

TO BE AND TO CREATE A FAMILY: THE LESBIAN LOOK AT INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

What has traditionally been understood as the only possible family model – a heterosexual married couple with children – has been beyond the reach of people who have accepted being homosexuals. On not finding a family model that is adequate for them, lesbians, via their 'daily experiences'¹ have made their own way and have tried to find ways of interacting to be able to satisfy their needs to 'care for and be cared for'². In the course of this, they have questioned what for heterosexuals is an accepted fact. Throughout their personal and historic course, homosexual women have been obliged to raise over and over again the topics relating to family relations. "How is a family formed? What does it mean for someone to be your relation? How important are blood links? How can I obtain motherhood?"

The relationships between people of the same sex challenge central elements in the traditional definition of the family. They question the difference of the couple's sex with respect to the alliance and dispute the consanguinity as a basis of filiation. According to Romans (1992), the lesbian mother challenges dominant ideologies about gender, maternity and the family. For this reason, the practice and narratives that women homosexuals construct as from their closest relationships are of great use at the moment of understanding the transformations that the ways of forming a family are experiencing in our time. These 'experiences' allow a return to questioning the fundamental topics of family and family relationships.

In Chile there are no studies about homo-parenthood. With only 16 years of democracy after 17 years of dictatorship, Chile is offering a complex scenery in which homosexuals and their relationships³ are observed with suspicion. Gays and lesbians live under a "heterosexual supposition" and face daily the possibility of discrimination by the general public. The legislation and the public politics are oriented towards a traditional family and do not recognize a homosexual couple, nor the motherhood by lesbian mothers. These relationships and the people involved – including the children – are completely unprotected. Lesbianism has recently begun to receive some social visibility and their treatment is via controversial cases present in the press.

Chilean lesbians do not have access to artificial insemination nor adoption and their projects for motherhood are marked by fear of discrimination. In the case of the lesbian judge Karen Atala whose maternal authority was removed by the Supreme Court for living with a female partner, has only justified this fear. Homosexual mothers must live with the fear that they will have their children taken from them and this deeply marks the way they can organize motherhood. However, even in contexts which are adverse for

them, lesbian women seek ways and means to establish family bonds and fulfill their needs to care for and be cared for.

The question that I have raised is how the lesbian women in Santiago de Chile face the topic of motherhood. I base this on the results of an ethnography carried out over 16 months using as investigation techniques profound investigations and observation 4. My objective is to be aware of the reflections, worries and decisions that face the interviewed lesbian women at the moment of thinking about being mothers. Some of the topics developed are:

- The difficulty of combining an identity considered to be transgressor, i.e. lesbian, with an identity considered to be traditional, i.e. mother.
- The lesbian motherhood as a reflexive project where what is accepted for heterosexual motherhood, is questioned.
- How the election of the method for obtain motherhood reveals the importance of the bloodline and genetics in the understanding of parenthood.
- How the strategies of validation of the non-biological mothers underline the importance of the care and affection in the construction of motherhood.
- How with the cancellation of the father they seek to protect the relationship with the child.
- How they seek to reproduce the family nucleus model to acquire social acceptance.

Without doubt the women who decide to create a family and bring up children with a partner of the same sex, question the fundamentals of parenthood and constitute new ways of organizing intimate relationships. However, traditional treatises still have a lot of influence on the ways people comprehend and construct the closest links. As opposed to the results of the investigations with lesbian mother by Donovan (2000) and Dunne (2000) the mothers interviewed do not express a sensation of freedom from the traditional expectations nor state that they are experiencing motherhood in a different way from the heterosexual norm or that they are redefining their meanings and contents. Rather, their narratives prove the importance of the ruling treatise about motherhood. The sensation of vulnerability that they have towards society makes their way of perceiving, constructing and presenting their family links to be marked by the search for acceptance and legitimisation. And so the Chilean lesbians do not construct a treatise of differentiation with respect to heterosexual families, but rather on the contrary emphasise the normalisation of their links.

On analyzing the ways of understanding and creating a family by the participants in my investigation, the paradox is revealed that the transformations do not contradict the conventional ways of perceiving and organising the family. The lesbians in Santiago hope that tradition will have the strength to give the legitimacy that they desire so much, to their intimate relationships, considered to be transgressor by their social surroundings.

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1. I borrow the expression from Borneman, 1997.

2. I borrow the expression from Borneman, 1997.

3. The results of the poll carried out by the Fundación Ideas in 2003 indicate that 51% of the polled agreed with the statement 'doctors should investigate the causes of homosexuality to avoid the birth of more'. The poll carried out by the Instituto de Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad Diego Portales in 2005 indicate that only 28,2% of the polled agreed with the statement "homosexual couples should have the right to get married" and 16% agreed with the statement "homosexual couples have the right to adopt children."

4. This investigation constiutes my doctoral thesis in Social and Cultural Anthropology presented to the Universidad de Barcelona.