



Same-Sex Parenting in Italy: An Affective and Developmental Psychocultural Analysis

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Abstract

Introduction The study focuses on the issue of same-sex parenting in Italy, one of the few Western countries where it is not legally permitted. The aim of the research is to collect the experience of parents who have had a child abroad through reproduction and/or gestation procedures not ratified and recognized by the national legal system.

Methods The research involved 32 same-sex parents, specifically 22 mothers ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.3$; $SD = 6.5$) and 10 fathers ($M_{\text{age}} = 43.8$; $SD = 7.4$) of at least one child. Data were collected in the first part of 2022, using a narrative interview designed to collect parents' representation of same-sex parenting in Italy. The interviews were analyzed using Emotional Textual Analysis, a text mining methodology for tracing the emotional dimensions of text.

Results The factorial analysis generated four thematic clusters (1—*loneliness*; 2—*denied rights*; 3—*starting a family*; and 4—*future of LGBTQ+ liberation process*) and two factors (1—*minority stress*; 2—*conservatorism*).

Conclusions The results highlight a strong cultural backwardness in Italy on LGBTQ+ parental rights. Participants experience the desire and the practice of being parents within a cultural framework that, in the absence of legislative norms that protect these forms of generativity, emphasizes their sense of difference and isolation.

Policy Implications Future policies should be concerned with the need for cultural and legislative advances, supported by progressive movements and associations, as well as the development of psychological-clinical settings capable of supporting an emotional position in the parents based on trust about the context and the future.

Keywords Same-sex parenting · LGBTQ+ · Isolation · Normativity · Generativity · Emotional Textual Analysis · Italy

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Divergent sexualities and identities have undergone a “standardization” that has implied some social recognition, such as the right to marriage and parenthood, which was unthinkable for our cultures just twenty years ago, while the dominant culture remains heterocentric (Butler, 2003). This process of emancipation has only covered certain regions of the world, such as Anglophone countries and some European (Western and Scandinavian) and Latin American nations, even if there are relevant legal and cultural differences by which these realities have normalized homosexuality and its implications within society. In Italy, where the context of this study is set, conservative policies and backwardness about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) rights still prevail due to the strong influence of Catholicism and, more recently, the new right-wing government (see the “[The Italian Context](#)” section below).

Doubtless one of the most persistent stereotypes concerns the generativity of LGBTQ+ people, who are very often assumed to have little emotional capacity to experience relationships without the risk of eroticizing these and other

aspects of reality (Giunti, 2017; Pistella et al., 2017). This widespread view has historically fostered the isolation of the LGBTQ+ community and the distrust of heterosexual people toward relationships with same-sex people. As a result of this discrimination, the debate over LGBTQ+ rights now focuses on the parenting ability of same-sex couples. Are two gay men or two lesbian women potentially capable of growing children? Although the world's largest professional organization, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychiatric Association, and the Psychological and Psychoanalytic Associations, agrees on the efficacy of same-sex parenting, the greatest difficulty is dealing with societal homophobia and the resulting consequences that limit the desirability of parenting for the lesbian and gay (LG) community. The main factors that distinguish same-sex families from families with heterosexual parents are social circumstances and the societal effects of heteronormativity (Stacy, 2012).

Therefore, a mixed-method study is conducted to make explicit the latent psychocultural and developmental dimensions within which same-sex couples perceive and frame their experiences of parenthood in the Italian context (for a detailed description of the theoretical model, see Salvatore & Freda, 2011). The presence of a radical Catholic cultural heritage and the widespread legitimation of the traditional family make this Italian case particularly interesting for psychological science. Such a heteronormative cultural condition is an example of how, even within the European Union (EU), the well-being of same-sex family members and the promotion of sexual minority rights are limited and outside the collective good.

Background

Studies of same-sex parenting emerged in the 1970s in the United States within a legal framework. During the years of youth demonstrations and the women's and gay liberation movements, some men, but mostly women, divorced to enter a new same-sex relationship (Arcidiacono & Carbone, 2021). At the time, many studies were commissioned by judges to decide on the custody of children from heterosexual relationships. However, there was a lack of any scientific evidence for or against same-sex parenting. The main doubts, guided mainly by common sense, were related to LG parenting skills, children's mental health, and their gender identity and sexual orientation (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2020). All research on the possible presence of risky disparities between LG and heterosexual parents emphasized that there are no risks for children growing up in same-sex families. In addition, research findings (Gartrell et al., 2011, 2019; Golberg, 2010, 2012; Goldberg et al., 2012; Goldberg & Allen, 2012; Golombok, 2015; Vinjamuri, 2015) point to the presence of compensatory processes

aimed at psychologically constructing the symbolic order of *femininity* and *masculinity* (Butler, 2003) in children's minds.

Overall, findings suggest that the best conditions for children's psychological development are not related to parents' sexual orientation, but to their relational and problem-solving skills (Baiocco et al., 2015), especially the ability to cope with *minority stress* (e.g., Amodeo et al., 2018; Scandurra et al., 2019). Indeed, several studies have found that children of same-sex parents are more likely to exhibit problems in their psychological and social development when they face perceived stigma or homophobic stigma (Takács, 2016). Same-sex parenting is not equally legitimized in all states (Digoix, 2020). It is interesting to note that in some societies or nations, an unfinished system of social and legal recognition of same-sex parenthood affects the lives and psychological development of same-sex families.

The Italian Context

Legislative and Civil Norms

Italy remains one of the most backward Western countries in terms of granting rights to the LGBTQ+ community. Although the country is part of the EU, LG couples were only formally recognized (civil unions) in 2016 (Paternotte, 2015). This puts Italy in the 22nd place chronologically out of 28 countries within the EU in terms of legal recognition of same-sex relationships (Digoix, 2020; Digoix et al., 2016; Yerkes et al., 2018).

The political debate on this topic started in 2007 and seemed immediately controversial (Lasio & Serri, 2019; Ozzano, 2015). In the same year, the new center-left government, presided over by Romano Prodi, proposed a bill aimed at recognizing certain rights and obligations arising from "cohabitation" in the Italian legal system. However, the legislative process was effectively interrupted by the premature fall of the government in 2008. In the two successive legislatures formed by a right-wing majority, the issue was deliberately dropped. Nevertheless, the EU has intervened several times in recent years to urge Italy to enact legislation in favor of recognizing non-heterosexual relationships. It is probably thanks to this intervention that the Parliament has recently reconsidered the idea of legislation on this issue. After a heated parliamentary debate, a law to protect and recognize the desire of LG couples to legally legitimize their relationship was finally passed in 2016 (Law 76/2016, the so-called Cirinnà). However, the legislative process had to contend with critical issues particularly raised by the right-wing parties. In fact, one of the center-right parties, which together with the Democratic Party formed the majority in Parliament, significantly restricted the final draft of the law. Thus, the law was firstly

approved by excluding the bond of mutual fidelity in civil unions and secondly by not allowing the so-called stepchild adoption, that is, the second parent adoption.

These disadvantages qualify a same-sex couple in a civil union in a very different way than a married heterosexual couple. The elements of the analogy to marriage are very contradictory. The overall message that the document conveys to Italians still contains a strong element of discrimination. First, a same-sex couple cannot adopt a child, even if it is their partner's son. Second, the relationship between two men or two women cannot be characterized by fidelity, so it is inherently unstable and not as solid and permanent as that of a married couple. This kind of recognition has been perceived by all as a truncated law that has provoked the anger and disappointment of the entire Italian LGBTQ+ community (Gusmano et al., 2019).

Previous Research Findings

Today in Italy, it is impossible for same-sex couples or single lesbian women and gay men to adopt a child, and children born to families with same-sex parents are children of only one legal parent. Unlike other countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Spain, or Germany, the law (184/1983) in Italy states that minors can only be adopted by married heterosexual couples, thus making adoption impossible for single people. In this scenario, most Italian lesbian mothers became parents through artificial insemination (especially, in Spain, Greece, Belgium, or Holland) and the gay fathers through surrogacy (Carone et al., 2017; Power et al., 2012) (mostly in the USA or Canada). These two practices are not legal in Italy, so one has to go abroad to take advantage of them. However, it requires a high level of economic capital, especially for gay men, to afford medical and legal consultation, pay fees and applications, and travel to other countries to become parents.

For these reasons, even if there are many same-sex couples in Italy who want to become parents, the possibility of achieving this goal can only be considered a privilege for those who can afford this process, which is expensive from an economic and social point of view (Baiocco et al., 2013, 2015; Bertocchi & Guizzardi, 2017). Moreover, Italy has a high proportion of lesbian women and gay men who often become parents in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship. As regards the legal recognition of parenthood of the social (non-biological) parent, there is no law in Italy that allows stepchild adoption. There are exceptions in which some Juvenile Courts have granted the non-biological parent an "adoption in special cases" by applying the letter d of Article 44 of Law no. 183 of 1983.

Family is a very important value in Italian culture, and starting a family is a fundamental developmental task for

young adults (Everri, 2016). Therefore, LG Italian parents face several prejudices as well as feelings of rejection due to cultural and religious influences (Baiocco et al., 2013; Pistella et al., 2017; Ruiu & Gonano, 2020). In general, same-sex couples face significant additional challenges compared to traditional families. Indeed, they have to fight prejudice and denigrating thoughts about their dyadic relationship, family functioning, and children's well-being and raise their children in the absence of specific laws for LG families (Lingiardi et al., 2015; Pistella et al., 2017; Zamperini, 2016).

In Italy, families with lesbian mothers and gay fathers face a great burden compared to families in the United States and Canada, as well as in other EU countries such as Spain, France, and the United Kingdom. Indeed, in Italy, stereotypes against families with same-sex parents are still strong (Baiocco et al., 2013, 2014; Iudici et al., 2020; Pistella et al., 2017). Moreover, Catholic religion is known to have an important influence on negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people and families with same-sex parents in Italy, although there has been some progress in religious communities toward acceptance of homosexuality; for example, Pope Francis has recently called on the Church to welcome and accept gay people. These negative attitudes, as noted by Baiocco et al. (2014), are more prevalent and entrenched in rural areas and small communities, especially in southern Italy (Agueli et al., 2022). This could be the main reason why most same-sex couples have moved to the largest cities such as Milan, Rome, Naples, and Florence. However, some couples deliberately choose seclusion for fear of being rejected by society and settle on an island or in a mountainous region. Sometimes they are forced to leave their own community to escape the disapproval and shame of their family of origin (Ioverno et al., 2019).

Although the number of families with same-sex parents is increasing in Italy, there are few studies that address same-sex parenting. Most literature is dominated by case studies and few are quantitative. In Italy, "Famiglie Arcobaleno" (Rainbow Families) (www.famigliearcobaleno.org) is a national association founded in 2005 that brings together lesbian mothers and gay fathers, LG people who want to have children, and ordinary supporters. The association's membership has grown considerably in recent years to about 700, 60–75% of whom are women. Almost 200 parents of children and teenagers are members of the association. Most of the children in Rainbow Families were born within their family. Of the children, 80% are about 10 years old, while the average age of gay and lesbian parents is between 35 and 40. Even if the situation for families with same-sex parents is changing in Italy, the concept of LG parenthood is still little known or at least far from being legally and socially recognized.

In a recent study by Baiocco et al. (2013), surprisingly, no differences were found in the extent of parent-reported problems with peers. Same-sex parents did not report higher

levels of problems with peers in their children's lives. This unexpected finding is the result of the unique strength of LG parents, possibly due to their affiliation with the Italian Rainbow Family Association (the majority of LG parents, 32 of 40, were members of the Italian Rainbow Family Association). They found creative ways to be a different family and showed flexibility in coping with everyday problems, which can help all members during transitions in family life (Monaco & Nothdurfter, 2021).

Methods

Participants and Sampling Strategy

Thirty-two same-sex parents participated in the study: 22 mothers ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.3$; $SD = 6.5$) and 10 fathers ($M_{\text{age}} = 43.8$; $SD = 7.4$) (see Table 1). Eighteen participants are biological parents (12 mothers and 5 fathers), and 14 are social parents (10 mothers and 5 fathers). Eighteen parents are legally united through a civil union contracted in Italy, 2 parents are married abroad, and 8 live together in a committed relationship. Eighteen parents live in northern Italy, 6 in the center, and 10 in the south. Among the respondents,

there are two pairs of partners. Each parent has at least one child ($M_{\text{age}} = 6.2$) (the oldest is 18 years old and the youngest 8 months). Procreation was by insemination through an anonymous donor for the women and by gestation for third parties for the men. The level of education is medium–high. All respondents have at least a high school diploma, 9 have a high school diploma, 19 have a university degree, and 4 have a PhD. In terms of working conditions, most respondents are also in the medium–high range: 5 are public school teachers, 2 are university professors, 3 are managers in public administration, 11 are freelancers, 2 work in multinational companies, and 2 are entrepreneurs. Five indicated that they are not currently working. All participants are Caucasians and Italian citizens, and one couple is of French origin and has dual citizenship (Italian-French). As regards the places of conceiving of the child, in the cases of surrogacy, it was carried out in Canada and the USA, while medically assisted reproduction took place in Spain, Holland, Greece, Sweden, and Denmark.

Respondents were recruited through a snowballing sampling strategy (Corbin et al., 2014; Morse, 2010), considering gender and place of origin. In this type of sampling, a certain number of people with the specific characteristics that fit the research questions are selected and they are asked

Table 1 Descriptive of parents' characteristics ($n = 32$)

	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i> _{age} (<i>SD</i>)
Parents		
Mother	22 (69%)	<i>M</i> _{age} = 41.3 (6.5)
Father	10 (31%)	<i>M</i> _{age} = 43.8 (7.4)
Civil status		
Married	6 (mother = 4; father = 2; 19%)	
Civil union	18 (mother = 12; father = 6; 56%)	
Convivente	8 (mother = 6; father = 2; 25%)	
Parent's education		
Degree	21 (mother = 15; father = 6; 66%)	
High school diploma	11 (mother = 7; father = 4; 34%)	
Religion		
No	26 (mother = 20; father = 6; 81%)	
Yes	6 (mother = 2; father = 4; 19%)	
Parent's political orientation		
Conservatives	3 (mother = 1; father = 2; 9%)	
Progressives	29 (mother = 21; father = 8; 91%)	
No. of son/daughter		
1	24 (mother = 16; father = 8; 75%)	
2	6 (mother = 4; father = 2; 19%)	
2+	2 (mother = 2; father = 0; 6%)	
Italian region		
North	16 (mother = 10; father = 6; 50%)	
Center	6 (mother = 4; father = 2; 19%)	
South	10 (mother = 8; father = 2; 31%)	

to interview others. It is mainly used when the population consists of people who tend to hide their identity or who are difficult to find, as in this case (Sullivan et al., 2003). The group of participants was formed and expanded by using the relationship networks of the principal investigator and some interviewees; there was no prior knowledge between the interviewers and the participants. Initial contact was made through the association of Italian same-sex families, “Rainbow Families”.

Instrument for Data Gathering

The instrument for this study was a qualitative interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Potter & Hepburn, 2005) designed specifically for this research. All interviews began with a single open-ended question designed to allow respondents to freely express their emotions and free associations related to their own parental experiences and expectations for the future. The interviewer’s interventions were limited to encouraging the respondents to continue speaking after moments of pause, embarrassment, or prolonged stagnation. Each interview was based on the above-mentioned open-ended question, introduced by the following presentation: *A Psychology Department of an Italian Public University has commissioned a research project to reflect on same-sex parenting and to explore the needs of these families. We are conducting interviews with same-sex parents. The research findings will be discussed with the other families, as well as with the research staff who participated in the study, to further the debate and share reflections on how to support same-sex parents and their child/children. Your experiences will be a valuable contribution to improving knowledge about different parenting styles. We can get right to it. I am going to ask you a question. The experience of having or thinking about having a child certainly changes the lives of those who care for the child. I would like you to think about your personal experience as a parent with a same-sex partner. I would also like to know what parenting functions, activities, and relationships you regularly engage in as part of your family life and the importance you place on the environment that surrounds you.*

Procedures

Participants were interviewed from January 2022 to June 2022. Data collection ended when theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006; Morse, 2010) was reached, i.e., when the researcher determined, after reading the interviews, that the main theoretical categories related to the research questions had been satisfactorily completed. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and individually with each member of the couple. Interviews were usually conducted by the principal

investigator at the participants’ homes, lasted an average of one hour, and were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed. At the beginning of each meeting, the aims of the research were explained, including ensuring the anonymity of the data and any information that could be attributed to individuals or factual circumstances. At the end of the introductory explanations, they were asked to sign an informed consent form, previously approved by the ethics committee; informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviews were conducted by the first author. The research procedures were approved by the Ethical Committee of the first author’s university in accordance with the ethical recommendations of the Italian Academic Association of Psychology (AIP) and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Data Analysis

Emotional Textual Analysis (ETA) (Carli & Paniccia, 2002; Carli, 2018; Carli et al., 2016; Carbone et al., 2021, 2022) has been used to detect latent meanings of textual data. ETA is a semi-automatic bottom-up method of content analysis based on the co-occurrence of words as a similarity criterion for clustering thematic units. The cluster analysis of words and texts is used in psychological sciences with the aim of identifying the emotional investment expressed by the participants in a specific object of reality, by detecting and interpreting the association of the co-occurrence of words expressing a strong emotional meaning (Carli et al., 2016). ETA is based on invariant algorithms operationalized by a specific software: in this case, a method developed by T-LAB (PLUS_9.0 version). This technique implements the different steps of the method in the following way: (a) division of the text into elementary contexts (ECs) that effectively correspond to phrases; (b) creation of lexical units of vocabulary; (c) digital representation of the text; (d) multi-dimensional analysis focused on cluster definition of the co-occurrences of lexical units (and context units corresponding to these co-occurrences); and (e) researcher interpretation focused on such clusters and also dedicated identifying the core theme of which each cluster is a marker.

The cluster interpretation presented in the next paragraph was done by analyzing the ability of a word to have multiple, potentially infinite interconnected meanings and cross-references to symbolic universes (*emotional polysemy of words*) (Carli & Paniccia, 2002; Carli et al., 2016).

The last phase of ETA consists of a qualitative interpretation of the clusters). Its aim was to transform the material obtained from the clusters in terms of the relationships between words into descriptions that shed light on the implicit emotional meaning of the experience. Starting from the dense words with the largest chi-square value in each cluster, the interpretation consisted mainly

in identifying the emotional polysemy of the words and examining their etymology to determine their symbolic meaning beyond the literal sense of the word (Carli, 2018; Carli & Paniccia, 2002; Carli et al., 2016). The analysis was conducted by the first author, and the list of dense words to be analyzed was discussed and confirmed in three consensus meetings with the whole research group. The interpretation was produced through discussion meetings in which each member of the research group was able to provide their own input in order to make meaningful connections between the words identified in the cluster analysis. The researchers that make up the research team are all experts in the field of ETA methodology and the topic of same-sex parenting.

Results

The multiple correspondence analysis and cluster analysis yielded a factorial space with four (4) clusters and two (2) factors (Fig. 1). Overall, 3978 elementary contexts (ECs) were classified (82%) out of a total of 4851 (Table 2). Cluster analysis yielded four groupings of dense words (clusters) that differed both in the percentage of ECs that clustered (min. 14.83%, max. 39.08%) and in their arrangement at the factor levels (Fig. 1). For each cluster, the words with the highest chi-square value were selected. Clusters are presented in a descending order of relevance (ECs %); the interpretation starts with the most co-occurrent dense words (in italics). Correspondence analysis yielded a factorial

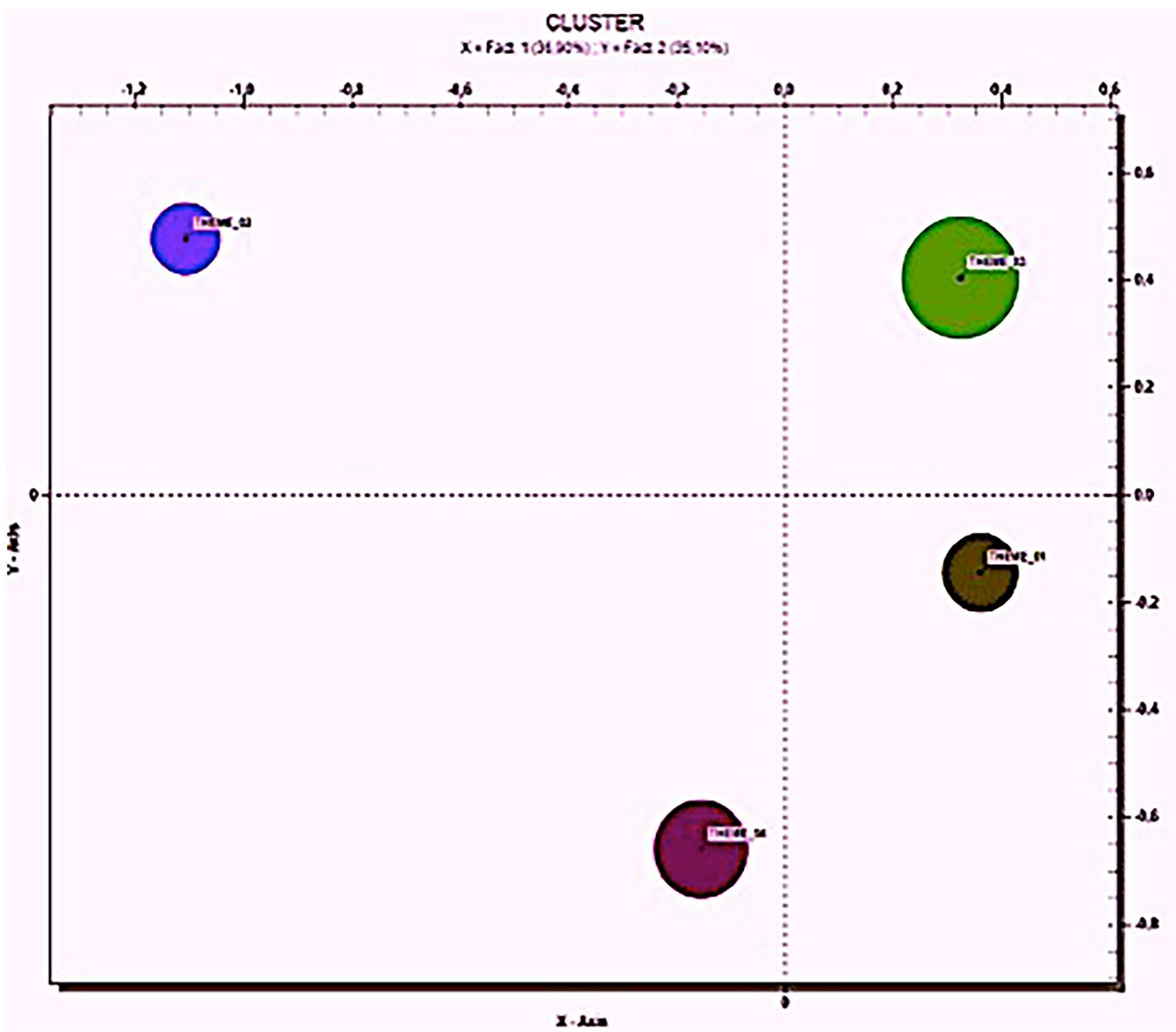


Fig. 1 Multiple correspondence and cluster analyses

Table 2 Clusters of dense words

	Cluster 1		Cluster 2		Cluster 3		Cluster 4	
	ECs 92 (18.44%)		ECs 74 (14.83%)		ECs 195 (39.08%)		ECs 138 (27.66%)	
Dense words	School	24.767	Politics	46.891	To choose	26.636	Politics	24.377
	Tribunal	21.123	To happen	44.767	Choice	25.744	To see	22.638
	To work	21.101	Social	42.676	Home	22.819	To end up	19.495
	Period	20.052	Civil rights	32.491	Get pregnant	11.840	Recognition	17.983
	Twin	20.052	Law	32.491	Time	11.516	Phase	17.055
	Spanish	16.895	Commonplace	26.037	Future	11.516	Gay	17.055
	To check	16.895	Ignorance	26.037	Personality	9.637	Baby	16.244
	Alone	16.135	Cultural	25.488	Cousin	9.637	Norm	14.616
	Week	14.083	Absence	25.488	Only child	8.786	Carry forward	14.616
	To help	12.368	Belonging	25.488	Kindergarten	8.167	Couple	14.616
	Brother	12.368	Church	25.488	To imagine	8.167	To deal with	14.200
	Turn to	11.965	Prejudice	22.207	Loved ones	8.167	To protect	14.200
	City	11.965	Success	19.262	Traditional	8.029	Legal	14.200
	To believe	11.965	To evolve	19.262	Nest	8.029	Genetic	14.200
	Little boy	11.965	Street	19.262	Dinner	8.029	Ward	14.200
	To see	11.951	Tour	19.262			Therapy	12.178
	Years	10.622	Canada	18.524			Country	12.178

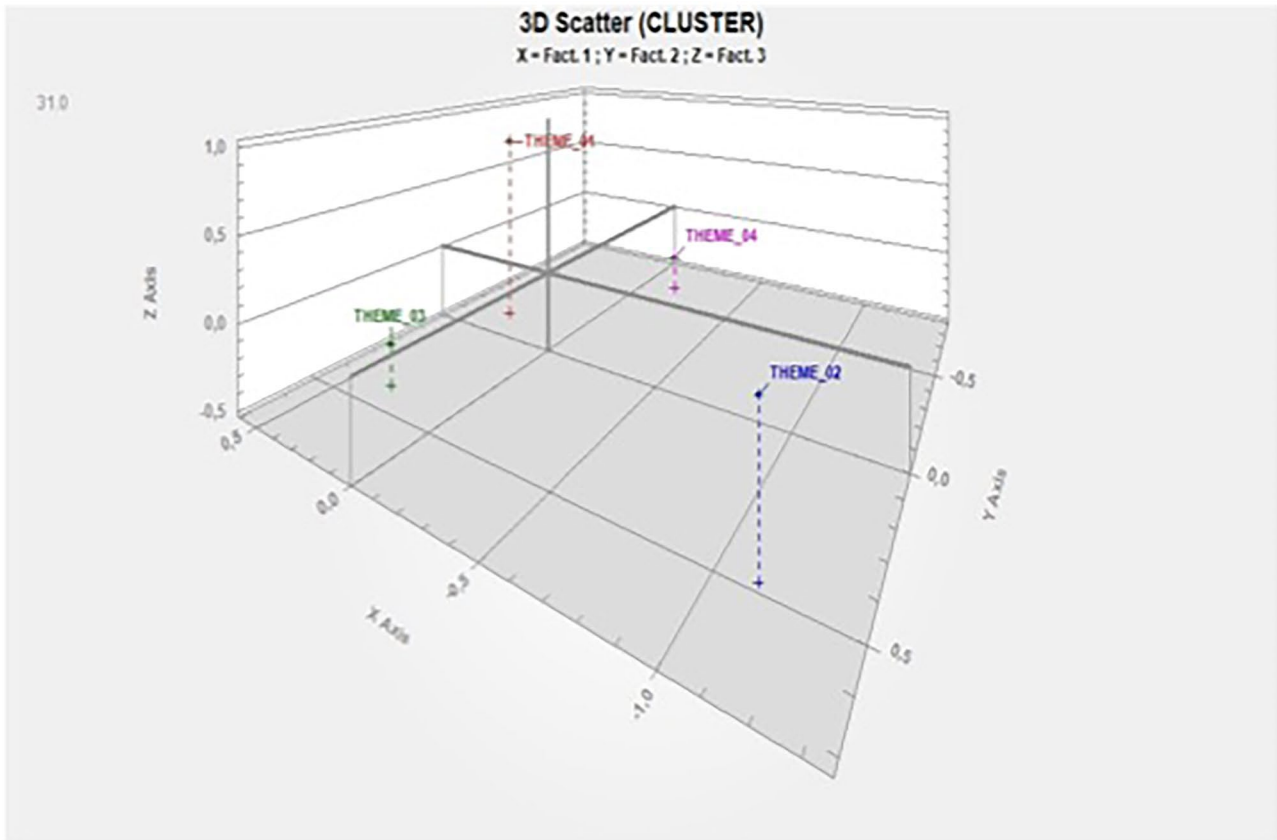


Fig. 2 3D cluster

space (Fig. 2) with 2 factors. To describe the results, the four clusters grouping the words of the text are analyzed and interpreted. The latter were presented in a hierarchical order according to their frequency in each cluster. The next step is to interpret the main semantic differences in the text by analyzing the distance of the clusters on the factors as a criterion for difference (the greater the distance between the clusters, the greater the semantic difference).

Clusters

Cluster 1: Loneliness

The first word in this cluster is “*school*,” an institution that pursues educational goals through methodically ordered activities; immediately after it appears the word “*tribunal*,” a place where one is judged on a moral level. Gay and lesbian parents immediately refer to a particular type of education and family, the Catholic one, on which the Italian school is based, and from which one immediately feels excluded—for this reason, culture, same-sex parenting and, before that, homosexuality are unimaginable—and from which one feels deeply persecuted for transgressing its norms as regards the word *tribunal*. The third word is the verb “*to work*,” an activity to produce a good, and the word “*period*,” an interval of time characterized by certain facts and characters. To what period of time do they refer? The next two words, “*twins*” and “*Spanish*” clarify the matter. They refer to artificial procreation, where the percentage of multiple births is higher, and to Spain, a country to which Italian lesbian or single mothers often turn for heterologous reproduction, since this is allowed by law. The time to which the words “*work*” and “*period*” refer is the preparatory moment, but also one that prepares the decision to become parents (the good produced is the procreation of a child).

Then, we find four words that emotionally characterize the phase of reproduction and its developments, where the word “*to check*” refers precisely to the need to keep power, to control this process, to “*have one’s eyes open*” to what could go wrong, a feeling linked to the deep sense of being “*alone*,” of experiencing the “*weeks*” of pregnancy, in which one would like to receive support, “*help*,” perhaps from a “*brother*,” a family member to whom one could “*turn*”. In the last part of the cluster, a change of course emerges. The sequence of the words “*believe*,” “*little boy*,” “*see*,” and “*years*” introduces the theme of public opinion, of people in one’s “*town*,” in one’s neighborhood “*city*,” and about being a parent in such a place even though one is a gay person.

Subsequently, the theme of societal distrust of the motherhood and fatherhood (social or biological) of LGB people emerges. The words “*believe*” an “*seeing*” referring to a newborn “*little boy*” point precisely to the perplexity with which parenthood outside of heterosexuality cannot be

imagined (Bosisio, 2016). In the last part, parents seem to reflect on how they must justify their parenthood to the rest of the world, from which, to echo the beginning of the cluster, one feels judged and distanced.

Cluster 2: Denied Rights

This cluster begins with the word “*politics*,” the science and art of governing the state, and refers to national LGBTQ+ politics, its role and performative effects (“*happening*”) in informing reality, organizing associated (“*social*”) life and communities.

Parents refers specifically to the legislative power (“*law*”) to grant “*civil rights*” that the Italian LGBTQ+ population is particularly lacking, a serious deficiency that leaves room for the propagation of “*common sense*” and ignorance about homosexuality and its connotations (e.g., AIDS contagiousness, perversion, inability to maintain relationships and offspring, promiscuity, etc.), the “*absence*” of a common (“*cultural*”) culture capable of transcending gender binarism and heterosexism and to which everyone can feel they belong (“*membership*”), a rigidity, that of the heterosexual family (Baiocco et al., 2013), the only one capable of generating the hegemony of Catholicism, the “*church*,” and falsely shaping common sense (“*prejudice*”). The need for society “*to evolve*” seems clear, as does the need to take to the “*streets*” (a possible allusion to the Gay Parade), or in some cases it seems necessary to leave the house to embark on a journey, a “*tour*” where, for example, LGBTQ+ rights are advanced and gestation for others is allowed and regulated, as in “*Canada*”.

Cluster 3: Starting a Family

“*Choose*” and “*choice*” are the first two words of this cluster. The etymological meaning is “*taking the best part by separating the worst*,” referring to the act of making a firm decision that may seem unusual or transgressive. The following words clarify the subject of this assessment. The first word that follows is “*home*,” a private place where different people live together, followed by “*get pregnant*,” which refers to a pregnancy, a family where expecting a child adds the factor of “*time*” to the house and makes the family members feel within a life span.

The theme of this future is the child’s “*personality*,” i.e., families question themselves and focus on the factors that can influence and characterize the development of a child, to define its identity and its peculiarities, to make it recognizable among many. In this relationship, the relationship with peers is fundamental, the word “*cousin*” recalls precisely the first relationships with peers that often take place within the extended family, a necessary relationship when one’s own

child is an “*only child*”, as is often the case; the “*kindergarten*” appears as another context of socialization.

Immediately after this appears a final sequence dominated by the verb “*to imagine*”. The parents think of moments in family life, of moments with their “*loved ones*,” of the “*traditional*” daily life they spend at home (“*kindergarten*”), for example, at “*dinner*” when everyone is together.

Cluster 4: Future of LGBTQ+ Liberation Process

The fourth cluster proposes again the “*political*” theme, where parents ask that it recognizes their needs to finally “*see*” them, precisely “*to end up*” the process of “*recognition*” of LGBTQ+ rights, which is currently in a “*phase*” of arrest (up to the civil unions granted in 2015). Currently, there is no proposal to legitimize the right of “*gay*” people to parenthood (“*baby*”). In this regard, there are no “*norms*” capable of “*carrying forward*” this struggle to protect same-sex “*couples*,” who see themselves as the only subjects who can “*deal with*” it to sanction their right to parenthood, “*to protect*” themselves and their children from the “*legal*” pitfalls that do not recognize the relationship between same-sex parents and their child, and from having to resort to “*genetic*” reproductive practices (adoption is not allowed in Italy, neither for LGBTQ+ couples nor for singles), up to experiencing anguish (“*therapy*”) in the “*wards*” of hospitals. It is a situation that, as described, affects all of Italy (“*country*”).

Polarities of Factors

The first factor corresponded to the horizontal axis (*X*), while the second factor was identified with the vertical axis (*Y*). The pole of the factors expressed the opposition between the clusters. The distance between the clusters was directly proportional to the possibility that the words included in each cluster could co-occur in the same part of speech (elementary context). This means that if the words in each cluster occur among themselves to a high degree, this is never or almost never the case for the words in the opposite cluster. More precisely, it is a real-valued function that quantifies the similarity between two objects. Figures 1 and 2 show that on the *X*-axis cluster 1 and cluster 2 are opposed and that on the *Y*-axis cluster 2 and cluster 4 represent two opposite polarities.

X Factor—Minority Stress: Cluster 1 vs Cluster 2

This factor has two polarities: cluster 1 (*Loneliness*) on one side and cluster 2 (*Denied rights*) on the other. The first difference is that the two clusters refer to two different dimensions of sociality. The first refers to the individual sphere and how it relates to the individual realities within which parenting must

first navigate, i.e., the court, the school (Goldberg & Smith, 2017; Goldberg, 2012; Goldberg et al., 2012, 2017, 2018), the foreign country in which artificial insemination occurs, and the contexts in which the emotion that predominantly emerges is loneliness. In the second cluster, there is more evidence of the collective dimension of a culture that is not very tolerant and progressive towards LGBTQ+ issues; in this case, the predominant emotion is disappointment and being perceived as a cultural minority. What the two polar factors have in common is minority stress and its impact on the relationship between person and context (cluster 1) and on the relationship between person and collectivity (cluster 2).

Y Factor—Conservatism: Cluster 2 vs Cluster 4

The second factor focuses on the political theme. Two ways of representing political culture are juxtaposed. On the one hand, cluster 2 (*Denied Rights*) represents the absence of values such as diversity inclusion and the difficulty of Italian culture to bring about change; on the other hand, cluster 4 (*Future of LGBTQ+ liberation process*) calls for and motivates the need for legal openness towards same-sex parenthood. Thus, the factor shows, on the one hand, the causes and, on the other hand, the consequences of the lack of legality of lesbian or gay parenthood.

Discussion

The results of the current study seem to highlight that parenthood and the desire to raise a child, which is impossible in Italy from both a biological and legal point of view, are attempts by same-sex couples to develop a *private* relational space, their own family, in which they can live their existence and create a future (cluster 3).

The analysis of clusters and factors highlights the centrality of the relationship between the private and public spheres of homosexuality and how specifically same-sex parenting makes the relationship between the family and the community more complex. On the one hand, for gay and lesbian people, creating their own family with same-sex parents seems to be an attempt to escape the cultural oppression, the stereotype of being considered sterilely marginal. In an attempt to create an image of themselves that is different from the stereotypes (cluster 1) built by the power-knowledge structures (Butler, 2003) such as psychiatry, morality, and biology, a non-heterosexual orientation becomes generative and tries to reproduce itself differently than in the past, when it was considered a social evil and AIDS was its just punishment, as well as a way for politics to get rid of it without any effort. A young heterosexual couple, after the engagement, has many stages ahead to which they can direct their efforts and convey the interest of their

family environment and friendship: the marriage, the birth of a child, the baptism, the first communion, the first day of school, the first engagement, and so on. What remains for a same-sex couple after the first moment of euphoria that comes from being young? For gay and lesbian people who become parents, the opportunity to reorganize their future lives amidst the unpredictability associated with raising and growing a child can save couples from social isolation and the difficulty of confronting the everyday attitudes of society, also helping them to deconstruct the everyday norms that organize a heterosexist society often seeing diversity as a deficit. The image of the LGBTQ+ community is often associated with sexual promiscuity, entertainment, and carnival parades like Gay Pride, but sometimes we forget the problems that homosexuality brings in terms of relating to the different life contexts of those who come out. The idea of considering oneself as a family like others and among others is here missing, as Everri (2016) has suggested.

Yet, same sex-parents often feel isolated because of this oppression (Arcidiacono & Carbone, 2021). These parents feel alone because they have chosen to have a family despite the prohibition of nature and the national legal system. This creates a conflict with social norms, a conflict that turns into an experience of transgression, unable to strengthen the relationship between the context, one's family of origin, and one's generational constellation (Carbone et al., 2022). The weight of stereotypes affects the relationship with the family of origin and friends as well as with the choice of the job and the place they want to live in. Outside of big cities, local contexts are not yet ready to accept same-sex couples with children, as schools (Nothdurfter & Monaco, 2022; Selmi et al., 2019) and healthcare systems often view same-sex families as a whim or sometimes a provocation, fueling LGBTQ+ people's fear of coming out and asking for support.

The other point on which the other two clusters (2 and 4) focus is the Italian political and legal framework. It seems interesting to analyze the peculiarities that appear in the different clusters.

In the second cluster, the Italian cultural order is despised for its rigidity and stagnation, for the ponderous presence of Catholic culture that shapes aspects of personal, family, and cultural life, and for the concept of familial naturalness. We distance ourselves from this culture; we feel little understood, excluded, in short, the experience of feeling without a home sets in, as the need to go abroad to see one's desires fulfilled. It seems important to emphasize the difficulty that these families face in not developing a sense of belonging to the community, a process that certainly affects aspects of identity. In the same theme, in cluster 4, the same-sex parents propose instead a sense of social revenge and protest, and politics is called upon to act as interlocutor, to side with minorities, to listen to their own suffering, which is also

related to the need to resort to medically oriented techniques with uncertain outcomes.

The analysis of factors *X* and *Y* also illustrates a synthesis of the psychodynamic processes that describe the relationship between same-sex parents and the symbolization of the cultural processes peculiar to the Italian context. The two axes represent respectively the problem of minority stress (*X*) (Mezzalana et al., 2022; Scandurra et al., 2017, 2018a, b, 2020a, b) and the cultural conservatism that prevents any progress in the recovery of LGBTQ+ rights. Both axes are connected by a feeling of helplessness, except in 3, the only one in which a developmental process emerges, the building of a family in which one can lead a "normal" life (and in which one no longer experiences minority stress).

The proposed narratives lack other interlocutors. The family of origin, which is present but seems distant and not very understanding, immersed in an ideal of the heterosexual family. On the other hand, the neighborhood they belong to is considered troublesome and inquisitorial. On the other hand, the neighborhood they belong to is considered annoying and inquisitorial. Other contexts of coexistence do not appear, outward the hospital ward, in foreign countries like Spain and Canada (López-Sáez et al., 2023), certainly emotionally dense places within the relationship to the processes of reproduction and birth.

Policy Implication and Recommendations

The findings summarize some important considerations for social and public health policies that can contribute, above all, to the development and support of a relationship that promotes a dialog between a cultural framework of belonging that is considered homophobic and the construction of a family in which a parent experiences the suffering of feeling like a same-sex parent. The main objective of any form of intervention is certainly to reduce the transgressive experience associated with the loneliness that characterizes the lives of the members of these families, considering the results. This process can only be favored if practices in which the personal and collective dimensions are symbolically reconciled are promoted. To this end, many intervention actions can be carried out at different levels: (a) a legislative level—granting and normalizing more practices in which same-sex parenthood can be achieved (i.e., adoption for singles, adoption for same-sex couples, and stepchild adoption); (b) a psychosocial level—promoting relationships and opportunities for exchange between the different family forms in public institutions or through third sector associations (Monaco, 2022); (c) a professional level—promoting awareness campaigns on this topic for social and educational professionals; (d) a psychological-clinical perspective—developing and disseminating knowledge on this topic within the social and psychological professions (Baiocco

et al., 2020; Everri et al., 2021) and promoting settings in which it is possible to provide psychological support to parents in the conception phase and after the birth of the child (Segatto & Lombardi, 2022), within services of the national system and within organizations with progressive values and diversity inclusion; and (e) a political level—creating moments of reflection and exchange in the public debate on the topic, which until today often remains on the margins.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study has some important limitations that should be considered in future research.

First, the study relates to a very specific Western cultural context, characterized both by the presence of a dominant Catholic conception of the family and by the absence of an inclusive public debate on the subject due to the inconsistency of progressive alternatives in the political sphere. These conditions make it difficult to generalize the proposed results and conclusions to other countries.

The second limitation concerns the homogeneity of the participants, as more mothers ($n = 22$) than fathers ($n = 10$) participated in the study. This selection bias in recruitment could be because the sampling was supported by a snowball procedure, which resulted in reaching more women than men, although an attempt was made by focusing on different parts of Italy.

A third limitation is that other characteristics of the sample were not considered, such as the socio-economic status. This aspect deserves special attention given the exorbitant costs that artificial reproductive technologies and gestation for others impose. A comparison of the income of LG parents with the average Italian income could shed light on the unequal access to parenthood outside heterosexual couples, to the extent that access is possible today for elite groups.

A fourth limitation concerns the fact that this study does not include parents with a bisexual sexual orientation or trans and non-binary people, whose prevalence is increasing (Scandurra et al., 2021).

A final limitation is that, in the context of research on parenting, this study does not consider the impact from the perspective of sons/daughters and the quality of their development. Future research, based on the last point, should include the life experiences of children conceived and raised outside of same-sex couples to understand how cultural dimensions affect their social reality, their own aspirations, and difficulties in interacting with others because of the stigmatization of their parents. Another line of research could consider legal culture and family law by interviewing juvenile and family court judges about their views on the relationship between homosexuality and parenting and the future of queer parenting. Finally, it would be interesting to conduct transnational research (i.e., in the southern EU)

to compare the peculiarities of the different family models that tradition has produced and how they conflict with the concept of same-sex parenting.

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Availability of Data and Material The raw data, analysis code, and materials used in this study are not openly available but are available upon request to the corresponding author.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethics Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 2013 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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