

## Parenting, between radicalism and ideology

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**Abstract.** As has been the case for several years in many countries, in Italy, new forms of family composition, as well as increasingly complex forms of parenting, are sharply taking root. These innovations are often accompanied by criticisms and (pre)conceptions that (in)form our traditional and consolidated way of thinking about the family. Issues related to the right of the child to pursue his or her best interests and the possible functioning of the family constellations with non-genetic links are feeding important ethical questions. The careful analysis of scientific literature suggests freeing oneself from ideological approaches to base assessments and choices on the data available within psychological studies on the phenomenon. The commitment of professionals working with children is to welcome the complexity of today's families without stigmatizing, pathologizing, or ideologizing.

**Key words:** new family forms, parenting, child adjustment, assisted reproductive technology, gender role, culture, gender stereotypes, parental role

### Introduction

*Parenting in contemporary families: an archipelago of constellations and (pre)concepts*

The great variability of the forms of parenting that occur, in the spontaneous encounter between people, as a result of jurisprudential rulings, or again as a result of the technological contributions of medical science pushes us to reflect on the very definition of the concept of parenthood, a hybrid made of blood, feelings, conduct; a construct that possesses the ability to connect the scope of naturalness, biology and that of the social and that sometimes arouses even radical considerations, characterized by strongly ideological positions, not always proven by adequate studies and research (1-3).

In terms of parenting, as with many other functions investigated by psychology and neuroscience, we can see how much our biology is built to take shape in interaction, in culture, in the social context (4).

Our brain is plastic, it develops with experiences, in contact with the environment, with the world of interpersonal relationships (5).

Many of the questions we ask about science (questioning the relationship between parenting and gender differences; seeking to investigate the relationship that exists between the natural inclinations and propensities that we traditionally ascribe to women and men and the different attribution of parental roles, or even that they wonder if there are differences between children conceived naturally and those that are the result of the contributions of more bodies, of mixed conception...) are indeed questions that do not add knowledge, that have no legitimacy, as there was no sense for queries in the past about the differences between races, between whites and blacks, between men and women.

As the biologist Steven Rose writes it is a poor science that asks these questions because the answers to these questions cannot be found in biology, but in the choices that relate to our social and pedagogical policies, the anthropological and cultural context in which we live and develop (6, 7).

It is for this reason that before having to account for the new forms of parenting (from the transcultural situation of migrant mothers raising their children living in distant countries, to the homogenous situation

which does not attribute parental roles on the basis of gender diversification; to the surrogate that uses the uterus of a pregnant woman to give life to a child; to the adoptive one, to that of single mothers and trans-sexual parents, to that which used the techniques of the assisted reproductive to exist), it is foremost necessary to investigate prejudices, the stereotypes, the radicalisms that accompany the interpretation, the reading of the exercise of parenting and the much discussed “best interest of the child” (8).

### **Parental identity and culture: from the attribution of a role to the exercise of a function**

There are several contributions of psychology on this topic, but among these, we must certainly remember the research that the Clark spouses conducted between the '40s and the '70s of the 900; research that may turn out to be obsolete, but that the reality of today still makes very current and significant (9).

Here we are referring to the so-called “Doll test” experiment that had the merit of showing how African American children subjected to the laws of apartheid, prejudices, and discrimination, had already developed a racial identity at an early age, underlying a feeling of inferiority. These children attributed negative traits to their own identity, they correctly identified themselves with the dark-skinned doll that they describe as the ugliest preferring to play with the white-skinned doll. Research shows how prejudices can impregnate the basic culture, the daily life, that is, they are able to penetrate people, even to their detriment, and guide the reading of reality.

Fiske and collaborators (Cuddy, Glick and Xu) in 2002 developed the theory of stereotype content to explain the mechanisms that govern the formation of prejudices (10).

The authors describe prejudice as an expression of man's fundamental need to categorize reality, to simplify it; a need that has a great adaptive value because it categorizes, identifying elements with meaning is a fundamental requirement for moving and interacting in a complex environment.

In this regard, great sociologists such as Bateson and Goffman have introduced the concept of a

cognitive framework, of “frame”, that is, of that context within which events acquire a meaning (11).

These cognitive categories over time are subject to modification, however, being essential tools for survival, once built they become automatic, unaware. Baumann argued that having a cognitive framework is a universal fact, like language, he wrote that having a cognitive framework “punishes and derides the human species”. Because it is certainly uneconomic to question every time those frames that are our tools of orientation and that have such a high adaptive value (12).

Patterns, and frames, tend therefore to stiffen, become unconscious, translate into implicit expectations, into certain visions of the other. They create biases, inclinations of the mind, arbitrary interpretations, cognitive errors, false reassurances, of interpretative cages that limit the information available and show only what coincides with the starting beliefs of the observer.

What then are the stereotypes that accompany our conception of parenthood today?

Many still deal with the division of parental functions according to presumed sexual-specific attitudes (13), even though the sciences have questioned the so-called “trinity of gender differences” since the 1970s: that females are more easily able to acquire language, communicate and therefore more predisposed to care and care, that males are favored in the learning of mathematical science subjects and in spatial orientation and therefore intended for work, productivity.

Stereotypes that are far from being overcome, are only more masked, more nuanced, and more subtle; prejudices that insinuate themselves much more easily among adolescents today, perhaps because they are more exposed to the fluidity of gender models and to a growing confusion of proposals.

Another prejudice concerns the belief that the ideal family has one, maximum of two children. This conviction, also devoid of any empirical reference, which in the field of adoption connotes the choices of many courts that often tend to authorize the adoption of only one child per family, in the arbitrary belief that the traumatized minor needs and depletes all the resources of the nucleus, making most adopted children unique, despite their great need for family.

Other prejudices underlie the persistence of a privileged position of the heterosexual conjugal family

at the expense of other forms of families, not only in the background culture, but also in the legislative field, despite many studies, showing that most of the difficulties encountered by new families are not intra-family, but are determined by how they are perceived by the outside world (14, 15).

### Self-determination and the right to procreation

To date, the concept of self-determination has experienced an unprecedented expansion that involves many areas of personality and care (16, 17).

Self-determination, willingness, and programming represent key concepts also in the context of the processes of building kinship.

The use of assisted reproduction technologies has increased significantly, allowing many people who were hampered by infertility issues to conceive, giving rise, also thanks to the growing recognition of the principle of self-determination, to the constructs of parenting less and less bound to the bond of “blood”, as evidenced by the different forms of technologically assisted procreation (18).

In Italy, the debate about assisted reproduction has been very wide, also involving the status of the embryo and its use in research (19).

In its original formulation, the Italian Law n 40 of 2004 on assisted reproductive technology allowed only the medically assisted procreation using eggs, spermatozoa, or gametes of the couple itself. Consequently, the use of heterologous fertilization was prohibited (by gametes coming from external donors with respect to the couple). The intervention of the Constitutional Court in 2014 (judgment 162 of 2014) removed this obstacle to the effective exercise of the individual’s right to self-determination (20).

In Italy, however, the ban remains operational for gestation for others (GPA), a technique that continues to raise concerns because the embryo that is implanted in the uterus of the “carrier” may also be the result of the combination of gametes from external donors compared to the requesting pair.

According to the Constitutional Court, which has intervened several times in this matter, the GPA

“intolerably offends the dignity of women and undermines human relations” in its depths (21).

However, the issue of the GPA is frequently addressed by Italian judges called upon to evaluate the requests made by Italian couples who claim registration with the Italian registry office of the birth certificate of the child born abroad by this technique.

In recent years the Constitutional Court has ruled several times on the possible and different scenarios of parenthood.

In 2020, the question, raised by the Venice Court, concerned the request of two women (civilly united) to be registered as both mothers on the birth certificate of a child (22). In particular, the child was born in Italy thanks to the assisted fertilization perfected abroad and, consequently, it was the desire of the intentional mother to be considered a parent in all respects exactly like the biological mother.

In the present case, the Court has admitted that it is true that “the parenting of a born person following the use of medically assisted procreation techniques is also linked to the consent given and the consequent responsibility assumed by both parties who have decided to access such a procreative technique, [...] but has established that it is always necessary that those involved in the project of parenting so shared are couples “of different sex” “ (22).

Even more recently (judgments n. 32 and 33 of 2021) the Constitutional Court has addressed the issue of the recognition of the relationship of sonship and, in particular, of the relationship between parent and child, in reference to the figure of the intentional parent. In both judgments, the Court has made clear that there is a real legal vacuum in our legal system in this field, stressing the need for the legislator, in the exercise of his discretion, to fill the alleged lack of protection as soon as possible, in the face of incompressible children’s rights.

With judgment n. 32/2021, the Court has specified that “it would not be more tolerable the protracted legislative inertia, so serious is the lack of protection of the pre-eminent interest of the child” (23).

By judgment 32 of 2021 the Court declared inadmissible the questions of constitutional legitimacy of Articles. 8 and 9 l. 40/2004 and 250 c.c. stating that “those born because of heterologous assisted

reproduction practiced by two women are in a worse condition than that of all the others born, only because of the sexual orientation of the people who have put in place the procreative project.

By judgment 32 of 2021, the Court declared inadmissible the questions of constitutional legitimacy of Articles. 8 and 9 l. 40/2004 and 250 of the Italian civil code stating that “those born because of heterologous assisted reproduction practised by two women are in a worse condition than that of all the others born, only because of the sexual orientation of the people who have put in place the procreative project. These born are destined to remain incardinated in the relationship with a single parent, precisely because they are not recognizable by the other person who built the procreative project”, seeing so seriously compromised the protection of their pre-eminent interests.

The case relating to the aforementioned judgment 33 of 2021 of the Constitutional Court concerns a homosexual couple (having Italian nationality) who married in Canada and decided to resort to surrogacy. Upon returning to Italy, the couple requested recognition of the Canadian measure that attributed parenting to both men. Underlining once again the existence of a regulatory vacuum on this very important issue, the Constitutional Court affirmed that “the task of adapting existing law to the needs of protecting the interests of children born of surrogacy - in the context of the difficult balance between the legitimate aim of discouraging recourse to this practice, and the essential need to ensure respect for the rights of children [...] - can only be, in the first place, the legislator, which must be given a significant margin for manoeuvre in finding a solution that takes on all the rights and principles at stake”(24).

The examination of the two judgments shows, therefore, an explicit intolerance towards the situation of unjustified discrimination of the minor children of the same-sex couples that occurs in our internal legal system, due to factors of different origin: the characteristics of the generative project; the status acquired abroad or in Italy; the gender, male or female, of the same-sex couple. All elements that, because they are exclusively linked to the model of procreation and to the characteristics of the couple that aspires to parenthood, determine a lack of protection for the child, difficult to justify, after the reform of sonship, strongly

anchored in the implementation of the principle of the uniqueness of child status.

If in the past the relationship of sonship - and in particular the parent-child relationship - based on the bond of “blood” was essentially protected, today the jurisprudential panorama opens the door to a slow (but gradual) “change of pace”. In fact, the basis of the recent rulings is the so-called concept of “best interest of the child”, a fundamental criterion in disputes concerning children, as also anticipated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) signed in New York in 1989.

### **The new frontiers of parenting between ethics and supportive interventions**

The multiple analyses carried out on the different types of families, bring out some recurring and shared themes regarding the well-being of children, considering socio-cultural factors, as well as what happens within the families themselves.

One of these issues concerns the child’s knowledge of his origins.

Already in 2011, Italian Committee for Bioethics recommended to the parents of the assisted reproductive technology to reveal to the child the modalities of its conception and called for the recognition of the right of born to access the registers to obtain information on its genetic data, essential for the protection and care of his health. Almost unanimously the clinic asks that the good parent uses maximum transparency on conception, communicating to the child the steps and choices made to make him come into the world, considering his emotional possibilities, the current rules and the varied panorama of possibilities (25-27).

Nevertheless, research on families who have conceived a child with the contribution of a donor shows that most parents prefer not to reveal the circumstances of conception, except on particular occasions and in advanced age.

The interviews identify fear as the reason for secrecy; fear of stigmatization; fear that grandparents or other relatives treat these children differently, or less favorably, and, above all, the fear that disclosure can upset their children and upset the balance of the family.

This research urges technicians and practitioners of law to assess the suitability of the exercise responsible for parenthood, to rely on empirical data, observations of the quality of life of the child, the quality of his relationships, of the positivity or not of its development and not on obsolete and stereotypical considerations.

In the perital field, unfortunately, we are witnessing the return of an adult-centric vision that leaves no room for minors, who do not listen to them, does not observe them. Advice that lends itself to prejudices because it focuses on the choices of adults and little on the actual, concrete and real quality of life of minors.

There are many ethical concerns that these new family structures and these new forms of parenting raise with respect to the couple's freedom to self-determination. The debate and suspicions concern the educational suitability of contemporary families and the well-being of individual members and of the child. There are many questions and challenges to be faced: the rights of individuals, those of minors, the right to be informed about their origins by children, the potential risks of scientific progress that open to different forms of "surrogacy" of the maternal role, just to mention the most well-known.

The contributions of the research emphasize that such questions can and should be addressed through the lens of knowledge and good documentation, rather than the divisive ideological position often present in debates on this subject.

## Conclusions

### *Ethics in Parenting Assessment*

Recognizing that the well-being of a child is not solely attributable to the sexual roles of parents, it is necessary to reiterate the need to develop research that can grasp and develop all the complex functions that underlie family life.

It must still be stressed that there are no unambiguous answers to the question of parental assessment, but that it must always be based on real, objective data derived from the observation of the child and his or her condition, in order to reduce the likelihood of decisions inconsistent with socio-cultural realities, by

helping the courts to abandon and relativize sometimes outdated positions based on unfounded premises, avoiding the adoption of rigid strategies and ideologies, opaque, no longer transferable in current family realities.

Parenting is a theme that inspires reflections on the 'limits' and the boundaries of law itself as an entity, and on its relationship of dependence on other disciplines. A certainly mutual dependence, an interdependence that unfortunately the recent reform of the Juvenile Court in Italy has largely disregarded, precisely penalizing the technical skills and the historical figure of the expert, the private component, of the Honorary Judge as a constitutive part of the judgment, sacrificing, with essentially economic reasons, close to corporate policies, remittance, reflux, the enhancement of complexity and in it the authentic promotion of children's rights.

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