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Who should have (no) children? Results of a vignette experiment in Switzerland

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Abstract

Objective: In this study, we test whether same-sex couples and singles seeking to have a child by surrogacy or adoption are viewed more critically compared to different-sex couples. We rely on data from a factorial survey experiment run on a representative sample of the Swiss population.

Background: Empirical studies of attitudes towards non-normative reproduction often lack a theoretical foundation. Based on the concept of hegemonic heteronormativity and heteronormalization, our central thesis is that certain family types are subsumed into the norm, while others remain excluded.

Method: A factorial survey experiment on the acceptance of adoption and surrogacy for intended parents with differing relationship status and sexual orientation, income, education, age, and number of children in the family was conducted to test this assumption with 2,128 respondents from a representative sample of the Swiss population.

Results: The results show that same-sex couples have similar acceptance rates to female-male couples, while singles, older intended parents, and intended parents with low incomes are least accepted as adoptive parents. In general, there is a firm rejection of surrogacy and a low willingness to (even partially) fund either adoption or surrogacy publicly.

Conclusion: While we find a similar level of support for same-sex intended parents through adoption as different-sex couples, single, older, and low-income intended parents are less accepted by the Swiss population.

Key words: heteronormalization, heteronormativity, factorial survey experiment, assisted reproduction, LGBTIAQ+, family formation

1. Introduction

In Switzerland, same-sex couples could not jointly adopt a child or receive sperm donor insemination until July 2022. Then, "Marriage for All", which opens marriage for same-sex couples, was introduced by a vote of the population with a 64 percent yes-share. Before, same-sex couples had to go through the process of stepchild adoption, which was implemented in 2018 and was the only option for both parents to become legally acknowledged. This demonstrates how prevalent norms and values in society are constantly changing and how, when translated into policies, they can have a concrete material impact on the life choices available to its members (Ross & Solinger, 2017). This article aims to contribute to the understanding of public attitudes towards two aspects of non-normative reproduction. First, we focus on who is allowed to have children in the eyes of the public (comparing same-sex couples to different-sex couples and single parents). Second, we explore attitudes towards two different pathways to parenthood (adoption and surrogacy). To this end, we developed a factorial survey experiment portraying different hypothetical prospective parents. These people are portrayed as either in line with heteronormativity – the belief that only two separate and opposing genders exist, that are aligned with their assigned sex and fixed gender roles and are exclusively attracted to each other (van der Toorn et al., 2020, p. 160; Warner, 1991) – or at odds with it. Respondents are then asked to indicate to which degree they approve of the described couple or single person having a child through surrogacy or adoption.

Although many other family forms exist, this study focuses exclusively on heterosexual and same-sex couples, as well as single parents. We chose these three family forms, because they are well-known (no need for further explanation in the questionnaire), relatively common and in the focus of lawmakers and political debates (e.g., although recent progress has granted married same-sex couples the right to adopt and access medically assisted reproduction, these opportunities remain unavailable to single parents). For the same reason, we limited the study to surrogacy and adoption as methods of non-normative reproduction that are also viable for intended parents who cannot get pregnant and give birth.

While various theoretical approaches explain the rejection of homosexuality (Herek, 2004; Roberts, 2019; van der Toorn et al., 2020), quantitative studies on attitudes towards reproductive medicine and accessibility for different population groups, often overlook them or consider them only superficially. In this article, the concepts of hegemonic heteronormativity (Allen & Mendez, 2018) and heteronormalization (Ludwig, 2016) are applied to the study of non-normative reproduction. These concepts allow for a critical analysis of the shift in values towards more liberal reproductive norms, while considering social inequality. Heteronormalization describes the inclusion of certain LGBTIAQ+[1] lifestyles into the norm (Raab, 2011; Woltersdorff, 2019) which thereby strengthens "the classed, racialized and ability-centered normalities that structure heteronormativity" (Ludwig, 2016, p. 422). We use this term in distinction from the very similar concept of homonormativity (Duggan, 2004) to describe the inclusion of certain LGBTIAQ+ individuals in a heteronormative ideal rather than a normalization of homosexual and other LGBTIAQ+ lifestyles. Homonormativity was used by Yv Nay (2016) in their dissertation about LGBTIAQ+ parent families in Switzerland. They focused, among other things, on LGBTIAQ+ parents' assimilation and normalization processes. In distinction, we focus on the attitudes of mostly cis-heterosexual respondents.

Relying on this theoretical framework, we use a factorial survey experiment that was part of a representative survey of the Swiss population in spring 2023 (Büchler et al., 2023) to uncover the prevailing attitudes on non-normative reproduction in Switzerland. The factorial survey experiment allows us to examine how the acceptance of adoption or surrogacy is affected by the characteristics of the prospective parent(s). The design furthermore allows us to assess the relative importance of the included factors describing the parents: gender, age, relationship status, whether they already have children, income, and education. Because respondents evaluate a situation based on various aspects simultaneously, and it is not apparent which aspect is decisive for the individual respondent, the risk of data distortion due to social desirability bias is reduced (Wallander, 2009).

1 We use the acronym LGBTIAQ+ to describe Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Trans(-gender), Intersex, Asexual, Aromantic and Agender and all other individuals who see themselves as Queer or different from the norm in terms of sexuality, romantic preferences and/or gender identity (+).

2. Current state of research

In the following, we review existing research on the acceptance of non-normative reproduction. First, we discuss the establishment of non-normative reproductive methods in light of shifting societal values. Next, we test for heterogeneity in the degree of acceptance of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) and support for LGBTIAQ+ family formation.

2.1 The establishment of non-normative reproduction

Increasing societal demands for gender equality, the right to divorce and abortion, as well as the acceptance of homosexuality are indications of a rapidly spreading global trend towards the individualization of reproductive values (Inglehart et al., 2017). Unlike other post-materialist trends, such as secularization and the acceptance of migrants, which progress more slowly, the individualization of reproductive values is advancing swiftly. Inglehart et al. (2017) attribute this to a shift from "pro-fertility norms" (p. 1315) to "individual-choice norms" (p. 1315) that emphasize self-determined decisions regarding sexuality, reproduction and family life. This shift is driven by increased material security due to industrialization, gradually shifting societal values from survival to self-fulfillment (cf. Rössel, 2006). In pre-industrial societies strict reproductive and sexual norms, often derived from religious beliefs, ensured community survival through high fertility rates. With the shift in values, individualization norms focusing on self-fulfillment as opposed to fertility rates are now spreading (Inglehart et al., 2017).

Evidence of the significant increase in LGBTIAQ+ acceptance since the 1970s is found in the global decline in the criminalization of homosexual acts (ILGA, 2023), the legalization of same-sex marriage in an increasing number of countries (Chamie & Mirkin, 2011), opinion polls (for Switzerland, see Adamoli, 2021), and the increasing rights of gender-diverse and trans individuals (Williamson, 2023). This growing acceptance of LGBTIAQ+ and the use of assisted reproduction can both be explained by this spread of individualization norms. Furthermore, acceptance of ART correlates with the acceptance of homosexuality and egalitarian gender norms (Szalma & Djundeva, 2020). Reproduction is no longer necessary for community survival; it is viewed more as a personal decision shaped by individual preferences and needs. While ART usage increases with rising GDP (an indicator of material security), the cultural values of a country can interfere with this effect (Präg & Mills, 2017).

Although these developments are positive and increasingly counteract discrimination against LGBTIAQ+ individuals, it is important to recognize the vulnerability of these changes. Recent political developments in the USA make it clear that rights gained are not guaranteed and issues surrounding gender can be politically instrumentalized (Boso, 2025). In the past couple of years, this backlash phenomenon has been discussed by several scholars trying to explain the rise of (right-wing) authoritarian populism in Europe and the USA (Kováts, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

At the individual level, religious individuals are more likely to reject ART and homosexuality (Szalma & Djundeva, 2020), and the rejection of both is more likely for those with lower educational degrees (Dempsey & Critchley, 2010; Szalma & Djundeva, 2020; Webb et al., 2017). When it comes to income, Ho et al. (2022) found that individuals with lower incomes were more likely to support insurance coverage for ART procedures, suggesting that lower-income respondents, who may face significant financial barriers in accessing ART, are more inclined to favor policy measures that would reduce cost-related obstacles.

Additionally, women are generally more accepting of homosexuality than men (Riggs & Due, 2018; Webb et al., 2017). Comparing views on ART by gender, a less consistent picture emerges (Fauser et al., 2019; Szalma & Djundeva, 2020). While some studies find that women express more supportive views on ART (Dempsey & Critchley, 2010; Szalma & Bitó, 2021), others find no significant effect of gender or even find men to be more supportive (Fauser et al., 2019).

Furthermore, previous studies have shown that rejection of ART tends to be higher among older people, while the youngest respondents show rather high levels of acceptance (Fauser et al., 2019; Stöbel-Richter et al., 2009; Szalma & Bitó, 2021). However, not all research finds a linear age effect. Some evidence suggests a curvilinear relationship between age and ART attitudes – for example, in a U.S. sample, Shreffler et al. (2010) observed that the youngest adults (under 30) had higher ethical concerns about ART than slightly older adults (in their 30s), and concerns rose again for respondents older than 40. This age effect was especially pronounced for women. The authors assume that when individuals approach the end of their fertile years, they may view ART as more relevant or "urgent", leading to higher support in middle-age

before declining in older age (Shreffler et al., 2010). This interaction between age and gender also holds for the opinions regarding reproduction for same-sex couples: using data from an Australian survey, Dempsey and Critchley (2010) found that those respondents being consistently supportive of ART access tended to be young (highly educated) women while men – across all ages – were only supportive of ART access for heterosexual couples.

However, equating liberal reproductive norms with the acceptance of ART is not entirely accurate. For instance, religions vary in their approach to reproductive medicine (Dutney, 2007; Szalma & Djundeva, 2020). Furthermore, rather than acceptance increasing uniformly worldwide, religious-cultural influences are leading to persistent regional differences (Roberts, 2019).

2.2 Differences in the acceptance of non-normative reproduction

Traditional family values do not necessarily lead to a rejection of ART. In societies where having children is highly valued, the distress caused by infertility is greater on average, which in turn increases the acceptance of specific ART methods (Harzif et al., 2019). Furthermore, research consistently shows a hierarchical evaluation within non-normative reproduction. Both specific ART methods and different people seeking to use them are accepted to various degrees. This is reflected in the legal landscape; with prohibitions against specific ART methods in place in many countries or restricted access for heterosexual (married) couples (Leibetseder & Griffin, 2018). In general, homologous methods, using the sperm and egg cells of the intended parents, are more accepted than heterologous methods which involve sperm or egg cells from a third party or surrogacy (Dempsey & Critchley, 2010; Shreffler et al., 2010).

Different-sex couples are the most accepted users of ART (Dempsey & Critchley, 2010; Riggs & Due, 2018). When comparing single parents to same-sex couples, singles are favored slightly, especially in countries where homosexuality is stigmatized (Fauser et al., 2019; Herrera et al., 2013; Skedgel et al., 2021). Parent constellations consisting solely of women (i.e., single mothers and female couples) receive more support than male parents (Dempsey & Critchley, 2010; Riggs & Due, 2018; Webb et al., 2017).

When examining the motives for using ART, non-self-inflicted medical reasons are the most accepted (Williamson & Lawson, 2021). This is evident in the more decisive rejection of ART for age-related reasons (Fauser et al., 2019; Herrera et al., 2013; Skedgel et al., 2021).

3. Theory

This study investigates the relationship between the denial of reproductive access to specific demographic groups and heteronormativity in the context of changing parenthood norms. We begin by discussing heteronormativity and hegemony. While the critique of heteronormativity expects a complete rejection of non-normative reproduction, implying relatively stable parenthood norms, the concept of hegemonic heteronormativity predicts a rejection of access only for certain kinds of families but not for others and expects evolving parenthood norms. We argue that the concept of heteronormalization helps to explain differences in the acceptance of non-normative reproduction for different types of people, and thus to uncover social inequality in reproduction.

3.1 The rejection of homosexuality

The origins of the rejection of homosexuality are attributed to various factors, including religious beliefs (e.g. in the USA: Whitehead, 2010), fear of devaluation of traditional values through societal change (van der Toorn et al., 2017), pronatalist survival norms in collectivist societies (Inglehart et al., 2017), and the erroneous assumption that a heterosexual majority implies a prescriptive norm (van der Toorn et al., 2020). This discourse occurs against the backdrop of the ongoing struggle for rights by same-sex loving and other queer individuals (Engel, 2001), who continue to face discrimination (European Union, 2014) and threats to their physical safety (ILGA, 2023).

Heteronormativity is defined as a "social norm and central power relation (...) that essentially permeates all societal and cultural areas" (Hartmannn & Klesse, 2007, p. 9, own translation). The term encompasses both the descriptive and prescriptive assumption that there are two genders, each exclusively attracted to the

other (van der Toorn et al., 2020; Warner, 1991), thereby rendering non-heterosexual identities and relationships as deviant. Critics of heteronormativity not only highlight the discrimination faced by non-heterosexual individuals but also challenge socially constructed categories such as woman, man, heterosexual, gay, and lesbian (Butler, 2015/1990). This perspective views sexual and gender identities as fluid and extends the theoretical framework to include all marginalized gender identities, sexual orientations, and practices. Additionally, it questions the perception of non-heteronormative lifestyles as anomalies.

Feminist theorists argue that the dominant family ideal of the nuclear family, consisting of a cisgender father, mother, and their biological children is heteronormative and exclusionary (Hayman & Wilkes, 2017). Furthermore, due to traditional gender roles, women are more strongly associated with motherhood and thus face greater scrutiny regarding reproductive and parental legitimacy than men do (Wells & Heinsch, 2020). This leads to the stigmatization of non-conforming families and their exclusion from reproductive opportunities. However, due to its abstract and static nature, this criticism of heteronormativity seems insufficient for explaining evolving reproductive norms (Laufenberg, 2022, pp. 111–115).

To address this limitation, Allen and Mendez (2018) propose *hegemonic* heteronormativity, a concept that introduces a temporal axis into heteronormativity research. Unlike "classical" heteronormativity in parenthood norms, which assumes stable binaries, hegemonic heteronormativity accounts for change, demonstrating that groups once considered deviant can become normalized over time. The key insight of this approach is that heteronormativity is not merely a static system of exclusion but a dynamic structure in which the boundaries of normativity shift: "[...] likewise, the bodies that benefit from hegemonic heteronormativity also change and evolve." (Allen & Mendez, 2018, p. 75). According to the authors, the ones that have been benefiting most from this shift are gay and lesbian monogamous couples, while single and polyamorous parents are still viewed as deviant. Therefore, norms have shifted from two different-gendered parents and one or several biological children to a more liberal family image of two parents with one or more children, irrespective of their biological relatedness and gender. The relationship form (romantic, monogamous, between two people who fit in with a binary view on gender) of the two parents nevertheless stays unchanged.

As certain LGBTIAQ+ individuals and family structures gain acceptance, they are integrated into the normative framework under specific conditions. This process of selective normalization is shaped by neoliberal ideals, privileging those who can successfully navigate the privatization of economic and public life. Hegemonic heteronormativity is not universal inclusion; it is a mechanism of differentiation, incorporating some while continuing to marginalize others. Moreover, it functions within intersecting power structures such as class, ethnicity, and nationality.

3.2 Heteronormalization: The neoliberal reproduction of inequality

Similar to what Allen and Mendez (2018) describe, critical developments in the theory of heteronormativity, particularly those critiquing neoliberalism, explain the differences in the acceptance of non-normative reproduction by introducing an economic axis into the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2015/1990). Neoliberalism is thereby defined as a globally spreading, anti-social mindset that attributes responsibility for one's social situation entirely to the individual (Brown, 2019, pp. 23–53). In neoliberal societies, social inequality is viewed as the legitimate result of performance differences and thus negated as a relevant societal issue. At the same time, individuals are led to believe that their happiness depends exclusively on their efforts and right decisions.

Ludwig (2016) argues that certain queer lifestyles align with the neoliberal ideal. For example, an urban, well-earning male couple that marries and has a child via surrogacy is not only self-determined in terms of their "own economic fortune" but also their "'own' and 'specific' sexuality, desire, reproduction and family" (Ludwig, 2016, p. 421). Whom we love and with whom we start a family is seen as a solely private matter. Ludwig refers to this incorporation of some specific homosexual lifestyles into the norm and the privatization of sexuality, drawing on Foucault (2008) as heteronormalization (Ludwig, 2016, p. 422). She further concludes that this is not only tolerated in neoliberalism but is required to maintain the image of individual freedom in capitalism, where people determine their lives free from social constraints (cf. Duggan, 2004).

The concept of heteronormalization thereby focuses on the neoliberal power structures that allow non-conforming families to be included in the accepted norm while others are excluded. A society therefore

becomes more tolerant of certain lifestyles and reproduces heteronormativity and social inequalities simultaneously.

Neoliberalism thus applies a market logic to family formation. The exclusion of individuals from reproduction due to their lack of resources is not historically new. The costs of settling down and getting married has long been a barrier to having children in Switzerland, as reflected in birth rates (Höpflinger, 2021). Reproductive medicine offers new opportunities for reproduction, but often only for those who can afford it. In Switzerland, only three homologous inseminations, the diagnosis of fertility problems, and hormonal stimulation for egg maturation are covered by mandatory basic health insurance (Mitter & Widmer, 2021). Thus, same-sex couples are entirely excluded from insurance coverage.

These dynamics not only shape who can access parenthood but also influence how people's different pathways to family-formation are evaluated by others. Building on research studying attitudes towards welfare (van Oorschot, 2006), Ludwig's framework can be expanded to take into consideration how neoliberalism not only limits access to reproductive technologies but also structures normative ideas about who should receive support. From this perspective, reproductive support is not simply withheld from certain groups because of their deviation from the nuclear family norm, but also because they are not perceived as economically "responsible". Reproduction becomes a matter of merit and investment, reinforcing the idea that only those who have "earned" parenthood – through financial stability and conformity to dominant ideals – should be publicly supported. Thus, heteronormalization operates not only through inclusion into the norm but also through a hierarchy of deservingness.

3.3 The position of single parents in heteronormalized parenthood norms

Public attitudes towards single parents are shaped by gender norms, economic concerns, and family ideals. While single mothers are often viewed more favorably than single fathers or same-sex parents, they still face social and economic disadvantages (Cheng et al., 2023). The assumption that children need two parents remains strong, reinforcing traditional ideas about caregiving and financial responsibility. At the same time, acceptance of single parenthood depends on economic self-sufficiency. Turnbull-Dugarte (2024) shows that people are more supportive of single parents who can provide for their children without state support. This aligns with neoliberal family ideals, where parenting is seen as a private responsibility rather than a collective one. Weissman (2017) adds that the idea that only certain kinds of reproduction are socially legitimate limits support for single parents, especially when they need assisted reproduction. Parenthood is still more accepted when it follows traditional pathways, such as through heterosexual relationships, and when parents can financially sustain themselves. In sum, single parents are more accepted than other non-traditional families, but only under certain conditions. Gender, financial stability, and alignment with dominant family models all play a role in shaping who is seen as a "legitimate" parent.

3.4 Hypotheses

The theories of heteronormativity, hegemonic heteronormativity, and heteronormalization offer complementary perspectives on the inclusion and exclusion of non-normative reproduction into parenthood norms. While theorists focusing on heteronormativity critique the social norms that privilege heterosexual, cisgender, nuclear families, the concept of hegemonic heteronormativity introduces a dynamic model that recognizes the evolving boundaries of normativity, shaped by intersectional power relations. Finally, heteronormalization exposes the neoliberal logic underlying these shifts, revealing how economic privilege determines which non-normative families are perceived as legitimate.

Based on these theories, we test three main hypotheses in the following analyses. In line with heteronormativity, one would assume that different-sex couples who wish to have children still represent the norm and that all types of reproduction that deviate from this norm are accordingly rejected, regardless of the type of reproduction:

H1: *The reproduction of same-sex and single parents is rejected due to its deviation from heteronormativity.*

A second conflicting assumption is that the reproduction of same-sex couples is accepted to a similar degree as for different-sex couples, since the couples can thus conform to the ideal of a family, while acceptance is lower for singles (hegemonic heteronormativity). We expect to find this heteronormalization effect especially among younger respondents.

H2a: *The right to reproduction of same-sex couples has been established.*

H2b: *The support for reproduction of same-sex couples decreases with the age of respondents.*

The last group of hypotheses builds on this and adds an economic axis by assuming that non-normative reproduction that contradicts neoliberal logic is rejected. This would mean that individuals and couples who are perceived as not having the resources deemed necessary for reproduction (income, partnership, reproductive age) are less accepted:

H3a: *Reproduction is rejected for singles and couples with low incomes as well as older people.*

Because neoliberal logic supports social inequalities and a materialistic concept of deservingness, we expect this effect to be stronger for individuals with higher income.

H3b: *The rejection of singles and couples with low income and older age increases with the income of respondents.*

Finally, because adoption is allowed in Switzerland, while surrogacy is not, we expect surrogacy to be less accepted than adoption (H4).

4. Data and methods

4.1 Data

The data we use is from the first wave of the first Swiss panel study collecting data on attitudes, experiences, and beliefs related to assisted reproduction and families (Büchler et al., 2023). The first wave was collected from March to August 2023. The study employed a disproportionately stratified sampling approach, drawing a sample of 20,000 individuals from the Swiss population register. The population of interest comprised all adults living in Switzerland. The sample was stratified according to the three main language regions[2] and, within these strata, by gender. Individuals were then selected at random within each stratum. The target population was contacted via postal letter and invited to complete the survey either online or in paper format. The response rate was 26%, yielding a total of 5,256 respondents[3]. The comprehensive questionnaire covered a wide range of topics, requiring an average of 40 minutes to complete. After several extensive qualitative pretests, the whole questionnaire was pretested on a random sample of 37 German-speaking Swiss residents (200 individuals were contacted once).

The vignette experiment, which forms the basis of the analyses, was administered to half of the respondents (2,663). After cleaning the data and introducing weights for language regions, 2,128 cases remained. The average age of respondents was 48 years old (ranging from 18 to 101). Slightly more women (56%) responded than men (44%). Some important characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

2 The language regions included the three main languages: German (including Romansh), French, and Italian. Some cantons belong to two language regions (e.g., Bern). To make representative statements for each language region, the strata were of different sizes: German-speaking Switzerland accounted for 66.6% of the population of interest, French-speaking Switzerland 23.4%, and Italian-speaking Switzerland 10%. The Italian-speaking population of the canton of Ticino is overrepresented to allow for separate analyses. The sample was drawn with an equal distribution of men and women (50:50) within each stratum.

3 However, certain selection tendencies were apparent. For example, the participation rate of Swiss citizens was significantly higher than that of non-Swiss citizens, and participation rates were higher in urban areas compared to rural areas. Furthermore, participation was higher in Ticino. Additionally, there is an education bias, with higher participation rates for those with higher educational degrees.

Table 1: Sample description (weighted data)

Sample characteristics	N	Mean	p50	SD	Min	Max
Age	2111	48	48	17.0	18	101
Income (net monthly, household) in 11 categories	1845	5 (CHF 8,000-10'000)	5 (CHF 8,000-10'000)	2.4	1 (CHF 0-2'000)	11 (More than CHF 20'000)
Women	2114	0.56	1	0.50	0 (no)	1 (yes)
Heterosexual	2008	0.94	1	0.24	0 (no)	1 (yes)
No or completed mandatory education	2090	0.04	0	0.21	0 (no)	1 (yes)
Vocational training	2090	0.58	1	0.49	0 (no)	1 (yes)
University degree	2090	0.38	0	0.48	0 (no)	1 (yes)
Has children	2116	0.63	1	0.48	0 (no)	1 (yes)
Single	2098	0.19	0	0.39	0 (no)	1 (yes)
Total sample N	**2128**					

Note: These characteristics describe the subset of the full sample that received and responded to the vignette questions. The differences in sample sizes, as shown in the column labeled N, result from missing data in the relevant variables (e.g., only 2111 of the respondents who answered the vignette questions also provided their age).

4.2 Experimental design

Vignette experiments (Rossi, 1979) are written experiments that can be included in a questionnaire, making them relatively simple and cost-effective for collecting data on large numbers of participants. In social sciences, vignette experiments are a well-established method for analyzing complex attitudes and behaviors related to inequality. In these experiments, researchers present respondents with systematically varying, hypothetical scenarios – the "vignettes" – where key dimensions or stimuli (e.g., ethnic background, gender, economic indicators) are manipulated in a controlled manner and the respondents are then asked to answer one or more related question(s). This multifactorial design, as outlined by Steiner et al. (2016), permits the identification of causal effects by ensuring that factors are varied independently and are randomized across respondents. Such designs have proven especially valuable in studies on discrimination in the housing market (e.g. Havekes et al., 2013; Wolter et al., 2023), fairness perceptions, e.g., regarding the gender pay gap (Auspurg et al., 2017), or teachers' tracking decisions in education (Gilgen & Stocker, 2024). Moreover, vignette experiments have been successfully applied to topics closely related to our own, such as in the work of Horne et al. (2013) on women's reproductive autonomy in Ghana, where the method enabled the researchers to test how normative constraints are enforced through social practices like bride wealth. Another example is a paper by Massey et al. (2013), who showed that the evaluation of same-sex parents vs. different-sex parents did not differ in positive parenting situations, but that same-sex parents were rated significantly less positively in negative situations. By combining the internal validity of experimental manipulation with the external validity of a general population survey, vignette experiments provide robust, nuanced insights into the causal mechanisms underlying discrimination and inequality.

In our case, the vignette briefly describes intended parents who wish to use a specific reproductive method. The stimuli describe the prospective parents. Because the treatments are grouped in vignettes independently, causal effects can be identified. Each respondent received one vignette. For example, one vignette reads as follows (with the individual stimuli, or dimensions, in bold):

"The woman (aged 47) and her female partner (aged 49) would like to use surrogacy (with the surrogate's egg). They have two children already. The couple has a net monthly income of CHF 16'600. Both have a university degree."

Table 2 describes the dimensions and their levels. For instance, in one vignette, a single man, in another, a woman with a male or female partner, etc., who wants to use surrogacy or adoption is presented. The income of the first person described was added to the partner's income where the described person was in a relationship.

When filling out the questionnaire, participants were first asked to read the description and then answer two questions about it. First, they indicated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (very much) how much they approve of the intended parents having a child in the described way (adoption or surrogacy). Second, they were asked what percentage of the costs the parents should pay for themselves as opposed to the costs covered by the public (0%, no costs carried by the intended parent(s), to 100%, all costs carried by the intended parent(s)).

Table 2: Dimensions and levels of the factorial survey design (no restrictions)

DIMENSION	LEVELS			
Gender	1) Female	2) Male		
Age	1) 27	2) 37	3) 47	4) 57
Relationship	1) Yes	2) No		
Gender partner	1) Female	2) Male		
Method	1) Adoption	2) Surrogacy with the surrogate's egg cell	3) Surrogacy with egg-cell donation	
Children	1) 0	2) 1	3) 2	
Income for singles	1) CHF 4,170	2) CHF 8,330		
Income for partners	1) CHF 8,340	2) CHF 12,500	3) CHF 16,600	
Educational degree (described person and partner)	1) Compulsory school	2) Vocational training	3) University degree	

Note: Out of a vignette universe of 3'456 possible combination we chose a selection of 288 vignettes with a 98% D-efficiency.

The described reproductive methods (surrogacy and adoption) were chosen since they can be used for all parent configurations. All possible combinations of the levels result in a vignette universe of 3,456 unique vignettes. Since this number exceeds the number of participants, a selection of vignettes (fractional factorial) was made using the %MktEx macro using the statistical software SAS (Kuhfeld, 2010). Two criteria were relevant: the individual dimensions should not be correlated (independent variation) and all levels should ideally be represented equally often (Kleinewiese, 2022). Our design of 288 vignettes has a D-efficiency of 98%, where 100% represents a perfectly balanced model according to these criteria (Kuhfeld, 2010). Because the questionnaire was very long and reached a sufficiently large sample, we decided to present only one vignette to each participant.

4.3 Analysis

For the analyses, some adjustments were made to the vignette variables. First, the income of the intended parents was categorized as "high" (CHF 8,330 for singles and CHF 12,500 or CHF 16,600 for couples) and "low" (CHF 4,170 for singles and CHF 8,340 for couples) to avoid a correlation between relationship status and income. Second, the two types of surrogacy (with own or donated egg cells) were combined because they were rated very similarly. Third, to improve readability, five family types were created using the dimensions of relationship status, gender, and partner's gender: male-female couples, female couples, male couples, single women, and single men. Since responses varied significantly according to the ART method, separate models were calculated for surrogacy and adoption.

As the data stem from an experiment using a near representative sample, and we are interested in the opinion of the Swiss population, it was not necessary to include control variables in the models. Nevertheless, we use weights for the language regions (see Table 3 in Appendix). Two regressions per method (adoption and surrogacy) were calculated for the two dependent variables: 1) approval of the family formation plans using surrogacy or adoption and 2) the proportion of costs the intended parents should pay for themselves. Since each participant received only one vignette, a multilevel analysis was unnecessary. Therefore, linear regressions based on ordinary least squares (OLS) were used to test the hypotheses[4].

To explore the effects of respondents' characteristics relevant to our theoretical assumptions, we examined interaction effects first and then – in the case of heterogeneity – calculated separate models. Specifically, we considered gender (woman: yes/no), age in the year 2023 (18-49 years vs. 50 years or older), and net monthly household income (CHF 0-8'000 vs. CHF 8'001 and more). According to previous findings, we expected women, and specifically younger women, to be more accepting regarding non-normative family types compared with (older) men.

5. Results

5.1 Vignette experiment

On average, the acceptance of the described (intended) family was 4.5 out of 10, although this varied significantly depending on the reproductive method (adoption: 6.1, surrogacy: 3.8) and characteristics of the respondents[5]. The mean proportion of treatment costs that the intended parents should have to pay for themselves, according to the respondents, was 73% (adoption: 69%, surrogacy: 75%).

The first chart in Figure 1 shows the ranking of alternative family types in the context of adoption, with couples and women favored over singles and men. The acceptance of female couples ($p>0.1$) does not significantly differ from that of male-female couples. Male couples are rated slightly more negatively ($b=-0.63$, $p>0.1$), while single mothers also receive significantly less approval ($b=-1.3$, $p<0.001$). Single men are most strongly rejected with 2 points lower ratings on average compared to different-sex couples ($p<0.001$). Thus, the hierarchy of acceptance follows the axes of gender, sexual orientation, and relationship status. The results also hint at a growing acceptance of same-sex couples. No characteristic of the intended parents has a robust statistically significant impact on the funding of adoption at a 5%-level; the respondents reject the idea of public funding altogether.

Concerning the approval of surrogacy, a different pattern emerges: female ($b=0.6$, $p<0.05$) and male couples ($b=0.6$, $p<0.05$) are even preferred over different-sex intended parents, while the acceptance of singles does not differ from that of male-female couples.

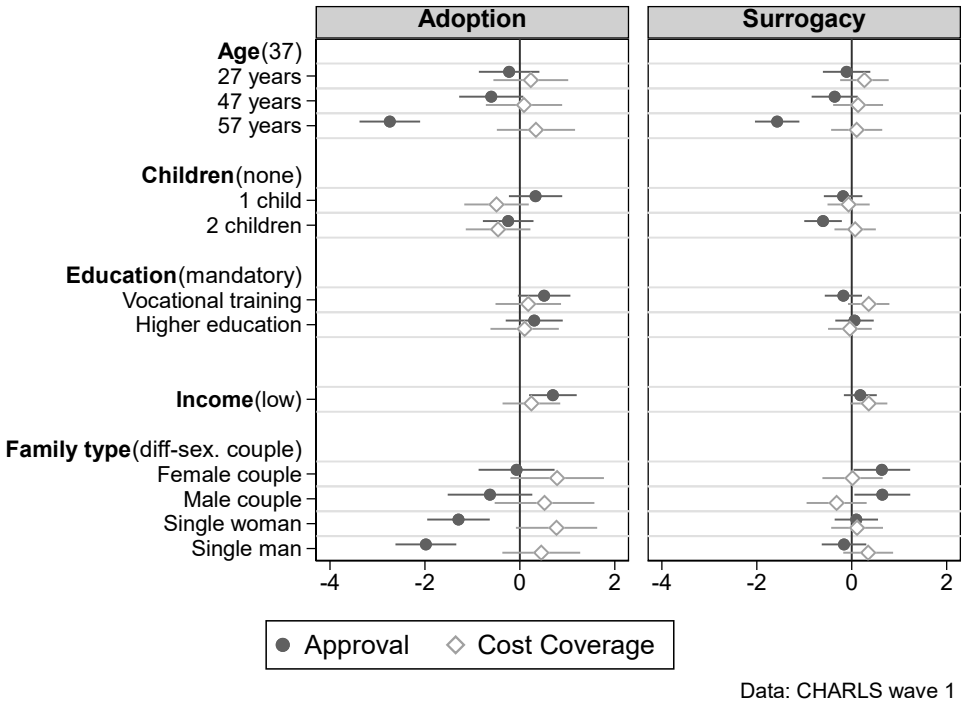
Respondents do not support family formation for older intended parents, regardless of gender, method, or family type (in case of 57 years of age, $b=-2.7$ for adoption, $b=-1.6$ for surrogacy, both $p<0.001$). The number of children already in the family does not affect the acceptance of adoption. However, respondents believe that surrogacy is less acceptable for families who already have two children (third vs. first child: $b=-0.6$, $p<0.01$).

Adoption is more likely to be approved when the intended parents have high incomes ($b=0.7$, $p<0.01$). There is also a weakly significant positive effect for intended parents with vocational training compared to compulsory education ($b=0.5$, $p<0.1$). Regarding who should pay for surrogacy, there is a weakly significant positive effect for intended parents with higher incomes ($b=3.6$, $p<0.1$), i.e. they are expected to pay a larger share themselves. Thus, in the case of surrogacy, intended parents with less resources are more likely to be supported.

4 We additionally ran tobit regressions Tobin (1958) because of the non-normal distribution, but did not find significant changes in the results. See Table 5 in the Appendix.

5 The most favored constellation was a heterosexual couple, 37 and 39 years old, with no children, a university degree and a high income, aiming to use adoption to create a family (acceptance: 7.4, share of costs paid for privately: 67%). The least favored constellation was a single man, 57 years old with a low income, who already has two children, and with only completed compulsory education, wanting to use surrogacy (acceptance: 1.4, share of costs paid for privately: 75%).

Figure 1: OLS-regression coefficient plots (adoption, n=685, surrogacy=1443).



Note: For further details, see Table 4 in the appendix. For a more consistent presentation, both dependent variables are scaled from 1 to 10. A positive effect on funding indicates that respondents believe that intended parents with the corresponding characteristics should pay a higher proportion of the costs themselves.

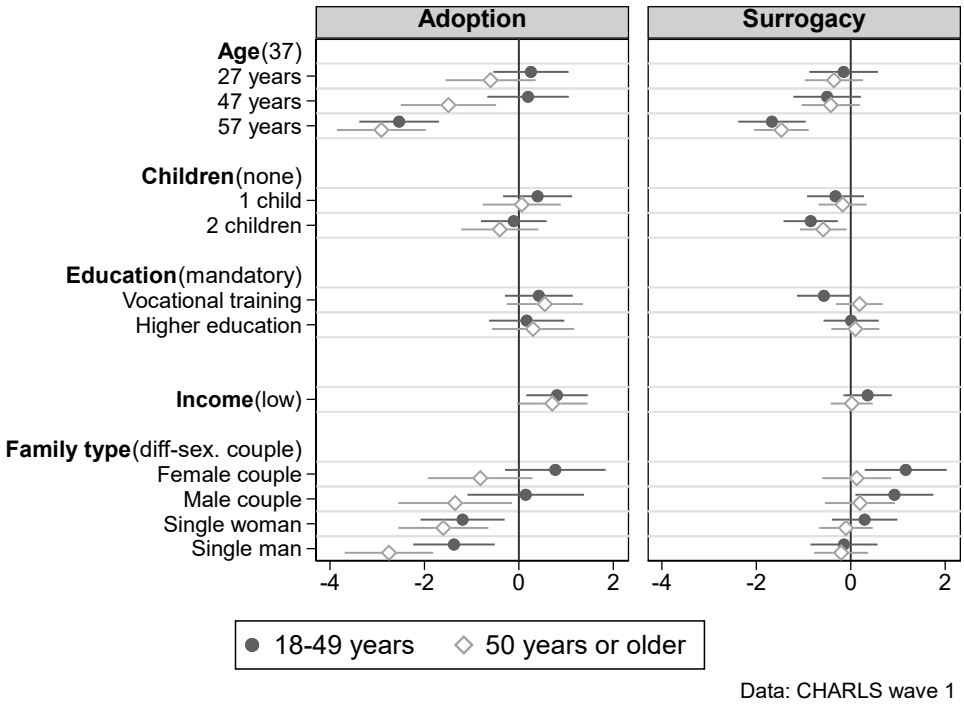
The results of the OLS regressions presented in Figure 1 support the hypothesis claiming that while the ideal family is heteronormative, there is simultaneously a normalization of same-sex couples taking place. The fact that approximately half of the respondents completely reject public funding for both methods (adoption: 42%, surrogacy: 51%) speaks to a neoliberal perspective on reproduction as a private matter.

5.2 Respondent characteristics

The analysis of gender as a respondent characteristic revealed no consistent patterns. Women seem to favor male over female couples, while men prioritize female intended parents regardless of their relationship status (see Table 7 in Appendix). Moreover, when it comes to cost coverage, women are more critical about advanced age, and men are more supportive of families who already have children. We found no support for the predicted interaction effect of (young) age and (female) gender (not shown).

Regarding the age of respondents, a higher acceptance of different family types, but not of surrogacy as a method, is visible among younger respondents (see Figure 2). This supports our hypothesis H2b that the acceptance of same-sex couple parenting decreases with age. An interaction effect of family type and age is significant for female couples ($b=-0.03$, $p<0.05$), single women ($b=-0.02$, $p<0.05$), and single men ($b=-0.02$, $p<0.05$) in a combined model for adoption and surrogacy (see Table 5 in Appendix). Additionally, older respondents are more critical regarding becoming a parent at an advanced age.

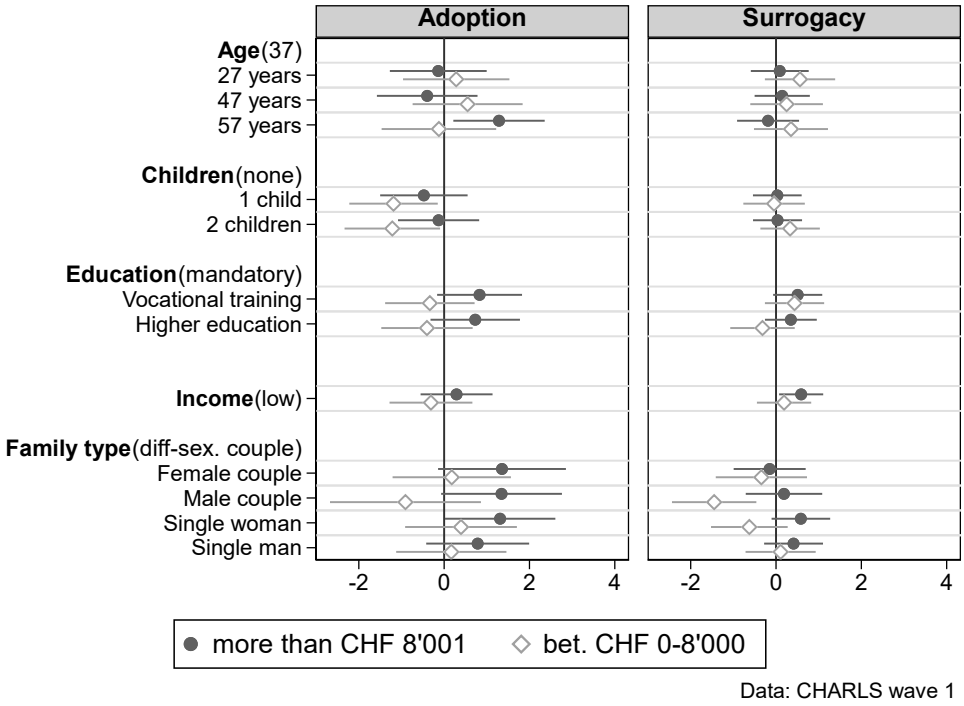
Figure 2: OLS-regression coefficient plot for approval of adoption and surrogacy, separately by age (18-49 years: n=731, 50 years or older: n=699).



Note: For further information, see Table 8 in the Appendix.

Respondents' net monthly household income did not affect their acceptance of different family types; however, the higher their income, the more accepting they were of public funding for both methods (b=0.91, p<0.001, see Table 5 in Appendix). An interaction effect between respondents' income and family type is significant for male couples (b=3.70, p<0.001) and single women for funding (b=1.09, p<0.05, in a joint model for surrogacy and adoption, see Table 6 in Appendix. Figure 3 shows that respondents with higher income are less willing to publicly fund adoptions for older (57 years old) intended parents (vs. intended parents aged 37, b=12.86, p<0.05), single women (vs. different-sex couples, b=13.12, p<0.05) and surrogacy for intended parents with high income (b=5.90, p<0.05). On the contrary, respondents with a net monthly household income below CHF 8'000 support funding of adoption more for families who already have children (b=-11.86, p<0.05 for the second child, b=-12.15, p<0.05 for the third child vs. for the first child in the family) and – in the case of surrogacy – male couples (vs. different-sex couples, b=-14.50, p<0.001). These results partly align with hypothesis H3b, suggesting that the rejection of non-normative reproduction by singles, intended parents with low income, and those who are older increases with respondents' income. The lower willingness to publicly fund non-normative reproduction in general, and of same-sex couples, singles, as well as intended parents with high income specifically, nevertheless reveals a neoliberal logic that is stronger in respondents with higher income. In contrast, respondents with lower income adhere to the principle of need more often.

Figure 3: OLS-regression coefficient plot for funding of adoption and surrogacy, separately by income groups (adoption & more than CHF 8'001: n= 337; adoption & between CHF 0-8'000: n=251, surrogacy & more than CHF 8'001: n=650; surrogacy & between CHF 0-8'000: n= 542).



Note: For a more consistent presentation, the dependent variable is scaled from 1 to 10. A positive effect on funding indicates that respondents believe that intended parents with the corresponding characteristics should pay a higher proportion of the costs themselves. For further information, see Table 9 in the Appendix.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to explore the acceptance of the use of adoption and surrogacy by different (non-)normative intended parents, and opinions regarding cost coverage for the procedures within the Swiss population. Using a factorial survey experiment allowed an independent examination of the factors influencing acceptance of adoption and surrogacy and support for public coverage of the costs while minimizing the influence of social desirability. Since the experiments were implemented in a near representative national survey, they provide a good insight into the prevailing opinions of the Swiss population. The theoretical framework relied on feminist perspectives of heteronormativity (H1; Warner, 1991), hegemonic heteronormativity (H2; Allen & Mendez, 2018) and heteronormalization (H3; Ludwig, 2016) for the explanation of changing parenthood norms.

The first hypothesis predicted a general rejection of non-normative reproduction (H1). However, we find indications of the establishment of individual decision norms regarding reproduction. The acceptance of homosexual couples has aligned with that of different-sex couples (supporting H2a), whereas single parents, parents of older age, and those with lower income are rejected (supporting H3a). Surrogacy is even more accepted for same-sex couples than for heterosexual intended parents. At this point, we can only speculate about the reasons for this somewhat surprising finding. However, since many respondents completely rejected surrogacy, these differences are likely only to be found among those who are more liberally inclined.

In adding respondent characteristics to our analyses, we were further able to confirm that the support for the reproduction of same-sex couples decreases with the age of respondents (supporting H2b) – a finding that echoes earlier research on the dynamic boundaries of heteronormativity (Allen & Mendez,

2018). However, an interaction effect of age and gender, showing that young women show the highest support, as found by Dempsey and Critchley (2010), could not be found in our case.

The third hypothesis predicted that non-normative reproduction would be rejected if it contradicts neoliberal logic. We find that differences in evaluation of non-normative reproduction occur not only according to family types but also based on the resources available to intended parents. Indeed, configurations where intended parents have exceeded natural reproductive age, have low incomes, or are not in a relationship have lower acceptance rates.

While the rejection of older intended parents has been well established in previous research (Fauser et al., 2019; Herrera et al., 2013; Skedgel et al., 2021), the support of single women seems to be culture dependent, especially when compared to support for same-sex couples who often find less acceptance than single mothers by choice in other countries (Dempsey & Critchley, 2010; Herrera et al., 2013; Riggs & Due, 2018). In Switzerland, parenthood norms seem to have included same-sex parents, while the norm of two parents stays robust. However, due to our cross-sectional data structure, we cannot make any reliable claims about change over time.

To conclude, although the overall results support the heteronormalization thesis, there are also contradictions. The results reveal another aspect not covered by any hypothesis: a needs-based approach to surrogacy and adoption. Respondents with a low income supported public funding of adoption for families who already have children as well as surrogacy for male couples, hinting at a principle of need among low-income respondents. High-income respondents, in contrast, were especially hesitant to support cost coverage for older intended parents and single women in the case of adoption, and high-income intended parents in the case of surrogacy (supporting hypothesis H3b). This may reflect greater identification with structural barriers to reproduction and less attachment to the neoliberal ideal of individual responsibility, and thus more solidarity among less privileged people. By contrast, respondents with higher incomes may apply stricter deservingness criteria, in line with neoliberal meritocratic values that view reproduction as a private matter to be financed individually. In this sense, support for assisted reproduction does not map neatly onto liberal or conservative ideologies, but hinges on a layered logic of deservingness, shaped by both gendered and class-based norms. The result that people with higher incomes have more negative views on public funding for non-normative reproduction is in line with previous research (Ho et al., 2022). In contrast, we find no heterogeneity by income for the acceptance of non-normative reproduction by family type and method.

Overall, the results for surrogacy show a complex interplay of factors influencing opinions. Respondents felt that it should primarily be used to fulfill the desire for a first child, rather than to expand a family that already includes children, indicating that the social, psychological, and physical costs of a surrogate mother may be perceived to outweigh the needs of prospective parents in many cases. Future studies could explore the influence of media portrayals of surrogacy, with and without reference to LGBTIAQ+ parent families to shed light on the puzzling finding that the surrogacy plans of homosexual couples are supported over those of different-sex couples (cf. Petersen et al., 2017).

One limitation of this study is that the strong general rejection of surrogacy overshadows the effects other factors may have on the acceptance of people resorting to it, as many respondents completely reject the situation based on this reproductive method without considering the characteristics of the intended parents. This reduces the explanatory power of the analyses. In addition, adoption and surrogacy are very distinct in terms of costs, access, and need. Although this can help us understand how reproduction is perceived, it makes comparisons more complex. Consequently, distinguishing between surrogacy with egg donation and surrogacy with the surrogate's own egg proved unhelpful, as it was irrelevant to respondents (perhaps the difference was not understood or even perceived). Similarly, no statements can be made about other ART methods because only one was tested for methodological reasons (applicable to all included family forms). Additionally, the coupling of relationship status and income by adding up the two incomes for couples prevented a more precise analysis that would have allowed the independent identification of income effects.

Moreover, the design included a restricted number of family types, implying cis-gender identification and rendering other identities invisible. Additionally, racism and anti-migrant attitudes would have been another important dimension to test for. In the context of reproduction, attitudes on the "suitability" of migrants and members of ethnic minorities as parents would provide important evidence for (feminist) suggestions that the reproduction of certain (white, rich, able-bodied) individuals is supported, while the reproduction of others is not (non-white, poor, disabled) (Kahlert, 2008; Weckemann, 2014). Additionally,

empirical evidence on this topic would provide important insights into the effects of the mainstreaming of the conspiracy theory of "the great replacement" (Ekman, 2022). Further studies are needed to uncover potential intersectional effects of gender identity, race, ethnicity, and migration status / ethnic origin on the acceptance of family formation through ART and adoption. Lastly, expanding the investigation to families with more than two parents would reveal whether the rejection of single parenthood is due to a traditional family ideal or rather the assumption that one person alone does not have enough resources to raise a child ideally. Future studies should therefore ideally investigate the acceptance of additional reproductive methods and include further characteristics of respondents.

By situating our findings within the broader context of previous studies on assisted reproductive technologies and family, our research highlights both continuities and shifts in public opinion. Our results not only support the established evidence that heteronormative family forms still serve as the benchmark for legitimacy but also uncover how emerging norms – characterized by individual autonomy and neoliberal meritocracy – reshape these benchmarks. In sum, our study underscores that the perception of the legitimacy of non-normative reproduction is not solely determined by family form but is also contingent upon the interplay of different socioeconomic characteristics.

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Data availability statement

The data from the Swiss Assisted Reproduction Longitudinal Study (CHARLS) will be provided upon reasonable request by the URPP "Human Reproduction Reloaded" at the University of Zurich (contact the corresponding author).

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Wer soll (keine) Kinder haben? Ergebnisse eines repräsentativen Vignettenexperiments in der Schweizer Bevölkerung

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Diese Studie untersucht, ob gleichgeschlechtliche Paare und Singles, die Leihmutterschaft oder Adoption in Anspruch nehmen möchten, kritischer beurteilt werden als verschiedengeschlechtliche Paare. Grundlage sind für die Schweizer Bevölkerung repräsentative Daten eines faktoriellen Umfrageexperiments.

Hintergrund: Empirische Einstellungsuntersuchungen zu nicht-normativer Reproduktion sind oft nicht theoriegeleitet. Basierend auf den Konzepten der hegemonischen Heteronormativität und der Heteronormalisierung ist die zentrale These, dass gewisse Familienformen Eingliederung in die Norm erfahren, während andere davon ausgeschlossen sind.

Methode: Als Methode dient ein faktorielles Umfrageexperiment zur Akzeptanz von Adoption und Leihmutterschaft für Wunscheltern, die sich in Beziehungsstatus, sexueller Orientierung, Einkommen, Bildung, Alter und in der Anzahl bereits in der Familie vorhandener Kinder unterscheiden. Es wurde mit 2'128 Befragten einer repräsentativen Stichprobe der Schweizer Bevölkerung durchgeführt.

Ergebnisse: Die Resultate zeigen, dass v.a. gleichgeschlechtliche Frauenpaare Frau-Mann-Paaren in ihrem Akzeptiertwerden angleichen, während Singles, ältere Wunscheltern und Wunscheltern mit geringem Einkommen für die Inanspruchnahme einer Adoption abgelehnt werden. Generell lehnen die Befragten Leihmutterschaft stark ab und es besteht ein geringer Wille zur (partiellen) Kostenübernahme bzgl. beider Verfahren durch die Allgemeinheit.

Schlussfolgerung: Während gleichgeschlechtliche Elternschaft durch Adoption etwa gleich stark unterstützt wird wie verschiedengeschlechtliche Elternschaft durch Adoption, entsprechen alleinstehende, ältere und einkommensschwache Wunscheltern nicht dem von der Schweizer Bevölkerung vertretenen Familienideal.

Schlagwörter: Heteronormalisierung, Heteronormativität, Faktorielles Survey Experiment, assistierte Reproduktion, Regenbogenfamilien, Einstellungen

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