



“Non-Traditional” Parents in Contemporary Societies

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1. Introduction

The term “family” is derived from the Latin word “famīlia”, that, in turn, originates from “famūlus” (i.e., servant, domestic), referring to a group of slaves or servants living under the same roof. This original definition of “family” suggests that the meaning of the word has changed greatly over time, along with the growing importance of considering parenthood through sociohistorical–cultural and psychological lenses (Christopher 2012; Gato et al. 2022; Georgas et al. 2006; Valiquette-Tessier et al. 2016, 2019; Tasker and Gato 2020).

Each family—and their respective parenting practices—has its own peculiarities that make it difficult to determine what is “traditional” and what is not. Nonetheless, some reviews have reported that a configuration of the concept of a family, compared to which other parental configurations are generally evaluated—and sometimes discriminated against—is the first-marriage nuclear family with two different-gender parents (see Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020; Valiquette-Tessier et al. 2016, 2019 for reviews). In 2016, Valiquette-Tessier and colleagues reviewed a decade of research on attitudes and stereotypes related to parenthood and family structures. They retrieved and analyzed 17 studies from the US, Canada, Australia and, marginally, from Italy. Results showed that in any study, married/biological parents were systematically compared to divorced, single, step, same-gender and/or adoptive parents; in some studies, mothers were systematically compared to fathers. In other words, the authors found that married/biological parents, and especially mothers, were represented as the standard model against which many other parent types were judged. In particular, from that review, it emerged that married heterosexual biological parents were perceived more favorably than other parents, with the exception of different-gender adoptive parents (e.g., Claxton-Oldfield and O’Neil 2007; Claxton-Oldfield et al. 2006; Planitz and Feeney 2009; Troilo and Coleman 2008). Furthermore, Valiquette-Tessier et al. (2016) also found that divorced and single mothers tended to be negatively evaluated compared to divorced and single fathers. Results also suggested a view of the family that remains anchored to traditional gender and parental roles in which parenthood is still considered the primary responsibility of a mother who raises her children in an intact nuclear family. Other studies confirmed this tendency to rate more negatively “non-traditional” parents, such as same-gender parents and step-parents compared to biological and heterosexual parents, particularly for participants with a strong endorsement of traditional gender role beliefs (e.g., Baiocco et al. 2020; Di Battista et al. 2022; Di Battista et al. 2023; Figueroa and Tasker 2020). Across ten countries from four continents, Ganong and Sanner (2023) showed that stepfamilies can be dysfunctionally influenced in their relational dynamics and family processes by nuclear family models, resulting in relational conflicts and communication difficulties. Research also showed that lay conceptions of stepfamilies are generally more negative than biological families, pointing to issues such as broken ties, insecure bonds, a lack of affection, being unsupportive and having problematic outcomes (e.g., Planitz and Feeney 2009). As for LGBTQ parents, despite the many positive aspects of being egalitarian role models leading to a greater acceptance of LGBTQ people and diversity, research



Citation: Di Battista, Silvia, and Monica Pivetti. 2024.

“Non-Traditional” Parents in Contemporary Societies. *Social Sciences* 13: 2. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13010002>

Received: 29 November 2023

Accepted: 4 December 2023

Published: 19 December 2023



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still demonstrates that negative attitudes, distress linked to experiences of exclusion and heterosexism, the endless process of “educating the world about queer parents” as well as the lack of legal safeguards for LGBTQ parents and their children still represent challenges for these families (Gartrell et al. 2019).

In this Special Issue, we present six studies that investigated attitudes and perceptions toward, as well as aspirations and challenges for parents or prospective parents in contemporary societies. The papers include three Italian experimental studies investigating attitudes toward LG parents and stepmothers as well as the relationships between negative attitudes and conservative ideologies or beliefs about gender roles. Two further empirical studies, conducted in Portugal and Belgium, explored issues related to reproductive justice and wellbeing for transgender and nonbinary prospective parents and lesbian mothers. Finally, a qualitative study conducted among different-gender couples of Austrian parents showed the negative relationship between gender role beliefs and work–life balance. Each of these papers contains important aspects linked to parenting that are worth fully exploring, with suggestions of implications for research, practice and policy-making.

2. Attitudes toward LG Parents and Step-Parents

Three experimental studies (Ballone et al. 2023; Di Battista 2023; Di Battista et al. 2022a) employing the methodology of a vignette manipulation, explored negative biases and attitudes toward gay and lesbian parents and step-parents. In these experimental studies, following the reading of a fictitious scenario about a parenting couple, participants responded to measures of attributions and attitudes toward depicted parents or couples. Implementing this methodology, Ballone et al. (2023) found that the perception of a conflict was positively associated with the perception of lower parental competence, especially in the gaymen parents’ condition. Results of a moderated mediation model also showed that for Italian participants with highly conservative political ideologies, gender essentialist beliefs impacted on the perceptions of poor parental competences for a gaymale couple as prospective parents, through the mediation of conflict attribution for this type of couple.

Di Battista et al. (2022a) also found similar results exploring Italian attitudes toward the competence of lesbian mothers and stepmothers. In this further experimental vignette study, authors presented to each participant one of four different hypothetical mothers (i.e., heterosexual biological mother, heterosexual stepmothers, lesbian stepmother, and lesbian biological mother) engaged in a trifling argument with her two children who were misbehaving. Again, moderated mediation analyses showed that participants with medium–high levels of traditional genderrole beliefs evaluated all the non-traditional mothers as being less competent compared to the hypothetical heterosexual biological mother by assigning them greater culpability for the argument with the children. These results were also in line with the third experimental study (Di Battista 2023), in which a moderated mediation analysis showed that participants with higher levels of traditional gender role beliefs evaluated a hypothetical heterosexual stepmother as being less competent as compared with a hypothetical heterosexual biological mother by attributing to her more animal traits representing an aspect of the ontologization process. In summary, in all three studies, the attribution of culpability or conflict in certain fictitious situations by participants with stronger conservative orientations—or gender role beliefs—determined an indirect impact on the assessment of non-traditional parenting competence, offering to these participants a subtle way to express their negative attitudes (Di Battista 2023; Di Battista et al. 2022a; Ballone et al. 2023). In other words, the poor assessment of parental competence described in the vignette depended on the mediating role played by negative attributions and the moderating role exerted by the participants’ beliefs.

3. A Focus on Reproductive Justice and Wellbeing

Societal attitudes can have a relevant impact not only on the meaning of parenting, but also on the related reproductive aspirations and rights. These aspects vary across religious, national, racial, cultural, gendered and political boundaries. As for a reproductive

justice framework, the right to (not) have children and to parent them in an equal, safe and healthy environment is influenced by gendered constructions of parenting, sex and reproduction (Ross and Solinger 2017). In the study by Gato and Fonseca (2022), by means of a questionnaire on fertility preservation administered to Portuguese transgender and nonbinary youths and their parents, it was shown that the youths had less interest in their reproductive rights as compared to their parents. The main reason why these youths did not seem to prefer a fertility preservation procedure gamete was due to the lack of knowledge about this process and regarded the possibility of gamete preservation. According to social attitudes, transgender youths reported feeling more supported and informed by professionals compared to nonbinary youths as to the impact of hormone therapy on genetic parenthood and the opportunities to achieve genetic parenthood, even while undergoing hormone therapy. Negative attitudes and barriers were more evident for nonbinary peers.

According to the APA report titled *Lesbian and Gay Parenting* (2005), beliefs that lesbian and gay adults are not fit as parents have no empirical foundation as the offspring of lesbian and gay parents have been found to be equally well adjusted overall as those of other parents (e.g., Patterson 2013). LGBTQ parents have not been found to differ compared to heterosexual and different-gender parents either in their overall mental health or in their approaches to childrearing (e.g., Anderssen et al. 2002; Carone et al. 2021). However, specific societal challenges are still influencing the parenting aspirations and wellbeing of LGBTQ parents (Gato et al. 2021). In our Special Issue, D'Amore et al. (2022) present a cross-sectional study conducted in Belgium comparing lesbian mother families with donor-conceived children and heterosexual parent families with spontaneously conceived children. The results found similar family alliance quality and coparenting for both family types using the Lausanne Trilogue Play procedure. Furthermore, lesbian-parented triads displayed proper verbal and non-verbal play interactions, appropriate parental scaffolding, and positive and warm support mainly congruent with the emotional states of their partner and child.

4. The Work–Life Balance and Gender Role Beliefs

“Non-traditional” could also be the gender role played by different-gender parents who struggle with their work–life balance. For instance, a 21-country study found that a balanced division of parental leave between men and women has the potential to change the traditional gender role division of housework and work practices, since public policies could protect at least one parent’s job for a period of weeks, months, or years following childbirth (Ray et al. 2010). In this Issue, the paper by Maurer (2023) correlated the accessibility of paid parental leave in Austria with the means by which the couple negotiate household chores, childrearing and work practices between the two of them and with fellow employees, via 42 qualitative interviews. Austria has introduced a partnership bonus for parents who share childcare benefits 50:50 or 60:40, and this paper featured interviews with some of the few couples who shared childcare benefits. From a gender studies perspective, those benefits promote gender equality. The results of the content analysis showed the persistence of the traditional gender role model, where a substantial number of fathers continue to work while receiving childcare benefits, whereas mothers had to insist forcefully that they could continue to work during the early transition to parenthood. More interestingly, interviewed couples seemed to manage to overcome traditional gender inequalities in reconciling work and family with the support of the newly activated childcare benefits. Findings suggested that if women have increasing opportunities to continue working, the gender pay gap and the gender care gap could decrease in the future with the support of new policies offering adequately remunerated parental leave and childcare benefits.

5. Conclusions

In summary, this Special Issue looks at “non-traditional” families from different angles. As social scientists dealing with the study of prejudice, we are greatly interested in stigma

often related to “non-traditional” family structures and roles, sexual and gender identities, as well as their cultural background and experiences, which in turn may negatively affect parents’ and children’s wellbeing (e.g., Farr and Vázquez 2020; Perrin et al. 2019). In this sense, this Special Issue tries to shed some light on the mechanism behind the prejudice toward “non-traditional” families and how it could be addressed in the future. Future research could address those issues by means of longitudinal studies that are able to measure and account for the changing social attitudes toward “non-traditional” families, as society itself changes and as new forms of protection are established every day.

Understanding and investigating psychological and social aspects of attitudes, perceptions, and representations of families is essential because these aspects have implications not only for parents themselves, but also for their children’s development and the overall societal beliefs on gender roles, reproductive rights and protections for all family configurations (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020). Social inequalities, a lack of rights and protections, marginalized status, stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination as well as a diffusion of intensive parenting ideology could unjustly and negatively impact parents (e.g., mothers, LGBTQ parents, immigrant parents) and their children. Political stakeholders, educators, social workers, sociopsychological professionals and institutions have to be aware of the continued impact of these stressors and the specific vulnerabilities related to families’ specificities in their specific social contexts.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.D.B. and M.P.; writing—original manuscript preparation, S.D.B. and M.P.; writing—review and editing, S.D.B. and M.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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