

## **Measuring attitudes towards voluntary childlessness in Europe**

### **Introduction**

Cultural norms and values have traditionally encouraged reproduction and parenthood, whereas childlessness has been regarded as a stigmatised status, especially for women (see: Miall 1986). Across the world, common lay beliefs emphasise that parenthood is essential to have a meaningful and fulfilled life (Hansen, 2012) and becoming a parent has been usually described as part of a standardised life course (Neugarten, 1969). The decades since the 1960s, however, have seen both cultural and structural changes that have redefined the adult life course, family, and parenthood. Major ideational and cultural shifts have increasingly emphasised self-fulfilment, choice, personal development, and freedom, so that the choice of having children became just one among many concurrent others (Inglehart, 1990; Mills et al., 2011). Some authors suggest that the process of secularisation and the blurring of social prescriptions have given women the genuine choices as to how to live their lives and to follow their real preferences about family and career or a mix of the two (Hakim 2003). Other authors see the choice of remaining childlessness as the ultimate liberation in the process of women's emancipation from their gendered role. The widespread availability of safe contraceptives, since the Seventies, allows women to make an effective decision about whether to have children or not, while being sexually active. Childlessness, along with the deliberate choice to remain childfree, has become more prevalent and more visible (see; Hakim, 2000). With the increasing prevalence of childlessness in most Western societies (Sobotka, 2017), having children becomes less and less of a socially expected norm (Noordhuizen et al., 2010).

Lifetime or permanent childlessness means that an individual has not had biological or adopted children by the end of their reproductive life. However, childless individuals are a very heterogeneous group, who can experience childlessness in different—in some cases concurrent—temporal, motivational, and normative dimensions. However, there are other dimensions of parenting such as social parenting. It can be defined as there is neither a biological nor a legal link between the adult and the children, but their relationship is similar to a child-parent relationship due to the social aspects such as having stepchildren (Bures & Koropecj-Cox, 2009). However, survey research on social parenting does not address the issue.

It is difficult to study effectively what people evaluate to make the decision to remain childless, as childlessness is characterised by a non-event. It is not a choice as the decision to have a child,

so that one can theoretically study around nine months before, how the decision was taken, and assess the possible determinants of this choice. In case of permanent childlessness, a series of choices repeated across time is made, possibly for different reasons. The whole process leading to childlessness might be blurred: in some cases, the paths leading to childlessness is part of a rational choice process, adopted consciously to reject parenthood, but very often is just a continuous series of postponing childbearing (Berrington, 2017). Literature recognizes the permanent postponers who seem to desire to have children, but that postpone parenthood indefinitely, until they renounce it. In this case childlessness is not a deliberate choice. This process can be linked or not to the process of postponing (Berrington, 2017). Childlessness might also be explained by medical reasons.

Most research differentiates between two types of childlessness: voluntary and involuntary (Gillespie, 2001; Letherby, 2002). The former group includes those who freely choose to be childless, while the latter category includes those who are prevented from having children by external factors such as partnership instability, medical reasons or financial uncertainty. This dual division does not adequately accommodate the group who initially considers themselves temporarily childless but postpone childbearing until they run 'out of time' and are no longer able to have children for biological reasons or because the time range socially accepted for childbearing is over. Furthermore, the double division cannot classify homosexual individuals who want to have children but live in societies where there is heteronormatively prescribed childlessness, which means that non-heteronormative reproduction should be limited as much as possible.

Multiple studies have analysed voluntary childlessness (Noordhuizen et al., 2010; Rijken & Merz, 2014; de La Rochebrochard & Rozée, 2022; Eicher et al., 2016; Yucel, 2015) and many national and international surveys now contain questions on these issues. However, when respondents are surveyed about voluntary childlessness, it is not completely clear which situation respondents have in mind when they are asked to express their attitudes towards the decision of remaining childless. The present study attempts at shedding more light thereon.

Previous studies (Rijken & Merz, 2014) suggest that across countries, voluntarily childless people face different perceptions. Moreover, perceptions towards voluntary childlessness are different for men and women. Previous studies on gender differences showed that there are stronger expectations for women than for men to become parents (Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 2002). On the contrary some studies found more favourable attitudes towards men (Rijken & Merz, 2014). In their recent study, de La Rochebrochard and Rozée (2022) analysed how different survey designs account for the contradictory results. However, they did not

differentiate between item wordings. While their findings contribute considerably to our understanding of measuring voluntary childlessness, they did not examine the effect of using different items to measure the acceptance of voluntary childlessness. Yet, it is at least theoretically probable that when examining such a complex and sensitive issue as the attitudes towards voluntary childlessness not only the design affects the results, but that the item wording, i.e. what dimension is measured, also matters. Therefore, in this study we elaborate thereon. The dimensions considered are prescriptive vs. proscriptive.

The focus of this paper is on measuring attitudes towards voluntary childlessness. We first describe different indicators that are used and then focus on two that are used in international surveys. In order to assess how to measure attitudes towards voluntary childlessness, we replicate the analysis for two surveys that attempt to measure this concept. If the analyses produce corresponding findings, both measures of attitudes towards voluntary childlessness can be considered reliable.

Empirically, studying attitudes towards voluntary childless populations is important. First, to contribute to raising awareness of the implications of looking at different measures of voluntary childlessness. For survey research it is crucial to develop valid measures of voluntary childlessness. Second, the proportion of voluntary childless people is expected to further increase, so it is important to understand attitudes towards them and how it changes across time and space. Third, in some countries strong pronatalist family policies often portray voluntarily childless people as a free rider in a welfare state. Since it is a growing population group it is important to monitor the attitudes towards them in order to prevent their discrimination.

## **Data and methods**

Using data gathered from both the European Values Study (EVS) and the European Social Survey (ESS) regarding the attitudes towards voluntary childlessness and carrying out equivalent analyses, we test the relationship of these variables with other socio-demographic variables, individual level attitudes and values that are available in both surveys. This allows us to examine whether there are differences between the associations of socio-demographic determinants and attitudes towards voluntary childlessness, if they are measured in different ways, i.e. by two different variables within two surveys within the same set of countries.

The following 27 European countries took part in both the EVS and the ESS data collection: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal,

Norway, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. These countries are included in our analysis.

The sample is intended to represent the adult population 18 years old and older. In the ESS individuals over 15 are surveyed; here, we restrict the sample to those who are 18 or older in order to harmonise the two datasets. Face-to-face interviews with a standardised questionnaire were conducted between 2018 and 2020 in ESS. While EVS fieldwork was conducted between 2008 and 2017 through face-to-face interviews with standardised questionnaires.

The following item was included in the EVS: *“Do you think that a woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled or is this not necessary?”* The answer categories for this question were the following: 1- needs children; 2- not necessary. Later in the survey the following question was asked: *“Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: A man has to have children in order to be fulfilled”*. The answer categories were measured on a 5-point scale where 1 means agree strongly, and 5 means disagree strongly. These items represent a measure of proscriptive social norms of childlessness.

The ESS includes one item with a 5-point Likert scale asking to what extent respondents approve or disapprove the following statement: *How much do you approve or disapprove if a woman/man chooses never to have children?* Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disapprove) to 5 (strongly approve). This item represents a measure of perspective on social norms of childlessness since this item explicitly focuses on „choosing” not to have children and does not focus on its consequences as the EVS item. Moreover, it is not about (non-) acceptance but (dis)approval.

## **Results**

We found that the levels of acceptance toward male and female voluntary childlessness differed considerably across Europe. Regarding the mean values of our dependent variable, the lowest levels of support toward male and female voluntary childlessness are found in Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania and Hungary, while the highest levels of support were expressed in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Based on the ESS data we also found that the acceptance of voluntary female childlessness is higher in almost all countries than the acceptance of male voluntary childlessness.

In the ESS, the item focuses on the perspective of voluntary childlessness, i.e. it stresses the social expectation of parenthood. This item is formulated to focus on active decision-making; however, it is not clear how respondents understand and interpret this question. A Dutch

national survey Cultural Change in the Netherlands was clearer when it used almost the same item, but they added the half-sentence circumscribing “*A married couple decides to not have children, while there are no medical restrictions*” (Noordhuizen et al., 2010). The ESS item does not filter out active-decision making when somebody chooses not to have children because of health-related concerns. Thus, we suggest survey designers should complete the item with this clarification. For example, survey items should filter out medical issues and not having a partner.

The EVS item focuses on the proscriptive dimension of voluntary childlessness which means that it stresses the consequences of not having children. But this item neither filters out those who cannot have children due to medical restrictions. Since this item does not focus on the active decision-making it is less necessary to complete it with the medical restriction supplement.

Our aim was to explore whether these two items can equally measure the attitude towards voluntary childlessness by examining the same socio-demographic and family related factors and macro level indicators influence the attitudes towards the two dimensions of voluntary childlessness. To do that we included the same countries and the same independent variables. Across datasets, some results were similar: being higher educated, attending religious services more frequently, being childless predicts more supportive attitudes towards both male and female voluntary childlessness on both measurements. For the macro level variables, we found that gender inequality is strongly associated with attitudes towards both male and female voluntary childlessness in both dimensions.

However, there are also some differences between the two measurements: individuals who are retired are less tolerant in terms of the proscriptive dimension of voluntary childlessness than their employed counterparts. There is no association between employment status and prospective attitudes towards voluntary childlessness. Regarding the macro level factors there is a positive association between childlessness rate in the given country and attitudes towards voluntary childlessness in the prospective dimension, but there is no association in the perspective dimension which is consistent with previous studies (Eicher et al., 2015).

Meanwhile, the GII is an important factor in both attitudes towards voluntary childlessness. This might be because in societies where gender inequality is high, there are more traditional families with traditional gender roles. In these traditional families, having children is a key issue (Cook et al., 2023). At the same time, country level religiosity is not associated with attitudes towards voluntary childlessness in either of the studies. This result is an important contribution

to the literature since previous studies did not examine the association between country level religiosity and individual-level attitudes towards voluntary childlessness.

We found little difference in attitudes towards female and male voluntary childlessness; this indicates that how attitudes towards voluntary childlessness are measured is more important than whether the question applies to men or women.

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