

The effect of dyadic trust and parental stress on children's resilience in heterosexual and homosexual couples

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Abstract

The present study aimed to compare hetero- vs homosexual couples on their dyadic level of trust, parental stress, and child's resilience. Moreover, the study analyzed whether dyadic trust and parental stress were associated with child's resilience. Thirty-eight couples agreed to participate in the study; half of them were in a heterosexual relationship and half in a homosexual one. The couples were matched based on the adults' gender and the gender and age of the first-born. The age range of the first-born was 3-11 years ($M = 5.5$; $SD = 2.2$) for heterosexual couples and 3-14 ($M = 6.4$; $SD = 3$) for homosexual couples. The findings showed no differences between the two groups on trust, parental stress and child's resilience. Furthermore, the results revealed that trust

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is positively correlated, and stress negatively so, with child resilience. Thus, the parents' sexual orientation did not impact child's resilience competences; on the other hand, trust between romantic partners and parental stress were protective and risk factors, respectively, on child resilience. Our findings highlighted that, regardless the parents' sexual orientation, the couples' dynamics and parental stress have an impact on their children's interpersonal competence.

Keywords: Parenting; Homosexual; Heterosexual; Dyadic trust; Parental stress; Resilience.

1. Introduction

An extensive body of research (Morse, McLaren, & McLachlan, 2007; Patterson, 2007; Short, Riggs, Perlesz, Brown, & Kane, 2007; Wainright & Patterson, 2008; Patterson, 2009; Gartrell, Bos, & Goldberg, 2010; Golombok & Badger, 2010; Shum, 2010; Baiocco, Santamaria, Ioverno, Petracca, Biondi, Laghi *et al.*, 2013; Baiocco, Santamaria, Ioverno, Fontanesi, Baumgartner, Laghi *et al.*, 2015; Acevedo-Correa, Marín-Castillo, Heredia-Quintana, Gómez-Vargas, Múnera-Rúa, Correa-Sierra *et al.*, 2018; Baiocco, Carone, Ioverno, & Lingiardi, 2018) has highlighted that parental sexual orientation (hetero- vs homosexual), per se, does not necessarily play a detrimental role in child development. It is more concerned with what happens between the couple, i.e. the couple's dynamics, the parental competencies, and resources used to play a significant role in the child's development.

The present study fits within this debate and explores, in hetero- and homosexual families, the association between couple dynamics, in terms of shared trust between romantic partners, and their level of stress as parents, and the impact that these variables have on the child's resilience.

1.1. Trust between romantic partners and its determinants

Trust between romantic partners includes the belief that the other would take care of the partner, would respect each other, and would be devout and attentive to the partner's needs (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985; Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Holmes, 1991). The capability to trust one's partner and to reciprocate this trust is related, in some ways, to the early experiences of the family (Rotter, 1980; Rotenberg, Petrocchi, Lecciso, & Marchetti, 2015). Rempel and colleagues (1985) defined three dimensions of trust: predictability, reliability, and faith. Predictability includes the coherence of the partner's behaviors; reliability is the belief that the other is genuinely interested in the partner's needs; finally, faith comprises the trusting expectation that the partner will act honestly in the future.

Several studies (Canevello & Crocker, 2010; Birnbaum, Reis, Mizrahi, Kanat-Maymon, Sass, & Granovski-Milner, 2016) have identified dyadic trust as crucial in good and balanced relationships between romantic partners. Studies on this topic have examined both heterosexual (Uysal, Lin, & Bush, 2012; Khalifian & Barry, 2016) and homosexual (Kamen, Burns, & Beach, 2011; Gabbay, Lafontaine, & Bourque 2012; Mohr, Selterman, &

Fassinger, 2013) couples, albeit separately. In particular, the studies on heterosexual couples found that low levels of trust between romantic partners were associated with more secrecy (Uysal *et al.*, 2012) and less romantic intimacy (Khalifian & Barry, 2016). With regard to homosexual couples, the authors highlighted that high levels of trust between romantic partners were associated with good perceived relationship quality (Kamen *et al.*, 2011), couple satisfaction, and reciprocation (Gabbay *et al.*, 2012). To the best of our knowledge, only one study (Frost & Gola, 2015) examined this construct comparing hetero- and homosexual couples. The evidence showed that there are no significant differences in romantic involvement, intimacy, and dyadic trust between the two groups of partners.

Several studies have demonstrated that children's and adult's trust beliefs in others (e.g. parents or professional; for details see Petrocchi, Rotenberg, Levante, & Lecciso, 2018; Rotenberg & Petrocchi, 2018) are cross-sectionally (Rotenberg, 1995; Rotenberg *et al.*, 2015; Xin, Li, & Liu, 2019) and longitudinally (Rotenberg, Boulton, & Fox, 2005; Landry, Whipple, Mageau, Joussemet, Koestner, DiDio *et al.*, 2008; Malti, Averdijk, Zuffianò, Ribeaud, Betts, Rotenberg *et al.*, 2016) associated with children's well-being, social development, and social adaptation. To date, there has been no research that analyses whether the degree of trust between romantic partners is associated with children's resilience and whether this relationship is influenced by the sexual orientation of the partners.

1.2. Parental stress: definition and consequences

According to Abidin (1995), parental stress is determined by the disparities between the requests associated with the parental role and the resources needed to satisfy them. The author suggested that the level of parental stress depends on a number of risk factors: parents' psychological disorders (i.e. depression, withdrawal, attachment pattern, and coping strategies), the child's temperament, and adverse family and social contexts (Östberg & Hagekull, 2013). Furthermore, according to Hobfoll's conservation of resource model (Hobfoll, 1989), Berry and Jones (1995) conceptualized the stress construct as *loss* (p. 465) of both positive/pleasure and negative themes related to the parenthood.

Parental stress has been extensively investigated with the purpose of comparing hetero- and homosexual couples (Bos, 2010; Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010; Shechner, Slone, Meir, & Kalish, 2010; Bos, Knox, Van Rijn-van Gelderen, & Gartrell, 2016; Van Rijn-Van Gelderen, Bos,

Jorgensen, Ellis-Davies, Winstanley, Golombok *et al.*, 2017). Many (Bos, 2010; Farr *et al.*, 2010; Shechner *et al.*, 2010; Lavner, Waterman, & Peplau, 2014) found no significant differences between the two groups. In one study (Bos *et al.*, 2016), the authors found a significant difference between heterosexual and homosexual mothers, with the former showing less stress than the latter.

Research has highlighted that parental stress was extensively examined in families of atypically developing children, such as children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Schieve, Blumberg, Rice, Visser, & Boyle, 2007; Spratt, Saylor, & Macias, 2007; Yamada, Suzuki, Kato, Suzuki, Tanaka, Shindo *et al.*, 2007; Valicenti-McDermott, Lawson, Hottinger, Seijo, Schechtman, Shulman *et al.*, 2015; Shawler & Sullivan, 2017; Postorino, Gillespie, Lecavalier, Smith, Johnson, Swiezy *et al.*, 2019), to understand the impact of the child's mental or physical disability on the family dynamics (see Lecciso, Petrocchi, Savazzi, Marchetti, Nobile, & Molteni, 2013). On the contrary, few studies (Durtschi, Soloski, & Kimmes, 2017; Chan, Nugent, & Bale, 2018) have investigated the impact that the degree of parental stress has on the development of social abilities in typically developing children.

Several studies on typical developing children (Anthony, Anthony, Glanville, Naiman, Waanders, & Shaffer, 2005; Crnic, Gaze, & Hoffman, 2005; Camisasca, Di Blasio, & Ardino, 2010; Durtschi *et al.*, 2017; Chan *et al.*, 2018) have identified that high parental stress levels triggered frustration, impotence, and irritation within family members. Moreover, high levels of parental stress have an effect on children's well-being in terms of a high vulnerability to internalizing (e.g. anxiety, depression; Patrizi, Rigante, De Matteis, Isola, & Giamundo, 2010; Vaughan, Feinn, Bernard, Brereton, & Kaufman, 2013; Sher-Censor, Shulman, & Cohen, 2018) and externalizing problems (e.g. Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorders; Buonanno, Capo, Romano, Di Giunta, & Isola, 2010; Pimentel, Vieira-Santos, Santos, & Vale, 2011; Solem, Christophersen, & Martinussen, 2011; Hutchison, Feder, Abar, & Winsler, 2016; Li & Lansford, 2018). Moreover, a cross-lagged analysis demonstrated that mother's and father's stress predicted children's behavioral problems from the age of 3 (see Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012; Thompson, 2014). However, the study of consequences of parental stress on the child's resilience is quite rare.

1.3. Resilience competence: antecedents and consequences

The construct of resilience explains how the individual is able to use defense mechanisms to cope with stressful everyday events and overcome them, as well as expand his own resources with a consequent positive reorganization of life (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Malaguti, 2005). To develop resilience, it is crucial to have positive reference figures inside the family (Losel, 1994).

Several studies (Werner, 1989; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1998; Van Rijn-Van Gelderen, Gartrell, Bos, & Hermanns, 2009) have focused on resilience in developmental age highlighting that resilient children showed high levels of self-esteem, a greater propensity to have new experiences, greater optimism for the future, the ability to implement coping and emotion regulation strategies, problem solving skills, and the ability to pursue long-term goals.

Some of the current literature has focused on family variables that could serve as protective or risk factors for the development of resilience competence. Several authors (Benard, 1991; Marcus & Swisher, 1992; Catalano & Hawkins, 1996) detected the quality of the parents' relationship, their cohesion, and compassionate tendencies as protective factors. On the other hand, the number of parental disputes, conflicts, and parental stress were identified as risk factors (Meyersburg & Post, 1979; Rutter, 1987; Jarvis & Creasey, 1991). These risk factors would cause the children to become less resilient (Werner & Smith, 1992).

When the construct of the resilience was investigated on heterosexual couples (see Reiss, 1981; Walsh, 1998) the results highlighted the role of affectivity, emotional support, and a well-functioning family structure as determinants. When the same construct was studied in homosexual couples (Bozett 1987; Gershon, Tschann, & Jemerin, 1999; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Golombok, 2000; Frosch & Mangelsdorf, 2001; Leddy, Gartrell, & Bos, 2012; Perrin & Siegel, 2013; Kuvalanka, Leslie, & Radina, 2014), it was found that the degree of family cohesion, the quality of the caregiver system, and the parents' degree of well-being were the most important factors in developing family resilience.

Even if no studies have compared hetero- vs homosexual couples considering children's resilience, it seems that high quality of the emotional functioning of the families, alongside low levels of stress, could be connected with family resilience. In this study, we hypothesized that trust between partners and parental stress were two psychological constructs

theoretically associated with children's resilience competence. Regardless of parental sexual orientation, a good level of trust between romantic partners and low level of parental stress would be associated with children's resilience. Both constructs are seen as crucial for the development of children's social skills, such as resilience. We hypothesized that trust between romantic partners would be a protective factor, whereas parental stress serves as a risk factor. We did not expect to find any significant difference between hetero- and homosexual couples on their level of trust. Some sort of difference between the two couples on their parental stress may be found, given the evidence from the current literature, but we did not expect to find different paths of association between dyadic trust, parental stress, and children's resilience due to the personal sexual orientation.

2. Method

2.1. Participant

Thirty-eight couples agreed to participate in the study; half of them were in a heterosexual relationship, and half in a homosexual one. The heterosexual and homosexual couples were matched based on the adults' gender (7 gay fathers were matched to 7 heterosexual fathers, as well as 12 lesbian mothers matched to 12 heterosexual mothers) and the gender and age of the first-born (with a *SD* of +/- 12 months). The mean age for the homosexual couples was 45.42 years (*SD* = 6.03; *range* = 37-56), whereas for heterosexual couples it was 39.21 years (*SD* = 5.27; *range* = 32-51). In both groups, regardless of their sexual orientation, 47.4% of the adults were salaried workers and 42.1% of them were self-employed; 5.3% of the homosexual parents and 10.5% of the heterosexual parents were unemployed; 5.2% of the homosexual couples did not give information about their occupation. All homosexual couples had a high level of education (i.e., 13-18 years, which corresponds to a university degree); 78.9% of heterosexual parents had a high level of education (13-18 years, which corresponds to a university degree), 21.1% of them had a low educational level (8-12 years, corresponding to a high school degree).

In both groups, couples had from 1 to 3 children (*M* = 6.06, *SD* = 2.7; homosexual couples: *M* = 5.67, *SD* = 2.3; heterosexual couples: *M* = 6.44, *SD* = 3). The present research considered the resilience of the first-born (*N* = 19). The age range of the first-born was 3-11 years (*M* = 5.5 years; *SD* = 2.2) for heterosexual couples and 3-14 (*M* = 6.4 years; *SD* = 3) for homosexual

couples. Twelve children of homosexual parents were born through Medically Assisted Procreation (MAP) and 7 through surrogacy. None of the heterosexual couples used any MAP techniques.

2.2. *Statistical analysis*

To compare parental socio-demographic variables, Paired sample *t*-tests and χ^2 tests were conducted. Furthermore, correlations were carried out to evaluate the associations between the constructs investigated. Finally, to evaluate the impact of trust between romantic partners and parental stress on their first-born's resilience, a hierarchic regression analysis was carried out.

2.3. *Procedure*

Homosexual couples were recruited by collaborating with a national association of homosexual families; all participants came from different regions of Italy. Heterosexual parents were recruited across different Italian cities through word-of-mouth. All parents who agreed to participate received a cover letter explaining the research project and signed the informed consent form. Both partners in each dyad answered the questionnaires in a quiet room without the other present.

2.4. *Measures*

Trust between romantic partners. The *Trust Scale* (Rempel *et al.*, 1985) is a self-reported questionnaire developed to assess the three dimensions theorized by Rempel and colleagues (Rempel *et al.*, 1985); the measure includes 17 items with a response option on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 "strongly agree" to 7 "strongly disagree"). A total score was calculated as an average of all items for each parent and then a total average was calculated, with higher scores indicating a higher trust level ($\alpha = .88$, $r_s > .30$).

Parental Stress. To assess positive (happiness, fun, joy, and love) and negative (loss of resources in terms of time, money, energy) features of parenting when stressors (e.g. child and/or parent' disability) were absent, the self-report questionnaire called the *Parental Stress Scale* (PSS; Berry & Jones, 1995) was administered. The measure includes 17 items with a response option on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 "strongly agree" to 5 "strongly disagree"). A total score was calculated as the sum of the items for

each parent and then a total average was calculated, with higher scores indicating higher levels of stress ($\alpha = .83$, $r_s > .33$).

Child's Resilience. The *Resilience Scale* (RS; Wagnild & Young, 1993; Callegari, Bertù, Lucano, Ielmini, Braggio, & Vender, 2016; Girtler, Casari, Brugnolo, Cutolo, Dessi, Guasco *et al.*, 2016) allows the assessment of the child's resilience competencies. For the purpose of the present study, 18 items have been chosen and adapted to evaluate the child's resilience as perceived by parents. The items had a response option on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 "strongly agree" to 5 "strongly disagree"). A total score was calculated as an average of the items for each parent and then a total average was calculated, with higher scores indicating the child possesses higher levels of resilience abilities as perceived by the parents ($\alpha = .81$, $r_s > .34$).

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analysis

Table 1 shows several demographic characteristics of the sample. Statistical analyses on socio-demographic variables revealed no significant differences between the two groups of couples for occupation and educational level. A significant difference was found, $t_{(36)} = 3.3$, $p = .002$, in parental ages: homosexual parents were older ($M = 45.42$ years; $SD = 6.03$) than heterosexual ones ($M = 39.21$ years; $SD = 5.27$).

Table 1 - *Details of sample socio-demo information*

	Homosexual parents	Heterosexual parents
Fathers	7	7
Mothers	12	12
Male first-born	10	10
Female first-born	9	9
Marriage	5*	17
Civil Marriage	8	1
Cohabitation	6	1

Note: *The marriage is not valid for Italian state since it was contracted in other countries.

3.2. Comparison between homosexual and heterosexual couples

Paired sample *t*-tests (see Tab. 2) showed no significant differences between the two groups of couples on their dyadic trust and parental stress. Furthermore, no significant differences were found on the first-born's resilience competence, as evaluated by the parents.

Table 2 - Comparison between mean score on trust between romantic partner, parental stress, and child resilience

Measures	Homosexual parents <i>M (SD)</i>	Heterosexual parents <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>
Dyadic Trust	5.62 (1.08)	5.26 (.82)	$t_{(36)} = 1.18; p = .243$
Parental stress	34.37 (7.84)	35.21 (6.38)	$t_{(36)} = -.36; p = .719$
Child resilience	4.01 (.41)	3.83 (.36)	$t_{(36)} = 1.40; p = .168$

3.3. Correlations and hierarchical regression analysis

The results of the correlations showed that dyadic trust was significantly and positively correlated with first-born resilience ($r = .36; p = .03$). The correlation between dyadic trust and parental stress was not significant, whereas there was a correlation between parental stress and child resilience ($r = -.12, p = .048$).

A hierarchical regression analysis was carried out. The dependent variable was the child's resilience; the independent variables were the group (hetero- vs homosexual, coded as a dummy variable), children's age and gender inserted at Step 1, and dyadic trust and parental stress inserted at Step 2.

The results of Step 1 were not significant ($F_{(73\ 75)} = 1.981, p = .168, R^2 = .052, R_{adj} = .026, F_{change} = 1.981, p = .168$). Step 2, on the other hand, showed a significant model ($F_{(4\ 33)} = 2.913, p = .036, R^2 = .261, R_{adj} = .171, F_{change} = 3.108, p = .040$), with a negative but not significant impact of parental stress ($t = -1.810; p = .079; Beta = -.28$), and a positive and significant impact of dyadic trust between romantic partners ($t = 2.339; p = .026; Beta = .36$) on children's resilience as perceived by parents.

4. Discussion

The first aim of this paper was to provide a comparison between the two groups of couples (hetero- and homosexual) on the constructs of dyadic trust, parental stress, and child resilience. The second aim was to evaluate the impact of dyadic trust and parental stress on the child resilience.

With regard to our first aim, according to previous studies (Bos, 2010; Farr *et al.*, 2010; Shechner *et al.*, 2010; Goldber & Smith, 2014; Lavner *et al.*, 2014; Frost & Gola, 2015; Bos *et al.*, 2016; Van Rijn-Van Gelderen *et al.*, 2017), our results demonstrated that parents' sexual orientation did not impact the psychological constructs investigated.

With regard to the second aim, that is the evaluation of the impact of dyadic trust and parental stress on child resilience, our results provided an initial contribution to the literature regarding the comparison of hetero- and homosexual couples on these constructs. Our results highlighted that parents' sexual orientation did not impact child resilience. Conversely, dyadic trust between partners and parental stress, albeit marginally, play an important role on this competence. Our findings confirmed a broad and complex view of parenting, highlighting the importance of the socio-relational variables associated with interpersonal relationships between parents and children (Marchetti, Castelli, Cavalli, Di Terlizzi, Lecciso, Lucchini *et al.*, 2014).

In addition, our results highlighted that dyadic trust between partners was positively associated with and impacted child resilience. In the literature, there were no studies that related dyadic trust and child resilience. Therefore, our results contribute to the research topic emphasizing how the quality of couple dynamics are essential in the development of crucial skills such as resilience. This result supports others (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Golombok, 2000; Frosch & Mangelsdorf, 2001; Taurino, 2016), according to which a child's development of socio-emotional and coping strategies is closely related to the context in which he/she lives and the family climate in which trust in the parental couple is an important aspect.

With regard to the psychological construct of parental stress, we found a negative correlation between them and a trend when the regression analysis is considered. As confirmed by previous studies (Smith, Kelly, & Finch, 2006; Summers & Chazan Cohen, 2012; Wu, Feder, Cohen, Kim, Calderon, Charney *et al.*, 2013), a high level of parental stress is associated with low child resilience competencies; stress seems to have, therefore, a negative

impact on the system of attachment and adaptation of the child (Jarvis & Creasey, 1991) which, according to the literature, are included in the resilience capacity (Cyrulnik & Malaguti, 2005).

5. Limitations and implications

The limitations of this contribution can be ascribed to three main issues. The first can be linked to the sample size and the birth-order of the children evaluated. Future studies should examine the variables considered here by expanding the study sample. In addition, it would be appropriate to evaluate and compare the child resilience competence for the second-born and third-born. The second limit of the study was related to the assessment of the child resilience competencies. In fact, the measure we administered was not a direct assessment of the child, but a parental evaluation through a parent-reported tool that, as such, is subject to bias related to their own parental representation. Third and finally, the present research is cross-sectional. Longitudinal research needs to determine the causal relations among the variables.

Our findings confirmed, once more, that it was not the parents' sexual orientation that has an impact on the children's skills, but the quality of the relationship between partners, which can be studied in its many facets. This allows us to highlight, on the one hand, the equivalence between hetero- and homosexual families, and the role played by psychological variables (trust and stress) with regard to children's development on the other.

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