Putting families of origin into the queer picture

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Putting Families of Origin into the Queer Picture

Putting Families of Origin into the Queer Picture: introducing this special issue

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Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) individuals have been socially constructed as “family outlaws” (Calhoun 2000, p. 132), but in relation to partnership and parenting, far-reaching changes have taken place in the last decades, and research has kept an attentive eye on these changes. We proposed this special issue to the *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* because since its first issue, it has also kept an attentive eye on research on families of origin and shifting discourses and constructions of family. Thus, it seemed to us a very conducive site within which to further develop these reflections, by getting a sense of what we know, where and how to move further.

In undertaking our own separate research projects and in our cross-continental comparative analyses of those projects, we became aware of the gaps between the richness of research on GLBT lives, including experiences of intimacy and parenthood, and the paucity of research on their relations with their families of origin. Still marginal is, in particular, research on the perspectives of the families of origin themselves: parents, but also siblings, grandparents and other members of extended families. For the purposes of this special issue, we are deploying the term “families of origin” to mean heterosexual-identifying family members (at least as they publicly perform and display their sexualities), living within a heteronormative socio-politico-cultural system. As we will argue in this introduction, however, there is a need to document and research, and thereby historically situate, family diversity, including the increasing shifting discourses and lived experiences of same-sex and other queer families of origin.

The limited research into heteronormative families of origin is a striking absence, especially if viewed with Southern European eyes, where intergenerational closeness and dependence mark people's lives. In a country like Italy, where GLBT people develop their identities and form their personal communities under "the Southern European shadow of the parental household" (Therborn, 2004, p. 221), the need to take a closer look into how families of origin are involved in negotiating meanings and experiences of sexuality and intimacy appear fairly obvious, and the research outcomes prove highly valuable (see Bertone & Franchi and Cappellato & Mangarella in this issue). In fact, one of the purposes of this issue that arose in our discussions as
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Italian and Italian-Australian researchers, with our shared and differing experiences of family and, we believe, one of its strengths, is to make visible research being conducted in Southern and Eastern Europe. These research locations are marginal in relation to the international visibility of research being conducted in Anglophone Western countries (US, UK, Canada, Australia), but their research findings have much to say on intergenerational relations. Thus, in providing a location for dialogue between various countries and their internally culturally diverse communities, this special issue offers insights into the importance of contextualisation, of connecting variations in family experiences with local family cultures, sexual minority configurations, and the political, economic, religious, health and educational conditions that define configurations of citizenship and human rights.

The above concerns are best addressed, we believe, through an interdisciplinary dialogue, which is another main goal of this issue. There is a need to build a bridge between research aiming at providing tools to promote family acceptance and prevent GLBT youth from experiencing distress, and research focusing upon how family practices are related to social constructions of gender, sexuality and intimate life. Going beyond the goal of putting the families of origin into the queer picture, this dialogue can help us develop a more comprehensive attention to the complexity and heterogeneity of the ways people with their different gender and sexual identities “do” families. Indeed, its main result can be a queering of the very distinction between the families GLBT people come from (families of origin), and the ones they create (families of choice), by questioning the (hetero)normative assumptions about forms and boundaries of family this distinction rests upon. These issues will be discussed in more detail later in this introduction.

**Queering the families of origin**

The importance of the relations of GLBT people with their families of origin for well-being, living conditions, identity and lifestyle choices is generally recognised. The negative effects of physical, emotional and sexual violence, or familial reactions of refusal, rejection and denial to disclosure, are well researched and acknowledged (D'Augelli, Grossman & Starks, 2005; Pallotta-
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Chiarolli, 2005b). Studies exploring how families negotiate a member’s GLBT identity have noted that acceptance of that member’s chosen partner and/or friends is key to supportive family relationships. Evidence in this respect comes mainly from the US (Herdt & Koff, 2000; Oswald, 2002), but also from other contexts. Respondents in Mayock, Bryan, Carr & Kitching’s (2008) study on the mental health and wellbeing of young people coming out in Ireland who felt supported within an affirmative family environment appeared to benefit greatly from this experience. Family support certainly enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem and also appeared to facilitate respondents’ ability to negotiate broader societal challenges. Mayock, Bryan, Carr & Kitching (2008) also found that because of the complex interconnections of lives in the family, critical events create ‘countertransitions’ (Boxer, Cook & Herdt, 1991: 64). In other words, events that occur in the life of one family member also affect others in the family. Thus, ‘the coming out process in a child may potentially initiate a parallel process for the parent’ (p. 64). This was also evident in Pallotta-Chiarolli’s (2005a; 2005b) research with Australian parents of young people coming out. While there were parents who had never considered their children’s coming out as “a problem” and indeed “felt blessed to have a gay child”, many parents discussed three initial reactions: “their coming out means I’m going into a closet about my child’s sexuality and life”; “their coming to shore has set tidal waves off in my life” where issues within the family, such as conflicts between siblings and between husbands and wives, which have been submerged or lain dormant, suddenly come to the fore; and “they have made me have bad feelings about myself” wherein parents experience self-blame, shame, guilt, disappointment and despair, and sometimes doubly so as they may also feel guilty for being disappointed or ashamed of their own child (2005a: 20-24).

Studies on family acceptance often assign a centrality to coming out as an act of revelation triggering family change. However, the idea that a supportive family environment is conditional upon mutual disclosure and open communication, which self-help literature powerfully conveys, has also come under empirical research scrutiny. In fact, one of the most complex countertransitions for families of origin is what Petronio (2002; 2010) calls Communication Privacy
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Managament (CPM), the complex process of privacy regulation in personal relationships. For example, Lannutti (2013) used CPM as a theoretical framework to describe how married or engaged same-sex couples regulate their private information during interactions with family members about legally recognized same-sex marriage (SSM). Couples described how SSM triggered privacy rule change among family members. Couples and family members experienced either privacy boundary rule coordination and/or privacy turbulence surrounding sharing news about the couples’ SSM and about the couples’ relationship details. The articles by Svab and Kuhar, and Glass, in this issue address family silences and CPM in relation to children coming out, and to children in same-sex relationships participating in families of origin rituals and events. Questioning the imperative of disclosure, Poulos also argues that there may be “occasions- perhaps even daily, in many people’s lives- where it is best to withhold, edit, or avoid revealing so-called secret knowledge, thoughts or fantasies” (2009: 32). Poulos (2009) refers to this as a “strategy of silence” whereby withholding information prevents disclosures that “can unleash all sorts of grief” and “gives off at least the illusion of control. (...) And thus secret-keeping can become a central form of family communicative practice” (p. 38). Bertone (forthcoming) discusses the class specificity of stories of family change framed as narratives of disclosure, and shows how an emphasis on open communication and negotiation works at making children accountable to their parents for their lifestyle choices as well as for the very definition of their identity.

Given the clear potential fruitfulness of such insights into families, closets and disclosures, why then has there not been greater interest in understanding the family dynamics within which the reactions and “countertransitions” mentioned above occur? What makes some family members go into their own closets while others proudly and confidently air their children’s and their own realities “on the clothesline” and undertake strategies such as getting informed, creating and joining social and support networks, and assisting in their children’s ongoing coming out processes with other family members, in schools and in the wider societal spaces? (Pallotta-
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Chiarolli, 2005a, p. 25). To what extent and how do families of origin and their GLBT children’s later families of choice develop and/or maintain interwoven ties?

Weston (1991) provides some insights into the place assigned to families of origin in GLBT studies. In her work on gay and lesbian communities in San Francisco, she shows how the "ideological construction of gay families" established an opposition between "straight" and gay and lesbian families - the families gay and lesbian people came from, and those they created - based on a fundamental difference in the definition of family ties: "love, choice, and creation" against biology and blood (p. 27). Weston relates this opposition to the experience of lesbian and gay people with their families of origin. When coming out to relatives became a normative step in the construction of their identity, gay and lesbian people had to face the possibility of being rejected by one’s family. Kinship ties, based on blood and on unconditional love, could not be taken for granted any more. Notwithstanding its actual diffusion as an experience, the very possibility of rejection introduced a dimension of choice in the notion of kinship, which became central in the construction of what Weston's interviewees defined as their present families. Through the construction of the image of gay and lesbian families as creative, innovative experiences, freed from the constraints of traditional family models, a categorical distinction between straight and gay and lesbian families was established. By associating straight families to "the fixedness often attributed to biology in this culture", this distinction "echoes old dichotomies such as nature versus nurture and real versus ideal" (p. 38). To what extent has the construction of this dichotomous opposition influenced the goals and perspectives of research on the families of origin? And if this construction is linked to and based on GLBT experiences in the US and UK (mainly white middle-class) metropolitan communities, what happens in other geographical and cultural contexts?

Research looking at the families of origin of GLBT people has mainly developed in the field of psychology, and in the US context, and has mostly been concerned with their reactions to disclosure and with the conditions fostering a development of their attitudes towards full acceptance. In her review published in the first issue of this Journal, Connolly (2005) remarked that
"The literature is geared toward family nonacceptance or acceptance of a GLBT member; it is often implied that families remain somewhat static or move in a linear progression toward the more positive end of the change continuum" (p. 14). In this picture, the families of origin seem to take a rather passive role, as objects of a pressure to change.

A smaller body of research in the fields of sociology or anthropology has explored the connections between family responses and social change, moving the focus from what fosters acceptance to what is accepted, how the boundaries of what is socially acceptable are redefined. In these studies, a tension can be grasped between interpretations of families of origin as forces of normalization of GLBT lives, of pressure towards making them conform to heteronormative models such as being monogamous, getting married where legally possible, and raising children (Fields, 2001; Marsh, 2011), and those emphasising a non-heteronormative model of influence, pointing to the fact that more and more people have to deal with family members who do not conform to the heteronormative model of family, and arguing that, as a consequence, its hegemony as the ideal of the good life is losing ground (Stacey, 1996).

Discussions in both these directions of interpretation of current changes often bear a common risk: to assume straight and gay and lesbian families as two distinct and polarised objects of inquiry and theorisation. Such a distinction carries, in turn, the risk of losing sight of complexity and heterogeneity, both in GLBT and heterosexual experiences, which are actually highly differentiated, primarily on the basis of gender, but also of class and other structural and cultural dimensions (Hicks, 2005). The upsurge of critical research on heterosexuality in everyday life has revealed, in fact, how multidimensional, variable, contradictory it can be as an institution, and as an experience (Jackson & Scott, 2012). Questioning the opposition between the straight family, representing the guardian of tradition or the rather passive receiver of innovation, and the gay and lesbian “new” families, we can look at how people “do family” (Morgan, 1996) in their everyday lives, at the same time reproducing and challenging hierarchies of gender and sexuality, as well as other social hierarchies. This is the direction undertaken by recent scholarship on queer relationship and family configurations such as
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Polyamorous families (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a; 2010b; Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon & Hunter, 2013) and mixed-orientation families (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014a; forthcoming). From this perspective we can also trace an increasing attention paid to bisexual and transgender young people coming out, as we have presented in this issue in several papers, who are often the marginalised or silenced B and T in GLBT research (Costello, 1997; Heath, 2010; Norwood, 2013; see also Goldberg & Allen, 2013); as well as to migrant, ethnic and racial minority families of origin, also evident in this issue (see also Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005a; 2005c; Beckett, Mohummadally & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2013).

What emerges from research developments in these last decades is thus a more nuanced, diverse, and contextualised picture of the relations between GLBT people and their families of origin, which we have also sketched out in this introduction. On the one hand, a closer look at the practices of intimacy, care, solidarity, parenting among GLBT people has shown the importance of the ties with members of the families of origin and of the extended family in their everyday lives (Shipman & Smart, 2007). On the other hand, a closer look at the families of origin has questioned homogenized representations and linear views of their changes. Studies are moving beyond parents, to explore the experiences of siblings (Rothblum, 2010), grandparents (Schrerrer, 2010) and extended families. Family diversity along social hierarchies has also been explored, although more in relation to race or ethnicity (Merighi & Grimes, 2000) than to class. Although Horne, Rostosky, Riggle & Martens (2010) have argued that there is still little research modeling "the experience of family members within the contemporary sociopolitical context", contextual specificity has been addressed, for instance, in studies discussing the impact of anti-gay movements and policies (Arm, Horne & Levitt, 2009).

We see this issue as contributing to further movement in this same direction, mainly by proposing visions from the margins: a focus on marginal contexts and marginal subjects as a way to challenge the universality of privileged narratives within heteronormativity, homonormativity and anglocentrism. From the articles in this issue, visions from the margins reveal crucial resources
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parents mobilise to make sense of their children's GLBT identities and lived experiences. What is still lacking, however, is a more attentive eye throughout most of the papers on gendered differences between mothers’ and fathers’ responses and reactions, and a broader picture of family relations extending beyond parenting, an issue addressed in Rothblum's final commentary.

An overview of the issue

The first two articles explore the identity construction of both sexual minority youth and their parents as relational processes, addressing issues of contextualisation and temporality. Undertaking this exploration from the perspective of gay and lesbian Slovenians, Svab and Kuhar question a view of coming out in the family as a step towards a visible gay and lesbian identity, showing how family silences shape new closets. Coming out, they argue, is an ongoing struggle on the conditions of acceptance, conditions that are informed not only by family relations but by the wider social and cultural context.

Investigating parents' perspectives in the US, Grafsky also describes the redefinition of their identities as parents of a queer son or daughter after disclosure as a long term relational process. The perception of how welcoming or hostile the social world outside the family can be for their children, and the possibility of imagining a happy life for them, emerge as important contextual conditions. In line with recent studies focusing upon the positive aspects of parents' experiences after disclosure (Gonzalez, Rostosky, Odom & Riggle, 2013), she discusses how these positive narratives depart from the grieving processes through which parent's reaction to the coming out of a sexual minority child has often been interpreted.

Parents' accounts - this time in Italy - are explored again in Bertone and Franchi's contribution, which focuses upon a more specific aspect, namely the ways parents of gay men and lesbians deal with Catholicism. They argue that a narrative of suffering plays an important role, providing a bridge between Christian notions of mercy and therapeutic narratives of authentic love, while preserving parents' privileged position as heterosexuals. The authors also call for an attention
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to the uneven social distribution of the cultural tools enabling parents to develop socially legitimate narratives.

In the next four papers, new subjects, who have been largely overlooked in research on the families of origin of sexual minority youth, come to the fore. An intersectional perspective is developed by Glass, who provides an original insight into Black lesbian couples dealing with the invisibility of their multiply marginalized identities through the lens of rituals. The article shows how the possibility of rejection upon which, according to Weston (1991), lies the opposition between straight families and gay and lesbian families of choice, does not hold for these Black families, where severing the ties is never considered a real possibility. Rather, negotiations concern how to be a participant in different types of family rituals, which identities can find a place, and which ones get silenced.

Watson also deals with processes of becoming and with negotiations of the closet, by exploring experiences of bisexuality in Australia. The diversity and fluidity of bisexual experiences challenge a singular view of change in the families of origin as triggered by the disruptive event of coming out. Her research shows, in fact, how people are involved in ongoing negotiations of family secrets regarding different ways of crossing the boundaries of gender and sexual norms, and how complete or selective silence on non-normative choices works as a viable option. Costello (1997) speculated that the experiences of bisexual people coming out to their families of origin may be influenced by the extent to which they conform to socially constructed notions of family (being married to a different-sex partner, with children). This is also discussed in Watson’s paper.

Two articles, coming from Spain and the US, deal with parents of gender non-conforming children and youth. These address Norwood’s (2013) concern regarding how disclosure of trans identities has been shown to bring about change in family relationships, yet little is known about how trans identities function as family stressors. The meanings families assigned to trans identity, the complex processes by which they arrived at those meanings, and how meanings fostered or hindered support for their trans family members require much more examination. The first article
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to address trans identities and meanings is based on interviews with parents and professionals by Platero. It shows how the medical framework is taken up by parents as a resource for challenging stigmatization and blaming, and for voicing their need for help from professionals, although they are seldom satisfied with what they receive. At the same time, pointing to the essentialising and oppressive implications of this framework for gender non-conforming subjects, she poses the question of how to develop forms of support outside a medicalised perspective of pathologisation.

In their case study on the single mother of a transgender child in the US, Johnson and Benson draw our attention to the need to explore families of origin beyond the "straight" couple-family image of the heterosexual household. The article describes how this mother faced multiple layers of stigmatization, and how she responded with a narrative on the positive aspects of experiencing difference, and with engaging in advocacy for both her child and herself. Drawing on the mixed assessment of this mother’s encounters with mental health professionals, the authors provide suggestions for improving therapeutic work.

Another significant perspective provided in this issue is the relationship between media representations of families and families of origin as media consumers. Two theories which endeavour to analyse and understand this relationship are pertinent to the next two papers. First, Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 2002) states that the effects of media messages involves a passive process: exposure over a prolonged period of time to portrayals of reality as defined by the media will lead to perceptions of reality that are consistent with these portrayals. Thus, the increasing representations of GLBT children in families of origin will mainstream these families and allow for greater family and community acceptance and affirmation. Second, Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2002) states that individuals may actively observe media portrayals for insight into how they themselves could behave, especially if they are performed by individuals perceived as attractive, powerful and popular and if the outcomes are viewed as appealing. So if an observed behaviour, such as accepting and affirming a GLBT child, results in a desired outcome in the film, television program or festival event, individuals will engage
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in similar behaviour believing that in doing so they will gain the same benefits. In this issue, Baldo provides a case in which a vision from the margins via film turns out to be a resource for families of origin. In her reading of the representations of Italian-Canadian families in the film “Mambo Italiano”, she shows how parents in this film creatively draw upon their experiences of migration and of belonging to an ethnic minority to "familiarise" their offspring's sexual minority identity. Family rituals emerge in the film, again, as crucial moments in this process.

One of these moments is the object of Malici's original research on practices of media consumption, namely the everyday ritual of watching television together, which in Italy remains a common aspect of family life. Exploring the impact of the increasing GLBT televisibility in Italy, Malici points to the disruptive potential of "queer moments", when GLBT experiences break into family silence, and open space for discussion after the TV viewing is over. On the other hand, he shows how hard it is to break up the persistent privileging of a heterosexual gaze. Malici's work also reminds us of the need to consider localities, cultural and ethnic specificities in assessing the significance of media representations (Dines & Rigoletto, 2012).

Given the discussion on the significance of ritual, celebrations and social occasions for families of origin, Cappellato and Mangarella provide a very original insight into families of origin participating in queer rituals and festivals through their study of Pride parades and how they are experienced by Italian parents of gay men and lesbians with different levels of involvement, from watching the parades on the TV or on the streets, to organising the participation of the national parents' association, AGEDO (Associazione di Genitori Di Omosessuale). A pioneering work on this issue, their analysis shows the importance to move out of the family context in exploring the role of families of origin in shaping life conditions for GLBT people: in this case, parents' role in the process of familization of gay and lesbian citizenship rights.

Further questions and directions

A question seems to be lingering throughout this special issue: under which conditions can the encounter with sexual minority experiences open up possibilities for queer coalitions (Phelan
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1994) between parents and gender non-conforming and non-heterosexual children? In other words, and extending the scope of the question, how can alliances along family ties develop on the basis of shared stories of family diversity and marginalised identities, rather than of loving (and normative) support to GLBT people in need, and an advocacy in their name from a position of heterosexual privilege?

In the stories told in this issue's contributions both possibilities are depicted, but certainly more research exploring the diversity of experiences within families and between families is needed to address this question. The families of origin of GLBT people have been a hard-to-reach population, and this has certainly limited and oriented this kind of research. The samples of existing studies, including those hosted in this issue, are often mainly recruited through organisations like PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gay Men) in the US, or similar ones in other countries (like AGEDO in Italy). A thorough discussion on the implications of this recruitment requires that these organizations become themselves objects of inquiry, about how they shape meanings, identities and motives for action (Broad, Crawley & Foley., 2004; Broad, 2011; Johnson & Best, 2012), and about how they may reproduce hierarchies of gender and sexuality, but also of race and class (Broad, Alden, Berkowitz & Ryan, 2008). Qualitative studies, based on small samples, have been recently joined by online surveys (Horne, Rostosky, Riggle & Martens, 2010; Conley, 2011; Gonzales, Rostosky, Odom & Riggle, 2013), which might also contribute to exploring differences between more active parents (and other family members) and those developing their coping strategies without contact with these organisations. What shapes parents' narratives is, however, a complex question to address. The pervasiveness of self-help material (Martin, Hutson, Kazyak & Schrerrer, 2010), which is produced or influenced by these same organisations' frames, must be taken into account.

Finally, in the light of our goal and discussion of the need to engage with the complexity and heterogeneity of families of origin, such as class and cultural differences, we are cognizant that another limitation is that our endeavours to provide a site for marginal voices have not led to a
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greater diversity of cultural representations. There is a need for greater international visibility of contributions and explorations of families of origin in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and South America, within which nations have experienced the impacts of religious fundamentalism (eg Christianity or Islam) and/or colonialism and therefore colonial legal, political and social constructions of gender, sexuality and family. The ongoing processes of decolonization and post-colonial multiplicities and their significance in the everyday worlds of families of origin and their non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming children, in both non-Western worlds and in the First Peoples of Western worlds, requires much more research and international recognition.

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