

# Double Standards: Differences in Norms on Voluntary Childlessness for Men and Women

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**Abstract:** We examined double standards in norms concerning voluntary childlessness. Whether the choice to remain childless is more accepted for men or women is not a priori clear; we formulated hypotheses in both directions. Parenthood might be considered as more central to women's identity than to men's, resulting in higher disapproval of childlessness for women. Yet, as the costs of parenthood are higher for women, people might also be more accepting of their choice to remain childless and disapprove more of childless men. Multilevel analyses were conducted, including individual and societal-level variables. Our sample consisted of  $N=44,055$  individuals nested in 25 European countries, obtained from the third round of the European Social Survey (2006). Subjective norms regarding voluntary childlessness were measured with a split-ballot design: half of the respondents were randomly assigned items regarding women choosing childlessness, and the other half was assigned items regarding men. Findings indicated that men were more disapproved of when choosing not to have children than women. Generally, this double standard was endorsed by women, not by men. Clear cross-national variation in the double standard existed, which was partly explained by the level of gender equality. We found that higher levels of gender equality were associated with larger double standards favouring women.

## Introduction

During the past decades, the prevalence of childlessness has increased enormously, although at different rates across Europe. The percentages of childless women born between 1960 and 1964 vary from a low of 5 in Bulgaria and 6 in Slovenia to a high of 24 and 27 in Germany and Switzerland, respectively (Dykstra, 2009). Not only has the prevalence of childlessness increased during the past decades, but the same is also true for the societal acceptance of childlessness in the Western societies (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001; Koropecjy-Cox and Pendell, 2007a; Noordhuizen, De Graaf and Sieben, 2010). However, this trend towards greater acceptance does not imply that the choice to remain childless is universally accepted in the Western world (Merz and Liefbroer, 2012).

Western societies have witnessed an enormous increase in gender equality during the past decades.

Despite the link between this gender role revolution and 'new' demographic behaviours, such as voluntary childlessness, the acceptance of such behaviours has not been studied from a gender perspective. The theory of the second demographic transition (Van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 2007), which describes and aims to explain the changes in demographic behaviour in Western societies starting in the 1960s, has been criticized for a lack of an explicit gender perspective (Bernhardt, 2004). Empirical research on attitudes and norms regarding childlessness and other non-traditional family behaviours ignored potential differences in norms for men and women, either by using gender-neutral survey items (Thornton, 1989; Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001; Koropecjy-Cox and Pendell, 2007a,b) or by focusing on women only (Mueller and Yoder, 1997; Rowlands and Lee, 2006). Similarly, qualitative studies on experiences of the childless, including stigmatization and

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stereotyping, often focused only on women (Ireland, 1993; Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 2002). This is unfortunate because parenthood impacts the lives of men and women differently and, consequently, choosing not to become a parent may not be accepted for men and women to the same extent.

In the current study, we focused on the double standard in attitudes towards *voluntary* childlessness. Prior research revealed that voluntary childlessness was disapproved of whereas involuntary childlessness (low fecundity, infecundity) was not universally stigmatized (Lampman and Dowling-Guyer, 1995; Kopper and Smith 2001). A double (or multiple) standard can be defined as a different evaluation of the same behaviour for different groups of people. The distinction of groups may be based on a variety of characteristics, such as sex, ethnicity, nationality, or socioeconomic background (Foschi, 2000). Most often the concept refers to a different norm for men and women, as it does in this article. We consider disapproval of men and women who choose to not have children. Four perspectives combining male and female respondents and male and female targets are explicitly differentiated: men's attitudes about men, men's attitudes about women, women's attitudes about men, and women's attitudes about women.

In light of (gender) equality principles that are fundamental values in many countries, investigating factors that might influence different evaluations of the same behaviour for men and women is scientifically interesting and has societal relevance. Knowledge about factors leading to double standards may help prevent stigmatization and discrimination.

Whether men or women who choose not to have children are more disapproved of is not a priori clear; the importance of parenthood for the social construction of identities is not gender-neutral, but the costs of parenthood are not gender-neutral either. We formulated hypotheses in both directions. We also examined whether men and women hold the same double standard. Furthermore, double standards might be related to the societal level of gender equality. Therefore, we examined whether double standards vary across European countries, and to what extent this variation can be explained by differences in national levels of gender equality in terms of economic and political participation and power.

We extend the literature in several ways. First, we contribute to the study of attitudes and norms regarding childlessness by taking into account differences in norms for men and women, which have been neglected in previous research. Second, we contribute to the literature on double standards, which is largely limited to double standards regarding sexuality. Third, our focus on cross-

national differences in the double standard concerning childlessness extends our understanding of the ways in which societal contexts shape double standards. Most studies on double standards used relatively small student samples and took on a psychological perspective, whereas we conducted a large-scale study from a culturally comparative viewpoint. We made use of the third wave of the European Social Survey (ESS), covering 25 European countries.

## Literature Review, Theory, and Hypotheses

The classical and most researched example of a double standard concerns men's and women's sexual behaviour. This double standard implies that men are held to a more lenient standard than women; promiscuity and extramarital affairs are judged as less acceptable for women than for men. Research has indicated that there is still evidence of the existence of this double standard (Crawford and Popp, 2003 for an overview), although others have not found evidence (O'Sullivan, 1995; Marks and Fraley, 2005). Another example of a double standard concerns the inference of task competence. Surveys and (quasi-)experiments have shown that women have to try harder and are allowed fewer mistakes than men for the attribution of the same level of ability (for an overview of these studies, see Foschi, 2000). Furthermore, physical signs of ageing have been found to result in more negative evaluations of women's attractiveness than of men's, which is referred to as the double standard of ageing (Deutsch, Zalenski and Clark, 1986).

Double standards in the evaluation of family formation have not received much scholarly attention yet. Hardly any studies have investigated whether a double standard in the acceptance of voluntary childlessness exists. However, quasi-experimental vignette studies have measured people's perceptions of childless individuals and couples on personality scales by presenting respondents with vignettes describing a married couple, with randomly varying numbers of children (including zero). The respondents' perceptions of the couple and of each of the partners were measured. The effects of the target person's sex (husband or wife) on the ratings—which might be indicative of a double standard—were mixed (Polit, 1978; Jamison, Franzini and Kaplan, 1979; Calhoun and Selby, 1980; Kopper and Smith, 2001) or not examined at all (Lampman and Dowling-Guyer, 1995; Mueller and Yoder, 1997; LaMastro, 2001; Koropecj-Cox, Romano and Moras, 2007, for an overview). Although the measures of attributed personality characteristics are indicative of stereotyping of

childless people, these vignette studies did not actually measure *disapproval* of the choice not to have children, which is more appropriate when one is interested in norms and double standards. Moreover, all discussed vignette studies are based on samples of American university students, except for the study by Kopper and Smith (2001) among American adults. In contrast, our study has a cross-national perspective.

### The Direction of the Double Standard: Are Norms Stricter for Men or for Women?

Why would we expect that men and women who choose childlessness are judged differently? One reason is that being a parent is often considered to be more central to women's lives than to men's lives (Hird and Abshoff, 2000; Letherby, 2002). In many societies, motherhood is viewed as an integral part of the feminine gender role (Agrillo and Nelini, 2008) and cultural discourses of the feminine gender role and femininity have historically been constructed around motherhood (Gillespie, 2000). Especially since the 19th century, mothering has been presumed to be a primary identity for most adult women (Arendell, 2000). Fatherhood is not equally important for the masculine gender role, and male success is most often dependent on occupation achievement rather than children (Agrillo and Nelini, 2008).

It has also been suggested that parenthood is considered to be more 'natural' for women than for men; a Canadian study showed that a majority of male and female respondents indicated that the desire to be a mother was innate for women, whereas the majority thought that the desire to father was learned behaviour (Miall, 1994). Hence, motherhood might be considered as more important for women's identity than fatherhood for men's. Therefore, choosing not to be a parent could be seen as more deviant for women than for men.

Another argument for the assumption that voluntary childlessness is less accepted for women than for men can be derived from the theory of status difference (Foddy and Smithson, 1989; Foschi, 2000). This theory focuses specifically on the explanation of double standards and suggests that double standards are related to status or power differences. A double standard often entails that the group with more power (e.g. the group with the higher status or the majority group) imposes stricter rules on or sets higher standards for the lower-status group, while members of the higher-status group are evaluated by more lenient standards. Through such practices the more powerful group can maintain its position. Although designed to explain double standards in the evaluation of task competence, this theory could also be used to predict double standards in the

evaluation of family behaviours. In patriarchal societies, men are more powerful and family-related double standards favouring men would facilitate the stabilization of a family system in which men are most powerful. Both the theory of status difference and the idea that parenthood is considered more important for women's identity than for men's lead to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a: Women who choose not to have children are more disapproved of than men.

Arguments that point in the opposite direction are, however, also plausible. It is not unusual nowadays to acknowledge the negative sides of parenthood, such as strains and sacrifices in personal and professional life (Sobotka, 2004; Dykstra, 2009). Especially women's employment opportunities are restricted by parenthood (Koropecj-Cox and Pendell, 2007b). Men's opportunity costs associated with parenthood are often lower and educational and career opportunities may not be threatened by fatherhood, especially in countries that support a traditional male breadwinner model (Kalmijn and Saraceno, 2008). There is also some evidence that parenthood increases daily strains more for women than for men (Ross and Van Willigen, 1996; Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2006). Besides, women are the ones who have to bear the physical costs of pregnancy and childbearing. Because the costs of parenthood are generally higher for women than for men, there might be more understanding for women who choose not to have children than for men. This argumentation results in a contrasting hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1b: Men who choose not to have children are more disapproved of than women.

### Sex Differences in the Endorsement of the Double Standard

Previous studies showed that men are more disapproving of childlessness than women (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001; Koropecj-Cox and Pendell, 2007a,b). Yet, these studies used gender-neutral measures of attitudes towards childlessness, so they did not indicate double standards. Perhaps individuals can identify or empathize better with fertility choices of their own sex and therefore disapprove more of 'non-conformist' behaviour of the other sex. Women are more likely to view parenthood as more restrictive than men (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001). Possibly, men do not recognize the costs of parenthood *for women* as much as women do themselves. Furthermore, holding a double standard that mainly restricts the other sex allows more

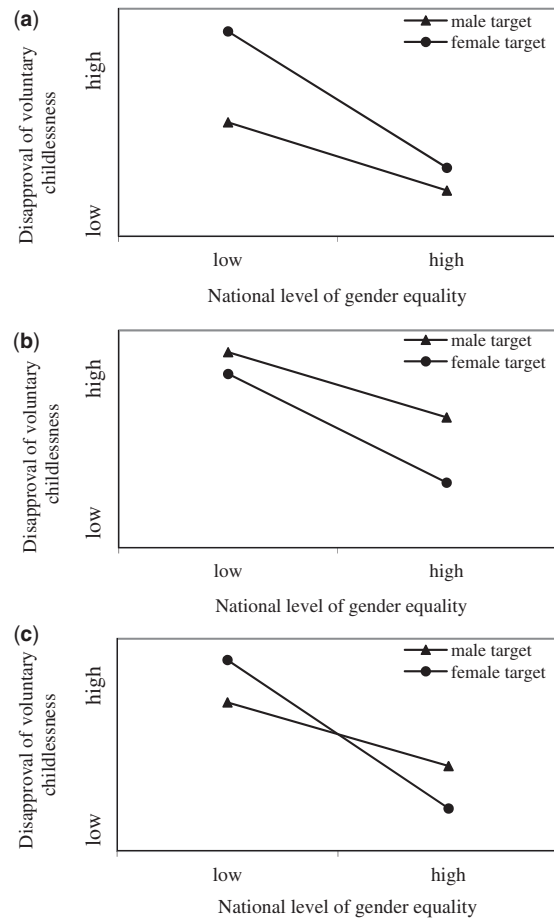
freedom of choice whether to have children for the own sex and thus for the self.

There is no empirical evidence on the extent to which men and women hold double standards regarding childlessness, and surprisingly few studies on other kinds of double standards took the sex of respondents into account. What scarce empirical evidence there is mainly comes from research among American and Canadian college students on sexual double standards, and findings are mixed (Jurich and Jurich, 1974; Milhausen and Herold, 1999). Interesting is Robinson and Jedlicka's (1982) finding that male and female American college students imposed greater restrictions on the sexual behaviour of the other sex than on that of one's own. Because the empirical evidence on double standards is inconclusive and there is no established theory formation on potential differences between men and women in their endorsement of double standards, we regarded this issue as exploratory.

### Double Standards and Societal Level of Gender Equality

Finally, we expected that the existence or size of the double standard concerning voluntary childlessness would be related to the level of gender equality in a society. In gender-egalitarian societies, childlessness is more accepted for men and women than in less gender-egalitarian societies (Merz and Liefbroer, 2012). We assumed, however, that norms for women vary more strongly by the national level of gender equality than norms for men because higher levels of gender equality have been preceded by a process of women's emancipation. Women's lives have changed more than men's (Gershuny and Robinson, 1988; Sayer, 2005; England, 2010), and probably attitudes about women's roles have changed more than attitudes about men's roles. As the level of gender equality varies across European countries, we expected the double standard to vary across Europe too.

The exact form of this variation depends on the average direction of the double standard across these countries. Three different situations could apply. First, given that across Europe childlessness is more accepted for men than for women (H1a is true), we would expect that this double standard favouring men becomes smaller with increasing levels of gender equality (H2-I). This situation is graphically depicted in Figure 1a. If, in contrast, voluntary childlessness is more accepted for women across all countries (H1b is true), this tolerance towards childless women might be even greater in gender egalitarian countries, where emphasis might be given in particular to women's right to autonomy. Hence, the double standard is expected to become larger with



**Figure 1** Different forms of double standards by national level of gender equality

increasing levels of gender equality (H2-II, see Figure 1b). Finally, a third possibility is that a 'flip over' occurs: in countries with low levels of gender equality, double standards are favouring men, whereas in countries with high levels of gender equality, double standards are favouring women (H2-III). In this case, the double standards in different countries could average each other out and we might not find a main effect of sex of target (Figure 1c).

## Method

### Data

In this study, we used data from the third round of the ESS. The ESS is a repeated cross-sectional survey conducted in many European countries, measuring changing social attitudes and values using face-to-face

interviews. Data for the third round were collected in 2006 in 25 countries (Table 2). The ESS intends to be representative of the residential population of each participating nation aged 15 years and older, regardless of nationality or citizenship. In total, 47,009 respondents participated. Response rates per country varied between 46.0 and 73.2 per cent. The (unweighted) average is 63.5 per cent. Due to missing values, our sample consisted of 44,055 individuals nested in 25 countries.

## Measures

### Individual level variables

The dependent variable, disapproval of voluntary childlessness, was measured with the question 'How much do you approve or disapprove if a woman/man chooses never to have children?' Answer categories ranged from 1 = *strongly disapprove* to 5 = *strongly approve*. We inversely recoded the answers so that higher scores implied higher disapproval. The survey had a split-ballot design; the female version of the question was randomly assigned to half of the respondents, and the male version was assigned to the other half. Hence, the double standard was not measured at the individual level. However, our interest lay in the double standard as a characteristic of groups: of men, women, and populations of countries. In this article, we therefore focused on the effects of the dummy variable *female target*, which indicates whether the respondent was assigned the female or the male version of the question on disapproval of voluntary childlessness (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*). The direction of the effect of this variable indicates whether voluntary childlessness is more disapproved of when displayed by men or by women (Hypotheses 1a and 1b). A positive effect indicates greater disapproval of women, and a negative effect means greater disapproval of men. Values closer to zero indicate a smaller double standard. The variable *female respondent* indicates the sex of the respondent (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*) and was included to examine whether men and women hold a different double standard regarding childlessness.

Additionally, we included a set of control variables at the individual level that have been shown to correlate with norms about childlessness. Koropecj-Cox and Pendell (2007a,b) reported that younger adults held more positive attitudes about voluntary childlessness than older adults, yet they also found that middle-aged respondents were more likely to believe that a childless person can have a fulfilling life compared with those who were younger and older (Koropecj-Cox and Pendell, 2007b). Numerous studies have found the higher educated and employed hold less traditional family attitudes than those with a low level of education (e.g.

Pampel, 2011; Rijken and Liefbroer, 2012). Religious doctrines encourage family formation and reproduction (Pearce, 2002); hence, religious people may disapprove more of voluntary childlessness than non-religious people. Given that a stable partner relationship is usually viewed as a prerequisite for childbearing, single persons might hold less negative opinions about childlessness than those with a partner. The same may be true for people who do not have children themselves. They might have more positive attitudes towards childlessness than parents. Education, religiosity or church attendance, partner status, and parental status were found to be associated with attitudes towards childlessness in America (Koropecj-Cox and Pendell, 2007a,b) and Europe (Merz and Liefbroer, 2012).

To account for a non-linear effect of age, we included dummy variables distinguishing four age categories: 15–30 (reference category), 31–45, 46–60, and *older than 60*. Educational level ranged from 0 = *primary education not completed* to 6 = *second stage of tertiary education and employment status from 0 = not employed to 1 = employed*. We accounted for religion by using the degree of religious involvement measured as a factor score based on three items: frequency of church attendance, frequency of prayer, and self-evaluated level of religiosity (measured with the question 'How religious are you?'). A factor analysis revealed one factor underlying these items. The higher the factor score, the higher a person's religious involvement. We created the following dummy variables indicating partner status: *married or widowed* (reference category), *divorced* (not married or cohabiting with a new partner), *cohabiting* (unmarried), and *single* (never married and not cohabiting). Parental status indicated whether the respondent ever had one or more children (coded as 1, with 0 = *childless*). An overview of the descriptive results on these variables is presented in Table 1.

### Country-level variables

The level of gender equality is measured by the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) retrieved from the United Nations Development Programme (2008). This measure combines (in)equalities between men and women in three areas: political participation and decision making, economic participation and decision making, and power over economic resources. Theoretically, the scale ranges from 0 = *inequality* to 10 = *equality*. We control for gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in purchasing power standards (pps) (Eurostat, 2008), which is an indicator for economic development and is expected to be associated with GEM, with family attitudes, and possibly also with double standards. We centred both variables around their grand means to facilitate a meaningful interpretation of the

**Table 1** Overview of individual characteristics ( $N = 44,055$ )

Variable	<i>M</i> (%)	<i>SD</i>	Range
Independent variables			
Age (%)			
15–30	21.02		
31–45	25.61		
46–60	25.55		
>60	27.82		
Educational level	3.02	1.46	0–6
Employed (% yes)	53.89		
Religious involvement <sup>a</sup>	0.00	1.00	–1.43–2.33
Partner status			
Married or widowed (% yes)	62.76		
Divorced (% yes)	6.34		
Cohabiting (% yes)	8.71		
Single (% yes)	22.18		
Parental status (% with children)	68.70		
Female respondent (%)	54.69		
Female target (%)	50.25		
Dependent variable			
Disapproval of voluntary childlessness	3.14	1.14	1–5

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Factor scores of a factor analysis of three variables: self-evaluated religiosity [ $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 2.92$ , range 0 (not at all religious)–10 (very religious)], frequency of church attendance [ $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 2.44$ , range = 1 (never)–7 (every day)], and frequency of prayer [ $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 2.44$ , range = 1 (never)–7 (every day)].

intercepts and cross-level interaction estimates. The non-centred values are presented in Table 2.

## Method of Analysis

We estimated multilevel models including variables at the individual and the country level and within and cross-level interactions to predict double standards in attitudes on voluntary childlessness. The effect of the variable female target indicated whether there are double standards regarding voluntary childlessness, and the direction of the effect indicates whether voluntary childlessness is more disapproved of when displayed by men or by women (Hypotheses 1a and 1b). To investigate whether men or women hold larger double standards regarding voluntary childlessness (exploratory issue), we added the interaction term between female target and female respondent to the model. To examine cross-country variation in the double standard, we used random-slope models allowing the slope of the variable female target to vary across countries. To test whether the strength of double standards is related to a country's level of gender equality (Hypothesis 2), we added the cross-level interaction term between female target and GEM. Because of the high correlation between GEM and GDP per capita ( $r = 0.80$ ), we did not add GDP per capita and its interaction with female target to all models, but we present a separate final model including these variables.

Analyses were conducted with the `xtmixed` command in Stata12 using maximum likelihood to estimate variance components. See Appendix A for additional discussions of multilevel modelling, the measurement scale of the dependent variable, and the reason for including individual-level control variables in our models.

## Results

### Descriptive Results

Figure 2 displays the mean disapproval of voluntary childlessness by sex of respondent and sex of target separately for countries with high gender equality and countries with low gender equality. In countries with high gender equality, most disapproval is expressed by women regarding men choosing not to have children and least by women regarding women choosing voluntary childlessness. Men and women seem to endorse a double standard, though women's double standard is larger. In countries with low gender equality, the levels of disapproval are much higher than in countries with high gender equality, but neither men nor women seem to hold double standards.

Table 2 displays the mean scores on disapproval of voluntary childlessness and the double standard per country. We observe that disapproval of voluntarily

**Table 2** GEM mean disapproval, and double standard by country

Country <sup>a</sup>	GEM <sup>b</sup> 2006	GDP per capita in pps <sup>c</sup> 2006	Average disapproval of voluntary childlessness <sup>d</sup>	Double standard <sup>e</sup>	N
Ukraine	4.6	2.9	4.38	-0.02	1,882
Russia	4.9	4.5	4.16	0.06	2,156
Romania	5.0	3.8	3.77	-0.02	1,943
Hungary	5.7	6.5	3.63	0.05	1,343
Cyprus	5.8	9.3	3.72	0.15*	938
Bulgaria	6.1	3.7	4.44	0.03	1,254
Poland	6.1	5.3	3.38	-0.05	1,657
Slovenia	6.1	8.9	3.15	-0.18**	1,361
Latvia	6.2	5.6	3.63	-0.03	1,690
Slovak Republic	6.3	6.4	3.58	0.01	1,566
Estonia	6.4	6.8	3.95	-0.06	1,462
Belgium	6.5	12.3	2.49	-0.18***	1,784
Switzerland	6.6	13.6	2.86	-0.11**	1,769
Portugal	6.9	7.4	2.93	-0.02	2,107
Ireland	7.0	14.3	2.99	-0.16***	1,437
France	7.2	11.3	3.12	-0.25***	1,965
United Kingdom	7.8	11.9	2.79	-0.12***	2,343
Austria	7.9	12.9	3.09	0.01	2,113
Spain	7.9	10.2	2.89	-0.14**	1,840
Germany	8.3	11.4	3.15	-0.04	2,753
The Netherlands	8.6	13.2	2.20	-0.14**	1,841
Denmark	8.8	12.7	1.67	-0.07	1,448
Finland	8.9	11.6	2.47	-0.40***	1,875
Norway	9.1	18.7	2.10	-0.14**	1,722
Sweden	9.1	12.0	2.51	-0.40***	1,866

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Countries are ranked by GEM values, <sup>b</sup>Scale: 1–10, a higher score represents a higher level of gender quality, <sup>c</sup>(EU27=10). As Eurostat does not provide GDP per capita for Russia and Ukraine, these values were obtained from the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook. The correlation between Eurostat and World Factbook values for GDP per capita for is .98 (based on 22 countries from our sample), <sup>d</sup>Scale: 1 (strongly approve)–5 (strongly disapprove), <sup>e</sup>Double standards are calculated as the average disapproval of voluntarily childless women minus the average disapproval of voluntarily childless men (disapproval measured on a scale from 1 to 5; the higher, the more disapproving). Negative scores imply that norms are stricter for men.

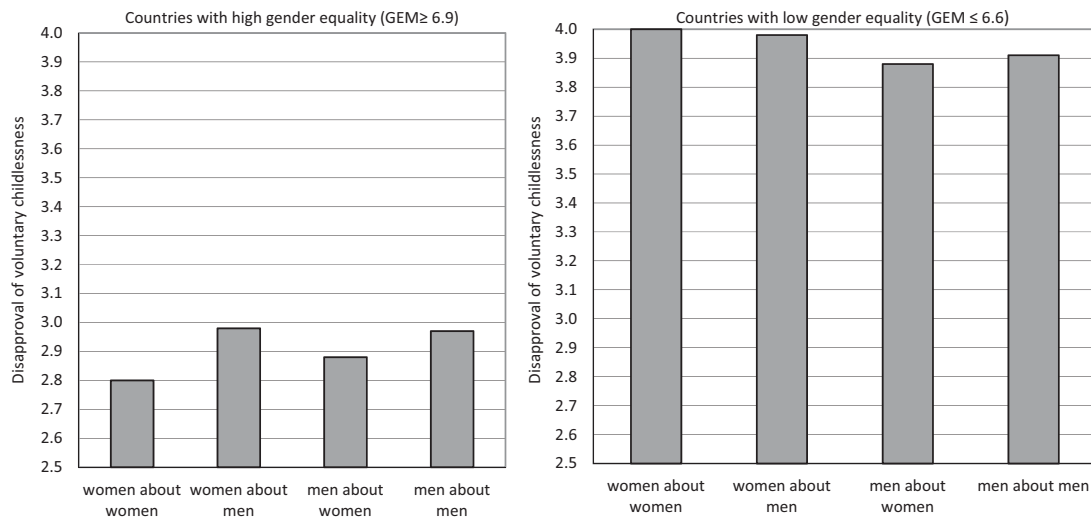
\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

childless men is stronger than that of women in most countries (negative scores on the double standard), although in about half of the countries the difference is not statistically significant. The size of the double standards shows considerable variation across Europe. It is largest in Sweden and Finland, while in Eastern Europe, Austria, and Portugal the differences between norms for men and women are smallest. Only in Cyprus, the double standard clearly is in the reverse direction; here women choosing not to have children are more disapproved of than men.

### Multilevel Analyses

Table 3 presents the multilevel models predicting disapproval of voluntary childlessness. Model 1 displays that

age, education, employment, religious involvement, partner status and parental status, female respondent, and female target all predicted attitudes towards voluntary childlessness. Respondents aged 31–60 years are less disapproving of voluntary childlessness than younger respondents (15–30 years), whereas the attitudes of older (>60 years of age) respondents do not differ from those of the young. Lower educated, not employed, and religiously involved respondents are more disapproving compared with younger, higher educated, employed, and less religious individuals. Furthermore, married and widowed respondents are more disapproving of voluntary childlessness than those who are divorced, cohabiting, or single. Not surprisingly, parents are more disapproving of voluntary childlessness than respondents without children.



**Figure 2** Disapproval of voluntary childlessness by sex of respondent and sex of target

Notes: Disapproval of voluntary childlessness was measured on a scale ranging from 1 to 5 (5 is highest disapproval) and is weighted by a population size weight to ensure that each country is represented in proportion to its population size. The SDs of the bars range from .9 to 1.0. The left-hand diagram represents Portugal, Ireland, France, United Kingdom, Austria, Spain, Germany, The Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden; the right-hand diagram represents Ukraine, Russia, Romania, Hungary, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Poland, Slovenia, Latvia, Slovak Republic, Estonia, Belgium, and Switzerland.

The negative effect of female respondent implies that women generally are less disapproving than men of voluntary childlessness. The negative effect of female target indicates the existence of a double standard regarding voluntary childlessness; men choosing to remain childless are more disapproved of than women who do not want to have children. This result supports Hypothesis 1b. As expected, in countries with a higher national level of gender empowerment, voluntary childlessness is less disapproved of. Finally, the random part of the model shows that the variance of female target is .014 (significantly different from 0), indicating that the double standard varies across countries. The size of this random slope variance can be interpreted by considering that the interval  $\beta \pm 1.96 \times \sqrt{\text{random slope variance}}$  contains 95 per cent of the slopes. This means that the slope of female target (the size of the double standard) varied between  $-0.325$  and  $0.139$  (i.e.  $-0.093 \pm 1.96 \times \sqrt{.014}$ ) across countries.

In Model 2, the interaction between female target and female respondent was added. The main effect of female target now represents the effect of female target for male respondents and is not statistically significant anymore, which indicates that men do not hold a double standard regarding voluntary childlessness. However, the negative interaction effect indicates that women do hold a double

standard. The main effect of female respondent—now representing the effect of female respondent on disapproval of childless men—is also not significant anymore. This indicates that, taking into account the effects of control variables, women and men have the same attitudes towards men who choose not to have children. Adding the interaction improved the fit of Model 2 compared with Model 1 ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 18.16$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

In the next step, the cross-level interaction between female target and the level of gender empowerment was added (Model 3). The negative effect of this cross-level interaction indicates that the higher the level of gender empowerment in a country, the larger the double standard in this country. Hence, in countries with greater gender equality, the judgments of voluntary childless men and women diverge more widely. This divergence reflects higher levels of approval of childless women compared with men, supporting Hypothesis 2-II. By adding this interaction, the variance of female target decreased with 42.9 per cent. This implies that a large proportion of the cross-country variation in the double standard is explained by differences in level of gender equality. The model fit improved significantly compared with Model 2:  $\Delta\chi^2 = 5.87$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ). The plot of this interaction effect would be consistent with version II of Hypothesis 2 (Figure 1b).



**Table 3** Multilevel estimates of disapproval of voluntary childlessness ( $N = 44,055$ )

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Constant	3.345***	0.081	3.317***	0.081	3.316***	0.081	3.316***	0.072
<b>Individual level</b>								
Age (ref. cat. = 15–30)								
31–45	−0.165***	0.015	−0.165***	0.015	−0.165***	0.015	−0.165***	0.015
36–60	−0.113***	0.016	−0.113***	0.016	−0.113***	0.016	−0.113***	0.016
>60	0.004	0.017	0.004	0.017	0.004	0.017	0.004	0.017
Education attainment <sup>a</sup>	−0.049***	0.003	−0.049***	0.003	−0.049***	0.003	−0.049***	0.003
Employment status <sup>b</sup>	−0.031**	0.011	−0.031**	0.011	−0.031**	0.011	−0.031**	0.011
Religious involvement <sup>c</sup>	0.127***	0.005	0.127***	0.005	0.127***	0.005	0.127***	0.005
Partner status (ref. cat. = married or widowed)								
Divorced	−0.129***	0.018	−0.129***	0.018	−0.129***	0.018	−0.129***	0.018
Cohabiting	−0.105***	0.017	−0.105***	0.017	−0.105***	0.017	−0.105***	0.017
Single	−0.069***	0.017	−0.069***	0.017	−0.069***	0.017	−0.069***	0.017
Parental status <sup>d</sup>	0.235***	0.014	0.234***	0.014	0.234***	0.014	0.234***	0.014
Female respondent <sup>e</sup>	−0.068***	0.009	−0.016	0.012	−0.015	0.012	−0.015	0.012
Female target <sup>e</sup>	−0.093***	0.025	−0.036	0.027	−0.035	0.022	−0.035	0.022
Female target × female respondent			−0.103***	0.017	−0.104***	0.017	−0.104***	0.017
<b>Country level</b>								
GEM <sup>f</sup>	−0.383***	0.060	−0.381***	0.060	−0.383***	0.060	−0.191*	0.086
GDP per capita <sup>g</sup>							−0.081**	0.029
<b>Cross-level interaction</b>								
Female target × GEM					−0.058***	0.015	−0.055*	0.025
Female target × GDP per capita							−0.001	0.008
<b>Random part</b>								
Variance (female target)	0.014**	0.004	0.014**	0.005	0.008**	0.003	0.008**	0.003
Variance (constant)	0.153***	0.044	0.153***	0.044	0.153***	0.043	0.116***	0.033
Covariance (female target, constant)	0.001	0.012	0.002	0.013	0.002	0.008	0.001	0.007
Variance (residual)	0.796***	0.005	0.796***	0.005	0.796***	0.005	0.796***	0.005
−2 Log likelihood	−57595.721		−57577.559		−57571.689		−57568.247	

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Scale: 0–6, <sup>b</sup>0 = not employed, 1 = employed, <sup>c</sup>Factor scores, <sup>d</sup>0 = no children, 1 = has child(ren), <sup>e</sup>0 = male, 1 = female, <sup>f</sup>Scale: 0–10, mean-centered, a higher score represents a higher level of gender quality, <sup>g</sup>EU27 = 10, mean-centered.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

In the final model (Model 4), we controlled for GDP per capita, and its interaction with female target. GDP per capita is negatively associated with disapproval of voluntary childlessness, and adding this effect reduces the association between GEM and disapproval of childlessness by 50 per cent compared with Model 3. However, the interaction effect of GEM and female target has hardly changed, and there is no interaction effect of GDP per capita and female target and, consequently, no further reduction in the variance of female target. In other words, the association between GEM and the double standard is not explained by GDP per capita.

In Appendix B, we discuss additional analyses in which we studied the interactions of three other country-level variables with female target: rate of childlessness,

average disapproval of voluntary childlessness, and average religious involvement. They were modelled separately, as the number of countries in our sample does not permit including too many country-level variables. We did not find these country-level characteristics to explain any cross-country variation in the double standard in addition to GEM.

## Conclusion and Discussion

This study is, to our best knowledge, the first to show the existence of a double standard regarding voluntary childlessness through analysis of a large and representative dataset including a majority of European countries. Previous research on attitudes towards voluntary childlessness ignored the possibility of different norms for

men and women. Earlier work on double standards mainly focused on sexual double standards, double standards of ageing, and double standards in the evaluation of task performance. The current study found double standards concerning voluntary childlessness favouring women, varying in strength across Europe and differently endorsed by men and women. In most countries, double standards exist in the sense that voluntary childlessness of men is judged more harshly compared with women's. Women were found to endorse stronger double standards than men. Furthermore, the results indicate that double standards are associated with a country's level of gender equality; the higher the level of gender equality is, the larger the double standard favouring women. In the following text, we discuss these results and their theoretical implications more fully, considering the role of cultural context in shaping double standards, speculate about societal implications of double standards, and offer some direction for future research.

Whereas gender-related double standards until now usually implied that norms are stricter for women (e.g. sexual double standards), our findings indicate that voluntary childlessness is more accepted for women than for men. This double standard favouring women is mainly endorsed by women. Overall, men do not judge voluntarily childless men and women differently. Note that this is overall in Europe; in some countries, men also hold a double standard favouring women. It is not the case, however, that women are more disapproving of childless men than men themselves. They are as tolerant as men towards men who choose not to have children, but they are more tolerant towards women who make this choice. This finding might be explained by the fact that women bear the physical costs of having children and usually take up the greatest share of childcare. Hence, the costs of having children for their personal and professional lives are higher *for* women and might be especially recognized *by* women. As men's lives are affected less by parenthood in many countries, their choice not to have children might be less understood and seen as self-centric. Perhaps, when a man chooses not to have children, some women even consider him to be 'obstructing' his partner from realizing her potential wish to have children.

Several American survey studies (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001; Koropecj-Cox and Pendell, 2007a,b) showed that women are more accepting of childlessness than men, based on gender-neutral measurements of attitudes towards childlessness. Koropecj and Pendell (2007b) suggest that part of the explanation is that the costs of parenthood are higher for women. We agree with this, but would like to add to this

explanation that female respondents might think especially of women when answering a gender-neutral question about childlessness, which would increase the likelihood of reporting a positive attitude. After all, our study shows that when background characteristics are controlled for, women and men hold the same attitudes towards men's voluntary childlessness.

The existence and size of the double standard with respect to voluntary childlessness varied substantially across Europe and was related to a country's level of gender equality. Interestingly, we found that the higher the level of gender equality is, the larger the double standard with respect to voluntary childlessness. This result might seem counter-intuitive, but given the fact that in Europe the double standard concerning voluntary childlessness is generally favouring women, it is not surprising. Apparently, people (and women in particular) in more gender-equal countries are particularly tolerant towards fertility decisions of other women. In countries with high gender equality, such as Sweden and Norway, processes of modernization and emancipation may have led to a higher emphasis on individual autonomy and decision making, especially for women. Particularly with regard to fertility decisions, women might want to and are able to act autonomously and make their own choices. In addition, in these countries, women's pursuit of a professional career might be better understood than in countries with lower gender equality. We did not find double standards in the former communist countries, with the exception of Slovenia. Today, these countries have relatively low levels of gender equality. In the communist era, these countries had high female employment and low gender pay gaps, yet this gender equality in the public sphere was imposed by governments and the oppression of civil society inhibited the development of a women's movement (Pascall and Lewis, 2004).

We did not find other country-level characteristics to explain the cross-country variation in the double standard in addition to GEM or to affect the association between GEM and the double standard (Appendix B). This strengthens our conclusions about the relationship between structural gender equality at the country level and the double standard regarding voluntary childlessness.

Our findings point at the gendered nature of the second demographic transition. Self-actualization and the transition to the modern family model are more revolutionary for women's lives than for men's (Bernhardt, 2004), and this may be reflected in a stronger emphasis of women on their own autonomy than on men's. Furthermore, the findings of this study do not support the theory of status difference, which postulates that norms would be stricter for women. Although we recognize the value of this

theory for other areas (Foschi, 2000), this theory does not explain double standards regarding voluntary childlessness, as men have higher status than women, even in countries with high gender empowerment scores. However, one could argue that women have more power in the sphere of having children.

Our findings may have different social implications across European countries. Childlessness may lead to smaller social networks and fewer resources for support and care at higher ages (Dykstra, 2009). Men are at risk of having smaller networks than women (Pugliesi and Shooks, 1998) and hence are even more disadvantaged when they remain childless. In addition, when they are also stigmatized compared with childless women, their resources may again be smaller. In some countries, social welfare buffers the disadvantage of having limited networks and resources. In countries, however, where there is less social security and help and support come from family networks, smaller networks and higher disapproval of certain family behaviours may hit one sex harder compared with the other. It is interesting to relate our findings to those of Huijts, Kraaykamp and Subramanian (2013), which are based on ESS data as well. They indicated that the relationship between childlessness and psychological well-being varies between countries; this is explained by the strength of social networks and norms against childlessness. They also found childlessness to affect men's well-being more negatively than women's. The authors ignored the double standards in these norms at the societal level, yet we think those double standards might partly explain the reported sex differences in the relationship between childlessness and well-being. In some of the countries with double standards favouring women, such as Ireland, Belgium, Spain, and Slovenia, childless men have lower levels of well-being than men with children, whereas their childless fellow countrywomen have equal or higher levels of well-being than women with children. In Sweden and Finland, the countries with the greatest double standards, childless men do not have different levels of well-being than men with children, yet childless women in these countries have higher levels of well-being than women with children. Although similar patterns were presented for a few countries where we did not find (strong) double standards, we tentatively suggest that double standards regarding childlessness may cause sex differences in the psychological well-being of childless persons.

The current study offers an extension of previous work on double standards and on norms about voluntary childlessness through the analysis of a large and geographically representative dataset. The split-ballot design of the ESS provides an excellent opportunity to

examine various kinds of double standards. Measuring double standards at the individual level might be very difficult; when each respondent would have to rate his or her disapproval of men *and* of women based on the exact same items, the likelihood of social desirable answers (no double standard) would probably be high.

These strengths noted, this study is not without limitations. First, it is worth mentioning that the ESS is not a longitudinal survey and consequently our study had a cross-sectional design. We assumed that emancipation processes have caused more changes in attitudes towards women than towards men, explaining the different strengths in double standards for men and women. We do not know, however, if and how a double standard in norms about voluntary childlessness was manifest in past times. There are no cross-national trend data at hand that could provide such information.

Additionally, future research could elaborate on links between personal characteristics, such as education and religiousness, and double standards. Besides our main focus on cross-national differences in double standards, we chose to investigate only one individual characteristic, namely, sex. When examining sex-related double standards, this is obviously the most important individual determinant to take into account. Investigating the effects of other individual characteristics would have required the inclusion of more interaction effects—as double standards are not measured at the individual level—which would have produced less parsimonious statistical models. Another suggestion for future research is to focus on the 'target' and to examine whether men and women do experience the existence of double standards regarding childlessness, and if yes, how it affects them. Despite these limitations, we believe that the results of our study underline the value of using a gender framework and a cross-national perspective when studying attitudes and norms towards modern demographic behaviour such as voluntary childlessness.

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