

Attitudes toward Medically Assisted Reproduction in Europe: the Role of Socio-Economic Status

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1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The decline and postponement of fertility witnessed in the last decades in all high-income countries have contributed to a growing demand and use of medically assisted reproduction (MAR) techniques (Wyns et al., 2021). Despite increasing acceptance of MAR technologies across Europe, the role of individual characteristics in shaping attitudes towards MAR remains underexplored. Understanding these variations is essential to uncover the social mechanisms that underlie reproductive norms and inequalities.

Attitudes towards MAR – such as artificial insemination and in-vitro fertilization – reflect broader societal views on family formation, gender roles, and bioethical boundaries. Most studies investigating attitudes toward MAR have focused on specific groups, such as patients undergoing MAR treatments, university students or healthcare professionals, and have typically been limited to single-country contexts (e.g., Blaževičienė et al., 2014; Meissner et al., 2016; Stenfelt et al., 2018). Understanding attitudes and acceptance of MAR among the general population is essential, as it influences both the demand for and the provision of these techniques (Ziebe and Devroey, 2008; Szalma and Djundeva, 2020). Evidence suggests that attitudes toward MAR vary according to individual characteristics such as age, gender, education, and income (Szalma and Djundeva, 2020). However, a gap in the literature exists regarding how broader socio-economic conditions shape these attitudes over time and across cohorts.

This study aims at analysing how attitudes towards MAR in the general population are shaped by individuals' socio-economic status (SES), and how this association changes over time and across cohorts, enabling a temporal comparison and a comprehensive understanding of the social determinants of MAR attitudes. Building on the literature on social stratification and attitudes (Bourdieu, 1984; Kraus et al., 2012; Kitschelt and Rehm, 2014), this study conceptualizes individuals' SES – encompassing education, income, and occupation – as a key determinant of attitudinal orientations toward MAR.

The socio-economic positioning of individuals shape their access to material and symbolic resources, their cognitive frameworks, and moral views (Bourdieu, 1984; Piff et al., 2012; Lareau,

2018). Previous evidence suggest that higher-SES individuals tend to have more liberal attitudes, to be more open with respect to new technologies and new family forms, while lower-SES individuals tend to adhere to more traditional views, partly due to different socialization patterns, material constraints, and cultural capital (Weakliem, 2002; Shreffler et al., 2010; Solaz et al., 2025). We argue that alongside education and income, the occupational role may contribute to shaping attitudes towards MAR (Kitschelt and Rehm, 2014).

Investigating the influence of SES is particularly relevant, as it may affect both perceptions of and access to medically assisted reproduction, reflecting broader patterns of social inequality and shaping the future demand for these techniques.

Therefore, this paper aims at investigating how attitudes toward MAR vary by socio-economic status across European countries, over time and across cohorts. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the prevailing attitudes toward MAR in Europe, and how have they changed across cohorts and over time? (2) How do attitudes toward MAR vary by socio-economic status – measured by considering both education, income, and occupation?

2. Data and Methods

The analysis draws on data from the European Values Study (EVS), waves 4 (2008-10) and 5 (2017-20), which include an item measuring attitudes toward MAR, by asking: *“Please tell me whether artificial insemination or in-vitro fertilization can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between”*, with responses ranging from 1 (“Never”) to 10 (“Always”). This item serves as the dependent variable.

The key independent variable is individuals’ SES, which is conceptualized as a composite concept, including the educational level, household income and occupational position. First, the three components of SES will be considered individually in order to evaluate how each one relates to MAR attitudes. Then, SES will be operationalized through a composite index combining the three measures – i.e., education, income and occupation.

Additional covariates include individual-level characteristics such as respondents’ age, gender, marital status, and religiosity, as well as country-level factors including the legal framework of MAR, GDP, and the mean age at first birth.

Analyses will be conducted first by pooling the two survey waves (wave 4 and 5) into a single dataset, to examine overall patterns and cross-national differences in attitudes toward MAR. Multilevel regression models will be estimated, allowing the assessment of both individual-level predictors (e.g., SES, gender, age, marital status, religiosity) and country-level characteristics (e.g., legal framework of MAR, GDP, mean age at first birth). Second, analyses will be conducted separately by wave and by birth cohort, to explore generational differences and temporal changes in attitudes towards MAR in Europe.

3. Expected Results and Contributions

Based on prior research and the theoretical framework, we expect higher SES individuals (i.e., those with higher levels of education, greater household income, and better occupational positions) to show greater acceptance of MAR. This expectation aligns with previous evidence linking social position, moral values, and openness to new family forms (Weakliem, 2002; Shreffler et al., 2010; Solaz et al., 2025). Moreover, we expect education to have the strongest influence on attitudes toward MAR, followed by occupational role and income. This expectation stems from prior evidence showing that education is closely linked to moral openness, and liberal value orientations, whereas occupation- and income-related differences tend to reflect material or status-based inequalities with more indirect effects on attitudes and moral views (Bourdieu, 1984).

Cohort effects are anticipated, so that younger cohorts are expected to express higher support for MAR regardless of SES. Furthermore, we expect a general increase in MAR acceptance between the two waves (2008-10 and 2017-20), especially in countries experiencing expansions in reproductive rights and more egalitarian family policies. Finally, we expect that cross-country variation will reflect institutional and cultural contexts, so that individuals in countries with more supportive legal frameworks for MAR will be generally more favourable toward these technologies. Moreover, we expect the influence of SES on MAR attitudes to be more pronounced in countries where MAR remains morally contested or unevenly accessible.

By integrating education, income, and occupation into a unified SES measure and by extending analysis to the most recent EVS wave, this study advances existing research (Szalma and Djundeva, 2020) and provides a dynamic, multi-dimensional view of how social stratification shapes reproductive attitudes in Europe.

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