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Untangling perceptions of atypical parents

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Abstract

Objective: This study examines how the public perceives of five types of “atypical” parents in the United States—single mothers, single fathers, lesbian couples, gay couples, and adoptive parents—including, critically, the factors that contribute to these perceptions.

Background: Although a handful of studies have considered attitudes toward atypical parents, virtually no studies have considered why people hold the attitudes they do. In addition, few studies have compared multiple types of parents simultaneously, to understand the direction and magnitude of people’s perceptions of alternative families.

Method: The authors designed and conducted a national phone survey ($N = 827$). Respondents were randomly assigned to an experimental condition corresponding to one of these five types of parents. Then, respondents were asked how well the parent(s) can: bring up a child (i.e., an overall perception item), provide for children’s basic needs, have a warm relationship, and teach important values, compared to their normative counterparts.

Results: Respondents are by far the most receptive toward adoptive parents across all four of these items. Perceptions of single parents are most strongly shaped by beliefs about economic resources. Perceptions of same-sex parents are most strongly shaped by beliefs about morality. We also find key gendered perceptions within these parent groups. For example, emotional considerations shape perceptions of gay couples, but not lesbian couples.

Conclusion: Adoptive parents are broadly accepted in the United States, but much resistance toward single parents (on mostly economic grounds) and same-sex parents (on mostly moral grounds) remains.

KEYWORDS

adoption, gender, LGBTQ, parent–child relationships, parents, same-sex marriage

INTRODUCTION

The “traditional” or “typical” American family—that is, a family consisting of two different-sex parents and their biological children—has been declining in prevalence for many decades. Although this was once considered the ideal family form in the sociological literature, scholars have increasingly recognized the diversity (and, at times, complexity) of U.S. families (Coontz, 2016; Hamilton et al., 2007; Powell et al., 2010, 2016; Reczek, 2020; Rosenfeld, 2007; Rosenfeld & Kim, 2005; Stacey, 1996). Indeed, “atypical” families—including single parents, same-sex parents, and adoptive parents—have become so common that the moniker “atypical” is not nearly as accurate as it once was (although we use the term “atypical” throughout this article because many Americans consider different-sex biological parents to be normative or the “default” against which other families are judged; Smith, 1993).

A small number of prior surveys have considered Americans’ attitudes toward these so-called atypical families, including the extent to which parents in these families are perceived as able to raise children effectively. Take, for example, the General Social Survey (GSS), which is the largest and most influential survey to have fielded such questions. The GSS has asked respondents three times (in 1994, 2002, and 2012) whether “one parent can bring up a child as well as two parents together.” In 2012, the GSS also fielded questions on whether “A same-sex female [or male] couple can bring up a child as well as a male-female couple” (Smith et al., 2012). These items are immensely useful for gauging attitudes toward single parents and same-sex parents in the United States (see, e.g., Cheng et al., 2017). And yet, if a respondent reported positive (or negative) assessments of these parents on the GSS, we would have no direct follow-up attitudinal items that help explain why this is the case. It may be that respondents perceive these parents as able to provide for their children economically, form close bonds with them, or teach them important values—but these general survey items, by themselves, do not fully unpack these beliefs. Other surveys have taken a similar approach by asking global or general questions about how people perceive of certain types of families, but have stopped short of asking questions that gauge the content of their beliefs. As a result, further research is needed to understand *why* people think about atypical families the way they do.

In this article, we consider Americans’ beliefs about five types of “atypical” parents in the United States: single mothers, single fathers, lesbian parents, gay parents, and adoptive parents. We conducted a national phone survey with a large sample of U.S. adults ($N = 827$), and randomly assigned respondents to an experimental condition corresponding to one of these five types of atypical families. In addition to a global question that asked respondents to assess how well these parents could raise a child, we asked them three other questions that gauged respondents’ beliefs about how well these parents could provide for children’s basic needs, have warm relationships with children, and teach children important values. By combining the data from these items, we are able to better understand what respondents mean when they express support (or skepticism) toward atypical parents in the United States. This is an important consideration not only from a scholarly perspective, but also from a policy perspective, because these data are useful for isolating the widely-held cultural assumptions about atypical families that allow inequalities to persist. In what follows, we theorize as to how these types of parents may be perceived in the United States, drawing on prior research on single parents, same-sex parents, adoptive parents, and gendered expectations related to parenting.

BACKGROUND

The prevalence of “atypical” parents in the United States

Children today grow up in the context of increasingly diverse family structures. Indeed, over the past several decades, single parents, same-sex parents, and adoptive parents have all

increased in prevalence according to U.S. Census data. Most notably, between 1970 and 1990, the proportion of families with children headed by single mothers essentially doubled, from about 12% to about 24% (McLanahan, 2004); the proportion of single mother-headed families has remained approximately stable since then. Recent estimates of single father-headed families (about 5% of families with children), same-sex parent families (about 1%), and adoptive parent families (about 2%) indicate that these family forms are all gaining in prevalence (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). At the same time, more “typical” family structures have become less common by comparison. From 1970 through 2019, the proportion of families with children headed by two different-sex non-adoptive parents has declined from about 87% to about 70% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Thus, while these families remain a majority in the United States, their majority is not nearly as large as it once was (see also Goldberg & Conron, 2018; Powell et al., 2016; Reczek, 2020; Vespa et al., 2013).

Despite this growing diversity, much literature in the social sciences continues to compare atypical families to their more typical or normative counterparts. This is partly out of necessity; research often requires the use of reference groups or comparison groups, and comparing alternative families against more normative families makes sense from a design perspective. This is also partly a response to ideological claims about what families are and should be; because conservative religious groups and others have frequently held up different-sex biological parents as the “ideal” family form, social scientists have tested these claims empirically by comparing outcomes in alternative families against those in more normative families. Most of this research has assessed outcomes related to child-rearing, considering that much opposition toward same-sex couples, in particular, has centered on how children fare when they are raised by gay or lesbian parents. Despite much research showing that children fare just as well, if not better, when they are raised by same-sex couples as compared to different-sex couples (Baiocco et al., 2018; Cheng & Powell, 2015; Mazrekaj et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2016; Prickett et al., 2015; Reczek et al., 2016; Rosenfeld, 2015), opposition toward same-sex parents remains, along with comparisons to different-sex parents. Various criticisms and/or concerns have also been levied against single parents and adoptive parents, as we discuss further in the next sections.

Theorizing beliefs about atypical parents: How favorable and why?

The small number of prior studies that have assessed beliefs about atypical parents have usually relied on global or general questions about how these parents compare to their normative counterparts. This has left scholars with little understanding of the specific dimensions of parenting that contribute to these beliefs about single parents, same-sex parents, and adoptive parents. In this section, we draw on scholarship in the areas of family, economic inequality, and gender to theorize Americans’ beliefs about atypical families—including, critically, *why* Americans hold the beliefs they do. We posit that in addition to popular hesitations or objections that respondents may have about these families, their beliefs may also have a gendered component, such that respondents’ beliefs within types of families are not uniform (e.g., people’s beliefs about lesbian parents are not the same as their beliefs about gay parents, partly due to gendered expectations).

Single mothers and single fathers

Popular and scholarly accounts of single mothers and single fathers often focus on one particular dimension of parenting: the economic dimension. Although many single parents receive some amount of child support (but perhaps not as much as one would think; the U.S. Census Bureau (2018) estimates that only 44% of custodial parents receive the full amount of child

support owed to them), single parents, by definition, rely mostly or entirely on one income to support their households. As a result, single-parent families are at relatively high risk of experiencing poverty.

Poverty is especially high among single mother-headed families, as much research has shown (Brady et al., 2017; Brady & Burroway, 2012; Edin & Kissane, 2010; McLanahan, 2004; Musick & Mare, 2004). This is partly because women (and mothers in particular) are frequently penalized in the labor market, making it harder to accrue high wages and other resources that can be used to support children (Correll et al., 2007; Ishizuka, 2021; Quadlin, 2018; Weisshaar, 2018; Yavorsky, 2019). Aside from the persistent penalties that women experience in the labor market relative to men, we also expect the public to have negative expectations about single mothers' economic fitness because this group faces stereotypes related to the receipt of public assistance. Research shows that single mothers may be blamed for their circumstances or otherwise looked down upon, in part because children may be "born out of wedlock" or raised "without a father figure" (DeJean et al., 2012; Ganong et al., 1988). Single mothers may also be stereotyped as avoiding paid work and relying on food stamps and other government-funded programs (Edin & Lein, 1997). This stereotype was certainly prominent decades ago, and while we suspect that this view has declined in prevalence, it may continue to linger among some members of the public. Single fathers do not face these stereotypes to the same extent, and fathers, if anything, may be rewarded in the labor market relative to non-fathers (Hodges & Budig, 2010), so we do not expect single fathers to be regarded as negatively as single mothers on economic dimensions of parenting.

Lesbian couples and gay couples

We expect moral considerations to be a key factor that shapes people's perceptions of both lesbian parents and gay parents. Although acceptance of same-sex parenting (and same-sex marriage more broadly) has increased rapidly in recent years (Gates, 2015; Hart-Brinson, 2018; Powell et al., 2010, 2015), a nontrivial segment of the public continues to object to same-sex parenting on moral grounds. Some commentators have argued, for example, that same-sex parents are "morally bankrupt" or that they will "corrupt" children (Webb & Chonody, 2014). One particularly common claim is that children who grow up in LGB-headed households will be more likely to grow up to become LGB adults because their parents have set a "deviant" example for them. Setting aside the question of whether being LGB is even harmful (or "deviant"), research that has assessed this claim has found little apparent link between parents' and children's sexual orientation (Gates, 2015). Still, for some Americans, this would indeed be considered a failure in parenting. In light of this evidence, we posit that moral considerations shape public perceptions of both lesbian couples' and gay couples' overall parenting ability.

Aside from these concerns about morality among same-sex parents, we also consider whether gendered expectations are linked to perceptions of emotional capacity among lesbian and gay parents. In some ways, we might expect perceptions of emotional capacity (i.e., how well parents can develop a warm relationship with children) to negatively affect perceptions of both of these types of couples. Research shows, for example, that lesbians are perceived as decidedly less warm than many other sexual orientation groups, in part because they are perceived as lacking femininity (Mize & Manago, 2018). This finding suggests that lesbians may be perceived as uniquely lacking in their ability to form close relationships with children. Yet, we expect gay couples to be even further penalized on this dimension. Women are stereotyped as having greater emotional capacity than men, as well as stronger and more innate parenting ability (Doan & Quadlin, 2019; Hays, 1996). Members of the public may assume that if a lesbian couple has opted-in to having children, these must be two lesbians who are relatively warm and relatively high in maternal instinct (equating to something of a selection effect among lesbians

who have opted-in to motherhood). Additionally, because most gay couples (i.e., gay couples consisting of two cisgender men) exclude biological mothers, Americans may be skeptical that either parent in a gay couple can have as warm a relationship with children as a biological mother could. Of course, neither parent in a lesbian couple may be the biological mother either, but this is a much greater possibility among lesbian couples than among gay couples, and this may factor into Americans' decision-making. Accordingly, we expect people's beliefs about emotional suitability to guide their overall beliefs about parenting among gay couples, but perhaps not among lesbian couples.

Adoptive parents

Finally, we expect Americans to have a relatively positive outlook on adoptive parents. Many adoptive parents do not share a direct biological connection with their children and, as a result, some scholars and members of the public would argue that compared to biological parents, adoptive parents will invest fewer resources or will not have as strong of an emotional bond (Buss, 1995; Hamilton, 1964). The expectation may be that adoptive parents perceive their parenting experience as "not quite as good as having your own," to quote Fisher's (2003) influential work on the sociology of adoption. But despite their lack of a direct biological connection, many adoptive parents have ample economic resources, and they are often perceived as altruistic and highly motivated to have children (Hamilton et al., 2007; Powell et al., 2016). This is, in some ways, a stereotypical portrait of adoptive parents—one that relies on tropes about (White, high-SES, different-sex) couples who turn to adoption after many years of being unable to conceive children on their own. In reality, the population of adoptive parents is far more diverse than this trope would suggest. Many children are adopted by nonparent relatives, such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents, and these adoptive parents tend to have relatively low educational attainment and income (Powell et al., 2016). Yet, research on adoptive families typically finds positive outcomes in terms of children's well-being, emotional development, academic performance, and eventual educational attainment (Feigelman, 2008; Hamilton et al., 2007; Lansford et al., 2001). Given these findings as well as popular conceptions of adoptive parents, we expect Americans to rate adoptive parents relatively highly across multiple dimensions of parenting, including their overall perceptions of these parents.

METHOD

The data for this study are from the Constructing the Family and Higher Education Survey, which was conducted through the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University. Three authors (Natasha Quadlin, Long Doan, and Brian Powell) were either PI or Co-PI of this national phone survey in the summer of 2015. About half the survey focused on public opinion regarding family, especially perceptions of alternative family forms, and about half the survey focused on public opinion toward the funding of higher education. The survey also included standard demographic questions that are typical in survey research (e.g., respondent education, age, gender, and marital status).

We designed the survey with a team of graduate students and collected the data with a larger team of trained undergraduate and graduate student interviewers as well as professional interviewers from the Center for Survey Research. We pretested the survey questions in early May 2015; we revised the questionnaire in response to the pretest results; and production interviewing ran from mid-May through mid-July 2015. Respondents were recruited using list-assisted random digit dialing (RDD) with a comprehensive sample of both landline and cellular phone numbers. At each RDD residential phone number, a respondent was randomly selected from all household members age 18 or older. Cellular phone users were considered eligible if they were age 18 or older and they were the primary user of the cellular phone for personal,

nonwork purposes. Notably, because we conducted the study in summer 2015, data were collected both before and after the landmark Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage (*Obergefell v. Hodges*; see Kaufman & Compton, 2021). We conducted analyses to determine whether the decision affected people's responses to the experimental conditions, which we discuss later in the results.

Descriptive statistics for the sample are shown in Table 1, along with equivalent statistics from the GSS. Although our sample is comparable to the GSS on many demographic measures, we note that our respondents tend to be Whiter, older, and more educated than the typical GSS respondent. This is offset by the fact that our sample is similar to the GSS on key attitudinal measures that predict beliefs about gay and lesbian parenting and rights more broadly. These include contact with gay and lesbian individuals and views about the Bible ("Biblical literalism"). Thus, respondents' broad beliefs are very much in line with what we would expect from other national surveys, although the sample differs from national estimates in some ways that should be kept in mind when evaluating the results. For more information on the data collection, survey, and sample, see Quadlin and Powell (2022).

Experimental design

During one of the modules about halfway through the survey, respondents were randomly assigned to one of five vignette conditions corresponding to five types of "atypical" parents: a single mother, a single father, a lesbian couple, a gay couple, or two adoptive parents. We then asked respondents four questions about that parent's (or parents') ability to raise children as compared to their normative counterparts. As an illustration, consider the introduction (which was the same for all respondents) and the four questions that we asked respondents who were randomly assigned to the "single mother" condition. The default text of these questions is shown below; the telephone interviewers read the portions in parentheses if respondents asked for clarification:

People these days have differing opinions as to how well certain groups of people can raise children. I will read some statements about how well certain groups of people can raise children. Please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with the following statements.

(1) *A single mother can bring up a child as well as two parents together.*

(2) *A single mother can take care of her child's basic needs, like providing food, shelter, and protection as well as two parents together.*

(3) *What about having as warm a relationship with her child as two parents together? (Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree that a single mother can have as warm a relationship with her child as two parents together?)*

(4) *What about teaching her child important values? (Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree that a single mother can teach her child important values as well as two parents together?)*

The first item is an *overall* item that captures people's general impressions of their atypical parent group. The remaining items refer to *economic*, *emotional*, and *moral* dimensions of parenting, respectively. We chose these measures to gauge dimensions that family scholars have identified as core competencies in parenting (Johnson et al., 2014). The economic dimension reflects parents' ability to earn money and/or hold down a job in order to support children's

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics, *N* = 827

Respondent characteristic	2015 survey %	2014 GSS %
Marital status		
Respondent is currently married	0.53	0.46
Respondent is currently not married (ref.)	0.47	0.54
Parental status		
Respondent has no children (ref.)	0.26	0.28
Respondent has at least one child	0.74	0.72
Race		
White (ref.)	0.84	0.74
Black	0.09	0.15
Other race	0.07	0.10
Sex		
Female	0.54	0.55
Male (ref.)	0.46	0.45
Age category		
Age 18–29 (ref.)	0.15	0.15
Age 30–44	0.18	0.28
Age 45–64	0.36	0.35
Age 65+	0.32	0.20
Education		
High school or less (ref.)	0.22	0.42
Some college, no BA	0.33	0.29
Bachelor’s degree	0.24	0.19
Master’s degree+	0.21	0.10
Contact with gay and lesbian individuals		
Respondent has close friend or relative who is gay or lesbian	0.55	0.54 ^a
Respondent does not have close friend or relative who is gay or lesbian (ref.)	0.45	0.46 ^a
Biblical literalism		
The Bible is a book of stories and fables recorded by humans	0.23	0.23
The Bible is the inspired word of God, not to be taken literally	0.47	0.44
The Bible is the literal word of God	0.30	0.33

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. We collapsed Latinx, Asian, and all other race groups aside from White and Black into an “other race” category due to small cell sizes. *Source:* Constructing the Family and Higher Education Survey, 2015.

^aThese estimates are from a 2006 GSS module that asked respondents how many of their friends and acquaintances were gay or lesbian.

well-being. Emotional and moral dimensions of parenting, on the other hand, are considered foundational parenting capacities that matter for raising independent children who are psychologically and cognitively well (Johnson et al., 2014; Mansager & Volk, 2005). The phrasing for item 1 is derived from prior GSS items on single parents and same-sex parents, and the phrasing for item 3 is derived from prior GSS items on perceptions of working mothers (Smith et al., 2012). To our knowledge, no prior national surveys have used multiple items together to gauge how people’s beliefs about atypical parents vary across dimensions of parenting. We also are not aware of any research that has gauged perceptions of adoptive parents specifically.

Survey experiments are becoming increasingly common in the social sciences, and they are particularly useful for gauging people's beliefs about social groups because they allow researchers to make causal arguments and isolate the effects of predictor variables (Mutz, 2011). Most survey experiments today are conducted online, such that respondents are randomly assigned to read a vignette or view another visual stimulus, and then they are asked a set of questions that is the same for all respondents (see, e.g., Doan et al., 2019; Jackson & Cox, 2013; Pedulla, 2014; Quadlin, 2019; Stacey, 2022). The data from our phone survey experiment are equivalent to data from survey experiments that are conducted online. Not all survey experiments could be conducted effectively over the phone because the vignettes would be too long and/or complex, but because our questions were short and to-the-point (and we did not use vignettes), we were able to conduct this study effectively over the phone.

In particular, this experiment has a few key advantages over standard surveys. We asked each respondent about one type of parent (i.e., a between-subjects design) instead of all five types of parents. Between-subjects designs are effective for preventing carryover effects, or the tendency for people to use earlier conditions to inform their responses to later conditions (Mutz, 2011). In our case, a respondent might have been asked about single fathers first, and then they might later try to provide equivalent answers about single mothers to maintain internal consistency or avoid the appearance of social desirability bias. The between-subjects design ensures that each respondent gave their initial impressions about only one parent type. Additionally, because we were conducting this survey over the phone, a 20-item series would have been overly long and cognitively burdensome for our respondents. Our approach allowed us to cover multiple topics fairly quickly and curb respondent fatigue.

That said, this type of broad-based attitudinal experiment has other limitations that can be refined in future research. First, the text of the questions necessarily varied slightly across conditions because the normative comparison group differs for these five types of families. In the single mother and single father conditions, we asked respondents to compare them to "two parents together"; in the lesbian couple and gay couple conditions, we asked respondents to compare them to "a father and a mother together"; we chose these phrasings to mimic the GSS. In the adoptive parents condition, we asked respondents to compare them to "biological parents together"; these groups have not been included in the GSS or, to our knowledge, in any major national survey. Although the wording varied slightly across conditions, in all cases, we were essentially asking respondents to compare their alternative family to two different-sex biological parents. We chose not to standardize this phrasing because, in some conditions, we would be introducing information that could confuse respondents. For example, in the single mother condition, if we asked respondents to compare a single mother to "a married biological mother and father together," this could potentially raise questions about whether the mother is biological, among other issues. This would be an unnecessary source of respondent burden. That said, with our more flexible approach, it is possible that some respondents might not have been thinking of exactly the same comparison family. Some respondents, for example, may have interpreted the phrasing of "two parents together" as a cohabiting couple or even a divorced couple or non-residential family. We think this is unlikely given our results as well as the prominence of married heterosexual parents in many Americans' minds but, ideally, the comparison groups could have been phrased uniformly in order to make the data perfectly comparable across conditions. (*Note:* for readers interested in prior GSS items on this topic, we have included a document in the Supporting Information S1 that summarizes the timing and phrasings of these items. The GSS is immensely useful especially for examining the demographic correlates of attitudes toward single and same-sex parents.)

Second, we asked respondents about broad categories like single mothers and gay couples to gauge people's broad-based assessments of atypical parent groups. These broad categories are frequently invoked in the media and even discussions about public policy, so it is important to assess the public's beliefs about these categories. Although this approach is helpful for

collecting data on multiple groups simultaneously, it also limits our depth of theorizing on any one group. Perceptions of single parents, for example, are likely shaped by assumptions (and stereotypes) about parental age, education, and race/ethnicity; similarly, perceptions of adoptive parents are likely shaped by assumptions about marital status. These are important considerations that were outside the scope of this immediate study, but we return to this point in the discussion because future research can incorporate these assumptions into the design.

Analytic strategy

The results are presented in two parts. First, we use ordinal logistic regressions to compare results across the five types of atypical families—that is, we pool the data from all conditions, using the five types of atypical families as predictor variables, and the four parenting items as outcomes. These models essentially gauge which dimensions of parenting may be perceived as strengths and weaknesses for each type of atypical family. Second, we assess which dimensions of parenting contribute to people's overall impressions of each type of atypical family. For this analysis, we use separate models for each family type, with our three parenting dimensions as predictor variables (i.e., perceptions of economic, emotional, and moral dimensions of parenting) and our overall perceptions of parenting (i.e., how well parents can bring up a child) as the outcome. The results from these models indicate which dimensions of parenting factor into people's overall impressions of atypical parents—for example, when people report their overall impressions of single mothers, what dimensions of parenting are most salient to their answers?

We confirmed in Supporting Information S1 analyses that our ordinal logistic regressions generally did not violate the parallel regression assumption. In two cases, we found that our models may be violating this assumption, so we conducted additional diagnostics and alternative models to assess the robustness of the results. We found that the results were consistent across multiple alternative model specifications in both cases; see the Supporting Information S1 for more information.

To arrive at our analytic sample size, we dropped respondents with missing data on one or more outcome variables ($n = 20$, or about 2% of the full sample of 847). We also considered respondents missing if they volunteered a response that was not offered in the survey (e.g., “neither agree nor disagree”). Although these respondents theoretically could have been slotted in as their own category in ordinal logistic regressions, the cell sizes were very small and thus challenging to analyze in a regression framework. We then used multiple imputation with chained equations to account for missing values on the control variables. Technically it should not be necessary to control for sociodemographic characteristics because respondents were randomly assigned to conditions, and thus any variation across groups should “net out” and should not alter the effects of the experimental manipulations (Mutz, 2011). Yet, we present models that include controls for these factors because we are substantively interested in the effects of sociodemographic characteristics, and because these controls help to account for any residual error (Mutz, 2011). In supplementary analyses, we confirmed that the effects of the experimental conditions are substantively identical regardless of whether controls were included in the models.

RESULTS

Assessing perceptions of atypical parents

We begin by considering how Americans perceive of atypical parents across each of our survey items. Table 2 provides an initial snapshot by showing the means and distributions across our

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics—outcome variables

	Single mother	Single father	Lesbian couple	Gay couple	Adoptive parents
Can bring up a child					
Mean	3.05	2.92	2.77	2.63	3.70
(SD)	(0.83)	(0.83)	(1.13)	(1.15)	(0.64)
Strongly Agree	0.31	0.24	0.34	0.29	0.77
Agree	0.50	0.49	0.31	0.31	0.18
Disagree	0.14	0.20	0.15	0.14	0.02
Strongly Disagree	0.06	0.06	0.21	0.26	0.02
<i>n</i> =	169	164	163	160	165
Can take care of basic needs					
Mean	3.20	3.46	3.29	3.20	3.85
(SD)	(0.85)	(0.69)	(0.98)	(1.07)	(0.42)
Strongly Agree	0.43	0.56	0.55	0.55	0.87
Agree	0.40	0.36	0.28	0.25	0.12
Disagree	0.12	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.01
Strongly Disagree	0.05	0.01	0.10	0.14	0.01
<i>n</i> =	169	165	164	161	166
Can have warm relationship					
Mean	3.58	3.22	3.16	2.95	3.75
(SD)	(0.74)	(0.90)	(1.11)	(1.14)	(.56)
Strongly Agree	0.71	0.47	0.55	0.44	0.79
Agree	0.20	0.36	0.22	0.24	0.18
Disagree	0.06	0.10	0.07	0.14	0.01
Strongly Disagree	0.03	0.07	0.16	0.18	0.02
<i>n</i> =	170	163	165	161	165
Can teach important values					
Mean	3.63	3.49	3.12	3.01	3.89
(SD)	(0.68)	(0.82)	(1.12)	(1.20)	(.37)
Strongly Agree	0.72	0.65	0.53	0.51	0.90
Agree	0.22	0.24	0.20	0.21	0.10
Disagree	0.04	0.06	0.12	0.06	0.00
Strongly Disagree	0.02	0.05	0.15	0.22	0.01
<i>n</i> =	170	165	165	161	166

Note: Proportions may not add to 1 due to rounding. Source: Constructing the Family and Higher Education Survey, 2015.

five atypical parent groups. From this vantage point, the means for lesbian couples and especially gay couples look to be relatively low across each of these items, particularly the overall dimension and the emotional and moral dimensions of parenting. These patterns are driven by the fact that a relatively large proportion of respondents in the lesbian and gay couple conditions “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” that these parents could perform as well as their normative counterparts. This is a unique response pattern in the lesbian and gay couple conditions that we assume is driven by general animus toward same-sex parents (see Cheng & Powell, 2015; Powell et al., 2015). Although respondents did not always give “strongly agree” responses in the single mother and single father conditions either, they tended to be less critical

of single parents than same-sex parents as a general rule. The responses for adoptive parents, meanwhile, are relatively positive across the board.

One other point worth addressing is that the means for the overall parenting item (“can bring up a child”) are systematically lower than the means for the other three items. We suspect this happened because the overall item captures general feelings of social closeness or distance toward atypical parents, whereas the other three items require respondents to be more methodical (or perhaps “rational”) in their comparisons. For example, a respondent who objects to gay parents could easily be dismissive and say that gay couples cannot bring up children as well as heterosexual couples, but it is much harder to make a rational case that gay couples cannot provide for children’s basic needs. Another possibility is that the overall parenting item captures perceptions that are unmeasured in our more specific parenting items, although we tried to make these specific items as broad as possible to avoid omitted variable bias. The scores for the overall item might have been higher if we moved it to the end of the module because respondents might have felt the need to “account” for this final item using their responses to prior items (e.g., if they had rated gay couples relatively highly throughout the module, they might have rated them relatively highly in their overall assessment, even if this was not their initial inclination). Thus, by putting this item first in the survey, we avoid these carryover effects and can more effectively capture respondents’ first impressions about atypical parents.

Table 3 builds on these descriptive statistics by showing the effects of the experimental conditions and controls on our overall measure as well as respondents’ perceptions of economic, emotional, and moral dimensions of parenting. For this analysis, single mothers are the reference group against which we compare the other four experimental conditions (i.e., single fathers, a lesbian couple, a gay couple, and adoptive parents). Log odds are reported here and throughout.

Although we focus on the effects of the experimental conditions in this study, some notable patterns across sociodemographic groups are also apparent here. (*Note:* because we have combined the data from all five experimental conditions in these models, the controls reflect group-based perceptions of atypical parents broadly, rather than group-based perceptions of any one type of parent. For models showing the effects of sociodemographic characteristics on perceptions of specific types of atypical parents, see Tables A–D in the Supporting Information S1.) Women and respondents with gay friends or relatives are generally more receptive to atypical parents, compared to their respective counterparts. Additionally, those who believe that the Bible is the literal or inspired word of God are less receptive to atypical parents than those who think of the Bible as a book of fables. We also find that race, age, and education tend to shape attitudes toward atypical families. These effects are primarily operating through Biblical literalism and contact with gay and lesbian individuals, which we can see by comparing the reduced models to the full models. These patterns are broadly consistent with research on perceptions of single parents and same-sex couples in the United States (Cheng et al., 2017).

Overall parenting ability

Models 1 and 2 show how the public perceives of atypical parents’ ability to bring up a child, which we consider to be an *overall* measure of perceptions of these parents. Here we see a clear distinction between gay parents, adoptive parents, and then all other types of atypical parents. Compared to single mothers, respondents were less likely to believe that gay parents could bring up a child as well as their normative counterpart ($b = -.55, p < .01$; *Note:* we report coefficients and significance levels from the full models in this section). This pattern points to a disadvantage for gay parents in terms of overall perceptions. Adoptive parents, however, have a clear advantage on this overall measure. Respondents were more likely to believe that adoptive parents could bring up a child as well as two biological parents together, as compared to this

TABLE 3 Effects of experimental conditions and controls on beliefs about atypical parents

	Can bring up a child		Can take care of basic needs		Can have warm relationship		Can teach important values	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
<i>Parent type (ref: single mother)</i>								
Single father	-0.19 (0.20)	-0.15 (0.20)	0.63** (0.21)	0.65** (0.22)	-0.96*** (0.23)	-1.01*** (0.23)	-0.33 (0.24)	-0.38 (0.25)
Lesbian couple	-0.38 (0.21)	-0.33 (0.21)	0.33 (0.22)	0.37 (0.22)	-0.95*** (0.23)	-0.94*** (0.24)	-1.07*** (0.23)	-1.10*** (0.24)
Gay couple	-0.65** (0.21)	-0.55** (0.21)	0.23 (0.22)	0.31 (0.22)	-1.35*** (0.23)	-1.33*** (0.24)	-1.18*** (0.24)	-1.18*** (0.24)
Adoptive parents	1.98*** (0.24)	2.10*** (0.25)	2.25*** (0.28)	2.33*** (0.28)	0.47 (0.26)	0.49 (0.27)	1.25*** (0.31)	1.28*** (0.32)
Currently married	-0.31 (0.16)	-0.25 (0.17)	-0.06 (0.18)	-0.01 (0.18)	-0.04 (0.18)	0.04 (0.18)	-0.31 (0.19)	-0.27 (0.20)
Has 1+ children	0.01 (0.21)	0.05 (0.21)	-0.07 (0.22)	-0.03 (0.23)	0.08 (0.22)	0.16 (0.22)	0.30 (0.23)	0.38 (0.24)
Black	-0.39 (0.24)	-0.06 (0.25)	-0.43 (0.27)	-0.11 (0.28)	-0.78** (0.25)	-0.46 (0.26)	-0.59* (0.26)	-0.26 (0.28)
Other race	-0.08 (0.30)	-0.10 (0.31)	-0.34 (0.31)	-0.32 (0.31)	-0.40 (0.30)	-0.43 (0.31)	-0.40 (0.32)	-0.44 (0.34)
Female	0.82*** (0.14)	0.89*** (0.15)	0.64*** (0.15)	0.69*** (0.16)	0.60*** (0.15)	0.70*** (0.16)	0.71*** (0.16)	0.77*** (0.17)
Age 30-44	0.17 (0.27)	0.27 (0.27)	0.32 (0.32)	0.39 (0.33)	0.05 (0.29)	0.12 (0.30)	-0.05 (0.32)	-0.02 (0.32)
Age 45-64	-0.41 (0.25)	-0.13 (0.25)	-0.29 (0.28)	-0.06 (0.28)	-0.12 (0.27)	0.17 (0.28)	-0.51 (0.29)	-0.25 (0.29)
Age 65+	-1.04*** (0.25)	-0.58* (0.26)	-1.15*** (0.28)	-0.80** (0.29)	-0.89*** (0.27)	-0.43 (0.28)	-1.22*** (0.29)	-0.79** (0.30)

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

	Can bring up a child		Can take care of basic needs		Can have warm relationship		Can teach important values	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Some college, no BA	0.09 (0.19)	-0.07 (0.19)	-0.06 (0.20)	-0.24 (0.21)	0.26 (0.19)	0.10 (0.20)	0.52* (0.21)	0.36 (0.21)
Bachelor's degree	0.23 (0.20)	-0.10 (0.21)	0.15 (0.22)	-0.15 (0.23)	0.50* (0.22)	0.20 (0.23)	0.47* (0.23)	0.17 (0.24)
Master's degree+	0.56** (0.21)	0.16 (0.22)	0.22 (0.23)	-0.17 (0.24)	0.68** (0.22)	0.26 (0.23)	0.64** (0.23)	0.23 (0.24)
Has gay friend/relative		0.60*** (0.15)		0.30 (0.16)		0.51*** (0.15)		0.47** (0.16)
Bible is inspired word of God		-0.89*** (0.19)		-0.48* (0.21)		-1.03*** (0.23)		-0.95*** (0.24)
Bible is literal word of God		-1.39*** (0.22)		-1.25*** (0.24)		-1.69*** (0.25)		-1.65*** (0.26)
τ_1	-2.20	-2.61	-2.51	-2.90	-2.83	-3.50	-2.79	-3.48
τ_2	-1.19	-1.54	-1.69	-2.06	-2.08	-2.69	-2.17	-2.83
τ_3	0.68	0.46	0.07	-0.22	-0.68	-1.19	-0.89	-1.46
N	821	825	825	824	824	827	827	827

Note: Ordered logistic regressions. Log odds reported; standard errors in parentheses. Comparison group for single parents is two parents; comparison group for same-sex parents is a father and mother; comparison group for adoptive parents is two biological parents. Reference categories are: single mother; currently not married; has no children; White; male; age 18-29; high school education or less; no gay friends or relatives; Bible is a book of stories. Source: Constructing the Family and Higher Education Survey, 2015.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

equivalent item for single mothers ($b = 2.10, p < .001$). We find no significant differences between perceptions of single mothers, single fathers, and lesbian couples on this overall item.

Economic dimensions of parenting

Models 3 and 4 consider how the public perceives of atypical parents' ability to take care of children's basic needs, such as food and shelter. This economic dimension of parenting essentially captures people's beliefs about how well parents can provide for their children financially. Overall, single mothers, lesbian couples, and gay couples are disadvantaged on this dimension, with single fathers and adoptive parents faring more favorably. As we discussed earlier, single mothers are often perceived as struggling to make ends meet, so it is perhaps not surprising that they were rated relatively low on this dimension. Yet, we find no significant differences between single mothers and lesbian and gay couples. This is perhaps surprising because, quite plainly, lesbian, and gay couples are comprised of two potential wage-earners, so it is challenging to reason why lesbian and gay couples would fare poorly here. In contrast, respondents were more likely to believe that single fathers ($b = .65, p < .01$) and adoptive parents ($b = 2.33, p < .001$) could provide for children's basic needs, as compared to single mothers. The result for adoptive parents is particularly notable because this is the largest contrast in the table in terms of sheer point estimates.

Emotional dimensions of parenting

Models 5 and 6 examine public perceptions of atypical parents and their ability to have a warm relationship with children—a key emotional dimension of parenting. Here we see that respondents may be skeptical of several groups in terms of their emotional capacity for child-rearing. Compared to single mothers, we find that single fathers ($b = -1.01, p < .001$), lesbian couples ($b = -.94, p < .001$), and gay couples ($b = -1.33, p < .001$) are perceived as potentially lacking in their capacity for emotional support of children. The contrast between single mothers and lesbian couples may be surprising, considering that single mothers (presumably) score well because women are assumed to be good emotional caretakers, and yet lesbian couples (i.e., two women) are perceived in a far less positive light than single mothers. This is an important gendered dynamic that we discussed earlier and will return to in the discussion. In addition, respondents' perceptions of single mothers and adoptive parents are statistically indistinguishable, suggesting that these groups are perceived similarly in terms of their emotional support of children. Overall, then, we find that single mothers and adoptive parents are perceived relatively favorably on this dimension, and single fathers, lesbian couples, and gay couples are perceived less favorably.

Moral dimensions of parenting

Finally, Models 7 and 8 show how the public perceives of atypical parents' ability to teach children important values, which we characterize as a moral dimension of parenting. The results here indicate that respondents may be skeptical of gay and lesbian couples' capacity to teach children important values. Both lesbian couples ($b = -1.10, p < .001$) and gay couples ($b = -1.18, p < .001$) were disadvantaged relative to single mothers on this dimension. This pattern suggests that same-sex couples, regardless of sex, are perceived as relatively poor moral caretakers of children. In contrast, adoptive parents are perceived as better-equipped than single

mothers to teach children important values ($b = 1.28, p < .001$). This is yet another dimension on which adoptive parents are perceived in a positive light.

As an aside, we mentioned earlier that because this study was conducted in summer 2015, data were collected both before and after the *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court decision, which legalized same-sex marriage throughout the United States. We kept track of which respondents completed the survey before and after the decision and analyzed whether this had a meaningful effect on the results. This looks not to be the case, particularly for respondents in the lesbian and gay conditions, who would have been the most likely to be affected from a theoretical standpoint. These results are shown in Table E in the Supporting Information S1. We should also note, however, that our analyses should not be taken as evidence that *Obergefell* did not affect perceptions and experiences of gay and lesbian couples, especially considering the immediacy of our study (i.e., not all respondents would have followed media coverage of the decision) as well as other research showing that *Obergefell* has had a lasting positive impact (Mallory & Sears, 2020).

Predicting overall perceptions of atypical parents

When Americans assess parenting in atypical families, what specific dimensions of parenting are they thinking about? To assess this question, we consider the extent to which our survey items about the economic, emotional, and moral dimensions of parenting predict our overall parenting item (i.e., how well parents can bring up a child). This analysis is useful for untangling people’s beliefs about atypical parents in the United States, and for establishing what specific dimensions of parenting they may be thinking about when they express either support for, or hesitation toward, atypical parent groups. Table 4 shows these results, with separate models for each of the five parent groups.

Model 1 demonstrates that economic and moral dimensions of parenting shape people’s general impressions of single mothers’ parenting ability. Respondents who were more confident

TABLE 4 How dimensions of parenting factor into overall impressions of atypical parents

	Outcome: Respondent’s perception of how well X can bring up a child as well as their normative counterparts				
	Single mother (1)	Single father (2)	Lesbian couple (3)	Gay couple (4)	Adoptive parents (5)
Can take care of basic needs	1.23*** (0.21)	0.94*** (0.26)	0.73* (0.32)	0.58* (0.29)	1.85*** (0.53)
Can have warm relationship	0.21 (0.26)	0.24 (0.22)	0.48 (0.30)	0.60* (0.27)	1.00* (0.40)
Can teach important values	0.99*** (0.29)	0.69** (0.24)	1.48*** (0.31)	1.49*** (0.28)	0.00 (0.66)
<i>N</i>	168	162	162	160	164

Note: Ordered logistic regressions. Log odds reported; standard errors in parentheses. These models gauge the extent to which respondents’ answers to the three dimensions of parenting items (economic, emotional, and moral dimensions of parenting) predict their answers on the overall parenting item (how well parents can bring up a child). Comparison group for single parents is two parents; comparison group for same-sex parents is a father and mother; comparison group for adoptive parents is biological parents. Models include controls for marital status, parental status, race, gender, education, contact with gay and lesbian individuals, and Biblical literalism. *Source:* Constructing the Family and Higher Education Survey, 2015.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

about single mothers' financial capacity tended to have more positive beliefs about single mothers' overall ability to raise a child ($b = 1.23, p < .001$). In terms of sheer point estimates, this is one of the larger effects in this table, suggesting that economic concerns were often top-of-mind when people were assessing parenting ability among single mothers. In addition, respondents were more likely to have positive perceptions of single mothers' general parenting ability when they believed that single mothers could teach children important values ($b = .99, p < .001$).

In Model 2, we see a similar pattern emerge for single fathers. Respondents were more likely to perceive single fathers as capable of bringing up a child when they believed that single fathers could provide for their children financially ($b = .94, p < .001$) and teach children important values ($b = .69, p < .01$). Thus, we see similarities in how people form their overall impressions of single mothers and single fathers. As we saw in Table 3, there are still notable differences in terms of how single mothers and single fathers are perceived—that is, single mothers are perceived as disadvantaged on economic grounds, and single fathers are perceived as relatively ill-equipped to have warm relationships with children. Yet, as we see here, respondents draw on similar sources to form their overall perceptions of single mothers and single fathers.

Turning to lesbian couples in Model 3, we see that economic and moral dimensions are what tend to shape people's overall impressions of lesbian parents. Respondents who believe that lesbian couples can care for children economically were more likely to believe that lesbian couples could raise children effectively ($b = .73, p < .05$). Additionally, respondents who believe that lesbian couples can teach important values as well as their normative counterparts also tend to trust lesbian parents' overall parenting ability ($b = 1.48, p < .001$).

Model 4 shows that respondents' overall perceptions of gay couples are shaped by economic, emotional, and moral dimensions of parenting—all three of the dimensions we included in our survey. When respondents have greater confidence in a gay couple's ability to provide for their children economically ($b = .58, p < .05$), build a warm relationship with children ($b = .60, p < .05$), and teach children important values ($b = 1.49, p < .001$), they also have positive perceptions of gay parents' overall parenting ability. The result for teaching important values is particularly striking, considering that moral dimensions of parenting were also highly salient for lesbian parents. Thus, to the extent that respondents have negative impressions of gay and lesbian parents, these beliefs may often be shaped by their perception that same-sex couples fail to teach their children important values.

Finally, Model 5 shows that perceptions of adoptive parents are largely determined by economic and emotional dimensions of parenting. When respondents believe that adoptive parents can take care of children's basic needs ($b = 1.85, p < .001$) and build warm relationships with children ($b = 1.00, p < .05$), they tend to be more confident in adoptive parents' overall parenting ability. However, this looks to be something of a statistical artifact, considering that respondents were very receptive toward adoptive parents across each of the four survey items. In the cases of single parents and same-sex parents, many respondents indicated that these parents could not raise a child as well as their normative counterparts, and thus the economic, emotional, and moral items are helpful for understanding why this is the case. But because the vast majority of respondents believed that adoptive parents could perform just as well as biological parents, the data on parenting dimensions are less useful because there is less heterogeneity to parse out.

DISCUSSION

Using data from a unique telephone survey experiment, this article has considered Americans' beliefs about atypical parents, including, critically, the factors that contribute to these beliefs. Single parents, same-sex parents, and adoptive parents are much more common than they once

were. In fact, the moniker “atypical” may no longer be accurate, considering the great diversity of family forms that has emerged in the United States. But despite this increased diversity, two-parent different-sex biological families are often a reference group against which all other families are judged, especially when it comes to child-rearing. We asked our respondents to make such judgments in this study. In addition to asking respondents global or general questions about how well these atypical parents can raise a child, we tapped into key dimensions of parenting that have been theorized to affect public opinion toward these families, including how well these parents can provide for children’s basic needs (an economic dimension of parenting), have a warm relationship with children (an emotional dimension), and teach children important values (a moral dimension).

Our findings reveal key patterns in Americans’ beliefs about atypical parents. Overall, the results show that while many Americans believe that atypical parents can perform just as well as their normative counterparts, many others continue to privilege two-parent different-sex biological families as the standard against which other families should be evaluated. These findings thus demonstrate the lingering power of cultural ideology even in the face of rapid diversification of family forms in the United States. What is more, Americans’ beliefs about atypical parents reflect not only widely-held cultural assumptions about single parents, same-sex parents, and adoptive parents, but they also draw on gendered assumptions about men’s and women’s child-rearing abilities. Americans’ beliefs about single parents are a case-in-point. We find that economic dimensions of parenting—that is, beliefs about how well parents can provide for children’s basic needs—are most determinative of people’s overall beliefs about single parents. When respondents believed that single parents could provide for children’s basic needs, they also tended to believe that single parents could bring up children well (and vice-versa). But in assessing how single mothers and single fathers were actually rated in terms of their ability to provide for children, single mothers were rated significantly lower than single fathers—perhaps because respondents are concerned about women’s economic fitness or women’s lesser earning power relative to men. This pattern suggests that while economic considerations matter for single parents broadly, single mothers are more likely to be penalized for this perception, thus reflecting something deeply gendered about how Americans think about single parents.

We find a similar gendered component (albeit one that takes a different form) in Americans’ perceptions of same-sex parents. Americans’ assessments of same-sex parents most often hinged on economic and moral dimension of parenting. When respondents believed that same-sex parents could provide for children’s basic needs and teach children important values, they also tended to believe that same-sex parents could bring up a child as well as different-sex parents. But Americans’ assessments of same-sex parents also depend on the parents’ gender. We find that assessments of gay couples—but not lesbian couples—are dependent on respondents’ beliefs about how warm of a relationship they can have with children. This pattern implies some amount of uncertainty about fathers compared to mothers, and the extent to which men can be as nurturing and caring as their women counterparts. Prior research shows that women are perceived as nurturing by default, but for men, nurturance is much less taken-for-granted. It may be surprising, then, that perceptions of emotional fitness do not drive people’s beliefs about *single fathers* the same way they do for *gay fathers*. Indeed, both single fathers and gay couples score relatively low on this dimension (see Tables 2 and 3), suggesting that the public is skeptical about whether fathers, generally, can have warm relationships with children. However, we suspect that because single fathers are solely responsible for running their households, economic considerations become much more central to whether single fathers can bring up a child well, making this consideration more salient for gay parents by comparison.

The emotional dimension of parenting is also key to the comparison of single mothers and lesbian couples. In the first part of the analysis, we found that single mothers are perceived as better able than lesbian couples to have warm relationships with children. This finding is partly surprising, considering that single mothers and lesbian mothers are all women, who are

assumed to be nurturing and caring. If one mother is perceived as nurturing, then it follows that two mothers should be perceived as even more nurturing. But at the same time, this finding is partly unsurprising, considering that lesbians are stereotyped as lacking warmth, in part because they are viewed as less traditionally feminine than heterosexual women. Notably, we did not specify in the single mother condition that the single mother was heterosexual, but our respondents likely assumed this was the case, in line with research showing that heterosexuality is a normative assumption in the United States (Rich, 1980). Ultimately, these differences in perceptions between single mothers and lesbian couples may not be entirely consequential because the emotional dimension is not what drives people's global perceptions of either of these groups. However, these differences in perceptions of the emotional dimension of parenting still remain, and may well have effects in other areas of social life.

Our respondents were by far the most receptive toward the final group of atypical parents: adoptive parents. The vast majority of respondents believed that adoptive parents could bring up children, take care of children's basic needs, have a warm relationship with children, and teach children important values as well as biological parents. Importantly, we should point out that the adoptive parents in this experimental condition were likely assumed to be heterosexual, and respondents may well have been less supportive if they were presented with, for example, adoptive gay parents. Although we find that economic and emotional dimensions of parenting drive people's overall perceptions of adoptive parents, we hesitate to over-interpret this finding because the ratings of adoptive parents were so consistently high.

We have taken care in this study to improve upon previous research, namely by conducting an experiment (to isolate people's attitudes toward each parent type), asking about multiple dimensions of parenting (as opposed to just an overall question about parenting ability), and incorporating multiple types of atypical families (to allow for a comparison of the direction and magnitude of public perceptions across a broad range of families). Future research can build upon this design to assess other types of families—including, for example, families that are explicitly described as having a given set of sociodemographic characteristics. As we discussed earlier, perceptions of single parents are likely shaped by assumptions about parental age, education, and race/ethnicity, among other factors. Perceptions of same-sex parents are likewise shaped by assumptions about marital status and perhaps education and income. By specifying these characteristics in a more complex vignette design, research can more effectively isolate the effect of atypical parenthood, as opposed to characteristics that are correlated with but ultimately separate from atypical parenthood. For example: If single mothers are described as White, older, and/or having a college degree, are respondents still skeptical of their ability to provide for children's basic needs? These inquiries would help with further untangling perceptions of atypical parents.

Future research can also consider other dimensions of parenting that have been shown to affect children's outcomes. For example, many studies have considered educational outcomes among children raised in atypical families (e.g., Downey & Powell, 1993; Hamilton et al., 2007; Mazrekaj et al., 2020). Scholars can take an experimental approach to assessing perceptions of how well parents can provide homework help, advocate for resources at school, enroll children in enriching activities, and other measures that are often included in educational datasets, such as those sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; see, e.g., Quadlin, 2015). Lastly, inquiries into other national contexts would provide insight into whether (and, if so, why) beliefs about atypical parents vary cross-nationally.

This article has brought us closer to understanding Americans' beliefs about atypical families. Although we find widespread support for adoptive parents, considerable resistance toward single parents and same-sex parents remains, at least in comparison to their normative counterparts. Although these findings may be disheartening, we also posit that knowing the content of Americans' resistance toward atypical families is key to developing education and advocacy. By understanding the stereotypes that persist about single mothers, single fathers, lesbian parents,

and gay parents, we can more effectively combat these stereotypes through targeted messaging and policy. This work is critical to enhancing the lives of atypical families until they are widely considered “typical.”

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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