Making Bodies, Making Relatives. Family Resemblances and Relatedness in the Age of Assisted Reproductive Technologies

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Abstract

This essay deals with the meaning of family resemblances from the perspective of infertile couples who resort to assisted reproduction involving donation of gametes or embryos. Focusing on an online discussion forum, we try to grasp the value of resemblance for people who cannot boast genetic bonds with their children, and to appreciate the way this bodily dimension is managed socially. For most of them, resemblance talk "is not only an accepted form of public discourse but also a societal convention that reaffirms family relationships and social relationships more generally" (Becker *et al.* 2005, p. 1301). In particular we can appreciate the efforts made to construct bodily similarities through specific medical (e.g. matching managed by medical staff) or social practices (how the child's body is molded socially).

Key-words: family resemblances; relatedness; assisted reproduction; online discussion groups; Italy

Introduction

Seeking resemblances between parents and children, and relatives in general, is a common almost automatic gesture, deeply rooted in our social representations. Everyone has an opinion or something to say about it. Everyone is likened to someone else, and sees himself as resembling, or desires to resemble another, often many others. Resemblances are not only found between parents and children but also between siblings, grandparents and grandchildren, uncles and nephews, cousins, etc. More precisely, everyone can resemble several people at once: a one to one resemblance to only one individual is almost impossible. The similarities serve to create multiple kinship bonds. According to Becker and colleagues

> Resemblance talk is everyday talk (Becker *et al.* 2005, p. 1306). It is not only an accepted form of public discourse but also a societal convention that re-

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> affirms family relationships and social relationships more generally. Akin to mapping one's roots and ancestry, tracing the origins of the child's physical traits 'places the child' in a particular position in his or her social world (*Ibidem* 2005, p. 1301).

Resemblance is therefore a way of placing a child in the kinship network and establishing ties between the family members. By recognizing the existence of a link between the newborn and those who craved him, noting resemblances is a parental activity that builds the family and kinship group (Marre, Bestard 2009; Vernier 1999). Along with this public discourse that endorses the child as part of the family, the newborn's resemblance to different family members is always an "important element in the formation of individual identity. It has to do with the process of identification" (Marre, Bestard 2009, p. 65), through which an affective bond with one or more people is recognized. We can say that resemblance talk concerns both the physical uniqueness and the relational dimension of a person.

Referring primarily to the idea of bodily continuity among relatives and mirroring of the parent in the child's body, assessment of likeness in western tradition is generally understood as an expression of the genetic link between two people. However, physical likeness does not mean solely a *given* kinship (derived from conception and the laws of inheritance) but also the result of bodily camouflage, sharing, etc. derived from being together daily (Howell, Marre 2006; Marre, Bestard 2009). Thus, bodily resemblances are not only a metaphor of biological bonds, or proof of the *bio-genetic truth* of kinship, but something more complex that goes beyond procreation and refers to how people *actively act* to define or redefine their relations in order to build new relations (*kinning*) or to de-construct them (*de-kinning*)[1]. In the common discourse, the search for similarities also refers the idea that living together makes people similar by effective social shaping of their bodies.

The article focuses on the meaning of similarities in contemporary "Euro-American kinship thinking" (Strathern 1992; Edwards, Salazar 2009) from the perspective of infertile couples who resort to assisted reproduction technologies involving donation of gametes (eggs, sperm) or embryos: in principle they have little or no genetic connection with their children. Such experiences of parenting, in which *intentionality* (the choice and desire to be parents) plays a central role, is entangled in the complex and ambiguous logic of resemblances.

Starting from some recent socio-anthropological studies on family similarities (Becker *et al.* 2005; Howell, Marre 2006; Marre, Bestard 2009; Nor-

1 The simultaneous processes of *kinning* and *de-kinning* is part of the adoption practice (Howell 2006; Fonseca 2011), and the assisted reproduction (Thompson 2005; Edwards 2014).

dqvist 2010; Fortier 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Ariza 2015; Hammond 2018), I focus on an online discussion forum (*www.cercounbimbo.net*)[2] specifically dedicated to dealing with similarities in children born with donation of gametes or embryos[3]. In this online discussion (entitled *Heterologous: donation and parent-child resemblances*)[4], a group of women, who have availed (or intend to avail) themselves of gamete or embryo donation, talk openly about the apparently "incongruous topic" of family resemblances. Between April 2007 and 14th March 2018, the participants, each using a nickname, posted 176 comments. They form a digital "bio-social community" (Rabinow 1992) sharing the biological and social condition of being unable to have children naturally and of choosing to resort to medical technologies. Many are already mothers, others are about to become mothers, all seem to have pursued anonymous donation (gametes or embryos) in clinics abroad[5], while a few are trying again after one or more failures. As noted by several authors, for many women in contemporary society the web is a fundamental tool for *structuring* their own reproductive experience (Ranisio 2012; Parisi 2017; Saraceno 2017). They seek information about medical possibilities, and also find a platform for exchanges with peers and for sharing their intimate dimension.

The exchanges between participants of this digital community allow us to grasp the meaning of "resemblance talk" for people who cannot "boast" genetic bonds with their children. The way these mothers explain resemblance or non-resemblance with their offspring shows how this bodily dimension is managed socially by efforts to construct bodily similarities through specific medical (e.g. matching by medical staff) or social practices (how the child's body is molded culturally). Several more general questions raised by the

2 Literally "Iamlookingforababy". Founded in 2003, this web site is dedicated to the themes of infertility and medically assisted procreation (MAP). It contains about 40 discussions and self-help forums on topics ranging from endometriosis to male infertility, from in vitro fertilization to adoption, from drugs to natural methods of conception and from pregnancy to relating to children. There are also 10 medical advice forums managed by specialists (in andrology, gynecology, in vitro fertilization, embryology, genetics, psychology, sexology, pediatrics) and a legal advice forum. *Cercounbimbo* offers information on the diagnosis of infertility, on MAP techniques, on procedures for national and international adoption, on the state of Italian and foreign legislation regarding MAP.

3 It is an open forum that can also be consulted by those (external people) who do not participate in the discussion. This is, in fact, my position chosen in order to not influence the discussion with my questions and comments. Moreover, I was not interested in studying the online community but capturing topics and contents spontaneously circulating in this discussion forum. For an analysis of online communities and interactions, and of different ways of participation in the discussion, see Kozinets (2010, 2015) who focus, in particular, on the implications of online social interaction and experience in the context of conducting and representing academic ethnography (the so-called *netnography).*

4 http://www.cercounbimbo.net/forum/index.php?showforum=43

5 Italian law no. 40/2004 outlawed gamete and embryo donation togheter.

technologies of medically assisted procreation emerge, such as the different bodily involvement of men and women in reproduction, the different valency of female and male gametes, the social weight of genetics in the conception of parental bonds, and the dynamic interaction between natural and cultural levels in the construction of relatedness. The online discussions are used as a basis to weave a more general reflection on family resemblances, in the belief that this topic can show significant aspects of how relatedness is built, conceived and practiced.

Family Resemblances and Relatedness

Bronislaw Malinowski (1929 [2005]) understood that the perception of likeness was a culturally conditioned way to think and talk about kinship ties, after noting a great difference between his own way of interpreting physical similarities among kin and that of the Trobriand people. The importance of family resemblance for understanding how the Trobrianders conceived kinship, partly realized by Malinowski, has received little sustained attention in classical kinship studies, with rare exceptions (see Vernier 1999).

Only since the nineties, thanks to the so-called *new kinship studies*, the theme of resemblance has reappeared closely connected to a vision of kinship as a social construction, not necessarily based on "the blood and the law" (Schneider 1968 [1980]) but strictly linked to local notions concerning the body, the person and gender relations (Carsten 2004). According to many local theories of procreation, the newborn is considered the result of a process actively played by external agents other than the parents (gods, spirits and social forces) (Godelier 2004). The idea that bodily substance (blood) is affected by environmental factors is quite common (Sahlins 2014). Food, in particular, is thought to play a crucial role in the formation and development of "a person as kin" and is often considered to gradually turn into blood in the body. This is why those who live and eat together come to share flesh and resemble each other, as well as developing emotional closeness (Carsten 2004, p. 139). By a similar process, in which physical and social aspects of kinship merge into each other, a child who lives with foster/adoptive parents (or relatives) for a long time will also gradually come to resemble them in physical appearance and social manners (Weismantel 1995). According to Carsten, in many societies the divide between what is biological and what is social, far from being clear and defined, is very permeable: "Instead of being a vehicle to distinguish the social from the biological, fostering appears to be a means for transforming the former (social) into the latter, or of merging one into the other" (Carsten 2004, p. 141). Resemblances are very often attributed in particular to the mother's power, through her social behaviors, to mark the body of her child during

pregnancy or immediately after birth, as in the case of the Vezo people of Madagascar (Astuti 1998). A similar conception was also entertained by past European societies: the *imaginific theory*, elaborated by physicians and philosophers in the sixteenth century, showed the power of the mother to mark the body of her child with a sign (birthmark), the "voglie" or mother's desires (Pancino 1996).

Recent studies on new family forms and relatedness in Euro-American societies show that resemblance is a very important matter in transnational adoption (Howell, Marre 2006; Marre, Bestard 2009; Di Silvio 2015)[6] as in assisted reproduction involving donated gametes or embryos (Hayden 1995; Thompson 2005; Becker *et al.* 2005; Fortier 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Norqvist 2010; Ariza 2015; Parisi 2017).

Medical technologies have definitely made the traditional western way of dealing with kinship as a "natural fact" more problematical. As noted by several scholars, the meaning of human reproduction and kinship, and the relation between *nature* and *culture* in general, have been re-crafted by the new reproductive technologies (Strathern 1992, 2005; Franklin, Mckinnon 2001; Carsten 2004; Thompson 2005; Gribaldo 2005; Edwards, Salazar 2009; Freeman *et al.* 2014). These technologies have upset major implicit assumptions about kinship and genetic connections: first of all, that half the child's genes come from the mother and half from the father. The use of donor gametes in the conception process has raised new issues, concerns and negotiations regarding the notions of maternity and paternity. This possibility has forced us to rethink the meaning of genetics in defining kinship ties.

According to Petra Nordqvist: "One of the areas in which assisted conception raises particular concerns for the families involved is around physical resemblances" (2010, p. 1129). Infertile couples (both hetero and homosexual) forced to resort to medical technologies involving donation of gametes or embryos do not easily "give up" family resemblances, which are the subject of a sort of "super investment" (Fortier 2009, p. 254). However, the meaning of resemblance talk has changed in a significant way, as we shall see.

The importance accorded to the natural bond, and consequently to resemblance, explains why many infertile couples prefer to resort to medically assisted procreation with donor than to adoption. Through gamete or embryo donation, in fact, these infertile couples try to have a child *at least partly their own,* linked genetically to one of the two parents (Lombardi 1999; Fortier 2009; Gribaldo 2005; Parisi 2017). However, the possibility for the

6 The lack of any biogenetic bond between parents and adoptive children and an evident difference in phenotype does not make the search for physical resemblances, attitudes, etc. less important. Adoptive parents look for and/or try to find resemblances with the child matched to them, as soon as they receive the first photograph (from the adoption agency) (Howell 2006; Di Silvio 2015; Marre, Bestard 2009).

child to resemble their parents also depends on how the donor is selected. In fact, selection of a donor with phenotypic characteristics similar to those of the receiving couple (especially the parent excluded from conception) is an established routine in most European countries and elsewhere. Assisted reproductive centers are committed to "ensuring" the greatest possible phenotypic and immunological similarity between donors and parents: the medical team is expected to consider details of the general phenotype of the parents in order to match them with a donor looking quite similar from the point of view of skin, hair and eye color, sometimes also height and size (Becker *et al.* 2005; Norqvist 2010; Fortier 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2015; Ariza 2015). This procedure meets the parents' desire to have a child who is not too different from them, not necessarily an "ideal child" (the tall, blond, blue-eyed Aryan model), but a child who looks like them, primarily in terms of skin color. According to Fortier (2011a), while in certain countries same sex and heterosexual couples try to re-create resemblances with the non-biological parent in line with a "reality principle" that has little to do with "eugenic pressures", in others, instead, their practices are clearly influenced by the construction of "race" or ethnicity[7]. As noted by Lucia Ariza, among mothers receiving donor eggs in Argentina, the necessity of physical appearance is nevertheless "rarely argued for in racial terms, the matching of egg donors' and recipients' physical appearance is primarily concerned with achieving racial coherence, supporting Wade's (2012a) suggestion of an expected 'race-kinship congruity' between parents and offspring" (Ariza 2015, p. 6). This topic is undoubtedly worthy of further attention. Here, I just note that many Italian couples (homo or heterosexual), forced to conceive their children in clinics abroad (since law no. 40/2004 came into force), openly declare having selected the donor by negotiation with medical staff, so as to "reproduce a certain phenotype" and in particular to find a donor as similar as possible to the social parent (Parisi 2017; Grilli 2018)[8]. This seems very important for same sex couples in which the social parent is not yet recognized by law and resemblance is used to reinforce his/her role. Since Italian Supreme Court ruling no.162/2014 restored the possibility of gamete and embryo donation for infertile heterosexual couples, the compatibility of the main phenotypic characteristics (skin, hair and eye color) of the donor

7 Fortier (2011a, 2015) noted that the *temptation* to choose a donor with European standards of beauty (blond hair, blue eyes, etc.) only characterizes single women who buy semen online from a sperm bank (they are about 40% of the clients of *Cryos,* a Danish international sperm bank). In particular she has critically examined the role of this online sperm bank in the development of a "racial" and "ethnic" typology.

8 In a clinic for infertility in Cortona (Tuscany), for example, donors (both male and female) expressly are selected by experts on the basis of ethnicity, color of skin, eyes, hair, and others physical other features such as short or long-limbed body, see: https://www.retepma.it/il-centro/.

with those of the receiving couple is guaranteed by public and private reproductive centers, also in Italy (although couples are not allowed to choose specific phenotypic characteristics in order to avoid eugenic selection)[9].

In countries, such as the United States and Canada, where parents can choose donors from among friends or relatives (Hayden 1995; Thompson 2005) or thanks to detailed descriptions, photographs or sometimes videos, it is very common to select a donor similar to the social parent. In a pioneering study on lesbian mothers in the United States (1995), Corinne Hayden noted how resemblances could create an affective bond between child and *co-mothe*r. In order to compensate the absence of a biological link with the social *mother,* "a couple may choose a donor whose physical characteristics in some way resemble those of the co-mother suggesting the sharing of substance and the reproduction of her image" (Hayden 1995, p. 53).

In more recent work on lesbian couples in England, Petra Nordqvist (2010) explored how family resemblances are perceived by these couples, and how they negotiate the involvement of a sperm donor. The desire to find donors with "matching" physical characteristics is very common among lesbian couples; they aspire to create what can be understood as phenotypical resemblances between the social mother and the child. According to Nordqvist, a shared genotype between parents and child is replaced by a shared phenotype (looking alike) as in other contexts of donor conception. This effort can be interpreted as a way to obscure the donor (the procreative other). If the child resembles the social mother, the involvement of the donor in the conception is symbolically hidden or canceled. "Knowledge that a donor has genetically contributed to the child is obscured and as he moved out of sight physically, his genetic involvement also moved out of mind" (Nordqvist 2010, p. 1135). The specific function of resemblance is thus to reaffirm the social *primacy* of the lesbian couple on the donor, excluding him definitively as a potential parent. It should be noted that "what can be traced are notions of resemblances as connectedness, but also distance" (*Ibidem* p. 1135). In other words, making the donor's contribution to the conception invisible is understood as a form of *de-kinning*.

Through donor selection, it is therefore also possible to build resemblances among *siblings*. The desire to make *siblingship* through the same sperm or egg donor is very common among homosexual fathers and mothers (Grilli 2018, 2019). In general, they share the idea that using the same donor allows them to *create* a very *strong tie* among their children through resemblances and indirectly to reinforce the couple. Resorting to the same donor to have a second child is probably also common among heterosexual couples; moreover, it is considered a legitimate right

9 As provided by the Guidelines of the State-regional treaty (2014), https://www.sierr.it/images/normativa_naz/Conf_Stato-Regioni_2014.pdf

by political and health institutions. According to the guidelines of the 2014 treaty between the Italian State and the Regions regulating donation of gametes (limited to heterosexual couples), it is possible to resort to the same donor for the second child in order to create a genetic link and a probable physical resemblances between children of a same couple.

It is interesting to note that while the donated substances (eggs or sperm) have the *capacity* to connect the children of a given couple (also thanks to resemblance), i.e. to create a kinship bond between siblings, on the contrary the genetic link between babies and their donors is not recognized as a kinship tie. This evident paradox betrays an underlying social logic. As noted by several authors, the strategic or creative use of biogenetic ties in some parental choices gives rise to denial of other genetic or biological bonds (Hayden 1995; Cadoret 2007; Carsten 2004; Thompson 2005), constituting a formal and social disconnection, or *de-kinning* (Edwards 2014).

Who does the child look like? Resemblance talk in an online discussion group

> Today something happened that had to happen sooner or later... My son Christian is three months old and the more time passes, the more his hair becomes red. I wish to clarify that he was born with egg donation and it was therefore to be expected that he was not like me. This is the only aspect that does not give me 100% serenity.

With this post on 2nd April 2007, cugida, starts the discussion forum. All the participants seem aware that resemblance talk is "not only ubiquitous, unavoidable, and uncontrollable", but that it is also "a challenge for parents whose children were conceived with donor gametes or embryo (Becker *et al*. 2005, p. 1300). The matter of resemblances, in fact,

> has the capacity to exacerbate ongoing uncertainties about their disclosure decision (or lack of one), worries about establishing their child within the extended family, and apprehension that insensitive remarks could make the child feel different from other family members (*Ibidem* 2005, p. 1300).

In her first post, cugida expresses a worry shared by many parents who resorted to donation: how to manage any physical divergence of their children *socially*. An acquaintance made an insinuating comment on her son's red hair. This comment makes her fear for the child, who could suffer if someone pointed out that he is the only member of his family to have red hair. Very often, as in this case, not even the birth of a child allows the mother to get over the grief of not being able to have a natural child (infertility). Indeed, the words of many infertile women reflect how much the diagnosis

of infertility upset the course of their lives and forced them to confront with "normative ideologies of reproduction and motherhood where reproduction is natural and expected, mother and child are genetically related, and two (genetic) parent families are what is normal" (Hammond 2018, p. 266). In several cases they seem to have internalized the normative model of maternity; the real and perceived stigma of infertility pervades the narrated life of these couples and damages their identities (*Ibidem*).

For many of them physical resemblance is still considered something that authoritatively signifies and confirms natural connectedness. If similarity indicates connectedness, dissimilarity indicates disconnectedness. A dissonant physical element, such as the red hair of cugida's child, elicits the fear of many mothers that their child's body may demonstrate the *lack* of genetic bonds. These mothers therefore hope that their children will look like them (or their partner), so that they will appear to be their *own natural children*. This will enable them to avoid insinuating comments or having to provide explanations.

In the discussion forum, the participants confide in each other and readily share worries, anxieties and fears, as well as joys and satisfactions. Many of them do not hide "a veil of sadness" in which they are sometimes caught: not being or only partially being biological parents, they do not tolerate any questions from others about resemblance that might introduce an element of uncertainty into the parental process of establishing their child in the extended family. Some openly admit to being more entangled in "resemblance talk" than biological parents; they feel they have to equip themselves to answer their child's fateful question: who do I look like? Or: why am I the only one in the family with red hair?

Cugida continues (2nd April 2007):

> What will I say to my son? Will I have to "invent" the story of the great-grandmother with red hair (since you rightly pointed out that even biologically it can happen in any birth) or is telling him the truth always the best thing to do? Who can say?

This mother is concerned with inventing a plausible scenario that would account for the child's discordant physical trait. Her dilemma is whether to resort to the explanation of a red-haired grandmother, as suggested by several other mothers, or to explain how the child was conceived: whether or not to tell the *truth* about the nature of the conception. If disclosure is chosen, it is necessary to decide how and when to tell the child and possibly with whom to share the information. Several participants have only revealed the truth to a few close relatives (usually the mother, a sister, less likely the mother-in-law or sister-in-law, etc.); others have not yet decided what to do and they are taking time to think. Almost all participants seem willing to handle this information with a certain amount of freedom, having the possibility of resorting to

analogy with biological parents (the strategy of *passing*). Unlike homosexual couples who are forced to disclose (Cadoret 2007), heterosexual couples may decide not to reveal the truth, or to reveal it in a partial way, choosing the moment deemed most appropriate for themselves or for their children. In the meantime, they can watch the inevitable "game of similarities" among external observers (family, friends, acquaintances), having a little fun observing what those unaware of the truth see or think they recognize. Ramonita writes (19th May 2008): "[...] Three grandparents out of four are still unaware of the egg donation and they are shooting big on resemblances, to our amusement... I can imagine their faces when we explain the egg donation...".

These mothers express concern for their children, and especially for their partners if conception was the result of donor sperm: as noted by Becker *et al*. they are "often concerned with the feelings of loss experienced by their husbands" (2005, p. 1304) and they fear their partner may not know how to handle possible non-resemblance of the child on a social and discursive level, non-resemblance that evokes the procreative other, an intruder, and therefore the "specter" of adultery (Fortier 2009, pp. 261-262). On this level, the different position of mothers and fathers with regard to assisted reproductive technology reappears: their different bodily involvement and the different symbolic value of sperm and eggs. As Thomas Laqueur already suggested, it is reasonable to question the need to interpret the anonymous gift of gametes according to traditional cultural conceptions that semen "claims rights when it enters a woman's body" (1997, p. 311). While the sperm is understood as an element that colonizes the receptive (female) body, imposing a social identity (Gribaldo 2005), there is no prejudice to be overcome by an ovule that passes from one female body to another: it is not a bestowal of *the essence of motherhood*, but is associated more with gestation rather than with generation.

Learning to look like: the social construction of family resemblance

In the era of assisted reproductive technologies, the process of *kinning* (Howell 2006) begins before the birth of the child. As in the case of SaraStella (2th Septemeber 2011), pregnant with a baby girl from a donor egg, the first ultrasound image of the fetus unleashed speculation about family resemblances among the grandparents:

> […] we decided to do an ultrasound scan 4d and then announce the baby to our families (they obviously didn't know anything about the donation)... well, our relatives were divided ... some thought that she looked like the father, others said that she looked like the mother ... It is a personal (subjective) opinion … *Who knows what people see*?

Thus, resemblances seem to confirm an *obvious truth* for those who do not know: "children resemble their parents, a truth coming from biological facts" (Marre, Bestard 2009, p. 70). Perceiving resemblances during pregnancy is evidence of kin pressure on the parents in anticipation of a baby who looks like the partners of the couple and generally resembles other members of the family. The image of the technologized fetus is "a stimulus" to build a relationship between it and other members of the family. The child *not yet born* is transformed through the eyes of the mother and other relatives into an "individualized entity that becomes part of the family body through the knowledge of kinship. Family resemblances are precisely what define family identity" (*Ibidem*, p. 70).

In general, for these women, the discovery of possible similarities with their children is seen with a mixture of amazement and satisfaction: the result of chance, a small miracle, or the outcome of work well done by the medical staff. Many participants talk about the role played by experts in the donor selection process with a sense of gratitude: they are aware that any possible physical resemblance with their children depends largely on the matching process conducted by the clinic staff. On the other hand, as noted by Becker and colleagues: "This professionally orchestrated selection procedure [...] normalized the use of a donor and reassured couples by giving *them a sense of control over the process*" (2005, p. 1303)[10].

It is a common belief that as a child grows up, it comes to resemble its parents through genuine identifying mimicry: it takes the same facial expressions, the same smile, the same way of walking, because "Children take on similarities with those who raise them..." (desdemona, 15th April 2008). According to many participants, this explains why adoptive children are often seen as resembling their parents, despite the obvious physical diversity. "[...] A dear friend of mine has an adopted son and I swear that before I knew it, I told her, your son is identical to your husband! And it's true!" (Cucciolomi16 16th Apr 2008). Adoptive mothers, aware of not being genetically related to their children, primarily express their motherhood in terms of commitment, responsibility, parenting and social role. In support of the idea that "one learns to be similar to someone else", FEDERICA66 (16th Apr 2008) describes her personal experience with the *step-father:* "[...] I was raised by my mother's second husband (who has always been "father" to me). My circle is full of people who do not know the story and who continue to say how much we resemble each other."

10 Also, among adoptive families, the belief prevails that the experts in charge wish to bring compatible people together by considering mainly physical (phenotypical) and attitudinal similarities between adoptive parents and children (Howell, Marre 2006; Marre, Bestard 2009; Di Silvio 2015).

In general, therefore, parents with donor, as indeed adoptive parents, can only trust in their capacity to mold social resemblances. These are often learned implicitly and expressed in body language (gestures, postures, tone of voice, etc.) and social attitudes (personality, emotional traits), and are evidence of the will and capacity of these parents *to build* a relationship with their children, according to an idea of a kinship based on specific social practices (Carsten 2004; Howell 2006; Di Silvio 2015).

Similarities due to socially acquired traits have just as much emotional impact as traits of biological origin. Explaining resemblance not as natural, but as the conscious work of the parent, does not diminish it, but broadens its expressive potential, making it a *chosen bond* between parent and child. As in the case of homosexual parenthood, in which recognition of resemblances with the social parent publicly demonstrate the parental role he/she played in the daily care of the child, the presence of the social parent is concretized in the *body language* of the child (Grilli 2018). It is as if the social parent devoted more attention and commitment than the biological parent to make the "second body" of the child: the first body is the result of genetic inheritance, the second is "a sign of the parent's devotion or neglect" (Strathern 2005, p. 5).

In this way, the genetic truth may be overshadowed by the social truth, visible in the child's resemblance to those by whom he/she was raised. Although they know the manner of conception, parents, grandparents and aunts will tend to focus on *acquired* similarities (gestures, postures, attitudes, etc.), or will try to find resemblances as in this comment by gwinet (2nd Oct 2013):

> […] The most beautiful thing is to hear the grandparents who, aware of the donation, still see similarities with themselves in their own way, and me too: despite my stoic character, I see traces of myself in the gaze of my son or in the attitudes of my daughter …

It is also not surprising that some women feel more related to offspring conceived with donor eggs, due to the ties they forge with them through the experience of pregnancy and delivery, than due to any genetic connection (Konrad 2005; Hammond 2018).

In a recent post, mariavittoria (14th March 2018) reports a link to a scientific article about epigenetics:"Science is revealing a world, unknown until recently. I am realizing that there is not so much physical strangeness between the recipient (mother) and the child: he is hers in every respect!!"

There are two positions on epigenetic theory: some consider "imprinting theory" a pious illusion not to be relied on by those opting for heterologous fertilization; others consider it reassuring, and an explanation of similarities considered surprising. According to Milena66 (14th march 2018), epigenetic

theory obviously does not mean that pregnant women can transmit DNA to the child, but only that "[...] there is a link between the fetus and the receptive womb and that this condition engages genes". The relevance of epigenetic theory for many participants is confirmed in another discussion forum of the same web site, called "Imprinting of recipient over donated ova"[11]. Here, from 2010 till 2018, many women have posted messages concerning resemblances. Andromeda (8th september 2010) in particular, writes:

> […] We condition our children very strongly in every sense on a physical and emotional level. These are things we already knew in our hearts ... but science is now bringing us evidence that fills our hearts and wipes away so many shadows for those who choose this way of becoming a mother.

This mother's hope that scientific knowledge will soon demonstrate the molding role of the gestating mother (during intrauterine development of the fetus) shows the ambivalent and complex feelings of those who resort to donation. Although many share the idea that parenthood is primarily a question of choice and intention (and therefore emphasize daily maternal/parental care and social intimacies), many others try to naturalize the relation with their children, compensating the lack of a genetic bond with the "biological bond" of pregnancy, considered to have a decisive influence on the offspring's body.

Final remarks

Mothers recurring to embryo or gamete donation struggle between the view of their parenthood as an expression of choice and desire to be parents and the strength of the normative model, more or less internalized, based on the primacy of the biogenetic bond between parents and children. They have to face the common idea that likeness is a direct expression of biogenetic link. Thus, resemblance talk is always a challenge for most of them. A lack of resemblance can often be experienced as a stigma that recalls their infertility, their incapacity to have a child on their own.

We have seen that seeking similarities between newborns and their parents, as well as other relatives, weaves a bond of bodily continuity in a context of filiation characterized by genetic *discontinuity* (Marre, Bestard 2009). According to Fortier (2009, p. 272), where there is genetic discontinuity, similarity can establish continuity at a visible level: resemblance and biology therefore tend to dissolve and merge into the wider corporeal category.

11 http://www.cercounbimbo.net/forum/index.php?showtopic=143995

The narratives of the women participating to the discussion show that the specificity of family resemblances, their value and social effectiveness, consists in linking individuals based on the recognition of shared physical and social traits. Whatever the source (biological or social), resemblances have important emotional consequences in the building of kinship ties and in the development of a sense of belonging to a larger family group.

Physical or behavioral similarities between relatives, resulting from natural inheritance laws, *kinning* practices (bodily mimesis, food sharing, etc.) or genetic combinations in assisted reproductive technologies (first of all the matching of gametes) show the key role that the body continues to have in the definition and conceptualization of kinship.

Analysis of this topic, which is both a way to talk about kinship and to concretely build kinship ties, therefore affords an important opportunity for reflecting on the "metamorphosis" of *relatedness* in contemporary societies. As an expression of social practices in daily life, often interpreted beyond genetic inheritance, similarity becomes the visible trace of parental *investment* in the relationship with the child. The matter of resemblance therefore belongs to the idea of kinship as *relatedness,* in which the intentionality of the subjects plays an important role. Intentionality refers to the relational work that the subjects (in their different roles and status) are required and commit themselves to performing. Resemblance talk proves to be

> a way of creating continuities between individual persons in a kinship network and also [...] a way to visualize the double face of Euro-American kinship in the body: that is, what is given and what is made in the constitution of the individual person (Marre, Bestard 2009, p. 64)

In conclusion, resemblance talk is a social discourse about the way we are related to each other. Nowadays it is precisely through resemblances that a particular "kinship thinking" is expressed. It is a way of talking about what we can do by manipulating nature through technology, but also a way to affirm the social role of parents and the ways in which relatedness is forged through different kinds of social intimacy.

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