

# HOMOPARENTAL FAMILY, HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING AND SCHOOL CONTEXT: THE SEARCH FOR NEW MEANINGS

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## ABSTRACT

Although the homoparental family is growing, it is still a target of prejudice in our society. This study aims to report research conducted with 8 education professionals whose goal was to know the meanings that education professionals attribute to the homoparental family and their children's experiences in the school context. The instrument used was the dialogic interview and the results show the subjects recognize the homoparental family as a legitimate family model, with skills to raise their children. However, most of them are prejudiced and don't feel prepared to deal with students from such families, with the homophobic bullying they experience and the prejudice of parents and the community. Thus, they request training. The analysis and articulation between the speeches of the participants, social constructionism and gender show that such issues demonstrate a naturalistic heteronormative view of sexuality and family. This study concluded that the social construction's speeches promoted new meanings to sexuality, identity categories, social inclusion, family, and training.

## Keywords

homoparental family; homophobic bullying; school; gender; social constructionism; psychology

## RESUMO

A família homoparental embora em crescimento, ainda é alvo de preconceitos em nossa sociedade. Este estudo visa relatar uma pesquisa realizada com 08 profissionais da educação, cujo objetivo foi conhecer os sentidos que esses atribuem à família homoparental e às vivências dos respectivos filhos (as) no ambiente escolar. O instrumento foi entrevista dialógica e os resultados mostram que as participantes reconhecem a família homoparental como um modelo legítimo de família, com habilidades para criar seus filhos; no entanto, a maioria delas tem preconceito e não se sente preparada para lidar com estudantes dessa família, com o bullying homofóbico que eles sofrem, com o preconceito dos pais e da comunidade e por esses motivos, solicitam capacitação. A análise e articulação entre os discursos, das participantes, construcionismo social e gênero, evidencia que tais questões explicitam uma visão naturalista heteronormativa da sexualidade e família. Consideramos que os discursos da construção social favoreceram novos sentidos para a sexualidade, categorias identitárias, inclusão social, família e para a capacitação.

## Palavras Chave

família homoparental; bullying homofóbico; escola; gênero; construcionismo social

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## FAMILIA HOMOPARENTAL, BULLYNG HOMOFÓBICO E CONTEXTO ESCOLAR: A BUSCA POR NOVOS SENTIDOS

### **Introduction**

Socio-cultural, political and economic changes have caused several social transformations and, at the turn of the century, debates on gay marriage, adoption by homoaffective couples and criminalization of homophobia filled social media. Intimacy, relationship, family, and identity have all been resignified. Although it is difficult to define them, the contemporaneity has been described by the plural, mutable, and even liquid attributes (Bauman, 2010).

In the clash between the transformations and the permanency, institutions, such as the state, the family, the religion, the school, and the media, among others, are maintainers of the status quo of heteronormativity, i. e., the sexual order based on the heterosexual family and the reproductive model, marginalizing the ones who do not fit these standards. People, who do not match the model considered "normal", are discriminated against and become victims of physical and psychological violence. Among them, we mention the homoparental family, the focus of this study.

The impossibility of reproduction; only one gender as a reference for the child; questions regarding the effectiveness of the parental care, especially when the couple is comprised of the male gender (gays) since such care has always been related to maternal instincts; a promiscuous environment and the possibility of gay parents (male) sexually abuse their children; an impaired sexual/gender identity; low self-esteem and difficulty socializing due to social exclusion; the possibility of the children becoming homosexual are questions and justifications that permeate the rejection and the lack of legitimation of the homoparental family by the Brazilian family. Such speeches explain a naturalist biological conception of sexuality and moral orders and disregard the speeches of gender social construction.

Negative representations were documented by Marchi-Costa and Perroni (2010), in research conducted with social assistants, lawyers, and psychologists specialized in family therapy, with undergraduate students of the 4th year of Psychology, with professors and also with people without a university degree. They revealed and ratified the concerns with the child development that were previously mentioned and that, in general, reflect the resistance to accept parenthood by homoaffective couples.

These questions can be reflected upon and new understandings can arise from the speeches of social construction. Social constructionism is opposed to essentialism, which assumes that all beings and objects have a natural or cultural essence that is fixed, immutable (Weeks, 2007). This speech is associated with a complex set of different theoretical proposals in the human sciences that, in a post-modern perspective, aim to emphasize the relational and historical character of the construction of the reality and the performative role of the language in this process.

In that direction, researchers focus on the school as this is a public space, with mandatory attendance, where children, teenagers, and young people develop their social identities and establish relations with the world, involving rules and affections. It is, therefore, an institution that has a great weight and influence not only in terms of academic information but also in terms of the global formation of the human being (Marchi-Costa, 2018).

Research shows that, in the educational environment, the propagation of homophobia occurs on a large scale and homophobic bullying, in its different forms, is part of the routine. Also, the education professionals report they don't know how to deal with such situations.

A study by UNESCO, in 2009, conducted in 13 Brazilian capital cities and the Federal District provided a certain understanding of the extent of homophobia at school (in Middle and High School). It was verified, for example, that the percentage of teachers who affirm they do not know how to approach themes related to homosexuality in the classroom varies from 30.5% in Belém to 47.9% in Vitória; parents of male students that wouldn't like homosexual people to be their sons' classmates are 17.4% in the Federal District; between 35% and 39% in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Salvador; 47.9% in Belém; and between 59 and 60% in Fortaleza and Recife; male students also indicated "beat homosexuals" as the least serious of the six examples of a list of violent actions (Junqueira, 2009, p.18).

This and other research shows the Brazilian scenery is preoccupying and we, as psychologists, cannot omit ourselves. Such omission would spread and perpetuate practices of oppression and violence. We represent psychological science and must make it an instrument in favor of the culture of respect and peace. This study might be able to represent a first step and a possible source of aids for the elaboration of future projects.

From these reflections, researchers ponder over the importance of giving voice to the education professionals through this study. We justify the meanings the professionals

attribute to the homoparental family impact on their positioning with students whose parents are homoaffective, as well as on their positioning regarding possible situations that occur in the school environment and that denote homophobic bullying.

Thus, this study aims to report research conducted with education professionals and looks for new understandings of the homoparental family and the homophobic bullying from the social and gender constructionist speeches.

### ***Objectives of the study***

To know the meanings that education professionals attribute to the homoparental family and their children's experiences in the school environment.

How do they deal with the discrimination of these children from other children and families?

### **Method**

This is a qualitative study guided by the social constructionism theory. When applied to the research field, it is a collaborative process between participants and researchers in the construction of new forms of knowledge (Mcnamee, 2012). The social constructionist research is considered to be a social practice and it mainly explains the processes by which people describe, explain, or somehow cope with the world they live in (including themselves) (Gergen, 2009; Losantos; Montoya & Exeni, 2016, Shotter, 2016).

### ***Participants***

This study was conducted with 08 education professionals, who work in three public high schools in the São Paulo State: four teachers, two assistants, one school principal, and one pedagogical coordinator.

### ***Instrument***

We used a dialogic interview mediated by two prompt questions: 1) what do you think about the homoparental family? (Homosexual female or male couples who have children) and 2) how do you see the experiences of such children in the school environment?

## **Procedures**

First, we contacted the school administration to ask permission to research with its professionals. We explained the objective and the ethical procedures as well as the need to record the interview to reach reliability in the speech transcription and also the need for a private space to perform the interview.

After the acceptance by the direction, the education professionals were invited to participate in the research, the objectives and ethical procedures were explained, and, after their approval, date and time were scheduled for the interview. On the day and time scheduled, the participants signed the consent form.

## **Results**

The interviews were analyzed under the perspective of the social constructionist theory associated with the gender discourse of feminist contemporary authors. In the process of finding the attributed meanings in the participant's narratives, six themes emerged: 1) the recognition of the homoparental family as a reality that cannot be denied; 2) the most discriminated family model due to prejudice based on moral and religious beliefs of all the participants whether they were expressed in a clear or veiled way; 3) the recognition of the ability of fathers and mothers to raise and educate their children in a healthy way, although a great part of the education professionals, parents, community and society questions this type of parenthood; 4) the position of professionals regarding homophobic bullying experienced by students whose parents are homoaffective, 5) the prejudice of professionals, parents, and community as significant obstacles that inhibit the process of social inclusion and maintain the homophobic bullying; 5) the loneliness and helplessness of the education professionals as they don't feel prepared to deal with such questions; and 6) the request for help through special training.

## **Discussion**

The narratives of the education professionals that participate in this study evidenced that it is no longer possible to ignore that the heterosexual family has lost more and more space for other family models, being the homoparental family among them.

However, they note that most of the education professionals do agree and have already observed explicit or veiled prejudice, which can be confirmed by the speeches of

some participants: get out you faggot [...] (Lívia)<sup>2</sup>, [...]the son of the two butches ( Débora) [...]daughter of the fags ( Josi).

On the other hand, the participants Livia and Rosana also exemplify cases of professionals that are more careful since they are in the role of educators, expressing their prejudice in a veiled way, in which prejudice is seen between the lines: he is the child of two fathers.... but he is an intelligent boy (Lívia), school needs to welcome all different people, such as the visual, physical and mental impaired and the homosexual (Rosana).

When participants report that some professionals are more careful with their speeches because of their role of educators, they allow us to reflect about the expectation our culture nourishes in relation to the educator role, which can also be ratified by the excerpt below: discrimination does not come only from the teacher, it is of the human being in general, but the teacher shouldn't ever show it; he is the educator and must control himself a lot. But it is possible to see between the lines the discrimination from the teacher and then we question to what extent we connive and help to form a homophobic attitude (Lívia e Rosana).

It is important to reflect that, although our society is highly homophobic, educators are expected not to be like that, because the educator's expected role is incongruous with discrimination; otherwise, he could contribute to reinforcing the homophobia among children. Then, educators are in an ambiguous situation, between the dominant cultural and moral beliefs and the responsibility to teach the respect to diversity without prejudice. Therefore, they must be careful in order not to become also targets of prejudice from the community as they express themselves in a veiled way (Marchi-Costa, 2018).

Participants consider the homoparental family is the model that is the most polemic and discriminated against due to prejudice based on moral values and religious principles which are a consequence of the heteronormative patterns, mainly because they involve children. They also report that homosexual parents, regardless of whether they are two men or two women, can raise and educate their children as well as heterosexual parents, but agree that in general there is a great deal of resistance on the part of education and community professionals to accept parenting of homosexual couples.

It is worth mentioning the review of empirical studies with homoparental families by Gato and Fontaine (2011), which mentions that the absence of one progenitor of

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<sup>2</sup> the names are fictitious

different gender in the psychosexual development of children, teenagers, and adults has a trivial influence in their psychosexual development regarding sexual orientation and gender identity.

The studies conclude there is no evidence that the parental efficiency is related to the parents' sexual orientation and no significant difference was found in the ability of parenthood of lesbian mothers and gay fathers compared to heterosexual parents, as well as in the mental health and social adjustment of the child (Gato and Fontaine (2011).

However, most of society, including education professionals, do not have access to such information. We believe that at the basis of this resistance is the conception of family-oriented by biological discourses. Such discourses naturalize heteronormativity as an ideal standard and clarify the correlation between genders, identity and gender expression, which means that some functions, or, as they say in a structuralist perspective of science, the roles of gender are considered as inherent to the male and female. For example, "the care for the children" is attributed to women (female) and the role of "limiting, ruling" is attributed to men (male), who are the model that represents the strongest and the most rational side.

This concept creates concerns, rejections, and questionings whenever the parenthood is practiced by two people of the same sex/gender because it brings to light the absence of the model of the other gender and the capacity of a single-gender to take care of a child, since in this perspective, each one has a role.

Butler (2003) questions this understanding of gender identities as a result of a normative coherence among sex, gender, and desire that is questionable and shows that the cultural matrix of gender intelligibility excludes other possibilities of identities.

By suggesting gender as a performance, i. e., as an identity maintained by reiteration and repetition of norms whose effects pass as natural, Butler (2003) points to the paradox of the need to fit them in categories, when the intention was to free them from these. However, Butler adds the fact of questioning how identities were built does not mean they will be abolished. She agrees that they are still politically necessary; so it is possible to fight for them, since the gender is a construction of power and cannot be separated from the cultural, historical and political context that produces it and connects it with other categories of identity classifications, such as race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. According to this, we justify the maintenance of the name homoparental family in this study.

In addition to the prejudices from the education professionals themselves, the participants also highlight those from parents and community as important obstacles inhibiting the process of social inclusion and maintainers of homophobic bullying.

We exemplify positions of some parents who express prejudice through excerpts from the speeches of some of the participants: This subject does not interest me and it is not the school's role to talk about these issues (Lívia), I do not want my son to play with this boy, because he is a bad example (Rosana), I do not know what they learn from these two women (Rosana), My church does not approve of this type of marriage, this is against the law of God (Beth).

Faced with the different positions of professionals and community regarding the homoparental family, social constructionism ponders that the terms and forms by which we reach the understanding of the world and ourselves are social artifacts, products of historical and culturally situated exchanges. Thus, to evaluate the world, it is not possible to leave all the traditions in which we participate, because our descriptions are the product of our immersion in relationships (Gergen, 2009).

In this perspective, prejudice and its effects refer to moral and ethical issues. These are built on social processes, i.e., by individuals in a relationship. Morality, in this understanding, is not something that individuals possess, but an action that acquires its meaning in a context that defines their traditions about what morality is.

Thus, there are many challenges. We verified that homophobia and its expression in different forms of homophobic bullying is a reality in the school environment and education professionals report they don't feel prepared to deal with students who are victims because they are from a homoparental family, with students who are the aggressors, and with the different types of expressions of the homophobia practiced by parents and community.

We can see examples of this fact through the following narratives:

...there was a boy, a child of a homosexual couple, who suffered, cried..... it was very difficult. He accepted himself and said he was happy at home, but he was tired to see his classmates offending his family. The school environment was making him suffer. He focused on the studies because he didn't have many friends; in class, he stayed isolated. I didn't know exactly how to ask them to stop; if I should have a more energetic attitude or if I should pretend that was not happening. I ended up choosing to be quiet to help him, but I don't know if I did it right (Débora).



I have a student who is the daughter of two mothers, and there was more than one classmate's birthday party to whom she was not invited. She is very quiet; I got to know this through one of her mothers. After the birthdays, I talked to her and told her that when this happened, she should come to talk to me. She said she was used to it and I was supposed to be quiet and so I did because I didn't want to embarrass her (Laura).

There was a student who had two fathers; his classmates would mock him that he was the son of two "fagots". At first, he took the joke but then he began to defend himself by hitting his colleagues. I was not sure what to do, so I ended up calling everyone's attention and saying that they should stop those conversations (Luci).

In this sense, we highlight a survey conducted by UNESCO (2015), which showed that young people subjected to homophobic bullying are more likely to drop out of school, practice self-mutilation and suicide, and engage in activities or behaviors that pose a risk to health. Such consequences are just a few among many others.

The homophobic bullying leads us to the discursive perspective of Butler as it integrates the strategies of power that are put into action in the social relations to establish roles and reinforce the frontiers between the accepted, the normal, and its opposite. When someone escapes from this system, this pre-established destiny, he occupies a position of abjection and framing practices are imputed to them referring to their abnormal, marginal position (Butler, 2003).

Aware of the need of school to act in order to deconstruct prejudice and minimize homophobic bullying, participant Livia observes that, although all project initiatives are worth, the issue of gender should be transversal to the content of the subjects and it should be present in school on a daily basis, without the need for specific projects (Livia). We agree with the participant but, sadly, the themes about homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender issues are still invisible in the curriculum, in textbooks and even in discussions on human rights at school (Marchi-Costa, 2018).

Given the limits experienced, the participants ask for help through training and denounce loneliness and helplessness regarding what they consider to be one of the functions of the school and its professionals. We verify that in the excerpt of the speech of some participants:

It is necessary to qualify the teacher and work with sexuality workshops; the teacher has to look for a pedagogical strategy on the theme to be more prepared

to deal with the difficulties with this differentiated type since we have prejudice. School cannot say something like: look, you are going to work with this. Teachers need to have preparation provided by the education department (Josi).

I think the professionals should be qualified for this too if a teacher puts it in a wrong way or seems to be uncertain or prejudicial with that child or that family.... he is an example, and he will contaminate the other children and employees as well. (Luci).

We consider the claim for help through training and the will to learn how to deal safely with the homophobic bullying evidence the professionals' search for ready models. Such positioning ratifies the structuralist speeches consonant with the modern paradigm of knowledge, as well as it ratifies the scientific speeches being used, which support discrimination against the ones who run out of the prescriptions of such models.

It is worth to reflect on: why do they need training? Aren't these people just like the others? Why do they need different strategies to deal with these issues? We can even go a little further: why do they need the protection of the social inclusion processes?

It is important to pay attention to the inclusion practices as they are conducted in our educational system. There is a well-marked place for the "other"; the logic that is usually used refers to an ideal, which should be the expected, the heteronormativity so that different speeches are used to keep the "different" apart. We cannot underestimate that the acquisition of legal rights showed to be essential to guarantee spaces and legitimacy. Also, teachers have acquired this legal speech on human rights and sexual rights. The possibility of inclusion of the sexual different/varied is supported by the speech of the UNESCO (2009), under the orientation that everybody has the right for schooling; however, there is a questioning about the proposal of inclusion that is its use as a practice of tolerance and an attempt to end differences, having the "normality" as a reference.

Such speeches make us reflect on the naturalization of the moral order, prejudice, discrimination, and expectations of the positioning of different social segments. We can mention institutions such as school, family, church, state, media, among others, as maintainers of such order and being more committed with the status quo than with social transformation. Therefore, we can evidence speeches that legitimate social and institutional structures, at the same time that these structures support and validate them (Marchi-Costa, 2017).

Thus, the claim for the training of the education professionals could be fulfilled, but based on other models. We believe that if the education professionals are familiarized with the perspective of the social construction of sexuality and its gender and sex categories, they will be able to understand them as strategic descriptions for the social change (Foucault, 1979).

We consider teachers cannot stay alone in this task since we are all co-participants and responsible for the process of transformation. They also think like us:

...it is a tripod: student, family, and school. It is not possible to walk alone, so I believe the family is also very important. Then, from the school to the outside, we will slowly involve the society because we cannot think only about the school; we have to think about the child as a sociable being in any place, in any environment. Then, from that point, he will be able to place himself and respect in any environment he attends, he and his family (Luci).

The homosexual parents need to have a more effective participation in school activities and meetings; only one of the mothers come, one of the fathers, I think they should impose more and come both, I think it is a way for the parents and the community to get used and accept this kind of family, but they need to impose more (Lívia).

It needs to be a continuous, long, gradual work, not only inside the school but observing what happens outside school, in the society, concerning these people inside the family, the companies. The media could help as well (Hellen).

In this sense, we refer to what MacNamee and Martins call collective responsibility, co-responsibility. So that diversity can be recognized and legitimized, we need to establish joint relations, which generate possible ways of commitment and co-responsibility of all the social actors involved (Macnamee & Martins, 2014).

### **Final considerations**

As we were able to verify, the discrimination of the homoparental family and its consequent homophobic bullying experienced by the children from this type of family are far beyond the school environment and we are all co-responsible for changing this reality in favor of a more equalitarian and fair society.

We directed this study to the education professionals due to the importance they have in the present and future lives of students. This importance is evidenced by the UNESCO (2009), as it considers the process of teaching and learning, in the education of

the XXI century, to be far beyond books, notebooks, and tasks. It is present through behavior, language, and posture in the relations that are built in the school routine, showing the essence, i.e., what is set as true and necessary by its models, especially the teachers, and many times these truths are perpetuated in an unnoticed way.

The reality of the students is built through their interaction with other students, teachers, the principal, the coordinator, and school employees. Their experiences transform them as subjects; in the same way, they transform the ones who surround them, it is a two-way road. The person of the educator is a concrete presence in the life history of students, with whom they (the students) will be able to talk always they feel the need, relating today with yesterday, in a kind of reference of continuity of their stories, which will leave marks in the two subjects involved, educator and student (UNESCO,2009).

We know school is considered a decisive space to contribute to the construction of critical awareness and in the development of practices based on respect for diversity and human rights. Maybe someday we will be able to remember homophobia and homophobic bullying, which are serious social problems nowadays, as positions from a distant past.

Therefore, when talking about homoparental family, discrimination, and homophobic bullying in the school environment, we are first inviting the education professionals, especially teachers, to co-participate in the process of deconstruction of speeches that essentialize and naturalize forms of life that were historically and culturally built. These professionals must be able to question the established truths and work more and more for the development of a practice committed with ethics, care for oneself and the others.

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