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**NARRATIVAS SOBRE VIVÊNCIAS E REFLEXÕES EM TORNO DA HOMOPARENTALIDADE: UM ESTUDO PORTUGUÊS**  
**NARRATIVES ABOUT EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS AROUND SAME-SEX PARENTING: A PORTUGUESE STUDY**  
**NARRATIVAS SOBRE EXPERIENCIAS Y REFLEXIONES EN TORNO A LA HOMOPARENTALIDAD: UN ESTUDIO PORTUGUÉS**

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## RESUMO

**Introdução:** Em Portugal, apesar das recentes transformações ao nível legal, continuam a verificar-se dificuldades no reconhecimento social da homoparentalidade. Além disso, a pesquisa nesta área está ainda em processo de afirmação, tendo-se focado essencialmente na análise das atitudes da sociedade, sendo fundamental conhecer e compreender a perspetiva das próprias famílias.

**Objetivos:** Identificar perspetivas e experiências em torno da homoparentalidade.

**Métodos:** Foram realizadas entrevistas a sete mulheres lésbicas e um homem gay que tiveram filhos no contexto de uma relação heterossexual anterior ( $n = 2$ ) ou de uma relação anterior/atual com uma pessoa do mesmo sexo ( $n = 6$ ). As narrativas foram analisadas de acordo com os procedimentos da Análise Interpretativa Fenomenológica.

**Resultados:** Da análise emergiu uma perspetiva de responsabilidade acrescida no exercício da parentalidade, traduzida na reflexão e gestão dos desafios externos, designadamente ao nível das práticas parentais e das construções de sentido direcionadas para a validação e afirmação da família no contexto social.

**Conclusões:** Os resultados contribuem para a compreensão das vivências da homoparentalidade no contexto português, particularmente os recursos internos e externos que os participantes mobilizam para gerirem as adversidades vividas/antecipadas. São apresentadas implicações para as famílias e para os técnicos que trabalham nesta área de atuação profissional.

**Palavras-chave:** homoparentalidade; resiliência familiar; Portugal; Análise Interpretativa Fenomenológica.

## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** In Portugal, despite recent changes in the legal system, the social recognition of same-sex parenting remains difficult. In addition, research on this topic is still in a process of affirmation and has focused primarily on social attitudes, being fundamental to know and understand the perspective of the families themselves.

**Objectives:** Identify perspectives and experiences related to same-sex parenting.

**Methods:** Seven lesbians and one gay man who were mothers/father in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship ( $n = 2$ ) or in a planned lesbian family ( $n = 6$ ) were interviewed. Their accounts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

**Results:** A view of increased responsibility in parenting emerged in the analysis, translated both in the reflection on and the management of external challenges, namely in parenting practices and in the construction of meaning directed to validate and affirm the family in the social context.

**Conclusion:** The results contribute to a deeper understanding of experiences surrounding same-sex parenting in the Portuguese context, namely the internal and external resources the participants mobilize in order to adapt to the experienced/anticipated adversity. Implications for both families and professionals who work in this area are presented.

**Keywords:** same-sex parenting; family resilience; Portugal; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

## RESUMEN

**Introducción:** En Portugal, aunque los recientes cambios legales, persisten las dificultades en el reconocimiento social de la homoparentalidad. Además, la investigación en esta área sigue sendo en proceso de afirmación, y se ha centrado principalmente en el análisis de las actitudes sociales, siendo fundamental conocer y comprender la perspectiva de las propias familias.

**Objetivos:** Identificar las perspectivas y experiencias en torno a la homoparentalidad.

**Métodos:** Se realizaron entrevistas con siete mujeres lesbianas y un hombre gay que han tenido hijos en el contexto de una relación heterosexual anterior ( $n = 2$ ) o de una relación anterior/actual con una persona del mismo sexo ( $n = 6$ ). Las narrativas se analizaron de acuerdo con los procedimientos del Análisis Interpretativo Fenomenológico.

**Resultados:** Del análisis surgió una perspectiva de mayor responsabilidad en la crianza de los hijos, que se ha traducido en la reflexión y gestión de los desafíos externos, a saber, a nivel de las prácticas parentales y de construcciones de significado dirigidas a la validación y afirmación de la familia en el contexto social.

**Conclusiones:** Los resultados contribuyen a la comprensión de las experiencias en torno a la homoparentalidad en el contexto portugués, particularmente los recursos internos y externos que los participantes movilizan para manejar las adversidades experimentadas/antecipadas. Se presentan implicaciones para las familias y los técnicos que trabajan en esta área profesional.

**Palabras Clave:** homoparentalidad; resiliencia familiar; Portugal; Análisis Interpretativo Fenomenológico.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite society's attitudes and concerns regarding same-sex parenting, the results of research conducted in families with lesbian and gay parents consistently indicate that these parents and children are competent and psychosocially well-adjusted (see Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses, 2013). As compared to the international level, few studies have addressed this topic in Portugal. The present study is part of a larger project on the theme (Xavier, Alberto, & Mendes, 2015; Xavier, Alberto, & Mendes, 2017), and seeks to identify perspectives and experiences of lesbian and gay parents living in Portugal. The results will hopefully deepen the understanding of these families in Portugal thereby contributing to the professional performance of those who work in the field of parenting and helping to dispel the reservations surrounding this topic.

## 1. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research on same-sex parenting began in the late 1970s, in the United States of America, prompted by legal disputes, particularly in the case of women, over child custody after one parent had come out. Following an initial phase that focused on situations in which parenting occurred in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship, a second phase emerged because of social changes, during which the focus shifted to parenting in the context of a same-sex relationship through adoption, foster care, or artificial insemination (AI) (Johnson, 2012). In both phases, the focus was on the functioning of the family and the implications for the children's development, generally based on comparisons with heterosexual families. More recent studies have emphasized the specific details and diversity of these families (Gato, 2016).

The few studies on this subject that have been conducted in Portugal generally highlighted the attitudes of higher education students about same-sex parenting (e.g., Gato & Fontaine, 2016, 2017). Nevertheless, there are also some analyses of these attitudes in samples of the community (Costa et al., 2013; Costa, Pereira, & Leal, 2015; Ramos, Atalaia, & Cunha, 2016) and studies about professionals' representations towards these families (Xavier et al., 2017). A review of the Portuguese literature also reveals some studies focusing on parenting intentions and desires (Aboim, Costa, & Gomes, 2012; Costa & Bidell, 2017) and the experiences of these parents (Aboim et al., 2012).

In the legal domain, there's an increasing recognition of same-sex families, following the approval of civil marriage, in 2010 (Lei No. 9/2010 de 31 de maio). In this sense, the year 2016 represents an important milestone in this regard, with the removal of limitations/bans on legal family rights, such as joint adoption (Lei No. 2/2016 de 29 de fevereiro) and the expansion of access to medically assisted insemination for all women, irrespective of marital status and sexual orientation (Lei No. 17/2016 de 20 de junho).

In summary, the literature review points to a social climate in Portugal in which attitudes of reservation (Costa et al., 2013; Costa et al., 2015; Gato & Fontaine, 2016, 2017; Ramos et al., 2016; Xavier et al., 2017) coexist with a progressive legal recognition of families with same-sex parents.

This study is based on the several starting points. First, the concept of parenting as a relational and functional model that underlies the adults' performance of support and executive functions, such as the protection, education and sociocultural integration of the children (Alarcão, 2006; Goldberg, 2010). This model undergoes restructuring over the course of the family's life cycle. Second, the ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Goldberg, 2010) renders it possible to identify at various systemic levels the possible influences of institutional heterosexism and sexual prejudice (Herek, 2009) on the family's development and functioning (Goldberg, 2010), calling for the mobilization of coping strategies and the development of resilience (Oswald, 2002; Walsh, 2016). In fact, aware of the heterosexism, discrimination and scrutiny surrounding their families, lesbian and gay parents express concerns about how to best balance family public disclosure and prepare their children for possible encounters with stigma, but also believing they may experience unique benefits, such as being more tolerant and accepting of others, as a result of growing up in a minority family (Goldberg, 2010). Recently, based on research in the domains of same-sex families and family resilience, Prendergast and MacPhee (2018) proposed a model of family resilience grounded in minority stress theory. They describe several individual (parents and children), family and contextual protective (and risk) factors, including those that may constitute key strengths in same-sex families. Prendergast and MacPhee (2018) highlight: (a) the parent-level (parenting efficacy, couple bond, division of labor, and social support from extended family, friends, and community); (b) the child-level (parent-child relationship, parent socialization regarding discrimination, and school curricula with regard to sexual minorities); and (c) the family level (regulatory factors such as adaptability, involvement, meaning-making processes, among others).

## 2. METHODS

This study was conducted according to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2008), an ideographic approach that explores in detail the perceptions and meanings that individuals attach to their experiences, events, and states. IPA constitutes a situation of double hermeneutics (Smith & Osborn, 2008) requiring the researcher to be alert to preconceived ideas, facilitate the expression of phenomena and remain open to new constructions of meaning (bracketing).

## 2.1 Sample

The study is based in a convenience sample in which the participants were contacted using the snowball method (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The participants were eight individuals who identified themselves as parents, lesbians ( $n = 7$ ) and gay ( $n = 1$ ). The researchers contacted associations that advocate for LGBT rights in Portugal, such as ILGA-Portugal, among others, to promote the study, and two participants volunteered to be interviewed. The others were referred by participants who had been interviewed ( $n = 5$ ) or were reached through the authors' network of contacts ( $n = 1$ ).

The average age of the participants was 40.1 years ( $SD = 4.61$ ). All were employed university graduates. Six lived in urban areas and two in rural areas. Five were in non-marital partnerships, one was married, one was divorced, and one was single/separated. The maximum number of children was two, with an average age of 7.4 ( $SD = 6.43$ ) years (age range 1–19). As in Aboim et al. (2012) and Costa and Bidell (2017) studies, the routes to parenthood were diverse: two participants, a man and a woman, became parents in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship, and six were mothers in a current or prior lesbian relationship. More specific information about their families can be seen on Table 1.

**Table 1** - Families of the participants

Id.	Age	Gender	Self-identification	Marital status	Children	Route to parenthood
A	36	F	Lesbian	Non-marital partnership	♀ (4 years old)	AI with an anonymous donor
F	40	F	Lesbian	Single /Separated	♂ and ♀ (9 and 7 years old)	Self-insemination
M	38	F	Lesbian	Non-marital partnership	♂ and ♂ (1 year old)	IVF with a known donor
CS	35	F	Lesbian	Married	♀ (5 years old)	AI with an anonymous donor
C	44	F	Lesbian	Non-marital partnership	♀ (4 years old)	Non-biological mother <sup>a</sup>
SM	36	F	Lesbian	Non-marital partnership	♂ and ♂ (1 years old)	Non-biological mother <sup>a</sup>
R	46	M	Gay	Divorced	♂ and ♂ (17 and 13 years old)	Previous heterosexual relationship
SB	46	F	Lesbian	Non-marital partnership	♂ and ♀ (19 and 14 years old)	Previous heterosexual relationship

Note. M = Male; F = Female; ♀ = Girl; ♂ = Boy; AI = Artificial Insemination; IVF = *In Vitro* Fertilization.

<sup>a</sup> Without legal recognition at the time of the interview.

## 2.2 Data collection instruments and procedures

The participants were contacted prior to the interview to explain the purpose of the study, obtain their informed consent, and to schedule the interview. The interviews began with the participants signing informed consent forms and authorizing audio recording, with assurances that ethical principles would be respected regarding confidentiality and anonymity in the reporting of results.

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured script designed for this study, based on the ecological model of the family of Bronfenbrenner (1986; Goldberg, 2010) and the systemic perspective of the family life cycle (Alarcão, 2006; Goldberg, 2010). The first section of the script collected socio-demographic information, followed by questions regarding the participants' experiences with parenting, focusing particularly on the transition to parenthood and the resources and challenges encountered since then, both of an internal and external nature. Topics that emerged from the participants' accounts were also explored (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

The interviews were conducted by the first author in settings convenient to the participants, including at home ( $n = 6$ ), in the workplace ( $n = 1$ ), or in a public location ( $n = 1$ ). The duration of the interviews varied from 36 to 139 minutes. At this time, the above legal changes in the access to joint adoption and artificial insemination had not yet occurred.

## 2.3 Data analysis

After the complete transcription, interviews were subjected to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Following Smith and Osborn (2008), the transcript of the first case was re-read several times while notes were taken regarding the content and initial interpretations. Next, the notes were transformed into emerging themes at a higher level of abstraction. This process culminated in the development of a chronological list of themes, which were, then, grouped according to conceptual similarities

in a hierarchy of main themes and sub-themes while constantly being checked against the participant's narrative. These procedures were repeated for each case. Finally, all the themes were reviewed and systematized in an iterative process that focused on the similarities and differences among the participants. The co-authors reviewed the final list of themes, checking them against the data.

In the analysis, excerpts from the interviews are in quotes and accompanied by letters identifying the interviewee and her/his route to parenthood (i.e., in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship – *PHR*; lesbian biological mother – *LBM*; lesbian non-biological mother – *LNBM*). Omitted sections are indicated by ellipses in parentheses, and clarifications are depicted by brackets. The collected data were discussed based on information from international literature review regarding same-sex families. The parallel records of the participants' narratives sought to preserve their first-hand accounts of experiences and to allow readers to examine the suitability of the interpretations (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, the main themes reflect the motivations and the internal and external challenges and resources participants associated with their parenting experiences. This study addresses one of those themes, entitled *assumption of increased responsibility in parenting*, and whose sub-themes refer to intentional actions and the construction of meaning that validate and affirm the family when integrated into a context perceived to be somewhat hostile (Goldberg, 2010; Oswald, 2002; Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018), namely: (a) openness and assertiveness with others; (b) anticipating/managing children's questions/experiences regarding their family; (c) building resilience in children; (d) valuing the presence of gender role models; and (e) negotiating the name by which each mother/the stepparent will be called.

Before going on to explore them, it should be mentioned that despite lingering concerns regarding same-sex parenting, which are sometimes expressed as concern for the children's welfare because of stigma and discrimination (Clarke, 2001) – a topic to which the participants of this study were not indifferent – there is widespread agreement among researchers that sexual orientation does not determine the quality of parenting. Thus, as Oswald (2002) suggested in a revision of the literature that focused on the resilience processes that enable members of gay and lesbian families to create and strengthen their family networks, it is important to direct the focus from the sorts of problems that are posed by challenges such as heterosexism towards the study of the strengths deployed by these families to confront those challenges (Walsh, 2016).

Justifying the name given to the main theme, the term 'increased' is intended to convey the idea of taking on responsibilities beyond the typical support, protection, education and socialization required of parents, in accordance with the children's development (Alarcão, 2006), which, although not the object in this analysis, were also revealed in this study. Bos, van Balen, van den Boom, and Sandfort (2004) employed the term 'parental justification' to refer to these parents' need to prove the quality of their parenting to others, for example, by devoting more attention to their children than other parents do in anticipation of society's negative reactions.

Some participants referred to strategies and reflections at this level that began with their coming out and the dissolution of their previous different-sex marriage: 'My daughter was very small and would be raised by two women. [I read] a book; that's where I got a lot of it' (SB, *PHR*). Others referred to the process of deciding to have children: 'It's no wonder that gays and lesbians, in general, think much more than a heterosexual couple before having a kid (...) because they know they'll be under society's magnifying glass. And I think it would be almost irresponsible not to understand this' (F, *LMB*). The subthemes are set out below.

#### *Openness and assertiveness with others*

In the first sub-theme participants noted the need to be open with others regarding their family, aware of the message they would send their children if they were not. One of the lesbian biological mothers mentioned, 'If we don't start to share this too, it will be much harder for her [his daughter]. We set the example; she really must see we're comfortable with this' (A, *LBM*).

Another participant, who became a mother in the context of a former heterosexual relationship, also said that keeping secrets would not be positive for the family: 'There's nothing worse than a child (...) having to keep a secret' (SB, *PHR*). The needs of the children seem to be crucial to these parents' decisions regarding coming out, in the sense of creating an environment of openness with others. And as one of the participants noted, openness begins with self-acceptance as a buffer against social scrutiny and discrimination (Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018):

'I think a person who's in the position I was in five years ago [not ready to come out] shouldn't take this on (...) [We need] to show the world that people like me have all the skills and then some to be able to raise children' (CS, *LBM*).

Another participant also referred to opening up to the outside world as an ongoing active task (Oswald, 2002) but one that is necessary to guarantee her rights and the rights of her children. In this context, the parental self-efficacy and sense of agency seem to have been determinant (Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018):

'[In one of the schools], we sat at the principal's desk, and when they gave us the card to fill out, it asked for "name of the father, name of the mother". We answered right away, "This child has no father; it has two mothers. What

should I do, scratch out where it says father and put mother?" You have to inform people of things and give them room to ask questions (...), but this is not asking for permission (...) I don't need anyone's blessing to demand that my rights and, essentially, the rights and guarantees of my children be respected. And I think this attitude has also made a difference' (F, LBM).

#### *Anticipating/managing children's questions/experiences regarding their family*

Parallel to the openness with the outside world, participants referred to investing in the anticipation and management of their children's questions and experiences in an age-appropriate manner by providing information regarding their family and how it might be perceived by others, alerting them to possible incidents (Golberg, 2010):

'Throughout their lives, there will be the confrontation with the question of not having the traditional family. Whether in school, or with their friends, or at university, or on the street (...) We expect they'll start to ask us questions. [We'll] try to explain in an age-appropriate way' (M, LBM).

Meeting a strategy adopted by R (PHR), these concerns include the parents' respect by the level of openness desired by the children in relation to their family, particularly in adolescence: 'For better or for worse, I decided to avoid showing up in places where he hangs out with his [teenage] friends'.

Additionally, the participants talked about the measures they have taken to compensate for the family's lack of legal standing (Oswald, 2002), particularly with regard to non-recognition of the non-biological mother in planned lesbian families. Thus, one of the mothers mentioned that 'just to be safe in the future, her [the partner's] brother is registered as the father' (A, LBM). In order to secure the children's future, another participant also said,

'At this time, the other person [the other mother] has no legal authority over the children (...) So if something happens to me, the children won't have a right to anything. We would most likely have to make wills or donations to each other now, while we're alive, to be able to secure [their future]' (M, LBM).

#### *Building resilience in children*

This set of intentional strategies that focused on the development of family resilience (Walsh, 2016) seemed to culminate in the empowerment of children by reinforcing their strengths and resources to face potential social stigma (Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018). As two participants mentioned, 'Of course, lesbian and gay parents, and thinking of myself too, have additional concerns that other parents don't have, [of] preparing their children for the less positive looks they'll get from society' (SB, PHR); 'Since it's already difficult for me (...) I try to give them strength (...) [to] build up their defenses' (R, PHR).

And how do the participants do/intend to do it? By preparing children to talk with others about their family—'They [children] will need to have their own explanations ready' (SM, LNBM)—and teaching them respect for diversity—'Telling stories, I always try to point out differences and show her we must respect differences [in people]' (CS, LBM); 'we try to promote the idea that there are other kinds of families' (C, LNBM).

Some participants also noted the importance of providing opportunities for contact with other same-sex families as another protective factor that can mitigate the potential negatives effects of stigmatization (Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018):—'No wonder I feel it's important for my kids to meet other children who have two fathers, two mothers' (F, LBM); 'we try to give [our daughter] opportunities to play with children who have two mothers' (A, LBM).

#### *Valuing the presence of gender role models*

Our analysis also revealed the value placed on the presence of gender role models, particularly for the lesbian planned families (for both girls and boys): '[Her godfather] is a male reference figure for her and very important to her. And to us' (C, LNBM); 'We think it's important for the boys to have male figures present in their lives; we arrange for that to happen' (M, LBM); 'we discuss these issues as a couple; there will always be male figures around' (SM, LNBM).

In addition to actively searching out contacts with other same-sex families, valuing the presence of gender role models can serve as another way to obtain support for the family (Oswald, 2002), and, possibly, manage the cultural anxiety about the effects of the opposite sex parent absence on children's psychosexual development (Clarke, 2001; Goldberg, 2010).

#### *Negotiating the name by which each mother/the stepparent will be called*

Finally, along with intentional actions, reflection has also emerged about the language used to 'constitute' the family as another way to address the fact that the family is not recognized by the outside world (Oswald, 2002). The couple bond/relation seems to have an important role in this meaning-making process (Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018), as seemed to be the case of one of non-biological mothers' experiences:

‘[Although] the fact that she [the other mother] gave birth (...), I still feel like I’m a mum too (...). I shouldn’t have to legally be the aunt, you know? [on the child’s birth registration, they named her brother as the father]. It’s something that bothers me; it devalues my role in terms of society, and I don’t think that’s fair. But I don’t let it devalue my role here at home (...) And it works because I have a supportive partner (...) that says, “you are as much a mother as I am”’ (C, *LNBM*).

The other non-biological mother specifically stressed the need for thinking about the name by which each mother will be addressed, concluding that the choice will end up being what feels ‘comfortable’ for the family: ‘They [children] are the ones who’ll end up choosing; it has to feel comfortable, maybe, at home, and then other people will get used to it’ (SM, *LNBM*). On the one hand, that preparation appears to refer to the construction of parental identity as well as to conveying this relationship to children, particularly for the non-biological lesbian mothers (Bos, 2013); conversely, such preparation and meaning making also appears to be a component of negotiating relations between family and society, perceived as necessary in light of the challenges facing so-called non-traditional families (Oswald, 2002; Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018).

The experience of one of the participants who had children in a former heterosexual relationship motivated this reflection. Referring to the relationship of the children with her current partner, she said, ‘They call her aunt. It was their decision (...) they felt awkward addressing her by her name’ (SB, *PHR*). Tasker (2013) also noticed this reflection in these specific families: once more, defining the name, and eventually, the role that the same-sex partner will assume both within and outside the family.

In sum, aware of the realities and the potential negative effects of heterosexism and discrimination, the participants describe and reflect about several internal and external resources that may be important to adapt themselves, their children and their family system to adversity (Goldberg, 2010; Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018). Assuming an increased responsibility in parenting, they balance self-acceptance and pride in one’s family structure with public disclosure, and also inoculating their children in resilience. In line with the model proposed by Prendergast and MacPhee (2018), the sense of parental efficacy, the quality of couple relation and social support, as well as the development and mobilization of family regulatory factors such as communication/negotiation, adaptability, monitoring, involvement and meaning making process, were acknowledged as relevant protective factors by these parents.

## CONCLUSIONS

The studies regarding these families in Portugal are scarce, hence this study aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge through an in-depth analysis, based on interviews, of the perspectives and experiences of seven lesbians and one gay man who were mothers/father in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship ( $n = 2$ ) or in a planned lesbian family ( $n = 6$ ). This analysis is of particular interest in view of the specific features of the social context surrounding same-sex parenting, and the fact that there is no single way for families to cope with the challenges they face (Walsh, 2016).

The challenges experienced in a context generally perceived to be somewhat hostile appear to have been considered by our participants as promoters of (self-)mobilization of ‘extra’ forces and resources to ensure both social validation/affirmation and the family’s well-being. In this sense, the participants mentioned intentional actions and reflections around constructions of meaning (Oswald, 2002; Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018), such as (a) openness and assertiveness with the outside world, (b) anticipation and management of their children’s questions and experiences in an age-appropriate manner, (c) empowerment of children by reinforcing strengths and defenses to face potential social stigma, (d) widening family social network in terms of gender role models and other same-sex families, and (e) reflections about language used to ‘constitute’ the family in a hostile social context.

Although participants refer to common experiences, their accounts also seem to suggest the importance to consider the heterogeneity of same-sex families based on their history. More specifically, the particularities around the construction of the parental identity of the non-biological mothers in lesbian planned families (cf. Bos, 2013), and the experiences of both parents and children in post-heterosexual divorce/separation situations (cf. Tasker, 2013).

Although they cannot be generalized, these results may offer a resource for both families and professionals in the formal support network at a time when same-sex parenting can be expected to achieve greater visibility because of legal changes that have occurred in Portugal. Recognizing social challenges to be a vulnerability factor, participants referred to protective factors (Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018; Walsh, 2016), which, in addition to being mobilized by families, should be promoted by those who work in this field.

Concerning families, and also people that may be weighing a parenting project, it should be clearly stated that, in accordance to research, despite stigma and discrimination against sexual minority population, same-sex families may be resilient and adjusted. In fact, all family configurations have their strengths and weaknesses (Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018). So, it’s important taking into account not only the risk factors — like how stigma and discrimination may impact self-acceptance and implicate an ongoing anticipating of stigma, all with potential effects on psychological well-being, both in parents and children — but also how they may be buffered. Returning to the experiences of the participants, investing in self-acceptance, in couple bond and/or in a social network of support in order to recruit/expand emotional and instrumental support, immediately in the transition to parenthood

or even during the decision process of having children (e.g., with other same-sex families, but also with families and parents in general), may be important factors to considerer, parallel to the development of coping strategies that may be, then, modeled to children. Those strategies integrate family communication, reflection, negotiation and problem solving, adaptability, and meaning making process, such as the reflections around the narratives and language used to define family identity (e.g., the names by which each parent will be called, and how to tell the family history to others).

For its part, professionals must reflect on the influence of personal beliefs in this matter and use scientific evidence when working with these families (Xavier et al., 2017). In the face of heterosexism and discrimination, they have the responsibility to transform the reality and optimize the responses/services that same-sex families can turn to if/when needed. Maintaining an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Goldberg, 2010; Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018; Walsh, 2016), they should (a) support families in contextualizing their situation, considering their specific circumstances (e.g., the route to parenthood) and helping them recognize and manage both individual, couple and family experiences resulting from the challenges posed by the outside world; (b) facilitate the construction of informal support networks by, for example, promoting meetings among same-sex-parent families as a way to expand instrumental support (e.g., by exchange of information and provision of advice) and support the construction of family identity; and (c) considering stigma and discrimination as social problems that need to be solved, contribute to creating a positive environment in the context of the formal network in which families circulate, such as schools, health services, work places, and the legal system, among others, investing in raising awareness of this issue in society.

There are limitations to this study that require acknowledgement, namely, the sample size, which is small and includes diverse routes to parenthood. It should be emphasized, however, that studies have made use of IPA with a variable number of participants, ranging from one to fifteen or more and that the objective is to conduct a deep analysis of perspectives and the meanings that individuals attribute to their personal and social worlds (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The sample primarily comprised women and people with university degrees who volunteered to participate in the study, limitations that have also been noted in other studies (cf. Goldberg, 2010). Given the social context surrounding these families in Portugal, it is important to ask whether the results would be the same if the participants faced more difficulty affirming the family's identity to the outside world, for example, compared with the degree of openness revealed by our participants (Goldberg, 2010).

Further studies are necessary, both qualitative and quantitative, with a view to a deep knowledge and social and professional sensitization and respect for different family configurations. In future studies, in addition to extending this study to more families and other family members, such as children, it will be important to identify how the perspectives and meanings constructed by lesbian and gay parents change or remain the same considering the legislative changes that recently occurred in Portugal.

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