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# Tackling Prejudice and Discrimination Towards Families with Same-Sex Parents: An Exploratory Study in Italy

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## Abstract

Though studies have shown that the sexual orientation of parents does not influence their parenting skills or the well-being of their children, prejudice against same-sex families is still very widespread. Research has not sufficiently explored the ways in which parents tackle this prejudice. Using qualitative methodologies, in particular textual analyses, this study has analysed the discourse used by same-sex families to handle the prejudices that they face. The results highlighted that conflicts, which may even be ideological in nature, are sometimes created between traditional families and “atypical” families. These often result in estrangement and isolation from their own family and the communities to which they belong, in turn damaging the growth of the children involved. Furthermore, means for moving beyond conflict, sharing experiences and effectively tackling prejudices are also discussed.

**Keywords** Prejudice · Same-sex parenting · Communication · Discourse analysis · Qualitative research

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## Introduction

The term “same-sex parenting” was first cited by Gross (2003) and describes any family situation in which at least one adult, who self-identifies as homosexual, is the “parent” of at least one child, which constitutes the new family unit (Eleuteri et al. 2012). Studies in this field have historically focused on the differences between homosexual and heterosexual parents, demonstrating that there are no substantial differences in development compared to the children of heterosexual couples (Green et al. 1986; Qu et al. 2016), that the sexual orientation of the parents does not impact the psycho-sexual and psycho-social well-being of the children (Baiocco et al. 2013) and that the sexual identity of the children is in no way influenced by the sexual orientation of the parents (Golombok and Tasker 1996; Knight et al. 2017).

The most recent studies have shifted their focus to constructs such as the “health” and “psychological well-being” of the children: for example, the studies by Gartrell et al. (2005) and Patterson (2006) conclude that the children examined are comparable to children raised by heterosexual couples. Dempsey (2013) has found that selected measures of wellbeing were more positive among children in same-sex parented families compared to other children. Other studies have highlighted that there are no significant differences between children raised by homosexual parents and children raised by heterosexual parents in terms of their ability to adapt or regulate their feelings and behaviour (Bos 2004; Wainright et al. 2004). Others still (Baiocco et al. 2013; D’Amore et al. 2013; Bastianoni et al. 2015) have found that the quality of triadic interactions is not influenced by the composition of the family. Various studies have tried to discover if the sexual orientation of individuals influences their parenting ability, concluding that sexual orientation does not determine parenting skills and that these are also widespread amongst homosexual couples (Harris and Turner 1986; Pacilli and Taurino 2009; Van der Toorn et al. 2011). Adams and Light (2015) reviewed thousands of peer reviewed articles on same-sex parenthood, comparing the differences between children of heterosexual parents and children of same-sex parents, confirming that children of same-sex couples do not suffer any disadvantage. Despite the findings of scientific research, prejudice against homosexual parents is still very widespread (Ferrari 2015). In fact, the discourse constantly compares heterosexual and homosexual parents, with the former being considered as the norm or the natural condition and the latter being forced to defend itself against prejudices (Lingiardi and Carone 2016). This has created a contrast that risks being biased and rooted in ideology, as if there is a way to be a competent parent based on the category to which one belongs (Baiocco et al. 2013; Faccio et al. 2018).

It would seem that being parents and being homosexual are often considered by common sense two irreconcilable personal dimensions. Furthermore, there is a lack of scientific literature on the subject: there is little research investigating the assumptions, birth and development of homosexual families. This situation is complicated by the socio-cultural and juridical impossibility to accept and constitute “new” regulations on the matter. Another fact is that families with same-sex

parents are on the rise but risk not being recognised and consequently harmed for these reasons (Eleuteri et al. 2012). From a regulatory point of view, Italy is currently in a phase of change. On the one hand, we have judgments that do not recognise a child with two fathers (Judgment of the Court of Cassation 12193); on the other hand, a child can grow up in a balanced way even in a family with same-sex parents because it is a “mere prejudice” to claim that “it is harmful for the balanced development of the child the fact of living in a family centered on a homosexual couple” (with judgment number 601). In this phase of change, our focus is on how the Italian mentality is changing regarding the issue of same-sex parents and how these changes are managed. Italian research, in particular, has provided a general picture of the situation and is not very developed. We are interested in understanding what prejudices the members of homogeneous families are practically suffering and, essentially, in understanding how they are being dealt with, in this phase of considerable fluctuation. All this is part of the aim of helping people in a homogenous nucleus to deal with the difficulties they experience in relation to existing prejudices. The research questions concern how people in a homogeneous nucleus relate to the prejudice expressed explicitly or suffered culturally and institutionally.

The aim of the research is to determine the most widespread prejudices against members in families with homogeneous couples and how the interaction with those who implement those prejudices is managed by the parents involved.

In order to better understand the context within which this need is placed, we present below a short paragraph on the Italian situation.

### **Homosexual and Homoparental Discrimination in Italy**

When talking about homoparental families in Italy, the prevailing attitude is one of discrimination, prejudice and insensitivity (Dall’Orto 1990; Trappolin and Tiano 2015; Capozzi and Lingiard 2003; Fruggeri 2007; Lelleri et al. 2008) Italy is still strongly anchored to a vision of the traditional nuclear family, although some changes and transformations within the society are slowly changing the very idea of family. This is also due to the strong influence of Catholic thought in our society and to some regulations that identify the family nucleus as one composed of a head of family, the spouse and the legitimate, natural, recognised and adopted children (D.P.R. n. 1035 of 1972).

Still today, homosexuality in Italy is mainly configured in contrast with the concept of family and family life. Because, more or less consciously, homosexuals are still associated with emotionally and affectively unstable, hedonistic, frivolous, fickle lives, as if they constantly lived their lives like a pride parade”. And therefore they are considered to be little inclined to family life, made up of stable affections, routine, and even serene boredom. This is all the more unsuitable for family life when it involves children, who have a particular need for affective stability and reliability. On this subject, the discriminatory position of ordinary people and regulations is quite clear: homosexual couples cannot procreate, it is against nature, children need a mother and a father, homosexual couples cannot adopt, nor can they

have access to medically assisted procreation techniques; in some cases, they could not donate blood. In working environments, in the armed forces and in some health, sports and school environments, there are no explicit positions against discrimination (Danna 2009; Lingiardi et al. 2005).

For example, many lesbian and bisexual women do not undergo regular gynaecological examinations because they fear that they will not be accepted because of their sexual habits or that revealing their sexuality will adversely affect the quality of the treatment received. In addition, about 34% of lesbians interviewed fear that they will receive lesser treatment from doctors or nurses after their sexual orientation has been revealed. Younger girls turn out to be less so: only about 15% of homosexual women in the South (D'Ippoliti and Schuster 2011). In some cases, the worsening of the doctor-patient relationship is reported. About 25% of the women interviewed do not declare their sexual orientation even to the gynaecologist although they consider sharing this kind of information important, and over 21% do not declare their homosexuality even to their psychotherapist. According to the same research, about 11% of psychologists and psychotherapists had a negative idea of the patient's sexual orientation (Lelleri et al. 2005). In a study by Pacilli and Taurino (2009), on the other hand, a very interesting theme is tackled: the attitude of homosexual men and women towards homosexual parenting from which stereotypes about parenting emerge even in homosexuals themselves. Yet, homosexual parental families exist, even in Italy, and are constantly growing. It is estimated that people living in same-sex parented families are about one hundred thousand, less than traditional families. However, the point is not to claim the superiority of one type of family over another but their substantial equality. Starting from this, it is possible to note that the first and fundamental methodological principle on which to base any analysis is the consideration that parental evaluation should not be carried out according to the family configuration (homosexual rather than heterosexual as well as "united" rather than "separated"; "nuclear" rather than "recomposed/reconstituted") but rather, the quality of relationships, dynamics and processes within the configuration itself regardless of the reference structure (Lingiardi and Nardelli 2014). In this direction, various problems can be shared in this area, for example, the idea that there are different family configurations with the implication that the contexts in which parenting skills are applied are different and plural. Moreover, these new configurations should not be approached as deviations from the norm but as new realities to be studied and recognised. Finally, it is important to clarify that there might be very different ways of exercising the parental role, some hinged on tradition and others on the discontinuity of conventional contexts. Although the latter might be different, they are not to be understood as alternatives and opposites. The analysis of these modalities applied in interaction constitutes the scope of our research work.

## Methodology

The methodology used in this study involves analysing discourse, which focuses on how a text is produced (means of creating discourse, type of discourse), as well as consideration regarding who produces it (Bolasco 1999). This type of analysis

belongs to the so-called qualitative research methods. Discourse analysis developed from linguistic studies, literary criticisms and semiotics; the foundation of discourse analysis refers to the idea that language and words, which constitute a system of signs, assume their meaning from shared and agreed-upon use (Wittgenstein 1953; Chandler 2002). Studying language can reveal how social norms are created and maintained, how personal and group identities are constructed and how social and political interactions are negotiated (Crowe 1998; Gee 2005; Hayakawa and Hayakawa 1990). The order of discourse constitutes the linguistic and semantic aspect of social order (Anolli 2008; Van Dijk 2004; Salvini and Dondoni 2011). Referring to the studies of Foucault, Fairclough (1995) argues that discourse is a social practice, since it is a representation of social life that is characterised by a specific positioning. The various social players see and represent events in different ways. They constitute different narrative genres, that is, different ways of functioning, interacting and experiencing social life (for example, lessons, orders, interviews, etc.). They characterise styles, that is, ways of defining their own identity (being a manager or a leader, etc.). In this sense, discourse represents the configuration of what occurs during the interaction. As a result, discursive practices reflect the social paradigm on one hand and, on the other, contribute to creating and/or modifying it (Turchi 2014). When we speak of discourse, coherently with the definitions given by Harré and Gillett (1994) and discursive psychology, we mean the product of exchange and interaction. In this case, we refer to the interaction between those who use prejudices and those who receive and respond to them. We are therefore interested in how prejudice is used, but we believe that the same prejudice does not specifically belong either to those who oppose homogenising families or to the homogenising families. We therefore understand it as a cultural historical discourse with practical reality effects.

## The Participants

The research was conducted in Italy involving associations such as “Rainbow Parents” and “Rainbow Families” born with the mission to promote public debate on homogeneity and to protect homosexual families with children, homosexual couples who want a child or single parents and/or cases of co-parenting (people who decide to commit to raising a child without living together as a couple). The majority of the sample comprised parents from northern and central Italy. All participants are part of same-sex parented families. Specifically, 88 parents participated in the research, including 51 mums and 37 dads. Approximately one-third of the parents defined their situation as a “stable, non-formalised relationship”. Nineteen parents married overseas and 31 formalised their union through legal procedures other than marriage (Civil solidarity pact—PACS,<sup>1</sup> the local registry for civil unions, etc.). More

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<sup>1</sup> PACS refers to a Civil Solidarity Pact, which was introduced in France in 1999; this is a contract for two people of any gender, which aims to formalise their life together. It protects couples in terms of rental relationships and tax matters, but does not regulate other areas, such as inheritance, parentage and adoption (Gentili 2013). With the approval of the law regarding civil unions in Italy, which remains a separate legal institution to marriage, all of the rights and duties of the latter are recognised and guaranteed, including those relating to matters of adoption.

**Table 1** Research protocol

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1. As a parent in a homogeneous family, are there any specific difficulties you have faced? If so, can you describe them?
  2. How did you manage or would you manage these difficulties?
  3. Have you experienced any specific difficulties concerning your family members? If so, how would you describe them?
  4. How did you manage these difficulties or how are you managing them?
  5. As a homosexual parent, are there any prejudices or common sense ideas that you have been confronted with or that you think may occur? If so, can you describe them?
  6. Describe how you have faced or would face such situations.
  7. With reference to potential prejudices that could affect homogeneous families, are there any situations and/or difficulties that your child might encounter?
  8. How would you facilitate the management of such difficulties/prejudices?
  9. Have you ever explained your homogeneous family to your children? If so, what methods did you use? If not, what methods would you use?
  10. Have you ever found yourself telling them the story of their conception? If so, when and in what way? If you have not yet done so, how would you tell them?
  11. How did you communicate or how would you communicate to your child the differences in sexual orientation?
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than half of the families have only one child. The rest of the families have two or more children. The majority of the parents used assisted reproduction techniques, while some children come from previous relationships, particularly heterosexual relationships. Specifically, four parents claim to have children from previous heterosexual relationships but currently live with a partner of the same gender. All parents are in a stable relationship with a partner of the same gender; one specific mother, although not required, says she is transsexual and couples with a bisexual while another mother says she is separated from her partner. Apart from a male couple who have three children from a heterosexual marriage of one of the two partners, all other couples have at least one child from the current homosexual relationship. The requirement to participate in the research was to be a parent in a family with same-sex parents, in order to be able to meet the research objectives.

## Data Collection

Starting from the research question, a list of open-ended questions was drafted and individually administered to the participants (see Table 1). The researcher was available to answer any questions regarding the meaning of the questions and to clarify the meaning of the answers provided by the participant. The written text reveals the way in which the participants use language and the discriminatory and prejudicial formulae that can characterise it. In fact, the participants' discourse provides information about how they use language to achieve their goals and position themselves in relation to other people. The choice of this tool is consistent with the methodology of discourse analysis according to the approach of the discursive positioning of Harré and Gillett (1994).



Given the importance of understanding how people use language to tackle prejudices around parenting, the coding phase involved identifying inherent aspects of the discursive process, rather the content itself (the discursive positioning). The object of the analysis pertained to the use of the participants' discursive methods, that is, the narratives within which it is possible to comprehend the linguistic process of constructing reality (Turchi and Orrù 2014). On an operational level, the analysis of the data occurred in three phases: open coding (examination, comparison, conceptualisation and categorisation of the data), axial coding (reassembling the data in groups, based on relations and models within, and between, the categories identified in the data) and selective coding (identification and description of the central phenomenon, or "central category, in the data) (Dey 1999; Strauss and Corbin 1998). The codification was carried out independently of the authors of this study and the minor differences that were uncovered were revised (Finlay 2002; Cutcliffe 2000).

## Results and Discussion

### Tackling Discrimination and Prejudice

Certain interview subjects cite the provocative and *prejudicial phrases* that they receive most often: "But who does the man's things and who does the woman's things?", "Who is the real mother or the real father?", "If you're not the biological mother, you're not the mother", "A child cannot grow up without a mother or without a father," etc. Other times, they identify the main arguments that make them feel discriminated against, such as, for example, "that they are 2nd class families", "that they are not good parents", "Mother's and Father's Day", "thinking that gay couple's lives are carefree and frivolous". Faced with these prejudices, the responses of the parents interviewed contain *anti-judgement* discursive methods, with arguments that are ideological in nature: in fact, some of the interview subjects consider the school or church environment to be very prejudicial (for example, "some teachers seem to judge us at school" or "some criticisms come from local ecclesiastical environments"). Likewise, the media and political landscape are considered to be highly discriminatory (for example, "not in real life or daily life, but we feel a lot of prejudice on TV and in the political class" or "We notice prejudices in the church and from homophobes and hypocrites that you see around or on TV").

One of the main strategies for tackling prejudice that emerges is *creating an ongoing dialogue* with discriminatory people (for example, "I asked the teachers to consider doing a more generic family celebration"), or "to explain themselves" and *inform people* about the normalcy of same-sex families (for example, "I think the only solution is to let people know who we are, a family like any other, with our own good things and our own problems").

In many responses, however, a *contradictory* method (for example, "People often say... you're a fantastic mother... I contradict them... I am not a mother, just a man and a father" or "explaining the scientific results about this, exposing prejudices or simply showing how normal it is"), or an *avoidance* of certain particularly discriminatory interactions ("we do not accept criticisms of our family and our children

from people who do not know us, but, most importantly, from people who do not have kids”) seems to emerge. Of course we understand these responses, especially as they come from situations of prejudice and discrimination, which are often repeated. Here, however, we are trying to highlight how the interaction between people is articulated.

On the other hand, many people use descriptive methods (for example, “When asked about the father, I explain that he does not have a father, just a donor, and that he will not miss something that he never had”). Few parents, however, claim that they have never encountered prejudice to this point.

## Discussion

Although prejudices are very widespread and frequently reported by the participants in the study, the means for responding to those prejudices risks certain problems. For example, when tackling the issue of difference from a contradictory point of view involves trying to establish who is right or which theory is more valid, rather than sharing a problem that involves both of the parties involved—those who doubt it or disapprove of it and those that defend it. In fact, informing the community about certain arguments does not, in itself, tackle the problems created by prejudices and social stereotypes, nor does it ensure a cultural change. In effect, simple “information” about LGBT issues is not enough. The “how” is quite important. Of the responses provided, “creating an ongoing dialogue” offers the possibility of a continued discussion, if it the most widespread method involves trying to convince the other party. Some parents prefer to avoid contact with discriminatory individuals; though this is understanding from a human perspective, it cannot be considered to be an effective strategy, since the relationship will not only fail to improve but, presumably, risks getting worse.

## Tackling Family Matters

In terms of how one relates to their own family, it is possible to identify two types of answers: some respondents have experienced difficulties mainly due to the non-acceptance of their emotional situation by their household, while the rest of the parents had not encountered such difficulties. In terms of the first group of answers, one significant piece of data is that the majority of the problems around acceptance within the family concern the partner or, more generally, recognition of two mothers or two fathers (for example, “Unfortunately, my in-laws still don’t think of Laura as a real mother, but they’re loving and affectionate grandparents to our son” or “Yes, there are difficulties in accepting our relationship”), or the need to accept to accept relations between people of the same gender and the fear of societal prejudices (for example, “I definitely noticed a lot of uneasiness/reluctance from my parents about alternative family structures. They did not initially agree with our chooses but, at the same time, they never tried to stop us from becoming parents” or “After an initial period of confusion, which was more about their fear of societal judgements, my parents are now completely in love with their grandchild”), rather than the children

themselves. In fact, it would seem that the difficulties around acceptance and prejudices in many families do not fall on the children (“I am of Belarussian extraction, so my family is very against my decision to live with a woman. However, they are very happy about having a grandchild”) or have even been eased by the latter (for example, “Things are better now, since my daughter was born”).

In the other responses, they limit themselves to stipulate what the difficulties are or who they have had them with (for example, “Definitely had difficulties with the rest of my families. Sisters and brothers have backward mindsets. Very little space for tolerance, so they are indifferent and there is little communication” or “Some initial difficulties around the pregnancy from the non-biological grandmother”).

In terms of means for tackling this, parents report talking with family members and offering them *explanations* (for example, “I talked with them, explained the situation and, finally, they understood” or “We explained the situation calmly and focused on moving forward”). Another frequent method is *acting without thinking, or simply being oneself* (for example, “With my mother, love was enough: she saw us taking care of our child and each other and she became a proud grandmother and mother-in-law” or “Simply being ourselves and showing that we are a normal family in everyday life, as much as we could”). Some participating parents talk about *sharing* and involving their families (for example, “Trying to communicate and share...” or “I continued on my own path, trying to involve them.”), without describing anything else.

Certain responses seem to contain discursive methods that hint at *avoidance, passivity and resignation* (for example, “Not everyone is able to easily accept equal mothers and there’s nothing I can do about it”), or a sort of *tolerance* for the family unit quietly continuing on (for example, “We do not tackle it really. When we see his brother (very rarely), we act as if nothing has happened and for holidays, like Christmas, we exchange gifts and greetings, but nobody says anything. It’s a cold relationship”). In some cases, they claim to have succeeded in softening their relationships *by concentrating on their child* (for example, “A lot of resistance when they found out we were expecting a child; now that he’s here, they participate in raising him and our struggle to be recognised” or “Family members were reticent at first, then softened spontaneously over time”). In other cases, participating parents decided to *cut off relationships* (for example, “I have cut off all contact with my sister-in-law and I have no interest in repairing our relationship” or “I have not seen them in several years”).

## Discussion

In terms of difficulties with, or discrimination or prejudices from, family members, the participating parents were very descriptive, identify them and state what they are or who they have them with, without adding many details. Some subjects provide no further information, nor do they explain what works or does not work. An “airtight and self-referential” narrative position can be derived from this, based on what others have said (prejudices or discrimination).

Another interactive mode used is to be prescriptive, that is, by telling the person they are talking to what must be done or what they must think. Once again, the

intent seems to be to explain to their families about scientific or cultural innovations, as if this in itself is enough to tackle prejudices and dismantle them. In reality, talking or discussing does not lead to certain results but rather creates even “colder” or more conflicting relationships, as can be seen from many responses. These are based on differing opinions and, in extreme cases, cause relationships to be cut off. Instead of trying to change the prejudices of more reticent family members with “facts”, some parents try to involve family members in the development of the children and/or to introduce themselves to their family with the simple, transparent experiences of daily life (Rostovsky et al. 2004). This becomes very effective because it focuses on what the two parents, or a new father and a grandfather, can have in common with reference to normal concerns such as taking care of a child/grandchild. The responses make it clear that even the most hostile family members become more caring and welcoming when faced with a child, which is more effective than endless talking.

### Anticipating Difficulties

In their responses, the participants report the kinds of difficulties that they anticipate encountering. The main ones reported include: (a) the difficulty of being recognised as good parents, due to the absence of legislation (for example, “as a non-biological parent in Italy, we have absolutely no rights and duties for our daughter, just like my family”), (b) the difficulty of having children via fertilisation in Italy (for example, “I have to go abroad to get pregnant and the process is very expensive”) and (c) discrimination at work or in school (for example, “The difficulty that some people have in defining my partner as the non-biological mother of our child”).

Among the most commonly used means for tackling these issues, we find *explanations* to those who are reticent; *optimal sincerity and transparency* in their various interactions (for example, “I have only spoken about it with some trusted colleagues” or “Explaining that I am a relative of the child”); protecting oneself at a legislative level, for example, through permits, proxies or anything else that is available (for example, “I had to draft a will to take care of my child and my partner” or “since there is no legal recognition, I had to fill out a proxy form so my partner could take our child out of school”); *completely changing the interaction/institution or adapting and accepting* the contingency (“I’m sure I will encounter it. There are many ignorant people and the media gives a platform to politicians who spout absurd theories about gender for the sole purpose of getting attention from people who read articles while bored or listen absent-mindedly to the news during dinner”), almost taking it for granted that what is said is the unchanging truth.

Regarding the difficulties that their children might encounter, the chief fears are *discriminatory acts by peers* or being quizzed about the family (for example, “they might encounter prejudice from educators or the parents of other children”). They use *polemic* discourse (for example, “the media gives a platform to politicians who spout absurd theories about gender”) or *suppositions* (for example, “I firmly believe that ignorance is the mother of all problems”), making the arguments used to reach certain statements implicitly clear. In fact, the participants rarely consider the merit

of their arguments: they limit themselves to *stating what they think* (for example, “society here in Italy is not ready for situations like this yet”) or talking as if what they are saying is fact or defending their point of view or opinion without considering the merit of the criteria used (for example, “Clear and simple: we are not wrong. We are perfectly normal and, if someone does not realise that, that’s their problem”).

Some modalities can be defined *generalizations* (for example, “sincerity is the most important thing. Even for children”), with factual/cliché phrases *or comments/judgements* (for example, “Prejudice is the evil of this world” or “Common sense, solidness and an awareness of who I am and what I deserve”). In certain cases, the participants anticipate what could happen (for example, “After choosing between several schools that mostly met our needs and ideas for education and training, we contacted the director. After the first conversation, we already enrolled for March. We have the director a book about same-sex family for the teachers and two books about the same subject for kids, which she could put in the school library. In July, we will participate in a few afternoon play sessions for the kids who will be together next year, and we can get to know the other parents”).

Certain parents use “networking” criteria (for example, “Trying to create a network and talk openly with our child about the prejudices and difficulties that they may face” or “Tackling each situation on a case-by-case basis, when we meet families like ours that may have already experienced certain things”), a strategy that is more constructive and more in line with the methods for tackling difficulties that lead to real cultural change.

## Discussion

The use of some of the discursive methods outlined above risk creating further fragmentation and isolation between the two opposed parties, who are intent on proving their own superiority over the other rather than moving towards a common, shared outlook: the more one pushes their own point of view, thus delegitimising the other’s, the more the differences are emphasised and maintained. When this difference is used to establish who is right and who is wrong, this is more likely to further shut down dialogue and reinforce the opposition between them. In the same way, using polemic tones and limiting oneself to commenting and judging what happens in society may seem understandable on one hand but, on the other hand, does not combat prejudices and stereotypes and does not create changes. Instead, it risks fueling the conflict. It is understandable and legitimate that those who suffer prejudice or marginalisation tend to choose or prefer to focus on daily survival rather than invest themselves with more moralistic and ideological burdens (Iudici and Verdecchia 2015). In this study, we do not want to blame, or worse judge, those who do so. We want to highlight how a certain type of interaction can open up certain scenarios that can go towards changing certain closures or towards consolidation and thus further closure. On the other hand, it is more reasonable to start from those who already see this prejudice to change those who perpetrate it and consequently still do not see it. Hence the attempt to show the parents concerned how the prejudice could be unhinged or at least begin to be cracked and as a fallout, also change the patterns of those who implement it.

On the other hand, methods for tackling the problems such as “networking” between parents or being transparent from the beginning in various interactions helps to share problems and increases the opportunities to solve them, for example, by talking with somebody who has already dealt with them. Anticipating difficulties can also lead to proposals aimed at creating new and more communal situations (for example, working together to find solutions to educational problems, which everyone could encounter at school), rather than those which are divisive in nature (which an ideology or a point of view could be). It is important (and more effective), however, to establish a dialogue, not simply stating what the problems are or emphasising personal positions and ideas. Difficulties stemming from the legislation are a more complex case: there are no laws in Italy that allow so-called “non-biological” parents to adopt children and, therefore, be recognised or legitimate with respect to their children. It is interesting to note, however, how many same-sex families, and therefore how many parents, try to work around a legislative system that is still lagging behind compared to other countries in Europe and protect their children through other constitutional means.

### Tackling Communication with Children

In terms of tackling communication with children, the most frequently cited tools for talking to children about sexuality and differences in sexual orientation are (*reading*) books and the use of *stories*, fairytales, short stories (for example, “”) and *photos* (for example, “Our main instrument for communicating is still books and, obviously, recent photos of us from before he was born, to show him our love, which is the reason he was born”), or *creating a personalised story* (for example, “We will explain that, in order to have a baby, you need an egg and sperm. His mothers love each other, but they only have eggs. So, in order to make him a part of our family, we asked a nice man to give us his sperm. One mother carried him in her belly and the other carried him in her heart... and that’s how he arrived”). Parents with very young children also respond by saying that, when their children are older, they will use books and fairytales to tell them how they were born and about their history (for example, “We will tell him that we were looking for him. We will use specific support books for surrogacy, where the concept of family is explained as separate from the biology and where they explain that family is who wants you, looks for you, loves you and takes care of you”).

In light of personalised stories, the most frequently adopted strategy is *personalisation*, that is, constructing discourse based on what is known about their own child, as well as their experience in the school environment (for example, “When he asks, I will tell him the truth, which he can learn at that moment” or “We were never given any reference, so we’ll focus on reality” or “We’ll put it simply, without exaggerating, and tell him the truth about diversity in the world”, that is “exactly how it is... There are men who love women and others who love men. The same is true for women”).

In terms of communication with children about more specific subjects, like diversity and sexual orientation, the parents maintain that it is not necessary to make

these subject explicit or to deal with them directly, because, according to some, *children experience diversity openly every day* (for example, “I think, if you are born and raised in a same-sex family, there is no need for one of the parents to tell you at some point: ‘Honey, I wanted to tell you something... I’m gay’” or “I don’t think there’s any need to explain it. At home, he will see two men who live together and love each other. He will see our parents and heterosexual couples with kids, so he will understand about diverse sexual orientations”; “There’s a good book for kids, ‘Tango’, which tells the true story of two male penguins in a zoo in New York. They made a family, hatched an egg from another couple that did not want it and then their chick was born” or “He sees it every day in certain families that we visit. We explain by saying that they are people who love each other and want to start a family and spend their lives together”).

*Moral judgements* return in certain responses (“Our guideline will be truth and simplicity”, “Tolerance for every living thing and respect for people. “Everything else will come in time” or “the diversity of family”).

## Discussion

The responses reveal that parents prefer to use books and stories to talk with their children about diversity, sexual orientation and conception. Therefore, the way to tackle communication consists of talking to children and explaining the possible ways that men and women can fall in love and conceive. Another method is using experiences to provide an example, that is, “showing children” what is happening around them: living in a same-sex family or visiting other same-sex parents; showing children that people of the same sex who love each other and start a family exist is enough to teach them about diversity for many parents. Furthermore, some parents share the idea that communication should be personalised and tailored to the needs of the child and their level of awareness. This confirms some studies in the literature (Lingiardi and Carone 2016). It is worth noting that more than one-third of the parents who participated in the study live with young children (0–4 years), so the use of age-appropriate books, fairytales and “simple” words can be a stimulating way to teach children about diversity, especially as part of a strategy to begin talking about it with them from a young age. Responding in terms of personalisation offers the possibility to focus on the individual relationship and not to use stereotypes or improper generalisations.

## Conclusion and Limitations

By analysing the responses to the question, an attempt was made to highlight how same-sex parents are sometimes at risk of tackling various prejudices and discriminatory acts in a judgemental or contradictory manner. This firstly refers to judging the other person as a person with prejudices, stereotypes or a paucity of scientific awareness and, secondly, the attempt to convince prejudiced individuals not to have them by presenting data and information in support of their position. This creates a system that is based on differences and opposition (“those that align themselves with

“traditional families” and “those that align themselves with ‘different or same-sex families’”).

Instead, where it is possible to shift the discussion onto what “brings people together” and makes the two groups similar, it is possible to bridge an operational “gap”, creating a meeting point for the two people communicating that may be able to tackle the critical issues that arise. The parents interviewed thus find themselves interacting with families who are occasionally sceptical, with homophobic employers, with unaware friends and acquaintances and with teachers and schools that are frequently ill-equipped, and must try to advance their families’ rights through their experiences. Sometimes they can do this in an exemplary manner, anticipating problems and endeavouring to create increasingly more open and favourable environments for themselves and their children; other times, they implement less effective strategies by presenting themselves in a conflicting light, reacting to the other person and confirming certain ideological contrasts, occasionally with the intent of fighting them. The most effective way to tackle this debate in a constructive manner, then, and find practical solutions to the parenthood issue would be to primarily focus on the role of the parent and not gender differences. This involves focusing on the educational responsibility that the institution assigns to this and disregarding other common sense discourses. The research also highlights that the parties configure the differences in two different ways: a) as exclusive solutions that one party tries to affirm with respect to the other and b) as the product of a dispute that must first be understood and shared as a common problem. The second method seems the most pertinent, as it does not involve being evasive with, or even cutting off, one of the parties, but rather a shift towards a communal direction. Regarding this issue from the perspective of a culture of difference, this same divergence of views and opinions no longer becomes an occasion for fighting, evasiveness or fragmentation or isolation between the parties. Instead, it first becomes a shared heritage, an anchoring point from which people may start to create cohesion; it is only from this anchoring point that a shared solution is possible.

This study, therefore, was intended to focus on the ways in which people carry out the parental role, regardless of sexual orientation. Tackling prejudice, therefore, does not stem from their own values and ideologies on the issue, but rather how they learn to co-exist with different ones. As a result, same-sex parents are faced with a twofold challenge: being parents and legitimising themselves in a society that is still full of prejudices against them (Lingiardi 2013). Moreover, we, as professionals, are called upon to support same-sex families, supporting them not in their role as parents but in the way that they tackle the prejudices they face. This is done by supplying them with tools that allow them to not talk in coded language, to not have to differentiate themselves using the same prejudices and stereotypes that they encounter and tackle, to not put them in opposition by placing them on the same discursive level as those who delegitimise them using a prejudice, but, instead, creating a different type of discourse and promoting dialogue via other channels (Faccio et al. 2019; Iudici et al. 2018). In terms of parents relating to the difficulties of their children, two elective strategies are noted: providing examples of acceptance towards diversity and personalisation, that is, defining interventions that are specifically based on the needs of the children. We believe that the ways in which we deal



with prejudice can be used to make considerations to improve relationship management. We are well aware of what it means to be discriminated against, but our aim is to problematise certain interactive modes in order to offer greater educational effectiveness to the children involved. This concerns all parents, both homosexual, transgender and heterosexual. The critical aspects highlighted always concern the modality used and not the person who uses it and aims to make parents more aware of how they respond to prejudices. From our point of view, the change in the mentality of a population goes through a change of discourse and this can only happen if everyone makes a contribution in terms of responsibility, both individual and collective. In relation to the limits of this study, the first limit concerns the decision to use a written questionnaire. This decision was based on the following considerations: (a) the usability of the questionnaire and the speed of consulting, compiling and recovering the responses, both for the researcher and the participants. This, in fact, involved a questionnaire that was completely online and could be consulted from any device (smartphone, tablet, computer). This could, therefore, be sent via a standard Internet connection; (b) more freedom and a sense of peace when responding: as this involved sensitive subject matter, in particular certain questions, the ability to respond in writing, in a completely anonymous manner, allowed the participant to take as much time as they needed to respond. This eliminated any pressure or sense of invasiveness and gave them more freedom to respond. The results of this study concern the Italian situation and cannot be generalised although we believe that they may be a starting point for several countries in the Mediterranean area. Another limitation pertains to the concern that the researcher may judge or assess the quality of a same-sex parent, which is presumably the reason for some of the short answers that are lacking in detail. For this purpose of this study, it was helpful to contact the families, communicate with some parents in a variety of contexts and to explain and clarify the purposes of the research; starting from a context such as the Italian one in which prejudice can manifest itself on various levels and in various ways, as evident from the answers, the ultimate aim is to investigate how parents face it, not to judge or criticize them, but to give voice to their experiences, support them and guide them as professionals where they feel the need to be more effective in managing the practical consequences of these prejudices in aspects and levels of everyday life and to find possible solutions to live better. This allowed the parents to better understand the purposes of the research, at least partially.

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## **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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

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