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Parenting desires, parenting intentions, and anticipation of stigma upon parenthood among lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

We explored parenting desires, parenting intentions, and anticipation of stigma upon parenthood in a sample of 257 self-identified lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual childfree women in Portugal. No differences between the groups were observed concerning parenting desires. However, lesbian and bisexual women reported lower intentions to have children than their heterosexual counterparts. Although lesbian women considered themselves to have a higher chance of being victims of social stigma as mothers, this was not associated with their parenting desires. Furthermore, younger lesbian women intended to have children to a greater extent than did older lesbian women; relational status did not relate to lesbian women's parenting intentions, desires, or anticipation of stigma. Overall, this study contributes to knowledge about family formation processes among Portuguese women diverse in sexual identity.

KEYWORDS

Parenting desires; parenting intentions; stigma; lesbian women

In recent years, legal changes concerning marriage and adoption rights, as well as increased access to assisted reproduction techniques, have simplified access to parenthood among lesbian, bisexual, and other sexual minority women (Goldberg, 2010). Nevertheless, there are still many barriers that hinder the parenting plans of lesbian and bisexual women (Gato, Santos, & Fontaine, 2017).

We used the concepts of parenting desires and intentions (e.g., Riskind & Patterson, 2010) and anticipation of stigma upon parenthood (ASP; Leal, Gato, & Tasker, 2018) to gather knowledge about parenting plans of lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual (LBH) women. We further investigated how sociodemographic characteristics such as age, work status, educational level, and relational status influenced parenting desires and intentions among the three groups. Parenting desires correspond with the extent to which one wishes or wants to have children, whereas intentions are related

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to decisions or plans concerning parenthood (Riskind & Patterson, 2010). Thus, lower levels of parenting desires and intentions can contribute to lower rates of parenthood observed among lesbian and gay adults (Riskind & Patterson, 2010). Further, perceived prejudice and discrimination might act as barriers to the parenting plans of these individuals (Gato et al., 2017). In Portugal, although several bills in favor of same-sex couples' parenting rights were recently approved (e.g., same-sex couple adoption rights in 2016), high levels of prejudice against lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons have been reported (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2013). Thus, anticipating stigma as a parent might deter parenting desires and intentions among LGB individuals.

Analyzing data from the USA National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), Riskind and Patterson (2010) verified that lesbian women were less likely than matched heterosexual peers to express a desire for parenthood. However, lesbian women who expressed a desire for parenthood were similarly likely to their heterosexual peers to express intention to fulfill those desires. These findings were replicated in a later wave of the NSFG by Riskind and Tornello (2017), who additionally found that while no differences were observed between bisexual and heterosexual women regarding parenting desires, heterosexual women were more likely than their lesbian peers to express parenting desires. Women's parenting intentions were not correlated with sexual orientation in both studies. Using a different set of items to assess parenting desires and intentions among LBH women in the U.S., Simon, Farr, Tornello, and Bos (2018) observed no differences by sexual orientation for women's desires and intentions to have children. In contrast, Baiocco and Laghi (2013) found that lesbian women expressed a lower level of desire and intention for motherhood than did their heterosexual peers, a finding credited to the heterosexism and subsequent barriers to parenting by same-sex couples that exist in Italy. Recently, Leal et al. (2018) found that Portuguese LGB individuals desired and intended to have children more than did matched LGB individuals from the United Kingdom. These differences were explained by cultural factors, namely Portugal's familistic culture (Hofstede, 2011) and related social pressure to be a parent, including among sexual minority women.

Given that fertility among women is affected by age, it is expected that younger childfree women would express more desire and intention for parenthood than would older women who had remained childfree. Concurrently, there seems to be a cohort effect affecting lesbian women's and gay men's parental aspirations, with younger generations coming out earlier and including parenthood in their life plans (Costa & Bidell, 2017; Riskind & Patterson, 2010).

Having a job and source of income are usually instrumental conditions when considering whether or not to have children. Work conditions may be especially important to sexual minority women's parenting decisions

because adoption and assisted reproduction are usually costly and/or lengthy processes (Mezey, 2008). In this view, Simon et al. (2018) found that, compared to their heterosexual and bisexual peers, lesbian women were more likely to want a permanent position before having children. Because educational level is usually associated with a higher income, it is possible that lesbian women who reach a higher level of education would also be more proficient in achieving their parental goals.

Women's relational status may also influence decisions about parenting. Testa (2007) showed that having a supportive partner was the factor deemed the second most important among childfree women in Europe in the decision to have a child. Furthermore, single parents usually have lower income than parenting couples, and this may hinder women's parenting desires and intentions. However, given continued barriers to marriage between same-sex persons in many places worldwide, lesbian and bisexual women may be less vulnerable to a traditional narrative of having a child in the context of marriage. Instead, they may be more willing to create a family of choice and have children through a variety of pathways (Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, & Strong, 2008).

In this study, in addition to examining LBH women's parenting desires, parenting intentions, and ASP, we explored whether ASP and participants' sociodemographic characteristics were associated with parenting desires and intentions.

Method

Participants

The original sample was composed of 512 childfree participants in Portugal. For the purpose of this study, we selected participants who identified as cis-gender women and who were younger than 45 years of age ($N = 257$). We acknowledge that there is not an age limit when considering prospective parenting and that parenthood can be achieved through different social, legal, and biological pathways. Nevertheless, we considered the limit of 45 years as a useful threshold for parenthood in the Portuguese context because: (1) the age limit for access to assisted reproduction techniques (ART) funded by the Portuguese National Health Service is 42 years old, with a legally established upper age limit of 50 years old; and (2) in Portugal, candidates older than 45 years rarely adopt (Salvaterra & Veríssimo, 2008).

Sexual orientation was assessed with a categorical measure of self-identity: 64 defined themselves as lesbian, 67 as bisexual women, and 135 as heterosexual women. Concerning race/ethnicity, participants answered an open-ended question and the large majority considered themselves to be Caucasian (95.2%). The sample ranged from 18 to 45 years of age

Table 1. Comparisons between sociodemographic variables in function of sexual orientation.

		Lesbian women (<i>n</i> = 64)	Bisexual women (<i>n</i> = 67)	Heterosexual women (<i>n</i> = 135)	
Age	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	29.16 (7.85)	27.75 (6.68)	27.49 (6.28)	$F(2, 254) = 1.252,$ $p = .288$
Education level	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	5.09 (0.84)	5.13 (0.92)	5.20 (0.86)	$H(2) = 0.400,$ $p = .819$
% work		56.9	43.3	44.9	$\chi^2(2) = 2.874,$ $p = .238$
% in a relationship		67.2	68.7	65.9	$\chi^2(2) = 0.155,$ $p = .925$
Duration of relationship in months	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	50.87 (50.84)	40.48 (32.83)	55.95 (50.84)	$F(2, 168) = 1.637,$ $p = .198$

Note. Education level was coded according to the Portuguese grade classification: 1 = 4th grade; 2 = 6th grade; 3 = 9th grade; 4 = 12th grade; 5 = University Degree; 6 = Masters; 7 = Doctorate.

($M = 27.93$; $SD = 6.77$). Mean level of education was 5.16 ($SD = 0.87$), which corresponded to “university degree” on the scale used. The majority of the participants (66.9%) reported being in a committed relationship, with a mean duration of 50.66 months; approximately half (47.2%) had a full-time or part-time job; the remaining 52.8% reported being unemployed or students. The groups, as defined by sexual orientation, did not differ in either age, education level, employment status, relational status, or duration of relationship (Table 1).

Procedure

Data were collected online from April to June 2015 as part of a larger study on prospective parenting among LGB and heterosexual adults. In this period of time, same-sex couples were not allowed to adopt, and only infertile women in a different-sex relationship had access to ART in Portugal. Recruitment procedures were the same for LGB and heterosexual participants and the study was advertised in general and via LGB-oriented websites and social media. The study received ethical approval by the review board of the host institution.

Measures

Parenting desires and parenting intentions

To assess these variables, we relied on the work of Riskind and Patterson (2010), who used single items from the 2002 NSFG. Because the validity of single-item measures is often questioned (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1998), we added to each of the original sentences two additional items. Thus, parenting desires were evaluated by a scale composed of three items: (1) “[Looking to the future] if it were possible I would like to have a child” (original NSFG item); (2) “... I see myself as a parent”; and (3) “...to be a parent is

Table 2. Internal consistency of dependent variables.

	Total 249 ≤ n ≤ 257	Lesbian women 53 ≤ n ≤ 58	Bisexual women 64 ≤ n ≤ 67	Heterosexual women 131 ≤ n ≤ 132
Parenting desires	.96	.96	.93	.98
Parenting intentions	.95	.96	.95	.94
ASP	.76	.76	.79	.71

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, and statistical differences for parenting desires, parenting intentions, and ASP by sexual orientation group.

		Lesbian women (n = 64)	Bisexual women (n = 67)	Heterosexual women (n = 135)	df	F	p	η ²	Power
Parenting desires	M (SD)	4.06 (1.19)	3.89 (1.29)	4.22 (1.10)	2, 253	1.816	.165	.014	.377
Parenting intentions	M (SD)	3.51 ^b (1.34)	3.57 ^b (1.40)	4.05 ^a (1.09)	2, 254	5.476	.005	.041	.847
ASP	M (SD)	3.63 ^a (1.60)	2.67 ^b (1.52)	2.54 ^b (1.42)	2, 250	10.849	<.001	.080	.990

Note. ASP = Anticipation of stigma upon parenthood. Statistically significant differences revealed by the Tukey post-hoc comparison test are represented by superscripts ^a and ^b.

something I desire.” Differing from the original measure, we did not use a dichotomous yes/no answering option but a 5-point Likert type scale, from 1 (*definitely no*) to 5 (*definitely yes*) (see Riskind & Tornello, 2017; Kranz, Busch, & Niepel, 2018, for similar approaches). Regarding parenting intentions, participants read the instruction: “Sometimes what people want and what they intend are different because they are not able to do what they want. Looking to the future ...” and were given the three following items: (1) “... I intend to have a child at some point” (original NSFG item); (2) “... I have already decided that I’m going to be a parent”; and (3) “... having a child is part of my future plans.” The rating scale for parenting intentions was the same as for the parenting desires scale. Items were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater parenting desires/intentions.

Anticipation of stigma upon parenthood

To measure the extent to which stigma was anticipated if parenthood ensued, we used a scale developed by Leal et al. (2018) composed of five items. Items were devised so that they could be answered by heterosexual participants to enable comparisons by sexual orientation groups (e.g., “People would have doubts about my parenting skills”). A 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) was used. Items were averaged, with higher scores reflecting greater anticipation of parental stigma.

The internal consistency values (Cronbach’s alphas) of dependent variables presented good to very good values across all subsamples (Table 2). Preliminary analyses revealed that the distribution of the continuous

Table 4. Summary of regression analysis for variables predicting parenting desires among lesbian women, bisexual women, and heterosexual women.

Variable	Lesbian women (n = 54)			Bisexual women (n = 64)			Heterosexual women (n = 131)			
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	95% CI
Age	-0.06	0.02	-.39**	-0.01	0.02	-.02	-0.03	0.01	-.15	[-0.05, 0.001]
Relational status	0.17	0.33	.07	0.07	0.32	.02	0.48	0.18	.21**	[0.13, 0.83]
AP	-0.17	0.11	-.20	-0.51	0.12	-.49***	-0.42	0.08	-.43***	[-0.57, -0.27]
R ²	.16			.23			.27			
F	3.39*			6.04**			15.26***			

Note: ASP = Anticipation of stigma upon parenthood; relational status: not in a relationship = 0; in a relationship = 1; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Summary of regression analysis for variables predicting parenting intentions among lesbian women, bisexual women, and heterosexual women.

Variable	Lesbian women (n = 54)				Bisexual women (n = 64)				Heterosexual women (n = 132)			
	B	SE B	B	95% CI	B	SE B	β	95% CI	B	SE B	B	95% CI
Age	-0.09	0.02	-.51***	[-0.13, -0.05]	-0.02	0.03	-.09	[-0.07, 0.03]	-0.03	0.01	-.16*	[-0.05, -0.002]
Relational status	0.33	0.34	.12	[-0.35, 1.01]	0.18	0.35	.06	[-0.53, 0.89]	0.64	0.17	.28***	[0.30, 0.98]
ASP	-0.27	0.12	-.28*	[-0.50, -0.04]	-0.52	0.13	-.46***	[-0.78, -0.25]	-0.39	0.07	-.41***	[-0.54, -0.26]
R ²	.30				.20				.28			
F	7.17***				5.13**				17.60***			

Note: ASP = Anticipation of stigma upon parenthood; relational status: not in a relationship = 0; in a relationship = 1; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

variables (parenting desires, parenting intentions, and ASP) yielded values within the normality range regarding both skewness (-1.155 to 0.534) and kurtosis (-0.634 to 0.175).

Results

We conducted ANOVAs and found no significant differences as a function of sexual orientation on parenting desires (Table 3). Because the test power regarding this variable was very low, we merged lesbian and bisexual women and compared them with their heterosexual peers. Again, no significant differences were found between the groups, [$t(254) = 1.710$, $p = .088$; $d = .21$, Power = .660].

The bivariate correlations between each independent variable (age, educational level, work status, and relational status) and (1) parenting desires, (2) parenting intentions, and (3) ASP were tested separately for the three groups of women. Only age and relational status were correlated with parenting desires, parenting intentions, and ASP; thus, age and relational status were entered as predictors in the regression models (results available upon request from the authors). Age was a significant predictor only in the case of lesbian women, with younger lesbian participants desiring to have children more than older participants; relational status predicted only heterosexual women's parenting desires, with partnered participants more likely to want to have children (Table 4). ASP emerged as a predictor of bisexual and heterosexual women's desires for parenthood, but not for lesbian women. A similar pattern of results was found for intentions to parent (Table 5). However, age also emerged as a predictor of heterosexual women's intention to parent and ASP predicted the parenthood intentions of all women, irrespective of sexual orientation group. Effect sizes of models varied from medium to medium-large.

Discussion

We compared desire to parent, intention to parent, and the ASP in a sample of Portuguese LBH childfree women. We further explored the predictive power of sociodemographic characteristics and anticipated stigma upon parenthood on LBH women's desire and intention to parent.

No differences were observed by sexual orientation grouping regarding desire to parent. While this result is consistent with Simon et al.'s (2018) study, it is not in line with most previous research (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Riskind & Tornello, 2017). Like Simon et al. (2018), we allowed participants to answer items using a Likert-type scale, and this may have contributed to attenuated statistical differences in parenting desire. It may also be that familism, a characteristic of

Portuguese culture (Hofstede, 2011; Leal et al., 2018), positively influenced these women's desires for motherhood regardless of their sexual orientation.

Despite the modest effect sizes, lesbian and bisexual participants intended to have children less often than their heterosexual counterparts. Here, our results are contrary to studies conducted in the U.S. (Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Riskind & Tornello, 2017; Simon et al., 2018) in which women's parenting intentions were not associated with sexual orientation. Similar results to those found in the present study, however, were obtained in Italy by Baiocco and Laghi (2013) regarding lesbian women and their heterosexual peers. This difference in parenting intentions may be related to similar social and cultural barriers to parenting by same-sex couples in Portugal and Italy (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Gato et al., 2017). In this respect, it should be noted that, at the time of data collection for the present study, access to adoption and assisted reproduction techniques was proposed but not yet legalized for same-sex couples in Portugal.

The fact that lesbian women considered themselves to have a higher chance of being victims of social stigma as mothers is consistent with the high levels of prejudice against LGB individuals and biases regarding same-sex parenting that still exist in Portugal (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2013). It is also worthwhile to note that in anticipating stigma upon parenthood, bisexual women were more similar to heterosexual women than to their lesbian peers. In fact, bisexual people may have a greater chance of conceiving a child through penile-vaginal intercourse (Riskind, Patterson, & Nosek, 2013), through parenthood with a different-sex partner, or may perhaps pass without notice as heterosexual (Delvoye & Tasker, 2016), which may, at least partly, protect them from the effects of prejudice against same-sex couples. For these reasons, the gender of the partner, especially in the case of bisexual women, should thus be considered in future studies.

Educational level and work status were not associated with participants' desires or intentions to parent, yet future studies should explore these relationships. Consistent with the reviewed literature, younger lesbian women desired and intended to have children more often than their older peers (Costa & Bidell, 2017; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Riskind et al., 2013). Age also emerged as a predictor in the case of heterosexual women's intentions to parent, and this could be attributed to fertility aspects. Relational status only seemed to matter to heterosexual women (Testa, 2007). This finding may be explained by differential views of parenting among lesbian and bisexual women, who may see parenting as feasible outside a committed relationship (Riggle et al., 2008). Furthermore, as we noted before, at the time of data collection, only different-sex couples could adopt or access ART in Portugal. ASP was a strong predictor of most women's desire and

intent to parent, but not of lesbian women's desire to parent. As we have seen, lesbian women anticipated more stigma as parents than did their heterosexual and bisexual counterparts, but this did not seem to be a deterrent of their desire to become a parent. It may well be that lesbian women have "normalized" and developed a certain resilience to stigma, especially in comparison to their bisexual and heterosexual peers (Meyer, 2015). In this way, their desire for parenthood might be more related to intrinsic motivations concerning the creation of a family of choice (Riggle et al., 2008) than to psychosocial factors such as the anticipation of stigma.

The limitations of the present study relate mainly to sample size and an over-representation of highly educated individuals. Our results should be replicated with a larger number of participants from different educational backgrounds. Despite the aforementioned caveats, the present study contributed to expanding knowledge about women's prospective parenting in several ways. First, as recommended by Simon et al. (2018), we used multi-item instruments to assess parenting desires and intentions, thus reducing the potential for measurement error associated with single items (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1998). Second, even if conclusions drawn are mainly transferable to the Portuguese context, they can be used to inform this field of research about the impact of sexual orientation on prospective parenting in a more inclusive and culturally sensitive way. While the results from this study may most reflect the Portuguese population, it is likely that these findings may also have relevance to other Southern European and Latin American cultures that promote familistic values (Hofstede, 2011). Third, by considering bisexual women, we expand existing knowledge concerning the impact of bisexual orientation on prospective parenting for cisgender women (Delvoye & Tasker, 2016; Riskind & Tornello, 2017; Simon et al., 2018). Finally, our results clearly show that anticipating stigma as a parent influences LBH women's parenting aspirations. This is a novel result that calls attention to the influence of the cultural and social context in the parenting aspirations of LBH women. However, the absence of an association between ASP in the case of lesbian women's parenting desires is an intriguing result that should be explored further in relation to resilience and minority stress (Meyer, 2003, 2015).

Besides the aforementioned implications for future research, there are implications for practice, policy, and law. Although bisexual and lesbian women generally express lower levels of desire and intent to parent than did their heterosexual peers, it should not be assumed that sexual minority women are not interested in having children (Riskind & Tornello, 2017). Our results are particularly relevant for professionals who work with sexual minority women in different contexts, such as schools or health care services. Besides providing information and resources about parenthood (Simon et al., 2018), these

professionals should acquire multicultural competencies to work with sexual minority individuals, comprising three aspects: knowledge (understanding of sexual minority clients' psychosocial development), skill (developing culturally sensitive interventions), and awareness (i.e., self-reflecting on biases, assumptions, and limitations about the lives of sexual minority individuals) (American Psychological Association, 2012; Moleiro et al., 2017). Finally, because ASP was negatively associated with both parenthood desires and intentions, wider policies and laws against prejudice and discrimination against sexual minority individuals should be implemented and awareness of LGBT-parented families increased.

Notes on contributors

Jorge Gato, Ph.D., is a Researcher at the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto (FPCEUP), Portugal. He is currently interested in the parenting plans of LGBT individuals, as well as in the training of professionals who work with current or prospective LGBT-parented families.

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