

## Male homoparenting and its challenges: an integrative literature review

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ARTICLES REVIEWS

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**Abstract** *This study aims to elucidate the challenges faced in the exercise of male homoparenting, through an integrative literature review. Following PRISMA guidelines, empirical studies from the last 22 years were analyzed, independently collected by four researchers using the PubMed and APA PsychNet databases, with the descriptors "Homosexuality, Male" and "Father". The results reveal the unique and complex reality faced by homosexual men in the parental context. While some studies highlight significant challenges, such as stigmas and social prejudices, others do not observe such difficulties. The decision to become a father among homosexual men is influenced by factors specific to their reality, in a context where parenthood is not widely accepted. The findings of this study emphasize the need to understand the complex interactions among individual, social, and cultural factors in male homoparenting. In summary, this study highlights the need for inclusive and diversity-sensitive approaches to support family well-being.*

**Key words** *Homosexuality, Male, Child, Father*

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## Introduction

Homoaffective parenting, known as homoparentality, arises as a recent phenomenon and is still in the process of social legitimization. For centuries, social structures deeply rooted in heteronormativity have restricted homoparenting, denying it a legitimate place in the social sphere. However, significant sociocultural changes have been restructuring the traditional conception of family, transcending heterocentric normativity and creating space for new forms of identity and relationships in society<sup>1,2</sup>.

The end of the 19th century marked the beginning of a process of individualization that continues even today, gradually opening space for new ways of positioning individuals in society, including homosexual experiences. This process gained momentum in the 1960s, when social movements associated with the sexual revolution challenged previously uncontested social structures. The 21st century saw significant advances in medically assisted reproduction technologies and achievements in the rights of sexual minorities, expanding options for family formation and elevating the importance of affective relationships, moving away from the heteronormative discourse of procreation. Postmodern science has challenged traditional precepts related to family formation, highlighting the no need for a heterosexual couple and emphasizing the ability to perform parental roles regardless of gender in raising children<sup>2</sup>.

However, scientific literature suggests a lower tendency towards parenthood among homosexual individuals when compared to their heterosexual peers<sup>1,3,4</sup>. Notably, among gay men, stigmas associated with male social status appear to influence these trends<sup>2</sup>.

Despite the growing body of literature on parenting in homoaffective contexts, there are significant gaps in the specific challenges faced by gay men in parenting. This study seeks to contribute to this discussion by offering a comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of the unique challenges, experiences, and family dynamics of male homoparenting. In an innovative manner, the study focuses on the intersection of gender, sexuality, and parenting, exploring how these factors influence the experiences of gay parents and the psychosocial impacts on their families.

Understanding the factors underlying the challenges faced in male homoparenting is key to reaching an accurate understanding of the current reality and can provide a solid basis for

possible interventions at psychological, legislative, social, and health levels. These initiatives are aligned with the most emerging social and political demands advocated by international organizations in different areas of activity, particularly in mental health. Therefore, this study aims to elucidate the main difficulties encountered in the exercise of male homoparenting.

## Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative approach and performs an integrative review of the domain-based literature, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)<sup>5</sup> recommendation (Paul & Criado, 2020). The choice for an integrative review meets the objectives of this study, which aim to identify, in the scientific literature, the challenges faced by gay male couples when exercising parenthood. The use of PRISMA recommendations as a methodological guide follows the guidelines recommended by the Enhancing the Quality and Transparency of Health Research (EQUATOR) platform.

The definition of the research question was guided by international protocols for systematic and integrative literature reviews, guided by the PICo strategy (P = population; I = interest; Co = context;). This recommendation aims to recover more research with a qualitative focus focused on human experiences and social phenomena<sup>6,7</sup>. Thus, the guiding question was: What are the challenges faced (I) by gay men (P) in the exercise of homoparenting (Co)?<sup>7</sup>

Data production took place between January and July 2022. The initial search for online publications took place in the following databases: PubMed (free resource developed and maintained by the National Library of Medicine (NLM) of the United States) and APA PsychNet (PsychArticles). The descriptors were crossed, in Portuguese and Spanish, standardized in the Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS), and their respective English Medical Subject Heading (MESH), using the Boolean operators AND, AND NOT, and OR. Homosexuality, Male; Father. For the search strategy, the following configuration of descriptors, keywords, and Boolean operators was adopted: (1) Homosexuality, Male AND Father AND Child OR Homosexuality, Male AND Father.

The inclusion criteria adopted were as follows: studies available electronically and free of charge, containing empirical research, written in Por-

tuguese, English, or Spanish, related to the thematic area of the study, and published from the year 2000 onwards. The study's time period to the present date is justified by the intention of carrying out a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the field of homoparenting over time.

The evaluation of article titles was carried out by two independent researchers, following exclusion criteria that include the elimination of duplicate documents, works published outside the specified period (2000-2022), those that do not answer the guiding question, and materials considered "gray literature", such as book chapters, dissertations, theses, news, technical documents, comments, and editorials. To measure agreement between researchers, the Kappa index statistical coefficient was used, which provides a measure of agreement adjusted for chance. The results indicated that the researchers achieved substantial agreement, with a Kappa index of 0.8. Resolution of any discrepancies was achieved through additional discussions, ensuring final consensus on the choice of articles for inclusion in the review.

Data collection consisted of reading the full articles selected by the researchers, ensuring a complete and careful analysis of the relevant content.

#### Data extraction

After applying the exclusion criteria, the data from the articles selected for this review were organized using an instrument in the form of a table, aimed at minimizing errors in transcription and ensuring the recording of all relevant data<sup>7</sup>. The sample data were summarized into two groups of information, the first referring to the identification of the articles (title, authors, year, periodical, language, and place of study) and the second referring to the characteristics of the article (methodological approach, objectives, sample, results, level of evidence, conclusions, and limitations).

#### Data analysis

To present the research outcome, it was decided to organize the results through Content Analysis, including the phases of pre-analysis, analysis, and treatment of results, inferences, and interpretation<sup>8</sup>. Pre-analysis concerns the initial contact and reading of the material. At this stage, the data was organized, grouped by similarity. In the analysis phase, the themes were highlighted and their respective cores identified, including:

- Impact of social stigmas and prejudices on children's experience: Analyses how children of same-sex couples are affected by social stigmas and prejudices.

- Reflective process in the decision to move forward with parenthood by gay men: Highlights the in-depth reflection of gay men on the decision to become parents, contrasting with patterns observed in heterosexual couples.

- Child development in contexts of male homoparenting: Addresses the absence of specific damage to child development in same-sex families, emphasizing the importance of a healthy environment and adequate care.

- Influence of the cultural and social context on homoparenting: Explores how different social, cultural, and geographic realities influence the experiences and challenges of homoparenting, suggesting the need for a contextualized reading of these issues.

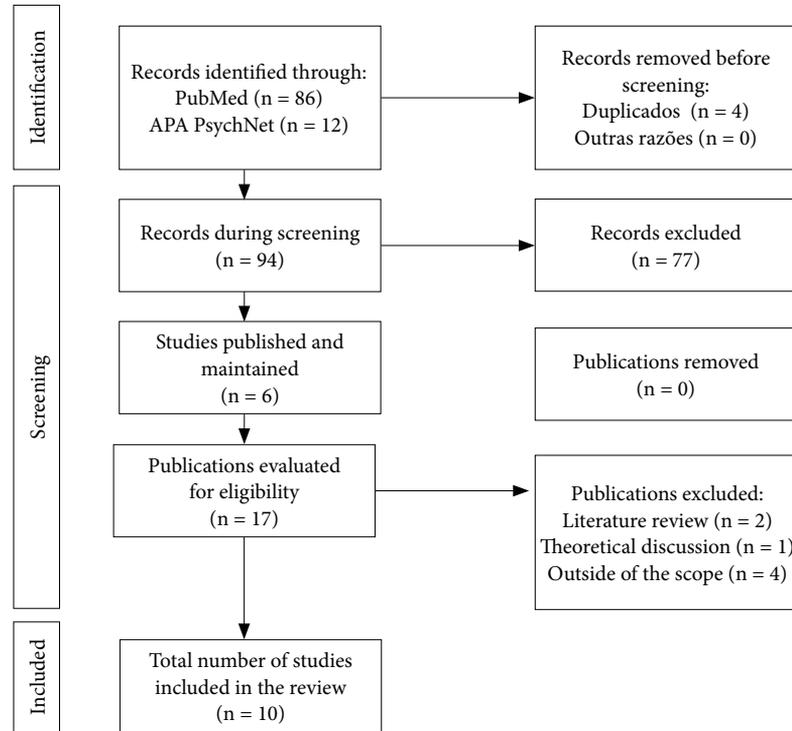
## Results

The initial bibliographic search identified a set of 98 studies, of which 86 were retrieved from the PubMed database and the remaining 12 from the APAPsychNet database. At the end of this selection process, based on the applicability of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, ten articles were maintained for analysis in their complete version, thus constituting the final sample of this study.

Figure 1, presented below, illustrates in detail the article selection process throughout this integrative review, highlighting the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria that led to the formation of the final sample.

Table 1 presents the titles, authors and years of publication of the ten articles selected to formulate this study's sample. These articles were published between 2011 and 2019, with a notable predominance of publications in 2018. Regarding language, all were published in English.

There is a methodological variety among the ten studies reviewed. Four conducted their research with couples who had adopted their children<sup>9-12</sup>. Another four studies analyzed couples who resorted to surrogacy, commonly referred to in Brazilian Portuguese as "barriga de aluguel"<sup>13-16</sup>. One of the studies did not specify the modality through which parenthood was achieved<sup>17</sup>, while another more comprehensive study investigated different routes of parenthood, including adoption, surrogacy, and co-parenting with women, whether heterosexual or lesbian<sup>18</sup>.



**Figure 1.** Flowchart of the study selection process using the PRISMA recommendation.

Source: Authors.

This diversity in studies reflects the multiple forms of parenting within the homosexual community, providing a comprehensive analysis of parental experiences in this context.

The article review reveals divergences regarding the identification of challenges in homoparenting. Among the ten studies analyzed, six of them reported the existence of specific challenges associated with parenthood among gay men<sup>10-16</sup>. By contrast, the remaining four studies found no significant difficulties in this area<sup>9,13,17,18</sup>.

Among the challenges highlighted in the studies, the experiences of prejudice and social stigma faced by gay parents stand out<sup>10-12,15</sup>. Furthermore, issues linked to the paths to achieving parenthood, especially in cases of assisted reproduction with the intervention of third parties, such as in the practice of surrogacy<sup>13</sup>, were reported as challenging.

On the other hand, studies that did not identify difficulties in exercising male homoparenting highlighted positive aspects of this experience.

Among them, the reduction in levels of depression and stress related to parenthood among gay men<sup>9</sup>, lower levels of cortisol, a hormone associated with stress, among gay fathers<sup>17</sup>, and a strong association between parenthood and personal fulfillment<sup>18</sup>. These studies also highlighted strong motivations that lead gay men to choose fatherhood, suggesting a balanced and multifaceted perspective on the topic.

## Discussion

The articles analyzed in this study offer a vision of the unique profile experienced by homoparenting among male same-sex couples. It was evident that this phenomenon is intrinsically linked to a multiplicity of factors, with the social dimension standing out as one of the most prominent aspects<sup>11,12,14,18</sup>. Among the studies examined, those that identified challenges in the experience of male homoparenting were consistent in high-

**Chart 1.** Articles analyzed in the review.

Authors	Scientific journal	Method	Year of publication
Golombok <i>et al.</i>	<i>Child Development</i>	Empirical study (questionnaire and structured and observational interview)	2014
Feugé <i>et al.</i>	<i>Attachment &amp; Human Development</i>	Empirical study (questionnaire)	2020
Sydsjö <i>et al.</i>	<i>Acta Obstetrica et Gynecologica Scandinavica</i>	Empirical study (questionnaire)	2018
Carone <i>et al.</i>	<i>Developmental Psychology</i>	Empirical study (multiple questionnaires and structured and observational interview)	2018
Burke & Bribiescas	<i>Psychology &amp; Behavior</i>	Empirical study (biological sample)	2018
Carone <i>et al.</i>	<i>Reproductive Biomedicine Online</i>	Empirical study (semi-structured interview)	2017
Shenkman & Shmotkin	<i>Journal of Family Psychology</i>	Empirical study (questionnaire)	2016
Tornello <i>et al.</i>	<i>Journal of Family Psychology</i>	Empirical study (questionnaire)	2011
Green <i>et al.</i>	<i>Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity</i>	Empirical study (questionnaire)	2019
Golombok <i>et al.</i>	<i>Child Development</i>	Empirical study (multiple questionnaires and structured and observational interview)	2018

Source: Authors.

lighting that such challenges are heavily related to the experience of prejudice and social stigma<sup>10-12,14-16</sup>. In this context, the evidence refutes the notion that homoparenting, in itself, is a factor that generates psychological suffering. In fact, suffering, when present, is linked to the adversities faced, including aggression, judgment, and exclusion in the social environment.

In this sense, the studies encompass the experience of the so-called “Minority Stress”, which is a type of psychological suffering that affects stigmatized people. These people find themselves needing to adapt to daily situations at a greater level, as compared to non-stigmatized individuals, due to the stressors specific to the minority group to which they belong, which are over and above the stressors common to all people<sup>19</sup>. Minority Stress works as an additional stress to everyday stressors, that is, all people can get married, divorced, hired or fired from jobs, but only those who belong to a group, more specifically those who have their sexual orientation outside the heteronormative standards, experience these events based on their minority status<sup>20</sup>.

The understanding of Minority Stress must expand beyond the individual psychological dimension, also encompassing the manifestations

of social and power imbalances. This stress, characteristic of marginalized groups, highlights the importance of implementing inclusive policies and promoting social awareness to combat prejudice. The persistence of this stress suggests the need for strong social and psychological support for individuals who belong to these groups, emphasizing the need to adopt a comprehensive perspective on mental health, which considers both social and individual dynamics.

Furthermore, the studies analyzed in our work found no signs of damage to the child development process in relation to children born to male same-sex couples simply because they have two male parents. However, signs of psychological distress were observed among children of gay couples<sup>15,16</sup>. All studies state that this suffering is related to the experience of stigma and social prejudice. In this sense, the lower the parents’ capacity for psychic resilience and emotional defense, the greater the risk of them not being able to adequately protect the child, allowing such violence to be perceived by the child<sup>15,16</sup>.

The impact of social stigma and prejudice on children of gay couples illustrates the intricate relationship between the social environment and children’s psychological development. This

finding challenges the traditional understanding that family structure is a determining factor in a child's well-being. On the contrary, it highlights the significant influence of the external context, encompassing both social acceptance and exposure to prejudice. This expanded approach suggests that interventions aimed at promoting the well-being of children in same-sex families must transcend the family sphere and engage society as a whole.

Additionally, some studies analyzed in our work state that, compared to heterosexual individuals, gay men seem to reflect more elaborately on the decision to have or not to have children<sup>9,13,14,18</sup>. This deeper reflection tends to result in stronger and more concise reasons that justify the choice for parenthood. This behavior is possibly influenced by the reality experienced by the gay population, in which the transition to parenthood is neither socially authorized nor naturally expected. Furthermore, there is the wear and tear of an adoption or assisted reproduction process, as well as the knowledge of the numerous challenges, mainly social, that gay men face when they choose parenthood<sup>10-12</sup>. This set of difficulties may well enhance reflections on decision-making, resulting in greater clarity and solidity in relation to gay men's reasons for becoming parents.

Gay men's careful consideration of parenthood reflects an awareness of the challenges and responsibilities inherent in fatherhood, particularly in a social context that often marginalizes them. This may also indicate emotional maturity and stronger preparation for parenthood, potentially leading to more reflective and mindful parenting practices. This analysis emphasizes the importance of considering motivations and decision-making processes in the context of homoparenting, highlighting the need for adequate support and resources for these parents in order to facilitate a positive transition to parenthood.

In this sense, it is interesting to note that the studies analyzed herein point to a greater tendency towards positive parental practices on the part of male same-sex couples, reflected both in a greater choice of care attitudes based on respect and affection, as well as in the search for educational knowledge to raise children<sup>10,18</sup>. Furthermore, the studies among couples who opted for assisted reproduction identified greater openness in relation to the elaboration of the child's birth route with the family and social network, as compared to heterosexual couples who seem to face greater stigma when opting for a similar reproductive route<sup>13</sup>.

The tendency of male same-sex couples to adopt positive parenting practices, such as affectionate care and the search for educational knowledge, contradicts the stigmatized narrative often associated with homoparenting. These findings challenge stereotypes and emphasize the ability of same-sex couples to provide an enriching and loving parenting environment. At the same time, it also highlights the need for a broader and more inclusive understanding of the different forms of parenting, recognizing that parental competence is not linked to sexual orientation, but rather to the quality of care and affection provided to children.

Although there is a plethora of studies categorizing the difficulties in male homoparenting, it is important to highlight that some found no difficulties in this regard<sup>9,13,17,18</sup>. Therefore, the analysis of these studies must take into account the difference in social reality where they were conducted, considering the cultural and social nuances present in different contexts. Data obtained in research must be analyzed considering the cultural and social context in which the studies were developed in order to obtain an appropriate reading of these complex issues.

The literature analyzed in our work also highlights positive aspects and the resilience of same-sex families. Studies, such as those by Green *et al.*<sup>12</sup> and Shenkman & Shmotkin<sup>18</sup>, have observed that homosexual parents often present high levels of satisfaction and fulfillment in parenthood, despite the social challenges<sup>12,18</sup>. These studies reiterate the ability of these families to provide loving and stable environments for child development, challenging stigmatized narratives. The inclusion of these perspectives in the discussion broadens the understanding of the complex and multifaceted experiences of male homoparenting.

By highlighting the complex experiences and challenges faced by same-sex parents, this study reinforces the urgent need for public health policies that promote inclusion and respect for diversity. The adoption of inclusive practices in the health system, combined with education and awareness strategies, can mitigate the adverse effects of social prejudice, contributing to the psychological well-being of same-sex families and, by extension, society as a whole.

## Final considerations

By elucidating the challenges faced in the exercise of male homoparenting, this study reveals a

complex and multifaceted reality. Same-sex couples, when dealing with social stigmas and prejudices, face unique challenges related to building a family. It is important to highlight that, although no harm to child development was found that resulted from the presence of two parents of the same sex, studies highlight the impact of social stigma and prejudice on children's psychological suffering. The ability of parents to act as protective barriers for their children plays a key role, influencing children's exposure to such violence.

The in-depth reflection on parenthood by gay men, more apparent when compared to heterosexual individuals, is another relevant aspect highlighted by the studies. Such a consideration is influenced by the social reality of the gay population, where parenthood is often not expected or widely accepted. The process of adoption or assisted reproduction, together with an awareness of social challenges, contributes to this in-depth reflection and the formation of solid motivations for parenthood.

The diversity of experiences and realities observed in the analyzed studies suggests that the challenges of male homoparenting are influenced by variable sociocultural and contextual factors. The research highlights a significant gap in the scientific literature on the topic, with a predominance of Westernized and Eurocentric studies. In this sense, it is recommended that future research be developed in the Brazilian and Latin American context, seeking a more comprehensive and contextualized understanding of the realities of male homoparenting in different cultures and societies.

In conclusion, by elucidating the main difficulties encountered in exercising male homoparenting, this study reveals an integrated and comprehensive understanding of individual, social, and cultural factors that affect this context. It also highlights the need for inclusive and diversity-sensitive policies and practices that promote the well-being of all families, regardless of their configuration.

## **Collaborations**

GB Silveira: definition of the research design; execution of research procedures; drafting of the manuscript. GB Roggia: execution of research procedures; drafting of the manuscript. J Rigue: drafting of the manuscript; theoretical and methodological review. CS Krue: definition of the research design; theoretical and methodological guidance; theoretical and methodological review; review of the manuscript's write-up.

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