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Predicting and Changing Attitudes toward Same-Gender Parenting: Informational Influence, Parasocial Contact, and Religious Fundamentalism

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ABSTRACT



Attitudes toward same-gender parenting are of timely relevance, given increasing recognition of LGBTQ+ rights around the world. Two studies examined the influence of 2 predictors of attitudes toward same-gender parenting. The first was informational influence, which was manipulated via a newspaper-style article dispelling misconceptions about gender identity of children reared by same-gender parents. The second was social influence via parasocial contact measured as prior exposure to a same-gender adoptive parents TV show. Religious fundamentalism (RF) was assessed as an individual difference moderator of informational or social influence. Outcome variables were beliefs about same-gender parenting, perceived problems with same-gender parenting, and social distance from same-gender adoptive parents. We studied these relationships in Canada (Study 1, where same-gender couples' adoption is legal) and in Italy (Study 2, where same-gender couples' adoption is not legal). RF moderated the results of informational and social influence in the Canadian context, such that those high in RF tended to be favorably influenced. In Italy, results of informational influence were typically observed among those low in RF, and social influence directly predicted favorable attitudes toward same-gender parenting. Informational and social influence can improve attitudes toward same-gender parenting, but RF and legal/cultural context are also important to consider.

KEYWORDS

Parasocial contact; informational influence; prejudice; religious fundamentalism; LGBTQ+; media; parenting

Adoption by same-gender couples can be a topic of controversy, as it relates to religious beliefs concerning parenthood and questions about gender identity of children. Individual differences in religiosity predict attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community, such that higher religiosity and fundamentalism predict more negative attitudes (Cunningham & Melton, 2013; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). Also influential are mass media that convey information and portray same-gender parents in positive and negative ways (Landau, 2009).

This research examined the interplay between religious fundamentalism (RF; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004) and different potential sources of influence on attitudes toward same-gender parents. The way in which information is presented by media is key in shaping general attitudes. Indeed, it is not the mere visibility of same-gender parents (Landau, 2009), but also a representation of them as parents contributing to the children's wellbeing and functional development (see Cavalcante, 2015) that triggers positive attitudes. Hence, we consider here informational influence conveyed through exposure to newspaper-style information about same-gender parenting

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(Clarke, 2001) and social influence in the form of parasocial contact through mass media positive examples (Mazziotta et al., 2011). To our knowledge, no one has examined how these types of influence affect the same-gender parenting attitudes of individuals varying in RF.

Informational influence

Clarke (2001) examined common arguments against same-gender parenting present in mass media (e.g., newspapers, TV talk shows) and individuals' discourses. Some key arguments refer to religious concerns about same-gender couples as unnatural or sinful, that they cannot provide appropriate role models, that their children will be targets of bullying, and will be more likely to develop a gay sexual identity.

Parents' gender roles and children's adjustment are two of the main concerns in mass media (Bronski, 2001; Goode, 2001; Riggs, 2005). Experimental research using vignettes to evaluate views of adoptive couples that either followed traditional gender roles or not, and that were heterosexual, gay, or lesbian; found that participants had the most favorable views of couples who followed traditional roles (McCutcheon & Morrison, 2015). Moreover, while the parents' gender-role conformity is believed to affect the gender-conforming development of their son, having same-gender male parents is believed to increase the likelihood of the son to be gay and bullied by peers (Carnaghi et al., 2020). These concerns about gender and sexual identity confusion in children are rooted in homophobia and heteronormative views of the world (Pennington & Knight, 2011). Nonetheless, it is important to note that multiple meta-analyses conducted over the years suggest little to no difference between children reared by same-gender couples and those raised by heterosexual couples on various measures, including gender role development and sexual orientation (see Allen & Burrell, 1996, Crowl et al., 2008; Fedewa et al., 2015). A recent review paper (Carneiro et al., 2017) considering both qualitative and quantitative data has, indeed, indicated that gay fathers and their children have been found to have good psychological adjustment and healthy parent-child relationships.

Nevertheless, it is relevant to assess the extent to which dispelling the gender identity misconception can promote more favorable views of same-gender parenting. With this goal in mind, we examined whether informational influence can affect attitudes toward same-gender parenting. Here we consider the power of newspaper articles reporting findings supporting same-gender adoption and dispelling concerns about gender identity of children raised by same-gender parents. This allowed us to test the positive effect of information influence by mimicking newspaper articles previously used for arguments against same-gender parenting (Clarke, 2001). To augment the persuasiveness of the information presented and to make the source a credible authority (Cialdini, 2009, Chapter 6), the article was framed as a report on scientific research findings.

Social influence: Parasocial intergroup contact

Researchers have noted the importance of consensus information, or what others are doing, in attitude formation and persuasion (Cialdini, 2009, Chapter, 4). Media, particularly television, provide potentially important sources of information about our social groups (Mutz & Goldman, 2010) and this may be particularly the case with repeated exposure, which has been shown to lead to more favorable evaluations (Zajonc, 1968). According to the social cognitive theory of mass communication (Bandura, 2001), media, particularly video, can influence our conceptions of reality in various ways, such as through vicarious learning and informing us about values and acceptable behavior patterns and social practices.

There has been an increase in same-gender parents' representation in mass media (see Landau, 2009). Television plays a particularly important role in stereotype maintenance and attitude change. Indeed, research on parasocial intergroup contact suggests that exposure to an outgroup (a group to which one does not belong) via television can give rise to more favorable attitudes

toward that group (Mazziotta et al., 2011; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). Growing evidence supports the effectiveness of parasocial contact in prejudice reduction, particularly among children (Haji & Noguchi, 2019). Recent research has demonstrated that negative parasocial contact can actually increase prejudice (Schemer & Meltzer, 2020). With regard to sexual minorities, Clark (2001) has suggested that their representation on television follows different stages from non-representation to regulation and respect (see Raley & Lucas, 2006). Exposure to positive representations of sexual minorities has been associated with endorsement of equality (Bond & Compton, 2015). Moreover, parasocial contact has been effective in promoting more positive views regarding sexual minority individuals (Schiappa et al., 2005). In two studies, exposure to gay men or transvestites via television was associated with more favorable views of gay men and transvestites respectively. In correlational research, frequency of exposure to the TV show *Will & Grace* (in which two primary characters are gay men) was associated with more favorable views of gay persons (Schiappa et al., 2006).

Although research to date suggests that social influence in the form of parasocial exposure to positive LGBTQ+ exemplars is associated with more positive attitudes toward this community, less is known about effects of parasocial exposure to same-gender parents, specifically. Research has, however, shown that direct interpersonal contact with gay men and lesbian women reduces sexual prejudice and increases comfort with being with gay people. These, in turn, can positively impact on attitudes toward same-gender parenting (Costa et al., 2015). Additionally, watching movies involving a nontraditional couple induces more positive attitudes toward nontraditionalism (Mazur & Emmers-Sommer, 2003), and it has been suggested that representing same-gender parents in TV shows may elicit more favorable attitudes (for a debate, see Cavalcante, 2015). Hence, the present research assessed the extent to which parasocial contact with same-gender adoptive parents predicted more favorable attitudes toward parenting by same-gender couples. We did this by measuring exposure to a popular sitcom, *Modern Family*, involving same-gender adoptive parents. In addition to assessing informational and social influence on attitudes toward parenting by same-gender couples, we took into account individual differences in religious fundamentalism.

Religious fundamentalism

As mentioned, some of the arguments against same-gender parenting are linked to religious beliefs (Clarke, 2001). When comparing religious and nonreligious Catholic individuals, research has found that the former hold more negative beliefs toward same-gender parents and stronger concerns for children's development (Costa et al., 2014). Other research has linked religiosity to negative attitudes toward same-gender parenting (Brodzinsky, 2002; Hon et al., 2005; Schwartz, 2010), although certain studies have failed to find a significant relationship (Baiocco et al., 2013). These studies have tended, however, to measure religious affiliation or religious participation, rather than some of the more complex individual differences that account for the variability in motivations and expressions of religious belief. Studies that have assessed individual differences have linked religious orthodoxy (Miller & Chamberlain, 2013) and intrinsic religious orientation (Hichy et al., 2015) to more negative views of adoption by same-gender couples. Interestingly, distinguishing between religious affiliation, religious behavior, and Bible beliefs allowed researchers to look at different aspects of religion suggesting that those who believe that a religious book (e.g., the Bible) requires interpretation were more likely to support same-gender adoption (Whitehead, 2018). Here, we extend previous work by examining another individual difference in religiosity that has been consistently linked to outgroup prejudice and intolerance, namely religious fundamentalism (RF), or the tendency to see one's own religious tradition as the one and only path to salvation (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004).

In a review of the literature on sexual prejudice, Herek and McLemore (2013) contended that "understanding the link between sexual prejudice and religiosity requires an examination of fundamentalism" (p. 317). They noted sexual prejudice among high RF individuals may be

partially rooted in certain interpretations of the sacred texts of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, where same-gender sexual behavior is viewed as sinful, although they noted that this does not satisfactorily explain negative attitudes toward sexual minority people. Instead, it is suggested that prejudice toward sexual minorities may serve a value-expressive function among those high in RF and may give them a sense of social connectedness with like-minded others (Herek & McLemore, 2013). Indeed, RF has been consistently related to negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals, in various cultural contexts. Research from Indonesia shows that RF is associated with views of LGBTQ+ as threatening and immoral (Arli et al., 2020). US research demonstrates that some aspects of RF predict antigay anger and aggressive responding toward LGBTQ+ (Vincent et al., 2011). Importantly, Israeli research shows that RF uniquely predicts negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, above and beyond religiosity and authoritarianism (Lazar & Hammer, 2018). We therefore focused on RF as an individual difference that could potentially moderate the relations between informational or social influence and attitudes toward same-gender parenting.

This research

This research aims to evaluate the impact of exposing heterosexual individuals to information about same-gender parents and it does so in innovative ways, incorporating experimental and quasi-experimental approaches (as recommended in previous research, see Umberson et al., 2015). On one hand, we experimentally manipulate the type of information participants were exposed to, namely information presented as positive scientific evidence concerning same-gender adoptive parents and effects on children. Hence, we mimic what is often reported in newspaper articles. This is socially relevant considering that mass media play an important role in communicating information and among the main arguments against same-gender parenting are concerns about the impact on children's gender identity, their development and adjustment, and their wellbeing (see Ioverno et al., 2018; Pennington & Knight, 2011; Pistella et al., 2018). On the other hand, we also considered participants' preexisting exposure to gay adoptive parents through mass media. Specifically, we evaluated parasocial contact exposure through the TV show, *Modern Family*, a comedy that portrays same-gender adoptive parents in a favorable light. We included this quasi-independent variable in our study as a different type of exposure (rather than written scientific-style information) and because exposure to this show is a self-selective naturally occurring variable (i.e., individuals can decide whether watch the show or not). Moreover, information processing through reading and watching television may demand different levels of attention and cognitive load (see Fahmy & Wanta, 2005). We predicted that participants would show more favorable views of same-gender parenting and less social distance from same-gender parents in the experimental than control condition (Hypothesis 1a). Moreover, participants watching *Modern Family* were expected to show more favorable views and less social distance than those who have never watched the show (Hypothesis 1b).

As noted, research that has evaluated heterosexual persons' views of parenting by same-gender couples has tended to focus on religious participation or affiliation, and has rarely evaluated the role of individual differences related to religiosity. A novel contribution of our research is the evaluation of the moderating role of religious fundamentalism on the influence of our predictor variables. We expected that high RF participants would particularly show more favorable attitudes and less social distance in the experimental (vs. control) condition (Hypothesis 2a) and when exposed to *Modern Family* (Hypothesis 2b). Less religious individuals usually show more positive attitudes toward same-gender parents (Costa et al., 2014; Gross et al., 2018; Whitehead, 2018) and so opinions of low RF participants may be less likely to change when exposed to information or parasocial contact.

Finally, we tested our predictions in two countries with different cultures and legal support for LGBTQ+ rights. Because recognition of LGBTQ+ rights go hand in hand with attitudes (see Mendos, 2019), and views of same-gender parenting in particular (Takács et al., 2016; see also Fasoli & Maass, 2020), by considering Canada (Study 1) and Italy (Study 2) we examined two contexts where same-gender adoption is either legal or not (ILGA-World, 2019). Moreover,

although the majority of the population in Italy is Christian (83%, and mostly Catholic), Canada has a more diverse compositions with 69% of the population being Christian (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Study 1

Study 1 was conducted in Canada and we investigated the two types of influence (informational, social) as predictors of attitudes toward adoption by same-gender couples, along with the potential moderating role of religious fundamentalism.

Method

Participants

Study 1 involved 160 heterosexual participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 23.09$, $n_{\text{female}} = 139$) recruited from an undergraduate participant pool at a Canadian university. Just over half (51.2%) reported previous contact with same-gender parents and 26.5% reported previous contact with same-gender adoptive parents specifically. The majority (54.9%) of participants were Christian (including Catholic and other denominations), and the vast majority (90.7%) were born in Canada.

Materials

Religious fundamentalism. The 12-item Revised Religious Fundamentalism Scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004) was used ($\alpha = .89$). Items such as “To lead the best, most meaningful life, one must belong to the one, fundamentally true religion” were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Informational influence manipulation. Based on random assignment, participants were exposed to an article, “Adoption by Same-Gender Couples: No Effects on Kids’ Gender Identity,” which was aimed at addressing concerns about gender identity of children raised by same-gender parents (informational influence condition) or a control article, “Adoption: Increasingly Popular Choice for Families,” which was about adoption in general (control condition). Articles were created for the purpose of the study but were loosely informed by scientific findings. For the purposes of experimental control, articles were of comparable length and the names of researchers mentioned in the articles were kept consistent.

Beliefs about same-gender parenting. These were assessed with the 12-item scale by Carone et al. (2017; $\alpha = .90$). Participants rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) the extent to which same-gender parents would be able to care for the child in ways such as “provide a safe social context.”

Problems with same-gender parenting. Perceived problems with same-gender parenting were assessed with five items from an 11-item measure of attitudes toward same-gender parenting (Costa et al., 2014). The following items loaded on the same factor ($\alpha = .84$): “Gay men and lesbians should not have children because it is a sin;” “Gay and lesbian parents do not care about the children’s best interests;” “Children of gay and lesbians will be homosexual or will be confused about their sexuality;” “Children of gay and lesbian parents do not have the needed masculine and feminine references for their normal development;” and “It is not natural for gay men and lesbians to have children.”

Social distance from same-gender parents. A 5-item scale based on the Bogardus social distance measure (Haji & Lalonde, 2017) was used to assess participants’ willingness from 1 (*definitely would not mind*) to 5 (*definitely would mind*) to have a member of a same-gender parenting

couple as a neighbor, friend, boss, colleague, member of extended family ($\alpha = .99$).

Parasocial contact. Parasocial contact with same-gender adoptive couples was measured by having participants indicate (*yes* or *no*) whether they had previously watched the TV show *Modern Family*. Those who reported having watched the TV show were also asked to answer two items (i.e., “How much have you watched the show?” on a scale from 1 [*not at all*] to 5 [*a lot*]; and “How much did you like the show?” on a scale from 1 [*not at all*] to 5 [*extremely*]). In this popular TV sitcom, two of the main characters are gay men who get married and become the adoptive parents of two children.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via an undergraduate student participant pool and received partial course credit as compensation. After providing informed consent they completed the religious fundamentalism scale, among other individual difference measures included for exploratory purposes. Next, they were exposed to the information influence manipulation and completed the beliefs about same-gender parenting and social distance measures. Finally, they answered the parasocial questions and completed a demographics questionnaire, background questions about interpersonal contact with same-gender parents, and a post-experimental questionnaire that included a suspicion probe.

Results & discussion

Moderated multiple regression was used to assess the combined influence of RF and information exposure and of RF and parasocial contact on the outcome measures. Direct influence of the predictors was also tested in these analyses (see Tables 1–3). The PROCESS macro for SPSS (model 1, Hayes, 2017) was used and in each case the categorical predictor was dummy-coded and the continuous predictor, RF, was mean-centred.

There was a significant RF \times Informational Influence interaction as shown on beliefs about same-gender parenting, and RF directly predicted beliefs about same-gender parenting. Regression model coefficients can be found in Table 1. As indicated by the significant conditional effect at high RF (Table 1) and as shown in Figure 1, participants high in RF exposed to the experimental article reported more favorable beliefs toward same-gender adoption than those high in RF exposed to the control article.

There was also a significant RF \times Informational Influence interaction on perceived problems with parenting by same-gender couples. RF and Informational Influence also directly predicted

Table 1. Regression model coefficients for informational influence by religious fundamentalism (RF) on beliefs about same-gender parenting (Canadian sample).

Predictor	Coefficient (se)	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Intercept	4.57 (.05)	89.93	.00
Religious fundamentalism	-.20 (.04)	-5.01	.00
Informational influence manipulation	.09 (.07)	1.32	.19
RF \times Informational influence	.16 (.06)	2.61	.01
Model <i>R</i> ²	.15	<i>F</i> = 9.18	.00
Interaction ΔR^2	.04	<i>F</i> = 6.82	.01
Conditional effects at values of RF			
	Coefficient (se)	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Low	-.08 (.10)	-.70	.43
Moderate	.11 (.07)	1.52	.13
High	.29 (.10)	2.93	.00

Note. All coefficients are unstandardized and based on models with all primary variables entered. Manipulated IV was dummy-coded (1 = informational influence, 0 = control). RF was mean-centred. Conditional effects are at the mean at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of RF.

Table 2. Regression model coefficients for informational influence by religious fundamentalism (RF) on problems with same-gender parenting (Canadian sample).

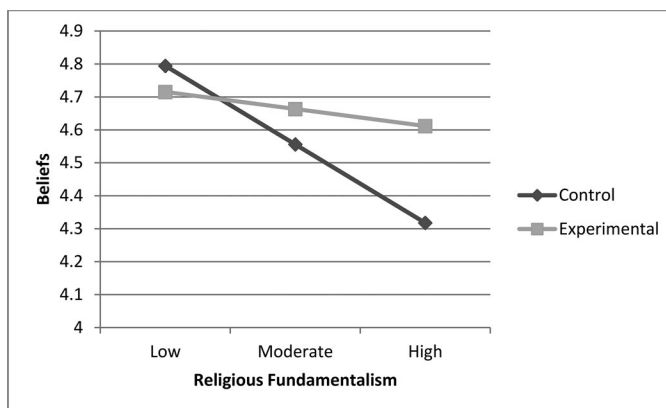
Predictor	Coefficient (se)	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Intercept	1.52 (.06)	23.49	.00
Religious fundamentalism	.30 (.05)	5.82	.00
Informational influence manipulation	-.23 (.09)	-2.51	.01
RF × Informational influence	-.15 (.08)	-1.97	.05
Model R ²	.22	<i>F</i> = 15.11	.00
Interaction ΔR ²	.02	<i>F</i> = 3.88	.05
Conditional effects at values of RF			
	Coefficient (se)	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Low	-.06 (.13)	-.47	.64
Moderate	-.24 (.09)	-2.66	.01
High	.42 (.13)	-3.28	.00

Note. All coefficients are unstandardized and based on models with all primary variables entered. Manipulated IV was dummy-coded (1 = informational influence, 0 = control). RF was mean-centred. Conditional effects are at the mean at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of RF.

Table 3. Regression model coefficients for parasocial contact by religious fundamentalism (RF) on social distance from same-gender parents (Canadian sample).

Predictor	Coefficient (se)	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Intercept	1.70 (.13)	13.11	.00
Religious fundamentalism	.47 (.13)	3.72	.00
Parasocial contact	-.46 (.17)	-2.68	.01
RF × Parasocial contact	-.37 (.15)	-2.43	.02
Model R ²	.12	<i>F</i> = 7.37	.00
Interaction ΔR ²	.03	<i>F</i> = 5.95	.02
Conditional effects at values of RF			
	Coefficient (se)	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Low	-.05 (.24)	-.20	.84
Moderate	-.49 (.17)	-2.86	.00
High	-.92 (.25)	-3.69	.00

Note. All coefficients are unstandardized and based on models with all primary variables entered. Parasocial contact was dummy-coded (1 = Modern Family exposure, 0 = no exposure). RF was mean-centred. Conditional effects are at the mean at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of RF.

**Figure 1.** Beliefs as a function of informational influence and RF (Study 1). Note. Interaction of influence manipulation and religious fundamentalism on beliefs about same-gender parenting (measured on a 5-point scale) among Canadian participants. Higher scores mean more favorable beliefs regarding same-sex parents.

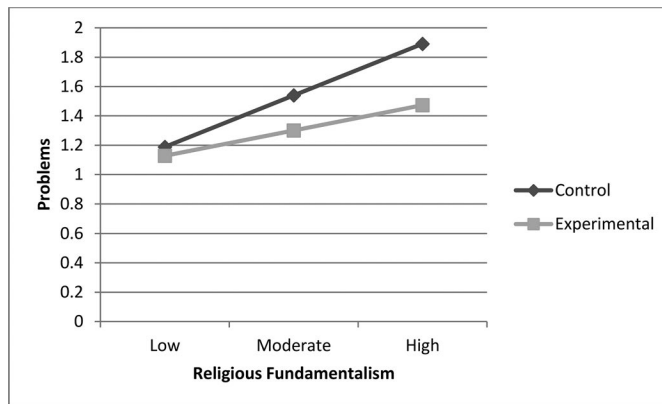


Figure 2. Problems as a function of informational influence and RF (Study 1). *Note.* Interaction of informational influence manipulation and religious fundamentalism on Canadian participants' perceived problems with same-gender parenting (rated on a 5-point scale). Higher scores represent greater perceptions of problems.

perceived problems. Regression model coefficients can be found in Table 2. As indicated by the significant conditional effect at high RF (Table 2) and as shown in Figure 2, participants high in RF exposed to the experimental article reported perceiving fewer problems with same-gender parenting than those high in RF exposed to the control article.

There was no significant RF \times Information Influence interaction on social distance from same-gender parents, and the manipulation did not have a significant direct effect. However, RF directly predicted social distance from same-gender parents, such that higher RF was associated with desiring more distance, $B = .20$, $se = .07$, $p = .01$.

We then proceeded to consider parasocial contact. Fifty-nine percent of participants reported having watched *Modern Family*, they watched it frequently ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.07$; t -test against the scale midpoint: $t(113) = 5.51$, $p < .001$) and enjoyed it ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .96$; t -test against the scale midpoint: $t(113) = 14.71$, $p < .001$). There was a significant RF \times Parasocial Contact interaction on social distance from same-gender parents, and RF and parasocial contact also directly predicted social distance. Regression model coefficients can be found in Table 3. As indicated by the significant conditional effects at moderate and high RF (Table 3) and as shown in Figure 3, participants moderate or high in RF with parasocial contact desired less social distance from same-gender parents than those high in RF without parasocial contact. There were no other significant RF \times Parasocial Contact interactions. However, RF directly predicted favorable beliefs, such that higher RF was associated with less favorable beliefs, $B = -.13$, $se = .03$, $p < .001$; and perception of problems, such that higher RF was associated with a greater perception of problems related to same-gender parenting $B = .22$, $se = .04$, $p < .001$.

Overall, information influence predicted beliefs in problems related to same-gender parenting and parasocial contact predicted social distance, partially confirming Hypotheses 1a and 1b. Moreover, in line with Hypothesis 2a and 2b, high RF participants exposed to information influence reported more favorable views and less beliefs in problems related to same-gender parenting and parasocial contact moderated desires for social distance in moderate and high RF participants.

Study 2

Study 2 was a conceptual replication of Study 1, with the important exception that it was conducted in Italy and the materials were in Italian. We were interested in assessing these processes in Italy because

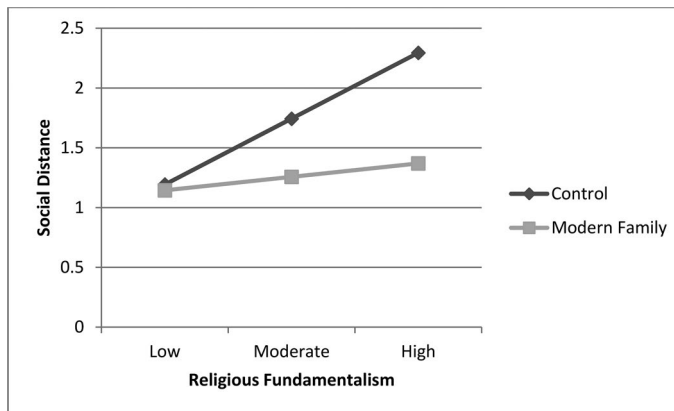


Figure 3. Social distance as function of social influence and RF (Study 1). *Note.* Interaction of parasocial contact and religious fundamentalism on Canadian participants' desired social distance from a parent belonging to a same-gender couple. Social distance is on a 5-point scale with higher scores representing more distance.

Catholic religion is highly salient (Garelli, 2007) and adoption by same-gender parents is not yet legal (ILGA-World, 2019).

Materials & method

Materials were the same as Study 1, but this time a community sample of Italian heterosexual participants ($N=96$) was recruited from Clickworker ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.16$, $n_{\text{female}} = 61$). They completed the materials in Italian. The majority (66.7%) of participants self-identified as Christian (including Catholic and other denominations). The majority (78%) had no prior contact with same-gender parents and 19.8% reported prior contact with same-gender adoptive parents, specifically. All the scales showed a good reliability (Religious fundamentalism: $\alpha = .85$, Beliefs about same-gender parenting: $\alpha = .92$, Problems with same-gender parenting: $\alpha = .88$, Social distance from same-gender parents: $\alpha = .96$).

Results & discussion

The data analytic approach was the same as Study 1. A significant RF \times Informational Influence interaction on favorable beliefs about same-gender parenting was found, and RF directly predicted these beliefs. Regression model coefficients can be found in Table 4. There was a significant conditional effect at low RF. As shown in Figure 4, we found an unexpected tendency among those low in RF to report somewhat less favorable beliefs when exposed to the experimental (vs. control) article.

There was no significant RF \times Informational Influence interaction on perceived problems, but RF directly predicted perceived problems with same-gender parenting, $B = .67$, $se = .10$, $p < .001$.

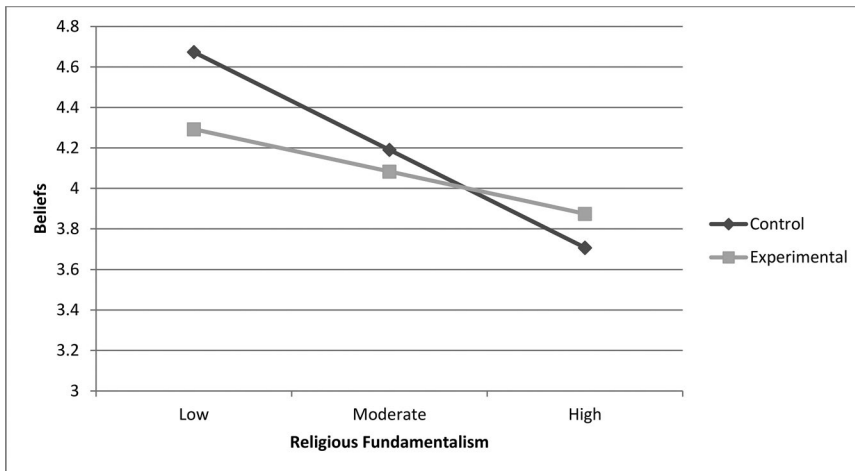
A significant RF \times Informational Influence interaction on social distance was found, and RF directly predicted social distance from same-gender parents. Regression model coefficients can be found in Table 5. There were no significant conditional effects. As shown in Figure 5, although those high in RF showed the typical pattern of desiring more social distance, we found an unexpected marginal tendency among those low in RF to desire greater social distance when exposed to the experimental (vs. control) article.

We then proceeded to consider parasocial contact. Thirty-seven percent of participants reported having watched *Modern Family*; they watched it frequently ($M=3.08$, $SD=1.21$; t -test

Table 4. Regression model coefficients for informational influence by religious fundamentalism (RF) on beliefs about same-gender parenting (Italian sample).

Predictor	Coefficient (se)	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Intercept	4.19 (.09)	45.98	.00
Religious fundamentalism	-.38 (.07)	-5.13	.00
Informational influence manipulation	-.11 (.14)	-.79	.43
RF × Informational influence	.21 (.11)	1.99	.05
Model <i>R</i> ²	.25	<i>F</i> = 10.22	.00
Interaction ΔR^2	.03	<i>F</i> = 3.95	.05
Conditional effects at values of RF			
	Coefficient (se)	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Low	-1.26 (.19)	-1.99	.05
Moderate	.00 (.14)	-.78	.44
High	1.28 (.20)	.84	.40

Note. All coefficients are unstandardized and based on models with all primary variables entered. Manipulated IV was dummy-coded (1 = informational influence, 0 = control). RF was mean-centred. Conditional effects are at the mean at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of RF.

**Figure 4.** Beliefs as a function of informational influence and RF (Study 2). Note. Interaction of informational influence manipulation and religious fundamentalism on Italian participants' favorable beliefs about same-gender parenting. Beliefs are on a 5-point scale with higher scores representing more favorable beliefs.**Table 5.** Regression model coefficients for informational influence by religious fundamentalism (RF) on social distance (Italian sample).

Predictor	Coefficient (se)	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Intercept	1.89 (.14)	13.91	.00
Religious fundamentalism	.61 (.11)	5.52	.00
Informational influence manipulation	.07 (.21)	.35	.73
RF × Informational influence	-.36 (.16)	-.16	.03
Model <i>R</i> ²	.28	<i>F</i> = 11.75	.00
Interaction ΔR^2	.04	<i>F</i> = 4.94	.03
Conditional effects at values of RF			
	Coefficient (se)	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Low	.53 (.29)	1.84	.07
Moderate	.07 (.21)	.33	.74
High	-.39 (.30)	-1.31	.19

Note. All coefficients are unstandardized and based on models with all primary variables entered. Manipulated IV was dummy-coded (1 = informational influence, 0 = control). RF was mean-centred. Conditional effects are at the mean at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of RF.

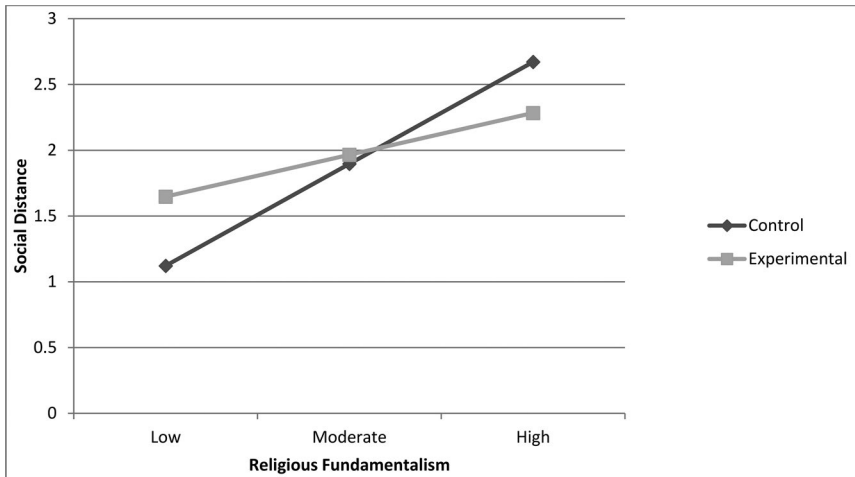


Figure 5. Social distance as a function of informational influence and RF (Study 2). *Note.* Interaction of informational influence manipulation and religious fundamentalism on Italian participants' desired social distance from a parent belonging to a same-gender couple. Social distance is on a 5-point scale with higher scores representing more distance.

against the scale midpoint: $t(36) = 2.92, p = .006$) and enjoyed it ($M = 3.17, SD = 1.30$; t -test against the scale midpoint: $t(35) = 3.08, p = .004$). There were no interactions between RF and parasocial contact. Importantly, however, those with parasocial contact reported more favorable beliefs in regards to same-gender parenting, $B = .45, se = .14, p = .001$ and also perceived fewer problems, $B = -.37, se = .18, p = .05$. Parasocial contact directly predicted social distance such that those exposed to parasocial contact desired less social distance from same-gender parents, $B = -.44, se = .21, p = .04$. RF predicted less favorable beliefs regarding same-gender parenting, $B = -.29, se = .06, p < .001$, greater perception of problems, $B = .45, se = .09, p < .001$; and the desire for more social distance, $B = .45, se = .10, p < .001$.

General discussion

In Canada, exposure to media-style information about same-gender adoption, whether in written form or through parasocial contact, mitigated the typical intolerance observed among individuals high in RF. In Italy, parasocial contact directly predicted favorable responses, although information exposure did not affect high RF individuals. Exposure to written information or parasocial contact can increase favorability toward same-gender parents, but religiosity needs to be considered to fully understand the complexity of these attitudes.

Our findings are broadly consistent with past research demonstrating associations between RF and intolerance toward LGBTQ+ persons (Arli et al., 2020; Lazar & Hammer, 2018; Vincent et al., 2011), but they also provide hope for mitigating intolerance among this group. Importantly, in the Canadian context, our manipulation was effective in eliciting more favorable views of same-gender parenting among those high in RF. Similarly, among those high in RF, parasocial exposure to *Modern Family* was associated with more favorable views of same-gender parenting. Among low RF individuals in Canada, attitudes were already highly favorable (essentially at ceiling). In Italy, our information influence manipulation did not evoke more favorable views of same-gender parenting or less social distance among those high in RF. However, parasocial exposure directly predicted favorable views of same-gender parenting, fewer perceived problems, and less social distance. It may be that the high salience of Catholic religion in Italy may have made high RF individuals' views on same-gender parenting more resistant to change (consistent with the intolerance generally observed among high RF), particularly among an older, more

religious, community sample. Indeed, with this religious backdrop, high RF in Italy may be qualitatively different (possibly stronger) than high RF in Canada. In the Italian context, informational influence tended to be influential among those low in RF, and parasocial exposure directly predicted attitudes (without being moderated by RF). Social influence, via parasocial exposure, may have been less threatening in the religious Italian context, due to the humorous format (i.e., a sitcom) and absence of a deliberate attempt at persuasion (as opposed to the newspaper-style informational article). It is also worth repeating that exposure to *Modern Family*, was correlational, based on participants' self-selected exposure. Given the much lower rates of direct contact with same-gender parents, it is perhaps not surprising that parasocial contact directly predicted attitudes. Indeed, past research indicates that parasocial contact has greater potential influence when direct contact has been low (e.g., Schiappa et al., 2006).

As predicted, and consistent with past research (Landau, 2009), informational influence in the form of a newspaper style article had an impact on attitudes toward same-gender parenting. Our research differs from past work in that our articles were framed as reports on scientific research findings. Importantly, the article that dispelled gender identity and development misconceptions about same-gender parenting, which were identified in past research (Ioverno et al., 2018; Pistella et al., 2018), resulted in more favorable attitudes and less social distance than the general article about adoption, at least in a context where same-gender parenting is legally recognized (i.e., Canada). It is notable that this was a moderated effect that was only observed among those high in RF. Indeed, in Canada, low RF participants generally reported favorable attitudes, less beliefs in problems, and less social distancing toward same sex parents regardless of the information they were exposed to.

Our findings are consistent with past research that has shown that parasocial contact is associated with more favorable outgroup attitudes (e.g., Mazziotta et al., 2011; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Schiappa et al., 2005, 2006). Whereas past research has shown that parasocial exposure to a TV sitcom with gay male characters is associated with more favorable views toward homosexual persons (Schiappa et al., 2005, 2006), this research shows that parasocial exposure to a TV sitcom with gay male adoptive parents is associated with more favorable views of same-gender parents. Notably, however, in our research these positive associations between parasocial contact and favorable outgroup attitudes tended to be moderated by individual differences in fundamentalism.

Our research is particularly timely and socially relevant. It examines one of the more controversial issues affecting LGBTQ+ communities, namely same-gender parenting and adoption. Moreover, our incorporation of an experimental approach aimed at attitude change has a practical and social relevance, beyond past research in this area, which has been primarily correlational in nature. By better understanding how to promote more favorable attitudes toward same-gender parenting, there is a potential for reducing bias in decisions relating to policy (rights of LGBTQ+ to adopt) and practice (choice of potential couples for adoption).

Limitations & future directions

These findings should be considered within the context of certain limitations. Participants in the Canadian study were university students, who may have had more open attitudes toward same-gender parenting. We relied on convenience samples in both studies, so the results may not be widely generalizable to the populations of Canada and Italy and do not represent the diversity of the populations in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, education level, and social status. Moreover, the sample size of Study 2 was moderate, which may again limit the generalizability of the results. Future studies should aim to expand and replicate this research by considering more diverse and representative samples from different countries (for a discussion on the importance to test cultural similarities and differences, see Costa and Salinas-Quiroz (2019)). Our quasi-experimental independent variable of parasocial exposure involved only same-gender male

parenting and adoption, although our attitude and belief measures dealt more broadly with adoption and parenting by same-gender couples. Future research should expand the investigation to parents who identify with other sexual orientations and gender identities that are also under-represented (see Biblarz & Savci, 2010), as well as consider attitudes toward LGBTQ+ parents who followed different pathways to parenthood (e.g., surrogacy).

Social influence in the form of parasocial exposure to *Modern Family* was a quasi-independent variable in our study, and therefore we cannot make any causal interpretations regarding its predictive associations on attitudes. Future research could aim to experimentally examine whether exposure to such sitcoms improve attitudes. Indeed, other research has experimentally demonstrated the effectiveness of parasocial contact in improving outgroup attitudes (e.g., Mazziotta et al., 2011; Schiappa et al., 2005). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that *Modern Family* is a sitcom, and that humor can function as a subtle way to define social norms (see Ford & Ferguson, 2004). Hence, future studies could compare whether representations of same-gender parents that involve humor or not would trigger similar results and whether humor plays a particular role. Finally, we did not assess whether participants watched the sitcom on video on demand (e.g., Netflix) or open TV channels that do not require subscriptions. Hence, we cannot know whether the exposure to *Modern Family* was voluntary, and participants chose to watch it, or if they were randomly exposed to it when the TV show was screened on an open TV channel. Future studies should consider whether voluntary or by chance exposure affects the results.

Future research should also test the effects of informational influence and social influence (parasocial exposure) in other cultural settings. Additionally, the predictive power of RF may vary based on the specific teachings of a particular religious tradition, and this also remains to be tested. Indeed, others have pointed out that negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ among some religious persons may be traced to scriptures of particular religious traditions (Herek & McLemore, 2013). Although we kept in mind principles of persuasion (Cialdini, 2009) when creating our manipulation, subsequent studies may provide further clues on how to optimize informational influence and social influence to promote the most favorable views of same-gender parenting.

Conclusion & implications

Though controversial to some, attitudes toward same-gender parenting can be predicted based on parasocial exposure to positive exemplars and individual differences in religious fundamentalism. These attitudes may also be malleable and subject to change based on exposure to information, particularly information that dispels misconceptions about gender identity of children reared by same-gender couples. Importantly, even the widely observed intolerance for LGBTQ+ persons among those higher in religious fundamentalism may be mitigated by information transmitted through scientific communications or through social exposure via television. Cultural context, legal precedent, and societal norms are also important factors to consider for those who are working to reduce bias and promote rights for the LGBTQ+ community.

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Conflict of interest

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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