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The Heteronormativity of the Motherhood

Mandate:

The Role of Woman Identity, Sexual Identity, and Identity-Related Metaperceptions in the Reproductive Intentions of Heterosexual and Queer women

Sammy van der Linden

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Department of Psychology
University of Groningen

Examiner/Daily

supervisor:

Prof. Dr. Ernestine Gordijn

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Abstract

The present research aimed to identify the different processes underlying the intention to have children among heterosexual and queer women, by exploring the role of woman identity, sexual identity and their identity-related metaperceptions in shaping reproductive intentions. A total of 196 heterosexual and 178 queer women filled out an online questionnaire. As expected, we found that heterosexual women have higher intentions to have children than queer women and are believed to be subjected to higher motherhood expectations than queer women. Both heterosexual and queer women believe that societal evaluations of heterosexual motherhood are more positive than of queer motherhood. However, we did not find support for our mediation analyses regarding the role of woman identity, sexual identity, and identity-related metaperceptions. Contrary to our hypothesis, heterosexual women's intentions to have children are predicted by their heterosexual identity rather than their woman identity. Similarly, queer women's intentions to have children were not predicted by their queer identity but their woman identity. Our findings challenge the notion that queer women are childfree by default, but suggest that their lower intentions are due to being subjected less to motherhood expectations and possibly being discouraged from pursuing motherhood due to expected stigma. This research highlights that women's intentions to have children are embedded in societal expectations and heteronormative pressures, and should not be oversimplified as being the result of mere personal desires. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: reproductive intentions, intentions to have children, heterosexual women, queer women, woman identity, sexual identity, metaperceptions, childfreeness.

The Heteronormativity of the Motherhood Mandate: The Role of Woman Identity, Sexual Identity, and Identity-Related Metaperceptions in the Reproductive Intentions of Heterosexual and Queer women

In the Dutch documentary “Spijtmoeders” (2024) [Regretting Motherhood], three women open up about their feelings of regret regarding having children. Two out of the three regretting mothers indicated never having had a deep personal desire to have children, the third one expressed the hope that maternal instincts would materialize the moment her children would be born. If there was no personal aspiration to motherhood in the first place, what motivated these women to go on and have multiple children? Extensive research shows that women face deep societal expectations to have children. This phenomenon has been termed the “motherhood mandate” (Russo, 1976). According to the motherhood mandate, motherhood is framed as a central component of what it means to be a “normal woman”, and the epitome of femininity (Gillespie, 1999, 2000; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). The fact that a “normal woman” means to be a mother (Gillespie, 1999), and that the non-mother is depicted as being cold and living an unfulfilling life (Szekeres et al., 2023; Ashburn-Nardo, 2016), indicates that motherhood is seen as a fixed and central part to the woman identity (Gillespie, 1999; Russo, 1976).

While most women seem to have children at some point in their lives (Hoffert & Martin, 1988; Gotlib, 2016), evidence from the US suggests that the majority of lesbian women in Western contexts remain childfree¹ (Mezey, 2012). Queer (a term used here to indicate non-heterosexual) women are often depicted as childless by default (Clarke et al., 2018). Framing the childfreeness of queer women as being self-evident has resulted in queer women being mostly absent in research on motherhood and childfreeness (Mezey, 2012).

¹ The term “childfree” is used here instead of terms such as “childless” or “non-mother”, which highlights the voluntariness of the choice to not have children instead of implying there to be something lacking from a woman’s life (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Hayfield et al., 2019).

However, research has suggested that queer women do make active reproductive choices (Mezey, 2012), which makes their childfreeness meaningful. Limited studies on the lived experiences of lesbian women have signaled the queer identity as freeing them from the assumptions of motherhood (Gillespie, 2003; Clarke et al., 2018). Considering that queer people have been historically discouraged from pursuing parenthood (Heitlinger, 1991; Morison et al., 2016; Peterson & Engwall, 2013), it can be implied that queer women do not experience the same societal motherhood expectations as heterosexual women, due to their sexual identity. Although women's reproductive decisions can be based on a multitude of reasons, we argue that the difference in reproductive intentions between heterosexual and queer women can be explained partly by their sexual identity and identity-related societal expectations. More specifically, we propose that heterosexual women have higher intentions to have children due to their woman identity, which means that they are subjected to the societal expectations of motherhood. In addition, we suggest that queer women have lower intentions to have children, due to their queer identity and lower associated motherhood expectations.

The Woman as Mother

Historically, women have been expected to both want and have children at some point in their lives (Basten, 2009; Moore, 2014). Although there have been slightly increasing numbers of women in Western societies that are choosing to remain childfree (Bartlett, 1994; Campbell, 1985; Ireland, 1993; McAllister & Clarke, 1998; Morell, 1994), most women have children at some point in their lives (Gotlib, 2016). Due to the dismissal of the importance of reproductive decisions of queer women, research on motherhood has been mostly limited to heterosexual women (Mezey, 2012). The shifting of social and political climates in the 1980's resulted in more opportunities for queer people to have children of their own, which is coined with the term 'Gay baby boom' (Dunne, 2000). Despite this increase in queer women

having children, the majority remains childfree (Mezey, 2012). This implies that their overall childfreeness seems not be solely attributed to having less opportunities to pursue motherhood due to societal and legal obstacles, but could be due to having lesser intentions to have children. This brings us to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Heterosexual women have higher intentions to have children than queer women.

Traditionally, motherhood has been perceived as the essential component of being a woman (Chrisler et al., 2013; Holton et al., 2009), the ultimate life fulfillment for women (Bergstrom-Lynch, 2016), and basically an inevitable path for every woman (Peterson & Engwall, 2013). Within this ideology, the woman as mother fulfills a sacred role (Hays, 1997), and is afforded a multitude of positive traits such as being naturally loving, kind, and perceived as being all-good (Arendell, 2000). The positive attitudes towards women having children have been illustrated in a myriad of studies, such as a study by Heilman and Okimoto (2007), where perceived warmth in female managers was significantly improved when their motherhood was mentioned.

While the woman as mother is seen as a good and valuable member of society (Hays, 1997; Arendell, 2000), breaching with the motherhood norm elicits stigmatization (Gillespie, 2000; Rowlands & Lee, 2006), as it is seen as violating traditional constructions of femininity and womanhood (Gillespie, 2000; Rowlands & Lee, 2006). Although there have been studies done on the overall negative stereotyping of childfree adults, driven by moral outrage over violating the social role of parenthood in general (Ashburn-Nardo, 2016; Bahtiyar-Saygan & Sakallı-Ugurlu, 2019; Ekelund & Ask, 2021), it can be argued that childfree women face even more scrutiny due to the essentialist view on the inseparability of motherhood from womanhood. Childfree women are evaluated to have unfavorable personality traits and are perceived to be psychologically unfulfilled (Ashburn-Nardo, 2016; Ganong et al., 1990;

Mueller & Yoder, 1997). A study by Szekeres et al. (2023) found that violating the norm of motherhood was met with more negative reactions than when women violated other gendered norms. Communality is seen as a typical feminine trait and linked to motherhood (Fiske et al., 1999; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007), but it was found that the non-mother with communal traits was evaluated more negatively than the mother without communal traits, showcasing the deep societal punishment for violating the motherhood norm (Szekeres et al., 2023).

Unsurprisingly, voluntarily childfree women elicited more hostile reactions than women who were biologically unable to have children (Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Szekeres et al., 2023). This shows the extensiveness of negative social reactions and stigmatization directed at childfree women.

Given the deep societal expectations of motherhood, and the social penalties associated with childfreeness (Gillespie, 2000; Rowlands & Lee, 2006), we argue that perceived expectations and judgments from society play an important role in women's reproductive intentions. Beliefs about societal expectations or judgments about the self or the group one belongs to are called *metaperceptions* (Laing et al., 1967). These metaperceptions can have important consequences as they elicit emotional or behavioral reactions (Gomez, 2002) and can influence decision-making (e.g., regarding career paths; Kalokerinos et al., 2014). Within this context the metaperception could be the belief that society believes that women should become mothers. Given that gender socialization occurs at an early stage in the lives of women, forming their expectations about what a woman should or should not do (Russo, 1976), we expect that both heterosexual and queer women hold the "women should become mothers" metaperception. The next hypothesis follows from this:

Hypothesis 2a. Both heterosexual and queer women believe that society expects women to have children (the "women should become mothers" metaperception).

However, research implies that motherhood expectations seem to be projected mostly on heterosexual women (Macintyre, 1976). This could be due to essentialist views on motherhood, where the biological mother within a heterosexual marriage is seen as the archetype mother (Miall & March, 2005). Although queer women experience more negative interpersonal evaluations than heterosexual women (Bettinsoli et al., 2020; Herek, 2000), and are seen as violating heteronormative gender norms (Bettinsoli et al., 2020), being a queer mother elicits fewer social penalties than being a heterosexual non-mother (Szekeres et al., 2023). Following these considerations, we propose the next hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2b. Both heterosexual and queer women believe that motherhood expectations are higher for heterosexual women than for queer women.

Arguably, there could be a multitude of reasons for women to remain childfree. Literature has shown that environmental concerns, fear of the pregnancy process, judging the self as unsuitable for parenthood, and simply not wanting to have children are common factors named in the decision to remain childfree (Mollen, 2006; Bimha & Chadwick, 2016; Mandujano-Salazar, 2019). However, there is a clear distinction between what society views as “desirable” candidates for motherhood – White, heterosexual, able-bodied, high SES – and “undesirable” candidates – women of color, lesbian, disabled, low SES – who are often discouraged from pursuing parenthood (Heitlinger, 1991; Morison et al., 2016; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). Following this reasoning, queer women could be demoralized in their intentions to have children due to expected or internalized social stigma, which brings us to our next hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2c. Both heterosexual and queer women believe that societal evaluations of heterosexual motherhood (the “heterosexual mothers are good mothers” metaperception) are more positive than of queer motherhood (the “queer mothers are good mothers” metaperception).

Woman Identity, Sexual Identity, and Identity-Related Metaperceptions

According to the social identity theory, one's personal identity is (partly) defined by their membership to a group. Gender identity has been shown to be one of the most salient identities that incorporates strong social roles and norms (Tajfel, 1974). Women that identify strongly with being women show a tendency of self-stereotyping themselves in culturally gender-typical characteristics (Chen et al., 2004; Van Breen et al., 2017). Given the centrality of motherhood in the woman identity, and the tendency of people to identify with their salient social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), it can be argued that the social identity of being a woman is an important factor in women's intentions to have children.

Although heterosexual and queer women share the woman identity, we expect that the woman identity is more predictive in heterosexual women's reproductive intentions compared to queer women's intentions. We argue that the queer identity of queer women could possibly work as a buffer against motherhood expectations. By virtue of their sexuality, lesbian women have been seen as escaping social pressure to become mothers, and have the freedom to "construct their own biographies" (Illouz et al., 1997). The possibility to define their own identity without reference to having children has been depicted as a major advantage to their sexual identity (Dunne, 1997). Studies on the lived experiences of lesbian women highlight their active voluntarily childfreeness, citing their queer identity as freeing them from the assumptions of motherhood (Gillespie, 2003; Clarke et al., 2018). Especially lesbian identification has been reported as a highly politicized identity that is linked to fighting patriarchal norms (Hagai & Seymour, 2021; Kitzinger, 1978). Additionally, social minority groups show high salience of their minority group membership in the concept of self, which may facilitate coping with the insecure status of belonging to a social minority (Mcguire et al., 1978). A possible coping strategy is stressing unique characteristics of one's group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which could be the inherent childfreeness of being queer. In

sum, we expect that the difference in reproductive intentions between heterosexual and queer women are partly explained by different salient identities. In addition to different salient identities, we believe that identity-related metaperceptions play an important role in the difference between heterosexual and queer women's reproductive intentions. From this point, we propose our final hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a. For heterosexual women, the woman identity is more predictive of their intentions to have children than the heterosexual identity. And **(H3b)** high intentions to have children are mediated by the belief that society expects women to have children (the “women should have children” metaperception) and by the belief that society holds positive evaluations of heterosexual motherhood (the “heterosexual mothers are good mothers” metaperception).

Hypothesis 4a. For queer women, the queer identity is more predictive of their intentions to have children than the woman identity. And **(H4a)** low intentions to have children are mediated by the belief that society does not hold positive evaluations of queer motherhood and by the belief that societal expectations for queer women to become mothers are low.

Method

Participants and design

Based on a Monte Carlo power analysis for indirect effects, to obtain a statistical power of .8 in both groups with moderate correlations of $r = .3$, we needed a minimum of 360 participants. The initial sample consisted of 380 participants, to account for possible attrition based on previously determined exclusion criteria. Participants were recruited online via the crowdsourcing platform Prolific. The study consisted of a questionnaire developed by the research team, and was conducted online through the ‘Qualtrics’ survey portal. The survey had a duration of 8 minutes approximately. Upon completion of the questionnaire,

participants received a financial compensation of 1.20 pounds. We only collected data of participants who self-identified as women, aged 18 to 36 years old, and who did not have children at the time of filling out the questionnaire. Our exclusion criteria consisted of excluding participants who failed at least two out of the three control questions, who showed response biases patterns that could indicate flatlining, who completed less than 50% of the survey, and/or who finished the questionnaire in less than 2 minutes. Using these criteria, six cases were removed from the dataset due to completing the questionnaire under the required 2 minutes. Hence our final sample included 374 participants.

From the total sample 196 women identified as heterosexual, 115 as bisexual, 38 as lesbian, 18 as asexual and nine women indicated 'other' for their sexual orientation (namely, three as queer and six as pansexual). For the sake of the study, the participants were divided in a heterosexual ($N=196$) and a queer group ($N=178$). To ensure that the participants correctly filled out the questionnaire (given that all items were written in English), we recruited from English-speaking countries. The nationalities of the participants were White ($N=380$), Black ($N=12$), Asian ($N=27$), Mixed ($N=20$), and Other ($N=3$; namely, Hispanic, South Asian and White-Irish).

The research design was a between-subjects (*heterosexual women* versus *queer women*) quasi-experimental approach. The predictor variables were identification with being a woman (woman identity) and identification with sexual orientation (sexual identity), and our dependent variable was the intention to have a child. The mediators included in the design were metaperceptions regarding the role of motherhood in relation to womanhood, and metaperceptions on heterosexual and queer motherhood. For the sake of exploratory purposes, the personal beliefs about being a mother themselves was examined, as well as several other established predictors of behavioral intentions according to the theory of planned behavior (namely, attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms).

Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained before we began recruiting participants by the ethics committee of the University of Groningen. Before participating in the survey, participants were asked if they consented to participating to the study and whether they agreed to their data being used. If participants did not consent to participation and data collection, they were led to the end of the questionnaire and no data was used. At the end of the survey, participants were given the option to comment on the survey and an e-mail address was provided should they have any remaining questions or remarks. Recognizing that the questions about sexual orientation, societal beliefs and motherhood might be distressing to some, internet resources were included in the debriefing dedicated to providing valuable support.

The questionnaire was created with the Qualtrics program, which was linked to the Prolific website. Initially, participants provided demographic information (by using the same categories as used by Prolific.org), namely age, ethnicity, and their sexual orientation. Following this, we measured identification with being a woman (woman identity) and their sexual orientation (sexual identity), beliefs regarding societal perspectives on the importance of motherhood in the context of womanhood (the “women should become mothers” metaperception), beliefs regarding societal perspectives about heterosexual and queer mothers (the “heterosexual mothers are good mothers” and “queer mothers are good mothers” metaperception), beliefs about societal expectations concerning their own decision to have children, followed by statements that assess self-perceptions as potential mothers, and their actual intentions of having children as dependent variable. To control for the classic predictors of intention according to the theory of planned behavior, participants' personal attitudes regarding having children, perceived behavioral control and subjective norms were measured.

The questionnaire included three attention checks, designed to maintain participants' attention and to exclude participants that show deviant response patterns. An example was "Please select '2' as an answer, this is an attention check."

Independent Variables

Answers were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *absolutely disagree*, 7 = *absolutely agree*) for all the measures.

Woman Identity

For the assessment of participant's degree of identifying with being a woman, we combined the centrality items of the identification scale developed by Leach et al. (2008) and the single-item measure of social identification developed by Postmes et al. (2013). The identification scale consisted of the items "I often think about the fact that I am a woman"; "The fact that I am a woman is an important part of my identity"; and "Being a woman is an important part of how I see myself". The single-item social identification item was "I identify with being a woman". The Cronbach's alpha of the combined scale was $\alpha=.83$.

Sexual Identity

Sexual identity was measured similarly as to woman identity, namely combining the centrality items of the identification scale developed by Leach et al. (2008) and the single-item measure of social identification developed by Postmes et al. (2013). For the purpose of this study the term 'queer' was used as a collective name for all sexual orientations that are non-heterosexual, as indicated in the questionnaire. To measure sexual identity, two different questionnaires paths were made depending on the sexual orientation being either heterosexual or queer. Items such as "I often think about the fact that I am heterosexual" and "I often think about the fact that I am queer" were used, depending on the participant's sexual orientation. The Cronbach's alpha were $\alpha=.82$ for the heterosexual identity scale, and $\alpha=.93$ for the queer identity scale.

“Women should be Mothers” Metaperception

To measure the “women should be mothers” metaperception, the beliefs about societal expectations regarding motherhood in relation to womanhood were measured using items that were developed by the research team. All items on the scale began with the premise “I believe that most people in society...” and would be followed by statements such as “...believe that having children is a core aspect of being a woman”; “...expect women to have children at some point in their lives”; and “...believe that being a good woman requires having children.” The Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha=.94$.

Metaperceptions about Heterosexual and Queer Mothers

In order to compare the metaperceptions about heterosexual and queer mothers, items were developed by the research team. The statements on metaperceptions were partially adapted from Leach et al. (2007) and Brambilla et al. (2011), with “capable” being the operationalization of competence, “kind” the operationalization of warmth, and “reliable” and “good” being the operationalization of morality. Firstly, the perceived expectations were assessed with the items “I believe that most people in society expect heterosexual women to have children at some point in their lives” and “I believe that most people in society expect queer women to have children at some point in their lives.” Next, we measured the perceived evaluations of heterosexual and queer mothers with the statements “I believe that most people in society believe that heterosexual mothers are...” and “I believe that most people in society believe queer mothers are...”, after which participants were asked to indicate to which extent they believed the mothers to be perceived as good, capable, kind, and reliable mothers. The Cronbach’s alpha were $\alpha=.53$ for the societal expectations scale, $\alpha=.97$ for the heterosexual mother scale, and $\alpha=.94$ for the queer mother scale.

Dependent Variable

Intentions to have a Child

The actual intentions to have a child were measured by a scale developed by the research team. The items included “I want to have a child at some point in the future”; “I intend to have a child at some point in the future”; and “I will try to have a child at some point in the future.” The Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha=.99$.

Explorative Variables

Theory of Planned Behavior: Attitudes, Perceived Behavioral Control, and Subjective Norms

We controlled for the original predictors of intention according to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

Attitudes. We measured personal attitudes about having children by partially adapting items from Ajzen and Klobas (2013), such as “Having a child would be fulfilling” and the reverse-coded item “There are more important things in life than having a child.” The Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha=.89$.

Perceived Behavioral Control. As a measure for perceived behavioral control, we partially adapted items from Vikat et al. (2005) to assess possible factors that would influence participants’ intentions to have children. The statement was “Having a child or not would depend on...”, and would be followed by items such as “...my housing condition”, “...having a suitable partner”, and “...availability of childcare.” The Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha=.93$.

Subjective Norms. Beliefs about societal expectations of having children, as a measure for subjective norms, were partially adapted from Vikat et al. (2005). The two items consisted of “People close to me expect me to have a child at some point in the future”; and “Most people in society expect me to have a child at some point in the future.” The Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha=.70$.

Beliefs about Societal Expectations and Reactions Regarding own Decision to have Children

Beliefs about societal expectations concerning participants' own decisions to have children were included for exploration. The scale was developed by the research team and the items included were "I expect positive reactions from society if someone like me has children"; "I expect positive reactions from society if someone like me remains childfree"; and "I believe that most people in society expect someone like me to be a good mother." The Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha=.80$.

Personal Beliefs about being a Mother

Self-perceptions as potential mothers were included for exploration and assessed by items developed by the research team, namely "I think I would be a good mother"; "I think I would be a capable mother"; "I think I would be a kind mother"; "I think I would be a reliable mother." The Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha=.93$.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

The preliminary analysis of the data revealed some interesting bivariate correlations between the key variables used in the hypotheses. We report these correlations separately for heterosexual participants (Table 1) and queer participants (Table 2).

Heterosexual Participants

As can be seen in Table 1, heterosexual individuals that showed high intentions to have children identified strongly with being a woman as well as being heterosexual, and believed in their own motherhood capabilities. Sexual identity seemed a stronger indicator for the intention to have children than woman identity. The "women should become mothers" metaperception correlated significantly with the "heterosexual mothers are good mothers" metaperception, but not with the "queer mothers are good mothers" metaperception.

Table 1
Bivariate Correlations Heterosexual Participants

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Intention	-								
2. Woman identity	.148*	-							
3. Sexual identity	.253**	.478**	-						
4. "Women should be mothers" metaperception	-.012	.127	.099	-					
5. "Heterosexual mothers are good mothers" metaperception	.064	.197**	.124	.152*	-				
6. "Queer mothers are good mothers" metaperception	.084	.120	.084	.019	.517**	-			
7. Expectations heterosexual women	-.075	.088	-.002	.606**	.203**	.003	-		
8. Expectations queer women	.080	.000	.098	.373**	.097	.281**	.375**	-	
9. Own motherhood capabilities	.655**	.218**	.199**	.081	.172*	.203**	-.067	.019	-

Note. $N=196$

* $p < .05$ level (two-tailed)

** $p < .01$ level (two-tailed)

Queer Participants

Table 2 shows that individuals that have higher intentions to have children identified more strongly with being a woman, believed that heterosexual mothers and queer mothers were more evaluated as "good mothers" by society, and believed in their own motherhood capabilities. No correlation between sexual identity and intention was found. Individuals that believed more that heterosexual women are being expected to become mothers agreed more strongly with the "women should become mothers" metaperception, and with the "heterosexual mothers are good mothers" metaperception. Stronger queer identity was related stronger beliefs that heterosexual mothers, and not queer mothers, are perceived as good mothers.

Table 2
Bivariate Correlations Queer Participants

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Intention	-								
2. Woman identity	.189*	-							
3. Sexual identity	.068	.120	-						
4. "Women should be mothers" metaperception	-.073	.017	.011	-					
5. "Heterosexual mothers are good mothers" metaperception	.174*	.171*	.199**	.162*	-				
6. "Queer mothers are good mothers" metaperception	.198**	.142	-.027	.016	.372**	-			
7. Expectations heterosexual women	-.047	-.028	.176*	.586**	.297**	-.011	-		
8. Expectations queer women	-.068	-.002	.063	.157*	.110	.181*	.325**	-	
9. Own motherhood capabilities	.643**	.247**	-.013	-.009	.142	.129	.005	-.082	-

Note. $N=178$

* $p < .05$ level (two-tailed)

** $p < .01$ level (two-tailed)

Testing the Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

In order to test the hypothesis that heterosexual women have higher intentions to have children than queer women, a one-way ANOVA with heterosexual and queer participants as between subjects variable was used. In line with this hypothesis, heterosexual women were found to have higher intentions to have children ($M=4.87$, $SD=2.05$) than queer women ($M=3.33$, $SD=2.14$), $F(1,327)=50.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2=.12$.

Hypothesis 2

According to Hypothesis 2a, both heterosexual and queer women hold the belief that society expects women to become mothers in general (the "women should become mothers" metaperception). This was examined by using an independent-samples t-test. Both the mean

score of the heterosexual women ($M=4.72$, $SD=1.66$) as of the queer women ($M=4.99$, $SD=1.63$) significantly exceeded the neutral point of 4 on the 7-point Likert scale, $t(195)=6.1$, $p<.001$, $d=.44$ and $t(177)=8.09$, $p<.001$, $d=.61$, respectively. Another independent-samples t-test shows that the two means did not differ significantly from each other, $t(372)=-1.56$, $p=.059$, $d=-.16$. These findings indicate that both heterosexual women and queer women have the belief that society expects women to become mothers, confirming Hypothesis 2a.

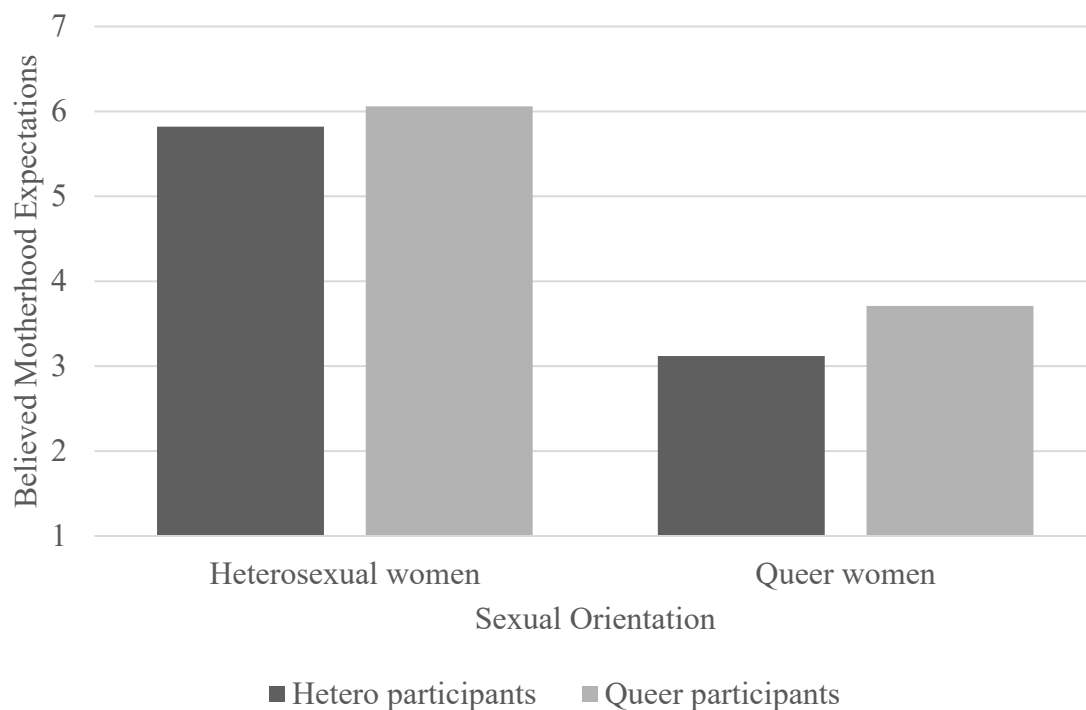
As stated in Hypothesis 2b, both heterosexual and queer women believe that societal expectations of women becoming mothers are stronger for heterosexual women than for queer women. This was tested with a 2 (sexual orientation: heterosexual women vs queer women) x 2 (societal expectation to become a mother: about heterosexual women vs about queer women) Analysis of Variance with the first factor between subjects and the second factor within subjects. In line with Hypothesis 2b, the analysis revealed a main effect of societal expectations, showing that societal expectations of women becoming mothers are indeed perceived to be higher for heterosexual women ($M=5.94$, $SD=1.33$) than for queer women ($M=3.40$, $SD=1.33$, $F(1,372)=1067.54$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.74$). A main effect of sexual orientation was found as well, showing that the beliefs of the queer participants about societal expectations for heterosexual and queer women to become mothers are stronger than the beliefs of the heterosexual participants, $F(1,372)=13.69$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.036$. This means that queer women hold stronger beliefs that society expects heterosexual and queer women alike to become mothers than heterosexual women.

These main effects were qualified by an interaction effect between sexual orientation and societal expectations, $F(1,372)=4.98$, $p=.02$, $\eta^2=.01$, suggesting that the sexual orientation of the participants (heterosexual vs queer) moderates the relationship between societal expectations regarding heterosexual and queer women having children. Specifically, t-tests showed that, although both groups showed similar beliefs about the societal

expectations regarding heterosexual women becoming mothers ($M_{hetero}=5.82$, $SD=1.45$; $M_{queer}=6.06$, $SD=1.16$; $t(372)=-1.76$, $p=.08$, $d=-.18$), the queer group had significantly higher beliefs about queer women being expected to become mothers ($M=3.71$, $SD=1.31$), $t(372)=-4.35$, $p<.001$, $d=-.45$, compared to the heterosexual group ($M=3.12$, $SD=1.16$) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

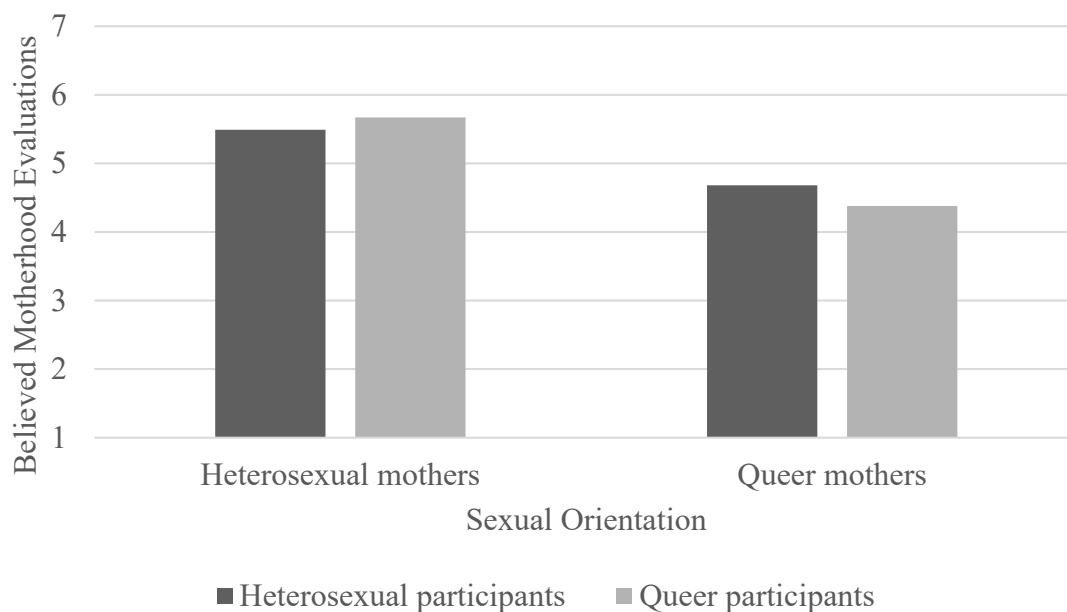
Beliefs about the Perceived Motherhood Expectations for Heterosexual and Queer Women



Hypothesis 2c proposes that both heterosexual and queer women believe that societal evaluations of heterosexual motherhood (the “heterosexual mothers are good mothers” metaperception) are more positive than of queer motherhood (the “queer mothers are good mothers” metaperception). We tested this by means of a 2 (sexual orientation: heterosexual women vs queer women) by 2 (beliefs about motherhood: about heterosexual mothers vs about queer mothers) Analysis of Variance with the first factor between subjects and the second factor within subjects. In line with Hypothesis 2c, the analysis revealed a main effect

of beliefs about heterosexual and queer mothers, showing that it is expected that society has more positive beliefs about heterosexual mothers ($M=5.58$, $SD=.98$) than about queer mothers ($M=4.54$, $SD=1.18$, $F(1,372)=316.13$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.46$). No main effect of sexual orientation was found, $F(1,372)=.427$, $p=.51$, $\eta^2=.001$. However, a significant interaction effect was found, indicating that the difference between beliefs about heterosexual and queer mothers was moderated by the sexual orientation of the participants, $F(1,372)=16.30$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.04$. T-tests showed that queer women expect that societal beliefs about heterosexual mothers are more positive ($M=5.67$, $SD=.92$) compared to the expectations of heterosexual women ($M=5.49$, $SD=1.03$; $t(372)=-1.74$, $p=.04$, $d=-.18$), and expect societal beliefs about queer mothers to be more negative ($M=4.38$, $SD=1.18$) compared to the expectations of heterosexual participants ($M=4.68$, $SD=1.17$, $t(372)=2.47$, $p=.007$, $d=.26$; see Figure 2). Interestingly, this confirms our hypothesis that both heterosexual and queer participants expect heterosexual mothers to be perceived more favorably than queer mothers by society, but also shows that this effect is somewhat stronger for the queer participants.

Figure 2
Beliefs about the Perceived Motherhood Evaluations of Heterosexual and Queer Mothers



Hypothesis 3

According to Hypothesis 3a, for heterosexual women woman identity is a stronger predictor of the intention to have children than sexual identity, and according to Hypothesis 3b this is mediated by the “women should be mothers” metaperception and the “heterosexual mothers are good mothers” metaperception. In order to test this hypothesis, a linear regression analysis was conducted with only the heterosexual participants (see Table 3).

Table 3

Regression Analysis of Identity, Intention, and Metaperception for Heterosexual Participants

	Model 1						Model 2					
	<i>R</i> ²	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	<i>Beta</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	<i>Beta</i>	<i>p</i>
	.065						.068					
(constant)		2.619	.942	[.761-4.4477]		.006	2.513	1.136	[-.273-4.753]		.028	
Woman identity		.077	.173	[-.265-.418]	.035	.659	.073	.177	[-.275,.421]	.033	.680	
Sexual identity		.373	.125	[.127,.619]	.237	.003	.374	.125	[.127,.621]	.238	.003	
“Women should be mothers”							-.056	.088	[-.230,.118]	-.045	.527	
“Hetero mothers are good mothers”							.070	.143	[-.213,.353]	.035	.626	

a. Dependent variable: Intention

b. Predictors: (Constant), Woman identity, Sexual identity (Model 1)

c. Predictors: (Constant), Woman identity, Sexual identity, “Women should become mothers”, “Hetero mothers are good mothers” (Model 2)

In the first step of the stepwise linear regression analysis, woman identity and sexual identity were entered as predictors of intention ($R^2=.07$, $F(2,193)=6.73$, $p=.002$). Woman identity was not significant ($\beta=.04$, $t=.44$, $p=.66$), while sexual identity did appear to be a significant predictor of intention ($\beta=.24$, $t=2.99$, $p=.003$). This suggests that heterosexual women’s intention to have children is predicted by their identification of being heterosexual rather than with being a woman, which is contrary to Hypothesis 3a.

In the second step of the analysis, we tested whether the independent variable (woman identity) predicts the mediators (the metaperception variables). Woman identity and sexual identity were entered as predictors, and the potential mediators (metaperception of women becoming mothers and heterosexual mothers being good mothers) were entered as dependent variables. For the “women should become mothers” metaperception ($R^2=.02$, $F(2,193)=1.77$, $p=.17$), neither woman identity ($\beta=.1$, $t=1.27$, $p=.2$) nor sexual identity ($\beta=.05$, $t=.61$, $p=.54$) were significant predictors. Further, for the “heterosexual mothers are good mothers” metaperception ($R^2=.04$, $F(2,193)=4.01$, $p=.02$), only woman identity predicted the perceived positive beliefs about heterosexual mothers ($\beta=.178$, $t=2.22$, $p=.03$), while sexual identity was not significant ($\beta=.04$, $t=.48$, $p=.63$).

Given the fact that woman identity did not predict intention, and only partially predicted the mediators, we could not test the predicted mediation pattern. This suggests no support for both Hypothesis 3a and 3b.

Hypothesis 4

According to Hypothesis 4a, for queer women the intention to have children is more strongly predicted by sexual identity than woman identity, and according to Hypothesis 4b this is mediated by the “queer mothers are good mothers” metaperception and beliefs about societal expectations of queer women becoming mothers. In order to test this hypothesis, a linear regression analysis was conducted with only the queer participants (see Table 4).

Table 4*Regression Analysis of Identity, Intention, and Metaperception for Queer Participants*

	Model 1						Model 2					
	<i>R</i> ²	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	<i>Beta</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	<i>Beta</i>	<i>p</i>
	.038						.080					
(constant)		1.093	.884	[-.652,2.838]		.218	.402	1.054		[-1.677,2.482]		.703
Woman identity		.343	.139	[.068,.618]	.184	.015	.287	.139		[.013,.561]	.154	.040
Sexual identity		.061	.099	[-.135,.257]	.046	.539	.082	.098		[-.112,.276]	.062	.404
“Queer mothers are good mothers”							.357	.136		[.088,.625]	.197	.010
Expectations queer women							-.175	.122		[-.415,.064]	-.107	.151

a. Dependent variable: Intention

b. Predictors: (Constant), Woman identity, Sexual identity (Model 1)

c. Predictors: (Constant), Woman identity, Sexual identity, “Queer mothers are good mothers”, Expectations for queer women (Model 2)

In the first step of the stepwise linear regression analysis, sexual identity and woman identity were entered as predictors of intention ($R^2=.04$, $F(2,175)=3.45$, $p=.03$). Sexual identity was not a predictor of the intention to have children ($\beta=.05$, $t=.62$, $p=.54$), while woman identity significantly predicted higher intentions ($\beta=.18$, $t=2.46$, $p=.02$). This suggests that queer women’s intention to have children is predicted by their identification of being a woman rather than with being queer, which is contrary to Hypothesis 4a.

In the second step of the analysis, to test whether the identification variables predict the metaperception variables, woman identity and sexual identity were entered as predictors, and the potential mediators were entered as dependent variables. Neither sexual identity nor woman identity predicted the metaperception of queer mothers being good mothers ($R^2=.02$, $F(2,175)=1.97$, $p=.14$; $\beta=-.05$, $t=-.59$, $p=.55$; $\beta=.15$, $t=1.95$, $p=.052$), or the societal expectation of queer women becoming mothers ($R^2=.004$, $F(2,175)=.35$, $p=.7$; $\beta=.06$, $t=.84$, $p=.4$; $\beta=-.01$, $t=-.13$, $p=.89$).

Given the fact that woman identity rather than sexual identity predicted the intention to have children, and the identification variables did not predict the proposed mediators, we were not able to test the predicted mediation pattern. This suggests no support for both Hypothesis 4a and 4b.

Exploratory Analysis

Theory of Planned Behavior

The usual predictors of intention, as used in the theory of planned behavior (TPB), are *attitudes*, *subjective norms* and *perceived behavioral control (pbc)*. The exploratory analysis of the data revealed some interesting correlations between the TPB-variables, the intention to have children and our proposed predictors.

Heterosexual Participants. In line with the theory of planned behavior, attitudes ($r=.84, p<.001$)², subjective norm ($r=.51, p<.001$), and pbc ($r=.17, p=.02$) were all correlated with intention. The metaperception that women should become mothers was significantly correlated with subjective norms ($r=.22, p=.002$), meaning that individuals that report experiencing social expectations to have children themselves also perceive women in general as to be expected to have children. High subjective norms were not correlated with the metaperception that heterosexual mothers are good mothers ($r=.07, p=.36$), nor with the metaperception that queer mothers are good mothers ($r=.03, p=.65$).

High womanhood identifiers held positive attitudes about motherhood ($r=.17, p=.02$), reported experiencing high subjective norms ($r=.17, p=.02$), but no high pbc ($r=.07, p=.32$). Individuals that strongly identified with being heterosexual also held positive attitudes about motherhood ($r=.36, p<.001$), reported high subjective norms ($r=.16, p=.02$), but no high pbc ($r=.071, p=.323$). This means that those that identify more strongly with being a woman and

² The correlation between intention and attitudes is of such magnitude, that it seems to measure the same construct.

with being heterosexual are more positive about becoming mothers as well as experiencing higher social expectations to have children, but do not express perceived control over achieving having children in the light of external factors and obstacles (i.e., having a partner or availability of childcare).

Queer Participants. For the queer participants a similar pattern was shown, with attitudes ($r=.88, p<.001$), subjective norms ($r=.40, p<.001$), and pbc ($r=.35, p<.001$) all strongly correlated with the intention to have children. Subjective norms correlated with the metaperception that heterosexual mothers are good mothers ($r=.28, p<.001$), but not the with the metaperception that queer mothers are good mothers ($r=.06, p=.40$), nor with the metaperception that women should become mothers ($r=.11, p=.14$). Woman identity was significantly correlated with positive attitudes about motherhood ($r=.18, p=.02$), subjective norms ($r=.17, p=.03$), and with pbc ($r=.16, p=.04$), while sexual identity was unrelated to all TPB-variables, ($r=.06, p=.40$; $r=.01, p=.87$; $r=-.01, p=.95$, respectively).

Comparing Heterosexual and Queer Participants. In order to test whether there are differences between heterosexual and queer women in the three TPB-predictors of intention, a series of independent-samples t-tests were performed. As expected, heterosexual women had more positive attitudes about motherhood ($M=3.65, SD=1.49$) than queer women ($M=2.72, SD=1.5$; $t(372)=5.98, p<.001, d=.62$), although both means were significantly lower than the neutral point 4 ($t_{hetero}(195)=-3.23, p<.001, d=-.23$; $t_{queer}(177)=-11.32, p<.001, d=-.84$), which means that both groups had relatively negative attitudes towards motherhood. Heterosexual women experienced more subjective norms to become mothers ($M=5.53, SD=1.25$) than queer women ($M=4.69, SD=1.49$; $t(372)=5.92, p<.001, d=.61$), meaning that heterosexual women more strongly experience their social environment as expecting them to have children than queer women. No difference was found for pbc ($M_{hetero}=5.66, SD=1.34$; $M_{queer}= 5.43, SD=1.67$; $t(372)=1.46, p=.15, d=.15$), meaning that both heterosexual and

queer participants perceive equal amounts of control over their intentions to have children.

Predicting Intention: Controlling for TPB-Variables. We were interested in whether the identification and metaperception variables remain predictors of intention to have children, when controlling for the TPB-variables. Hence, we tested this in the following analyses.

Heterosexual Participants. A linear regression was conducted, entering sexual identity, woman identity, the “women should be mothers” metaperception, the “heterosexual mothers are good mothers” metaperception, and in addition, subjective norms and pbc as predictors³. The model was significant ($R^2=.32$, $F(6,189)=14.9$, $p<.001$). While woman identity ($\beta=-.02$, $t=-.32$, $p=.75$), the “heterosexual mothers are good mothers” metaperception ($\beta=.04$, $t=.65$, $p=.52$), and pbc ($\beta=.1$, $t=1.65$, $p=.1$) were not significant, sexual identity ($\beta=.19$, $t=2.73$, $p=.007$) and subjective norms ($\beta=.5$, $t=7.9$, $p<.001$) predicted intention. This means that, when controlling for the usual predictors of intention, only heterosexual identity continues to predict heterosexual women’s intentions to have children.

Queer Participants. A linear regression was conducted, entering sexual identity, woman identity, the “queer women should be mothers” metaperception, the “queer mothers are good mothers” metaperception, perceived societal expectations of queer women becoming mothers predict intention, pbc and subjective norms as predictors. The model was significant ($R^2=.27$, $F(6,171)=10.77$, $p<.001$). The metaperception of queer mothers being good mothers ($\beta=.18$, $t=2.65$, $p=.009$), perceived expectations of queer women becoming mothers ($\beta=-.14$, $t=-2.05$, $p=.04$), pbc ($\beta=.23$, $t=3.39$, $p<.001$), and subjective norms ($\beta=.33$, $t=4.82$, $p<.001$) predicted intention, while woman identity ($\beta=.06$, $t=.95$, $p=.35$) and sexual identity ($\beta=.07$, $t=1.01$, $p=.28$) were not significant. Woman identity did not remain a

³ Due to the high correlation between intention and attitudes, we have decided to leave attitudes out as a predictor to ensure that not the same construct would be measured.

predictor of intention when adding pbc and subjective norms as predictors. However, the metaperception that queer mothers are good mothers did predict intention, as well as perceived expectations of queer women becoming mothers.

Queer Defined: Lesbian, Bisexual, Asexual, and Other

For the purpose of this study, the non-heterosexual participants were grouped together under the term “queer”. Of the 178 participants, participants who indicated to be bisexual were mostly represented in the sample ($N=113$). Although the samples of the other sexual orientations were too small to conclude from ($N_{lesbian}=38$, $N_{asexual}=18$, $N_{other}=9$), we were interested in possible patterns in the lesbian sample that were distinctly different from the bisexual sample. We have included the bivariate correlational tables in the Appendix.

For the bisexual participants, high intention was correlated with woman identity ($r=.24$, $p=.01$), while for the lesbian sample neither woman identity ($r=.05$, $p=.78$) nor sexual identity ($r=-.04$, $p=.80$) were correlated with intention. Believing in own motherhood capabilities was significantly correlated with high intention for both bisexuals ($r=.23$, $p=.01$) and lesbians ($r=.64$, $p<.001$). For bisexual participants, the higher the “women should become mothers” metaperception, the more positively they believed that heterosexual mothers would be valued by society ($r=.30$, $p=.001$), and the more they believed that heterosexual women ($r=.59$, $p<.001$) and queer women ($r=.27$, $p=.003$) are to be expected to become mothers. Interestingly, for lesbians, the higher the “women should become mothers” metaperception, the less they intended to have children themselves ($r=-.32$, $p=.05$).

Discussion

The aim of the present research was to investigate the different processes underlying the intention to have children among heterosexual and queer women. More specifically, we examined the relationships between woman identity, sexual identity, identity-related metaperceptions and the intention to have children.

Firstly, we predicted and found that heterosexual women have significantly higher intentions to have children than queer women (H1). In line with Hypothesis 2a, we found that both heterosexual and queer women believe that society expects women to become mothers (the “women should become mothers” metaperception), and that they believe that these societal expectations are stronger for heterosexual women than queer women (H2b). Next, we predicted that both heterosexual and queer women believe that societal expectations of heterosexual motherhood (the “heterosexual mothers are good mothers” metaperception) are more positive than of queer motherhood (the “queer mothers are good mothers” metaperception). Our data supported this, thus confirming Hypothesis 2c.

Further, we expected that the higher intentions of heterosexual women to have children were due to their woman identity (H3a), and mediated by the “women should become mothers” and “heterosexual mothers are good mothers” metaperception (H3b). Contrary to our hypothesis, heterosexual women that intended on having children identified more with being heterosexual than with being a woman. In addition, woman identity did not predict any of the mediators, which means that our results showed no support for Hypothesis 3a and 3b.

Finally, we expected that the lower intentions of queer women to have children were due to their queer identity (H4a), and mediated by the “queer mothers are good mothers” metaperception and beliefs about societal expectations of queer women becoming mothers. Our results showed that woman identity rather than sexual identity predicted the intention to have children, which was contrary to our hypothesis. Furthermore, queer identity did not predict any of our proposed mediators. This means that we were not able to find support for Hypothesis 4a and 4b.

Exploratory Findings

Theory of Planned Behavior

In an exploratory analysis, we examined correlational patterns between our predictors of intention to have children and the usual predictors of intention according to the theory of planned behavior (namely attitudes, perceived behavioral control (pbc), and subjective norms). As expected, all TPB-variables correlated with the intention to have children. Our data revealed that heterosexual women have more positive attitudes about motherhood than queer women, although neither group showed significantly positive attitudes. Heterosexual women also appeared to experience higher subjective norms to become mothers than queer women. In addition, heterosexual women that identified strongly with being a woman had more positive attitudes regarding motherhood, but also experienced high social pressure to have children themselves (subjective norms). For queer women we found that experiencing social pressure to become mothers themselves was correlated with the belief that heterosexual mothers are evaluated positively by society (the “heterosexual mothers are good mothers” metaperception), but not with the belief that queer mothers are evaluated positively (the “queer mothers are good mothers” metaperception).

To assess whether our variables effectively predicted intention, we controlled for the TPB-variables in our hypotheses. Our data showed that for heterosexual women, only heterosexual identity predicted intention when accounting for the TPB-variables. Neither woman identity or sexual identity predicted intention to have children for queer women, only the “queer mothers are good mothers” metaperception and the belief that queer women are expected to become mothers.

Comparing Bisexual and Lesbian Sample

Bisexual women that identified strongly with being a woman had high intentions to have children, while for the lesbian sample neither woman identity or sexual identity was correlated with intention. In line with the queer sample grouped together, the bisexual women showed high correlations between the “women should become mothers” metaperception and the “heterosexual mothers are good mothers” metaperception. For lesbians, the higher the

“women should become mothers” metaperception, the less they intended to have children themselves. Bisexual and lesbian women showed pointedly different patterns, although these results should be interpreted with caution because of a small sample size.

Theoretical Implications

We found that heterosexual women indeed have higher intentions to have children than queer women. This is in line with literature that shows that most heterosexual women have children, while the majority of lesbian women remain childfree (Hoffert & Martin, 1988; Gotlib, 2016; Mezey, 2012). As expected, our results showed that although both heterosexual and queer women believe that society expects women in general to become mothers, there is a consensus that these expectations are much greater for heterosexual women than for queer women. Extensive literature has shown that there are deep societal expectations for women to become mothers, even suggesting that to be a “normal woman” one has to fulfill the role of a mother (Gillespie, 1999, 2000; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). However, motherhood is seen as an inevitable path for especially heterosexual women (Peterson & Engwall, 2013). It is implied that heterosexual women that voluntarily remain childfree are attributed negative characteristics and are depicted as living unfulfilling lives (Ashburn-Nardo, 2016; Ganong et al., 1990; Mueller & Yoder, 1997). Although queer women experience more negative interpersonal evaluations than heterosexual women (Bettinsoli et al., 2020; Herek, 2000), being a heterosexual non-mother elicits more social penalties than being a queer mother (Szekeres et al., 2023).

Not only do motherhood expectations focus mostly on heterosexual women, we found that heterosexual and queer women alike believe that societal evaluations of heterosexual mothers are more positive than of queer mothers. This replicates existing research on what society deems desirable candidates for motherhood. Traditionally, women that are White, heterosexual, able-bodied, and/or have a high SES are expected to become mothers and to be

naturally good at it. In contrast, women that are of color, queer, disabled, and/or have a low SES are often branded as “undesirable” candidates and have been historically discouraged from pursuing parenthood (Heitlinger, 1991; Morison et al., 2016; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). Our results echo these findings and suggest that heterosexual women are subjected to more pressure to become mothers, in addition to queer women feeling disheartened from becoming mothers due to (anticipated) stigma.

We attempted to explain the high intentions of heterosexual women to have children by their woman identity and identity-related metaperceptions. More specifically, we hypothesized that due to the centrality of motherhood in the woman identity and the tendency for people to identify with their salient social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the social identity of being a woman would be an important factor in women’s intentions to have children. As our results and existing literature has shown, these motherhood expectations are mostly formed around the heterosexual woman as the archetype mother (Miall & March, 2005). However, contrary to our expectations, heterosexual women’s sexual identity predicted their intentions to have children. This could be explained by the fact that we made sexual identity salient in our study, but could also support the evidence on the innate heteronormativity of the motherhood mandate (Chrisler et al., 2013; Holton et al., 2009; Miall & March, 2005).

We hypothesized that due to low motherhood expectations and perceived negative motherhood evaluations, the low intentions of queer women to have children were predicted by their queer identity. However, sexual identity did not predict intention. Instead, the queer women that had strong woman identities showed higher intentions to have children. This is not in line with studies on the lived experiences of lesbian women, where the queer identity is depicted as freeing them from the assumptions of motherhood (Gillespie, 2003; Clarke et al., 2018). The fact that queer women that had strong woman identities showed higher intentions, could support the idea that the woman identity is embedded in motherhood expectations.

In our exploratory analysis, we found that although heterosexual women have more positive attitudes about motherhood, neither heterosexual nor queer women showed significantly positive attitudes about becoming mothers. This contradicts the notion that women have the deep and evolutionary desire to have children (Basten, 2009; Moore, 2014), and supports the notion of a motherhood mandate. When controlling for the TPB-variables, only heterosexual identity remained a predictor of intention of intention to have children for heterosexual women. Again, this is in line with studies on how motherhood is mostly viewed within the lens of heteronormativity (Chrisler et al., 2013; Holton et al., 2009; Miall & March, 2005).

Although our lesbian sample was too small to conclude from, it is interesting to note that the stronger the lesbian women believed that society holds motherhood expectations for women, the lower their own intentions were to have children. This supports literature that posits lesbian identity as a political identity that is used to fight patriarchal norms (Hagai & Seymour, 2021; Kitzinger, 1978), and that their sexual identity gives them the freedom to define themselves without reference to having children (Illouz et al., 1997; Dunne, 1997). In addition, bisexual women who strongly identified with being a woman showed higher intentions to have children. This indicated a possible alignment with traditional gender roles and societal expectations, while for lesbian women neither their woman identity or sexual identity was related to intention. This shows that there are significant differences between various queer identities that are of interest to examine further in larger samples.

Practical Implications

Practically, our findings challenge the notion that women only have children due to intrinsic aspirations to motherhood. This means that we must recognize that societal pressures can unduly influence women's reproductive decisions, resulting in possibly regretting motherhood (*Spijtmoaders*, 2024). Awareness should be raised on the pressure that women

experience to become mothers, to ensure that choosing motherhood is not done out of societal compulsion. It is of importance to object to stigmatization of childfree women, and appreciate childfree women as being able to live fulfilling and rewarding lives. The fact that motherhood seems as an inevitable path for heterosexual women, in addition to the stigma that remaining childfree evokes, shows that motherhood could be seen as partially a socially constructed symptom of heteronormative gendernorms, rather than a product of pure personal desire to have children. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the motherhood mandate can elicit moral outrage in people (Ashburn-Nardo, 2016) and thus form people's attitudes towards criminalizing abortion (Huang et al., 2016), pressuring women into having children (Holton et al., 2019), and discouraging women from having careers (Hock et al., 1984).

While opting out of motherhood should be met with less stigmatization, we advocate for more awareness of the discrimination and discouragement that queer women face when wanting to pursue parenthood. Additionally, queer women have to become more visible in reproductive research and their reproductive decisions should be seen as meaningful, without seeing their sexual orientation as proof of their inherent childfreeness (Clarke et al., 2018).

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

Our research contributed to the limited literature on the underlying processes of women's reproductive intentions, and especially the difference between heterosexual and queer women. We addressed the gap in literature on queer women's reproductive decisions, by seeing their characteristic childfreeness as meaningful and not marginalizing it as self-evident. Additionally, we added to the research on stigma surrounding queer women pursuing motherhood and the possible effect on the intention to have children. Further, by not limiting our queer sample to lesbian women but encompassing all those that identify as non-heterosexual, we hope to promote visibility to queer identities that are underrepresented (such as asexual people) in research on motherhood and childfreeness. Methodologically, a power

analysis has been conducted prior to data collection to ensure that we recruited enough participants. This resulted in a large sample size, which strengthens the validity, reliability, and generalizability of our findings.

With regards to limitations, because of the correlational nature of the study, we are not able to draw causal conclusions. For the current study, we used intention instead of actual behavior, since we were interested in examining the motivations behind wanting children. Intentions has been shown to be a good measure for actual behavior, since the stronger the intention of the individual, the higher the probability of them implementing that behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). However, future research could focus on longitudinal studies to determine whether these intentions are realized in practice. Further, the order of the questions in the survey may have impacted the results, such as by priming participants' sexual identity. This could have (partially) accounted for the strong heterosexual identity that the heterosexual participants felt.

Another limitation was the predominance of bisexual women in our queer sample. This might have influenced our findings, because bisexual women seemed to exhibit more similar patterns to heterosexual women. Given our interesting findings when comparing our bisexual and lesbian sample, future research should focus on different queer identities separately. Especially the role of the lesbian identity in the decision to remain childfree sheds interesting light on the heteronormative pressures of motherhood.

Despite our efforts to diversify the sample by recruiting from various English-speaking countries, the sample was mostly Western and White. Future research has to point out if our findings are generalizable to non-Western countries. In addition, the queer identity is highly politicized and illegal in many countries (Human Rights Watch, 2023), which possibly influences queer women's experience of the queer identity and the freedom felt in their reproductive decisions.

Lastly, our measure of the woman identity was left open to the interpretation of the participants. It would be interesting to differentiate between the different woman identities to uncover possible different interpretations between women with heterosexual and queer identities. Woman identities that are worth exploring are traditional womanhood as reflecting attitudes towards femininity and self-stereotyping, and feminist womanhood as reflecting attitudes towards a social position (van Breen et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The present research aimed to identify the different processes underlying the intention to have children among heterosexual and queer women. We examined the relationships between woman identity, sexual identity, identity-related metaperceptions and the intention to have children. As expected, we found that heterosexual women have higher intentions to have children than queer women. In addition, we hypothesized and found that both heterosexual and queer women believe that society expects women to become mothers, and that these societal expectations are stronger for heterosexual women than queer women. Next, our data supported our hypothesis that both heterosexual and queer women believe that societal evaluations of heterosexual motherhood are more positive than of queer motherhood.

However, we did not find support for our mediation analyses regarding the role of woman identity, sexual identity, and identity-related metaperceptions. Regarding the reproductive intentions of heterosexual women, it was their heterosexual identity instead of the proposed woman identity that predicted their intentions. We found that for queer women it was not their queer identity that predicted their lower intentions, but their woman identity. Both proposed predictors did not predict the metaperception mediators.

Our findings show that reproductive intentions for women are not based solely on personal desires, but are embedded in societal expectations and possibly heteronormative gender norms. By virtue of their queer identity, queer women are seen as having the

opportunity to define themselves without reference to motherhood (Gillespie, 2003; Clarke et al., 2018; Dunne, 1997). Acknowledging the high motherhood expectations of heterosexual women, more awareness should be made in order for them to also “construct their own biographies” (Illouz et al., 1997). After all, becoming a mother is one thing a woman *can* do, instead of the only thing a woman *should* do.

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Appendix

Exploratory Analysis: Bivariate Correlations of the Bisexual and Lesbian Participants

Table A1
Bivariate Correlations Bisexual Participants

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Intention	-								
2. Sexual identity	-.029	-							
3. Woman identity	.235*	.207*	-						
4. Own motherhood capabilities	.674*	-.032	.233*	-					
5. "Women should be mothers" metaperception	.063	.123	.021	.031	-				
6. "Heterosexual mothers are good mothers" metaperception	.080	.296**	.169	.015	.303**	-			
7. "Queer mothers are good mothers" metaperception	.184	.055	.182	.089	.096	.380**	-		
8. Expectations heterosexual women	-.092	.223*	-.064	.019	.594**	.416**	.019	-	
9. Expectations queer women	-.140	.153	.033	.218*	.273**	.280**	.218*	.426*	-

Note. $N=113$

* $p < .05$ level (two-tailed)

** $p < .01$ level (two-tailed)

Table A2
Bivariate Correlations Lesbian Participants

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. <u>Intention</u>	-								
2. <u>Sexual identity</u>	-.043	-							
3. <u>Woman identity</u>	.047	.226	-						
4. Own motherhood capabilities	.644**	-.043	.228	-					
5. "Women should be mothers" <u>metaperception</u>	-.322*	-.073	-.016	-.079	-				
6. "Heterosexual mothers are good mothers" <u>metaperception</u>	.327*	.099	.078	.440**	-.166	-			
7. "Queer mothers are good mothers" <u>metaperception</u>	.296	-.081	.067	.305	-.182	.203	-		
8. Expectations heterosexual women	-.118	.306	-.021	-.031	.522**	.196	.034	-	
9. Expectations queer women	-.029	-.083	-.020	-.356*	-.175	-.144	.228	-.107	-

Note. $N=38$

* $p < .05$ level (two-tailed)

** $p < .01$ level (two-tailed)