

Mapping Within-Family Perceived Disagreement in Six European Countries

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1 Introduction

Family members tend to hold similar attitudes as a result of socialisation and shared environments. While researchers have usually focused on disagreement in terms of the distance between *actual* attitudes held by family members, less attention has been paid to perceived similarity, i.e. distance from *what we think others think*. Arguably, perceived disagreement is far more important than actual disagreement in determining a sense of support and belonging and in reinforcing clusters in society. In this project, we investigate patterns of perceived attitudinal disagreement with family members (children, siblings, parents, grandparents) across four heterogeneous attitude domains: vaccination, climate change, adoption rights for same-sex couples, and the impact of immigrants on the national economy. We use data from a cross-national, nationally representative survey conducted in Germany, Spain, France, Hungary, Italy and the UK between March and July 2024, as part of the ERC-funded project IMMUNE. Our objectives are (1) to uncover country-level patterns in perceived disagreement, and how they vary across topic and relationship, and (2) to explore micro-level correlates of heightened disagreement with family members, including socio-demographic, ideological and exposure-related factors. With this work, we aim to contribute to debates about clustering and polarisation beyond wider society, focusing on the smaller but essential network of the family.

2 Background

2.1 Family Solidarity

Research on cohesion (and conflict) within family has traditionally focused on intergenerational relationships. In a seminal work on the topic, [Bengtson and Roberts \(1991\)](#) defined six dimensions of intergenerational solidarity within families, including *consensual solidarity*, defined as the perceived or actual concordance in values, attitudes and beliefs with other family members. While the original framework was tailored to vertical relationships within families, successive works have applied the same solidarity definitions to investigate cohesion among siblings ([Voorpostel and Van Der Lippe, 2007](#); [Voorpostel and Blieszner, 2008](#); [Hank and Steinbach, 2018](#)). Consensual solidarity has been studied far less than the

other constructs, such as financial support and assistance, frequency of contact and residential propinquity. This is likely due to data limitations, as information on what others think are not frequently collected in standard social surveys.

2.2 Actual and Perceived Disagreement

Transmission of attitudes between family members is documented in various domains, including politics (Iyengar et al., 2018), climate change beliefs (Grønhøj and Thøgersen, 2009), gender attitudes (Platt and Polavieja, 2016), and health-related views (Aksoy, 2022). In most cases, the object of study is family members' actual opinions. As argued by Ojeda and Hatemi (2015), the missing link in the transmission chain is the perception of others' opinions. Researchers have shown that individuals are prone to misperceive family members' attitudes, sometimes in unexpected directions. Parents and grandparents tend to feel closer to children than they actually are, given the higher "stake" older generations have in their relationship with younger generations (Bengtson, 2001). Children, on the other hand, have been found to perceive their parents as more different from them, reflecting a perceived rather than actual generational conflict (Acock and Bengtson, 1980). Accuracy in perceptions of others' attitudes additionally depends on the frequency of discussion and on the knowledge of the topic under discussion (Boonen et al., 2017).

Perceived disagreement, however, cannot be reduced to an imperfect proxy of actual disagreement. People are influenced directly by the meaning (attribution) they give to others' responses and only indirectly by the actual responses of others. As Acock and Bengtson (1980) argues, "The behavior or attitude of Other becomes meaningful and has consequences only as it is perceived or defined by the individual actor." Indeed, perceptions of the extent of disagreement within families have consequences for relationship quality (Sechrist et al., 2011) and for behaviours of family members.

In summary, (1) perceived and actual disagreement with family members can diverge in heterogeneous ways, and (2) perceived disagreement is a key measure for understanding cohesion and conflict within families.

3 Research Questions and Expectations

The present study aims to map perceived disagreement on four contemporary issues (vaccination, climate change, adoption rights for same-sex couples, and the impact of immigrants on the national economy) within families (children, siblings, parents, grandparents) across six European countries. We address two research questions:

1. How does perceived disagreement with family members vary across countries, relationships, and topics?
2. How do socio-demographic, ideological, and exposure-related factors relate to within-family disagreement?

Given the scarce research on heterogeneity in perceived attitudinal disagreement within families, our expectations can only be speculative.

At the macro level, researchers on family solidarity have tested whether countries characterised by a more familistic orientation (Reher, 2004) show higher levels of intergenerational financial support and contact, with mixed results (Dykstra and Fokkema, 2011). To our knowledge, no previous research has investigated comparative patterns in disagreement.

Therefore, we tentatively hypothesise that countries with a more family-oriented culture in our sample (i.e. Italy and Spain) will show lower levels of within-family disagreement than less familistic countries (i.e. the UK), with intermediate patterns for France, Germany, and Hungary. We also expect heterogeneity across topics, with those traditionally considered as generational cleavages (i.e. climate change and adoption rights for same-sex couples) showing higher levels of disagreement than vaccination. Lastly, we expect higher similarity in horizontal (sibling) relationships than in vertical (child–parent–grandparent) ones.

At the micro level, we will conduct an exploratory analysis testing the association of age, sex, minority status, education level, political leaning, moral values, use of social media, and the size of out-of-family social networks with the level of absolute disagreement within families. Older age, being a woman, holding more conservative ideological views, and being less exposed to external stimuli have all been shown to be associated with increased attachment to family in the literature.¹ While their association with within-family perceived disagreement has not yet been tested, we assume that the same characteristics will correlate with decreased perceived disagreement across topics and relationships.

4 Data

To answer our research questions, we will use innovative data collected by the IMMUNE project. Between March and July 2024, data were collected from nationally representative samples of respondents aged 18 or older (around 3,500 per country) in Germany, Spain, France, Hungary, Italy and the UK through a professional survey company. Along with core information on COVID-19 vaccination, the questionnaire collected data on respondents' and their family members' attitudes toward vaccination in general, climate change, same-sex couples' child adoption, and immigration. Information was collected with high granularity, with respondents asked to report the attitude of each family member (children, siblings, parents, grandparents) separately. The questionnaire also allows researchers to assess the size of non-family social circles (friends, coworkers, classmates), and the use of different social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, TikTok, and LinkedIn) as well as other information sources. Additionally, the IMMUNE questionnaire constitutes a rich source of socio-demographic and health-related information at the respondent level. To our knowledge, this is the first cross-country study to collect such detailed information on these topics. The attitude variables we will include in our analysis consist of four items, based on the European Social Survey (ESS)'s formulation of questions on similar issues (when applicable). They are: *1. Vaccines are decisive for the protection of human health, 2. Climate change will have a bad impact on people across the world, 3. Gay male and lesbian couples should have the same rights to adopt children as straight couples, 4. The fact that there are people immigrating from other countries is bad for the economy of the country of arrival.* For each item, respondents were asked to express their own agreement and the agreement of their family members (if they had previously declared having any) on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly agree to Strongly disagree. Following the ESS methodology, post-stratification weights were computed using micro level data from the European Labour Force Survey to correct for non-response in some demographic subgroups. In addition, a population size weight was computed for the pooled analysis to ensure that the complete sample is representative of the pooled population sample size.

¹We have omitted a broader discussion of these determinants in the Background section due to space constraints.

5 Methods

To answer the first research questions, we will compute weighted means and standard errors of country level disagreement across topics and relationships. An initial exploration of the data is presented in Figure 1. As for the micro-level analysis, distinct weighted linear regression will be estimated with absolute disagreement within families as the outcome. We will estimate both a pooled model including country fixed effects and separate models for each country to investigate possible heterogeneity in predictors' effects.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

Perceived disagreement with family members drives clustering and polarisation at the family level, shapes individuals' sense of belonging and support, and is fundamental to understanding individual behaviours. However, due to a lack of suitable data and a greater interest in actual similarity, research on this topic is virtually absent. With the present study, we aim to provide a comprehensive picture of the levels of perceived disagreement across six European countries characterised by different family cultures. Initial results (Figure 1) suggest that the situation can be counter-intuitive: the most familistic country in the sample, Italy, shows higher levels of disagreement than less familistic countries. This indicates that agreement may move differently and independently of other dimensions of family solidarity. Findings from the micro-level analysis will reveal within-country heterogeneity in the perception of concordance in opinions within families, uncovering the socio-demographic, ideological, and exposure-based predictors of perceived disagreement. Overall, we argue that incorporating perceived disagreement into comparative research can sharpen our understanding of how families operate in different cultural contexts and how family dynamics translate into broader social and political behaviours.

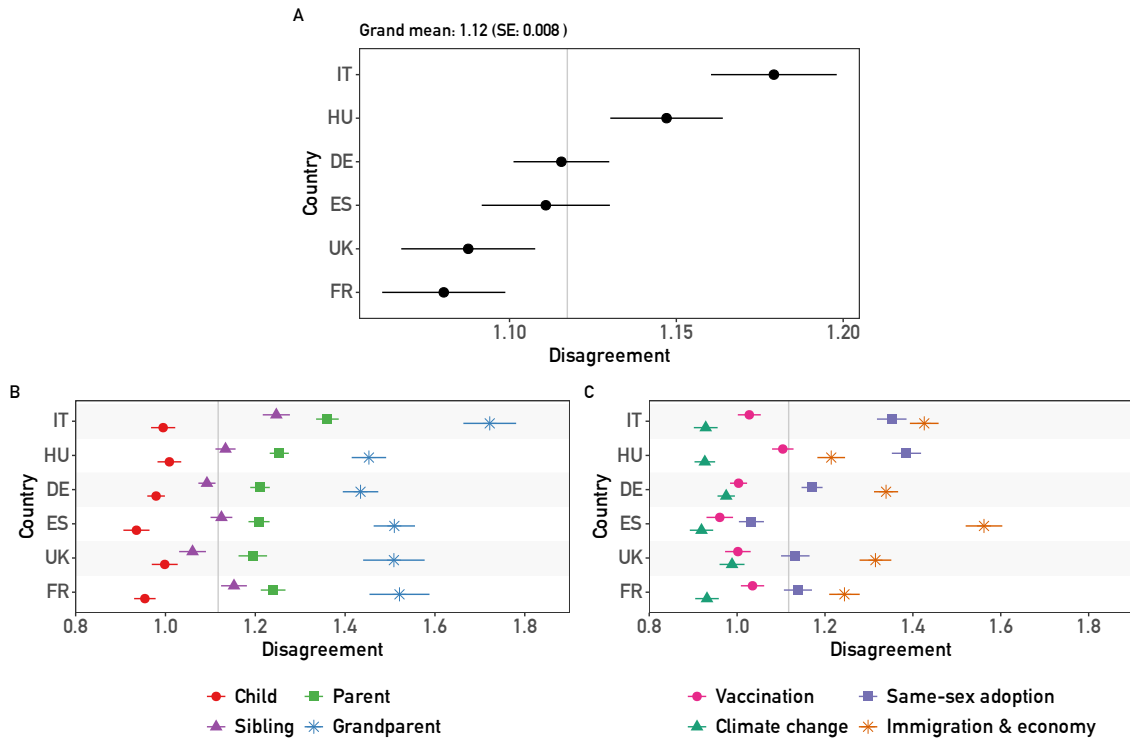


Figure 1: **Weighted means and SE for disagreement with family members across countries.** Possible values range from 0 = Complete agreement to 6 = Complete disagreement. The solid vertical grey line represents the grand mean of family members. A. Weighted means and SE for disagreement with family members averaging across relationship and topic. B. Weighted means and SE for disagreement with family members by relationship averaging across topics. C. Weighted means and SE for disagreement with family members by topic averaging across relationships.

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