing feelings of guilt (and shame) in the son/daughter, the reaction also places him/her in a symbolic

dimension with strong psychodynamic implications which can be defined as “reparatory adultisation”.

Putting things in a narrative dimension to clarify these considerations, if parents, in relation to the homosexuality of their offspring, start asking themselves a series of implicit/explicit questions along the lines of “where have I gone wrong?”, “what have I done to deserve this?”, “where have I failed?” “why are you causing me this pain?”, it is obvious that, as parents, they put themselves in a situation where they need to be comforted and supported by their son/daughter (these mechanisms could also be defined as a type of blackmail), who paradoxically finds himself/herself saddled with having to provide comfort and support for stress of which he/she is considered to be the cause. This gives rise to complex relational dynamics which have a profound effect on the emotional experience of young homosexuals and which, as already mentioned, can produce feelings of blame, shame and dejection which in the long term, if not adequately deconstructed and reformulated, become an intrinsic part of the homosexual experience, forming the basic core of interiorised homophobia.

In this aspect, the interpretation of these possible ambivalences present in the parenting relationship points to an area of intervention enabling parents to focus on their offspring in realistic rather than idealistic terms and to overcome the process of mourning for a non-heterosexual son/daughter. It is therefore necessary to support parents in constructing a space in which they can reconcile the imaginary son/daughter, desired on the basis of socially determined models of sexuality and interpretation of the normality/regularity of sexual orientation, and the actual son/daughter who represents and embodies a “difference”.

Another important dichotomy that emerged during analysis of the research results is the parental representation system which places in the same category, at opposite poles, heterosexuality as wellbeing and homosexuality as a malaise, which also translates into the contraposition between heterosexuality as happiness and homosexuality leading to necessary and inevitable suffering.

A specific area of the research looked into the warning signs which are reported by parents as predictors, indicators and symptoms of the homosexuality of their offspring. These signs are, specifically: forms of gender non-conformity, unease, isolation, aversion to school, anger, silence at home, etc.

The use and return of these data is an extremely delicate process. A fundamental question to be asked is: should these warning signs be considered as aspects that are innate in homosexuality or can they be interpreted as the product of a series of attitudes of discrimination/non-acceptance/rejection which homosexual offspring

experience (in the family, in society, in their peer groups, etc.) due to the fact that they are homosexual, therefore producing feelings of unease, isolation, anger, etc.?

It is obvious that in the first case we have a representation system which, in distorted terms, correlates homosexuality with dysfunction, unease and pathology. The second case, on the other hand, features a representational model which considers the warning signs themselves as the result of direct or indirect attitudes and behaviour towards young homosexuals and lesbians and which, in a sort of self-prophecy, produce an emotional experience and a system of behaviour/attitudes which are not linked to the homosexual condition in itself but rather to the condition of rejection perceived by homosexual offspring.

The question of “gender non-conformity” as a warning sign of homosexuality deserves more detailed comment. At this level, it is fundamentally important to ask what is meant by gender conformity and above all what the criteria are for establishing what objectively conforms to male behaviour, distinguishing it from what objectively conforms to female behaviour; this question conceals a basic conceptual fallacy since male and female are social and cultural constructs subject to mechanisms of change and transformation with respect to their constituent dimensions, and not biological, deterministic, static and objectively/universally valid constructs.

In this regard, in the fifties/sixties, with respect to the differential psychology of the sexes (Taurino, 2003), the “coherence model” became established, a model based on the assumption that there are stable pervasive characteristics of the personality that distinguish males and females and that these characteristics occur in a bipolar and mutually exclusive manner, since they are strictly connected to biology. Consequently wellbeing and individual adaptation must be considered according to the congruence between personality traits (male and female) and biological sex.

Subsequently, in the seventies/eighties, counter to the coherence model, the psychological androgyny model was developed which considers male and female not as the opposite poles of a continuum, but as independent dimensions which can coexist within the same personality system.

According to this model, it can be said that there is no objective, natural, obvious, linear, foregone gender conformity, but that this conformity is the result of an ideologically connoted conceptual framework (Taurino, 2005) involving the biological element (the idea of biology as an objective norm), the social element (society and social relations are organised on the basis of biological order) and the psychological element (the characteristics of individuals must conform to the prescriptions of the biological dimension).

Also in the clinical field, in some respects, we can observe the persistence, in terms of theory of the technique relative to clinical studies of sexuality, of a

conceptual framework based partly on the coherence model. In the DSM-IV, for example, i.e. the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, although homosexuality is no longer present (as it was eliminated in 1973), the category of sexual and gender identity disorders remains, in which non-conformity with the gender roles (for example, predilection for games and pastimes typical of the opposite sex!) is considered one of the symptoms of this disorder. Consequently, in relation to this semantic container, it would be useful to dedicate a study space to sexual and gender stereotypes, reflecting on their culturally and socially determined origin.

Another interesting dichotomy that emerged during analysis of the research data is the contraposition between heterosexuality as continuity of the family history vs. homosexuality as discontinuity and interruption. In this regard, families must be helped to disambiguate the dimensions underlying the construct of family and parenting. From this point of view it is fundamentally important for parents to acquire tools that made them aware of the difference between parenting (as an autonomous procedural function of the human being) and generativity (i.e. the biological capacity to generate offspring) (Bastianoni, Taurino, 2007). Homosexuality does not in itself represent discontinuity of the family history, not only because generativity can be present also in homosexual couples (for example, where legally possible, lesbian couples can resort to heterologous fertilisation), but also because parenting, not in terms of role dimension but as a function that implies the capacity to care for and provide affection etc., regardless of generativity, is not a function that excludes homosexuals (Taurino, 2007).

Consequently, admission of the possibility of homoparenting, for example in adoptions or in homosexual couples who have children from previous heterosexual partnerships, does not constitute a source and cause of discontinuity of the family history. Also in this case, discontinuity is not innate in homosexuality in itself, but the product of an ideological-cultural and political system which denies homosexuals the right to a family.

A last dichotomy revealed relates to an area of the research which aimed to monitor the significance and effects of the discovery by parents of the homosexuality of their offspring. As can be observed from the report, with respect to the significance of the discovery, a basic consensus seems to emerge around the idea of coming out as a “revelation”, as something to do with a dimension of authenticity. This leads to the conceptual authenticity-inauthenticity dichotomy: authenticity in relations with the family means “telling the truth about yourself, about your real self”, inauthenticity is not declaring your homosexuality, not revealing this dimension, not revealing your real self.

At this level it is fundamentally important to work with families on the idea that the authenticity of the relationship cannot be solely and exclusively regarded

in terms of the dynamics of the coming out, since being homosexual, and therefore sexual orientation, is not representative of a person's "real self" but one of the many aspects of that person rather than pervading his/her entire identity. It follows that if authenticity, as skilfully portrayed by Almodovar in the film "All about my mother", is not being what you are but striving to resemble the dream or idea you have of yourself, parents should be supported in helping their offspring to construct their process of authenticity in achieving their ideal of themselves, thus increasing their true sense of parenting, which is to support and manage the processes of growth and development of the other person/son/daughter.

Support for families must therefore involve all the above areas, with a view to overcoming the contraposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Conceptually, it is important for this support to place the theme of homosexuality inside the broader container of sexuality, a sexuality which should not be construed solely and exclusively in terms of sexual practice but as a dimension that involves the sphere of the emotions, affections and subjective identity, a sexuality vis-à-vis which homosexuality and heterosexuality represent only two of the possible and multiple configurations of sexual orientation. It is therefore essential to work on the intersubjective representation systems, which have not only a cognitive matrix but also and above all an emotive-affective matrix, in order to destructure dichotomic representation systems which create collusive attitudes or situations of opposition, separation and conflict in intergenerational relations.

We need to work at the level of the emotions, on support for emotionality, and create the conditions for a reformulation of emotionality on a common ground which can bring about processes of change, starting from the acquisition of a profound and at times "uncomfortable" awareness, i.e. recognition of the ambivalences inherent in relations between parents and their offspring and, in the specific case of our discussion, the need to come to terms with the fact that at times, failure to interpret or a distorted interpretation of the relational processes under way can lead the family itself to become the main vehicle for homophobic attitudes which, in the offspring, result in a switch from institutionalised homophobia suffered to interiorised homophobia.

References

- Barbagli M., Colombo A. (2001), *Omosessuali moderni. Gay e lesbiche in Italia*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
- Bastianoni P., Taurino A. (2007), *Famiglie e genitorialità oggi. Nuovi significati e prospettive*, Unicopli, Milano.
- Bertone C. (2003), *Famiglie a confronto con l'omosessualità*, in *Inchiesta*, 33, (140), pp. 60-64
- Bertone C., Bonucelli L., Cappotto C., Rinaldi C., (2003), *Relazioni familiari dei giovani omosessuali: la voce delle famiglie*, in Cappotto C., Rinaldi C., (a cura), *Fuori dalla città invisibile*, Ila Palma, Palermo.
- Rich A. (1980), *Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence*, in *Signs, Journal of Women in culture and society*, 5, 4.
- Saraceno C. (2003), (a cura), *Diversi da chi? Gay, lesbiche, transessuali in un'area metropolitana*, Guerini e Associati, Milano.
- Taurino A. (2003), *Identità in transizione. Dall'analisi critica delle teorie della differenza ai modelli culturali della mascolinità*, Unicopli, Milano.
- Taurino A. (2005), *Psicologia della Differenza di genere*, Carocci, Roma.
- Taurino A. (2007), *Famiglia e destrutturazione dei tradizionali ruoli di genere, La genitorialità omosessuale all'interno di una lettura decostruttiva*, Unicopli, Milano.

Part II

Voluntary action and policies in europe

Research report

Report on the non-governmental organisations supporting families and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Europe

by Sarah Hayes - *Sociologist* and Anita Naoko Pilgrim - *Anthropologist*,
University of Glamorgan

Introduction

For this research we contacted 38 organisations which work with parents, other family members and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Some were generic lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organisations which also offer support to families and friends. In Italy and Spain a central organisation supports a number of “chapters”. In the UK, there is a national representative body which has until recently been the umbrella organisation for separate local and regional support groups and helplines. Germany and Ireland have a single organisation working to develop limited support. In Belgium, France and Malta a generic lesbian and gay group seeks to support “dialogue” with parents.

Groups supporting parents, other family members and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT people) have been in existence since the 1970s. Since that time, many local and national groups have been set up, often only to disappear after a short time.

Evers and Laville¹ have spoken of the way in which the “third sector” of non-governmental organisations works in an “intermediary dimension”, between “state policies and legislation, the values and practices of private business, the culture of civil society and ... needs and contributions that come from informal family and community life” (p.15). This description fits well the workings of non-governmental organisations supporting families and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Involved both in providing services which are too specific for government or larger voluntary agencies to supply, and in lobbying and advocacy, these organisations are in close touch with national as well as European government agencies and commercial businesses as well as with individual families.

1 Evers, Adalbert and Laville, Jean-Louis (eds) 2004. *The Third Sector in Europe*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

The organisations exist in isolation from each other. Networks of support are very much restricted by national boundaries. There is little formal support in terms of funding or infrastructure for these organisations.

These organisations often fall through the funding net because the parents they work with are not viewed as vulnerable or needy enough. There is a lack of understanding that through accessing support, parents are themselves enabled to support their vulnerable LGBT children. Recently, research has started to identify the important difference parental support can make to LGBT people. This can be as vital as continuing to provide the child with a home – it is known that young LGBT people are often made homeless because their parent can't accept their sexuality or transgender identity – or being able to help a child being bullied – feedback from voluntary agencies working with LGBT young people shows that parental support can stop children who are bullied on the grounds of sexuality committing suicide.

Recommendations

This report recommends that the European umbrella organisation Euroflag should be funded to bring together organisations of parents, other family members and friends of LGBT people once every two years at a conference. (This funding must include the costs for representatives from national groups to travel to Brussels.)

The research found greatly increasing use of internet support by families and friends of LGBT people. The internet offers important and easily accessible facilities to organisations of the kind Euroflag brings together. Consideration should therefore be given to using the website being developed out of the Family Matters project as a permanent and on-going Euroflag website which provides appropriate information for all those interested in this field; friends and family members, professionals supporting friends and family members, researchers and the national organisation members of Euroflag.

Consideration should be given to providing an appropriate level of core funding support for Euroflag. (Establishing the appropriate level should be a task undertaken in discussion with the current working national organisations.)

Further research should be supported which can map with more precision the capacity of the sector. This research should be an action research project, working to support parent organisations in developing

- Volunteer strategies
- Fund-raising strategies

Conclusions

There are two main findings of this research:

Organisations supporting parents, other family members and friends of LGBT people provide a highly specialised and much needed service which is not, and probably cannot, be met by statutory or other voluntary service provision.

These organisations exist in damaging isolation from each other, heavily dependent on volunteer effort and good will in order to provide this much needed service.

We estimate that these organisations reach some 60,000 people each year, even though they are poorly advertised and many of those most in need of the support they offer are not aware of their services. The groups are often well-regarded by government agencies, receiving referrals from many sources including doctors and other well-known telephone helplines and support agencies. Nevertheless, they receive very little government support or funding. Under the pressure of providing services with limited and short-term pockets of funding, many organisations suffer internal disagreements and some disappear after a short time in existence.

A two-pronged provision of support is needed in this sector:

Organisations which work to support parents of LGBT children need support themselves to allow them to network and share best practice. They can learn much from each other not only about providing support services, be these peer counselling or information, but also about how best to run non-governmental organisations using volunteer effort. This support could best be provided through strengthening the capacity of Euroflag, the European network of parent organisations which has been inactive for some time owing to a lack of funding. Funding must be provided to allow at least the separate national groups to send representatives to a regular conference in order to network and discuss collaborative work in the European Union and beyond. Funding should also allow for key players in the field to attend this conference. This conference should provide feedback to the European Union on progress being made on achieving equal rights and providing better services for LGBT people and their families. It is recommended that the conferences be run every two years. The conferences would gain value from being run in conjunction with the conference for the International Lesbian and Gay Association Europe.

Support also needs to be provided from experts in the voluntary sector on developing good management practices, particularly in terms of strategies to support on-going fund-raising and to support the volunteer networks on

whom these organisations depend. Organisations such as The Red Foundation and LGBT Consortium and National Council for Voluntary Organisations in the UK, and similar bodies elsewhere in Europe, including the Third Sector European Network, could be consulted on how best to provide this support.

As we move into the internet age, it becomes increasingly likely for parents as well as their more computer-literate children to access information they want on the internet. Evidence from those organisations which do monitor website access shows high numbers of “hits” on these sites (2000 per month on FFLAG’s website), from all around the world. This makes the Euroflag website a valuable tool in the work these organisations are doing. The number of people whose distress and sense of isolation, or need for information, can be supported through this relatively cheap website provision, means that it could provide excellent value for money. However, the website will need to be maintained not only by a web-management team but also through an active network of parents’ organisations, engaged in on-going assessment of the changing needs of parents of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Because the legislative and social situation for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people differs greatly from country to country, the needs of their parents also differ. In Britain, where recent legislation means LGBT people have much greater rights now, and where social attitudes have dramatically shifted in recent years, there has also been a big shift in the needs of parents. Previously parents wanted much more telephone and face-to-face support to help them come to terms with the distress and shock they felt when their son or daughter “came out” to them. There are some British communities in which “coming out” is still problematic in this way, however many parents now are already at ease with their children’s sexuality when they contact support agencies, and are looking instead for ways to help their children in what they know is still a prejudiced society. In other European countries, LGBT sexuality and identity remain socially controversial. The British experience provides a good example of how things can be progressed for both LGBT people and their parents through the work of parents’ organisations, and this experience should be written up in more detail so that lessons can be learned from it.

Findings

National groups explicitly set up to support parents, other family members and friends of LGBT people exist in the following countries:

<i>Country</i>	<i>Name of group</i>	<i>Website</i>
Germany	Bundesverband der Eltern, Freunde und Angehörigen von Homosexuellen (BEFAH)	www.befah.de
Italy	Associazione di genitori, parenti e amici di omosessuali (Agedo)	www.agedo.org
Ireland	Parents Support	www.gayswitchboard.ie/parents.htm
Spain	Associació de Mares i Pares i Familiars de Gais i Lesbianes (AMPGIL)	www.ampgil.org
United Kingdom (UK)	Families and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (FFLAG)	www.fflag.org.uk

Some generic groups which provide support for parents in other European countries are:

<i>Country</i>	<i>Name of group</i>	<i>Site web</i>
Belgium	Holebifederatie	www. Holebifederatie.be
France	Contact	www.asso-contact.org
Malta	Malta Gay Rights Movement	www.maltgayrights.org/publications.htm

If we consider the chapters of the Italian and Spanish groups as local groups, the number of organisations working specifically with parents, other family members and friends of lesbian and gay people in Europe can be estimated as follows:

<i>Groups</i>	<i>Numbers</i>
National groups in Europe	4
UK local groups	11
UK helplines	5
(Additional helpline for British parents in Lanzarote)	1
Italian local chapters	22
Spanish local chapters	13
Total	56

The grand total of organisations working with parents, other family members and friends is currently estimated at **80**, (although there are likely to be many more generic agencies which provide this kind of support).

This research counted 24 telephone helplines, counselling agencies and lobbying organisations which work with parents of LGBT people as well as LGBT people themselves in Europe. Significantly in the UK, the Consortium of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Voluntary Organisations (LGBT Consortium) has been running a pilot project supporting parents in London funded by the British government.

Most of the groups explicitly aimed at families and friends of LGBT people were originally set up to support *parents of lesbian and gay* people, by parent-volunteers. Many groups also now support parents of *bisexual and transgender* people, a few groups work to support *siblings, wives and husbands, children or friends* of those who have “come out”. (It is possible that friends are included in recognition that in lesbian and gay sub-cultures, friends can be more important than family members who are likely to disown LGBT people). In general, groups are willing to provide support to anyone in distress who contacts them, this often includes LGBT people themselves, as well as grandparents, aunts and uncles.

It is difficult to dis-aggregate figures on support for parents, family members and friends provided by generic organisations from figures on support for LGBT people themselves. In the following section, we have therefore analysed the data available for groups which specifically supported parents, family members and friends of LGBT people. These groups estimate that

they provide support to more than 60,000 people per annum. This support is given through:

<i>Kind of support</i>	<i>Numbers</i>
Telephone counselling	4019
E-mail support	2500
Group counselling support	700
Provision of publications	5000
Website information	48000
Total	60219

In the UK, both the peer support group *Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays* and the LGBT Consortium *Parenting Project* found that the need for support was shifting away from that of parents shocked and distressed at finding their children are lesbian, gay and bisexual and towards parents willing to support their children and wanting to know how they can do this best. Both organisations feel that certain specific groups of parents, for example those from a religious faith background, are still in need of support to come to terms with their child's sexuality. Parents of those who are transgender are still likely to experience considerable difficulties coming to terms with their children's new identity. Other European countries still experience a high level of prejudice against LGBT people, and parents are therefore still likely to come to support organisations in distress and needing help coming to terms with their child's newly discovered sexuality or identity. All the groups were heavily dependent on volunteer effort to:

- provide peer support through parent-volunteers counselling other parents,
- run their organisation, and
- undertake any lobbying of national or European government.

<i>Kind of personnel</i>	<i>Numbers</i>
Volunteers	200 (estimate)
Paid staff	1.5 (actual)

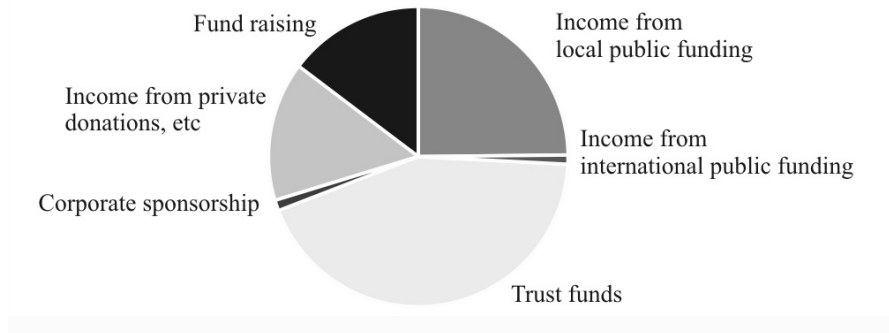
The organisations which were able to employ paid staff were Agedo in Italy and FFLAG in the UK. Agedo currently employ a full time education worker and occasionally employ a psychologist. Until January of this year, they employed an administrator but this post is currently vacant. During the

lifetime of this project, FFLAG lost its one paid staff member (Executive Director) as a result of funding running out. There are known to be two paid workers employed by a generic British organisation, working on *The Parenting Project*, a pilot scheme supporting parents of LGBT people in London. At the end of the *Parenting Project*, therefore, this sector will be dependent on unpaid volunteer effort in all countries except Italy.

Many organisations were unable or unwilling to provide us with full details of their income and expenditure. However, the information we could access showed that organisations which specifically support families and friends of LGBT people obtained the following kinds of funding:

Local public fundings	National public funding	inter-national public funding	Trust funds	Corporate sponsor	Private donations, etc.	Fund raising
£2,159.00 (2700 euro)	£ 0.00 (0 euro)	£ 0.00 (0 euro)	£ 3,702.00 (4600 euro)	£ 0.00 (0 euro)	£ 1,115.00 (1400 euro)	£ 1,355.00 (1700 euro)

Total annual income (2006) £347,515.44 (euro 430,600)



Funding of non government organisations supporting families and friends of LGBT people, in pie chart format:

By far the most funding support for these organisations comes from private sources, accessed by the organisations themselves. Although the figures do not show this, the researchers are aware that there has very recently been some limited European and national government funding of research and one pilot scheme in this sector. The European Union funded this *Family Matters* project under the *Daphne Programme* at a total of €201,900 (£160,000). In Britain, a strong government agenda pro-actively seeking to support good parenting means there is potential to access funding for parents of LGBT people. The British government, through a *Parenting Programme* of funding, have supported the employment of an outreach worker and a support worker for 2 years and capacity-building for the local London families' group and UK national group, a total of £167,000 (€207000).

Methodology

The researchers for the project looked for basic information on the capacity of these support organisations. Areas we sought to explore were: numbers of voluntary and paid staff support, income and sources of funding. We hoped to identify the value of the effort contributed by volunteers, through calculating how many hours of support are given to the sector in voluntary time but collecting this level of data proved to be beyond the means of this project.

We identified our data through the following means:

Internet search for voluntary support groups for families and friends of gays and lesbians in Europe,

Interviews with two key members of Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays aimed mainly at identifying other groups,

Telephone interviews of groups identified, discussing key topics from a list (see below), and

Drawing on an ethnographic understanding gained through working within the sector.

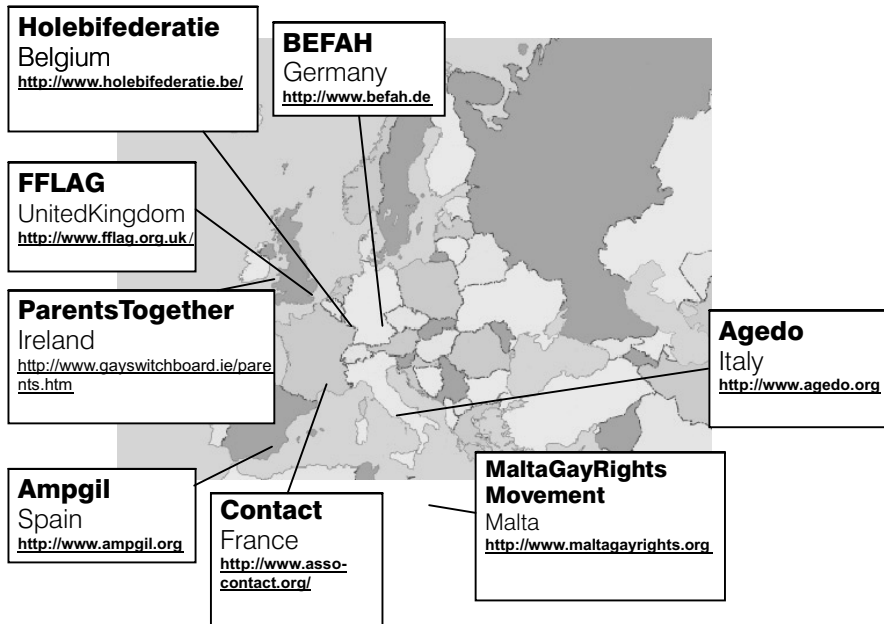
Questions asked of the groups

- Name of group
- Year founded
- Number of volunteers
- Number of paid staff
- Hours per week volunteered (insufficient data provided for analysis)
- Estimated number of people using resources annually
- Any specific contribution to public life
- Annual income (2006) and how this is made up:
 - local public funding
 - national public funding
 - international public funding
 - trust funds
 - corporate sponsorship
 - income from private donations, etc
 - fund-raising

Complete List of Groups Contacted

Acceptance
Agedo
Ampgil
Basildon and Thurrock Friend
The Beaumont Society and Beaumont Trust
Bundesverband der Eltern, Freunde und Angehörigen von Homosexuellen
Birmingham Parent Support Group
Bristol Friends and Family
Contact
Depend
Families Together
Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
FFLAG Wales Cardiff
Gay Glos
Gay Switchboard Dublin
Gender Trust
Gendys Network
GIRES
Holebifederatie
Imaan
Lancashire Friend
Leicestershire Parents Support Group
LGBT Consortium
LGBT Cymru helpline
London Lesbian & Gay Switchboard
Manchester Parents Group
Mermaids
MGRM Malta
North Staffordshire Lesbian & Gay Switchboard
Nottingham & Nottinghamshire Lesbian & Gay Switchboard
Outline
PACE
Parents Enquiry Scotland
Parents of Jewish Gay and Lesbians
PENE: Parents Enquiry North East
Parents Support (Gay Switchboard Dublin)
Stonewall
Strathclyde Gay and Lesbian Switchboard
WightOUT

Map of Europe Showing National Groups



Research report **Public support programmes for families with gay and lesbian children in Spain**

By Diego Herrera
Sociologist, Barcelona

Introduction

This investigation report is a summary of the results of the survey carried out between January 2007 and June 2008 by the Association de Mares i Pares de Gays i Lesbianes (AMPGIL) [Association of Mothers and Fathers of Gays and Lesbians] on the public care programmes for families with gay and lesbian children in Spain. This survey was part of a much wider research project financed by the European Union's DAPHNE II Programme, Family Matters, which is intended to prevent homophobic violence against young gays and lesbians through support given to their families.

In strictly cognitive terms, the results of the Family Matters project are, on one hand, an inquiry carried out in Italy examining processes and the experiences of families with gay and lesbian children, and, on the other, two qualitative investigations looking at the role played by the tertiary sector and public bodies in providing care to these families in the United Kingdom and Spain, respectively.

As far as this report is concerned, it is worth noting that its aims, as originally set out, were:

Firstly, to identify services or programmes of a public nature in Spain intended to prevent or act upon family situations of homophobic violence against young gays and lesbians

Secondly, to carry out two case studies of two services or programmes considered examples of good practice in the Spanish context

Finally to draw up a series of proposals aimed at improving on the actions of public bodies in this area

The difficulties in locating such specific services or programmes in Spain forced the researcher responsible for the project to expand upon and widen the scope of the criteria for searching for public devices, such that the first objective was reformulated in terms of support services or programmes for families with gay and lesbian children, whilst in terms of the second

objective, the two case studies initially planned were reduced to the single example which would strictly meet the goal of the project survey.

In order to pursue the first objective, qualitative research techniques were used. Firstly, three in-depth interviews were carried out (two telephone and one face-to-face) lasting approximately an hour and a half, with key informants on associationism and LGTB policy based on criteria for typological and territorial diversity shown in the following table. The purpose of these interviews was to obtain information on the recent political and social change which LGTB people in Spain have really seen, and whether there were any services and programmes of a public nature directed at families with gay and lesbian children.

Features of the in-depth interviews

Entity	Typology	Autonomous Community	Territorial area
Emphasis	Public bodies and the tertiary sector	The Basque Country	Local and provincial
Programa per al Col·lectiu gai, lesbiana i transsexual	Public bodies	Catalonia	Autonomous
COGAM Education Commission	Tertiary sector	Madrid	Autonomous

Secondly, twenty-five exploratory telephone interviews were carried out, lasting between 15 minutes and half an hour, with representatives from LGTB associations from all over Spain, in order to contrast the existence or absence of said services and programmes. Through the twenty-five exploratory interviews, it was possible to determine the real situation in all of Spain's Autonomous Communities in terms of the purpose of the investigation survey.

To pursue the second objective, a case study was carried out on an autonomous, public programme providing care to LGTB individuals and their families. In fact the only one which met the survey's search and selection criteria. The case study entailed spending a day at the programme's head office, making *in situ* observations and carrying out interviews using a questionnaire partially directed at the team of professionals responsible for developing the Programme and its services. A

total of four interviews were carried out, each lasting about an hour and a half.

Finally, with regard to the third objective, a Discussion Group was organised with a number of AMPGIL representatives based on the results of the research process in order to agree on a set of generic recommendations directed at public bodies, with a view to improving on their work (or underlining what they were not doing, as necessary) in terms of attention to the requirements of families with gay and lesbian children through specific services or programmes.

We now set out the most relevant results of the survey.

Part one.

Public care programmes for families with gay and lesbian children

1.1.-“Why these programmes?”

Several risk factors can be identified amongst the adolescent and young homosexual population, specifically associated with their age group, both from an emotional and identity point of view, and an economic or material one.

Identity building process. Although it is indeed true that personal identity is something which goes through a fundamental process, to a large extent contextual, adolescence and youth are stages characterised by the individuals' access to new areas and experiences which expose them to options which will have considerable impact on what they do and mark their identity; these may or may not be clear-cut. The absence of positive markers, the difficulty in identifying equals or the fear of homophobia in the social and/or family environment may erode the self-esteem of homosexual adolescents and young adults precisely when they begin to make political or vital decisions at a personal level, including in terms of their appearance.

Homosexuality in adolescence: a taboo subject. Traditionally, sexuality has been a talking point where adult acts are concerned, be this due to lack of knowledge of the processes which characterise personal development, or indeed due to ideological interests or preconceptions. The images of homosexuality held by society make recognising this affective-sexual condition even more difficult in adolescence, but especially during childhood, this last stage in turn idealised as being part of the concept of innocence. This lack of knowledge does not protect minors but rather means they continue to forget about it and take responsibility for it when it becomes a reality in their lives, and it is often particularly problematic because of the lack of social support.

A minority identity, one which people do not want to share. More and more adolescents and young people belonging to ethnic and religious minorities are seen socially, and, what is more, they enjoy the material and symbolic support which their institutions offer them. Within their group, the feeling of normality - including “exceptionality” - pre-eminates and this serves not only to compensate for potential discrimination from the majority group, but also to encourage the development of a strong, positive identity. Conversely, homosexual children and adults do not have such a favourable social environment, since their sexual orientation means that they are not

used to behaving socially and discussing their likes and dislikes outside. In fact quite the opposite: affective-sexual orientation, once expressed in a family environment - to give an example - is seen as a potential threat against the stability which has directed the relationships amongst its members and between them and immediate society around them.

Economic dependence. The lack of economic independence limits the degree to which adolescents and the young can do things; in addition to this are the expectations which cohabiting with parents generates in terms of fulfilment of certain obligations and promises made within family life. This fact should not be considered problematic or out of the ordinary, since the material dependence of gay and lesbian adolescents and young people places them in a particularly vulnerable position when faced with any scenes of homophobic violence. In such circumstances, it may be very difficult to make decisions on dealing with the emergence and/or worsening of conflict within the family, since the parents have a quite considerable comparative advantage over their children.

Whilst on the subject of family and homosexuality...

“... when we find ourselves confronted with homosexuality before our very eyes and it ceases to be a film on the television but forms part of our lives, and comes into the next room or somewhere nearby where the family meets, emotional resources often fail.” (Jesús Generelo 2008¹)

Distancing from homosexuality. Legislative changes and the emergence of homosexuality as a topic for debate in the media have played a part in bringing this aspect of real life closer to families and society as a whole. However, this apparent discursive “normality” suddenly disappears at the “moment of truth”, in other words, for the purposes of this survey, when the mothers and/or fathers find out that their children are gay or lesbian. Most families, including those with the most financial and cultural resources, are used to perceiving homosexuality as a reality which is quite alien to their lives, and affects some television personalities, other people’s children or a work colleague. The absence of a “universe of possible” where homosexuality is concerned will merely generate difficulties when it comes to confronting what they have revealed within the four walls of their home. Information as basic as that popularised through the Kinsey report should

1 Generelo, J. (2008) (being revised) It reaches the best-run families. Everything you have always wanted to know about homosexuality amongst your children, family or friends but did not want to ask.

suffice when trying to deal with the “shock” to mothers and fathers after one of their children has “come out of the wardrobe”.

Homophobic violence within the family environment Violence may manifest itself in any number of ways. The best known and most apparent is physical violence, which uses force as a mechanism for imposing a kind of order, also ideological. The other kind of violence, psychological or symbolic, does not manifest itself in quite such an obvious way, so identifying it accurately may require a closer look.

In this respect, one of the people interviewed described the following pattern which homophobic violence may take in the family environment:

- Presumed heterosexuality
- Denial
- Silence
- Abused trust
- “Good intentions”
- Intensifying of control and limiting mobility
- Threats
- Physical violence
- Outing

An adolescent’s or youth’s “exit from the closet” within the four walls of their family home may arouse all manner of reactions. Social representations of homosexuality mean that, on most occasions within this process, it does not have to be painful or cunning, either for children or for parents. In this respect, it appears that there is a departure from a heterocentric and homophobic context, which means that the social stigma veers towards homosexuality and the negative experiences of this affective-sexual orientation perpetuate, in the form of interiorised homophobia, both by homosexuals - in this case the children - and by those around them - in this case the parents.

Notwithstanding the above, it is still relevant to carry out some research into homophobic violence within families and the devices which exist to provide support to these families, especially when, within this space, any of the most important social integration processes within a person’s life take place.

1.2. The results of the “search”

The two original criteria for searching for and selecting services and programmes providing care to families with gay and lesbian children in

Spain (“public nature” and “situations of homophobic violence”) surveyed a space so sheltered from socio-political reality that it turned out quite difficult to identify the particular points being raised practically.

Both the in-depth interviews and the exploratory interviews in turn revealed that, unlike what currently happens within homoparental families, *the motivation which arises within families with gay and lesbian children does not attract much attention from the Spanish public authorities*. For these reasons, it was decided to widen the scope of the criteria for searching for these services and programmes, expanding on and generalising on the ultimate purpose of said devices in order to find any public initiative aimed at improving the quality of life of the members of those families whose groups really do include gay and lesbian children.

Despite all this, after the research was complete, it was only possible to find three potential examples (two regional and one local) likely to become the subjects of surveys through the case studies planned in the project. The *shortage noted of devices of a public nature orientated towards specialist support to families with gay and lesbian children* can be interpreted based on the taboo nature of childhood and adolescent (homo)sexuality and based on the LGTB subject’s/individual’s conception as the main focus of attention. Despite the progressive inclusion of the family setting within the interests of associations and a few autonomous and local bodies, both of these influencing factors have played a part in continuing to guarantee that people forget this really fundamental setting for socialising.

Where the family stands within public bodies is determined at two levels: a *first level for discussions*, declaring intentions, and a *second practical level*, looking at acting on the actual truth. Through the first level, the associations and bodies try to show their interest in and concern for what can happen within a family setting, both in terms of disorder and confusion due to a son or daughter’s “exit from the wardrobe”, and in terms of the emergence of reactive and possibly violent behaviour when confronted with this very situation.

The reality of the second level is, however, quite different. *Inter alia*, this happens because what they require in order to develop correctly (from the drawing up of an effective distribution campaign to the design of a plan of action, not to mention the recruiting of specialist personnel) occurs, in the specific case of tertiary sector associations, at a time when economic and technical resources are very scarce. To cite an example, it is not uncommon to find entities which rely on the roles played by mothers and fathers but whose degree of intensity is very low when it comes to the work they actually do.

As far as they are concerned, the few public bodies in Spain which devote some of their attention to families with gay and lesbian children also have to

confront a number of problems. One of these is the potential pressure of public opinion against matters relating to childhood and adolescent (homo)sexuality and/or care given to minority communities. These organisations contrast the visibility of their initiatives with the benefits which may be gained from them, so sometimes, the implementation of a service or programme to provide care to families with homosexual adolescents and young people is not accompanied by the appropriate distribution strategy. Another of the problems with orchestrating devices to care for families - possibly the most important of all based on what those interviewed said - is the *institutionalisation of the main subject to be acted upon in this area: the LGTB individual or community*. Recently, however, once the previous phase of “social closure” has been “overcome”, some associations and quite a lot fewer public bodies have said they are ready to increase their presence where *relationships between LGTB individuals* are concerned. The first intensifying their action in educational establishments and the workplace, amongst other places where people socialise, and the second carefully promoting scenes of equality in the same areas. The family also occupies a special place within this process, but the fact that it belongs to this area of the private sector often, in many cases, erects a barrier to the possibility of doing anything, and it is therefore relegated to a relatively marginal position behind other public places where people can meet.

Part two. The case study

2.1. The Programme

2.1.1.-The origin of the Programme

The Programme described in this survey will come into force in 2002 once it has been approved by the regional parliament in the Autonomous Community which it is to serve. It originates from a non-legal proposal presented a year before in which it was proposed to implement a service to provide psycho-social care and legal assistance to homosexuals and trans-sexuals and their social environment.

If indeed it is true that the non-legal proposal echoes many of the requests made by LGTB associations and communities, it is worth pointing out the development and consolidation of this public service in terms of *institutionalisation of demand from civil society* in order to fully understand the nature and scope of their actions.

2.1.2. Overview of the Programme

The Programme is a *free, public service* directed both at LGTB individuals and their families and, generally, society as a whole. The care it gives for 12 hours a day (9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.) is generally twofold: firstly, over the telephone, using a 900 number answered by the Programme's social worker, and secondly, in person, where, as far as possible, an attempt is made to prioritise users.

The Programme is divided into five areas: Reception and Information Area, Social Care Area, Psychological Care Area, Legal Assistance Area and Training, Studies and Sensitisation Area (see 2.1.3.-"Programme structure"). The marker or *sexual equality* is found in this service's professional profiles and all workers are specialist professionals who have worked previously with LGTB individuals within associations and/or privately.

The Programme deals with specific issues related to experiences of affective-sexual orientation and sexual identity, both exclusively and in conjunction with other services and institutions which work in the field of affective-sexual diversity or the family. According to one of the people interviewed, the Programme has a "*vocation of normality*" through which it works with other social care services.

In this respect, the Programme consults an *Instituto Regional del Menor y la Familia* [Regional Institute for Minors and Families] when it detects situations

of childhood violence, or indeed *Centros Locales de Atención a la Infancia* [Local Childhood Care Centres] when the issues require group therapy directed at entire families.

Another issue where the Programme would co-operate is violent adolescents. Family conflicts are not always to do with parents' homophobia when they find out their children's affective-sexual orientation, but these sometimes emerge as a consequence of a shock associated with the general/vital expectations people have of one another. When these situations are serious, attention is turned to a programme directed at violent adolescents developed by a university.

The Programme also maintains close ties with two institutions which work on sexual maltreatment between people of the same sex (one association and one university), as public services only contemplate and act upon heterosexual maltreatment.

Finally, sometimes it has also worked in conjunction with two programmes for dealing with bullying against homosexual adolescents, one of these directed at combating this kind of manifestation from a university and the other aimed at care for gay and lesbian youths from a council and a secondary educational establishment within the region.

2.1.3. Programme structure

The *Reception and Information Area* is the gateway to the Programme and is intended to inform people about how the service operates, determine their requirements and place them within one area or another according to their profile (or indeed refer them to external services when their requirements cannot be handled through the Programme).

The task of the *Social Care Area* is to offer public and private resources for social care to those people or families who ask for them, based on a support and monitoring plan supervised by the Programme social worker. This support plan includes a psychological care service, as in fact is provided to all parents who approach the Programme.

The *Psychological Care Area*, co-ordinated by the Programme psychologist, provides individual and group care. The first is structured around specific sessions on orientation and advice, but does not provide any psychotherapeutic or clinical care, for which the Programme, on request, co-operates with an external resource.

The scope of psychological care to groups may widen over time, as in fact happens in practice, and is organised around weekly work sessions related to a particular aspect of experience of affective-sexual diversity and sexual identity. This type of care always relies on the participation of a Programme

psychologist and social worker who are responsible for motivating the following psycho-social work groups:

- Group looking at self-acceptance of individual affective-sexual orientation and confronting internalised homophobia for boys
- Group looking at self-acceptance of individual affective-sexual orientation and confronting internalised homophobia for girls
- Group looking at problems amongst couples (couple search, processes for breaking up, building the affective link, etc.)
- Group looking at homoparental families (process of bringing up, tools for confronting possible situations of homophobia socially and at school, etc)
- Group of gays and lesbians, married or formerly married in heterosexual marriages
- Group of Mothers and Fathers of Gays and Lesbians (see 2.2.-“The Group of Mothers and Fathers of Gays and Lesbians”)

The *Legal Assistance Area*, co-ordinated by a lawyer (the person who, in turn, co-ordinates the Programme), whose purpose is to provide information and advice on legal matters relating to affective-sexual orientation and sexual identity: marriage, adoption, wills, homophobic aggression, marginalisation, asylum, compensation to victims of the *Ley de Peligrosidad Social* [Social Danger Act], *Ley de Vagos y Maleantes* [Tramps and Vagrants Act], name changes amongst trans-sexuals and matters related to medical intervention and its legal effects.

Finally, the *Training, Studies and Sensitisation Area* organises continuous training courses for the region’s social workers, as well as other public health professionals and generally, public officials and members of LGTB associations. The Programme’s entire team of professionals takes part in these courses from its respective work areas, trying to give a global response to the specific training requirements of a few professionals who do not specialise in dealing with LGTB individuals. However, no direct work has ever been carried out to sensitise within schools because, from the point of view of the people interviewed, this area depends exclusively on the Educational Advisory Board within the Autonomous Community in question. This Area also carries out studies, such as the first sociological guide to trans-sexuality and its diversity, published by the Families and Social Affairs Advisory Board. Similarly, within the Training, Studies and Sensitisation Area, there is a specialist documentation centre which brings together all works published in Spanish on homosexuality and trans-sexuality, and keeps a record of news items which appear in the written press and on the Internet on these two topics, which anyone who asks for it can consult.

2.1.4. The area within the Programme for families with gay and lesbian children

Family care is a feature inherent to the origin and development of the Programme, since the entity which manages it and the body which finances it agree that there is a need to run an area for equals at group level because of the therapeutic effect it may have on its members. Following what the people interviewed said, the inclusion of the family in the Programme as an area for action results from a request made to the Management based on previous analysis carried out by the LGTB community which this public body controls.

The assumption could be made that the inclusion of the family in the Programme is a *logical consequence of the social and ideological policy* which the autonomous government in this autonomous region is pursuing, insofar as this social institution is represented as an area which requires special attention. In this respect, the inclusion of the family in the Programme, still a politically delicate matter, would not be as polemic as that of a public place such as a school.

According to those interviewed, the way homosexuality is treated in the family context has a lot to do with social heteronormativity. In general terms, the family is another victim of the prevailing heterosexist system, as are all of the people who seek help from this service. The Programme is essentially a virtual *homophobia counselling service*, so it also offers the option of care to large families which request it or to married heterosexual couples living with homosexuals, and to professionals linked to work with families and minors.

The Programme attempts to involve the whole family in the process of accepting and managing affective-sexual diversity, although in practice this only happens in exceptional cases. The way in which family care is provided in practice depends more on the intervention options which each family group offers, than what requirements it may have. In this respect, the Programme deals with *problems related to experience of affective-sexual orientation and sexual identity*, acting mainly on specific members of the family group, because it is through them that requirements are determined.

According to the data from the Programme's action record, during 2007, 53 people passed through (mothers and fathers) from the Psychological Care Area, but only 4 family sessions could be held (parents and children together); thus, it can be deduced that *there is fragmented family presence within the service*.

Using the *systemic focus* adopted by the Programme, it can be deduced that any change in attitude seen in a family member in turn leads to changes in the other members of the family. Notwithstanding this, from other, more

orthodox systemic assessments, it can be seen that, if no action is taken within the family, no complete changes can be guaranteed.

According to those interviewed, the ideal situation would be to be able to work, simultaneously, with at least some of the members of the family group, both at individual and group level. However, when this is not possible, the option is taken to work with those people who ask for it (normally the mother, son or daughter) in the hope that working with these individuals may have some effect on the family as a whole.

The effect of the little simultaneous action which is taken against groups of family members is usually based on a proposal made by the team of professionals once some of these people have enrolled on the Programme. In these cases, the option is offered to mothers and/or fathers of organising one or more family group sessions with their children; if this does not happen, especially when these youths consider that they have already overcome the obstacles which were preventing them from recognising themselves and accepting themselves as homosexuals, they are asked whether they wish to involve their parents in this process.

Finally, it seems appropriate here to mention two more occasions when both parents and children and other family members may come together. On one hand, the annual meeting which the Programme's team of professionals organises between the Group of Mothers and Fathers of Gays and Lesbians and those looking at self-acceptance of gay and lesbian youths. On the other, the end-of-course family gathering in which fathers, mothers, children and other family members, such as brothers and sisters take part, not to mention aunts and uncles and grandparents of gays and lesbians. The purpose of both activities is to allow the exchange of *mutual knowledge of life's experiences and generate empathic feelings* in a distended social setting.

2.1.5. Psycho-social care of youths and parents within the Programme

When people arrive at the Psychological Care Area from the Social Care Area, initially, they are offered the option of taking part in an individual session, and, if they match the profile of existing groups, they are offered the option of joining a group one which may grow over time. Some specific groups, comprising both young people and adults, are open to anyone who wishes to take part in them for two years or more.

Individual intervention (see next paragraph for group intervention) includes an *advice, support and brief therapy service* with counselling, orientation in a class of its own as it is eminently practical, short and easy to access. It is more egalitarian orientation insofar as *it is the most effective meeting* in terms

of the people who use it and the role played by the psychologist as in other therapeutic or clinical assessments. The reason this type of work is used in the Programme is that it is the *most effective when only brief intervention is required*.

The Programme is not used to carry out clinical assessments or diagnoses but an attempt is made to determine which difficulties are top priority, preventing people from being able to deal with their affective-sexual orientation in a positive, clear way, or indeed the orientations of people who are close, such as, for example, their children, answering any queries they may have.

If the Programme offered a psychotherapy service such as that of the private initiative, it would not have any limits, in terms of the number of individual care sessions. Clinical and in-depth intervention, in any event, depends on the mental health services. Thus, if, through the Programme, more serious symptoms are detected, such as depression or anxiety, an attempt is made to place the person on specific clinical treatment because the service does not have adequate logistics.

The way the *individual care* is provided depends on the organisation of a limited number of sessions looking into matters such as the real reasons which prevent people from being able to deal with their affective-sexual orientation sensibly or manage conflict from outside forces or within the family. Furthermore, an attempt is made to improve the ability to manage people's interiorised homophobia, depending on the symptoms unique to each case.

According to the experiences of the people interviewed in the Programme, there are both real and preconceived ones: a person may access the service even if they have not assumed their affective-sexual orientation, whereas someone else has assumed it, but they have some serious family problems, adolescents who are victims of bullying, people with a profile of interiorised homophobia, who have admitted making homophobic comments, parents with a crisis of values after they have found out about their children's homosexual orientation, etc.

In fact, the discomfort experienced by youths when they confront their homosexuality often has to do with the existence of *psycho-socially insane motivation within their family itself*. The way an individual manages their homosexuality is closely linked to the family's psycho-affective structure, a fact which is considered when it comes to organising the work of the Programme's Group of Mothers and Fathers of Gays and Lesbians.

One of the techniques which enjoys the best results, carried out by the Psychological Care Area in conjunction with the Training, Studies and Sensitisation Area, is *bibliotherapy*. This entails providing bibliographical resources to families and individuals in an attempt to enable cognitive and

behavioural restructuring to take place. Reading can confront the complexity of social reality and make people start to look more deeply into certain topics and any erroneous beliefs which they may have instilled in their minds.

In this respect, a typical example is the preconception that homosexuality is an illness. People are constantly enrolling on the Programme because they believe they have a sexual illness or parents who believe their homosexual children have one. On these occasions, the team of professionals provides users with APA documentation (APA - *American Psychological Association*) and/or WHO documentation (WHO - World Health Organisation), these key world institutions when it comes to defining the criteria for diagnosing mental health. These state that homosexuality was removed from diagnostic manuals in about the 70s, so there is no reason to continue to use psychological techniques which treat homosexuality as an illness.

The Programme also offers materials adapted to people with a lower IQ, as well as audiovisual documents which enable users to look beyond abstract theory at examples being worked upon at any given time.

2.2. The Group of Mothers and Fathers of Gays and Lesbians

2.2.1. Overview

This is a *psycho-social intervention group* managed by a Programme psychologist and social worker. People arrive after they have been welcomed onto the Programme and after an assessment in which the team of social workers decides whether they need an external resource or whether, on the other hand, they may be handled by the service. There is no other parents' group anywhere in the region or the country which intervenes in this way, although there are several parents' groups which aim at combating behaviour.

The Group can be defined in terms of an open space which has emerged as a *communal self-support forum* in which people who have spent the most time on the Programme serve as positive examples to others who have joined more recently.

The Group meets once a week, has average attendance of about nine or ten people and has an annual cycle beginning in October and ending in June, although there are mothers who have been taking part in it for as much as five years. According to data from the Programme's record, in 2007, a total of 16 people passed through the Group.

In the four and a half years the Group has been in existence only on three occasions have both members of a couple taken part in it at the same time (in other words, the father and the mother). *The mothers are generally the*

dominant figure in the family home and, where this is the case, they act as a messenger between the parent and the child and the other family members.

2.2.2. Mothers' and Fathers' access to the Group

As has been stated previously, when the parents first enrol on the Programme, they attend a welcome session and then receive a support and monitoring plan. The time which passes between them enrolling on the Programme and them being included in the Group of Mothers and Fathers of Gays and Lesbians depends on each person. Some express resistance at the chance to tell the truth, publicly, as parents of gays and lesbians, and some never even participate in the Group.

When the time comes to include another person in the Group, a welcome session is organised. What makes this social area even more powerful is that people who have arrived recently find in the Group a set of *easy-to-access family examples* which do not exist within their everyday social circle. When they arrive, parents come into direct contact with the diverse world of gays and lesbians and their families, a fact which opens the *option of putting stereotyped social preconceptions and images* put across by the television or other discursive media *into perspective*. Experience as members of the group enables parents, over time, to acquire a series of useful tools which will enable them to confront interiorised homophobia as they travel on their biographical journey.

2.2.3. The Group as a place to socialise

The Group gives people an opportunity to express themselves and makes them feel protected, as they are *supported by a group of equals*. For parents, this means that they can relate to one another, on one hand, with people who have been through the same situation (such that they do not have to work hard to justify themselves or make themselves understood) and, on the other, with people who are going through different phases of the process of accepting that their child is homosexual (which helps them put it into perspective).

When they arrive in the Group, the parents bring with them stereotyped and erroneous information about reality with regard to affective-sexual diversity and sexual identity, so they have misconceptions about the matter. Many parents have a fatalistic vision in the sense that "I do not like this but I have got to accept it" and, on occasions, different, contradictory attitudes are exchanged by the members of the couple with regard to how they interpret or relate to their children's homosexual orientation.

At the same time, many people who join the Group find themselves at a very early stage in the process of accepting their children's homosexuality, which rather means that they have not assumed their affective-sexual orientation, or, if they have, they do not know how to manage the impact which revealing it may have on their private life and especially, the family's social life.

The Group stays together partly because there are people who have been in it quite a long time who encourage others to follow on after them. When one woman says to another, for example, "I was worse off than you when I arrived, but now look", a kind of positive reference is created towards which actions can be orientated. The members of the Group give each other support to the extent that this is almost the only time they can reaffirm themselves, where they can express themselves without being judged or fought because they have a homosexual child.

It can be said that the Group *speeds up the process of getting parents to accept that their children are homosexual*. When people who are further behind in the process reveal how they feel, the parents who are at a later phase can work together to motivate the Group discussions, explaining their experiences and personal strategies. In fact, the Group is rigid in its form and this means that, to put it into words, "leaders" are created, or people who have gone through the process and become actively involved in that of the others.

It is appropriate here to clarify that, when carrying out the interviews, there were 10 people in the Group 9 of whom were women. None of these worked away from home and the only man taking part in the Group was retired.

2.2.4. The work method

The Group is motivated by the Programme's psychologist or social worker and its purpose is to gradually eradicate the feeling of discomfort which comes about when people learn of their children's sexual orientation. To do this, *the fundamental attitudes of its members are worked upon at three response levels* (cognitive, behavioural and emotional) by discussing different topics related to affective-sexual diversity and sexual identity based on *objective, contrasted information* provided by the Programme's team of professionals and *the parents' personal experiences*.

The way the Group is motivated is largely based on experiences insofar as it is all about making people feel at ease and helping them to combat their feeling of worry or blame. Techniques such as *role play* are usually used (a simulation of a situation which may arise in real life), as well as *visual aids* (mental representation of images, sensations and emotions through guided relaxation) and other methods of *motivating groups* so that people can

confront what frightens them and foster relationships based on mutual support.

Many parents feel to blame when, on being asked why their children have not spoken to them previously about their homosexuality, they realise the suffering their children have been going through. At the same time, many parents feel they are to blame when they find out their children's real affective-sexual orientation. The Group often works on these problems using visual aids, as, since they cause flashbacks to previous situations, they can be used to access and influence individuals' cognitive processes.

Sometimes they also organise *inter-group* gatherings, as has already been stated. As far as the "exit from the wardrobe" is concerned one of the things which usually makes it more difficult for the children is the revelation of their affective-sexual orientation to their parents. At the same time, the parents are usually very reluctant to talk to their children about the feelings which are brought about by the news. In this respect, inter-group meetings are very enriching experiences because the parents can build up empathic relationships with the experience and diversity of young people's homosexuality, and these in turn can provide a clearer view of the difficulties which accompany the process of getting parents to accept their children's homosexual orientation.

According to the people interviewed, this is a very emotive and very effective activity because of the message which any Programme professional in turn carries into the homosexuality (self)acceptance process.

The Group does not organise any other activities apart from the weekly sessions, although on a couple of occasions three *guided visits* have taken place, two of these to a *district popular amongst the LGTB population* and the other to a *state federation of LGTB associations*. The district visits entailed trips to a number of places (clothes shops, bookshops, cafeterias, etc.) to spread knowledge about the diversity of leisure and trading facilities and form a solid basis around which to combat the fear which some members of the Group have experienced when faced with the possibility of accessing somewhere they believed was sordid and exclusively focused on sex. As for the other trip, the visit to the federation entailed spreading knowledge around parents on action and campaigns run by this entity centred on the rights of LGTB individuals.

2.2.5.-The topics which most concern parents

The role played by the psychologist and the social worker who motivate the Group entails creating the conditions necessary for getting people to discuss particular topics with each other. Periodically, *the parents are asked what topics* they would like to work on over the next few sessions and then

the team of professionals draws up a presentation on the chosen topics. The parents within the Group in turn put forward their queries and ask questions based on the input of information which they have received, which then forms the basis for a group debate hosted by the psychologist and social worker. It is not always possible to deal with evermore complex topics, as, during the course, new issues are brought up by mothers and - to a lesser extent - fathers which require adaptations to be made.

Over the five years the Group has been in existence, many topics have arisen, sometimes depending on *media coverage*. For example, a series such as *Queer as Folk* or words such as “the environment” used on some television programmes may raise new issues for parents. The same also happens when certain declarations are made in the media, such as the one which Sr. Marcos Rojas made recently in a television programme, stating that homosexuality could be cured. As he was from an authority working in the field of psychiatry, parents began to argue that there was a contradiction between this doctor’s positioning and that defended by the *American Psychological Association (APA)*, according to which you do not choose to be homosexual and therefore this cannot be changed.

The basic matters which are worked on transversally in the Group are related to concepts such as *sexual identity, sexual orientation, the roles played by the sexes, biological sex, homophobia*, etc. Many parents confuse homosexuals with trans-sexuals, so work begins by answering basic questions which depend on the diversity of the degree to which members of the Group are educated. In order to be able to talk about children’s affective-sexual orientation, for example, it becomes necessary to start by answering any questions and dealing with any confusion amongst parents. To do this, one item which is very frequently used is *25 questions on sexual orientation*, originally inspired by a document from the APA.

One of the aspects which most concerns parents is *sexual practices, sexually transmitted diseases and drug taking*, as many people in society believe that the latter practice is closely associated with the LGBTB population.

The Group’s team of professionals organises activities to try to dissociate these preconceived ideas, without, however, trying to hide any aspect of the truth. For example, when a visit has been made to one of the districts most popular amongst LGBTB individuals, things have been said about the existence of sex centres, because, of course, these are matters about which parents explicitly ask. In order to raise awareness of the diversity which exists amongst and within different social communities, this activity teaches people that heterosexuals also have areas to which they can go for sexual experiences.

Social homophobia is another aspect which is of great concern to parents, this being the main topic for discussion once they have managed to accept their children's affective-sexual orientation. Concern has a lot to do with social marginalisation within a person's close family and friends (at school, with neighbours, in a group of friends, etc.), with discrimination at work and with any aggression which may arise. Means of communication always report on aggression against people within the LGTB community, and it is worth noting that a very large number of those produced which are drawn up as part of the Programme relate to homophobic aggression.

2.3. Intervention in terms of homophobic violence within families

Situations of homophobic violence (in its widest sense, both physical and psychological or symbolic) within the family environment do not form the core of the demands of the Programme. Although this circumstance is found in most cases, the main demand by users directly concerns acceptance of the affective-sexual orientation itself, followed by parents' acceptance of children's homosexuality.

In any event, the data within the record of action taken in 2007 states that that year, *28 people experiencing serious situations of homophobic and transphobic violence within their families* enrolled on the Programme. Obviously, as far as family homophobic violence is concerned, people enrolled on the Programme are fundamentally children rather than their parents, as the latter are not used to seeking this service in order to learn how to bring their aggressive behaviour to an end.

The parents who take part in the Group of Mothers and Fathers of Gays and Lesbians are not representative of this type of violent behaviour because these are people who, *inter alia*, did not feel comfortable with their feelings towards their children. In this particular context, personal homophobia is tackled as an irrational feeling of marginalisation based on a set of preconceptions and these are, in turn, the gateway to beginning to work on homophobia from a social or community point of view.

In the Group, homophobia is tackled not so much at conceptual level, but at cognitive level. In this respect, people are encouraged to reflect on questions such as "What makes me feel how I do about my child's homosexuality?" or "What kind of thoughts and images form the basis of this feeling or perception?" with a view to encouraging changes in this behaviour.

Although the Programme seeks to detect episodes of homophobic violence within families, the team of professionals offers youths support so that they can look for alternatives, but it must be remembered that the situation may be rather dramatic if it concerns people who are economically dependent on

their parents. The Programme's team of professionals has, on a number of occasions, offered advice to young people who are victims of homophobic violence within their families, such as *how to report a crime*, or *how to leave the family home* in order to avoid aggression.

When the Programme's team of professionals believes that the best thing for the young person in question is to leave home, they are offered *employment assistance* with a view to guaranteeing them their economic independence, although it is worth pointing out here that this type of action has not always produced the intended results. Another option is to offer help so that the person affected by the homophobic violence can go and live with other family members (grandparents, aunts and uncles) who are in a position to accept their affective-sexual orientation.

Sometimes, circumstances do not enable the person to become more independent or move into the home of other family members. When this happens, an attempt is made to provide the victim with *resources and strategies for preventing and managing the conflict*.

According to those interviewed, the likelihood of situations of homophobic violence arising does not depend so much on the socio-economic characteristics of the families as ideological ones, more specifically, the *presence of a religious variable*. The most violent situations known within the Programme have occurred within families with very rigid religious beliefs, although this does not mean that all families with religious beliefs end up reacting violently to their children's homosexuality.

One of the Programme's limitations in terms of what to do in situations of homophobic violence within families arises when the victims are minors. *In the case of minors, it should be noted that it is the Instituto Regional del Menor y la Familia [Regional Minors' and Families' Institute] which intervenes in situations where there is lack of protection or serious abuse*, and so if, following initial enrolment, the Programme's team of professionals detects a situation with these features, it has a legal duty to refer it to this service within the Autonomous Community. Through the Programme, a *posteriori* intervention can be provided to parents and children, but situations which require urgent or external intervention have, initially, to be referred to this institution.

The Programme is used when "*an imbalance in everyday family experiences*" arises, because children's homosexuality has become an issue with their parents. The path the intervention takes will depend on whether members are willing to resolve the problem (the mother, the father, both, etc.) and on the plan outlined previously: enrolment, social care, psychological care, possibly legal assistance (for example, when the youth or adolescent asks to leave the family home), etc. The Programme always works with the parties involved in individualised care, but when the team of psychologists agrees that it is

necessary, mediation is also arranged between couples and children whenever possible.

As far as intervention concerning the whole of a family group is concerned, it is worth noting here that *parents and children both attend the Programme as users because homophobic violence is found outside the family home*. Sometimes, the problem of accepting homosexuality does not arise from within family circles, but from the surrounding social environment, the school community, more distant members of the family, etc., and when an individual's affective-sexual orientation is used to attack the family.

It is worth citing the case of families which use their own relational and affective methods to cure the emergence of the homosexual state of any of their members but ones who do not know what to do when those around them attack a child who, because of their age, does not have the means necessary for confronting a complex situation where there are neither enough guidelines nor enough information within easy reach.

2.4.-The scope and limitations of the Programme

2.4.1.-Scope

Based on information obtained through fieldwork (interviews, observations and documents), the Programme's scope can be summarised as follows:

- It is a public service which forms part of the Social Affairs Advisory Board within an Autonomous Community.
- It is financed 100% publicly and its management is entrusted to a tertiary sector entity which employs professionals who specialise in matters relating to LGTB individuals.
- Its timetable for providing assistance over the telephone and in person to users is 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., with interruptions.
- The holistic focus of the Programme through the diversity of specialist areas around which it is structured (social and psychological care, and legal assistance, on one hand, and training, studies and sensitisation, on the other).
- The location of the Programme's head office in the city centre a few metres from several different means of transport, and the quality and small size of its infrastructures (accommodation, furnishings, etc.).
- The inclusion of the family in the Programme as a specific target for action and the existence of a group of parents of gays and lesbians within it.

2.4.2.-Limitations

Based on information obtained through fieldwork (interviews, observations and documents), the Programme's limitations can be summarised as follows:

- The distribution of the Programme, insofar as the efforts made in this respect are mainly directed at informing professionals within the Autonomous Community rather than families.
- The exclusion of schools as intervention centres, both in terms of intermediation of conflicts arising through homophobic violence, and the possibility of carrying out tasks to sensitise the subjects concerned, the staff and the families (AMPAS).
- The fragmented presence of the family within the Programme, by which is meant the little protagonism which intervention directed at family groups (or a considerable number of their members) has. (Should we therefore be talking of support to "parents" rather than support to "families"?)
- The virtual non-existence of men in the Programme's Group of Mothers and Fathers of Gays and Lesbians.
- The difficulty in implementing action to mediate families, more specifically when faced with the emergence of situations of homophobic violence within the home against homosexual young people and adolescents.
- The absence of any therapeutic care service within the Programme for those people who need specialist intervention in the medium or long term.
- The lack of any initiative by parents within the Group to provide curative action and/or action to sensitise socially on rights and social reality within the LGTB community.
- The real impact of the Programme and more specifically, the Group of Mothers and Fathers, on the truth about families with gay and lesbian children in the region.

Part three.

Proposals for public bodies

A group of basic, generic proposals directed at public bodies is set out below. These measures include those aspects which should form the basis for any action of a public nature aimed at meeting the requirements of families with gay and lesbian children.

Public institutions must show some concern for the social reality specific to families with gay and lesbian children, and make a clear promise to offer people within them all of the support necessary through specialist services and programmes in order that they can manage any conflicts which arise from homophobia and resistance to affective-sexual diversity.

Public institutions must work on combating discrimination against gay and lesbian children, adolescents and youths who, even nowadays, are found in each and every one of the areas in which they make their presence known: school, educational establishments in their free time, in the street, etc., and more particularly, the family, given that this is one of areas where people socialise which is most neglected in this respect.

Distribution of information and accessibility policy, in all its forms, are two fundamental aspects which guarantee that any service or programme of a public nature providing support to families with gay and lesbian children is completely effective.

Similarly, in order to be able to fully guarantee that this type of device is effective, action must mainly be directed at all of the people who live together in the family home (parents, children, brothers and sisters, etc.), rather than to some of them (generally the mother and/or the homosexual child).

The service or programme must offer individual therapeutic support free of charge to users, with no time limits, or otherwise, guarantee an external resource which can offer this kind of specialist care when it is necessary. At the same time, the service or programme must offer family members the option of taking part in focused self-help groups orientated towards the process of accepting the actual affective-sexual or other orientation.

The work carried out with the families from this public service or programme must be based on a holistic assessment of the issues in question. Not in vain, society is generally heteronormative and homophobic, so discrimination against homosexuals may take place in any social environment.

Finally, running of the service and programme in question must be sufficiently flexible to adapt to families' specific requirements and those of their members, in terms of depth of studies, degree of marginalisation or acceptance of homosexuality, religious beliefs, mobility opportunities, origin, etc.

Why families matter

by Jeffrey Weeks

Sociologist, London South Bank University

Family secrets

I have really enjoyed the talks today and learning about the research behind them. It is a very important project, and what I want to do in this talk is not so much discuss what we have heard but rather to reflect on what I've learned from it, and to draw some of the general implications in relationship to the position of LGBT young people, to the changing nature of family life, and to the changes in sexual moralities across Europe, which have been uneven in their impact, but nevertheless really significant and life changing for millions of people.

I thought I'd start with a reflection on 'family secrets' because, in a sense, everything we've been talking about today is about family secrets, about way in which within the family secrets are generated and then usually become known, so they are not really secrets anymore, but they then become something that families have to deal with. Every family, you could say, is a mixture of 'secrets and lies', as a famous film of that title put it a few years ago, and it's how we cope with those secrets that I think determines whether we are really living in a civilized and humane society or not.

Let me give you a quote from a well-known British writer and playwright, Alan Bennett: 'Every family', he wrote, 'has a secret and the secret is that it is not like other families'. I think that this is quite a profound insight when you begin to think about it, because it implies first of all that of course every family has lots of secrets, but secondly that the real secret is that each of ours secrets is a different secret, and the fact of homosexuality within the family is just one of many, many secrets that, as families, we have to learn to live with.

Now here's one way of dealing with this secret, it is a very modern way of dealing with secrets, and I like this quotation because it reminds me what I'm doing at this moment, which is talking with the help of a PowerPoint presentation. This comes from an American survey of LGBT young people coming out:

One gay man, a business consultant, participating in a coming out group, described how he used a PowerPoint demonstration in helping his parents to understand both what it meant to be gay and what changes this disclosure would have on their relationship and on their roles as parents to a gay son in a committed relationship with another man.

This a very post-modern way of coming out, but it encapsulates many important changes we need to note. For example, it's a dramatic move away from the way I came out to my parents a long time ago when I felt highly emotional and distinctively tearful. I had broken up with my then partner, and I was very distressed, and it was the fact that I was in distress that forced my parents to ask me 'what's wrong?'. In contrast, here's a young man who feels completely confident about his gayness; what he is not so confident about is the attitude of his parents, and therefore he lectures them, as I lecture my students. This is a no-nonsense, unsentimental approach, and I am not convinced of the merits of it, but it certainly suggests that many people have a different attitude towards revealing their sexual secrets today. Most young LGBT people, however, probably follow a more traditional and perhaps more painful path in coming out to their families.

This reflection on family secrets has made me think of several important things about the way LGBT people come into the world as lesbian, gay, transgender or bisexual people. The first reality, of course, is that all LGBT people originated in families, they all grow up in families and that's true even if they live in institutions because institutions attempt, however inadequately often, to create family like institutions. Now, families, by the very way in which they are constituted in the modern world, seem to invalidate the non-heterosexual experience. The family is a heterosexual institution - at least that was pretty universally true until very recently - so all families if they conform to the heterosexual norm tend by their very nature to invalidate their LGBT offspring, simply because they don't conform to the normative reality of the 'typical family'.

And yet homosexuality is a secret born in the heart of this prime heterosexual institution, and this is true whatever you think the causes of homosexuality are, or if like me, you think causation is totally irrelevant. If you believe, for instance, that homosexuals and non heterosexual people generally, are genetically disposed to their sexual orientation, then you must believe that the genes have come through one or other or both their parents, and therefore it must be true that if anyone is to blame the parents must be to blame for the homosexuality of their children. If, as I tend to believe, there's a lot in the Freudian explanation, that our sexual dispositions are shaped within the family, then again the family can be blamed for whatever the desires of their offspring are, through the failure to satisfactorily resolve the Oedipal crisis. Or, and again I think that's a strong element of truth in this, if the way we think and do is shaped primarily in society, in the interactions in society, so that 'Nature has very little to do with it', then again the prime place where we begin to interact is in the family, so therefore the family again is at the heart of the creation of the homosexual. Looking at it historically, there's a prime and really unresolved paradox here: that the family creates

homosexuals in a literal sense and yet, till very recently, families tended to reject homosexuals as abnormal or freaks, and I think it is that conflict, that contradiction, that ambivalence at the heart of every family with LGBT offspring, that explains the difficulties of coming out within the family. It arouses above all too many guilt feelings, guilt in the children of course that they might be 'letting their parents down', but guilt also in the parents at very many levels because they have literally produced the children who they now have to struggle to accept – because they seem different. A great deal has changed in the last twenty or thirty years, and certainly in my life time, and coming out may well be much easier for young people today, but there's still that tension between what we want to be for ourselves and what we think our family wants us to be that has to be negotiated, and has to be resolved in one way or another in order for us to become full adults, capable of autonomous decisions in the world we are living in today.

So homosexuality is a secret born in the heart of the family; but it's a secret that, till very recently, dared not speak its name. Of course many things have changed. The Australian gay writer Dennis Altman said some years ago that 'the secret that once dare not speak its name, now can't shut up', and many think there's a strong element of truth in that. Today we speak all the time about coming out even if it's still very difficult for many to actually do the deed. So the secret love is not a secret anymore but there are still many problems. These problems provide the challenge we have been discussing today, but also provide the opportunity for rethinking the relationship between our sexualities, our families and the societies we live in.

Rethinking the Family

Let me say a little more about the nature of the modern family. Every old sociological or psychological textbook or every government minister encouraged to talk about the family will inevitably say 'the family is the building block of society'.. It is a cliché which hides many different realities, but like most clichés, part of the reason we continue to say it is that in many ways it has elements of truth, not least because, as I said earlier, most young people are born into families, literally, and they are shaped and moulded in those families. One of the reasons why, despite all the radical critiques of the family and the dramatic changes in the family that have gone on in the last couple of generations, we still talk about it, we still feel about it, we still want to live in something we can call 'a family', however different it may be from an ideal model of the family, is because it represents some basic things that all of us, as human beings, seem to need. It represents a sense of belonging, an element of continuity through time and across generations. It suggests we are not entirely isolated atoms separate from everyone else, it means we

have links with other people, whatever our differences. It is tempting to speak as if the family is one fixed thing, that there is an essence of the family, but the reality is the ways we live our daily lives are highly differentiated, each family is different from every other family. And the fact of difference is also something important for our personal and social identities.

Identity is based on what we have in common with some people, and what differentiates us from other people, and given that we usually belong to one family rather than many families, our sense of difference from others, our very identities as human and social beings are shaped within the family. Now 'the family' was until very recently, and in many parts of Europe still is, above all an institution as well as a network; it is a formal legal entity as well as an emotional nexus. Until very recently marriage was the key to family formation, and although that is not automatically true today, for large numbers of people marriage remains central. Marriage provides the focal point for kinship, that is the way we inherit not only our sense of belonging and property as well. Marriage assumed the gender order, the natural division between men and women, and a particular relationship between those men and women, a relationship largely of inequality, of differentiation, where men did one thing, women did another. Again, although lots of this has crumbled or has been renegotiated, the reality is that most families still do have some sort of gender differentiation and a sexual division of labour which shapes the way in which each individual family operates.

Yet whilst recognising the continuities it is important to acknowledge how much has changed, and changed dramatically. This is a quotation from a leading British policy researcher, Jane Lewis. I am using it because I think it is particularly true of Britain, but you can see echoes in all European countries to a lesser or greater degree, and I suspect it is the future for all late modern societies. She writes:

"the "facts" of family change are real and hard to exaggerate. In one generation, the numbers marrying have halved, the numbers divorcing have trebled and the proportion of children born outside marriage has quadrupled."

That has happened in a mere twenty to twenty-five years. It represents the most dramatic shift in the British family in its history. The patterns are slightly different in Italy, Spain, France or Germany, but the basic shifts are very similar. The traditional family is disappearing. But this is the important point I want to make: to say that must not be taken to mean that families are disappearing, or what we value in family life is disappearing. 'The family', singular, has become 'families', plural. And now we are beginning to recognise different patterns, different cultures, different ways of being human, and sexual.

Sociologists have tried to describe these changes in terms of a 'transformation of intimacy' over the past couple of generations. I believe that the coming out of homosexuality within the family is at the heart of this transformation of intimacy, because it represents fundamentally a break with that gender hierarchy which used to define the family, with the sexual division of labour that characterised it, with the traditional idea that sex is exclusively linked to reproduction, and that there is no purpose of sex outside reproduction, and so on. The transformation of intimacy is essentially about people choosing their own destinies much more than they were ever able to do in the past. In the past people born into traditional families, in conditions of scarcity, had no choice but to follow their fate, to follow whatever path their parents and grandparents and great grandparents, and so on into the mists of time, had shaped for them. For most of us, in the affluent West at least, that is no longer the case. Of course, we must never forget that there remain all sorts of inequality; in the midst of wealth there remains great poverty, there's unemployment, there's all sort of differences, including ethnic and 'racial' differences which shape different life chances. But the crucial thing that modern individuals have to face is the harsh reality of choice. We have no choice but to choose.

So how do we manage to marry that imperative to choose, which is so central a part of modern culture, a vital element of our individuality, and which is also the motor of the modern capitalist economy, with the need for a sense of belonging, for strong links with others, for a sense of genuine mutuality? The answer cannot be a return to the values of the past. That has gone. How today can you possibly stop people choosing to express their own sexuality and life style, and ways of being in the world? You cannot! Which is why there is a continuing tension between the new ethos of the late capitalist society that we're all living in Europe, and the families we come from, because families like to imagine that they are shaping our fate, they are shaping our future, but we, as individuals, like to think that we ourselves are shaping our own futures.

This grass roots transformation in patterns of intimacy has revolutionised the possibilities of living LGBT life styles. It is an unfinished revolution in many ways. It's unfinished because many families can't cope with their offspring coming out, it's unfinished because despite all the advances that have been gained in terms of legal frameworks and social attitudes, there's still a large degree of homophobia. Some people would also argue that it's an unfinished revolution because, although there have been tremendous changes, and it's difficult for even the most sceptical to deny that have been tremendous changes, the structures of heterosexual dominance, what is called heteronormativity, are still there. In other words, under the liberal surface there are still deep structures which prevent lesbian, gay, bisexual,

transgender people, being full citizens in the contemporary world. So, there are unresolved tensions within society, and inevitably within the family. And these tensions, in many ways, revolve around the way we tell our family stories.

Family Stories

We all live our lives by telling stories of our lives. These stories provide the core of our everyday gossip, what we talk about in the neighbourhood, the office, in our closest relationships. These family stories, in a very real sense, create realities about families. We're in the world of both myth making and reality here, because on the one hand there's a story we tell about our family, which circulate in the real world, and there's the reality of those families, including the tensions within families which shape the way we live.

Our family stories shape the ways in which we 'do' family, that is act out the various practices which together make up family life. Family is 'performative', something we make real by the ways in which we ritualise our everyday practices of caring, sharing, loving, rowing, cooking, parenting, day by day. Today we do not so much live in families as enact family life in a range of different ways. Families, perhaps, no longer exist straightforwardly, rather families exist through the ways we live in them. When we tell stories about our lives, we try to tell coherent stories, which means we gloss over some of the difficulties, ambivalences and contradictions in those stories. We like narrative closure, we like to tell a good story about how integrated and loving our family is, how our nearest kin have accepted our sexual differences and how there's a happy ending: like in the traditional fairy story, we all want to live happily ever after. In many cases, of course, it is a real story, in other it is not a real story at all, and it's again this difference between the reality and the myths, the stories and the hard difficulties of everyday life, that family stories have to cope with.

Commitment

Each family has its own stories about how its members relate to one another. For family is where we first learn commitment, or do not, where we learn responsibility, or do not, and to which we owe a strong sense of duty, or do not.

If you look at sociological studies of the family today, specially in a country like Britain, you'll see that often people reject the idea of duty, the idea you do things because you must, because God, or tradition, or the external moral codes says you must behave in a particular way. Yet individuals continue to develop a sense of mutual responsibility to one another, Instead of this

stemming from a sense of obligation or duty, however, people today prefer increasingly to talk about the ways in which they negotiate responsibilities, they accept responsibilities because they want to not because they must. Freely chosen responsibilities are stronger than those resentfully taken out because there is no alternative. Of course, there are powerful exceptions to this trend. When you talk to parents about their attitude to children you see they do indeed continue to display a strong sense of duty, they don't negotiate with their children by and large, they do things for their children because they must do it, they care for children when they're young, they care about children as they go out into the wide world. Again, one of the tensions that occurs in the family around coming out is that conflict amongst parents, between their sense of duty to children and their sense of commitment to other values, maybe religious values, maybe just the customary values of their area. So how do we negotiate these difficulties?

Fateful moments

Some years ago sociologists used to talk about the 'life cycle', they believed that there were automatic stages in everyone's life that you had to go through and these stages were neatly marked out: first love, courtship, getting married, having children, ageing, death. Here was a neat life cycle that everyone went through in more or less the right order and if you didn't go through it, then you were potentially dysfunctional. Today, sociologists like to talk not so much about a pre-set life cycle that we all go through, but rather about the ways in which we make our own lives in different ways at different times. Theorists now talk about the 'life course' rather than the life cycle. There is no pre-ordained pattern. The thing about the life course is that we have to make it up as we go along, we have to make decisions for ourselves at various stages of the life course. And what propels people through the life course often is what are often called 'fateful moments'. Fateful moments are moments of definition and redefinition in the way we tell the story of our lives. When the expectations of our lives get disrupted, we have to remake the story, reframe the narrative. These moments are associated generally with crisis points. Coming out stories show a common range of such crises: a feeling of difference in young people about their sexuality, the implications on the individual of first sexual explorations, the powerful impact of falling in love for the first time with someone of the same sex, the traumatic process often of coming out to friends, to family, to work mates and to the wider world and all the intense emotions that come to the fore in forming partnerships or breaking-up partnerships, and then perhaps re-forming partnerships, which is increasingly the pattern in a world of serial monogamy.

There are very different ways in which families respond to these crisis moments. For the sake of argument we may differentiate three different types of responses to someone trying to come out within the family. There's the authoritarian response, there's what I call an accommodating or liberal response, and there's the open response. I hope they speak for themselves. Essentially, an authoritarian family structure would not easily accept any deviation from the traditional patterns of family and reproductive life. An accommodating family may say 'well, I wish you weren't gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans but we love you anyway and we're going to go on supporting you', but it's never really full acceptance. And an open response? Well, we know from the research evidence as well as many coming out stories and anecdotes that an open response is not as strong as we may want, but it is certainly more generous and accepting. Here the response could be 'you're an individual, you made an individual choice, we're a family of individuals and we are going to stick together come what may, because we're all different, and we all have to live with that difference'.

This latter position seem to me to embody the values that we should be pursuing in a variety of different ways. It's about the autonomy of the individual, but the autonomy of the individual not as an isolated person but as part of a network of caring relationships. I believe that the crucial message of a key change that has been taking place in the last thirty or forty years, what sociologists like to call 'individualization', that is new social structures built around individual choice, does not actually mean a break down of relationships, it just means a redefinition of relationships. And what is crucial is that we recognize that it is through our involvement with others, whether the blood relationships of families of origin, or friendships, or new patterns of sexual and intimate relationships, it's through those relationships that we become fully autonomous, fully individual and fully free. We do not become autonomous by rejecting relationships, by going off in isolation, we become fully autonomous, all of us, by recognizing the autonomy of the other, but also the essential, necessary links with the other which is a necessary part of human life.

Baby boomers and others

What's interesting in the research, and I think it is reflected in what we have seen today, is that is very difficult when you look at the types of family responses I have sketched to see any necessary correlation with class, ethnicity, geography or whatever. There are working class families that are open and there are working class families that are authoritarian, similarly with middle class and upper class families. One characteristic though I do think is very important, and it is often forgotten, is that there has been a generation

which by and large since the 1960s has carried through a revolution in values, and it has been largely committed to liberal values, and that's the so called baby boom generation. If you look at the history of the last fifty to sixty years one of the remarkable features is that it is the generation born around about the end of the last World War, the mid-late forties, who became the hippies, the drop outs, the students revolutionaries, the new class of the 1960s, and the leaders of the 1990s and the early 2000s. They produced in turn a generation of children who started reproducing themselves in the 1980s and 1990s, and it is their offspring who are now our teenagers and early adults coming out as LGBT. The opportunities of those kids coming out today are doing so in families that by and large have been transformed by that "baby boom generation". It is, of course, difficult to generalize too much because there are, as I said, many families where this isn't the case: that baby boom generation created not only the liberal progressive class of the last couple of generations but also the deeply conservative New Right classes who have been so influential since the 1980s. Therefore, there's a clear tension in that generation. However, I still think it is largely true to say that the baby boom generation has carried forward a social revolution, not so much by the traditional revolutionary methods of storming the barricades or even, by and large, getting into political power. There are much more crucial changes that have been made, by making changes in civil societies, by making changes in the way we live everyday life, and that, in the end, is the most important shift of all. It is a grassroots revolution we are talking about that has transformed everyday life in Europe.

This grassroots revolution has inevitably been shaped by different national rhythms. There are many national cultural differences that one has to account for. We just need to think of the three countries represented in the papers we have heard today, Italy, Spain and Great Britain. Great Britain, my own country, forty, fifty years ago was regarded as one of the most conservative countries in Europe; today, in legislative terms and in many other ways, it is one of the most liberal, certainly in attitudes towards homosexuality. In the 18th century, Italy used to be regarded as a paradise for gay men, in the 21st century it lies behind much of the rest of Europe in the relation both to cultural acceptance of LGBT lifestyles and legislative changes, especially in relation to same sex marriage or registered partnerships. Spain, on the other hand, which like Italy has a strong Catholic tradition, and had a fascist government until the 1970s, has in the last five years had an amazing breakthrough in terms of liberal legislation. Countries go at different paces, have different legacies but, looking at the long term, they have a remarkable way of catching up or even leaping ahead of each other and setting new goal posts for other countries and cultures to keep up to. One of the crucial differences, of course, in these countries is the power of

religion, and religion has been enormously important in shaping family values and in shaping values towards homosexuality. Obviously here in Italy the power of the Papacy has been enormous, it was powerful in Spain, but religion has been much less powerful in Britain for perhaps most of the past hundred years, and Britain is now a highly secular society, which is why I think so many of the changes that have gone through in recent years have got through relatively easily in legislative terms.

Towards a conclusion

I want to conclude by looking at some of the resources necessary for supporting the parents of LGBT children. In her paper, Anita Naoko Pilgrim talked about the move from supporting families to families supporting children, and I thought this is a very interesting way of looking at some of the changes that have taken place. Twenty or thirty years ago, and I'm not saying of course that it doesn't happen today, when a child came out in a family uncertain of itself, it was the family, the parents you had to support. Today lots of the discussions we are having are about how families can be better resourced in a variety of different ways to support their children, and that seems to signify a very important shift. I'm not saying families no longer have crises, but the crisis is now often not about denying your child's sexual leanings but actually about affirming how you, as a family, can best support that child.

The second thing that has come through very strongly is the importance of grassroots organisations and grassroots consciousness because, as I said earlier on, I think one of the most crucial changes that's taken place over the last couple of generations is the way ordinary people, in a variety of different ways, have remade their own lives and their own values. It has been a grassroots revolution we have talked about in the absence often of any major legislative changes. As Anita's paper made clear, there's a limited range of NGO's across Europe which are able to help and many of them are poorly supported and very few pay employees and there's very limited direct State support, so there are limits to the way in which families can be resourced to help their offspring come to terms with their sexuality and emotional needs. Nevertheless, I believe there is a crucial lesson that we can learn: if we are going to provide better resources, it has to be through the institutions of civil society rather than directly through the State; the State could provide financial material resources but it seems to me the real change has to come through grassroots organisations, because that's where the real influence and impact is likely to be.

But the resources for change have really come about through the major changes that have reshaped the world over the past few generations, and it's very important to mark these. The underlying one has been the growing liberalisation since the 1950s and 1960s across Europe. This liberalisation

has been uneven in its impact, , certainly in terms of legislative achievements, but it is a major change that has brought formal equality to LGBT citizens. A crucial element in this has been the development of euro norms through the EU and the work of other European institutions, such as the Council of Europe.

Perhaps, the most crucial symbolic breakthrough has been the legalisation of same sex partnerships. Again the process has been uneven, but Italy now is one of the few laggards in having some sort of legislation, in Western Europe at least. And what such legalisation does is to recognise the fact that being gay is not so much about sex, nor transgression and exotic display, but is actually about loving relationships, and that is a crucial breakthrough I think in the way we imagine 'families' in all their variety today.

There's also been an explosion of knowledge about sexuality and gender. HIV/AIDS paradoxically, despite its disastrous impact on so many people, did create a whole new fund of transmissible knowledge about sexual behaviour, and the gap between the way people present themselves and what their lives are really like. Media globalisation has obviously been crucial more broadly in breaking down taboos, and in offering new and unprecedented resources of knowledge and networking, above all through the internet.

Another really significant change over the last generation has been the emergence of what I like to call 'families of choice'. Families of choice had their origins in the hostility that many LGBT people experienced in their families of origin, and therefore LGBT people had to create their own families, 'friends as families'. But I think what is really interesting over the last ten to fifteen years is the way in which traditional families themselves have in many cases become families of choice, the way in which in many cases those families begin to take in partners of their own LGBT offspring and begin to redefine themselves as an extended family made up of blood, traditional kin but also of friends and partners. That it seems to me is making all type of families chosen families, elective families.

Is blood thicker than water? In some cases it is. It's very interesting if you look at some recent research about attitudes to families amongst many LGBT people, you find that actually they still regard their blood families, even when they have been hostile to their sexuality, as the core commitment they have. They just want to make that family more open, more accepting of their friends and their values; so, blood is still very important.

There was an interesting little discussion earlier on about lesbian and gay parenting, and the new paradox that may emerge in relationship to gay parents, lesbian or gay parents having heterosexual offspring. The research that has been done on this – it has been largely done on lesbian parents so far, both in the United States and in Britain; I'm less familiar with other

European work -, is very interesting because it shows, that by and large the children of lesbian and gay parents tend to be no more disposed towards being gay themselves than the rest of the population, but what they are more disposed to being is more tolerant, they are more accepting of differences around sexuality but also about other things. So the little question that was posed about what does a gay couple do when they have an heterosexual child is, actually, to live up to the values that they should have taught their heterosexual offspring, which is to be open, to be tolerant, to be accepting of the of the different ways we can fall in love, and the different ways there are of being human.

One of the major issues in relation to same sex marriages, is whether they are assimilationist and accepting of the status quo, or whether there is something else going on. I like to think it is really about the importance of the recognition of difference, and recognition of the different ways that you can have love relationships, and this leads to my concluding point. I call it 'the importance of being ordinary', because it seems to me, talking to many LGBT people and their parents and just generally as a sociologist observing what's going on, that something new is happening in the LGBT world, and indeed in the wider world, and that is, not so much the acceptance of homosexuality in an assimilationist way, but actually an acceptance that there are different way of being sexual, there are different way of being gendered. As a result, some of the drama is going out this long running story. Same sex activity is not so much a transgression or scandal as it seemed even twenty years ago, it is just one set of possible ways of being among other possible ways of being.

We are reworking the story, we are beginning to tell new stories, we are beginning to re-imagine the many different ways there are of loving one another.

This is the crucial lesson for me of looking at this great transition of the last thirty or forty years that being LGBT has increasingly becoming something that is ordinary rather than extraordinary, But if you look at the history of the last thirty or forty years, with all its ups and down, with all its suppressions and oppressions and all the difficulties that LGBT children have had in coming to terms with their sexuality within families, being ordinary is still the most extraordinary thing that could happen.

The families tell their stories

Presentation of the film “Parents Reborn”

by Claudio Cipelletti

Good morning to everyone. I think that today will be different from yesterday. This project is multi-faceted: on the one hand we have the scientific studies, on the other hand we have a work played on emotions, a documentary by which we have looked at the real life of families. For the first time we have tried shed light upon what happens inside the homes, in those private moments that, to quote a common saying, lead to “washing the dirty clothes” behind closed doors.

There are many things which families experience as secrets, not only homosexuality. Yesterday, Jeffrey Weeks spoke about family secrets and I have found many consonances between what the studies of the Daphne project outlined and what emerged during the work for the film. This reassures me, because it is confirms that both the project and the documentary film build upon thorough scientific foundations, and that the research results correspond to the reality we met.

Speaking about families, I think that we still have to face a hidden, “unspoken” reality that needs to finally have the right to speak. The documentary film was aimed at giving parents a chance to speak, since they are often forgotten and left out in discourses about LGBT issues. Where is the family of origin of lesbian and gay people? No one seems to ask this question, and the fact that homosexuals have parents even appears as a surprise for some people.

It took a long time for this film to take shape. Back in 2002, Paola Dall’Orto, who was the President of Agedo at that time, brought this need to me, as a continuation of the work we had started with Nessuno uguale (No Two Alike), the previous documentary on young lesbians and gays coming out, that I filmed for Agedo. The path has been long, from the first brainstorming in 2002 to fund-raising attempts, and then through a waiting time, until 2004/2005 when the Daphne project opened up the chance to realise it, and pre-production started. It was then followed by a year of groundwork, with help from two extraordinary advisors, Francesco Pivetta and Lucia Bonuccelli, who are here sitting in the hall.

Together with them, and with Chiara Bertone, I have done the preliminary work that you can see behind the scenes: the issue was to understand how to bring these contents into a film, without reducing the whole work to some face to face interviews or to some classic solutions, such as a “voice off” explaining what is the problem and what should be done. I needed a completely different approach: that is why I wanted to work with a psychologist and an expert in groups’ dynamics, while writing down the

screenplay, something that an author of a documentary would not usually do. I wanted to be sure that the parents we filmed lived some real moments of discussion and confrontation and that I would be able to “steal” those moments and bring them to the public. For this purpose, we had to avoid setting people in front of me, but rather place them in quiet places where things could happen, with no time limits.

I spent entire days with the families of this movie, I stressed them out being with them at their table, day and night, since the morning coffee. Some of them are in the room now and I am very happy for their presence. Together with my two cameramen, we became the tapestry of their houses so that after a while they got used to us and we were able to, I wouldn't say disappear, but at least be less noticed, less intrusive.

The same process applied to the group: a very important part of the film was shot with a group of parents who spent entire days telling their stories. There, we shot a huge amount of material, I might say that it became almost embarrassing, because I have ended up with 120 hours of shooting. This has made cutting a very long and difficult process. It took a year from the last shooting to the final cut but I hope and I believe that in this film (although if it cannot be exhaustive) there is something that brings some issues to light that sooner or later will reach the audience, at least as questions.

I said that I have found many similarities with what the studies outlined. The small discussion we had yesterday over the origin of homosexuality (whether you are born or you become homosexual) is very telling,. On the one side, Deborah Lambillotte is right, it is incredible that we are still talking about it, but on the other side it shows that probably the world outside doesn't know.

Ironically, the issue about homosexuality is that we do not have black skin. Who would dare to say to a black person that he chose his colour? It would be an extreme offence: someone is fighting for his civil rights, the right to stay in the world, and they say to him “yes, but you could have chosen to be something else”. Wouldn't it have been an absurd answer, if given to Mrs. Rosa Parks in 1955 when she sat on a place for whites in that famous bus, claiming in this way a place in the world and becoming an icon of the fight against racial segregation in America? Who would dare to give such an answer to someone who simply says “I am, just let me be myself”. The question would be replaced, moving from a higher level, the one of human rights, to an issue of bestowed freedom. To me, that's too simply put, the problem being not to assure freedom as in the Constitution, but something else. What I mean for civil rights is even more fundamental than Constitution, they concern the right to be in the world. Now, if a Councillor is convinced that being gay is a choice but he

promises us twenty thousand copies of this video, it means that he has understood that there is a problem, that he has the sensitivity to face it and that, by doing so, he is helping us to reach the families with this message, which I think has to be admired. At the same time, I acknowledge that culture is lacking, and that we are here to try to bring this message to society.

I believe that this approach comes out from this film without need for any further comment. I get back now to what was said yesterday by Jeffrey Weeks and with great precision by Alessandro Taurino. The crucial point is that the heterosexual family, a man and a woman with children, is the site of the genesis of homosexuality. Where is homosexuality born? In a heterosexual family. That is the bewildering fact that a family which by its nature cannot include homosexuality, because it is built on the idea of heterosexuality, has to face homosexuality within itself. Although people can be open and get to think that homosexuality is possible and reasonable, they still are part of a heterosexual project, they have children, and they feel part of that type of life. And then, homosexuals are born there: the "freak" is born within a "regular" family and this fact is so surprising that it creates all the problems which we are talking about. There is a thin line between acceptance and what (I do not know how to define it) is beyond acceptance because it assumes that there is nothing to be accepted, and sees acceptance as almost being a paradox. Acceptance is an extremely ambivalent concept: I would say, as Taurino did yesterday, that a parent who accepts a child is a homophobic parent, because saying I love you under any conditions because you are my son, means putting the condition of homosexuality in the statement under any conditions, and saying in fact I love you despite it".

The real acceptance, and I think this clearly emerges from the film, takes place when the question for parents is not longer about accepting the child, but about changing themselves. This means that something happened, everything changed, and was no longer a question of giving rights, of including the "freak" in the family, but rather of re-discussing the family project and parents' position as human beings in the world. It requires that they open themselves up to the world. Acceptance becomes then an unnecessary word. I actually don't know how to call this other thing that happens in those families that are really making such a journey.

Perhaps the real subject of the film concerns parents making a journey and discovering that they can always learn, thanks to their offspring providing them with an opportunity to understand that their parenting project is much more beautiful, more extensive and more unexpected than they had believed. Parents can make this journey if only they have the humbleness to enter all the mysterious and uncharted territories that

they would never have thought of coming across in their life. These are the issues that the film wants to tackle, and show through emotions. It is a long film, lasting one and a half hours, a proper length for people to be able to experience a new world and to follow parents in their journeys.

According to me, it may also help those who never directly come across this “problem” to understand that the unexpected lives of their children are a common problem to all parents. It is, in the end, a film about parenthood, about being children and parents.

Sometimes it happens that the families do not engage in such a constructive process; indeed, this happens more often than we may think, and there are many families that are not as lucky as the ones we see in the film. My problem was also not to veil violence, that violence that we continue to see, which continues to exist in Italy against gay and lesbian children. We shouldn't forget that the project is about violence towards young people, also within the family, which is not an easy subject to talk about because nobody would come to an interview for my film saying I abused my son”. However, in our view this violence appears very strongly in this documentary. It's because we have chosen not to be reassuring. Yesterday Maria Gigliola Toniollo said: enough with tears, we shall present this issue with a certain lightness”. I agree with her, but today our duty is to answer to someone like minister Mara Carfagna saying that there is no such problem as homophobia in our country, which is belied by what is really happening. That's why this film is hard at times, because it shows the conflicts parents can engage in, as a first reaction, abusing their children because they do not recognize them as their own anymore. But if they don't recognize them, it is just because they are led to see them as “freaks”. Because that's what they learnt. What strikes you in the end is the awareness that these parents are also victims, not only perpetrators. They are fragile victims of the same cultural and social mechanism that is oppressing their children and that has set them one against the other. They can find each other again only afterwards, when they leave the prejudices they had learnt in a lifetime behind.

However, we have already experienced in Barcelona and Bristol that what you see in this film is exactly the same thing that is happening in England and Spain. This proves that we are not dealing with local issues in this film: we are trying to give voice to a social experience rather than to individuals. Exploring individual and family biographies, which are all different, through parents' and children's accounts, the cutting of this film has aimed at giving voice to all of them while conveying a sense of continuity. If there are some overlappings, it is because different people talk about similar events, but attaching different feelings to them, and thereby providing a complex net whose threads will link together later, in

the end of the film. There is a kind of a common issue travelling from person to person, creating a single character who is this Parent, who is male/female, young/elderly, parent/child: he/she is the subject of this film. It is as if there was a universal character containing many individual biographies. If it works, I think I reached at least a small result. And of course, as I said for "Nessuno uguale" (No Two Alike), if only one person will be able to live a little bit better thanks to this work, the result would be achieved. Enjoy it.

Between generations: relational dynamics in families with homosexual children

by Lucia Bonuccelli - Psychologist

First of all I would like to thank the parents who have decided with great courage to take part in the filming, the thanks go to their willingness to uncover themselves, to face each other and share their experience. I realize that it was not easy. I hope that their availability will offer to others a period of confrontation and above all of reflection that can turn into help.

When I was first asked to give this advice I must confess that I hesitated for a while, I thought about how we could do it in the best way for these parents, what was the road that could make their confession, their story, universal, and above all, which was the best way to protect them, because this is also very important. My work has tried from the very beginning to consider what I just said, therefore, each and every person who participated in the video was evaluated in accordance with their personal ability to bear this experience-path, as I like to think about it, once again inside themselves.

This is why when I met Claudio and Francesco was been first of all a reflection, a let see what we have in front of us, let them speak and listen to them; only after we've selected the participants through motivational interviews and experiences in groups. The criterion used to select them, in compliance with the ethical code, has been the ability of individuals to bear the re-edition of very strong emotional contents related to the discovery of having a homosexual child.

The documentary represents a natural process that may seem long, but we felt it was the only way to respect what was the natural, physiological process which takes place within the family, within the couple but also within the individuals. And I think that this length was the necessary and sufficient condition for the movie to acquire depth because we can see not only the first moment of crisis but also the resources that are activated in this moment, what occurs, what is the transition for what they call the regeneration. Not only the regeneration of their children, here's the title Parents Reborn, but also the regeneration of themselves and how this change was possible.

And this is why I ask you a few minutes, briefly, to take you inside this process. Yesterday we've taken part in some interesting debates that, if you stop to think it over, in some ways reflect this process from different angles, maybe a more external one but similar to what happens inside a person. Therefore, there's a dual level of understanding; the first one, the level of telling, is immediate, accessible to everyone, but there's also a level that may come later, the level of the internal awareness, the step of that process that

every person has to face, probably in the loneliness. Of course, in the video you'll see just some fragments of this group but we, me, Francesco and Claudio, have been very careful to maintain this natural process because in this way the viewer can implicitly and not only explicitly connect to the inside. The lead group had no therapeutic purpose and my presence was intended to make easier the expression of emotions and also help avoid any possible difficult moment.

Now I would like to make my personal comment to this video and also add my personal experience as a psychologist in support of families and homosexual children.

The documentary, because of technical needs, was cut but, as I said, this real process was maintained which is quite common and occurs in the family at the time of the children's coming out and right after.

We can say that the first moment is, for most parents, a moment of crisis and you need to know that this moment, which is more or less extended depending on the reaction of the parents, inside is almost timeless but it leads to the revisiting of the crisis.

My reading speaks of internal dynamics, personal and relational that occur in that process leading to the acceptance of your child, even if acceptance, as Claudio said, is a term that does not represent...*[suggestion of the public: recognition]*...yes, recognition, this is a good term, recognition of themselves and of the other.

I speak of a slow emotional adjustment that takes place inside every parent that inevitably has an impact also on the partner and on the child. I remind you that my view at this moment is internal. When we have a relationship with a person, the affection that we feel, the emotions that we stake mentally, can be defined "energy contents". If I connect with someone my emotional energy goes to him and I project in him all my interests and this is the relationship with a child. The other becomes the object of my love and of my emotions but if he hurts me, whoever he is and whatever he does, for example, as we have seen, with his "coming out", I temporarily withdraw my affection, I divert my interests and my energy comes back to me and crushes me emotionally ... it is a wave of confusion.

This wave takes an emotional form and I feel invaded, as a parent, by a moment of confusion and this has been reported to us. I have just described what happens when a child says Mom, Dad, I am gay.

Initially, we have it in the documentary, a mother says I felt like I had no ground under my feet; so, in some way, the internal emotions resemble a wave, an abnormal wave.

As such, this wave at first makes the horizon and the personal boundaries disappear and this internal struggle, because it is a real one, is transformed, for an intense period of time, in a struggle, I would say, for the psychical

survival of themselves as parents and of their own children. The secret, to continue the metaphor, is to be carried by this abnormal wave and, as it happens in reality, this sea will come back, only in random order.

What does all this really mean? After the first moment of confusion, the system tries to resume the balance, thoughts and memories arrive and everything is confused, contradictory, mixed.

Just remember that the point of view is always internal. It begins a slow rearrangement which goes through different moments; from the outside, the parental couple begins to question its educational work, sometimes accusing each other, sometimes looking for some obscure reasons that may have produced in this child the origin of a sexual orientation that is often, until then, unknown, never imagined and more importantly, as it was said yesterday, so different from theirs.

Diversity is truly disorientating and there is a beautiful comment by a father who says: there is the loss of a safe harbour represented until then by the expectations built on that child. The sense of loss, you have seen, is piercing, pervasive. The first psychological need is probably to isolate them and it is felt not only by the couple but also on a personal level. These parents feel the need of a moment of extreme loneliness, they need to be alone with themselves and I believe that, right at that moment, the idea of the perfect parent, totally committed, is wiped out and there remains a human being to be discovered. This is the necessary step in which you question yourself. Therefore, not only the child is seen in a different way but also the understanding of themselves changes, they discover that they've worn a mask, that different face that you've seen in the video. It's a mask painfully built over the years, the result of mediations, often compromises between the image that parents had built on them and the one they loved to have about them. When the mask is broken, the crisis becomes manifest: anger, guilt, for some desperation and loss of boundaries. In this moment, the emotional answers are completely different and this is the interesting point. The line that establishes the difference between the variety of emotional answers you've seen, is the quality of the relationship that the person has with himself, the relationship between conscious and unconscious, the quality of the relationship which also show us the particular personality.

If there's a sufficient internal balance, if there is the ability to establish good relations, if the parent has been also loved and cared, a natural system of self-help is created and this is what you have seen in this video. Some parents begin an uphill road, as (if you remember) in that wonderful dream, that leads to a very personal territory, dark and secret, where you may have to face that homophobic constituent which is part of heterosexuals. It's a return to the origin and this is again a rich path.

In other cases, the difficult memory that they've also, in some way, disappointed the expectations of their parents, has brought back to the person, because here is automatic and implicit the reference to the parental figures as the first source of what is right and wrong, you've also seen it in the Family Day, as rules and limits.

As another father says, we're always looking, even when we get older, for the approval of our parents"; therefore, it automatically brings back the memory that you've also been the object of your parents projections and your personal pain and effort to take off these clothes. There's a beautiful sentence of a mother, my mother wanted a son," and the comment below, resulting from that process I have described, her desire was legitimate, she had only females. Of course, now, being an adult parent, that pain has become understandable but only after a path, as she remembers. Therefore, the path is from the son to the couple, from the couple to themselves and from themselves to their parents and this is why also the link to the grandparents is very important in this video. The internal process goes through the generations and in this process I see the chance of a true, deep and renewed contact with the child and an opening for a new emotional investment.

Through themselves these parents may not only start being empathic but also start feeling with their own sons. The roles at this point are reversed, as a parent says: the old educational tools seem unnecessary and the ability to manage our own parenting skills becomes nothing, and for a period of time the children become the only chance of confrontation. The parents turn to them and the children become the "keepers" of the knowledge of that unknown, not even imagined, world; therefore, they know that they have to be committed and patient and they offer themselves as a "bridge", the only one possible, between the heterosexual and the homosexual world and they become an important source of enrichment.

This process, which is truly an opportunity of rebirth, does not take place for all the parents. Some of them, rare and lucky, don't need to "re-live" the experience to be born again. For others, however, the son's revelation opens some very difficult scenarios and often it is not the society, it is not the culture but some dysfunctional internal mechanisms that do not allow the re-approach of the parent to the child. A parent of the documentary is right when he says the parents that are here in this group are lucky but there are others who will never know..." and, even if they do come to know, I would add, the emotional disinvestment in the child would become full and final. Recent events are an example and today there's a boy who will tell us his experience.

Analyzing the processes in the light of psychological dynamics, the psychical internal responsibility, in some way, is shifted from the parent to

the child; indeed, the child is not causing any suffering but the personality of the parent, his emotional internal organisation, may. Unfortunately, in my job I meet parents who can not face the idea of having a homosexual child. I understand that my point of view is not objective because the parent who comes to me for therapy is a person who has internal trouble which comes to surface when the child declares his homosexuality.

The coming out usually makes this trouble arise. These are the cases in which the homosexuality of the son may cause the fall of the precarious balance of a person. We're talking about people with unresolved parental relationships, often sexophobic, with little access to genuine emotions and I would say also with low self-esteem so that the child becomes the chance for these non integrated parts of their personality to come out.

Working with these parents means first of all moving the focus from the responsibility of the son to their own. It is not the son that hurts, he's not the one carrying the trouble but the problems are inside themselves.

The therapeutic work is long and difficult because of the way in which our society is structured where a dysfunctional internal reality often coincides with a large part of homophobic external mechanisms, whose first representatives are at an institutional level. Therefore, the awareness becomes slower and the mechanisms of defence stronger. But even for these parents, only after many years, arrives the chance of starting over again.

The coming out of the children turns into their chance to get to know themselves. I conclude by borrowing a sentence of a mother which "I tried to understand her summaries this process: and I found myself, this has been my way of sharing, this has been my rebirth. It's my freedom and it's hers and this was the way for me to be free and to let her go". Thank you.

**Is my son how I thought of him?
Growing with our children: a path of diversification between
reason and tugging of the heart strings.**

by Francesco Pivetta - *Pedagogue*

As parents, educators, adults, who have decided to follow a child, a student or a young person as he grows up, we are bound to arrive – sooner or later – at a particularly critical moment that stirs up strong emotions: when we have to ask ourselves, ‘Who is this person before me, I thought I knew him, but now he appears to be totally different? Different from me, different from what I expected, from what I imagined’.

That’s the moment when we discover that ‘I don’t know you’, when we are forced to review our emotional images, renegotiate the relationship, accept or reject a path of growth – that of my son, just as my own path was different from that of my parents – which proceeds by diversification from every model that perhaps I ever established, imagined or dreamt for him.

It is a crucial moment of bewilderment, a sense of loss, a fear of going ‘too deep’ because we are afraid of foundering, us and him together.

The film “Two times parents” starts from that moment, when the outlines of our map of emotion and rationality are suddenly changed. These girls and boys talk about themselves and amaze us, and we no longer know what to do.

Through their gestures, words, letters, diaries, small and large signals, we discover that their emotions, sexuality and plans for the future are suddenly foreign to us. We fear that we no longer have the tools to interpret what they are saying to us. So we start asking ourselves questions: ‘Who is my son? Where did I go wrong? What can I do? How can I tie up the threads of the web of affection so as not to leave him by himself?’

In “Two times parents” the consternation is formidable because it talks about homosexuality, something that is often not even remotely foreseeable in the life of any father or mother. Prejudices, ignorance, personal history, moral, cultural or religious convictions, social fears, expectations, all come in conflict with the other person’s identity. Then it is difficult to sit and listen to that one so different from me, my child, my student, or that young person who has decided to betray everything that up until then I had built up from myself and expected for him.

Anger, fear, shame, disappointment become powerful and overwhelming. Yet something has got to be done.

In the film, Rita remembers that moment when she says: “When I think back to that day when my son sent me the famous letter telling me he was a homosexual, it was as though, instead of a letter, a huge knife had arrived at

the house and made a cut, opened a crevasse, like a dreadful landslide. I and my other four children were on one bank, and my son was on the other bank". In the middle there was a ghost, the word 'homosexual'.

A word which sweeps away certainties and expectations and which hurts, it hurts very hard.

Then a parent feels lost, because things don't add up any more. My son, my daughter, is not as I imagined them, the insurance, the investment in 'my future' by colonising 'his or her future' ends up in bankruptcy.

Lino is quite clear when he says: "The moment that image of my son disappeared, I lost sight of a safe harbour on the horizon, an anchorage in reality".

That's the crisis, the red danger signal. For me, but for him too. That is the moment when the parent – and also the teacher – becomes dangerous and dreadful, when he uses the power of his emotions and his credibility as an adult to inflict heavy blows, often violent ones, often underhand, sometimes malicious.

Gianfranca remembers those moments of anger in this way: "I wouldn't have liked it to be so, I wanted to blame that girl. I wanted to attribute to her, and to my daughter too, the infamy of a moment, of a failure".

What disturb us are not things for themselves, as Epictetus said, but 'the opinions we have of things'.

"Two times parents" tells of the difficulty encountered by fathers and mothers in growing with their homosexual children. But let's try replacing the word homosexuality with phrases that are apparently more commonplace, maybe with simpler 'ghosts' or monstrous ideas, such as 'I've decided to drop out of university', 'I'm going to live with a gypsy but not get married', 'I'd rather be a punk than be like you', 'I want to be a priest'...

Banal examples of unexpected revelations which, with relation to the situation narrated in the film that we saw, involve us all: parents, educators, teachers of young people, whether they are homosexuals or not.

While we were shooting the film we asked ourselves, 'but doesn't this tell the story of all parents? Of the parents they are today, and of the children that they once were?'

So we tried to make an experiment, proposing similar themes to a group of 'ordinary' parents, who accepted to collaborate with us at the Little Circus in Milan. Three Sunday mornings, in a real circus tent, Claudio Cipelletti shot hours of film with young parents talking about their children, 'about the necessity of treating them like young cubs', 'about the parent who takes it for granted that when they grow up they will be like this or like that', and about how they, the parents, thought of themselves 'as teenagers'.

This experience is not directly reported in the film, but it enabled us to form new questions and to seek new answers in our meetings with the parents of homosexuals.

We have understood that the unexpected is always there and is not even contemplated, that usually no space is even allowed for it unless after a moment of... what I might call 'emotional rationalisation': when we understand that the heart has its reasons which the head does not understand but that the heart, nevertheless, needs to resume the relationship of care, sewing up the relationship with the son, seeking help, searching for new instruments.

Rita sums it up to great effect in these words: "I thought that I had to build a bridge. And I had to cross this bridge, so did his brothers and sisters, his aunts and uncles. Everyone had to cross it. So it wasn't a light bridge. And I had to build it."

Sometimes an unexpected help comes from the son who provides strong tools for dialogue. Filippo remembers his son Salvo, "He stopped by at our house and began by saying 'I'm still me'. And then he said, 'I'm gay'. And that burnt us".

Salvo chose well. He obliged his mum and dad – still smarting from the blow – to 'remember' the person that was their son.

So that, after brooding over it for a while, Filippo asks himself: "Why do I want my son to be like me, while he is completely different?" The indigestible thought of a sexual orientation different from his own 're-directs' Filippo: "I thought, I've never let the kids into my bedroom. Why should I stick my nose into his?"

This is love which becomes respect, a love able to understand that in relationships there is a sacred, insuperable space, and able to give dignity to an identity different from one's own. How? By giving it a name and a value. My son is a homosexual but I am not him and he is not me. He is different from me and he is still himself. I respect him because that's the way he is. And I love him for it.

A loving syllogism that is faultless, where the parent, despite the confusion, knows how to remain a parent, without lapsing into the self-indulgence of love that is 'owed', which often justifies that 'poisonous pedagogy' which, on the other hand, acts as a vehicle for all kinds of abuses under the banner 'I know what's good for you'.

I'm talking about the sentiment declared by that parent who, at the 'Family day', when asked 'what if your son were gay?', replied: "I would love my son but I would disagree with his choices", or by that woman who said: "I would suffer as a mother, but I would do it to give him the possibility to open his eyes and not fall into a trap that can never bring him happiness".

Here there come into play the states of denial studied by Stanley Cohen, when he explains how denial expresses the need to be innocent in one's own eyes because otherwise we would have to recognise something disturbing, which would upset the continuous and conformist restoration of the structure of our identity. Fragility which becomes non-listening and arrogance, unable to open up to comparison and, therefore, to grow.

But even acceptance – when it happens – is, although very important, only a stage. The journey continues.

After the discovery, after the wave of emotions, after acceptance, the adult, the parent, has to rebuild the relationship.

As Tim says, “once I was the rock and from moment I am not the rock any more and it is he who has to guide me as I take my first steps”.

A stage in our role as parents has ended, my son is unlike me and different from what I expected, I am no longer the anchorage that gave him security and perhaps there is no longer any need for me to be one. It is the discovery of our own vulnerability which knows how to ask the son for help.

“It's not making a new start, because there is nothing you can do about it.

What you have to do is admit that this is a world that is still unknown to me,” confesses Tim.

“So I start again from there, a parent for the second time, but without the ability to manage my role as a parent that I had in the first place”.

All children migrate, following their own path of diversification. We have all been children and have migrated towards the unknown promised land of adulthood.

Parents migrate too, discovering that they are to some extent their children's children and different from the children that they used to be.

You can become two times parents if you have the good luck to travel this path along with your children.

Comments on the film

by Piergiorgio Paterlini - *Writer and journalist*

I won't talk about this movie. Not to escape from it but because this is a movie – as they all should be but they are not, at least not as effective as this one - that says everything on its own.

So I think that I'll talk about Claudio Cipelletti's next movie, the third one, after *Nobody is the same* (*Nessuno uguale*) and *Parents Reborn* (*Due volte genitori*)”.

In Claudio Cipelletti's next movie there will be the story of Claudia, a girl from Volterra, heterosexual, whom I met recently with her class, her headmaster, her teachers and some parents and who has decided, without anyone forcing her, to prepare for her graduation exam a dissertation entitled *What changes if you are gay?* The sexual orientation is not a choice.

In Claudio Cipelletti's next movie there will be my friend Gianluca, 20 who lives in Casarsa; this is one of those *literary* coincidence that I love and that I think are also very real, Casarsa, in fact, is the town from which Pasolini has been banished for his homosexuality. Gianluca is catholic, he's an educator, he's responsible for the education of large groups of children, kids and teenagers. He's homosexual. He told everyone: his family, his priest, his group of colleagues. He has not been banished. He goes on doing his job, being a catholic educator. With no morbidity in what remains a very small village in the countryside of Friuli.

In Claudio Cipelletti's next movie there will be the hundreds of boys and girls – yes, they are so many even in that Italy so backward and always tempted in taking a step back from a thousand subtle or explicitly violent forms of racism, exclusion, prejudice, ignorance- heterosexuals boys and girls growing up and living in homosexuals families without showing for that mental disorders and without being forced to “social heroism”. So, close to gay children of heterosexual parents we have heterosexual children of gay parents...think how far we've gone...

Claudio Cipelletti's next film will talk about the Italian television, the worst in the world but, in spite of that, able to give a proper representation – at any time of the day or the night – morning, afternoon, in kid's shows, in fiction, Saturdays and Sundays- educational and maybe even “didactic” – but in this case in its civil and educational meaning- of homosexuality, or better, of homosexual people, men, women of all ages: teens, adults, older peoples. That television that - with all its ugliness - after the war has unified and created our country through the language, nowadays constantly shows- and it is not just a way of saying - models of homosexual teenagers happy, in love and peaceful, with accepting and loving parents.

In Claudio's next movie there will be the reality of many heterosexual families - I have recently met one in Turin and others in the past years all around Italy, not necessarily in the big cities- that allow their sixteen years old to sleep home with his boyfriend, almost a paradox - but significant, and in any case real - because maybe the same family would not allow an heterosexual daughter to sleep in the room next to them with her boyfriend (and I do not think it would be just because for two boys is more difficult to conceive by accident).

Why will there be all this in Claudio Cipelletti's next film? Because, compared to twenty-thirty years ago, even in Italy we can find two parallel and opposite realities, meaning that we are in a real moment of transition where what's old get mixed with what is new.

Reality is still confused but there's something new, and it is there mixed with all the old, all the pain, all the struggle, all the suffering that we all know very well. But that is no longer alone and single, unique and universal. There are also great signs of hope, great new things. There are families, schools, churches, most of all, there are boys and girls, parents who are happy, peaceful because they've escaped from all the agony and the difficult time to find a new balance in their life.

They're already living and experiencing that future in which we all hope, and experiencing it does not only feed the hope, and it wouldn't be already a small thing, but contribute, in a kind of virtuous circle, to build it. Kids, families that haven't gone through all the pain and the struggle related to the discover of being gay or parents of a gay son.

So it would be paradoxical not to give visibility to this reality. Also because we created it. It did not rain from the sky. It was not a gift. It was created also by the two previous Claudio Cipelletti's movies. Thank you.

Comments on the film

by Brett Shapiro - *Writer and journalist*

I did not prepare anything for this event. I simply intended to react to the film in front of you. After watching the film, however, I decided that I did not want to do that either. The film speaks for itself, and I don't believe that I would have much to add to what the parents spoke about in the film. There is a very significant slice of reality that emerges in this film, a reality that I had to come to terms with in more or less the same way – that is, from complete rejection by my parents of my homosexuality to full acceptance. It was a rather brief trajectory, and one that is presented in this film as a “current event”, although for me it took place 36 years ago. Surely a cultural difference between the United States and Italy played a part in this so-called current event occurring so long ago for me. In any event, the fact that it did take place a generation back signifies that in some way I represent a possible “future” of what the film has presented. And it is this future that I would like to talk about in the form of a story. Being a writer, story-telling is my preferred method, but I will tell the story of these 36 years in five minutes.

I am a gay parent and therefore in some way I represent both the children and the parents in the film – simultaneously the generation before and the current generation. I adopted my son, which could be done in the United States with enormous difficulty, when he was only three days old. I raised him along with my companion of 17 years, who also has a son the same age as mine. Our sons are now 20 years old and we have lived as a family here in Italy from the time the boys were 3 years old. My companion is Italian, is out, was with a woman, also an Italian, who knew about his homosexuality when they fell in love. They had a child, they separated, and it was his ex-wife who introduced the two of us, with the hope that it would “click”. All of this took place in Italy! We raised our children in Rome, where they went to public school. Personally, I haven't had a single problem of any kind with anyone regarding our non-traditional family. I can't tell you why. I wouldn't even venture a theory. I've never hidden my homosexuality, but neither have I shouted it aloud in the streets. At the same time, that would have been unnecessary, since the situation presented itself as rather unusual all on its own – after all, I took my son to school every morning and picked him up every afternoon. I was the only father who showed up at school every day. On Mother's Day, I had to explain to the teachers that there was no mother in our house, requesting that they be sensitive to this fact when planning any festivities in class. In other words, there were these little signs and indications of something outside the so-called norm. In our building, the doorman knew,

the local shopkeepers knew – in neighbourhoods, people come to know such things – and there was never the slightest incident. Our concerns had to do with how to protect our children from any fallout from our diversity. At the same time, diversity was their reality, and I must add that their parents happened to be very serene people. By the time that they understood that their situation was different from most, they had lived it for so long that it was academic. I remember once when one of our sons came home from school and showed me his wallet. He was 11 years old at the time. He had put a large pin on the wallet, on which was written, “Gay men are fabulous dads.” Can you imagine? At 11 years old, he had intentionally placed this pin on an object that was the most visible among his friends. It was his choice! To finish my fragmented story, I would like to add one more incident that truly caught me off guard. So often we parents believe that we know almost everything, if not everything. Despite our efforts to humble ourselves, we usually don’t succeed. I had a lovely dose of humility’s slap in the face last year, when I accompanied my son to the United States, where he was about to begin university. He had chosen and been accepted to the Academy of Art in San Francisco, and I decided to stay with him for six weeks in order to help him set up house. But I didn’t want to actually live with him, wanting him to taste his independence, so I rented a house for myself in the gay neighbourhood called the Castro. It’s a beautiful neighbourhood, with lots of restaurants, theatres, bars and cafes. His apartment was in a rather seedy part of town, with little night life. Consequently, I would invite him almost every night to come to the Castro to have dinner with me and take walks. I was worried about subjecting him continually to the gay ghetto and kept asking him, “Are you sure it doesn’t bother you to always come up to this neighbourhood?” He responded, “You know something Dad? I think you have real problem with your homosexuality.” Thank you.

Perspectives

The discussion of the research outcomes, which these Proceedings have given account of, confirms the existence of a contradiction between the invisibility of the families of origin and their crucial role for the well-being of lesbian and gay people. Not so rarely, these families are perpetrators of discrimination and violence. At the same time, they are also victims of the social stigmatization of homosexuality that in different ways also applies to them. In many cases, they are also actors of social change: in daily individual practices, as well as through collective action, they may become fundamental resources to fight against discriminations related to sexual orientation, and more in general to diversity in the ways of doing families.

Improving knowledge

The first step is, therefore, letting these families out from invisibility, getting to know their experiences and forms of organisation. This project has made a step in this direction, but further in-depth investigation is required. It would also be necessary to extend the research on the experiences of relatives, which was tested in Italy, to other countries.

In-depth studies about the activities of voluntary organisations would be useful to detect this especially to explore the less visible experiences of self-organisation in different European countries, above all where the persecution of homosexuals and the denial of civil rights is more dramatic, and case studies might provide useful insights for the development of good practices. As far as public intervention is concerned, it is necessary to investigate whether, and under which forms, families are included in actions aimed at combating discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Supporting collective action

In the changes that families face after disclosure of homosexuality by a family member, their private and public dimensions are closely interconnected. This interconnection is reflected in family members' often expressed need to organize themselves. The organisations that they create are recognised a fundamental importance, but they also carry with them certain elements of weakness. Linked first of all to the lack of well-established organisational bases, preventing them from learning from experience, consolidating and coordinating with similar experiences in other countries.

The cooperation between the existing organisations of different European countries appears therefore crucial: the Euroflag website represents for this reason a fundamental resource that will help the development of a net and

will provide information and support to countries, like those of Eastern Europe, where well-established organisations are largely lacking.

Support to the following actions is moreover recommended:

- supporting organisations' networking by providing funding to give the Euroflag net organisational continuity and to allow it to hold regular meetings aimed at networking and discussing collaborative work
- supporting national organisations on developing research and good management practices aimed at their organisational improvement and at developing strategies to support on-going fund-raising and the volunteer network on which these organisations depend.

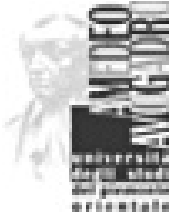
Developing public policies

Families must also become more visible in the development of public policies aimed at countering discrimination based on sexual orientation. The research on public policies which was carried out in Spain has pointed to possible directions for the development of policies recognising the multiple roles that families can play in relation to these discriminations:

- Families must be considered sites of discriminatory and violent behaviours, and therefore they must be included in actions preventing and combating discrimination, together with other sites which are usually taken into account, such as schools, workplaces and spaces for leisure activities.
- Families, being themselves victims of a discriminatory context, must be supported through services and targeted programs. Accurate information about homosexuality and about causes of discrimination must be available. A suitable service should provide individual therapeutic support, which must be flexible in time, and at the same time offer family members the option of taking part in self-help groups. These activities must take into account diversities between families and within families, and involve the different family members; we know in fact that the weight of mobilising resources would otherwise fall upon mothers.
- In order to provide adequate support and information, training of professionals who are often contacted by families, including psychologists, doctors, and teachers, should be arranged.
- The actions supporting families must be based on a holistic assessment of the issues in question, and therefore be part of a more general plan against discrimination.
- A very important dimension of these actions is accessibility: the families of origin of lesbian and gay people, in fact, do not usually have real or virtual communities or meeting places they can turn to. The risk for a poorly accessible service is to only reach the families that are already the most able to find information and to mobilize resources for support.



The partners of the project



Department of Social Research University of East Piedmont

The *Department of Social Research* was founded in 1998, immediately after the creation of the University of Eastern Piedmont. Its present director is Professor Maria Luisa Bianco.

The Department comprises 2 Full Professors (Maria Luisa Bianco and Paolo Perulli), 5 Associate Professors (Bruno Cattero, Enrico Ercole, Michael Eve, Anna Rosa Favretto, Cinzia Meraviglia), 4 Research Fellows (Elena Allegri, Gian-Luigi Bulsei, Chiara Bertone, Daniele Scarscelli), 2 research technicians, 5 graduate students and 14 research assistants.

The Department was recently co-opted as the only Italian member of the ISSP (*International Social Survey Programme*).

It is associated with the Doctoral school in Applied Sociology and Methodology of Social Research, based at the University of Milan Bicocca.

At the time of its founding it was the administrative base of the University Master's Degree in Local Development.

It also produced two academic spin-offs (LaboReS and LaST).

The Department has developed numerous lines of scientific research, both in the form of basic and theoretical research and in that of applied research interacting with the territory, with important research projects PRIN, FIRB, Daphne, EQUAL, INTI, with European Structural Funds and financed by Banks, etc.

The main themes of research are:

Social inequalities and structure

General themes

Normative socialisation, parenting, family mediation

Migratory processes

Local development, tourism and environmental sustainability

Local welfare and third sector

Methodology and epistemology



Association of Parents and Friends of Homosexuals

Who we are

Agedo is a voluntary Non Profit Organisation (NPO) which offers solidarity and help against the distress caused by the rejection of homosexuals, both inside and outside their families. It operates in situations of social alienation and offers its services as interlocutor in the fight against discrimination, intolerance and injustice.

Our activities

Agedo is active in training, the safeguarding of civil rights, and social care. It caters for homosexuals and their families. Its work is divided into the following sectors:

Prevention of distress and of suicide.

Our listening and help lines, active since 1993, offer free counselling and support services to homosexuals and their various family members. Each year thousands of families contact us to receive support and information, from every region in the country.

Support and counselling.

Agedo offers free reception centres for homosexual youths and adults and their parents. In the Association, a special job is done by the Sector for Homosexual Adolescents and Youths: it provides a protected environment in which to receive and support young homosexuals in difficulty, with the aid of educators and psychotherapists. In Milan and Palermo, Agedo has formed a Youth Centre for meeting and psychosocial support which, with the aid of professionals and volunteers, offers a setting that respects the diversity of homosexuals (especially minors) and their families.

Culture, research, training.

Every year, in many Italian towns, Agedo organises and participates in meetings, study days, workshops and training courses focussed on parents, educators and teachers. The Agedo Culture Section takes part in public meetings, debates, round tables on the family and homosexuality, and intervenes through interviews, press releases, articles in the press and educational meetings. It produces didactic and educational tools, and puts together materials that can be used for studies and research in the psychological and sociological field. The Agedo volunteers undertake to publish texts that may be of assistance to the families of homosexuals.

Lastly the Documentation Centre is a resource for scholars who wish to examine the themes of homosexuality and family distress. It collects books, dossiers, theses and articles on the topic.

National events

Each year Agedo believes it is fundamental to take part in the Gay Pride event; it sends various delegations to the parade and to the cultural and political activities that are organised in the different towns chosen for the occasion.

Self-help

Agedo offers occasions for meeting and debating on this theme (relations with the original family, problems of relating to children, help for families in difficulties due to homosexual children who are HIV-positive). Through the self-help groups it provides psychological, informative and legal support for people who have difficulties fitting into society. In connection with psychotherapists, sexologists, social workers, lawyers, it supports people during the process of adaptation of the new family structure, after their homosexual children have come out. For these activities it has been recognised by the Region of Lombardy as an “Association of family solidarity”.

National and international coordination

In 2000, with the Ministry of Public Education and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (Department for Equal Opportunities), Agedo signed an “Interministerial memorandum of intent” on the valorisation of sexual differences. Agedo and the Ministries work together to offer occasions of cultural growth on the theme “homosexuals in school” to teachers, parents and students. Agedo is a member of the international federation *Pflag* (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbian and Gay), with head office in Washington – DC (USA) and joint founder of the international association Euroflag

Our offices

Agedo has parents and professionals available to help homosexuals and their families in a great many Italian towns. By telephoning to the national office or visiting the Association’s website, information may be obtained concerning the nearest Agedo office.

Agedo Presidency and National Secretariat
Via Bezzacca, 4 – 20135 Milano
Tel. 02/54122211
e-mail info@agedo.org



Association of Mothers and Fathers of Gays and Lesbians

The association of Mothers and Fathers of Gays and Lesbians (AMPGYL) is a Spanish no profit association created at the beginning of the nineties to support parents whose son or daughter came out as homosexual and experience the need to share with other parents who have lived through the same experience. In this way fathers and mothers have found a space of understanding and mutual support which enables them to understand and work through the acceptance of their son's and daughter's sexual orientation, to challenge the roles imposed by an heteronormative society and to fight against the discrimination of their sons and daughters.

During the years the association has kept on evolving, it has grown, and expanded the range of activities. These have had both social and media impacts that have increased awareness and attention of various public administrations. Nowadays, in AMPGIL there are partners and friends that help the association to promote its projects. The board of directors communicates the action of the association and delegations visit various parts of Spain: different parents of the various autonomous communities in which Spain is organized administratively can therefore organize themselves and work for the goals of the association in each village or city.

The current tasks of the association are: monthly talks open to all public where experts or professional adress LGBT issues, talks at schools or high schools, receptions of new fathers and mothers in need of information and advice after their son or daughter coming out, preparation of informative material for sons or parents.

Among other AMPGIL is running the campaign Like telling it to your parents? destined to the sons and daughters coming out and disclosing their sexual orientation to their parents:the campaign is made of posters in places frequented by youngsters an informative guide for them, or the creation of a guide for parents, destined to the parents going out of the upboard), Moreover, we edit posters and materials of divulging external, we participate in debates, colloquium, we collaborate with the different institutions, make projects of European escale like DAPHNE, the seminar of July where some 300 persons are gotten together etc.

The association then is a dynamic and active association that struggles for the social recognition of the rights LGTB, the awareness of this reality like one more, the no discrimination of the persons LGTB and at the same time we accommodate to the new parents who are informed of the reality of their son and daughter by a respectful world so that they find answer to their



doubts and they join in with our project of struggling with the sexual orientation of our sons and daughters.

Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

FFLAG is a voluntary organisation mainly consisting of the parents, family members and friends of lesbian women, gay men and bisexual men and women which was set up in 1993 to relieve emotional distress suffered by lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people and their families, and to raise public awareness of issues of sexual orientation. In 2007 the charity decided to include support for transgender people and their families as well. FFLAG works through a central helpline offering support to parents, other family members and friends and the dissemination of a wide range of information including booklets and web-based material and presentations to different audiences such as corporate institutions.

As well as the Family Matters project, FFLAG have been involved as a partner over the last two years in a Parenting Project in London, with the Consortium of LGBT voluntary and community groups and the London-based Families Together parents' group. FFLAG was a founding member of the Education for All coalition, which was initiated at a FFLAG national conference in 2003. ('Making a Difference' was held in Birmingham to celebrate a decade of FFLAG.) The Education for All project aims to promote a 'Safe Learning Environment for All' through: challenging homophobia and homophobic bullying in schools; ensuring accurate information about lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people and their experiences; creating a favourable environment to address marginalisation and invisibility of young LGB people.

www.fflag.org.uk



Finito di stampare nel 2008 presso Tipografia E. Canepa - Spinetta Marengo - Alessandria
Progetto editoriale e impaginazione: Za! Factory



