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# Sensitivity and Rough-and-Tumble Play in Gay and Heterosexual Single-Father Families Through Surrogacy: The Role of Microaggressions and Fathers' Rumination

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Gay and heterosexual single fathers through surrogacy may be targets of microaggressions (i.e., subtle and implicit stigma-related stressors), as they present highly contested aspects of family formation: single parenthood, surrogacy conception, and, in the case of gay single fathers, nonheterosexual orientation. However, to date, no research has addressed whether experiences of microaggression impact the quality of the father–child relationship and the factors that mediate this process. The present study investigated the indirect effect of family-related microaggressions on observed sensitivity and rough-and-tumble play (RTP) via rumination in 35 gay and 30 heterosexual single-father families ( $n = 65$ ), with children (3–10 years of age) born through surrogacy. Both groups of fathers showed high sensitivity and RTP quality during parent–child interactions. However, regardless of their sexual orientation, single fathers who perceived more frequent microaggressions also reported a higher tendency to “brood” in response to stress, and this was, in turn, linked to lower sensitivity—but not RTP quality—with their child. The findings provide a unique contribution to the fathering literature, as these underscore—for the first time—that although explicit and overt forms of stigmatization may differ in form and content, subtle and ambiguous forms of prejudice are equally detrimental to the parent–child relationship. Accordingly, the findings emphasize the need to raise awareness in practitioners and the broader society about the ways in which values and ideological assumptions about parenting, families, and conception may affect the lives of gay and heterosexual single fathers and their children.

## **Public Significance Statement**

The findings underscore that frequent experiences of family-related microaggressions can devalue single fathers' perception of their social identity as a parent, and their attempts to restore this identity via rumination may diminish the resources they have available to sensitively interact with their child. As both explicit and implicit prejudice against new family forms is common and widespread, the present study advances our understanding of the challenges faced by single fathers through surrogacy in parenting their children. The findings provide insight into the need to raise awareness in practitioners and the broader society about the ways in which values and ideological assumptions about parenting, families, and conception may negatively impact the quality of the father–child relationship.

**Keywords:** single-father family, microaggressions, sexual orientation, rumination, father–child relationship

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This study was derived from a larger research project on single-father families created by surrogacy (Carone, Baiocco, Lingiardi, & Barone, 2020). Ideas and data appearing in the manuscript have not been presented in any conference or shared on websites.

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Single-father families are a relatively new family type (Coles, 2015). The majority of such families are formed following parental separation or divorce, or—less commonly—following the death of the mother, when the mother lacks interest in parenting or loses custody owing to neglect or abuse, or when children actively seek to live with their father (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Coles, 2015; Golombok, 2015). Very recently, so-called “single fathers by choice” have emerged as a new parenting category; single fathers by choice are heterosexual, gay, or bisexual men who actively elect to parent alone through adoption or surrogacy—the practice whereby a woman (the “surrogate”) bears a pregnancy for the intended parent(s) with the intention of handing over the resulting child (Carone, Baiocco, & Lingiard, 2017b). The present study involved gay and heterosexual single fathers through surrogacy. In Italy, where the research was conducted, the exact number of single fathers is not known; however, according to the most recent statistics of the European Union, 2.8% of all European households in 2018 were single-father families, representing all paths to parenthood (i.e., not only surrogacy families; Eurostat, 2019).

In Italy, owing to the particular sociocultural context and regulation of assisted reproduction, intended single fathers face several challenges when seeking to create a family through surrogacy. First, in Italy, surrogacy is completely prohibited; thus, single men who wish to have children in this way must turn to transnational surrogacy in countries (e.g., California, Canada) allowing reproductive services for nonresident people, regardless of their sexual orientation and marital status (Carone et al., 2017b). This implies that Italian intended single fathers have to fly to the surrogates' home country several times throughout the pregnancy; furthermore, depending on the surrogates' will, they have the option of joining her in the delivery room. However, intended single fathers are limited in their ongoing physical presence with the fetus, which has been found to have an effect on the emotional response of expectant fathers (Lederman & Weis, 2009). Like women, in fact, men communicate with their fetus during the last trimester of pregnancy and attribute meaning to embryonic behavior. As this is not possible for Italian single fathers who likely experience pregnancy at distance, surrogates usually send them fetal ultrasound images, which help intended single fathers strengthen the bond with their developing fetus (Carone, Baiocco, & Lingiard, 2017a). After the birth, in accordance with the laws of the States where surrogacy was practiced, citizenship is given to the newborn, and the single father is officially recognized as the child's father on the birth certificate. Upon their return to Italy, single fathers register their child as their own, with mother unknown. This process likely occurs quite straightforward, given both the genetic connection between the father and the child and the fact that the surrogate is not mentioned on the birth certificate.

Second, a frequently held assumption in the public debate is that the combination of surrogacy and a single father may harm the child owing to the absence of a mother from the outset (Lingiard & Carone, 2016). Third, in the case of gay single fathers, homophobic attitudes and traditional gender ideologies still prevail and likely represent a further burden (Ioverno et al., 2018). Regarding this, the Italian situation on attitudes toward gay men, and sexual minorities in general, is quite unique because of the location of the Vatican State in Italy, which favors connections between the clergy and political parties, making in turn the recognition of civil rights for sexual minorities slower than that of other European

countries. In this vein, it is worth mentioning the president of the Italian Episcopal Conference, Msgr. Bagnasco, who few years ago stated that the new forms of family are aimed at confusing the people and are a kind of “Trojan horse” that will weaken the only worthy form of family, consisting of both a man and a woman (Bagnasco, 2014). It is thus intuitively evident that Italian gay and heterosexual single fathers through surrogacy are situated, to different degrees, in a heteronormative context in which it is contended that two parents are desirable for children to flourish and that a mother is an essential figure for child development (Scandurra et al., 2019).

To date, no research has been conducted with single-father families through surrogacy, either to address the extent to which they suffer stigmatization related to their family arrangement (i.e., single parenthood, surrogacy conception, and, in the case of gay single fathers, nonheterosexual orientation) or to examine child adjustment and the quality of the father–child relationship (for exception, see Carone, Baiocco, Lingiard, & Barone, 2020). Such research is greatly needed in Italy (and indeed worldwide) to inform the public dialogue on this emerging family form and to ground policies relating to the regulation of single parenthood and assisted reproduction. To this end, the present study drew on the microaggression theory (Sue et al., 2007) as a conceptual foundation to examine whether family-related microaggressions experienced by gay and heterosexual single fathers impacted the quality of the father–child relationship (as operationalized in fathers' sensitivity and rough-and-tumble play [RTP]); it also identified the mediating mechanisms (i.e., fathers' rumination) of this process. Further, considering the specificity of the sample, and in line with research showing that the negotiation of ongoing stress associated with living in a homophobic and heterosexist society (such as Italy) may influence the parenting competency of gay fathers (Armesto, 2002), the minority stress theory (Meyer, 1995, 2003) was used to explore whether the mediation paths were moderated by fathers' sexual orientation (gay vs. heterosexual). Finally, to deeply situate the father–child relationship in systems that are likely to impact its quality, the research drew on the developmental ecological systems framework (Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, & Roggman, 2014; Volling & Cabrera, 2019), which combines several theories, including Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development; family systems theory, as applied to developmental and family issues (Cox & Paley, 2003); the determinants of parenting model (Belsky, 1984); and the transactional processes of development model (Sameroff, 2000).

### Assessing the Parent–Child Relationship in Single-Father Families

Single fathers are the primary and (presumably) sole caregivers for their children. For this reason, from both theoretical and methodological perspectives, they offer a unique opportunity to assess specific aspects of the father–child relationship, such as sensitivity and RTP quality (RTP-Q), with both the parent's male gender and their primary caregiving role held constant. Sensitivity and RTP are universally presented in all parents, regardless of family form, and both constructs have been found to impact child outcomes (Fletcher, StGeorge, & Freeman, 2013; Grossmann et al., 2002; Lucassen et al., 2011; Notaro & Volling, 1999; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). In this regard,

Fagan, Day, Lamb, and Cabrera (2014) convincingly argued that researchers should move beyond a search for specific mothering and fathering dimensions and instead adopt a gender-neutral model for parent constructs. However, to date, the quality of the father–child relationship has been mainly evaluated through RTP, even though RTP constitutes only a small percentage (8%) of play interactions between parents and young children (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998).

This approach perpetuates the assumption rooted in mother–father families that, on the whole, fathers provide economic support and interact with their children in a “rough” way, whereas mothers provide sensitive responding and emotional support to their children’s expressions of distress (Cabrera, Volling, & Barr, 2018). However, this assumption is inaccurate because it does not reflect the experiences of contemporary families (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000), and it is clearly inapplicable to single-father families. In the same vein, single fathers pose a challenge to researchers with respect to identifying the best approach for measuring the father–child relationship and capturing all types of activities that the fathers and children engage in together, as well as determining the extent to which these activities are associated with child development (Volling & Cabrera, 2019). In the present study, the father–child relationship was observed through both paternal sensitivity and RTP-Q, during interactions.

### Microaggressions Against Single Fathers Through Surrogacy

It has been suggested that, because most people in contemporary times do not engage in overtly hostile or consciously biased behavior toward members of targeted social groups, discrimination against new family forms does not exist in a major way (Massey, Merriwether, & Garcia, 2013). However, research with families headed by sexual minority parents (e.g., gay fathers through surrogacy, adopted children with gay and lesbian parents, donor-conceived children, and adolescents with lesbian mothers) has demonstrated that people tend to uphold both explicit biases (i.e., prejudice that is conscious and known) and implicit biases (i.e., prejudice that is unconscious and unknown) against these families (Bos & Gartrell, 2010; Bos & van Balen, 2008; Carone, Lingardi, Chirumbolo, & Baiocco, 2018; Farr, Crain, Oakley, Cashen, & Garber, 2016; Farr & Vázquez, 2020; Goldberg & Garcia, 2020; Golombok et al., 2018; Green, Rubio, Rothblum, Bergman, & Katuzny, 2019; Haines, Boyer, Giovanazzi, & Galupo, 2018; van Gelderen, Gartrell, Bos, & Hermanns, 2009; van Rijn-van Gelderen, Bos, & Gartrell, 2015). This being the case, it is likely that gay and heterosexual single fathers through surrogacy (and their children) suffer from some degree of stigma and discrimination as a result of their family form.

Within this scenario, microaggressions have been defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional and unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative [...] slights and assaults to the target group or person” (Sue, 2010, p. 191). This notion was formulated by Sue et al. (2007) in the context of racial microaggressions in the United States, but, shortly thereafter, it was extended to include microaggressions toward other minorities, such as women, religious minority groups, and lesbian, gay, bi-

sexual, transgender, and queer/questioning persons (for a review, see Capodilupo et al., 2010; Nadal, Whitman, Davis, Erazo, & Davidoff, 2016; Sue & Capodilupo, 2008). Sue et al. (2007) identified three forms of microaggressions: *microassaults* (i.e., explicit derogations with the intention of causing harm through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposefully discriminatory actions), *microinsults* (i.e., communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and that demean a person’s identity), and *microinvalidations* (i.e., communications that negate or nullify a person’s thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality).

Examples of microaggressions toward single fathers may include the use of the term *surrogacy* in a derogatory way (i.e., alluding to a “womb for rent” or “paying a woman to have a child”), comments that a child needs a mother and a father to be well adjusted, or obvious discomfort in their presence after they have disclosed their path to parenthood. Owing to the subtle nature of microaggressions, a victim may be left to sort out whether a microaggression has actually occurred and what an appropriate response might be, all while weighing up the consequences of acting or suppressing their reaction (Massey et al., 2013; Sue, 2010). Research with gay two-father families through surrogacy has confirmed that this path to parenthood may expose parents to overt stigma or microaggressions (Carone et al., 2018; Golombok et al., 2018; Green et al., 2019; Haines et al., 2018). These studies have shown that, when stigmatization does occur, it generates a variety of negative outcomes for both fathers and their children, such as lower behavioral child adjustment and greater negative parenting (Carone et al., 2018; Golombok et al., 2018; Green et al., 2019).

Through the lens of the developmental ecological systems framework (Cabrera et al., 2014; Volling & Cabrera, 2019), the father–child relationship may be viewed as part of the microsystem in which both father and child live; although microaggressions occur in the exosystem, these may directly or indirectly influence the quality of the father–child relationship. In this vein, gay and heterosexual single-father families through surrogacy may experience similar microaggressions than those experienced by gay two-father surrogacy families, as their family form may be perceived to challenge the very nature of family and effective parenthood owing to the additional feature of single parenthood (Carone et al., 2017b). Should microaggressions toward single-father families occur, their effect on the quality of the father–child relationship is not yet known.

### Fathers’ Rumination as a Potential Mediator

Although microaggressions may not be intended to cause harm (Sue, 2010), their collective impact can generate considerable distress, given their various manifestations from multiple sources (e.g., members of dominant social groups, members of other marginalized groups, and individuals with shared marginalized identities) and their repetitive—often daily—occurrence (Nadal, 2008; Nadal et al., 2016). Gay and heterosexual single fathers who experience microaggressions may manage and cope with their devalued identity as a parent through surrogacy by ruminating. However, the effort required for such rumination may diminish the resources they have available to parent and sensitively respond to their children. Although these speculations are only tentative, previous research on microaggressions against sexual and social

minority persons has demonstrated a direct link between microaggressions and rumination, as well as the mediating role of rumination in the association between microaggressions and individual behavior (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Kaufman, Baams, & Dubas, 2017).

A subtype of rumination is “brooding,” which is a maladaptive, self-critical process that involves comparison between one’s current state and an unachieved standard; it is further characterized by a focus on stress symptoms, causes, and consequences, as opposed to possible solutions (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). According to this definition, the persistent, recursive, self-focused attention (Papageorgiou & Wells, 2001) prompted by microaggressions may be particularly relevant to research on the father–child relationship in Italian single-father families through surrogacy, because, in these families, fatherhood may hold particularly high personal relevance, given the burdens single men face to achieve parenthood in Italy (Carneiro, Tasker, Salinas-Quiroz, Leal, & Costa, 2017; Erez & Shenkman, 2016; Lingiard & Carone, 2016; Shenkman & Shmotkin, 2014). For these men, experiences of microaggression may negatively impact the value they place on parenthood. Although studies on the effects of brooding on the quality of the father–child relationship are lacking, evidence from the literature on mothers indicates that maternal brooding is associated with reduced maternal responsiveness (Stein et al., 2012; Stein, Lehtonen, Harvey, Nicol-Harper, & Craske, 2009) and sensitivity (Tester-Jones, Karl, Watkins, & O’Mahen, 2017) during mother–child interactions.

### Fathers’ Sexual Orientation as a Potential Moderator

In line with the minority stress theory (Meyer, 1995, 2003), it could be expected that gay and heterosexual single fathers experience microaggressions to different degrees. The minority stress theory (Meyer, 1995) has empirically demonstrated that sexual minority persons (e.g., gay single fathers) are chronically exposed to stigma-related stressors because of the work needed to maintain their identity within the context of social stigma. In this vein, microaggressions can be causally related to minority stress, in that cumulative experiences of subtle forms of discrimination may result in psychological distress and other mental health issues (Haines et al., 2018; Hatzenbuehler, 2009).

However, the minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) applies to all social identities that depart from societal norms (Nadal et al., 2016), including heterosexual single fathers. For such fathers, the decision to become a parent through surrogacy may raise questions regarding both the controversial nature of the conception and their fit with cultural stereotypes of masculinity and fatherhood, as well as their desire for fatherhood without a female partner (Lingiardi & Carone, 2016). Therefore, the present study explored whether the effect of microaggressions on the quality of the father–child relationship via rumination was conditioned by fathers’ sexual orientation (gay vs. heterosexual).

### The Present Study

The present study was a multi-method and multi-informant investigation of the effect of family-related microaggressions on the quality of father–child relationship via rumination in gay and heterosexual single-father surrogacy families. Drawing on the the-

ories of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) and developmental ecological systems (Cabrera et al., 2014; Volling & Cabrera, 2019), as well as the literature discussed in the previous text, it was hypothesized that more frequent experiences of microaggression would indirectly relate to lower paternal sensitivity and RTP-Q through more frequent rumination. In line with the minority stress theory (Meyer, 1995, 2003), the research also tested whether these associations were moderated by fathers’ sexual orientation (gay vs. heterosexual).

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 35 gay single-father families and 30 heterosexual single-father families ( $n = 65$ ) residing in Italy, all with a child aged 3–10 years and born through gestational surrogacy abroad. The choice to focus on this wide age range was guided by several factors, including the difficulty involved in recruiting participants from within the limited—though growing—number of single-father surrogacy families in Italy. Furthermore, the upper age limit of 10 years was chosen to optimize the sample size while ensuring the appropriateness of the measures across the age range.

In families with more than one child in the relevant age range, the oldest child was studied. The inclusion of both gay and heterosexual single fathers through surrogacy enabled the parent’s male gender, the father’s genetic relationship with the child, and the surrogacy conception to be controlled, while enabling potential variations in the outcome variables to be tested as a function of fathers’ sexual orientation. The inclusion criteria for fathers were as follows: (a) self-identified as gay or heterosexual, (b) decided to undertake parenting alone, (c) had not cohabited since the birth of the child, (d) had not been involved in a noncohabiting relationship for longer than 6 months, and (e) had conceived the target child through surrogacy.

Single fathers were recruited using multiple strategies: First, the researchers posted advertisements on the websites of single parent groups ( $n = 22$ , 33.9%); second, participants passed information about the study to their friends, colleagues, and acquaintances who fit the study criteria and/or disseminated information about the study through social media ( $n = 37$ , 56.9%); and third, an association of same-sex parents distributed information about the study via their mailing list ( $n = 6$ , 9.2%). Owing to the variable sources of recruitment used for each family group, it was not possible to determine the exact number of fathers who were informed about the study; however, of the 91 fathers who contacted the research team, the 65 who met the inclusion criteria and agreed to take part constituted a participation rate of 71.4%. Participant characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

### Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Developmental and Social Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome. Written informed consent to participate was obtained from parents, whereas verbal assent was obtained from children. Data were collected between November 2016 and May 2019. Specifically, one researcher and two graduate students vis-

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics of Sociodemographic Information by Family Type (N = 65)*

Variables	Gay single-father families (n = 35; %)	Heterosexual single-father families (n = 30; %)	$\chi^2(df)$	
Child gender			0.29 (1)	
Boy	21 (60.0)	16 (53.3)		
Girl	14 (40.0)	14 (46.7)		
Number of children			0.87 (1)	
1	28 (80.0)	21 (70.0)		
2	7 (20.0)	9 (30.0)		
Family residence			0.32 (2)	
Northern Italy	14 (40.0)	14 (46.7)		
Central Italy	18 (51.4)	14 (46.7)		
Southern Italy	3 (8.6)	2 (6.6)		
Father ethnicity (Caucasian)	35 (100)	30 (100)	Not calculated	
Father educational attainment			0.20 (2)	
Undergraduate degree	4 (11.4)	3 (10.0)		
Master's degree	20 (57.2)	16 (53.3)		
Postdoctoral degree	11 (31.4)	11 (36.7)		
Father work status			<.01 (1)	
Full-time	29 (82.9)	25 (83.3)		
Part-time	6 (17.1)	5 (16.7)		
Current relationship status			1.49 (1)	
Single	27 (77.1)	19 (63.3)		
In a relationship	8 (22.9)	11 (36.7)		
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F(df)</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Child age (in months)	65.43 (22.89)	67.53 (23.25)	0.14 (1,63)	<.01
Father age (in years)	46.06 (5.39)	46.50 (6.12)	0.10 (1,63)	<.01
Annual household income (in Euros)	64,457.14 (26,080.58)	61,833.33 (28,464.23)	0.15 (1,63)	<.01
Experiences of microaggression	3.26 (0.72)	2.81 (0.66)	6.64* (1,63)	.10
Fathers' rumination	2.37 (0.67)	2.32 (0.59)	0.10 (1,63)	<.01
Observed father sensitivity	5.06 (1.37)	5.00 (1.34)	0.03 (1,63)	<.01
Observed RTP quality	3.74 (1.07)	3.97 (1.03)	0.73 (1,63)	.01

Note. RTP = rough-and-tumble play. Microaggression experiences were rated on a scale from 1 (*hardly ever/never/not at all*) to 5 (*constantly/a great deal*). Fathers' rumination was rated on a scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 4 (*almost always*). Observed fathers' sensitivity was rated on a scale from 1 (*no evidence*) to 7 (*pervasive/extreme evidence*). Observed RTP quality was rated on a scale from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*).

\*  $p < .05$ .

ited families at their homes. During these 3-hr visits, single fathers were administered standardized questionnaires and interviews, and they participated in three video-recorded observational tasks with their child. For the present study, only questionnaire and observational measures were used (for the wider study, see Carone et al., 2020).

## Measures

**Sociodemographic characteristics.** Fathers completed questionnaires about their (and their child's) sociodemographic details. Specifically, fathers were asked about their age, path to parenthood, family residence, number of children, ethnicity, educational attainment, work status, current relationship status, and annual household income. Fathers sexual orientation was assessed using the Kinsey scale, where 0 = *exclusively heterosexual* and 6 = *exclusively homosexual*. Finally, child gender and age were also assessed.

**Observed fathers' sensitivity.** Each father-child dyad participated in a video-taped assessment of their interaction in "real time" during the Etch-A-Sketch task (Stevenson-Hinde & Shoul-

dice, 1995). The Etch-A-Sketch is a drawing tool with two knobs on the front of the frame that allow users to draw vertically and horizontally, respectively. In the Etch-A-Sketch task, each dyad is asked to reproduce a picture of a house, with clear instructions that the child is to use one knob and the parent the other knob, without overlapping activity. In the present study, father-child interactions were coded using the Coding of Attachment-Related Parenting (CARP; O'Connor, Matias, Futh, Tantam, & Scott, 2013), which is a global measure of parent-child interaction quality derived from the attachment theory. Reliability and validity data for the coding system have been reported in several samples (O'Connor et al., 2013; O'Connor, Woolgar, Humayun, Briskman, & Scott, 2019). The CARP places conceptual emphasis on patterns of sensitivity, emotional attunement, and bidirectional dyadic processes such as mutuality. In the present study, the variable related to *sensitivity* (i.e., the degree to which the fathers showed awareness of their child's needs and sensitivity to his or her signals, promoted the child's autonomy, adopted the child's psychological point of view, and physically or verbally expressed positive emotion and warmth toward the child) was rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*no evidence*)

to 7 (*pervasive/extreme evidence*), with higher values indicating greater sensitive responding throughout the interaction. To establish interrater reliability, approximately one third of the videos ( $n = 22$ ) were randomly selected and coded by a second rater who was blind to family type. The intraclass correlation for sensitive responding was .81. Means and standard deviations are provided in Table 1.

**Observed RTP quality.** Each father–child dyad was asked to play two rough-and-tumble games: “Get-Up” and “Sock Wrestle” (Fletcher et al., 2013). Each game lasted 5 min. In the Get-Up game, fathers were instructed to lie on their back and, at the word “Go” from the group leader, to try to stand up while their child tried to hold them down. In the Sock Wrestle game, father and child played on their hands and knees, with each trying to get the other’s socks off without losing their own. Both games were played within the confines of a large square rug, with a small camcorder mounted on a tripod ~3 m away. A researcher instructed the father and child on the procedure of the two games and, after turning on the camera, left the room. Two independent coders rated the interactions using the RTP-Q scale (Fletcher et al., 2013). This measure comprises items related to warmth, control, sensitivity, winning and losing, physical engagement, and playfulness, captured as both individual and dyadic behaviors. Five global narrative descriptions describe the quality of the interaction and behavior of the father and child (i.e., *poor* = 1, *fair* = 2, *good* = 3, *very good* = 4, and *excellent* = 5). The behaviors at each of the five levels of RTP-Q are operationalized to form a 16-item scale and a specific rating level within each item (using 5-point Likert scales). The items capture the individual and dyadic affective states and behaviors of the father and child, including verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Each item is assessed for frequency and/or intensity, with higher ratings corresponding with increased frequency and intensity.

In the present research, overall judgments about the presence of the behaviors (i.e., “global ratings”) were used, because the primary research interest was not specific behaviors (i.e., a microlevel analysis), but clusters of behaviors that, together, shaped the quality of the father–child interaction during the games (Fletcher et al., 2013). Scores obtained on the two tasks were averaged for each dyad and approximately one third of the videos ( $n = 22$ ) were randomly selected and coded by a second rater who was blind to family type. Of note, videos referring to the father–child dyads that had already been coded with the CARP (O’Connor et al., 2013) were excluded from the selection; furthermore, the second rater who coded the videos with the RTP-Q was different from the rater who coded the videos with the CARP. The intraclass correlation for the overall level of RTP-Q was .77. Following Fletcher et al. (2013), after the two tasks, fathers were asked whether the Get-Up and Sock Wrestle play interactions were more or less similar to their usual interactions with their child. Fathers indicated that there were no major differences between the video-taped play and regular play with their children. Means and standard deviations of the RTP-Q scale are provided in Table 1.

**Family-related microaggressions.** Fathers completed 14 items from the Homonegative Microaggressions Scale (Wright & Wegner, 2012) to rate the frequency with which they had experienced family-related microaggressions over the past 6 months, using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*hardly ever/never/not at all*) to 5 (*constantly/a great deal*). The items were adapted from three

subscales of the original scale (i.e., Microinsults, Microassaults, and Environmental Microaggressions) to better reflect the specificity of gay and heterosexual single fathers’ family arrangement. Sample items include “How often have people made statements about why surrogacy should not be allowed?” (Microinsults subscale); “How often have people made statements against single fathers having children?” (Microinsults subscale); “How often have people (directly or indirectly) defined your family arrangement using derogatory terms like ‘womb for rent,’ ‘paying women for having children?’” (Microassaults subscale); “How often have people made offensive remarks about single fathers through surrogacy in your presence, not realizing your family arrangement?” (Microassaults subscale); “How often have you felt like your rights (such as practicing surrogacy in your country) are denied?” (Environmental Microaggressions subscale); and “How often have religious leaders spoken out against single fathers having children through surrogacy?” (Environmental Microaggressions subscale). A total mean score is calculated, with higher scores indicating more frequent experiences of microaggression. The scale has shown good psychometric properties (Wegner & Wright, 2016). In the present study, Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .79.

**Rumination.** Fathers were administered the six items of the Brooding subscale of the Ruminative Responses Scale (Treynor, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003; for the Italian validation, see Palmieri, Gapsarre, & Lanciano, 2007) to assess their general thoughts and behaviors in response to difficult or stressful events. On this measure, items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 4 (*almost always*). A sample item is “Think: ‘What am I doing to deserve this?’” A total score is derived from the mean of the six item scores, with higher scores indicating more frequent rumination. The scale has shown adequate internal consistency and test–retest stability (1-year time interval; Treynor et al., 2003). In the present study, Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .81.

## Data Analysis

All analyses were performed using the statistical software R (R Development Core Team, 2018). Bivariate Pearson two-tailed correlations were run to assess the presence of significant associations among the variables of principal interest. Sociodemographic variables that were significantly associated with outcomes were included as covariates in the moderated mediation models. Analyses of variance were conducted to determine potential differences between gay and heterosexual single fathers on the predictors and outcome variables. For moderated mediation models, direct and indirect effects were evaluated, and the bootstrap percentiles method was used to compute confidence intervals (CIs; in accordance with current recommendations and practices in mediation analyses), to evaluate statistical significance (Hayes, 2017; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). Specifically, in the two moderated mediation models—one for each outcome—the direct and indirect effects of microaggressions on fathers’ observed sensitivity and RTP-Q via fathers’ rumination, and whether these relations differed for gay and heterosexual single fathers, were tested. When no moderation effect was found, to preserve statistical power (given the limited sample size), mediation models were rerun excluding sexual orientation.

**Results**

**Preliminary Analysis**

Bivariate Pearson two-tailed correlations indicated that fathers who were wealthier,  $r = .34, p < .01$ , had less children,  $r = -.33, p < .01$ , reported less frequent microaggressions,  $r = -.33, p < .01$ , and ruminated less,  $r = .66, p < .001$ , showed greater sensitivity during interactions with their children. Alongside, fathers with a male child,  $r = -.29, p < .05$ , and younger children,  $r = -.30, p < .05$ , who were wealthier,  $r = .25, p < .05$ , had less children,  $r = -.33, p < .01$ , reported less frequent microaggressions,  $r = -.30, p < .05$ , and ruminated less,  $r = -.31, p < .01$ , showed greater RTP-Q. Furthermore, more sensitive fathers also showed greater RTP-Q,  $r = .26, p < .05$ . The complete correlation matrix is displayed in Table 2. Given their significant associations with the study predictors and outcomes, annual household income and number of children were entered as covariates in the mediation model predicting fathers' observed sensitivity, whereas annual household income, number of children, and child gender were entered as covariates in the mediation model predicting RTP-Q. Of relevance, owing to the dramatic child age range (3–10 years), child age was also used as a covariate in both mediation models. Analyses of variance showed that the only difference between groups related to experiences of microaggression, with gay single fathers reporting more frequent microaggressions than heterosexual single fathers,  $F(1, 63) = 6.64, p = .012, \eta_p^2 = .10$  (for complete results, see Table 1).

**Observed Sensitivity Predicted by Microaggressions Through Fathers' Rumination**

The central hypothesis was that there would be a significant indirect effect of microaggressions on fathers' observed sensitivity via fathers' rumination, and that this mediated relation would be stronger for gay single fathers than heterosexual single fathers. To test this hypothesis, a moderated mediation model was run with sexual orientation as a moderator and fathers' rumination as a mediator of the relation between microaggressions and fathers' sensitivity, controlling for child age, annual household income, and number of children. The results indicated that the mediated

effect of microaggressions on fathers' sensitivity via fathers' rumination was significant,  $\beta = -.37, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.07, -.03], p < .001$ , but did not vary as a function of fathers' sexual orientation,  $\beta = -.15, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.05, .01], p = .140$ . A further mediational model was run with fathers' rumination as a mediator and child age, annual household income, and number of children as covariates, but without the moderation of sexual orientation. The results indicated that microaggressions did not significantly predict the level of sensitivity independently (direct effect),  $\beta = .02, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.03, .03], p = .902$ , but, as expected, fathers' rumination mediated the effect of microaggressions on the level of observed sensitivity during father-child interactions (indirect effect),  $\beta = -.35, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.07, -.02], p < .001$  (for the coefficients of individual paths, see Figure 1). Note that a predictor can influence an outcome through a mediator in the absence of a direct effect between the predictor and the outcome (Shrout & Bolger, 2002), as was the case here. Overall, the total effect was significant,  $\beta = -.33, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.07, -.01], p = .005$ , accounting for 48% of the variance in fathers' observed sensitivity. It can, therefore, be concluded that gay and heterosexual single fathers who experienced more frequent microaggressions ruminated more, and that this, in turn, decreased their sensitivity during interactions with their child.

**Observed RTP Quality Predicted by Microaggressions Through Fathers' Rumination**

As regard fathers' sensitivity, it was hypothesized that there would be a significant indirect effect of microaggressions on observed RTP-Q via fathers' rumination, and that this mediated relation would be stronger for gay single fathers than heterosexual single fathers. The results of the moderated mediational model indicated that neither the mediated effect of microaggressions on observed RTP-Q via fathers' rumination,  $\beta = -.12, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.03, <.01], p = .124$ , nor the moderation of sexual orientation,  $\beta = .09, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.02, .04], p = .493$ , were significant. Again, to preserve statistical power, a further mediational model was run with fathers' rumination as a mediator and child age, annual household income, and number of children as covariates, but without the moderation of sexual orientation. The results indicated that, although the total effect was significant,  $\beta = -.30, 95\% \text{ CI}$

**Table 2**  
*Means, Standard Deviations, and Associations Among Children's and Fathers' Characteristics, RTP Quality, Fathers' Sensitivity, Microaggression Experiences, and Fathers' Rumination (N = 65)*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	M	SD
1. Child gender	1.00									/	/
2. Child age	<.01	1.00								66.40	22.90
3. Father age	-.05	.23 <sup>†</sup>	1.00							46.26	5.70
4. Annual household income	-.18	-.22 <sup>†</sup>	-.03	1.00						62,246.15	27,022.58
5. Number of children	.01	.30*	.20	-.24 <sup>†</sup>	1.00					1.25	0.43
6. Microaggression experiences	.15	.08	.14	-.16	.17	1.00				3.05	0.72
7. Fathers' rumination	.27*	.19	.12	-.29*	.26*	.52***	1.00			2.35	0.63
8. Observed fathers' sensitivity	-.14	-.20	-.01	.34**	-.33**	-.33**	-.66***	1.00		5.03	1.35
9. Observed RTP quality	-.29*	-.30*	-.12	.25*	-.33**	-.30*	-.31**	.26*	1.00	3.85	1.05

*Note.* RTP = rough-and-tumble play. Child gender was coded as -1 = boy, 1 = girl. Microaggression experiences were rated on a scale from 1 (*hardly ever/never/not at all*) to 5 (*constantly/a great deal*). Fathers' rumination was rated on a scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 4 (*almost always*). Observed fathers' sensitivity was rated on a scale from 1 (*no evidence*) to 7 (*pervasive/extreme evidence*). Observed RTP quality was rated on a scale from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*).  
<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



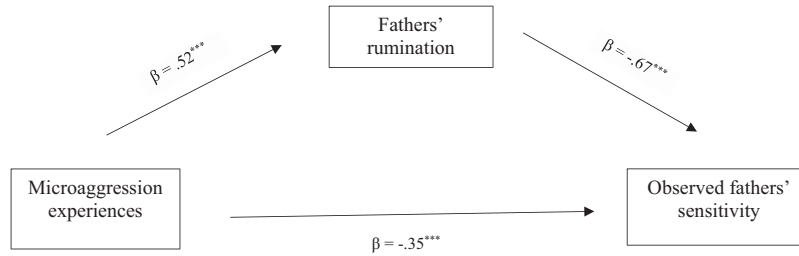


Figure 1. Mediation model with fathers' rumination as a mediator of the effect of microaggressions on observed fathers' sensitivity. Child age, annual household income, and number of siblings were added as covariates in the model. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

$[-.06, -.01]$ ,  $p = .012$ , accounting for 30% of the variance in observed RTP-Q, neither the direct effect of microaggressions,  $\beta = -.19$ , 95% CI  $[-.05, .01]$ ,  $p = .194$ , nor the mediated effect of fathers' rumination,  $\beta = -.11$ , 95% CI  $[-.03, <.01]$ ,  $p = .148$ , were significant in predicting the quality of RTP (for the coefficients of individual paths, see Figure 2). It can, therefore, be concluded that microaggressions experienced by gay and heterosexual single fathers did not influence the quality of RTP with their children, either independently or via fathers' rumination.

## Discussion

The present study found that both gay and heterosexual single fathers through surrogacy showed high levels of sensitivity and RTP-Q when interacting with their children. It was also the first to underscore that subtle and implicit stigma-related stressors (microaggressions) toward gay and heterosexual single fathers owing to their family arrangement indirectly affect the quality of the father-child relationship during interactions, through rumination. However, the findings indicated that this association follows different paths for paternal sensitivity and RTP-Q. Partially in line with the hypothesis, both gay and heterosexual single fathers who experienced more frequent microaggressions reported a higher tendency to "brood" in response to stress, and this was, in turn, linked to lower sensitivity—but not RTP-Q—with their child.

These different paths cannot be explained by the findings of previous research, as the present study was the first to investigate the link between microaggressions, rumination, and paternal sensitivity and RTP-Q. However, a few tentative explanations may be proposed. First, in the present research, sensitivity and RTP were

assessed during real-time father-child interactions, but the target activities and evaluated behaviors differed significantly. On the one hand, high levels of sensitivity were assigned to fathers who showed an awareness of their child's signals, promoted their child's autonomy, adopted their child's psychological point of view, and physically or verbally expressed positive emotion and warmth toward their child quite constantly throughout the interaction. On the other hand, in high-quality RTP, both the father and the child balanced warmth, control, sensitivity, winning and losing, physical engagement, and playfulness throughout the interaction. In light of this, it cannot be known whether—or to what extent—the child uniquely contributed to maintaining a high quality of RTP, even in cases where the father was brooding.

Second, a complementary reason for the different results for sensitivity and RTP may be owing to comfort and familiarity with the two different interactive contexts for the fathers. Perhaps single fathers in this study engaged in RTP regularly and felt comfortable playing with children in this manner, whereas the Etch-A-Sketch task was by nature more challenging and required cooperation and potentially more control and direction with children to do the task "correctly." By the same token, the Etch-A-Sketch task may have made it more difficult for fathers to manage the tension and frustrations of experiencing microaggressions; this was likely seen when having to instruct children but not in the playful and fun nature of RTP.

This leads to a third possible explanation. More frequent microaggressions may have led fathers to practice more frequent rumination. Fathers who ruminated during the task with their child would have likely deployed most of their attentional resources

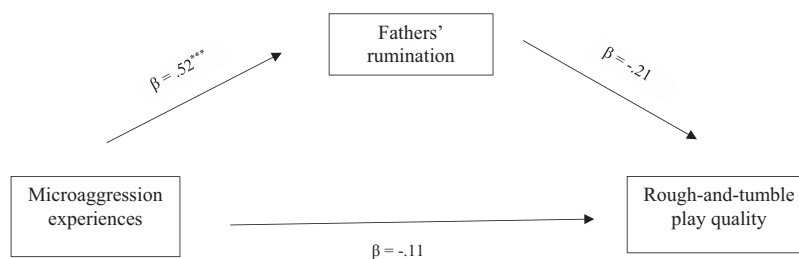


Figure 2. Mediation model with fathers' rumination as a mediator of the effect of microaggressions on observed rough-and-tumble play quality. Child age, child gender, annual household income, and number of siblings were added as covariates in the model. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

internally, scanning the self to determine how they might appear to others (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008; Papageorgiou & Wells, 2001) and/or monitoring whether they might be perceived as “good enough” in their interactions with their child. Fathers in these conditions may have been distracted and not fully capable of detecting their child’s signals and responding adequately. Ultimately, this may have impaired their sensitivity levels, as suggested by the literature on brooding mothers (Stein et al., 2009, 2012; Tester-Jones et al., 2017). In this vein, it would be helpful to note that, conversely, RTP encouraged the fathers to allocate attentional resources externally to process environmental stimuli (e.g., what their child was doing) because it required arousing, physically challenging, and competitive play; here, in the process of reciprocating roles (i.e., with one dominating and the other acting as subordinate) between father and child, parental sensitivity was an individual indicator of the father’s behavior, though it was evaluated in a dyadic context. Finally, because the present study assessed only microaggressions and rumination from the father’s side, it cannot be excluded that the finding was influenced by a shared source of variance.

Gay single fathers perceived more frequent microaggressions than heterosexual single fathers, but fathers’ sexual orientation was unrelated to the effect of microaggressions on the father–child relationship via rumination. Apparently, this finding runs contrary to the minority stress theory (Meyer, 1995). However, although the minority stress theory has been widely adopted in investigations of psychological distress in sexual minorities (Bos, van Balen, van den Boom, & Sandfort, 2004; Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016; Meyer, 1995; Meyer & Frost, 2013), its criteria apply to all minorities, including heterosexual single fathers through surrogacy, who represent a particular social minority group. Closer inspection of the theory helps to clarify this path. In his seminal article, Meyer (2003) proposed several assumptions underlying the minority stress concept, which,

is (a) unique—that is, minority stress is additive to general stressors that are experienced by all people, and therefore, stigmatized people are required an adaptation effort above that required of similar others who are not stigmatized; (b) chronic—that is, minority stress is related to relatively stable underlying social and cultural structures; and (c) socially based—that is, it stems from social processes, institutions, and structures beyond the individual rather than individual events or conditions that characterize general stressors or biological, genetic, or other nonsocial characteristics of the person or the group. (p. 276)

Thus, through this perspective, although the gay single fathers’ nonheterosexual orientation may have generated additional stigmatization—as the significant differences between groups showed—all single fathers used the same strategy (i.e., rumination) to cope with stress, with similar consequences for their sensitivity during father–child interactions. In fact, the findings suggest that more frequent experiences of family-related microaggressions can devalue single fathers’ perception of their social identity as a parent, and their attempts to restore this identity may diminish the resources they have available to sensitively interact with their child. From the perspective of the developmental ecological systems theory (Cabrera et al., 2014; Volling & Cabrera, 2019), it is also relevant that, in Italy, at a macrosystem level, public discussions about parenting practiced by sexual and social minority groups oppose the surrogacy conception and the absence

of a mother in the household more than they oppose parents’ nonheterosexual orientation (Lingiardi & Carone, 2016; Scandurra et al., 2019). This being the case, the microaggressions experienced by all single fathers are likely similar, regardless of the fathers’ sexual orientation, because all single fathers challenge traditional notions of family (i.e., that the ideal family form involves two different-sex parents collaboratively raising a child who was conceived spontaneously).

Despite the relevance of the findings, the present study has several limitations. First, the analyses were performed on cross-sectional data. As the models assumed a causal process, longitudinal data are needed to assess the temporal order in which fathers’ rumination and sensitivity develop. Although the study found that more frequent rumination was linked to lower sensitivity during father–child interactions, it may be the case that fathers who suffered microaggressions and were less sensitive with their children were more prone to rumination because they felt confirmed in the devaluation of their parenting ability. Second, as is often the case with initial studies of minority and hidden groups, the sample of single-father families was not large and nonrandom sampling techniques were used for recruitment. This prevented the research from investigating further mediating and moderating factors (e.g., social support, resilience) and from controlling for aspects that are closely tied to the study variables, such as fathers’ psychological functioning. Third, it cannot be ruled out that, under different circumstances (e.g., larger samples and more diverse population of gay fathers), the two mediation paths could differ as a function of sexual orientation. Fourth, the study used data from a sample for which it is difficult to precisely estimate representativeness (with respect to the general population of single fathers through surrogacy); however, the prohibitive cost of surrogacy suggests that men who take this path to parenthood comprise a demographically homogeneous group of very high earners (Carone et al., 2017b).

Consistent with the theories of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) and developmental ecological systems (Cabrera et al., 2014; Volling & Cabrera, 2019), future research should consider contextual elements in the relationship between microaggressions and the quality of the parent–child relationship. It has been suggested that experiences of microaggression from a stranger may be less impactful than experiences of microaggression from a family member, friend, or colleague (Sue, 2010). In this vein, a qualitative investigation of microaggression experiences could provide more insight into the contexts in which microaggressions are particularly harmful by focusing on, for example, the person who delivers the microaggression. Furthermore, owing to the nature of microaggressions, which largely depend on what and how the targeted persons feel and think about the perpetrators’ microaggressive behaviors or statements, an in-depth examination of the themes of microaggressions could be informative of the ways in which microaggressions manifest in the lives of gay and heterosexual single fathers through surrogacy, and their children. In a similar vein, as microaggressions may operate at the entire family system level—for example, children may be questioned about the legitimacy of having social or sexual minority parents (Farr et al., 2016; Haines et al., 2018)—future studies could include children of single fathers to more deeply understand how they navigate experiences of their family arrangement and their coping strategies when faced with microaggressions and feelings of difference (Farr et al., 2016; van Gelderen et al., 2009, van Rijn-van Gelderen et

al., 2015). This approach would not only provide insight into the cognitive resources children need to identify the sometimes ambiguous nature of microaggressive interactions, but it would also prepare parents to talk with their child in an age-appropriate manner about his or her conception or family arrangement and how the child might handle others' questions or comments and appropriately respond to teasing.

### Theoretical and Practical Implications

The importance of focusing on fathers in parenting research has been emphasized by several scholars (Ahnert & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2020; Cabrera et al., 2018; Cowan & Cowan, 2019; Lamb, 2010; Palkovitz, 2007; Volling & Cabrera, 2019), as well as is the focus of the current special issue. The present study followed this approach, investigating fathers from the small—though growing—groups of gay and heterosexual single fathers through surrogacy, respectively. By doing so, the research was uniquely able to shed light on aspects related to parenting (i.e., sensitivity and RTP-Q), while holding the parent's male gender and primary caregiving role constant. This represents a completely original contribution to the fathering literature.

Furthermore, the family composition of the sample (involving only primary caregiver fathers) reduced the possible confounding effects of parental gender and the caregiving role on both aspects of the parent-child relationship. Research with mother-father families, in which the mother is usually the primary caregiver and the father is usually the secondary caregiver, have generally found that sensitivity and RTP are present in both mothering and fathering, but to different degrees: Mothers typically demonstrate more sensitivity than fathers, and fathers typically show higher RTP-Q than mothers (Fletcher et al., 2013; Grossmann et al., 2002; Lucassen et al., 2011; Paquette, Carbonneau, Dubeau, Bigras, & Tremblay, 2003; van IJzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997). However, as suggested elsewhere (Carone, Baiocco, Lingiard, & Kerns, 2019), such findings may be influenced by the conflation between parents' gender and the caregiving role. Thus, to a wider extent, the present findings have implications for research with mother-father families, as they underscore the importance of assessing caregiving roles without assuming the nature of these roles on the basis of the parents' gender.

As regard practical implications, the integration of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007), minority stress (Meyer, 1995, 2003), and developmental ecological systems (Cabrera et al., 2014; Volling & Cabrera, 2019) theories enabled the present research to explain the relationship between daily, subtle stigma-related stressors, and the quality of the father-child relationship in gay and heterosexual single-father families through surrogacy. The findings thus advance our understanding of the challenges faced by single fathers through surrogacy when parenting their children and emphasize the need to raise awareness in practitioners and the broader society about the ways in which values and ideological assumptions about parenting, families, and conception may affect the lives of gay and heterosexual single fathers and their children (and, by extension, all social and sexual minority parent families).

In this vein, the results add novel insights to the literature on the effect of stigmatization in new and emerging family forms (Bos & Gartrell, 2010; Bos & van Balen, 2008; Carone et al., 2018; Farr et al., 2016; Farr & Vázquez, 2020; Goldberg & Garcia, 2020; Golombok et al., 2018; Green et al., 2019; van Gelderen et al., 2009, van Rijn-van

Gelderen et al., 2015). Although explicit and overt forms of discrimination and microaggressions differ in form and content, the present findings demonstrate that subtle and implicit prejudice is equally detrimental to the father-child relationship.

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