

Does Context Matter for Parenthood Aspirations and Realized Fertility of LGB Individuals? A Comparison Across Two Cohorts

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HIGHLIGHTS

- This is the first study of parenthood desires among LGB people across cohorts using a nationally representative sample.
- The prevalence of child-free desires among lesbian women has decreased across cohorts.
- Parenthood desires among gay and bisexual men have increased or remained stable across cohorts.
- Bisexual women show little cohort variation.
- Overall, desires for parenthood are higher when obstacles to accessing it are lower.

ABSTRACT Do parenthood aspirations among lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people change as parenthood becomes more available and socially accepted across cohorts? This article examines this question by using Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey data to study cohort differences in parenthood aspirations among LGB people. The analysis first confirms findings from previous research indicating that LGB people have somewhat lower parenthood desires than heterosexual individuals. I observe differences between lesbian/gay and bisexual people, as the former group displays lower parenthood desires. The inclusion of cohorts in the analysis provides several novel findings: not desiring children decreases across cohorts but only for lesbian women, which is in line with the notion that such desires are higher when obstacles to access parenthood are lower. Moreover, I observe increases in parenthood across cohorts for lesbian women, whereas the opposite is seen for gay men. Results for bisexual women present little or no cohort variation, and bisexual men report a pattern similar to that of gay men. In short, the focus of this article on cohort differences provides novel insights into the current demographic debate on parenthood aspirations of LGB populations, highlighting how desires are shaped by external constraints.

KEYWORDS LGB population • Parenthood aspirations • Sexual identity • Cohort analysis • Australia

Introduction

Over the past three decades, demography has gradually incorporated the family dynamics of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ*) people in its research. The increased availability of representative data that allows for the identification of LGBTQ* individuals has provided an opportunity for demographic research to deepen its understanding of family dynamics different from those of heterosexual nuclear families, especially in high-income countries (e.g., Black et al. 2000; Carpenter and Gates 2008). This research has highlighted significant disparities between the LGBTQ* population and their heterosexual counterparts across various aspects of life, including parenthood and expectations regarding parenthood (Hank and Wetzel 2018).

Concurrently, an expanding body of research in family psychology has sought to explore parenthood desires and expectations (together referred to as “parenthood aspirations”) of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB)¹ people (e.g., Baiocco and Laghi 2013; Leal et al. 2018; Patterson and Riskind 2010; Tate and Patterson 2019). Findings suggest that although parenthood aspirations of LGB people tend to be somewhat lower than those of the general population, the majority of childless LGB people express a desire or expectation to have a child (Hank and Wetzel 2018; Riskind and Patterson 2010; Tate et al. 2019). At the same time, levels of LGB parenthood remain considerably lower than in the general population (Badgett et al. 2021; Gates 2012; Kolk and Andersson 2020).

The lower parenthood aspirations among the LGB population—particularly found among lesbian/gay persons—and the consequently reduced share of LGB parents might reflect both personal preferences and the difficulty of realizing these aspirations because of biological and legal obstacles. In addition, parental aspirations of LGB individuals might be shaped by societal norms about parenthood, partnership, gender, and sexuality prevalent in a heteronormative environment.

LGB parenthood is still a controversial topic, even in countries that already have some sort of recognition of same-sex couples (Baiocco et al. 2013). The normative expectation to become parents is lower for LGB people than for heterosexual individuals (Hank and Wetzel 2018) but this might increase with increasing possibilities to pursue parenthood. In fact, in recent years, LGB individuals in several high-income countries have been granted the rights to marry and access assisted reproductive technologies (ART), gestational surrogacy, and adoption. This growing acceptance might translate into increased desires for parenthood, as previously suggested by some authors (Gato et al. 2021). Yet, an alternative scenario emerges: despite legal advancements that have improved access to parenthood, the process itself might remain challenging and complex, potentially limiting access and negatively shaping desires. LGB people could also experience a decline in parenthood desires across cohorts if the need to conform to heteronormative family trajectories decreases. However, the extent to which desires decrease across cohorts might also be influenced by the gender differences in accessing parenthood encountered by LGB people.

Despite the importance of contextual differences, demographic research has not yet investigated how parenthood aspirations of LGB people change across contexts. This

¹ Starting from this point, we focus on LGB (and not LGBTQ*) people because of data availability in our analysis and to ensure consistency with the existing literature.

article aims to fill this gap by studying cohort changes in the desires and expectations for children among LGB individuals in Australia. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to include cohort change in research on the parenthood aspirations of LGB people. Australia is a relatively favorable context for the LGBTQ* population, although it lagged in legalizing same-sex marriage, medically assisted reproduction, and adoption rights relative to other high-income countries. LGB women have experienced increased access to parenthood options, such as ART, whereas gay and bisexual men's access to gestational surrogacy remains a long and complex journey (Kneebone et al. 2023). This evolving context allows for an examination of how parenthood aspirations and realized fertility among LGB people have changed over time with the greater acceptance of parenthood across cohorts. However, only LGB women have seen significant increases in opportunities to become parents. Therefore, examining gender differences along with cohort changes can offer further insights into the impact of constraints on the journey to parenthood. Within this framework, I pose the following research question: Have parenthood aspirations changed across cohorts for LGB people and are there differences by sexual identity and gender?

I use Waves 1–22 of the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, an annual, representative panel study ongoing since 2001 (Watson and Wooden 2001). The major strength of this dataset is the presence of a question that directly asks respondents about their sexual identity. Moreover, questions on fertility desires and expectations are repeated each wave, which allows me to distinguish cohort from age effects, to some extent.

I find that fewer lesbian women in the younger cohort than in the older one do not want children; this is observed alongside increased realized fertility across cohorts among lesbian women. At the same time, not desiring children increases in the younger cohort of bisexual women and gay and bisexual men. Although there is little variation overall across cohorts of bisexual women, the younger cohort of bisexual men exhibits lower levels of realized fertility than the older one.

Between Parenthood Desires and Expectations of LGB People

I begin the literature review by reporting previous findings on parenthood aspirations of LGB individuals. Throughout the article, I use “aspirations” as an umbrella term encompassing desires, expectations, ideals, and intentions, specifying each when necessary. Most existing studies rely on nonprobabilistic samples within psychology, though some use representative data (Tate et al. 2019) or data drawn from demography (e.g., Hank and Wetzel 2018). I then examine reasons for expected cohort changes within the LGB population, with gender as an essential element. Although the first part of the review focuses on parenthood desires, I conclude by discussing expectations—where mismatches with realized fertility should be most evident.

Parenthood Aspirations of LGB Individuals: From Psychology to Demography

Parenthood among the LGB population often differs from that among the general population—and not only because of biological differences related to reproduction.

Legal and policy barriers, social stigma, and economic challenges are just some examples of the additional considerations the LGB population must face when trying to access parenthood. Indeed, throughout the article, I use “parenthood” rather than “fertility” aspirations when referring to the LGB population, as the latter implicitly excludes nonbiological parenthood, whereas the former better acknowledges family diversity. In this section, I first explore previous findings on whether lesbian/gay individuals and subsequently bisexual individuals want to be parents, which I refer to as “parenthood desires.”

The bulk of existing research—largely conducted on nonprobabilistic samples—consistently reveals that lesbian and gay people generally express lower levels of parenthood aspirations than their heterosexual counterparts (Leal et al. 2018; Tate and Patterson 2019). Concerning fatherhood aspirations, gay and bisexual men report lower desires for parenthood and display fewer intentions to become parents than their heterosexual counterparts (Baiocco and Laghi 2013; Jeffries et al. 2020; Kranz et al. 2018; Tate and Patterson 2019). These patterns persist across various contexts beyond the predominantly studied U.S. setting, as demonstrated by research such as Baiocco and Laghi (2013) in Italy. On the other hand, parenthood aspirations of LGB women diverge from those of gay and bisexual men. For instance, Baiocco and Laghi (2013) in Italy and Riskind and Patterson (2010) in the United States found no significant differences in parenthood desires between LGB and heterosexual women. Also, as Tate et al. (2019) found in one of the few studies on the topic with a nationally representative U.S. sample, ideal family size is similar among heterosexual and lesbian women.

Despite receiving minimal attention in research, bisexual individuals—both women and men—consistently express reduced fertility aspirations, as evidenced by available but scarce data (Costa and Bidell 2017; Leal et al. 2018). For instance, a study spanning 2011–2013 revealed that 47% of childless gay men in the United States desired parenthood, whereas 75% of bisexual men and 85% of heterosexual men expressed similar aspirations (Riskind and Tornello 2017). Furthermore, research suggests that the parenthood aspirations of bisexual women may vary on the basis of specific contextual elements, such as their choice of sexual partner. Specifically, bisexual women in relationships with other women often share desires and intentions comparable to those of lesbian women—a trend similarly observed among bisexual men (Riskind and Tornello 2017). These trends echo findings by Gates et al. (2007) that indicate that both bisexual women and men tend to display a heightened interest in parenthood compared with lesbian and gay women and men.

In the following sections, I further explore these differences found in the literature and provide some explanations that could account for cohort and gender changes.

Between the LGB Population and the General Population: The Role of Contextual Constraints

Before addressing potential changes in parenthood desires of LGB people across cohorts, I discuss insights from research on the general population to understand how context affects fertility desires. Within the framework of the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe 2010), as well as with insights from the Gender Revolution

(Goldscheider et al. 2015), various authors have delineated a shift in perceptions regarding childbearing and family dynamics (Goldscheider et al. 2015; Sobotka 2008). Along with the widespread decrease in fertility rates (Goldscheider et al. 2015), there is evidence suggesting a potential transition toward diminished intentions for childbearing and smaller ideal family size (Goldstein et al. 2003; Lutz et al. 2006; Sobotka 2009).

The concept of a “low-fertility trap” (Lutz et al. 2006) suggests that declining fertility rates set off a chain of events leading to reduced interactions with children and a decrease in desired family size. This situation is often explained by a shift in preferences, such as the spread of postmaterialist values and the importance of life goals other than becoming a parent (Golovina et al. 2024; Sobotka et al. 2011; Thomson 2015). However, although on a theoretical level parenthood desires reflect abstract wishes about parenthood preferences while expectations consider potential external challenges (Philipov and Bernardi 2011), structural constraints—or at least perceived uncertainty—seem to be impactful for fertility desires too (Savelieva et al. 2023).

Nonetheless, attitudes toward parenthood and childbearing remain, on average, positive across high-income countries, and the desire for children remains overall stable across cohorts (Sobotka 2008). At the same time, fertility expectations and intentions of the general population have declined over time and across cohorts (Goldstein et al. 2003; Golovina et al. 2024; Hartnett and Gemmill 2020). Hence, one could argue that desires appear to be less changeable and remarkably resilient to external constraints, whereas expectations appear to be more malleable and responsive to shifts in the context. A similar dynamic might be observed among LGB people, with stable desires for parenthood coexisting with a decline in expectations among younger cohorts, as a result of society-wide changing values and norms about parenthood in general. However, it is likely that many other contextual factors unique to the experiences of the LGB population are relevant for changing their parenthood aspirations. Although desires appear to be stable in the general population, these external factors—an issue I turn to in the next section—could affect aspirations already at the desires level in the case of the LGB population.

Cohort, Gender, and Parenthood Aspirations Among the LGB Population

Changes Across Cohorts

The acceptance of LGB families—despite still being relatively low—has been increasing in most high-income countries (ILGA-Europe 2023). Although the LGB population remains disproportionately overrepresented in singlehood trajectories compared with the heterosexual population, their rates of partnership formation have increased across cohorts (Bohr and Lengerer 2024; Ophir et al. 2023). Moreover, with the growing acceptance of sexual diversity among younger generations, young LGB individuals are more inclined toward envisioning future parenthood (D’Augelli et al. 2008; Gates 2012). Until recently, LGB individuals did not contemplate parenthood outside of different-sex relationships. This has changed, however, as they increasingly express the desire to become parents within same-sex relationships (Gates 2015; Rabun and Oswald 2009). Riskind and Patterson (2010) found that

younger gay men were more likely to express concerns regarding a childless future than their older counterparts. The presence of a supportive social environment facilitates envisioning parenthood within the context of a same-sex relationship, as shown by Costa and Bidell (2017). Indeed, a more favorable social context and greater social acceptance of same-sex partnerships might help LGB individuals to picture parenthood as a feasible and attractive objective. The benefits of becoming a parent might be much better in favorable contexts for LGB people, hence younger cohorts of LGB individuals—regardless of gender—might have greater desires for parenthood. Therefore, the emerging pattern might go in the opposite direction than what is found for the general population.

At the same time, younger cohorts of LGB people may exhibit a greater desire for parenthood influenced by the spread of laws that recognize LGBTQ* rights and the consequent increased accessibility to various pathways to parenthood. In fact, only in recent years have LGB people been granted the right to marry, finally achieving equality with different-sex couples (ILGA-Europe 2015). As Aldén et al. (2015) discussed, the legal recognition of same-sex couples plays a crucial role in enabling parenthood and broader family formation, especially for women. These recent legal changes have provided LGB people in same-sex relationships greater access to parenthood through ART, gestational surrogacy, and adoption—potentially making younger cohorts more inclined than older ones to consider parenthood (Andersson et al. 2006; Gates 2012, 2015; Tornello and Patterson 2015).

Desires of parenthood among LGB persons might be at the very peak when discrimination against LGB families is low and medically assisted reproduction, surrogacy, or adoption are widespread. For this reason, one would expect to see a larger share of LGB individuals who express a desire for parenthood in younger cohorts. Nonetheless, the extent to which this is the case depends on how accessible ART, adoption, and surrogacy are in a given context, because obstacles emerge even among the more modern pathways and discrimination is still present.

In this regard, health-related research on sexual diversity indicates little or no improvement across cohorts in the subjective well-being of people with a same-sex partner (Hank et al. 2023). In some cases, disparities persist or even widen, particularly among bisexual individuals (Hatzenbuehler et al. 2018; Liu and Reczek 2021). Bisexual people often face the burden of “double erasure” (i.e., marginalization from both lesbian/gay and heterosexual people) and additional minority stressors, such as the misrecognition of their identities (Morgenroth et al. 2022). Consistent with this, previous studies have highlighted lower life satisfaction and self-rated health for bisexual individuals than for lesbian/gay people. Hence, even if legal possibilities have expanded and attitudes have become increasingly favorable, persisting discrimination might lead to relatively low levels of parenthood aspirations among younger cohorts too.

The Impact of Gender

Recent developments in assisted reproduction have expanded the possibility for many LGB women in several high-income countries to become a parent as a single person or in the context of a same-gender couple (Evertsson et al. 2020). However,

this advancement is not mirrored for couples in which neither partner can carry a pregnancy, given the social, legal, and political controversies around gestational surrogacy and its illegality in most high-income countries (De Groot 2025; Rodríguez-Jaume et al. 2021). Where gestational surrogacy (altruistic or remunerated) is illegal, LGB individuals often face the challenge of long journeys abroad to access it. Going abroad to embark on surrogate parenthood is expensive and risky, as once the child is born, both fathers might not be legally recognized as parents (Evertsson et al. 2020). Alternatively, they must pursue adoption, which is not always a straightforward route. Domestic adoption opportunities in high-income countries are limited, and foreign countries where adoption is more accessible frequently prohibit same-sex couples from adopting (Brown et al. 2009; Messina and D'Amore 2018). As a result, the intersection of gender and sexual identity proves to be an essential element to account for, because gay and bisexual men's options are limited compared with those available to lesbian and bisexual women.

Partnership dynamics provide further insights into these gender differences. Prior research has pointed to an overall “feminization” of same-sex marriage. In Sweden, for instance, Kolk and Andersson (2020) found a pronounced increase in same-sex marriage among women but only a modest rise among men. As noted earlier, the legal recognition of same-sex couples carries particular importance for women, given its implications for family formation and legal parenthood (Aldén et al. 2015). Taken together, these gendered differences in access to parenthood pathways and the distinct patterns of partnership dynamics might lead to fewer gay and bisexual men than LGB women expressing parenthood desires.

As already outlined, parenthood aspirations of bisexual individuals closely align with those of heterosexual individuals. Therefore, it is plausible to consider that the availability of assisted reproduction, surrogacy, and adoption may not significantly increase parenthood desires further, also taking into account their possibility to pursue parenthood through different-gender relationships. Therefore, one would expect to see fewer variations across cohorts and genders among bisexual individuals than among lesbian/gay individuals. However, as same-gender relationships become less stigmatized and bisexual people are likely increasingly considering these avenues as a feasible option, they might more often encounter obstacles when approaching parenthood and see steeper drops in desires and expectations than their heterosexual counterparts.

Parenthood Expectations

Whereas desires are conceptualized to reflect extemporaneous and decontextualized parenthood preferences, expectations are more likely to consider potential obstacles to parenthood (Philipov and Bernardi 2011). Focusing on the difference between desires and expectations as they are conceived for the general population, this distinction holds potential for shedding even more light on the role of context—for example, social and legal barriers—in the pursuit of parenthood for LGB people.

For LGB individuals, desires might be high because, *in theory*, it is possible to access parenthood through different pathways (e.g., ART, surrogacy, adoption).

Nonetheless, *in practice*, the access to these resources is often costly (e.g., not covered by the public health system); uneven (regional or gender differences); complex (long waiting time for adoption); and, in some cases, impossible (low possibility of national adoption and international adoption allowed for same-sex couples) (Boertien 2024; Rozental and Malmquist 2015). Therefore, if LGB people express a significant desire for parenthood, this might not be transferred to expectations. Indeed, recent evidence from a statistically nonrepresentative sample of nonheterosexual Canadian men suggests that although a significant share of nonheterosexual men desired parenthood, an even higher share stated it was unlikely they could actually realize this desire (Yee et al. 2024).

In summary, I expect to find that parenthood expectations vary significantly across cohorts and by gender and sexual identity. Younger cohorts of LGB women may have higher expectations than older ones because of the improved access to parenthood over time, similarly to what we expect to find with desires. Conversely, younger cohorts of gay and bisexual men might adjust their expectations in response to the challenges they face in accessing parenthood, aligning expectations to reality even more than they do with desires. In particular, I expect to find that the mismatch between expectations and desires becomes most clear among those who strongly desire children.

The Australian Context

Australia is among the countries with an overall relatively favorable environment for LGB individuals (Valfort 2017). In the decade 2005–2015, public support for equal rights for same-sex couples increased from 39% to 66% (Perales and Campbell 2018). Nevertheless, compared with other high-income countries, access to marriage and parenthood in the context of a same-sex relationship arrived later.

In 2004, the Marriage Amendment Act banned same-sex marriage nationwide, although adoption rights were extended to same-sex couples that same year. In 2008, the Australian government equalized the rights of *de facto* same-sex couples and those of different-sex couples in such areas as pensions, taxation, child support, and social security. In 2017, 62% of the population voted in support of same-sex marriage in a national postal vote (Perales and Todd 2018); therefore, I use 2017 as a cutoff year for LGB family rights and to define the cohorts to analyze.

By 2022, all Australian states had legalized second parent or joint adoption for same-sex couples (ILGA World n.d.). Access to parenthood for gay and bisexual men varies, with opportunities for surrogacy available in some regions, prohibited in others, and lacking specific legislation in still others (Kneebone et al. 2023). Altruistic surrogacy is legal nationwide, except in the Northern Territory, whereas remunerated surrogacy is illegal in all states (Sifris and Page 2021). However, access to altruistic surrogacy is not accessible to men in same-sex couples in Western Australia, nor to single individuals in the Australian Capital Territory (Kneebone et al. 2023). As of 2017, all states provide access to assisted reproduction for all women, regardless of marital status and without the need for an infertility diagnosis (Short et al. 2007); moreover, the non-birth partner is automatically recognized as a parent on the birth certificate, following the 2008 amendments to the *Family Law Act 1975*

(*Family Law Amendment (De Facto Financial Matters and Other Measures) Bill 2008* (Commonwealth) 2008).

Data and Methods

Data and Sample

I use HILDA Waves 1–22 (2001–2023). The survey follows more than 17,000 individuals every year and is one of the few large representative surveys that directly asks for respondents' sexual identity. Inclusion of this question allows for exploration into the parenthood desires and expectations of LGB individuals without the need to rely on a partnership-based approach, which prevents the inclusion of nonpartnered LGB people.

To maximize the available data, I include multiple waves of information per person, when available. The initial sample comprised 454,861 person-years (17,144–23,507 per wave). I consider only respondents who have at least one valid measurement for sexual identity (i.e., participated in at least one wave in which sexual identity was recorded), reducing the sample to 329,047 person-years. I account for the “unsure/don't know” and “prefer not to say” answers (2.28%, $n=7,489$) by excluding those respondents who answered with one or both of these options in all three waves in which sexual identity was asked, further reducing the sample to 321,558 person-years.

I restrict the analytic sample to person-years of respondents aged 26–40, losing 75.9% ($n=244,186$) of valid observations from the original sample. I do so because parenthood desires and expectations questions were asked exclusively to respondents aged 18–55 and because this age selection ensures at least 30 observations in each cohort—for each combination of age group, sexual identity, and gender. I divide these respondents into two cohorts: those born before 1980 and those born in 1980 or after. I consider 2017 as a cutoff year for LGB family rights in Australia. By then, the older cohort had approached age 40 and the end of their reproductive years. Adoption, assisted reproduction, and gestational surrogacy require some planning and this cohort, therefore, experienced major challenges in accessing parenthood (Park et al. 2020). Conversely, the younger cohort still had at least some years left before reaching age 40 and, therefore, might still have a feasible time frame in which to realistically plan for and achieve parenthood.

Lastly, I include only respondents who completed information on parenthood desires/expectations—losing 4.6% ($n=3,572$) of the previous sample—and year of birth, gender, origin, region, and presence of children—losing another 2.2% ($n=1,702$). In Table A1 (shown in the online supplementary materials, along with all other tables and figures designated with a letter), I provide basic sociodemographic characteristics for the observations lost while accounting for parenthood aspirations. Minor differences from the main analytic sample appear, especially for women, who are slightly older and more often Indigenous or foreign-born (and from a major English-speaking country). The final analytic sample consists of 72,098 person-year observations: 1,537 person-years for gay and lesbian individuals, 1,742 person-years for bisexual individuals, and 68,819 person-years for heterosexual individuals.

Variables

Dependent Variables

Parenthood desires are collected every wave through the following question: “Now a question about any future children. I want you to pick a number between 0 and 10 to show how you feel about having more children/a child in the future. The more definite you are that you would like to have more children/a child, the higher the number you should pick. The more definite you are that you do not want to have more children/a child, the lower the number.” Response options were the numbers 0–10, with “don’t know” and “refuse” also available. As explained in an interviewer note, the question includes only natural children and not adopted ones. Although there are very few adoptions in Australia, even for LGB people, this might bias downward parenthood desires particularly for gay and bisexual men. This question was directed only to women aged 18–49 and men aged 18–54.² Figure A1 and Table A2 show the variable’s distribution for different sexual identity and gender combinations. All groups have a spike in the lowest score of desires (0 = not desiring children at all); otherwise, for scores 1 to 9, the distribution is largely flat. In the case of LGB women, we also see a peak at the highest score of parenthood desires. I create a categorical variable that combines information on parenthood desires and presence of children: (1) have children, (2) no desire for children, (3) low desire for children, and (4) high desire for children. For this, I consider scores of 1–5 in the fertility desires scale as low desire and 6–10 as high desire, and a score of 0 indicates no desire.

Although I have focused on parenthood desires and expectations so far, it is inevitable to consider realized fertility as the tangible outcome of parenthood aspirations. Increased access to parenthood may result in higher realized fertility, particularly in the youngest cohorts of the LGB population—and especially those who may have easier access, such as women. Given the substantial levels of unmet parenthood desires among LGB individuals, one can consider individuals with children as likely having had a desire for parenthood that they successfully fulfilled (Boertien et al. 2024). Therefore, I include presence of children as a category of my main outcome. It accounts for the presence of children in the household (both own and resident stepchildren) and for own nonresident children. I consider that a cross-cohort comparison of the share of people who do not have a desire for children gives the clearest indication of whether parenthood desires change across cohorts. In other words, I assume that the other categories all have or have had some parenthood desires.

The exclusion of nonresident stepchildren might be an issue because LGB individuals in many cases might approach parenthood through a partner’s children born in previous relationships. For this reason, and given the high availability of information on children, I perform several robustness checks by using different variables to capture the presence of children (results are presented later and conclusions remained unchanged). I exclude foster children from the analysis given the low number of observations and the absence of additional information on them (e.g., how long they have been part of the respondent’s household and if they are related to the respondent).

² Some differences in the age range are present across waves. In general, this question is always asked to respondents who are younger than 56 years old, thus explaining our choice of age range.

Parenthood expectations are collected via the question, “And now pick a number between 0 to 10 to indicate how likely you are to have more children/a child in the future? The more likely it is that you will have more children/a child, the higher the number you should pick. The less likely it is, the lower the number.” Response options and age limits for this question were the same as for fertility desires. For the analysis, I am interested in the parenthood expectations of only respondents who reported a score of at least 6 on the parenthood desires scale and who did not yet have children. In this way, I can directly study any major discrepancies between desires and expectations, as the combination of high expectations and low desires is uncommon (see Figure A1).

Explanatory and Control Variables

Sexual identity is collected in three different waves (12, 16, and 20) via the question, “Which of the following categories best describes how you think of yourself?” Response options were “heterosexual or straight,” “gay or lesbian,” “bisexual,” “other,” “unsure/don’t know,” and “prefer not to say.” Although sexual identity is time-varying and a measurement at each wave would have been more accurate, I consider the last recorded measurement on sexual identity for each wave. I perform a robustness check by using only the last measurement on sexual identity ever recorded for each respondent and transposing it to all the other waves.

Cohort distinguishes between respondents born before 1980 and those born in 1980 or after. The older cohort includes respondents born between 1960 and 1979 (46%, $n=33,339$ person-years, $n=270$ individuals) and the younger cohort includes respondents born between 1980 and 1996 (54%, $n=38,699$ person-years, $n=5,301$ individuals). Overall, the two cohorts are quite balanced across sexual identities; the only exception is for bisexual individuals, who are disproportionately concentrated in the younger cohort (Table 1).³

Gender/sex is included as a binary variable (woman or man). From Wave 1 to Wave 20, respondents were asked, “Are you . . . ?” with possible response options being “male” and “female.” In Wave 16, the option “another term/other” was introduced.⁴ Unfortunately, HILDA overcame this limitation only in the latest wave available by adding a question on gender (in addition to one on sex recorded at birth), which includes the options “nonbinary” and “I use a different term.” It is unclear whether the variable captures sex or gender, as the phrasing might lead respondents to interpret it as gender but the variable is labeled as one capturing sex. I acknowledge that employing a gender-binary framework is a limitation of both the dataset and the analysis.

Control variables include the presence of children (as explained earlier), age in five-year intervals (from age 26 to age 40, included), region of residence, and origin. The eight regions of residence are New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania, Northern Territory, and Australian Capital Territory. The origin variable includes four categories based on country of birth and

³ For bisexual men aged 26–30 in the older cohort, there were only 17 observations. Given the overall low number of observations for bisexual men, I decided to proceed with this cell size.

⁴ The possibility to specify in the other/another option is available in only some waves.

Table 1 Sample characteristics by sexual identity and gender (*n* = 72,098 person-years)

	Lesbian Women (<i>n</i> = 731)	Gay Men (<i>n</i> = 806)	Bisexual Women (<i>n</i> = 1,352)	Bisexual Men (<i>n</i> = 417)	Heterosexual Women (<i>n</i> = 36,107)	Heterosexual Men (<i>n</i> = 32,712)
Parenthood Desires						
Have children	32.8	9.3	55.3	46.0	66.1	57.5
No desire	16.8	27.9	7.1	8.4	2.9	2.8
Low desire	18.9	31.9	10.7	17.5	5.7	7.6
High desire	31.6	30.9	26.9	28.1	25.3	32.1
Age Group						
26–30	34.6	41.4	46.5	38.1	33.9	34.4
31–35	33.5	32.0	33.4	29.0	33.9	33.7
36–40	31.9	26.6	20.1	32.9	32.2	31.9
Cohort						
Cohort 60–79	47.5	41.2	29.9	35.2	47.6	45.9
Cohort 80–96	52.5	58.8	70.1	64.7	52.4	54.1
Region						
New South Wales	29.1	39.0	24.2	30.2	28.6	27.9
Victoria	33.2	16.4	30.1	19.9	26.2	26.3
Queensland	14.8	21.3	23.8	22.8	21.7	22.2
Southern Australia	3.2	2.7	10.9	6.2	8.1	8.6
Western Australia	12.3	8.6	6.7	17.5	8.9	8.6
Tasmania	0.0	5.7	1.9	1.2	3.3	2.9
Northern Territory	1.1	1.5	0.0	1.0	1.0	0.9
Australian Capital Territory	6.3	4.8	2.4	1.2	2.2	2.6
Origin						
Native-born, non-Indigenous	82.8	73.5	85.0	66.4	79.0	80.5
Native-born, Indigenous	2.7	2.5	5.9	2.4	3.3	2.7
Foreign-born, major English-speaking country	8.9	17.1	5.6	21.3	10.0	10.9
Foreign-born, other country	5.6	6.9	3.5	9.8	7.7	5.9

Notes: Data are unweighted. The table includes repeated information.

Source: HILDA (2001–2023).

Indigenous (Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander) background: native-born, non-Indigenous; native-born, Indigenous; foreign-born, major English-speaking country; and foreign-born, other country. The main variables included in the analysis are reported in [Table 1](#).

Analytic Approach

To determine the impact of sexual identity and cohort on parenthood desires, I employ multinomial logistic regression models. For parenthood expectations, I perform a set

of linear regressions for each combination of sexual identity and gender. Since I use repeated observations, I cluster the standard errors over the ID of the respondents to account for intraindividual correlation. Nonetheless, the coefficients do not immediately reveal the relevance of the cohort effect sizes. To make these effect sizes easier to interpret, I estimate the predictive margins of the dependent variable for both the older and younger cohorts, setting the control variables at their average. With this, I can estimate the predicted probability of a certain outcome given the belonging to one or the other cohort. The complete underlying models are presented in the online supplementary materials.

I conduct several robustness checks to ensure the validity and reliability of the selected measurement. Throughout the main analysis, I avoid the use of weights because HILDA does not provide specific weights for sexual orientation/gender identity questions. Nonetheless, among the various additional analyses, I include some key results with general sample weights applied, which show very similar results to those of the main analysis.

Results

Parenthood Desires Across Sexual Identities and Cohorts

To provide a thorough overview of the sample, I report the distribution of the dependent variable across sexual identities—including heterosexual respondents—to provide a broader understanding of how LGB individuals collocate in the more general context. As expected, individuals who identify as heterosexual or bisexual exhibit a higher prevalence of parenthood (Figure 1). Conversely, individuals who identify as gay or lesbian present slightly higher levels of not desiring children. Nonetheless, the share of lesbian and gay individuals reporting parenthood desires—especially a high desire—is nonnegligible for all three age groups.

This first general description does not consider cohort or gender, and it does not allow us to understand whether the changes recorded across age groups represent a cohort or age effect. However, Figures 2 and 3 show the distribution of the outcome variable for each combination of cohort, sexual identity, and gender. From here on, the analysis focuses on only LGB identities.

Figure 2 shows cohort differences in parenthood desires of lesbian/gay women and men. As expected, the share of lesbian women who do not desire a child (and do not have one) is smaller among those born in 1980–1996 (Cohort 80–96) than among those born in 1960–1979 (Cohort 60–79). Moreover, lesbian women in the younger cohort not only show a significant increase in their parenthood desire—with a substantial prevalence of high desires at younger ages—but also were able to fulfill this desire to a much greater extent. This is particularly observable for the 36–40 age group, of which less than 35% of lesbian women in Cohort 60–79 have a child compared with about 75% in Cohort 80–96. In contrast, there appears to be little variation across cohorts for gay men.

The results for bisexual men and women are shown in Figure 3. Bisexual women do not present substantial variation across cohorts, although Cohort 60–79 has a smaller share of not desiring children in the youngest age group compared with Cohort 80–96.

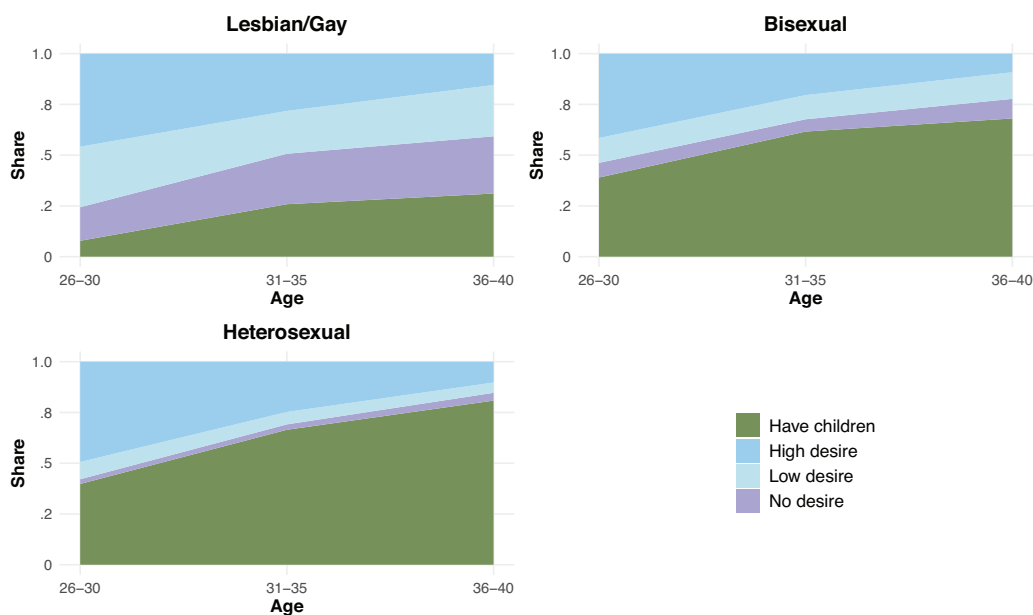


Fig. 1 Share of parenthood desires and presence of children by individuals' age among gay/lesbian ($n=1,537$), bisexual ($n=1,742$), and heterosexual ($n=68,819$) person-years. The graphs include repeated observations, and weights are not applied. Low desire = scores of 1–5, and high desire = scores of 6–10. *Source:* HILDA (2001–2023).



Fig. 2 Cohort differences in parenthood desires and presence of children by individuals' age and gender among lesbian women ($n=731$ person-years) and gay men ($n=806$ person-years). The graphs include repeated observations, and weights are not applied. Low desire = scores of 1–5, and high desire = scores of 6–10. *Source:* HILDA (2001–2023).

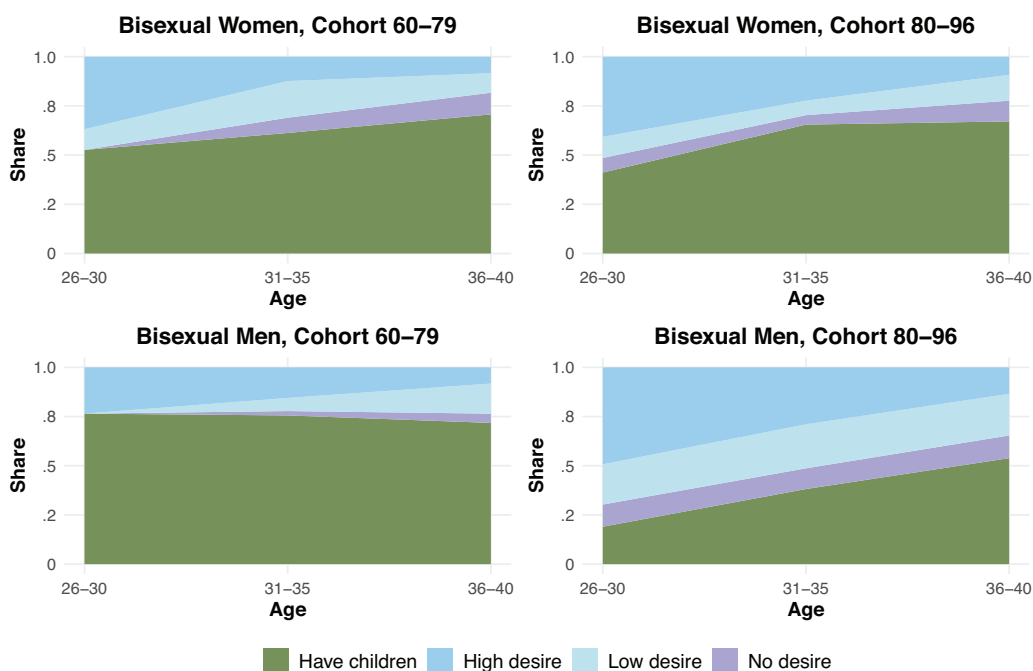


Fig. 3 Cohort differences in parenthood desires and presence of children by individuals' age and gender among bisexual women ($n=1,325$ person-years) and bisexual men ($n=417$ person-years). The graphs include repeated observations, and weights are not applied. Low desire = scores of 1–5, and high desire = scores of 6–10. *Source:* HILDA (2001–2023).

An interesting result is the larger share of bisexual men not desiring children in Cohort 80–96 than in Cohort 60–79, along with a smaller share of realized fertility. Although realized fertility appears to be less common in the younger cohort, the share of high parenthood desires is significantly larger. At the same time, not desiring children becomes more evenly distributed across ages in the younger cohort of bisexual men.

Assessing Cohort Differences

To corroborate the statistical significance of these descriptive results, I conduct a set of multinomial logistic regressions with parenthood desires as the outcome. Figure 4 presents the predicted probabilities of the four groups analyzed. The models are conducted using not desiring children as the reference category, because this is more comparable across the life course and cohorts. The models are detailed in the online supplementary materials and include age, region of residence, and origin as controls. Overall, the results from the models are in line with the descriptive graphs, although the coefficients of cohort are not statistically significant in many cases (see Tables B1 and B2).

Focusing on not desiring children, I find that only among lesbian women is the probability of the outcome significantly lower for Cohort 80–96 than for Cohort 60–79. The opposite pattern is observed for the other three groups, particularly among

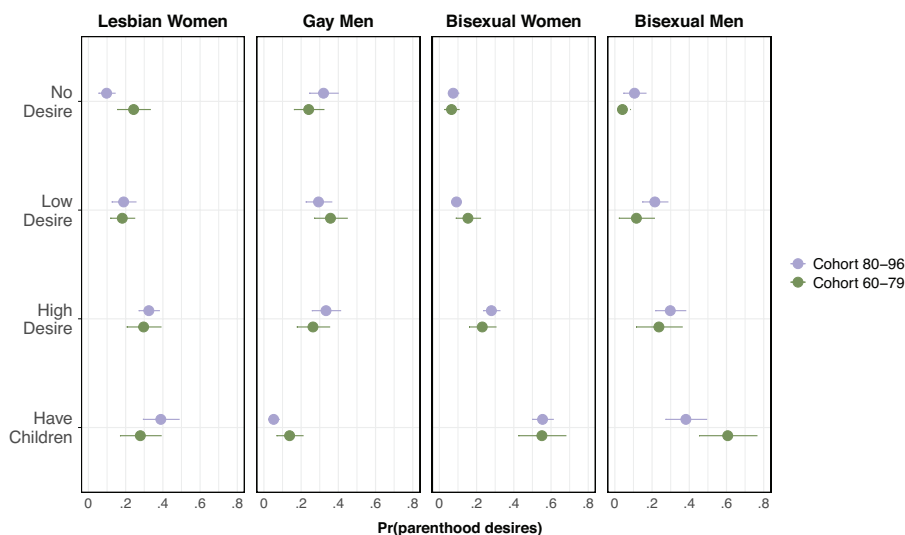


Fig. 4 Predicted margins (and 90% confidence intervals) from multinomial logistic regression of parenthood desires by cohort for lesbian women, gay men, bisexual women, and bisexual men (aged 26–40). The graphs include repeated observations, and weights are not applied. The reference category is no desire for children. *Source:* HILDA (2001–2023).

gay men—a finding that demands further attention. To determine whether the decline in not desiring children among lesbian women differs significantly from the trend observed for gay men, I conduct a pooled logistic regression for only lesbian and gay individuals (comparing not desiring children vs. every other category) and include an interaction between cohort and gender. The results reveal a statistically significant difference between lesbian women and gay men in the effect of cohort (see Table B3 and Figure B1).

Similarly, the predicted probability for realized fertility is statistically greater among lesbian women in Cohort 80–96 than those in Cohort 60–79 (.39 vs. .27), whereas the opposite is true for gay men (.05 vs. .14). The models do not provide strong evidence of variability across cohorts in having high or low desires and the variation in coefficient sizes is similar across groups; however, there is a slight increase in the predicted probability of expressing high desire for all of the groups in Cohort 80–96. In sum, the decline across cohorts in lesbian women not desiring children goes hand in hand with higher levels of realized parenthood, rather than unfulfilled parenthood desires. For gay men, however, increases across cohorts in not desiring children coincide with lower levels of parenthood.

Parenthood Expectations

As an additional analysis, I look at the parenthood expectations of childless LGB respondents who reported a strong parenthood desire (greater than 5 on the 10-point scale). Although the LGB population express relatively positive desires for parenthood, expectations might present more variation across cohorts and groups. Indeed, these are

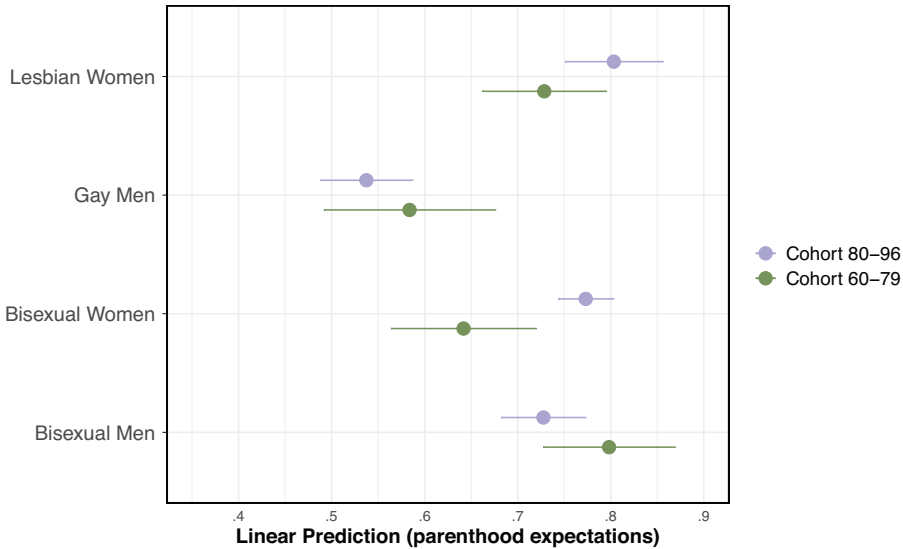


Fig. 5 Predicted margins (and 90% confidence intervals) from linear regression of parenthood expectations by cohort for lesbian women, gay men, bisexual women, and bisexual men (aged 26–40). The graph includes repeated observations, and weights are not applied. *Source:* HILDA (2001–2023).

more context-dependent than desires even in the general population and, for LGB people, obstacles in accessing parenthood emerge predominantly at the expectations level.

I perform a set of linear regressions for each combination of sexual identity and gender (see Table C1). Although the coefficients of cohort are not statistically significant (except for bisexual women), the signs go in the expected direction, as shown in Figure 5. LGB women in Cohort 80–96 have a higher predicted probability of expectations than those in Cohort 60–79, whereas the opposite is found for gay and bisexual men. Also, note how bisexual individuals show larger cohort variation in coefficient size.

Interestingly, every group of the younger cohort besides gay men reports relatively similar and high predicted probabilities of parenthood expectations (greater than .6 in each cohort). These levels might support our expectations: within the groups analyzed, gay men have the most difficult access to parenthood; thus, although their desires do not differ much from those of the other groups, gay men adjust their expectations to the reality of complicated access to parenthood.

Additional Analysis: Robustness Checks

To test the validity and reliability of the findings, I conduct several robustness checks, which do not produce substantial changes from the main analysis (see supplementary materials section D). Results are robust to using only the last sexual identity measurement available and transposing it to all of the other waves⁵ (see Figure D1), to various

⁵ I checked the variability of sexual identity for those respondents who answered it in all three waves when it was asked and found that in 99.81% of cases for heterosexual individuals, 99.36% for gay individuals, and 96.76% for bisexual individuals, the answer did not change across waves.

definitions of having children (Figure D2), to alternative cohort compositions, also considering a gap between cohorts (Table D1), and to considering different age intervals for parenthood expectations (Table D2).

I replicate the analysis after applying cross-section population weights because, throughout the analysis, I avoided using them given that their construction does not account for sexual identity.⁶ No substantial differences are found with the descriptive graphs of the main analysis (Figure D3).

Although mediation analysis is not feasible with such small sample sizes, I replicate the models for the parenthood desires outcome while including the highest level of education and partnership status. One would expect partnership status to have a positive impact on parenthood desires and realized fertility, as living with a partner has been found to be a strong predictor for both (Boertien et al. 2024; Tate et al. 2019). However, neither is a strong predictor of parenthood desires in our sample (see Table D3).

I perform a fixed-effect linear regression with the parenthood desires outcome (0 = not desiring children, 1 = desiring/having children) to understand whether the variation between age groups found in the descriptive results indicates changes in the composition of the two cohorts or actual age effects. The results show evidence of an age effect, although not in all of the groups analyzed (see Table D4).

To conclude, I consider the gender of the partner of partnered bisexual respondents across the two cohorts to understand whether a change in the couples' composition might help in understanding some results. As Table D5 shows, there is no increase in the prevalence of same-gender couples in the younger cohorts of bisexual men and women. Thus, the substantial cohort change found for bisexual men cannot be linked to a change across cohorts in the gender composition of couples.

Discussion

Previous studies using small and nonrepresentative samples have provided only snapshots of parenthood desires and realized fertility within the LGB population (Baiocco and Laghi 2013; Riskind and Patterson 2010). The lack of research on this topic has hindered a comprehensive understanding of how broader contextual factors impact parenthood aspirations and outcomes. This study addresses this gap by using representative data from Australia to answer the research question, "Have parenthood aspirations changed across cohorts for LGB people and are there differences by sexual identity and gender?" To my knowledge, this is the first study to analyze parenthood aspirations across cohorts using a representative sample, highlighting the importance of contextual changes. I used data that identified LGB respondents through a direct sexual identity question—moving beyond research solely considering same-gender couples. Overall, the results provide several novel findings.

First, I found either an increase or stability in the desire to remain child-free among the younger cohort across all groups, except for lesbian women, among whom a decrease was found across cohorts. These findings raise questions about internalized

⁶ To understand how the weights were constructed, see Summerfield et al. (2023).

obstacles, especially when considering lesbian and gay people. If many of the barriers to parenthood have been lifted, making it more accessible for lesbian women, this could explain the decrease in their child-free desire and the substantial increase in realized fertility in the younger cohort. Meanwhile, the younger cohort of gay men—who face the greatest barriers in accessing parenthood—are confronted with unprecedented challenges (e.g., the lack of possibilities to access gestational surrogacy and the stigma revolving around it), which may lead them to adjust their desires accordingly. Interestingly, despite these challenges, gay men report levels of strong parenthood desires that are roughly comparable to those of other groups. However, only a small share manage to fulfill this desire, which might contribute to high levels of unmet desires and frustration.

Second, bisexual women present little cohort variation, which could be because of increased access to ART, as well as the possibility to achieve parenthood through different-sex relationships. On the contrary, I found unique patterns for bisexual men. The most impactful one is the substantial decrease in realized fertility in the younger cohort. At first, a higher prevalence of same-gender partnerships in the younger cohort—thus leveling the experience of bisexual men in accessing parenthood to that of gay men—seemed to be a feasible explanation. However, I did not find support for this hypothesis. An alternative explanation relates to the growing visibility of bisexual identities in recent years, which may lead to increased stigma and greater challenges in forming partnerships, particularly for bisexual men (Morgenroth et al. 2022).

However, it is only by examining parenthood expectations that we can gain a clearer understanding of these patterns and confirm the significant influence of context. Indeed, my third empirical observation is that the younger cohort of gay and bisexual men express lower parenthood expectations than the older cohort, whereas the opposite is true for LGB women. These gender differences within LGB individuals support the idea that actual access to parenthood—and the cohort-based changes around it—are intertwined with the evolving expectations of LGB people. In a context where adoption is not common, different-gender relationships as an access to parenthood are less encountered among the LGB population, and there is uncertainty regarding access to gestational surrogacy, younger cohorts of gay and bisexual men might adjust their expectations to the reality. At the same time, the increased access to medically assisted reproduction for LGB women of the younger cohort seems to have had a positive impact on their parenthood expectations.

These patterns are also reflected in the changes of realized fertility across cohorts, especially for lesbian and gay individuals: once again, we see gay men of the younger cohort adjusting their realized fertility to the scarce possibilities they have. Instead, contrary to what previous research found (Ophir et al. 2023), lesbian women seem to be taking advantage of the increased routes to parenthood they can access, as the younger cohort reports a substantial increase of realized fertility compared with the older one.

My last reflection goes back to the general population. From the results, I understand that desires cannot be considered separately from possibilities for the LGB population, given that external obstacles are internalized already at the level of desires. The theoretical distinction between desires and expectations encountered in the general population might not hold so clearly for the LGB population, and eventually more generally. Recent research has highlighted how childlessness desires

are slightly increasing even for the general population (Golovina et al. 2024). Even though a shift in preference has long been the main explanation for the increasing trend, my results—if generalized to the broader population—suggest that external constraints may also have shaped these childlessness desires, consistently with what is hypothesized by recent research (Savelieva et al. 2023). Indeed, contrary to expectation, I find clearer cohort changes in desires than in expectations.

One of the key limitations of this study is the use of two closely timed cohorts. The limited sample size prevented me from using more detailed cohorts, while including more distinct and distant cohorts could have yielded stronger findings. Moreover, as the new cohorts approach parenthood and favorable legislation for LGBTQ* rights is enacted, data from even younger cohorts than the ones used in this study might provide even clearer patterns of cohort variation.

Second, I acknowledge the lack of gender and sexual diversity in the data as an impactful precondition of my study. Although I was able to distinguish between lesbian/gay and bisexual individuals, which is an important advancement in sexual diversity studies within demography, it was only possible to include individuals identifying as women or men.

Lastly, although I tried to delve deeper into the role of additional factors, such as level of education and partnership status, these did not provide significant findings. However, access to parenthood for LGB individuals often points to economic inequalities because, in most cases, these expensive procedures are not covered or only partially covered by the public health system. To better understand the role of potential stratification and the intersection of socioeconomic status and access to parenthood, I encourage further studies in this direction. Moreover, future research could benefit from a more in-depth analysis of partnership status, as it may offer additional insights into gender dynamics related to parenthood aspirations, for instance.

Despite these limitations, I was able to investigate—for the first time—cohort differences in parenthood desires and expectations among LGB people and to expand the existing literature. Given the variation found across cohorts, it becomes clear that context plays a significant role in shaping the parenthood desires and expectations of LGB individuals. The observed patterns, along with the differences between expectations and desires, suggest that barriers to parenthood—rather than simple differences in preferences—are likely the underlying factor influencing changing parenthood aspirations. ■

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Reproducibility and Data Availability This research used unit record data from the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey, which is conducted by the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) and available upon request at <https://dataverse.ada.edu.au/dataverse/hilda>. The findings and views reported in this article, however, are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Australian Government, the DSS, or any DSS contractors or partners.

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