

## Prejudice and Egalitarian Norms: Analysis Based on Moral Judgment

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**ABSTRACT** – Based on the social psychology of development, this study investigated whether differences in moral reasoning would imply differences in prejudice, conforming with an egalitarian norm and in the use of moral justifications for the suppression of prejudice. A total of 555 Brazilians participated in this study, the final sample being composed of 500 Brazilians, who answered an online questionnaire with measurements used to assess the variables of interest in the research. Based on descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, the results indicated a relationship between differences in moral judgment and differences in the level of prejudice, in accordance with the egalitarian norm and the use of moral justifications. The results are discussed from the perspective of social psychology and moral development.

**KEYWORDS:** prejudice, social norms, moral judgment, adoption

## Preconceito e Normas Igualitárias: Análises a Partir do Julgamento Moral

**RESUMO** – A partir da psicologia social do desenvolvimento, este estudo investigou se diferenças no raciocínio moral implicariam em diferenças no preconceito, na conformidade com uma norma igualitária e no uso de justificativas morais para supressão do preconceito. Participaram deste estudo um total de 555 brasileiros(as), sendo a amostra final composta por 500 brasileiros(as), que responderam um questionário on-line com medidas utilizadas para avaliar as variáveis de interesse da pesquisa. Baseados em análises estatísticas descritivas e inferenciais, os resultados indicaram uma relação entre diferenças no julgamento moral e diferenças no nível de preconceito, de conformidade com a norma igualitária e com o uso de justificativas morais. Os resultados foram discutidos a partir da psicologia social e do desenvolvimento moral.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** preconceito, normas sociais, julgamento moral, adoção.

One of the characteristics of democratic societies is the possibility of advancing civil rights and protections for minorities. In some cases, the rights won by these groups are perceived as violations of the values of majority groups that defend the maintenance of the *status quo* (Scruton, 2016). For example, the fight for decriminalization of abortion is an important agenda in the feminist movement, however, for more conservative groups the issue represents a violation of religious values. When considering this example, we can observe that the defense of the value of life has different

meanings and focuses: for feminists, the focus is on the life of the woman, who should have the right to make decisions about her own body; for people who defend more conservative positions, the focus is on the child's life and on valuing and respecting religious principles.

Analysis of social issues, as in the example given, can be carried out from the point of view of moral judgment, being conventional and post-conventional (Kohlberg, 1981, 1984). Moral judgments are constructed from values whose function is to guide reflections and motivate actions on different social

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issues (Colby et al., 1987). Due to their prescriptive character, values are at the base of the construction of social norms. It is in the relationship between values, reasoning and moral judgments that social norms are constructed and can guide perceptions on issues involving other social groups (Sherif, 1936; Testé, 2002).

Based on values, social norms also have a prescriptive character (Colby et al., 1987; Dubois, 2003; Gielen, 1994; Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1965), and in addition to having the function of guiding actions, they give legitimacy to values that sustain them (Beauvois, 2002). In this sense, compliance with a norm implies awareness of the values that underlie it and the need for its existence (Colby et al., 1987; Gielen, 1994; Kohlberg, 1984). So we can say, at first, that the relationship between the individual and society is built from the awareness of norms. Over the course of ontogenetic development, this relationship becomes more complex and also begins to involve awareness of the values that give them content and form (Piaget, 1965). Therefore, it is not possible to conceive the existence of a social norm without an underlying value.

Kohlberg (1984), based on the contributions of Piaget (1932, 1964), defended the evaluative and prescriptive character of norms placing them as central elements in the notion of justice. From this perspective, the evaluative character attributed to norms is constructed from the understanding of the notion of society and its conventions (Kohlberg, 1984), that is, when people initially understand the function of social conventions, known as conventional morality, and when, later, they understand everything that is beyond these conventions, i.e., post-conventional morality.

The concept of conventional morality presented by Kohlberg (1984) involves the way people act in their relationships based on socially established norms. Morality is thus related to laws, social conventions, and cultural traditions and how they are applied to groups (Colby et al., 1987). Thus, reflections and actions considered morally correct are those that conform to the social norm of a group (e.g., friends, family, society) and that aim to maintain expectations, order and harmony in relationships.

The quantitative increase in social interactions, based on participation in life in society, favors the perception that different people and groups can interpret the same situation from different perspectives and values (Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1965). The perception of the existence of different values works as a stimulus for the evaluation and validation of one's own values when these are compared with new values with which one comes into contact. Thus, the evaluation of the validity of values implies the evaluation of the validity of norms, which, consequently, favors the construction of judgments about which values are the fairest when thinking about society.

According to Kohlberg (1984), this reflection on the validity of values and norms from the articulation between

different perspectives, characterizes the passage from conventional morality to post-conventional morality. The main characteristic of this new moral perspective is a change in the understanding of the validity of norms: instead of thinking of norms as regulators of action, people start to consider values, which structure norms, as regulators in themselves. That is, with conventional morality people justify their actions in accordance with norms and, therefore, learning comes from this conformity; with post-conventional morality, it is values that justify practices, even if these practices do not conform to socially established norms.

The change in priority between norms and values during the passage from conventional morality to post-conventional morality does not necessarily imply the denial of the validity of norms. For Kohlberg (1984), these continue to be valid to regulate social relations, as long as they do not violate universal ethical values (e.g., equality, freedom and dignity). What happens is that the change in the relationship with priority causes values to be perceived as more important than norms, as they are able to meet the demands of all people, in all groups and in various different situations, that is, they increase the scope towards universality. As stated by Kohlberg (1981, p. 135), "principled (post-conventional) morality defines the rights of anyone in any situation".

Based on these theoretical reflections, we consider it reasonable to expect that people who guide their social relations based on conventional morality (conservative in their power relations and traditions), a type of moral thinking that emphasizes the role of laws in maintaining social harmony, comply with prescriptive norms only because of the awareness they have about the need to respect norms. These people would not be aware of the implications of using values in norms, since the same values that support a restricted social harmony can support more egalitarian, more comprehensive norms, inclusive of differences. This understanding of the conservation of values in a new form is characteristic of people with post-conventional morality. On the other hand, it is reasonable to expect that people who guide their actions from a post-conventional morality present a conformity with egalitarian prescriptive norms, which would imply not only an awareness of the need for this norm, but also an awareness of a new applied perspective to the values underlying the norms.

## Social Norms and Prejudice

With the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) there was a change in the quality and form of social relationships (França & Monteiro, 2013). By presenting equality and freedom as universal ideals, the UDHR prescribed norms through which humanity and institutions should guide their actions, thus enabling the construction of reflections on the need for norms that reduce discrimination and prejudice in societies.

Prejudice was defined by Allport (1971, p. 7) as “a hostile attitude towards a person who belongs to a social group simply because he/she belongs to that group, assuming that he/she possesses the qualities attributed to the group”. This attitude, according to Allport (1971), is based on an unrealistic and unjustified judgment about the person and the group to which they belong. Thus, for a prejudice about a particular social group to develop, there must be an incompatibility between the values of the in-group and the out-group. In this context, prejudice represents a way of protecting individual and group values and beliefs against the threat of opposing values (Allport, 1971).

From the second half of the 20th century onwards, research began to show an association between the diffusion and defense of egalitarian norms and the reduction in prejudice as well as the increase in tolerance directed towards different social groups, especially racial groups (see Costarelli & Gerłowska, 2015; Crandall et al., 2002; Lima, 2020; Lima et al., 2006; Pereira & Vala, 2010, 2011). However, studies indicate that prejudice never ceased to exist and still contributes to different types of discrimination and violence; what happened was a change in its form of expression due to the need to conform to egalitarian norms (Lima & Vala, 2004; Lima et al., 2006; Pereira & Vala, 2010, 2011). Once the direct expression of prejudice became unacceptable, prejudice began to be expressed in a subtle or disguised way, with the help of justifications that indicated an acceptance or conformity with the egalitarian norm, an aspect that made it more difficult to identify than when it is blatant and explicit (Crandall et al., 2002).

Pereira et al. (2009) emphasize that social norms can influence or suppress the explicit expression of prejudice, depending on the context in which people are inserted. The expression of blatant prejudice, which is a more direct form of hostility against a minority group, seen as a threat to the in-group (Lima & Vala, 2004), is facilitated when people feel protected by group norms, which authorize the expression of prejudice. In situations where there is a norm that represses overt discrimination, the expression of blatant prejudice is suppressed as it can have negative consequences for the individual or his group. Under these conditions, we can find the expression of a subtle and even justified prejudice, characterized by the defense of traditional values, the exaggeration of cultural differences and the denial of negative emotions about the target group (Lima & Vala, 2004). Further to the relevance of social norms to reduce the expression of prejudice, Oyamoto et al. (2017) found that the endorsement of egalitarian values and changes in social norms favored a decrease in the expression of prejudice against these minorities between 1992 and 2012, especially on the part of people who defended authoritarian values.

Despite the evidence indicating that there is a tendency to express conformity with a social norm, it is not always possible, especially when the norm is opposed to individual values. Costarelli and Gerłowska (2015) found that a social

context governed by norms that prohibited the expression of prejudice produced a cognitive ambivalence in people, which involved the desire to express negative evaluations about a member of a group, or about a certain group, and the need to stay in agreement with the norm, thus favoring social harmony. For these authors, the cognitive ambivalence produced in situations of this type favors the search for elements that can justify negative evaluations and that maintain valid individual values, contrary to the norm.

As forms of reasoning, justifications for prejudice are constructed on the basis of the values that people defend and the arguments they use to suppress prejudice against minority groups. Crandall and Eshleman (2004, p. 248) defined justification as “any social or psychological process that serves as an opportunity to express genuine prejudice without suffering an internal or external sanction.”. Thus, we consider that with the identification of thought structures that support the arguments used to justify conformity (or non-conformity) with an egalitarian social norm, it is possible to know if the expression of conformity (or non-conformity) with a norm is being used as a form of suppression of prejudice.

For Leidner et al. (2018), the arguments constructed to justify conformity or non-conformity with a norm can be of two types: pragmatic or moral. The pragmatic arguments are built from the process of categorization and social differentiation and tend to defend the perspective and values of the in-group, considering, therefore, the costs and benefits of the norm for this group. On the other hand, moral arguments tend to characterize norms, depending on their content, as a form of protection or violation of Human Rights and ethical values or ideals, and thus show concern for the rights of groups in conditions of injustice or vulnerability.

From the study carried out by Leidner et al. (2018) and based on Kohlberg’s theory of moral judgment (1984), we consider the possibility that the acceptance of a prescriptive and egalitarian norm, for people who base their relationships on conventional morality, could be a product of the social pressures to accept this norm. This acceptance, in turn, would be structurally justified in values other than equality or equity, which are characteristic of egalitarian social norms. Furthermore, because prescriptive and egalitarian norms are designed to guarantee rights to minority groups, we consider that the acceptance of this type of norm by people who base their relationships on conventional morality could also be used as a way of suppressing prejudice against some of these groups.

In this sense, considering that principles of justice are the basis for the development of moral judgment (Kohlberg, 1984), these principles are also essential elements for the construction of social norms, and literature has highlighted the importance and relevance of the study of social phenomena with the integration of developmental psychology and social psychology (Rutland et al., 2010). The general objective of this work was to investigate whether the significant variation between levels of moral judgment would imply differences

in the level of prejudice, while adhering to an egalitarian social norm and while using moral justifications as a way of suppressing prejudice.

To this end, we consider the right to adopt children by same-sex couples as an egalitarian social norm (Silva et al., 2017). The possibility of this type of adoption in Brazil was a consequence of the achievement of other rights by this group, such as: the recognition in 1999 by the Federal Council of Psychology that “homosexuality is neither a disease, nor a disorder, nor a perversion” (CFP, 1999); the right to a stable union, approved on May 5, 2011 (Bill n. 612, 2011), which amended Articles 1,723 and 1,726 of the Brazilian Civil Code, which deal, respectively, with the definition of family and the right to civil registration of this new family configuration; and the conversion of civil partnership into marriage, as of Resolution No. 175, of May 14, 2013. Thus, since civil partnership or marriage represent an important factor, but not a requirement of the Child and Adolescent Statute for adoption (Federal Senate, 2018), the document also presents the possibility of adopting children by same-sex couples. These legal changes indicate that sexual orientation should not be treated as an exclusion criterion for an adoption candidate (Santos et al., 2018).

However, if, on the one hand, the achievement of these rights in the form of the law reaffirms the norm of social equality, indicating that homosexual couples have the same rights as heterosexual couples, on the other hand, it contradicts conservative values related to traditional gender roles and the nuclear configuration of the family, and the family as a heteronormative institution. Despite the diffusion of egalitarian norms and research that, to date, does not indicate substantial differences in the psychosocial development of children adopted by same-sex couples when compared to children adopted by heterosexual couples (Gato & Fontaine, 2014), hostility towards the possibility of homoparenthood by adoption is still a reality in Brazil (Silva et al., 2017).

In order to meet the objective of this study, we developed the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1.** People with dominant conventional moral judgment will present a higher rate of prejudice against homosexuals when compared to people with dominant post-conventional moral judgment.

**Hypothesis 2.** People with dominant conventional moral judgment will present a higher rate of opposition to the adoption of children by same-sex couples and a lower rate of acceptance of this type of adoption, when compared to people with post-conventional moral judgment.

**Hypothesis 3.** People with dominant conventional moral judgment will present greater use of moral justifications for the expression of agreement with the adoption of children by same-sex couples when compared to people with dominant post-conventional moral judgment.

These hypotheses are supported by research that reports on, in the first hypothesis, the relationship between moral reasoning and prejudice (Endicott et al., 2003; McFarland, 2010). The second hypothesis considers research that reports on the relationship between ideology and prejudice (Chambers et al., 2013; McFarland, 2010; Passini & Morselli, 2016) and between values and moral judgment (Narvaez et al., 1999; Rest, Cooper et al., 1974; Rest, Thoma & Edwards, 1997).

Furthermore, in regard to the second hypothesis, the opposition to the adoption of children by homosexual couples represents an expression of prejudice against homosexuals, since participants with conventional moral judgment would base their relationships on the conservation of traditional values. Finally, the third hypothesis is supported by research that considers that people who defend ideologies that legitimize social hierarchies respond to violations of norms in a less post-conventional way (Passini & Villano, 2013), or more utilitarian (Bostyn et al., 2016), and that conventional moral reasoning is used to justify social exclusion (Rutland & Killen, 2015).

## METHODS

### Participants

A total of 555 people participated in this survey. From an initial analysis of the answers given to the research instruments, participants who answered the items of all the instruments in the same way were excluded. In order to maintain homogeneity in terms of age, participants who reported being over 55 years of age were excluded, and to meet ethical criteria, participants who indicated they were under 18 years of age were excluded. At the end of this stage, the sample consisted of 500 young people and adults, with ages ranging from 18 to 40 years ( $M = 29.22$ ,  $SD = 6.42$ ),

most of them heterosexual (76%) and with higher education (59.8%). As for religion, we found a distribution of 20.6% Catholics, 22.6% atheists and 28.6% people with no religion. A post-hoc power analysis of the design adopted here, using G\*Power (Faul et al., 2007), indicated a power of 99% to detect a minimum effect size, equivalent to a Cohen's  $d$  of .5.

### Instruments

**The Defining Issues Test (DIT).** It consists of an objective measurement developed by Rest, Cooper et al. (1974) for the evaluation of Moral Judgment according to

Kohlberg (1984). DIT assesses moral judgment based on the importance that participants attribute to 12 statements which present reflections on a central conflict in each of the six moral dilemmas presented (e.g., “in social relationships, people must regulate themselves by principles” – the Heinz Dilemma; “Society would be better without laws, without the oppression of legal systems” – Escaped Prisoner Dilemma) and that present moral reasoning of the three levels of moral judgment proposed by Kohlberg (1984). Participants’ responses are indicated on a 5-point Likert scale, in which 1 indicates *little importance* and 5 indicates *very important*. For the present research, we used the version of DIT adapted to the Brazilian context by Camino and Luna (1989), composed of two moral dilemmas (the Heinz Dilemma; Escaped Prisoner Dilemma). The “P-index” and later the “N2 index” are obtained from DIT scores, which represent post-conventional thought indices. These indices are calculated from the participants’ choices of four statements that are considered the most important among the 12 presented in each dilemma. The reliability of DIT, evaluated from the mentioned indices varied from .70 to .80 (Camino et al., 1996). However, in view of the objective of verifying the differences based on the level of moral judgment, we chose to work with the averages of the items of the moral dilemmas equivalent to the conventional (stages 3 and 4) and post-conventional (stages 5 and 6) levels of moral judgment. Thus, 18 items ( $\alpha = .491$ ) of the two indicated dilemmas were used, with 12 items referring to conventional moral judgment and six items referring to post-conventional moral judgment.

**Scale of Rejection of Intimacy with Homosexuals (SRIH).** This measurement consists of a subscale developed by Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) based on blatant prejudice against homosexuals. The measurement is composed of ten items that present situations of proximity to homosexuals (e.g., having a friend who is openly homosexual, talking to gays, etc.). For each item, participants must indicate, on a seven-point Likert scale, the level of discomfort felt in specific situations (1 – *Very comfortable*; 7 – *Very uncomfortable*). For the present research the version adapted for the Brazilian context by Pereira et al. (2009) was used, which for this measurement found a unifactorial structure whose reliability was .87.

**Scale of Attitudes towards Homoparenthood by Adoption – Revised (SAHA-R).** This measurement was developed by Falcão (2004) with the objective of evaluating, through 23 items, the positive and negative attitudes of people towards the adoption of children by homosexual couples. For the present research, we used the reduced version of this scale (Freires, 2015), which is divided into two dimensions: acceptance of homoparenthood by adoption ( $\alpha = .90$ ), composed of four items (e.g., “A child educated with moral values in a homoparental family will be a socially adapted

adult”); and opposition to homoparenthood by adoption ( $\alpha = .94$ ) consisting of six items (e.g., “a child adopted by lesbians will be afraid of men in the future”). Participants must indicate, on a seven-point Likert scale (1, *completely disagree*; 7, *completely agree*), their agreement with each item.

**Scale of Moral Justifications about Homoparenthood by Adoption (SMJHA).** This measurement was developed by the first two authors of this article with the objective of verifying the types of moral justifications used to express conformity or non-conformity with the social norm of the adoption of children by homosexual couples. The measurement is composed of a fictitious scenario that presents the situation of a homosexual couple (Pedro and Ricardo) who are thinking of adopting a child. After presenting this scenario, participants are invited to respond whether or not they agree with the couple’s adoption, with the possibility of responding that they do not know how to answer this question. After this question, participants are invited to indicate, on a five-point Likert scale (1, *Strongly disagree*; 5, *Strongly agree*), agreement with a set of 22 items that present reasoning based on four types of values, determined by Colby et al. (1987) as central to the development of conventional and post-conventional moral judgments (utilitarian, social harmony, social contract, and equity). Examples of items on this scale include: “Pedro and Ricardo should consider that one day they will be punished for violating God’s laws (Utilitarianism); “The adoption of a child would give Pedro and Ricardo the chance to help the LGBT community to be more respected” (Social Harmony); “Like any couple who cannot have children, Pedro and Ricardo must rely on the law that guarantees their right to adoption” (Social Contract); and “Adoption guarantees the child the right to have a family” (Equity). After performing factor analysis, 4 items were excluded and the final set of 18 items ( $\alpha = .684$ ) showed satisfactory factorability indices (KMO = .860, Bartlett  $\chi^2$ [153] = 3741.22,  $p < .001$ ) and resulted in a structure composed of four factors, whose reliabilities ( $\alpha$ ) ranged from .568 to .849.

**Sociodemographic Questionnaire.** This questionnaire aimed to collect information necessary for the characterization of the sample by considering age, gender, sexual orientation, education, and religion.

## Procedures

### Ethical Procedures

The research was approved by a research ethics committee and met all the recommendations of Resolutions 466/12 and 510/16 of the National Health Council (CAAE: 79724117.5.0000.5052).

## Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected online during April 2018. The link with the Free and Informed Consent Term, with the research objectives and the instruments used was prepared on Google Forms and distributed via email and social networks (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). The distribution of the link with the research form started with the authors' contact networks and in the research distribution message there was

a request for the participants to share the link with their contact networks.

## Data Analysis Procedures

Descriptive (means and frequencies) and inferential (reliability, mean comparison, factor and correlation) analyses were performed using IBM SPSS version 20.

## RESULTS

In order to meet the objective of verifying differences in the analysis variables from differences in the level of moral judgment, the sample ( $N = 500$ ) had to be divided according to the level of dominant moral judgment. In order to do so, we compared the means of DIT scores through a *t*-test for related samples. The results showed that the mean of the post-conventional moral judgment ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ) was significantly higher than the mean of the conventional moral judgment ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = .43$ ;  $t(499) = 17.228$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This result indicated that the study sample was composed of people with different moral judgments, which allowed us to carry out comparison analyses of the variables of interest, considering differences in moral judgment. Thus, it was necessary to divide the sample into independent groups based on the level of dominant moral judgment.

We considered the level of dominant moral judgment the one in which the participant obtained the highest mean. Based on this criterion, we verified a total of 100 participants with dominant conventional moral judgment (conventional) and 375 participants with dominant post-conventional moral judgment (post-conventional). Thus, of the total of 500 participants, 25 presented equal means in both levels of moral judgment, indicating the possibility of inconsistency in moral judgment (Rique & Camino, 1997) and, therefore, were excluded from the analyses. For this group ( $N = 475$ ), we found a predominance of self-styled heterosexual participants, with 80% of heterosexuals in the group of participants with conventional moral judgment, and 76.8% of heterosexuals in the group of participants with post-conventional judgment.

### Analysis of Flagrant Prejudice

In order to verify the rate of blatant prejudice against homosexuals, we carried out an analysis of the SRIH means for the group of conventional participants and for the group of post-conventional participants. From this analysis, we found a low rejection of intimacy with homosexuals for both groups of participants (Conventional:  $M = 1.34$ ,  $SD = .75$ ; Post-conventional:  $M = 1.20$ ,  $SD = .57$ ). A *t*-Test for independent samples indicated that although the prejudice index for the two groups of participants was low, the result

was significant, confirming hypothesis 1, which predicted significant differences in the prejudice index from the difference in the level of moral judgment. In other words, we found a significant difference in the average rejection of intimacy with homosexuals, indicating that conventional participants had a higher rate of prejudice against this group ( $t[467] = 2.137$ ,  $p = .033$ ,  $d = .21$ ).

### Analysis of Attitudes Towards the Adoption of Children by Homoaffectional Couples

In order to verify hypothesis 2, we carried out an analysis of the means of the subscales of acceptance of homoparenthood by adoption and opposition to homoparenthood by adoption for conventional and post-conventional participants. A *t*-Test for independent samples indicated that conventional participants ( $M = 2.11$ ,  $SD = .62$ ) were more opposed to this type of adoption than post-conventional participants ( $M = 1.97$ ,  $SD = .44$ ,  $t[473] = 2.489$ ,  $p = .013$ ,  $d = .28$ ). We also verified in both groups a high acceptance of the adoption of children by same-sex couples (Conventional:  $M = 5.61$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ; Post-Conventional:  $M = 5.86$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ), there was not, however, a significant difference between them ( $t[473] = 1.646$ ,  $p = .100$ ). Through these results, we partially confirm hypothesis 2 of the present study.

### Analysis of Moral Justifications About the Adoption of Children by Homoaffectional Couples

In order to verify hypothesis 3, we initially carried out a frequency analysis on the agreement or disagreement of the participants about the possibility of adopting a child by a homosexual couple, considering the level of moral judgment. Of the total number of conventional participants ( $n = 100$ ), 91% ( $n = 91$ ) agreed with the adoption rule. Only five did not agree and four indicated that they did not know how to answer this question. Of the total number of post-conventional participants ( $n = 375$ ), 95.2% ( $n = 367$ ) agreed with the adoption rule. Only 2.1% ( $n = 8$ ) indicated that they did not agree and 2.7% ( $n = 10$ ) did not know how to respond.

Through an analysis of the means obtained for the Scale of Moral Justifications about Homoparenthood by Adoption and a *t*-Test for independent samples, we confirmed hypothesis 3 of the present study, that is, we found that participants with conventional morals used more moral justifications to express conformity with the adoption of children by same-sex couples ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = .50$ ) than participants with post-conventional morality ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = .50$ ,  $t [473] = 2.741$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $d = .289$ ).

Table 1 presents the *Pearson* correlation indices verified for the scores of the scales used in this study, for participants with conventional morality and for participants with post-conventional morality. For conventional participants, we found a positive and significant association of the Scale of Moral Justifications about Homoparenthood by Adoption

with the Scale of Rejection of Intimacy with Homosexuals and with the Subscale of Opposition to Adoption. This result indicated that the greater the use of moral justifications to express conformity with the adoption of children by homosexual couples, the greater the level of prejudice and the greater the opposition of these participants to this type of adoption.

For post-conventional participants, the associations between the Scale of Moral Justifications about Homoparenthood by Adoption, the SRIH and the Subscale of Opposition to Adoption were not significant. Thus, for these participants, we did not find a relationship between the use of moral justifications to express conformity with the adoption of children by same-sex couples with their level of prejudice, nor with their opposition to adoption.

Table 1

*Pearson correlation indices for samples with Conventional and Post-conventional Moral Judgment.*

|                           | 1     | 2       | 3       | 4       |
|---------------------------|-------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. Moral Justifications   | 1     | .200*   | .227*   | -.072   |
| 2. Prejudice              | .080  | 1       | .605**  | -.482** |
| 3. Opposition to Adoption | .032  | .721**  | 1       | -.414** |
| 4. Acceptance of Adoption | .127* | -.299** | -.310** | 1       |

Note. Results regarding Conventional Moral Judgment are shown above the diagonal. The results regarding the Post-Conventional Moral Judgment are shown below the diagonal. \* Significant correlation at .05 (2-tailed); \*\* Significant correlation at .01 (2-tailed).

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we sought to investigate whether differences in the levels of conventional and post-conventional moral judgment imply differences in the level of prejudice, in accordance with an egalitarian social norm and in the use of moral justifications to suppress prejudice. In order to do so, we use as an example of a social norm the adoption of children by homosexual couples, once the possibility of adoption was recently attributed as a right which aims to recognize equality between different types of family, specifically, in the case of this study, a homoaffective family formed by two gay men.

The presuppositions of this research place moral judgment as a guiding variable for the degree of adherence and acceptance of egalitarian social norms, which is important for facing prejudice. Two reasons support these hypotheses in moral judgment: the first considers that moral judgment has values as its basis for supporting arguments. Thus, values can be supported by conservative ideologies, which are consistent with conventional morality, or by egalitarian ideologies, which focus on the acceptance of differences, which aim to achieve respect and equality, and which represent characteristics of post-conventional morality

(Kohlberg, 1984; McFarland, 2010; Moreira & Rique, 2019; Moreira et al., 2018). The second reason considers results from social psychology studies that indicate significant relationships between moral judgment and prejudice, specifically positive correlations between conventional moral judgment and generalized prejudice (McFarland, 2010) and post-conventional moral judgment and acceptance of intergroup differences (Endicott et al., 2003).

From these assumptions, we built three hypotheses to verify the differences: in levels of moral judgment in prejudice (H1), in adherence to the egalitarian norm (H2) and in the use of moral justifications as a form of prejudice suppression (H3). When we tested blatant prejudice through the Scale of Rejection of Intimacy with Homosexuals, we found results that indicated a low degree of rejection at each level of moral judgment. However, even at low thresholds, participants with conventional morality significantly reported not accepting greater social proximity to homosexuals compared to participants with post-conventional morality. In the same way, we found in the conventional group a significantly greater opposition to adoption and a lower acceptance of adoption by a couple of gay men.

This result caught our attention due to the fact that, when answering whether they agreed with the possibility of the adoption of a child by a gay couple, 91% of the participants in this group said yes, which is a contradiction between judgment and behavior regarding the expression of prejudice. These results corroborate those found by Passini and Villano (2013) and by Rutland et al. (2010) on social exclusion. According to these authors, people do not perceive the contradiction when answering that they accept social diversity, but disagree with the attribution of rights to members of this group. In terms of morality, for these participants, treating people of different races, ethnicities or sexual orientations well is enough, since “the other” already has the support and appreciation in the moral judgment of the “good child”, who does not mistreat anyone. However, institutionalizing differences, through a law that attributes equality, requires other understandings of moral values and arguments that fall outside the scope of conventional morality.

This contradiction between moral judgment and behavior was maintained in the results of this research, which indicated positive correlations between conventional moral justifications, prejudice and opposition to adoption. We interpret this contradiction as having two levels: interpersonal, as conventional people affectively value and relate to the other, who, despite being different, is close to themselves or to the group of equals; and intrapersonal, because morally the person in this context perceives him/herself as a good person. However, this does not advance the idea of including the minority social group in the sphere of rights and protections by the State, as this position requires another level of understanding of values, their acceptance and consistent moral reasoning.

Studies carried out by Leidner et al. (2018), Oyamoto et al. (2017) and Pereira et al. (2009) on the justification of prejudice consider that the creation of egalitarian social norms has the power to repress the blatant expression of prejudice, that is, the expression of public social behavior. What is more, Lima and Vala (2004) verified in contexts of naturalization of immigrants in a country, the opposition to the right of citizenship is related to prejudice mediated by the perception of symbolic threat. In the case of the present study, it is possible that the perception of threat occurs when the person cannot understand the values that support the egalitarian norm in a post-conventional way, considering them a threat to the idea of family and marriage. Thus, faced with the need to express openness to differences and simultaneously express prejudice, this becomes justified in the form of moral reflections. It is also noteworthy that sociocognitive inconsistencies such as these are part of the ontogenetic and social development process, as presented by Piaget (1965). Thus, its resolution involves interactions in the social environment that favor the development of more complex cognitive structures in the moral domain.

Another relevant perspective for understanding these results was presented by Passini and Villano (2013). These

authors verified that people’s moral reasoning varies according to the content of the action to be judged and the perception of the social dominance of the group to which the other belongs. They interpreted the variation of moral arguments within the same individual as an indication that morality varies according to the content to be judged. Putting it in terms of this study, if the content of the situation presented is related to dominant versus minority conceptions (heteronormative families vs. homoaffective families), conventional people tend to respond with less acceptance of norms that favor gay men. Perhaps because literature on moral judgment is more available in developmental psychology, Passini and Villano (2013) did not consider the possibility that the inconsistency found in their results reflects a conscious regression in the level of moral judgment (Rique & Camino, 1997), a phenomenon that can occur according to the content of the dilemma and the perception of social dominance.

In addition, Passini and Villano (2013) evaluated the participants using DIT P-Index, a calculation that prevents conscious regressions from being verified and allows us only to interpret “degrees of more or less post-conventional arguments”. The P-Index does not support conventional arguments, therefore, it does not allow us to verify, as we did, differences between groups based on different structures of moral judgment, that is, conventional and post-conventional moral judgments. The logic is that the conventional argument is known and can be useful in the context even for post-conventional people, but the opposite does not occur, since a conventional person cannot justify post-conventional actions because they do not have the form of structural reasoning applied to the values characteristic of this type of moral judgment.

In the case of this study, the inconsistency found is of a socio-normative nature of development, and can be exemplified when the person does not integrate the expressed behavior (I am not against the adoption of a child by a couple of gay men) with the understanding of the rights and the values underlying this right (I am against laws that allow gay men or other same-sex couples to adopt). In this case, this person would be, according to Kohlberg (1984), between the morality of the “good child” (stage 3 – conventional) and the morality based on the laws and norms of a reference group (stage 4 – conventional). This person with conventional morals still does not understand how and when these norms move into the sphere of rights (stage 5 – post conventional). Therefore, these conventional people who participated in our study may be in transition or even accommodated at the conventional level (Rique & Camino, 1997). Therefore, moral development psychology needs to dialogue with social psychology on how it is possible to advance the debate on issues such as this one.

For post-conventional people, sociocognitive incoherence does not exist. The correlation analyses indicated a significant and positive association of moral justifications only with the acceptance of adoption, which indicates that such justifications

were used to express not only the acceptance of the norm, since 95.1% of the participants indicated that they agreed with the adoption, but also agreement with the egalitarian norm. As explained earlier, this result highlights a coherence between the values defended by post-conventional people and the understanding of the values applied to the content of the norm in question. Thus, for these participants, the use of moral justifications related to the adoption of children by a couple of gay men can be understood as an expression of a positive attitude towards this social group. These results are consistent with the literature on moral development psychology that report on the relationship between moral judgment and the defense of egalitarian values (Moreira & Rique, 2019; Moreira et al., 2018; Narvaez et al., 1999; Rest, Cooper et al., 1974; Rest, Thoma & Edwards, 1997).

The literature on moral developmental psychology revisited in this study emphasizes that people's assessment of social issues involving the need to guarantee rights to minority groups, or the denial of these rights, is a product of moral judgment (Colby et al., 1987; Kohlberg, 1984). This means that people evaluate different social situations as morally right or wrong based on how they understand the values they espouse. It is possible that the strong opposition to the adoption of children by same-sex couples verified in conventional people was an effect of the set of instruments used. The measurement used to evaluate the use of moral justifications presents a scenario with two gay men considering the possibility of adoption and some of the consequences or challenges that this couple would face in society when deciding to adopt a child. People with traditional values defend the role of women as being responsible for the care of children. Therefore, presenting two men as being responsible for the care of a child may have been conflicting not only because of their sexual orientation, but also because

this is not the role traditionally assigned to men in general. Therefore, we present as a limitation of the study the fact that the instrument presented only one scenario that implies two forms of prejudice (homophobia and sexism).

Another limitation was the absence of an analysis of the normative pressure felt by the participants to accept and agree with egalitarian norms, as well as the effect of social desirability in contexts of normative pressure. Also in regard to these limitations, we should consider that the research link was sent out by email and on social networks in early April 2018, a period of political and social unrest due to the arrest of, at the time, former president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva. Twitter was one of the social networks chosen for the dissemination of the research link and, according to Parmelee and Bichard (2011), this is a social network widely used to discuss political issues. In this context, interactions between users can follow two paths: people can close themselves off, only following other people who share the same political vision; or they can be more open and follow people who share different political views. In these two forms of interaction, people are susceptible to normative pressures, whether from their own group or from different groups. In this sense, social networks are subject to normative pressures and, in this way, it is possible to think that the lowest rates of prejudice against homosexuals, both for people with conventional, conservative morals, and for post-conventional people, and the greater acceptance of homoparenthood by adoption from conventional participants may have been an effect of this pressure related to the need to express respect for minorities and the need for these people not to be perceived as prejudiced in the virtual environment. We suggest that future studies seek to overcome the limitations presented as a way to achieve a more in-depth analysis on the subject.

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