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LGBTQ+ Family: An Interdisciplinary Journal

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Attitudes Toward Adoption by Transgender Adults

ABSTRACT

This study explored cisgender heterosexual adults' perceptions of children placed in an adoptive family led by a couple with a transgender partner. Participants ($n = 871$) read one of five vignettes in which a couple (a cisgender different-gender couple, a cisgender same-gender male couple, a cisgender same-gender female couple, a couple with a female transgender partner, or a couple with a male transgender partner) intended to adopt two children. After reading the vignette, participants rated beliefs about children's psychological development, willingness to support the adoption, and completed an attitude toward LGBTQ rights scale. Moderation analyses revealed that participants with low levels of support for LGBTQ rights perceived children adopted by couples with a transgender partner as being at greater risk of victimization and poor psychological adjustment compared to children adopted by either cisgender same-gender couples or cisgender different-gender couples and were less inclined to endorse adoption. A multigroup path analysis model revealed that support for LGBTQ rights impacted on agreement with adoption *via* the mediation of participants' concerns for children's psychological adjustment more strongly regarding transgender parents than cisgender same-gender couples. Our findings demonstrated that cis-heteronormativity concerns eclipsed claims to reproductive justice for transgender people seeking parenthood.

KEYWORDS

Attitudes; Cis-normativity; Transgender Parents; Sexual Prejudice; Same-Gender Parents

Introduction

Substantial numbers of transgender individuals parent children (Carone et al., 2021; Stotzer et al., 2014) through biological means, step-parenthood, fostering, or assisted reproduction (Gato et al., 2021; Tornello et al., 2019). When asked, transgender people without children have often expressed a preference for adopting a child over other routes to parenthood (Chen et al., 2018; Gato & Fonseca, 2022; Marinho et al., 2021; Tornello & Bos, 2017). Studies examining the aspirations of transgender adults to have children have revealed that these have been impeded by legal constraints, agency barriers, and stigmatization by self and others (C. Brown & Rogers, 2020; Goldberg et al., 2019; Tasker & Gato, 2020). For example, one U.S. study exploring LGBTQ individuals' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences related to adoption and foster care revealed that transgender adults reported more fears of discrimination regarding gender expression, gender identity, finances, and social support than did cisgender sexual minorities (Goldberg et al., 2020). The main aim of the current study was to explore cisgender heterosexual people's attitudes toward binary transgender men and women applying for adoption with their cisgender partner and identify those beliefs that might impede endorsement of adoption.

Attitudes toward LGBTQ parents

Scientific literature on public attitudes toward families formed by LGBTQ people has burgeoned in recent years (e.g., Carone et al., 2021; 2024; Di Battista et al., 2024; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2019; Salvati et al., 2020). The average level of acceptance for LGBTQ parent families has increased since the 1980s (Flores, 2021). Many studies have investigated attitudes toward parenting of supposedly cisgender lesbian and gay, but relatively few studies have explored attitudes toward parenting by transgender people (Bower-Brown & Zadeh, 2021; Stotzer et al., 2014; Worthen & Herbolzheimer, 2022).

Understanding public attitudes toward transgender parenthood involves addressing the potential points of contention. Beliefs concerning what is correct for child development often fuel a powerful 'rights of the child' argument against acceptance of reproductive justice (Nixon, 2013; Ross & Solinger, 2017). Thereby reproductive justice - the equal right to choose whether or not to parent and to bring up a child in a safe and healthy environment—could be denied for transgender individuals. The right to apply for adoption is a key site for reproductive justice: a point when the equal rights of a prospective parent contend with the dominant justice principle applied in family law, namely, the best interests of the child (Polikoff, 2014).

In applying to adopt a child both legal constraints and professional judgements about acceptability of a family form impact on the eligibility of applicants as prospective parents and the specific placement of a child with an adoptive parent identifying as transgender (Gato et al., 2021). Even under relatively progressive legislatures, such as those in the UK, where the numbers of cisgender same-gender couples approved as potential adopters has increased, placement figures have been slow to rise and transgender applicants rare (C. Brown & Rodgers, 2020; Tasker & Bellamy, 2019). Thus, the current study sought to distinguish between the factors underlying public acceptance of cisgender same-gender female or male couples as prospective adoptive parents and those underlying public acceptance of the reproductive rights of prospective transgender parents.

Investigating attitudes toward sexual and gender minority adults who parent

Psychology research on attitudes toward same-gender parents (until recently usually presented as cisgender) has often favored vignette methodology. Varying family type in a vignette scenario

within a between-subjects experimental design partially mitigates social desirability effects since each participant evaluates only one fictitious family type, while the surrounding content remains constant (e.g., Di Battista et al., 2021; Massey et al., 2013; Tušl et al., 2020). In past studies, it was usually left unspecified whether the protagonists of the vignettes were cisgender or transgender, just as many other variables were not manipulated. Very few studies have used experimental designs to explore attitudes toward transgender parents and their children (e.g., Cables et al., 2022; Weiner & Zinner, 2015). Weiner and Zinner (2015) investigated attitudes toward a cisgender different-gender couple, a gay-male couple, and a different-gender couple where one partner was a transgender woman through presenting a vignette of a child custody dispute. Results showed that U.S. undergraduate students perceived both the gay-male couple and the couple with a transgender woman to be more emotionally unstable than the cisgender different-gender couple, with higher cis-normativity scores associated with more negative ratings. Additionally, participants were less willing to grant custody of the child to a transgender woman than to a partner in a gay-male couple. However, in this study no vignette scenario depicted a transgender man. Furthermore, beliefs concerning children's development were not investigated. In another U.S. based vignette study depicting transgender and bisexual couples with adopted children, Cables et al. (2022) found general positive perceptions concerning outcomes for the adopted children, particularly from non-heterosexual participants and others who held generally liberal attitudes. Here investigators sampled a modest sample of 100 young adults without children asking them to rate a kindergarten aged child with 'imagined transgender adoptive parents' (Cables et al., 2022, p. 177) specifying neither the gender of the adoptive parents nor their sexual identity.

Transgender parents and children's psychological wellbeing

Research has indicated that parental gender identity does not lead to adverse outcomes regarding the quality of relationships between transgender parents and their children (Chiland et al., 2013; Imrie et al., 2021; Zadeh et al., 2021). Upbringing by a transgender parent does not have a negative impact upon children's psychological and socio-emotional adjustment (Freedman et al., 2002; Imrie et al., 2021; Patterson, 2022). Nevertheless, the idea that transgender parenthood is detrimental to children's psychological adjustment is widely held (Tornello et al., 2019; Tornello & Bos, 2017) as are beliefs that children with transgender parents would be ostracized (Dierckx et al., 2017).

Driven by cis-heteronormative views, what beliefs about children's development may be influencing attitudes toward adoption for transgender persons? Gato et al. (2013) identified four main categories representing common negative beliefs about children's development when being brought up by non-heterosexual and non-cisgender parents: 1) concerns about children's self-concept and socio-psychological adjustment (i.e., psychological adjustment); 2) concerns about children's development of sexual orientation, gender role behaviors, and gender identity (i.e., stereotypes about sexuality development); 3) concerns about children's risk developing emotional and behavioral problems (i.e., psychological disturbance); and 4) concerns about children's risks of exposure to victimization and stigmatization by peers or adults (i.e., victimization). Each category of beliefs was associated with personal attitudes toward rights for LGBTQ people, although unfounded in scientific evidence. Thus, each category of beliefs may play a distinctive role in hindering the full realization of reproductive justice for transgender people. Moreover, arguments in opposition to LGBTQ rights often refer to concerns about harming children, especially in the case of children of transgender parents (Stone, 2019).

Consequently, it may be the case that the effect of attitudes toward LGBTQ rights on evaluations toward specific adoption cases is mediated by such concerns.

Indeed, research shows that sexual prejudice and negative beliefs about LGBTQ parents can have a negative impact on beliefs regarding children's development, e.g., regarding their future psychological adjustment (Baiocco et al., 2020; Hermosa-Bosano et al., 2021; Ioverno et al., 2018). Rarely have studies investigated the role of LGBTQ rights support on such beliefs. Support for LGBTQ rights could have a positive and opposite effect compared that exerted by sexual prejudice, as we predicted. However, support for LGBTQ rights could also give rise to unexpected findings. In line with the increasing studies showing the positive effects of social support in the lives of LGBTQ people (see Leung et al., 2022 for a review), we used a positive variable of mediation linked to support, instead of a negative measure of sexual prejudice.

The current study: Aims and hypotheses

The general aim of this study was to investigate cisgender heterosexual people's beliefs about children's development and agreement with adoption in the case of adoptive transgender parents using an experimental design with vignette methodology. The vignette study was launched in Israel, Italy, Portugal, and the UK. In all these countries, above and beyond legislative differences, cis-heteronormative claims to parenthood prevail over reproductive justice arguments despite the variability in the strength of attitudes (ILGA-Europe, 2024; Ross & Solinger, 2017).

We assumed that, irrespective of the country of residence, negative beliefs about children's development were associated with negative attitudes toward adoption for transgender people, and that these beliefs and attitudes were related to support for LGBTQ rights. In particular, we expected that participants with low levels of support for LGBTQ rights would perceive the vignette children (both male and female) at the center of the adoption case as being more at risk of problematic developmental outcomes regarding psychological adjustment; psychological disturbance; victimization; and stereotypes about sexuality development if they were adopted by a different-gender couple that included a transgender partner (either a transgender woman or a transgender man) when compared to other cisgender parent family types comprising different-gender and same-gender couples. Thus, the vignettes portrayed an equivalent need for reproductive justice across all five types of couples who were unable to conceive a child within their couple relationship. Plus, a randomized experimental design highlighted the contrast between the social gender presentation of the two different-gender couples (one of which included a transgender partner) against the two cisgender same-gender couples.

Four moderation hypotheses were articulated based on the results of previous studies finding that attitudes toward trans-identified parents tended to be more negative than those concerning gay or lesbian parents (e.g., Apperson et al., 2015; Goldberg et al., 2020; Weiner & Zinner, 2015):

- a). Participants who report low levels of support for LGBTQ rights will perceive children adopted by a cisgender different-gender couple as less at risk in their development compared to the same children adopted by cisgender same-gender couples and couples with a transgender partner (H1a). Furthermore, participants who report low levels of support for LGBTQ rights will perceive children adopted by couples with a transgender partner as more at risk in their development compared to the same children adopted by cisgender same-gender couples (H1b).

b). Participants who report low levels support for LGBTQ rights will be more in agreement with the adoption of children by a cisgender different-gender couple compared to either adoption by cisgender same-gender couples and couples with a transgender partner (H2a). Furthermore, participants who report low levels support for LGBTQ rights will be less in agreement concerning the adoption of children by couples with a transgender partner compared to adoption by cisgender same-gender couples (H2b).

Further, focusing our investigation on the differences between cisgender same-gender couples and couples with a transgender person, we designed and tested a comprehensive conceptual model in which support for LGBTQ rights on agreement for adoption was mediated by beliefs about children's development. We were specifically interested in investigating all possible mediation paths among the variables in order to test potential differences on agreement with adoption between cisgender same-gender couples and couples with a transgender person.

Materials and Methods

Participants

Participants were 871 cisgender heterosexual people (Israel: $n = 207$; Italy: $n = 214$; Portugal: $n = 205$; UK: $n = 245$) aged from 18 to 84 years ($M = 32.62$, $SD = 12.95$), of whom 449 self-declared as women (51%) and 422 as men (48.5%). The majority of participants identified as White Caucasian, European Caucasian or Israeli Caucasian ($n = 790$; 90.7%), and 636 were childfree (73.0%). Participants declared from 1 to 30 years of education ($M = 15.07$; $SD = 4.03$).

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Data collection

A self-report questionnaire was implemented using the Qualtrics.com platform, between February and August 2022. Participants were recruited using Prolific Academic Ltd in the case of Italy, Portugal, and the UK. Prolific selected three convenience samples of heterosexual and cisgender participants, with the appropriate nationality and residence in the requested nation. Participants received £1.25 for completing the survey. In Israel, participants were recruited using a convenience sample strategy with the collaboration of students and researchers who sent a university URL or the questionnaire to the participants via announcements on internet forums, social media, and various mailing lists of acquaintances. In Israel, no compensation was offered for participation¹. On average, the questionnaire took approximately 10 - 15 min to complete. After reading a description of the study, all participants indicated their willingness to participate via an informed consent form. Then, each participant was randomly assigned to one of 5 conditions presenting an adoption vignette with either a: 1) cisgender different-gender couple ($n = 181$); 2) cisgender same-gender male couple ($n = 173$); 3) cisgender same-gender female couple ($n = 182$); 4) couple with a female transgender partner ($n = 171$); 5) couple with a male transgender partner ($n = 164$). Approval was obtained from the Ethical Review Authors' Institutional Boards for Research in Psychology [MASKED]. The study was pre-registered in OSF registries on 03, February, 2022 [MASKED]. Data and materials are available under request.

Measures

Vignettes

The vignette scenario depicted a couple seeking to adopt as being two adults involved in a happy 12-year long relationship, who did not have children of their own, and who wanted to adopt twins (adapted from the vignette used by Weiner & Zinner, 2015). All the vignette couples presented were described as having biological fertility difficulties that underpinned their adoption application. Each vignette presented the couple hoping to adopt the children as well-educated, healthy and never affected by psychiatric illness or serious financial difficulties. The vignettes that presented either a transgender man partnered with a cisgender woman or a same-gender partnership of two cisgender women—paralleled Weiner and Zinner’s original vignettes depicting a cisgender gay-male couple and a different-gender partnership between a cisgender man and a transgender woman. Thus, a total of five vignettes were presented in the current study: (1) a cisgender different-gender couple; (2) a cisgender same-gender male couple; (3) a cisgender same-gender female couple; (4) a different-gender couple with a transgender woman; (5) or a different-gender couple with a transgender man. In each vignette, two adoptive children (one girl and one boy) were depicted. We chose to describe a pair of twins, so as to test for differences in participants’ perceptions of the children’s outcomes and with respect to their gender (while the other characteristics, such as age, remained constant). Each participant received only one version of the vignette, and their attention to details was checked through responses to three manipulation and attention check items (e.g., “Jack and Margaret applied for an adoption.” True/False; see Appendix C in the Supplemental Material).

Beliefs about children’s development

In order to assess beliefs and attitudes toward children’s outcomes, the Child Developmental Outcomes Rating Scale was administered (CDORS; Gato et al., 2013). After reading the vignette participants were asked to rate their expectations on 11 items for each vignette depicted girl and boy, covering four areas of child development: (a) psychosocial adjustment (e.g., “Olivia will relate well with others;”) (b) victimization (e.g., “Olivia will be a victim of discrimination by adults throughout her life;”) (c) psychological disturbance (e.g., “Olivia will have emotional problems;”) and (d) stereotypes about sexuality development (e.g., “Olivia will display behaviors, interests and activities characteristic of a girl.”) Each item was rated on a 6-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (absolutely no) to 6 (absolutely yes). Following preliminary analyses establishing no significant differences in ratings according to the vignette child’s gender (see Supplemental Material), the measures concerning beliefs of boy’s and girl’s development were averaged in order to build four composite dependent variables. For Psychosocial Adjustment, higher scores indicated the participant’s belief that the child’s psychological adjustment would be positive ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 0.92$; $\alpha = .92$). For Victimization, higher scores indicated a stronger belief that the child would run the risk of being stigmatized ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.07$; $\alpha = .87$). For Psychological Disturbance higher scores indicated a stronger belief that the child risked developing a psychological problem ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.99$; $\alpha = .88$). For the Stereotypes about Sexuality Development dimension, higher scores indicated a stronger belief that the child’s development regarding sexual orientation, gender role behavior, and gender identity would conform to “normative” expectations ($M = 1.16$, $SD = 1.26$; $\alpha = .54$).

Agreement with the adoption

Four items evaluated participants’ agreement with the adoptive placement proposed for the children depicted in the vignette (e.g., “Do you feel that this adoption path is the best option for Olivia?”) The items were rated on a 6-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (absolutely no) to 6 (absolutely yes). Then, the items were averaged, and higher scores indicated positive

endorsement of the adoptive placement for both the depicted children ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.13$; $\alpha = .87$).

Support for LGBTQ rights

The subscale measuring support in the Multidimensional Scale of Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men (Gato et al., 2012) was deployed to measure support for equal rights and visibility for lesbian, gay and bisexual people (7 items; e.g., “Lesbians, gay men and bisexual persons still need to protest for equal rights”), and transgender and nonbinary people (7 items; e.g., “I see the movement for trans and nonbinary people as a positive thing.”) The items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree). Values were averaged as a single factor measuring positive attitudes and support ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.20$; $\alpha = .97$). No specific item measured agreement with access to adoptive parenting for LGBTQ people.

Data analyses

Some statistical analyses were conducted via SPSS (version 25). Skewness and Kurtosis values were within the normal range (Kline, 2015), and all variables yielded good to very good reliability scores with the exception of the sub-scale of stereotypes about sexuality development (see Tables 1 and 2a and 2b of the Appendix A in the Supplemental Material). As exploratory and preliminary analyses, 4 (nations) \times 5 (types of family) \times 2 (gender of the child: male or female) three-way Repeated Measure Analyses of Variance for each dependent variable, with the latter factors varying within subjects, were conducted. Moderation analyses were used to test whether the effect of manipulation on the evaluation of couples was moderated by levels of participants' support for LGBTQ rights. To test the hypotheses, the SPSS PROCESS macro for testing moderation was used (model 1; Hayes, 2013). For this analysis, planned Helmert contrasts were implemented. The type of couple was the multi-categorical independent variable [0 = Cisgender Different-Gender couple; 1 = Cisgender Same-Gender couples; 2 = Couples with a Transgender Partner]. Following the predictions, we first contrasted the cisgender different-gender couple with the two other groups (X1). Then, the cisgender same-gender couples vs. couples with a transgender partner were compared (X2). A 5,000 bootstrap bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (CI) was used. We adopted a complementary approach using two methods to data analyses, following recommendations by Hayes (2018). First, a standard deviation (or ‘simple slopes’) approach was used to examine how the effect of X varies at different levels of M. Second, we used the Johnson-Neyman interval to exactly indicate where the predictor's slope becomes significant or not significant at a specified alpha level. We used the “interaction” package in R (Long, 2024) to generate the Johnson-Neyman plots for each dependent variable. These graphs are useful to identify the interval regions in which the interaction effects are significant (Hamilton, 2006). We also implemented a completely identified path analysis model (with multiple mediators) and probed the potential differences between cisgender same-gender parents and transgender parents by contrasting coefficients of indirect effects pertaining to each group. Analysis was conducted with *lavaan* (Rosseel, 2012), an R package for Structural Equation Modeling by using the RStudio graphical interface. We report all manipulations, measures, and exclusions in these studies

Results

Repeated measure analyses of variance

A power analysis, with an alpha = .05 and power = .80, showed that the projected minimum sample size needed to detect an effect size of $f = .15$ is $n = 260$ (for a repeated measure Anova with 5×4 between groups and 2 within groups; using GPower 3.1). The exploratory repeated measure analyses of variance (see the Appendix A of the Supplemental Material) showed that no significant national differences emerged in the analyses, neither were there significant interactions between nationality, type of couple, and gender of child. In addition repeating the preliminary analyses with participants' gender, age, and education level either as a covariates did not yield significant outcome results.

Moderation analyses

Beliefs about children's development

Psychological adjustment. Contrasts between the cisgender different-gender couples and all the other groups (X1), and couples with a transgender partner vs. cisgender same-gender couples (X2) produced significant effects. The differences between groups on ratings of the vignette child's psychological adjustment were not significant when levels of LGBTQ rights support were in the medium range ($p = .09$). However, the differences between the cisgender different-gender couple and all the other groups were significant both when levels of LGBTQ rights support were low, $F(2, 865) = 8.21$; $p = .001$ (i.e., children of cisgender different-gender couple were perceived as more adjusted than the other children, in line with the predictions), or high, $F(2, 865) = 17.66$; $p < .001$ (i.e., children of the cisgender different-gender couple were surprisingly perceived as less adjusted than the other children). The differences between couples with a transgender person and cisgender same-gender couples were significant only when levels of LGBTQ rights support were low, showing that children of cisgender same-gender couples were perceived as more adjusted than children of couples with a transgender parent (see Table 3 and Figure 1 (a) in Appendix B of the Supplemental Material). The Johnson-Neyman plot demonstrated that the effect is significant for values below 5.09 and above 5.77 (see Figure 1(b) in Appendix B of the Supplemental Material).

Victimization. The contrasts X1 and X2 produced significant effects. The differences between groups on anticipated victimization of the vignette children were significant when levels of support were low, $F(2, 865) = 27.29$; $p < .001$, medium, $F(2, 865) = 28.58$; $p < .001$, and high, $F(2, 865) = 7.25$; $p < .001$. Examination of specific differences between the cisgender different-gender couple and all the other groups were significant across each level of support for LGBTQ rights (low, medium, and high), showing that children of the cisgender different-gender couple were perceived as less at risk of victimization than the other children. The difference between ratings of couples with a transgender person and cisgender same-gender couples were significant only when levels of support were low, showing that children of cisgender same-gender couples were perceived as less at risk of victimization than children of couples with a transgender parent (see Table 3 and Figure 2(a) in Appendix B of the Supplemental Material). The Johnson-Neyman plot demonstrated that the effect is significant for values below 5.09 and above 5.77 (see Figure 2(b) in Appendix B of the Supplemental Material).

Psychological disturbance. The contrast X1 was significant, but the contrast X2 produced a non-significant effect. Furthermore, results revealed that the differences between groups were not significant when level of support was low ($p = .08$). However, the differences between the cisgender different-gender couple and all other groups were significant both when levels of support were medium, $F(2, 865) = 5.69$; $p = .003$, and high, $F(2, 865) = 24.15$; $p < .001$, showing that children of cisgender different-gender couples were perceived as more at risk of

disturbance than the other children (see Table 3 and Figure 3(a) in Appendix B of the Supplemental Material). The Johnson-Neyman plot demonstrated that the effect is significant for values below 3.63 and above 4.59 (see Figure 3(b) in Appendix B of the Supplemental Material).

Stereotypes about sexuality development. The contrast X1 was significant, but the contrast X2 produced a non-significant effect. The differences between groups were not significant when level of support was either classified as medium ($p = .48$), or high ($p = .17$). However, the differences between the cisgender different-gender couple and all the other groups were significant when levels of support were low, $F(2, 865) = 6.26$; $p = .002$, showing that children of cisgender different-gender couples were perceived as being more likely to develop a cisgender heterosexual sexuality in comparison to children in the other types of adoptive family (see Table 3 and Figure 4(a) in Appendix B of the Supplemental Material). The Johnson-Neyman plot demonstrated that the effect is significant for values below 4.45 and above 6.14 (see Figure 4(b) in Appendix B of the Supplemental Material).

Agreement with adoption. The contrasts X1 and X2 produced significant effects. Results revealed that the differences between a cisgender different-gender couple and all other groups were significant when the level of support for equal rights was low, $F(2, 865) = 42.75$; $p < .001$, medium, $F(2, 865) = 11.18$; $p < .001$, and high, $F(2, 865) = 3.59$; $p = .03$. When level of support was low or medium, adoption placement with the cisgender different-gender couple was more likely to be recommended than was placement with the other types of vignette depicted couples. When level of support was high, children of cisgender different-gender couple were less likely to be recommended than were the other children. The differences between couples with a transgender person and cisgender same-gender couples were significant when level of support for equal rights was low, showing that children with cisgender same-gender couples had more adoptive placement recommendations than did children with the couples including a transgender partner (see Table 3 and Figure 5(a) in Appendix B of the Supplemental Material). The Johnson-Neyman plot demonstrated that the effect is significant for values below 5.09 and above 5.77 (see Figure 5(b) in Appendix B of the Supplemental Material).

Multigroup path analysis

Our tested path analysis model revealed a significant positive association indicating a direct connection between the extent of support for LGBTQ rights and the participant's endorsement of the adoptive placement. Such associations consistently emerged across couples presented with a transgender partner ($\beta = .46$, $se = .052$, $z = 8.83$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .359, .564), and vignettes with cisgender same-gender couples ($\beta = .45$, $se = .049$, $z = 9.09$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .349, .541). Support for LGBTQ rights (i.e., the putative predictor) was found to be positively associated with the mediator variable of psychological adjustment both for couples with a transgender partner ($\beta = .57$, $se = .039$, $z = 14.68$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .493, .645) and for cisgender same-gender couples ($\beta = .42$, $se = .054$, $z = 7.73$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .310, .521). As for victimization (i.e., the second investigated mediator), analysis revealed a significant negative association of support for LGBTQ rights present within the vignette ratings of couples with a transgender partner ($\beta = -0.30$, $se = .052$, $z = -5.74$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = -0.399 , -0.196), this association was again negative although only marginally significant within the vignette rating of the cisgender same-gender couples ($\beta = -0.12$, $se = .062$, $z = -1.94$, $p = .053$, 95% CI = -0.240 , $.001$). Support for LGBTQ rights was related to the third proposed mediator - psychological disturbance—in ratings of couples with a transgender partner ($\beta = -0.50$, $se = .050$, $z = -9.89$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = -0.595 , -0.398) and in those for cisgender same-gender couples ($\beta = -0.41$, $se =$

.053, $z = -7.60$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = $-0.509, -0.300$), with both vignette groups displaying robust significant negative associations. In contrast, the fourth mediator, namely stereotypes about sexuality development, was found to be unrelated to either hypothesized prediction regarding support for LGBTQ rights when rating vignettes of either couples with a transgender person ($\beta = .11$, $se = .063$, $z = 1.82$, $p = .068$, 95% CI = $-0.009, .239$) or cisgender same-gender couples ($\beta = .04$, $se = .077$, $z = 0.57$, $p = .57$, 95% CI = $-0.107, .195$). The mediator variables also displayed specific associations with the extent of agreement with the children's adoptive placement, across both same-sex couples and couples with a transgender partner. Specifically, psychological adjustment was significantly and positively related with the criterion for couples with a transgender partner ($\beta = .37$, $se = .051$, $z = 7.37$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = $.275, .474$), but was unrelated to extent of agreement on vignette ratings of cisgender same-gender couples ($\beta = .11$, $se = .063$, $z = 1.84$, $p = .066$, 95% CI = $-0.008, .238$). Analysis showed the opposite pattern of association for the mediator of psychological disturbance: It was significantly and negatively related with adoptive placement agreement only in the case of ratings for the cisgender same-gender couples ($\beta = -0.15$, $se = .057$, $z = -2.68$, $p = .007$, 95% CI = $-0.265, -0.041$), but not for couples with a transgender partner ($\beta = -0.02$, $se = .050$, $z = -0.42$, $p = .68$, 95% CI = $-0.119, .077$). Victimization was not significantly related to adoptive placement agreement when considering either vignettes depicting different-gender couples with a transgender partner ($\beta = -0.08$, $se = .044$, $z = -1.74$, $p = .081$, 95% CI = $-0.161, .009$) or those displaying cisgender same-gender couples ($\beta = -0.07$, $se = .043$, $z = -1.74$, $p = .081$, 95% CI = $-0.158, .009$). Similarly, stereotypes about sexuality development was unrelated to adoptive placement agreement either for different-gender couples with a transgender partner ($\beta = -0.06$, $se = .036$, $z = -1.79$, $p = .074$, 95% CI = $-0.134, .006$) or for those with showing cisgender same-gender couples ($\beta = .06$, $se = .047$, $z = 1.38$, $p = .17$, 95% CI = $-0.027, .157$). The above patterns of associations were indicative of some indirect, i.e., partially mediated relationships, that could be probed further. We tested and found a significant mediation pattern that included level of support for LGBTQ rights, beliefs about children's psychological adjustment, and adoptive placement agreement for ratings of couples with a transgender partner ($\beta = .21$, $se = .034$, $z = 6.21$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = $.146, .280$). In contrast, such a mediation effect was not significant regarding vignette ratings of cisgender same-gender couples ($\beta = .05$, $se = .028$, $z = 1.74$, $p = .082$, 95% CI = $-0.006, .102$). To further corroborate the different patterns pertaining to the extent of agreement with the adoptive placement for couples that included a transgender partner compared to cisgender same-gender couples, we contrasted the indirect coefficients in both models to find a significant difference ($\beta_{diff} = .16$, $se = .044$, $z = 3.75$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = $.079, .251$). For the vignette ratings of the cisgender same-gender couples, we found a unique significant indirect association between support for LGBTQ rights, beliefs about children's psychological disturbance, and adoptive placement agreement ($\beta = .06$, $se = .025$, $z = 2.49$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = $.013, .111$) that was not significant regarding ratings of couples with a transgender partner ($\beta = .01$, $se = .025$, $z = 0.42$, $p = .68$, 95% CI = $-0.038, .059$). Nevertheless, when we contrasted the coefficients of the indirect effect between the two groups, we did find a non-significant difference ($\beta_{diff} = .05$, $se = .035$, $z = 1.47$, $p = .14$, 95% CI = $-0.120, .017$) thus indicating a certain degree of overlap between the two groups in this effect pointing to a spurious finding (see Figure 1).

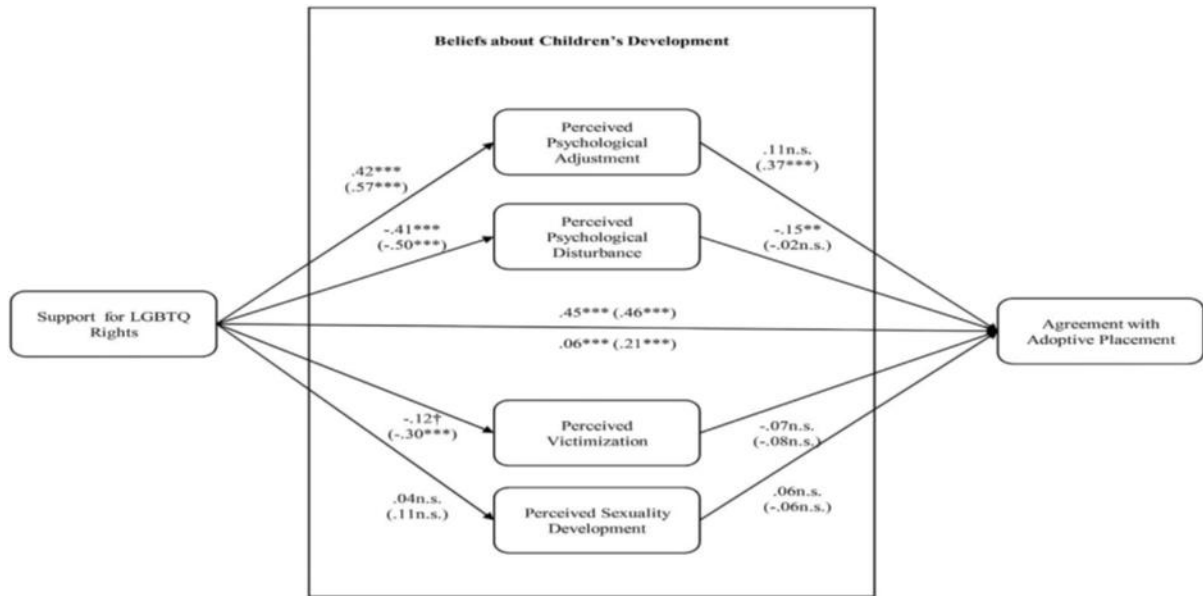


Figure 1. The final path model depicting pathways between support for LGBTQ rights and agreement with adoption.

Note. Standardized path coefficients for couples with a transgender partner in parenthesis. Non-significant paths are denoted by n.s.; † = $p < .06$; * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$

Discussion

Despite attitudes toward LGBTQ parenting becoming significantly more positive in many countries (Flores, 2021), perceptions that transgender parenting disrupts the appropriate psychological development of children are still widespread (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2019; Tornello et al., 2019). In addition to confirming both of these conclusions from previous research, findings from the current study point to the role played by both existing levels of support for LGBTQ rights and beliefs about children’s development when cisgender heterosexual people make judgements concerning the acceptability of adoptive parenting. Our experimental vignette-design additionally highlighted how attitudes diverged regarding judgements made about couples with a binary transgender partner when compared to those regarding cisgender same-gender couples, drawing attention to the specificity of cisgender heterosexual people’s views regarding transgender parenthood. Findings from moderation analyses revealed that among participants expressing low levels of support for LGBTQ rights those presented with a cisgender man and a cisgender woman (i.e., cisgender different-gender couple) undergoing assessment as future adoptive parents anticipated that the children being adopted would have better psychological adjustment, experience less victimization, and be more likely to grow up to identify as cisgender and heterosexual than did participants given otherwise identical presentations of cisgender same-gender couples or couples with a binary transgender partner (partially in line with H1a).

When levels of support for LGBTQ rights were low, participants’ endorsement of the recommendation to proceed with the adoption of the twin children was higher in case of those evaluating a cisgender different-gender couple compared to all other groups (congruent with H2a). We also found that among participants with low levels of support for LGBTQ rights, discrimination biases were associated with the anticipation of lower levels of psychological

adjustment and greater likelihood of victimization for children adopted by couples with a binary transgender partner (partially in line with H1b and in line with H2b). These results aligned with prior findings that attitudes toward gay or lesbian parents were significantly more positive than those toward trans-identified parents (Apperson et al., 2015). Further, our findings point to beliefs concerning the likelihood of children's developmental outcomes that seem to underlie the judgment biases made against couples with a transgender partner who apply to adopt. Results of the multi-group path analysis demonstrated that support for LGBTQ rights was linked with agreement to the adoptive placement via the mediation of beliefs about children's psychological adjustment more strongly among participants evaluating vignettes of couples with a transgender partner than among those evaluating cisgender same-gender couples. Specifically, the mediating role played by concerns about children's social psychological adjustment (e.g., "Margaret will relate well with others") was critical when distinguishing differences in response to couples with a binary transgender parent compared to cisgender same-gender couples. In sum, our results confirmed that participants' likelihood of agreement with the placement of adopted children was related to beliefs and concerns about children's psychological adjustment more strongly when a couple relationship include a binary transgender partner than when evaluating cisgender same-gender two-parent families (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2019; Ryan & Martin, 2000).

The fact that the agreement with the adoptive placement particularly involved concerns for children's positive psychological adjustment, but did not involve negative beliefs about psychological disturbance, could represent an expression of subtle prejudice. Our findings may suggest that when children are adopted by transgender parents, the perceived vulnerability of the adopted child (H. C. Brown & Cocker, 2008) combined with the pressure to be "well adjusted" to compensate for that vulnerability, may raise societal demand for cis-heteronormative parenthood.

Aside from our consideration of cisgender heterosexual participants expressing low levels of support for LGBTQ rights, we correspondingly addressed those endorsing moderate to high levels of support for LGBTQ rights—those who occupied a neutral or an ally position concerning LGBTQ rights—although we did not develop specific predictions about the responses of these participants. Nonetheless, in line with a claim of equality in terms of reproductive justice, we offer duly cautious interpretations of these observed variations in ratings across the five vignette groups. Findings from our moderation analyses revealed that participants recording higher levels of support for LGBTQ rights perceived that the children's anticipated levels of psychological adjustment were higher and anticipated levels of psychological disturbance were lower when rating children considered for adoption by the non-heterosexual and non-cisgender couples than by the cisgender heteronormative different-gender vignette couple. In other words, supporters of LGBTQ rights apparently "overvalued" the parenting performed within the same-gender and transgender parent families. However, those who endorsed LGBTQ rights also anticipated that the children of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender couples would be likely recipients of victimization. These unexpected results could represent LGBTQ allies being alert in their desire to protect LGBTQ families against the effect of stigma (Di Battista et al., 2021). In other studies LGBTQ allies have shown strong awareness of the risks of victimization faced by LGBTQ parents and family members living in highly stigmatizing contexts (Duncan et al., 2017). Beyond that, however, the results seem aligned with what the research finds in relation to the children's development of LGBTQ parents. Indeed, there are several studies that show that LGBTQ families may perform better in children's psychological adjustment and parent-child relationship than different-gender families (see Zhang et al., 2023 for a review and meta-

analysis). However, research on outcomes of transgender or bisexual parent families remains limited as well as research on stigmatization of these families.

Our findings have social and clinical implications. It might be suggested that two types of intervention could be made in public education, for example, in personal and social education lessons in schools. First, classes could review factors that may bias judgements, including those specifically related to discrimination against transgender people. Second, lessons directed at exploring parenthood could consider how scientific evidence points to connections between children's psychological well-being and family processes, not family composition or structure. Personal and social education on these topics would benefit both cisgender heterosexual people and sexual and gender minority people by challenging the normative cultural assumptions that influence the way people imagine and desire parenthood, as well as the routes to parenthood open to them (Shenkman, 2021; von Doussa et al., 2015).

Strengths and limitations

Some important sampling limitations were present in our study design. Although, we sampled across four distinct national contexts, each subsample was neither representative of each country's population nor balanced with respect to participants' key characteristics, such as age group that has been associated with sexual prejudice in different cultural contexts (Jäckle & Wenzelburger, 2015). Proportionately more younger adults without children than middle aged or older adults with children, volunteered for the study. Furthermore, in Israel, the data were collected with the collaboration of students and researchers, unlike all other national contexts where data were collected on Prolific. The data collected in Israel may therefore suffer from lower representativeness than that collected elsewhere but we found no significant national differences. Nevertheless, the sample was balanced according to gender and each of the significant differences remained present in the study findings controlling for nationality, age group, educational level and parental status.

Although the current combination of vignettes enabled us to establish discriminatory judgements and trace the association of these different beliefs about the developmental vulnerabilities of children, our findings only pertain directly to the situation of some adoption applicants who identify as transgender. In particular, we did not address the situation of gender non-conforming (nonbinary) transgender people seeking to adopt. Neither did we consider adoption applications made by transgender people in the context of a same-gender couple relationship, nor applications made by single transgender adults. Future studies should probe the different ways in which sexual orientation, gender identity and parental partnership interact with each other creating distinct combinations that may be reasons for stigma (Salvati & Koc, 2022) plus consider pathways to parenthood other than through adoption, such as medically assisted reproduction.

Furthermore, the sub-scale "stereotypes about sexuality development" has a low reliability in all national samples (see Table 2b in the Supplemental Material). This sub-scale (previously named "normative sexuality") is part of a validated scale used in other research (Gato et al., 2013). The sub-scale has already shown correlations with aspects of sexual prejudice such that expressed concern regarding children's sexual development is usually associated with sexual prejudice. Future research should better reflect on this construct and observe whether it is associated with beliefs about the etiology of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Although we did not find differences between nations, future studies should further pursue this issue measuring cultural aspects. For example, studies could consider how attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities are nourished within various by socio-cultural climates.

Conclusions

Overall our results indicated that cis-heternormative claims to parenthood via adoption prevailed over bio-reproductive justice arguments when cisgender heterosexual adults rated various scenarios of couples applying to adopt children. Further, evaluations for couples with a binary transgender partner were more extreme than those given for parallel sets of vignette ratings concerning same-gender couples who were depicted as presenting otherwise identical applications to adopt. These attitudinal biases have the potential to impede the impartial assessment of transgender applicants seeking to adopt a child. Existing levels of support for LGBTQ rights were significantly related to biased evaluations of transgender people applying to adopt a child, as were participants' beliefs about the likely effects of the adoption scenario on the psychological wellbeing of the children.

Institutional review board statement

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committees of Birkbeck University (UK; 24 January 2022; protocol code: 2122011), Reichman University (Israel; 1 November 2021; protocol code: P_2021160), and University of Bologna (Italy; 14 December 2021; protocol code: 314846).

Note

1. In the Israeli sample non-heterosexual and noncisgender participants were excluded from the final analyses to make the sample comparable to others. The few non-heterosexual and non-cisgender Israeli participants were excluded from these analyses considering that the purpose of the study is to explore the biases of heterosexual and cisgender people who have not therefore experienced discrimination related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

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Data availability statement

Study was pre-registered in OSF registries on 3 February 2022. Associated project: osf.io/j9p2f. Internet Archive link: <https://archive.org/details/osf-registrations-wgsdh-v1>. Registration DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/WGSDH> Data and study materials are available under request by corresponding author.

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