



# Attitudes and Beliefs of Italian Educators and Teachers Regarding Children Raised by Same-Sex Parents

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## Abstract

Teachers and educators represent meaningful relationships for children, and their attitudes can have a major influence on a child's development. This research examined the role of background characteristics, contact experiences, and sexual prejudice in determining beliefs about children's adjustment in same-sex parent families. The sample consisted of 323 Italian teachers and educators working in nursery schools, kindergartens, and primary schools. The Scale on Beliefs about Children's Adjustment in Same-Sex Families was used to assess adults' beliefs about negative impacts on children raised in same-sex parent families. Hierarchical multiple regression was used to test the association between individual and normative opposition to same-sex parenting and background information, political and religious orientation, contact experiences, sexual prejudice, and beliefs about same-sex couples' parenting abilities. Sexual prejudice, religious involvement, and negative beliefs about two-father couples emerged as strong predictors of individual and normative opposition to same-sex parenting, whereas political orientation and negative beliefs about two-mother couples predicted only the individual form of opposition. Empirical data are essential in understanding the level of prejudice and discrimination in schools in order to provide policies and programs designed to improve knowledge and competencies to deal with same-sex parent families and their children.

**Keywords** Same-sex parenting · Children · Educators · Sexual prejudice · Attitudes

## Introduction

Research on lesbian and gay (LG) adults has changed over time, evolving from an approach focused on the characteristics and manifestations of sexual orientation to the study of attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes, and discrimination regarding sexual minorities and their consequences for mental health (Baiocco et al. 2018a; Fisher et al. 2017; Frias-Navarro et al. 2014; Herek 2010). An important field of study concerns attitudes toward same-sex parenting (Baiocco et al. 2013; Costa

and Salinas-Quiroz 2018; Morse et al. 2007; Pacilli et al. 2011) and beliefs related to children's development in this family type (Frias-Navarro et al. 2013; Pascual-Soler et al. 2017).

Several studies have shown no differences between children raised by same-sex parent and different-sex parent families in cognitive and social development, academic performance, psychological adjustment, gender identity, and sexual orientation (Baiocco et al. 2018a; Baiocco et al. 2015; Carone et al. 2018b; Fedewa et al. 2015; Gartrell et al. 2018; Gartrell

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et al. 2011; Patterson 2017; Van Gelderen et al. 2012). However, strong prejudice and a widespread lack of confidence regarding LG parenting skills still persist in several contexts (e.g., school, social institutions).

The last national official statistics that offers data about same-sex parent families shows that in Italy, where this study was conducted, a total of 7513 same-sex couples are in a stable intimate relationship and, of them, 529 couples have children (ISTAT 2011). Generally, Italian lesbians and gay men become parents in the context of previous heterosexual relationships (Baiocco et al. 2014; Baiocco and Laghi 2013), though in the last decade there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Italian lesbians and gay men, be they single or coupled, who had children through donor insemination and surrogacy abroad (Baiocco et al. 2018a; Carone et al. 2017a, 2017b; Carone et al. 2018a; Lingiardi et al. 2016a; Petrucelli et al. 2015).

The legal recognition of nontraditional families has both a strong influence on people's beliefs (Hooghe and Meeusen 2013) and a crucial impact on children's development because family represents a key element for children's well-being, and perception of safety and protection (Perrin, Siegel, and Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health 2013). In this vein, it is fundamental to briefly refer to the Italian legal context in which children and their same-sex parents live. Civil unions between same-sex partners in Italy have been regulated for the first time in February 2016, but serious gaps regarding same-sex parent families' protection and recognition still remain. For instance, same-sex partners cannot access to either any form of assisted reproduction or adoption. Furthermore, the 2016 law does not recognize and protect the relationship between the child and his or her non-genetic parent.

One of the greatest risks of these legislative gaps is its failure to promote the positive psychological adjustment of children raised in nontraditional families (Perrin et al. 2013). Another important consequence concerns the lack of knowledge, by the general population, of same-sex parenting issues, that is often linked to negative beliefs and attitudes toward same-sex couples' parenting competencies. Beliefs and attitudes related to stigmatized social groups are mostly culturally transmitted and generally not based on personal experiences (Gillis 1998; Herek and Capitanio 1995).

The term "sexual stigma" refers to heterosexism, the shared belief system of a society involved in denigration and devaluation of non-heterosexual identities. When sexual stigma is internalized by heterosexual people, we are dealing with sexual prejudice, which is distinguished by individual hostility, disgust, and negative attitudes toward sexual minorities and is guaranteed by social institutions (Herek 2007). Beliefs about sexual minorities are strongly associated with sexual prejudice and can be considered the cognitive sources of stereotyped attitudes. Manifestations of sexual prejudice can be distinguished between traditional and modern forms of negative

attitudes and beliefs (Pettigrew and Meertens 1995), with the former referring to expressions of open rejection of sexual minorities and the latter being more subtle expressions of rejection and often requiring a defense system aimed at justifying the own negative beliefs (Salvati et al. 2018a; Salvati et al. 2018b).

Negative beliefs about children raised by same-sex parent families are commonly characterized by unfounded fears related to children's development, such as social rejection, homophobic bullying, and the development of non-heterosexual sexual orientation and nonconforming gender identity (Gato and Fontaine 2013). These arguments have been addressed by two studies (Frias-Navarro et al. 2014; Pascual-Soler et al. 2017) using the Scale on Beliefs about Children's Adjustment in Same-Sex Families (SBCASSF), which enables the assessment of two different types of rejection of same-sex parents: an open and aggressive opposition named individual opposition (IO), and a more subtle opposition named normative opposition (NO) to LG parenting (Barrientos et al. 2013; Frias-Navarro and Monterde-i-Bort 2012).

These two forms of rejection reflect traditional and modern forms of sexual prejudice: the IO subscale expresses a clear homophobic prejudice based on beliefs about the deviance or inferiority of LG parents, whereas the NO subscale refers to normative justifications used to oppose to same-sex parenting, such as beliefs concerning the social exclusion to which the child will be subjected because of the sexual orientation of their parents. Consistently, it was found that sexual prejudice had stronger correlations with the individual dimension compared with the normative one (Frias-Navarro et al. 2013; Frias-Navarro et al. 2014).

Another variable that appears to be involved in the formation of attitudes and beliefs regarding sexual minorities concerns intergroup contact. Contacts and social interactions between members of different groups, under favorable conditions, can reduce prejudice and unfounded beliefs (Allport 1954; Herek and Capitanio 1996; Pettigrew et al. 2011). Some investigations have shown that attitudes and beliefs regarding same-sex parenting can be related to the interpersonal experiences with LG people in terms of direct contact and closeness (Frias-Navarro et al. 2014; Petrucelli et al. 2015; Tropp and Pettigrew 2005; Turner et al. 2007).

Prior studies found that persons with a conservative political orientation and with a higher level of religious involvement had more negative attitudes toward same-sex parents (Baiocco et al. 2018b; Olson et al. 2006; Sherkat et al. 2010). Recently, similar findings have been also found by some Italian studies (Baiocco et al. 2013; Pacilli et al. 2011; Petrucelli et al. 2015). Kindergartens and schools are probably the first social context in which same-sex parents are stimulated to explain the origin of their families. Parents, in particular in the Italian context, may be anxious regarding attitudes of educators and teachers about their families, their competencies as parents, and the well-being of their children.

Nevertheless, only few studies have investigated teachers' and educators' roles, influence, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of same-sex parent families (Averett and Hegde 2012; Bliss and Harris 1999; Hegde et al. 2014; Herbstrith et al. 2013; Kintner-Duffy et al. 2012; Larrabee and Kim 2010; Maney and Cain 1997) and, to our knowledge, there is a lack of empirical research on this topic in Italy. Some international studies revealed that participants, overall, had few homophobic attitudes and more positive attitudes toward homosexuality, but they felt uncomfortable working directly with same-sex parents, asking for personal information, or asking them other questions (Maney and Cain 1997; Averett and Hegde 2012). The researchers also found more negative attitudes in older teachers compared with younger ones. Bliss and Harris (1999) found that teachers reported negative attitudes toward LG parents, particularly toward gay fathers, and expressed concerns that peers and others might react negatively to the disclosure of a parent's sexual orientation. The teachers also expressed concerns about students' relationships with their parents, including possible anger toward them.

Teachers and educators represent meaningful relationships for children and can have a major influence on a child's development. The quality of teacher-student relationships has been shown significantly associated with several aspects of students' adjustment, such as social functioning (Ladd et al. 1999), engagement, and achievement (Roorda et al. 2011). In order to ensure a safe school environment, it is necessary to analyze teachers' beliefs about and perceptions of their pupils (Nappa et al. 2018) and their possible association with homonegative attitudes in case of children with same-sex parents, given the strong influence that beliefs and attitudes may have on behaviors toward them (Ajzen and Fishbein 2005).

Given the relative lack of research in this field, we wanted to investigate teachers' and educators' attitudes and beliefs concerning the development of children raised in same-sex parent families. In line with the literature, we expected that (1) a higher level of sexual prejudice is associated with more negative beliefs about children's adjustment when raised by same-sex parent families (Frias-Navarro et al. 2013; Frias-Navarro et al. 2014); (2) some predictors of negative beliefs about children's adjustment, several demographic characteristics, such as older age, low educational level, high religious involvement, and high political conservatism, are associated with homophobic attitudes (Olson et al. 2006; Sherkat et al. 2010; Baiocco et al. 2013); (3) direct contact and closeness with LG people may reduce negative beliefs (Frias-Navarro et al. 2014; Petruccioli et al. 2015; Tropp and Pettigrew 2005; Turner et al. 2007). Finally, (4) we analyzed the correlations between attitudes and beliefs toward same-sex parenting and beliefs about children's adjustment under the assumption of an association between them, as shown by previous studies (Ioverno et al. 2018).

## Method

### Participants

The study involved a sample of 323 Italian teachers and educators (96% females) working in nursery schools (31%), with children aged between 1 and 3 years; kindergartens (37%), with children aged between 3 and 6 years; and primary schools (32%), with children aged between 6 and 11 years. Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of the sample. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 65 years ( $M = 41.06$ ,  $SD = 11.95$ ). Almost 7% of the teachers were specifically educated about same-sex parenting, and 4% had experience with children reared by same-sex parents in their class.

### Procedure

The participants were recruited from several Italian schools, mainly from Central Italy. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents answered the same questionnaire individually, taking about 20 min to complete the survey. Informed consent was obtained from all teachers and educators. Before the data collection started, the protocol

**Table 1** Descriptive of teachers' and educators' characteristics ( $N = 323$ )

Teachers'/educators' characteristics	
Gender (% females)	311 (96.3%)
Sexual orientation (% heterosexual)	318 (98.5%)
Mean age $\pm$ SD (years)	41.06 $\pm$ 11.95
Work: educational establishment	
Nursery school	102 (31.6%)
Kindergarten	119 (36.8%)
Primary school	102 (31.6%)
Work experiences	
Years of work (mean $\pm$ SD)	13.28 $\pm$ 11.02
Same-sex parenting classes (% attendance)	22 (6.8%)
Children raised in same-sex parent families (% contact)	14 (4.3%)
Socio-economic status	
Low	36 (11.1%)
Middle	277 (85.8%)
High	10 (3.1%)
Educational level	
High school diploma	167 (51.7%)
Bachelor's degree	73 (22.6%)
Master's degree	62 (19.2%)
Post-graduate degree	21 (6.5%)
Political orientation	
Right-wing	80 (24.8%)
Center	78 (24.1%)
Left-wing	165 (51.1%)

was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Department of Developmental and Social Psychology of Sapienza University of Rome. The criterion for inclusion in the study was that respondents worked as teachers or educators in the field of nursery and primary school in the Italian context.

## Instruments

All the participants completed an *Identifying information questionnaire* to collect data about demographic characteristics such as age, gender, sexual orientation, and place of residence, as well as to obtain background information such as educational level, socioeconomic status, political and religious orientation, and work experience, including years of work, educational establishment's field, experiences of contact with children (reared by same-sex parents), and attendance to same-sex parenting training courses.

**Contact Experiences** We measured participants' contact with sexual minorities through seven items based on "intergroup contact theory" (Allport 1954) in order to analyze if direct contact with people whom the participants have close relationships that self-identify as gay or lesbian can influence attitudes toward lesbians and gay men in general (Herek and Capitanio 1996; Herek 1996; Herek and Glunt 1993; Pettigrew et al. 2011) and toward same-sex parenting in particular (Petruccelli et al. 2015). The items concerned the approximate number of gay and lesbian acquaintances, including family, friends, colleagues, and couples consisting of lesbian mothers or gay fathers (e.g., "how many lesbian and/or gay friends do you have?"), and were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 0 = "none" to 6 = "more than five LG persons"). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha value was .76.

**Sexual Prejudice** The Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men (ATLG; Herek 1984; Herek 1988) scale was used in its short form (Herek and Capitanio 1995, 1999) to assess the attitudes of heterosexual people toward lesbians (ATL, five items) and gay men (ATG, five items). The ATLG is a valid measure of homonegativity and sexual prejudice (Herek 1988; Stoeber and Morera 2007). The same item pool can be used to assess attitudes toward both lesbians and gay men. Thus, we used the total score of the scale for all analyses, derived from the 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = "totally agree" to 5 = "totally disagree"), where a higher score indicated greater sexual prejudice toward lesbian women and gay men. The scale included items such as "I think male homosexuals [lesbians] are disgusting" or "male [female] homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in men [women]." The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .87.

**Beliefs on Same-Sex Parenting** We used the Beliefs on Same-Sex Parenting (BOSSP; Ioverno et al. 2018) scale to measure

the presence or absence of moralistic opinions and prejudice regarding same-sex couples' parenting abilities. In the present study, we only used the Parental Adjustment subscale to assess beliefs about the impact of challenges related to same-sex parenting on children's well-being, with a higher score indicating positive beliefs about the ability of parents to provide a safe social context for their children, to integrate themselves with other families, and to adopt a model of parenting that is culturally accepted. The Parental Adjustment subscale includes two forms that enable distinguishing attitudes toward two-father parenting (six items) from attitudes toward two-mother parenting (six items). The items are scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = "completely disagree" to 5 = "completely agree"). The subscale includes items such as "how two fathers [two mothers] would be able to provide adequate female and male role models" or "how two fathers [two mothers] would be able to disclose to the child his/her origins." The Cronbach's alpha for both forms of the Parental Adjustment subscale was .92.

**Beliefs on Children's Development** The Scale on Beliefs about Children's Adjustment in Same-Sex Families (SBCASSF; Frias-Navarro and Montere-i-Bort 2012) was used to assess the adults' beliefs about negative impacts on children raised in same-sex parent families. The SBCASSF is a 14-item questionnaire divided into two subscales: (1) individual opposition (IO; seven items), concerning the beliefs about the effects of same-sex parenting on the psychological adjustment of children (e.g., "A boy raised by lesbian mothers will be an effeminate child"); and (2) normative opposition (NO; seven items), which consists of using social pressure and heterosexist norms as an argument to justify discrimination against same-sex parents, considering them the cause of the child's maladjustment (e.g., "A child who is raised by a gay/lesbian couple will be teased by his/her classmates"). The items are scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = "completely disagree" to 5 = "completely agree"). A higher score indicates negative beliefs about the effects of same-sex couples' parenting practices on children's development. The Cronbach's alpha for both subscales was .90. Descriptive statistics of instruments and bivariate correlations between the key variables of the study are shown in Table 2.

## Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 22.0). Bivariate correlations were performed to assess the relationships among variables of interest. Next, hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted to investigate the relevance of such variables to predict the beliefs about children's adjustment in same-sex parent families.

**Table 2** Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables ( $N=323$ )

	<i>M</i> (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	41.06 (11.95)	1.00										
2. Educational level	3.80 (.97)	-.19**	1.00									
3. Socio-economic status	2.92 (.38)	.16**	-.06	1.00								
4. Political orientation	4.51 (1.42)	.11	.14*	.02	1.00							
5. Religious orientation	3.00 (1.07)	.24**	-.11	.05	-.28**	1.00						
6. Contact experiences	1.53 (.70)	-.23**	.13*	.09	.20**	-.24**	1.00					
7. Sexual prejudice	25.05 (5.95)	.14*	-.07	.03	-.29**	.21**	-.29**	1.00				
8. Parental Adjustment (mothers)	22.65 (5.20)	-.07	.05	-.05	.35**	-.27**	.35**	-.31**	1.00			
9. Parental Adjustment (fathers)	22.21 (5.29)	-.07	.04	-.05	.37**	-.27**	.35**	-.31**	.89**	1.00		
10. Individual opposition (IO)	18.75 (5.32)	.02	-.15**	.05	-.24**	.25**	-.25**	.29**	-.41**	-.42**	1.00	
11. Normative opposition (NO)	18.09 (6.28)	.24**	-.18**	-.01	-.40**	.44**	-.42**	.40*	-.70**	-.70**	.54**	1.00

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

## Results

### Correlations Between Variables

As expected, we found that both forms of Parental Adjustment (two-father and two-mother forms) were negatively correlated with the subscales of IO and NO, as well as sexual prejudice. In addition, a right-wing political orientation and religious involvement were positively associated with negative attitudes toward same-sex parenting and with sexual prejudice. Finally, contact experiences were positively correlated with Parental Adjustment subscales and negatively correlated with IO, NO, and sexual prejudice (Table 2).

### Predicting Individual Opposition to Same-Sex Parenting

Using hierarchical multiple regression, we further examined how age, educational level, socioeconomic status, religion, political orientation, contact experiences, sexual prejudice, and Parental Adjustment may relate to IO to same-sex parenting (subscale of SBCASSF). The three steps of the regression are shown in Table 3.

The analysis of the sample showed that high scores of IO to same-sex parenting were associated with age,  $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .001$ , lower educational level,  $\beta = -.09$ ,  $p = .012$ , lower socioeconomic status,  $\beta = -.07$ ,  $p = .043$ , right-wing political orientation,  $\beta = -.10$ ,  $p = .013$ , and religious involvement,  $\beta = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ . In addition, higher levels of sexual prejudice,  $\beta = .12$ ,  $p = .002$ , and lower score of Parental Adjustment for the two-mother form,  $\beta = -.30$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the two-father form,  $\beta = -.28$ ,  $p < .001$ , were significantly associated with an IO to same-sex parenting. Conversely, IO to same-sex parenting was not associated with the contact

experiences,  $\beta = -.07$ ,  $p = .059$ , of respondents. The adjusted  $R^2$  for the whole model was .64.

### Predicting Normative Opposition to Same-Sex Parenting

Table 3 shows the three steps of hierarchical multiple regression using NO to same-sex parenting as a dependent variable. The results showed that high scores of NO to same-sex parenting were associated with lower educational level,  $\beta = -.12$ ,  $p = .021$ , religious involvement,  $\beta = .14$ ,  $p = .014$ , higher levels of sexual prejudice,  $\beta = .14$ ,  $p = .009$ , and lower score of Parental Adjustment for the two-father form,  $\beta = -.22$ ,  $p = .041$ . Conversely, NO to same-sex parenting was not associated with age,  $\beta = -.10$ ,  $p = .064$ , socioeconomic status,  $\beta = .04$ ,  $p = .472$ , political orientation,  $\beta < .01$ ,  $p = .972$ , contact experiences,  $\beta = -.07$ ,  $p = .183$ , and Parental Adjustment for the two-mother form,  $\beta = -.10$ ,  $p = .357$ . The adjusted  $R^2$  for the whole model was .25.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate teachers' and educators' attitudes and beliefs concerning the development of children raised in same-sex parent families. We examined two forms of beliefs and opinions, identified as two ways to express prejudice toward same-sex parents. The IO and NO refer to two different types of disapproval toward same-sex parent families' existence, reflected in stereotyped negative beliefs about the psychological and social consequences that could affect children raised by same-sex parents (Barrientos et al. 2013; Frias-Navarro and Monterde-i-Bort 2012). The IO subscale identifies opinions involving open and aggressive rejection of the effects of the educational practices of same-sex

**Table 3** Hierarchical regression analyses for political and religious orientation, contact experiences, sexual prejudice, and Parental Adjustment predicting individual opposition to same-sex parenting ( $N = 323$ ) and normative opposition to same-sex parenting ( $N = 323$ )

	Individual opposition (IO)					Normative opposition (NO)				
	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1 (identifying and background variables)				.08***	.08				.02*	.02
Age	.07	.02	.14***			-.04	.02	-.10		
Educational level	-.58	.23	-.09*			-.64	.28	-.12*		
Socio-economic status	-1.16	.57	-.07*			.51	.70	.04		
Step 2 (importance of policy, religion, and contact)				.38***	.30				.15***	.13
Political orientation (left-wing)	-.44	.17	-.10*			.01	.21	.00		
Religious orientation	1.26	.33	.15***			.99	.40	.14**		
Contact experiences	-.66	.35	-.07			-.57	.43	-.07		
Step 3 (attitudes and beliefs concerning LG people)				.64***	.26				.25***	.10
Sexual prejudice	.12	.04	.12**			.13	.05	.14**		
Parental Adjustment (mothers)	-.36	.09	-.30***			-.10	.11	-.10		
Parental Adjustment (fathers)	-.33	.09	-.28***			-.22	.11	-.22**		

The tabled values for beta reflect *B*s after step 3

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

parents, as reflected in the beliefs related to psychological and developmental problems of the child. The NO subscale measures a more subtle form of prejudice linked to heterosexism, through which negative beliefs are justified by attributing to society the child's social rejection and isolation and consequent maladjustment (Pascual-Soler et al. 2017). These two concepts differ in relation to the quality of these oppositional beliefs, reflecting traditional and modern forms of homonegative attitudes, that are typical of western societies, in which the traditional forms of sexual prejudice are increasingly less accepted, giving way to modern and subtle forms of negative attitudes (Frias-Navarro et al. 2014).

As expected, we found that higher level of sexual prejudice was strongly associated with both forms of negative beliefs about children's adjustment in same-sex parent families. Negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men can be considered one of the main predictors of rejection of same-sex parenting (Barrientos et al. 2013; Frias-Navarro et al. 2014). No significant differences were found between the scores of the two subscales of the SBCASSF (individual and normative opposition), which indicates a shift toward more modern and subtle forms of rejection of lesbians and gay men (Frias-Navarro et al. 2014; Morrison and Morrison 2011; Morrison et al. 2009; Whitley and Kite 2010). In a prejudiced context such as Italy, where sexual minorities face everyday heterosexism (Baiocco et al. 2010; Fisher et al. 2017; Lingiardi et al. 2016b; Pistella et al. 2016), we can suppose that explicit homophobic attitudes are still legitimized and guaranteed at an institutional level and still belong to common opinion in the same way as less explicit forms.

We further analyzed the role of background characteristics in determining beliefs on children's adjustment in same-sex parent families. Concerning the IO subscale, all the characteristics considered were strongly associated with respondents' beliefs, partially confirming our second hypothesis. Thus, the most religious people, those with a conservative political orientation, older people, and people with a lower educational level and a lower socioeconomic status showed more negative attitudes toward same-sex parenting. The findings are consistent with previous studies that indicated greater homonegativity in older people (Baiocco et al. 2013; Herek 2002; Steffens and Wagner 2004); the influence of educational level on attitudes toward LG people and their relationships (Ohlander et al. 2005; Shackelford and Besser 2007); and a strong correlation between religious and political conservatism and attitudes toward LG people (Herek 1988, 2002; Whitley Jr 2009) and their rights, such as same-sex parenting and marriages (Olson et al. 2006; Schwartz 2010; Sherkat et al. 2010). Conversely, the NO subscale was not associated with age, socioeconomic status, or political orientation. Only religious involvement and lower educational level seem to predict this dimension. A possible explanation could be related to the particular form of rejection measured by this subscale: the more subtle form of prejudice may manifest itself unconsciously, and people with a more liberal view can easily internalize it.

Contact experiences were associated with more positive attitudes and beliefs only through correlations, but they do not seem to predict beliefs about children's adjustment in same-sex parent families in a significant way. We expected a

reduction in negative beliefs thanks to closeness with LG people (Herek and Capitanio 1996; Petruccelli et al. 2015; Pettigrew et al. 2011). It will probably be necessary to consider a more homogenous sample and analyze other variables related to contact experiences, distinguishing different levels of proximity.

Our last hypothesis concerned the relationship between beliefs about same-sex couples' parenting abilities and about children's adjustment in same-sex parent families. Once again, the findings fully confirmed our expectations only for the IO subscale. The negative attitudes toward both two fathers and two mothers indicate the belief that their children will develop psychological difficulties and maladjustments. We expected that both high IO and NO would be negatively associated with positive beliefs about two-mother and two-father couples' Parental Adjustment (Ioverno et al. 2018); however, normative opposition was significantly associated only with the two-father form. One way to look at these findings could be related to the sample of our study: participants were almost exclusively women that worked in the educational field. We can suppose that the more explicit nature of the rejection related to the IO dimension implicates negative attitudes toward both gay fathers and lesbian mothers, whereas the NO dimension can also affect women that do not necessarily show negative attitudes toward two lesbian mothers, given by the easier identification of being a woman and mother and by the predisposition to care typical of the educator's role. Finally, several studies showed that people have more negative attitudes toward gay fathers than toward lesbian mothers (Gato and Fontaine 2013; Ioverno et al. 2018), and the multi-minority status (Baiocco et al. 2013; Carone et al. 2018b) that affects gay fathers (being gay in a heterosexual parenting community and being a father in a gay community) in countries such as Italy can influence beliefs about social exclusion of their children due to the difficulties of integrating in a heterosexist society.

### Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, it was based on a sample mainly composed of women, not enabling the investigation of possible differences between male and female educators' attitudes. On the other hand, childcare and working in the early educational field are traditionally considered to be women's roles (Robinson 2002), and it is not easy to access a fairly distributed sample. In addition, it would be interesting to analyze if attendance to same-sex parenting training courses can change and improve attitudes and beliefs related to same-sex parents and children's adjustment, as documented in previous studies (Kintner-Duffy et al. 2012; Riggs et al. 2011; Szalacha 2004). As only few teachers in our sample took part in those courses, we could not analyze the possible efficacy of the training in positively changing attendants' attitudes and

beliefs toward same-sex parenting. Future research should examine this issue.

### Conclusions

This study contributes to increasing the scientific knowledge related to the attitudes and beliefs regarding same-sex parenting (Costa and Salinas-Quiroz 2018; Frias-Navarro et al. 2014; Ioverno et al. 2018; Pascual-Soler et al. 2017) and the well-being of children raised in same-sex parent families (Gato and Fontaine 2013; Petruccelli et al. 2015), while focusing on teachers and educators, given the critical role of the school environment in the development of children's identity and well-being (Fedewa and Clark 2009; Ladd et al. 1999). Empirical data are essential in understanding the level of prejudice and discrimination in schools in order to provide policies and programs designed to improve knowledge and competencies to deal with same-sex parent families and children raised in these families.

In order to ensure a safer school environment, it is necessary to analyze teachers' beliefs about and perceptions of their pupils as a first step toward change and improvement. To adopt inclusive practices, teachers have to become social change agents through the questioning of their personal and professional beliefs (Larrabee and Kim 2010). Teacher's attitudes can indeed have a critical and lasting impact on children's development, self-esteem, and general well-being (Hegde et al. 2014; Maney and Cain 1997). The involvement of parents in their child's education and a positive relationship between schools and families may in fact determine better social and academic performance of children (Fedewa and Clark 2009). Moreover, when children from nontraditional families are represented in the school curriculum, their confidence and motivation increase (Gilmore and Bell 2006), whereas the omission of their family structure can have an adverse effect on their identity development (Casper and Schultz 1999; Larrabee and Kim 2010; Meadows 2001). Like other institutions, schools may reflect and reproduce heterosexism and homophobic stereotypes. The sexuality taboo, in fact, prevents people from talking about homosexuality and sexual identity because it is considered a private affair, thus contributing to promoting heterosexuality as the only representation of natural sexuality. Homophobic attitudes and discomfort with dealing with LG issues are usually related to religious, moral, and cultural beliefs and a wide lack of knowledge (Robinson 2002). Our findings highlight the need to implement safe school programs that include curricula about LG family structures and to implement a safe learning environment in which children of same-sex families can grow and develop. Future research should further explore the link between beliefs and behaviors and the impact of school-level interventions, such as same-sex parenting training courses.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

Informed consent was obtained from all teachers and educators. Before the data collection started, the protocol was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Department of Developmental and Social Psychology of Sapienza University of Rome.

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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