



Article

Attitudes toward “Non-Traditional” Mothers: Examining the Antecedents of Mothers’ Competence Perceptions

Silvia Di Battista ^{1,*}, Marco Salvati ², Irem Ertan ¹ and Monica Pivetti ¹¹ Department of Human and Social Sciences, University of Bergamo, 24129 Bergamo, Italy² Department of Human Sciences, University of Verona, 37129 Verona, Italy* Correspondence: silvia.dibattista@unibg.it

Abstract: Mothers are the protagonists in a widespread narrative that emphasizes motherhood as prolonged and exclusive attention to children, accompanied by references to natural competence in child-rearing skills. The present research aimed to investigate the linking mechanisms and conditional processes underlying the perception of mothers’ competence. Cisgender heterosexual Italian participants ($N = 230$) read one of four vignettes describing a situation in which a mother (i.e., heterosexual biological mother, heterosexual stepmothers, lesbian stepmother, and lesbian biological mother) interacts with her two children who had misbehaved. After reading the vignette, the participants rated the depicted mother’s competence and to what extent the children’s misbehaviour was attributable to the mother. Moderated-mediation analyses indicated that all the non-traditional mothers were perceived as being less competent compared to the heterosexual biological mother, by giving them greater responsibility for their children’s misbehaviour, among participants with medium–high levels of traditional gender-role beliefs. Sexual orientation and biology relatedness were not cumulative variables, but intersecting categories creating a unique way to perceive mothers. As the number of non-traditional families grows, negative societal attitudes toward non-traditional parents and their children should be increasingly considered.

Keywords: attitudes; gender role beliefs; motherhood; mothers; sexual prejudice

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1. Introduction

A review concerning stereotypes associated with different types of parents (Valiquette-Tessier et al. 2016) showed that the “nuclear” family is usually the standard by which other family groups are judged. This family structure receives labels such as “functional,” while other family structures (e.g., stepparents, same-sex parents) are often classified as dysfunctional. Furthermore, in general, researchers have used married/biological mothers as the standard against which other types of parents have been compared (e.g., Miall and March 2005).

In 1996, Hays (1996) formulated the intensive mothering mandate as a dominant belief in Western cultures, advocating mothering as a “sacred” job, with an emphasis on intensive child-rearing methods. According to this set of beliefs, mothers are the primary caregivers in a family and should spend huge amounts of energy, time, and financial resources in the familial field (Hays 1996). Adopting a feminist approach to the study of motherhood, Hays acknowledged how intensive mothering ideologies limit women’s opportunities and favour privileged groups. Feminist scholars have explored how motherhood ideologies were both caused and maintained by patriarchy (e.g., Tazi-Preve 2013) and have discussed the gendered “myth of motherhood” that influences perceptions of mothers and the ways in which family members and non-family members related to women who are mothers (e.g., Braverman 1989). This myth represents a normative standard that, similarly to the intensive mothering mandate (Hays 1996),

describes all mothers as being responsible for the growth and development of their children and the way in which mothering practices and arrangements are evaluated.

Attitudes toward gender roles have become more egalitarian over time. Women moved into the workforce in large numbers in the 1970s and the 1980s; however, there was not equal progress in men's engagement in the family and domestic settings (Cotter et al. 2011; England 2010; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015). Intensive mothering and the myth of motherhood are possible explanations for this lack of progress. In these gendered ideologies, mothers tend to be perceived as being all-good (e.g., naturally loving, kind, and patient) when absorbed in nurturing activities and situated in the biological nuclear family (Arendell 2000), or all inappropriate, depending on a motherhood hierarchy in which married, biological and heterosexual mothers are more proper than other typologies of mothers, such as working mothers, lesbian mothers and stepmothers (Boris 1994; Gabb 2005; DiLapi 1989; Ganong and Coleman 1995; Lewin 1994; Johnston and Swanson 2003). Studies did not support these expectations and consistently found that outcomes of children raised by "non-traditional parents" (comprising lesbian mothers and stepmothers) do not depend on the parents' sexual orientation or biological relatedness to their children but on other factors, such as the quality of parent-child relationships (e.g., Baiocco et al. 2018; Jensen 2022; Suárez et al. 2022). Therefore, it is important to understand the dynamics of the prejudice that persists toward non-traditional forms of parenting.

Experiences of stigmatization and prejudice can be understood from an intersectional perspective, acknowledging the unique and multifaceted experiences stemming from intersections of several stigmatized dimensions (Parent et al. 2013). In this sense, although different women may share a social identity as a mother, motherhood identity and perceptions may also vary along other social dimensions such as sexual orientation (i.e., to be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or others) and biological relatedness. Park et al. (2015) found that biological mothers tend to be represented as a social category possessing special properties, such as being a "natural" category, with impermeable borders and persistent characteristics, composed by homogeneous members who share a common fate and pursue common goals. Authors also found that these essentialized perceptions of motherhood were reduced for women who did not experience physical changes in the course of becoming mothers (e.g., adoptive mothers and stepmothers) and that these perceptions had consequences in the form of an array of judgments toward women. For instance, as a consequence, these perceptions could have an influence on both women's and men's beliefs that to rear children is a biological mothers' "sacred job—a job that they alone are uniquely capable of" (Park et al. 2015, p. 966).

These naturalistic discourses on motherhood as a fundamental part of feminine identity tend to be related to negative attitudes, stigmatizations and discriminations toward mothers who fall outside of this discourse (Garwood 2014), such as stepmothers (e.g., Aslam et al. 2015; Ganong and Coleman 1983, 1995; Planitz et al. 2009). Some vignette studies have shown that normative obligations to support stepparents were weaker than obligations to support biological parents (Ganong and Coleman 2006; van Houdt et al. 2018). However, studies examining attitudes toward parents rarely considered multiple intersectional elements such as biological relatedness and sexual orientation. In 2007, Claxton-Oldfield and O'Neil investigated undergraduate students' perceptions of four family compositions (i.e., gay parent stepfamily, lesbian parent stepfamily, heterosexual parent stepfamily, or biological parent family). The results revealed that students perceived a couple of biological parents as being more stable than the heterosexual mother-stepfather couple, while the lesbian stepfamily was rated as being more satisfying/secure than the mother-stepfather couple. However, in this study, the perception toward a heterosexual father-stepmother couple was not explored. Kalmijn (2021) investigated Dutch attitudes toward biological and non-biological parenting. He found that people who were raised in a stepfather family were less likely to endorse the importance of biological relatedness and more likely to believe that stepparenting was an

acceptable form of parenting compared to people who lived only with their biological parents. However, people who lived in a stepmother family had more negative attitudes toward stepparenting in general. The author's interpretation of these results lay in the strong socio-cultural emphasis on biological motherhood, something that is especially negative for non-biological mothers' attempts to live up to biological mothers' standards and expectations.

In Italy, using a manipulation of scenarios, Di Battista et al. (2020a) found that heterosexual participants perceived a couple of lesbian (step)mothers (i.e., a lesbian biological mother and a lesbian stepmother) as being more animal in traits of ontologization than other stepfamily compositions (heterosexual parent stepfamilies and gay-men parent stepfamily). The two non-traditional mothers¹ were also judged equally animal and human on traits of ontologization compared to the other family compositions, which were perceived as more human than animal². Authors discussed their results, arguing that a fatherless family, comprising non-traditional women, may struggle within the traditional mothering mandates (Hays 1996). Exploring attitudes toward same-sex stepparents in the Italian context, Di Battista et al. (2020b) also found that a couple of lesbian (step)mothers (i.e., a lesbian biological mother and a lesbian stepmother) and a couple of gay (step)fathers (i.e., a gay biological father and a gay stepfather) were perceived as being less competent parents compared to heterosexual couples of (step)parents, by giving them greater responsibility for their child's misbehaviour, among participants with medium–high levels of traditional gender-role beliefs. However, in this study, participants were each asked to judge an entire parental couple and not biological parents. These results do not allow us, therefore, to understand the judgments addressed to different types of mothers.

The Current Study

In 2019, the Italian Institute of Statistics (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica—ISTAT) reported that 184,088 marriages were registered where, for every five ceremonies, at least one person was at their second wedding and that in 89% of cases, children were managed with shared custody. Furthermore, considering that, in Italy, there are no laws allowing full adoption and access to medically assisted procreation techniques for same-sex couples, children of same-sex parents often grow in a stepfamily configuration.

This study aimed to explore and compare attitudes toward four different typologies of traditional and non-traditional mothers (i.e., heterosexual biological mothers, lesbian biological mothers, heterosexual stepmothers, and lesbian stepmothers) in the Italian context. We also considered the role of gender-role beliefs in line with evidence that people with high levels of traditional gender-role beliefs tend to perceive family caretaking responsibilities as being central to a woman's life and identity (e.g., Barry and Beitel 2006; Schreiber 2016).

The scarcity of studies exploring attitudes toward biological mothers and stepmothers while also considering their sexual orientation makes it difficult to formulate hypotheses. It is possible that lesbian stepmothers suffer from a process of multiple stigmatization for their homosexuality and the lack of their children's biological relatedness by participants with high levels of traditional gender-role beliefs, in line with evidence of multiple types of stigma toward same-sex stepparents (Berger 2000; Lynch 2004). Predominantly, the factor of assigning responsibility for children's negative behaviours could reveal participants' negative attitudes toward non-traditional forms of motherhood. Indeed, in line with our previous studies on attitudes toward same-sex parenting families (Di Battista et al. 2020b), the lesbian stepmother could be judged as the most responsible parent for their children's misbehaviour at medium–high levels of traditional gender-role beliefs, and this, in turn, could lead participants to evaluate her as the least competent mothering figure. In other words, it is not about directly evaluating non-traditional mothers as being incompetent, but about supporting the idea that children need a traditional parenting structure. This is in line with Clarke (2001), who argued that

concern for children provides people with a strong justification for discriminating against non-traditional families, such as same-sex parents.

However, following an alternative prediction, the two dimensions (i.e., sexual orientation and the biological relatedness) may not be additive elements. Indeed, although heterosexual stepmothers and lesbian stepmothers share an identity as non-biological mothers—and lesbian mothers and lesbian stepmothers share an identity as homosexual mothers—sexual orientation and biological relatedness may be considered not as cumulative variables, but as intersecting categories that generate unique ways to perceive all the non-traditional mothers (Di Battista et al., forthcoming; Stewart and McDermott 2004). In this last case, we expected that participants with a medium and high level of traditional gender-role beliefs would evaluate all non-traditional mothers as being more responsible for their children's misbehaviour and this, in turn, would lead them to be evaluated as more incompetent parents compared to a heterosexual biological mother (see Figure 1 for the conceptual representation of the moderated mediation model).

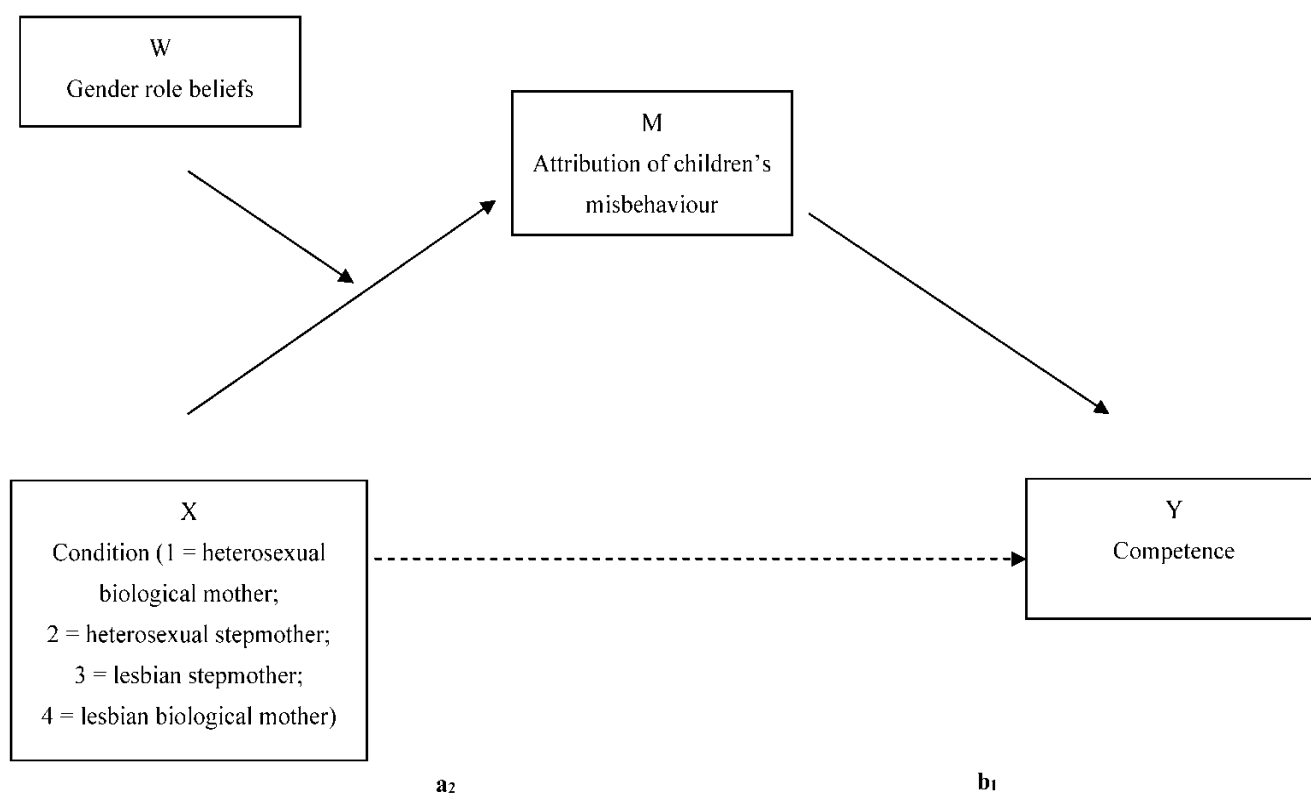


Figure 1. Conceptual Representation of the Moderated Mediation Model. Notes: X—-independent variable; Y—dependent variable; M—mediator; W—moderator.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Procedures

A power analysis, with an alpha = 0.05 and power = 0.80, showed that the projected minimum sample size needed to detect an effect size of $f = 0.25$ is $n = 180$ (for a between-groups comparison ANCOVA with 4 groups and 2 covariates, using G*Power 3.1.9.7 Faul et al. 2007, 2009). Two-hundred and forty-nine people completed the questionnaires. However, 5 people failed the manipulation check questions, 4 people were homosexual, 7 people were bisexual, 1 person was pansexual, 1 person was asexual, and 1 person was transgender. The remaining participants were $N = 230$ heterosexual and cisgender Italian people, all with Italian nationality (155 female; 67.4%; M age = 41.78, $SD = 16$, from 18 to 78). The majority of participants were from Northern Italy ($n = 178$; 77.4%); 23 were from

central Italy (10%) and $n = 28$ from Southern Italy (12.2%). The sample was medium-to-highly educated, with 55.7% having completed secondary school ($n = 128$), 30.4% having a university degree ($n = 70$), and 7% having a post-graduate degree or a PhD qualification ($n = 16$; 1 was missing for education). Half of the participants were biological parents (49.1%; $n = 113$), 5 participants were adoptive parents (2.2%), and $n = 109$ were not parents (47.4%; 1 was missing). As for the main occupation, $n = 141$ participants were workers (61%), $n = 40$ were students (17.4%), $n = 19$ were students and workers (8.3%), $n = 20$ were retired (8.5%; 1 was missing for main occupation).

As for the procedures, the self-report questionnaire was implemented using the Qualtrics.com platform. Participants were recruited using a convenience sample strategy (Etikan et al. 2016), with the collaboration of students and researchers who sent the link to the questionnaire to the participants via announcements on Internet forums, social media, and various mailing lists of acquaintances. In this study, no compensation was offered for participation. On average, the questionnaire took approximately 15 min to complete. After reading a description of the study, all the participants indicated their willingness to participate in an informed consent form. Participants completed demographic information, including self-reports of their gender identity and sexual orientation. Then, each participant was randomly assigned to one of four conditions presenting a mother. Participants were debriefed after data collection.

The research complied with the World Medical Association-Declaration of Helsinki (2013). Approval was obtained from the Ethical Review Board for Research in Psychology, University of Verona (protocol code: 159372).

2.2. Materials and Measures

Socio-Demographic Section: We collected data concerning participants' age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, level of education, parenting status, nationality, place of residence in Italy, and main occupation.

The Vignettes: Four vignettes described a mild disagreement between five-year old twins, a boy and a girl, and their mother at the end of the school day (The questionnaire and the vignettes are provided in Supplementary Materials on the OSF repository: <https://osf.io/b48vn>; adapted by Claxton-Oldfield 1992). Each participant responded to one version of each vignette. The vignettes were constant between the conditions, with the exception of the mothers' biological relatedness to their children and their sexual orientation: (1) A heterosexual biological mother ($n = 57$); (2) a heterosexual stepmother ($n = 55$); (3) a lesbian stepmother ($n = 58$); (4) a biological lesbian mother ($n = 60$). Participants were asked to rate their first impression of the mother and the child described in the vignette. After reading the vignette, participants answered three manipulation and attention-checking questions (e.g., "*Antonio and Sara are the biological children of Anna*;" responses: true or false).

Parenting Competence: Participants rated items evaluating the target mother's competence (3 items ad-hoc and adapted from Di Battista et al. 2020b; McLeod et al. 1999): her competence, preparation, and capacity as a mother on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = absolutely disagree; 6 = absolutely agree; "*On the base of my first impression, Anna is a competent mother*"). Higher scores indicated a better view of the mother's ability. A total score was computed on the grounds of the mean ($\alpha = 0.94$, $M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.26$; $Skewness = -0.35$, $Kurtosis = -0.58$).

Attribution of Children's Misbehaviour: Participants indicated how likely it was that the depicted children's misbehaviour could be attributable to the mother/stepmother described in the vignette. Participants first read: "*Antonio and Sara are misbehaving because...*". Then they rated 9 items (e.g., "*... because Anna doesn't act as a true mother*;" adapted from Di Battista et al. 2020b; Ganong and Coleman 1997). Each item was assessed on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicated that participants felt the children's misbehaviour depended on an inappropriate

mothering role. A total score was computed on the grounds of the mean ($\alpha = 0.89$, $M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.02$, $Skewness = 0.98$, $Kurtosis = 0.56$).

Gender Role Beliefs: The Gender Linked subscale of the Social Roles Questionnaire (Baber and Tucker 2006) was administered to measure individuals' "traditional" and stereotypical attitudes toward gender roles. The scale is made up of 8 items (e.g., "Mothers should work only if necessary") with a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicated more stereotypical and traditional attitudes toward gender roles. Items were subsequently added together to create an index of Gender-Linked beliefs ($\alpha = 0.86$, $M = 20.28$, $SD = 8.80$, $Skewness = 0.65$, $Kurtosis = -0.50$).

Sexual Prejudice: Participants also responded to the 7 items of the Subscale of Modern Heterosexism of the Multidimensional Scale of Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men (Gato et al. 2012; the Italian validation in Scierri and Batini 2019) on a 6-point Likert scale (from 1 = absolutely disagree; to 6 = absolutely agree, e.g., "I believe same-sex parents are as capable of being good parents as heterosexual parents." Reversed item.) Higher scores indicated a higher level of sexual prejudice. Items were subsequently averaged together to create an index of sexual prejudice ($\alpha = 0.87$, $M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.34$, $Skewness = 0.25$, $Kurtosis = -0.87$).

The questionnaire and the vignettes are provided in Supplementary Materials on the OSF repository except for measures of beliefs about gender roles and sexual prejudice that are available in the literature (<https://osf.io/b48vn>).

2.3. Data Analyses

By using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS 25.0), we conducted statistical preliminary analyses such as reliability analyses, descriptive statistics, correlations, Chi-square tests, and analyses of variance. The values for asymmetry and kurtosis ranged between -1 and $+1$; thus, they are acceptable to prove normal univariate distribution (Kline 2015). A two-way (biological relatedness vs. sexual orientation) Analysis of Co-Variance (ANCOVA) was performed for each dependent variable. Gender-role beliefs and sexual prejudice were entered as covariates in the ANCOVA, in order to investigate the differences between mothers and evaluations on competence and attributions of responsibility. Beliefs about gender roles and sexual prejudices directed toward same-sex families were included as covariates to control for their effects. Then, a moderated mediation analysis was conducted to test the effects of the mother's condition on the evaluation of competence through the mediation of the attribution of children's misbehaviour, which would depend on the participants' gender-role beliefs. To test this model, we used the SPSS PROCESS macro for testing moderated mediation (model 7; Hayes 2013). Power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al. 2007; 2009). A significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ was adopted as the threshold value for statistical significance.

2.4. Preliminary Analyses and Results

We performed preliminary analyses to test the differences across the four experimental conditions (i.e., types of mothers) on gender role beliefs, sexual prejudice and socio-demographic variables. There were no differences across the four conditions as for participants' age, $F(3, 227) = 0.24$; $p = 0.87$; gender, Chi-Square (3, 230) = 0.62, $p = 0.89$; region of origin in Italy, Chi-Square (6, 229) = 6.44, $p = 0.38$; participants' main occupation, Chi-Square (12, 229) = 5.79, $p = 0.93$; having children, Chi-Square (9, 228) = 8.33, $p = 0.50$; education, Chi-Square (15, 230) = 20.042, $p = 0.17$; gender role beliefs, $F(3, 229) = 0.95$; $p = 0.42$; and sexual prejudice, $F(3, 221) = 0.34$; $p = 0.79$.

Table 1 shows correlations. Participants' level of traditional gender role beliefs was negatively related to the evaluation of mothers' competence and positively related to the attribution of culpability. Furthermore, these two last outcomes were negatively related

to each other. Sexual prejudice and evaluation of mother’s competence were not related, but the other correlations were all positive and significant.

Table 1. Zero-Order Correlations Among Variables.

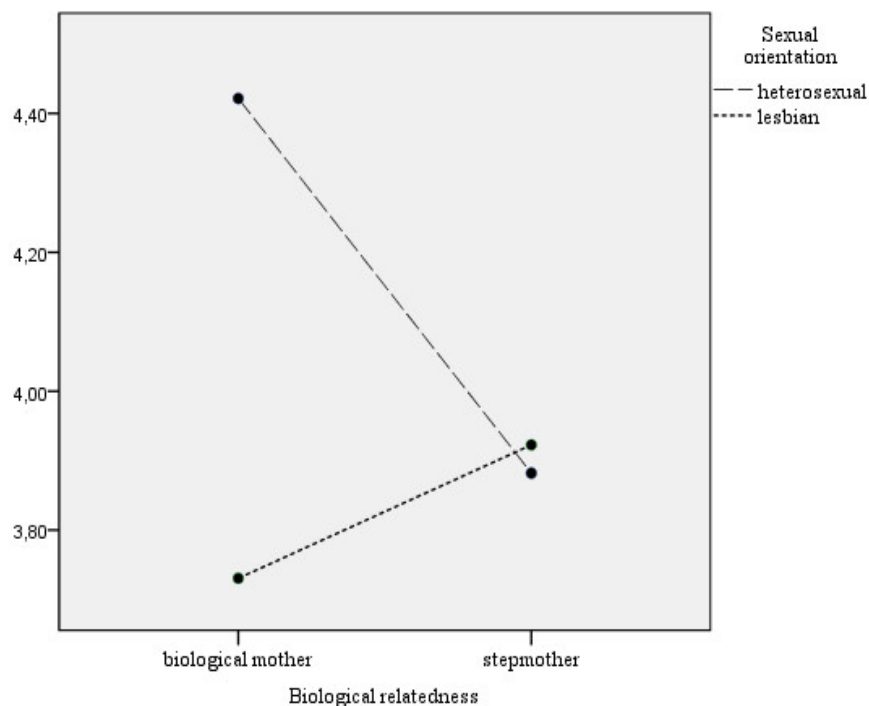
	1	2	3	4
1. Competence	1			
2. Attribution	-0.546 **	1		
3. Sexual Prejudice	-0.117	0.408 **	1	
4. Gender Role Beliefs	-0.187 *	0.525 **	0.631 **	1

Note. ** = $p < 0.001$; * = $p < 0.01$.

3. Main Results

3.1. Perceptions of Mothers’ Competence

ANCOVA on perceptions of mother’s competence yielded a significant interaction effect between biological relatedness and sexual orientation, $F(1, 221) = 4.86, p = 0.03, partial \eta^2 = 0.02$, but the main effects were not significant. Gender-role beliefs, $F(1, 221) = 3.11, p = 0.08$, and sexual prejudice, $F(1, 221) = 0.15, p = 0.08$, did not emerged as significant covariates. As for sexual orientation, participants evaluated the competence of the heterosexual biological mother ($M = 4.42; SD = 1.14$) higher than the competence of the lesbian biological mothers ($M = 3.73; SD = 1.19$), $F(1, 216) = 8.81, p = 0.003, partial \eta^2 = 0.04$. However, participants acknowledged the same level of competence for the heterosexual ($M = 3.88, SD = 1.41$) and lesbian stepmothers ($M = 3.92, SD = 1.24$), $F(1, 216) = 0.30, p = 0.86$. As for biological relatedness, participants evaluated the competence of the heterosexual biological mother higher than the competence of the heterosexual stepmothers, $F(1, 216) = 5.03, p = 0.03, partial \eta^2 = 0.02$. However, participants acknowledged the same level of competence for the lesbian mother and lesbian stepmothers, $F(1, 216) = 0.70, p = 0.41$ (see Figure 2).



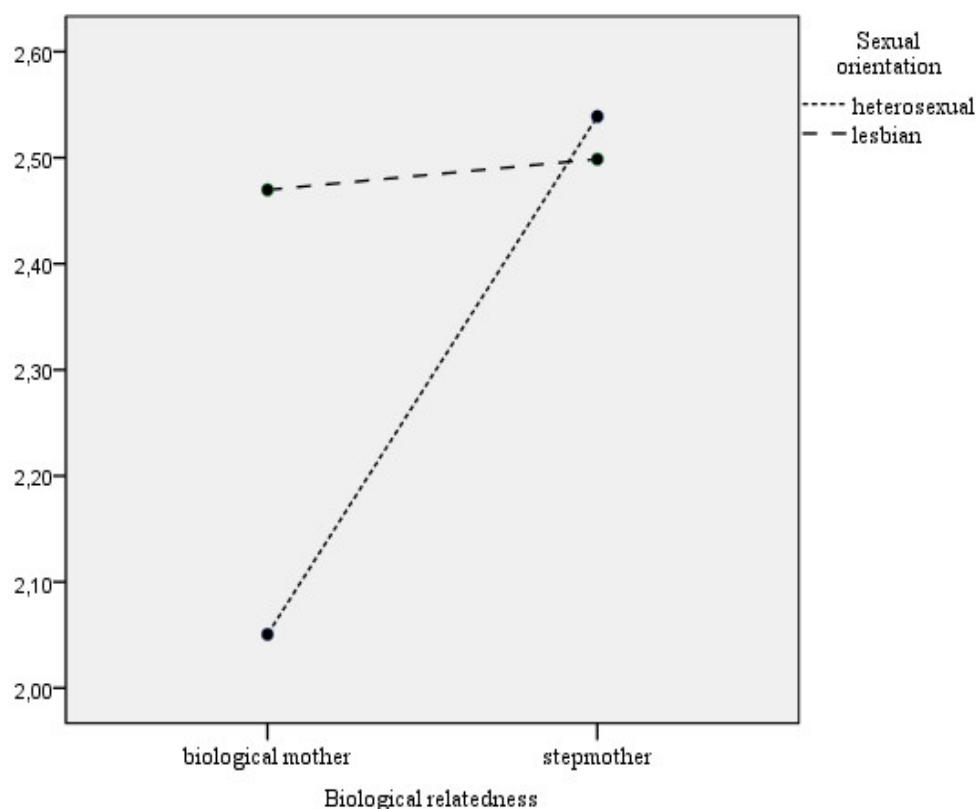
Values of covariates: Gender role beliefs = 2,49; Sexual prejudice = 3,22

Figure 2. Ancova Interaction for Competence Evaluations.

3.2. Attributions of Responsibility

ANCOVA on perceptions of mother's responsibility for children's misbehaviour yielded a significant interaction effect between biological relatedness and sexual orientation, $F(1, 221) = 4.22, p = 0.04, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.02$, and a significant main effect for biological relatedness, $F(1, 221) = 5.31, p = 0.02, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.02$, with lower levels of evaluation of responsibility for biological mothers ($M = 2.26; SD = 0.81$) than for stepmothers ($M = 2.52; SD = 1.13$), $F(1, 216) = 5.31, p = 0.02, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.02$. Gender-role beliefs, $F(1, 221) = 33.94, p < 0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.13$, and sexual prejudice, $F(1, 216) = 4.14, p = 0.05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.02$, emerged as significant covariates. Both the effects of covariates were in the positive direction (gender role beliefs: $\beta = 0.52, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001$; sexual prejudice: $\beta = 0.41, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001$).

As for sexual orientation, participants evaluated the responsibility of the heterosexual biological mother ($M = 2.05; SD = 0.72$) lower than the responsibility of the lesbian biological mothers ($M = 2.47; SD = 0.86$), $F(1, 216) = 7.14, p = 0.01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.03$. However, participants acknowledged the same level of responsibility for the heterosexual ($M = 2.54; SD = 1.21$) and lesbian stepmothers ($M = 2.50, SD = 1.08$), $F(1, 216) = 0.64, p = 0.81$. As for biological relatedness, participants evaluated the responsibility of the heterosexual biological mother lower than the responsibility of the heterosexual stepmothers, $F(1, 216) = 9.07, p = 0.003, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.04$. However, participants acknowledged the same level of responsibility for the lesbian mother and lesbian stepmothers, $F(1, 216) = 0.35, p = 0.85$ (see Figure 3).



Values of covariates: Gender role beliefs = 2,49; Sexual prejudice = 3,22

Figure 3. Ancova Interaction for Evaluations on Attributions of Responsibility.

3.3. Moderated Mediation Analysis

We then tested a moderated mediation model comparing heterosexual biological mothers vs. all other non-traditional mothers. The categorical independent variable (X)

was the scenario condition (1 = heterosexual biological mother; 2 = heterosexual stepmother; 3 = lesbian stepmother; 4 = lesbian biological mother). Attitudes toward mother’s competence was the continuous dependent variable (Y), the attribution of culpability was the mediator (M), and the gender-role beliefs was the moderator (W). The multi-categorical independent variable was coded with the indicator coding system in PROCESS that can be used to compare the first category (1= heterosexual biological mother) with each one of the other experimental conditions, resulting in three indicator variables (X1, X2, X3). These indicator variables represented the four experimental conditions coded in the IV. Thus, rather than a single indirect effect, we tested three relative indirect effects (Hayes 2018). The results showed that the equations for both the effects on attribution of culpability, $R^2=0.41$, $F(7, 222) = 22.44$, $p < 0.001$, and competence, $R^2=0.31$, $F(4, 225) = 25.24$, $p < 0.001$, were significant. Furthermore, the interaction between independent variable and gender-role beliefs significantly impacted on the attribution of culpability, $\Delta R^2=0.09$, $F(3, 222) = 11.43$, $p < 0.001$.

The indexes of moderated-mediation indicated conditional indirect effects that were defined by different levels of gender-role beliefs (see Table 2). The results revealed that, at medium and high levels of traditional gender-role beliefs, all non-traditional mothers’ conditions led to an increase in the indirect influence of the moderator on the evaluation of competence. In sum, our findings supported the hypothesis that non-traditional mothers were perceived as being less competent mothers as compared with heterosexual biological mothers, according to the attribution of culpability for her children’s misbehaviour, among those holding moderate and high levels of traditional gender role beliefs. Moderated mediation analyses, in which the lesbian stepmother target was compared with all other mother targets, did not produce significant results, except in comparison with the biological heterosexual mother, as seen in the previous analysis.

Table 2. Moderated-Mediation Estimates.

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>
Direct Effect						
<i>Competence as DV</i>						
Constant	5.74	0.19	28.94	0.00	5.3476	6.1289
X1	-0.23	0.21	-1.11	0.27	-0.6355	0.1768
X2	-0.18	0.20	-0.92	0.36	-0.5838	0.2128
X3	-0.38	0.20	-1.92	0.06	-0.7742	0.0104
<i>Attribution of Culpability</i>						
Constant	-0.65	0.07	-9.21	0.00	-0.7910	-0.5122
<i>Attribution of Culpability as DV</i>						
Constant	2.05	0.26	7.70	0.00	1.5232	2.5708
X1	-1.17	0.38	-3.08	0.00	-1.9272	-0.4235
X2	-0.98	0.37	-2.64	0.01	-1.7144	-0.2511
X3	1.21	0.38	3.22	0.00	1.9537	0.4714
Gender Role Beliefs	-0.03	0.09	-0.29	0.77	-0.2252	0.1677
X1 x Gender Role Beliefs	0.68	0.14	5.03	0.00	0.4173	0.9546
X2 x Gender Role Beliefs	0.60	0.13	4.47	0.00	0.3373	0.8698
X3 x Gender Role Beliefs	0.70	0.14	4.91	0.00	0.4202	0.9833
	Effect	Boot SE			Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Conditional Indirect Effect for Traditional Gender Role Beliefs						
Low Level (X1)	0.12	0.15			-0.1600	0.4297
Low Level (X2)	0.08	0.12			-0.1491	0.3340
Low Level (X3)	0.14	0.11			-0.0610	0.3665
Medium Level (X1)	-0.38	0.11			-0.5984	-0.1504
Medium Level (X2)	-0.36	0.10			-0.5509	-0.1596
Medium Level (X3)	-0.37	0.09			-0.5540	-0.1886

High Level (X1)	-0.86	0.18	-1.2167	-0.4860
High Level (X2)	-0.79	0.19	-1.1654	-0.4286
High Level (X3)	-0.87	0.17	-1.2054	-0.5466
<i>Index of Moderated Mediation</i>				
Gender Role Beliefs	-0.46	0.09	-0.6572	-0.2677

Note. Moderator values are at the -1SD, Mean, and +1SD. DV = dependent variable. SE = standard error. Boot 5000 bootstrap samples. LLCI = bias corrected lower limit confidence interval. ULCI = bias corrected upper limit confidence interval.

4. Discussion

The present study investigated attitudes toward motherhood, including Italian heterosexual and cisgender participants. By exploring perceptions of mothers' intersecting identities in combination with gender role stereotypes, we elucidated some of the antecedents of mothers' competence perceptions. Research has shown that children's outcomes when raised by lesbian (step)mothers do not depend on parents' sexual orientation or biological connection (e.g., Jensen 2022; Suárez et al. 2022), but negative attitudes towards non-traditional forms of motherhood nonetheless seem widespread.

Few studies have looked at the intersection between mothers' group memberships (Sheeran et al. 2019), with most attitudinal research focused on single identities. The results of this study confirmed the presence of differences in the evaluation of heterosexual biological mothers vs. (lesbian)stepmothers and lesbian biological mothers. Firstly, the findings of Ancova analyses supported the prediction that biological heterosexual mothers are more positively evaluated in terms of perceived competence as a mother, compared with all other groups of mothers, even though lesbian stepmothers did not receive more negative evaluations as compared with all other groups of mothers. Specifically, biological heterosexual mothers are perceived as being more competent both than lesbian biological mothers and stepmothers (independently of their stepmothers' sexual orientation), whereas the participants did not evaluate the latter differently regarding levels of competence. Similarly, the Ancova results also suggest that people tend to attribute less responsibility for children's misbehaviour to the mothers when they are biological and heterosexual, rather than biological and lesbian, or when they are stepmothers (independently of their sexual orientation). At the same time, people did not attribute the responsibility for children's misbehaviour differently for stepmothers and biological lesbian mothers.

Moderated-mediation analyses deepened the previous results and supported the hypothesis that non-traditional mothers were perceived as being less competent mothers compared to biological heterosexual mothers, by giving them greater responsibility for their children's misbehaviour, among participants with medium and high levels of traditional gender-role beliefs. In line with previous studies examining perceptions of stepparent and same-sex stepparents (e.g., Di Battista et al. 2020b), we validated the prediction that negative attitudes toward non-traditional parents tend to be expressed through an attribution of culpability. Indeed, from those with a medium and high level of traditional gender-role beliefs, children's misbehaviour would represent evidence that non-traditional familial configurations - such as lesbian (step)mothers - are unacceptable for "children's welfare" (Clarke 2001). However, the prediction of a multiple stigmatization (Berger 2000; Lynch 2004) concerning lesbian step(mothers) was not confirmed. Our results confirmed that heterosexual biological mothers tend to be perceived as the "standard" or the prototype by which all other mothers tend to be judged (Valiquette-Tessier et al. 2016).

Traditional gender-role beliefs represent powerful arguments against non-traditional forms of parenting. Pervasive negative attitudes toward lesbian (step)mothers, such as being responsible for children's misbehaviour and for being incompetent, may be

problematic in the policy sphere, regarding the practices concerning stepchild adoption in Italy (Di Battista et al. 2020a). In Italy, in a limited number of situations, stepchild adoption and foster care can be enforced by a court order regulated by law n° 184/1983—Art. 44 (the so-called “adoptions in particular cases”). However, in principle, adoption is permitted only to different-sex couples in accordance with law n° 149/2001 (Art. 6, modifying the law n° 184/1983). Therefore, in Italy, stepmothers and lesbian stepmothers tend to be almost invisible regarding the duties and rights they have over their children, in line with the incomplete institutionalization hypothesis (Cherlin 1978; Sanner and Coleman 2017). Furthermore, following the social stigma hypothesis (Ganong et al. 1990), (same-sex)stepparents tend to be perceived as deviant groups by those who have high gender-role stereotypes. In other words, lesbian mothers and stepmothers raise their children in a wider context that is stigmatizing and fails to provide adequate legal rights and protection. These negative attitudes and the social invisibility may have a negative impact on the psychological wellbeing of non-traditional mothers and their children (e.g., Doodson and Davies 2014; Henry and McCue 2009; Shapiro 2014; Shapiro and Stewart 2011; van Houdt 2022). For instance, same-sex mothers have been found to be subjected to distal forms of minority stress related to their family structure, such as discrimination and stigmatization (Wells and Lang 2016). Minority stressors may, in turn, impact several aspects of parents’, couple’s and children’s functioning (e.g., mental health, parenting; Siegel et al. 2022). Furthermore, research has found that the perceptions of special properties with which biological mothers are imbued may have negative consequences for biological mothers as well. To see child-rearing exclusively as a woman’s job negatively impacts women’s career development, the involvement of fathers in the day-to-day childcare provision (Park et al. 2015) and women’s wellbeing (Hays 1996; Johnston and Swanson 2003; Rizzo et al. 2013). This is even more important in Italy, where there are few family policies to support mothers and women are almost entirely responsible for care-giving tasks within the family (Paleari et al. 2022).

Some limitations to this research should be acknowledged. The convenience sample is of limited size and is mainly made up of medium–highly educated female participants from Northern Italy, leading to the low representativeness of the sample and low generalisability of the results. As the literature suggested that the education level is effective in diminishing sexual prejudice (e.g., Ohlander et al. 2005), further studies should explore the same topic in a more representative and balanced sample. Other antecedents of mothers’ competence assessments could also be explored, such as measures of ontologization and dehumanization (Di Battista et al. 2020a). Future studies could also include gender and sexual minority participants, in order to explore their attitudes toward non-traditional parenting, offering new insights on the topic, including an in-group perspective. Indeed, sexual prejudice and stereotyping are still widespread in Italian society and modern societies in general (Salvati et al. 2020; Salvati and Koc 2022) and gender, and sexual minority people might have internalized stigma concerning same-sex parenting, leading them to accept stereotypes and prejudice against same-sex parents, and to avoid creating paths of access to parenthood (Carone et al. 2020; DeMartini et al. 2022). In this study, the use of a fictional scenario may represent a limit to the study’s ecological validity. However, the use of these vignettes is well-known and they have been used in several studies exploring attitudes and prejudice toward same-sex parents and stepparents (e.g., Claxton-Oldfield et al. 2002; Claxton-Oldfield and O’Neil 2007; Crawford and Solliday 1996; Gato and Fontaine 2015; Massey et al. 2013; McLeod et al. 1999; Morse et al. 2008; Rye and Meaney 2010; Tušl et al. 2020). The advantage of manipulating vignettes is that we were able to manipulate biological relatedness and sexual orientation, while all other factors were kept constant.

Our findings contributed to the theoretical understanding of how people view motherhood, elucidating some prejudices that may have a negative impact on women’s life and family relationships. The results can contribute to promoting the implementation

of more effective ad-hoc interventions and policies to help mothers and families (Leal et al. 2021).

Supplementary Materials: The questionnaire and the vignettes are provided in Supplementary Materials on the OSF repository and can be downloaded at: <https://osf.io/b48vn>.

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Notes

- ¹ Two different-sex parent households have been referred to in the literature as the “traditional family,” with any variation from this family structure labelled “non-traditional”. Occasionally, for ease of discussion, we also adopted these heuristics for non-heterosexual and non-biological mothers (i.e., “non traditional mothers”).
- ² The ontologization process is placed within the dehumanization processes and involves the use of a social representation implying the nature–culture and/or animal–human binaries to classify both ingroup and outgroup members. For instance, studies within the ontologization paradigm have focused on the attribution of lesser humanity to some minority groups and more cultural/human characteristics to the ingroup members compared to the outgroup members (Berti et al. 2013; Pérez et al. 2002).

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