

Normative Climates of Parenthood across Europe: Judging Voluntary Childlessness and Working Parents

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Abstract

Past research on gender role attitudes has often focused on individual- rather than country-level explanations. Drawing on European Social Survey data from 21 countries, we examine the effect of societal normative climates (i.e., shared perceptions of others' attitudes) on personal attitudes towards two non-traditional gender roles: Voluntary childlessness and working full-time while children are young. To detect potential gender differences, we analyse disapproval of men and women separately. Findings reveal that there are strong differences in normative climates across countries, and that people generally perceive more disapproval of women than of men for both behaviours. Most importantly, in countries where a higher share of respondents perceives disapproval of these behaviours, respondents themselves disapprove more strongly—even if they do not believe that others disapprove, and even after controlling for other relevant individual- and country-level characteristics. What is more, the independent effect of normative climate explains most of the differences between countries. This robust finding demonstrates the power of country-level normative climates in explaining individuals' attitudes and between-country differences in attitudes toward gender roles.

Attitudes towards the roles of men and women in society may be more or less traditional, and social norms within a country may be more or less restrictive in terms of which behaviours are and are not socially acceptable for men or women. This article examines the link between social norms and individuals' attitudes regarding two non-traditional family behaviours: voluntary childlessness and working full-time when children are young. In Western societies, the prevalence of these behaviours has increased dramatically in recent decades,

although at differing rates across countries and these behaviours are likely to be seen differently for men and women.

Drawing on European Social Survey (ESS) data from 21 countries, we examine the impact of individuals' normative expectations (Bicchieri, 2006)—that is, perceptions of what *others* believe is appropriate or inappropriate—on personal attitudes. We further examine the degree to which such normative expectations are *shared* within a society, and how these *societal*

normative climates are associated with individuals' attitudes. Indeed, social norms should be particularly powerful in exerting their claims when they are consensually shared within particular social contexts (Elcheroth, Reicher and Doise, 2011). Using a multi-level approach, we empirically disentangle the effects of these two aspects of social norms—individual normative expectations and societal normative climates—on gender role attitudes. Before treating the intersection between gender role attitudes and social norms, and introducing our research questions, we briefly address these topics in their own right.

Gender Role Attitudes

The association between social norms and gender role attitudes has not yet been investigated systematically. Much research has investigated individual-level factors that predict gender role attitudes. For instance, men, older, and religiously active adults endorse more traditional gender roles, while women, younger, and more educated adults endorse less traditional attitudes (e.g., Alwin, Braun and Scott, 1992; Brewster and Padavic, 2000; Knudsen and Waerness, 2001; Brooks and Bolzendahl, 2004; Brajdić-Vuković, Birkelund and Stulhofer, 2007).

Traditional gender roles emphasize women's obligations as mothers and caregivers, and men's obligations as breadwinners. We investigate two behaviours that directly relate to these roles: choosing to remain childless, and working full-time when having young children. These two statuses are poignant because they threaten traditional notions of adulthood and family life—the rejection of motherhood and fatherhood, and deviation from gendered role expectations, whether for fathers in not being full-time providers or for mothers in not being full-time caregivers to young children.

Full-time employment is in direct conflict with the caregiver role for mothers, but is aligned with the provider role for fathers. Relative to parental employment, disapproval of childlessness may be less strongly differentiated for women and men, although motherhood is probably seen as more central to the lives of women than fatherhood is to the lives of men (Agrillo and Nelini, 2008). Most studies have not differentiated between attitudes towards men's and women's childlessness, but two recent studies have paradoxically found more disapproval of male childlessness (Merz and Liefbroer, 2012; Rijken and Merz, 2014). Interestingly, men with egalitarian gender attitudes have higher fertility intentions than those with traditional gender attitudes (Puur *et al.*, 2010).

Few studies have investigated the effect of country-level variables on gender role attitudes. These studies have demonstrated that country-level gender equality (Fuwa, 2004) and economic development (Knudsen and Waerness, 2008) are associated with more equitable division of labour in households, which is related to gender role attitudes (Jansen and Kalmijn, 2002; Lewin-Epstein, Stier and Braun, 2006). In countries with strong support for dual-earner families (e.g., good childcare coverage rate), people also endorse more egalitarian attitudes and behaviours (Sjöberg, 2004; Geist, 2005; Stier and Lewin-Epstein, 2007; Bühlmann, Elcheroth and Tettamanti, 2010). Norms may be an important factor in explaining differences in gender role attitudes between countries (Alwin *et al.*, 1992; Geist, 2005; Crompton and Lyonette, 2006; Lewin-Epstein, Stier and Braun, 2006), and might mediate the effect of policies on gender role attitudes (Sjöberg, 2004).

Social Norms: Distinguishing Normative Expectations and Normative Climates

Norms are shared social prescriptions for, or proscriptions against, involvement in 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' activities or roles (Settersten and Hagestad, 1996a,b; Settersten, 2003; Dannefer and Settersten, 2010). They are, by definition, widely shared in social groups and reinforced through social relationships and networks and in social institutions, policies, and the media, among other things. By providing a definition of what is 'normal', social norms can, from functionalist and constructivist perspectives in sociology respectively, provide a means for ensuring order in societies and a sense of security and predictability in the life course for individuals.

Numerous studies have documented the important role of social norms in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviours (see Berkowitz, 2004). These studies typically focus on individuals' normative expectations (Bicchieri, 2006)—that is, on perceptions of what *others* believe is appropriate or inappropriate. People generally do not restrict these normative expectations to specific situations or local communities, but rather apply them to a larger spectrum of situations and broader imagined communities (Paluck and Shepherd, 2012).

We should not assume, however, that normative expectations are completely shared within a society or that people endorse them without question. Contemporary societies are marked by the coexistence of a multitude of beliefs and values, 'giving rise to practices of debate, argumentation and contestation' (Fasel, 2014: p. 28; see also Doise, 1993; Howarth, 2006).

Perceptions of the attitudes of others are surely shaped by a wide array of factors, from interpersonal interactions and personal observations of daily behaviour to the representation of public debates and information in the mass media (e.g., [Mutz, 1998](#)). Perceptions of others' attitudes may therefore be based on where people live and the networks in which they are embedded. For instance, highly educated people endorse more egalitarian gender attitudes ([Knudsen and Waerness, 2001](#)), so those who are surrounded by many highly educated people may overestimate the broader distribution of egalitarian attitudes.

We call the sum of these different perceptions and interactions in a country the *societal normative climate* and assume that it is associated with personal attitudes. In recent social psychological research, 'ideological climates' ([Cohrs, 2012](#)) of socially shared values and beliefs have been shown to have an impact on individuals' attitudes towards immigrants, even after accounting for personal values and beliefs ([Sarrasin et al., 2012](#); [Fasel, Green and Sarrasin, 2013](#)). These studies have investigated normative climates as the aggregation of individuals' *own* attitudes. We instead aggregate individuals' perceptions of *others'* attitudes, thus assessing *socially shared* perceptions. We thus extend previous studies by examining societal normative climates alongside individuals' normative expectations.

Gender Role Attitudes and Normative Climates in Europe

Societal normative climates result from historical processes: They are maintained, challenged, and shaped over time through both bottom-up and top-down processes ([Fasel, 2014](#)). Gender role attitudes and matters of gender equality have seen dramatic changes in the last half-century, but there are nonetheless differences across countries. For instance, people in Eastern European countries endorse more traditional gender role attitudes regarding childlessness ([Merz and Liefbroer, 2012](#)), while attitudes regarding maternal employment are more progressive in Eastern and Northern European countries ([Treas and Widmer, 2000](#); [O'Sullivan, 2007](#)). Although such differences have been studied with respect to gender equality ([Fuwa, 2004](#)), economic development ([Knudsen and Waerness, 2008](#)), and welfare regimes ([Sjöberg, 2004](#); [Bühlmann, Elcheroth and Tettamanti, 2010](#)), we argue that these differences are partly due to different normative climates.

One reason to study normative climates on the level of societies is that this level typically corresponds to the institutional contexts in which relevant policies are

implemented, which both reflect and construct normative climates. In this article, we aim to disentangle the effect of societal normative climates from relevant institutional policies on individuals' gender role attitudes. We focus on policies directly relevant to the behaviours we study, namely childcare coverage rate and length and compensation of maternity leave. Additionally, we control for the country's economic situation (gross domestic product, GDP) and level of gender equality (gender equity index, GEI), which prior research has shown to be associated with gender role attitudes and division of housework ([Fuwa, 2004](#); [Knudsen and Waerness, 2008](#)).

Research Questions

This study probes the association of normative climate and gender role attitudes in the European context—specifically, the disapproval of women and men who decide to remain childless or work full-time when they have children aged <3 years. We focus on the disapproval end of the approval–disapproval spectrum, as these behaviours are typically seen as proscriptions ('what not to do') rather than prescriptions ('what to do'). We ask:

1. *Are individuals' perceptions of others' attitudes (i.e., their normative expectations) associated with their own gender role attitudes?* We expect a positive association, such that when individuals believe that others disapprove, they will also express stronger disapproval themselves (Hypothesis 1).
2. *What is the normative climate in different European countries for women and men with regards to voluntary childlessness and to parents working full-time when children are young?* Our hypothesis is that perceived disapproval will be more widespread for women than men on both behaviours because these pose a stronger threat to traditional women's roles (Hypothesis 2).
3. *Does the normative climate have an effect on gender role attitudes over and above individuals' normative expectations and other relevant personal characteristics? If so, does the effect hold even after controlling for country-level characteristics (especially relevant policies) related to these outcomes?* We expect normative climate to have a positive effect—such that in countries where many individuals believe that others disapprove, individuals will express greater disapproval themselves (Hypothesis 3). To test for the robustness of a normative climate effect, we include several individual- and country-level controls that have been shown to be important in previous research.

Method

Data

We use data from 21 countries in the third round of the ESS, which included the rotating module ‘The timing of life: The organization of the life course in Europe’ and was collected between August 2006 and November 2007 (for information on the module, see [ESS Round 3 Data, 2006](#); Fitzgerald and Widdop, 2007). In each country, participants were selected as a random probability sample of all people aged ≥ 15 years. The current study is restricted to those who are aged ≥ 18 years. The survey was carried out in 25 countries, but no design weights were available for Latvia and Romania (which were necessary for the construction of normative climate indicators), and many country-level indicators were not available for Switzerland and Ukraine.

The module was administered as ‘split ballot’: a random half of respondents were asked questions about women’s lives, while the other half were asked the same questions about men’s lives. This design provides a unique opportunity to compare perceptions *about* women and men *by* women and men. However, it does not enable comparing opinions about men and women within individuals because respondents were asked *either* about women *or* about men. Separate analyses are therefore conducted for four groups: women judging women, men judging women, men judging men, and women judging men.

Dependent Variable

Gender role attitudes

Gender role attitudes were assessed with two items: ‘How much do you approve or disapprove if a woman [man] chooses never to have children?’ and ‘How much do you approve or disapprove if a woman [man] has a full-time job while she [he] has children aged under 3?’. These items were rated on a 5-point scale: 1 (*strongly disapprove*), 2 (*disapprove*), 3 (*neither approve nor disapprove*), 4 (*approve*), and 5 (*strongly approve*). These items were recoded so that higher values indicated stronger disapproval.

Independent Variables

Individual-level variables

Perception of others’ gender role attitudes. Respondents’ perceptions of others’ gender role attitudes were assessed with the same items, but with a different introduction and response scale: ‘Apart from your own

feelings, how do you think most people would react if a woman [man] they knew well did any of the following?’: ‘How would they react if she [he] chose never to have children?’ and ‘How would they react if she [he] had a full-time job while she [he] had children aged under 3?’. These items were rated on a 4-point scale: 1 (*most people would openly disapprove*), 2 (*most people would secretly disapprove*), 3 (*most people would not mind either way*), and 4 (*most people would approve*). We created a dichotomous variable to indicate perceived disapproval (1, combining Categories 1 and 2) vs. no perceived disapproval (0, combining Categories 3 and 4).

Control variables. The following individual-level variables were included as controls: birth cohort (reference: born before 1946), country of birth (reference: born in country of data collection), marital status (reference: married), years of education, religious affiliation (reference: no religious affiliation), and religious activity (reference: less than once a month). Additionally, we control for respondents’ own relevant behaviour, namely whether they have children (reference: no children) and whether they work part- or full-time (reference: no employment).

Country-level variables

Normative climate. Dichotomous responses from the perception of others’ gender role attitudes were aggregated on the country level (design weights were applied in the aggregation). A ratio was created to represent the share of respondents who perceive that others disapprove.

Gross domestic product. As an indicator of a country’s economic situation, we used the 2006 value for GDP at Purchasing Power Parity per capita, which was available for all countries.

Gender equity index. GEI is an index of socio-economic opportunities in the domains of knowledge, economic resources and participation, and political empowerment ([Mills, 2010](#)). GEI was available for 2007 in all countries.

Coverage rate for children <3 years old. This variable indicates the ‘number of places in public (or publicly subsidized) childcare facilities as a share of the number of children aged 0 to 2 years’ (Keck and Saraceno, 2011: p. 61). The information, from the Multilinks Database on Intergenerational Policy Indicators, was available for 2004 in all countries.

Maternity leave. This indicator reflects the length and compensation of maternity leave. It is the product of two indicators from the Multilinks database: ‘Maximum length of standard maternity leave’ (transformed into months) multiplied with ‘Cash benefit during maternity leave in percentage of income before taking up leave’. The resulting indicator represents number of months with 100 per cent income, and was available for 2004 in all countries.

Childlessness rate. The indicator represents the percentage of women aged 33–37 years with no children living in their household. This is an approximate indicator of childlessness, as ‘these women are old enough to have had most of the children they are ever going to have; and they are young enough that only a very small proportion of their children will have left home’ (Iacovou and Skew, 2010: p. 16). This indicator was available for 2007 in 18 countries (Bulgaria, Norway, and Russia are exceptions).

Maternal employment rate. From the OECD Family Database, this indicator represents the percentage of mothers who work when their children are <3 years of age. It was available for 2011 in 19 countries (Norway and Russia are exceptions).

Data Analyses

Multilevel models with individuals at Level 1 and countries at Level 2 included the 21 countries for which most relevant variables were available. All country-level variables were grand-mean-centred. First, intercept-only models were run to determine the intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs). Second, all individual-level variables (including normative expectations) were included. In the third model, societal normative climate was added at the country level. In a fourth step, policies (childcare coverage rate and maternity leave) and country-level control variables (GDP and GEI) were added. To examine the robustness of the societal normative climate effect, we also tested additional country-level variables individually (not reported here but available on request), which did not change the reported results.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of gender role attitudes, as well as societal normative climate, for each country. Personal disapproval of fathers working full-time is generally weaker than disapproval

of mothers working full-time and women and men being voluntarily childless—and for both men and women in every country. Differences in the disapproval of men vs. women are smaller for voluntary childlessness than for working full-time. Overall, however, there is stronger disapproval of men who decide to not to have children than of women who choose not to do so. The lower disapproval of women may be owing to the perception that women must often make a choice between having a family and having a career, while men are not typically faced with such a stark decision and thus have no ‘valid’ reason to remain childless. Respondents in Denmark and Norway are least disapproving of men and women who decide to remain childless or work full-time with young children, while respondents in Bulgaria and Russia are most disapproving of men and women who decide to remain childless. Point-biserial correlations between own gender role attitudes and perception of others’ gender role attitudes are moderate for all groups for childlessness (r_{pb} varied between 0.38 and 0.44) and for full-time work (r_{pb} varied between 0.31 and 0.47).

Figures 1 and 2 map, across countries, societal normative climates regarding voluntary childlessness and working full-time when having young children, measured as the percentage of respondents who believe that others disapprove, and presented separately for men and women as targets. Normative climate regarding childlessness varies strongly across countries, and the variation for women seems greater for childlessness than for full-time work. The pattern of results observed for normative climate (average perceived disapproval) generally mirrors the tendencies observed for gender role attitudes (respondents’ own disapproval) in Table 1. However, in contrast to gender role attitudes, there is in most countries a stronger normative climate of disapproval of voluntary childlessness for women than for men.

There are sharp cross-country differences in normative climates related to women’s voluntary childlessness and full-time work. For instance, in Eastern European countries, perceived disapproval of women not having children is more widespread than for mothers working full-time; in contrast, in liberal market states (i.e., those that provide minimal support to families, such as the Netherlands and United Kingdom), perceived disapproval of mothers who work full-time is far more widespread than for women who are childless.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, there is more perceived disapproval of women’s voluntary childlessness ($M = 42.48$, $SD = 21.35$) than of men’s childlessness ($M = 39.35$, $SD = 21.79$) in 19 out of 21 countries, and

Table 1. Sample sizes, means, and standard deviations for gender role attitudes (own disapproval) and normative climate, by country

Country	Sample size				Own disapproval								Normative climate				
	About women		About men		Voluntary childlessness				Full-time work				Voluntary childlessness		Full-time work		
	W	M	M	W	W	M	M	W	W	M	M	W	W	W	M	W	M
	n				M (SD)				M (SD)				Per cent of disapproval		Per cent of disapproval		
Austria	619	594	455	618	3.11 (0.96)	3.18 (1.05)	3.07 (0.95)	3.15 (0.94)	3.59 (1.00)	3.58 (1.00)	2.38 (0.95)	2.43 (1.10)	39.87	36.53	66.15	12.14	
Belgium	430	377	418	469	2.41 (1.09)	2.37 (1.08)	2.52 (1.09)	2.60 (1.13)	2.57 (1.15)	2.62 (1.13)	1.79 (0.85)	1.81 (0.85)	28.86	25.06	23.88	5.07	
Bulgaria	402	255	270	427	4.43 (0.95)	4.50 (0.77)	4.36 (0.93)	4.45 (0.87)	3.23 (1.29)	3.34 (1.34)	1.95 (1.31)	1.94 (1.27)	83.42	83.39	34.38	11.07	
Cyprus	248	233	219	249	3.77 (0.91)	3.86 (1.00)	3.57 (1.12)	3.71 (1.04)	2.48 (0.92)	2.41 (0.90)	1.98 (0.76)	1.97 (0.80)	78.33	76.97	27.60	8.12	
Denmark	359	359	359	392	1.59 (0.84)	1.70 (0.92)	1.71 (0.87)	1.70 (0.88)	2.06 (1.11)	2.03 (1.06)	1.58 (0.74)	1.49 (0.65)	16.28	9.97	9.74	1.91	
Estonia	441	317	312	378	3.93 (0.83)	3.93 (0.76)	3.94 (0.81)	4.02 (0.81)	3.48 (0.80)	3.62 (0.80)	2.10 (0.90)	2.01 (0.89)	68.12	63.95	36.53	5.51	
Finland	476	452	434	448	2.21 (1.01)	2.33 (1.00)	2.64 (1.07)	2.70 (1.13)	2.32 (0.96)	2.45 (0.96)	1.91 (0.71)	1.73 (0.69)	32.63	29.37	17.54	4.01	
France	505	465	435	523	3.00 (1.10)	2.94 (1.09)	3.27 (1.07)	3.22 (1.12)	2.86 (1.21)	2.86 (1.18)	2.11 (1.07)	1.97 (0.97)	41.16	38.19	27.43	9.79	
Germany	727	670	691	684	3.07 (0.76)	3.19 (0.73)	3.16 (0.76)	3.16 (0.72)	3.40 (0.89)	3.42 (0.84)	2.45 (0.86)	2.43 (0.91)	36.16	29.91	59.81	11.18	
Hungary	423	303	307	441	3.70 (0.97)	3.57 (0.87)	3.50 (0.82)	3.66 (0.88)	3.36 (1.00)	3.38 (0.94)	1.99 (0.85)	1.92 (0.83)	54.28	50.61	43.99	8.24	
Ireland	423	354	370	439	2.92 (0.85)	2.90 (0.65)	3.06 (0.74)	3.10 (0.70)	2.88 (0.89)	2.94 (0.79)	2.19 (0.86)	2.30 (0.87)	26.73	22.10	23.53	3.25	
Netherlands	486	420	431	512	2.09 (1.03)	2.26 (1.09)	2.30 (1.08)	2.31 (1.03)	3.22 (1.19)	3.25 (1.11)	1.98 (0.85)	2.16 (0.93)	30.48	29.07	63.79	10.95	
Norway	405	428	423	408	1.92 (0.94)	2.09 (1.05)	2.05 (0.90)	2.29 (0.99)	2.01 (1.07)	2.15 (1.06)	1.75 (0.78)	1.72 (0.74)	11.81	10.42	11.42	3.14	
Poland	428	382	382	424	3.33 (1.05)	3.39 (1.02)	3.40 (0.99)	3.47 (1.04)	2.74 (1.01)	2.81 (0.98)	1.98 (0.82)	1.98 (0.76)	47.27	40.02	22.51	6.13	
Portugal	680	442	393	655	2.92 (0.89)	2.93 (2.71)	2.91 (0.87)	3.01 (0.88)	2.75 (0.86)	2.71 (0.87)	2.37 (0.82)	2.47 (0.85)	31.43	32.27	21.24	12.50	
Russia	711	435	480	686	4.22 (0.80)	4.20 (0.78)	4.12 (0.83)	4.20 (0.77)	3.49 (0.95)	3.48 (0.91)	2.06 (0.99)	2.01 (0.99)	84.06	82.11	54.39	12.84	
Slovakia	407	399	389	445	3.61 (0.90)	3.52 (0.88)	3.52 (0.91)	3.64 (0.85)	3.25 (0.98)	3.36 (0.92)	2.11 (0.91)	2.21 (1.00)	54.20	49.12	44.29	12.34	
Slovenia	361	312	310	402	3.09 (1.11)	3.03 (1.01)	3.26 (1.01)	3.21 (1.03)	2.76 (0.98)	2.82 (0.98)	2.46 (0.81)	2.32 (0.77)	49.92	45.03	23.16	14.58	
Spain	498	423	436	449	2.76 (1.01)	2.90 (0.93)	2.96 (1.03)	2.96 (0.98)	2.67 (0.95)	2.78 (0.98)	2.11 (0.91)	2.22 (0.90)	33.36	33.26	30.73	13.95	
Sweden	471	439	474	466	2.20 (0.87)	2.41 (0.87)	2.66 (0.80)	2.72 (0.86)	2.62 (1.06)	2.67 (1.01)	2.41 (0.86)	2.50 (0.85)	24.49	21.66	25.14	8.88	
United Kingdom	649	525	515	623	2.71 (0.78)	2.77 (0.73)	2.82 (0.78)	2.90 (0.63)	3.18 (0.91)	3.34 (0.83)	2.19 (0.84)	2.19 (0.87)	19.29	16.97	43.33	5.06	

Note. W = female respondents, M = male respondents.

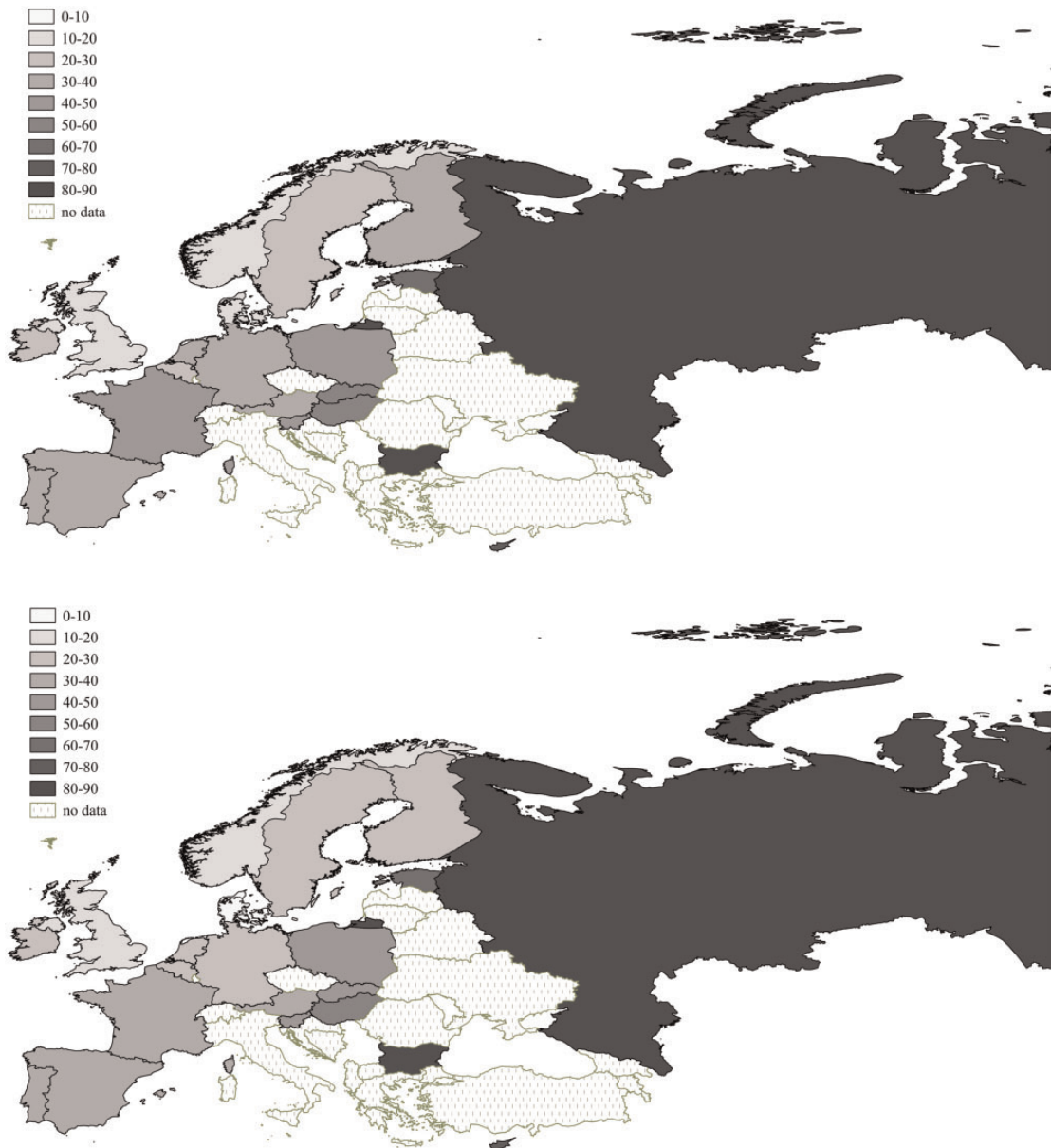


Figure 1. Normative climate of disapproval of voluntary childlessness for women (top) and men (bottom). The shading scale represents the percentage of respondents who believe that others disapprove. The dotted pattern represents countries for which no data were available.

the Wilcoxon signed-rank test is significant ($P < 0.001$). The difference in perceived disapproval for women and men is also present—and much stronger—for full-time work: In all countries, perceived disapproval of mothers' full-time work ($M = 33.84$, $SD = 16.54$) is much more widespread than perceived disapproval of fathers' full-time work ($M = 8.61$, $SD = 3.93$, $P < 0.001$).

Table 2 shows the correlations among the country-level indicators and normative climates of voluntary childlessness and full-time work for men and for women. The two normative climate variables are moderately correlated for men and for women. Normative climate regarding childlessness is negatively associated with all variables except maternity leave, which is

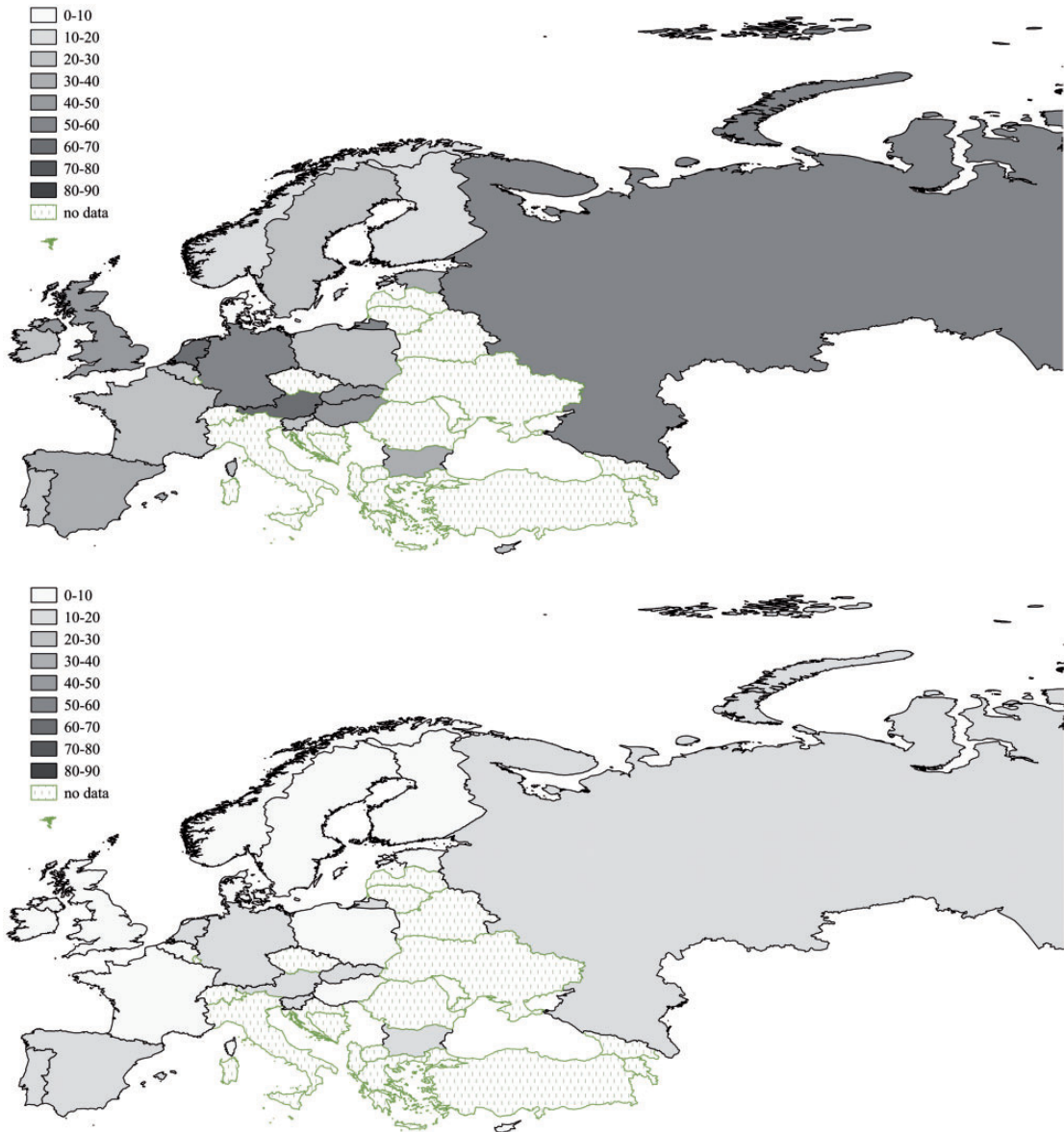


Figure 2. Normative climate of disapproval of full-time work for women (top) and men (bottom) who have children <3 years of age. The shading scale represents the percentage of respondents who believe that others disapprove. The dotted pattern represents countries for which no data were available.

positive. Normative climate concerning women's full-time work is negatively associated with childcare coverage rate, while normative climate concerning men's full-time work is negatively associated with GDP. None of the correlations present problems of multicollinearity, with the exception of the correlation between GDP and normative climate regarding childlessness. For this reason, we also tested models of childlessness without GDP, and all results remained the same.

Model Testing

We first describe the results for voluntary childlessness, and then turn to working full-time when children are <3 years of age.

Voluntary childlessness

In Step 1, we ran intercept-only models to determine the variance at the individual and country level (Table 3). For personal disapproval of childlessness, the ICCs

Table 2. Correlation coefficients between country-level variables and climates of voluntary childlessness and full-time work for parents with children <3 years of age

	Climate full-time work	GDP	GEI	Coverage rate under 3	Maternity leave	Maternal employment	Per cent of without children (childlessness)
About women							
Climate childlessness	0.44* (N = 21)	-0.83*** (N = 21)	-0.56** (N = 21)	-0.46* (N = 21)	0.50* (N = 21)	-0.48* (N = 19)	-0.47* (N = 18)
Climate full-time work		-0.28 (N = 21)	-0.22 (N = 21)	-0.49* (N = 21)	0.27 (N = 21)	-0.24 (N = 19)	0.17 (N = 18)
About men							
Climate childlessness	0.55* (N = 21)	-0.85*** (N = 21)	-0.57** (N = 21)	-0.47* (N = 21)	0.50* (N = 21)	-0.46 (N = 19)	-0.52* (N = 18)
Climate full-time work		-0.55** (N = 21)	-0.23 (N = 21)	-0.30 (N = 21)	0.37 (N = 21)	0.14 (N = 19)	-0.08 (N = 18)
All							
GDP			0.33 (N = 21)	0.42 (N = 21)	-0.47* (N = 21)	0.47* (N = 19)	0.49* (N = 18)
GEI				0.29 (N = 21)	-0.15 (N = 21)	0.21 (N = 19)	0.56* (N = 18)
Coverage rate under 3					-0.16 (N = 21)	0.49* (N = 19)	0.01 (N = 18)
Maternity leave						-0.22 (N = 19)	-0.18 (N = 18)
Maternal employment							0.11 (N = 18)

Note. Spearman coefficients. *** $P < 0.001$, ** $P < 0.01$, * $P < 0.05$.

show that there is great variance at the country level (>30 per cent) for both men and women.

In Step 2, we included all individual-level variables simultaneously. Consistent with the first hypothesis, the more respondents believe that others disapprove of voluntary childlessness, the more they disapproved themselves, and this is true for all groups of respondents (i.e., effect of normative expectations). Respondents born before 1946 disapprove more of childless men and women than younger birth cohorts, immigrants disapprove more than natives, and married respondents disapprove more than single and divorced respondents. Religious individuals disapprove more than others. Respondents who are unemployed or non-active disapprove more than those in part-time or full-time employment. Education is only relevant when men judged women and women judged men: In these cases, those with lower education disapprove more than those with higher education. Not surprisingly, respondents with children express much stronger disapproval than those who are childless.

In Step 3 we included - in addition to the previous variables - *only* societal normative climate as country-level variable. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, normative climate has a significant positive effect in all four groups

(women judging women: $B = 0.03$, $S.E. = 0.00$, $P < 0.001$; men judging women: $B = 0.03$, $S.E. = 0.00$, $P < 0.001$; men judging men: $B = 0.02$, $S.E. = 0.00$, $P < 0.001$; women judging men: $B = 0.02$, $S.E. = 0.00$, $P < 0.001$). In countries where many people believe that others disapprove of childlessness, respondents generally disapprove more of childlessness.

In Step 4 (shown in Table 3), we included the family-work policy indicators, as well as GDP and GEI. The economic situation in the country has no impact on disapproval of childlessness, while women in countries with lower gender equity express greater disapproval of women who are childless. In countries where the childcare coverage rate for children <3 years of age is high, men are less disapproving of women who decide not to have children. In countries with longer and better-compensated maternity leave, respondents are less disapproving of men who remain childless. Importantly, the societal normative climate effect remains significant in all groups of respondents, even when controlling for these country-level indicators.

In a separate model (owing to missing information in several countries, $n = 18$), we included the country-level childlessness rate to test the robustness of the normative climate effect. The proportion of childless women is not

Table 3. Final multilevel models for disapproval of voluntary childlessness, for each group

Independent variables	Women about	Men about	Men about	Women about
	women	women	men	men
	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)
Individual level				
Intercept	2.76 (0.07)***	2.78 (0.07)***	2.81 (0.07)***	2.94 (0.06)***
Cohort 1946–1955 vs. cohort < 1946	–0.16 (0.03)***	–0.08 (0.04)*	–0.09 (0.04)**	–0.17 (0.03)***
Cohort 1956–1965 vs. cohort < 1946	–0.28 (0.04)***	–0.17 (0.04)***	–0.18 (0.04)***	–0.26 (0.03)***
Cohort 1966–1975 vs. cohort < 1946	–0.29 (0.04)***	–0.23 (0.04)***	–0.23 (0.04)***	–0.30 (0.04)***
Cohort > 1975 vs. cohort < 1946	–0.10 (0.04)*	–0.09 (0.04)*	–0.13 (0.04)**	–0.14 (0.04)***
Country of birth: other	0.16 (0.04)***	0.10 (0.04)*	0.14 (0.04)**	0.12 (0.04)**
Single vs. married	–0.11 (0.03)**	–0.02 (0.04)	–0.06 (0.04)	–0.06 (0.03)
Divorced vs. married	–0.13 (0.03)***	–0.09 (0.04)*	–0.09 (0.04)*	–0.07 (0.03)*
Widowed vs. married	0.07 (0.03)*	–0.02 (0.06)	–0.01 (0.05)	–0.06 (0.03)
Children	0.27 (0.03)***	0.18 (0.03)***	0.24 (0.03)***	0.18 (0.03)***
Years of education	0.00 (0.00)	–0.00 (0.00)**	0.00 (0.00)	–0.01 (0.00)***
Part-time vs. no employment	–0.06 (0.03)	–0.24 (0.06)***	–0.05 (0.06)	–0.01 (0.03)*
Full-time vs. no employment	–0.04 (0.03)	–0.08 (0.03)**	–0.07 (0.03)**	–0.05 (0.02)
Catholic vs. no religion	0.08 (0.03)**	0.04 (0.03)	0.09 (0.03)**	0.14 (0.03)***
Other Christian vs. no religion	0.06 (0.03)*	0.11 (0.03)***	0.12 (0.03)***	0.10 (0.03)***
Other non-Christian vs. no religion	0.37 (0.08)***	0.54 (0.08)***	0.33 (0.08)***	0.28 (0.08)***
Religious activity	0.20 (0.03)***	0.13 (0.03)***	0.12 (0.03)***	0.10 (0.03)***
Perception of others' disapproval	0.42 (0.02)***	0.54 (0.02)***	0.57 (0.02)***	0.57 (0.02)***
Country level				
Normative climate	0.03 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.00)***
GDP	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Gender equality GEI	–0.02 (0.01)*	–0.01 (0.01)	–0.02 (0.01)	–0.01 (0.01)
Coverage rate for children under 3	–0.01 (0.00)	–0.01 (0.00)*	0.00 (0.00)	–0.01 (0.00)
Maternity leave (length and compensation)	–0.15 (0.09)	–0.14 (0.08)	–0.17 (0.08)*	–0.22 (0.08)**
Variance components				
ICC (intercept-only)	0.395	0.377	0.334	0.342
Within-country variance (intercept-only)	0.879	0.861	0.859	0.840
Between-country variance (intercept-only)	0.575	0.521	0.430	0.437
Within-country variance (all predictors)	0.783	0.772	0.742	0.742
Between-country variance (all predictors)	0.059	0.058	0.055	0.049

Note. *** $P < 0.001$, ** $P < 0.01$, * $P < 0.05$.

associated with personal disapproval of childlessness (women judging women: $B = 0.01$, $S.E. = 0.02$, $P > 0.05$; men judging women: $B = 0.01$, $S.E. = 0.01$, $P > 0.05$; men judging men: $B = 0.01$, $S.E. = 0.01$, $P > 0.05$; women judging men: $B = 0.01$, $S.E. = 0.01$, $P > 0.05$), and the effect of societal normative climate remains significant in all groups.

Working full-time when children are <3 years of age

We followed the same procedure for analysing disapproval of parents who work full-time work when children are young (see Table 4). Relative to voluntary childlessness, the country-level variance for working full-time is much smaller but nonetheless remarkable,

especially for disapproval of mothers. In contrast, the between-country variance for men working full-time is small (<10 per cent).

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the more respondents believe that others disapprove of fathers and mothers who work full-time when they have young children, the more they themselves disapprove—and this is again true for all groups of respondents (i.e., effect of normative expectations). Generally, the individual-level variables have a bigger impact on disapproval of mothers who work full-time than of fathers who do so. Similar to childlessness, respondents from cohorts born before 1946 disapprove more of mothers working full-time than younger birth cohorts, but there is no such effect for fathers working full-time. However, men <30 years of age are more

Table 4. Final multilevel models for disapproval of parents who work full-time while children are <3 years of age, for each group

Independent variables	Women about	Men about	Men about	Women about
	women	women	men	men
	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)
Individual level				
Intercept	2.90 (0.06)***	2.82 (0.06)***	2.05 (0.06)***	2.12 (0.06)***
Cohort 1946–1955 vs. cohort < 1946	–0.11 (0.03)**	–0.08 (0.04)*	0.05 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)
Cohort 1956–1965 vs. cohort < 1946	–0.16 (0.04)***	–0.19 (0.04)***	0.04 (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)
Cohort 1966–1975 vs. cohort < 1946	–0.20 (0.04)***	–0.24 (0.04)***	0.04 (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)
Cohort > 1975 vs. cohort < 1946	–0.25 (0.04)***	–0.13 (0.05)**	0.11 (0.04)**	0.02 (0.04)
Country of birth: other	0.11 (0.03)**	0.04 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)
Single vs. married	–0.09 (0.03)**	–0.04 (0.04)	–0.05 (0.04)	–0.05 (0.03)
Divorced vs. married	–0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	–0.01 (0.03)
Widowed vs. married	0.02 (0.03)	0.10 (0.06)	0.04 (0.05)	–0.08 (0.03)**
Children	–0.01 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	–0.07 (0.03)*	–0.06 (0.03)*
Years of education	0.00 (0.00)	–0.01 (0.00)***	0.00 (0.00)*	0.00 (0.00)
Part-time vs. no employment	–0.09 (0.04)**	–0.16 (0.06)**	0.05 (0.05)	–0.03 (0.03)
Full-time vs. no employment	–0.22 (0.03)***	–0.08 (0.03)**	–0.04 (0.03)	–0.08 (0.02)***
Catholic vs. no religion	0.06 (0.03)*	–0.02 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	–0.05 (0.03)
Other Christian vs. no religion	0.13 (0.03)***	0.05 (0.03)	–0.01 (0.03)	–0.02 (0.03)
Other non-Christian vs. no religion	0.34 (0.08)***	0.43 (0.08)***	–0.08 (0.08)	0.02 (0.07)
Religious activity	0.17 (0.03)***	0.12 (0.03)***	0.03 (0.03)	0.06 (0.02)**
Perception of others' disapproval	0.75 (0.02)***	0.82 (0.02)***	0.91 (0.04)***	0.99 (0.03)***
Country level				
Normative climate	0.02 (0.00)***	0.01 (0.00)***	0.03 (0.01)*	0.04 (0.01)**
GDP	–0.00 (0.00)*	–0.00 (0.00)*	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Gender equality GEI	–0.02 (0.01)*	–0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Coverage rate for children under 3	0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Maternity leave (length and compensation)	–0.08 (0.07)	–0.06 (0.07)	–0.10 (0.07)	–0.15 (0.07)*
Variance components				
ICC (intercept-only)	0.171	0.181	0.063	0.080
Within-country variance (intercept-only)	1.015	0.974	0.782	0.811
Between-country variance (intercept-only)	0.210	0.215	0.053	0.071
Within-country variance (all predictors)	0.841	0.792	0.692	0.704
Between-country variance (all predictors)	0.033	0.033	0.036	0.037

Note. *** $P < 0.001$, ** $P < 0.01$, * $P < 0.05$.

disapproving of fathers working full-time than men aged ≥ 60 years. Education has a complex effect for men: Men with lower education are more disapproving of mothers working full-time, but less disapproving of fathers working full-time, than men with higher education.

Native and married women are more disapproving of mothers working full-time than immigrant and single women, and married women are also more disapproving of fathers working full-time. Respondents without children are more disapproving of fathers working full-time, and religious individuals disapprove more strongly than others. Not surprisingly, respondents who work part- or full-time are less disapproving of mothers working full-time, and women working full-time are also less disapproving of fathers working full-time.

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, societal normative climate has a significant effect on personal disapproval, such that in countries where many people believe that others disapprove of full-time work with children, respondents are also more disapproving (women judging mothers: $B = 0.02$, $S.E. = 0.00$, $P < 0.001$; men judging mothers: $B = 0.02$, $S.E. = 0.00$, $P < 0.001$; men judging fathers: $B = 0.03$, $S.E. = 0.01$, $P = 0.010$; women judging fathers: $B = 0.03$, $S.E. = 0.01$, $P = 0.002$).

In lower GDP countries, respondents are more disapproving of mothers who work full-time when they have young children. As with the findings on childlessness, women in countries with lower gender equity are more disapproving of mothers who work full-time. In countries with longer and better-compensated maternity

leave, women disapprove less of fathers who work full-time. However, these policy indicators have no impact on how women and men think about mothers, or on how men think about fathers.

In a separate model (owing to missing information in some countries, $n=19$), we included the country-level maternal employment rate to test the robustness of the normative climate effect. The percentage of mothers working is not associated with disapproval of mothers or fathers who work full-time (women judging mothers: $B=0.00$, $S.E.=0.00$, $P>0.05$; men judging mothers: $B=-0.01$, $S.E.=0.00$, $P>0.05$; men judging fathers: $B=0.00$, $S.E.=0.00$, $P>0.05$; women judging fathers: $B=0.00$, $S.E.=0.00$, $P>0.05$). As before, the normative climate effect remains significant in all groups of respondents after controlling for the country-level indicators.

Discussion

Societal Normative Climates across Europe

Our first aim was to describe normative climates of parenthood across Europe, focusing on two issues that potentially threaten traditional views of adulthood and family life: women and men who choose to remain childless or to work full-time when they have young children. The descriptive statistics indicated that societal normative climates regarding these behaviours differed significantly across countries. While the perception that having children is primordial for women and men is shared by many respondents in Eastern European countries, a smaller portion of respondents perceive disapproval of voluntary childlessness for men and women in countries with liberal market states, such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, which provide only minimal support for families. However, in these latter countries, as well as in some countries with conservative states like Austria and Germany, a much higher percentage of respondents believe that mothers but not fathers are expected to stop working full-time to take care of their children. This is much less the case for women in Eastern European countries, where mothers' participation in the labour market has been encouraged by communist states (Brunnbauer, 2000). The societal normative climates surrounding voluntary childlessness and full-time work for parents with young children were themselves only moderately associated for both men and women.

It is important to note, however, that people generally perceived more disapproval of women than of men for both behaviours, as predicted by Hypothesis 2. Motherhood is seen as central in women's lives, and

many respondents thought that women who reject this life transition are subject to significant social disapproval. There was little perceived disapproval of fathers' full-time work across Europe, but perceived disapproval of the rejection of fatherhood was much more widespread and similar to perceived disapproval of the rejection of motherhood. Having children is thus collectively valued as a central event of both women's and men's lives. In contrast, the raising of children is perceived to be women's role much more than men's, suggesting that the traditional male breadwinner model generally remains valid in most contexts.

Societal Normative Climates and Individuals' Gender Role Attitudes

Our second aim was to assess whether normative climates are associated with gender role attitudes over and above individual-level characteristics and, if so, whether the effect remains after controlling for country-level characteristics. First, individuals who believed that others disapprove of voluntary childlessness and full-time work for parents with young children also reported more disapproval of these behaviours themselves (Hypothesis 1, effect of normative expectations). This effect was strongly significant even after controlling for individual-level characteristics, such as own relevant behaviour.

The major finding, however, was the persistent and robust effect of societal normative climate on gender role attitudes (Hypothesis 3). In countries where a higher share of respondents perceived disapproval of childlessness or of parents with young children who work full-time, respondents themselves disapproved more strongly—even after controlling for their own perception of others' disapproval. This climate effect was *not* due to the fact that people who disapproved also believed that others disapproved more. By including the perception of others' disapproval on both individual and country levels, we showed a consistently strong *contextual* effect, indicating that individuals disapprove more when they live in a country where many people believe that others disapprove.

In additional analyses (available on request), we tested for cross-level interactions between perception of others' disapproval (i.e., normative expectation) and normative climate. With the exception of women's judgment of other women's childlessness, none of the interactions were significant. These results revealed that respondents who themselves perceived others' disapproval tended to express even stronger disapproval when they live in societies where the perception of

others' disapproval is collectively shared. More strikingly, in such climates, even those who believe that others *approve* (for example, because of their specific social position) tended to express more negative views than their counterparts who live in societies where there is less consensus in the perception of disapproval. This reveals that the impact of normative climates can shape individuals' positions beyond their own interpretation of public opinion. In other words, how people speak about relevant societal issues is, among other things, shaped by internalized societal codes that can go beyond their conscious 'rational' reading of public opinion. This is in accordance with Bodor (2012: p. 272), who, referring to Noelle-Neumann's (2001) 'spiral of silence' theory of the influence of public opinion, stresses that 'the climate of opinion is not perceived via some sort of conscious process or in a calculating fashion... Instead, individuals sense the opinion climate—at least in part—unconsciously'.

Furthermore, the effect of normative climate persisted after controlling for relevant individual-level variables, such as respondents' own relevant behaviour (e.g., parental and employment statuses), religiosity, education, and cohort. Again, this illustrates the importance of the normative climate, as it affects even individuals who themselves engage in the disapproved behaviours (e.g., individuals without children).

Finally, by controlling for relevant country-level variables, we showed that general levels of gender equity or policies in a given country *could not* explain the effect of normative climate. Normative climate carried an independent effect. Even more, differences in gender role attitudes between countries were almost completely explained by differences in the normative climate within countries. This does not mean that normative climates and policies are unrelated. To the contrary, we suggest that normative climates are influenced by, and in turn influence, policies and institutions. However, the fact that the normative climate effect did not disappear once we introduced policy indicators revealed that the normative climate could not be equated with or reduced to effects of policies and institutions.

Effects of Individual- and Country-Level Variables

Individual-level predictors found in previous research were largely confirmed in this study. Older, less educated, and religious individuals disapprove more of voluntary childlessness and mothers' full-time work than others. Married women disapprove more of childlessness and mothers' full-time work than single and divorced women, which may reflect their different life

style. Interestingly, younger and highly educated men disapprove more of fathers working full-time than do older and less educated men. Stronger disapproval seems to reflect an endorsement of more egalitarian gender roles, emphasizing the role of fathers in caring for young children as opposed to their traditional and more exclusive role as breadwinners.

Results concerning the effect of family-work policies were more complex than anticipated. Childcare coverage rate had almost no effect, but maternity leave decreased disapproval of men but not of women who work full-time and are voluntarily childless. The effect for fathers' full-time work may be due to the two-sided nature of maternity leave. Maternity leave helps reconcile work-family tensions, but it also ensures that it is women who care for young children while men work full-time. The effect for men's childlessness is difficult to interpret and further research is necessary to detect underlying mechanisms.

Interestingly, gender equality only had an impact on women who judge other women: Women who live in highly *unequal* societies judged other women more severely, which may reflect their personal experiences. Women in unequal countries have fewer opportunities, are generally less educated, and have lower employment positions. This may reinforce and validate traditional life courses and foster their disapproval of women who seem to prioritize their careers over children. The lower disapproval of mothers' full-time work in higher GDP countries is likely due to the fact that childcare coverage and maternal employment rates are also higher in these countries, thus making mother's employment more normal and acceptable. The two behaviour-based country-level indicators (i.e., childlessness rate and maternal employment rate) had no effect on disapproval of men and women. The absence of effect of maternal employment rate on disapproval of working mothers was due to the inclusion of GDP: In models without GDP (not shown here), there was an effect of maternal employment rate on disapproval of mothers who work full-time. The absence of an effect of childlessness rate may be owing to the fact that such a measure cannot capture lifelong childlessness.

Our study considered normative climates at the national level because we were interested in depicting the influence of social norms at the broader societal level, which is relevant for norm transmission through public debate, mass media, and institutional settings. However, normative climates are surely shaped by and exert their influence at various levels (e.g., local communities, transnational linguistically defined spaces) and in various groups and contexts (e.g., occupational areas,

religious communities, or virtual social media communities), making it likely that multiple normative climates coexist within a country and beyond its borders. Future research should compare the nature and experience of normative climates at the societal level with those operating at more local levels and in different types of social groups and communities.

Conclusion

Normative climates regarding the roles of men and women in society are highly variable across Europe, especially regarding women's roles as mothers and workers. Furthermore, the weak and less variable normative climate concerning fathers' full-time work suggests that the traditional role of the male breadwinner is not contested.

Most importantly, normative climates are reliably and strongly associated with individuals' gender role attitudes *independently* of relevant individual- and country-level characteristics. This finding is particularly important in terms of social change and points to an important direction for future research concerned with the effectiveness of policies: Although policies and normative climates are related, the persistence of the normative climate effect suggests that a change in attitudes (and likely behaviours) depends not only on a change in policies, but a change in the reigning normative climate, which is likely to be much slower and more gradual. The study of normative climates thus seems crucial for understanding contemporary gender role attitudes and their evolution.

The independent effect of normative climates also represents an important angle for understanding the latent role of norms in contemporary European societies. In these societies, which often emphasize flexibility and freedom in individual life choices, behaviours seem less constrained by strict traditional and religious regulations. However, in such environments, societal codes concerning appropriate behaviours may nonetheless exist and exert a powerful and independent influence on individuals. That is, they seem to be internalized to such an extent that they shape individuals' opinions above and beyond their personal perceptions of prevailing norms. The results and methods presented here demonstrate this less visible but nonetheless significant impact of societal influences on attitudes about the contemporary roles of men and women.

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