

What Same-Sex Parenting Does to Kinship

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What are the effects of same-sex parenting on the kinship system of Western societies? A collection of international papers edited by two anthropologists of kinship lead them to reject the thesis of an anthropological break or the claim that the current kinship system has been disrupted. Instead, they emphasize the centrality of multiple parenting.

Reviewed: Jérôme Courduriès and Agnès Fine (ed.), *Homosexualité et parenté*, Paris, Armand Colin, coll. Sociétales, 2014, 230 p., 24, 50 €.

In Western societies, homosexuality has, in a decade or two, emerged from its marginal and clandestine status and entered the public sphere. Even if it has not been unanimously recognized as merely one sexual orientation among others, it has henceforth become more widely accepted. Legal mechanisms regulating the shared lives of same-sex couples have been established, including, to speak only of France, the PACS (*pacte civil de solidarité*, or civil solidarity pact, created in 1999) and same-sex marriage (2013). While in recent years there has been more and more research on homosexuality, much of it explores relationships, sexuality, access to parenthood, and lifestyle. Few studies analyze kinship itself, asking whether homosexuality transforms—and if so, to what extent—the kinship system existing in European and American societies, despite the fact that this question has, at the same moment, triggered vigorous ideological debates within society. The book under review, edited by two anthropologists, Jérôme Courduriès and Agnès Fine, and which originated with a conference held in Toulouse in December 2011, adopts precisely this perspective. Over ten chapters, sixteen anthropologists and sociologists present the results of their research. Two questions emerge: what is the relationship between gays and lesbians and their biological relatives, specifically their immediate family members (i.e., father, mother, and siblings)? And does the access of same-sex couples to parenthood change the nature of kinship? Though it makes no claim to address these questions exhaustively, the book has the advantage of considering the matter from an international perspective: in addition to France, the essays deal with Belgium, Spain, Switzerland, the United States, and Brazil.

Homosexuality and Relationships with Biological Relatives

Addressing the first question, Courduriès demonstrates that, increased tolerance notwithstanding, some families continue to reject homosexuality at a visceral level when it concerns their own children. Having studied young people who were forced out of their homes due to their sexual orientation, he calls attention to the violent nature of parental reactions: exclusion from the family is often, for instance, preceded by a period of sequestration aimed at hiding the “shame” experienced by fathers and mothers. For young gays and lesbians rejected in this way, brothers and sisters are most often allies, but in some circumstances they are, on the contrary, “their parents’ accomplices” (p. 58). Often, fathers and mothers have to “come out” as parents of homosexual children. They may also do so

when the latter enter into a relationship. Wilfried Rault, who is interested in how PACS ceremonies are celebrated, shows how these rituals reveal the ambivalence of intergenerational relationships. Though an ideal of peaceful relations prevails, they are generally rather tense. Consequently, biological relatives tend to be sidelined and, ultimately, to be confined to secondary roles, while pride of place is given to the couple's peers. Sometimes separate ceremonies are held, with friends and relatives each having their own services at different times.

From the standpoint of intergenerational relationships, the situations in Brazil and Spain seem rather different. In societies where mutual aid between family members is crucial and widespread, a child's homosexuality presents no obstacle to relationships of support and exchange between family members. Contrary to Kath Weston's description (1991) of the homosexual scene in California in the 1980s, networks among friends do not fill the void left by the retreat of family members. Mutual assistance between biological relatives is too valuable for homosexuals—or their kin, for that matter—to relinquish it. In Spain, material and financial exchanges exist that offset homophobic attitudes and promote the *de facto* integration of young gays and lesbians (see José Ignacio Pichardo Galán's essay). In Brazil, incidences of intergenerational cohabitation are not uncommon: fathers and mothers will allow their child and his or her partner to live with them for a period of time. In return, they receive financial assistance, in which the family conforms to a practice that is very widespread (see the article by Claudia Regina Nihnig and Miriam Pillar Grossi). Flávio Luiz Tarnovski calls attention to the role played in Brazil by "gay uncles." The latter are single homosexual men who are deeply immersed in mutual aid relationships with their relatives. This practice can be seen as a reinterpretation of a traditional role that can often extend to raising a brother's or sister's child, following the model, which is well known to anthropologists, of fosterage or "Brazilian-style adoptions." In these cases, the uncle recognizes the child as his own, which is illegal yet widespread among working-class populations. This highly original form of homosexual access to parenthood is only conceivable in a society in which the "circulation of children" is common.

As Céline Costechareire emphasizes in a study of French lesbians living as couples, parental attitudes have a profound effect on the homosexual experience, including lifestyle, relationships with the homosexual community, and identity. Yet these effects are in no way mechanical, since additional factors may intervene—notably pervasive homophobia, which, depending on one's social milieu and family situation, can be more or less strong, and the unevenly distributed ability to detach oneself from it. In working-class milieus, a combination of such factors often leads to self-deprecation and social isolation, with family hostility exacerbating this stigmatization. Circles of friends play a crucial role, both because of the sheer fact that they exist and because of the way in which they are constituted (homogeneous or mixed, from the standpoint of sexual orientation). They can also offset the effects of familial exclusion.

Same-Sex Parenting, Biologism and Filiation

The most striking factor in gay and lesbian access to parenthood and its implications for the kinship system is the power of "biologism"—that is, beliefs pertaining to the biological dimension of the bond of filiation. Becoming a parent is a decisive step in affirming one's sexual orientation vis-à-vis one's father and mother. At this stage, hiding ceases to be an option and relatives have no choice but to yield to obvious facts. Martine Gross has analyzed the impact on families of the French gay community's recourse to surrogacy. If the announcement of a plan to have children is most often disturbing for the

partners' fathers and mothers, the situation normalizes itself at the birth of the child. Fathers and mothers are delighted to become grandparents, and their own children's homosexuality becomes a secondary concern. Gay couples who opt for surrogacy, despite its economic and social costs (in France, the practice is illegal), do so in order to become "full-time fathers" (p. 160), a possibility afforded neither by adoption (in which only the member of the couple who is formally adopting the child is recognized as the father), nor by shared parenting (in which a gay couple must arrange for the presence of a woman, who gives birth to the child and is its legal mother, whether or not she herself belongs to a couple). On several occasions, Gross emphasizes the importance of the belief in the transmission of biogenetic characteristics for creating a sense of paternity. The rhetoric of resemblance is very present in these situations: resemblance (both physical and psychological) and biological connection mutually reinforce one another, following a circular logic in which the former is the sign of the latter, in ways that strengthen the belief in parenthood's biogenetic basis. Some couples, convinced of the symbolic power of the biogenetic bond and its effects on affiliation as it relates to both lines to which the soon-to-be-born child will belong, refuse to allow it any role in defining fatherhood: they mix their embryos together, which are then inserted into the surrogate's uterus, so that each can fully feel like he is the father and their close relatives remain ignorant of the biological father's true identity. Having the sister of the man who is not the child's biological father make a gift of her oocytes is another way of manipulating genetic materials to place the kinship bonds between the gay couple, their respective lineages, and the child on a biological and hence irrefutable basis.

Access to gay fatherhood in the United States, as studied by Ellen Lewin, once again demonstrates the potency of references to biology and resemblance in establishing a family. This explains why, among other reasons, American gays prefer surrogacy, particularly since the public adoption system only makes them eligible for children who are reputed to be "difficult," whom married heterosexual couples tend to avoid. In a social context characterized by the "commercialization of reproduction" (p. 140), with some gay couples spending up to \$100,000 per pregnancy, becoming parents is, for many homosexuals, a way of no longer being gay—in other words, of leaving behind a "gay world" that is deemed frivolous and futile, thus ensuring greater familial and social integration.

The final two essays deal more specifically with situations of shared parenting, i.e., when a same-sex couple raises a child that one of them had with a third party, whether the latter also belongs to a couple or not. Generally speaking, both couples share responsibility for the child. From the standpoint of the law, only the child's biological parents count as its true parents, while their respective partners find themselves in the fragile position of being noncustodial parents. Drawing on a study undertaken in French-speaking Switzerland, Claire Ansermet, Yazid Ben Hounet, Pascal-Eric Gaberel, and Marianne Modak show how uncomfortable the status of noncustodial parent can be in situations of shared parenting: because they are not recognized by the law, such parents often find themselves "anxious about losing their children" (p. 198), notably if the couple breaks up. A sword of Damocles constantly hangs over their heads, for the agreements made in the event of break-up (who has custody of the child, child support, and so on) have no legal standing and are entirely contingent upon the legal parents' good will. The parent-child bond is, as a result, significantly weakened. The conclusion of such analyses is that it is difficult to make multiple parenting function in daily life: in some of the shared parenting systems developed by same-sex couples, one finds a kind of structural rivalry between the father and the biological mother's partner that often leads to conflict. Of course, similar rivalry can be found in other multiple parent situations, such as in the case of blended heterosexual families, where it often

occurs between the father and stepfather. But in the case of same-sex multiple parenting, the rivalry is exacerbated by the fact that the noncustodial parent is a woman rather than a man, and, moreover, the partner of the child's mother since the inception of the family project: there is, consequently, a greater likelihood that she would care for the child and step on his prerogatives as father.

The fragile status of the noncustodial parent also extends to the grandparents' generation, as Cathy Herbrand shows in a Belgium-based study. Fathers and mothers of the noncustodial parent are less likely to think of themselves as grandparents than those who base their relationship with their grandchildren on biogenetic and legal bonds. The ideal of consanguinity is so deeply rooted that it leads "social grandparents" (p. 183) to make distinctions between their grandchildren even when they accept their child's homosexuality and shared parenting plan: for instance, the child of a son's or daughter's partner is not fully integrated into the kinship system. Weaker integration impacts the parental couple, as the noncustodial parent feels that his or her parental status is not recognized. As Courduriès and Fine observe in their introduction, noncustodial parents and social grandparents are seen as allies rather than blood relatives, and therefore occupy a peripheral space within the family. It thus seems that multiple parenting rarely leads to complex filiation—i.e., filiation consisting of more than two lines. Unquestionably, biologicistic beliefs are difficult to let go.

An Historical Break in the Kinship System?

In their remarkable introductory essay (consisting of nearly thirty solidly argued pages), the editors do much more than present an overview of the various contributions. They put the findings in perspective, discussing them, identifying new paths that require further exploration (the weight of national particularities, the influence of religious belief, the asymmetry between men and women in the reproductive process, and so on). They also pose a question that is essential to the analysis of kinship: do homosexual conjugality and same-sex parenting represent an anthropological break in the European and American kinship system? Their answer is "no," and is thus in disagreement on this point with the way in which Anne Cadoret (2002)—one of the first anthropologists to become interested in same-sex parenting—uses the term "homosexual filiation" (*homoparenté*). This term implies, they argue, that lesbian and gay access to parenthood has introduced a specific form of kinship. For Courduriès and Fine, however, the real novelty lies in multiple parenting, which is not unique to homoparental families, as one also finds it in the blended families of heterosexual couples. The question is determining how one should handle these "extra parents" in a kinship system based on exclusive bilateralism, which, in turn, is reinforced by a "spontaneous biologism" (to use Francis Zimmermann's term [1993]) that equates parenthood with biological parenthood). Thus Courduriès and Fine conclude: "If an anthropological break has occurred, it seems, in our view, tied not to homosexuality and same-sex parenting but to the role of multiple living adults in bringing into the world and educating the same child" (p. 36).

This is a bold thesis, reiterating the argument that Fine (2013) made the previous year in an aptly titled article: "To Have Two Fathers or Two Mothers: Revolution or Revelation in the Meaning of Filiation?" Its great merit is to have resituated the questions of homosexuality and same-sex parenting within recent and more general kinship trends that are unique to Western societies. Similarities do indeed exist with blended families, some adoptive families, and couples with children that resorted to assisted reproduction, such as gamete donation or surrogacy: all of these situations raise the question of the role of third parties, which make it necessary in some cases, particularly when the third party participates in the child's education, to conceive of parenthood pluralistically. Yet besides the fact that the argument

attributed to Cadoret is one that she has not defended since her 2002 book *Des parents comme les autres* (“Parents like any Other”) and that the term “homosexual filiation” (*homoparenté*) is in fact the title of an essay by Jean-Pierre Winter (2010), a French psychoanalyst noted for his hostility to same-sex parenting, the claim that homosexuality and same-sex parenting have as such had no significant effect on kinship is debatable, if not reductive. The findings presented in the various contributions to this book add some nuance to this claim. One can see that in the current state of our kinship system, as well as the beliefs and rules that sustain it, homoparental pairings—to speak only of couples, leaving out shared parenting arrangements—are not self-evident: the self-deprecation many homosexuals feel when they face significant hostility from close relatives makes access to parenthood difficult in psychological terms; biologicistic beliefs leave little space for social parents (i.e., the partners of biological fathers or mothers)—who are also typically noncustodial parents, recognized neither by the law nor by the institutions—and their lines; and, despite the “family effect” produced by the birth of a child, the inclusion of homoparental couples within networks of relatives remains fragile and limited, except in societies in which the practice of familial mutual assistance is a vital necessity or a deeply rooted cultural trait. It would thus seem that multiple parenting is not the sole factor. From our point of view, the real problem lies in the spontaneous biologism that still underpins most beliefs relating to kinship: the reluctance to accept multiple parenting is only one instance of this problem, and surely not the only one. The fact that almost all same-sex parents must negotiate with the ideal of consanguinity, often at their own initiative and sometimes unconsciously, is proof that homosexuality’s challenge to the European and American kinship system can only be addressed by relativizing spontaneously biological representations of kinship bonds—a task that is both difficult to achieve and, regrettably, frequently misunderstood by society and families.

In conclusion, we should note that Ellen Lewin was right to observe in 1993, when discussing Kath Weston’s *Families We Choose* (1991), that gay and lesbian studies represented an important turning point in the analysis of kinship, comparable to the turn in the 1980s towards feminist history and anthropology. Its great advantage is to have revealed the kinds of belief that underpin the kinship system and the tensions that emerge in this realm between different ontologies of kinship. The plurality of beliefs pertaining to kinship destroys the fiction of a naturalistic, transcendent, and universalistic family. Kinship thus becomes a political question, which Courdurières’ and Fine’s volume helps us to conceptualize. This book is unquestionably a major event in the French-speaking world and represents a landmark in the literature.

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