



*International Review of Couple and Family Psychoanalysis*

**ISSN 2105-1038**

**N° 22-1/2020**

**Homosexualities, Homoparentalities**

**Same Sex Parenthood<sup>1</sup>**

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*[Received and accepted: November 8, 2019]*

### **Summary**

This study aims to examine a “classic psychoanalytical” viewpoint of the Oedipus complex and to underline mistakes, analyzing them by starting with Freud’s own point of view. The author proposes that it is no longer possible to describe and understand homosexuality as resulting from a regression to or a fixation at a stage of temporal experience preceding the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, or in the end as a failure of oedipal rivalry leading to an identification with the parent of the opposite sex. Freud himself underlined in his later works (1923) that things were much more complicated than what he had first thought, starting from an original bisexuality in every human being. And since Freud, a large number of authors have considered “mental orientations” the result of a compromise made between drive exigency and cultural necessity. With respect to same-sex parenting, then, as psychoanalysts, we are obliged to take another look at the importance of the theory of the Oedipus complex in its simplified form, just as Freud himself found it necessary to do.

**Keywords:** classical psychoanalysis, homoparentality, homosexuality, mental orientations, oedipus complex.

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<sup>1</sup> This article has published in *Rivista Psicoanalisi*, 2014, 60, 1:147-158.

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### **Résumé. Parentalité de même sexe**

L'étude proposée examine les points de vues de la soi-disant "psychanalyse classique" autour du complexe d'Œdipe et en souligne les erreurs, en les analysant du même point de vue de Freud. L'auteur met en évidence qu'il n'est pas possible de décrire et de comprendre l'homosexualité comme le résultat d'une régression ou d'une fixation à des stades d'expériences temporelles précédentes la résolution du complexe d'Œdipe et, finalement, comme un défaut sur les progrès de la rivalité œdipienne, en donnant la priorité à la notion d'identification avec le parent du sexe opposé; d'autre part, Freud lui-même, comme l'a souligné dans ses œuvres ultérieures - en 1923 - a compris que la situation était plus complexe par rapport à ce qu'il avait pensé auparavant, et il est reparti de l'idée d'une bisexualité originaria appartenant à chaque être humain. Et après Freud, de nombreux auteurs ont étudié les "orientations mentales" comme le résultat d'un compromis entre la pulsion et les besoins culturels. Donc, par rapport aux parents du même sexe, en tant que psychanalystes nous sommes forcés de reconsidérer la pertinence de la théorie du complexe d'Œdipe dans sa forme simplifiée, tout comme Freud lui-même a jugé nécessaire de faire.

*Mots-clés:* complexe d'Œdipe, homoparentalité, homosexualité, orientations mentales, psychanalyse classique.

### **Resumen. Parentalidad del mismo sexo**

El estudio que aquí proponemos, examina los puntos de vista del así dicho "psicoanálisis clásico" sobre complejo edípico, revisando sus errores a partir de la misma visión de Freud. La Autora pone en evidencia que no se puede describir y comprender la homosexualidad como el resultado de una regresión o de una fijación en etapas de experiencias temporales anteriores a la resolución del complejo edípico, o - en fin - como un defecto en el curso de la rivalidad edípica, dejando predominar la identificación con el padre de sexo opuesto; esto se basa en el mismo Freud que, en sus trabajos siguientes - 1923 - captó que la situación fuera más compleja de lo que había pensado con anterioridad, entonces vuelve a la idea de una bisexualidad originaria que atañe a cada ser humano. Y después de Freud muchos autores han considerado las "orientaciones mentales" como el resultado de un compromiso alcanzado entre pulsión y necesidades culturales. Así que, en relación a los padres del mismo sexo, en cuanto psicoanalistas, nos compete reexaminar la relevancia de la teoría del complejo edípico en su forma simplificada, así como al mismo Freud fue preciso hacer.

*Palabras clave:* complejo edípico, homosexualidad, padres del mismo sexo, psicoanálisis clásico, orientaciones mentales.



## Sexual orientation and the oedipus complex

In the past, psychoanalysts have without doubt contributed to a negative image of homosexuality. Many of them interpreted the Freudian concept of the Oedipus complex in quite a narrow way: either its outcome was “positive” or “negative” and this meant “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” respectively: the identification with the parent of the same sex follows the renunciation of possessing the parent of the opposite sex and was considered the peak of *infantile sexuality* and as the pre-condition for the consequent development of adult heterosexuality. From such a “classic psychoanalytic” viewpoint, homosexuality is understood as resulting from a regression to or a fixation on a stage or modes of temporal experience preceding the dissolution of the Oedipus complex and, in the end, as a failure of Oedipal rivalry, leading to an identification with the parent of the opposite sex. But Freud himself had underlined in his later works that things were much more complicated than what he had first thought.

It was in 1923 that Freud reconsidered his first conception of the Oedipus complex and highlighted the potential for a bisexual orientation in all human beings; only a superficial and partial reading of the theory of the Oedipus complex makes it possible to think that it is obvious that the young boy identifies with the paternal imago while the young girl, with the maternal imago so as to arrive at a heterosexual object-choice and that, moreover, this dynamic is “better” than any other outcome. Concerning the evolution of the concept of the Oedipus complex within his oeuvre, Freud writes: «Closer study usually discloses the *more complete* Oedipus complex, which is twofold, positive and negative, and is due to the bisexuality originally present in children: that is to say, a boy has not merely an ambivalent object-choice towards his mother, but at the same time he also behaves like a girl and displays an affectionate feminine attitude to his father and a corresponding jealousy and hostility towards his mother. It is this complicating element introduced by bisexuality that makes it so difficult to obtain a clear view of the facts in connection with the earliest object-choices and identifications, and still more difficult to describe them intelligently» (1923, p. 33; my emphasis).

The “complete” Oedipus complex consists in the fact that, beyond the “positive” and “negative” complex, one observes «a whole series of mixed cases in which these two forms co-exist in a dialectical relationship» (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1967, p. 80).

Before we get to heterosexual or homosexual tendencies or orientations, we don’t care much about the sex of our caretakers: the baby is not even aware of the existence of different sexes. He can rapidly distinguish between mom and dad’s voice but this does not mean that he knows what is masculine and feminine and baby loves both of them. That’s the reason why Freud speaks of an *original bisexuality* of every human being: the erotic and amorous impetus, like the child’s identifications, hardly pays any mind to the sexual membership of the primary caretakers: the bisexual capacity - to desire, to love, to be able to identify with both



sexes - belongs entirely to the subject's psychic life and to the forces and vicissitudes shaping the singularity of a specific history. Original bisexuality remains responsible for homosexual traces in the experience of each individual.

### **Genital sexuality**

Prejudices (not only) in psychoanalysis about the possible quality of homosexual relationships were based on the notion of *genitality*. Homosexual experience was supposed to be not *genital* but *pregenital*. But nobody explained why this would be so. Freud defined successful love by the meeting up of the “affectionate” current and the “sensual” current, and it would be difficult to think that homosexuals are excluded from this experience.

### **After Freud: “homosexualities”**

Culture has entered into a state of constant revision of tradition and life styles, and, as a result, they have become reflexive. Narratives have become more open-ended and varied and their corresponding attitudes along with them. This permissiveness might encourage the lifting of certain repressions, in this case that of bisexually orientated desires, leading to heterosexual object-choices as well as homosexual ones. If the Oedipus complex, as the French psychoanalyst Laplanche for example suggests, may be understood as a cultural, universal and prevailing meta-narrative, lasting for but a certain time, in order to organize our fantasy life and structure the unconscious, then we must take into consideration the fact that «mentalities are forms that the compromise between drive exigency and cultural necessity take» (Kahn, 2004, p. 213). These cultural necessities are subject to great changes. Numerous contemporary authors prefer speaking nowadays, not of “homosexuality” but homosexualities, thus emphasizing that their features are far from uniform and univocal.

Knowing the sexual orientation of a person tells us nothing about his health or his psychic maturity, nor about his character, his inner conflicts or his integrity (Roughton, 1999, p. 1291).

### **Same-sex parenting**

At first glance, a psychoanalyst cannot but be surprised by the findings of research carried out on children growing up with “same-sex parents”: none of the research could evidence any specific psychical and/or sexual orientation outcome in these children. From a psychoanalytical point of view, the following questions might be



asked: in such a situation, how does a child construct a representation of two different sexes, of the primal scene, and of his or her sexual identity?

“Same-sex parenting” is a general term that describes various family situations in which children are brought up by parents of the same sex and in which procreation, marriage bonds and the parental dimension do not overlap. The four kinds of same-sex parenting are as follows: a homosexual couple with a child born of a previous heterosexual relationship, adoption, recourse to medically-assisted procreation, and co-parenting<sup>2</sup>.

The disquiet arises from the supposed necessity of having both a father and a mother, each of them heterosexual, if a child is to develop in a satisfactory manner, the presumption being that clear sexual differentiation and “good” sexual dispositions exist in each member of the procreating couple. Single-parent families (usually mother and child) give rise to less disquiet probably because the mother is as a matter of course presumed to be heterosexual and therefore to have a solid foundation in the symbolic order. That said, in their comparative study of heterosexual and homosexual women bringing up a child by themselves, MacCallum and Golombok (2004) made use of the Children’s Sex Role Inventory to assess the sexual role orientation of those children with reference to two subscales, one involving masculinity, the other femininity. That study did not find evidence of any difference among children brought up in various kinds of family situations<sup>3</sup>.

## Research results

Two very important meta-analyses<sup>4</sup> studied the research that has been carried out over more than 35 years in this field. No significant difference with respect to children brought up by heterosexual parents was found to exist as regards several factors: the quality of the parent-child relationship, cognitive development, mental health, psychosocial development, sexual identity, and sexual orientation. These studies were based on a wide range of psychological paradigms: cognitive-behavioural, developmental, psycho-dynamic and psychoanalytical<sup>5</sup>. More than 330 papers on the topic of “same-sex parenting” published in scientific reviews were analysed by Vecho and Schneider (2005). The conclusion is perfectly clear:

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<sup>2</sup> Co-parenting is a situation in which a homosexual man and a homosexual woman have a child together, born of their sperm and ovum (either as a result of sexual intercourse or of “self-managed” or medically-assisted insemination); the child is brought up alternately in each of the two households.

<sup>3</sup> Similar conclusions have been reached by Cowl *et al.* (2008) and by Allen and Burrell (1997).

<sup>4</sup> Mikolajczak and Baruffol (2010); Vecho and Schneider (2005).

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Feld-Elzon (2010); Moget (2010); Naziri (2010); Drexler (2006); Vecho and Schneider (2005); Tasker and Golombok (1991); Huggins (1989); Kirkpatrick *et al.* (1981).



these children are in no better and no worse a state than those brought up in a traditional family setting.

It would nonetheless be a mistake to conclude that no difference exists between children of homosexuals and those of heterosexuals. It is important, however, to emphasize from the outset that difference does not imply deficit or deficiency. One of these differences was highlighted by Stacey and Biblarz (2001): when they examined the data from 21 studies on same-sex parenting carried out since 1980, they found that children brought up by same-sex parents showed more empathy towards social diversity, were less inclined to adopt gender stereotypes, and tended more to explore homosexual activity.

There is one topic that is often raised with some disquiet: that children brought up by homosexuals “risk” becoming homosexual themselves. When the idea of “risk” is mooted, the implication is that it is “better” not to be homosexual - but this is not a scientific issue; it is based on an implicit value judgment. In this connection, one could also point out that the vast majority of homosexuals were raised by heterosexual parents; yet this fact in itself obviously did not prevent them from having a different sexual orientation than that of their parents. In any case, there is no statistical proof that children raised by homosexuals have a greater tendency to become homosexual than children brought up by heterosexuals (Golombok and Tasker, 1996; Huggins, 1989).

Where, then, does the heterosexual orientation of these children come from? The debate surrounding the issue of sexual dispositions in children who are brought up by same-sex parents gives a new impetus to another question - that of the origins of homosexuality and, implicitly, of heterosexuality.

### **Some clinical and metapsychological reflections**

The fact that both parents of a child are of the same sex does not in itself prevent that child from constructing “triangulation”. In other words, these children come to realize that they are not alone in the world with their mother in a dyadic fusional relationship but that there are other people who play a “third-party” role. Differentiation comes into force as soon as two adults are in a relationship with each other, whether that relationship be real or fantasized. Nevertheless, that triangulation does not as such imply any acknowledgement of the existence of two different sexes. Hence there is a preliminary question: in a couple consisting of two women, for example, how is a psychical space containing the parents, the child and the donor created? What kind of explanation is given to the child as regards his or her existence: the fruit of a shared desire by two persons of the same sex - the parental couple - who nevertheless needed a third party of the opposite sex so that conception might take place?





The bisexual identifications and dispositions of human beings come very much to the fore when the idea of having a child takes the form of an actual project: two women or two men oscillate between “paternal” and “maternal” standpoints even before the project has come to fruition. A couple consisting of two people of the same sex is inevitably faced with the need to take into account the other sex: man, the masculine dimension, fatherhood/woman, the feminine dimension, motherhood. To take the example of a couple consisting of two women: a man enters into their life via the representation that these women have or create of him, whether the man in question is a friend who is ready to give his sperm in the context of assisted procreation or an anonymous donor who has otherwise nothing to do with their everyday life.

Having recourse to a man requires some major psychical repositioning in the dynamics of the relationship between two female partners. In a somewhat unexpected manner, having recourse to a donor reintroduces the third party and acts as a revealer of the difference between the sexes through the fact of bringing a new masculine element onto the psychical stage.

In the case of a female couple, the necessary and unavoidable psychical work that has to be undertaken prior to any project of having a child prepares both women not only for conception but also for the questions that their child will later ask about his or her origins, their father and the masculine element. In the interviews that precede artificial insemination, there is often the fear that, if there were no anonymity, the donor might later “claim” the child as his - this is a clear indication of just how present the male figure is in the representations constructed by the two women within their relationship as a couple.

In any case, the physical distress and suffering created by the elaborate treatment associated with assisted procreation contribute to the collapse of any possible fantasy of being able to beget a child by oneself. We can be sure that triangulation based on the difference between the sexes is involved from the very outset in the dynamics of female same-sex parenting.

This leads us to consider the questions that come into every child’s mind concerning his or her origins. Formerly, anxious parents would have recourse to metaphorical circumlocutions that enabled them to evade questions involving reproduction and their sexual relationship - hence tales of baby girls being born in roses, baby boys in cabbages, babies being brought by a stork, etc. Metaphors are used in order to tell a “story”. These stories or “family romances” (Freud, 1909) are one of the aspects of the psychodynamics of families, of their representational and fantasy life. Repeated narrations of significant events within a family create also romanced versions of reality: i.e. the various descriptions of a child’s birth, more or less closely related to reality and having many possible meanings - are also told by parents and children in order to increase their attachment to one another. Children often ask for these stories concerning their conception and birth to be told over and over again, while at the same time they are striving to come to grips with the idea



of reproduction, parental sexuality and the creation of a family. As is well known, such questions play a major role in individuation and the feeling of belonging. Their family is where children first hear about their origins. Every non-traditional family set-up - single-parent families, reconstituted families, same-sex parents, those who have recourse to a sperm or ovum donor because of sterility in one of the partners - has to deal in its own way with these questions concerning the origins of the child. Children of homosexual parents are therefore not the only ones who have to put more effort into attempting to understand and integrate the situation, compared with children who grow up in a traditional family setting.

When children ask their same-sex parents where they come from, how they were created, what can their parents tell them? If two same-sex caretakers claimed to be the only ones involved in the conception and birth of their child, this would not indicate a problem specific to same-sex parenting, but rather a psychotic way of functioning, because what is told to the child is a product of a delusional system in which the reality of his or her origins is quite simply denied and pushed to one side. In any event, since all children live in a world in which they are constantly meeting men and women, they would quickly come to understand that their parents had lied to them.

### **“Primal scenes”**

According to Freud, the primal scene - which is a first idea the child has of its conception and the difference of sex - is constructed based on something that they have observed concerning their parents' sexual relationship. We know, however, that even without any direct observation, children build up some idea, based on other things that they have witnessed, about sexual relationships and the link between these and the birth of children. The construction of the individual-subject and of the mind requires that the difference between the sexes and between generations be accepted; this enables the individual to have his or her own sexual identity and to integrate the prohibition against incest. There is, therefore, an obvious link between the realities of human life (the sense of belonging to or having a particular sex, age, quality of relationships) and the organization of fantasies that have to do with sexuality and one's origins.

Hence the question might be posed: how can a child brought up by two same-sex parents construct a primal scene? A whole series of observations (of animals, for example, or through watching television) and of signifiers will enable that child to understand what sexuality, conception and reproduction are all about. The construction of a primal scene implies identifying a fertile parental couple - i.e., a heterosexual one. A child brought up by two female parents may well have two primal scenes: on the one hand, the primal scene of his conception, the fertilizing encounter between his biological mother and the donor, the founding moment of





the family romance and, on the other, another scene, the product of a fantasy processing the excitement triggered by the erotic couple made up of two mothers. According to this hypothesis, the child will be able to differentiate between his or her internal representation of the couple-as-object, necessary for the structuring of the mind, and the perception of the parental couple in present time. It could also be said, perhaps, that the considerable effort that such parents put into having a child will have a strong, formative impact on their offspring. This could give rise to a new kind of primal scene fantasy: being a child of love adopted or medically conceived.

### **Acknowledgement of the difference between the sexes**

Constructing and processing the primal scene goes hand-in-hand with acknowledging the difference between the sexes and the sexual identifications related to it. It could be said that a varied environment made up of both men and women cannot but be beneficial for all children - and above all for children of same-sex parents.

As regards the difference between the sexes, these children will also have points of reference in their immediate family - grandparents, cousins of both sexes, uncles, aunts - and in other settings such as day-care centers and schools, as well.

Whatever the family structure in reality, the intersubjective relationships are triangular as soon as the child can differentiate him or herself from the mother and understand that she is in an affect-based relationship with someone else. In the case of a homosexual couple, that “other” person does not belong to the opposite sex. However, the link between parent and third-party is proof of the fact that neither the child nor the parent is omnipotent. Otherness and processes of triangulation are therefore not absent as a result of the simple fact of being brought up by same-sex parents; this does, however, raise the issue of the Oedipal framework in such families - or more precisely: sexual differentiation.

### **How does sexuality come to children?**

Newborn babies have not yet formed an idea of sexuality, but they have needs: to be fed, to be kept warm, to be clean, to be seen, to be spoken to. These needs and their satisfaction will quickly be enriched by pleasure and desire: over and beyond satisfying hunger, feeding times become a moment of sensual well-being, of communication and of pleasure. According to Freud even the initial needs are already “sexual” since their satisfaction is accompanied by the experience of erotic pleasure, whereas in contemporary psychoanalysis (Laplanche, 2006) we might think that it is the adult’s attitudes that “sexualize” the quite basic - survival and



attachment orientated - needs of the baby. Adults look after their babies, making sure that they are fed, and they also take care of the infant's body which inevitably brings into play the adult's unconscious fantasies, backed up by his or her own infantile development of psycho-sexuality. That psycho-sexuality, according to Freud (1905), is neither homosexual nor heterosexual: it is polymorphous and bisexual. The way in which the parent - homosexual or heterosexual - looks at the child, "compromised" as it is by his or her unconscious - will, without realizing it, "sow the seeds" of both heterosexual and homosexual fantasies in the scenarios experienced with the infant. These are "enigmatic" messages that the child will attempt to "translate", i.e. to understand in his or her own way. In this manner, what was initially innocent - a nourishing breast - becomes an object that takes the infant by surprise. No "translation", i.e. reappropriation of the message, takes place without some residue remaining - a part that cannot be translated - to shape the child's unconscious.

Infantile psycho-sexuality is marked by curiosity with respect to one's origins, and this gives rise to fantasies about a fertile heterosexual (parental) relationship. The adult's sexuality, whether he or she is hetero - or homosexual, is always underpinned by that infantile dimension - i.e. by the potentiality for "doing everything", at least in fantasy. It is therefore inevitable that the adult "sows the seeds" of a fertile heterosexual coitus in the child's mind.

## Conclusion

With respect to same-sex parenting, we are obliged to take another look at the relevance of the theory of the Oedipus complex in its simple form, just as Freud himself found it necessary to do (Freud, 1923). We could argue that the psychical flexibility that is typical of human beings helps them to implement a fantasy scenario that supports the structuring of their psychical organization - as long as they are not the victims of stigmatization.

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