RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Changing Educational Gradient in Nontraditional Attitudes toward Family Behavior: A Cross-National Study

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The second demographic transition (SDT) theory highlights how nontraditional family behaviors first emerged in Nordic countries and diffused elsewhere. Cross-national variations in approval of such behaviors across educational groups and changes over time remain underexplored, however. Using European Social Survey data (2006, 2018) from 21 countries, we examine approval of voluntary childlessness, nonmarital cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, parental divorce, and mothers working with young children. Approval was widespread for cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, and maternal employment, but voluntary childlessness and parental divorce were less accepted. Country differences did not always align with SDT predictions: Nordic countries showed the highest approval, followed by Southern Europe, where Spain and Portugal align with SDT progress, but Cyprus remains conservative. There is notable diversity in Western Europe—Belgium and the Netherlands showed approval similar to Nordic countries, while German-speaking countries displayed lower approval. Eastern Europe is polarized: Poland and Slovenia exhibit greater approval, while Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, and Slovakia remain less aligned. Educational differences vary by behavior: clear gradients exist for divorce and women's employment, whereas differences for other behaviors are modest. Over time, educational differences for nonmarital cohabitation and childbearing narrowed in Southern and Eastern Europe but remained stable in Nordic countries and Western Europe.

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Introduction

Over the past decades, families have become more diverse. Couples face greater uncertainty about having children, and if they do, how many (Agrillo and Nelini 2008; Albertini and Brini 2021; Balbo et al. 2013). The sequencing of events, such as marriage and childbirth, has also become less standardized (Di Giulio et al. 2019; Elzinga and Liefbroer 2007; Jalovaara and Fasang 2017; Lesnard et al. 2016; Potârcă et al. 2013). The underlying causes of these changes remain debated. Some highlight economic factors, including women's increasing economic independence (Becker 1993; Oppenheimer 1977) and couples' growing economic uncertainty (Alderotti et al. 2021; Blossfeld et al. 2005; Vignoli et al. 2020). Others, particularly proponents of the second demographic transition (SDT) theory, emphasize ideational change, increased progressivism, individualism, and secularization (Lesthaeghe 2020; Van De Kaa 1987). SDT theory suggests that a shift from traditional to individualistic values drives the postponement of marriage and childbirth, rising nonmarital fertility and voluntary childlessness—a diffusion process led by Nordic countries, with Southern and Eastern Europe following later and more slowly.

According to SDT theory, increases in educational attainment—reflected in a growing share of the population completing postsecondary education—played a pivotal role in the diffusion of these new values, with highly educated individuals leading the shift toward less traditional, more individualistic, family attitudes and behaviors (Lesthaeghe 1995; Sobotka 2008; Van De Kaa 1987). However, evidence shows SDT-related demographic patterns are increasingly common among lower educated groups in many Western countries (Jalovaara and Fasang 2015; Kalmijn 2013; Mikolai et al. 2018; Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos 2016; Potârcă et al. 2013; Žilinčíková and Hiekel 2018; Zimmermann and Konietzka 2018). Some research has suggested that, over time, less educated individuals increasingly adopted behaviors such as nonmarital childbearing and long-term cohabitation, while still maintaining more traditional family values (Aassve et al. 2025; Sobotka 2008). This behavior may reflect socioeconomic constraints—such as economic uncertainty—rather than liberalizing attitudes (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). For example, lower educated individuals may cohabit rather than marry, or forgo co-residential unions entirely, due to financial instability and less standardized lifestyles (Sturm and Van Bavel 2024). Conversely, in many European countries, highly educated individuals typically delay family formation but eventually follow a more traditional sequence, with births occurring within marriage (Lappegård et al. 2018; Mooyaart et al. 2022).

Given the significance of these changes in family behavior, there is surprisingly little research examining changes over time in the educational gradient of attitudes toward nontraditional family behavior (Gubernskaya

2010; Treas et al. 2014). Such research is needed to help understand whether the adoption of less traditional family behaviors by less educated groups corresponds to a broad diffusion of nontraditional values (from those with higher levels of education to those with lower education), or whether a paradox exists whereby the more educated tend to hold less traditional attitudes but display more traditional behavior, whereas the lower educated have more traditional attitudes but display less traditional behavior.

Earlier studies of the SDT predominantly focused on the diffusion of behavior (e.g., Aassve, Mencarini, et al. 2024; Lappegård et al. 2018; Lesthaeghe 2020; Vitali et al. 2015). Only a few European studies focused on the diffusion of attitudes, and these have not examined educational differences. Brzozowska (2021) and Hofäcker and Chaloupková (2014) demonstrated that while attitudinal shifts generally precede or correlate with behavioral changes across Europe, the strength of this relationship varies significantly by historical period and country. Aassve et al. (2025) show that traditional family ideals have been eroding in Spain and Italy, but unevenly: Spain has progressed further than Italy toward postmodern family ideals, while Italy retains more traditional elements, for example, emphasizing marriage as the context for childbearing. Focusing on fatherhood ideals, Martín-García et al. (2023) observed cross-national convergence toward the "normalization" of postponed parenthood and nontraditional family pathways. Lappegård et al. (2018) suggested that individualistic social norms and attitudes at the country level outweigh structural economic conditions in explaining variations in whether childbearing occurs within marriage or nonmarital cohabitation. Existing studies are limited in several key respects: they do not simultaneously examine changes over time alongside educational and cross-national variation (Hofäcker and Chaloupková 2014; Martín-García et al. 2023); they use broad ideational and moral indicators rather than specific attitudes toward the sequencing and combination of life-course events (Brzozowska 2021); often restrict their analysis to specific demographic groups, such as only women (Lappegård et al. 2018) or only men (Martín-García et al. 2023); and some focus exclusively on particular regions or countries (Aassve, Adserà, et al. 2024; Aassve et al. 2025; Martín-García et al. 2023). Our paper addresses these gaps with a comprehensive analysis of the educational gradient in nontraditional family attitudes across Europe and over time. We dig deeper into the attitudinal foundations to examine whether shifts are primarily led by the highly educated, converging across educational groups over time, and varying across country groups, consistent with differential SDT timing. We address the following research questions: *(1) Are there differences in nontraditional family attitudes across country groups? (2) Are there differences in nontraditional family attitudes across educational levels, and do these educational differences vary across country groups? (3) Have educational differences in nontraditional family attitudes varied over time, and does this change vary by country group?*

To answer these questions, we leverage attitudinal measures from repeated rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS) to capture norms about life-course organization—including approval for voluntary childlessness, nonmarital cohabitation, and reconciling full-time employment with parenthood—and track their diffusion both cross-nationally and across educational strata. Studying attitudes offers a clearer perspective on the cultural shifts underlying demographic behaviors, as attitudes can expose emerging tensions between evolving SDT values and persistent structural constraints—tensions that may be masked when relying solely on behavioral data. Therefore, to contextualize our findings on attitudinal change, we also provide background information, bringing together cross-national comparative data on changing behaviors in the countries studied.

Background

Nontraditional family behaviors and the attitude–behavior nexus

SDT theory identifies several nontraditional family behaviors diverging from the mid-20th-century model of early and universal marriage, high fertility, and gender-specialized roles (Lesthaeghe 1995, 2010). These include voluntary childlessness (representing the decoupling of marriage, sexual behavior, and parenthood); unmarried cohabitation (reflecting the shift away from marriage as the dominant form of partnership); nonmarital childbearing (illustrating the decoupling of marriage and parenthood); divorce among couples, including those with children (reflecting both increased union instability and changing family structures); and increases in maternal full-time employment when children are young (signaling changes in female gender roles). Central to these behaviors is the concept of decoupling, which highlights shifts in the sequencing and compatibility of key life-course roles and statuses—such as how marriage, parenthood, partnership, and employment co-occur or follow one another—reflecting evolving social norms around life-course sequencing. The extent to which individuals approve of such nontraditional behaviors reflects shifting family norms and values, including a different organization of the life course (relative to pre-SDT patterns).

Studies linking demographic behaviors to psychological mechanisms provide a conceptual bridge between nontraditional family attitudes and behaviors, positing that behaviors often reflect underlying values, norms, and ideals (e.g., Ajzen 1991; Bachrach and Morgan 2013; Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011). While the attitude–behavior link is conceptualized differently across these frameworks, a shared idea is apparent: attitudes are generally seen as distal predictors of behavior. Accordingly, changes in family attitudes may precede behavioral shifts, consistent with SDT theory's proposed role of changing values and cultural shifts in demographic change (Lesthaeghe

2010). Importantly, SDT theory emphasizes both cohort-based attitudinal change and gradual diffusion across social strata, often spreading from more advantaged groups to others, producing social gradients in the timing and adoption of new norms (Lesthaeghe 1995, 2010). Because behavior also depends on social, economic, and institutional opportunity structures, attitudes may not always translate into action. Even internalized attitudes may face barriers due to structural constraints (Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011) or perceived low self-efficacy and controllability (Ajzen 1991). This aligns with the pattern of disadvantage argument (PoD; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010), suggesting lower educated individuals may exhibit SDT-related behaviors not necessarily out of ideological alignment but due to constrained life circumstances (Perelli-Harris and Gerber 2011).

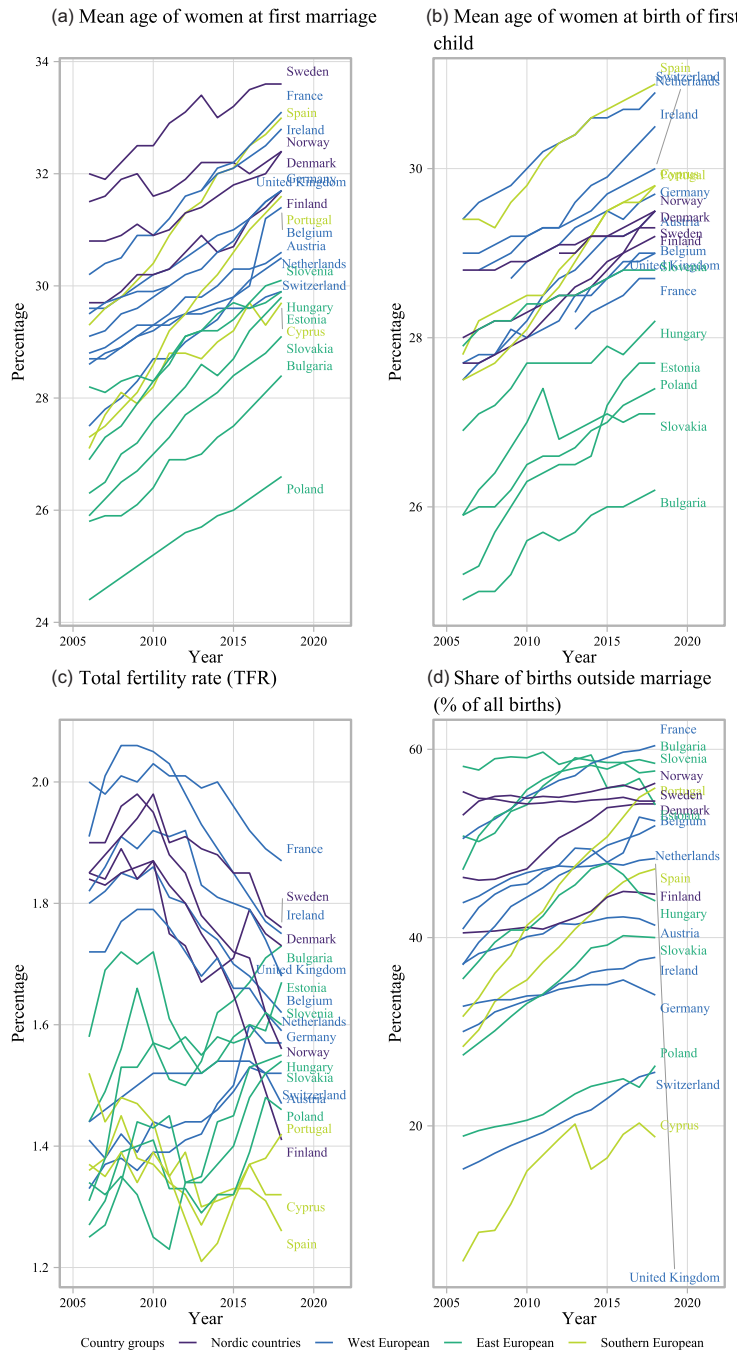
Feedback loops may complicate the otherwise linear diffusion of attitudes as suggested by SDT theory. Individuals may reshape attitudes through experience and reflection within their opportunity structures (cognitive-social model; Bachrach and Morgan 2013), while widespread societal behaviors can influence cultural schemas and normative acceptance (theory of conjunctural action; Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011). These dynamics mean some individuals or groups may remain more traditional even as attitudes and behaviors shift more broadly in society. Such feedback loops introduce inertia and complexity, making macro-level change less linear and more iterative than originally posited by SDT theory. Still, these feedback processes do not negate the relative stability and cohort-based progression of attitudes emphasized in SDT theory.

Shifting patterns in family behaviors across Europe

In this section, we use published statistics from 2006 to 2018 (the timeframe considered in this paper) to outline key shifts and differences in family behaviors across Europe. We refer to four broad country groups—Nordic countries, Western, Southern, and Eastern Europe—which correspond to regional patterns relevant to the SDT framework (see the section "Diffusion of the SDT across country groups in Europe" for details). Starting with marriage, fertility, and childbearing trends (Figure 1, panels a–d), a general postponement transition is evident, with delayed union formation and parenthood over time, though regional differences persist. Northern and Western Europe (e.g., Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, and France), and Southern Europe (e.g., Spain and Portugal), show higher mean ages at marriage and first birth (Figure 1, panels a and b), often 30 or older. Eastern Europe (e.g., Hungary, Bulgaria, and Poland) has younger mean ages at marriage and first birth.

Fertility rates declined across Europe, with regional nuances (Figure 1, panel c): Northern and parts of Western Europe saw stable or modest declines, then sharper declines in countries such as France, Sweden, and

FIGURE 1 Trends in marriage, fertility, and nonmarital childbearing in Europe



NOTE: All time series span from 2006 to 2018 (with some country-specific missing values).
SOURCE: Eurostat and UNECE Database (panel a), Eurostat (panels b and c); and OECD Family Database (panel d).

Norway; Eastern Europe experienced persistently low fertility with fluctuations; Southern Europe recorded the lowest rates. The share of nonmarital births rose steadily from 2006 to 2018 but varied widely (Figure 1, panel d), common in France, Sweden, Norway, with mixed patterns elsewhere (higher in Belgium, Slovenia, Portugal, the United Kingdom; lower in Switzerland, Poland, Cyprus).

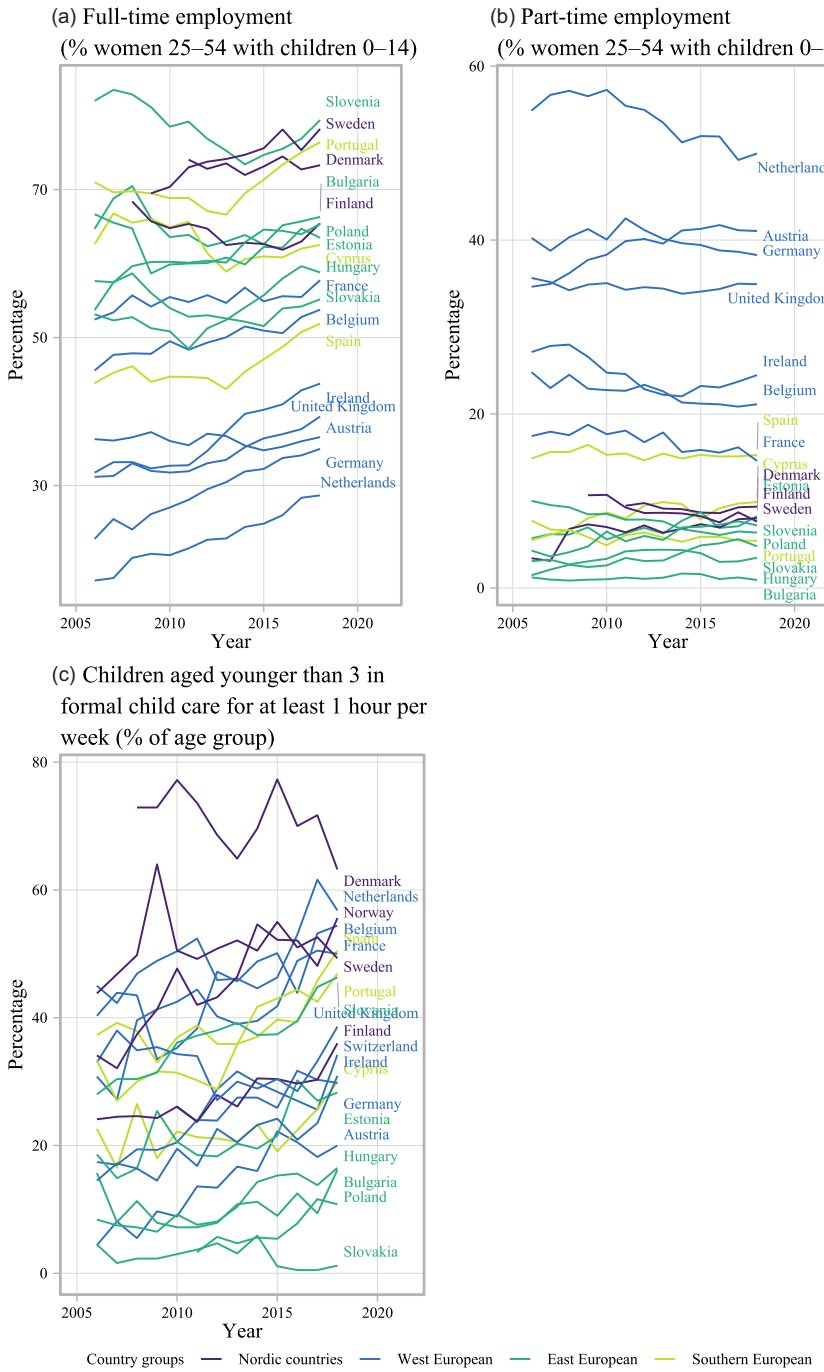
Maternal employment and childcare enrolment increased overall (Figure 2, panels a–c), especially where family-friendly policies and childcare services expanded (Chirkova 2019). Nordic and Eastern European countries maintain relatively high maternal employment, supported by strong welfare support (e.g., Sweden, Denmark) or revitalized public childcare systems post-socialism (e.g., Slovenia; Javornik 2016). Western Europe tends to have lower full-time maternal employment but not part-time (Figure 2, panel a). Southern Europe shows slower growth, with notable country differences: Portugal has relatively high maternal employment and formal childcare enrolment, whereas rates in Spain are more moderate—reflecting greater public willingness in Portugal to invest in work–family reconciliation policies compared to Spain (Doblytė and Tejero 2021).

Overall, family behavior shifts occur at varying speeds and intensities across Europe, consistent with a "convergence toward diversity" pattern (Billari and Wilson 2001): convergence in direction toward nontraditional behaviors but diverse timing and forms across countries. Distinct historical, cultural, institutional, and policy influences all help account for these cross-national differences (Esping-Andersen 1999; Lesthaeghe 2010; Mayer 2009).

Diffusion of the SDT across country groups in Europe

To examine variation in nontraditional family attitudes, we classify countries into four broad geographical groups that serve as a heuristic, reflect the spread of SDT-related behaviors (as detailed in the section "Shifting patterns in family behaviors across Europe"), and closely align with the original SDT framework (Lesthaeghe 2010; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2007). That the countries within each group are also geographically proximate is consistent with the spatial diffusion process central to SDT theory (Vitali et al. 2015; Vitali and Billari 2017). Moreover, we draw on shared institutional and cultural contexts—specifically convergences in welfare state arrangements, family-policy legacies and configurations, economic structures, and levels of gender equality—to substantiate these groupings. Our premise is that the diffusion of nontraditional family attitudes associated with the SDT has occurred at relatively similar levels within each country group and that country groups share similarities in macro-level contexts. We assume that distinct attitudinal patterns can therefore be delineated across these country groups. Theory-driven, no country fits perfectly into one group. There is no

FIGURE 2 Trends in maternal employment and childcare enrolment across Europe



NOTE: All time series span from 2006 to 2018 (with some country-specific missing values).
SOURCE: Eurostat and UNECE Database (panel a), Eurostat (panels b and c).

universal consensus on country groupings in demographic research; our classification aligns with some studies (Hofäcker and Chaloupková 2014; Van Winkle 2018) but differs from others that separate German-speaking (Alderotti et al. 2021; Sobotka and Berghammer 2021) or Anglo-Saxon countries (Zimmermann et al. 2024). Noting this potential for heterogeneity, we comment upon any national differences in the descriptions of the country groups that follow.

The *Nordic countries* (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden) are SDT forerunners, with low marriage rates and high rates of nonmarital births. Many couples cohabit before or instead of marriage (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). These countries feature high gender equality and strong, progressive welfare states supporting a dual-career model—generous parental leave, subsidized childcare, and work–life balance policies. Generally favorable attitudes exist toward women's workforce participation and widespread gender-egalitarian values (Guetto et al. 2015), with high tolerance for nontraditional behaviors such as voluntary childlessness, unmarried cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing—except in Finland (Hofäcker and Chaloupková 2014). Strong legal protections support nontraditional family forms (Goldscheider et al. 2015).

Western Europe (Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands) is generally considered an early adopter of the SDT. Some researchers treat the German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany, and Switzerland) as a distinct subgroup within Western Europe due to their comparatively moderate female labor force participation and more persistent traditional family patterns (Alderotti et al. 2021), contrasting with the Netherlands, Belgium, and France being closer to the Nordic countries in those terms. Although Germany and Switzerland had lower fertility rates than Nordic countries in the early 2000s, by the late 2010s their fertility rates converged to similarly low levels. They retain stronger male-breadwinner norms and less progressive gender roles than the Nordic countries, which have pursued gender equality for several decades. The United Kingdom experienced an earlier and more gradual shift toward nontraditional family behaviors, including rising cohabitation and nonmarital births, supported by social and legal changes. Ireland's transition started later but accelerated since the 1990s, with legal reforms on divorce and same-sex marriage (Sobotka and Berghammer 2021). Attitudes toward nontraditional families vary in Western Europe: using the European Values Study data, Guetto et al. (2015) found that the liberalization of attitudes toward women's gender roles—particularly in the context of family and work—between 1990 and 2008 was less pronounced in Germany and the United Kingdom compared to Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. Another cross-sectional study suggests that the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Switzerland have tolerance for nontraditional behaviors similar to Nordic countries, while Austria

and Germany are more skeptical, and Ireland shows low acceptance of nonmarital childbearing (Hofäcker and Chaloupková 2014).

Southern Europe (Cyprus, Spain, Portugal) is a late SDT adopter. Low fertility and delayed family formation are evident, but unmarried cohabitation and nonmarital births remain lower than in Nordic and Western European countries, partly due to strong family-oriented cultures and religious influences—Catholicism in Spain and Portugal and Orthodoxy in Cyprus (Aassve et al. 2025; Sobotka and Berghammer 2021). Welfare states in Southern Europe feature relatively low social assistance for families and the unemployed (Alderotti et al. 2021). The dual-earner model is weakly supported by policies; childcare availability and workplace flexibility are limited (particularly compared to the Nordic countries or Western Europe), making it difficult for women to balance work and family. Traditional gender roles prevail—with women as primary caregivers and men as breadwinners—and gender equality ideals have diffused more slowly than in the Nordic countries or Western Europe (Guetto et al. 2015). Although ideational change began later, it has since progressed rapidly, initially spreading among the higher educated and more secular before diffusing more broadly, as observed in Spain (Aassve et al. 2025). Within Southern Europe, Spain has embraced dual-earner norms and egalitarian attitudes more than other countries, with greater acceptance of divorce and a weaker attachment to traditional marriage norms. Italy—though outside our analysis—has shown greater resistance, maintaining more negative views toward divorce and stronger adherence to traditional family ideals, even as recent data reveal rapid increases in cohabitation, union dissolution, and nonmarital fertility consistent with SDT trends (Aassve et al. 2025; Aassve, Mencarini, et al. 2024). Despite these emerging ideational changes, institutional support remains weak and acceptance of nontraditional demographic behaviors—such as voluntary childlessness, unmarried cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing—is limited (Hofäcker and Chaloupková 2014).

Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia) is also a late SDT adopter, with SDT trends delayed by socialist regimes that promoted marriage and fertility (Sobotka 2008). Following the post-communist transition, fertility declined sharply, nonmarital cohabitation rose, and marriage was postponed—aligning with SDT, but often driven by economic instability rather than cultural shifts (Perelli-Harris and Gerber 2011). This country group is somewhat heterogeneous in SDT behaviors and family policies—prompting some earlier studies to also distinguish subgroups within Eastern Europe (e.g., Sobotka and Berghammer 2021). Cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing are more common in countries like Estonia, Slovenia, and Bulgaria, but relatively rare in Poland and Slovakia, reflecting religious influences (Sobotka and Berghammer 2021). Policy support for the dual-earner model also varies: Estonia and Slovenia have relatively strong work–family policies, whereas Poland, Slovakia, and

Hungary favor the male breadwinner model (Ferrarini and Sjöberg 2010). Poland and Hungary have also actively pushed back against nontraditional family attitudes through conservative policies, political rhetoric emphasizing traditional family roles, and resistance to progressive family legislation (Kováts and Põim 2015). Gender equality remains low and asymmetrical across this group, reflecting entrenched traditional gender roles despite women's relatively high labor force participation—a legacy of socialist employment policies. Until the mid-2000s, Eastern Europe exhibited the lowest tolerance—or outright rejection—of nontraditional family behaviors such as voluntary childlessness, unmarried cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing (Hofäcker and Chaloupková 2014).

Given that the spread of nontraditional behaviors follows different patterns across European country groups, we hypothesize a gradient in the approval of nontraditional family behaviors across country groups. Hypothesis 1 (H1): "*The approval for nontraditional family behaviors will be highest in Nordic countries, moderate in Western Europe, and lowest in Southern and Eastern Europe*."

Diffusion of the SDT—Educational differences

Theory and prior research suggest that nontraditional family attitudes vary not only across European country groups but also within them, especially by education. SDT theory posits that the cultural shift from traditional to nontraditional family attitudes began among the highly educated, who are more exposed to progressive ideas—often through universities—and more likely to critically question traditional family behaviors (Lesthaeghe 2010). This exposure fostered greater emphasis on self-actualization, individual autonomy, and other post-materialist values (Van De Kaa 1987). Furthermore, the highly educated typically enjoy a level of economic security enabling them to make life choices—such as not marrying or not having children—based on personal fulfillment rather than norms. Their greater cultural capital also aids diffusion of these nontraditional attitudes to other social groups through social interactions and institutional influence (Lesthaeghe 2010).

The gradual, top-down diffusion across educational strata is a key mechanism in explaining the cultural shift toward post-materialist values emphasizing individual autonomy, self-actualization, and gender equality. Importantly, SDT theory assumes these values, once established, are unlikely to revert. Diffusion continues until broad societal saturation reduces, though it does not eliminate, educational differences in family behaviors. However, the theory does not specify a clearly defined endpoint. By "endpoint," we mean when or at what level of diffusion family attitudes and behaviors stabilize or cease to change substantially (Lesthaeghe 1995; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2007; Van De Kaa 1987). Developed in the late 1980s to account for cultural and behavioral shifts that began in the

mid-1960s in Northern and Western Europe—including rising cohabitation, fertility postponement, and changing gender roles—SDT theory stops short of specifying if or when a new societal equilibrium is achieved.

Whether educational differences in nontraditional family attitudes have reduced remains an open empirical question, especially in contemporary Europe (2006–2018), after decades of substantial educational expansion since the 1970s. On the one hand, this expansion has increased the share of the population classified as "highly educated," potentially narrowing attitudinal gradients. Aassve et al. (2025) and Aassve, Mencarini, et al. (2024) argue that educational expansion—particularly the broadening of tertiary education—accelerates the diffusion of nontraditional family behaviors and attitudes, as shown in Italy and Spain. On the other hand, and despite this expansion, non-negligible shares of the population remain "lower educated," suggesting that the diffusion process is still underway and full convergence in educational gradients has not yet been achieved. Furthermore, educational expansion has reshaped the composition of educational groups: the lower educated now represent a smaller, more disadvantaged, and socially distinct segment, which may sustain or even deepen attitudinal divides.

Many studies find a positive educational gradient in nontraditional family behaviors (Van Winkle 2018; Vitali et al. 2015; for recent overviews of the literature, see Vasireddy et al. 2023; Kuang et al. 2025). In some European countries, this gradient has remained stable or even strengthened across birth cohorts (Wood et al. 2014). Parallel research on partnership and parenthood entry also reveals persistent educational differences in selection into family roles (Trimarchi and Van Bavel 2017). Assuming family behaviors reflect attitudes, these findings suggest a positive educational gradient in nontraditional family attitudes. Yet existing research specifically on these attitudes presents a mixed picture regarding educational gradients. Some studies find a positive educational gradient, where the highly educated hold less traditional values than the lower educated (Grunow and Evertsson 2019). Others report a negative or inverted gradient, with the highly educated expressing more traditional views on certain issues (Aassve et al. 2025; Liefbroer and Billari 2010). A third group of studies finds no consistent educational gradient in traditional attitudes (Martín-García et al. 2023).

For instance, Grunow and Evertsson (2019) found evidence of less traditional values among the highly educated and revealed an educational gradient in traditional parenthood values (including views on sharing childcare and employment) based on qualitative interviews with 156 dual-earner couples across eight countries. Aassve et al. (2025) nuance this pattern by showing that, in Spain, some educational gradients invert despite broad diffusion; notably, the highly educated express less favorable views toward cohabitation than the lower educated. Likewise, Liefbroer

and Billari (2010) found that the highly educated sometimes hold stricter, more traditional life-course norms than their less-educated peers in the Netherlands. Meanwhile, Martín-García et al. (2023), analyzing 2018 ESS data from five European countries, found that university education correlates with a higher ideal age for fatherhood but shows no consistent association with acceptance of male childlessness, male nonmarital childbearing, or full-time employment for fathers with young children. Together, these findings underscore the complexity of diffusion and suggest that educational gradients in nontraditional family attitudes may persist, evolve, or even invert (across contexts and behaviors).

An even more complex picture emerges from several studies documenting that some nontraditional family behaviors—particularly nonmarital childbearing—have become more prevalent among lower educated groups (Alderotti et al. 2021; Lappegård et al. 2018; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010; Vignoli et al. 2020; Zimmermann and Konietzka 2018). This challenges the SDT assumption that the highly educated are consistent forerunners in adopting post-materialist family values (Zaidi and Morgan 2017). The PoD framework suggests that among the highly educated, these behaviors often reflect deliberate, value-driven choices supported by economic security and liberal ideas, whereas among the lower educated, they stem more from economic insecurity and structural constraints than ideological shifts. This suggests educational gradients in family attitudes and behaviors may vary in direction and magnitude depending on context and mechanism.

Given the coexistence of these behavioral patterns and the mixed empirical evidence, we do not take for granted the persistence of a positive educational gradient in attitudes. Nonetheless, consistent with SDT theory and prior research, Hypothesis 2 (H2) is "*the approval for nontraditional family behaviors will be highest among the highly educated individuals and lowest among the lower educated individuals*." Testing H2 empirically allows us to evaluate the extent to which this core SDT assumption holds across European countries in the contemporary period.

Beyond a simple educational gradient, SDT predicts cross-national variation in how these gradients appear. The theory's core premise is that post-materialist and secular values diffuse geographically in a lagged pattern—starting with forerunners in Northern and Western Europe and reaching late adopters in Southern and Eastern Europe (Lesthaeghe 2010). The "lagged diffusion" logic suggests the educational gradient's strength varies by a country's transition stage. Context-specific histories and policies also play critical roles (Spéder 2023; Zaidi and Morgan 2017), as educational groups' access to resources and supportive policies differs across regimes (Mayer 2009; Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012).

In the Nordic countries, where nontraditional behaviors are already widespread and institutionalized, such attitudes likely permeate all social

strata, weakening the educational gradient. Robust work–life policies and high secularization promote broad acceptance. Conversely, in Southern and many Eastern European countries, where these behaviors remain incipient and less institutionalized, the educational gradient is expected to be stronger. Limited institutional support for nontraditional family forms and persistent pronatalist traditions reinforce traditional family attitudes, particularly among lower educated groups with less exposure to SDT "vanguard" values (Lesthaeghe 2010).

While Southern and Eastern European countries differ in institutional legacies and labor market patterns, such as maternal employment, they share late adopter status (Lesthaeghe 2010, 2020; Sobotka 2008). Here, nontraditional family values lack the normative consolidation or institutional entrenchment seen in SDT forerunners, making approval more dependent on individual educational resources that facilitate exposure to and adoption of SDT's "vanguard" values. Hypothesis 3 (H3) is "*the educational gradient in the approval for nontraditional family behaviors is weakest in Nordic countries and strongest in Southern and Eastern Europe*."

Diffusion of the SDT—Changes over time

SDT theory posited that European countries would eventually converge toward new nontraditional demographic behaviors in a relatively unidirectional and universal way (Van De Kaa 1987). Once adopted, less traditional values would tend to persist and shape family behaviors, especially when structurally reinforced by institutional changes such as social policy or legislative reforms (Lesthaeghe 2010; Zaidi and Morgan 2017). Early adopters such as Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and France are seen as forerunners, while parts of Southern and Eastern Europe lag behind. Structural and cultural factors—economic development, religious influence, and social policies—also influence this uneven diffusion of nontraditional family attitudes across countries (Sobotka and Berghammer 2021). Over time, laggards are expected to converge with forerunners, leading to a broader societal embrace of nontraditional family attitudes (Van De Kaa 1987). Italy exemplifies recent catching-up of SDT behaviors, with rising nontraditional family behaviors and a narrowing educational gap, initially driven by early innovators and spreading across society (Aassve, Mencarini, et al. 2024).

SDT faces criticism for its unidirectional assumption and inability to predict some contemporary family patterns, where cultural shifts may stall or reverse (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010; Sobotka 2008; Spéder 2023; Zaidi and Morgan 2017). Other studies contrast the top-down, unilinear SDT progression with a more complex and, to some extent, path-dependent process across countries or country groups (Hofäcker and Chaloupková 2014; Lappegård et al. 2018; Van Winkle 2018; Zimmermann et al. 2024). Despite extensive research on nontraditional family behaviors, few studies exam-

ine how nontraditional family attitudes diffuse over time across educational groups in Europe. The temporal dimension is essential for evaluating the SDT because it allows tracing the pace, scope, and stability of attitudinal change. Therefore, we examine the educational gradient in nontraditional family ideals over time and across country groups. Hypothesis 4 (H4) is "*the educational gradient in the approval for nontraditional family attitudes has become smaller over time, across all country groups*."

Data and method

Dataset and sample

Our data are from two rounds (2006 and 2018) of the ESS, which included the specific "Timing of Life" question module (ESS 2006, 2018). The ESS surveys individuals aged 15+ in over 30 countries. We restricted the original sample ($n = 92{,}519$) to countries included in both survey rounds, excluding the Czech Republic, Croatia, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine. We included respondents born between 1940 and 1999, excluding individuals from other birth cohorts ($n = 28{,}763$) as well as those with missing values on outcome variables, covariates of interest, or control variables ($n = 3{,}312$), to ensure a fair comparison across outcomes. The final sample comprised 60,444 respondents from 21 countries.

Study variables

We selected questions from the "Timing of Life" module assessing the approval of nontraditional family behaviors. Using a split-ballot design, respondents answered about men's or women's behaviors (irrespective of their own specific gender). The question was "*How much do you approve or disapprove if a man/woman: (1) …chooses never to have children?; (2) …lives with a partner without being married to her/him?; (3) …has a child with a partner he/she lives with but is not married to?; (4)…gets divorced while he/she has children aged under 12? (5) …has a full-time job while he/she has children aged under 3?"* Responses on these Likert-type items ranged from "strongly disapprove" to "strongly approve." We recoded "strongly disapprove" and "disapprove" to "disapprove"; "neither approve nor disapprove" to "neutral"; and "strongly approve" and "approve" to "approve." Questions 1–4 combined men's and women's behaviors (due to similar observed trends in further analyses divided by the gender of the person's behavior; Figures A1–A3 in the Online Appendix). Question 5 analyzed them separately, given gender inequalities in caring for young children, treating women's full-time work with young children as nontraditional and men's responses as a contrast.

Key variables are country groups, education, and interview year (Table 1). We consider four different country groups that correspond closely

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of the independent variables by country groups (frequencies are unweighted, percentages are weighted)

Variable	Category	Nordic		West		South		East	
		N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Country groups		11,245	6.29	27,337	64.74	6,925	13.87	14,937	15.10
ESS round	2006	5,792	48.10	13,297	48.22	3,937	47.45	6,984	49.43
	2018	5,453	51.90	14,040	51.78	2,988	52.55	7,953	50.57
Education	Low	1,844	19.83	6247	26.94	3,250	49.63	3,036	25.79
	Medium	5,363	51.62	13,983	48.85	2,095	25.23	8,977	55.18
	High	4,038	28.55	7107	24.21	1,580	25.14	2,924	19.03
Birth cohort	1940–1949	2,050	16.46	4395	14.86	1,152	12.82	2,470	13.34
	1950–1959	2,211	17.30	5339	18.46	1,244	16.34	3,235	20.33
	1960–1969	2,257	19.75	6095	21.26	1,503	22.33	2,770	17.44
	1970–1979	2,021	18.49	4938	17.63	1,426	21.98	2,762	19.16
	1980–1989	1,764	17.28	4390	18.10	1,175	18.44	2,561	20.38
	1990–1999	942	10.72	2180	9.69	425	8.09	1,139	9.35
Gender	Male	5,772	50.24	12,987	49.08	3,170	49.06	6,789	48.41
	Female	5,473	49.76	14,350	50.92	3,755	50.94	8,148	51.59
Foreign-born	No	10,332	90.45	23,839	86.13	6,250	88.79	14,183	98.48
	Yes	913	9.55	3,498	13.87	675	11.21	754	1.52

SOURCE: ESS data (Rounds 3 and 9). Authors' calculations.

with country classifications according to their progression in the original SDT theory (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2007): *Nordic countries* (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden); *Western Europe* (Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands[1]); *Southern Europe* (Cyprus, Spain, Portugal); and *Eastern Europe* (Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovak Republic). This grouping also aligns with data availability and sample sizes in the two ESS rounds. To assess potential heterogeneity within these groups, we conduct robustness checks including country fixed effects. Education was recoded as low (ISCED 1–2), medium (ISCED 3–4), and high (ISCED 5–8), where ISCED refers to the International Standard Classification of Education. The interview year is 2006 or 2018. Control variables include birth cohort, respondent sex, and foreign-born status (whether the person was born in the country or not). Religion was tested as a confounder in preliminary analyses but showed no association and is not included in the models presented here.

Analytical approach

First, we examine the unadjusted distribution of responses ("disapprove," "neutral," "approve") across country groups. Next, we use multinomial logistic regression to estimate predicted probabilities for each response (Agresti 2007). To test H1 and H2, approval was regressed on country group, education, interview year, and controls. To test H3, we added the interaction between country group and education; for H4, a three-way interaction between country group, education, and interview year was

added. Although the dependent variables are ordinal, we chose multinomial logit over proportional-odds cumulative logit models due to violated proportionality assumptions (confirmed by Brant tests). Standard errors clustered by country were bootstrapped to address bias from the limited number of countries (Cameron et al. 2011). All analyses use ESS-provided weights to adjust for selection probability, nonresponse, noncoverage, sampling error (related to the four post-stratification variables), and country population-size differences (ESS n.d.).

Results

Descriptive results

Table 1 presents the distribution of independent and control variables by country group. Western countries account for the largest share of the sample (65 percent), followed by Eastern and Southern Europe (15 percent and 14 percent), and Nordic countries (6 percent). Respondent distribution across ESS rounds 3 and 9 is fairly even. Education varies: medium education is most common (around 50 percent) in most country groups, except Southern Europe, where low education is most prevalent (almost 50 percent). The distribution across birth cohorts is uneven; the most recent cohort comprises 11 percent or less. The highest percentages of foreign-born individuals are found in Western and Southern Europe (14 percent and 11 percent).

Table 2 reveals distinct patterns across country groups. Overall, approval of nontraditional family behaviors is consistently highest in the Nordic countries, though differences between country groups vary by behavior. Notably, over 50 percent in Western Europe respond neutrally toward voluntary childlessness, while 46 percent of Eastern Europeans disapprove. Similar patterns are observed for nonmarital cohabitation and childbearing, with Western Europe showing the highest neutrality (46–48 percent) and Eastern Europe exhibiting considerable disapproval (21–22 percent). The other two country groups show higher levels of approval in comparison. Attitudes diverge more sharply on women's full-time employment or divorce with young children. Disapproval is high in several groups, especially regarding divorce with children under 12 in Eastern Europe (39 percent disapprove vs. 34 percent neutral vs. 27 percent approve) and mothers' full-time employment in Western Europe, often exceeding approval or neutrality.

Regression results

Differences across country groups

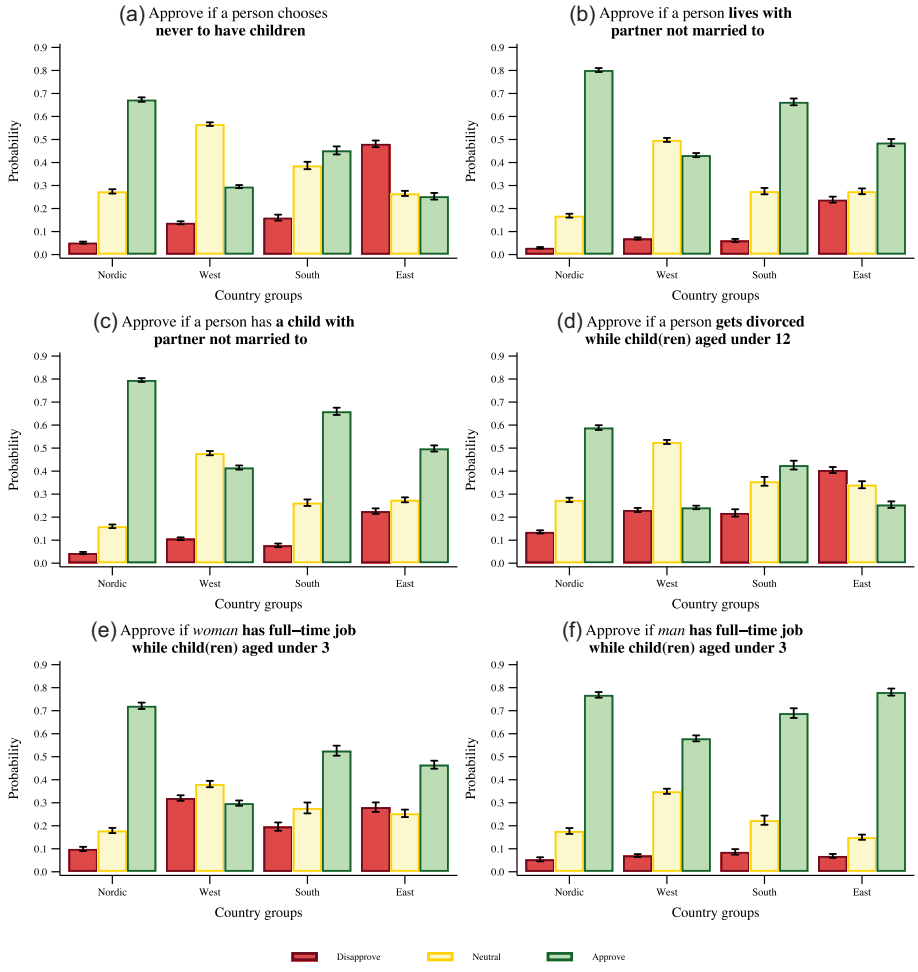
Figure 3 presents predicted probabilities, adjusted for controls, of disapproval, neutrality, and approval for five nontraditional family behaviors—

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics of nontraditional family attitudes by country group (frequencies are unweighted, percentages are weighted)

Variable	Category	Nordic	%	West	%	South	%	East	%
Approval if a person chooses not to have children	Disapprove	694	5.80	3,939	15.20	1,665	17.71	7,572	45.56
	Neutral	2,858	27.48	13,170	53.89	2,611	36.92	4,528	26.91
	Approve	7,693	66.72	10,228	30.91	2,649	45.38	2,837	27.53
Approval if a person chooses to live unmarried with a partner	Disapprove	376	3.42	2,083	8.42	743	7.57	3,122	21.78
	Neutral	1,659	17.22	11,191	47.74	2,054	26.61	5,421	27.56
	Approve	9,210	79.36	14,063	43.84	4,128	65.81	6,394	50.66
Approval if a person has a child with a partner not married to	Disapprove	577	5.09	3,109	12.15	948	9.06	3,160	20.96
	Neutral	1,577	16.25	10,753	45.61	2,012	25.49	5,142	27.36
	Approve	9,091	78.66	13,475	42.24	3,965	65.45	6,635	51.68
Approval if a person gets divorced while the child is under 12	Disapprove	1,706	14.55	6,374	24.44	1,652	23.81	5,652	38.83
	Neutral	2,716	26.90	12,776	50.14	2,612	33.90	6,020	33.96
	Approve	6,823	58.54	8,187	25.42	2,661	42.29	3,265	27.21
Approval if a woman has a full-time job while the child is under 3	Disapprove	546	10.44	4,631	32.87	671	20.96	2,569	28.10
	Neutral	921	17.81	4,511	36.50	1,017	27.09	2,337	24.90
	Approve	4,145	71.75	4,675	30.63	1,862	51.95	2,533	47.00
Approval if a man has a full-time job while the child is under 3	Disapprove	237	5.45	1,074	7.48	273	9.29	711	6.94
	Neutral	825	18.06	3,992	34.19	805	21.90	1,585	15.38
	Approve	4,571	76.48	8,454	58.33	2,297	68.81	5,202	77.68

NOTE: Attitudes were originally asked as Likert-type items ranging from "strongly disapprove" to "strongly approve." We recoded "strongly disapprove" and "disapprove" to "disapprove"; "neither approve nor disapprove" to "neutral"; and "strongly approve" and "approve" to "approve."
SOURCE: ESS data (Rounds 3 and 9). Authors' calculations.

FIGURE 3 Predicted approval, neutrality, and disapproval toward nontraditional family behaviors, by country group



NOTE: Predicted probabilities are from a multinomial logit model regressing approval, neutrality, and disapproval on country groups, education, year of the interview, and controls (sex, birth cohort, and foreign-born status). Confidence intervals are derived from clustered and bootstrapped standard errors.
SOURCE: Authors' weighted computations from ESS Rounds 3 (2006) and 9 (2018).

voluntary childlessness, nonmarital cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, divorce while raising children under 12, and women's full-time employment when children are under 3—as well as men's full-time employment when children are under 3, by country group. These derive from a multinomial logit model regressing the approval outcomes on country group and control variables (Table A1 in the Online Appendix).

Differences across country groups are evident, though not always as expected. Approval of all nontraditional behaviors is highest in the Nordic countries, consistent with their role as forerunners of nontraditional family

attitudes, ranging from approximately 60 percent (divorce with young children) to 80 percent (nonmarital cohabitation). Approval for mothers' and fathers' full-time work with young children is nearly equal in Nordic countries. Western Europe shows predominantly neutral responses; neutrality and approval are nearly equal (around 40−50 percent) for nonmarital cohabitation and childbearing, but neutrality dominates (over 50 percent) for divorce among persons with young children and voluntary childlessness, with approval at 20−30 percent. Regarding women's full-time employment with young children, neutrality, approval, and disapproval are roughly balanced (30–40 percent), in stark contrast with high approval (60 percent) for men.

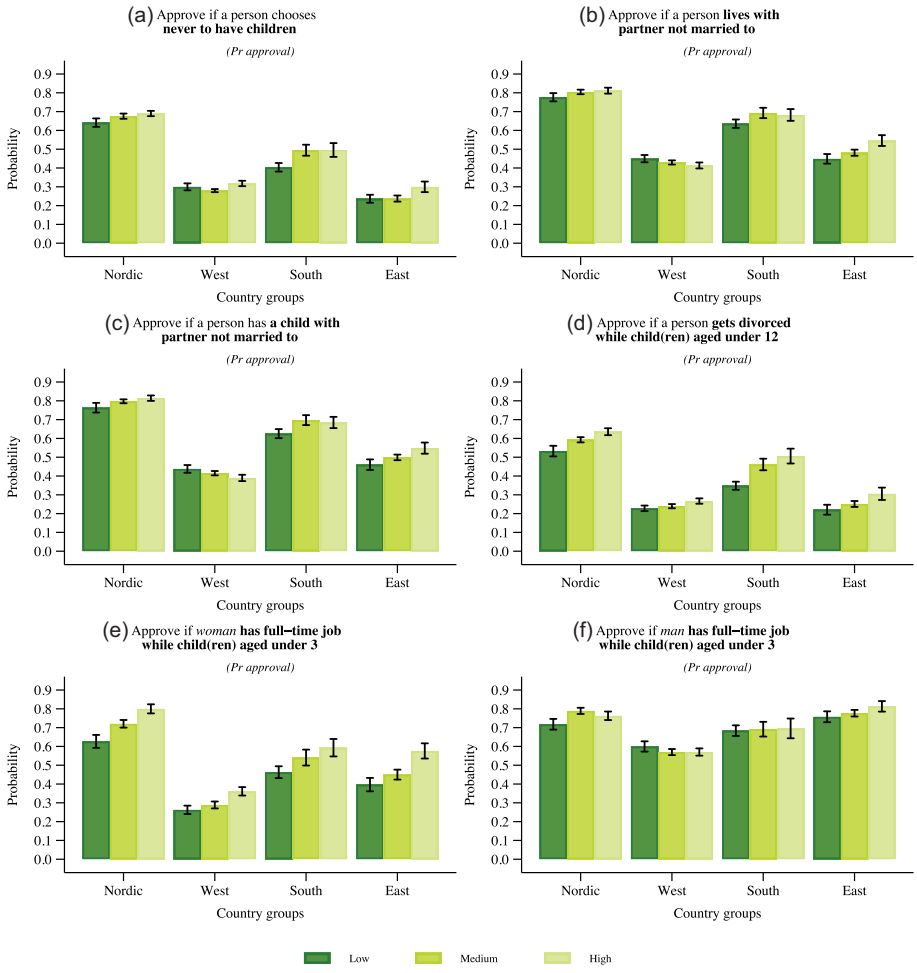
Southern and Eastern Europe exhibit lower levels of approval for all nontraditional family behaviors than Nordic countries but not necessarily lower than Western Europe. Approval is around or even exceeds 50 percent for nonmarital cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, and mothers' full-time employment with young children. Eastern Europe displays markedly higher disapproval of all nontraditional family behaviors than Southern Europe; predicted disapproval for childlessness and divorce with young children ranges from 40 to 50 percent in Eastern Europe versus at most 25 percent in Southern Europe (Figure 3). Conversely, approval for all nontraditional family behaviors is generally higher in Southern Europe than in Eastern Europe. Only approval for men's full-time employment is similarly high (70–80 percent) in both country groups.

Overall, these patterns offer only partial support for H1. Nordic countries fully embrace SDT behaviors, Southern Europe follows less strongly, Eastern Europe shows early-stage shifts with more openness to some behaviors (i.e., nonmarital cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, and mothers working full-time with young children), and Western Europe is characterized by a high degree of neutrality and comparatively low outright approval for nontraditional family behaviors.

Differences by education and country groups

Turning first to educational differences only (the regression results are presented in full in Table A1 in the Online Appendix), we observe no consistent positive educational gradient in the approval of all nontraditional family behaviors. For example, individuals with medium education and highly educated individuals are generally less likely to approve voluntary childlessness, nonmarital cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing compared to lower educated groups, although these effects are small and not always statistically significant. Conversely, the highly educated are more likely than the lower educated to approve of parental divorce and women's full-time employment with young children. A clearer educational gradient emerges in disapproval: medium and highly educated individuals are consistently

FIGURE 4 Educational differences in the predicted approval of nontraditional family behaviors, by country group



NOTE: Predicted probabilities are from a multinomial logistic model regressing approval, neutrality, and disapproval on country groups, education, their interaction, year of the interview, and controls (sex, birth cohort, and foreign-born status). Confidence intervals are derived from clustered and bootstrapped standard errors.
SOURCE: Authors' weighted computations from ESS Rounds 3 (2006) and 9 (2018).

less likely to disapprove compared to the lower educated. For behaviors such as voluntary childlessness, divorce with children under 12, and women's full-time employment with young children, these differences in disapproval across educational groups are substantial. Thus, H2 is partially supported.

Next, we consider differences by education and country group: Figure 4 presents predicted approval probabilities for each of the five nontraditional family behaviors—plus approval of men's full-time employment

while raising young children—by education and country group. These probabilities are derived from a two-way interaction between country group and education, which is statistically significant (regression results available upon request). Overall, a clear educational gradient in approval emerges only for divorce and women's full-time employment with young children, where approval increases with higher levels of education. This contrasts sharply with attitudes toward men's full-time employment in the same context, which is broadly approved across all country groups and shows no significant variation by education. For other behaviors—voluntary childlessness, nonmarital cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing—educational differences are modest, with overlapping confidence intervals suggesting limited statistical significance.

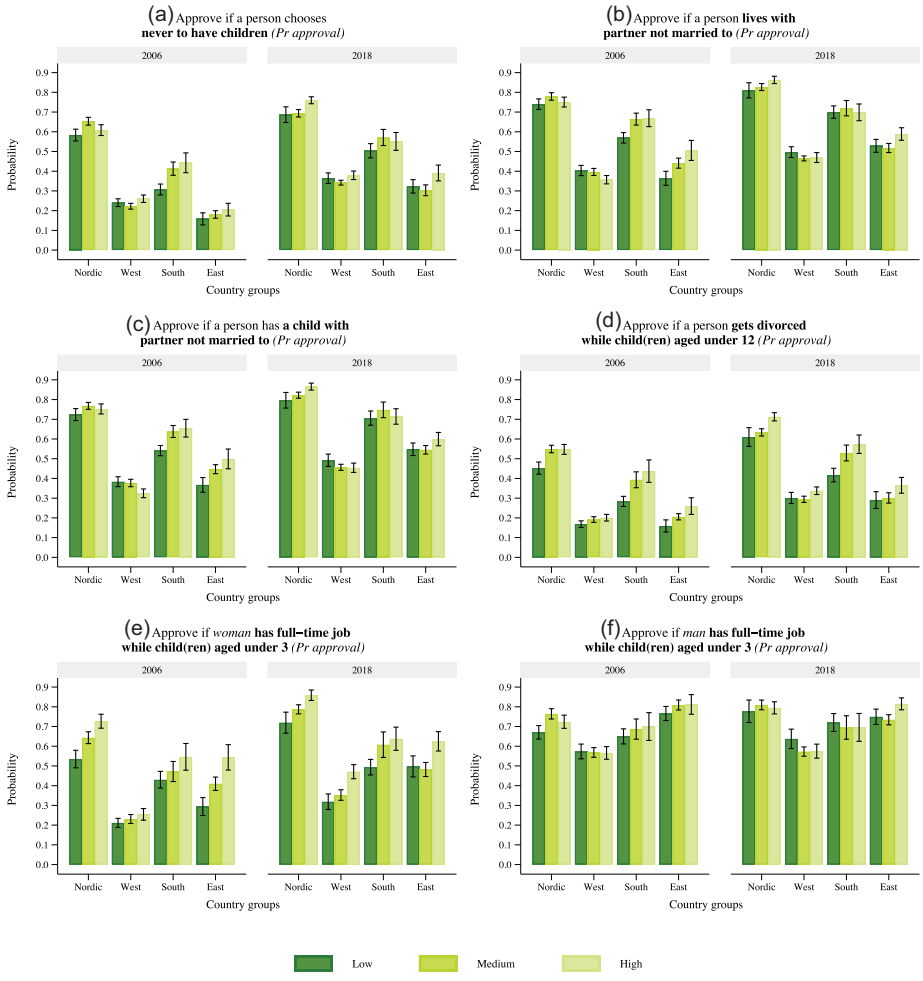
Graphs in Figures A4–A5 of the Online Appendix show that neutrality toward nontraditional family behaviors is higher among the highly educated only in Western Europe (a positive gradient; Figure A4 in the Online Appendix), whereas disapproval is consistently higher among the least educated across all outcomes and country groups (a negative gradient; Figure A5 in the Online Appendix). Contrary to our expectations, the educational gradient in approval of divorce or women's full-time employment with young children is neither weakest in Nordic countries nor strongest in Southern and Eastern Europe. These results suggest that the relationship between education and approval of nontraditional family behaviors does not align neatly with country groups, and, therefore, H3 is not confirmed.

Changes in educational gradients over time

Figure 5 displays predicted approval probabilities for each of the five nontraditional family behaviors—plus approval of men's full-time employment while raising young children—by education level, country group, and time period. These probabilities are derived from a three-way interaction between country group, education, and time, which is statistically significant (regression results available upon request). We do not observe a decrease in the educational gradient over time in the Nordic countries or Western Europe. Instead, in the Nordic countries, educational differences have slightly increased for voluntary childlessness, nonmarital cohabitation, and childbearing, with the highly educated showing greater approval gains. A similar trend occurs in Western Europe for approval of women's full-time employment with young children.

In Eastern and Southern Europe, educational differences in approval of nonmarital cohabitation and childbearing have narrowed since 2006, as initial higher approval among the highly educated lessened by 2018. Southern Europe also saw a reduction in the educational gap for voluntary childlessness, whereas Eastern Europe exhibited a slight increase. Changes

FIGURE 5 Educational differences in the predicted approval of nontraditional family behaviors, by country group and over time



NOTE: Predicted probabilities are from a multinomial logistic model regressing approval, neutrality, and disapproval on country groups, education, year of the interview, their interaction, and controls (sex, birth cohort, and foreign-born status). Confidence intervals are derived from clustered and bootstrapped standard errors.
SOURCE: Authors' weighted computations from ESS Rounds 3 (2006) and 9 (2018).

in Southern Europe relate mainly to approval of men's behaviors rather than women's (see Figure A3 in the online Appendix). Supplemental figures show that disapproval maintains a consistent negative educational gradient over time, with the least educated most disapproving, and this gradient persists (Figure A6 in the Online Appendix). Neutrality levels and gradients remain largely unchanged (Figure A7 in the Online Appendix). Overall, the patterns across education levels, country groups, and time offer only partial support for H4. Regarding diffusion over time, we note

that approval of nontraditional family behaviors has generally increased, without a corresponding reduction in educational disparities in approval.

Country-specific analyses and robustness checks

To assess the robustness of our country groupings, we conducted country-specific analyses using country fixed effects within each group (Nordic, Western, Southern, Eastern Europe). This allowed us to examine within-group variation, identify outliers, and evaluate the robustness of overall regional patterns. These results are compiled in the Online Appendix for reference.

Nordic countries show generally uniform, high approval of nontraditional behaviors. Denmark leads in approval, while Sweden shows somewhat higher neutrality, especially on childlessness and parental employment (Figure A8 in the Online Appendix). Western Europe is more heterogeneous: German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany, Switzerland) show lower approval and higher neutrality on childlessness, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing; Belgium and the Netherlands align more with Nordic approval levels; France, the United Kingdom, and Ireland fall in between, with mixed levels of neutrality and approval (Figure A9 in the Online Appendix). Southern Europe is heterogeneous, too: Cyprus exhibits greater disapproval or neutrality on childlessness, divorce with young children, and nonmarital childbearing but unexpectedly higher approval of mothers' employment. Spain and Portugal show greater approval consistent with advanced SDT stages (Figure A10 in the Online Appendix). In Eastern Europe, a clear divide emerges: Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, and Slovakia generally tend toward disapproval or neutrality, while Poland and Slovenia exhibit notably higher approval, especially for cohabitation, divorce with young children, and maternal employment (Figure A11 in the Online Appendix).

Educational gradients vary by country. In the Nordic countries, a consistent positive gradient appears: higher education associates with more approval of divorce and women's full-time employment with young children amid overall broad approval (Figure A12 in the Online Appendix). Western Europe's positive gradients appear mainly in Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands, with weaker or inconsistent patterns elsewhere (Figure A13 in the Online Appendix). Southern Europe shows moderate positive gradients: Cyprus has stronger educational differences amid generally lower approval, while Spain and Portugal exhibit higher approval with smaller educational gaps (Figure A14 in the Online Appendix). Eastern Europe's strongest gradients occur in Poland and Slovenia, where higher education relates to increased approval, whereas Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, and Slovakia show low approval and weak or absent education effects (Figure A15 in the Online Appendix). Across all countries, support for men's

full-time employment with young children remains high and stable, with negligible educational differences.

Between 2006 and 2018, approval of nontraditional family behaviors increased across educational groups, with notable country variation. In Nordic countries (Table A2 in the Online Appendix), approval was uniformly high—especially in Denmark—with modest increases. Sweden shows the largest rises among the highly educated for nonmarital cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, voluntary childlessness, and divorce with young children, widening educational gaps. In Western Europe (Table A3 in the Online Appendix), approval trends increased unevenly. Belgium and the Netherlands had strong approval across all education levels with minor divides, though in the Netherlands, approval increases of voluntary childlessness, nonmarital cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing were greater among the highly educated. Despite changes in the divorce question wording, approval of divorce with young children in the Netherlands follows similar changes as other outcomes. France saw the largest increases in approval among the highly educated, thereby widening educational gaps. In German-speaking countries, Germany started with lower approval in 2006 but, together with Switzerland, showed increased approval among the less educated by 2018, modestly narrowing gaps.

Southern Europe (Table A4 in the Online Appendix) shows significant increases in approval over time, mainly driven by highly educated individuals in Spain and Portugal, widening the educational gap. Cyprus had mixed trends, with modest rises for voluntary childlessness and nonmarital childbearing but declines among the highly educated for cohabitation and divorce with young children, indicating complex gradients. Eastern Europe (Table A5 in the Online Appendix) maintained generally low approval but with divergent patterns: Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia experienced large increases in approval, mainly among the highly educated, widening the gap; Bulgaria and Hungary displayed stable or declining approval, sometimes narrowing educational differences. Across all countries, educational differences in approval for women's full-time employment with young children remained, with approval increasing among the highly educated, whereas approval of men's full-time employment remained high and stable, with slight declines among higher educated men in some Eastern European countries.

While country-specific analyses reveal within-group heterogeneity, the broad alignment of these results with our country-group patterns supports that the country groups serve as both theoretically meaningful and statistically necessary units. This theoretically grounded approach allows us to overcome sample size limitations at the country level, providing a clearer lens for observing the attitudinal mechanism through which the SDT diffusion process operates.

Discussion and conclusion

This study examined variation in nontraditional family attitudes across educational levels, country groups, and time, testing predictions from SDT theory. Using cross-national data from 2006 and 2018 and multinomial logistic regression, we analyzed disapproval, neutrality, and approval for five nontraditional family behaviors: voluntary childlessness, nonmarital cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, divorce while raising children under 12, and women's full-time employment when children are under 3. Men's employment was also examined as a contrast. This provides the most comprehensive, up-to-date overview of SDT-related attitudes across Europe.

Our findings present a nuanced picture not entirely consistent with trends that would be expected from SDT theory. First, we found that patterns in nontraditional family attitudes across country groups only partially followed the SDT progression. As expected, Nordic countries act as forerunners, whereas Eastern European countries tend to lag behind, especially when considering the high predicted share of disapproval of voluntary childlessness and divorce of parents raising young children. While Nordic countries show a relatively cohesive high-approval profile, Eastern Europe is polarized: Poland and Slovenia demonstrate comparatively greater approval compared to Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, and Slovakia, which remain less advanced in terms of SDT attitudes. Southern Europe shows less expected results. Overall, predicted approval of the nontraditional behaviors is high, but varies by specific behavior. Country-specific analyses highlight that Spain and Portugal exhibit relatively higher approval consistent with more advanced SDT value shifts, especially for nonmarital childbearing and mothers' employment, whereas Cyprus shows mixed responses, with greater disapproval or neutrality on several nontraditional behaviors. This finding aligns with prior research identifying Spain as notably ahead in SDT progression within Southern Europe (Aassve et al. 2025) and confirms that Spain and Portugal outpace Cyprus in SDT attitude shifts.

Western Europe also exhibited a distinct pattern, characterized by the highest levels of neutrality and the lowest levels of outright approval for nontraditional family behaviors. Our robustness checks reveal that this overall profile masks important country-specific differences. Belgium and the Netherlands exhibit levels of approval comparable to those observed in Nordic countries—they can similarly be described as forerunners. France, meanwhile, occupies an intermediate position with mixed patterns of neutrality and approval toward nontraditional family behaviors. The United Kingdom and Ireland similarly display high levels of neutrality, resembling German-speaking countries for certain behaviors. Indeed, German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany, Switzerland) demonstrate notably lower approval and higher neutrality, particularly regarding childlessness, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing, and thus appear to lag

in SDT advancement within Western Europe. Prior research has sometimes identified German-speaking countries as more conservative and lagging in SDT behaviors (Alderotti et al. 2021; Sobotka and Berghammer 2021), but their high levels of neutrality—rather than outright disapproval—toward nontraditional family behaviors are striking. An attitudinal profile leaning toward neutrality can have a number of explanations. It may reflect either internalized "state neutrality" (Kis 2012), discouraging judgment of private behaviors, or ongoing tensions between emerging nontraditional practices and persistent traditional institutions (Elster and Gelfand 2021).

More generally, we found that nonmarital cohabitation and childbearing, as well as maternal employment when children are under 3 (except for Western Europe), enjoy widespread support across all country groups. This suggests a shift or adjustment in attitudes—perhaps because these nontraditional practices have become commonplace in contemporary Europe. In contrast, support for voluntary childlessness and divorce involving young children remains less widespread, particularly in Eastern Europe. Robustness checks confirm these overall patterns while revealing nuanced country-specific variations. On the one hand, these findings align with SDT arguments of partial convergence and differing speeds of attitudinal progression toward nontraditional family behaviors across Europe. On the other hand, the lower support for these behaviors may also reflect processes of re-traditionalization or persistent cultural resistance in certain contexts, as suggested by Spéder (2023).

Second, our findings reveal that educational differences in approval of nontraditional family behaviors are selective rather than universal. A clear educational gradient in approval is evident primarily for two behaviors: divorce while raising young children and women's full-time employment with young children—both showing higher approval among the more educated. In contrast, men's full-time employment in the same context is broadly accepted across all educational levels and country groups. For other behaviors—voluntary childlessness, nonmarital cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing—educational differences are modest and often statistically insignificant. Additional analyses show that neutrality is more common among the higher educated in Western Europe, while disapproval is consistently higher among the least educated across all country groups. The presence of an educational gradient in approval of women's full-time employment—but not for men's—supports the notion of a double standard and the "incomplete gender revolution" in Europe, particularly among the low educated (Goldscheider et al. 2015; Liefbroer and Merz 2009). One possible explanation is that the opportunity cost of working instead of caring for a young child is lower for low-educated women than for their higher educated counterparts (UN Women 2018), making full-time employment less socially acceptable among the low educated.

Third, while approval of nontraditional family behaviors has generally increased across Europe, this diffusion has not been accompanied by a consistent narrowing of educational differences—a pattern also evident in our country-specific analyses. In many contexts, especially in the Nordic countries and Western Europe, the educational gradient in approval has remained stable over time, suggesting that ideational change persists unevenly distributed across social strata. This pattern challenges the SDT's assumption of a universal cultural shift toward individual autonomy and self-expression. Instead, our results lend partial support to the PoD perspective, which posits that lower levels of approval among the less educated may reflect structural constraints or differing life experiences, rather than limited exposure to new norms and attitudes. Notably, we observe a reduction in educational differences in attitudes toward nonmarital cohabitation and childbearing in Eastern Europe, and toward nonmarital cohabitation, childbearing, and childlessness in Southern Europe—regions where these behaviors have become more common in recent decades. This suggests that behavioral normalization may, over time, lead to attitudinal convergence—consistent with Aassve, Mencarini, et al.'s (2024) argument of vertical diffusion through generational turnover—though this process appears to be context-specific and uneven.

Fourth, our findings indicate that the educational gradient in approval of nontraditional family behaviors has remained largely stable over time in the Nordic countries and Western Europe, consistent with robustness checks showing limited change in these country groups. In contrast, individuals with lower levels of education in Eastern and Southern Europe have become increasingly favorable toward such behaviors. These findings are consistent with the more recent diffusion of nontraditional family behaviors in Southern and Eastern Europe, compared to the earlier transitions observed in the Nordic countries and Western Europe (Sobotka and Berghammer 2021). Moreover, recent literature on rising economic uncertainty in Southern Europe suggests that such conditions may contribute to the adoption of less normative behaviors among lower educated individuals (Vignoli et al. 2016). If lower educated individuals were particularly likely to adopt nontraditional family behaviors—irrespective of whether due to socioeconomic pressures or not—they may have also become more accepting of them over time. Differently from the SDT theory explanation, which highlights how changes in attitudes precede behaviors, this mechanism would be consistent with a feedback-loop mechanism whereby changes in behaviors precede attitudes.

Our study is not without limitations. It relies on two pooled cross sections, which prevents us from assessing whether changes in personal circumstances influence individuals' approval, neutrality, or disapproval over time. Nor can we determine whether these attitudes are linked to actual behaviors. The relevant data from the ESS "Timing of Life"

module—measuring approval of nontraditional family behaviors—was only collected in 2006 and 2018. As such, we cannot capture potential shifts in attitudes that may have occurred following the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, with only two time points, we cannot fully assess claims of a "re-traditionalization" of norms and values or confidently attribute our findings for Eastern Europe to a genuine cultural reversal, rather than a temporary fluctuation or sampling variation. Some scholars analyzing long-term survey data and demographic indicators argue that Eastern European societies continue to struggle with accepting nontraditional family behaviors (Sobotka and Berghammer 2021; Spéder 2023), and our findings may be interpreted in that light. Moreover, recent results from the European Election Study suggest growing support for conservative parties in 2024 compared to earlier years (2004, 2019), particularly in Europe outside the EU-15 (excluding Luxembourg, Ireland, and Greece) (Abou-Chadi 2024). We therefore support calls for more systematic research into the nature and evolution of people's attitudes, values, and norms (Spéder 2023), and encourage the collection and analysis of more recent data to assess whether attitudinal trends have shifted in response to recent social and political developments.

In sum, our findings highlight that certain nontraditional behaviors—such as nonmarital cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, and women's full-time employment when children are young—have become relatively widely accepted. However, attitudes remain more divided on other issues, such as voluntary childlessness and divorce involving women with young children. Differences along SDT-aligned country groups are evident: Nordic countries have largely integrated and accepted nontraditional behaviors, while Southern European countries are progressively aligning with these trends (especially Spain and Portugal). Yet, important within-group specificities exist, with considerable country- and education-level variation, particularly in Eastern and Western Europe, which exhibit more ambiguous and diverse patterns. Our findings also reveal inconsistent patterns in terms of the educational gradient and its change over time. Taken together, this suggests that ideational shifts have occurred nonlinearly and in hybrid forms across country groups and social strata within the European context.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data availability statement

The data analyzed in this study are from the European Social Survey and can be accessed free of charge upon registration at https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/. The study was not preregistered. Replication materials (Stata code) are not posted in a public repository but will be shared by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Note

1 In the Netherlands, respondents in round 9 were asked, "How much do you approve or disapprove if a man/woman gets divorced while he/she has children aged under 3?" rather than the intended question about children "under 12." We retain Dutch respondents in the sample and explicitly discuss the implications of this discrepancy in the country-level analysis (see the section "Country-specific analyses and robustness checks").

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