Journal of GLBT Family Studies

A Respectable Scandal: Same-Sex Parenthood, Emotional Dynamics, and Social Change

Alessandro Pratesi [a]

[a] University of Chester, Cheshire, UK

Version of record first published: 14 Aug 2012

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

A Respectable Scandal: Same-Sex Parenthood, Emotional Dynamics, and Social Change

ALESSANDRO PRATESI

University of Chester, Cheshire, UK

Most of the scholarship and current literature on parental care focuses on its gendered costs and unbalances. Less attention is paid to the consequences of being excluded from this specific type of care—what we could call the right to parent. Gay and lesbian parents claiming their right to parent represents a momentous historical change: the increasing visibility of these parents is one of the most important components of such change.

Emotional dynamics are key to this social change. Emotions constitute the link between doing parenting at the micro level of interactions and doing, or undoing, difference at the macro level of social structures; similarly, different ways to do parenting and to do gender must be taken into account if we want to grasp a truly comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of parenthood. This article draws on a wider study on different kinds of care and caregivers, whose aim is to offer a more inclusive interpretation and a more reliable discourse on family care and parenthood. Parenthood is still societally significant, but different ways to attain parenthood (biologically, through adoption, surrogacy, etc.) or to be a parent (single or in a couple, gay or heterosexual, married or unmarried, etc.) seem to mark a more important difference. While such difference can translate into inequality, this is now being challenged by these increasingly more visible parents. Our findings show that the divide between the categories of "parents" and "nonparents" dissolves the divide between the categories of "gay/lesbian"

and "non-gay/lesbian." Gay and lesbian parents produce social change by taking the sexuality out of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) politics in the mainstream arena. Same-sex parenthood may still be perceived by many as a "scandal," but more and more as a respectable one.

INTRODUCTION

Parenthood is increasingly becoming a carefully planned choice for many people, especially within the upper-middle-class families to which the subjects of the research presented here belong. For gay and lesbian parents, though, the element of choice is more evident and compelling. Gay and lesbian parents represent a crucial topic of study because they cannot become parents by chance. On the contrary, their paths toward parenthood are often difficult, painful, and complicated. Why should they accept emotionally challenging pathways in order to achieve parenthood? Is it mostly about politics or about intimacy? What accounts for what several scholars (Patterson, 1994; Johnson & O'Connor, 2002) have appropriately defined as a true *gayby boom*? By looking at this growing phenomenon we can start to observe new emerging meanings of parental care and their central connections with inequality and social change.

The procreative desire or the parental choice is an urge of the heart and, as such, is something that cuts across all sorts of possible social labels. Arguably, no differentiation should be made between gay, lesbian, and heterosexual people when considering the parental choice. Indeed none of the persons I met as participants in my research reported to have chosen parenthood to make a social/political statement. Nevertheless, because of the inescapable societal fabric in which we all live, parenthood holds for gay and lesbian people specific unintended consequences, quite often political and social ones. The unintended consequences of gay and lesbian parenthood as well as its individual and social implications blend together in an original mix that makes this social phenomenon an unprecedented engine of social change, a social change which is rapidly spreading.

In this article I explore the connections of parental care with social inequality and social change by looking at the experiences of 42 same-sex parents generated from a broader study which addressed different kinds of care (child care and elderly care) and different kinds of caregivers: single, partnered, gay/lesbian, and heterosexual. Here, specifically, the focus is on one specific kind of informal care (child care) and one specific group of carers (gay/lesbian parents), which is part of a larger sample of 80 caregivers

discussed in another paper (Pratesi, 2011). I will argue that, in order to understand the real dynamics of inclusion/exclusion and the consequent outcomes of inequality that people produce while caring for others, we need to expand and intertwine the conceptual categories of parenthood, family, gender, and emotion and to shed light on the less visible rationales lying behind this specific type of informal care. By shedding light on the less visible and less investigated nature of parental care and its deep connections with emotions, inequality, and social change, this paper also aims to shed light on the *latent purposes of care*, those purposes that diverge substantially from the manifest purposes of "tending to" and "looking after" someone.

Doing Parenting, Doing Difference: Challenging Gender-Based Inequality Through Emotions

Theoretical perspectives on gender have become increasingly less concerned with denying or embracing difference than with revising the terms in which we traditionally conceptualize it. A growing body of feminist studies has started to indicate a third way: dislodging difference as the exclusive focus of gender-related questions and refocusing the inquiry on the differing dimensions of difference. This alternative way aims to challenge the power that dualism continues to exercise on collective consciousness, highlighting the necessity to worry less about difference and more about patterns of disadvantage or subordination (Bem, 1993; Butler, 2004; Epstein, 1988; Ferree, Lorber, & Hess, 1999; James, 1997; Ridgeway & Correll, 2000; Risman, 1998; Travis, 1992).

Emotions are crucial to understand the interactional mechanisms through which these patterns of disadvantage or subordination are daily constructed or challenged. My argument is that the emotional dynamics represent the key element to explain the connection between parental care and inequality. In order to understand how the emotional dynamics revolving around parental care reproduce structural patterns of inequality, the analysis needs to move beyond the socially constructed categories of gender and sexuality gender and shed light on the invisible strings created by heteronormativity, which imposes dual and oppositional logics that should instead be put into discussion (Ingraham, 2005). Hence I propose that the inclusion of gay and lesbian parents in the research on parental care is thus fundamental for several reasons. First, gay and lesbian parents have been so far excluded from "normal" research on parental care. When included, they have been taken into account only in a comparative perspective (to focus on the differences between gay and straight parents), rather than in an inclusive perspective. No studies have considered how and under what conditions the parent's sexual orientation can produce dynamics of inclusion/exclusion based on the emotionally felt and lived experience of care. Second, gay and

lesbian parents are key to visualizing the crucial role of emotion in the re-
production of social inequality. Third, they are also crucial in understanding
the link between agency and structure, between micro-situated (inter)action
and macro-structural inequalities. Finally, their inclusion reopens discussion
on both care and gender by means of a critical approach challenging het-
erosexuality as the norm. By bringing gay and lesbian parents to the fore in
research on parental care it becomes possible to avoid reproducing an ide-
ologically tainted discourse on care, widen its conceptual perspective, and
enable getting closer to its complex nature.

A careful investigation of the emotional dynamics involved in *doing
parenting* provide important clues to grasp what Fenstermaker and West
call *doing gender*—the interactional mechanisms by which difference and
inequality are constantly reproduced (Fenstermaker & West, 2002). The in-
tegration of Fenstermaker and West's ethnomethodological approach with
some of the most recent advances in the sociology of emotions can help
overcome the limitations of a traditional study on gendered division of care
work, and to offer a more reliable picture of the ways of *thinking* and *doing
parenting* (and *doing difference*) within a heterogeneous set of families and
intimate relationships. Rather than *who does what for whom and when*, I
consider *how she or he feels about that* and therefore I focus on the micro-
emotional dynamics through which the experience of parenthood produce
effects of emotional stratification that are eventually reflected at the macro
level. The aim is to gain deeper insights into the inner, interactional mech-
anisms by which parents construct and reproduce inequality (or challenge
it) while *doing parenting*; in other words, in the connections between the
"private" emotional processes connected to parental care and their "public"
structural outcomes.

Social Stratification as Unequal Distribution of Emotional Energy

Several approaches to the sociology of emotions have already inspired a
rich research agenda, establishing important links between micro and macro
levels of analysis or addressing the emotional mechanisms through which
social bond, social behavior, and social structures are interactionally and
situationally reproduced (Barbalet, 2001; Clark, 1990; Collins, 1990, 1993,
2004; Gordon, 1990; Hammond, 1990; Hochschild, 1979, 1995; Katz, 1999;
Kemper, 1978, 1990; Scheff, 1990; Smith-Lovin, 1993; Turner, 1999, 2000;
von Scheve & von Luede, 2005). This study draws in particular on Collins'
theory of *interaction ritual chains* (2004), according to which the emotional
dynamics underlying the social structures are based upon feeling of status
membership/inclusion in groups or coalitions.

Collins argues that emotions are the common denominator of rational
action because rationality depends on assessing the capacity to confer pos-
itive affect to alternative lines of conduct. Every interaction generates status

and power effects, and one of the primary goods of a successful interaction is the feeling of solidarity with a group: a sense of status membership or status inclusion. Collins describes this sense of status membership in terms of *emotional energy*, which is similar to the psychological concept of "drive" but with a specific social orientation: it is a long-lasting emotion that builds up across situations and makes individuals initiate or fail to instigate interactions; it is a feeling of confidence and enthusiasm for social interaction (Collins, 2004, p. 108). Emotional energy is thus both the ingredient and the outcome of the interaction. People's choices, behaviors, and decisions regarding daily-life issues are in fact based on the emotional outcomes and inputs. And people's chance to gain or lose emotional energy is affected by their perceived sense of status membership.

Privilege, power, and status are not "simply a result of unequal material and cultural resources" (Collins, 2004, p. xiii). There is no sharp distinction between "material markets and the market for emotional payoffs in IRs [interaction rituals]" (Collins, 2004, p. xv). Thus, in Collins' model, the level of emotional energy becomes a sensitive indicator of social position, and we can think about social stratification also as an unequal distribution of emotional energy rather than solely unequal distribution of material resources or social positions. Along with that, we can empirically visualize social stratification through a careful analysis of how emotional stratification is enacted in micro situations.

Internal Conversations

Collins' theory of emotional energy can be expanded by looking at parental activities as chains of interactions. The specific kind of interaction I am focusing on is the ongoing *internal dialogue* between the parent and a whole network of generalized others or what Norbert Wiley (1994) calls "permanent visitors"; that is, all those people who are variably present in our thoughts and with whom we are in a constant inner conversation (see also Archer, 2003, 2007; Doucet, 2008; McMahon, 1996). Within the context of parental care, the acknowledgment of a relationship as caring from both the parent and these generalized others gives *visibility* and *entitlement* to the status of parent and confers on him or her a sense of belonging to what I shall call here *the intangible community of entitled and successful parents*. During their constant internal dialogue with all these permanent visitors, all parents—independent of their gender and sexual orientation—are constantly verifying or disconfirming their status membership. *"Am I acknowledged, and therefore, do I feel entitled as a legitimate and successful parent?"*—the parents constantly ask themselves. And when it comes to decide on whether to have a child or not, particularly for gay and lesbian prospective parents, the question becomes: *"Will I be acknowledged as a 'good and legitimate'*

parent?" In other words: *"Will I feel included or excluded from the intangible community of fully entitled and legitimate parents?"*

Status membership, or status inclusion—as I mentioned—is the criterion which defines whether an interaction is successful or not, and therefore whether there is an increase or a decrease in the stocks of emotional energy, with consequent effects in terms of social inequality. In this article I indicate how the outcomes of the parents' inner dialogues with their "permanent visitors" determine the emotional stratification at the origin of inequality. Getting insights into the emotional stratification revolving around parental care was not an easy task and it required a qualitative multi-method approach, which I describe in the following section. Together with the methods, in what follows I summarize the characteristics of the parents from whom I gathered the information on which the discussion presented in this article is based.

METHODS

Recruitment

Between winter 2005 and end of summer 2007, the group of gay and lesbian parents who contributed to this study were recruited as part of a larger study of 80 informal caregivers. The participants were living in the United States, and more specifically in the Philadelphia urban and suburban areas, with the exception of a single father living in New York City. A purposive sample composed of married, cohabiting, and single caregivers drew mostly on two local children's centers (a day care and a parent infant center), informal networks, and two local gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) associations. To recruit my participants, I posted flyers in local schools, gay and lesbian community centers and activist organizations, a gay-friendly cooperative of services, and a local gay bookstore. I also sent out notices via e-mail through the electronic discussion list of a local association of gay and lesbian parents and other local organizations. The purposive sample was eventually enlarged through snowball sampling for all kinds of caregivers. Word of mouth was one of the most efficacious means to reach the participants.

Participants

Within the sample of 80 caregivers, 42 caregivers self-identified as gay and lesbian (as shown in Table 1). About one-third of the participants were single and approximately two-thirds were married or in a couple relationship. All participants (96.2%), except for 2 African-Americans and 1 Asian-American, self-identified as white/Caucasian. Age of the participants ranged from 25 to 65 with a mean age of 40.9. Age of the children ranged from 3 months to

TABLE 1 GLBT Participants by Gender and Current Relationship

Relationship Status	Men $N = 22$	Women $N = 20$	Total $N = 42$
Partnered	13	17	30
Single	9	3	12

13 years. Although most participants were white and belonging to upper-middle class, nevertheless in many ways this was a very diverse sample, in terms of type of care, marital status, sexual orientation, ways to get to parenthood, and parenting philosophies. Duration of individual interviews ranged from 1.5 to 4 hours.

As for the social networks that these caregivers could count on, 15% of the participants reported having a "very rich" network of support, 42% a "rich" social network, 32% a "poor" network, and 10% of the participants had a "very poor" social network they could count on in times of need. I reconstructed the quality of the social network through the information obtained with the interviews, but especially via one of the several instruments I used during the interview: the *circles of care*. At the start of the interview I showed the participants a drawing with two concentric circles and asked them to tell me who were the people—family members, partners, friends, relatives, neighbors, etc.—they were supported by on a regular basis and/or they knew they could count on in case of need. Participants located the different care-supporters within the different circles and more or less close to a hypothetical center according to the importance of their help/support.

Interviews, Diaries, and Ethnographic Data

My critical interpretive inquiry drew on a rich set of instruments and methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews, diaries, fieldwork, participant observation, online discussion forums involving gay and lesbian parents, ongoing direct (face to face) and indirect (via e-mail) conversations with the participants beyond the interview context, key-informants interviews, secondary sources on gay parenthood collected from adoption agencies and local associations, journal and newspaper articles, and the Internet. Among the secondary sources: "Equally Speaking," daily GLBT news from the *Human Rights Campaign* (http://www.hrc.org/), the largest grassroots force and national GLBT civil rights organization; the Equality Forum's newsletter (http://www.equalityforum.com); and *The New York Times* (http://www.nytimes.com/). Secondary material and grey literature was also collected from local experts, representatives of the local GLBT associations, public and private child care centers, and local organizations dealing with informal care. The multiplicity of mixed sources has been crucial in outlin-

ing the large interpretive puzzle which composes my present understanding of the phenomenon of parental care as well as its emotional and social implications.

The interview was aimed at eliciting answers that might account for the implicit "felt sense" of the participants' narratives. All interviews were conducted in person, using a set of open-ended questions as initial probes on a wide variety of topics. In-depth interviews focused systematically on the individuals' care experiences, including daily arrangements, the care network, the conciliation between work and care, the emotional and practical implications of care, the identity shifts involved in the care experiences, and the subjective evaluations of these experiences. Participants were encouraged to discuss their daily troubles and concerns, their thoughts, their feelings, and their narratives on their experiences of care.

Conceptually, the interviews aimed to take a constructionist and interactionist perspective on both the interviewing process and interview product, as a form of interpretive practice where both participant (seen as storyteller or narrator) and interviewer—working together— articulate ongoing interpretive structures, resources, and orientations through what Garfinkel (1967) called "practical reasoning." The questions were not constantly formulated anew, but they were adjusted according to the most important emerging themes and the participants' ways of orienting these themes (see also Gubrium, 1989; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994, 1995).

Although it was my intention to conduct all interviews individually, a few couples with jam-packed schedules and young children were interviewed together. The interview format was complex, including, among others, the following instruments: a picture with two concentric circles that facilitated the description of the participants' networks of care (the *circles of care*) as mentioned earlier; a scale (the *thermometer of feelings*) to help the participants to describe their emotions when *thinking* or *doing* care; a drawing with a staircase (the *existential ladder*) to stimulate the participants' narrative and visualization of their existential moves, steps, and progress; and several photos (*images of care*) portraying different kinds of care situations as a visual elicitation to facilitate additional reflections on the participants' emotional experiences of care according to the principles of visual sociology. All the interviews were fully transcribed and preliminarily coded using N-VIVO qualitative software. This process was extremely time-consuming but very helpful in grounding theory to data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and organizing the analysis of the extensive amount of qualitative data.

After the interview, the participants were asked to keep a record of the daily care activities in a paperback booklet that spanned three weeks, using the method of time-sampling diary (Brandstätter, 2001). The diary focused on the participants' attention to their feelings in the moments of self-observations. It covered a 24-hour period for 2 days in 3 subsequent weeks. The participants had to describe the emotional states experienced

in concrete situational contexts characterized by: type of care activity, time, place, other activities involved, perceived resources/constraints, and other persons present.

The 36 adjectives listed in the diary's instruction were grouped into 4 main categories of mood descriptors: active positive, passive positive, passive negative, and active negative, following the *circumplex model of affect* (Russell, 1980; Russell & Carroll, 1999) according to which there are 4 main broad categories of emotions which are derived from the 2 basic dimensions of valence (positive or negative) and activation (arousal or relaxation). The response rate for the diaries was not sufficient to attribute them the same weight as the interviews in the analytical process. However, the richness and the quality of such material represented an invaluable source of information.

There were other methods in addition to interviews and diaries by which I gathered information on the emotional dynamics revolving around parental care. One of these was doing ethnographic work while living for an academic year (2006/2007) in a suburban area of Philadelphia characterized by a high density of same-sex families. I lived for one year with a lesbian couple who was trying to get pregnant and I participated in several social events, informal gatherings, dinners/lunches, local happenings, and baby showers. Furthermore, my regular conversations with some of the participants with whom I stayed in touch beyond the interview context added an extra layer to my ethnographic immersion in gay and lesbian parenthood. I also took part in several sport, recreational, and cultural activities at one of the largest and oldest GLBT community centers of the city of Philadelphia.

My ethnographic data on gay and lesbian parenthood included the analysis of the messages that gay and lesbian families exchanged on the online common forums of GLB parents associations. The range of messages was vast and multiform; sometimes they were dealing with health, medical, or legal issues related to the specificity of gay/lesbian parenthood, some were dealing with more lighthearted issues related to common matters these parents faced in their everyday lives. The messages could be related to school problems, behavioral bewilderments, emotional troubles, legal advice, birth or baby shower announcements, informal meetings, and many other social and private occurrences or requests of help and/or information. Quite often, beyond their practical and immediate function in giving information, these exchanges of electronic messages accomplished the function of upholding a sort of virtual "collective effervescence" among the members and responding to their search for status membership.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

The data analysis was mostly guided by what Denzin (2001) calls *interpretive interactionism* and some other scholars have called *interpretive phenomenological analysis* (Smith, 2004; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). This qualitative

approach involves trying to understand the life experiences of individuals, how they make sense of them, and what meanings are attributed to them (Smith, 2004). It is phenomenological, interactionist, and interpretative in that it uses the life-world as a source of evidence and views the analytical outcome as resulting from interactions between the participants' accounts and the researcher's frameworks of meaning.

The interpretive phenomenological analysis was chosen above other qualitative methods of inquiry because it provides a detailed description of the person "who cares" and a broader phenomenological approach to the issue of parental care. I wanted to get a better understanding of the nature of parental care by analyzing parents' own narratives and grasping insights on how parental care is experienced from within. I considered this methodological approach as the one best suited with an interpretive process aimed at rethinking the phenomenon of parental care in a broader perspective which also included not-so-usual family contexts and relationships.

This approach was used to build a phenomenology of emotions revolving around parenthood through the "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the information collected at the micro level. One of the first analytical steps of this approach involves repeated reading of the interview transcripts, resulting in annotations concerning key concepts, general themes, and common patterns. Once this process has been repeated with each transcript several times, the resulting set of themes is connected with recurrent patterns across the transcripts to produce a final set of broader themes. In this way, the findings form a coherent narrative grounded on data, a map, a framework, or an underlying structure of the phenomenon analyzed. In such an analytical context, the *social significance* of a relationship or a difference between groups becomes more relevant than the *statistical significance*, since statistically significant differences might be socially insignificant and socially significant differences might not be revealed by statistics (Epstein, 1997; James, 1997).

The arguments I will outline about gay and lesbian parents navigating their emotional experience of parental care as well as their consequences in terms of inequality should be viewed in context and their limitations noted. Producing readable linear narratives out of complex social realities is one of the problems shared by all qualitative researchers. Similar to other qualitative studies, this work contains "some mix of careful planning, serendipity, blunder, and idiosyncratic predilections" (Leidner, 1993, p. 233). The nature of the processes I explored is too complex for any preplanned script to fit all calls. Moreover, the interpretive phenomenological analysis is shaped by the researcher's interpretive frameworks, which means that *credibility*, rather than *validity* in the dogmatic sense in which it is often proposed, becomes the criterion to assess the persuasiveness of the analyses developed in this kind of qualitative work (Becker, 1990, 2001). Credibility concerns are satisfied by detailing each of the emerging patterns and by giving examples of

how, where, and in what circumstances they take place with reference to the particular experiences of each participant.

The credibility of the findings is solidly grounded in the participants' local, contextual, and authentic experience of the phenomenon studied, in the multiple methods and tools used, and in the thorough, systematic analysis of the interview transcripts, the ethnographic data, and my deep immersion in the phenomenon of gay and lesbian parenthood. I wanted to open a door on local knowledge, listen to these parents' voices, their narratives, their emotional experiences of care, and their own constructions of the possible meanings of parental care, which often means different emotional and social outcomes. Pseudonyms were used in the quotes discussed in the following analysis.

RESULTS

Parenthood can be lived *by everybody* as an experience of both status inclusion and exclusion, independent of people's gender, marital status, or sexual orientation. One belongs to the community of "parents" and consequently may feel excluded from other groups or communities, such as, for instance, the groups of friends with different lifestyles or the community of successful colleagues whose CV records are higher, and so on and so forth. Yet, gay and lesbian parents can experience parental care activities as sites of status exclusion in a more prescriptive and rigid way than their heterosexual counterparts. The sense of status membership can be affected for gay and lesbian parents from the perceived normativity of the nuclear family and because of heteronormativity. In this case, for instance, Curtis clearly underlined the typical dilemma related to a sort of *double-bind* situation originating from his feeling torn between "being gay" and "having a family":

> One of the reasons I didn't want to be gay was I wanted a family, you know, I was like I want to—I had this picture of my life and it always involved kids.

The difficulties gays and lesbians must come to grips with start even before having children, as soon as they try to realize their parental choice. Clayton reminded us how those adoption agencies that discourage gay/lesbian parent adoption can force prospective parents to resort to alternative options, in this way preventing many children from finding timely living arrangements and loving families:

> I've always wanted to have children and have always—always had the idea that I would have children in my life. . . . I always expected to have a child through adoption, and it wasn't until, you know, I realized okay,

> it's not an easy path, it's very difficult for a gay man to adopt, that we
> investigated surrogacy.

The difficulties met by gay and lesbian parents to adopt a child can also
facilitate the introduction of an element of class-based inequality into gay
and lesbian parenthood, and this seems to be true especially for men. For
example, the substantial economic costs of surrogacy (including several trips
to the countries where it is legal) or other alternative options to adoption
automatically exclude all those aspirant parents who cannot afford to pay
for them. Above all, however, these difficulties can be extremely exhausting,
from both an emotional and psychological point of view, creating, for some,
stalled and inactive situations that can even last for years. In reconstructing
the nine-year ordeal he went through with his partner during their journey
toward parenthood, Jack gave a clear picture of such distress:

> Well, the first one was in Guatemala but then that agency fell through.
> It was a gay man who had an agency out of Hawaii but then Guatemala
> got wind that he was a single man, he was adopting to gay men, so they
> closed him down. That was the first thing and that was nine years ago.
> Then we went to a different agency to go to the Ukraine, but they were
> promising us twins because I wanted two kids at once. . . . But then when
> I called the people who had just been to the Ukraine, they said there
> were no babies at all, zero. . . . And then we went, we started talking with
> Jennie and Marybeth, our lesbian friends, having a baby with them. So
> for a year or two years, a while, we started really investigating that. We
> both got therapists, we both got lawyers and we were trying to make that
> work out. And then that didn't work out after two years, they decided
> not to do it. And so that was very devastating.

The perceived failure to inhabit an ideal can have negative effects, trig-
gering feelings such as pain, anxiety, concern, fear, and depression; yet,
it can also produce the premises for individual and social change. On the
one hand, status exclusion can produce a draining effect in the stocks of
emotional energy, with long-term negative consequences in terms of social
inequality. On the other hand, status exclusion, or what I shall rather call
here *status uneasiness*, meaning that one might also feel included but in
a stigmatizing and non-clearly-fitting way, can push people to look for al-
ternative sources of emotional energy, producing, in the long run, a gain
in the supply of emotional energy and reversing the outcomes in terms of
emotional stratification.

"I Liked that Marginality . . . ."

Gay people's drive to look for alternative sources of emotional energy may
push them to look more intensely for non-canonical paths to self-realization,

which may make them feel "non-stereotypical," but happily so. Sometimes the refusal to conform to mainstream values can become an identity marker for gay and lesbian people, and taking a distance from the canonical paths toward adulthood where gay and lesbian people have traditionally been banned (i.e., family, marriage, and children) does not necessarily translate into exclusion, unhappiness, or drain of emotional energy. This was particularly well expressed by Frida:

> I was really ambivalent about taking on the label of mother, you know. . . .
> I was really pretty used to being a non-heterosexual and without children,
> I mean like non-stereotypical, like I liked that marginality.

On the other hand, gay parenthood and a family-oriented pathway can become an appealing, reassuring, and comforting option with unexpected (positive) consequences in terms of status inclusion or status membership. Furthermore, parenthood can also become a way to open a new channel of communication with the straight counterparts, "an easy way to connect with people." Parenthood, in fact, opens the doors to the presumed universal language of child rearing and creates an unprecedented link between gay/lesbian and heterosexual people, facilitating the dialogue between people who would probably never communicate otherwise. This is clearly exemplified in the following passage, where the same participant defines parenthood as a "globally/universally shared experience" and makes an interesting comparison between a *before*, when, as a "childless woman," she was just considered a career woman, and an *after*, when, as a mother, she starts feeling "part of the mainstream":

> Yeah, and from a wider perspective I've been amazed at the degree to which having children is like this globally shared experience. So when I was a childless woman, that's a little bit strange in the world, childhood world, to be a childless woman. People put you in that box, so she's the career woman. . . . So that's the downside. But the upside is the globally kind of universal experience of having children is really easy to talk about, it's like an easy way to connect with people. And it's really ubiquitous . . . when I didn't have kids I wasn't part of the conversation. But as soon as you start to have kids—on a bus, in a training program with an executive, it doesn't matter—you can relate to so many people, you know, from this shared experience, this universally shared experience of having kids. So that is interesting, so I'm part of the mainstream. [Laugh]

Far from feeling excluded from the ideal-typical community of heterosexual parents, most of the gay and lesbian parents I met reported starting to feel included in a new and more comprehensive status-group, and parenthood seems to produce for them an immediate *status belonging effect*. As a corollary to this, another remarkable pattern emerged from the interviews:

the gay and lesbian parents I met more easily felt disconnected, sometimes even excluded, from the network of gay and lesbian friends without children than from the network of heterosexual parents. With a few exceptions, it seems clear that *having* or *not having child care responsibilities* is what mostly determines the watershed or the divide between different subgroups of caregivers. All of a sudden, sexual orientation ceases to be the primary social marker/identifier and to be strong enough either to exclude gay and lesbian parents from the intangible community of "traditional" (= heterosexual) parents, or to keep them inside the intangible community of GLBT people.

Belonging to a New Little Club (and Losing the Old Affiliation)

From the standpoint of these parents, the categorical identity of "parent" seems to be stronger than and somehow prevail over (or happily coexist with) the categorical identity of "gay" or "lesbian." For Kendrick, a single adoptive father, becoming a parent meant simultaneously belonging to a new *club*, the club of dads, and being excluded from another club, the club of his gay friends without children:

> You have a different level of credibility with straight couples . . . I coached my son's baseball team, I was a baseball coach, you know. And . . . I didn't come out and say I was gay or anything, I just did my job as a baseball coach. Most of the people in the urban setting are not stupid. I'm a white man with a black child, they're gonna figure out I'm probably gay. But I would have never had those relationships with those parents without a child. . . . Whereas these people, I would never have met, ever, except for sports or child activities. And it's like you belong to their little club and you talk about the same things and you talk about struggles at school and your kid and oh, it's like being accepted into a totally different society. . . . Because now my gay friends see me differently. They don't call, they don't write, they don't talk to me anymore . . . .

This aspect, which is consistent with recent research on same-sex parenthood (Clarke, 2007, 2008; Nelson, 2007; Patterson & Riskind, 2010), is certainly one of the most intriguing findings emerging from my analysis: along the ideal-typical continuum of status inclusion and exclusion that determines inequality, the perceived divide between the categories of parents and non-parents seems by and large to dissolve, for most subjects, the divide between the categories of gay/lesbian and non-gay/lesbian. Gradually, as Forrest highlights in the next quote, the growing connection with "straight people with kids" corresponds to a symmetrical disconnection from singles or gay friends without children, who do not share and understand the same interests and concerns:

And we found out that it's straight people who are more helpful than gay people, straight people with kids. Because there are not that many gay people with kids and if there are, they're busy. . . . So your cohort is people who are like you with kids and job and family and shopping and laundry and the same issues. Straight, single, gay people don't have the same issues. They have more time but maybe they don't understand. . . . Maybe they sympathize but I don't go to a bar and I don't meet that many single gay people. So they don't know my family, my problems, my history. Mother and father down the block, they know my history because they have the same problems we're talking about, care, work, mother, their parents, their kids. So I have more in common now, in some areas, with straight people than I would have with singles, with gay people who don't have kids.

Please, Just Call Us Parents

Once gay and lesbian parents have "taken the label of parent on" and once they have been completely absorbed by their new status, many of them highlighted how they stopped thinking of themselves as gays and lesbians or gay and lesbian parents, and started defining themselves just as "parents," with no labels:

But [I feel] tremendously lucky to be able to do it all, especially when I remember I'm a lesbian, which I don't remember all the time. . . . I mean most of the time I just feel like a mom, I don't feel like a lesbian mom in an interracial, interfaith family. Most of the time I just feel like I'm a mom and I'm trying to remember to do what I need to do in the world. (Brenda)

And I think we're viewed that way by people. I mean at Eli's school we're the class parents. (Sydney)

Many of these parents may be seen as "cultural entrepreneurs," while some others seem instead more inclined to embrace a modernized version of more traditional lifestyles, ending up being much closer to a mythological image of the "happy family" than many of their heterosexual counterparts. Such is the case of Clayton and Jerry, whom I met on several other occasions after the interview and who kept sending me updates on a regular basis, including photos of their son and postcards with their latest news. On those occasions I had the chance to verify the scrupulous care with which they had built a warm, safe, and protected environment where they actualized their own "ideal of a happy family" referring to traditional models. The pursuit of a mythological/romanticized image of the happy family, from what I could observe in my study, emerged more typically from the experiences of male

couples. Similarly to Brenda, Clayton and Jerry strenuously defended their right to be called "dads," with no other qualifications:

> I don't think of gay dads or straight dads or non-gay dads, I just think of dads.... And this is what I strive for. I want people to start to see us as dads, not gay dads. And don't think anybody means anything bad by it, but in other words I will define myself for purposes of research, a gay dad, I don't have a hang-up with that, just in the outside world we're just that, it's okay, we're just both dads. (Clayton)

Quite often parenthood not only becomes the medium through which these parents start perceiving themselves as "just" parents and stop identifying themselves as "just" gay or lesbian people, but it also becomes a means through which past relationships with the family of origin are renegotiated on the basis of completely new intergenerational contracts. This is markedly illustrated in Stephan's account, which described the radical identity shift his decision to have a child provoked for him and the members of his family. The relationship with his parents, and especially with his father, drastically changed in the direction of a newly perceived sense of maturity professed by both Stephan and his father; not differently from what happens to many other (heterosexual) parents. Once he became a father, Stephan started feeling and thinking of himself as a grown man, no longer under the aegis of his father. Interestingly enough, his father started looking at him in a different way, becoming more respectful of his choices and his sexuality. In Stephan's own words:

> I was in a really bad relationship with my parents. And when Victor was born we, you know, I went to see my parents, I said okay, I'm going to be a father, so they were glad, but you know, very reserved, like "what's going on" ... and I said, okay, what I want from you when Victor will be born, I want you to take your place as grandparents. I want Victor to have grandparents because I think it's important for his education.... and they said, yes, of course, if you let us be grandparents. And I said, okay, I know we are not in a good relationship, but you will have your place.... And Victor is just crazy about his grandparents and I'm glad. I'm glad that this relationship, that it's working well because it's important for him, and so my parents are, you know, now they're not considering me anymore as like their baby child but more like as an adult because ... now I am a father and they cannot talk to me as they used to do. So it changed, really radically.

A similarly interesting paradox emerged with Omar and Curtis, two participants who happened to appear in a U.S. top magazine for trendy and stylish upper-class parents, where several images of the stunning historical mansion where they lived were pictured, together with photos of the couple,

the baby, and the grandparents. After their child's birth, Omar and Curtis reported rediscovering a completely new relationship with their families of origin. Referring to his parents, Omar described the slow but radical change his mother went through thanks to the new arrival. Starting from a difficult acceptance of the relationship of her son with a man, she ended up not only acknowledging and giving entitlement to the same-sex partnership, but even preferring it to that of her two other married children:

> My mom was a kind of strongly Catholic traditional Spanish woman and would not accept my relationship with Curtis. There was a big problem. Years later, she said that we are "more normal" than my other two brothers.

Educating People Through Spontaneous and Daily "Street Activism"

The reconciliation of *self* with the rest of the outer world through the mediation of parenthood is vividly illustrated by Stacey, who provided an additional confirmation of the "connecting" power of care. Care, especially child care, suddenly connects many gays with the outer world of people who "would have never stopped and talked to you before." People start getting acquainted with the idea of gay families just through everyday encounters. Although they tend to live in gay-friendly environments, gay people and their families do not live in a social vacuum and their existence and visibility inescapably enter into people's daily activities. Thus, for instance, Stacey underlined the positive unintended consequences of just being present, as gay parents, in people's everyday lives: in the school, down the street, at a bus stop, in the park, and so on and so forth. She also stressed how people's unawareness of gay families' issues is to be attributed to the fact that they rarely think about them, rather than to a conscious decision not to:

> … we'll have to deal with teachers; we'll have to deal with other parents and other people. And those people will start looking at … at us and say yeah, you know, we have the same family problems that they have. You have to wake up in the middle of the night and feed the kid and you have to change the diapers and you have to figure out what you're gonna do about day care or after-school programs and all the tensions and all the issues for any family, and also all the good things, are the same regardless of whether the parents are opposite or same genders. And that's very, once again, it's very educational and enlightening to people, many of whom, probably, just it never occurred to them to think about before.

For Josie, the birth of her daughter also was the occasion for clearing up once and forever any possible ambiguity concerning her sexual orientation with her colleagues at work:

> Other people? Oh, definitely, yeah, people never dreamed that I would
> have a baby. And, yeah, actually I think everything's different because I
> wasn't really like out at work, people didn't know that I had a relationship
> with Linda or with anybody, really. So once we had the baby, I kind of
> had to tell everybody [laughter]. And they all took it very well, I was
> surprised. So yeah, now that everybody is very supportive and it is nice,
> it was a nice surprise the way everybody treats me now.

George described his going to the park, taking the stroller with his
"visibly" adopted son and talking to people as a form of individual and
impromptu activism. Parenthood is for George and his partner something
primarily private and personal. However, by walking down the street with
his children, behaving just as a dad who happens to share his care responsi-
bilities with another dad, and answering the questions from people about his
children's mother or absence thereof, he feels he is somehow accomplishing
his own private educational role, giving his little contribution to the cause of
gay parenthood:

> Yeah, yeah, that's my activism . . . walking down the street, walking down
> the street explaining to everybody who asks. I get a lot of questions. . . .
> We get what I call the triangle eyes, which is the stroller, and you see
> people trying to make out . . . and then people would say, where is his
> mommy? Is it daddy's day? Does mommy have the day off? You know
> . . . . So we usually say, well, I usually say that this baby has two dads,
> you know, try to keep it pleasant in life. . . . More often than not I say
> that and more often than not it's met with a smile or something pleasant.

And it is unquestionably true that "viewing real same-sex parents in
action" is by and large a more effective and meaningful introduction to gay
parenthood than referring to secondhand sources of information, including
academic papers, newspapers, television, or conversation. In the next quote,
George gave an example:

> It's up on xxxxxxx Street. And there was this young woman, African-
> American woman and she was taking our order, you know, processing
> our things and she looked over and we were talking to Henry, and she
> said: are you both his parents? and we said: yeah, and she said: I've read
> about this but I've never seen it in real life. [Laughter] And she had a big
> smile and, you know, we laughed.

George and his partner claimed they never subscribed to any associa-
tions for gay and lesbian parents, partly because of their lack of time and
partly because they did not feel the need to wave a flag to defend or support
gay parenthood as such. This form of political disengagement or detachment
appears to be quite typical among the gay and lesbian parents I met, partly

because of time constraints and partly because of a certain tendency to self-centeredness present among these upper-middle-class parents. In 1958, Edward Banfield published *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, a controversial account of poverty in a village in southern Italy, where he argued that the backwardness of the community was to be explained "largely but not entirely" by "the inability of the villagers to act together for their common good or, indeed, for any end transcending the immediate, material interest of the nuclear family" (p. 10). This was attributed to the ethos of *amoral familism*, which defines a cultural pattern characterized by the absence of moral obligations to anyone who does not belong to the family group, together with a strong distrust toward social and political institutions.

While I am not claiming here that the attitude and the ethos of upper-middle-class gay and lesbian parents are in any way comparable to what Banfield called *amoral familism*, during my two years of fieldwork, and particularly through the close analysis of the online discussion forums of gay and lesbian parents, I could observe in these parents a certain tendency to self-centeredness or self-absorption. This tendency is certainly justified by the necessity to protect themselves, the necessity to defend (or, better, to affirm) rights that are still not there, and the necessity to constantly re-create a sense of group membership. Yet, in doing this, some gay and lesbian parents tend also to create a gap between a "we parents" and all the rest of "childless gay/lesbian people," in fact excluded from their status group.

A Respectable Scandal: The Right to Care for Our Children

Societal constraints placed on gay and lesbian people are still numerous and often invisible even to those who, although not blatantly homophobic, unwittingly tend to reproduce them. In the collective imaginary, parental care is primarily designed, built, and intended for nuclear families, reinforcing a cultural norm of "family life" as synonymous to heterosexuality. In fact, gay and lesbian parents "parent in a milieu where their personal identities, their partner relationships, and their very claim to be families come under scrutiny, criticism, and even rejection" (Nelson, 2007, p. 231). This produces for gay and lesbian people a problematic emotional approach to parental care and affects potentially successful and emotional energy-enhancing care interactions.

In analyzing the emotional impact of care interactions on different kinds of caregivers I tried to privilege those relatively informal and unfocused interactions—mostly internal and typical of the processes that make up our thinking—which define *individual reputations* (Collins, 2004, pp. 272, 291, 295). Like anybody else, gay and lesbian people are constantly in search of what we might understand as emotional energy, produced by status membership and positive individual reputations. In this search, parenthood is becoming for some of them what I called a sort of *status redemption*, through

which they are redeemed from what many still consider "a sin" and awarded a certain degree of respect or respectability. In our still largely homophobic societies, gay/lesbian parenthood has become a way to give GLBT civil rights at large a halo of respectability. Gay civil rights can still be perceived by many as "scandalous" and sectarian; but through the mediation of such a good cause as child care, particularly when it involves adoption or foster care, these rights become somehow a *respectable scandal*, as Shannon eloquently maintained when describing her experience as a lesbian mother: "Perhaps [it is] still scandalous but respectably scandalous, something like that."

Today, this seems to be true in particular for lesbian mothers, but it is plausible to imagine that in the next 10 years both male and female same-sex parenthood will become less scandalous, more visible, and more customary as well. To use a Goffmanian terminology (Goffman, 1967), it is like bringing to the *front-stage* the respectable part (= parental care), of what is otherwise confined to the *backstage* almost by definition (= sexuality). Becoming parents, gay and lesbian people manage to displace the axis of both their personal and collective identification and to expand the symbolic membrane that is wrapping and constraining them. Parenthood seems, as if by magic, to dispel the typical obsession of the collective imagery on the sexual aspects of gay and lesbian people. In their seminal article Gagnon and Simon (1973) stated the following:

> It is necessary to move away from an obsessive concern with the sexuality of an individual, and attempt to see homosexual in terms of the broader attachment that he must make to live in the world around him. Like the heterosexual, the homosexual must come to terms with the problems that are attendant by being a member of society: he must find a place to work, learn to live with or without his family, be involved or apathetic in political life, find a group of friends to talk and to live with, fill his leisure time usefully or frivolously, handle all of the common and uncommon problems of impulse control and personal gratification, and in some manner socialize his sexual interests. There is a seldom-noticed diversity to be found in the life cycle of the homosexual, both in terms of solving general human problems and in terms of the particular characteristics of the life cycle itself. (p. 181)

Gays and lesbians who become parents displace such an "obsessive" collective concern with their sexuality and acquire a new and totally unexplored social visibility. If as "homosexuals" and "lesbians" they are mostly defined by their sexuality, as "parents" they manage to break the social marker that confines them into an abstract category of "people," and claim their right to be considered as any other person whose sexuality is not an issue at stake. It is as if parenthood could break gay people's own version of the *glass ceiling* to open completely unexplored territories where they need

to redefine themselves and their new rights as "persons" and "parents" rather than as "gay and lesbian people."

Much of this might have to do with the context in which I did my research, and more specifically with the fact that, although few Northern Americans have a strong sense of entitlement as *workers*, many do have a strong sense of entitlement as *parents*. But I would argue that it is probably tenable for most of contemporary Western societies. In such societies we often talk about the "right to receive care" and the "duty to provide care," but we rarely ponder on the "right to give care" or, to put it plainly, on the *right to care* for and about our own children, partners, friends, or other loved ones. Like any other parent, gay and lesbian parents need to feel free to claim their *right to care* in the workplace. And paradoxically, for some, it can be easier to say "my son/daughter is sick" than "my same-sex partner is sick" and I need to take a day off to take care of him or her. In other words, claiming the right to take care of one's child (as a gay and lesbian parent) can be experienced as something more "acceptable" than claiming the right to take care of one's partner of the same sex.

If it is true, as Butler (1990, 2004) suggested, that heterosexuality is a highly unstable system, always in the act of performing itself and excluding homosexuality for its very survival and for fear of being undermined, one could say that gay and lesbian parenthood is a way to "normalize" homosexuality without threatening heterosexuality by making it "deviant." This paradox entails several potential costs and gains to gay and lesbian families and to the GLBT communities at large, and particularly to those gays and lesbians who *do not* become parents in their lives. Not differently from what happens to heterosexuals, in fact, there are many gay and lesbian people for whom parenthood is not such an appealing option. Ironically enough, even though the parental choice is an eminently private and intimate matter, choosing parenthood (against all odds) implies for gay and lesbian people embracing at the same time the banner of nonconformity and becoming members of the mainstream club of parents.

The need for recognizing oneself as a specific individual and claiming a specific identity (as gay or lesbian) while still belonging to a broader societal consortium not exclusively defined by one's own sexuality can change during different stages of the life course, following different ways of being gay/lesbian, and according to the different environments in which people live. In the same way that this occurs to many heterosexual people, at a certain stage of their life, the desire for parenthood can become for some gay and lesbian people particularly intense. The realization of such desire, though, can also facilitate, for gay people, the successful coexistence of two seemingly irreconcilable needs: the necessity of defining themselves *also* as gay or lesbian and the necessity of coming to grips with their individual and social status membership(s). The extent to which the paradox of gay and lesbian parenthood might involve potential benefits (and costs) for the

GLBT communities at large, and particularly for childless gay and lesbian people, is something that is still not totally clear.

When gay men and women started organizing themselves in the 1970s following the example of the black civil rights movement, they made sexuality a political interest constituency, inescapably establishing the imprint of this "non-group," whereas GLBTQ status membership is by definition fluctuating, fragmentary, and ambiguous. As Michael Warner described it 20 years ago:

> Identity as lesbian or gay is ambiguously given and chosen, in some ways ascribed and in other ways the product of the performative act of coming out—itself a political strategy without precedent or parallel. In these ways sexuality defines—for most modern societies—a political interest-constituency unlike even those of gender and race. Queer people are a kind of social group fundamentally unlike others, a status group only insofar as they are not a class. (p. 15)

By ruling out sexuality as the exclusive site around which to organize politics, and including something that is lived by most people as less threatening and more easily locatable within a sense of moral order, gays and lesbians choosing parenthood confront two issues at the same time. On the one hand, they contest the radical anti-assimilationist politics of certain GLBT populations; on the other hand, they challenge the radical reactions against homosexuality in general. In fact, homophobic opponents of sexual freedom can no longer display the horrible nightmare of the risk of human extinction as an argument against homosexuality. And this might be part of the explanation for the harsh reaction and resilient opposition to gay and lesbian parenthood. Whatever the case is, the intended and unintended consequences of dislodging the focus from sexuality and making of parenthood a political interest constituency can have powerful, beneficial effects for gay and lesbian communities at large. Potentially, at least.

Gay and lesbian communities need to seek support from heterosexual communities, and if this is going to happen, it is more likely to happen *not* in the name of gay and lesbian civil rights, still considered irrelevant and/or sectarian, but in the name of their children. By focusing exclusively on *gay and lesbian parents' rights*, the risk is high that the entire issue keeps being manipulated for political propaganda not only against gay and lesbian parents, but also against gay and lesbian partnerships and families *tout court*, precisely because their rights might be considered sectarian and certainly of no interest for the wider society, except for the economic implications they might hold. It might be better to stress what, in the end, represents the main concern of these parents: their children's emotional and psychological well-being. Discriminating against gay and lesbian parents means discriminating against their children too. In this sense, as a study participant Sullivan stresses

in the following excerpt, children's and gay parents' rights, on the one hand, and gay couples' rights on the other, although different, are the two faces of the same coin:

> Oh, you know, I don't think there's anything about gay parents' civil rights. Because I think the issue is really having the kids feel like they're a member of the community and not being ostracized and the parents not feel ostracized. The issue of civil rights, I think, would come in when there's prejudice given towards the family or children. . . . That's different than the civil rights for couples, but I think without [them] being able to be married, then kids are more vulnerable to not having the protection of, you know, legal protection if something happened to the parent. . . .

The gay parents I met claimed their commitment to parenthood was about "being parents" and not about politics. It was about intimate and private life choices. Deciding to become a parent is not a political decision. However, the consequences of their parental choice are exceptionally social and political, and some of the leading figures within the GLBT movements and associations seem to have clearly perceived it. As Stacey, the director of a local organization for the defense of gay civil rights concluded, the GLBT movement has made more progress in the past 10 years than during its first 40 years of existence. Perhaps her parallels with the women's movements and the passing of anti-slavery or anti-race-based discrimination laws might not be completely fitting, but she is unquestionably right when she talks about the recent acceleration of change in social attitudes toward homosexuality:

> And it's something that's interesting, you know, . . . in the history of sort of civil rights generally, the speed with which the LGBT movement is going, is actually at warp speed. In an age where nothing can happen fast enough, you know, everyone is sort of, they're on the Internet and you just click here, get instant results kind of a thing. It can't be fast enough. But in comparison to, look how many years women were fighting for the right to vote, look at how many years it took for African-American people, just from the time that slavery ended to 100 years later, until the Civil Rights Acts were passed. So if you say that took 100 plus sort of years and there's still discrimination against African-American people, and that was, you know, civil rights bills were passed 30 something years ago, or 40 something years ago. So then if you look at the LGBT movement, Stonewall was in 1969, it hasn't even been 40 years and we might potentially have a federal nondiscrimination law. So part of what's hard about it is, especially before 1969, if you're not out and you don't advocate for yourself you can never get the laws. But the fact that people have been hidden for so long and we've been moving at the speed that we're moving really is, I think, an incredible thing in that, you know, the changes are happening so much faster. We wouldn't be having the same

type of conversation we're having today even 5 years ago or 10 years ago.

Within and beyond the GLBT community at large, the minority represented by gay and lesbian parents is giving its specific contribution to this process of acceleration, and I suggest that gay parenthood is actually becoming the most significant drive of such acceleration. The stories of these parents are relevant not only to their individual lives but also to the general processes of social change concerning family and parenthood, a social change that is becoming all the more evident in Western societies. These stories are also relevant to the progress in the battles for the recognition of civil rights of the larger GLBT communities. Thanks to the extension of the possible definitions of family and parenthood, to the challenge of stereotypical gender roles, to the battle against sexism and heterosexism, and to their involvement in adoption and foster care, gay and lesbian parents provide a service to the GLBT civil rights as well as to the society at large.

CONCLUSION

The current literature on parenthood still tends to focus predominantly on the gendered costs of parental care. Less attention is paid to the consequences of being excluded from parenthood, the consequences of not being acknowledged as a legitimate and entitled parent or a prospective one. It now seems evident that what I called the *right to care* should be more explicitly reframed and discussed as a public process involving status and power dimensions as well as private, emotional, and psychological processes. This is true for all kinds of parents, independent of their sexual orientation. For gay and lesbian parents, yet, at least in some national contexts, this represents a momentous historical change: gay people *claiming their right to care* as parents is something that has never happened before. When these private, emotional, and psychological processes simultaneously affect larger and larger segments of the population, as is happening with gay and lesbian parents in Western societies, they can generate social change. The visibility of these parents is one of the most important components of such change. These parents are producing social change in ways that are successful and effective insofar as they are grounded in their daily practices and submitted to people's scrutiny in small doses, little by little, *unharmfully*, one could say, and in nonthreatening ways. On a daily basis and simply by their "being out there," they demonstrate that the concept of family is a social construct and that, as such, it can be expanded and modified. They challenge gender stereotypes and make both visible and progressively customary alternative ways to make a family.

While a cultural change may be desirable, legally acknowledging the status of these parents is important as well to foster change in people's attitudes. What is certain is that these cultural pioneers have already started to open the doors of social change, a social change which is not merely concerning themselves, but heterosexual, gay, and lesbian communities at large. Education celebrating diversity, on the one hand, and a purposeful deconstruction of traditional roles, gender-based discrimination, and inequality cannot but benefit the entire societal context, creating the foundations for more just societies. In the end, these men and women represent the living, empirical evidence of how the categories of gender and sexuality are matters of social construction, and how deeply embedded we all are in gender systems and cultural beliefs.

It is only by connecting the lived experience of these groundbreaking groups of men and women to the wider social and institutional contexts that we can gain insights into this poorly understood aspect of social change. Analyzing the accounts of the emotional dynamics occurring in their internal conversations is crucial both for explaining and fostering the nature of such change. A more explicit understanding of the centrality of emotions to routine operations of social interaction (Barbalet, 2001) and of their explanatory role in social processes seems to emerge from the accounts of all the parents I met, regardless of their gender, relationship status, and sexual orientation. Thanks to the rediscovery of the crucial role of emotions, an entirely new way to approach both gender and parental care is coming into view, making it impossible to postpone a radical reconsideration of the current literature on parenthood. For all kinds of parents, care becomes primarily a matter of *emotional energy production* and *status inclusion*.

In this respect, as we saw, both the sign and the value of the dynamics of status inclusion and/or exclusion cannot be taken for granted. The divide between the categories of "parents" and "non-parents" seems by and large to dissolve the divide between the categories of "gay/lesbian" and "non-gay/lesbian." Having or not having child care responsibilities is what mostly determines the watershed between different subgroups of caregivers. Sexual orientation stops being the key identifier strong enough either to exclude gay and lesbian parents from the community of heterosexual parents or to keep them inside the community of GLBT people. In other words, the categorical identity of "parent" seems to prevail over the categorical identity of "gay" or "lesbian."

Adding a focus on different kinds of parents is important not only from a theoretical point of view, to fill conceptual gaps, but also from a practical one, to increase equality. Since difference and inequality co-determine each other in gender systems, and since sexual categorization will undoubtedly continue, the inclusion of diverse subjects into "parenthood" and the focus on the value of diversity might be one of the most effective ways not only to achieve greater gender and sexual equality but also, paradoxically, to

increase the symbolic importance people attach to this crucial human activity. By focusing on the emotional dynamics that reproduce inequality, we can visualize (and challenge) the labeling processes connected with gender and sexual orientation. While these labeling processes are not likely to disappear, we can at least reduce the stigmatizing cultural beliefs attached to them. Thus, for example, while the labeling process by which people distinguish between "gay parents" and "heterosexual parents" or "atypical families" and "traditional families" is most likely to remain in the future, the emotional dynamics can challenge and erode cultural beliefs about heterosexual parenthood and families as "natural" and gay and lesbian parenthood and families as aberrations of nature.

The life trajectories of gay and lesbian parents vary tremendously, as do their parental choices relative to important issues (surrogacy, domestic or international adoption, biological birth, etc.). What these parents are seeking is not the access of "gay and lesbian parents" to the world of a preexisting "normalcy" but rather a redefinition of the concept of "normalcy" itself, through which a variety of coexisting ways *to parent* and *make a family* might be equally acknowledged, legitimate, and respected. With a sort of curious irony, these "minority parents" are opening the doors to social change precisely by *capitalizing* on one of the least valued goods in our capitalist societies: informal care. Being a parent still makes a significant difference in our societies, but different ways to attain parenthood (biologically, through adoption, surrogacy, etc.) or to be a parent (single or in a couple, gay or non-gay, married or unmarried, etc.) seem to make a more important difference: a difference that translates into inequality, and an inequality that can now be "differently" challenged by those same emotional aspects that current politics and cultures of care are stubbornly trying to deny.

REFERENCES

Archer, M. (2003). *Structure, agency, and the internal conversation*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. (2007). *Making our way through the world. Human reflexivity and social mobility*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Banfield, E. (1958). *The moral basis of a backward society*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

Barbalet, J. M. (2001). *Emotion, social theory, and social structure. A macrosociological approach*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Becker, H. (1990). Generalizing from case studies. In E. W. Eisner & A. Peshkin (Eds.), *Qualitative inquiry in education* (pp. 233–242). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Becker, H. (2001). The epistemology of qualitative research. In R. Emerson (Ed.), *Contemporary field research: Perspectives and formulations* (pp. 317–330). Los Angeles, CA: University of California, Waveland Press.

Bem, S. (1993). *The lenses of gender*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Brandstätter, H. (2001). Time sampling diary. An ecological approach to the study of emotions. In H. Brandstätter, & A. Eliasz (Eds.), *Persons, situations, and emotions* (pp. 20–52). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble.* New York, NY, and London, England: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Clark, C. (1990). Emotions and micropolitics in everyday life: Some paradoxes of "place". In T. D. Kemper (Ed.), *Research agendas in the sociology of emotions* (pp. 305–333). New York, NY: SUNY Press.

Clarke, V. (2007). Men not included? A critical psychology analysis of lesbian families and male influence in child rearing. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, *3*, 309–349.

Clarke, V. (2008). From outsiders to motherhood to reinventing the family: Constructions of lesbian parenting in the psychological literature—1886–2006. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *31*, 118–128.

Collins, R. (1990). Stratification, emotional energy, and the transient emotions. In T. D. Kemper (Ed.), *Research agenda in the sociology of emotions* (pp. 27–57). New York, NY: SUNY Press.

Collins, R. (1993). Emotional energy and the common denominator of rational action. *Rationality and Society*, *5*, 203–230.

Collins, R. (2004). *Interaction ritual chains.* Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press.

Denzin, N. K. (2001). *Interpretive interactionism* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Doucet, A. (2008). From her side of the gossamer wall(s): Reflexivity and relational knowing. *Qualitative Sociology*, *31*, 73–87.

Epstein, C. F. (1988). *Deceptive distinctions. Sex, gender, and the social order.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Epstein, C. F. (1997). The multiple realities of sameness and difference: Ideology and practice. *Journal of Social Issues*, *53*, 259–278.

Fenstermaker, S., & West, C. (2002). Doing difference revisited: Problems, prospects, and the dialogue in feminist theory. In S. Fenstermaker & C. West (Eds.), *Doing gender, doing difference: Inequality, power, and institutional change* (pp. 205–216). New York, NY: Routledge.

Ferree, M. M., Lorber, J., & Hess, B. (1999). *Revisioning gender.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gagnon, J., & Simon, W. (1973). *Sexual conduct: The social sources of human sexuality.* Chicago, IL: Aldine Pub. Co.

Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual.* New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Gordon, S. L. (1990). Social structural effects on emotion. In T. D. Kemper (Ed.), *Research agenda in the sociology of emotions* (pp. 145–179). New York, NY: SUNY Press.

Gubrium, J. F. (1989). Local cultures and service policy. In J. F. Gubrium & D. Silverman (Eds.) *The politics of field research* (pp. 94–112). London, UK: Sage.

Hammond, M. (1990). Affective maximization: A new macro-theory in the sociology of emotions. In T. D. Kemper (Ed.), *Research agendas in the sociology of emotions* (pp. 58–81). New York, NY: SUNY Press.

Hochschild, A. (1979). Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure. *The American Journal of Sociology*, *83*, 551–575.

Hochschild, A. (1995). The culture of politics: Traditional, postmodern, cold-modern, and warm-modern ideals of care. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, *2*, 331–346.

Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (1994). Phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and interpretive practice. In N. K. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 262–272). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (1995). *The active interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ingraham, C. (2005). *Thinking straight. The power, the promise, and the paradox of heterosexuality*. New York, NY: Routledge.

James, J. B. (1997). What are the social issues involved in focusing on difference in the study of gender? *Journal of Social Issues*, *53*, 213–232.

Johnson, S. M., & O'Connor, E. (2002). *The gay baby boom: The psychology of gay parenthood*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Katz, J. (1999). *How emotions work*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Kemper, T. D. (1978). *A social interactional theory of emotions*. New York, NY: Wiley.

Kemper, T. D. (1990). Social relations and emotions: A structural approach. In T. D. Kemper (Ed.), *Research agendas in the sociology of emotions* (pp. 207–237). New York, NY: SUNY Press.

Leidner, R. (1993). *Fast food, fast talk. Service work and the routinization of everyday life*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

McMahon, M. (1996). Significant absences. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *2*, 320–336.

Nelson, F. (2007). Mother tongues. The discursive journeys of lesbian and heterosexual women into motherhood. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, *3*, 223–265.

Patterson, C. J. (1994). Children of the lesbian baby boom: Behavioral adjustment, self-concepts, and sex-role identity. In B. Greene and G. Herek (Eds.), *Contemporary perspectives of gay and lesbian psychology: Theory, research, and applications* (pp. 156–175). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Patterson, C. J., & Riskind, R. G. (2010). To be a parent: Issues in family formation among gay and lesbian adults. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, *6*, 326–340.

Pratesi, A. (2011). The productivity of care: Contextualizing care in situated interaction and shedding light on its latent purposes. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, *5*(2), 123–137.

Ridgeway, C. L., & Correll, S. J. (2000). Limiting inequality through interaction: The end(s) of gender. *Contemporary Sociology*, *29*, 110–120.

Risman, B. J. (1998). *Gender vertigo. American families in transition*. New Haven, CT, and London, England: Yale University Press.

Russell, J. A. (1980). A circumplex model of affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *39*, 1161–1178.

Russell, J. A., & Carroll, J. M. (1999). On the bipolarity of positive and negative affect. *Psychological Bulletin*, *125*(1), 3–30.

Scheff, T. J. (1990). *Microsociology discourse, emotion, and social structure*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Smith, J. A. (2004). Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *1*, 39–54.

Smith, J. A., Jarman, M., & Osborn, M. (1999). Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis. In M. Murray & K. Chamberlain (Eds.), *Qualitative health psychology: Theories and methods* (pp. 218–240). London, England: Sage.

Smith-Lovin, L. (1993). Can emotionality and rationality be reconciled? *Rationality and Society*, *5*, 283–293.

Travis, C. (1992). *The mismeasure of woman*, New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Turner, J. H. (1999). Toward a general sociological theory of emotions. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, *29*, 133–162.

Turner, J. H. (2000). *On the origins of human emotions. A sociological inquiry into the evolution of human affect*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

von Scheve, C., & von Luede, R. (2005). Emotion and social Structures: Towards an interdisciplinary approach. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, *35*, 303–328.

Warner, M. (1991). Fear of a queer planet. *Social Text*, *9*(14), 3–17.

Wiley, N. (1994). *The semiotic self*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.