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Prospective Parenting: Sexual Identity and Intercultural Trajectories

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Abstract

This study explored the impact of sexual identity on attitudes towards parenthood among childless individuals from Portugal and the United Kingdom (UK). Compared to heterosexuals, lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals were less likely to: desire and intend to have children, be concerned about the prospect of childlessness or perceive children as a source of enrichment. They also people anticipated more stigma as parents than did heterosexuals. Compared to UK participants, all Portuguese participants, independently of sexual identity, desired and intended more to have children, were more concerned about childlessness, reported higher levels of parental commitment, and anticipated less stigma and expected more social support as parents. Portuguese lesbian, gay and bisexual participants desired more to have children than did those in the UK. Only in the UK did lesbian, gay and bisexual participants perceive children less as a source of enrichment than did heterosexuals and also anticipate negative costs associated with parenting. We concluded that the intersectional influence of different cultural climates on parenting aspirations should be taken into account in future research alongside sexual identity.

Keywords: culture; lesbian; gay; bisexual; parenting desire; parenting intentions; UK; Portugal

Introduction

In recent years, sexual minority individuals' access to parenthood has been facilitated both by legal changes concerning same-sex marriage and adoption rights (Gato and Fontaine 2017) and by increased access to assisted reproduction techniques (Goldberg 2010). Although parenthood seems to be an appealing life project to some lesbians, gay men and bisexuals (e.g., D'Augelli et al. 2008), lesbians and gay men in the USA are less likely than their heterosexual peers to have children (e.g., Gates et al. 2007).

Few investigations have compared the attitudes of childless lesbian, gay and bisexual people toward parenthood with those of their heterosexual counterparts. Existing research has shown that despite endorsing the value of parenthood as strongly as their heterosexual peers, lesbians and gay men reported lower levels of both parenting desire and parenting intention (Baiocco and Laghi 2013; Riskind and Patterson 2010; Riskind and Tornello 2017). One of the factors that may affect attitudes toward parenthood among lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals are the legal barriers in place in different contexts. In the USA, Bauermeister (2014) observed that legal restrictions, such as the barring of same-sex adoption, moderated the relationship between parenting aspirations and psychological well-being in young, non-heterosexual men.

Life Course Theory highlights several important questions regarding parenthood, as individual life-course trajectories influence the available options to parenthood. The support available from a partner, family, and/or friends may particularly influence individual perspectives concerning prospective parenthood (Elder 1998). Sociocultural context also differentially influences the expectations of marginalised social groups (Allen and Henderson 2016). For example, in Baiocco and Laghi's (2013) study Italian lesbians reported higher levels of desire than did their counterparts from the USA (Riskind and Patterson 2010). Cultural factors influencing parental desires and intentions include values such as familism (Fontaine and Matias 2003) and the valorisation of motherhood as a key aspect of female identity (Baiocco and Laghi 2013). Despite evidence on the effects of the social-legal context and culture on parenting desire and parenting intention, to accurately assess their influence it is necessary to compare different legal and cultural contexts within the same study (Bauermeister 2014; Hatzenbuehler et al. 2010). For this reason, we set out to explore, not only the impact of sexual identity on attitudes toward parenthood, but also how different national contexts and cultural identities may further influence these aspects. With this purpose, we examined differences in attitudes toward parenthood among lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals compared to heterosexual individuals in two countries with different social climates and cultural and legal contexts concerning same-sex parenting, namely Portugal and the UK.

Impact of sexual identity on attitudes toward parenthood

There is research to suggest that on the one hand lesbians and gay men seem to be as concerned as their heterosexual peers about the prospect of not having children and may also value parenthood as strongly (Riskind and Patterson 2010). On the other hand, lesbians and gay men have also reported lower levels of both parenting desire and parenting intention compared with their heterosexual peers (Baiocco and Laghi 2013; Riskind and Patterson 2010). As for bisexual persons, previous studies have indicated

more similarities in their attitudes to heterosexuals than to lesbians and gay men (Riskind and Tornello 2017). However, Simon et al. (2018) recently found no differences concerning parenting desires and intentions among lesbians, bisexuals and heterosexual women.

In a recent study in Italy, lesbians and gay men perceived lower levels of psychological enrichment brought by parenting a child and held a more negative perception of the social support available to them as future parents than did heterosexuals (Baiocco and Laghi 2013). This may be due in part to the relatively high level of heterosexism in Italian society (Baiocco and Laghi 2013) but may also indicate that lesbians and gay men feel less obliged to become parents than do heterosexuals. Gender differences were also found with lesbians reporting higher levels of both parenting desire and intention, than did gay men (Baiocco and Laghi 2013; Riskind and Patterson 2010). In this regard, Baiocco and Laghi (2013) found that gay men reported lower levels of perceived enrichment and anticipated less social support available to them as parents compared with lesbian participants. Another study of lesbians in Greece found that the reduced social acceptance of lesbian parenthood prohibits lesbians from becoming biological mothers: in vitro fertilisation is allowed for single woman for medical reasons but is not allowed for lesbians (Voultsos et al. 2018).

Several reasons have been advanced to explain these gender differences among non-heterosexuals. Besides the biological fact that cisgender women are potentially able to bear children while cisgender men are not, another important barrier to gay men's parenting desires and intentions relates to the effects of gender stereotypes. Although men increasingly participate in the parental sphere, the care of children is still essentially seen as part of the feminine domain (Hicks 2013). Thus, just like their heterosexual male counterparts, some gay men may find that their male identity is not easily reconciled with a parenting role (Murphy 2013). Nonetheless, Costa and Bidell (2017) did not find any gender differences among Portuguese non-heterosexuals regarding their parenthood intentions.

Portugal and the UK: two different legal and cultural contexts

Portugal and the UK currently appear to have similar legislative freedoms and restrictions concerning same-sex marriage and adoption rights. However, this apparent similarity and equal rights belies two distinct social and cultural contexts. Portugal is part of cluster of countries characterised by more familistic and less individualistic values compared to those in the UK (Hofstede 2011). Portugal also shows a strong "we" consciousness: people are born into extended families that protect them in exchange for loyalty to the group. In contrast, the UK privileges more of an "I" consciousness where each person is supposed to take care of him/herself and his/her respective nuclear family only.

Regarding marital and partnership patterns Hajnal (1965) concluded that Western European countries, such as the UK at that time, were mostly characterised by nuclear family households, late marriage and a higher proportion of individuals of both genders who never married compared to other European countries. In contrast, Southern European countries, such as Portugal, presented more multigenerational households, earlier and almost universal marriage. This pattern or "Hajnal line" was recently confirmed by Steinbach, Kuhnt and Knüll (2016). Portugal is a country where fewer people than in the UK reported no intention to have children (Miettinen and Szalma

2014). Nonetheless, it is surprising that the recorded birth rate in the UK in 2015 was 11.99‰, compared to 8.39‰ was recorded in Portugal (PORDATA 2017). Several factors may be responsible for the higher fertility rate in the UK than in Portugal, most notably the higher immigration rate in the UK where more births were recorded to immigrant than non-immigrant groups (Office for National Statistics 2014). Furthermore, labour market insecurities in Portugal may have contributed to a lower than expected birth rate compared to the UK in recent years (Brinton 2016).

Regarding lesbians, gay, bisexual, and trans legal rights, Portugal was the first country in Europe (and the fourth in the world) to constitutionally prohibit discrimination based on an individual's sexual orientation. In 2015, Portugal ranked sixth within a set of forty-five countries on having the best equality policies for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people (ILGA-Europe 2016). Compared to the 2014 ILGA-Europe rankings, Portugal had become more progressive due to the passing of bills to allow same-sex couples to adopt a child (Law no. 2/2016, *Diário da República*,) and to permit access to assisted reproduction for all women, regardless of sexual identity, marital or fertility status (Law no. 17/2016, *Diário da República*).

In contrast to Portugal, the UK ranks third in same league table of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans rights across different nation states (ILGA-Europe 2016). Concerning parenting, the UK passed the Adoption and Children Act in 2002 to allow adoption by same-sex couples from 2005 onwards (Gross and Yip 2010). Recent data from the Eurobarometer survey (2015) showed that 58% of UK respondents, compared to 69% of Portuguese respondents, believed that discrimination based on sexual identity was a widespread phenomenon in their country. Findings from the European Union LGBT Survey conducted by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (EUFRA 2014) show that in Portugal in 2012, 86% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans respondents saw discrimination based on sexual identity as a widespread phenomenon in their country while in the UK only 62% of the similar respondents held the same view. Thus, even when lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans rights are assured, discrepancies can be found between the law itself and public opinion (Santos 2004).

In sum, Portugal and the UK have in place several policies that defend sexual minority rights in law with equal parity regarding same-sex marriage and adoption. However, differences exist between the two countries (Eurobarometer 2015; ILGA-Europe 2016), with more favourable attitudes being observed in the UK than in Portugal. Furthermore, the cultural values that characterise each country highlight the greater importance of family in the Portuguese context in contrast to the premium placed on independence and individuality within the UK.

The current study

The current study explored differences in attitudes toward parenthood (parenting desire, parenting intention, attitudes toward childlessness and parenting perceptions) associated with sexual identity (lesbians, gay men and bisexuals vs. heterosexual), sexual identity and gender (sexual minority women vs. sexual minority men) and country (Portugal vs. UK).

We based our rationale for this comparison on (i) the results of previous research regarding differences in attitudes toward parenthood in function of sexual identity, (ii)

the persistent gendered and heteronormative constraints upon same-sex parenting; and (iii) the legal and cultural-differences between Portugal and the UK.

Compared to their heterosexual peers we expected lesbian, gay and bisexual participants to express lower levels of parenting desire (hypothesis 1), parenting intention (hypothesis 2), and to feel less concerned by the prospect of not having a child (hypothesis 3). Given the scarcity of studies that have specifically focused on the differences between the group of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals and heterosexual individuals' perceptions of potential parenting experience, we opted not to formulate hypotheses regarding this construct. We also explored the effects of gender among lesbian, gay and bisexual participants (lesbians and bisexual women vs. gay and bisexual men): we expected gay and bisexual men compared with lesbians and bisexual women to express lower levels of parenting desire (hypothesis 4), intention (hypothesis 5) and to be less concerned by prospect of not having children (hypothesis 6). We further explored possible gender differences in lesbian, gay, and bisexual participants' perceptions of parenting. Besides the effect of sexual identity, we anticipated an effect of country of origin, and its interaction with sexual identity, to influence attitudes toward parenthood, both for lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals and heterosexual individuals. Given the exploratory nature of these analyses, we did not formulate specific hypotheses regarding the main effect of country and its interaction with sexual identity.

Method

Participants

The Portuguese sample was composed of 472 childless participants and the UK sample of 168 participants. To achieve a rigorous comparison between the two samples, we used the "nearest neighbour matching" technique (Stuart 2010). Therefore, we systematically selected, from the Portuguese sample, participants who were most similar to the UK participants on the following seven sociodemographic variables: age, gender, sexual identity, education level, relational status and duration of relationship, employment status and place of residence (rural area/urban area). Sexual identity was assessed with a categorical measure that asked participants to identify themselves as heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian or gay. Education level was coded according to the years of school attendance [1 = less than 9 years; 2 = 9 to 12 years; 3 = undergraduate degree; 4 = masters degree; 5 = doctorate]. Thus, the final matched sample was composed of 168 UK participants and 168 Portuguese participants. In terms of sexual identity across both the Portugal and the UK surveys 26 women defined themselves as lesbian, 52 as bisexual, and 164 as heterosexual; while 32 men defined themselves as gay, 4 as bisexual and 58 as heterosexual. Participants were evenly divided between the two countries in each sexual identity category. The sample ranged from 18 to 45 years of age ($M = 27.14$; $SD = 6.73$) with a mean educational level of 2.88 ($SD = 0.93$), corresponding on the scale used to "university degree". Approximately half of the participants (55.4%) were in a committed relationship, with a mean duration of 46.24 months. Most participants (83.8%) currently lived in an urban area and 53.8% were in paid employment (full-time or part-time).

Measures

Parenting desire and parenting intention. To assess these variables, we followed Riskind and Patterson's (2010) approach and used single items adapted from the 2002 USA National Survey of Family Growth. We devised a psychological scale to assess desires and intentions, by constructing two additional items to supplement each of the original single items.

Therefore, the following items evaluated parenting desire: (i) "[Looking to the future] if it were possible I would like to have a child" (original item), (ii) "... I see myself as a parent", and (iii) "...to be a parent is something I desire".

Regarding parenting intention, participants read the instruction, "Sometimes what people want and what they intend are different because they are not able to do what they want. Looking to the future..." Participants were then presented with the following items to answer: (i) "...I intend to have a child at some point" (original item), (ii) "...I have already decided that I'm going to be a parent", and (iii) "...having a child is part of my future plans".

Response options formed a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*Definitely no*) to 5 (*Definitely yes*).

Attitudes toward childlessness. To assess this variable, participants were asked: "If it turns out that you do not have any children, to what extent would that bother you?" (Riskind and Patterson 2010).

A Likert-type scale was used to assess this item from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*A great deal*) with higher scores reflecting greater endorsement that not having children would affect the respondent personally.

Perceptions of parenting. Perceptions of the parenting experience were measured using an adaptation of the Perception of Parenting Inventory (Lawson 2004; Gato, Santos and Fontaine 2016). Participants were instructed to think about what parenting a child would be like and the extent to which respondents valued or (devalued) different aspects of parenting was measured.

The POPI is composed of 28 items and six subscales: Enrichment, Isolation, Commitment, Instrumental Costs, Continuity and Social Support (Lawson 2004). The anticipated enrichment subscale is composed of eight items evaluating the psychological benefits that a child could bring to a parent's life (e.g., "Caring for the child would bring me happiness"); anticipated isolation consisted of four items and assesses the potential interference of a child with parents' free time and other relationships (e.g., "Caring for the child would interfere with the time I wanted to spend with my spouse"); anticipated commitment is also composed of four items and taps into the perceived responsibilities associated with having a child (e.g., "Parenting the child would be a never-ending responsibility"). The subscale anticipated instrumental costs encapsulated in five items that evaluated the difficulties associated with having children (e.g., "Raising the child would be financially expensive"). Since this subscale included instrumental costs as well as emotional and physical costs, the "instrumental" qualifier was omitted (Gato, Santos, and Fontaine 2016). Continuity consisted of four items assessing perceptions of generativity and continuity of family (e.g., "The child would carry on my family line"). Social support was composed of three items and evaluated the anticipated level of social support from family or community (e.g., "My community would provide me with social support").

To measure the anticipation of potential stigma upon parenthood, five items were added to the POPI. Although parenting stigma perceptions items are likely to be particularly relevant to individuals belonging to stigmatised groups, such as those with lesbian, gay and bisexual identities (Bos and Ban Valen 2008; Gartrell et al. 2005), these items were devised so that they could be answered by heterosexual participants as well: (i) “The child could be treated unfairly by people”; (ii) “My friends would find it strange if I had a child”; (iii) “Other people would find it strange if I had a child”; (iv) “People would have doubts about my parenting skills”, and (v) “My family would find it strange if I had a child”.

A Likert-type scale was used to assess parenting stigma perceptions from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*) with higher scores reflecting greater endorsement that parenting stigma was personally anticipated. The face validity of this version was established through discussion with a group of six Portuguese young adults. The adaptation of the original instruments to the Portuguese language included a process of translation and back translation. Subsequently, the face validity of the final version was verified by consulting with a focus group of 16 Portuguese young adults. The internal consistency values (Cronbach’s alphas) of all measures are presented in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Procedure

Data was collected on-line between April 2014 to June 2015 in Portugal, and between May to November 2016 in the UK, as part of a larger study on prospective parenting among lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and heterosexual adults entitled *Current and Prospective Lesbian and Gay Parenting: Contextual and Psychological Determinants*”.

Recruitment procedures were the same for lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual participants. In both countries, the study was advertised on general and lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans oriented websites and social media, using the following recruitment text: “To have or not to have (more) children? This is a question many people ask themselves. Would you be able to help us make a difference in awareness and understanding of what influences peoples’ decision to parent or, if you are already a parent, what influences your decision whether or not to have more children? To participate you must be over at least 18 years of age and we are interested in your opinion regardless of your gender, sexual identity or parental status. By clicking the following link, you will find more information about this survey which is being conducted at (host institution).” In the UK flyers with information about the study were also distributed at a major lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer community event.

Throughout the process data collection, the confidentiality of the data was ensured with the survey link being accessed via secure university services in Portugal and the UK. Completing the questionnaire took no longer than 15-20 minutes. This study received ethical approval by the institutional review boards of University of Porto and Birkbeck, University of London.

Analysis

We conducted factorial ANOVAS, with sexual identity and country as factors. We investigated the main and interaction effects of these factors in relation to parenting desire, parenting intention, attitudes toward childlessness and parenting perceptions (enrichment, isolation, commitment, costs, support, and anticipation of stigma) amongst lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual childless individuals from Portugal and the UK. To control for the potential confounds of gender, age, place of residence, education level, employment status, relational status and duration of relationship, we conducted t-tests and chi-square tests as appropriate to inspect group differences (Portugal vs. the UK; lesbian, gay and bisexual vs. heterosexuals) regarding these variables. Whenever differences were detected, the particular control variable was entered as an interaction term and factorial ANOVAS were conducted for every dependent variable (subsequent t-tests were then performed as necessary).

Results

First, we report on differences between groups as defined by sexual identity and country. Second, we consider results regarding the influence of sexual identity and country on: (i) parenting desire, parenting intention, and attitudes toward childlessness, and (ii) perceptions of parenting.

Differences between groups defined in function of sexual identity and country

Results regarding differences between groups defined by sexual identity and country are displayed in Table 2. Survey respondents (Portugal vs. the UK) differed only regarding employment status. When we controlled for the effect of employment an interaction effect between country and employment status was only found for the variable social support [$F(1, 325) = 8.067, p = .005, \eta^2 = .024$]. A subsequent t-test revealed differences in the UK group [$t(163) = -2.350, p = .020, d = -.38$], but not for Portugal [$t(162) = 1.637, p = .104, d = .26$], with unemployed participants in the UK perceiving higher levels of social support ($M = 5.39; SD = 1.06$) than their employed peers ($M = 4.99; SD = 1.06$).

Given the lower number of non-heterosexuals in our sample, we aggregated lesbians and gay men with bisexuals to compare them with heterosexual participants. Groups defined by sexual identity (lesbians, gay men and bisexuals vs. heterosexuals) differed only in age, because lesbian, gay and bisexual respondents were older than heterosexual respondents. We statistically controlled for the effect of age and no interaction effects were found between sexual identity and age (analyses are available from the authors upon request).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Parenting desire, parenting intention and attitudes toward childlessness

Preliminary analyses revealed that the distribution of the dependent variables yielded values within the normality range regarding both skewness (-1.372 to .233) and kurtosis (-.827 to 3.053). Concerning the effect of sexual identity on parenting desire, lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals reported lower levels of parenting desire ($M = 3.34; SD = 1.47$), than did heterosexual individuals ($M = 4.16; SD = 1.08$), and hypothesis 1 was thus

confirmed. A main effect of country of residence was also found with participants from Portugal reporting higher levels of parenting desire ($M = 4.23$; $SD = 1.09$) than their counterparts from the UK ($M = 3.53$; $SD = 1.37$) (see Table 3).

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Country and sexual identity produced a significant interaction on parenting desire, and a subsequent t-test revealed that, although levels of parenting desire were higher in Portugal (LGB: $M = 3.89$; $SD = 1.26$; Heterosexuals: $M = 4.40$; $SD = 1.26$) than in the UK (LGB: $M = 2.78$; $SD = 1.46$; Heterosexuals: $M = 3.91$; $SD = 1.15$) for all sexual identity groups, the effect size of this difference was higher for lesbian, gay and bisexual respondents [$t(106.185) = -4.262$; $p < .001$, $d = .82$] than for their heterosexual counterparts [$t(209.188) = -3.444$; $p = .001$, $d = .46$].

Concerning parenting intention, a main effect of sexual identity was detected with lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals reporting lower levels of parenting intention ($M = 2.89$; $SD = 1.47$) than heterosexuals ($M = 4.03$; $SD = 1.11$), thus confirming hypothesis 2. Furthermore, participants from Portugal recorded higher scores on this variable ($M = 3.91$; $SD = 1.21$) than did participants from the UK ($M = 3.37$; $SD = 1.45$). Regarding attitudes toward childlessness, sexual minority individuals were significantly less concerned about the prospect of not having children ($M = 3.05$; $SD = 1.46$) than were heterosexuals ($M = 3.80$; $SD = 1.25$), confirming hypothesis 3 (Table 3). As can be seen in Table 3, the effect of country was also significant: Portuguese participants being significantly more concerned about the prospect of not having children ($M = 3.77$; $SD = 1.15$) than were their counterparts in the UK ($M = 3.33$; $SD = 1.53$).

Regarding gender differences among sexual minority participants, no differences were found in parenting desire [$t(79.460) = 1.348$; $p = .182$, $d = .27$], parenting intention [$t(111) = 1.458$; $p = .148$, $d = .30$], or attitudes toward childlessness [$t(109) = 1.913$; $p = .058$, $d = .39$]. Therefore, hypotheses 4, 5 and 6 were rejected.

Perceptions of parenting

Regarding the main effect of sexual identity on perceptions of parenting, lesbian, gay and bisexual respondents considered that children were less likely to be a source of enrichment in their lives ($M = 5.19$; $SD = 1.15$) than did heterosexuals ($M = 5.67$; $SD = 0.93$). Lesbian, gay and bisexual participants also reported higher amounts of anticipated stigma ($M = 4.43$; $SD = 1.18$) than did heterosexuals ($M = 3.68$; $SD = 1.12$).

Country effects were detected for commitment to parenthood, with higher levels of this variable being reported in the Portuguese sample ($M = 5.81$; $SD = 0.89$) than in the UK group ($M = 5.38$; $SD = 1.14$). Portuguese participants ($M = 5.60$; $SD = 0.99$) also perceived higher levels of social support coming to them as future parents, compared with UK participants ($M = 5.14$; $SD = 1.07$). Finally, participants from Portugal anticipated less social stigma upon parenthood ($M = 3.70$; $SD = 1.18$) than did their counterparts from the UK ($M = 4.16$; $SD = 1.16$). Sexual identity and country interacted in the case of enrichment, isolation and costs (Table 4).

Concerning anticipated life enrichment through having children, a t-test revealed differences only in the UK [$t(78.890) = 3.956$, $p < .001$, $d = -.71$]: UK lesbian, gay and bisexual participants ($M = 4.94$; $SD = 1.23$) reported lower levels on this subscale than did

UK heterosexual respondents ($M = 5.68$; $SD = 0.86$). The same pattern of results was found on anticipating isolation [$t(134.140) = -2.927$, $p = .004$, $d = -.46$]: UK lesbian, gay and bisexual participants perceived greater isolation upon parenthood ($M = 5.10$; $SD = 0.97$) than did their UK heterosexual counterparts ($M = 4.58$; $SD = 1.27$); and costs [$t(123.604) = -2.927$, $p = .006$, $d = -.22$], with UK lesbian, gay and bisexual participants reporting higher levels of perceived costs ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 0.75$) than UK heterosexual participants ($M = 5.52$; $SD = 0.92$).

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Regarding perceptions of parenting no gender differences were found among lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals regarding the following anticipated variables: (i) enrichment [$t(105) = -.739$, $p = .461$, $d = -.15$]; (ii) isolation [$t(108) = -1.506$, $p = .135$, $d = -.31$]; (iii) commitment [$t(109) = .520$, $p = .604$, $d = .10$]; (iv) costs [$t(108) = .479$, $p = .720$, $d = .09$]; (v) support [$t(109) = .083$, $p = .934$, $d = .01$]; and (vi) stigma [$t(107) = -.733$, $p = .441$, $d = -.16$].

Discussion

In this study we examined attitudes toward parenthood in a sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual adults without children from Portugal and the UK. Concerning sexual identity, compared to heterosexual participants, lesbian, gay and bisexual people were less likely to desire or intend to have children and were also less concerned about the prospect of not having children. As far as parenting perceptions were concerned, compared to their heterosexual peers, lesbian, gay, and bisexual participants anticipated encountering more stigma upon parenthood, and specifically in the UK perceived parenthood as less likely to be a source of psychological enrichment. Despite the above-mentioned differences, reported values for lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual participants tended to be above the mean point on each of the subscales parenting desire, intention, attitudes toward childlessness, and anticipated enrichment, thus indicating that attitudes toward parenthood tended to be favourable generally. Our results here are consistent with those obtained in previous research: lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults are often interested in parenthood (Badgett 2003) but lesbian, gay and bisexual attitudes toward parenthood tend to be less positive than those reported by heterosexuals (Baiocco and Laghi 2013; Riskind and Patterson 2010).

Our cross-cultural study has been the first to investigate differences in anticipated parenthood of lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual individuals from two distinct cultural contexts. Despite the many legal and technological advances concerning same-sex parenthood (Goldberg 2010), these differences can be better understood if we consider that there are still societal barriers that lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons have to face regarding parenthood (Gato, Santos and Fontaine 2016). The finding that lesbian, gay and bisexual participants anticipated more stigma upon parenthood than their heterosexual counterparts may be a consequence of the heteronormative context they experience in both Portugal and the UK. This stigma might also be experienced within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans community, as it has been noted elsewhere that some lesbian and gay parents change their support networks from a primarily lesbian and gay social network to a more heterosexual one upon having children (Brown et al. 2009).

Finally, lesbian, gay and bisexual persons may not feel as pressured as their heterosexual counterparts to have children, or perhaps be as prone to pro-natalist social desirability pressures, when responding to a survey about prospective parenthood.

The relative emphasis on familistic versus individualistic values (Hofstede 2011) might have led Portuguese participants in our study to record a greater desire and a more definite intention to have a child than did their UK peers. As previously mentioned, southern European countries tend to view their family as their most supportive social network and to privilege early marriages and multigenerational households (Hajnal 1965; Steinbach et al. 2016) and to see motherhood as more central to women's identities (Baiocco and Laghi 2013). Accordingly, Portuguese participants anticipated more social support in parenthood and less stigma if they decided to have children compared to participants in the UK. In this way living in a familistic society can be associated with higher level of anticipated support in parenthood. Based on the findings of our study this seems to apply to heterosexual and lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons equally with the more familistic culture of Portugal acting as a centripetal force pulling family members together across the generations (McGoldrick, Carter and Preto 2013). Furthermore, differences in parenting desire between heterosexual and non-heterosexual persons with respect to sexual identity were of a lesser magnitude in Portugal than were those observed in the more individualistic society represented by the UK. Higher levels of familism might also explain why Portuguese participants anticipated making a greater commitment to parenthood than did their UK counterparts. In fact, perceiving the care of children as a lifelong endeavour may be more characteristic of a country like Portugal that considers family to be more central to an individual's life than of a country like the UK that values independence and agency. Nevertheless, as we did not directly measure cultural indices of familism and individualism, we cannot decisively conclude these dimensions account for the variability in the results we found and recommend the direct measurement of these cultural indices in future research. Contrary to what was suggested in previous research (Baiocco and Laghi 2013; Riskind and Patterson 2010), in our study gender did not have an impact on sexual minority individuals' attitudes toward parenthood. Here our results are in line with Costa and Bidell (2017) who did not find gender differences in the parenting aspirations of Portuguese lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. Future studies with larger samples are needed to investigate this pattern of results in full.

More sizeable differences between lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and heterosexual persons on prospective parenthood measures were found in the UK sample than in Portuguese sample. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the UK reported lower levels of perceived enrichment through parenthood, than did their heterosexual counterparts. Lesbian, gay and bisexual participants from the UK also anticipated greater isolation upon parenthood and perceived higher costs associated with parenthood compared to heterosexual UK participants. Despite more positive social attitudes and laws regarding lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals' rights in the UK, particularly with respect to parenthood, lower levels of familism in the UK may make parenthood a more daunting project in this country indicating an additional level of challenge to lesbian, gay, and bisexual prospective parents in the UK and possibly other more individualistic orientated societies.

Several limitations as to the generalisation of our results warrant mention. First, the lesbian, gay and bisexual subsample size was limited, although individual cell sizes in

our statistical analyses each had a minimum of 18 participants. Second, because we used a convenience sample, a possible self-selection effect might have occurred. For example, our sample over represented highly educated individuals although this was true for both countries. Further, it must be noted that collecting a representative sample of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals is extremely difficult and most studies to date on this subject have relied as we did on convenience samples (Baiocco and Laghi 2013; Costa and Bidell, 2017; Shenkman 2012). Third, due to statistical reasons related to sample size, bisexual persons were grouped with lesbians and gay men in all the analyses. Since the existing literature is not consistent in noting similarities and differences between bisexuals and lesbians and gay men regarding their parental aspirations (e.g. Gates et al. 2007) our findings here must be interpreted with caution. In this regard is important to look at Riskind and Tornello's (2017) results. These authors found that bisexuals were more similar to heterosexuals than to lesbians and gay men in terms of their parenting desires and intentions. In our study we aggregated bisexual women with lesbians, and bisexual men with gay men, but we still found differences between these groups of participants and the heterosexual group (despite an increased chance of a Type II error, concluding no statistical difference).

Notwithstanding the above caveats our exploratory study has highlighted the importance of cultural context: although slightly more favourable attitudes and laws regarding lesbian, gay, and bisexual rights can be found in the UK, we found fewer differences between the group of lesbians, gay men and bisexual participants and heterosexual participants in Portugal than in the UK. We propose that this is due to a more familistic cultural stance more evident in Portugal than in the UK. Thus, despite the importance of equal legal contexts (Bauermeister 2014; Hatzenbuehler et al. 2010), the influence of cultural values in parenting aspirations should not be discarded.

If cultural variables influence the way lesbian, gay and bisexual persons anticipate parenthood as we have found, then further practical questions should be considered. First, as stated by Mallon (2007), it is essential to recognise the areas in which lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, especially prospective parents, may require additional support, perhaps in more individualistic societies such as that in the UK. For example, lesbian, gay and bisexual parents may be a particular source of support for those who want to become parents in more individualistic cultural climates. Further we return to the paradox that while Portuguese participants reported higher levels of parenting desire and intention than did their UK peers, Portugal currently has a lower fertility index than does the UK (PORDATA 2017). Thus, while the desire for parenthood might be greater in a familistic society, such as in Portugal, both practical and economic complexities also clearly play a role in whether desire and intention develop into actual parenthood or become a source of disappointment if early anticipated parenthood is postponed.

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Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Table 1

Internal Consistency of Parenting Desire, Parenting Intention, and Parenting Perceptions

	Total	Portugal	UK	Lesbian, gay and bisexual	Heterosexuals
Parenting Desire	.96	.94	.96	.95	.96
Parenting Intention	.96	.95	.97	.96	.95
Enrichment	.88	.89	.87	.89	.86
Isolation	.75	.76	.76	.74	.76
Support	.72	.77	.67	.73	.72
Costs	.72	.75	.70	.72	.71
Anticipation of Stigma	.79	.81	.78	.70	.66
Commitment	.69	.66	.70	.69	.69
Continuity	.44	.46	.51	.52	.35

Table 2

Differences between Groups as a function of Country (Portugal vs. UK) and Sexual Orientation (lesbian, gay and bisexual vs. heterosexuals).

	Portugal	UK		Lesbian, gay and bisexual	Heterosexuals	
Gender	72.02% women; 27.98% men	72.02% women; 27.98% men		67.54% women; 32.46% men	73.87% women; 26.13% men	
Age	$M = 27.25$; $SD = 6.53$	$M = 27.03$; $SD = 6.93$	$t (334) = -0.300$, $p = .765$	$M = 28.17$; $SD = 7.87$	$M = 26.30$; $SD = 5.90$	$t (179.925) =$ $-2.952, p = .004$
Place of residence (urban/rural)	84.94% urban	82.63% urban	$\chi^2 (1) = 0.568, p$ $= .656$	87.61% urban	81.81% urban	$\chi^2 (1) = .175$, $p = .210$
Education level (<12 years / university level)	35.71% ≤ 12 years	46.11% ≤ 12 years	$\chi^2 (1) = 3.930, p$ $= .058$	36.8% ≤ 12 years	43% ≤ 12 years	$\chi^2 (1) = 1.046$, $p = .347$

Employment status (work/don't work)	44.24% work	63.10% work	$\chi^2 (1) = 0.001, p = .001$	60.53% work	50.22% work	$\chi^2 (1) = 0.074, p = .08$
Relational status (in a relationship/not in a relationship)	59.52% in a relationship	51.19% in a relationship	$\chi^2 (1) = 0.124, p = .154$	50% in a relationship	58.11% in a relationship	$\chi^2 (1) = 0.157, p = .166$
Duration of relationship (months)	$M = 49.27;$ $SD = 44.60$	$M = 42.04;$ $SD = 40.75$	$t (172) = -1.093,$ $p = .276$	$M = 50.35;$ $SD = 51.11$	$M = 44.48;$ $SD = 39.23$	$t (77.755) =$ $-0.739, p = .462$

Table 3

Main and Interaction Effects of Sexual Orientation and Country on Parenting Desire, Parenting Intention and Attitudes towards Childlessness

	<i>Df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2	<i>Observed power</i>
Parenting Desire					
Sexual orientation (SO)	1, 326	36.57	<.001	.10	1
Country (C)	1, 326	34.44	<.001	.10	1
SO *C	1, 326	5.08	.025	.02	.613
Parenting Intention					
SO	1, 329	65.66	<.001	.17	1
C	1, 329	18.27	<.001	.05	.989
SO * C	1, 329	1.95	.164	.01	.285
Attitudes toward childlessness					
SO	1, 325	24.30	<.001	.07	.998
C	1, 325	10.63	.001	.03	.902
SO* C	1, 325	1.25	.264	.00	.200

Note: *SO = Sexual Orientation; **C = Country

Table 4

Main and Interaction Effects of Sexual Orientation and Country on Parenting Perceptions

	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2	<i>Observed power</i>
Enrichment					
Sexual orientation (SO)	1, 317	16.27	<.001	.05	.980
Country (C)	1, 317	3.75	.054	.01	.489
SO * C	1, 317	5.21	.023	.02	.624
Isolation					
SO	1, 328	1.68	.196	.01	.252
C	1, 328	.80	.371	.00	.145
SO * C	1, 328	6.23	.013	.02	.701
Commitment					
SO	1, 327	.83	.362	.00	.149
C	1, 327	10.35	.001	.03	.894
SO * C	1, 327	1.12	.290	.00	.184
Costs					
SO	1, 325	1.77	.185	.01	.263
C	1, 325	.31	.578	.00	.086
SO * C	1, 325	5.57	.019	.02	.653
Social Support					
SO	1, 328	.42	.515	.00	.099
C	1, 328	16.47	<.001	.05	.982

SO * C	1, 328	.34	.561	.00	.089
Anticipation of stigma					
SO	1, 326	32.76	<.001	.09	1
C	1, 326	16.59	<.001	.05	.982
SO * C	1, 326	2.11	.147	.01	.305
