

Article

Childlessness and Barriers to Gay Parenthood in Czechia

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Abstract

This mixed-methods article focuses on childlessness and barriers to parenthood among non-heterosexual men in Czechia. On the quantitative sample of 419 men (165 gays, 125 bisexuals, and 129 heterosexuals with same-sex romantic/sexual attraction), recruited on a representative online panel, we map the parenting desires, intentions, and perceived barriers to parenthood. Our analysis identifies a substantial group of gay men without parenting desires and intentions compared to heterosexuals and bisexuals, and the lack of legal recognition of same-sex families as a crucial barrier to gay parenthood. The qualitative enquiry, based on semi-structured interviews with 23 self-identified gay men aged 25 to 47 years, explores how they reflect on (not) becoming parents and contextualises those reflections. The deployed concept of “parental consciousness” captures the variety of considered pathways to gay parenthood and proves itself useful in understanding the low parenting desires and a generational shift among Czech gay men. We argue that men able to come out in their early adulthood in the post-socialist context tend to have more diversified perspectives on possible pathways to parenthood. Among gay men without children, we identified three distinct perceptions of the state: given childlessness, chosen childfree life, and a life stage/indecision. The informants pursuing parenthood have seen identity-specific barriers to parenthood as crucial, which is discussed in the context of state selective regulations of the relational lives of persons with non-normative identities. Although Czech gay men’s parental consciousness has increased, legal conditions remain crucial for increasing their real-life options.

Keywords

barriers to gay parenthood; childlessness; Czechia; gay men; parenting desires and intentions

Issue

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1. Introduction

In so-called Western societies, the LGBTQ+ movement played an essential role in legitimising intimate relations and parenting constellations other than those practised by heterosexual individuals (Roseneil et al., 2013). Research carried out mainly in the Anglo-American context documented how lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parenting aspirations are shaped by the sociocultural, legislative, and institutional conditions (e.g., Baiocco &

Laghi, 2013; Gato et al., 2017; Lasio et al., 2020; Leal et al., 2019; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Shenkman et al., 2021). In some countries, the growing number of same-sex families has been referred to as a “gay baby-boom” (Johnson & O’Connor, 2002). However, other countries, including Czechia, show resistance to adopting legislation to support LGBTQ+ parenting rights (e.g., Guasti & Bustikova, 2020; ILGA-Europe, 2021), and the parenthood of non-heterosexual persons lacks recognition in these countries (e.g., Mizelińska et al., 2015; Takács &

Szalma, 2020). Thus, it is important to investigate how LGB parenting aspirations are shaped by conditions in different contexts.

In this article, we focus on childlessness, parenting desires, intentions, and the barriers to parenthood among non-straight men in Czechia. Considering the topic of LGBTQ+ parenthood is underresearched in post-socialist countries, and that there is a research gap in understanding gay men's parenting desires, intentions, and experiences of childlessness/pathways to parenthood, particularly in this region, we undertook an explorative mixed-methods study with a main focus on qualitative enquiry to obtain a comprehensive knowledge of the topic.

While most research on LGB parenting desires and intentions is based on convenience sample surveys, our research also demonstrates the advantage of combining qualitative data with a quantitative sample derived from a country-representative online panel. The quantitative enquiry maps men's parenting desires and intentions by their sexual identities and perceived barriers to gay parenthood, while the qualitative enquiry explores gay men's experiences and meanings of (not) becoming parents and contextualises them—resorting to the concepts of “parental consciousness” and “heteronormativity.” The contribution our study tries to make is twofold: First, we endeavour to fill the knowledge gap on parenting desires, intentions, and the barriers to parenthood among gay men in Czechia; second, we want to validate a research approach that allows the use of in-depth knowledge of gay men's experiences of childlessness and barriers to parenthood to better understand some of the differences in men's parenting desires and intentions according to their sexual identity. Finally, we discuss our findings with previous studies on LGBTQ+ parenting desires, intentions, and barriers to parenthood in neighbouring post-socialist countries to indicate a possible avenue for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

Late-modern societies provide individuals with more freedom for shaping their biographies. Widespread birth control and assisted reproductive technologies have helped decouple sexuality from reproduction and free reproduction from heterosexual intercourse. This has contributed to an increasing acceptance of childlessness as a deliberately adopted way of life—coined “child-free” (Lunneborg, 1999)—and the simultaneous spread of same-sex families (Roseneil et al., 2013).

Although becoming a parent is increasingly seen as non-mandatory, it remains an expected life transition that tends to be associated with heterosexuality as its privilege. There remains a tendency to stigmatise families that deviate from the norm of heterosexuality (Lasio et al., 2020). Here, researchers write about heteronormatively prescribed childlessness (Takács, 2018) and strategic denial of and compensation for parenting desires

among gay men and lesbians (Kuhar & Takács, 2007; Mizielińska & Kulpa, 2011).

It does not mean that LGBTQ+ people do not express positive parenting desires and intentions (i.e., wishes and plans to become a parent). Besides various sociodemographic, personal, relational, ideational, structural, and cultural factors that influence parenting desires, intentions, and transitions to parenthood in general, studies have identified factors affecting non-straight men's parenting desires and intentions in particular. They include heteronormativity in social institutions and interactions (Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2018), internalised heteronormativity (Pacilli et al., 2011), the legal conditions of becoming a parent and the parenting rights of non-straight persons (Takács, 2018), experiences of stigmatisation (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Jeffries et al., 2020; Leal et al., 2019), minority stress-related avoidance of intimacy and interdependence (Shenkman et al., 2019), and the financial, time, and other costs of non-straight men's pathways to parenthood by means of surrogacy, adoption, multiparenting (e.g., with a lesbian couple), and foster care (Golombok, 2015; Murphy, 2013). Country differences in parenting aspirations of LGB people were also explained by individualistic or familistic value orientations, pronatalism, and economic constraints at the societal level (Shenkman et al., 2021).

Quantitative studies done mainly in so-called Western countries demonstrate weaker parenting desires and intentions among non-straight persons and a greater desire-intention gap among gay men compared to their straight and bisexual peers (e.g., Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Riskind & Patterson, 2010). Gay men thus convert their desire into an intention to have a child less often than non-gay men and are more likely to remain childless (Gato et al., 2017). Furthermore, Riskind and Tornello (2017) indicate more similarities between bisexual and straight men than gay men because bisexual persons are more likely to have children in different-sex couples. We were inspired by such studies and expected to observe similar trends in our first quantitative mapping in Czechia. We anticipated low parenting desires and intentions among gay men due to homophobia and a long history of selective pronatalism in Czechia that excludes certain groups from reproduction.

To explain “how” gay men “become aware” that they can/cannot become parents in heteronormative societies, we were inspired by qualitative studies. Marsiglio and Hutchinson (2002) introduced the term “procreative consciousness” to conceptualise how men understand themselves as procreative and nurturing beings through sexual and romantic relations and fertility-related events. Others explored how procreative consciousness emerges among gay men in the absence of a direct fertility experience through adoption agencies, fertility clinics, and a bureaucracy that mediates access to parenthood (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). Murphy (2013) used the same concept to explore the pathways of American and Australian gay men towards surrogacy, revealing

that among the sources of their procreative consciousness were the promotional strategies of surrogacy agencies, media, their peers, and partners. Exposure to messages that promoted gay parenthood enabled them to develop the procreative consciousness that had previously been unavailable to them. The findings are context-specific and show that parenting desires are socially informed and enacted through available discourses and resources. Exploring the emergence of procreative consciousness among gay men in much less advanced countries in terms of LGBTQ+ rights, such as Czechia, is missing. Thus, by exploring Czech gay men's experiences with the use of "parental consciousness"—a concept based on procreative consciousness that captures the variety of pathways to parenthood beyond biogenetic reproduction—our study contributes to filling the knowledge gap on gay men's raising awareness of themselves as parenting persons outside advanced societies regarding LGBTQ+ rights.

Overall, our mixed-methods study examines the topic of childlessness, parenting desires, intentions, and barriers to non-straight parenthood through the lens of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is based on the assumption of two complementary genders as "normal," "natural," and "ideal." From the heteronormative perspective, being gay is associated with childlessness (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007), and gay fathers are faced with "dual stigmatisation" associated with the belief in the "naturalness" of heterosexual parenthood and the belief that men do not have a "natural" caregiving ability and cannot be as competent at parenting as women (Stacey, 2006). Heteronormativity manifests in a set of processes to re/produce heterosexuality on legal, cultural, structural, institutional, interactional, discursive, and individual levels (Lasio et al., 2020). Kimmel (2003) defines heteronormativity as an interplay of four social dynamics: misogyny (which marginalises femininity), bipolarisation (which marginalises non-heterosexualities), essentialism (which constructs heteronormativity and the resulting marginalisation of non-heterosexuality as "natural"), and religious prejudices. Although the last is relatively weak in Czechia, the Czech conservative gender regime and (internalised) homophobia (as signs of heteronormativity) have been fuelled by the medicalisation of sexuality via sexology in the 20th century, which also strengthened the essentialising and bipolar substance of heteronormativity (Lišková, 2018; Sloboda, 2021; Sokolová, 2021).

While LGBTQ+ movements have changed the "landscapes" of heteronormativity and transformed the institutions regulating non-straight sexualities in some societies (Roseneil et al., 2013), heteronormativity remains strongly institutionalised through legal and social barriers to same-sex parenthood in Czechia and its neighbouring post-socialist countries (European Commission, 2019; ILGA-Europe, 2021; Takács & Szalma, 2020). Their governments have applied selective pronatalist policies to protect such values as heteronormativity and eth-

nic and national belonging. While supporting the fertility and parenthood of some persons, they hinder the fertility and parenthood of others via limited access to assisted reproductive technologies, adoptions, child-care support, and legal definitions of parents and families (Hašková & Dudová, 2021; Takács, 2018). Our study thus also contributes to the knowledge about how gay men's parenting aspirations are shaped by a particular post-socialist context.

3. Context

In Europe, post-socialist countries are in general less accepting of LGBTQ+ rights, with Czechia doing better compared to many neighbouring post-socialist countries (European Commission, 2019). Civil unions have opened for same-sex couples in Czechia, Slovenia, Hungary, and Croatia but not in Poland and Slovakia. In Czechia, gays/lesbians are allowed to adopt children individually and, in contrast to Poland, research suggests this right is not to be circumvented in Czechia (Nešporová, 2021). However, joint adoptions by same-sex couples and step-child adoptions in same-sex couples have remained forbidden in Czechia, like in neighbouring post-socialist countries. Although neither assisted reproduction for lesbian couples nor surrogacy is legislated for same-sex couples in post-socialist countries, there is research evidence of these practices, and, in Czechia, the knowledge on how to proceed at fertility clinics is widely shared among lesbians (Nešporová, 2021). In same-sex families, though, only one of the parents has parental rights and obligations, while their same-sex partner remains legally unrecognised as a parent in Czechia (Burešová, 2020). Some gay men opt for multiparenting (Nešporová, 2021); yet again, no legal provisions for such families exist in Czechia (Burešová, 2020).

Sokolová (2009) found that gay men in Czechia who grew up under state socialism usually did not come out until long after they had children in a heterosexual relationship, while younger gay men typically came out before they reached the average reproductive age. As the state socialist regime ostracised and stigmatised homosexuality (Sokolová, 2021), it made it difficult for gay men to think about intimate relations outside the heteronormative condition. Despite persisting stigmatisation, attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights have been improving in Czechia and coming out has become much easier in the last two decades with same-sex parenting being positively portrayed in the media in the last decade (Sloboda, 2021).

In contrast, Hungary has experienced a strong neo-conservative nationalist backslide towards LGBTQ+ rights since 2010 (Kováts, 2021). In religious Poland, LGBTQ+ and gender ideology are defined as a threat to the nation (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021), and a similar trend was observed in Slovakia (Guasti & Bustikova, 2020). Although negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights and visibility are identifiable all across the post-socialist region (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021), which is fuelled by

anti-Western sentiments (Kováts, 2021), Czechia has remained relatively untouched by this (Sloboda, 2021). Nevertheless, homophobia persists in Czechia. It manifests itself in the fewer than two in three Czechs agreeing with step-child adoptions in same-sex families and only less than half approving of same-sex marriage or joint adoptions by same-sex couples (Spurný, 2019).

Gay fatherhood is moreover constrained by gender-conservative essentialising attitudes of Czechs towards parenting and gendered familialist policies that cement mothers as primary caregivers and constrain men's participation in care (Lutherová et al., 2017). In Czechia, mothers' long, full-time, intensive childcare and separate gender roles in families with preschool children are dominantly practised, leaving little space for fathers to participate in care (Lutherová et al., 2017).

Besides Sokolová's (2009) qualitative study of Czech gay parenting desires, only a few studies focused on the topic within the neighbouring post-socialist countries. They include mainly convenience sample surveys of non-straight people and rarely address both desires and intentions. Polish mixed-method study that started in 2013 (Mizelińska et al., 2015; Mizelińska & Stasińska, 2018) showed very low positive parenting intentions of gay men (5% contrasting to almost a quarter among lesbians) and a share of fathers among them (5%). More than half of those planning to have a child considered surrogacy and raising the child in a same-sex couple, less than a third considered adoption, while other options received much less support. In Slovenia, almost 40% of gay men desired to have children, with younger ones more often postponing the decision and older ones expressing more often resignation to parenthood (Švab, 2007). In Croatia, researchers found lower parenting desires in gay men (48%) compared to bisexual men (58%) and a preference for adoptions/foster care over surrogacy, with raising a child in a heterosexual relationship being the least preferred (Štambuk et al., 2019). In Hungary, before individual adoptions were banned in 2021, Háttér Társaság (2017) indicated an increasing share of non-straight people wishing to parent with solid support for adoptions among gay men. Despite the fact that the samples and methods of these studies differ, the short overview indicates that there are country-specific differences in the region.

4. Data and Methods

We apply a parallel mixed-methods research with a main focus on qualitative enquiry. While quantitative enquiry maps the outline of gay men's parenting desires, intentions, and barriers to their parenthood, the qualitative analysis explores their experiences and meanings of (not) becoming parents. Qualitative data alone could not provide enough information on the scope of gay men's parenting desires and intentions and the extent to which they differ from men declaring other than gay identities. In contrast, quantitative data alone could not provide

enough insight into gay men's experiences and meanings of childlessness and constrained pathways to parenthood. In both enquiries, we applied a broad definition of parenthood that includes procreating and raising a child who is genetically one's own, adopted, a partner's, or in one's long-term foster care.

Considering it is difficult to collect a representative sample of persons with non-normative sexual identities, studies have mostly relied on convenience samples (e.g., Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Carneiro et al., 2017; Costa & Bidell, 2017). In Czechia, there are no relevant census data, and general population surveys have produced extremely small samples of non-straight men. In the absence of a sampling frame for a representative survey of persons with non-normative sexual identities, we opted for an online survey using the representative Czech National Panel in 2019. We asked 25,000 respondents aged 25–49 (95% of people of this age use the internet every day; see CZSO, 2019) to complete a screening questionnaire on sociodemographic characteristics, including sexual identity. The screening clarified the distribution of persons by declared gender, sexual identity, place of residence, and age, helping us determine the quotas for our main sample that were allowed to proceed with the full questionnaire. As we focused on persons with non-normative sexual identities, those declaring exclusively heterosexual identities were excluded. The main sample thus consisted of self-declared gay men, lesbians, bisexual persons, persons declaring heterosexual identity with romantic/sexual attraction to the same-sex person in the last five years (predominantly straight), and persons declaring "other" identities. Given that we focus on men in this article, the analysed weighted dataset consisted of 129 predominantly straight men, 125 bisexual men, and 165 gay men. Another 22 men who declared "other" identities were excluded from the sample because this was probably a heterogeneous group that could not be merged with any other group nor analysed separately because of the small size of the group. The final sample of 419 men allows only descriptive statistics; yet, it is on a topic that has not yet been mapped in Czechia and the results complement the qualitative data.

Our qualitative enquiry was based on semi-structured interviews with 23 self-identified gay men aged 25–47 years in 2018–2020; nine of them were raising children and 14 were childless/childfree. They lived in a range of settlements from small villages to large cities, and their education ranged from apprenticeship to college. The interviews were on average 1.5 hours long and were transcribed verbatim. The interviewees' names are fictitious.

The interviewees were asked whether they were considering having a child in the future or had raised/were raising a child already. We then encouraged them to explain their reasons for (not) considering a child in the past/future and to explain the pathways and barriers to parenthood considered/experienced. Subsequently, we asked them about their childhood, formation of

non-straight identities, coming out, job and relationship trajectories, issues related to (pathways to) parenthood, discrimination, support networks, and engagement in LGBTQ+ movements.

The analysis included several steps. We started with thematic analysis. Three of the authors were coding the first nine interviews independently. Subsequently, we discussed the codes (repeatedly identified themes), produced a list of 45 codes and their “families,” and then re-coded these interviews and coded all the remaining interviews in the Atlas.ti software program using the list. For example, the family of codes “pathways to parenthood” included not only codes such as “surrogacy,” “adoption,” and “child from previous relationship,” but also “not/importance of biological parenthood,” “not/importance of mother,” etc. Then, we searched for further relations between the codes to develop more complex categories such as “declining parenthood.” Subsequently, we analysed the interviews as “life-stories” of childlessness or becoming a parent. Although life-stories accentuate personal experience and subjectivity, they contribute to the understanding of the formation of life-paths beyond an individual case (Rustin & Chamberlayne, 2002). Each life-story represents a fragment within the mosaic of contextualised understanding of gay men’s experience of (not) becoming parents. Finally, we merged our analysis of individual life-stories with developed categories to formulate collective stories (Charmaz, 2006). Collective stories do not capture the details of individual life-stories. They were constructed to highlight the main differences in the experience of childlessness and barriers to parenthood. In particular, we constructed collective stories of those who have never considered parenthood as their life option, those who chose to remain childfree, those who remain undecided

whether to pursue parenthood, and those who have desired parenthood and considered ways to achieve it.

5. Quantitative Enquiry

Quantitative data explore the “landscape” of heteronormativity in Czechia by mapping the extent to which parenting desires and intentions of self-identified gay men differ from those self-identified as bisexual or predominantly straight and by mapping the perceived barriers to gay parenthood.

As Czechia belongs to a region known for limited advances in LGBTQ+ rights, we expect that only a small portion of gay men would target parenthood. Our data are in line with such an assumption. While 78% of the predominantly straight men found it definitely or rather important to raise children, the same was true for 62% of the enquired bisexual men and only for 26% of gay men (Figure 1). Yet, social mechanisms leading to the reduced importance of raising children for gay men are to be explored with the qualitative data.

As in other countries (Baiooco & Laghi, 2013; Kranz et al., 2018; Riskind & Patterson, 2010), gay men in Czechia too showed smaller parenting desires, intentions, and transitions to parenthood compared to men in the other subcategories (Figure 2): Only 8% of gay respondents were fathers in contrast to 48% of bisexual men and 61% of predominantly straight men. In addition, 65% of gay men respondents reported not wanting children compared to only 25% of their bisexual and 12% of their predominantly straight peers. Moreover, the parenting desires of Czech gay respondents led to parenting intentions less often compared to the others. What discourses and barriers may contribute to these differences are to be further explored.

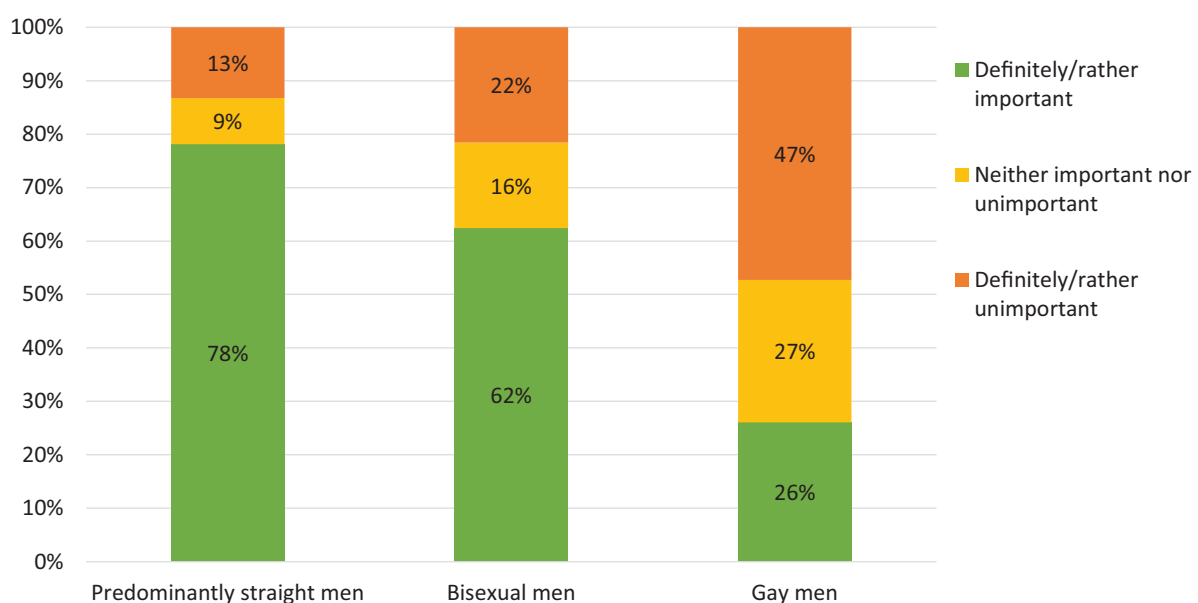


Figure 1. Importance of having one’s own family and raising children, by men’s sexual identities. Note: Chi-square test is statistically significant (Sig. = 0.000).

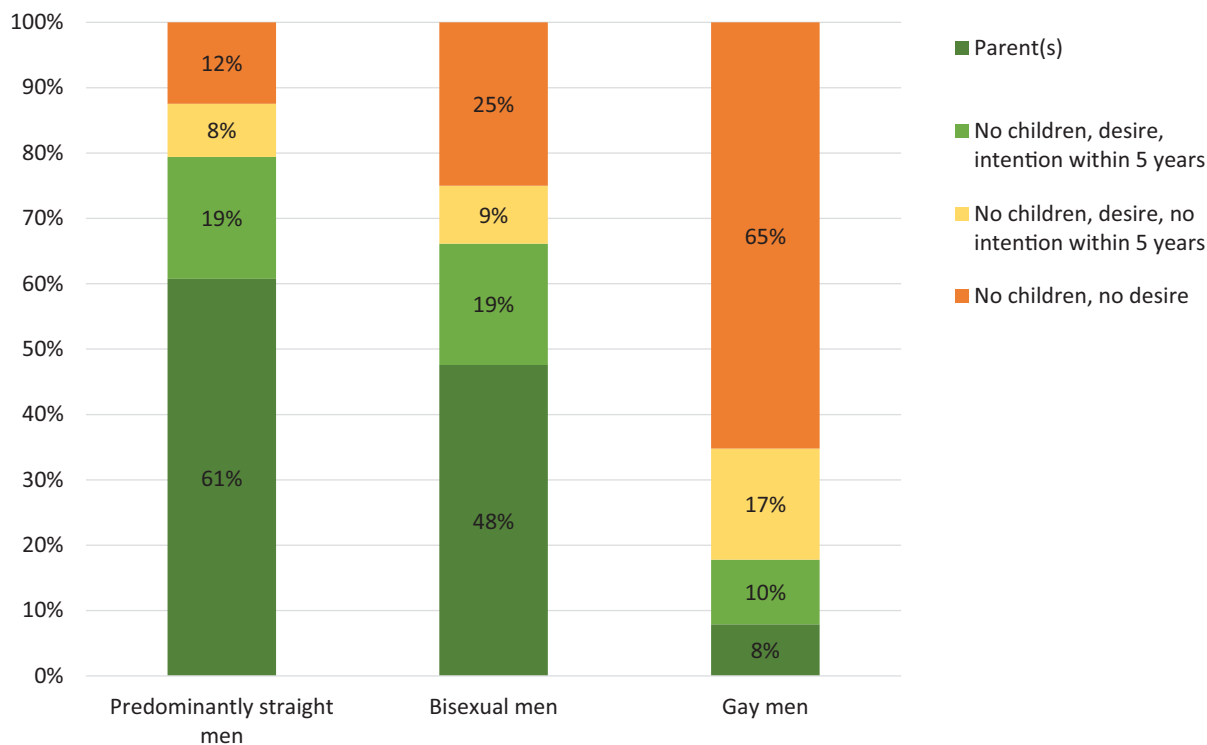


Figure 2. Parenthood, parenting desires and intentions, by men’s sexual identities. Note: Chi-square test is statistically significant (Sig. = 0.000).

In all the three subcategories of respondents, conception in a heterosexual relationship was the most frequent pathway to fatherhood. As many as 60% of the children of gay respondents were brought into the world in this way. This may reflect the plasticity of sexual identities, difficulties of declaring one’s gayness, and inaccessibility of other pathways to parenthood for gay men. The last reason is supported by the fact that the majority of gay respondents who wanted one/an additional child did not consider getting the child in a heterosexual relationship. Despite the small number of respondents, our data also imply that Czech gay men show neither a strong preference for biological children nor for a single pathway to parenthood (including adoption, surrogacy, foster care, heterosexual relationship, multiparenting, and raising their partner’s children from their previous relationships). Akin to other men, parenting with their partners is the most considered childcare arrangement by gay men (91%), followed by parenting with the help of one’s family (58%) and multiparenting (42%), while solo parenting and parenting with friends are the least considered options.

Although in late-modern societies, people are supposed to decide rather freely whether to start a family and, indeed, 92% of predominantly straight men feel free to choose, the same applies only to 87% of bisexual men and 69% of gay men (Figure 3).

A few percentage points more gay respondents are consistently single (23%) and fewer gay respondents have long-term monogamous relationships compared to other respondents; yet, the differences are not statistically significant. Therefore, relationship status cannot

explain the differences found in parenting desires, intentions, and perceived freedom of choice. A range of barriers to parenthood perceived by gay men seems to better explain such differences (Figure 4).

Topmost amongst the list of factors influencing gay men’s parenting intentions is their partnership situation with their economic situation also playing an important role for many. However, before the economic situation, almost 50% of gay men declare the impact of legal uncertainty of same-sex families on their parenting intentions. Moreover, legal uncertainty of multiparenting, fear of low acceptance of the child by society, and conditions of surrogacy are also mentioned as influential by a significant portion of the participating gay men. In short, gay men consider the mainstream factors influencing their parenting intentions and, by and large, the barriers specific to gay men on top of that.

6. Qualitative Enquiry

The qualitative enquiry examines how gay men reflect on (not) becoming parents. First, three collective stories of childlessness are analysed. Second, barriers to gay pathways to parenthood are discussed.

6.1. Childlessness as a Given

The quantitative analysis showed a substantial group of gay men wishing no children. The interviews illuminate why. Some gay men construct their childlessness as a “given,” a “matter of course”:

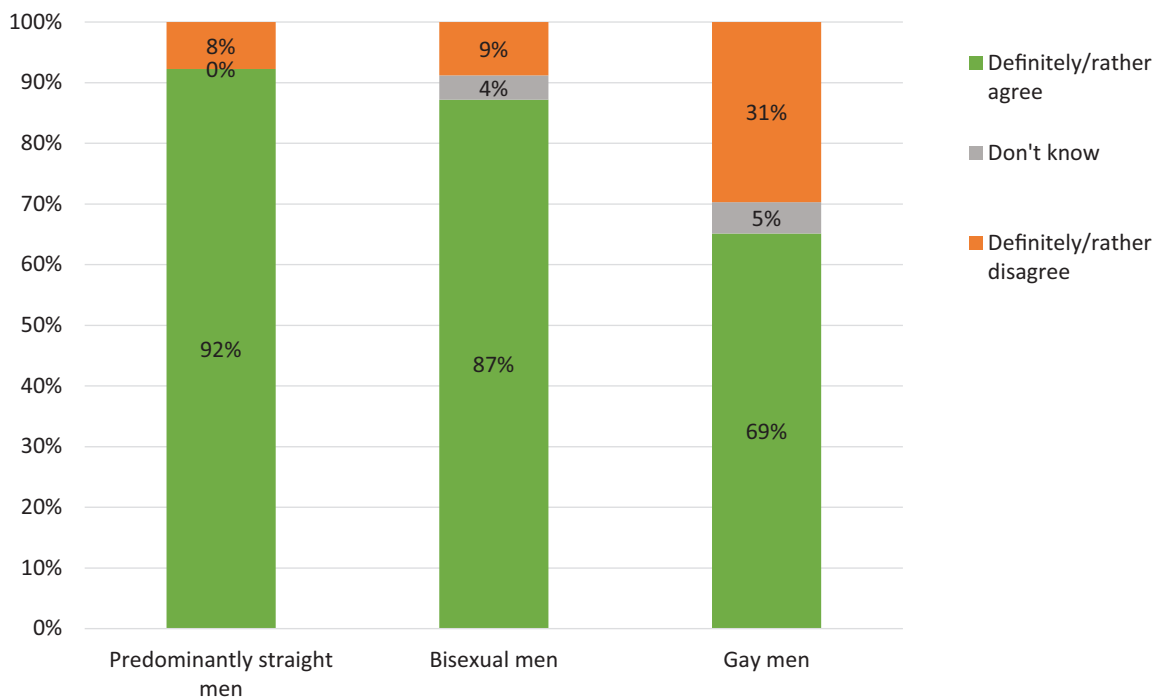


Figure 3. Perceived freedom to decide whether to become a parent, by men’s sexual identities; percentages were calculated based on answers to the question: Would you say, about yourself, that you are free to decide whether to become a parent? Note: Chi-square test is statistically significant (Sig. = 0.000).

I think I can’t be a parent due to my orientation....It would also be against nature to be a parent when I’m who I am. (Juraj, age 40, single)

If nature had wanted me to have children, it probably wouldn’t have made me what it made me. (Nomád, age 40, partnered)

These gay men’s rejection of parenthood refers to the “biologising discourse” of intimate relations. Their considerations are informed by the privilege of heterosexuality over homosexuality achieved in this discourse by attaching significance to linkages between parenthood and reproduction by heterosexual intercourse and by constructing manhood and womanhood as two complementary halves of a “natural” whole. Their experience may be described in terms of internalised homonegativity, manifested by self-stigmatization and internalization of negative societal attitudes towards homosexuality into the system of one’s self-concept, as a result of processes of minority stress (Shenkman et al., 2019).

However, as Kamil (age 40, partnered) shows below, the essentialising gendered view of caregivers is yet another aspect of heteronormativity that represents an important barrier to gay men’s parenting desires:

I don’t know how a man, or two men, should take care of a child. It’s the mother who takes care in the movies and fairy tales, she is the caregiver.

Kamil refers to the pronounced cultural belief in Czechia that women are always the caregivers and that female

bodies/minds are better equipped for childcare (Lišková, 2018). When accepting this view, gay men do not perceive themselves as those who should become parents. The norm of heterosexuality and the essentialising gendered view of caregivers block the emergence of their parental consciousness. They expect permanent childlessness as a “natural” outcome of their non-normative sexual identity and assumed lack of disposition to care. These strains of heteronormativity contribute to producing childlessness as a given in the views of these gay men; they lack the discourses for raising parental consciousness and thus cannot choose parenthood.

6.2. Childlessness as a Choice

Other gay men view their childlessness as a consequence of “liberation” from a “duty to become parents” rather than a perceived “inability” to procreate and care. Their narratives suggest that homosexuality can be viewed as a source of greater freedom than heterosexuality regarding the social pressure to become parents:

In childhood...no one wanted children....But I knew that one day I’d grow up and have children after all, but it’s not like I wanted it....It developed to the point that I never wanted children, that I’m content not to have to. [For gay men], not wanting a child is probably easier to defend, work with, or live with. If I was straight and had to get a wife, a wife who might want a child, then I would be under greater pressure to have one. (Martin, age 31, single)

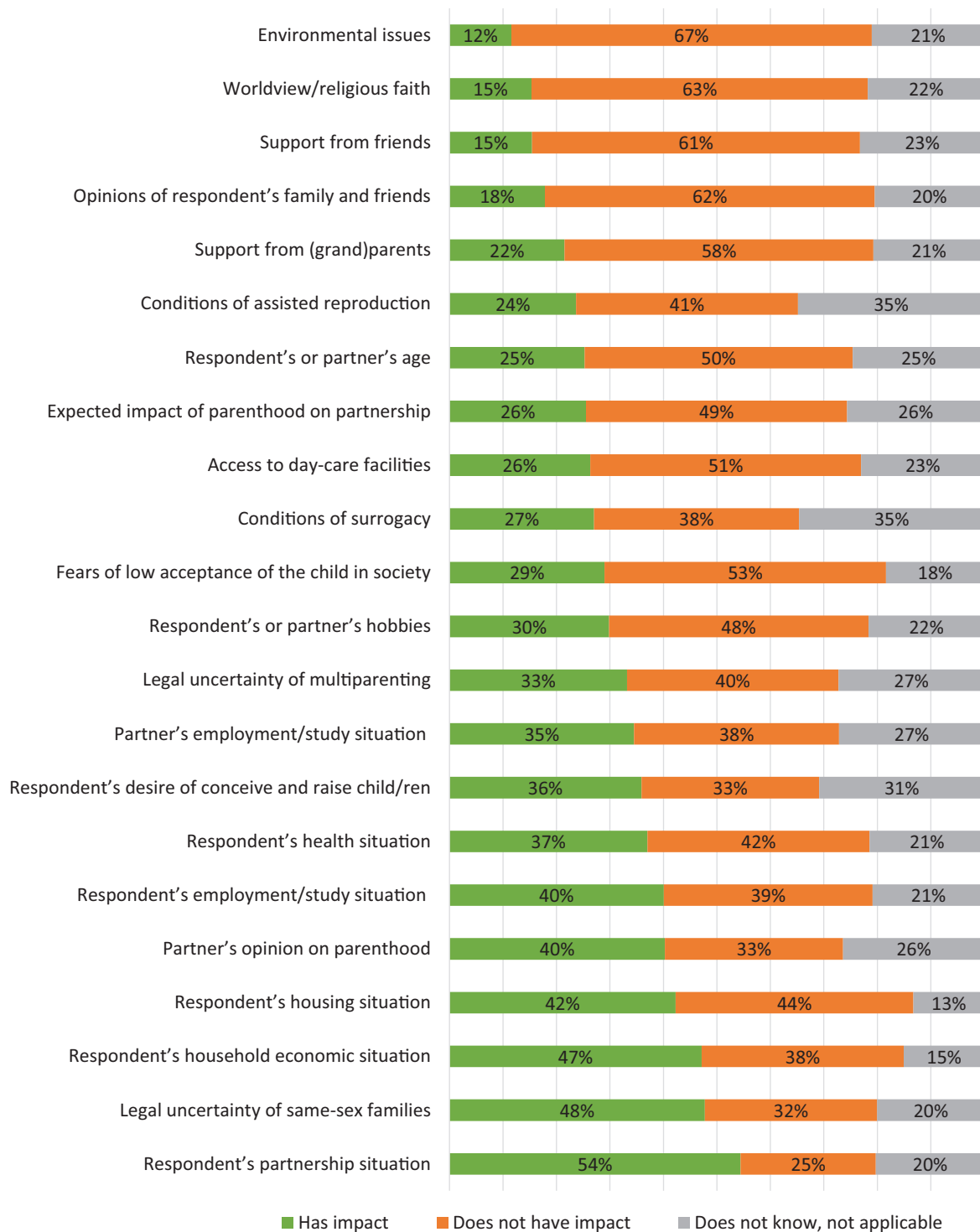


Figure 4. Factors in the view of gay men that have affected their parenting intentions.

For these gay men, childlessness is a preferred way of life allowing them to focus on their professional careers, childfree relationships, hobbies, or a combination of these. They may be aware of their potential of becoming parents. Their childlessness does not relate to an absence of parental consciousness. Just as childless gay men who lack parental consciousness and see their childlessness as “naturally” given, childfree gay men consider their childlessness as a permanent way of life; but as

opposed to the former, they construct this way as their genuine choice (e.g., van Houten et al., 2020).

6.3. Childlessness as a Life Stage and/or Indecision

Other childless gay men do not perceive their childlessness as a given nor do they adopt narratives of childlessness as a chosen way of life. Like many heterosexual childless men (Maříková, 2021), they view their childlessness

as unintended (but not given) or they are (still) undecided about their pursuit of parenthood. “Being undecided” relates primarily to younger gay men (mainly under the age of 30 years):

It’s something I’ve been thinking about more often than before but it’s not something I have clarity about. (Erik, age 25, single)

I don’t know, I haven’t felt the need to have children so far, nor do I feel one at the moment, but I suppose this will change within a couple of years. (Jáchym, age 30, intermittently partnered)

It’s a bit hard for me to tell if my reasons are rationalisations of the fact that I’m being prevented by external circumstances...or whether they are a result of my way of thinking. But I believe there are economic reasons and I’m not sure if the relationship I’m in...would be good enough to take care of a child. (Boris, age 26, partnered)

From a biographical perspective, they are still in the process of clarifying their orientation in life; they thematise the absence or quality of partnership, issues of study and work, and housing and financial insecurity—just as their heterosexual peers do (Maříková, 2021). In addition, they may face difficult relationships with their parents following coming out that may hinder decisions about parenthood in relation to minority stress-related avoidance of intimacy (Shenkman et al., 2019) and anticipated lack of support (Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2018). From a generational perspective, they do not share the rather older gay men’s a priori denial of gay parenthood. While conscious of their parental potential, they remain undecided about whether to pursue parenthood. They do not identify with permanent childlessness: Either they do not (yet) view parenthood as personally relevant or they view parenthood as a potential way later in life.

6.4. Barriers to Different Pathways to Parenthood

In their narratives, many gay men detail their considerations of different pathways to parenthood, although they have often resulted in perpetual/permanent postponement of parenthood. Only some accounted for real steps taken towards parenthood, some of which again failed to achieve their goals.

A few gay men in their 40s stated that their parenting desire had motivated them to have a child in a heterosexual relationship. Yet for none of the younger gay men who did consider parenthood, the pathway implied keeping their gay status a secret. This is in line with the quantitative data that indicated that most gay respondents who wanted a child did not consider a heterosexual relationship. Cyril’s (age 27, partnered) quote below illustrates such a generational shift. Although barriers to gay parent-

hood remain enormous, given the (LGBTQ+ movement driven) increase in knowledge about same-sex families and the legislative and social acceptance of same-sex couples, young gay men’s contemplation of future parenthood is no longer compulsorily linked to different-sex couple life:

I know people who have completely covered up their true orientation to have their family....I considered it but...such a life probably does not have the quality it should have.

Similarly, both types of data indicate that partnership plays a major role in gay men’s parenting intentions. In their narratives, the gay men thematised the absence/existence of a partnership, its quality, and their partner’s parenting preparedness. The last was emphasised as few gay partners may be prepared for parenthood given the low share and visibility of fathers among gay men. Although the country’s heteronormative legal system does not allow two men to become a child’s parents, Czech gay men (akin to heterosexuals) prefer the biparental model over solo parenting:

A child requires some security, you can have that with your significant other, I can’t imagine having a child on my own. (Tomáš, age 36, partnered)

I could not make it on my own...also timewise...when there’s a couple...the other person can fill in for you. (Karel, age 41, single)

Adoption and surrogacy are their preferred means to start a biparental family while multiparenting (like solo parenting contradicting the biparental model) is less preferred. As for multiparenting, they pursue the more or less extensive parental role. The extensive role includes, for example, shared custody whereby the child spends alternating periods in the gay father’s and the biological mother’s families. The minimal role foresees, for example, being a distant biological father and getting irregularly involved in childcare.

The absence of legal regulation of same-sex parenthood was considered a major barrier to gay parenthood. The men emphasised that only one of them could become the child’s parent, while the other partner would remain devoid of any parental rights and obligations. They realistically anticipated problems due to such legal regulations combined with anticipated prejudices against gay parenthood:

This is a huge problem...that only one can be the parent. This means that the child is cut off from half of their rights...inheritance, but also a representation of that child. Even if there are powers of attorney, a right cannot be 100% replaced by that. (Kamil, age 41, partnered)

The gay men who were considering the pursuit of parenthood were weighing the pros and cons of different pathways to that goal. Although the interviews suggest that adoption tends to be the initial consideration, many gay men are reluctant to accept a biologically unrelated child who would have a disadvantaged start in life:

For adoptions, I am worried that...there is no automatic feeling that this is my child. (Boris, age 26, partnered)

Some also anticipated prejudices from the adoption bureaucracy, but adoptive gay fathers did not confirm such prejudices either in our study or in a recent study of gay and lesbian families by Nešporová (2021). Eventually, adoption was only considered by those who did not insist on biological fatherhood and wanted to help an existing child.

Surrogacy was only considered following thorough mapping or failed pursuit of other pathways to parenthood, a process accompanied by a growing desire to have biological children; however, many gay men found surrogacy unacceptable as “shopping” for children or “a breach of the bond” between biological mother and child:

A child is not a thing that you buy at a supermarket or through an arrangement with someone: “Look, you will carry my baby, I will then take it.” (Tadeáš, age 29, partnered)

Surrogacy can’t have a good influence either on the baby or on the children in the surrogate mother’s family....The baby must sense being handed over by its mother. (Kamil, age 41, partnered)

I do not want to create a child in an unnatural way....Regarding surrogacy...I cannot afford to pay a mother...there are no legal provisions in Czechia and, above all, a woman has certain needs, hormones, potentially complicating the handing over of the child. (David, age 27, partnered)

They further emphasised the absence of surrogacy provisions in Czech law and the lack of financial, linguistic, or other resources for the pursuit of surrogacy abroad. Typically realised after many years of planning, surrogacy was an option only for stable couples of gay men who desired their biological children, knew other gay couples who had succeeded on this pathway to parenthood and had the above resources at their disposal.

When multiparenting was declined, this was typically in the context of the child-raising norms of coupledness and parental cohabitation. More than two parents and one household were considered confusing for the child and associated with difficult negotiations between more than two partners:

I know how difficult it is to negotiate with two people, let alone three people....Disputes between the parents are the worst thing the child can experience....I know gay families of three or four adults...there are disagreements...it is ideal when a child is raised by two people. (Kamil, age 41, partnered)

Real steps towards multiparenting were taken only by those willing to transgress the coupledness norm and view the existence of more involved parents as more resources for the child, rather than confusion. However, some told us that their pathways to multiparenting had failed because they wanted a greater stake in childcare than that offered by the prospective multiparenting lesbian couple:

Our idea was that we would be fully involved in that parenting...and the idea of the lesbian couple was that we would be involved just a little bit. It started to be a drama...then they said “no.” (Libor, age 45, partnered, children born with the same surrogate abroad)

Compared to heterosexuals, gay men’s pathways to parenthood are typically more complicated, longer, and negotiated with more people. The negotiations involve institutions in the case of adoption, a surrogate mother, a co-parenting lesbian mother/couple, and the like. All this renders the pathways highly planned, multilaterally negotiated, and consequently more prone to the risk of permanent postponement of parenthood. One has to overcome more obstacles and reconcile more interests than in the case of an unassisted conception by a heterosexual couple:

Many people in straight couples also feel they can’t afford a child, or [that] their relationship is not ready...but to us, it can’t just happen. We are much more obliged to consider this and take rational steps....My pathway to parenthood is also influenced by the sense of having to be the perfect parent....It’s another thing when having a child is a rational decision. (Boris, age 26, partnered)

In sum, parenting desires and intentions are conditional upon the existence of parental consciousness, which has grown in the new generation of gay men. However, their parenting desires and intentions often do not result in actual parenthood because of the severe barriers to their parenthood, leading them to postpone parenthood permanently.

The interviews also revealed important intersectional differences among gay men—concerning not only generation but also socioeconomic standing. High costs make surrogacy available only for gay men with high incomes. Moreover, given the geographic location of surrogacy agencies and the legal complexities of surrogacy, surrogacy seems also limited by communication skills. Moreover, multiparenting negotiations reflect the social

location of all potential parents too, which is strengthened by the fact that a positive approach to multiparenting is mostly related to the notion of increased resources for the child. Similarly to Takács (2018), we may thus view gay parenthood as a feature of socioeconomic privilege, while most gay men wishing for parenthood remain deprived of it.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Akin to the foreign studies (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Kranz et al., 2018; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Riskind & Tornello, 2017), our quantitative data show that gay men in Czechia differ from bisexual men and predominantly straight men in terms of significantly lower parenting desires, intentions, and transitions to parenthood. The data also indicated that Czech gay men turn their parenting desires into parenting intentions less often than bisexual and predominantly straight men and less often feel free to choose whether to become a parent. This relates to a legal uncertainty of same-sex families in Czechia (Burešová, 2020) being perceived as one of the major barriers to parenthood by gay men and highlights the impact of heteronormative state regulations on the relational lives of persons with non-normative sexual identities. Compared to legislative barriers, fears of low acceptance of a child in society and opinions of those surrounding gay men did not matter as much in their parenting intentions. Although even their impact must not be underestimated, their lower rating may reflect that the neoconservative backslide towards the rights of LGBTQ+ people observed in the post-socialist region (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021) may have been less pronounced in Czechia.

Additionally, our quantitative and qualitative data complemented each other in showing that akin to heterosexual men (e.g., Zhang, 2011), Czech gay men attach the greatest importance to their partnership situation because they also prefer to become parents while having a partner. Rejection of solo parenthood could be indicative of a conservative view of the family (in Czechia, however, not as a result of religiosity). The interviews show this rejection to be more a result of the need for support though, in terms of practicalities (time, resources) and to overcome the stigma of gay parenthood that manifests in the minority-related stress to undertake perfect parenthood.

Moreover, in the conservative gender regime in Czechia (based on the essentialisation of gender relations and the societal support for separate gender roles in families), all men are directed into the role of the secondary caregiver (Lutherová et al., 2017). This belief (even institutionalised in policies discouraging men from participating in care) contributes to the internalisation of the view of gay families as less competent in parenting and compromises gay men's parenting desires.

To better explain Czech gay men's low parenting desires and the generational shift in their approach to parenthood while embracing the variety of (considered)

pathways to gay fatherhood beyond biogenetic reproduction, we deployed the concept of parental consciousness inspired by the concept of procreative consciousness (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Murphy, 2013). The collective stories of childlessness illuminated how gay men's parenting desires are conditioned by their parental consciousness. Some (older) gay men internalised the belief that their sexual orientation is in contradiction with parenthood. In some countries, religiosity partially accounts for the negative beliefs about gay families (Costa & Bidell, 2017; Lasio et al., 2020) but in highly secularised Czechia, such beliefs are historically anchored in the biologising discourse on intimate relations (Lišková, 2018) and the related essentialising gendered view of caregiving (Sokolová, 2021). Qualitative data thus show how the absence of parenting desires may be coming from socio-cultural contexts (Shenkman et al., 2021).

Besides those whose heteronormatively prescribed lack of parental consciousness translated into the belief in their childlessness as given, we identified childfree gay men who defined their gayness as a source of freedom from the social pressure to become parents and those who remain undecided whether, how, and when to pursue parenthood. The indecision may last long because gay pathways to parenthood are highly planned, multilaterally negotiated, and full of institutional barriers, and, as a result, at risk of permanent postponement.

Even if sharing knowledge of pathways to gay parenthood becomes a resource for increasing parental consciousness of younger gay men, legal conditions remain crucial for increasing their real-life options. Moreover, due to the intricacies of gay men's pathways to parenthood, gay men seem to be divided more than others in their access to parenthood by their socioeconomic standing as was documented by Takács (2018) for Hungary. In the end, we see that very few Czech gay men pursue parenthood, and only a handful of them actually achieve their goal.

While Sokolová (2009) captured the shift in the timing of coming out in relation to parenthood, we captured the shift in parental consciousness of Czech gay men. While the older generation had to choose either fatherhood while keeping their gayness a secret or accept their gay lives as inherently childless, younger generations (currently in the reproductive age) seem to be conscious of the various types of openly gay parenthood.

This trend is in line with the studies for Poland (Mizielińska et al., 2015), Croatia (Štambuk et al., 2019), and Hungary (Háttér Társaság, 2017), wherein it was found that although most children in same-sex families were born in one of the parents' previous opposite-sex relationship, young gay men and lesbians prefer other ways to parenthood. Despite the severe barriers to gay parenthood persist in these countries, information on same-sex families is becoming more accessible. Moreover, as Sloboda (2021) shows, same-sex parenting has been positively portrayed in the Czech media in the last decade (in contrast to Hungary; cf. Takács, 2018),

which could have contributed to increased parental consciousness among Czech gay men.

The fact that neither the quantitative nor the qualitative data indicated either a clear preference for the only pathway to parenthood or any clear preference for biological fatherhood among gay men may relate to the context-specific barriers to the various pathways to gay parenthood. In contrast to some contexts (Murphy, 2013), promotional strategies of surrogacy agencies are remote for Czechs (geographically and language-wise) and surrogacy abroad is demanding and costly. This could partly explain why Czech gay men do not show any clear preference for biological fatherhood. Gendered essentialising belief in the importance of the mother in early childhood could also contribute to the distancing of gay men from surrogacy in particular.

Yet, in the context of other post-socialist countries, such as Poland, with its severe social and legal barriers to gay parenthood, a much stronger preference for surrogacy over adoption has been identified among gay men (Mizielińska et al., 2015). This might be because adoptions by gay men seem to be easier in Czechia than in Poland. Czech Constitutional Court repealed the previous provision prohibiting adoption by a person in a civil union, which received wide attention in the media (Hašková & Sloboda, 2018). Nešporová (2021) also documents that Czech gay men do not have to hide their partners during the adoption process. In contrast to Poland, preference for adoptions was identified also in Croatia (Štambuk et al., 2019). In this respect, our research also contributes to the knowledge about how geo-temporal conditions shape LGBTQ+ relational lives in yet another context beyond the dominant Western understanding of queer kinship (e.g., Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2018). Comparative international research is needed to explain country differences, though.

Among the main limitations of our study are the limited number of respondents and the absence of exclusively heterosexual men in the quantitative enquiry. While the limited number of respondents allowed for descriptive analyses only, the other limitation did not allow direct comparison with exclusively heterosexual men. Moreover, the focus on men alone does not allow potentially useful comparisons by gender. Finally, researchers in future should pursue international research to allow a direct comparison of how the variety of post-socialist gender regimes (in their Hungarian populist-nationalist, Polish and Slovak Catholicising, or Czech essentialising versions) shape the relational lives of persons with non-normative identities.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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