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TITLE

Hegemony and Heteronormativity: Homonormative Discourses of LGBTQ Activists about Lesbian and Gay Parenting

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ABSTRACT

LGBTQ activists have a crucial role in fighting sexuality-based discrimination. However, homonormativity can lead activists to adhere to hegemonic heteronormativity, thus threatening their efforts to widen the concept of family. Drawing on the Gramscian notion of hegemony, this paper analyzes the notion of heteronormativity and its homonormative facet as a form of hegemony that impacts activists, sustaining the premises of heteronormativity and seeking inclusion within such norms. This research investigates the hegemonic heteronormative assumptions that endure in the discourses of Italian LGBTQ activists when they talk about lesbian and gay parenting. Findings highlight the presence of heteronormative traces in their discourses, namely in terms of access to reproduction, the parents' place within the regime of gender and the right standards for child rearing. Hegemonic heteronormativity appears in multiform ways, and as largely consensual even to those it more directly oppresses, making it difficult to detect and therefore to deconstruct.

KEYWORDS

Hegemony; Heteronormativity; Homonormativity; LGBTQ Activists; Lesbian and Gay Parenting; Critical Discourse Analysis.

RUNNING HEAD

Homonormative Discourses on Lesbian and Gay Parenting.

Introduction

Although most European countries have produced laws regulating same-sex coupledness (Seidman, 2002; Weeks, 2007), and in many cases lesbian and gay parenting has been legitimized, heteronormativity has not lost the power to define sex, gender, and sexuality, thus establishing the boundary between the natural heterosexual family and “others” (Warner, 1991). Civil rights recognition for same-sex couples does not necessarily bring an end to the idea that sexuality outside the heterosexual order is a problem and, although the vast majority of existing research (e.g., Fedewa, Black, & Ahn, 2015; Goldberg, 2010; Tasker & Patterson, 2007) has found no relationship between children’s developmental outcomes and parents’ sexual orientation, lesbian and gay parenting remains controversial.

In Italy, the law that recognizes same-sex civil unions was passed in 2016 (*Legge 20 maggio 2016, n.76* – henceforth, *L.76/2016*) after a debate marked by strong opposition inside and outside Parliament (Lasio & Serri, 2017). However, the section on adoption rights initially laid down in the law proposal was so controversial that it had to be deleted in order for the law to pass. This reveals that, despite the law on same-sex civil unions being approved, heteronormativity (Kitzinger, 2005; Warner, 1991) in Italy grants only partial access of lesbian and gay couples to state institutions, while, at the same time, it still constructs heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexuality, thus marginalizing parents who do not conform to the dominant views of reproduction and kinship. By operating in everyday social practices, modern regimes of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1978) have established the distinction between normal and abnormal sexualities, contributing to repress, within the specific Italian cultural and historical context, any alternative to the hegemonic model of family.

A challenge to the heteronormative assumptions may occur due to the actions of LGBTQ social movements, which, besides political bargaining and changing policies and

laws, contribute to broader cultural effects that contest dominant norms and behaviors, thus troubling the public understanding of relevant social issues (Bernstein, 2003; Trappolin, 2004). LGBTQ activists question the stigmatization of identities, supporting the strategic recognition of new identities and deconstructing restrictive social categories (Bernstein, 1997). However, as queer critiques (e.g., Drucker, 2015; Richardson, 2000) have exposed with the concept of homonormativity, LGBTQ social movements do not necessarily contest dominant heteronormativity, and they can contribute to the social and cultural status quo. The concept of homonormativity was first used to describe the postwar assimilationist politics that embraced a model of gender-conforming homosexuals based on adherence to heteronormativity and public privileging of heterosexuality that demands homosexuals pass as heterosexuals (Rosenfeld, 2009). This is distinct from the new, neoliberal homonormativity “that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2003, p. 50). Equal rights politics under neoliberalism have resulted in a new gay normality that privileges the normative family model over radical social change or a critique of heteronormativity.

In this paper, the concept of homonormativity is used as a “facet of heteronormativity because it seeks the compliance of LGBTQ individuals demanding inclusion within the framework of heteronorms” (Oliveira, Costa, & Nogueira, 2013, p. 1478). Homonormativity is therefore an effect and a condition of the viability of heteronormativity, using the politics of passing off as straight (Rosenfeld, 2009) and gender normalization (Stryker, 2008) while advocating a consumption form of citizenship (Duggan, 2003).

Given the persisting power in Italy of heteronormativity, this article focuses on the hegemonic processes that may lead to being complicit with the heteronorms, thus sustaining

the uniqueness of heterosexual reproduction and kinship. Specifically, through a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001, 2003) of the discourses of LGBTQ individuals politically active in endorsing the recognition of same-sex couples and their children, the study addresses the following research questions: Does heteronormativity endure in the discourses of LGBTQ activists about parenting? If so, what are the heteronormative assumptions about gender, sexuality, reproduction, and kinship that permeate their discourses?

The paper draws on a notion of heteronormativity and its homonormative facet as a form of hegemony (Gramsci, 1975a) achieved through the consent given by subordinate groups to dominant worldviews. The notion of “hegemonic heteronormativity” (Ludwig, 2011) supports the understanding of how heteronormativity is naturalized and discursively constructed as normal in everyday action, where “the subject exerts power upon itself in a self-guided manner” (Ludwig, 2011, p. 49), thus explaining how LGBTQ politics may collude with heteronormative neoliberal ways of regulating sexuality. This hegemonic status of heteronormativity is very clear in homonormativity by making LGBTQ persons themselves adhere to and be compliant with heteronorms and to its subjective position in neoliberal and increasingly depoliticized gay and lesbian constituencies (Oliveira, Costa, & Nogueira, 2013).

By analyzing the hegemonic heteronormative assumptions that endure in the discourses of LGBTQ activists, this paper contributes to the advancement of understanding how power operates to maintain exclusive heterosexual access to reproduction and kinship, thus channeling counter-hegemonic forces into the heteronorm.

The article is organized as follows. First, since heteronormative practices and assumptions are manifested in diverse ways, according to the context in which they occur (Ryan-Flood, 2005), we analyze the historical, political, and cultural conditions that led the

state apparatuses in conjunction with private institutions (and primarily the Catholic church) to affirm the hegemony of heteronormativity in Italy. Second, the empirical section of the paper presents the analysis of the discourses of three groups of LGBTQ Italian activists about parenting, specifically focusing on the heteronormative assumptions that permeate their views about gender, sexuality, reproduction, and kinship. Finally, the paper highlights how heteronormativity is resistant to the possibility of being subverted, even in the discourses of LGBTQ individuals who are engaged in the struggle to overcome it. Implications on how counter-hegemonic forces can challenge the regime of normality are discussed.

Hegemonic Heteronormativity in Italy

Whereas over the last decades progressive normalization and new regulations for lesbian and gay couples and their children have happened in Western Europe, same-sex sexual orientations are still viewed as a social problem, and progressive initiatives related to intimacy and sexualities are still strongly contested, especially in those contexts where Catholicism exerts an important influence on social values with regard to family life and sexualities (Bernini, 2008; Garelli, 2007; Santos, 2013).

Deep social and political divisions have accompanied the adoption by the Italian Parliament of same-sex civil unions (L.76/2016), and legislative equal status for gay and lesbian couples and heterosexual couples failed to overcome the heteronormative regime in defining sex, gender, sexuality, and reproduction (Lasio & Serri, 2017). General politics and “regimes of truth” established by scientific discourses and institutions contributed to the social control of sexuality in the country, reinforcing throughout time the idea of one “dominant” sexuality (heterosexuality) and other “peripheral sexualities” (Foucault, 1978, p. 38). The heteronormative apparatus made up of cultural, social, legal, organizational, and interpersonal practices, silently and powerfully strengthened the idea that heterosexuality is

the natural form of sexuality and the sole access to reproduction.

Heteronormativity in Italy has acted mainly by silencing and condemning to invisibility what did not conform to the established order rather than operating through forceful actions or punitive and coercive powers. A “repressive tolerance” (Dall’Orto, 1988) has characterized Italian institutions’ approaches toward homosexuality in the guarantee of impunity of same-sex activities on the condition that homosexuals do not emerge from invisibility so as not to challenge the heterosexual order. The denial of diversity has had a vast echo on the social, political, and cultural life of the country. For instance, in advance of most European countries, the Italian penal code has excluded any reference to same-sexual activities since 1889; additionally, since the 1930 fascist reform of the penal code, in spite of the aversion of the regime to sexual diversities, no reference has been made to homosexual acts. On that occasion, fascist Minister of Justice Alfredo Rocco stated, “The filthy vice [homosexuality] is fortunately not common in Italy” (Manzini, 1936, p. 218).

The renouncing of Italian institutions to control sexuality through law was also possible because of the treaties between the state and the church,ⁱ which, besides financial convention and settlement of historical conflicts between the Italian government and the Pope, established a prominent role of Catholicism in Italian civil life (“the only religion of the State”), for which principles had to be taught in school, thus consigning to the church an important role in the moral and ethical education of the country (Ginsborg, 2013).

The Vatican’s reliance on a natural order of gender and sexuality, established since the foundation of Catholic theology, has been reaffirmed during the twentieth century in response to the challenges of modernity, such as the recognition of same-sex unions and parenting (Bertone & Franchi, 2014; Fassin, 2010).

In Italy, after the collapse in the early 1990s of the Christian Democratic Party, which ruled the country in close connection to the Vatican since the founding of the Republic, the

Catholic church continued to influence political decisions with regard to family life and sexualities (Bernini, 2008; Garelli, 2007). Over the last few decades, the Vatican has largely succeeded in silencing the debate about LGBTQ issues, and it expressed its contrariety every time the hypothesis of recognition of same-sex couples and their children emerged, warning electors and politicians about decisions that would undermine the family founded upon marriage (Bernini, 2008). Despite the numerous law proposals tabled in the Parliament since 1988, the discussion about same-sex couples and their children has been postponed or censored for about 30 years.

The Italian case is a paradigmatic example of how heteronormativity does not depend on a specific intentional decision of a leading group or political party; as a hegemonic force, heteronormativity does not need to resort to explicit oppression or coercion, but it is the result of socio-cultural concepts, shared norms, and habituated normalities.

Antonio Gramsci (1975a) describes hegemony as a power formation of the modern state that operates through both public state apparatuses—such as school, parliament, judiciary, police, government (Gramsci, 1975b)—and private apparatuses, named *the civil society* (Gramsci, 1975d)—such as trade unions, political, cultural and religious organizations, and newspapers and periodicals. Hegemonic views are repeatedly negotiated during daily interactions in civil society, since they become part of the state. As a result, the state gains power over civil society with no need to force or impose its rules. By making use of cultural forms of consensus production, ruling conceptions map the world for others, becoming the border of normality, defining what the world is and how it works for all practical purposes (Hall, 1988). Thus, worldviews of dominant groups turn into what Gramsci called *senso comune* [common sense] and become universal (Gramsci, 1975e). As a result, the relations of dominance become consensual, because they are continuously reproduced as natural. Cultural hegemony is a process of moral and intellectual leadership

that implies that certain ideas and values formulated by intellectuals organic to a social group (social class for Gramsci) become dominant. Consensus can be won in the realm of ideas, with the subordinated groups who confirm the social order, assuming the dominant views about what is normal, acceptable, true, and universal, thus agreeing to their conditions of subordination (Smith, 2010). In Gramsci's view, rather than through repression, hegemony operates through consensus, and this implies that subjects adopting hegemonic worldviews are at the same time directed by external processes and are complicit in their subjugation.

If Gramsci's reflection on hegemony is primarily related to the economic and political stability of capitalism, and he only refers to peasants and the proletariat as subaltern groups, the notion of subalternity emerging from his "Prison Notebook" was on a broader scale and included people from different religions or cultures and those existing at the margins of society (Smith, 2010). As Ludwig (2011) points out, broadening the notion of hegemony beyond class relations to include gender and sexual relations may explain why, in the face of increased visibility and judicial equality of gays and lesbians in neoliberal societies, heteronormativity has not decreased its importance for the constitution of intelligible subjects and social order.

Echoes of Gramsci's understanding of hegemony can be found in post-structuralist, feminist, queer, and postcolonial perspectives (Butler, 1993; Castro Varela, Dhawan, & Engel, 2011; Connell, 1995; Hall, 1986; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Spivak, 1988) that have rethought the notion of power and the conditions of its existence in modern societies. According to Mouffe (1979), Gramsci's conception of hegemony shifts the focus from the primacy of economic relations to the variety of forms and levels in which power acts: "far from being localized in the repressive state apparatuses, power is exercised at all levels of society and that it is a 'strategy'" (Mouffe, 1979, p. 201).

Based on the Gramscian "arsenal of concept", Laclau and Mouffe (2001) frame the

notion of hegemony in a discursive and post-structuralist perspective. In their analysis, the concept of articulation became central for defining hegemony as a relation of alliance between different groups and different demands that identify with each other so that a particular social force becomes representative of a totality that is incommensurable with it (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). The notion of articulation entails that political identities are not pre-given but are constituted and reconstituted through debate in the public sphere. Avoiding identity closure and deconstructing the idea of social relations that pre-exist political practices, the notion of hegemony challenges the essentialist view of dominator and dominated and invites an analysis of consent and complicity expressed from different social positions in relation to domination (Castro Varela, Dhawan, & Engel, 2011). Hegemony works to dissolve the opposition between marginalized and dominant, so that the dominant norm is “reiterated as the very desire and the performance of those it subjects” (Butler, 1993, p. 91). The best illustration for this conclusion is homonormativity by which LGBTQ individuals comply, reinforce, and reproduce the values of dominant groups.

Approaching hegemonic heteronormativity via homonormativity helps to enlighten how LGBTQ adhere to uncontested and normalized discourses on gender, sexuality, and dominant masculinities (Ludwig, 2011; Oliveira, Costa, & Nogueira, 2013; Stryker, 2008).

It should be noted that if, on one side, heteronormativity is powerful in governing and constituting intelligible subjects, on the other side, hegemony always entails a certain degree of openness and ambivalence: “every movement in the thesis leads to a movement in the antithesis, thus to a [synthesis] that is partial and provisional” (Gramsci, 1975b, p. 840, *our own translation*). Hegemony is an ongoing process, a compromised equilibrium in which competitive power dynamics of forces “permanently try to gain influence and as such organize and reorganize socio-cultural relations (Castro Varela, Dhawan, & Engel, 2011, p. 6). Heteronormativity is a form of hegemony based on a coherent articulation of sex, gender,

and desire; conversely, the introduction of incoherence in the articulation of sex, gender, and desire may represent a counter-hegemonic challenge to the heteronormative regime. Hegemonic heteronormativity is constantly subjected to compromises articulated in social struggles; thus, the politics of counter-hegemonic groups can challenge the ruling views of gender, sexuality, reproduction, and kinship.

With regards to LGBTQ social movements, while they may have a significant cultural impact on challenging the ways in which the social world is accorded meaning (Bernstein, 2003), at the same time, their actions are embedded in the wider context where heteronormative assumptions are hegemonic, and their politics are “always located within the paradoxical field of simultaneous complicity and challenge” (Ludwig, 2011, p. 59). As Duggan (2003) highlights, LGBTQ politics may be complicit in reproducing heteronormativity, an intuition already present in Antonio Gramsci’s thought:

[...] “subaltern groups” history is necessarily disjointed and episodic. There is no doubt that in the historical activity of these groups there is a tendency to the unification, although on the basis of provisional plans, but this tendency is constantly interrupted by the initiative of dominant groups [...]. Subalterns groups always suffer the initiative of dominant groups, even when they rebel and rise up (Gramsci, 1975f, p. 2283, *our own translation*).

Discourses of LGBTQ Activists about Parenting

Introduction to the case study

Three groups of LGBTQ activists from three different associations took part in the research. The three associations (A1, A2, A3) were chosen between those politically active in

combating discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and those for endorsing the recognition of LGBTQ civil rights.ⁱⁱ

Analysis of documents and websites and informal conversations with their representatives allowed us to know the main characteristics of the associations. The three associations were committed to promoting different activities relevant to the LGBTQ communities, which comprised information campaign, awareness-raising and training programs, social campaigns and public demonstrations, film festivals and other cultural events, and legal assistance for LGBTQ individuals. A1 also offered psychological and medical counseling services. All the associations advocated taking initiatives to legally recognize same-sex couples and lesbian and gay parenthood, and over time, they have organized several actions to this end.

The three associations are based in three different cities of Central and Southern Italy. A3 was founded at the beginning of the nineties, while A1 and A2 were founded between 2000 and 2001. All the associations declared no connection with a specific political party, but members are mostly center-left or left-oriented. The number of members varies between 200 and 250 individuals, although only between 15 and 30 individuals are constantly involved in the associations' activities.

The invitation to participate in the focus group was addressed to those members who regularly contribute to the associations' activities. Two groups were composed of 12 participants, while the third one was composed of eight participants, for a total of 32 participants of 20 men and 12 women. Participants' ages varied from 20 to 48, with a slightly higher average in the A1 association. The majority of participants did not identify with any religion, while nine participants self-identify as Catholic. Only a woman from A3 was a parent.

We carried out three focus groups, one with each association. Focus group method was chosen, because it offers the possibility of observing a group, constructing meaning and evaluations on a subject of discussion (Frisina, 2010).

During the focus group, we asked participants to reflect on gay and lesbian parenting and any differences from heterosexual parenting. Each focus group lasted approximately an hour and a half. Everything was recorded and transcribed verbatim. In operationalizing the analysis, first, the authors independently read the transcripts multiple times in order to identify emerging themes; then they categorized the texts into the main themes and entered them into a list with illustrative key quotes. Working together, the authors agreed on the identified themes and the most illustrative quotes. Successively, the authors focused on specific discourses as particular ways of representing lesbian and gay parenting. Although contrasting argument emerged during focus groups, and in some cases, participants opposed heteronormativity by referring to a variety of co-existing models of family, analysis mainly focused on those discourses that maintain the hegemonic view of reproduction and kinship. In examining the discursive data, we drew on the assumptions of critical discourse analyses (Fairclough, 2001, 2003) with the purpose of revealing social practices that contribute to maintaining social order, thus sustaining the subjugation and discrimination of lesbian and gay individuals and their children.

Blood versus choice

One of the main issues discussed in all three groups was the role of biology in kinship. This happened in A1, for instance, when participants discussed what the daughter of a lesbian couple should call the non-biological mother:

Lucianoⁱⁱⁱ: *Once I met a lesbian couple and they had a daughter, I don't know if they had her or if they adopted her or if one was the mother and the other one wasn't, but anyway, both of them wanted to be called mum, so they were mimicking [biological heterosexual parents]. This is wrong in my opinion; you shouldn't pretend to be something that you aren't. One should raise a child, one should be a parent with no label, to raise the child and that's it, without saying "I'm the mother and she's the mother as well," without instilling these ideas. They are wrong because the child goes to school and he says "I have two mothers," and the other child answers "It's impossible: two mothers don't exist!"*

Savina: *How should she call them?*

Luciano: *No, I really don't agree with these things.*

Luca: *How should she call them?*

Luciano: *I don't know, maybe by name.*

Clara: *The mother is the mother!*

Luciano: *Yes, I also think it's wrong; it means to force the reality.*

Savina: *No, it isn't.*

Valentino: *How should she call them?*

Savina: *Mums.*

Valentino: *Both of them? Two mothers?*

Savina: *She calls them mum because both of them are raising her, both of them are mothers.*

Luciano: *Another consideration, among other things it would be wrong to call her mother, because that one is not the mother.*

Dario: *May I say something? The biological relationship is a relationship that you can feel, I mean... I'm the son of my mother; I feel that I'm the son of my mother. If my mother lived with another woman, I don't know if I could feel the same way about her.*

Luciano presented the case of the mother who wants to be called “mom” despite not having a biological tie to the child as a case of “fictive kin”, thus reifying the hierarchical system in which genetic ties are essential for kinship, while other forms of family relationships are considered fictional (Weston, 1991). Although some participants challenged his view by contesting the bearing of blood ties on the meaning of family, the group oscillated between the view of biology as a mere symbol and the construction of blood ties as the substrate for “feeling” the connection between parents and children.

As a general point, the group discussions largely reflected the primacy given by science and common sense to blood bonds (Schneider, 1984), yet this resulted in different conclusions of what form of parenthood would be preferable for same-sex couples. In the case of A1, Luciano expressed his preference for adoption as the solution for same-sex parents to avoid the privileged relationship between the biological parent and the child.

Luciano: I think that is something unbalanced, actually, I would not raise a child if I were the biological father and the other “that guy”. I’d rather prefer to be an adoptive father, two adoptive fathers, because otherwise you could be walking into this unbalanced situation, so it’s better if none of us is the biological parent—neither him nor I.

A different position emerged in A3, when participants debated about surrogacy and the differences between genetic and adoptive ties. In this case, some participants considered biological reproduction as the means to satisfy the need to transmit one’s own genes. Their discourse rested on the *genetic fallacy* that genetic connection would ensure that children

have the same outlook as their parents that is, “a mere superstition, in the guise of modern science” (Levy & Lotz, 2005, p. 237).

Mirco: Wouldn't it be better to adopt a child instead of doing it by yourself [through surrogacy]?

Elisa: It would be better because there are so many children.

Mirco: There are so many children around.

Massimiliano: But when the child is yours, he comes from you, because the semen is yours.

Daniela: Yes, obviously.

Mirco: Well, in my opinion to say, “The semen was mine!” is an egoistic point of view. If you really love the child, you love him regardless of the semen being yours or not.

Daniela: This is true, this is true.

Massimiliano: But the fact that he is part of you makes a difference [...] There's a deeper tie, in any case this is a blood bond, it's not only a matter of giving love to a child, but you think, you are going on with the continuation of the species, the continuity, a part of your gene, your things, so it's something of you that goes on. It's not only, “uh, I have so much love to give to someone, so I take a child and it's ok, I give my love to you.”

Bice: It's part of the instinct.

Pina: The instinct.

Massimiliano: [...] When the children grow up, they want to know who their real parents are. On the other hand, a child who is, somehow or other, your child [talking to Mirco] wants to know who is the mother, but anyway he's your child, he isn't simply adopted from who knows who and where. In any case, there is a part of you.

Two different visions of kinship were at stake in this excerpt, and Mirco's point of view that *love makes a family* was combated through the naturalization of the need to transfer genes and to continue the species. The "sense of own-ness" (Overall, 2014), attributed to the child's genetic connection to the parents, emerged as the reason that adoptive children could not become equally as successful as genetic offspring. Genetic essentialism led some participants to emphasize the prominence of knowing one's genetic origins in order to develop an adequate self-knowledge, thus undermining the role of social practices in constituting personal identity (Witt, 2005). In Massimiliano's view, heterosexual reproduction becomes an imperative, and although some same-sex parents cannot fulfill the ideal format, since one of the two parents remains inaccessible (e.g., assisted reproductive technologies with an anonymous donor), the presence of at least one biological parent represents a preferable *fictional* achievement of the heterosexual standardized family compared to the adoptive family.

The primacy of the biological family was also confirmed in relation to overlapping of reproduction and the sake of humanity, which emerged in A2 when Giuseppe resisted Sandro's attempt to deconstruct the need to reproduce as being universal:

Sandro: *I'm not one of those people who say "uh, a child is something that gives you a sense of completion." No, I really think that it's because the importance we give to biology that you feel satisfied when you have a child, it's because you think that at the end there will be something left after you die. This makes me sick, I see the biological imperative as a terrible thing.*

Giuseppe: *But if we are here after millions of years it's because there were things like this.*

Sandro uncovered the human illusion of achieving a vicarious biological immortality through genetic descendants (Overall, 2014) but came up against the very idea of procreation as the fundament of the human: In Giuseppe's view, the supremacy given to biological reproduction is natural and obvious, since it guarantees the sake of the species.

Limits of nature

Participants many times used terms that evoked a dichotomy between “natural” and “artificial” procreation, with surrogacy being the paradigmatic example of an abnormal means to have a child. The following excerpt from A2 is an example of this:

***Sandro:** I think that if I chose to have a child, I would prefer to have it the natural way instead of surrogacy or other kinds of big messes [...] I prefer those who adopt their children.*

***Federico:** From a pragmatic point of view, as I'm homosexual, I cannot have a child in a natural way, but I'd really like it. I would choose adoption, I think; then you have to consider what your partner wants, and, well, if they will not allow singles to adopt [...] I would like to have children and I would personally prefer to adopt them; I mean, surrogacy is unnatural.*

***Marzio:** Yes, me too, adoption, not now, but adoption.*

***Giuseppe:** Yes, the same, in the sense that between adoption, or how do you say, “child from egg?” [Laughs] “First-hand child or second-hand child?” [Laughs] Yes, absolutely adoption.*

In this case, surrogacy was considered a symbol of technologies transcending what is admissible in the context of procreation. Federico clearly expressed the popular belief that represents gays and lesbians as a clearly distinct species (Foucault, 1978), non-procreative and alienated from kinship (Weston, 1991). Assisted reproductive technologies, exceeding limits imposed by nature on humanity, took on the meaning of something that *muddles* the natural order, a *freakish* means for reproduction.

A3 also discussed the opposition between natural access to reproduction and the need to make use of “artificial” techniques. In some discourses, limits posed by nature emerged as criterion for identifying borders that should not be exceeded, as testified by Bice’s choice:

Bice: I did the ovarian stimulation three times, but then I got my period. After the third time, the doctor told me, “I will send you to those who make the insemination seriously, they make IVF [In vitro fertilization]”; then I told him, “Listen to me, if nature says no, it’s no!”

In Bice’s view, assisted reproductive technologies represented a “stretch”, an attempt to substitute what nature did not allow for non-heterosexuals with an undue human intrusion into the natural course of life.

In A2, the limit posed by nature emerged in relation to the concept of instinct and supposed “biological urges”:

Camillo: I do not feel the longing for fathering. I don’t want to have a child, so, I really don’t feel this urge, absolutely not. And I gave a lot of thought to this topic, and things that are too thoughtful [...] I don’t know, paradoxically, I think that certain things should be done with the heart, not the head; they don’t need to be

very organized—having a child is an instinctive urge. If you think too much about it, it means that there is something wrong or something that doesn't fit with you.

The biological urge is traditionally supposed to be a primary instinct to have a child that inevitably arrives at some point in one's life, and especially in the life of a woman. And as a result, the decision to have a child is stripped of its social value without regard to the specific social order where the decision is situated (Brinamen & Mitchell, 2008; Mallon, 2004; Mezey, 2013). By reducing the decision of whether to have a child or not to an instinctual urge, Carlo failed to recognize that beliefs that gays and lesbians “do not, should not, or cannot parent” vary in length and are influenced by stereotypes and by gay cultural norms (Brinamen & Mitchell, 2008).

Some participants depicted gays and lesbians as challenging the natural order by failing to fulfill the biological urges upon which reproduction rests. In A3, Elisa expressed her desire to have a child, but she did not feel ready for it, and she considered the possibility of recourse to assisted reproductive technologies at a later age as something that might lead to a ridiculous situation. The paradoxical impasse led to the assumption that gays and lesbians are incapable of taking on responsibilities and fail to procreate:

***Elisa:** Yes, I would like to have a child, but let's be honest, my biological clock is ticking away, but I'm not up for this [having a child] right now. I can't think to take care of a baby. I still have so many things in my life to fix [...] I still leave myself 15 years to solve my things and then...*

***Bice:** 15 years?*

***Elisa:** Yes, then I'll do as that woman who got pregnant when she was 60. I don't know how she did it. I would give birth to Benjamin Button.*

***Luisa:** There is also an age limit beyond which we shouldn't go.*

Massimiliano: There is also an adolescent in us [pointing at the other participants] who doesn't want to die.

Elisa: We really have the Peter Pan syndrome.

Mirco: And this syndrome of Peter Pan is more frequent for gays and lesbians.

Along with the critique of women (regardless of their sexual orientation) who delay giving birth until their middle ages, some participants affirmed that gays and lesbians are more frequently affected by the “Peter Pan Syndrome”, thus echoing the long-lasting medical conception of homosexuality as a symptom of arrested development that has traditionally distanced lesbian and gay individuals from kinship.

Constructing a natural and straight motherhood

The clear distinction made by some participants between what is *natural* and what is not was also the *leitmotif* of many discourses about parents' gender roles. Specifically, a distinctive female connection to mothering emerged in all three groups, referring to a natural, instinctual women's inclination to reproduce.

Clara (A1): I think that women, many women, have the maternal desire, some perhaps not, but most women have it [...]. Desiring a child also means that you're creating a family project, and that you have a long-term project in a way; educating, raising, facing difficulties.

Luisa (A3): I'm not a mother by choice; I don't feel a very strong maternal instinct like most women feel. Many women would like to have children; they were born

with this idea, they grew up with the idea of having children. It's not my case. Probably because I'm egoistic, or because I've no sense of responsibility.

In the excerpts above, the desire to have children assumed the feature of an instinctual and universal experience for women to the point that, for Luisa, if she did not feel it, this was because something was wrong with her, like selfishness or irresponsibility. In many cases, the groups constructed motherhood as the most obvious fulfillment for women, and their maternal desire is the main engine for building a family, thus supporting the social device already identified by Hollingworth (1916) that created the ideal of a “normal woman” who wants to be a mother as a form of social control. In some participants' views, motherhood emerged as a primary role for women, and a woman who does not want to be a mother is “other” to this accepted/expected female norm (Letherby, 2002).

In many cases, constructing women as naturally oriented to care led to building complementary gender roles for men and women based on supposed enduring internal disposition as well as family arrangement based on gender order of society (Connell, 2009). This emerged, for instance, when Donatella (A3), the only mother among participants, told what happened when her son's teacher asked her whether the child should be involved in the Father's Day activities or not. Donatella saw the teacher's request as an intrusion and a negative remark toward the absence of a male figure in her son's life.

Donatella: *Once the teacher asked me: “Shall we ask your son to do a Father's Day present?” And I answered: “I think you should not worry because the child in the future will identify himself with... I don't know, it's up to him to choose to identify himself with the grandpa, with the uncle, with the father if there is one.*

Don't worry about it, let the child do the Father's Day present; my son is not different—he's like all the other children."

Although Donatella perceived the teacher's request as out of line and she wanted to contend it, her answer implied the need for the child to self-identify with a same-sex figure, and she could not escape the trap that considers the primary sexual difference as the core of psychic life.

Discussion

This study has revealed the heteronormative assumptions that endure in the discussions of LGBTQ activists about lesbian and gay parenting. The main discourses that emerged during the focus groups were: the emphasis on the biological tie between parents and children; the limits imposed by nature on reproduction; and the construction of straight motherhood.

With regard to the biological ties in parenthood, many participants introduced a clear distinction among biological kinship and *family by choice* (Weston, 1991) by stressing the discontinuity between procreation and parenting that commonly overlaps in the nuclear heterosexual family (Fruggeri, 2005). Beyond the intelligibility of same-sex families, some participants highlighted that lesbian and gay parenthood poses a risk to the natural mechanism of human reproduction, to the primacy of genetic connections in kinship (Levy & Lotz, 2005), and to the "sense of own-ness" (Overall, 2014) that arises from conceiving a child. In many cases, participants failed to recognize the symbolic value of blood ties; rather, they considered blood as an indisputable criterion for distinguishing who is a real relative and

who is not (Weston, 1991). Moreover, kinship based on genetic links would ensure children's access to the *real* parent. On this basis, some participants claimed that biological reproduction is preferable to adoption, even if, on the other side, lesbian and gay parents always have to face the impasse deriving from the unfair privilege that the biological parent has in the relationship with the child in comparison to that of the non-biological parent. In these discourses, kinship was reduced to a natural fact that escapes critical thought and transformative political processes. The primacy given to biology led some participants to accentuate the importance of the continuity of one's own genetic material and the continuity of the human species, thus connecting reproduction on a micro-level to the reproduction of the social status quo.

The importance of the genetic link is supported by the underlying belief “that it is better for well-off persons (who of course are also likely to be white and well-educated) to increase their fertility rates, rather than persons whose offspring supposedly are less valuable to society and to humanity” (Overall, 2014, p. 101). Lesbian and gay parenting highlights that biology and kinship can be disjointed, and that human reproduction is not predetermined and unalterable; rather, it can be changed by human engagement (Carsten, 2004). Concerns related to the absence of genetic links in kinship express other political fears about technology, demographic policies, the nation's unity, and the transmissibility of culture (Butler, 2002).

The second discourse that emerged during the focus groups underlined the need not to further the limits of “natural” procreation. In some cases, participants' views were based upon the premise that what is natural is intrinsically necessary, perfect, and immutable. The naturalistic fallacy, which suggests that what is moral coincides with what is natural (Cole, Avery, Dodson, & Goodman, 2012), informed the discussion about assisted reproductive technologies, the right timing of reproduction, and the alleged instincts behind the decision

whether of to have a child or not. As a result, respecting the limits imposed by nature was considered by some participants morally superior over the use of technologies.

Along with the changes in ethics, the role of technique has changed in modern societies, since it is no longer seen as a means but rather as the first objective to reach in order to be able to pursue all other purposes (Galimberti, 2009; Severino, 1998). However, the use of technologies in reproduction is still stigmatized and restricted. This is the case, for instance, for the Italian regulation on assisted reproductive technologies (*Legge 20 maggio 2004*) that restricts fertility treatments to those situations—stable heterosexual couples—in which *non-natural* reproduction is allowed, because it serves to reproduce the normal acceptable family (Parolin & Perrotta, 2012). New assisted reproductive technologies deconstruct the association between biology and kinship, showing that they can be an object of choice (Hayden, 1995; McKinnon, 2015). The limits of nature cannot be taken for granted, and kinship needs to be conceived as flexible and moldable by human engagement (Carsten, 2004). Claiming that what is natural is preferable to what is technical has the effect only of favoring certain relationships and stigmatizing others, justifying discriminatory policies against sexual minorities (Cole et al., 2012).

The third discourse that occurred during the focus groups outlined that some participants relied on the heteronormative model of family that identifies gender complementarity as essential for raising children. Specifically, the role of the mother was, in many discourses, defined according to the ideology of intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) that describes women as naturally and instinctively able to care and establish a special tie with the baby.

The gender order of society (Connell, 2009) constructs differences between men and women as natural and it ascribes opposite enduring internal dispositions to men and women, thus defining the gendered division of roles and responsibilities as legitimate and obvious. By

suppressing natural similarities between men and women (Rubin, 1975), parenthood is constructed along the heterosexual gender binary (Lorber, 1994), and lesbian and gay parents are perceived as threatening the order of the family, a challenge to the ideology of gender, motherhood, and family that, altogether, are considered the basis of the stability of society (Romans, 1992). Participants' statements that those women who do not have the instinctual urge to procreate are selfish and irresponsible are based upon pronatalist ideology, meant as an invisible device that encourages reproduction and exalts the role of parenthood (Park, 2002; Peck & Senderowitz, 1974). On the cultural level, pronatalism constructs childbearing and motherhood as natural and central to women's identities, while, on the ideological level, the motherhood mandate coincides with a patriotic, ethnic, or eugenic obligation; on the political level, the state intervenes to regulate the dynamics of fertility and to influence its causes and consequences (Heitlinger, 1991). The Western commitment to parenthood, which considers children to be a blessing and barrenness to be a punishment (Miall, 1986), and the persistence of pronatalist beliefs, which encourage reproduction as conducive to individual, family, and social well-being (Park, 2002), strongly affect voluntary childless women, because they evade the responsibility to guarantee the future of the human species.

The reference to these three discourses in the discussion about lesbian and gay parenting disclosed participants' adhesion, to a certain extent, to hegemonic, heteronormative assumptions. This is not surprising, because, although in the last decades some changes have occurred in Western Europe and a process of "homonormalization" (Roseneil, Crowhurst, Hellesund, Santos, & Stoilova, 2013) is underway, an alternative and broader model of kinship is resisted by hegemonic heteronormativity that continues to prevail in defining the normal access to reproduction, the appropriate gender roles of parents, and the right standards for child rearing. More particularly, in Italy, many people still disapprove of non-

heterosexual families, and only a small proportion of the population believes that lesbian and gay couples should have the same legal rights as heterosexual couples (ISTAT, 2012). Moreover, as the recent debate over the legal recognition of same-sex couples and their children has shown, if, on one side, Italy has partially filled the legislative gap on this matter, on the other side, the “natural order” argument is still powerful in perpetuating the heteronormative view of reproduction and kinship (Lasio & Serri, 2017).

The presence of heteronormative traces in participants’ discourses should not be regarded as representative of the approach of associations to which they belong in fighting against sexuality-based discriminations, and neither should participants’ individual opinions and the choices they made in their own lives undermine the importance of their daily commitment to opposing discrimination against LGBTQ individuals. Their action has an unquestionable social value, and their presence in the community represents an important reference point for LGBTQ individuals, a defense for democracy, freedom, and civic engagement, which offers benefits to the entire community. However, as members of a given society, this does not make them immune to the apparatus of heteronormativity, and as a result, they oscillate between complicity and rejection of heteronormativity.

The reference to hegemonic heteronormativity during the discussions about lesbian and gay parenting proved that, while LGBTQ social movements have the potential to deconstruct the hegemonic definition of family, the power of heteronormativity is proportional to its ability to hide its own actions and to appear largely consensual, “natural”, and based on common sense, even to the eyes of those it oppresses (Gramsci, 1975a, 1975b). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how repression acts, not only punitively with formal explicit prohibitions but also by using pervasive and multiform strategies that shape public and private discourses, thus saturating the entire field of social representations of non-heterosexualities (Halperin, 1995).

We should not lose sight of the possibility to deconstruct heteronormativity, which, as it is a hegemonic force, is always the result of compromises that imply a certain degree of openness and ambivalence (Gramsci, 1975b, 1975c). Thus, it can be contested and challenged (Ludwig, 2011). Counter-hegemonic forces, such as LGBTQ social movements, may propose (and they actually do) different and incoherent definitions of sex, gender, sexuality, reproduction, and kinship, contributing to challenging the taken-for-granted meaning of the social world (Bernstein, 2004).

If, on one side, it is difficult to disarticulate complicity with the norm from resistance to it (Duggan, 2003), on the other side, the creation of a chain of equivalence among various democratic struggles against different forms of subordination (sexism, racism, sexual discrimination, in defense of the environment, etc.) supports the affirmation of counter-hegemonic projects (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). As Castro Varela, Dhawan, and Engel (2011) underline, this would mean recovering the original meaning of heteronormativity as intended by Warner (1993), who was not focused on the social inclusion of a minoritarian identity but rather on a broader challenge to the ruling heterosexual order. As shown by the Italian historical background briefly outlined above, heteronormativity is not restricted to subjectivity and intimacy but is embedded in a wide range of institutions, thus requiring a more general resistance against a more general “regime of the normal” (Warner, 1993, p. xxvi), which furthers the political demands for inclusion or tolerance.

Conclusions

The analysis of LGBTQ activists’ discourses about lesbian and gay parenting has revealed the traces of a conception of reproduction and kinship, deeply rooted in the Italian cultural context, which has historically suppressed any alternative to the heteronorms.

Within the context of a progressive access of lesbian and gay people to formal, conservative institutions in Western countries, Italian sexual politics are marked by contrasting tendencies: in spite of the newly approved law that recognizes same-sex couples and most of the rights of heterosexual married couples (L.76/2016), heteronormativity remains hegemonic in the country by denying, rejecting, disqualifying, and stigmatizing parenting that falls outside the social order. The pervasiveness of hegemonic heteronormativity is unveiled by the collusion of LGBTQ activists with the social, cultural, and political status quo that sustains the premises of their subjugation. While their political action is aimed at advocating the legal recognition of same-sex couples and lesbian and gay parenthood, at the same time, they reproduce a (hetero)normative model of reproduction, kinship, and parenting.

The contribution of this study depends upon understanding how homonormativity may present specific characteristics according to the context in which it occurs. In Italy, where sexual politics are marked by deep contradictions, and progressive access of gay and lesbian individuals to dominant conservative institutions co-occurs with the substantiation of heterosexuality, equal rights politics remain harnessed between opposite tenets: on one side, the request to be admitted to a state institution and, on the other side, the absorption of heteronormative assumptions that excludes them from the hegemonic model of family to which they request to be assimilated. As a result, LGBTQ equal rights demands are caught in the paradox of being complicit of their own marginalization, thus depoliticizing their claims and their rights. Homonormativity stabilizes the complicity in neoliberal sexual politics that demobilize and privatize LGBTQ constituency. This implies that the efforts to promote LGBTQ rights should be continued in light of a critical relation to the norms and ability to suspend or defer the need for them (Butler, 2004) so as not to be complicit with the condition of subordination of queer lives.

A counter-hegemonic project needs to be articulated on the basis of an alliance between different demands that pose an overall challenge to restrictive conceptions of identities and their relationships. Only collectively is it possible to articulate an alternative, minority version of the norm “that gives sexuality a domain separate from that of kinship, which allows for the durable tie to be thought outside of the conjugal frame and thus opens kinship to a set of community ties that are irreducible to family” (Butler, 2002, pp. 37-38).

By disclosing some discursive mechanisms that give structure to existing power relationships, the study may sustain subalterns’ awareness of the worldviews that maintain their subalternity. In conclusion:

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, that is a “knowing yourself” as a product of the historical process so far held which has deposited in you an infinity of traces that have been embraced without the benefit of an inventory.^{iv} Such inventory must be made at the outset (Gramsci, 1975g, p. 1376, *our own translation*).

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ⁱ See the Lateran Treaty (Legge 27 maggio 1929 n. 810) and the Agreement of Villa Madama (Legge 25 marzo 1985 n.121) that delegated to the Catholic Church the authority on morality and the ethical education of the country.

ii In Italy, there is only one association of lesbian, gay, and trans parents or prospective parents (*Famiglie Arcobaleno*). Since the association differs from all the other Italian LGBTQ associations, because it is the only one that deals exclusively with issues related to parenthood, it was not involved in the research.

iii All names are pseudonyms.

iv In Italian, to take something with the benefit of inventory means to have some reservation on the truth of information, because the source is not reliable.