

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN GAYS AND LESBIAN WANTING CHILDREN

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Abstract

The study of gays and lesbians wanting children can more largely enlighten what is going on with men or women are wanting children. The issues tackled in this article will question for this population in the French context the articulation between conjugality and parenting, the articulation between biological ties and social bonds, finally the innovations possibly made within the homofamilies, of the gender roles in raising children.

Introduction

In this paper, I will speak about lesbigay parenting but taking into account the specific French aspects due to France's family and bioethics' laws and their influence on people who want to become parents.

First let me underline two asymmetrical aspects of the question. One is the asymmetry between men and women on the one hand, and parents that enjoy a legal status and those who don't on the other hand.

In France, men and women are not equal when they want to become a parent whether it be biological parent or by adoption.

During many centuries women were not master of their own body, nowadays they may decide by themselves if and when to get a child, they may choose to give birth or to have an abortion. Adoption set apart, a woman gets her legal status as a mother automatically at the moment she gives birth, but men have to know which woman gave birth to his child in order to register as a father with the authorities. Motherhood results from nature, fatherhood from will.

Even though the French laws of 1994 on bioethics limit medically assisted procreation, MAP, to straight non fertile couples, lesbians, because they are women, have more possibilities than gay men. Women may go to neighbouring countries as Belgium, or Spain for MAP. Of course, they may ask a male friend to be a sperm donor, they may also apply for an adoption. They may also contact a man to conceive a child with view of "co-parenting", that is to say to be responsible together and to bring up the child they will conceive. This co-parenting may involve two to four persons depending on the will of the partners to share parenthood. Under this concept, we include the whole process of looking for a future father or a mother, conceiving and raising the child.

One has to agree that the choices open to men are far less numerous.

The very great majority of men (82%), members of the APGL Association des parents et futurs parents gays et lesbiens, this is the French association of gay and lesbian parents, have chosen co-parenting as a solution, whereas only 38% of the women have chosen this way.

As I told before, there is another asymmetry: the one between persons that may become legal parents and those who may not. That is to say, the father's male partner, or the mother's female partner, even if they act as parents, may not get the legal status of parent. Legally, a child may have only one male and one female

legal parent and no more. From one day to the next, the relationship the child has built with his parent's partner may be severed, for example, by separation or death of one of his legal parents.

Planning to start a family, is this an individual plan or a plan of the couple?

From those taking part in the APGL survey of 2001, women outnumbered men in declaring that they live as a couple and proportionally they were far more numerous to declare they have lived in a relationship for more than 5 years (sixty nine percent 69% women living in a couple relationship, opposite to only forty one percent 41% men). This has to be put in context to surveys (Spira, Bajos, groupe ACSF 1993; Bozon, Leridon, Riandez, groupe ACSF 1993; Jaspard 1997; Bajos, Bozon et al 1998; Simon et al 1978) on the sexuality of the French having been conducted for about thirty 30 years now.

Women's preference for relational and marital aspects and men's for the sexual ones seem thus to be confirmed at the APGL where more women live in a couple relationship than men, and for a longer period of time.

The male population of the APGL thus, lives more often in a couple relationship than the general gay men population (Schiltz M.A., 1999).

To live as a couple and to wish a child does not necessarily imply to be a couple's wish but may be an individual wish.

How do you know if this is the plan of a couple?

For example, when you hear in an interview that "the child is a kind of extension of the couple" or that a couple relationship is an essential prerequisite for the fruition of the child-wish that may have existed even before the couple relationship.

Another example is when the male or female partner is self-positioning as a "parent".

What is going on with men and women about this issue?

For men this plan is more often than not, the plan of only one of both partners of the couple; there may also be two separate individual plans. It only rarely happens that the partner defines himself as a second father.

For women, the child wish is very often a wish of their couple; it is the fulfillment of their couple. Having a child is the materialization of their love. The mother's female partner very often considers herself as a second mum.

Let's come back now to co-parenting... As I said before, it may involve two to four persons depending on the will of the partners to share parenthood.

Here I would like to point out how the couple aspect and the parent aspect do interact. In this context, I will speak about biparental families, that is to say a family with two parents or multiparental families with more than two parents.

When we interviewed gay and lesbian parents about the way they have chosen to become a parent either by adoption, MAP or to resort to a surrogacy mother which leads [lids] to a biparental family, or co-parenting which often leads to a multiparental family, they all say that they have looked at each alternative and set aside those that did not match their understanding of the child interest or their own definition of family.

Why have men and women chosen biparentality?

For men to choose for a biparental type of family means the fulfillment of a specific type of fatherhood, where the main aspect is the relation with the child, the daily concrete full time caretaking of the child. For women this choice does not mean fulfillment of motherhood, but rather a fulfillment of the family as an extension of the couple. One of the reasons often expressed by men who chose biparentality is that they want to be fathers without any outside interference. These gay fathers are resolutely nowadays fathers, meaning that they consider their role as a relational fatherhood with their child.

They want to be full time fathers and fulfill totally their fatherhood.

In opposition to men, women do not fear any limitations in their relationship with the child.

They have ruled out co-parenting out of fear the couple relationship might be weakened by a third party joining the relationship. Their representation of the family is that of being a continuation of the couple.

And what is going on when people have chosen co-parentality?

If the co-parenting type has been chosen, the statements of men and women are more alike: both say they want "a father and a mother" for their child.

What is the reason for choosing co-parenting?

Co-parenting has two advantages

First, Co-parenting is not subject to any social control because of its "naturalness" . A men and women may have children as they deem right. They become parents without asking any approval by society

And second: It soothes men's and women's feeling of guilt to give birth to a child under unusual circumstances. At the first sight, men and women seem to make the same statements concerning co-parenting. Co-parenting provides the child with a father and a mother, a model of sexual otherness. This is in full compliance with the message conveyed by the media, psychologists and the main stream. It removes guilt feelings about transgression of social rules. Partly it is an answer to what the child will be confronted with at school, and, more generally speaking, outside the family. We nevertheless must keep in mind that men and women are not equal when confronted with this choice, and that the representation of fatherhood and motherhood become more blurred nowadays, this is also true for straight families. For men, as we have said, co-parenting is often the only conceivable possibility of becoming a father. They also say that they cannot imagine a child without a mother.

Women say they want to provide their child with a father.

Men and women are sensitive to nowadays popular psychology. Even if no single woman or man can recognize her/ or himself in this representation, can they really elude it?

New fathers

Gay fathers when considering as essential to spent time with their children are somewhat a new kind of father.

It might very well be the growing process between the time men realize that they are gay and the moment when they become a father that brings more gay fathers than others to see their fatherhood as an essentially relational one.

Two examples to illustrate this

In our survey one man said:

if a gay guy wants a child it's not just for showing him every two or three weeks to his parents or to some other people as something to be proud of. I want to be with my child fulltime

A woman said:

Before the birth of the child we have talked over with Marc for several months the modalities of alternate custody that had to be set up progressively but nothing has been written down. I thought the alternate custody would start after 5 years whereas Marc thought of 5 weeks. Anyway, what ever the period of custody might be the mother will always think she keeps her child too little and the father too much. Over two years, we have tried out ten different custody periods and each and every time I thought he keeps the child too long and I, not long enough.

These examples show the unavoidable tensions between those fathers placing their fatherhood on relational ground that can only grow by spending actual time with the child and the mothers whose representation of motherhood is based on a similar idea: the time spent with the child and the relational and physical bonds established with the child. The fathers might be "new fathers" (Castelain Meunier, 2002), but mothers are still relatively "traditional" ones. When women want a father for their child, they rather seem to want to give the concept of a father than the actual conditions that may allow the evolving of a relationship father-child that might challenge their own relation with their child. Three elements generate tensions for the co-parenting family: the two same sex couples, the two persons unit composed of the two legal father and mother. As we have seen, lesbians often elaborate a parental plan within their same sex couple. However in the case of co-parenting the other partner of the same sex couple lacks any legal status, and it is most painful for her not to be considered as a "second" parent.

In the period beginning after birth, the mother will try to reassure her partner as to her position in relationship with the child, and this the more so as the two women will take care of the child on a day to day basis. The father on the other side, having already waited impatiently during the pregnancy period, might feel having been set aside.

This shows that the perception of the role played by men and women in the family is partly determined by what people consider to be inherent to the role of a man and to the role of a woman. But this is nevertheless starting to shift towards a more balanced position, a newer social relation insuring more equality for both genders as to their parental role... Co-parenting induces an inversion of role prioritization in so far as the mothers, because it was they that have given birth, can decide on who will be the second parent at their side: their female partner or the father.

Beside this inversion of prioritization where the mother decides who will be the second parent, progressively new, more egalitarian values come about for the role each gender has to play in a co-parenting family by questioning, as called by Michel Tort (2005), the paternal dogma .

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