The Discursive Construction of Contemporary Family Types: An Introduction

Giuseppe Balirano
University of Napoli L'Orientale
gbalirano@unior.it

Jai Mackenzie
Birmingham Newman University
j.mackenzie@staff.newman.ac.uk

Angela Zottola
University of Turin
angela.zottola@unito.it

Giuseppe Balirano, PhD in English Linguistics, is Professor of English Linguistics and Translation at the University of Naples L'Orientale, where he is also the current Director of the University Language Centre (CLAOR) and Rector's Delegate for Lifelong Learning, E-learning and Multimedia Enhancement. He is the President of the Italian Association for the Study of English (AIA). He is also the Director of the monitoring group on hate speech online at the University of Naples L'Orientale and Principal Investigator (PI) of the PRIN 2022 Project admitted for national funding titled "ECHOES. English studies to Contrast Hate Online and Enhance Solidarity". He is the BeTwiXt series director, publishing original monographs in the field of linguistics and communication studies. His research interests and publications lie in the fields of multimodal critical discourse studies, humour, masculinity and queer studies, the discursive representation of organised crime and audio-visual translation. His most recent publications include: *The Rainbow Conspiracy: A Corpus-Based Social Media Analysis of Anti-LGBTIQ+ Rhetoric in Digital Landscapes* (2024, with B. Hughes); *Re-Defining Gender, Sexuality, and Discourse in the Global Rise of Right-Wing Extremism* (2021, co-edited with R. Borba); *Homing in on Hate: Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (2020, co-edited with B. Hughes).

Jai Mackenzie is a Senior Lecturer in Applied Writing and Humanities at Birmingham Newman University. Her research focuses primarily on the ways in which gendered, sexual and familial roles, relationships and practices are (re)produced and mediated in a range of contexts. She has undertaken a range of collaborative and single-authored

research in this area, and her publications include the monographs *Language, Gender and Parenthood Online* (Routledge, 2019) and *Connected Parenting* (Bloomsbury, 2023). Jai is convenor of the Language, Gender and Sexuality special interest group, which sits within the British Association for Applied Linguistics. She is a member of the editorial board for *Discourse, Context and Media.*

Angela Zottola is a Researcher in English Language and Linguistics at the University of Turin (Italy). She received her PhD in *Mind, Gender & Language – Language, Linguistics and ESP* from the University of Napoli Federico II. Before joining the University of Turin, she was a Research Fellow at the University of Nottingham (UK) and at Lancaster University (UK), and a Teaching Fellow at Aston University (UK). Her research interests include (Critical) Discourse Analysis, Corpus Linguistics, Ecolinguistics and Queer Linguistics applied to the investigation of the traditional and new media, including mainly newspapers in different languages and social media platforms such as Twitter. She is a member of the Italian Association of English Studies (AIA), the Inter-University Research Center on Metaphors (CIRM) and the Inter-University Research Center on Identity, Language and Diversity (I-LanD). She currently sits on the board of the *International Gender and Language Association* (IGALA) and is a member of the Advisory Board of the CADAAD Journal. Among her most recent publications is *LGBTQ+ and Feminist Digital Activism. A Linguistic Perspective* published by Cambridge University Press.

Contemporary family types

The traditional nuclear ideal of a cisgender, heterosexual mother and father giving birth to a child through the fulfilment of marital duties has been central to definitions of family and parenthood for centuries. This view relies on normative discourses that define families according to heteronormative and binary conventions of marriage and procreation. In the last sixty years, social norms and expectations around partnership, family and child rearing have shifted in many contexts, prompting a number of social, legal and political changes to family formations and practices. For example, in the UK the 2002 Adoption and Children Act meant that unmarried and same-sex couples could adopt children; since the 2008 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, same-sex and unmarried couples (including those who conceived via donor conception and/or surrogacy) have been able to apply for a parental order, and the 2014 Marriage (same-sex couples) Act led to state recognition of same-sex marriage. These changes have contributed to a steady rise in single and same-sex family formations (ONS 2022). Likewise in the United States and Canada, there have been notable legal and societal shifts concerning adoption, same-sex relationships, and reproductive rights, though challenges persist in the navigation of differing state and provincial laws. In the United States, many states now allow unmarried and same-sex couples to adopt children, and a 2015 Supreme Court ruling legalized same-sex marriage nationwide. Similarly, Canada legalized same-sex marriage in 2005, leading to more inclusive adoption policies in many provinces. In both the U.S. and Canada, assisted reproductive technologies are generally accessible to unmarried and same-sex couples, although specific regulations may differ by state or province.

In Italy, where most of the authors in this collection live and work, same-sex marriage was legalized in 2016 through the Cirinnà Law, which recognised civil unions but did not entirely equate them with traditional marriage. Although the Constitutional Court ruled in 2016 that the ban on adoption by same-sex couples was unconstitutional, the Italian situation concerning adoption by unmarried and same-sex couples is still the subject of harsh debate and regulatory claims for change. Moreover, assisted reproduction is still restricted by Law 40 of 2004, which prohibits the practice for unmarried and same-sex couples, thus creating legal complicacies in the recognition of such a practice when carried out abroad. Lastly, the parliament is currently considering passing a law which defines surrogacy as a criminal offence, leaving couples (same-sex and heterosexual) and their children in a particularly problematic situation. In fact, these families could be fined to up to one million euros, causing in most cases bankruptcy, and the non-biological parent could face up to two years in prison, ultimately leaving the children without a parent

In line with these shifts in family formations and practices, cross-disciplinary research in the past few decades has attended to the dynamics, social practices and representations of parents and families who break from traditional moulds. This includes a significant body of social and psychological research that points to the success of "new" western family formations such as same-sex and single-parent families who bring children into their lives through surrogacy, donor conception, or other reproductive practices. There is a wealth of research, for example, consistently demonstrating that children with same-gender parents, and children of parents who are single-by-choice, are thriving – by some measures even more so than their peers with

more traditional family types (e.g. Golombok 2015; Golombok et al., 2016; Green et al. 2019).

Despite these shifts in family practice and academic discourse, negative and discriminatory depictions have continued to limit the production of dialogic spaces in which non-normative families can exist and feel acknowledged. Worldwide, conservative and right-wing political parties are in a continuous effort "to preserve the patriarchal and cis-heteronormative 'natural' social order" (Baran 2023, p. 78), reinforcing and perpetuating discrimination towards identities and practices that do not conform with cisheteronormative and binary views. These efforts gravitate around the so-called concept of "gender ideology" (Borba 2022, Zottola and Borba 2022), which is used as a scarecrow to ignite discrimination and persecution against minority groups.

Popular media has a significant role to play in the circulation of such negative discourses, whereby two-parent heterosexual families are taken as the benchmark for "good" and "natural" family relations. Same-gender parents and marriages, for example, are frequently depicted in entertainment and news media as a threat to the social welfare of children (Goldberg 2012; van der Bom et al. 2015), whilst single parents can be represented as ignorant, irresponsible, and a drain on national resources (Salter 2018; Tyler 2008). Furthermore, Balirano and Hughes (2024) underscore how prevalent it remains on social networking sites to depict LGBTQ+ individuals as "pedophiles", "family wreckers", and "child groomers", thereby portraying traditional family values as tainted by alternative family structures.

Nevertheless, contemporary media has the power to overturn negative representations and drive forward new, alternative and transformational perspectives. Indeed, parents in new and marginalised family formations have long been mobilising media resources to find information and community, promote wider recognition of diverse family formations, advocate for and support other families, share new and emerging family practices, and seek support in the face of wider social stigma and misunderstanding. For example, Hogben and Coupland (2000) have shown how gay individuals and couples negotiate their desire for parenthood in relation to societal norms within advertisements seeking reproductive partners. The authors point to the role of these ads in reshaping public perceptions of family, reproduction, and sexuality, suggesting they can be seen as a form of social activism that promotes greater acceptance and understanding of diverse family forms. More recently, Mackenzie (2023) has shown how UK-based single, LGBTQ+ and/or adoptive parents use digital and social media to connect with like-minded individuals, groups and communities, forging connections that have the potential to transform their own and others' parenting practices, as well as broader understandings of diverse family structures and social actions. Both studies point to the significance of media platforms for social activism, change, and improved recognition of diverse family forms.

Discourse analytical approaches offer a range of tools and perspectives for the exploration of social norms and structures around parenthood and family formation as they are constructed, contested and negotiated in specific texts and practices. As Mackenzie and Zhao (2021) have suggested, these approaches are particularly well suited to explorations of the interaction between parenthood and family as social constructs, parenting and care-giving as social practice, and media discourse as social action. Although there is a relatively significant body of work that examines the representation of non-traditional parenthood and family forms across the globe, especially in the news media (e.g., Landau 2009; Zadeh and Foster 2016), there is far

less that takes an explicitly discourse analytical perspective. Studies that do exist in this area are able to deconstruct and identify some of the specific discursive strategies through which macro-level normative discourses of parenthood and family can be taken up, reproduced or challenged at the micro-textual level. For example, Sunderland and McGlashan's (2012) multimodal discourse analysis of 25 picture books that feature two-mum and two-dad families shows how mums tended to be constructed as co-parents, whilst dads tended to be constructed as partners. Riboni (2022) has also analysed children's picture books, in this case combining critical metaphor analysis with multimodal metaphor studies to investigate representations of multiethnic families in pre-adoption narratives. Examining below-the-line comments in articles about LGBTQ+ adoption in socially conservative UK newspapers, Sokalska-Bennett (2017) examines the construction of the ideal "nuclear" family. Through an in-depth membership categorisation analysis, she shows how parental roles are persistently gendered as feminine and masculine, with the implication that these binary role models are central to successful child-rearing.

This issue of *de genere* continues to refine and develop scholarly understanding of the social norms, structures and practices that shape conceptions of family, parenthood, and means of family formation. By examining media constructions of contemporary family types, both within and beyond the heteronormative ideal, all the articles in this issue seek to chart the current discursive landscape for families, parents and intended parents. Each investigation focuses on media representations of different family formations, including the "traditional family" (Fruttaldo), surrogacy and same-gender couple parenting (Mongibello), transracial adoption (Riboni), and single parent families, including single parents by choice (Nisco and Zollo; Rizzo; Scotto di Carlo). The explorations also cover varied geographical contexts, including Italy, Canada, the U.S., and global online discourses. Further, they examine a wide range of media data, including relatively static and traditional platforms such as news media (Mongibello) and entertainment media (Rizzo), as well as newer, multidimensional platforms through which a range of perspectives may converge, such as Twitter/X (Fruttaldo) and YouTube (Riboni; Scotto di Carlo).

Contributions to this collection adopt a range of discourse analytical approaches, including critical discourse analysis, and variations of this approach such as social media critical discourse analysis (Fruttaldo; Riboni) and multimodal positive discourse analysis (Nisco and Zollo). Several articles adopt an innovative combination of methods, with Fruttaldo and Mongibello each combining corpus-based and critical discourse analysis, and Rizzo charting new methodological ground with a Conversation Critical Discourse Analysis that examines the representation of solo mums "by choice" in a British sitcom. Scotto di Carlo, further, combines quantitative sentiment analysis with qualitative critical discourse analysis to examine two large corpora of YouTube comments. Such mixed-methods approaches are key to understanding the complex interplay between relatively dominant and more marginalised narratives around family formations in the media. Methodological synergies, such as that between CDA and corpus-based approaches, (see Baker 2006; Taylor and Marchi 2018) provide reliable methods for tracing discursive patterns and ideological implications. Selecting the most appropriate tools for their investigations, the authors analyse the discursive construction of contemporary family types through a range of semiotic means and across a wide range of media data.

Structure of the issue

The Discursive Construction of Contemporary Family Types opens with Fruttaldo's exploration of the discursive strategies used in the representation of the concept of "traditional" (nuclear, heterosexual and cisgender) family on Twitter/X. In this paper Fruttaldo shows how, despite some users contesting the notion of a traditional family, a large number of tweets are structured around the idea that traditional families are under attack, leading to a loss of values, cultural heritage and gender roles. These results confirm and mirror the current situation described at the beginning of this introduction with regards to the marginalization of, and/or discrimination against diverse family types that overturn traditional concepts of "family".

One of the controversial topics currently invading the public debate in Italy (and worldwide) has to do with the possibility of creating a family through surrogacy. Two of the authors involved in this special issue deal with this topic from different perspectives. Mongibello draws a comparison between the media representation of this practice in Italy and in Canada. The analysis of Canadian and Italian online news reports, which focus on stories related to surrogacy and alternative forms of parenthood, highlights some locally relevant threads that are related, in Italy, to the difficulties of the legal and political situation and in Canada, to a legitimation of different family types or alternative parenthood as the author defines it. Scotto di Carlo also touches on the topic of surrogacy, looking at the representation of single mothers and single fathers by choice on YouTube. The author concludes that single fathers seem to be represented more positively than single mothers, nonetheless she points to a growing optimism around the representation of different family types and suggests that children's wellbeing is increasingly associated with nurturing bonds rather than the gender of the parents.

Nisco and Zollo also focus on single parenthood in the Canadian context, but rather than discussing how the family came about, they look at the way in which these families are supported in this country and how charities and associations are working to eradicate the social stigma that is associated to single-parent families. Specifically, they focus on single-motherhood and analyse multimodal resources available on the websites of three Canadian non-profit organizations. In particular, their findings put forward a positive multimodal representation of single mums supported by positive messages related to having a support community and being resilient.

On the same topic, Rizzo analyses the British televised representation of such reality. In this regard, we must bear in mind that even though they are fictional, televised representations generally mirror societal realities. The author provides insights into the conversational patterns used in sitcoms and how these are valuable tools to explore power relations and the ideologies that underline specific cinematic choices. Rizzo, in fact, highlights how the series does not lack negative stereotyped representations of single motherhood shedding light on the societal norms and expectations that in many cases taint parenthood.

One last family type is represented in this issue. Riboni, in fact, shifts the focus to families created through adoption. Here she looks at strategies used on YouTube by a user of this social media platform to challenge mainstream narratives on transracial adoptions. The author underlines the importance of constructing a trustworthy and expert online persona in order to voice the needs and experiences of transracial adoptees.

The diversity of experiences and the variety of family types described in this issue of *de genere* point to the fact that, despite what religious fanatics or right-wing extremists want to us to believe, non-conventional, non-heteronormative, non-cisgender family types exist and are thriving. People have understood it, the media has understood, society is ready, now it's time for politics to catch up!

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