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What Would it Be Like to Be a Parent? Exploring the Role of Sexual Orientation and Culture on Perceptions of Parenthood in the Future

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Abstract

Objective: This study explored the impact of sexual orientation and cultural context on the way lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) and heterosexual cisgender adults without children from Portugal, Israel, and the UK anticipate the parenting experience. **Background:** Higher levels of parenthood aspirations (e.g. desires and intentions) and more positive perceptions of the parenting experience (e.g. emotional enrichment upon having children) have been reported among heterosexual individuals than LGB ones, and more so in familistic societies than in individualistic ones. However, perceptions of the parenting experience have rarely been examined across different cultural contexts. **Methods:** One-hundred and sixty-eight adults without children (57 self-reported as LGB) in Portugal were matched on socio-demographic variables with 168 participants from the UK and 168 participants from Israel, resulting in a convenience sample of $N = 504$ (Heterosexual: $n = 333$, $M_{\text{age}} = 27.48$, $SD = 5.47$; LGB: $n = 171$, $M_{\text{age}} = 29.77$, $SD = 7.12$). **Results:** Overall, participants from Israel and Portugal, as well as heterosexual participants in general, perceived parenting in a more positive way than either their counterparts in the UK or LGB participants, respectively. Parallel patterns also appeared separately for LGB and heterosexual participants, with higher levels of social support and lower levels of stigma anticipated in both Portugal and Israel than the UK. **Conclusion:** Both sexual orientation and the socio-cultural context are associated with parenting perceptions. However, the effect of the cultural context seems to surmount that of sexual orientation, with both LGB and heterosexual individuals from more familistic countries anticipating parenthood in a more positive way, than their peers from the UK. **Implications:** Repercussions of the findings include consideration of the needs of prospective LGB parents in terms of social support, culturally competent and affirmative interventions regarding LGB parenthood, and policies targeting prejudice and counteracting heteronormativity.

Keywords: perceptions of parenting; sexual orientation; cross-cultural comparisons; heteronormativity; enrichment; anticipation of stigma

What Would it Be Like to Be a Parent? Exploring the Role of Sexual Orientation and Culture on Perceptions of Parenthood in the Future

Understanding the factors that lead individuals to decide to have children is a topic of great interest among family researchers and policy makers. This issue is of particular salience, given the increasing tendency for individuals to delay parenthood or to remain childfree (Matias & Fontaine, 2017; Smock & Schwartz, 2020). The parenthood decision-making process is a complex one involving many social, economic, political, and individual factors (Hashemzadeh et al., 2021). The way people anticipate the parenting experience is one of such individual factors (Lawson, 2004; Gato et al., 2020) which, in turn, is affected by a series of features embedded in the social context and life course processes (Guzzo & Hayford, 2020), such as one's sexual orientation and cultural context (Leal et al., 2019; Shenkman et al., 2021).

According to Lawson (2004), two main approaches have been taken in psychological research on attitudes toward parenting. The first has been to examine the specific issue of the perceived value of children to prospective parents, while the second has a wider focus to evaluate the appeal of parenthood as a precursor to the desire or intent to parent. Within the former framework, researchers focused their efforts on measuring the intensity of the desire to be a parent and examining its relationship with various psychological and demographic variables (Lawson, 2004). Overall, psychological variables, namely attitudes toward parenthood, seem to account for more variance in the desire/intention to be a parent than do demographic variables. For instance, Gato and colleagues (2020) found that attitudes toward parenting, namely the perception of emotional enrichment upon having children, explained a major portion of the variance in parenthood intent in their sample of childfree individuals. Intentions to have children generally seemed to be more dependent upon individuals' cognitive and emotional resources than on structural characteristics. This pattern is understandable within the modern individualization process (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), in which emotional fulfillment and individual well-being tend to be perceived as more important determinants of individual action than do traditional structural factors,

such as social class or kinship. For example, the falling fertility rate observed in most European countries since the late 1960s has been linked to a shift to an individualistic family model (Lesthaeghe, 2014). The widespread western departure from traditional ideas, values, norms, beliefs and ideologies has generated greater individual autonomy in decision-making, namely regarding parenthood. Thus, the emergence of higher desires for self-fulfillment, choice, personal development and emancipation, nowadays drive many parenthood decisions. In brief, having children is seen as an expression and extension of one's self.

In the present work, we use Lawson's (2004) framework – parenting perceptions – as our psychological framework to explore attitudes toward parenthood. Parenting perceptions encompass many facets of parenthood situations that are salient to individuals' lives: the perceived emotional enrichment brought by children, perceptions of continuity or generativity, commitment associated with parenthood, anticipated social support from family or the community, feelings of isolation upon parenthood, and the instrumental, emotional, and physical costs associated with having a child (Lawson, 2004). To what extent these attitudes vary as a function of sexual orientation and cultural context is the main question we aimed to address in this study. This way, and adding to prior research (Leal et al., 2019; Shenkman et al., 2021), we explored how lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) and heterosexual individuals without children imagine what it would be like to become a parent. Specifically, we sampled childfree adults from three countries – Portugal, the UK, and Israel – that diverge in cultural values or national policies concerning the importance of individual autonomy versus family involvement, the extent of pronatalism, and attitudes toward LGB individuals.

Sociolegal restrictions and parenthood: Heteronormativity and Culture

Despite advances in assisted reproduction techniques (ART) techniques and the opening up of adoption to same-gender couples in many countries, having children is still considered a prerogative of heterosexuality and research interest in the way LGB individuals envisage parenthood is quite recent (Allen & Mendez, 2018; Gato et al., 2021). Heteronormativity, that is to say the reinforcement of the beliefs and practices within social institutions and policies that legitimize and privilege heterosexuality

(van der Toorn et al., 2020; Warner, 1993), has kept sexual and gender minority individuals in a disadvantaged vulnerable position also regarding their family formation plans (Baiocco et al., 2014; Lasio et al., 2019; Lasio et al., 2020). For instance, sexual minority individuals' parenthood aspirations may be hampered by a belief that their sexual orientation is immoral, that they would be less competent as a parent than their heterosexual peers, that every child should have a mother and a father, that a child could be harmed if they were to be raised by a same-gender couple, or that a child might be exposed to sexual minority stress because of being raised by a same-gender couple (for a review studies about the impact of minority stress on parenthood prospects of sexual minority individuals see Gato et al., 2021). Thus, in spite of legal and technological advances in many countries, such as the approval of same-gender adoption laws and increased access to ART, research shows that in comparison with their heterosexual peers, LGB individuals are still less likely to aspire to parenthood (e.g., Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Costa & Bidell, 2017; Gato et al., 2020; Kranz et al., 2018; Leal et al., 2019; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Shenkman, 2012, 2020; Shenkman et al., 2019). Sexual minority individuals also seem to perceive parenthood in a more negative way than do heterosexual people: they anticipate more stigma upon parenthood and expect children to bring them fewer emotional benefits relatively to their heterosexual counterparts (Gato et al., 2019; Gato et al., 2020; Leal et al., 2019; Shenkman, 2021).

Besides sexual orientation, cultural context also has been found to play an important role in parenthood prospects (Leal et al., 2019; Shenkman et al., 2021). Regarding the countries targeted in the present study, Portugal is considered to be a familistic society with a strong "we" consciousness (Hofstede, 2011). However, Portugal currently has a remarkably low fertility rate (1.42 children/woman; OECD, 2022), attributed to the constrained employment prospects of young adults along side other economic hardships (Oliveira et al. 2014). Israel is also perceived to be a family-oriented society (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2016) but Israel has a higher fertility rate than that in Portugal (3.01 children/woman; OECD, 2022). In fact, pronatalism has been a consistent characteristic of Israeli society where childlessness is often negatively viewed (Birenbaum-Carmeli & Dirnfeld, 2008; Donat, 2011;

Yeshua-Katz, 2018). More individualistic values and an “I” consciousness prevail in the UK (Hofstede, 2011). Notwithstanding these cultural differences, the fertility rate is lower in Portugal than in the UK (1.63 children/woman; OECD, 2022). The lower fertility rate in Portugal has been attributed to the relative lower economic prospects particularly of young adults in Portugal in comparison to those in the UK (Oliveira et al., 2014). Furthermore, the relatively high immigration rate in the UK compared to Portugal (Nguyen, 2017), combined with the relatively higher fertility rate of non-UK born women compared to the UK average, has contributed to the relatively buoyant birth rate (Office of National Statistics, 2016).

More positive social attitudes toward sexual minority individuals have been observed in the UK than in either Portugal or Israel (Flores, 2019). Concomitantly, different legislative positions characterize access to adoption and ART in Israel, Portugal, and the UK reflecting both pronatalist policies and LGB rights. Same-gender marriage and adoption are possible in both Portugal and the UK (Leal et al., 2019). In contrast, same-gender marriage is not possible in Israel where adoption opportunities also are extremely restricted (Costa & Shenkman, 2020). Israel’s pronatalism and heteronormativity are also enshrined in legislation that facilitates ART for different gender couples and single women, but not for same-gender couples and single men (Shenkman, 2021). In 2016, Portuguese law extended publicly funded ART to all women, regardless of their marital status, sexual orientation, or any infertility diagnosis. However, surrogacy is not possible in Portugal neither for same-gender nor for different-gender couples (Areias et al., 2021).

In the UK, the Human Fertilization and Embryology Act (HFEA, 2008) facilitated the recognition of non-biological mothers in lesbian couples as the other legal parent to children conceived through donor insemination. Likewise, the HFEA facilitated non-profit making surrogacy arrangements for same sex couples in the same way as it did for different sex couples. In the UK, unlike Israel and Portugal, only limited funding is available for ART, but UK legislation per se does not distinguish between same-gender and different-gender couples.

Perceptions of Parenting: Associations with Sexual Orientation and Culture

Previous research has indicated that the pro-parenthood cultural characteristics evident in Portugal and Israel may explain the higher levels of parenthood desire, intent, and concern about childlessness reported in these two countries compared to the UK, both among heterosexual and LGB individuals (Shenkman et al., 2021). Here we consider various factors that have been associated with the relative gains and losses of parenthood and then consider whether these factors might be more or less promoted within the dominant cultural value systems in Israel, Portugal, or the UK.

According to Lawson (2004), the way individuals perceive parenting involves a complex assessment via balancing what can be gained against what can be lost through parenthood. Lawson's positive perceptions of parenthood encompass anticipations of emotional enrichment brought by children, perceptions of continuity or generativity, as well as endorsement and social support from family or the community. Conversely, Lawson's negative perceptions of parenthood include feelings of being overwhelmed by commitment and sacrifice, feelings of isolation upon parenthood, and feeling inhibited by concerns about the instrumental, emotional, and physical costs associated with having a child. Recent studies also considered the anticipation of stigma upon parenthood as another negative perception of the parenting experience (Gato et al., 2019; Gato et al., 2020; Leal et al., 2019; Shenkman, 2021).

Childfree sexual minority individuals anticipate lower levels of **emotional enrichment** arising from having children than do their heterosexual peers (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Leal et al., 2019; Tate & Patterson, 2019). Regarding the impact of cultural aspects on this variable, Leal et al. (2019) noted that in the UK LGB individuals perceived parenthood as a less likely source of potential psychological enrichment compared to their heterosexual counterparts, whereas Portuguese LGB and heterosexual childfree adults did not differ. The perception that a child can guarantee the **continuity** of the family line and provide support later in life also has been described as a motivator for parenthood among lesbian women and gay men as it is with many heterosexual individuals (Goldberg et al., 2012; Langridge et al., 2005; Lawson, 2004). Nevertheless, Siegenthaler and Bigner (2000) found that lesbian women seemed

less focused on generativity and passing on family traditions than did their heterosexual peers. Although to our knowledge no studies have identified cultural differences in perceptions of generational continuity, it is plausible to predict that generativity is more valued in family-centered and pro-natalist societies than in individualistic ones.

The availability of **social support** during life transitions such as parenthood plays an important role, especially among LGB individuals (Leal et al., 2021). In this respect, the lesbian women and gay men in Baiocco and Laghi's study (2013) reported being less confident about receiving social support in future parenthood than did their heterosexual counterparts. However, Leal et al. (2019) found that heterosexual and LGB individuals in Portugal anticipated both more social support in parenthood and lower levels of social stigma if they decided to have children, compared to their counterparts in the UK.

The level of **commitment** associated with parenting a child and the imposition of **isolation** upon having a child are both negative perceptions of the parenting experience (Lawson, 2004). Leal et al. (2019) did not find any differences in these aspects between heterosexual and LGB individuals studied in either the UK and Portugal. Entry into parenthood is usually a more costly social and economic undertaking for sexual minority than for heterosexual persons, given the anticipated expenditure associated with ART and adoption (Gato et al., 2021). In fact, Tate and Patterson (2019) found that lesbian women perceived parenthood as having a considerable economic cost and that this alone largely accounted for parenthood aspirations differences between them and their heterosexual counterparts. Differences in **anticipated social and economic costs** may also be moderated by culture. Thus, Leal et al. (2019) found that in the UK but not in Portugal LGB participants perceived higher costs associated with parenthood in comparison with their heterosexual peers. Nevertheless, in spite of the more favorable economic prospects in the UK, the authors conjectured that family-centered Portuguese culture mitigated anticipated costs of parenthood even among sexual minority individuals (Leal et al., 2019).

Research has found that LGB individuals anticipated more stigma upon parenthood than did their heterosexual peers (Leal et al., 2019; Gato et al., 2019, 2020; Shenkman, 2021). The Portuguese

participants in Leal et al.'s study (2019) anticipated less stigma if they decided to have children compared to participants in the UK. Again, notwithstanding a more favorable social climate towards LGB individuals in the UK (Flores, 2019), the familist culture of Portugal might have acted as a buffer of stigma upon parenthood for this population (Leal et al., 2019) and the same can be expected in Israel.

No studies have yet compared how individuals anticipate the parenting experience in Portugal, the UK, and Israel simultaneously. However, prior studies surveying participants' parenthood aspirations (desires, intentions, and concerns about childlessness) with planned statistical comparisons between countries with distinct sociolegal policies and cultural normativities can be used to devise hypotheses regarding the way the parenting experience is anticipated across the three societies (Leal et al., 2019; Shenkman et al., 2021). Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize that in comparison to individuals living in the more individualistic culture of the UK those who live in family-centered societies (Portugal and Israel) would anticipate greater emotional enrichment, social support upon becoming a parent, and satisfaction upon generativity through having children. Further, in comparison to their counterparts in the UK, individuals from Portugal and Israel can be predicted to foresee fewer social and economic costs to parenthood and possibly reduced likelihood of social stigma, or to anticipate parenthood as a burdensome life commitment and a source of social isolation.

In summary, parenthood seems to be perceived as a more daunting endeavor for LGB individuals, when compared to their heterosexual peers. Furthermore, the tendency to value the gains that parenthood may bring and devalue (or downplay) the more negative aspects of this life stage can be expected in countries in which cultural norms dictate mutual family obligation and family level support (Portugal and Israel) while the opposing pattern could be expected in individualistic societies (UK). We anticipate that the aforementioned national differences associated with the value attached to parenthood will be sharpest for many LGB individuals living in countries that promote heteronormativity in their sociolegal framework and where cultural values approve parenthood (Israel), milder among LGB individuals living in countries with substantial equal rights legislation but where strong cultural values favor parenthood

(Portugal), and weakest in the UK with a longer tradition of equal rights legislation and cultural values that encourage individualism (Leal et al. 2019; Shenkman et al., 2021).

Research Hypotheses

Regarding the effect of country of origin, hypothesis 1 predicts that participants from Portugal and Israel will perceive parenthood in a more positive way endorsing higher levels of enrichment, social support, and continuity, and lower levels of isolation, commitment, costs, and anticipated stigma upon parenthood, compared with participants from the UK. Concerning the effect of sexual orientation, hypothesis 2 predicts that heterosexual participants will perceive parenting in a more positive way than LGB participants. Furthermore, hypothesis 3 predicts a parallel pattern of results across sexual orientations: both groups of LGB and heterosexual participants from Portugal and Israel will perceive parenthood in a more positive way, than their LGB and heterosexual counterparts in the UK.

Method

Study design

The present correlational study has drawn upon data from a wider international research project that aimed to explore the social and contextual determinants prospective and current parenting among LGB and heterosexual adults in Portugal and the UK (Leal et al., 2019) and subsequently extended to include Israel (Shenkman et al. 2021). Previous analyses of a subset of data included comparison of differences in parenting perceptions between Portugal and the UK (Leal et al., 2019) and considered parenthood desires, intentions, and concerns about childlessness in Israel, Portugal, and the UK (Shenkman et al., 2021). The present work has extended knowledge in the field through analyzing perceptions of parenting in the three countries simultaneously thus permitting a more robust and complete examination of the influence of cultural context on the attitudes toward future parenthood of LGB and heterosexual persons.

Participants

The initial sample was composed of 472 adult participants without children from Portugal, 168 participants from the UK, and 612 Israeli participants. Participants from Portugal were matched with participants from the UK for the purpose of a previous study (Leal et al., 2019) using the “nearest neighbor matching” systematic technique (Stuart, 2010) to select those individuals in the Portuguese sample who were most similar to the UK participants on binary gender (women vs. men), age, sexual orientation, education level (university level vs. <12 years of school), relational status (in a relationship vs. not in a relationship), employment status (working vs. not working), and place of residence (rural area vs. urban area). For the purpose of a further study (Shenkman et al., 2021), participants from the Israeli sample were matched to the Portuguese sample in the same manner, resulting in a unified sample of 504 participants (168 from each country).

Descriptive characteristics of each national group are presented in Table 1, showing that Israeli participants were significantly older and less likely to be living in a city than their counterparts from either Portugal or the UK. Participants from the UK were less likely than counterparts in either Portugal or Israel to have a university level education. Participants from Portugal were less likely to be working than participants from either Israel or the UK.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Regarding sexual orientation across the three samples, 111 participants in each country defined themselves as heterosexual, while 57 defined themselves as LGB (26 bisexual women, 2 bisexual men, 17 gay men, and 12 lesbian women in Israel and Portugal, and 26 bisexual women, 2 bisexual men, 16 gay men, and 13 lesbian women in the UK). Descriptive characteristics of the LGB and heterosexual subsamples in each national group are presented in Table 2. In Table 2 sexual minority participants from the UK were significantly older than their heterosexual peers, while in Israel a higher proportion of LGB compared to heterosexual participants were in paid employment at the time of the study.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Measures

Sexual orientation. Sexual orientation was assessed through self-report as follows: 1 = Lesbian woman, 2 = Gay man, 3 = Heterosexual man / woman, 4 = Bisexual individual, 5 = Other. This assessment is common in sexual minority survey research (e.g., Leal et al., 2019).

Perceptions of parenting. Positive and negative dimensions of the personal salience of the parenting experiences were assessed using the Perception of Parenting Inventory (POPI; Lawson, 2004; Leal et al., 2019). Participants were asked to think about what parenting a child would be like. Beyond measuring the extent to which respondents valued (or devalued) each aspect of being a parent, the POPI also assessed the extent to which respondents thought each aspect would be personally experienced if they were to become a parent.

In the POPI items on positive perceptions of parenting combined to contribute to three subscales: Enrichment, Social support, and Continuity. The *Enrichment* subscale was composed of eight items and evaluated the benefits that a child would bring to their own life (e.g., “Caring for the child would bring me happiness”); *Social support* comprised three items assessing the perception of social support from family or community (e.g., “My friends and family would help me to care for the child”); *Continuity* consisted of four items assessing the perception of generativity family continuity (e.g., “The child would carry on my family line”). Negative perceptions of parenting encompassed appraisals of Isolation, Commitment, and Costs. The subscale *Isolation* (four items), evaluated the interference of a child with a parent’s free time (e.g., “I would have less time to spend doing what I enjoy”). *Commitment* was again measured by four items tapping into the level of commitment associated with to the decision to have a child (e.g., “The child would be dependent on me for the rest of my life”). The five item subscale *Costs* included evaluations of the emotional and physical difficulties associated with having children (e.g., “I would worry about the child’s future”). Finally, the five item subscale *Anticipation of stigma upon parenthood* had been added to the POPI battery (Lawson, 2004) in previous studies (Gato et al., 2019; Gato et al., 2020; Leal et al., 2019) to measure a participant’s expectation of prejudice upon having a

child. Items were devised so that they could be answered by heterosexual participants to enable comparisons by sexual orientation groups (e.g., “The child could be treated unfairly by people”). All the items described above were assessed using a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores reflecting greater anticipation of personally experiencing a dimension characteristic if parenthood was pursued.

The adaptation of the POPI (Lawson, 2004) to the Portuguese language included a process of translation and retroversion by a qualified professional. Subsequently, the face validity of this version was established based upon a cognitive interview with a group of Portuguese young adults (Gato et al., 2019). Small semantic adjustments to the items were made taking into account the given suggestions. The same procedure was followed regarding the adaptation of the instrument to Hebrew. The reliability of the instrument was examined in the total sample and in all subsamples by looking at the internal consistency of the subscales (Cronbach’s alpha). The majority of the subscales presented reasonable to very good reliability both in the total sample and across all subsamples (Table 3). The subscale Continuity revealed low internal consistency and was abandoned in the remainder of the present study.

Statistical Analyses

Preliminary analyses were conducted to identify potential covariates by examining country of origin differences in the demographic variables using chi-square tests (for gender, education level, being in a romantic relationship, place of residence, and employment status) and ANOVA tests (for age and duration of romantic relationship). To test the first two hypotheses, one multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted. In this MANCOVA country (Portugal, UK, and Israel) and sexual orientation (LGB vs. heterosexual) served as the independent variables and parenting perceptions served as the dependent variables. The four sociodemographic variables (age, education level, place of residence, and employment status) that differed between countries served as covariates in each analysis. To test hypothesis 3, two MANCOVAs with country as the independent variable, with parenting perceptions as the dependent variables, and the four sociodemographic covariates mentioned before were

run separately for LGB and heterosexual individuals. A power analysis using the G* Power 3.1.9.4 software indicated that a minimum total sample size of 158 people would be needed to detect a medium effect size of partial $\eta^2 = .06$ with a conventional power of .80 at .05 significance level, using ANCOVA with four covariates.

Procedure

Data were collected on-line between April 2014 and June 2015 in Portugal, and between May and November 2016 in the UK, as part of a larger study on prospective and current parenting among LGB and heterosexual cisgender adults. In Israel, data were collected between November 2019 and February 2020. Recruitment procedures were the same for LGB and heterosexual participants and the study was advertised in general and in LGB oriented websites and social media in the three countries (e.g., Facebook), 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)”. The announcement included a link to an online web survey (using different platforms in each country) and participants were asked to participate voluntarily and anonymously, in a study dealing with prospective parenthood. In the UK, flyers with information about the study also were distributed at a major lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer community event. The confidentiality and anonymity of data were guaranteed with a survey link hosted on a server of each host institution which did not allow for the identification of the IP addresses. There were no mandatory answers and an ‘exit’ or ‘withdraw’ button on each page allowed for participants to withdraw from the survey at any given time. Contact details for the principal researcher in each country were provided

should participants have any concerns or questions, or needed a more thorough debriefing. Informed consent was presented electronically on the first page of the survey and participants indicated that they had read and understood consent information by checking boxes at the start of the questionnaire. Participation was without monetary compensation, although in the UK participants received course credits for their participation. This study was reviewed and approved by the institutional review boards at the host institutions for compliance with standards for the ethical treatment of human participants prior to data collection.

Results

We began our analyses by examining the distribution of the continuous variables used in the study to confirm that values were within the normality range regarding both skewness (-1.40 to 0.67) and kurtosis (-0.30 to 3.09) (Hair et al., 2014). Next, we verified whether the dependent variables were themselves correlated. Except for Commitment, which did not correlate with either enrichment, social support, or anticipated stigma, all variables presented low to moderate correlations (Table 4).

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Next, we report results regarding (i) effects of country and sexual orientation on perceptions of parenting in the overall sample (hypotheses 1 and 2), and (ii) differences between countries in perceptions of parenting for heterosexual and LGB participants separately (hypothesis 3). In line with Hypothesis 1, the results indicated a significant multivariate effect of the country on parenting perceptions, Pillai's trace = .209, $F(12, 894) = 8.712$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .105$. As shown in table 5, pairwise comparisons, using Bonferroni-corrected post-hoc tests, indicated that Israeli participants scored significantly higher than did participants from the UK ($p = .004$) on the level of perceived enrichment. Portuguese participants did not significantly differ on level of enrichment from either their counterparts from Israel ($p = .514$) or the UK ($p = .176$). When considering social support, Portuguese and Israeli participants did not differ between each other ($p = .436$) and both scored significantly higher on this

variable than did participants from the UK ($p < .001$ for both pairwise comparisons). All countries differed between each other regarding anticipation of stigma upon parenthood, with participants from the UK scoring higher than participants from either Portugal ($p = .012$) or Israel ($p < .001$); and participants from Portugal scoring higher than participants from Israel ($p < .001$). Contrary to what was expected, Portuguese participants registered significantly higher levels of perceived commitment upon parenthood than did participants from the UK ($p = .002$). Israeli participants did not significantly differ on levels of perceived commitment upon parenthood either when compared with counterparts from Portugal ($p = .671$) or the UK ($p = .096$). However, hypothesis 1 was only partially corroborated as univariate results showed differences in the expected direction regarding enrichment, social support, and anticipated stigma, but revealed an opposite trend with respect to commitment. No differences between the countries were detected for perceptions regarding the isolation and costs of parenting.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

In line with hypothesis 2, the multivariate effect of sexual orientation on parenting perceptions was significant, Pillai's trace = .129, $F(6, 446) = 10.977$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .129$. As can be seen in table 5, significant univariate effects were detected regarding enrichment and anticipation of stigma upon parenthood again in the expected direction. Pairwise comparisons, using Bonferroni-corrected post-hoc tests, indicated that heterosexual participants scored significantly higher on enrichment than did LGB participants. In turn, LGB participants scored significantly higher than did heterosexual participants on the level of stigma anticipated upon parenthood. However, because no differences were found between LGB and heterosexual participants on the remaining perceptions of parenting experiences, hypothesis 2 was only partially supported.

[Insert Table 6 about here]

In line with hypothesis 3, the multivariate effects of country surveyed on parenting perceptions were significant both for LGB individuals, Pillai's trace = .26, $F(12, 288) = 3.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .128$, and heterosexual individuals, Pillai's trace = .25, $F(12, 590) = 6.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .123$. As shown in

Table 6, LGB participants from the UK expected lower levels of social support upon parenthood compared with their counterparts from Portugal and Israel ($p < .001$ for both pairwise comparisons). LGB participants in the latter two countries did not differ between themselves regarding social support ($p = .436$). In a parallel way, heterosexual participants from the UK also expected lower levels of social support upon parenthood than did their counterparts from either Portugal ($p = .007$) or Israel ($p < .001$). Heterosexual participants in Israel expected more social support than did their counterparts in Portugal ($p = .005$). Regarding the anticipation of stigma upon parenthood, LGB participants in the UK reported higher levels of anticipation of stigma upon parenthood than did their counterparts in Israel ($p < .001$). LGB participants in Portugal did not differ from either those in the UK ($p = .072$), or in Israel regarding anticipated stigma ($p = .055$). In an almost parallel way, heterosexual participants in the UK ($p < .001$) and in Portugal ($p = .006$) reported higher levels of anticipated stigma upon parenthood than did their counterparts in Israel and heterosexual participants in Portugal did not differ from those in the UK on this variable ($p = .343$). Thus, hypothesis 3 received partial corroboration as parallel results between countries for each sexual orientation emerged only for social support and the anticipation of stigma upon parenthood.

Discussion

Adding to prior research (Leal et al., 2019; Shenkman, 2021), our study looked at the influence of sociocultural factors, i.e., sexual orientation and cultural contexts, on prospective parenthood by exploring the perceptions of parenting held by adults who were not currently parents at the time of the study. Participants from more familistic cultures (Portugal and Israel) tended to perceive parenthood in a more positive way than did their peers from the more individualistic culture represented by the UK. In the same vein, heterosexual participants anticipated parenting as a more positive experience than did their LGB counterparts. Finally, a similar patterning of results was evident across sexual orientations: both groups of LGB and heterosexual participants from Israel and Portugal tended to perceive parenthood in a more positive way, than did their LGB and heterosexual counterparts from the UK.

In line with our first hypothesis, participants from Portugal and Israel perceived parenting in a more positive way, i.e., they reported higher levels of enrichment and social support, and anticipated lower levels of stigma upon parenthood than did their counterparts from the UK. These differences are in accordance with previous studies reporting higher levels of parenthood aspirations and more positive parenting perceptions among Portuguese and Israeli adults without children than among their British counterparts (Leal et al., 2019; Shenkman et al., 2021). These results may be explained by reference to the prevailing familistic values held in Portugal and Israel compared to the more individualistic values adhered to in the UK (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2016; Hofstede, 2011; Leal et al., 2019). Furthermore, notwithstanding the less favorable parenthood laws in Israel than in either Portugal or the UK (Areias et al., 2021; Costa & Shenkman, 2020; HFEA, 2008; Shenkman, 2021) or the more negative social climate towards LGB individuals in Portugal and Israel than in the UK (Flores, 2019) our findings indicate that sexual minority individuals might be more protected from stigma upon parenthood in the familistic societies, such as Portugal and Israel, than in individualistic societies, such as the UK (Leal et al., 2019; Shenkman et al., 2021).

Participants in Portugal reported higher levels of perceived future burdensome commitment as a parent than did participants from the UK, a result also found by Leal et al. (2019). Again, this result could be explained by the higher level of individualism which characterizes the UK (Hofstede, 2012), where parenthood commitments could reflect a looser sense of obligatory ties. Interestingly, differences in commitment were only found among heterosexual individuals where participants in the UK reported lower levels of commitment than did participants from either Portugal or Israel. Due to heteronormative gender roles, the reconciliation of parenthood and professional life may be more challenging for different gender than for same-gender couples (Hammack et al., 2018), and this may have implications for the way future parenthood and associated obligations are perceived by heterosexual individuals. However, this explanation merits further investigation regarding gender differences between heterosexual participants.

Consistent with our second hypothesis, LGB participants generally anticipated parenthood as a less positive experience than did their heterosexual peers: LGB participants endorsed lower levels of enrichment through parenting and anticipated more stigma upon parenthood than did their heterosexual counterparts. These findings are in line with accounts of disparities regarding differences in parenthood aspirations (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Costa & Bidell, 2017; Gato et al., 2020; Kranz et al., 2018; Leal et al., 2019; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Shenkman, 2012, 2020; Shenkman et al., 2019) and also parenting perceptions (Leal et al., 2019), as a function of sexual orientation. In fact, despite the numerous social and legal advances made by LGB-parented families in recent years in many societies (Gato et al., 2021), sexual minority individuals are still in a vulnerable position regarding their family formation plans (Allen & Mendez, 2018; Baiocco et al., 2014; Lasio et al., 2019; Lasio et al., 2020) and are both externally and internally challenged by heteronormative values (Gato et al., 2021; van der Toorn et al., 2020; Warner, 2013). Concurrently, the route into parenthood often entails overcoming many legal, financial, and reproductive barriers for LGB individuals which remain largely unanticipated by their heterosexual peers (Gato et al., 2021).

Finally, in line with our third hypothesis, parallel results between countries emerged for social support and the anticipated stigma upon parenthood, for each sexual orientation, i.e., LGB participants in Israel and Portugal reported higher levels of perceived social support upon parenthood and lower anticipated stigma than did their LGB peers in the UK with a similar pattern of findings also evident among heterosexual participants. These findings further underline the important role of cultural aspects in the way individuals anticipate the parenting experience in particular their socialization into familistic and/or pronatalist values and their economic prospects (Birenbaum-Carmeli & Dirnfeld, 2008; Costa & Shenkman, 2020; Donat, 2011; Hofstede, 2011; Leal et al., 2019; Flores, 2019; OECD, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2014; Shenkman et al., 2021; Yeshua-Katz, 2018). Given the growing trend for individuals to delay parenthood, or to remain childfree (Matias & Fontaine, 2017; OECD, 2022; Smock & Schwartz, 2020),

the consideration of variables associated with parenthood intent, such as parenting perceptions and their sociocultural determinants, are of utmost importance (Gato et al., 2020).

In spite of its contributions, the present study is not without certain caveats. We relied on a convenience sample curtailing the automatic generalizability of results. The relatively small LGB subsamples also make results difficult to generalize. This sampling issue has been recognized as a problem in the field (Krueger et al., 2020) and therefore, authors launched another study aspiring to a larger sample. The correlational design of the study has precluded any process inferences being drawn from our results. In our sample gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual individuals were grouped together due to the relatively small numbers in each sub-group. While this pooled sample maximized the potential for key cross-cultural comparisons, it nonetheless curtailed a more refined understanding of the distinctive positions of each sexual minority group and within this a consideration of the situations of cis or transgender individuals. Furthermore, there was a preponderance of ciswomen in the sample and this may have limited the potential relevance of our findings when seeking to understand cismen's perceptions of future parenting. Neither was the gender of current partner noted for bisexual individuals. Also, due to missing data and differences in legislation between the countries in same-sex marriage, important variables such as marital status, cohabitation/household composition, and ethnicity were not taken into account. We also noted that the mean age of participants did not match the mean age of primiparous [parents](#) in each country, thus, the age of participants in the current study could confound our findings.

As noted previously (Gato et al., 2020; Leal et al., 2019), the internal consistency of the continuity subscale of the Perceptions of Parenting Inventory remained problematic in the present study; this has been a persistent finding across different cultures raising concern about the reliability of the construct. The fact that parenthood is increasingly a child-centered intensive endeavor and not on generativity (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Lesthaeghe, 1995; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020) is a plausible explanation for the low reliability of the subscale in question. Finally, future studies should consider

other variables that may contribute to increase our understanding about prospective parenthood processes. In this regard, the association between parenting perceptions, on the one hand, and parenting desires, parenting intentions, and the gap between parenting desires and intentions (Baiocco et al., 2013; D'Augelli et al., 2007; Lasio et al., 2020; Riskind & Patterson, 2010), on the other hand, should be explored as a function of sexual orientation and cultural context. Also, a direct assessment of cultural aspects such as attitudes toward familism, individualism, and pronatalism to further understand how they specifically interact with parenthood prospects and sexual orientation in different socio-cultural contexts is advisable (Leal et al., 2019; Shenkman et al., 2021).

Conclusion and Implications for Intervention and Social Policy

Using the psychological framework of perceptions of the parenting experience (Lawson, 2004), the present study has expanded cross-cultural research on prospective parenthood as a function of sexual orientation and culture (Leal et al., 2019; Shenkman et al., 2021). Sexual orientation and cultural contexts are associated with parenting perceptions; however, as both LGB and heterosexual individuals from more familistic countries (Portugal and Israel) tend to perceive future parenthood in a more positive way, than do those from individualistic countries (UK), cultural context seems to exert a stronger influence on perceptions of parenting than does an individual's sexual orientation.

Our findings have implications for intervention and social policy. Regarding intervention, it is essential to recognize areas in which LGB individuals, especially prospective parents, may require additional support. In this way, LGBTQ+ community groups may become an important facilitator of social support (Leal et al., 2021), particularly for those who want to become parents in more individualistic cultural climates, such as the UK. Additionally, our results are relevant for professionals who work with sexual minority young adults in different contexts, for example, in school or college settings or in primary healthcare services in relation to family planning consultations. Here professionals should endeavor to counter the effects of heteronormativity on parenthood prospects (Baiocco et al., 2014; Lasio et al., 2019; Lasio et al., 2020) by providing scientifically validated information about LGB

parenthood, and by giving accurate information about resources – both legal and in terms of services – for those pursuing parenthood.

Legal vulnerability increases the risk for all members in same-sex parent families of experiencing adverse outcomes in health- and family-related domains (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010; Siegel et al., 2021). Furthermore, contextual, familial, couple, and individual level characteristics may moderate the deleterious impact of legal vulnerability. In a similar vein, our results seem to have indicated that cultural context may act as a buffer against the negative effects of a legally vulnerable context when it comes to prospective parenthood perceptions. In fact, although same-sex marriage is not allowed and adoption opportunities especially for same-sex couples are curtailed in Israel, childfree LGB individuals from this country characterized by pronatalist values seem to anticipate parenthood in a more positive way than their counterparts from the UK. Furthermore, the effect of a familistic culture can inclusively surmount the effect of a more adverse economic context in which parenthood is postponed, such as the case of Portugal. This said, policymakers should be aware of the negative consequences of less favorable legal, economic and social contexts on the well-being and parenthood prospects of sexual minority individuals.

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