DIGITHUM

A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON CULTURE AND SOCIETY

ARTICLE

Unconventional relationships, positive marginalities and citizenship

Alessandro Pratesi
University of Chester

Abstract

Long distance relationships and caring at a distance may be connected with emotional and psychological exhaustion but also gratification, reward and empowerment; above all, they possess important implications in terms of social justice, equality and citizenship. The expression 'world families' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2014) includes a heterogeneous and tension-filled set of social actors who have in common the potential to bridge traditional distinctions between public and private, centre and periphery, national and international, able-bodied and physically/cognitively impaired, heterosexual and homosexual, bypassing dichotomous ideas of inclusion/exclusion which typically characterise the concept of citizenship. These families represent a group of very different social actors, including couples of mixed cultures and ethnicities, low-paid migrant workers, skilled migrant workers, asylum seekers, refugees, distant families, etc. who challenge our culturally homogenous understanding of family and society and are defined therefore as 'pioneers of cosmopolitanism' and cultural diversity.

Drawing on recent work on families, relationships, intimacies and caring for distant others and contextualising it within the specific and still unexplored context of Living Apart Together (LAT) same-sex couples, this article examines the moral, sociological and institutional geographies of these less visible chains of care and affection and their unequally entitled rights and visibility. The literature review is combined with auto-ethnographic work analysing and discussing the case of a married, same-sex, transnational, Living Apart Together (LAT) couple.

This article suggests that by looking at what happens at the level of emotion-based, micro-situated interactions we can get some crucial insights into the changing nature of families, intimacies and relationships and their multiple implications in terms of social inclusion, entitlement to rights/citizenship and social change. It is a form of relational, emotion-based and micro-situated social inclusion and entitlement to rights/citizenship which is occurring, on a daily basis, in the interstices of people's interactions even when such change still meets several obstacles at the structural, political and institutional level.

Keywords

Unconventional relationships, sexualities, citizenship, autoethnography, positive marginalities

Relaciones no convencionales, marginalidades positivas y ciudadanía

Resumen

El cuidado de otros y las relaciones a larga distancia pueden estar vinculados al agotamiento emocional y psicológico, pero también a la gratificación y el empoderamiento; sobre todo, tienen importantes implicaciones en términos de justicia social, igualdad y ciudadanía. La expresión «familias globales» (Beck y Beck-Gernsheim, 2014) abarca un conjunto de actores sociales, heterogéneos y cargados de tensiones, que tienen en común el potencial de superar las distinciones tradicionales entre lo público y lo privado, el centro y la periferia, lo nacional y lo internacional, las personas sanas y aquellas con discapacidades físicas/cognitivas, los heterosexuales y los homosexuales, eludiendo las ideas dicotómicas de inclusión/exclusión que por lo general caracterizan el concepto de ciudadanía. Estas familias constituyen un grupo de actores sociales muy disímiles, entre otros, parejas de culturas y etnias mixtas, trabajadores migrantes mal remunerados, trabajadores migrantes calificados, solicitantes de asilo, refugiados, familias distantes, etc. que desafían nuestra comprensión culturalmente homogénea de la familia y la sociedad y que se definen, por lo tanto, como «pioneros del cosmopolitismo» y la diversidad cultural.

Partiendo de trabajos recientes sobre las familias, las relaciones, las intimidades y el cuidado de otros residentes en ubicaciones distantes y contextualizándo dichos trabajos en el ámbito específico, y todavía inexplorado, de las parejas del mismo sexo que están juntas pero viven separadas (LAT, por sus siglas en inglés), este artículo examina las geografías morales, sociológicas e institucionales de estas cadenas, menos visibles, de cuidado y afecto, así como su desigualdad en términos de derechos y visibilidad. La revisión de la bibliografía se combina con un trabajo autoetnográfico donde se analiza y discute el caso de una pareja LAT casada, transnacional y del mismo sexo.

Este artículo sugiere que al examinar lo que sucede en un nivel micro de las interacciones basadas en emociones, podemos obtener algunas ideas esenciales sobre la naturaleza cambiante de las familias, las intimidades y las relaciones, así como sobre sus múltiples implicaciones en términos de inclusión social, acceso a derechos/ciudadanía y cambio social. Es una forma de inclusión social y adquisición de derechos/ciudadanía, relacional, basada en la emoción y situada en un nivel micro, que está ocurriendo a diario en los intersticios de las interacciones entre las personas, aun cuando dicho cambio sigue encontrando diversos obstáculos estructurales, políticos e institucionales.

Palabras clave

relaciones no convencionales, sexualidades, ciudadanía, autoetnografía, marginalidades positivas

Introduction

This article is at the intersection of three vast research areas: research on relationships, intimacies and care; research on emotions; and research on sexual, intimate and cultural citizenship (Bertone, 2013; Kershaw, 2010; Phelan, 2001; Plummer, 2003; Richardson, 2000; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Ryan-Flood, 2009; Seidman, 2010; Shipman and Smart, 2007; Stychin, 2001; Taylor et al. 2010; Turner, 1993; Weston, 1997; Wilson, 2009). The research background is linked to the necessity to rethink current ideas of citizenship in light of the changing context of our global, diverse and immigrant democracies and is manifold. It relates to earlier phenomenological research on family care the author conducted a few years ago in the United States, based on those traditions of the sociology of emotion that explain inequality in terms of emotional dynamics occurring at the micro-level of interaction. It draws on the growing literature regarding the multiple implications of relationships, intimacies and care in terms of citizenship. It is then based on an auto-ethnographic case study concerning a married same-sex, transnational, Living Apart Together (LAT) couple.

What follows is the result of a number of questions which can be summarised as follows: (1) what can we learn from the experience of unconventional forms of intimacies, relationships and care when we analyse them within the context of our complex societies in which issues of membership, entitlement and citizenship have become more problematic? (2) what are their broader implications in terms of status inclusion/exclusion, citizenship and social change at the structural level? (3) can we apply the vast potential of citizenship discourse surrounding these unconventional relationships to other contexts and other social groups such as national, religious, and ethnic minorities? These questions cannot be answered in simple terms and any of them would require a book-length discussion, which is out of the scope of this article. Thus, the primary aim of this article is to provide a broader, more grounded, relational understanding of citizenship and to highlight some of the multiple issues and implications of the changing nature of families, relationships and intimacies by integrating the above mentioned research areas with a case study concerning a married, same-sex, transnational, LAT couple.

Research on relationships, intimacies and families (Duncan and Smith, 2002, 2006; Duncan and Phillips, 2010; Gabb, 2008, 2009; Morgan, 2011; Jamieson, 1998, 1999, 2011; Jamieson and Simpson, 2013; Roseneil, 2006, 2010; Smart, 2004, 2007), has amply illustrated the multiple ways through which individuals "do family" and in which families and other forms of intimate relationships are at the core of the interpretation of many aspects of contemporary societies, which include issues of inequality, social justice, social inclusion and citizenship. More specifically, Jamieson (1998, 2011, 2013) has largely explored and effectively illustrated the historical and cultural shifts in practices of intimacy, the complex relationships between globalisation and personal life and the analytical potential of the concept of intimacy to understand social change. The investigation of the emerging phenomenon of Living Apart Together (LAT) couples in the United Kingdom has been particularly developed by Duncan who, similarly to Roseneil (2010) and

Jamieson (1999) has also highlighted the limitations of the individualisation theory which years ago was supported, among others, by Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992). Morgan's and Smart's suggestions to focus on family practices as a way to go beyond particular models of 'the family' and look instead at the activities through which family life is enacted and experienced represent a useful theoretical and methodological approach which is now widely considered as a benchmark for research on families. Gabb's original contributions, then, offer innovative conceptual and methodological frameworks to grasp the complexity of the processes shaping intimacy and sexuality in contemporary families and challenge misleading dichotomous interpretations of private and public spheres (Gabb, 2008, 2009).

These contributions situate themselves within the context of our increasingly globalised societies, where issues of relationships, intimacies, interactions and identities have become more fluid and problematic (Baumann, 2013a, 2013b). More recently, for example, Jamieson addresses the issue of digitally mediated forms of communication and intimacy in personal relationships and how this is affecting selves (Jamieson, 2013), De La Fuente Vilar highlights the role of information and communication technologies in sustaining family relationships and roles at a distance and allowing emotions to flow over borders (De La Fuente Vilar, 2011), and Parreñas examines the constitution of intimacy in the use of communication technology in Filipino transnational families (Parreñas, 2014). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2014) use the terms "world families" – or families at a distance or global families – to define families that live together across national, religious, cultural or ethnic borders. In Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's analyses (2014), world families represent a group of very different social actors, including couples of mixed cultures and ethnicities, low-paid migrant workers, skilled migrant workers, asylum seekers, refugees, distant families, etc. who challenge our culturally homogenous understanding of family and society and are defined therefore as 'pioneers of cosmopolitanism' and cultural diversity. As such, they represent a possible synthesis between private and public spheres, centre and periphery, national and international borders, traditional and liberal politics, and force us to rethink the concept of citizenship by virtue of their geographical mobility and their increased contacts with different cultural and national groups.

Quite obviously, when we talk about *world families* we talk about a series of different subjects who vary considerably, depending on the reasons which are at the origin of the geographical separation, the possibility (or impossibility) to change them, and, above all, depending on several sociological variables such as social class, race/ethnicity, culture, age, able bodiedness, sexuality and many others. What they do have in common, however, is that they all inhabit cultural, legal and political limbos, in-between areas whose borders are still not clearly defined. These different social actors – which I prefer to call *unequally entitled citizens* – have in common their liminality in terms of belonging and entitlement to rights, in other words, their inequality in terms of citizenship. The concept of liminality – from the Latin 'limen'– has to do with margins, borders, edges. A state of liminality is characterised by the simultaneous coexistence of present, past and future typical of those symbolic or real passages (from one phase of life to another, from one country and/or culture to another etc.) during which the usual point of references are temporarily suspended; what is left behind starts being elaborated in terms of past experience and identity and what waits ahead in terms of new social and cultural landscapes is still undetermined. Liminality is therefore a land of opportunities and open spaces, where ambivalence, ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy show all their positive and negative potential (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; Sennet, 2011; Sharma, 2013). But it is also a land filled with risks and challenges. It is "a world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries, a world...where anything is possible" (Sharma, 2013, p. 109). It may be offering chances of inclusion and entitlement for someone at the same time it may involve exclusion and marginalisation for others.

These in-between areas, momentarily freed from normative constraints, social roles and status membership open up the possibilities of social change and foster the creation of new alternative social worlds and identities. Innovation happens in the interstices of liminality. Losing one's

dwelling place allows the potential of becoming something radically new. Such potential unfolds itself in different directions: it can create uneasiness, anomie, depression, despair and even illness and death; but it can also set the foundations for positive transformation of both Self and Others. Sennett (2011) describes the foreigner's experience of displacement as one which creates value: a reflexive value which allows the subject to add meaning and solidity to his/her experience. The nature of liminality, its complex features and multiple implications can be analysed best by looking at those social actors who experience several layers of displacement, intersecting, for example, geographical mobility, sexuality and ethnicity. Therefore, the analysis of unconventional distance relationships, illustrated in what follows, can be particularly insightful, especially when it includes in its analyses the still relatively unknown subject of same-sex distance relationships.

Unconventional distance relationships: the uncharted territory of LAT same-sex couples

The number of families and partners who, due to work-related geographical mobility, live separately and are forced, as such, to entangle love and care relationships at a distance is increasing (Duncan and Smith, 2002, 2006; Duncan and Phillips, 2010). This phenomenon occurs within a context where global forces, trends and dynamics make the issue of social and political entitlements particularly complex and problematic. The focus here is on those subjects, families and couples who live separately out of necessity and not because of their choice; and more specifically, on the relevance of the uncharted territory of same-sex distance relationships.

There are several theoretical reasons for paying attention to unconventional forms of distance relationships. To start with, because, with a few exceptions (Holmes, 2014), there are no studies on same-sex couples living in distance relationships. In her extremely inspiring and timely research on intimacy and emotions amongst academics and their partners in dual-locations, Holmes (2014) includes three lesbian couples. However, her research mostly concerns academics and professionals, half of whom tend to reunite weekly, one quarter fortnightly and only a few every two months, and it does not thematise the specificities of same-sex couples or their additional challenges in terms of their relationships with their heterosexual and heteronormative families of origin. The analysis of these additional challenges represents a striking absence from the research on same-sex families, as also recently highlighted in a Special Issue of the Journal of LGBT Family Studies (Bertone and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014).

In addition, same-sex couples and families undoubtedly challenge and redefine the symbolic, cultural and social boundaries of citizenship, reflecting an interesting and potentially democratising paradox: they look for social and legal inclusion within pre-existing and more or less conventional definitions of families and intimacies and at the same time they claim their right to overtly love and care about their same-sex partners by offering new, nonconventional perspectives on intimacy and care which represent a model of *anti-assimilationist citizenship* (Donovan et al, 1999; Weston, 1997; Weeks, 1998; Weeks et al, 2001; Pratesi, 2017; 2018). In fact, same-sex families experience forms of *relational integration* and *inclusion* and produce social change by being visible, 'out there', and having to live in close proximity to heterosexual cultures (in the negotiation with schools, other parents, local communities, etc.) whilst not being able – or willing – to inhabit the heterosexual ideal (Ahmed, 2010; Pratesi, 2012a, 2018a). If that's the case, same-sex couples relating at a distance might add relevant information about the complexities of such social change. It might be interesting to explore, for example, similarities and differences between heterosexual and same-sex distance relationships, to verify or disconfirm dynamics of convergence or divergence between the two and to challenge stereotypical assumptions about same-sex couples as less tightly centred on a sexual dyad, less stable, more promiscuous and individualistic, etc., a critique which is confirmed by current literature on unconventional forms of intimacy and family (Roseneil, 2006, 2010; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004).

Another reason which makes the study of unconventional distance relationships theoretically relevant is related to the concept of "intimate citizenship" which was introduced by Plummer

(2003) to understand the nature and the quality of the change concerning personal life, relationships and intimacies in contemporary societies and their different implications in terms of entitlement to rights (Shipman and Smart, 2007). Same-sex couples relating at a distance might add further relevant information about the complexities of such change because they possess a double layer of potential exclusion or lack of entitlement: their (ambivalent) rights as a same-sex family and their (ambivalent) rights as a family relating at a distance.

A fourth reason making the study of unconventional distance relationships theoretically relevant is that their living at a distance might make it possible to compare them with other distance relaters, including several of the different social actors who are described by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim in terms of world families (2014). Above all, a focus on these *unequally entitled citizens* is relevant to shed light on the micro-situated dynamics through which forms of exclusion, inequality and homophobia which persist at the structural level may be somehow fought against and overcome at a micro-level by forms of *interactional* and *relational inclusion* (Pratesi, 2018a).

This requires shifting the focus upon the micro level of analysis and looking at the spaces where the situated actions and interactions occur; at the ways, in other words, in which people constantly construct and negotiate their sense of entitlement to rights and status inclusion. It also requires to be creative and innovative from a methodological point of view and to think about alternative approaches to capture the complexities of the multiple ways of *doing citizenship* in situated interactions (Pratesi, 2012b). This is why it might be interesting to integrate current research on intimacies, relationships and care at a distance with some reflexive, auto-ethnographic accounts focusing on a specific case study: that of a married, same-sex, transnational, LAT couple.

Autoethnography as method

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method combining ethnography and autobiography and through which researchers reflexively analyse their personal experiences and their interactions with others and interpret them in order to reach wider cultural, social and political understanding (Chang, 2016; Denzin, 2006; Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011; Pace, 2012). Ellis et al. (2011) define autoethnography as an approach to research "that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act" (2011, p. 273). The main methodological principles of both autobiography and ethnography converge into autoethnography, which focuses on the researcher's subjective experience, making this qualitative method simultaneously a process and a product. Personal stories, feelings, and observations are disclosed to the reader to shed light on the not-so-visible connections between the private sphere of (auto)biographies and the public sphere of the broader societal context (Mills, 1959/2000).

In this sense, Ellingson and Ellis (2008) describe autoethnography as a social constructionist approach which is able to overcome binary oppositions between objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self and others, and the personal and the political. An autoethnographer is "first and foremost a communicator and a storyteller" (Ellis and Bochner, 2006, p. 111), and by telling the readers his/her personal story, he/she invites them to enter the researcher's world and to reflect on, understand and interpret what they learn there (Ellis, 2004).

Whilst it is quite unlikely for every story to resonate with every reader, this does not mean that autoethnographic research does not interrogate itself about issues of validity, reliability and generalizability. Within such a context, though validity, reliability and generalizability do not apply in a traditional manner as in autoethnographic research "we look at validity in terms of what happens to readers as well as to research participants and researchers [. . .] our work seeks verisimilitude" (Ellis, 2004, p. 124). The generalizability of findings emerges not only from the *credibility* of the reflexive accounts (Becker, 1996) but also from the readers themselves and it

depends on the extent to which the researcher has managed to open up a dialogue and a conversation with his/her readers. For an autoethnographer the most important questions are: "who reads our work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going?" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 10). Opening and developing a conversation are indeed the main aims of the reflexive analyses illustrated in the next section. Nevertheless, I am also cognizant that the researcher should put the reader in the position of being able to verify whether "the story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know" (Pace, 2012, p. 3).

The autoethnographic case study presented in what follows concerns a same-sex couple whose members belong to two different nationalities (Italian and French), who are legally married in the United Kingdom but live in two different countries – France and the United Kingdom – and whose civil and political rights, as a consequence, stand at the crossroads of three different countries – Italy, France and the United Kingdom– with three different types of legislations on same-sex unions. Heteronormative assumptions about sexuality and family constitute the basis of existing notions of entitlements and citizenship. As shown by a number of scholars, heterosexuality is the necessary (if not sufficient) condition for full entitlement of rights and obligations and socially constructed notions of *sexual citizenship* are both reflected and reproduced by a dominant heteronormativity (Bertone, 2013; Kimmel and Llewellyn, 2012; Richardson, 1998, 2000a, 2000b; Richardson and Monroe, 2012; Seidman, 2002, 2010). The autoethnographic case study illustrated in this article embraces therefore several layers of ambivalence and liminality: that related to the couple's legal rights; that related to the fact that they live in two different countries; and that related to the relationship with their families of origin. Hence the significance of this case study and its relevance in shedding light on some of the theoretical challenges exemplified above.

The literature on the experience of same-sex couples tends to focus on discourses concerning diversity, inequality, coming-out, inclusion/exclusion, tolerance, acceptance, different forms of explicit or implicit homophobia, etc. What I am trying to do with the reflexive, auto-ethnographic accounts which follow is going beyond these quite conventional discourses and situating instead the concepts of sexual, cultural and intimate citizenship within my own biography. In order to grasp the complex nature of citizenship by looking at its sexual, intimate and cultural components, we must understand how 'self', 'others', and several forms of symbolic and real margins and boundaries interlink. Contextualising citizenship within specific empirical settings and providing a relational, micro-situated and emotion-based understanding of it based on the combination of the vast existing literature with reflexive, auto-ethnographic accounts can help us overcoming its current limited and limiting interpretations. The investment in the "self" (expressed in the use of "I" and/or first person) is key in auto-ethnographic writing. Therefore, the reader will forgive me if in the next section I momentarily switch from the more conventional use of the third person to the use of the first person, more suitable for reflexive analyses.

An Autoethnographic Case Study: Same-sex, married and living apart together. Reflexive analyses

The case study here illustrated concerns a couple of professionals aged 46 at the time of the auto-ethnography and living in two different countries: my partner, in France, and me, in the UK. This specific choice has to do with multiple reasons – clarified earlier on in this article – which make the study of unconventional distant relationships theoretically relevant; but also with the fact that the (personal) story here disclosed concerns a couple whose members live in two separate countries, with different cultural attitudes towards and different types of legal regulations about same-sex unions and holds, as such, a number of significant cultural and political implications. Autoethnographies are political by default as they engage their readers with important political issues and often induce them to see things differently, with different lenses or form a different perspective. The following reflexive accounts are therefore meant to represent an example of the

multiple ways in which the personal becomes political and personal biographies intersect and become relevant for the wider society (Mills, 1959/2000).

Within the context of our experience of married, same-sex distant relaters, we can visualise the micro-situated mechanisms inclusion/exclusion by looking at the *internal conversations* between us and a whole set of generalised others or what Wiley (1994) calls *permanent visitors*: all those "others" who are variably present in our thinking processes and with whom we constantly interact through our internal conversations—be they conscious or unaware (Wiley, 1994; Archer, 2003, 2012; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Doucet, 2008). Heteronormative definitions of families and relationships constantly communicated and reproduced by different types of permanent visitors (families of origins, friends, media, colleagues, institutions, etc.) shape the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion, defining different types and degrees of real or symbolic entitlements. These ongoing reproductions of heteronormative assumptions and narratives are not necessarily explicit or conscious, but they constantly accompany and shape our ordinary experiences and interactions with our families of origins, be they real (face-to-face) or virtual (by phone, email or Skype). During our constant internal dialogues with all these permanent visitors we constantly verify or disconfirm our status inclusion to or exclusion from a wider imaginary community of 'fully entitled' partners and/or couples.

Several micro-situated mechanisms inclusion/exclusion and entitlement can be visualised by looking at the emotional dynamics and interactions with our families of origins, peers, friends and other social actors. In broad terms, two main (at times simultaneous) processes emerge through such emotional dynamics and interactions: *inclusion* and *exclusion*, which resonate with some of the main themes emerging from the literature. These forms of interactional and intermittent inclusion and exclusion suggest a micro-situated, emotion-based, phenomenological model of social inclusion, entitlement to rights and, ultimately, citizenship. On one hand, there are the unintentional, accidental, involuntary dynamics of exclusions or inequality which can occur through wedding ceremonies, family photos, family gatherings (all embedded in heterosexual scripts), email messages, assumptions about long-distance relationships (about, for example, the unspoken and implicit idea that it might be easier or less problematic for two men with no children to live separated; about financial issues; etc.), family expectations (about family visits and holidays, who's going where and when; who's organising family gatherings, etc.), heteronormative assumptions about sexual non-conformity or about family-centred leisure time activities and preferences, etc. By no means am I suggesting that these accidental, involuntary dynamics of exclusion occur all the time; but they occur. And when they occur, they can generate feelings of exclusion, frustration, and also inequality. On the other hand, however, there are also the positive and somehow pleasurable aspects of marginality: the nice feeling of being part of most of our family gatherings – via Skype or other technological means – without having to be physically there every time, is one of them. But I am mostly thinking here about the positive forms of marginality (Unger, 2000) which resist dominant stereotypes and reframe a seemingly undesirable characteristic (sexual diversity) to use it as an agent of both personal and social change. It is a phenomenological, micro-situated and emotionally charged form of social change which unfolds *from within* the family system and which is embedded in the social construction of reality that occurs at the micro-level of interactions.

This resonates with the findings emerging from my previous research on family care conducted some years ago in the United States, where some of the gay/lesbian parents eloquently and vividly described themselves as '*happy to be out of the rat race*' and happily inhabiting marginal, interstitial spaces – '*I liked that marginality*'[1] (Pratesi, 2012a). From the theoretical point of view, the research was drawing on those aspects of the Sociology of Emotions that explain *inequality* and

social exclusion in terms of *emotion-based processes* which occur at the level of micro-situated actions and interactions (Barbalet, 2001; Burkitt, 2014; Clark, 1990; Collins, 2004; Gordon, 1990; Hammond 1990, Hochschild, 1979, 2003; Katz, 1999; Kemper, 1978, 1990; Scheff, 1990; Smith-Lovin, 1993; von Scheve and von Luede, 2005). More specifically, it was drawing on Collins' theory according to which the emotional dynamics underlying the social structures are based upon feelings of *status membership* or *status inclusion* in groups or coalitions (Collins, 2004). The findings from this research showed how same-sex families challenge and redefine the symbolic, cultural and social boundaries of citizenship, reflecting an interesting paradox: they look for social and legal inclusion within pre-existing definitions of families and intimacies, and at the same time they claim their unique *right to care* by offering a new, nonconventional perspective on intimacy and care which challenge our conventional definitions of family and care related entitlements and rights (Pratesi, 2012a, 2017, 2018). In claiming their right to care, same-sex families produce social change by enriching the possible definitions of family and parenthood, by challenging stereotypical gender roles and fighting against hegemonic sexualities, and by being visible and living in close proximity to heterosexual cultures – in the negotiation with schools, teachers, other parents, local communities etc.– whilst not being able or willing to inhabit the heterosexual ideal (Ahmed, 2004). In other words, same-sex parents claiming their right to care represent a historic change which can be seen as a model of *anti-assimilationist citizenship*, or at least as a model of more pluralist, flexible and relational citizenship (Pratesi, 2012a, 2018).

Similar dynamics or reciprocal positive contaminations apply to the case study here illustrated. While heteronormative discourses and practices shape everyday conversations and interactions, everyday conversations and interactions with unconventional discourses and practices also play their part in shaping these wider discourses. As a result, the alternative narratives offered by unconventional forms of relationships about what may be desirable or not for different people, about different ways to "do family", about affection and love, about living apart together, but also about resilience (i.e. the multiple challenges involved in maintaining a distant relationship) unavoidably challenge and rewrite the heteronormative scripts (Ahmed, 2010) and produce new narratives, new "finite provinces of meaning"[2] (Schutz, 1967) and new forms of micro-situated entitlement. As an illustrative example of this, the description of the family dynamics prompted by our marriage intimately celebrated in a 'neutral' space (the United Kingdom) and only eventually shared with families and friends can perhaps be useful. Formalising the same-sex union in the United Kingdom was considered the most suitable choice for different reasons, including the fact I resided there, that the country had recently legalised same-sex marriage, and that the neutral location would have allowed – eventually – to legally acknowledge the union, also in the other two European countries involved in this sort of legal triangulation: France, first, and eventually, when lawfully possible, Italy.[3] Our families of origins and different members of the family within them reacted quite differently to the fact that the legal act was celebrated intimately, without notice or invitations – except for the two wedding witnesses – and communicated only after the ceremony. Several members of our families wished they had been invited and some expressed, either directly or indirectly, their disappointment; whereas others did not necessarily feel excluded and thought

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[2] Alfred Schutz developed the notion of various *finite provinces of meaning* a long time ago, as a development of the theory he illustrated in *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Each province contains its distinctive logical, temporal, corporal and social dimensions, and interactions and movements between the provinces occur because the provinces are permeable and dynamic. Individuals interacting in a social system create, over time, concepts or mental representations of each other's actions, and these concepts are eventually transformed into (new) habits which shape social actors' roles, interactions and behaviours. When these habits start being spread to other members of society, people's knowledge, conceptions and beliefs of what reality is change and the 'unconventional' becomes ordinary and institutionalized. This is what Schutz (and other social constructivists) meant when he talked about reality as something which is constantly socially constructed.

[3] In France, same-sex marriage was recognised in 2013. Italy only recently (in 2016) acknowledged same-sex civil union, but not same-sex marriage. When we got married in the United Kingdom, in Italy there was no form of legal recognition of same-sex couples. In the United Kingdom, same-sex marriage, which integrated the pre-existing same-sex union, was acknowledged just one month before we formalised our union, which was in May 2014.

that a certain level of privacy, 'discreetness' and understatement was probably the most appropriate decision to formalise this relatively unconventional type of union.[4] In both cases, and with few exceptions, discontents and bewilderments were not manifestly voiced out, and an overall careful attention not to raise explicit complaints prevailed instead. Cultural differences, however, visibly emerged between our French and Italian families of origin in relation to the conjugal formal act, my Italian family explicitly manifesting a preference to keep it quiet and my partner's French family expressing instead a slightly more explicit disappointment for the privacy and intimacy of the event. My partner's large French family of origin – more accustomed to celebrating each and every family event and remarkably more family-oriented than the Italian family – showed some frustration for not having been informed about and included in the English ceremony. My Italian family, on the other hand, considered our choice to deliberately avoid following a conventional heterosexual marriage template, a wise and respectable one. These different cultural and emotional dynamics, quite obviously, echoed our own mixed feelings and ambiguities towards the event which was, on one hand, a symbolically important step and decision that we were happy to share with families and close friends, and, on the other hand, represented something we did not want to particularly emphasise, as we considered the institution of marriage an utterly discriminatory one, for both heterosexual and homosexual couples. Marriage, in fact, entitles some people to certain rights (and we wanted those rights) and excludes all those who decide not to get married (and we did not like that at all); thus, we felt and lived all the emotional contradictions of this oxymoron.

A couple of months after the formal act of marriage where only the two witnesses were present, a party bringing together close friends and the two families of origin was organised in Italy. The social gathering had been organised far before the marriage – which originally was not in the plans – and it was merely meant to celebrate our relationship and share its importance with families and friends who had never had the chance to meet us together because of our LAT situation. Far from wanting to replicate more or less conventional/traditional ideas of marriage, the main goal of the party was bringing together friends and families form different parts of Europe and the United States who would not have had the chance to meet and gather otherwise. But here, too, it was not straightforward for many – including close friends – to understand our reluctance to call it a 'wedding ceremony' and to consider that, instead, a mere collective celebration of our affection and love. The English marriage, in fact, was first and foremost a legal and political act which was meant to provide us with some legal protection and had not much to do with affection and love. Let me try to clarify: we never felt we needed to get married to confirm and/or sanction in any formal way our love for each other, but we felt instead pushed and almost forced to get married because of the current legal regulations which clearly discriminate between married and unmarried couples, regardless of their sexual orientation. That does not mean that affection and love were not part of our intimate and private ceremony in the United Kingdom, but simply that they were not part of its main underlying rationale. The party, on the other hand, was meant to celebrate our love relationship and had nothing to do with the formal matrimonial act. Or so was the intention.

Indeed, several interesting dynamics were prompted by this family/social gathering which had been planned a long time before the institutional marriage. On one hand, the ambivalent attitude towards the party of (part of) my Italian family of origin, reflecting perhaps a cultural trait or the Italian way to deal with sexual diversity which is still deeply affected by a Catholic background, even for those families who are not religious at all. In this respect, Bertone and Franchi (2014) argue that "a narrative of suffering plays an important role, providing a bridge between Christian notions of mercy and therapeutic narratives of authentic love, while preserving parents' privileged position as heterosexuals" (Bertone and Franchi, 2014, p. 9). Whichever the case, my Italian parents, while very happy about our relationship, were not particularly keen to be involved in a sort

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[4] The unconventionality of our relationship was not merely related to the fact that we were two men, which, in itself, is quite common, but rather to the fact that we were working and living in two separate countries, with different cultures and different types of acknowledgment and legal recognitions of same-sex unions.

of public and collective celebration of it. On the other hand, my partner's French family of origin was so keen to be included in the celebration with a central role, that during the evening preceding the party, organised a sort of symbolic, intimate celebration of our relationship in which family portraits, photos, short videos and other family paraphernalia recollecting the history of the entire family were nostalgically displayed with a projector and commented upon. Interestingly enough, however, none of our wedding photos were included in such a nice family recollection, confirming the ambivalent and somehow lumbering nature of the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion often characterising the relationship between same-sex partners and their heterosexual families of origin (Bertone, 2013; Bertone and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014). The alleged celebration of our relationship, oddly enough, became the opportunity to celebrate the (heterosexual) family of origin, without many explicit references to us and our recently formalised union.

Beyond the different stances of our families of origin, the party was celebrated with shared enthusiasm, participation and several of the ritual ceremonies and gifts which typically accompany such events, but with an overall tacit understatement of the 'wedding' nature of it. It was a party with no name – which indeed perfectly resonated with our own choice – despite its unavoidable connotations of a wedding ceremony, which included both frontstage – the beautiful setting, the catering service, the elegant tables, the music, etc. – and backstage elements (Goffman, 1959). Regardless of their different distribution of social, cultural, emotional and symbolic capital, the necessity to develop socially acceptable narratives about their children's unconventional relationship was quite evident in both our families of origin. Some of the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion illustrated above relate to the still liminal characterisation of same-sex couples, their inhabiting marginal, in-between areas, and the ambivalences intrinsically connected to their being *outsiders inside* (Unger, 2000), no matter how more or less conforming to heteronormative scripts they are or can be. Ambivalences which strongly characterise ourselves and shape our own motivations and perspectives, our own visions from the margins.

Visions from the borders: positive marginality, citizenship and social change.

These *visions from the margins* and from different geographical and cultural borders can help us to grasp some useful insights into the changing nature of families, intimacies and relationships and their multiple implications in terms of social inclusion, entitlement to rights/citizenship and social change. Unconventional forms of relationships can represent a context in which daily surprises and creative dialogues are constantly acted out: the unquestioned, taken for granted beliefs that give our lives stability are constantly put in discussion and negotiated in these contexts, particularly when we observe the interactions of same-sex families with their heterosexual families of origin. Flexibility, adaptability and creativity are key for unconventional distant relaters, especially when they inhabit different social, cultural and symbolic contexts. Inhabiting marginal, liminal areas enables these social actors and many other *unequally entitled citizens* (Pratesi, 2018b) to develop stronger forms of flexibility and a stronger ability to embrace change or invent new strategies to deal with it, which can make them more fit for confronting the challenges of our diverse and rapidly changing societies. Thus, shedding light on these forms of *positive marginality* can help us to challenge conventional narratives in terms of heteronormativity, but also in terms of victimisation, ethnocentrism, Euro-centrism and several other dominant perspectives on entitlement, citizenship and civil rights.

During the 1990s, LGBT movements and activism have been characterised by a gradual move towards *identity* and *relationship* based rights claims contrasting with *freedom of sex* based rights claims of earlier political campaigns (Richardson, 2000a). Parallel to this, a new emerging literature has highlighted the links between citizenship and sexualities discourse (Wilson, 2009; Langdridge, 2013) and the necessity to develop broader definitions of citizenship, including cultural dimensions and new forms of belonging, beyond the traditional contexts of law, politics and welfare (Turner, 1993; Pakulski, 1997; O'Byrne, 2003, Richardson and Monroe, 2012). In her critical analyses of

the concept of happiness, Sara Ahmed (2010) uses the examples of LGBT people, feminists and migrant people to show how these marginal social actors have the capacity to stimulate non-conventional definitions of happiness and, more broadly, alternative narratives about life, unveiling and overcoming traditional dichotomies such as public/private, inclusion/exclusion, assimilation/marginalisation, etc. and making their borders more blurred, less clearly defined. Several scholars have further highlighted the necessity to go beyond a mere comparative research agenda which has thus far characterised much of current literature on sexual minorities and same-sex families (Clarke et al., 2010; Gato, 2016). Far from reproducing a narrative of oppression and victimisation, these critical perspectives tend to emphasise the benefits of being *outsiders inside* (Unger, 2000) and shed light on the ways in which several types of unequally entitled citizens can produce emotion-based and micro-situated forms of social inclusion, entitlement, citizenship and social change (Albrecht, 2016, 2018; Cappellato and Mangarella, 2014; Pratesi, 2017, 2018a). This clearly resonates with Pakulski's notion of *cultural citizenship* (Pakulski, 1997), which represents a new set of claims – including the right to symbolic presence and visibility vs. marginalisation, the right to dignifying representation vs. stigmatisation; and the right to affirmation and propagation of identity vs. assimilation – involving the idea of a *full inclusion* in the culture of a specific society. Although from completely different perspectives, these rights apply to many types of unequally entitled citizens who inhabit several sorts of legal and political limbos, in-between areas whose borders are still not clearly defined.

Increasingly, critical theorisations of care work, intimacy and citizenship from feminist, multicultural and global perspectives have highlighted several ways to bridge the gaps between the theories and practices of care, sexuality, intimacy, migration and social inclusion, providing a broader, more grounded, intersectional understanding of citizenship (Epstein and Carrillo, 2014; Fudge, 2014; Kershaw, 2010; Longman et al., 2013; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Yuval-Davis, 2007). For example, Longman et al.'s comparative, intersectional analysis of 'mothering' in non-conventional mother-child relationships (2013) shows how care work and its micro-based, affective potential to shape politics of inclusion and recognition becomes a form of 'citizenship practice' which changes hegemonic understandings of belonging and entitlement. Kerhsaw's claim the 'caregiving *for identity* is political' (2010) advances the debate on the contested status of care work as a form of political citizenship. Fudge (2014) discusses the extent to which universal *human rights* and *citizenship* discourses intersect when migrant workers claim for greater protection in a growingly globalised world. Epstein and Carrillo (2014) illustrate the concept of *immigrant sexual citizenship* by discussing ethnographic data from a study on Mexican gay and bisexual male immigrants to California and describing the multiple, intersectional challenges they face. Regardless of their different perspectives and specific foci, what these visions of citizenship share in common is the necessity to overcome deceptive dualisms (such as the public/private dichotomy) or comparative logics (hetero- vs. homo-) and situate the debate on sexual citizenship within more inclusive, phenomenological, intersectional and interdisciplinary boundaries. Moreover, the social, cultural and political relevance of emotions as a bridging element connecting micro- and macro- levels of analysis illustrated by several scholars (Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Archer, 2003; Barbalet, 2001; Burkitt, 2014; Collins, 2004; Katz, 1999; Kemper, 1990; Scheff, 1990; von Scheve and von Luede, 2005) has been recently further highlighted by a special issue of *Digithum* which bring together contributions focusing on emotions from a relational perspective and showing the ubiquitous nature of emotions and their multiple implications in different contexts (Albrecht, 2016; Cantó-Milà, 2016; Terpe, 2016).

Conclusions: implications and suggestions for further research.

If we want to understand the complex nature of the concept of sexual, intimate and cultural citizenship, we must understand how 'Self', 'Others', borders, the world and different forms of intimacies intertwine. A phenomenological, relational, micro-situated and emotion-based understanding of citizenship based on the analysis of the changing nature of relationships and

contextualised into specific empirical settings can help us in overcoming its current limited and limiting interpretations. This article clarifies what we can learn from the experience of unconventional forms of intimacies, relationships and care and their broader implications in terms of citizenship and social change when we analyze them within the context of contemporary, global societies in which entitlement, inclusion and citizenship and their legal, symbolic and cultural borders are becoming more and more blurred.

The case study of a same-sex, married, transnational and distant relationship illustrated in this article does not have the ambition to represent all *unequally entitled citizens* and the complexity and changeability of several dimensions – including social class, status, education, age, gender, race, ethnicity, etc. – need to be acknowledged and carefully contextualised. It is not the aim of this article to make incongruous associations or comparisons between radically diverse social actors and groups. Besides, and quite obviously, the role of social, legal and political institutions, media, education system and academic communities needs to be clearly addressed. Nevertheless, it might be worth to further explore the value of the theoretical and methodological suggestions here discussed. This article suggests that by looking at what happens at the level of emotion-based, micro-situated interactions – and particularly by looking at the margins, the borders, at the liminal interstices inhabited by different types of unequally entitled citizens – we can get some crucial insights into the changing nature of families, intimacies and relationships and their multiple implications in terms of social inclusion, entitlement to rights and social change. It is a form of relational, emotion-based and micro-situated social inclusion and entitlement to rights/citizenship which is occurring, on a daily basis, in the interstices of people's interactions even when – or despite the fact that – such change still meets several obstacles at the structural, political and institutional level.

The practical implications are manifold. One way to measure the relevance and the potential impact of the theoretical and methodological suggestions here illustrated is the development of an integrative knowledge about the effects of an emerging social phenomenon (LAT families) in various social and cultural contexts, and the development of new, qualitative methodologies to further investigate the extent to which micro-situated and emotion-based strategies of social inclusion represented by different types of unequally entitled citizens can be used to rethink our ideas of citizenship. From the practical point of view, this can be translated into policy recommendations based on more grounded, inclusive and innovative accounts of contemporary experiences of family, intimacy and care and the development of important practical tools (such as equality indicators, diversity indicators, etc.) and innovative strategies of social inclusion implemented at the local level. However, further research on family diversity along social hierarchies of class, culture, ethnicity and religion is also needed. More specifically, there is a need for greater international visibility of contributions and explorations of these issues in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America, within which nations have experienced the impacts of religious fundamentalism and colonialism and therefore legal, political and social constructions of gender, sexuality, and family dramatically differ. Thus, the next research step will also involve finding ways to apply the vast potential of citizenship discourse surrounding these unconventional forms of intimacies, relationships and care at a distance to other contexts and other social groups such as national, religious, cultural or ethnic minorities. This article – combining literature, theory and autoethnographic work—is only the opening of a hopefully productive dialogue.

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Alessandro Pratesi
(a.pratesi@chester.ac.uk)

University of Chester

Alessandro Pratesi is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in Sociology at the University of Chester, UK. He is a member of the Sociology of Emotions Research Network of the European Sociological Association (ESA) and has published widely in the area of care, emotions and relationships. His research interests include the Sociology of Emotions; Care and the Ethics of care; Relationships, Intimacies and Families; Migration, Citizenship and Social Change; Innovative Qualitative Methods. His recently published book articulately captures them all: Pratesi, A. (2018). *Doing Care, Doing Citizenship. Towards a Micro-situated and Emotion-based Model of Social Inclusion*, Palgrave Macmillan.

University of Chester
Westminster Building
Parkgate Road Campus
Chester

Cheshire
CH1 4AR
United Kingdom