

Research Article

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From Biological Parenthood to Adoptive Parenthood: Sociocultural Challenges of Adoption

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Abstract

All children have the right to grow up within a family and a home where they can be welcomed and develop in a safe and nurturing environment. However, it is not always possible for this environment to be provided by the biological family. In this context, adoption emerges as a transformative process, both for the adopted children and for the adoptive families, playing a crucial role in safeguarding children's rights (Comissão Nacional de Promoção dos Direitos e Proteção das Crianças e Jovens, 2024). This study aims to highlight adoptive parenting.

Problem: Adoption faces significant challenges, including social prejudice, bureaucratic difficulties, and emotional issues that may hinder its full acceptance as a legitimate form of parenthood.

Objective: To analyse the sociocultural aspects of adoption in Portugal, focusing on social prejudices and challenges that impact this process, and on the role of healthcare professionals—particularly Specialist Nurses in Maternal and Obstetric Health (EESMO)—in promoting inclusive parenting.

Design: A qualitative approach was adopted, based on a literature review and critical analysis of secondary sources, complemented by the testimony of an adoptive family for data collection. The research sought to identify sociocultural barriers, prejudices, and stigmas associated with homoparental and single-parent adoption. Data collection consisted of the full reading of selected scientific articles, ensuring a deep analysis of the testimony.

Methods: Consultation of scientific databases (CINAHL, MEDLINE, Cochrane Plus Collection) covering the period between 2013 and 2018, together with a qualitative interview with an adoptive family. The qualitative methodology was chosen as it allows for a detailed analysis of lived experiences and the meanings attributed by the adoptive family to their parental experiences.

Results: Significant sociocultural barriers were identified, including prejudices related to the child's origin, preferences for younger children, and stigmas linked to homoparental and single-parent families. The analysis also indicated that specialist nurses play a key role in deconstructing these prejudices.

Four major thematic categories emerged from the analysis: Persistent prejudice and stigma; Legal and bureaucratic challenges, including long waiting periods in Portugal; Adoption by single-parent and same-sex families, which—although legally permitted—still face social and institutional resistance; The role of healthcare professionals, particularly specialist nurses in maternal and obstetric health, who have a crucial role in community awareness.

Keywords: adoption; parenting; social prejudice; culture; maternal health

Introduction

Throughout history, the concept of family has undergone profound transformations. From the traditional model based on biological and marital ties, it has evolved into a more diverse and inclusive institution, capable of embracing various forms of affection, care, and social structure. Within this context, adoption represents one of the most significant expressions of this evolution, as it allows individuals and couples to form families based on love, protection, and belonging, rather than purely biological bonds. Adoption is therefore not simply an

act of generosity or solidarity, but a legal and affective process that guarantees a child's right to grow up within a family. It constitutes both a protective measure and an opportunity for social reintegration, ensuring that children deprived of a stable family environment can experience the emotional, educational, and developmental support necessary for their well-being. In Portugal, adoption is regulated by a robust legal framework that safeguards the rights of both children and adoptive parents. However, cultural beliefs, social stereotypes, and bureaucratic hurdles continue to shape public perceptions of

adoption, often generating resistance or misunderstanding. Among these issues, the influence of biological determinism, the persistence of traditional family ideals, and moral judgments about who is deemed fit to adopt stand out.

In recent decades, same-sex couples and single individuals have gained legal recognition as eligible to adopt, reflecting broader changes in Portuguese society regarding family diversity. Yet, despite these advances, social prejudice and institutional barriers remain significant obstacles to the normalization of adoption as an equally valid form of parenthood. The process of adoption is complex, requiring psychological preparation, emotional maturity, and resilience from prospective parents. It also demands an informed and empathetic intervention from professionals—especially nurses specializing in maternal and obstetric health (EESMO)—who can play a decisive role in guiding, supporting, and educating families throughout the process. Understanding adoption as a social, cultural, and emotional phenomenon is essential for improving both professional practice and public awareness. This study therefore seeks to explore adoption in Portugal from a sociocultural perspective, emphasizing the challenges, prejudices, and contributions of healthcare professionals in fostering inclusive and loving parenthood.

Theoretical Framework

Adoption Process in Portugal

According to the 2023 report of the National Council for Adoption (CNA), there was an increase in the number of adoptions in Portugal for the first time in three years. In 2023, there were 193 new children in adoptable situations, representing an increase of 20 children compared to 2022, marking the highest number since 2019 (206 adoption processes). This increase is particularly significant after a period of successive declines, reflecting greater societal awareness about the importance of adoption and changes in social policies aimed at simplifying this process. In 2024, around 300 applications were submitted. Childless couples continue to be the main adopters, with single applicants remaining a minority. Regarding the age range of children, most applicants still seek to adopt children up to 6 years old without siblings or disabilities, a choice that may involve a waiting period of about 7 years from the submission of the application to the adoption. The CNA report also notes that an increasing number of couples have

no preference regarding the ethnicity of the children (CNA, 2024). When it is not possible in a child's country of origin to identify a family capable of ensuring the child's right to grow up in a family environment, international adoption has emerged as a solution. In cases of international adoption, it is necessary to establish agreement between the legislations of the countries involved. Portugal stands out as one of the few countries that simultaneously acts as a receiving country and a country of origin in the adoption context. Thus, it is possible for children residing abroad to be adopted by families living in Portugal, in processes where the Portuguese Central Authority for International Adoption (ACAI) acts in the capacity of Portugal as Receiving Country (PPA). Conversely, there are situations where children residing in Portugal may be adopted by families living abroad, in which case Portugal assumes the role of Country of Origin (PPO) (ACAI, 2023).

Over the past five years in Portugal, there has been growth in single-parent adoptions carried out by men. According to the CNA (2023), men currently represent about one-third of this type of adoption, a significant increase from 2016, when they accounted for only 13%. Between 2016 and 2022, this proportion nearly tripled, reaching 31%. During this period, 318 individuals initiated single-parent adoption processes, of which 74 were men choosing to adopt alone. In contrast to women, whose number of applications has shown negative fluctuations, male participation has shown consistent growth. Although female applicants remain the majority, with 31 women versus 14 men in 2022, the upward trend among men is clear, with only a slight decrease in the number of male applicants in 2019 compared to the previous year (CNA, 2023). It is also important to note that, according to CNA regulations, adoption processes for couples and single-parent families are evaluated equally, with no priority given to joint applications. In Portugal, adoption is regulated by specific legislation (Diário da República, 2020). It can be carried out by a couple (joint adoption) or by an individual (single adoption). Adoptive parents must be at least 25 years old and may be married or in a de facto union for more than four years. Since Law No. 2/2016, same-sex couples and couples in de facto unions may also adopt. After the age of 60, adoption is only possible if the child was already entrusted to the adoptive parent before that age or is the child of the spouse. The age difference between adoptive parent and child must not exceed 50 years.

Children eligible for adoption include those registered with Social Security or children who are the offspring of the adoptive parent's spouse. Regarding age, children or adolescents under 15 years at the time of the application may be adopted. However, adoption is also possible for those under 18 who are not emancipated and/or have been entrusted to the adoptive parents or one of them until the age of 15, or when they are the spouse's child (Institute of Social Security, 2024). The process is supervised by the Ministry of Labor, Solidarity, and Social Security, which evaluates the social and psychological capacities of the applicants and registers them on a national list upon approval. A child may only be adopted if in an adoptable situation, meaning there are no adequate affective ties with the biological family. Social and psychological studies are conducted by the Social Security adoption teams, and if the absence of such ties is confirmed, the court issues an adoptability ruling.

Subsequently, a match is made between the child and potential adoptive parents. If accepted, a period of cohabitation begins to assess the formation of affective bonds. Once the bond is confirmed, the court decrees the final adoption. Post-adoption follow-up may continue until the adoptee reaches adulthood.

In summary, the adoption process in Portugal comprises the following stages:

Application and assessment of adoptive parents – conducted by multidisciplinary teams (psychologists, social workers, and legal experts), who evaluate the emotional, financial, and motivational stability of the couple or individual.

Training and preparation – applicants participate in training sessions on adoptive parenting, emotional bonds, and challenges of integration.

Matching – the child's profile is matched with the family's profile.

Placement and post-adoption follow-up – the child is placed in the new home under professional monitoring during an adaptation period (Directorate-General of Social Security, 2023).

Through adoption, the child becomes the legal child of the adoptive parent, acquires the new family surname, and loses the original one, although the given name may be changed in exceptional circumstances. The child also ceases to have legal ties with the biological family, except in cases determined by the court. Adoptive parents are entitled to

adoption benefits, including leave and financial support.

Law No. 143/2015 reinforces that the best interests of the child must prevail throughout the process. The child has the right to information, to be heard according to their maturity, and at 16 years of age, can learn about their origins. The judicial process is confidential, and violating this secrecy constitutes a criminal offense.

Finally, adoption is distinguished from other legal arrangements:

Civil guardianship – the child lives with court-appointed guardians while maintaining ties with the biological family;

Foster care – a temporary situation supervised by Social Security, with no possibility of adoption by caregivers, who receive financial support.

(Sources: Diário da República, 2020; Institute of Social Security, 2024; Law No. 2/2016; Law No. 143/2015)

Myths and Prejudices about Adoption

Adoption is still surrounded by social myths and prejudices, which negatively impact adoptive families and institutionalized children, reducing their chances of being adopted—especially in the case of older children and adolescents (Valério, 2020).

Among the main myths identified (Andrei, 2001, cited by Valério, 2020) are:

“Bad blood” – the belief that adopted children inherit negative behaviors from their biological parents;

“Fairy child” – the idealization of the adopted child as white, newborn, and problem-free;

Racial prejudice – discrimination against Black children;

Older children – the fear that older children are difficult to raise.

These beliefs reinforce stigmas and hinder the integration of children into families. Therefore, it is essential to raise awareness and educate society to deconstruct these ideas (Valério, 2020).

According to Oliveira and Costa (2023), many applicants prefer to adopt babies or young children to experience parenting from birth, which negatively affects the adoption of children aged 3 to 18. The longer a child remains institutionalized, the greater the prejudice and the more their personal and social development is affected.

Social language itself contributes to stigma through pejorative terms such as orphan, rejected, bastard, or illegitimate (Waggenspack, 1998, cited by Bettencourt, 2011). Additionally, adoptive parenting

is often seen as a “second-best” form of parenting, considered inferior to biological parenting (Iall, 1997, cited by Bettencourt, 2011).

The traditional view of family, based on the heterosexual and biological model (Wegar, 2000, cited by Bettencourt, 2011), reinforces the marginalization of adoptive families, often treated as “deviant.” However, authors such as Salvaterra and Verissimo (2008) argue that family bonds are built through coexistence and affection, not biology. For Wegar (2000), adoption represents the human capacity to create genuine bonds beyond blood relations.

Emotional and Psychological Challenges in Adoption

Adoptive families face emotional and psychological challenges that affect both parents and adopted children. Parents may experience insecurity, anxiety, and difficulties related to social and personal expectations regarding the bond with the child (Araújo & Faro, 2017).

Children, in turn, may exhibit behavioral problems such as intense tantrums, aggression, anxiety, depression, and difficulties in emotional self-regulation, particularly in late adoptions after stays in institutions (CHOP, 2021). These difficulties are often linked to prior traumas, such as abandonment, neglect, abuse, and violence.

For healthy adaptation, it is essential to understand the causes of behaviors and provide psychological support and specialized follow-up. In interracial or intercultural adoptions, challenges may increase; parent awareness of the child’s cultural and identity needs and support from an inclusive social network help integration and the sense of belonging (University of Nevada, Reno, 2022).

Marital and Family Dynamics in Adoptions

Marital relationships result from the union of two people with their own histories and identities, who together build a shared identity (Magalhães & Féres-Carneiro, 2011, cited by Comin & Cecílio, 2013). Studies indicate no significant differences in marital satisfaction between biological and adoptive families; however, in adoptive families, the challenging journey can foster greater mutual support between spouses (Ferreira, 2008, cited by Comin & Cecílio, 2013). According to Santos (2018), the family dynamics of adoptive families are similar to those of biological families, and the sense of belonging is essential to consolidate emotional bonds (Hamad, 2002;

Nabinger, 1997, cited by Santos, 2018). However, late adoption may hinder emotional attachment, as older children often carry negative markers related to abandonment (McGoldrick, Gerson & Petry, 2012, cited by Santos, 2018). These difficulties may be more pronounced in interracial adoptions or in cases involving children with disabilities (Keck & Kupecky, 2014, cited by Santos, 2018). The mental state of adoptive parents is considered a determining factor for adoption success and the creation of healthy bonds (Hartman, 1994, cited by Santos, 2018). In terms of impact, adopted children show more favorable social, emotional, and cognitive development than those who remain in institutions (Van Ijzendoorn, Juffer & Poelhuis, 2005, cited by Santos, 2005).

Adoption by Single-Parent Families

Adoption by single-parent families has gained recognition, reflecting social, cultural, and legal changes that broaden the traditional concept of family (Biasutti, Nascimento & Canal, 2021). In Portugal, the law allows single adoption by people over 30 years old, regardless of marital status, and from 25 years old if the adopted child is the spouse’s child (Institute of Social Security, 2024). Often, this is a conscious choice motivated by the desire to provide a safe and affectionate home for children in vulnerable situations. However, this family model faces significant challenges, such as the accumulation of parental and professional responsibilities, emotional stress, and financial vulnerability, especially when public support is lacking. In these circumstances, family and community networks are crucial for the well-being of both caregiver and child. Despite the challenges, research shows that children raised in single-parent families exhibit healthy emotional and social development, similar to other family models. The quality of parental relationships, based on affection, boundaries, and encouragement, is the main factor for success, and many of these children demonstrate resilience and autonomy (Benatti et al., 2021). Although social acceptance of this type of family is growing, cultural prejudices associated with the nuclear family ideal remain. However, legal recognition and greater social visibility of these families have helped deconstruct stereotypes and promote a more inclusive and diverse view of family (Biasutti, Nascimento & Canal, 2021).

Adoption by Same-Sex Couples in Portugal

Law No. 2/2016 legalized full adoption by same-sex couples in Portugal, marking a milestone in equal rights and overcoming the traditional heterosexual family model (Macieira, 2020). This change reflects the constitutional principle of equality and non-discrimination (art. 13 of the Portuguese Constitution) and prioritizes the best interests of the child, based on the parents' ability to provide love, stability, and care, regardless of sexual orientation (Figueira, 2013).

Currently, it is estimated that around 23,000 children are raised by same-sex parent families in the country, signaling advances in social acceptance. However, prejudices and cultural resistance persist, especially in conservative sectors and during adoption assessment processes (Macieira, 2020). Institutional and social homophobia may still affect perceptions of parental suitability, although no scientific evidence supports such discrimination (Figueira, 2013).

Studies show that the psychological, emotional, and cognitive development of children raised by same-sex couples is similar to that of children raised by heterosexual couples, and that the determining factor for child well-being is the quality of family relationships, not the composition of the couple (Macieira, 2020; Gomes, 2013). Despite this, children from same-sex parent families may face stigma and discrimination, especially in less inclusive social contexts, although they show greater resilience when raised in environments that value diversity (Gomes, 2013).

Acceptance of same-sex parenthood has grown, particularly among urban and more educated populations, but resistance remains in rural and conservative areas, where a heteronormative and biological view of family prevails (Figueira, 2013). In the contemporary context, the concept of family has been reconfigured, valuing emotional and social bonds over biological ones. Same-sex parent families symbolize this transformation, reinforcing that the true best interests of the child lie in the quality of care, emotional stability, and affection provided (Gomes, 2013; Figueira, 2013).

Methodology

For the development of this study, an integrative literature review was conducted using recognized electronic databases such as CINAHL, MEDLINE, and Cochrane Plus Collection, selecting articles published between 2018 and 2023. The choice of an integrative review aligns with the study's objectives,

which aim to identify the challenges faced by a family in exercising parenthood in the context of infertility. The research focused on studies about adoptive parenting, social prejudices, and challenges faced by adoptive families. Additionally, a qualitative account from an adoptive family was analyzed through content analysis, providing a realistic perspective on adoptive parenting and its emotional and social implications (Bettencourt, 2011). The qualitative approach allowed a deeper understanding of the experiences of adoptive families and the stigmas associated with the adoption process. The data were critically analyzed, identifying trends and patterns that contribute to difficulties in the social recognition of adoption. In research that emphasizes subjective experience and the construction of family identity, qualitative methodology is particularly appropriate, as it enables access not only to descriptive data but also to the meanings and interpretations that participants themselves attribute to their experiences (Minayo & Costa, 2018).

By seeking to answer specific and complex questions, qualitative research focuses on dimensions of reality that cannot be quantified, exploring the universe of meanings, beliefs, values, attitudes, and motivations. It is a field of analysis that examines social processes and phenomena in depth, without reducing them to mere measurement of variables (Minayo & Costa, 2018, p. 21). Meaning is the central concept of the investigation. This perspective is essential in socio-anthropological studies, as it allows understanding of adaptation dynamics, parental roles, and the social impacts experienced by families. By valuing the authentic expression of participants, qualitative methodology often relies on semi-structured interviews, which combine thematic guidance with the freedom for spontaneous and in-depth exploration. The construction of the questions was conducted carefully, ensuring an open approach and encouraging the interviewee to share personal experiences freely. Efforts were made to maintain the interviewer's neutrality, a fundamental element to reduce biases and promote a trustful environment. The selection of questions was designed to cover different dimensions of parental and family experience, balancing direct and open-ended questions to facilitate free and reflective expression (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this way, the adopted methodological design provides a solid foundation for the next stage of this research, dedicated to interpreting and discussing the

discourse produced, allowing the identification of patterns, meanings, and nuances present in the interviewee's narratives in response to the questions asked. The interview was conducted with a heterosexual couple, married for five years, who were unable to have children but dreamed of becoming parents. Only the adoptive mother was interviewed. The testimony highlights the obstacles, motivations, and emotions involved in the adoption journey, complementing the theoretical data presented throughout the study. The selection of the participating couple was based on criteria that included availability and willingness to share their experiences, as well as their experience with the recent adoption of a child. These criteria ensured an adequate level of representativeness; however, generalization of the concepts analyzed would require increasing the number of interviews, in accordance with the principles of rigor and validity inherent to qualitative methodology. Next, the question guide prepared to conduct the interview is presented.

Guiding Questions for the Interview

Could you briefly share what led you to consider adoption as an option?

What were the biggest challenges you encountered during the adoption process?

How would you describe the role infertility played in your decision to adopt?

Did your family, friends, or community support your decision to adopt?

Did you experience any stigma or prejudice related to adoption? If so, could you share an example?

Have you noticed any changes in how society views adoption over the years?

Do you feel that adoption has affected your family's dynamics or structure?

If you are married, how has adoption influenced your relationship with your partner?

Were there any special adjustments you felt were necessary after your child arrived?

What emotional or psychological challenges did you and your partner face during the adoption process and after your child joined the family?

How did you address issues related to your child's identity and integration into the family?

Did you receive any social or psychological support? Was it helpful?

How did infertility continue to affect you emotionally, even after adoption?

Do you feel that adoption helped you overcome feelings of loss from infertility, or do those feelings still come up?

Did you explore other options before deciding to adopt?

What advice would you give to couples or individuals considering adoption after experiencing infertility?

In your opinion, what could be improved in the adoption process in Portugal to better support adoptive families?

The interview was conducted in person in December 2024, strictly following the established ethical procedures to ensure confidentiality and protection, in accordance with Portugal's legal and ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from the interviewee, ensuring that her identity and personal data would remain confidential.

The informed consent also included the right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research without the need for justification, ensuring respect for the interviewee's autonomy. This ethical commitment is essential for creating an environment of safety and mutual respect, which are fundamental to the quality and credibility of the research (Moreira et al., 2022).

Data Discussion

Throughout the following analysis, the main issues that emerged from our study are highlighted, both from the literature review and the interview, including those related to:

Emotional impact of infertility;

The adoption process in Portugal;

Stigmas and prejudices;

Legal and bureaucratic challenges faced by adoptive families;

Impact on family dynamics and marital relationships;

Adoption by single-parent and same-sex parent families.

Emotional Impact of Infertility

It is important to note that the reason the interviewee in this study resorted to adoption was infertility. This is one of the most common factors in the decision to adopt, often perceived as a viable alternative for starting a family. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), infertility affects approximately one in six people worldwide, leading many couples to consider adoption after unsuccessful assisted reproductive treatments. This scenario is common in various international contexts, where adoption is seen as a promising solution for couples facing prolonged infertility (WHO, 2023).

Regarding the emotional impact of infertility, the interviewee expressed feelings of happiness, evidenced in the following words:

“We had been married for five years, and I couldn’t get pregnant. I could have undergone treatment, but since I had always dreamed of adopting a child, we decided we were going to adopt. At first, B. wasn’t very interested, but I managed to convince him, and we went to Social Security to find out what was needed to start the adoption paperwork.” (Interviewee, 2024)
“I felt happy [after the adoption].”

When asked whether adoption helped her overcome feelings of loss associated with infertility, the interviewee responded:

“Yes, adoption helped me a lot.”

“It was a dream come true.”

“Adoption helped me overcome feelings of loss associated with infertility.”

When questioned about the advice she would give to other couples facing infertility, the interviewee was emphatic:

“I advise them to adopt, because it was the best thing I have ever done in my life. R. came to fill our lives, to bring color to my life.”

The Adoption Process in Portugal

The Ministry of Labor, Solidarity, and Social Security issues guidance materials to clarify the doubts of people interested in adopting. This government department states that adoptive parenting has specific requirements, so prospective adoptive parents undergo social and psychological assessments regarding their capacities for adoption and are also required to participate in training. The assessment (for example, through interviews at the services and at home) and training are the responsibility of Social Security, particularly the adoption teams. After a positive assessment, prospective adoptive parents are registered on the national list of candidates for adoption.

“From the beginning of the adoption process, we were always supported by a social worker and a psychologist. After R. arrived, they would come to our home once a month.” (Interviewee, 2024)

“I think this support is important because they need to see how the child is being treated and whether we were well-adapted, which was reassuring.” (Interviewee, 2024)

When a child is adopted, they become the child of the adoptive parent, join the family, and acquire legal and inheritance rights. They take the surname of the adoptive family and lose their original surname. At

the request of the adopted child, the court may, exceptionally, change the child’s first name if the modification safeguards their best interests, particularly their right to personal identity, and promotes integration into the family (Institute of Social Security, 2024).

“We decided that R. would keep the name given to them and that we would only change the surname. We decided that no one would have to know R.’s true identity, except for the two of us.” (Interviewee, 2024)
When asked what could be improved in the adoption process, the interviewee responded:

“I think they should reduce the waiting time; the process is very slow.”

Stigmas and Prejudices

Myths such as “bad blood,” which associates adopted children with a supposed negative inheritance from their biological parents, persist (Valério, 2020). In addition, there is a tendency to prefer newborns, making the adoption of older children and adolescents more difficult. However, the interviewee in our study stated:

“I never felt any prejudice or stigma. Sometimes I felt some curiosity from people when they learned that our child was adopted, but we were never directly discriminated against.” (Interviewee, 2024)

Legal and Bureaucratic Challenges Faced by Adoptive Families

The average waiting time for adoption in Portugal is approximately seven years, a prolonged period that can discourage potential adoptive parents (National Council for Adoption, 2024). Regarding the waiting time, the interviewee stated:

“I think the biggest challenge I felt was the wait; it took 4 years. It’s a long time. The judicial process was lengthy and exhausting, but we also understood that these steps are necessary to ensure the children’s safety.” (Interviewee, 2024).

The child was adopted at two months old through the Institute of Social Security, based in Lisbon. The four-year waiting period was justified by the authorities because the child was a baby, which makes the process longer.

The couple had been married for five years when they submitted the official adoption request. However, due to bureaucracy and their desire to adopt a very young baby, the process took four years until S.S. adoption was finalized. When R. joined the family, the couple had already been married for about nine years.

Impact on Family Dynamics and Marital Relationships

The arrival of a child inevitably transforms family relationships, whether biological or adoptive. In the context of adoption, these transformations can be more complex, as they involve personal trajectories marked by significant prior experiences. In this case, the interviewee faced infertility, which prevented biological motherhood. Although she could have undergone assisted reproductive treatments, she chose not to do so.

Adoption, by its nature, is a complex relational experience, requiring the couple to demonstrate high levels of flexibility, empathy, and cohesion to adapt to the arrival of the child. As the interviewee mentioned: “Our life changed a lot, really a lot. R. came to bring joy and life to us. Our relationship remained the same. The responsibility, however, was different.” (Interviewee, 2024).

“In the beginning, it wasn’t easy, especially because on the first day we met R., he just cried, and I thought, ‘How are we going to make this child like us?’ But thank God everything went well.”

Adoption in Portugal has progressed legally, but sociocultural challenges remain. Among the main obstacles identified are:

Adoption by Single-Parent and Same-Sex Parent Families

Adoption by single-parent families has gained recognition, reflecting social, cultural, and legal changes that expand the traditional concept of family (Biasutti, Nascimento & Canal, 2021). Despite the challenges, studies show that children raised in single-parent families have healthy emotional and social development, similar to other family models. Law No. 2/2016 legalized full adoption by same-sex couples in Portugal, marking a milestone in equal rights and overcoming the traditional heterosexual family model (Macieira, 2020). This change reflects the constitutional principle of equality and non-discrimination (art. 13 of the Portuguese Constitution) and prioritizes the best interests of the child, based on the parents’ ability to provide love, stability, and care, regardless of sexual orientation (Figueira, 2013). Although the legislation allows it, these families still face social and institutional resistance (Figueira, 2013). Same-sex parenthood, known as homoparentality, is a recent phenomenon still in the process of social legitimization.

Prejudices and Stigmas

Myths such as “bad blood,” which associates adopted children with a supposed negative inheritance from their biological parents, persist (Valério, 2020). There is also a tendency to prefer newborns, making adoption of older children and adolescents more difficult.

Legal and Bureaucratic Challenges

The average waiting time for adoption in Portugal is approximately seven years, a prolonged period that can discourage potential adoptive parents (National Council for Adoption, 2024). Despite progress, procedural delays remain a recurring problem, resulting from the mismatch between the profile desired by adoptive parents—usually small, healthy children without siblings—and the profile of available children, who are often older or have special needs.

The Role of Health Professionals

Specialist nurses play a crucial role in raising community awareness, helping to dispel misconceptions and promote a more inclusive view of adoptive parenting. Maternal and Obstetric Health Specialist Nurses are key in deconstructing these prejudices, promoting community awareness, and providing emotional and social support to adoptive families. Public education campaigns and training of health professionals can contribute to normalizing adoption as an expression of inclusive parenting.

Conclusion

Despite regulatory advances, the average waiting time for completing an adoption is still considered long, due to the discrepancy between the profile desired by adoptive parents and that of the available children (Sousa & Carvalho, 2020). To ensure children’s rights and create stable, nurturing environments, adoption emerges as a legitimate alternative for parenthood. This research mainly addressed aspects related to the adoption process in Portugal, covering the legal framework, bureaucratic challenges, social stigmas, as well as the emotional and psychological difficulties faced by adoptive families. To ensure the success of adoption, the importance of a multidisciplinary approach is emphasized, including legal, psychological, and social support. The experience shared by the interviewee reinforces this perspective, highlighting the resilience required to face the inherent challenges of adoption, as well as the value of continuous support: “Our family has always supported us; in fact, we always felt that people (family, friends, etc.) were happy with our decision.

We were always welcomed in our community, but I know not all families are that fortunate.” (Interviewee, 2024).

Although the number of adoptions in Portugal has increased due to public policy changes and the inclusion of new types of families, the long waiting times and complex bureaucracy remain factors that limit access to more inclusive and timely adoptive parenthood. The importance of eliminating prejudices and stigmas associated with adoption was also highlighted, such as the preference for adopting younger children and beliefs related to behavioral heredity.

The social acceptance of single-parent and same-sex adoptive families was also discussed, showing both the progress achieved and the obstacles that still arise. Understanding the particularities of the adoption process equips future Maternal and Obstetric Health Specialist Nurses to provide excellent support to families. This care should include guidance on adoptive parenting, assistance in managing expectations, and mediation of emotional conflicts, promoting harmonious family integration.

In conclusion, adoption should not be seen as a second option, but as an enriching way to build or expand a family. Raising societal awareness is crucial to ensure that children can grow up in homes characterized by love, care, and protection. In this context, health professionals—especially Maternal and Obstetric Health Specialist Nurses—play a key role in promoting positive parenthood, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society.

The future of adoption in Portugal depends on the coordination between public policies, professional training, and the recognition of affective parenthood as the foundation of family life.

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