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Putting prejudice into perspective: Does perceived suitability for adoption depend on sexual orientation more than on other applicant features?

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Abstract

Most prejudice studies focus on a single aspect, for instance, sexual prejudice, overlooking other individual characteristics or multiple minority status (i.e., identity intersections). As a drawback, this approach could overestimate specific sources of prejudice. We demonstrated this empirically in the context of the controversial topic of adoption by same-gender couples. In three experiments (total $N = 603$) we examined the conditions under which members of the general population rate target adults' written applications as indicating suitability for adopting, independently manipulating target sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), and age. We found that SES explained as much or more variance in adoption suitability decisions as sexual orientation; applicant gender influenced those decisions more than applicant sexual orientation. Younger applicants were also preferred to older ones. Few interactions were obtained. Mediators of adoption suitability decisions were assumptions about the general well-being of the child, and specific worries concerning the child. Our results suggest that reservations against adoption by same-gender couples may be overestimated if one focuses exclusively on sexual orientation.

Keywords: *attitudes toward homosexuality; attitudes towards the poor; gender; social roles; stereotypes; adoption.*

"I'm Gay, Black and Jewish. What else is there?"
Aneesa Ferreira, former cast member of MTV's
Real World Chicago

Around the world, lesbians' and gay men's civil rights are constantly changing. According to the ILGA's latest report (2012), in Europe the legal recognition of civil rights is still unequal and public opinion is divided. In fact, full joint adoption for lesbians and gay men is currently (fall 2014) only legal in eleven European countries (Belgium, Denmark, Spain, France, Luxembourg, Malta, The

Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom, Iceland, and Norway). Other countries, for example, Germany, have implemented successive adoption rights (i.e., the child adopted by one partner first can later be adopted by the other as well). Thus, in Germany lesbian and gay individuals may petition to adopt, but same-gender couples may not jointly adopt.

Notwithstanding the growing recognition of civil rights, the issue of social acceptance of same-gender couples and families remains. Although attitudes toward homosexuality have become increasingly positive in recent years (see e.g., Steffens, Jonas, & Denger, in press; Steffens & Wagner, 2004), attitudes toward gay and lesbian couples adopting children remain relatively more negative (Rye & Meaney, 2010) and vary considerably by country. A large poll by Gallup Europe (2003) showed that only in the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, and Denmark a slight majority of the population agreed with the authorisation of child adoption by gay/lesbian couples (for similar findings, see Euro-Barometer 66, 2006). In contrast, policies of many North American adoption agencies are supportive of gay parenting (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2006). Ten thousands of adopted children live in male-male or female-female headed households in the U.S. (see Matthews & Cramer, 2006). Gay and lesbian adoption thus is still a contested topic. To inform policy making, reliable results are necessary that are not biased because of a lack of contextualised assessment. We argue that attitudes towards gay adoption can be better understood if findings are put into perspective.

Identity Intersections: Contextualised Assessment of Prejudice

Mainstream social psychology has recently been criticised for focusing on certain social identities, group memberships, or categorisations without explicitly mentioning any underlying self-imposed restrictions. People stigmatised on the basis of one social identity may be stigmatised simultaneously on the basis of other identities, or not. Therefore, intersectionality research considers simultaneously “the meaning and consequences of multiple categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage” (Cole, 2009, p. 170) and aims at investigating the diversity of social categories (Shields, 2008). For instance, at the intersection of being lesbian or gay and being old or poor, new issues may emerge. Similarly, research on prejudice should not generalise findings from members of one marginalised group to members of that group at the intersection with other social groups. For example, if participants prefer straight men to gay men, and white men to black men, we cannot generalise that straight black men are preferred to gay black men (see Remedios, Chasteen, Rule, & Plaks, 2011, for respective findings). Over-generalisations overlooking identity intersections should therefore be avoided.

Yet, opinion polls such as those cited above typically ignore identity intersections, but report what can be described as “main effects only”. Moreover, whereas it is asked whether one opposes adoption by gay couples, it is not asked whether one opposes adoption by other social groups as well, for example, by single men. Thus, a context for the percentages obtained is not provided. For this reason, it is an open question whether sexual orientation is always *the* central attribute when assessing suitability as an adoptive parent. Below, we pursue the research question *which social categories determine perceived suitability for adoption*. We test experimentally whether sexual orientation is in fact always the core social category, whether intersections with other categories matter, and what processes mediate adoption decisions.

Factors Influencing Apparent Suitability for Adoption

Previous adoption research has focused on heterosexual couples forming “traditional” families, and has taken a hetero-normative point of view. That is, this research has reflected the belief that heterosexual couples represent the “proper” mode of relationships when families are founded (see D’Amore, Miscioscia, Scali, Haxhe, & Bullens, 2013; Rye & Meaney, 2010). To account for prejudice against adoptive parents in general,

we extend an influential theory from a different research area, *role-congruity theory* (Eagly & Karau, 2002). For the present purposes, the important point this theory makes is that there are both stereotypes of social groups and stereotypes of roles, tasks, and jobs. Prejudice against social groups arises to the degree that incongruity is perceived between the social groups’ features and the features required in a given role; in the present case, this would be the parenting role. Parents are supposed to be warm and nurturing on the one hand and to keep harm from their children on the other. Thus, applied to adoption decisions, the question is whether features of lesbians and gay men are indeed perceived as incongruent with features of the parenting role, and whether other categorisations such as gender, age, or socio-economic status (SES) contribute to the perceived level of incongruity. Perceived incongruity should lead to the assessment that a target is not a good caregiver and/or that the child could be harmed in that family. In turn, the target should be denied adoption. Which predictions can we deduce from this perspective?

Being nurturing and caring for others is regarded one of the two core dimension of stereotypes, *warmth*, that is part of the female stereotype (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Thus, as a consequence of the incongruity between men’s stereotypic lack of warmth and the nurturance needed of parents, men should be perceived less favorably for adopting than women. Thus men should “lose” relative to women in adoption decisions (Hypothesis 1) because they are perceived as less warm and nurturing (mediator hypothesis). Second, to the degree that older parents are perceived as unable to fulfil their children’s needs, they should “lose” relative to younger parents in adoption decisions (Hypothesis 2).

A third prediction concerns the impact of socio-economic status on adoption judgments. Given the stereotype of adoptive parents as white and middle or upper-class (see Ryan, Pearlmuter, & Groza, 2004), perceived incongruity with that stereotype is expected for targets of lower SES. One reason why a low SES may be incongruent with the adoptive parent stereotype is the negative stereotype of low SES parents: stereotypes of welfare recipients as “lazy”, violent, abusive, alcoholic, and unmotivated (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). Even children already hold these stereotypes (Chafel, 1997). Indeed, SES has been shown to be correlated with child development in many ways (e.g., Scaramella, Neppl, Ontai, & Conger, 2008; Wadsworth & Santiago, 2008), including health and cognitive development (for a review, see Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), and to affect

several aspects of children's lives (Bradley, Corwyn, Pipes McAdoo, & Garcia Coll, 2001). In Germany, nation-wide scholastic aptitude tests (PISA) revealed better educational achievement for children from a high SES background (PISA-Konsortium Deutschland, 2004, 2006). Given these results, being adopted by a low SES family could be perceived as having a negative impact on children's development, so low SES adoptive parents should "lose" relative to high SES parents in adoption decisions (Hypothesis 3).

A fourth factor that may influence perceived suitability for adoption is the sexual orientation of applicants. Different hypotheses can be derived from the literature. On the one hand, lesbians and gay men are often perceived as transgressing gender roles (see Whitley, 2001), and gay men are often perceived as higher in warmth compared to lesbians and to men in general (e.g., Asbrock, 2010). In Asbrock's German study, gay men fell into the same cluster as women in general: into the cluster of social groups perceived as high in warmth. Based on these findings, heterosexual men and lesbians should "lose" relative to heterosexual women and gay men in adoption decisions (Hypothesis 4a) because they are perceived as less warm and nurturing (mediator hypothesis). Respective impressions of lesbians and gay men may also depend on individuating information (for the role of individuating information in impression formation, see Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). For example, gender-atypical hobbies may particularly indicate gender-role transgressions and thus make warmth-ascriptions to gay men more likely.

On the other hand, heterosexism and negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men need to be taken into account when formulating predictions. Rye and Meaney (2010) argued that because of heterosexism, attitudes toward gay adoption tend to be negative. People who strongly value the traditional family and who are intolerant of gender-role violations should react defensively towards gay parenting. In particular, men in general hold more anti-gay prejudice than women (Herek, 2002; Kite & Whitley, 1996), in particular against gay men (e.g., Steffens & Wagner, 2004). Clarke (2001) pointed out heterosexuals' two main fears when objecting to gay or lesbian parenting: Homosexual parents will turn the children homosexual, or the child may grow to be confused about his or her gender. In numerous decisions the courts did not award custody to the homosexual partner because it was assumed that homosexuals were incapable of parental bonding with their children, and that a homosexual parent may be mentally unstable (see Fraser, Fish, & MacKenzie, 1995). Contradicting these negative stereotypes,

scientific research showed that relationship quality is high in homosexual couples (Kurdek, 2008), and their commitment is particularly high if they have children (Oswald, Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Clausell, 2008). Furthermore, reviews on "rainbow families" concluded that lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) individuals have good parenting skills (Jansen & Steffens, 2006), are successful long-term foster parents (Downs & James, 2006), and their children develop "normally" (for reviews, see Chamberlain, Miller, & Bornstein, 2008; Patterson, 2006; Pawelski et al., 2006). Still, based on the above considerations regarding heterosexism, gay and lesbian couples should "lose" relative to heterosexual couples in adoption decisions (Hypothesis 4b), which should be mediated by concerns about possible harm to the children.

Overview of the Present Research

In order to test the above predictions, we used a matched-guise technique (Goldberg, 1968). Each participant received a handwritten application questionnaire for adoption and rated the applicants' suitability. Age, SES, and sexual orientation of applicants were manipulated independently. We also assessed assumptions about general well-being and specific worries concerning the child to test for mediation of adoption suitability decisions. All other information was held constant with the following exceptions. In Experiment 1a, couples were presented as applicants, in Experiment 1b, singles. In Experiment 2, instead of the previous ecologically valid manipulation of SES in the application questionnaire, the manipulation was reduced to two core pieces of information on SES (i.e., education and income), and gender-typicality of hobbies was manipulated in addition. Table 1 presents an overview of the experiments and findings.

Experiment 1a

The aim of Experiment 1a was to test how lay people's adoption decisions depend on applicants' age, SES, sexual orientation, and their intersections. Each participant received an application questionnaire for adoption and was asked to rate the couple's suitability.

We hypothesised that younger and high SES applicants would be favored over older and low SES applicants. Given applicant sexual orientation, on the basis of stereotypes of gay men as particularly warm, gay male couples could be favored over heterosexual and lesbian couples. In contrast, on the basis of antigay attitudes, heterosexual couples should be favored over lesbian and particularly over gay male couples. If warmth stereotypes were crucial, effects should be mediated by impressions of the child's general well-being. If antigay attitudes were crucial, effects

Table 1

Overview of Experiments, Manipulations, and Main Statistical Findings.

	Experiment 1a: Couples as applicants	Experiment 1b: Single applicants	Experiment 2: Couples as applicants
<i>Factors manipulated:</i>			
Age	Young vs. old: $F = 7.37, R_p^2 = .04$	Young vs. old: $F = 3.80, p = .05, R_p^2 = .02$	— (young)
Socio-economic status	Education, income, & living situation: $F = 24.88, R_p^2 = .13$	Education, income, & living situation: $F = 33.65, R_p^2 = .14$	Education & income: $F = 3.75, R_p^2 = .02$
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual vs. gay vs. lesbian: $F = 3.86, R_p^2 = .04$ $H > G$	Heterosexual vs. gay/lesbian: $F < 2.95, p = .09, R_p^2 = .01$	Heterosexual vs. gay vs. lesbian: $F = 8.76, R_p^2 = .08$ $H > G$
Gender	— (included in sexual orientation)	Male vs. female: $F(1, 209) = 16.61, R_p^2 = .07$	— (included in sexual orientation)
Gender-typicality of hobbies	—	—	Gender-typical vs. atypical hobbies: $F < 1$

Notes. In Experiment 1a, degrees of freedom (*df*) were (2, 162) for sexual orientation and otherwise (1, 162). $H > G$ indicates that adoption decisions were more positive for heterosexual than for gay male couples. In Experiment 1b, *df* were (1, 209). In Experiment 2, *df* were (2, 192) for sexual orientation and otherwise (1, 192).

should be mediated by worries that the child could be exposed to harmful experiences.

Method

Participants

Voluntary participants were randomly assigned to Experiments 1a and 1b. The total sample obtained via the snowball technique consisted of 399 adults in Germany (mainly from the east German areas of Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia, and Berlin), 66% of them were female; 174 participated in Experiment 1a. Participants received the questionnaire by e-mail or as a paper-pencil version. As an incentive, several small prizes were raffled among them. As one would expect given random assignment, there were no significant differences between samples.

In the total sample, participants ranged in age from 17 to 81 years ($M = 42, SD = 16$). More than half of them were married (52%); the others were single (21%), widows (3%), living in registered (homosexual) partnerships (3%) or in heterosexual (19%) or homosexual relationships (2%). The majority had either one or two children (58%), 32% had none. Concerning the highest educational level, 37% held a university degree, 17% had finished the higher education entrance qualification (highest school track), 32% had attended the intermediate

school track, and 8% had attended the lowest school track. Three out of four participants (75%) indicated no religious affiliation, which is typical of former East Germany, 14% were Protestants, and 6% were Catholic. Finally, 31% of the sample lived in a village (under 2,000 inhabitants), 30% in a small town (2,000 to 25,000 inhabitants), 30% in a town with 25,000 to 100,000 and 9% in a city with more than 100,000 inhabitants. Throughout the present research, no participants were excluded on the basis of their age, gender, SES, or sexual orientation.

Materials & Procedure

Participants were asked to take part in a short survey about the importance of different criteria for adoption decisions and read the applicant questionnaire in order to decide whether they would agree with an adoption by the described applicants. Anonymity was assured. The 2.5 page questionnaire for adoption was modelled after questionnaires for foster care/adoption used by German youth welfare offices. There were two columns (first and second applicant). All of the following information was held constant: last name, day and month of birth, [unknown] birthplace, German nationality and ethnicity, no religious affiliation, hobbies (reading, soccer, jogging), no former marriages, no bodily or mental

disabilities, no mental-health problems, and reason for adoption (“being childless against one’s will”).

Applicant age was manipulated via year of birth (applicants were indicated to be 31/28 versus 51/48 years old). Sexual orientation was manipulated by filling in two common female first names, two common male first names, or one male and one female first name. The same names appeared equally often in the heterosexual and lesbian/gay versions (Karin, Petra, Jörg, Paul). In addition, sexual orientation was implied by the marital status ticked (“married” vs. “living in a registered partnership”). SES was manipulated in an ecologically valid way (see Table A1 in the Appendix), including education, income, and living situation. After reading one application, each participant was asked to tick whether they personally would agree to an adoption by the applicants, using a 4-point scale from “disagree” to “fully agree” (following Gallup Europe, 2003). After that, participants responded to ten statements about the child’s general well-being and possible worries in that family that we had generated after pilot testing (see Appendix 2). The experiment ended with a manipulation check. Data of participants who did not correctly remember SES, applicant gender, marital status, and sexual orientation were excluded from analyses (across Experiments 1a-b: $N = 8$).

Design

Main dependent variable was the adoption decision. Independent variables were: Applicant SES (high vs. low), sexual orientation (heterosexual couple vs. lesbian couple vs. gay male couple), and age in a $2 \times 3 \times 2$ between-subjects design. In order to detect a medium-size effect of SES or age ($f = .25$) (Cohen, 1977) with $\alpha = .05$ and a statistical power of $1 - \beta = .90$, 171 participants were needed (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007), and 174 were obtained.

Results

All significance tests were conducted with $\alpha = .05$, and individual p-values are omitted. As an indicator of the effect size, R_p^2 is reported (which is numerically identical to η_p^2), the proportion of variance explained by a given factor in relation to the variance not explained by any other factor (see Cohen, 1977).

Effects of Applicants’ Characteristics

As expected (see Figures 1 and 2), adoption decisions were more favorable towards couples with a higher SES and younger couples. Also, more favorable decisions were made for heterosexual couples. However, descriptively the difference between heterosexual and lesbian couples appears

small. A $2 \times 3 \times 2$ ANOVA corroborated these impressions. As Table 1 shows, applicants’ SES explained the most of the variance in adoption decisions, relatively. Moreover, a positive adoption decision was more likely for younger applicants. The effect of sexual orientation was also statistically significant. Post-hoc tests (Tukey HSD) showed that the only statistically significant difference was between the gay male and the heterosexual couple (95% confidence interval, CI : $-.81$ to $-.06$). The 95% CI for the difference between the lesbian and the heterosexual couple was $-.49$ to $.25$ ($p = .73$) and that for the gay male versus lesbian couple was $-.69$ to $.06$ ($p = .12$). Implying a high generalisability of the main effects, there were no interactions (all F s < 2.07). The patterns of findings were identical in all ANOVAs presented in this paper if participants were excluded who indicated to live in homosexual relationships or partnerships.

Figure 1. Mean adoption decisions by applicant SES (upper panel) and applicant age (lower panel; 1, would not agree, 4, would totally agree). Error bars are standard errors of means.

Mediators of Adoption Decisions

A principal components analysis of the ten statements about the child's general well-being and worries (criterion of extraction: Eigenvalues > 1) revealed two underlying factors. Factor 1 is "specific worries" (6 items, Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$, see Appendix 2 for the items), and Factor 2 "child's general well-being" (3 items, $\alpha = .80$; one additional item was excluded that loaded on both factors). Mediation analyses were performed to test what mediates the effects of SES, age, and sexual orientation on adoption decisions (Hayes, 2013). A first regression analysis confirmed that both factors predicted adoption decisions, $F(2, 171) = 85.63$, $R^2 = .50$: specific worries: $B = -.26$, $SE = .05$, $\beta = -.28$; general well-being: $B = .52$, $SE = .05$, $\beta = .56$. Adoption decisions were more positive the less worries participants held and particularly the more they believed in the well-being of the child in that family.

SES. Using the PROCESS macro provided by Hayes (2013), we found that given higher SES applicants, the mediator was the belief in the child's general well-being (for the relation between SES and specific worries, $p > .09$). Higher SES went along with stronger beliefs in the child's general well-being ($B = .46$, $SE = .08$, $t = 6.78$). When adoption decisions were regressed on SES, worries, and well-being, the effect of SES was not significant anymore ($B = .05$, $SE = .06$, $t < 1$), but both potential mediators were (worries: $B = -.26$, $SE = .05$, $t = -4.81$; well-being: $B = .50$, $SE = .06$, $t = 8.19$). As implied by those findings, there was no direct effect of SES on adoption decisions, but an indirect effect via convictions as to the child's general well-being ($B = .23$; bootstrapping estimates with 5,000 re-samples: $SE = .04$, bias-corrected 95% $CI [.15; .32]$; for specific worries: $B = .03$; $SE = .02$, 95% $CI [-.00; .08]$). Thus, data suggest the interpretation that adoption decisions were less favourable for lower SES applicants because participants imagined the child would be better off in a higher SES family.

Age. Applicants' age (coded: -1: old, 1: young) was also related to belief in the child's general well-being ($B = .17$, $SE = .07$, $t = 2.31$; for the relation between SES and specific worries, $p > .15$). When adoption decisions were regressed on age, worries, and general well-being, a significant effect of age remained ($B = .12$, $SE = .05$, $t = 2.24$), and both potential mediators were significant (specific worries: $B = -.28$, $SE = .05$, $t = -5.17$; general well-being: $B = .49$, $SE = .06$, $t = 8.91$). In line with that, there was a direct effect of age on adoption decisions ($B = .12$, $SE = .05$, $t = 2.24$), and an indirect effect via convictions as to the child's general well-being ($B = .08$; bootstrapped $SE = .04$, 95% $CI [.02; .16]$; for specific worries: B

$= -.03$; $SE = .02$, 95% $CI [-.09; .01]$). Thus, data suggest the interpretation that adoption decisions were less favourable for older applicants partly because participants imagined the child's well-being was more likely in a younger family, and partly for unknown reasons.

Sexual orientation. We next tested why gay couples appeared less suited for adoption than heterosexual couples ($N = 115$). Participants indicated fewer worries with heterosexual than gay male couples ($B = -.27$, $SE = .09$, $t = -2.97$) and also believed the child's well-being would be higher in a heterosexual family ($B = .19$, $SE = .09$, $t = 2.04$). When adoption decisions were regressed on sexual orientation, worries, and well-being, there was no significant effect of sexual orientation ($t < 1$), but both potential mediators were significant (worries: $B = -.26$, $SE = .07$, $t = -3.89$; well-being: $B = .58$, $SE = .07$, $t = 8.66$). In line with that, there was no direct effect of sexual orientation on adoption decisions, but an indirect effect via worries ($B = .07$; bootstrapped $SE = .03$, 95% $CI [.02; .15]$; for well-being: $B = .11$; $SE = .06$, 95% $CI [-.01; .22]$). Thus, data suggest that adoption decisions were less favorable for gay male couples because participants worried more about the child than in a heterosexual family.

Summary. In a nutshell, we found a large effect of applicant SES on adoption decisions, along with a small effect of sexual orientation that was comparable in size to the effect of applicant age. The effect of sexual orientation was due to a difference between heterosexual and gay male couples. The more proximal reasons behind the effects of SES and age were the belief that the child would generally be better off in a higher SES household or in one with younger parents. In contrast, the effect of sexual orientation was due to specific worries concerning the child's life in a gay male family.

Experiment 1b

Two elucidations of the findings of Experiment 1a can be obtained with Experiment 1b. First, given that the heterosexual couple appeared more suited for adoption than the gay male couple, it is an open question whether this was mostly driven by their sexual orientation or by their gender. Thus, in Experiment 1b a questionnaire by a single male or female applicant was presented, either being heterosexual or gay/lesbian. (As stated in the introduction, in principle, single adults are allowed to adopt in Germany.) If the different impressions of the gay male and the heterosexual couple in Experiment 1a were based on a lower congruity of men in general with the parent stereotype, then we

should find an effect of applicant gender in Experiment 1b, not of sexual orientation.

A second clarification of Experiment 1b concerns the large effect of SES that we found in Experiment 1a. Given that SES is not a dichotomy, the size of the effect could depend on the size of the manipulation. The second applicant in our high SES couple was rather well-off, so one could suspect that the effect of SES was based on positive attitudes towards rich adoptive parents, rather than prejudice against the poor. Similarly, the second applicant in the low SES condition was unemployed, and attitudes towards welfare recipients are more negative than those towards low SES people (see Henry, Reyna, & Weiner, 2004). If the effects in Experiment 1a were driven by impressions of the rich versus those of welfare recipients, we should find a smaller effect of SES when only the first applicant in Table A1 is presented, with the second row left empty.

Method

Of the total convenience sample described already in the Method section of Experiment 1a, 225 had been randomly assigned to Experiment 1b. Using Experiment 1a's questionnaire for adoption, only the first column was filled in (first applicant, see Table A1). Sexual orientation was implied by the applicant's response to the question whether they had lived in a long-term relationship before ("yes, heterosexual relationship" vs. "yes, same-gender relationship"). The dependent variable was the adoption decision. Independent variables were: Applicant SES (high vs. low), sexual orientation (heterosexual vs. gay/lesbian), applicant gender (male vs. female), and age (31 vs. 51 years old) in a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects design.

Results

Effects of Applicants' Characteristics

Given single persons as applicants, adoption decisions were overall less favorable, which is quite expected (see Figure 1). Aside from this, adoption decisions were again more favorable towards higher SES and younger applicants. Moreover, female applicants appeared to be preferred to male applicants (see Figure 2). In contrast, the effect of sexual orientation appears small. A $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA corroborated these impressions. Again, as Table 1 shows, applicants' SES explained relatively the most of the variance in adoption decisions. A positive adoption decision was also more likely for female than male applicants, $M_s = 2.58$ vs. 2.14 . It tended to be more likely for younger than older applicants, and the effect of sexual orientation missed the pre-set criterion of statistical significance and was small in terms of practical significance, $M_s = 2.46$ vs. 2.26 .

Out of 11 possible statistical interactions, one 2-way and one 4-way interaction were significant. The two-way interaction between SES and applicant gender indicated that adoption decisions were particularly favorable for high SES women as compared to the other three groups. The 4-way-interaction should be interpreted with caution because the per-cell sample size was only between 14 and 17 participants. This being said, out of the 8 simple effects of sexual orientation within the same level of each of the other factors, one was statistically significant: given young female low SES applicants, the lesbian received less favorable adoption decisions than the heterosexual woman, $M_s = 1.64$ and 2.43 , $t(26) = -2.33$. We refrain from further interpretation of this finding.

Figure 2. Mean adoption decisions (1, would not agree, 4, would totally agree) by applicant sexual orientation in Experiment 1a and by applicant gender and applicant sexual orientation in Experiment 1b. Error bars represent standard errors of means.

Mediators of Adoption Decisions

For the child's general well-being and worries we computed the same two scales (see Appendix 2, "specific worries", $\alpha = .76$, and "child's general well-being", $\alpha = .85$). Mediation analyses were undertaken for the applicant features that significantly predicted adoption decisions. Again, both worries and beliefs about a child's well-being predicted adoption decisions, $F(1, 222) = 151.85$, $R^2 = .58$, worries: $B = -.32$, $SE = .05$, $\beta = -.34$; well-being: $B = .48$, $SE = .05$, $\beta = .52$. In line with Experiment 1a, adoption decisions were more positive the less specific worries participants held and the more they believed the child would generally be well in that family.

SES. Again, given higher SES applicants, the mediator was the belief in the child's general well-being (for the relation between SES and specific worries, $p > .16$). Higher SES went along with stronger beliefs in the child's general well-being ($B = .52$, $SE = .06$, $t = 9.21$). When adoption decisions were regressed on SES, worries, and general well-being, the effect of SES was not significant anymore ($B = .06$, $SE = .05$, $t = 1.19$, $p = .23$), but both potential mediators were (specific worries: $B = -.34$, $SE = .05$, $t = -6.51$; general well-being: $B = .44$, $SE = .06$, $t = 7.29$). As that implies, there was no direct effect of SES on adoption decisions. In contrast, we found an indirect effect via convictions as to the child's well-being ($B = .23$; bootstrapped $SE = .04$, 95% $CI [.16; .32]$; for worries: $B = .03$; $SE = .02$, 95% $CI [-.01; .08]$). Again, data suggest the interpretation that adoption decisions were less favorable for lower SES applicants because participants imagined the child's general well-being was more likely in a higher SES family.

Gender. The relationship between gender (-1: male, 1: female) and adoption decision was partially mediated by the absence of specific worries and by the belief in the child's general well-being. There were less worries and more belief in the child's well-being for female than male applicants ($B = -.20$, $SE = .07$, $t = -3.07$, and $B = .18$, $SE = .07$, $t = 2.80$, respectively). When adoption decisions were regressed on applicant gender and both potential mediators, there was no statistically significant direct effect of applicant gender on adoption decisions ($B = .07$, $SE = .04$, $t = 1.78$, $p = .08$). Instead, both potential mediators were significant (worries: $B = -.31$, $SE = .05$, $t = -6.20$; well-being: $B = .47$, $SE = .05$, $t = 9.59$). Both indirect effects of applicant gender via worries and via well-being were found ($B = .06$; $SE = .02$, 95% $CI [.03; .11]$, and $B = .09$; $SE = .03$, 95% $CI [.03; .16]$). These findings indicate that our participants preferred female to male applicants because they

worried more about a child in the care of a single man than single woman and they thought the child would generally be better off with an adoption mother than father.

Summary. Using single applicants rather than couples, we replicated the large effect of applicant SES on adoption decisions, suggesting that this effect did not depend on the contrast between a well-off applicant and a welfare recipient in Experiment 1a. In addition, we found that female applicants were preferred over males, whereas applicant age and sexual orientation did not explain adoption decisions in a significant way. This suggests that apparent prejudice against gay parents may have more to do with their (male) gender than with their sexual orientation. Underlying the effect of SES was again the belief that the child would generally be better off in a higher SES household. The effect of applicant gender was due to specific worries about the child's future in a single-male family in addition to beliefs about the child's well-being. Regarding identity intersections, we found that high SES women appeared particularly well-suited as adoptive parents; low SES lesbians appeared quite unsuited, which could be a chance finding given the small sample size in this cell.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 was carried out to shed light on three open questions. First, in terms of ecological validity, our manipulation of SES and sexual orientation in Experiments 1a-b was adequate (i.e., close to reality). However, from an experimental point of view, it is undesirable that all factors except for SES were manipulated with only one or two pieces of information. Thus participants had more information pertaining to SES than to other factors, perhaps explaining the stronger effects of this variable. Experiment 2 was a replication of Experiment 1a in which SES was manipulated with fewer pieces of information concerning its core components education and income. Second, in order to avoid specific job-associated stereotypes that may have driven the effects of SES (e.g., participants might think that journalists are particularly good adoptive parents), we chose similar occupations in both SES conditions. Third, it is possible that the effects of sexual orientation were smaller than one might expect because the applicants' sexuality identity was mentioned, but not elaborated. Prejudice based on sexual orientation might be more apparent for targets who enact their identity, for example by transgressing gender roles (see Whitley, 2001), rather than for targets who live in same-gender relationships but for whom sexual orientation is not manifest in any other way. Alternatively, gay men with gender-atypical hobbies may appear particularly warm and

thus more congruent with the parent prototype. To explore this, we manipulated the gender-typicality of applicants' hobbies (for a similar approach, see Cox & Devine, 2013). Mediator variables were omitted in order to make data collection more economic because they were not needed to obtain the aims of Experiment 2.

Method

Participants

Our convenience sample consisted of 204 adults. Again, several small prizes were raffled among them. Missing percentages indicate non-responses. Of our participants, 53% indicated to be female, 46% to be male, and they were from 11 different federal states in Germany. Participants ranged in age from 15 to 79 years ($M = 34$, $SD = 13$). The largest groups were married (30%), single (30%), or lived in heterosexual (34%) relationships. A few lived in a gay/lesbian partnership or relationship (3%). The majority had no children (56%), 37% had one or two, and 7% had 3-6 children. Among participants, 51% had finished 13 years of schooling, 32%, 10 years of schooling, 10%, 9 years of schooling, and 7% ticked "other". Two thirds (64%) indicated no religious affiliation, 21% were Protestants, 12% Catholic, and 2% ticked other. Finally, 21% lived in a village, 12% in a small town, 19% in an intermediate-size town, and 47% in a large city.

Materials & Procedure

Materials and procedure were identical to Experiment 1a with the following exceptions. First, we omitted the following pieces of information that had been manipulated with regard to SES: Residential area, quality of housing, living space, number of rooms, size of child's room, play facilities, professional graduation, working hours, monthly fix costs, amount of money available for living. Thus, SES was manipulated via its core components school graduation, current work, and net income. Second, similar jobs were selected in the high and low SES condition. Applicant 1 worked in a federal ministry as a civil servant versus a messenger and Applicant 2 was a dentist versus a dentist's medical secretary. Third, in the questionnaire the information on marital status preceded the information on SES to avoid the possibility that the previous effects of SES were based on a primacy effect. Fourth, the older-applicants conditions were omitted. Fifth, each person was assigned a gender-typical or a gender-atypical hobby. After pretesting, we selected *dancing* and *fashion* as female-typical and *soccer* and *motor-biking* as male-typical hobbies. In the gender-atypical hobbies conditions, these assignments were reversed (both for heterosexual and gay/lesbian applicants). All other information

was held constant across conditions, including common last (Müller) and first names (Katrin, Claudia, Michael, and Thomas, see Rudolph, Böhm, & Lummer, 2007). All applicants lived at the outskirts of a city. Briefly, again, participants took part voluntarily in a survey about criteria for adoption decisions and read the applicant questionnaire, to then decide whether they would agree with an adoption.

Design

The dependent variable was again the adoption decision. Independent variables were: Applicant SES (high vs. low), sexual orientation (heterosexual couple vs. lesbian couple vs. gay male couple), and gender-typicality of applicants' hobbies in a $2 \times 3 \times 2$ between-subjects design.

Results

As the $2 \times 3 \times 2$ ANOVA showed, applicants with gender-typical hobbies did not appear more suited for adoption than those with atypical hobbies ($M_s = 2.88$ vs. 2.91 , respectively), and this factor did not interact with any other variable (see Table 1). Gay men with typically male hobbies appeared equally suited for adoption as those with typically female hobbies ($M_s = 2.69$ vs. 2.64 , respectively, $t < 1$), and lesbians with typically female hobbies even appeared a bit less suited than those with typically male hobbies ($M_s = 2.80$ vs. 2.92 , respectively, $t < 1$; mean suitability of heterosexuals with typical vs. atypical hobbies: $M_s = 3.15$ vs. 3.18).

Again, adoption decisions were more favorable towards couples with a higher SES, $M_s = 2.79$ and 3.00 , and towards heterosexual couples, $M_s = 3.16$, 2.85 , and 2.66 for heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male couples, although the effect of SES was considerably smaller in size than in Experiments 1a-b (interactions: all $F_s < 1$). Post-hoc tests again showed that the gay male couple appeared less suited than the heterosexual couple (95% CI : $[-.78; -.21]$). The 95% CI for the difference between the lesbian and the heterosexual couple was $[-.59; .02]$ ($p = .07$), gay male versus lesbian couple: $[-.52; .11]$ ($p = .29$).

Summary. Again, in suitability for adoption based on sexual orientation, the only statistically significant difference was found between the gay male and the heterosexual couple. Furthermore, we used a more subtle manipulation of SES. This led to a smaller effect of SES, but well-off couples still appeared better suited for adoption than lower-middleclass couples.

General Discussion

The aim of the present study was to test the role of applicant sexual orientation in lay people's adoption suitability decisions, as compared to and possibly interacting with other applicant features that deviate from the adoptive parent prototype. Our study showed several effects of applicants' characteristics: adoption decisions were more favorable towards couples with a higher SES, younger couples, and heterosexual ones. Given single persons as applicants, female applicants were preferred over male applicants, independent of sexual orientation (Experiment 1b), qualifying the effects of sexual orientation in Experiments 1a and 2. We found evidence of several mediators of adoption suitability decisions. Generally, data suggest that adoption suitability decisions were more positive the fewer specific worries participants held and particularly the more they believed the child would generally be well in that family. Regarding SES, age, and gender, there were indirect effects on adoption suitability decisions via convictions about the child's general well-being. For sexual orientation and gender, we found indirect effects on adoption suitability decisions via specific worries concerning the child. Finally, in Experiment 2 applicants with gender-typical hobbies did not appear more suited for adoption than those with atypical hobbies. As this experiment also indicated, peripheral aspects related to SES, such as size of child's room and good play facilities, appeared to have a large influence on adoption suitability decisions in Experiments 1a-b.

The Role of Identity Intersections

Regarding identity intersections, our main effects of applicant features were hardly qualified by interactions, thus attesting to their generality. The only important identity intersection that appeared to qualify effects was that of sexual orientation and gender. This is discussed in the section on sexual orientation below. Additionally, high SES women appeared particularly suited for adoption, possibly, because they appear to combine typically female warmth with an affluent background that appears to support the child's well-being.

The relative lack of interactions stands in contrast to findings from other domains where prejudice depended on boundary conditions (e.g., Lilling & Friedman, 1995). Such boundary conditions were not obvious in our experiments, and it is thus an open question when they are relevant and when they are not. Based on previous research, one could assume that ethnicity and sexual orientation should interact more strongly than the factors we investigated because stereotypes of ethnicities appear to be gendered

(e.g., Galinsky, Hall, & Cuddy, 2013; Remedios et al., 2011). Our preliminary conclusion is that identity intersections of sexual orientation, age, and SES play a minor role in the context of prejudice against adoptive parents. Effects rather appear additive. Before discussing these identity aspects in turn, we acknowledge that any discrimination may be painful, even if other groups are discriminated even more.

The Role of Age

Experiment 1a revealed that, for couples as applicants, adoption decisions were less favorable for older applicants partly because participants imagined the child's well-being was more likely in a younger family, and additionally for unknown reasons. For singles as applicants in Experiment 1b, a comparable trend was not statistically significant. We believe that couples around 30 years represent the prototype of people becoming parents better than those around 50 years. In line with this idea, specific worries did not play a role in the less favorable decisions regarding older couples. However, we need to acknowledge that the effect of age on adoption decisions was not fully mediated by the mediators we considered. Thus, additional worries could have played a role that we did not assess, for example, those related to age stereotypes.

The Role of SES

The present research demonstrated much prejudice against low SES applicants as adoptive parents. Adoption decisions were less favorable for lower SES applicants because participants imagined the child would be better off in a higher SES family. Experiment 2 showed that discrimination against low SES applicants was reduced, but not eliminated, when SES was manipulated more subtly. We predicted an effect of SES based on the deviation of low SES people from the prototype of affluent adoptive parents. The mediation analyses suggested that negative trait ascriptions to poor people that would give rise to specific worries were the smaller factor in the effect of SES on adoption decisions. Rather, given low SES, participants doubted that a nurturing relationship with enough care, time, and room for the child would develop. Given evidence that SES is related to child development in many ways (cf. Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), one could argue that it is sensible to base adoption decisions to a large part on SES. However, it should not be overlooked that there is much variability within each SES group for all indicators of child development (Bradley et al., 2001; Wadsworth & Santiago, 2008).

Also, there are several reasons why applicants of lower SES are well-suited for adoption. First, moderately positive affective attitudes towards

poor people have been reported (Cozzarelli et al., 2001). Second, there are cultural depictions of poor but virtuous people (see Kay & Jost, 2003), including dimensions that should be relevant for parents, such as being warm. Finally, our second low-SES applicant in Experiment 1a was described as unemployed and would thus have much time for developing a nurturing relationship with the child. For these and other reasons, prejudice against poor adoptive parents should be overcome.

In Experiment 2, the effect of SES was reduced when we did not use ecologically valid application sheets modelled after those of youth welfare offices, but information about SES was markedly reduced. By implication, the large effect of SES depended in part on characteristics of application sheets. It is possible that SES has similar large effects on professionals' adoption decisions. This could be intended or not. If not intended, it should be reduced by revising those sheets. An additional implication of the difference in effect sizes between Experiments 1a and 2 is that the peripheral pieces of information we omitted in Experiment 2 (size of child's room, closeness of playground, etc.) influenced adoption suitability decisions substantially.

It remains an open question whether the large effect of SES on impression formation generalizes beyond the specific domain we have investigated (i.e., adoption suitability). On the one hand, these effects could be limited to the current topic: People who are not generally prejudiced against poor people could still be convinced that it would be desirable for a child to be placed into an affluent family (see Lareau, 2003, for related discussion), off-setting other peculiarities present there (e.g., gay parents). On the other hand, it is also possible that larger effects of SES than of other target features are found across a range of decisions (employment, housing, etc.). Some existing research suggests that the effect of SES is generally larger than that of other target features (e.g., Lott & Saxon, 2002). Future research should test the generality of the large effect of SES. If SES is generally a more important source of judgment than other, often investigated social categories, it is important for psychologists not to neglect SES. Indeed, given the confluence of low SES with other social categorisations (e.g., race), evaluations of members of these categories could stem as much from their class as from their race.

The Role of Gender

Our findings on gender are in line with our extension of role-congruity theory (see Eagly & Karau, 2002), where perceived incongruity between the social group that a target belongs to and the parenting role leads to prejudice against

members of that social group as parents. Experiment 1b highlighted that participants preferred female to male applicants because they thought the child would generally be better off with an adoption mother than father. Thus, the present findings are a first indicator that role congruity theory can be extended to the warmth dimension and to the present context.

In Experiment 2 we had manipulated the gender-typicality of hobbies in order to indicate gender-role transgressions. However, we found no statistically significant effects of this manipulation. Possibly, in the context of much important information regarding a child's possible living conditions and regarding applicant features (e.g., their job), the applicants' hobbies appeared too peripheral to influence impressions significantly. Future research should test more effective ways to manipulate gender role perceptions.

The Role of Sexual Orientation

In suitability for adoption based on sexual orientation, the only statistically significant difference was found between the gay male and the heterosexual couple. Indeed, it seems that sexual orientation was consistently overshadowed by gender. Data suggest that adoption decisions were less favorable for gay male couples because participants worried more about the child than in a heterosexual family. Moreover, the findings of Experiments 1a-b indicate that it is less important whether applicants are gay or lesbian than whether they are rich or poor. Our findings suggest that being of high SES may be more central to the parent prototype than being heterosexual. Even being young and female appeared more important factors for adoption decisions than being heterosexual. Thus the parent prototype appears to be affluent and female, and perceived incongruity between a target person and that prototype may lead to prejudice against that person as an adoptive parent.

The small and often non-significant effect of applicant sexual orientation on adoption decisions in our experiments stands in sharp contrast to the controversy that surrounds gay adoption rights in public discourse. Given the frequency and force with which it is argued in the media that each child needs and deserves a mother and a father, a female and a male role model; that it would be unfair if innocent children suffered from discrimination based on their parents' sexual orientation: one could have expected that applicant sexual orientation has the major influence on adoption decisions. Instead, we found that an affluent gay couple may have an edge over, for instance, a female office worker whose husband is unemployed and who live in a less generous space.

Still, to the degree that applicant sexual orientation was taken into account in adoption decisions, the driving forces mediating this influence were related to those well-known from the debate surrounding gay adoption: Worries about the reasons behind the adoption motive, about the child's difficulties getting used to the new family and living situation, and/or worries about possible neglect or sexual abuse. Our hypothesis that gay men could appear particularly suited for adoption because of their stereotypical warmth received no support at all. Rather, (negative) prejudice against gay men appeared to influence adoption decisions, even though effects were rather small across the present research.

Our findings are in line with previous research demonstrating that the main fears heterosexuals cite when objecting to gay and lesbian parenting are linked to considerations about the child's best interest (Clarke, 2001). This suggests that there is still a lot of work to do on people's attitudes and beliefs about same-gender families. Public policies should focus on informing citizens about the "normal" development of children and the good parenting skills of gay and lesbian parents.

Limitations and Conclusions

A strength of the present approach is that people were asked about multiple social groups and their features, so their negativity towards lesbian and gay male adoptive parents could be gauged relative to this other information. Also, we mitigated demand effects because we presented individuating information rather than directly asking about social groups. Rather than drawing attention to sexual orientation as a core piece of information on which judgments should rest, our approach yields a more adequate assessment of the influence of sexual orientation on adoption decisions. As each participant was faced with only one application, the weighting of information in the application was up to participants, not implied by the question. Opinion polls, in contrast, ask about general categories for which broad stereotypes are likely to be particularly salient, rather than about specific people. Moreover, the social categories in focus are not pitted against other comparison categories. This may result in a discrepancy between what people say about groups in the abstract and their attitudes towards specific group members, and about specific groups in comparison to other groups or features. In our study, there was a match with the level on which adoption suitability decisions are made in reality. Adoption suitability decisions depend on assessing individual suitability; there is no general right that is given to a social group. Therefore, for an assessment of the role of sexual orientation for judging parent

suitability, our paradigm appears appropriate. In adoption suitability decisions, individuals are judged in their social contexts, and impression formation depends on individuating processing. In contrast many polls focus on general rights given to a social group, an approach that can bias results and subsequent policy making. Notwithstanding those precautions, it may be that social desirability also played a role when judgments were made in our experiments, and they may have influenced judgments of gay men and lesbians more than judgments of other groups because of a higher awareness of sexual-orientation-based discrimination.

A second limitation is that our sample was not representative of any population in general. Differences in degree of discrimination with these particular participants and measures do not necessarily indicate absolute real-world differences in discrimination. We did not aim at obtaining a representative sample. Instead, we used an experimental approach in which we tested several factors we manipulated in their individual and combined influence on the dependent variable, given sufficiently large sample sizes. Thus, our findings are not meant to be generalised to other populations, manipulations, and the like. A third limitation is illustrated by the difference in the size of the effect of SES between Experiments 1a and 2. This difference shows that the size of the manipulation influenced findings. In contrast to the other factors we investigated, age and SES are not dichotomies; therefore the size of the effects found for these factors needs to be interpreted with caution; and given other age groups, effects of age may even reverse. However, whereas specific stereotypes could partly explain the effect of SES in Experiment 1a (rich, unemployed), the finding was replicated in Experiment 1b where these two specific factors were avoided. Fourth, and relatedly, the present research could not tell whether the effects of SES are due to discrimination of the poor or due to preferential treatment of the rich. Two of our findings indicate that preferential treatment of rich adoptive parents could be relevant. First, specific worries (regarding low SES adoptive parents) did not mediate the effect of SES on adoption decisions. Second, adoption decisions were particularly favorable for high SES women (Experiment 2). Future research could use more levels of SES in order to determine whether preferential treatment of rich adoptive parents plays a larger role than discrimination against poor adoptive parents.

Heated discussion about lesbian and gay adoption suggests that applicant sexual orientation would weigh heavily in adoption decisions. Given individuating information in three experiments, we

found instead that the influence of sexual orientation was rather small when considering couples as applicants for adoption; it was not statistically significant for single males or females as applicants; it was never statistically significant for lesbian couples. As reported elsewhere, for the adoption of teenage girls, gay male couples were even preferred to heterosexual couples (Steffens & Jonas, 2010). Other deviations of the applicant(s) from prototypical adoptive parents influenced decisions much more; above all, their socio-economic status including the overall living situation. If polling pretends that sexual orientation is always the main factor determining adoption decisions, this may actually contribute to the prejudice that the group in question is facing. By interpreting attitudes out of context, if such data prompt politicians to not endorse equal rights agendas for fear of what voters would think, then research may create a discriminatory reality that would not exist without it.

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Research Profile

Melanie C. Steffens, holds the position of full professor for Social and Economic Psychology at the Department of Psychology at the University of Koblenz-Landau (since 2013). From 2004-2013, she was a professor for Social Cognition and Cognitive Psychology at the University of Jena.

In 2009-2011, she was the head of the Jena department. She studied psychology at the University of Bonn (1989-1994) and did her doctorate at the University of Trier (1998). In 2001, she was a *Visiting Fellow* at Yale University. From 2011-2013, she was the speaker of the Social Psychology interest group within the German Psychological Society (DGPs). Her research interests comprise implicit and explicit attitudes and stereotypes of social groups, social categorisation and impression formation, in addition to memory phenomena. She is a member of the research unit “Person perception” (funded by the German Science Foundation, DFG). She has published more than 60 papers in international peer-reviewed journals, is a member of the editorial board of *Experimental Psychology* and the *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* and of the international advisory board of the *Psychology of Sexualities Review*.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Table A1: Manipulation of Applicants' Socioeconomic Status (SES) in Experiment 1a.

	1 st Applicant	2 nd applicant	1 st Applicant	2 nd applicant
<i>SES</i>				
	<i>high</i>		<i>low</i>	
Education:				
School graduation*	highest school track	highest school track	middle school track	lowest school track
Profession graduation*	University	university	apprentice-ship	apprentice-ship
Current work	independent journalist	dentist, at home	office worker	unemployed
Working time (hours per week)	30 (freely disposable)	40	40	—
Income:				
Net income (month)*	2200 Euro	6000 Euro	900 Euro	650 Euro
Monthly fix costs	1000 Euro	total 3000 Euro	450 Euro	total 800 Euro
Available for living	1200 Euro	total 5200 Euro	450 Euro	total 750 Euro
Living area:				
Residential area	small town		city	
Quality of housing	house with garden		flat	
Living space	130 m ²		55 m ²	
Number of rooms	6		3	
Child accommodation	own room (16 m ²)		own room (9 m ²)	
Play facilities	playground, garden		playground	

Notes. In Experiment 1b, the information in the column “1st applicant” constituted the manipulation.

* Manipulation of SES in Experiment 2.

Appendix 2: Statements about the Child's General Well-being Used as Mediators

Factor 1: Specific Worries

The applicant(s) could be acting for selfish reasons.

It is an open question whether there is enough warmth and motherliness in this household.

The child could have difficulties getting used to the "new family".

With regard to the applicant(s) one must consider whether the child might suffer anything bad (e.g., neglect of care).

The child would probably have difficulties with the "new living situation" after adoption.

One needs to worry that the applicant(s) might neglect or sexually abuse children.

Factor 2: Child's General Well-being:

The adopted child would probably be taken good care of.

A good relationship between the applicant(s) and the child could develop after the adoption.

Enough time and room would probably be at the child's command.

Scale: 1: "not important at all" to 5: "very important"