INVISIBLE FAMILIES: HOMOSEXUALITY, EVERYDAY-LIFE AND SOCIAL POLICIES

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In this research the families that were interviewed are therefore a highly selective sample of AGEDO activists, who appear to be very supportive towards their gay/lesbian family members. We have therefore used their stories to identify the personal, social, and cultural resources that they mobilised, but also to understand the role AGEDO played as one of the resources used in coping with the event of discovering the homosexuality of a family member. Through our research we noticed how Italian families lack socio-juridical support from State and institutions and how the socio-juridical idea of Italian family still is grounded on the patriarchal and hetero-normative model. What is going to be presented are raw research materials still in process of analysis. The results can be used as tools for the elaboration of policies and legal tools to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Presentation of material:
- 3 modules, each containing detailed information on the cases studied, taken from three interviews, in Northern, Central, and Southern Italy
- Each module is preceded by a profile of the family and a short description of the place where the interview took place
- The material is presented here anonymously

Anonymous account of the key topics emerging from the experience of the families involved in the cases studied.

This section presents the key topics we have summarised as follows:
1) Reaction to the crisis and behaviours adopted with respective experiences;
2) Coming out as the trigger for a process of evolution within the family;
3) Prejudices which are a focus for the family’s worries;
4) Resources mobilised by the families;
5) Possible policies: suggestions from the families

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1) Reaction to the crisis and behaviours adopted with respective experiences

The discovery that one’s son/daughter is homosexual produces at least initially a sudden reaction of shock, an explosion of feelings of surprise and grief, the discovery is experienced at first as a completely unexpected event, due to a lack of the most elementary information about the phenomenon of homosexuality. The parents are caught unprepared and disorientated, not only on a personal level but also within the family system. It is interesting to see how this “crisis” is managed, that is, whether the initial shock gives way to an active-reparative stage, which we may sum up as an immediate rejection of the situation, followed by an ambivalent conflictual stage beginning the process of acceptance. This emotional sequence usually once again involves the personal level and the family system. The families we interviewed also manifested the sequence of these three stages, with one distinctive feature: the different behaviour of the fathers and the mothers in managing the initial impact of the crisis. The fathers reacted at first by withdrawing into themselves and by rejecting dialogue as a way to understand the events which had upset the balance of relationships within the family; in one case there were also fantasies of suicide. These fathers were not at first able to use new symbolic and interpretative channels to help themselves understand and give meaning to the changes which their son’s declaration had initiated. In contrast, the mothers immediately took on an active support role, directed invariably not just towards the son, but also towards the husband. With the son they tried to use the channel of understanding and control of the emotional aspects and the new situations connected with him. Of course, the type of support offered depended on the personality structure of the subject and her capacity to manage the frustration determined by the crisis situation, a capacity corresponding to the strength of the Ego. The fathers needed a longer time to elaborate the situation, several months, and in one case, years. It is not at all certain that any of the parents interviewed are even now happy to have a homosexual son. At a cognitive level at least, there seems to have been for these parents, after an initial stage of more or less definite denial, especially on the part of the fathers, a stage of new awareness followed by a change in illusory expectations, which are replaced by new, more realistic ones. It should be remembered that Italian culture and society in no way provides reference models of families with homosexual children. Families are therefore denied the possibility of having a “buffer” between the stimulus and the stressful event which might help by reducing the negative quality and quantity of stimuli produced by the situation. For such parents the absence of models, in the sense of social indicators of behaviour, means that they are unable to mitigate or redefine their perception of the stimuli as stressful, or lessen their emotive impact and respond immediately in an adaptive and active way. They thus find themselves in a state of isolation in which they can only fall back on their individual resources. The starting point, and for some also the point of arrival, is a vacuum, the only way out of which is apparently the help available from the social network. By social network we do not mean only the pattern of links surrounding the individual, but the set of links existing among all the members of a society. The perception of the availability of this support is important. Altogether, we can say that these families, even when they sometimes felt the need for it, did not manage to find support from the help network, particularly at first. We may advance the hypothesis that the absence of perception of external help is on a functional basis. The system, in this case the family system, always needs a phase of internal restructuring before it can go on to a new openness. We had no terms of comparison to establish whether cultural level is an important or unimportant element in the degree of success in managing the family crisis. In fact, all of the subjects we interviewed were educated to college diploma or degree level. We can advance the hypothesis that in any case the process of understanding and acceptance works at a deep intrapsychic level where the cognitive component can often be more of a hindrance than a help.

2) Coming out as the trigger for a process of evolution within the family
Coming out is an important milestone for a homosexual person, and marks a major point in his/her psychological growth, something like being born again. It is a process that lasts for a lifetime, in which the support or lack of support found in the family circle is decisive for the serenity of the person’s future growth. All of the young people we interviewed regarded the process of deciding to come out as treading a fine line between the costs and benefits of making their declaration to the family. Our results suggest that the parents are not the first people that adolescents confide in. The first confidant was the peer group or a close friend, although some of the young people seemed to behave towards their parents in a way that suggested they almost wanted to hasten the coming out process. The conflict of the pre-revelation phase, focused on the fear of not being accepted or of giving too much grief to the parents, has a common denominator: these young people had all in some way sought some pre-contact with their parents, sometimes explicitly, sometimes through behaviour prompted by the desire to share this part of their lives with significant people. The fears of these adolescents were also increased by the fact that they were surrounded by an environment which gave out distorted information about homosexuality, and in the absence of other reference models they had been in danger of forming a self-image that was negative, stereotyped, inculcated by the prevailing view of homosexuality. The moment of coming out was decided by the level of maturity they had reached regarding their self-identity, which in these young people we have seen was a gradual process, an almost natural fact embodied in a desire not to keep the situation secret any longer. All of them found that afterwards they felt more confident and less troubled, and as the parents remarked, some kinds of intolerant behaviour on their part, and conflicts towards the family, also disappeared.

The parents’ partnership also underwent a major growth process, and, after initial disorientation, the couple reacted by strengthening their bond. In accepting the new situation they had to mobilise interior resources and restructure the value system they had followed up to then. In the dynamics of family relationships, the most striking changes were in the parent-child and in the husband-wife relationship; oppositions and conflicts which had been a characteristic of the affective communications within the family system gave way to forms of dialogue that were more understanding and more honest, with two of the couples declaring that their marriage had been strengthened.

After a period of crisis and incomprehension, new dimensions such as complicity, sharing and the acceptance of the child’s sexual/emotional life were typical, particularly in the mother-son relationship. After coming out, the young people who had a steady relationship with a partner were able to integrate their relationship into the family system. Again in two cases this was perceived in positive terms by all the family members. In the third family, there was a refusal on the father’s part, which focused on not wanting the son’s partner to visit the family home; in Marco’s words, “he wasn’t able to say he was happy to have a gay son. It was something that didn’t bother him too much, but it was there. He wasn’t actually intolerant, maybe it was just that my boyfriend couldn’t come to the house. In the first two years he told me, quite calmly, that he didn’t want to be involved in this aspect of my life”. (Marco, son, Rome).

In the other two families, the son’s partner was easily integrated into the family system. In this connection there is one feature common to the three families: the fact that this figure from outside the family system was assigned a representative role with respect to the perceived image of homosexuals. We can hypothesise that the son’s partner was assigned roles and behaviours more congruent to those that would have been given to a partner of the opposite sex and sexual orientation. This aspect, discussed below, might be an index of the degree of internalised homophobia expressed as the defence mechanism of a patriarchal cultural component common to many Italian families. Their sons’ coming out and consequent social visibility had the effect of making the mothers reconsider their experience of their sons’ homosexuality and realise the precariousness, the disinformation and the difficulties that they themselves had had to face, with the result that they invested some of their personal resources in a parents’ association, AGEDO. This
form of activism resulted in an overlap between the situation within the family and shared public contexts. The mothers were even sometimes accused by their sons of carrying out this activity without giving due consideration to their (the sons’) privacy, and continued their activity without involving the family system. The fathers too continued to carry out their former activities, while remaining partially outside. We may therefore hypothesise that turning to an association had a functional role more on an individual level than with regard to the family system.

The parents’ new understanding was however highly conditioned by the deep affection that each parent had always had for his/her children. Coming out therefore, generally speaking, had a catalysing function for a variety of psychological and re-elaborative processes which were largely managed on a personal level and subsequently carried over into the family system, helping to break down existing equilibriums with a view to re-establishing other, more functional ones.

3) Prejudices which are a focus for the family’s worries

Homophobia is the most visible expression of prejudice towards people who are homosexual, and emerges on an individual level as a prejudice deriving from internalised homophobia. What is internalised is an institutionalised form of discrimination. This mechanism leads to a generalisation and a simplification of the situation behind certain platitudes which become a scheme of interpretation through which anything expressed by a homosexual person is filtered. We want to look at this concept, because it seems to us to recur in a number of assessments or attitudes presented by the subjects interviewed. Stereotypes, prejudices and the social portrayal of homosexuality were in any case elements which existed before the son’s coming out in nearly all the cognitive patterns of the various members of the families in our study. These symbolic dimensions resulted in a whole series of defensive mechanisms and worries being triggered in the fathers and mothers regarding the son, his adult life and the social context; specifically, the fathers’ fears often centred on the possibility that their son would lead a deviant, dissolute life along the lines of the way gays are often portrayed by the media.

We should emphasise that it is almost impossible for someone who has been bombarded every day by homophobic and heterosexist conditioning not to have internalised the negative image of homosexuals given out by society. The result is that each individual must come to terms with his own internalised homophobia, which may emerge in a variety of more or less explicit ways. The most insidious and dangerous of these are the least easy to identify, those which at different levels we also found in the accounts of our interviewees:

• Saying that one is not homophobic but not wanting one’s son to reveal his homosexuality through effeminate behaviour.
• Exaggerated fears of the son contracting AIDS
• Looking for a genetic reason to justify homosexuality
• Admiring homosexuals in general for being more sensitive and positive
• Thinking that a homosexual couple is incapable of forming a lasting relationship
• Trying as long as possible to hide from one’s colleagues at work the fact that one’s son is homosexual
• Homosexuals thinking that there is a feminine element in gays
• Recalling presumed feminine behaviour in a gay son’s childhood
• Activating protective behaviour towards one’s son
• Homosexuals criticising heterosexuals for being unable to talk about topics relating to homosexuals

Internalised homophobia, along with the lack of social models which might be indicators of behaviour or reference points for personal comparison, gives rise to a number of phenomena which we found in our sample. Some hints emerged during the interviews to suggest that there was some
confusion regarding the concept of the homosexual identity, and perhaps the most distinctive feature was that the young men themselves expressed such uncertainties. We are thinking particularly of the difficulty in conceiving the homosexual identity outside the usual clichés which portray gay men as effeminate and lesbians as masculine women. The idea that each person, irrespective of his/her sexual orientation, possesses on a deep intrapsychic level male and female components in equal measure, and that these components are revealed equally but with subtle differences in behaviour, is a fact which is still by no means clear, not only in our interviewees but also in the collective imagination in Italy. Two of the adolescents we interviewed displayed a marked, highly homophobic social resonance, which does not permit free expression and so tries to give homosexuality a mere pathological interpretation. Not having role models during adolescence leads to confusion over one’s identity. Trying to reconstruct the thought process more or less mediated at a conscious level, we can imagine that it goes something like this: “I perceive that I am different because I do not feel attracted to women. As all men are attracted to women, I am not a man”. It is at this point that the lack of role models makes itself felt: the classification of oneself as gay is filtered through a cognitive mediation which points to the fact of not being a man or at least a “normal” man. At this point the only dichotomic category available is the female one. As a result, modes of behaviour closer to those of women may be conceived, if not always expressed, because there are no other reference indicators available. It is common to find that these adolescents believe that there is a large feminine component in being gay.

As we can see, the subject in recalling his behaviour as a child highlights the fact that he liked to identify himself with female show business personalities, drawing in this way a line between himself and heterosexual children. In addition, he says there is a feminine component in being gay. We cannot make further inferences, but we must emphasise that the subject probably constructed homosexuality around stereotypes like this one, and in some way displays internalised homophobia which emerges on an unconscious level, which makes it less easy to identify, as a defence mechanism with which the individual arms himself to face up to his own difference.

The lack of reference models, and prejudices, can be better seen in the following words:

“...maybe I don’t make so many ambiguous remarks to Dad because he might take them more on an instinctive level – I mean, I don’t know, it’s like if I told a male friend I was gay, the first thing that might come into his head might be, God, he’s going to make a pass at me!, while with a girl friend it might be, well, I’m ok, he’s not going to try anything with me. It’s the same with my parents, not that I try anything on with my father, of course, but he might see it as my trying to involve him in my homosexuality . if I made suggestive remarks to him” (Igor, son, Northern Italy).

In other cases there were comments from the parents on certain of their sons’ interests and modes of behaviour which did not conform to a socially accepted perception of the male role. Some of the classic stereotypes regarding gender difference emerge, such as interest in flowers, plants and animals, “fits of weeping”, but above all lack of interest in football. All of the parents suggested more or less explicitly that they would not approve of effeminate behaviour from their sons. Finally, we can say with certainty that there exist very strong mechanisms of social control to ensure that all the members of the community, whether heterosexual or homosexual, scrupulously respect the rules, customs and behaviour expected of them in appearing sufficiently “male” or “female”. Our interviewees too seem to have more or less internalised these control mechanisms.

4) Resources mobilised by the families

As emerged in the preceding section, the families in this study adopted different strategies to cope with the discovery of their son’s homosexuality. This section will compare the resources mobilised, to highlight the kind of social and cultural capital that each family called on, in relation to other resources they used, such as professional advice or contact with GLBT organisations. These resources are compared with the role of the family’s involvement in AGEDO.
A. The family from Northern Italy.
1. Social capital: strong mobilisation of social capital by the mother in particular, but not only by her. Characteristics of this capital: wide network of heterosexual friends who are regarded as “sound” and open-minded; visible homosexual friends, including some activists. Importance of mobilisation of the son’s network of friends.
2. Cultural capital: activation of cultural capital, especially the expert psychological knowledge of the mother, who is determined to know more, understand, read “in depth” books… This runs parallel to their rejection of consultation with external professionals such as psychologists.

The role of AGEDO
While the mother heard about AGEDO by chance from a television programme, her direct contact with members of the association came about through mobilisation of her network of personal friends.
The mother’s involvement in AGEDO was from the start highly committed, and involved the father as well. It now appears to be an essential network not only as a means of comparing different viewpoints, but also because it allows the family of a homosexual youth to have an active role, i.e. to use their experience to help other parents grappling with the same situation. However, the other social networks, the parents’ and the son’s, also remain important in the process of elaborating their experience.

B. The family from central Italy
1. Social capital: little mobilisation of social capital. The mother alone talked to a friend, the father living through the whole coming out process and beyond in isolation. Potential mediation role of relatives (grandparents) not realised.
2. Cultural capital: activation of the cultural capital, but also here limited by and channelled through the son.
There was also some recourse to professional help, although more in terms of a search for something than as a real support. The mother’s friend apparently assumed the role of confessor, spiritual guide; a psychologist was contacted, but only for one consultation; the father refers to the possible help of a doctor whose help he might find useful.

The role of AGEDO
The mother’s active seeking out and contact with GLBT associations, first ARCIGAY and then AGEDO, appears to be in the context of a search for forms of support outside her own social network.

C. The family from Southern Italy
1. Social capital: Limited mobilisation of social capital by the mother.
2. Cultural capital: limited activation of cultural capital.
This corresponds to the central importance ascribed in particular by the mother, but also partly by the father, to the chance discovery of and contact with AGEDO, and to the personal network created with relatives of other homosexual boys through the association.

The role of AGEDO
The chance discovery of AGEDO was for both parents an event which not only strengthened their marriage but stimulated them to take an active part in initiatives in favour of young homosexuals, to the extent that they are now responsible for the Southern Italy branch of the association. The family unit has thus become a reference point for other relatives and families who have sought help, and through and with whom these others can share their experiences. The informal networks activated, especially as regards groups of adolescents involved and their families, have helped to establish
forms of cooperative learning, and elaboration and comparison of experiences within the family unit, which often acts as a catalyst and meeting place for other families.

5) Possible policies: suggestions from the families

The families suggested a variety of policies they would like to see in operation. Two kinds of policy were mentioned as being desirable in many of the interviews, albeit with differences of emphasis, orientation and details:

1. Policies leading to a general change in the situation of gays and lesbians in society, a change in the way society perceives homosexuality, a change in the general culture (in the media) but also more specific changes, e.g. in schools, with the inclusion of non-discriminatory discussion of homosexuality in sex education classes, and more generally in what is taught as a whole. Discriminatory laws and bureaucratic procedures should be eliminated:

   “we need a non-discriminatory society, a non-discriminatory culture, an appreciation of the individual which is the same for everybody whatever they are like, we need legal and moral support which is fair and available to everybody” (F. father from the south of Italy)

2. Specific policies in support of the process of acceptance for relatives of gays and lesbians, but also for the young homosexuals themselves. The families repeatedly refer to the basic need that such policies should respond to: the need for families not to be left alone, and for them not to feel alone. There are two elements in this second type of policy. On the one hand there are “vertical” policies, i.e. services providing professional help designed to support families in a crisis situation: psychological support for family members, advisory bureaux, including sexually transmitted diseases advice centres, etc. But most emphasis seems to be placed on “horizontal” policies, i.e. organisations, self-help groups or networks which help families of homosexuals to share their experiences and compare notes, maybe with assistance from the social services.

In some cases, for example for the family from Northern Italy, there seems to be a distance, even expressed explicitly, between the kind of resource they mobilised themselves, which was found essentially by activating their own social capital, and the kinds of policy they advocate in general. In fact, the more “public” resources which are referred to as desirable were not found, and were not always sought, by parents who, as we have seen, sought support primarily within their informal networks.

5. Summary of the key topics emerging from a critique of the research

This study opens up a field – the experiences of the families of young homosexuals, told in their own words – which is substantially absent, apart from some initial contributions, from the scientific literature in Italy, whether sociological or psychological.

It partly confirms some of the elements highlighted in research on the experiences of gays and lesbians in Italy: the shock caused to the family by the coming out, the heterogeneous reactions of different families, which are not strictly allied to their social characteristics, the process of change in family relations triggered by the coming out.

On the other hand, the interviews we have analysed provide some new items of knowledge regarding the families’ experiences and the coping strategies they bring to bear on learning that their son/daughter or brother/sister is homosexual.

Point 1) Reaction to the crisis and behaviour adopted with respective experiences:
learning of the homosexuality was a highly shocking event, in which the parents found themselves without reference models, which are absent in the Italian cultural and social context.

The initial moment of crisis was followed by an active-reparative stage.

The initial crisis was managed differently by the mothers and the fathers: the mothers assumed an active role of support, towards both their sons and their husbands, whose immediate reaction was to withdraw into themselves.

The lack of an immediate perception of help from the social network seems to have been functional to the internal restructuring of the family system.

It was not possible to specify whether the culture variable might be a useful indicator in the management of the crisis.

Point 2) Coming out as the trigger for a process of evolution within the family:

On the whole, the coming out acted as a catalyst for a number of psychological and re-elaboration processes which were managed primarily at a personal level and subsequently carried over into the family system, helping to break down equilibriums in order to establish other more functional ones.

   - For the boys: this was an essential milestone, made more difficult by the lack of social indicators for their behaviour. On the whole we can say that it had the effect of triggering a major growth process on a personal and social level.
   - For the parents: it initially caused a strong feeling of disorientation, which afterwards helped to trigger adaptive processes which generally strengthened their bond. Resistance and conflicts which had previously characterised the affective communication between parents and their sons, and within the couple, gave way to forms of dialogue that were more understanding and more honest.
   - For the mothers there was the possibility of transforming the stressful situation into a resource; they became closer to their sons and involved themselves more in the sons’ life. Furthermore, they took an active part in a parents’ association, which was viewed as a resource more on a personal level than on the level of the family system.

Point 3) Prejudices which are a focus for the family’s worries:

   - The declared acceptance of the son’s homosexuality is accompanied by the persistence of implicit elements of homophobia and heterosexism, which emerged mainly in the presence in the parents of the stereotype of femininity associated with male homosexuality, and in their fears of the risks of sexually transmitted diseases.

Point 4) Resources mobilised by the families:

   - In the journey from a son’s coming out to its acceptance, the family attributes a variable amount of importance to the mobilisation of informal networks, in which the mothers had a more active role. It is noticeable, however, that the families did not get any great help from formal services or external experts, such as psychologists or counselling services, which were essentially non-existent.

Point 5) Possible policies: suggestions from the families

   - Of the possible policies which might support families, our interviewees suggested that two main types of policy would be necessary at the same time:
     - Changing society’s perception of homosexuality, so that young homosexuals and their families can find cultural reference models;
- forms of support which are specifically directed towards the families, mainly with “horizontal” interventions, creating possibilities for comparison with other families in similar situations, so that together they may compare and define models of behaviour and communication that the families cannot find anywhere else.

6. Comments on new perspectives

Observation of the state of social relations, primarily within the family, but also among peers, would seem to be an essential element in assessing the degree of isolation, the fragility of reference points, and the sense of belonging to the collectivity, experienced by young homosexuals.

There follow two general comments on the struggle of young homosexuals against discrimination: (a) it is not possible to separate the plan of elaboration from the plan of action (it is precisely during the active struggle against stigmatisation that the various aspects of the phenomenon are perceived, and objectives and methods of intervention are perfected); (b) while forms of collaboration and codes of good practice may be conceived on a transnational level, the struggle against discrimination must remain on a local level (the only level that permits an in-depth, objective analysis of the forms of exclusion, and which permits the activation of the networks necessary to reverse the trend). The role of the socio-cultural context is decisive, and here there may be a working towards positive repercussions. Any intervention should have these main changes as its objective: a) intrapersonal and interpersonal changes in young homosexuals and their families of origin, as well as within the peer group. In particular, this would involve forms of empowerment which would, it is to be hoped, accompany a change in attitudes, behaviour, affective states, level of satisfaction and self-esteem, and in an improvement in the quality and quantity of relations with family and/or friends; b) changes at an intersystemic level: this could involve coordination, collaboration and harmonisation of activities between the services operating in an area - school, local health board, and GLBT Associations, as well as encouraging an integration of information and training services.

In short, the need for support evinced by the families is on the one hand connected to changes in the general culture, which would allow the families to be better prepared, and have cultural and communicative tools available, to manage the shock of finding out that a son/daughter or brother/sister was homosexual. On the other hand, the development of more specific forms of support, especially “horizontal” forms through self-help groups, implies an active, integrated role for GLBT services and associations operating in an area. However, we should emphasise that making more specific suggestions about the support required by young homosexuals and their families would demand a much more extensive, in-depth knowledge of their experiences than is available in the sociological and psychological literature in Italy, or than emerges from the interviews analysed in this report.
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