

Attitudes about alternative families in Europe: the role of life-course experiences

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Short abstract

Attitudes towards diverse families vary considerably, largely driven by beliefs about the consequences for children's well-being. Yet, little is known about what shape these attitudes. This paper examines how individual life-course experiences influence views on diverse families. Specifically, we analyse the role of personal experiences during childhood - measured by the family structure at age 15 - and in adulthood - proxied by current marital status and experience of previous separation – in shaping perceptions of child well-being within diverse family types, including single-parent, step-parent, and same-sex families.

Drawing on data from the new “Attitudes toward family diversity” module of the European Social Survey Cronos-2 (2022), conducted across eleven European countries, we examine how people perceive children’s well-being in six alternative family types compared to the “traditional” non-separated two-biological parent (mother-father) families.

Results indicate that one-parent families receive less societal approval than step-families or same-sex families. Level of support vary widely across regions - from about 40% in Central and Eastern Europe to around 85% in Nordic countries. Young people, women, and those raised in non-traditional families tend to hold more positive attitudes toward child well-being in such family types. Stepwise logistic regressions, controlling for age, gender, education, income, professional situation, and country- reveal that experiencing parental separation during childhood - and, to a lesser extent, in adulthood – is associated with greater confidence in child well-being within non-traditional families such as one-parent (mother or father) and lesbian families, but not in stepfamilies. Future analyses will explore country-specific patterns.

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Long abstract

Background and aim

European families have diversified, with a growing number of children being raised in one-parent, stepparent, and same-sex parent families (Bernardi and Mortelmans 2018; Steinbach, Kuhnt, and Knüll 2016). While child outcomes within these families have been well-studied, societal attitudes toward family diversity remain comparatively underexplored (Cheng, Kelley, and Powell, 2023). Attitudes towards child well-being in families differ according to beliefs about the “right” kind of parenthood, and yet, the origins and evolution of these beliefs are poorly understood.

Evidence show that young people and women tend to hold more favourable attitudes toward child well-being in non-traditional families. Such supportive attitudes towards family diversity vary markedly, ranging from about 40% in Central and Eastern Europe to around 85% in the Nordic countries (Solaz et al., 2025).

Beyond these country-specific and individual characteristics, to what extent does an individual's life-course shape attitudes about a child's well-being growing up in diverse family settings? This paper explores how **individual life course experiences** may influence perceptions of child well-being in non-traditional families, particularly single-parent, stepparent, and same-sex families.

We focus on the role of two types of **personal experiences of separation**

- **during childhood**, measured by family structure at age 15 (15% of respondents had parents who were separated).
- **during adulthood**, proxied by the experience of previous separation as an adult (no separation /separation with children 17% /without 12%)

Hypotheses

The childhood life course - measured by the family structure at age 15 - may shape attitudes through direct personal experience as a child. Its influence may be positive if individuals have been exposed to alternative family forms, or negative if they experienced hardships growing up in such families, particularly in contexts where non-traditional families are rarer and potentially more subject to stigma.

The adult life course is proxied by the experience of separation in adulthood, with or without children. Separation as an adult, especially when children are involved, may have either a positive or a negative impact. It can foster greater acceptance if the separation was self-initiated, or lead to a more negative attitude if feelings of lack of agency or guilt towards the children were involved.

Data & Model

We draw on the new “Attitudes toward family diversity” module of the European Social Survey Cronos-2 (2022), collected across eleven European countries. Respondents were 18 years or older, lived in private households, and had access to the Internet. The sample included 6,586 respondents

in 11 countries with country-specific numbers: Austria (n=647), Belgium (573), Czech Republic (284), Finland (739), France (724), Iceland (525), Italy (243), Portugal (396), Slovenia (1221), Sweden (847), and United Kingdom (487).

The questions assess respondents' perceptions of a child's well-being when raised in various alternative family types. The introductory prompt reads:

"In the next questions, we would like to ask your opinion about different kinds of families. When we refer to parents in the first set of questions, we refer to both biological parents and heterosexual parents who have adopted children. Compared to growing up with both parents, do you think it is better or worse for children to grow up with their mother only?"

Respondents were asked to rate their views on a five-point scale :

- 1 Much worse to grow up with *their mother only*
- 2 Worse to grow up with *their mother only*
- 3 Makes no difference
- 4 Better to grow up with *their mother only*
- 5 Much better to grow up with *their mother only*
- 9 No answer

The same question was repeated for six family types: *mother only, father only, father and stepmother, mother and stepfather, lesbian parents, and gay male parents.*

We created a synthetic indicator by summing positive responses across the six non-traditional family types, yielding a scale that ranges from 0 to 6. Because the experiences of separation in childhood and adulthood are correlated with various socio-demographic characteristics, we estimated an OLS regression model controlling for potential confounders, including age, gender, education, income, employment status, and country.

Descriptive results

Overall, people hold more favourable attitudes toward two-parent families, regardless of whether the parents are step-parents or of the same sex. In contrast, one-parent families receive considerably less approval concerning children's well-being. We observed, however, significant cross-national differences in these attitudes across Europe.

Figure 1: Positive attitudes toward children’s well-being when raised in non-traditional family types

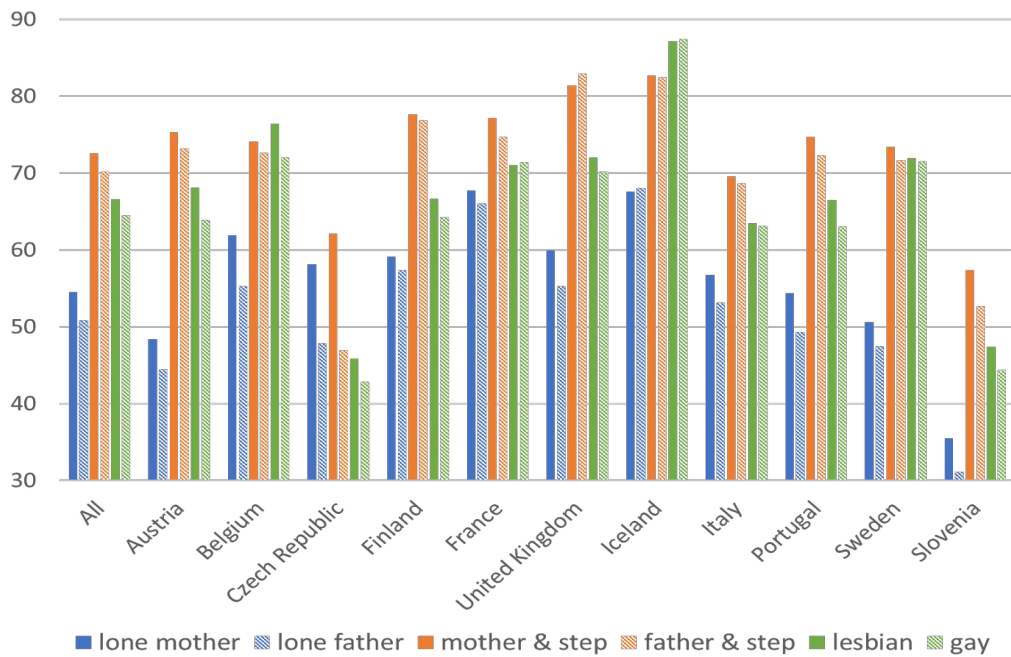
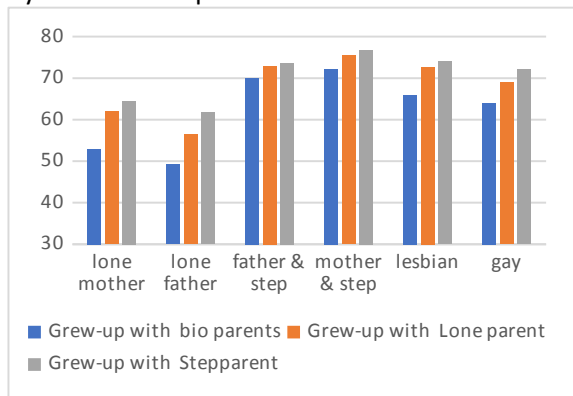
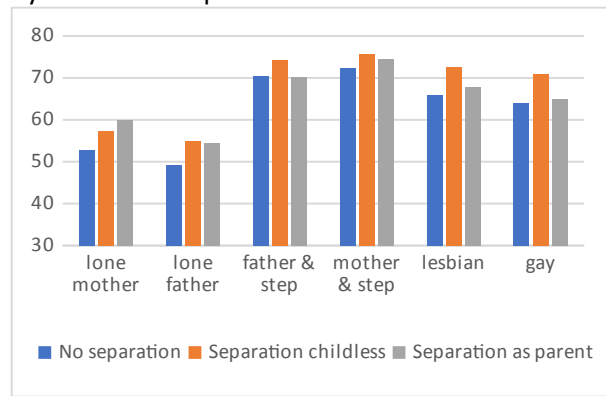


Figure 2: Openness to non-traditional family types

by childhood experience



by adulthood experience

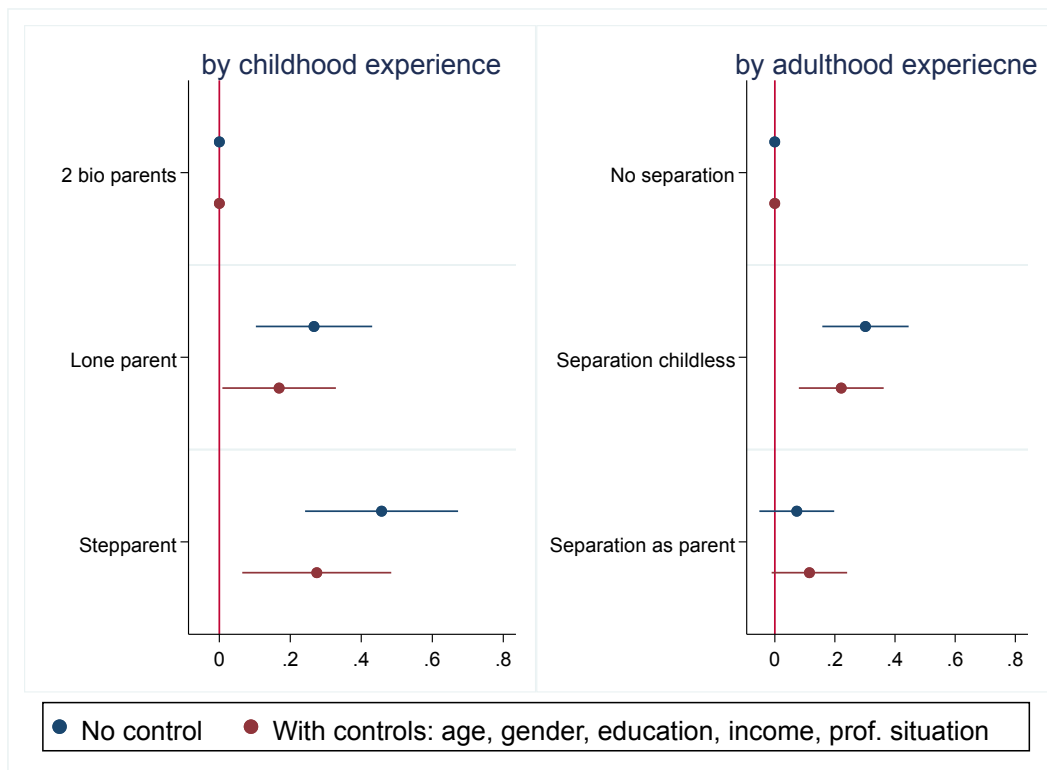


Model results

Regarding the childhood life course, our models indicate that individuals who grew up in a stepfamily hold more positive attitudes towards children’s well-being in alternative families than those raised by both biological parents. Respondents who were raised by a lone parent also display more positive attitudes, although this association is mainly accounted for by their socio-demographic characteristics.

In terms of the influence of the adult life course, individuals who have experienced separation without being parents themselves are more open to alternative family types than those who have never experienced separation.

Figure 3: Openness (synthetic indicator) to non-traditional family types



Conclusion

One-parent families receive less societal approval than stepfamilies or same-sex parent families. Experiencing parental separation during childhood is associated with greater confidence in children's well-being within non-traditional family types. This suggests that direct experience – or temporal distance from the event – can foster more open and positive attitudes towards diverse families.

Experiences of separation in adulthood, however, have a more limited effect on attitudes. Individuals who have separated without children tend to express more positive views, whereas separated parent may feel greater guilt or heightened concern for their children's well-being. R o

This study has a few limitations. The data lack information on the level of conflict surrounding the separation, whether the respondent initiated the separation, and, among those who did not grow up with both biological parents, how they felt during childhood. These unmeasured differences could meaningfully shape experiences and attitudes towards family diversity for children's well-being

References

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