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To cite this article: Jorge Gato, Margarida Rangel Henriques & Daniela Leal (2021) Adoption by Lesbian Women and Gay Men: Perceived Challenges and Training Needs for Professionals in Portugal, *Adoption Quarterly*, 24:2, 152-175, DOI: [10.1080/10926755.2020.1834044](https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2020.1834044)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2020.1834044>



Published online: 19 Oct 2020.



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Adoption by Lesbian Women and Gay Men: Perceived Challenges and Training Needs for Professionals in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Lesbian women and gay men face many barriers to accomplish a parental project, including when seeking to adopt. In Portugal, same-sex couple's adoption was recently allowed and we sought to understand adoption professionals' perspectives regarding this issue. We conducted two focus groups with adoption professionals using a semi-structured interview script. We aimed to explore (i) the main challenges for adoption by LGs and same-sex couples; (ii) knowledge, skills, and personal beliefs regarding about these family settings; (iii) the importance of gender (couples, child) in the matching process; and (iv) topics to address in any training for this area. The participants' discourses oscillated between a certain awareness of the prevailing social prejudice and discrimination toward sexual minorities on one hand and a heteronormative discourse on the other hand. Challenges in working with this population and training necessities were identified. Findings point to the need for guidelines for the home study of LG applicants and cultural competency training to deal with this population in three aspects: knowledge, skills, and awareness of personal attitudes.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 July 2019
Revised 28 September 2020
Accepted 4 October 2020

KEYWORDS

Adoption; lesbian women;
gay men; professionals

Lesbian women and gay men face many obstacles in their journey to parenthood (Gato et al., 2017), including when seeking to establish or expand a family through adoption (Brodzinsky & Pertman, 2012; Messina & D'Amore, 2018). One such obstacle relates to the social prejudice expressed against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) persons (European Union, 2019), particularly when evidenced in health, educational, and social services (e.g. Gato & Fontaine, 2017).

When looking at biased attitudes toward lesbian and gay persons, it is important to draw a distinction between the concepts of homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity. While the notion of homophobia involves negativity toward sexual minorities in individual traits (Herek,

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1984), heterosexism traces this negativity to a wider ideological system, one that denies and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community (Herek, 1990). Heteronormativity, meanwhile, refers to reinforcing the beliefs and practices within social institutions and policies that legitimise and privilege heterosexuality (Warner, 1991).

It should be noted that prejudicial attitudes against lesbian women and gay men have become less pronounced in recent decades, especially in societies that forbid discriminatory practices against minorities (Gato et al., 2012a). However, more socially acceptable expressions of prejudice toward sexual minorities tend to manifest nowadays in the form of negative attitudes toward same-sex marriage or parenthood (Gato et al., 2012a), as well as in relation to the visibility or expression of lesbian and gay identities (Hegarty, 2006). Psychological distress experienced by many lesbian and gay individuals often originates in the above-mentioned forms of stigma, which create a hostile environment potentially damaging for their well-being and mental health, as stated by Meyer's minority stress model (Meyer, 2003, 2015).

Studies have shown a range of experiences for the interface between sexual minorities and adoption agencies and social workers. Brooks and Goldberg (2001) verified that one of the great barriers identified by lesbian and gay parents in the adoption process was the confrontation with negative beliefs and attitudes about their parenting abilities. This finding echoes those of Ryan (2000), who surveyed adoption social workers and verified that race or ethnic background (e.g. African American), as well as religious upbringing (e.g. Christian), were indicative of higher levels of homophobia and a lower likelihood of recommending a placement with lesbian and gay adoptive parents. However, these findings also showed that such attitudes could change when workers received training about lesbian- and gay-headed families and child development.

When interviewed by Matthews and Cramer (2006b), gay male adoptive parents reported being discouraged by social workers to be open about their sexual orientation at the preplacement stage. They also felt pressured by adoption agencies into adopting older children or those with special needs. In contrast, a high level of satisfaction with social workers in adoption services was reported by lesbian adoptive parents when surveyed by Ryan and Whitlock (2007). A Canadian study revealed that lesbian and queer adopters either suspected prejudice or reported having actually experienced discrimination during the adoption process (Ross et al., 2008). In the UK, the Cambridge Adoption Study (Mellish et al., 2013) revealed that a large majority (75%) of lesbian mothers felt they had experienced some negative reactions in the adoption system, compared to 50% of gay parents

and 30% of heterosexual parents. Hicks (2000) noted that adoption professionals in the UK persevered in exploring how same-sex couples would provide appropriate gender role models for children.

A recent study that analyzed data from LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) adoptive parents and prospective adopters in the UK found that most of them had not experienced discrimination in the adoption system (Costa & Tasker, 2018). However, gay men seeking to adopt believed they were more likely, compared with others on the waiting list, to be matched with harder-to-place children. Likewise, lesbian women who had already adopted were more likely than other participants to state that they had indeed been matched with harder-to-place children.

Another UK-based interview study of 22 lesbian and gay foster carers and adoptive parents indicated that overt refusal, or even excessive scrutiny of sexual identity, was a rare experience (Wood, 2016, in Tasker & Bellamy, 2019). However, many of Wood's interviewees spoke of their caution in presenting their relationship to adoption professionals because they felt they did not fit with the heteronormative nuclear family model that adoption professionals, or panels, seemed to expect. A more recent study about the experiences of same-sex adoptive families was conducted in three European countries (Spain, France, and Belgium), and this revealed that the stressors faced during the adoption process were context specific and depended upon the existing legal barriers in each country (Messina & D'Amore, 2018).

When investigating attitudes toward same-sex adoptive families among Portuguese students from helping professions, Gato and Fontaine (2017) found an association between modern heterosexism, which is a more subtle form of prejudice, and negative attitudes toward adoption by lesbian women and gay men. Furthermore, in the same study, concerns about the parental competence of same-sex adopters appeared to be less socially desirable than worries about how it may affect children's development. In fact, worrying about the development of children like this may be a way of protecting the individual identities of those training to work with families in an area of expertise. In turn, Xavier et al. (2019) aimed to identify the social representations of same-sex parenting by interviewing a sample of psychologists, social workers, lawyers/attorneys, and judges in Portugal with experience in the area of family and parenting. The narratives highlighted specific competencies in these families, and arguments asserting that sexual orientation does not define parenting quality were identified in participants' discourses. However, reservations about same-sex couples' access to parenting were also found, particularly among the lawyers/attorneys. In summary, although positive experiences were reported, there is also accumulated cumulative evidence of prejudicial attitudes toward

lesbian and gay adopters among helping professionals and heteronormative practices in adoption services.

Regarding attitudes toward single parent versus couple adoption, when inquiring Portuguese students from helping professions, Gato et al. (2012b) verified that single lesbian and gay prospective adopters were expected to receive more social support from the community than same-sex couples did. Further, in the case of lesbian prospective parents, participants awarded custody with greater probability to a single woman than to a couple. Anticipation of greater social prejudice in the case of couples, whose sexual identity is more salient relatively to their single sexual minority peers, was one the explanations offered by authors for these results (Gato et al., 2012b).

The present study

Family service professionals, particularly workers in child welfare agencies, play critical roles in deciding who will be a suitable foster or adoptive parent and who will not (Mallon, 2012). In this work, we sought to solicit adoption professionals' perspectives on adoption by sexual minorities in Portugal (both as single parents and in couple). This aim is particularly relevant considering that adoption, fostering, and second-parent adoption by same-sex couples were recently approved in Portugal (Law no. 2/2016, 2016, Diário da República). Although important, participants' perspectives about adoption by individuals belonging to other sexual (e.g. bisexual persons) or gender (e.g. transgender persons) identities were not contemplated in the present study.

As a justification for the current research we have previously addressed the following theoretical and empirical lenses: (i) social psychological literature about stigma directed at sexual minorities (e.g., Borrillo, 2000; Herek, 1984, 1990; Warner, 1991) as well as its effect on these individuals' well-being (Meyer, 2003, 2015), and (ii) studies exploring the interface between sexual minority persons and human services, particularly adoption agencies. Next, we sought to examine the Portuguese context for adoption by same-sex couples. Culturally competent practices in the work with sexual minority adopters were also identified.

The Portuguese context for adoption (by same-sex couples)

In Portugal, adoption is a public process under the auspices of the state. Candidates must enroll in one of the existing national adoption services that are located in the capitals of the country's administrative regions. Adoption teams are multidisciplinary and comprise social workers,

psychologists, educators, social educators, and lawyers. These vary in number according to the population density in the geographical area to which they belong. Applicants start the adoption process with a group session, during which they are informed about adoption in general, as well as the specific needs of children in foster care. The candidates are then assessed by the adoption services, usually by professionals working in pairs, namely a social worker and a psychologist. The evaluation process focuses on identifying the suitability of candidates and their capacity to meet the child's needs following Palacios' Model of Needs-Capacities (Palácios, 2007). This assessment includes a set of interviews and some optional questionnaires, with the specific contents for evaluation following national guidelines (Instituto de Segurança Social, 2014). The assessment process must be concluded within a maximum of six months. Each case is analyzed by the whole team before a report is concluded and the assessment result is presented to the candidates. Contacts with biological family members are suppressed once the legal decision for adoption is issued. (Open adoption is not allowed in Portugal.)

Regarding adoption rates in recent years, 241 children were adopted in 2016, 284 in 2017, and 148 in 2018. However, because the law allowing for adoption by same-sex couples was only introduced in 2016, the only statistics so far about same-sex adoption are for 2018. In this year, 85% ($n = 125$) of children were adopted by different-sex families, 12% ($n = 18$) by single persons, and 3% ($n = 5$) by same-sex couples. It is likely that some of the single adoptive parents belong to a sexual minority, but the data were not broken down into non-heterosexual and heterosexual adopters (Conselho Nacional Para a Adoção, 2018). The above ratios resemble those found in other European countries where same-sex adoption is possible, such as the UK (Tasker & Bellamy, 2019). There is also some evidence that lesbian and gay persons have a higher chance than heterosexual persons of adopting children whom adoption services have traditionally found difficult to place due to an older age or different racial/ethnic background (e.g. Costa & Tasker, 2018; Matthews & Cramer, 2006b; Mellish et al., 2013). For this reason, the number of children adopted by lesbian and gay individuals is expected to increase in the coming years.

Culturally competent practices when working with lesbian and gay adoptive parents

The importance of attaining proficiency when working with sexual minorities has been enshrined in the ethical standards of professional organizations around the world (e.g. American Psychological Association - APA, 2012; APA, Society for the Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender

Diversity, Division 44, 2019; Shaw et al., 2012), including in Portugal (Order of Portuguese Psychologists - OPP, 2013, 2020). In this regard, the APA (2012) has advocated a need for multicultural competency training for its members, including in three aspects: (i) knowledge (i.e. understanding the psychosocial development of sexual minority clients); (ii) skill (i.e. developing culturally sensitive interventions); and (iii) awareness (i.e. being able to self-reflect on biases, assumptions, and limitations).

A great deal of knowledge has been accumulated over the last decade about lesbian and gay adoptive families. In brief, research into family relationships and child outcomes in lesbian and gay adoptive households does not support the critics' claims for this type of adoption, both in terms of the well-being of the children (e.g. Farr, 2017; Farr et al., 2010; 2018; Lavner et al., 2012; Mellish et al., 2013) and the quality of family relationships (e.g. Goldberg & Garcia, 2015; Goldberg & Smith, 2009; Mellish et al., 2013). Children raised by same-sex couples fare equally well to children raised by heterosexual parents (e.g., Crowl et al., 2008; Knight et al., 2017) and show similar levels of emotion regulation and psychological well-being than children raised by different-sex couples (e.g., Baiocco et al., 2015).

In the United States, nearly half of the adoption agencies surveyed by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (Brodzinsky, 2012) reported that they would be interested in receiving in-service training directed toward working with prospective lesbian and gay adoptive parents, specifically in the following areas: the psychological issues of children raised by lesbian or gay parents; social casework issues when working with such clients; psychological issues with adoptive parenting by lesbian women and gay men; attitudes, biases and stereotypes regarding sexual minority individuals and same-sex couples; and relevant legal issues (Brodzinsky, 2012).

In our view, other important topics that could be addressed include: (i) the complexity and multidimensionality of the concept of sexual identity (Diamond, 2013; Dworkin, 2013; Parsons & Grov, 2013); (ii) the development of a lesbian or gay sexual identity and the coming-out process (e.g. Cass, 1979; Maguen et al., 2002; Savin-Williams, 2001); (iii) the LGBT family life cycle (McGoldrick et al., 2013); and (vi) how stigma affects the lives of many lesbian women and gay men (Meyer, 2003, 2015).

Regarding the skill level entailed in the development of culturally sensitive interventions, Matthews and Cramer (2006a) suggest that professionals ought to address two key events in the lives of lesbian and gay (prospective) adopters that may help them to better understand the life experiences and challenges that their adopted children may face, namely (i) managing a sexual minority identity and (ii) managing the difference from the norm. Concerning the first aspect, a thorough knowledge of how a lesbian or gay

sexual identity unfolds can be better achieved through life-course-based frameworks that integrate biological, cognitive, social, and historical contexts (Elder, 1998; Hutchinson, 2003) rather than through frameworks of linear development stages (e.g. Cass, 1979). For instance, although the disclosure of a lesbian or gay identity has been associated with positive identity development and psychological well-being (Greenfield, 2008), nondisclosure may be an adaptive response to the social context for some people in certain circumstances.

Some studies have reported that lesbian and gay persons may be disadvantaged regarding social support from their families of origin (e.g. Leal et al., 2019). In fact, when lacking this form of support, sexual minority individuals sometimes create new relational networks or “families of choice” (Weston, 1991). This way, when lesbian and gay individuals, as well as their partners, have strained relationships with their own parents, they should not be penalized because of their relatives’ attitudes. Under the assumption that biology predicts closeness, inquiring about support networks and specifically referring to relationships with families of origin could be considered a form of adoptism (Matthews & Cramer, 2006a). Instead, professionals should explore what alternative support networks are available to potential adoptive parents (Mallon, 2012).

Furthermore, asking prospective lesbian and gay adopters how they might go about handling the disclosure of their sexual orientation to their adopted children is an important topic for exploration. If these discussions do not occur, prospective adopters may be left inadequately prepared in some areas, such as how to handle such disclosures to their children and how to manage interventions with individuals and agencies (e.g. daycare providers, teachers, and health-care providers) whom the family will interact with (Matthews & Cramer, 2006a, 2006b). Managing differences from the norm is another task that can be useful in helping lesbian and gay adoptive parents to deal with the challenges their adopted children may face (Matthews & Cramer, 2006b).

Sexual minority individuals need to make decisions about how to present themselves to their social networks (e.g. family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, etc.). While some lesbian women and gay men emphasize how their lives are “normal” and how they function as parents much like heterosexuals do, others acknowledge that their partnerships and parenting styles may differ from those of heterosexuals, although not necessarily in an inferior way. For instance, same-sex couples demonstrate less of the traditional gender-specific expectations and exhibit more flexibility in how to divide household chores and childcare responsibilities (Farr & Patterson, 2013; Goldberg et al., 2012; Shechory & Ziv, 2007). According to Matthews and Cramer (2006b), these strategies also apply to adopted children. Much

like lesbian and gay persons, families formed through adoption are also considered different from the norm and are susceptible to negative attitudes about adoption (Steinberg & Hall, 2000).

Finally, besides obtaining the knowledge and skills to work with (prospective) lesbian and gay adoptive parents, professionals should be encouraged to develop an awareness of their own heteronormative biases and prejudices and how these might affect their interactions with clients (Goldberg & Gianino, 2012; Mallon, 2012).

Method

Participants

We conducted two focus groups with 12 adoption professionals (five in the first group and seven in the second group) (Krueger & Casey, 2009). All participants were Caucasian women aged between 35 and 64 years old, with a mean age of 45.25 years ($SD = 8.41$). In average, at the time of the focus groups professionals had 14 years of experience in the adoption field (12 years when the same-sex couple's adoption bill was passed in Portugal). They included psychologists, social workers, kindergarten teachers, and lawyers.

Data collection

Focus groups provide an opportunity to engage and build upon the ideas of others in the group, generating a rich understanding of how diverse people view a social phenomenon (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Morgan, 1998). In the present study, the choice of this technique allowed for the participants to share and compare experiences, opinions and doubts, regarding a sensitive topic in a friendly and respectful environment. The sample was purposely recruited from the second author's professional network and it was a convenience sample. After being granted authorization from the two adoption services, participants were recruited through invitations to each of the teams' members. Following an explanation of the project by the researchers, all members of both teams agreed to participate. The participants themselves acknowledged their needs in the area of adoption by lesbian and gay individuals and asked for specific training/supervision. Focus groups then acted as a first step in identifying these professionals' needs in terms of knowledge, skills, and awareness of biased attitudes (APA, 2012). The groups belonging to the two adoption services were natural and homogeneous, including adoption professionals who usually worked together and enjoyed good relationships with each other. The choice of using of natural groups was based on reactions from the professionals. On being faced with

the prospect of participating in focus group interviews with colleagues from other teams (note that all the teams knew each other), they revealed some discomfort due to the novelty and sensitivity of the topic. We therefore considered it important to respect the professionals' comfort, not least because the familiarity between group elements would allow for a more genuine conversation.

One focus group was conducted at the researchers' host institution, while the other one was held at the adoption service. At the opening of each session, the researchers provided complete information about the study regarding all ethical issues, namely confidentiality, anonymity, the possibility to quit at any moment, and the later presentation of the results. All the guidelines and principles established for research by the Order of Portuguese Psychologists were respected. Thus, all participants gave free and informed consent to participate, as well as for audio and video recording of the group interviews. There was no financial compensation for participating. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview script with the following general themes/questions: (i) the main challenges for adoption by same-sex couples; (ii) knowledge, skills, and personal beliefs regarding about these family settings; (iii) the importance of gender (couples, child) in the matching process; and (iv) topics to address in any training for this area. The sessions were moderated both by the first and second authors and lasted for 120 minutes and 90 minutes. As the second author already knew the professionals from previous meetings, she introduced the first author, and about ten minutes of social conversation followed to break the ice. After this warm-up stage, the rules of the focus group interview were carefully presented. Interviews were video-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy.

Data analysis

Although the topic guide covered several subjects, no a priori coding categories were identified, and themes were allowed to emerge from the data. The focus group transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is a widely used method for identifying and reporting patterns and themes within textual data. Its use is appropriate in cases where the research question is broad and the goal is to identify and richly describe participants' perspectives. Thematic analysis is considered by Rennie (2012) compatible with the hermeneutical circle and it was used in this study in an inductive or "bottom up" way, in which the researchers categorize their own data (Rennie et al., 1988).

We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process for conducting thematic analysis. During the first phase, authors became familiar with the

data by reading each transcript twice. On the second reading, initial ideas for coding were written in the margins, and then initial codes were generated in a second phase. The first two authors systematically coded each unit of meaning across the entire data set and collated data relevant to each code. Phase three entailed sorting the codes into potential themes, while phase four consisted of reviewing and refining the devised set of initial themes by checking whether the data cohered together meaningfully within each theme. In phase five, the specifics of each theme were decided upon, and the overall story of the data emerged. In the sixth and final phase, the report was written, and compelling excerpts from participants were selected to illustrate each theme.

Following the guidelines of qualitative research studies in psychology proposed by Elliott, Fisher and Rennie (1998), the credibility checks used were multiple qualitative analysts and an additional auditor for a verification step. Specifically, inspired in the consensual qualitative research (Hill, 2012; Hill et al., 1997) the first two authors, with expertise in LGBT parenting and adoption, worked together to build a consensual system of codes and themes. This way, they systematically coded each unit of meaning across the entire data set and collated data relevant to each code and sorted them into a set of themes, in a consensual way. Consensus was reached in phases two and three and reinforced in phase four as there was no need to make changes to the initial set of themes. The first author worked independently from the second author from phase four to phase six. The third author played the important role of auditor, reviewing the data generated in phases four and five in order to affirm and to expand on the primary team's findings (Hill, 2012). These themes are discussed further in the following section.

Results

The thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts yielded two main themes within participants' thoughts about adoption by lesbian women and gay men: i) the challenges of this type of adoption, and (ii) multicultural competency needs. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the thematic structure of these two themes, including the subthemes. The results are described using excerpts from transcripts that are accompanied by a code identifying the participant and the focus group.

Challenges of adoption by lesbian women and gay men

This theme was expressed in two ways: *same challenges* and *specific challenges*. It should be noted that participants also talked about their

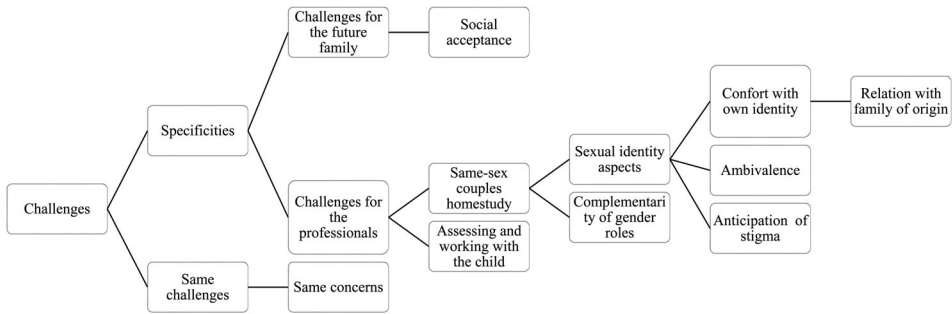


Figure 1. Subcategories included in the category “Challenges”.

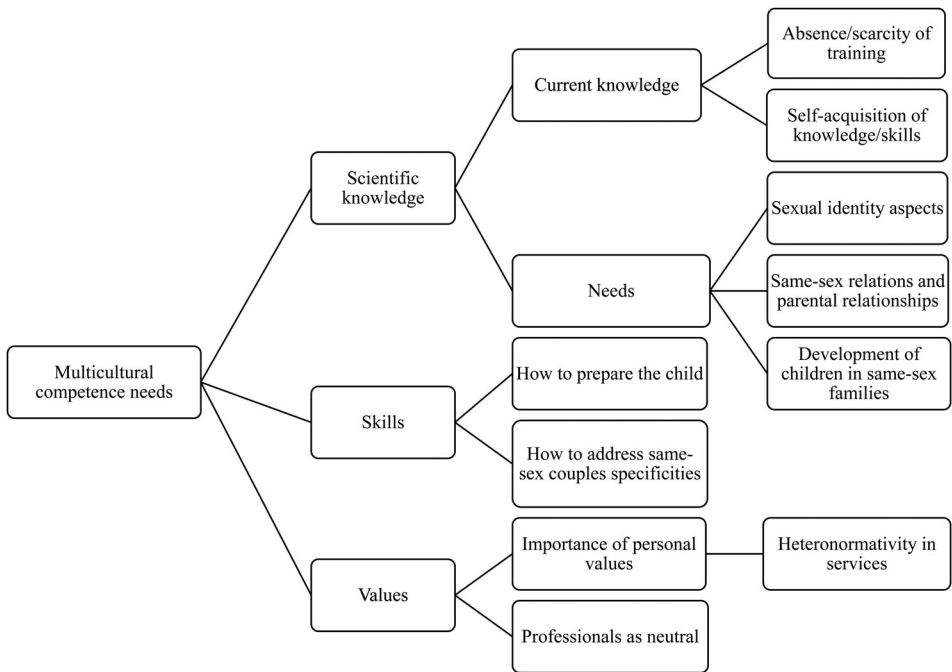


Figure 2. Subcategories included in the category “Multicultural Competency Needs”.

experiences with single candidates who identified as lesbian women or gay men, including before the bill was passed that allowed for adoption by same-sex couples in 2016.

Same challenges

Some professionals mentioned they had the same concerns about assessing prospective heterosexual and lesbian/gay adoptive parents (e.g. “my doubts are exactly the same as I have with all the other couples that is, is this going to work or not? Always from the perspective of the kids, is love going to happen, will there be a spark?” [S., FG1]). The motivation to

adopt was a general concern unrelated to an applicant's sexual orientation that was mentioned by one participant: "But we know and have argued that this motivation to adopt [because one cannot have biological children] can be a risk factor. There has to be something else ... because adoption is a social responsibility issue as well" [N., FG2].

Specific challenges

Most participants talked about the specificities of adoption by lesbian women and gay men. These specific aspects related to challenges for both the future family and the professionals. Social acceptance was seen by some participants as a challenge for same-sex-headed families in the future. One participant noted, "...what kind of extra difficulties will these kids face because they have two mothers or two fathers. Because our society is not prepared" [J., FG1]. The professionals themselves expected challenges in two important stages of the adoption process, namely the home study and the preparation of the child. Regarding the home study, participants seemed worried with aspects related to the sexual identity of the prospective adoptive parents. First, they underscored that lesbian and gay applicants should be comfortable with their own sexual identity and able to protect the child from prejudice and discrimination: "Therefore, we have to guarantee that they will have competences, abilities, strength, so they can be able to defend the child's best interests in the face of stigma, [homophobic] remarks, etc." [K., FG2]. Based on their previous experiences with single applicants, participants mentioned that talking about sexual identity could be challenging when applicants did not disclose their sexual orientation in all contexts: "...so how is it going to be with the child, with school, with the community (...). And then you find people that are not comfortable with their own identity yet. And that's more difficult" [Q., FG2]. One aspect that relates to prospective parents' comfort with their own sexual identity concerns their relationship with the family of origin. Describing a home study in which there was a cutoff between a same-sex couple and their respective families of origin, one participant mentioned: "Because we can even understand that at first there was a break-up, but we are talking about something that happened more than 20 years ago, but then life goes on and people need to rebuild their lives. They can make up, can't they?" [N., FG2]. Another sexual identity aspect that emerged from the participants' discourses relates to a certain ambivalence about applicants' openness about their sexual orientation and the possible effects that this visibility may have on the child's wellbeing. Talking about a couple of prospective lesbian parents, one participant said, "They are very involved,

which can be good or bad... These are people that are quite active, that go ... that go to [LGBT] demonstrations ...” [J., FG1].

Some participants reported that lesbian and gay applicants anticipate stigma themselves. This was understood by some participants as a sort of prejudice that sexual minority candidates present toward adoption professionals and society in general: “They [lesbian women and gay men] are very prejudiced themselves ... It’s the expectation that others will be prejudiced against them” [N., FG2]. However, another participant positioned this anticipation of prejudice in a wider and more complex social process: “I don’t know if one can interpret that just as a personal insecurity. The surrounding social context also matters” [N., FG2]. Regarding the absence of a person of the other sex in same-sex households, the need for complementary gender roles was mentioned by some participants: “... a figure of the opposite sex. Does it have to exist? Do we have to consider this when we make the selection? Haaaa ... theoretically, we know that we should ...” (J., FG1).

The preparation of the child for adoption was also seen as a challenging process when the child is to be placed with a same-sex couple. In this case, the participants considered that the child should be made aware of his or her future family’s configuration. One participant talked about a specific case: “We were careful when we told the kids [in the foster institution] that families are all different, just like their own family, some live with their grandparents, others with their mother, others with their dad” [S., FG1].

Multicultural competency needs

The second theme that participants used when reflecting on adoption by single lesbian women and gay men and same-sex couples relates to their multicultural competence needs. This theme was expressed through three subthemes: (i) scientific knowledge, (ii) skills, and (iii) values.

Scientific knowledge

Participants reflected on their current scientific knowledge about LGBT issues and identified needs in this area. They complained about an absence/scarcity of training: “The only thing that changed was the legislation, period! Because there is no guidance whatsoever, there has never been awareness, nothing has ever existed” [I., FG1]. Given this absence of guidance, the participants resorted to self-acquiring knowledge and skills through on-line sources: “I need help. I need more. We read things on-line ... it’s not enough” [Q., FG2]. Alternatively, they drew on their own professional experiences: “I think that 10 years of work in this area

prepared me a lot more ... a multidisciplinary team where we talk, where we discuss ... I think it prepares us much more than any ... in my perspective ... academic training” [S., FG1].

Professionals’ needs in terms of scientific knowledge related to (i) sexual identity aspects, (ii) same-sex relationships and parenting, and (iii) the development of children in same-sex families. The participants admitted they lacked scientific knowledge about sexual identity aspects that may be relevant to the home study of prospective same-sex adopters: “Now what I sometimes question in the assessment is to see to what extent ... they [lesbian women and gay men] accept themselves or if they are still in a stage of ... insecurity” [B., FG1]. Not surprisingly, same-sex romantic and parental relationships were also important aspects to consider in a future training:

To what extent in the evaluation will I be able to realize ... of course the stability of the relationship, the years together, as a couple? With heterosexual candidates, this is also something that is weighed, and the way conjugality is lived and all this. Here [with same-sex couples] I have some doubts ... [B., FG1].

Finally, participants expressed a need to learn more about the development of children within same-sex families:

I think it would be important to know about ... follow-up studies with same-sex couples who have already adopted. How well did these children grow up and how are they now, above everything else. Because it’s like [colleague’s name] said, what we stand for is the well-being of children, it’s the children’s rights in the first place. And what I care about is that the child who is going to that family will be fine, regardless of everything [Q., FG2].

Skills

Participants identified training needs in the following technical skills: (i) how to prepare the child and (ii) how to address the specificities of lesbian and gay adopters. Concerning the first aspect, one participant mentioned this was needed “because the child has to have confidence in the [future] family and has to be well prepared” [D., FG2]. How to best address the specificities of lesbian and gay adopters was a professional skill that participants showed a willingness to acquire: “We have a type of assessment protocol that has been built over the years ... intended for different sex couples, which affects the assessment of same-sex couples and also individual applications” [J., FG2].

Values

During the discussions, our participants considered how their personal values might influence their attitudes and placement decisions. Some participants acknowledged that their own personal values and attitudes may possibly influence their professional practice:

Although we rationally say to ourselves, “Okay, for me it’s normal; it’s the same”, I wonder to which extent... we do not allow ourselves to be contaminated in some way by some, I would not say prejudice, but we are influenced by all these beliefs and values that we also have [J., FG2].

For this issue, some participants called attention toward the heteronormativity that prevails in adoption services: “But we do not ask either. So, right from the start, there it is, our prejudice. We assume that we all, we all are heterosexuals” [I., FG1]. Finally, a few participants considered that professionals could be neutral: “... I think the degree gave me tools... the ability to distance myself. When I am here, I am evaluating as a technician and I am not [her name]” [Q., FG2].

Discussion

In this work, we explored the attitudes of adoption professionals toward prospective lesbian and gay adopters, as well as their access to scientific knowledge about same-sex parenting and their own experiences and needs when working with the lesbian and gay population.

The participants noted some similarities between adoption by heterosexual and sexual minority parents. In reality, sexual orientation is just one aspect in the lives of prospective lesbian and gay parents (Mallon, 2012), so it follows that lesbian and gay adopters should be evaluated in the same way as any other potential parents (Brodzinsky, 2012). Nevertheless, some specificities in this family configuration need to be taken into account (Brodzinsky, 2012; Hill, 2009; Mallon, 2006, 2012; Matthews & Cramer, 2006a, 2006b; Messina & D’Amore, 2018), and the participants’ discourses centered mostly on these specific challenges. This is unsurprising considering the recent changes in Portuguese law that made it possible for same-sex couples to adopt (Law no. 2/2016, 2016, Diário da República), the absence of training for adoption by lesbian and gay persons, and the motivation of our participants to undertake future training in this area. As we will see next, the accounts of these specificities oscillated between a certain awareness of the prevailing prejudice and discrimination toward sexual minorities on one hand and a heteronormative discourse on the other hand. Finally, training needs were identified that relate closely to the challenges of working with prospective lesbian and gay parents during the different stages of the adoption process.

Between awareness of stigma and heteronormativity

The participants raised some concerns about social acceptance of lesbian and gay adoptive parents, thus showing their awareness of the continuing social prejudice in Portugal toward sexual minorities (European Union, 2019) and the additional stigma-related stress that sexual minorities may be subjected

to (Meyer, 2003, 2015). In line with current adoption best practices, the participants therefore deemed it important for sexual minority applicants to be comfortable with their sexual orientation, so they could effectively deal with prejudice and protect the child (Brodzinsky et al., 2012; Mallon, 2012).

Nevertheless, modern socially acceptable forms of prejudice toward sexual minorities (Gato et al., 2012a; Hegarty, 2006; Warner, 1991) were apparent on several occasions, namely in the concerns that participants had about (i) the applicants' relationships with their families of origin, (ii) the issue of visibility for a sexual identity, (iii) the anticipation of stigma, and (iv) complementarity in gender roles. First, the participants assumed that the social support networks of sexual minority individuals would be the same as for heterosexual individuals, yet this is not necessarily true (Gianino, 2008; Leal et al., 2019, 2020; Weston, 1991). Second, although applicants were expected to be comfortable with their own sexual identity, doubts arose when they publicly expressed it, such as in LGBT pride events. This double bind communication pattern constitutes a modern expression of prejudice, one where homosexuality is accepted as long as it remains hidden and does not openly question the normativity of heterosexuality (Gato et al., 2012a; Hegarty, 2006). Third, the anticipation of stigma was sometimes interpreted as a sort of prejudice in how sexual minority candidates present themselves toward adoption professionals and society in general. This reveals a lack of understanding of how social stigma affects the life of an LGBT person (Meyer, 2003, 2015). Fourth, although it was questioned by some participants, the notion that mothers and fathers possess mutually exclusive skills based on gender was often seen as a scientific theory that should guide practice (Hicks, 2000). Such heteronormative biases therefore need to be challenged and confronted with evidence-based studies that underscore the importance of psychological processes over family structure (e.g. Farr, 2017; Farr et al., 2010, 2018) and frameworks that value family diversity in adoption (Brodzinsky, 2012; Brodzinsky et al., 2012; Hill, 2009; Mallon, 2006, 2012; Matthews & Cramer, 2006a, 2006b).

Countering heteronormativity through multicultural competency training

The needs identified by our participants can be conceptualized within the framework of multicultural competence (APA, 2012), and they correspond to scientific knowledge, skills, and values. These needs were very similar to those reported by adoption agencies in the USA when surveyed by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (Brodzinsky, 2012). For instance, a thorough understanding of the experience of coming out (Cass, 1979; Maguen et al., 2002; Savin-Williams, 2001) and its impact on prospective

parents' significant relationships represents an important part of a home study for lesbian and gay individuals (Mallon, 2012). However, a complete understanding of the complex social and family relationships of sexual minority individuals in the context of prevailing social stigma (Meyer, 2003, 2015), can only be achieved by taking into account a life course framework that integrates social and historical contexts (Elder, 1998; Hutchinson, 2003). The need to conceal or selectively disclose one's sexual orientation, including to one's own family, should be understood within such a framework, and lesbian and gay candidates that are cut off from their extended families must not be penalized in the adoption process for this reason (Mallon, 2012). Finally, knowledge about same-sex relationships (e.g. Farr & Patterson, 2013; Goldberg et al., 2012; Shechory & Ziv, 2007) and same-sex (adoptive) parenting dynamics is of the utmost importance (Farr, 2017; Farr et al., 2010, 2018; Farr & Patterson, 2013; McGoldrick et al., 2013). In fact, according to Mathews and Cramer (2006a, 2006b) lesbian and gay adopters have valuable experience in managing differences, and this should not be discarded by professionals. In this way, professionals can help prospective parents to draw parallels between their experiences as members of a stigmatized sexual minority and the issues that their adopted children are likely to face (Matthews & Cramer, 2006b; Steinberg & Hall, 2000). Teaching children about family diversity was also considered important by our participants. As Mallon (2012) suggested, in order for the child to be integrated into the family, it is important to value differences, as well as to prepare him or her for negative social interactions and anticipate concerns. Regarding this aspect, the Program for Preparing Children for Adoption (PPCA) (Henriques et al., 2017), which is extensively used in Portugal, needs to be updated in order to address adoption by lesbian and gay individuals. Finally, recognizing how heteronormativity operates is an essential aspect of any multicultural competency training (APA, 2012, 2019; OPP, 2013, 2020; Ryan, 2000), and professionals should therefore be encouraged to develop an awareness of their own comfort levels, biases, and prejudices and consider how these might affect their interactions with clients (Goldberg & Gianino, 2012). In summary, the different experiences and specificities that lesbian women or gay men bring to fostering and adoption should be acknowledged, explored, and welcomed by adoption professionals (Brodzinsky, 2012; Hill, 2009; Mallon, 2006, 2012; Matthews & Cramer, 2006a, 2006b).

Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations of the current study warrant mentioning. First, the study relied on convenience sampling, so the perspectives of other adoption

professionals remain unknown. Second, the study sample is small and homogeneous in terms of gender and race/ethnicity. This means the findings should be viewed as exploratory. Third, the participants all volunteered to participate, were part of the professional network of the second author, and recognized from the beginning that they needed training in the area of adoption by lesbian and gay individuals. This means some negative opinions toward such family configurations might have been overlooked and some socially acceptable responses might have occurred. Notwithstanding, modern forms of prejudice were apparent in the participants' discourses. Fourth, we only inquired participants about adoption by lesbian women and gay men and future studies should extend their focus to professionals' viewpoints about adoption by individuals with other gender and sexual identities, such as transgender (e.g. Goldberg et al., 2020) or bisexual persons (e.g. Delvoye & Tasker, 2016). Furthermore, an intersectional framework regarding the multiple identities of adopters (e.g. ethnicity and sexual identity) could be used to investigate professionals' perspectives (Parent et al., 2013). Finally, although there is some evidence that lesbian and gay adoptive parents are matched with harder-to-place children (e.g., Costa & Tasker, 2018) this result did not come up and constitutes therefore an additional question that needs further research.

Implications for professional practice and policies

Despite its exploratory nature and notwithstanding the abovementioned caveats, several implications for adoption professionals and services can be drawn from this study. In line with Mallon (2012), providing guidelines for the home study of lesbian and gay applicants is useful because they render the assessments carried out by different teams equal while also providing general cultural competency information. No specific procedures for working with (prospective) sexual minority adoptive parents have yet been included in the national guidelines for adoption services in Portugal. For instance, assessment procedures and application forms currently in use were created before adoption was legalized for sexual minority parents, and are not yet inclusive of same-sex couples (e.g., inclusive language such as "parents" instead of "mother/father"). In this regard, the results of this study highlight the need for culturally competent work with prospective adoptive parents and the associated children. The findings also indicate areas for improvement in the application of new standards to better prepare the professionals in adoption teams for working with lesbian and gay applicants. The professionals in this study complained about the absence of training and admitted they had to resort to acquiring knowledge and skills themselves, and this highlights the urgency for developing specific theory-

driven guidelines and training syllabi. The existence of these theoretical guidelines would give professionals the opportunity to be confident in their performance across the different phases of the adoption process. Taking into account the participants' availability to search for information online, a multilevel, multimethod training system integrating group sessions and online support, could also be devised.

Conclusion

This work is both pioneering and timely given the shifting social and legal context in Portugal for adoption by lesbian and gay parents. The study is particularly relevant because it captures the voices of professionals who will assess lesbian and gay adopters without yet receiving any formal training in how to deal with the specificities of this population. We hope that future studies and interventions will continue to expand our knowledge of lesbian and gay (prospective) adoptive parents and their children, as well as culturally competent professional practices and inclusive social policies.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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