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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Schmidt, E.-M. (2024). Needing a child to be fulfilled? The relevance of social norms around childbearing desires in collective orientations and individual meanings. *JFR - Journal of Family Research*, 36, 5-24. <https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-942>

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Needing a child to be fulfilled? The relevance of social norms around childbearing desires in collective orientations and individual meanings

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Abstract

Objective: This study examines collective orientations and individual meanings regarding a fulfilled life with the aim of answering the questions of which social norms around childbearing become relevant in the biographical fertility decisions of women and men, and how they do so.

Background: While the normative expectations of social networks have been found to be highly relevant for individuals who are in the process of deciding for or against childbearing, the findings are inconsistent and fragmented. This study contributes to the knowledge on this topic by examining social norms as normative and empirical expectations.

Method: In a qualitative approach, data from five focus groups (n=22) were triangulated with biographical interviews (n=9) with women and men of different ages and different family statuses across Austria. The in-depth analysis facilitated the reconstruction of collective orientations around childbearing desires and individual meanings.

Results: The desire for childbearing was identified as a gendered social norm, both in collective orientations and individuals' meanings, long before and after fertility decisions were made. Strong relationalities to social norms around gendered responsibilities for (expectant) parents also shaped individual desires, particularly women's.

Conclusion: The relationalities of childbearing desires and persistent gendered parenting norms entail gendered challenges. They are related to individual self-optimization and self-responsibility, and have the potential to hamper childbearing decisions.

Key words: behavioral expectations, relationality, parenthood, collective orientations, subjective meaning, neoliberal demands, fulfilled life



1. Introduction

The desire to have children has been investigated by social science scholars since the second half of the 20th century, when medical advances and social upheavals enabled people to influence the timing of parenthood and the number of children they had. Thus, having children is no longer considered a natural life event, but is instead seen as the result of a comprehensive process of reflection and decision-making. As biographies have become open to increasing optionality, optimization, and contingency (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2012; Lewis, 2006), and societal values regarding family and personal life have become blurred, fertility and marital childbearing have declined (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Nevertheless, social norms remain strong reference points influencing people's individual life decisions and life satisfaction (Bernardi et al., 2015; Preisner et al., 2020; Suppes, 2020). Lower fertility intentions have been attributed to the spread of gender egalitarian values and the declining value of childbearing for leading a fulfilled life (Goldscheider et al., 2015; Raybould & Sear, 2021). Yet to date, it is not fully clear how social norms around childbearing are collectively constructed and become relevant for individual biographies and fertility desires and decisions.

This paper contributes to this body of research by providing results from a qualitative study conducted in Austria, a country that has a pattern of low fertility, highly gendered parenting norms, and neoliberal policies that strongly emphasize freedom of choice (Berghammer & Schmidt, 2019; Burkimsher & Zeman, 2017; Österle & Heitzmann, 2020; Rille-Pfeiffer & Kapella, 2017; Sobotka, 2012). We seek to answer the questions of which social norms are collectively constructed and appear in individual women's and men's biographies, and how this occurs. Based on theories of the relationality of personal life and family life (Roseneil & Ketokivi, 2016; Smart, 2007), we focus on social norms concerning the desire to have children that are collectively shared as empirical expectations, and are reflected in individual accounts as normative expectations (Bicchieri, 2006; 2017). This theoretical framing is implemented in our methodological approach, which differentiates between collective orientations and individual meanings. Thus, on the one hand, we conducted group discussions to capture collective orientations and social norms as empirical expectations regarding the desire to have children; while on the other hand, we performed biographical interviews to examine the individual meanings and the relevance of social norms as normative expectations in relation to the desire to have children.

The results of the reconstructive analysis show the persistence of the social norm of wanting to have children, as the desire to have children and to realize this desire was a continuous point of reference, appearing as an empirical expectation in the discussions and as a normative expectation in the biographical interviews. The results also suggest that the social norm of wanting to have children was markedly gendered, as women, but not men, were expected to have a natural desire to have their own children, and were required to justify themselves when they did not adhere to this expectation. Moreover, in relation to the cultural, economic, and political conditions in Austria, the gendered normative expectations entailed unequal demands and burdens for women and men as (expectant) parents. Examining these relationalities in connection with existing evidence may help to explain why parenting responsibilities remain gendered and fertility rates are persistently low in Austria.

2. Childbearing desires contextualized

Social norms regarding childbearing and parenting responsibilities are subject to historical change. In the second half of the 20th century, after a long period characterized by war and political and economic uncertainty, Europeans reacted to these conditions by elevating the importance of the family. Having children was considered a normal part of life, and life plans that did not include marriage and parenthood, especially motherhood, were perceived as involuntary (Ehmer, 2021; Neyer & Bernardi, 2011). These developments led to a massive increase in birth rates, and reinforced the ideals of the nuclear family and full-time motherhood (Ehmer, 2021). From the 1960s onward, following the "contraceptive revolution" (Lesthaeghe, 2010), parenthood was considered a private matter, with the mother retaining almost exclusive responsibility for caregiving. During this period, women and men who were voluntarily childless were met with little acceptance (Ehmer, 2021; Schütze, 1991). Correspondingly, in Austria, the share of childless women aged 40 or older decreased up to the 1940 birth cohort (Beaujouan et al., 2016), the total fertility rate

peaked at 2.70 in 1965, and the average age at first birth reached a low of 22.9 years in 1970 (Kaindl & Schipfer, 2023).

In the decades that followed, Austria was characterized by declining fertility rates, a pattern of low fertility, increasing childlessness (Burkimsher & Zeman, 2017; Sobotka, 2012; Zeman & Sobotka, 2023), an increasing average age at first birth for mothers, declining marriage rates, rising levels of non-marital childbearing, and increasing divorce rates (Kaindl & Schipfer, 2023). According to the prominent theoretical framework of the second demographic transition, these demographic developments and behavioral changes could be linked to ideational changes (Lesthaeghe, 2010), as measured by attitudinal indicators like the importance of freedom of choice or a woman's desire to have her own children and a home (Brzozowska, 2021; Sobotka, 2008). Indeed, decisions regarding intimate partnerships or family relationships were no longer based on stable and shared meanings. Thus, these decisions were seen as risky and unreliable (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2012; Giddens, 1992; Lewis, 2006), as they were being shaped by changes in social perceptions of childbearing as a path to personal fulfilment, as well as by medical and legal developments related to reproduction (Bernardi et al., 2015; Neyer & Bernardi, 2011).

Neoliberal tendencies have promoted these ideas by constructing the ideal citizen as being an active, self-controlled, self-responsible, and self-optimizing "adult" worker. Increasingly, individuals are constructed as being empowered, free to make their own individual decisions about how they want to live, and responsible for their individual advancement and success in a competitive free market (Adkins, 2018; Giddens, 1991; Nehring & Röcke, 2023; Trnka & Trundle, 2014). Thus, individuals are forced to consider different possibilities, and to "craft" their "reflexive biography" from a pool of options (Beck et al., 1996; Hitzler & Honer, 2012). While economic policies in Austria have been less oriented toward these values than in other welfare states (Österle & Heitzmann, 2020; van Stokkom & Terpstra, 2018), the country's family policies have increasingly focused on offering individuals the freedom to choose how they formalize and organize their intimate relationships and their professional and family lives. However, this freedom may not be real, as it depends on gendered prerequisites, opportunities, and values, as well as on unequal structures (Auer & Welte, 2009; Berghammer & Schmidt, 2019; Rille-Pfeiffer & Kapella, 2017).

Along with these neoliberal ideas, normative expectations for parents have become increasingly contradictory and challenging. First, parenthood has become a project that, while ostensibly free and individualized, has to be thoughtfully designed, responsibly planned, and optimized (Cornelißen et al., 2017; Ruckdeschel, 2015) with the aim of raising ideal future citizens and regenerating human capital (Hamilton, 2016; Lister, 2003; Vincent et al., 2010). Second, particularly in Western societies, mothers are generally expected to adhere to the "intensive" parenting ideal, which involves prioritizing their children's needs and investing substantial temporal and emotional resources into meeting them (Diabaté & Beringer, 2018; Ennis, 2014; Hays, 1996; Schmidt et al., 2023). Third, mothers are expected to remain attractive and economically productive labor market participants as "Mamapreneurials" (Connell, 2009; Güney-Frahm, 2020; Schmidt, 2022; Wilson & Yochim, 2017), while fathers face challenges in balancing their constant responsibility to serve as the primary breadwinner (Schmidt, 2018; Schröder, 2018) with growing expectations that they also provide care. Increasing levels of time pressure, feelings of overwhelm, and feelings of guilt and regret are often reported by mothers (Donath, 2017; Heffernan & Stone, 2021; Ruckdeschel, 2015) and fathers (Meil et al., 2023; Wernhart et al., 2018), reflecting their worries about not fully meeting these expectations. In line with existing evidence, Austrian parents' struggles with balancing these contradicting norms predict the low fertility pattern observed in Austria (Han et al., 2023; Raybould & Sear, 2021; Sobotka, 2012; van Bavel et al., 2018).

Explanations for demographic changes have thus considered revolutions in gender norms that not only reinforce women's rights to regulate their fertility and to participate in the labor force (Lesthaeghe, 2010), but also men's caregiving duties and investments, which are expected to lead to increasing fertility (Bernardi et al., 2015; Goldscheider et al., 2015; Lappegård et al., 2021; Preisner et al., 2020; Raybould & Sear, 2021; van Bavel et al., 2018). In Austria, however, the "gender revolution" has been replaced by a "part-time revolution": while fathers' increased participation in caregiving has stagnated at a low level, the spread of part-time work among mothers, particularly those with higher education, has led to a decline in the work volume of mothers (Berghammer, 2014; Riederer & Berghammer, 2020; Schmidt, 2022; Schmidt & Schmidt, 2023). Thus, the second part of the gender revolution is on hold in Austria, as adopting non-normative behavior and "swimming against the tide" is expected to reduce parents' well-being levels (Schmidt et al., 2019; Schröder, 2018; Suppes, 2020).

While it is clear that the normative dimension plays a central role in fertility decisions, the findings on this topic are inconsistent and fragmented. On the one hand, growing numbers of people no longer regard having children as a fundamental prerequisite for leading a fulfilled life, and consider childbearing a matter of personal fulfilment (Bernardi et al., 2015; Gietel-Basten et al., 2022; Inglehart et al., 2011). In Austria, the level of agreement with the statement that “a woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled” has declined significantly over the past decade, with the share of women who agree falling from 23% to 12%, and the share of men who agree decreasing from 28% to 13%. Meanwhile, over this period, the share of respondents who agree with the same statement, but applied to a man, has fallen from 18% to 10% among female respondents, but only from 28% to 20% among male respondents (Schmidt & Neuwirth, 2023). However, other studies have shown that the majority of people consider children to be an important source of happiness (Berghammer et al., 2019; Riederer, 2018) and to be important for a partnership, with 63% of women and 57% of men agreeing with the latter statement (Berghammer & Schmidt, 2019).

While the share of Austrians who agree that a life without children is an empty life has decreased over the past decades, from 54% to 41% (Berghammer et al., 2019), it remains high, as is also the case in other countries where intentional childlessness is not endorsed and is viewed rather negatively (Bernardi & Klein, 2017; Gotlib, 2016; Ruckdeschel, 2007). However, the level of agreement with attitudes toward childbearing cannot be equated with individual childbearing beliefs and intentions (Ajzen & Klobas, 2013). Compared to other European countries, childlessness is relatively widespread in Austria, reaching around 20% for women born in 1972. Moreover, childlessness has a strong educational gradient, and is expected to increase further (Burkimsher & Zeman, 2017; Zeman & Sobotka, 2023). Individuals’ perceptions of fertility behavior in their neighborhood (Yu & Liang, 2022), as well as the normative expectations of their social networks, were found to be highly relevant for individuals’ decisions for or against childbearing (Albertini & Brini, 2021; Bernardi & Klärner, 2014; Bernardi & Klein, 2017; Bernardi et al., 2015). To date, however, it is not fully clear how social norms around childbearing are constructed on a collective level, or how they become relevant in the individual biographies of women and men.

3. Relationalities and social norms: Theoretical framework

The theoretical starting point of this study is the relationality of individual life (Roseneil & Ketokivi, 2016; Smart, 2007; Twamley et al., 2021). Accordingly, individuals’ life choices, like their childbearing decisions, and their satisfaction with these biographical decisions are theoretically conceptualized as relational processes that occur on three different levels. This process, is, first, related to the relational person itself, i.e., to an individual’s desires, needs, thoughts, reflective capacity, agency, and emotionality. Individuals’ life choices are, second, related to broader frames of various social norms, and to political, economic, and spatiotemporal contexts, as outlined above. Third, these choices are constituted by their relationality to interactions, as biographical decisions are aligned with a variety of significant actors in the narrower or broader social network an individual is embedded in (Bernardi & Klärner, 2014; Horne, 2014; Philipov et al., 2015; Riederer, 2018).

Social norms are defined as rules of behavior about which there is a certain degree of social consensus (Horne, 2014). These rules are socially constructed, and they determine what constitutes a good, ideal, normal, accepted, desirable, or preferred behavior (Bicchieri, 2006). Nevertheless, this consensus is always context-specific. What types of behavior are expected and desirable is dependent on the historical, cultural, or political context; and is potentially contradictory, dissonant, and changeable (Bicchieri & Mercier, 2014; Pfau-Effinger, 2005).

Social norms do not exist as explicit or predefined rules. Rather, they become evident in part through empirical expectations: i.e., the expectation of individuals that most individuals in their social reference network will also adhere to this rule of behavior. For example, most individuals expect other individuals to join the back of the line at the supermarket checkout. At the same time, individuals also rely on normative expectations: i.e., the expectation of individuals that most individuals in their environment also expect them to adhere to this rule of behavior. For example, most individuals are aware that the other people in the supermarket also expect them to get to the back of the line at the supermarket checkout. When these two sets of expectations regarding a certain behavior largely coincide, social norms fully unfold their self-reinforcing potential (Bicchieri, 2006; 2017).

Accordingly, the enforcement of social norms is closely tied to social networks and individuals' interdependence within a social group (Bernardi & Klärner, 2014; Horne, 2014). Social norms are enforced by the people in an individual's social environment who hold expectations and who (potentially) demand and reward normative and compliant behavior, or who sanction noncompliance. Individuals follow social norms in response to the expected negative or positive consequences associated with their behavior (Ajzen & Klobas, 2013; Horne, 2014). These close social relationships in social groups can be more relevant than structures such as policies or legal frameworks. Adherence to and maintenance of social norms function in implicit ways, without formal or legal force (Bicchieri, 2017). Expectations, assumptions, and rules of behavior are often internalized and promote or constrain certain behaviors. The stronger the consensus and the collectively shared beliefs regarding a social norm, the more individuals will adjust their behavior accordingly (Bicchieri, 2006).

Social norms can be regarded as crucial for individual behavior and decisions, and as guidelines for individual attitudes. Nevertheless, individual values or moral concepts differ significantly from social norms. Only social norms have a social status, require social relations, and can be maintained through social sanctions. Moreover, in terms of their content, individual values and individual behavior may not conform to social norms, and can deviate significantly from them (Ajzen & Klobas, 2013; Riederer, 2018; Schnor, 2012). Thus, relying on the prevalence of a particular behavior as the sole indicator of a social norm's validity may lead researchers to overestimate its effectiveness (Bicchieri, 2006; Yu & Liang, 2022). This study's methodological approach acknowledges the relationality of individuals' biographical decisions and considers the two-fold theoretical conceptualization of social norms as empirical and normative expectations, as explained in the following.

4. Methodological approach and data

To realize the aim of reconstructing childbearing norms and their relevance for subjective decisions to have children, a methodological approach that allowed participants to approach the topic as openly as possible on both a collective and an individual level was needed. Thus, we opted for a qualitative approach. In line with the premises of qualitative social research, we framed our research interest in a manner as open-ended as possible by asking the participants the following question: "What makes a fulfilled life?" To avoid standardization, we attempted to prioritize the participants' relevance structure, and to avoid focusing the analysis along predefined concepts, dimensions, or specific aspects (Bohnsack, 2010b; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014). With regard to our research interest, the triangulation of different methods and data types was indicated and necessary (Flick, 2011).

The focus groups enabled us to capture taken-for-granted beliefs, shared values, and collective orientations (Bohnsack, 2017; Morgan, 2012) regarding what constitutes a fulfilled life. Through the interactions, mutual exchanges, and discussions among the participants, social norms in the form of empirical expectations were brought to light, as the groups drew on, represented, and "actualized" (Bohnsack, 2010a) these social norms. This approach is considered especially effective when the group members share a "conjunctive" space of experience (Mannheim, 1980) that unites them. Even if behavioral rules only affect a certain group of people, other actors explicitly or implicitly participate in their construction (e.g., the expectation that a pregnant woman will take parental leave is co-constructed by the employer, who automatically asks her about the duration of the leave).

We also conducted biographical interviews (Rosenthal, 2008; Schütze, 1983), which enabled us to record individual perspectives on life planning and individual ideas of life satisfaction, and to analyze the relevance of social norms in the form of normative expectations regarding these issues. This method is suitable for evoking and sustaining narratives. In contrast to a structured interview, this procedure is based entirely on the relevance system of the interviewees, and not on predefined categories and topics. Thus, this very open approach to prompting narratives is designed to lead the interviewees to tell their entire life story, and to address or highlight their individual goals and phases or visions of life (Rosenthal, 2008).

Against the background of the historical changes in childbearing and parenting patterns outlined in the section above, in our study, we sought to capture different perspectives on the phenomenon of wanting to have children by eliciting the perspectives of different groups of people and individuals. However, the participants selected for the group discussions had to have a shared space of experiences to be theoretically expected to exchange certain collective orientations (Bohnsack, 2010a; 2017) regarding a fulfilled life and

childbearing. Therefore, while our sampling strategy was based on methodological considerations, it was also developed against the background of longstanding gendered parenting norms in Austria.

Table 1: Sample of group discussion participants and interview partners

	ID + gender	Age	Family status	Number of children (in household)	Educational level	Size of residence
GD1	Aw	54	Married	2	Upper secondary	< 5,000 EW
	Ew	43	Married	3(1)	Tertiary	< 2,000 EW
	Bw	59	Married	3	Upper secondary	< 50,000 EW
	Dw	25	Cohabiting	0	Tertiary	> 50,000 EW
	Cw	34	Single	0	Tertiary	> 50,000 EW
GD2	Dm	73	Married	3	Upper secondary	Capital Vienna
	Aw	35	Married	1(1)	Tertiary	< 20,000 EW
	Bm	61	Married	4	Tertiary	< 5,000 EW
GD3	Cw	52	Married	3(1)	Upper secondary	< 5,000 EW
	Dw	44	Cohabiting	1	Tertiary	Capital Vienna
	Cw	52	Cohabiting	0	Upper secondary	Capital Vienna
	Aw	66	Married	2	Upper secondary	> 50,000 EW
	Bw	65	Married	3	Secondary	< 5,000 EW
GD4	Ew	25	Cohabiting	0	Tertiary	Capital Vienna
	Dw	76	Widowed	1	Upper secondary	> 50,000 EW
	Am	20	Single	0	Upper secondary	> 50,000 EW
	Cw	80	Divorced	0	Upper secondary	> 50,000 EW
GD5	Bm	30	Single	0	Tertiary	Capital Vienna
	Cm	46	Married	2(2)	Upper secondary	Capital Vienna
	Am	59	Married	1	Secondary	< 10,000 EW
	Dm	28	Single	0	Tertiary	Capital Vienna
Interview partners	Bm	41	Married	1(1)	Tertiary	Capital Vienna
	IP1w	80	Divorced	0	Upper secondary	> 50,000 EW
	IP2w	30	Cohabiting	0	Tertiary	> 50,000 EW
	IP3m	73	Married	3	Tertiary	< 50,000 EW
	IP4w	76	Widowed	1	Upper secondary	> 50,000 EW
	IP5m	54	Single	0	Secondary	< 2,000 EW
	IP6m	24	Cohabiting	0	Upper secondary	Capital Vienna
	IP7m	47	Divorced	2(2)	Upper secondary	Capital Vienna
	IP8w	40	Married	3(3)	Upper secondary	Capital Vienna
IP9w	41	Married	3(1)	Tertiary	< 2,000 EW	

Note: Group discussion participants in alphabetical order and interview partners, including abbreviations for male (m) and for female (w)

Accordingly, as captured in the table, we conducted one focus group of men and two focus groups of women that were diverse in terms of family status and age (GD1, GD3, GD5), and two mixed-gender groups, one with childless people and one with parents of different ages (GD2, GD4). In total, 14 women and eight men participated in the group discussions. All the participants shared the experience of having grown up or having lived in a family in Austria. In addition, the sample of nine interviewees was comprised of five women and four men who were either younger or older than 40 years old, and who either did or did not have an own child.

All participants were recruited for the study by circulating the invitation and the study details among members of life counselling institutions, leisure centers, and student associations, and by using snowball sampling through email, social media, and word of mouth. All the group discussions took place in an online setting. Some of the interviews were conducted online, while others were conducted in person (shaded in the table). As intended, the sample was highly diverse in terms of age, family status, number of own children, educational level, and place of residence (state and population size).

In line with a qualitative cyclical research approach, we carried out the first analytical steps after the first interviews and group discussion, which helped us to refine our sampling strategy. Our further analysis process, which was supported by software (MAXQDA), was based on the transcripts of the group discussions and interviews and on the corresponding field notes. Oriented toward reconstructive methods of analysis (Bohnsack, 2010a), the analytical procedure strictly distinguished between manifest content (what was discussed and narrated) and latent content (how something was discussed and narrated).

First, we conducted a thematic analysis and “formulating” interpretation (Bohnsack, 2010a) of each group discussion or biographical interview to capture the thematic process (Rosenthal, 2008). Summarizing the formulations, paraphrasing, and open coding of the foreground information helped us to obtain an initial overview of the data; to inductively capture key categories (e.g., the life goal of having a family, a child, or employment); and to identify significant text passages according to the research question. In addition, we used memos to record the thematic flow, the sequence, the topics discussed, and the contents covered.

In the second phase of analysis, we combined the “reflecting” interpretation (Bohnsack, 2010a) with hermeneutic techniques (Froschauer & Lueger, 2003). Selected coded text passages and sequences with significant content regarding our research question were analyzed and compared in greater depth and in a comparative manner using the following questions: How might the immediate situation of text generation have influenced the sequence? In what context is such a text normally produced, and how can this context be described? Which latent structures of subjective meaning and generally typical frames of orientation underlie the sequence: i.e., taken-for-granted and implicit norms, ideals, values, and taboos? Which possibilities for action are predetermined by these frames, and which are restricted?

The hypotheses we derived and abstracted from this procedure were systematically compared both with other text passages and with as many other readings and interpretations as were theoretically possible. Through this approach, the hypotheses were continuously checked, expanded, rejected, or condensed. This methodologically controlled procedure enabled us to generate an understanding of the precise frames that might have led to a specific formulation or discussion process, and to reconstruct taken-for-granted and implicit values, orientation patterns, and meaning structures. Thus, the resulting theory on the phenomenon of interest is deeply anchored in the empirical material, and is generalizable not in a statistical but in a structural sense beyond the context-specific statements made in a given interview or group discussion (Bohnsack, 2010b; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014).

5. Social norms around wanting to have children

In the focus groups, the participants rarely mentioned having their own children as essential to leading a fulfilled life, and thus did not explicitly consider this aspect to be of primary importance. Rather, they emphasized the wide range of available options that enable each person to shape his or her life individually so that it is fulfilling for him or her. The participants explicitly argued that social expectations should not restrict individual decisions; that everyone should define her or his individual goals; and that individual decisions not to have children have to be accepted.

However, the reconstructive analysis revealed that in the discussions, people’s desire to have their own children was a continuous reference point and a socially expected or at least unquestioned rule of behavior, i.e., was a social norm. This was reflected in collective discourses that, for example, emphasized that decisions not to have children are “also ok” (Aw:GD3) and “not forbidden” (Cm:GD5), and that today it is “also completely normal” (Bm:GD5) to not want to have a family. People without children were described as “certainly also having a fulfilled life” (Ew:GD3) and as “also being a very happy person” (Aw:GD3) without children. In stark contrast to people who do not have their own children, people who have children and who realize a desire to have children were not discussed in-depth, and their behavior and desires were not questioned or justified to the same extent in the discussions. Rather, on an implicit level, the participants

collectively and automatically expected these people to have a fulfilled life, and did not emphasize this expectation explicitly.

Thus, not having children was cited in the discussions as a socially accepted option, but not as an expected or unquestioned behavior. On a collective level and on an implicit level, the discussants did not assume that people would not want to have their own children, and they did not expect that people would ultimately choose not have children. Many of the participants' statements indicated that they expect a person who does not have children to attach importance to this state, to reflect on it, or to delay the final decision about whether to have children. In addition, the participants assumed that people who decide against having their own children might come to regret their decision or be sad about it. Moreover, the discussants assumed that in cases in which childless people have a desire to have their own children that is not fulfilled, this non-normative and rather deficient condition may lead to feelings of disappointment and grief.

Social norms are, however, relationally anchored. In the following, we will first show how the discussants had actualized social norms as empirical expectations in the focus groups, and how the narrated life stories or individual accounts reflected these norms as normative expectations. Second, we will demonstrate that gender was significant in the relationality of these expectations, both in the group discussions and in the participants' biographies.

6. Gendered expectations and biographical relevancies

As the analysis revealed, the constructions and expectations regarding the desire to have children were markedly gendered. In all groups, regardless of their gender composition, the discussants associated individual desires and decisions to have one's own children or the situation of having children much more readily and in greater detail with regard to women than with regard to men. The biographical interviews also reflected this difference: accounts from women (in the mixed-sex groups GD2 and GD4 and in the biographical interviews with women), about women (in all groups or in interviews with men), or discussions among women (in the female groups GD1 and GD3) included multiple and multi-layered expectations for women to a much greater extent than for men, and these expectations arose much earlier in the biographies of women than in those of men; i.e., long before women decided for or against having their own children. Not fully adhering to these expectations required much more argumentation and legitimation for and by women.

6.1 *Women's natural desire to have their own children*

In both the discussions and the life stories, wanting to have and having children were relevant and continuous reference points, particularly in relation to women. This referencing occurred when a woman's desire to have children was absent or did not clearly correspond to expectations, or when a woman had experienced difficulties or had failed in realizing this desire. Thus, these reference points reproduced and strengthened the social norm that a woman naturally wants to have children.

In the focus groups, a woman's desire to have children was not considered a "recipe" (Dw:GD3) for a fulfilled life, but it was empirically expected and collectively labelled as something "naturally very beautiful" that a woman "naturally" deals with (as, for example, in the gender-mixed GD4). The female interviewees also pointed to a "natural" need for motherhood. IP8w, for example, said spontaneously that she had absolutely wanted to have children and to find an appropriate husband who would enable her to fulfill her wishes and ideas. IP4w and IP9w, the two other mothers in the sample, also referred to this social norm when admitting that they had "not always wanted to be a mother" (IP9w), as might have been normatively expected. IP1w, a woman in her eighties, mentioned the norm that a woman should become a mother when acknowledging, with reference to her two sisters, that "between the three of us we just managed to have one daughter." She also explicitly talked about social pressure coming from her husband and her doctor that she as a woman should have children. Similarly, a 30-year-old IP2w said that her doctor had confronted her with this social norm by "pointing to the ticking clock." She also indicated that she assumes her close relatives are expecting her to have children soon. No similar reflections were elicited in the interviews with men.

According to the discussants in the focus groups, fulfilling the desire to have children was associated with making immense changes and meeting various and highly ambiguous demands, both collectively and individually. It was, for example, observed that women are much more affected by the "dilemma" (Dw:GD3) of having to decide between career and children; that they sit "between the chairs" (Dm:GD5); and that they would have to be "lucky" (Aw:GD3) to be able to continue to work "without worry" (Bw:GD3). In discussing this decision, the participants considered it crucial for women to ask themselves whether and to what extent they wished to devote themselves to either their emotional and maternal side or their professional activities and personal goals (e.g., GD1:27-30; GD3:2-6). In the interviews, this point was reflected when, for example, IP8w expressed very clear and positive ideas about "being a mom," saying that motherhood should take priority over a woman's other needs or plans, and that mothers should work to a limited extent only. However, the reconstructive analysis yielded evidence of highly ambiguous considerations and expectations for women that were not elicited in discussions about men or in the interviews with men.

On the one hand, the participants assumed that a woman wants to make "sacrifices" and to withdraw from the labor market when she becomes a mother. Correspondingly, in the focus groups, they talked about women who were reluctant to have children, and who decided or who might decide against having their own children despite initially wanting to have a family. These women were described as being not able to prioritize mothering and to put their employment on hold due to the necessity to earn money or the requirements of their career (like Ew:GD3). One discussant concluded that she is "not ready in my career, I don't want to take on this responsibility yet" (Cw:GD2). These expectations were also reflected in the biographical interviews. For example, IP2w explained that she does not feel ready for this kind of mothering, and therefore concluded that given the sacrifices required, "I don't need a child."

On the other hand, the focus group discussants assumed that women with children "also want to work," as withdrawing from the labor market would be "unsatisfactory" for them. Correspondingly, they also talked about women who might decide against having their own children despite initially wanting to have a family when it became clear that their aspiration to continue in their career could not be realized because their partner or their circumstances did not support this choice. In the interviews, IP1w referred to this normative expectation, and said that her fear of having to give up her occupation, travels, and freedom ultimately led her to decide not to have a child, contrary to her husband's wishes. Similarly, 30-year-old IP2w said that while her partner wanted to start a family, she was reluctant to have children because she feared that if she became a mother, she, but not her partner, would have to sacrifice professional and private goals.

6.2 *Men's plans for starting a family*

For men, reflections on the desire to have their own children, the issue of whether having children is necessary to lead a fulfilled life, the consequences of having children, and the need to justify childlessness were less evident in the data. In the focus groups, the empirical expectations for men were less clear and were not as contingent and complex as those for women. The interviews with men did not reflect experiences with clear normative expectations regarding their desire to have their own children, or with the consequences of their childbearing decisions. For men, including IP3m, starting a family was instead described as "somehow a matter of course [...], not even particularly planned somehow, but that was somehow obvious. It just happened." Furthermore, a man's desire to have children appeared to be somewhat dependent on that of his partner. For example, IP6m said that his girlfriend had been eagerly "awaiting the ring for ages" (IP6m:12), and that she could also hardly wait to have a child, explaining that while she wanted to have a child in the next three years, he would "take his time."

The discussions in the focus groups indicated that for men, the topic of "starting a family," the question of whether men "do or do not have a family," and the question of whether the "family topic" has or has not been completed were more relevant. These discussions reflected empirical expectations regarding men's ability and long-term responsibility to provide for the family's financial security through having a secure, well-paid, and full-time job. Correspondingly, in the biographical interviews, the men appeared to base their childbearing decisions on this normative expectation. One interviewee said he did not yet feel ready to support a family (IP6m), while another described it as a man's task after a "son came into the world" (IP7m), and a third declined to do so: IP5m, who had intended to remain childless, affirmed several times in his narrative that his job was "not a family job now, you don't earn so much" (IP5m:3). It was evident in both the interview and the focus group data that for a man, unlike for a woman, having a full-time job was

compatible with family life. After mentioning his transition to fatherhood, IP7m immediately spoke of his "cozy" job with a workday from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Similarly, IP3m said that he appreciated the location of his young family's new home because it allowed him to easily reach his workplace. These normative expectations for men were, however, associated with feelings of happiness as well. For example, one male participant observed: "When I have a child that I'm fond of and I see how it develops, that is simply a feeling of happiness, even if, of course, there has to be a material basis" (Bm:GD2). Arguments like these were not elicited in the accounts of the female study participants.

6.3 *No children? Legitimate when justified*

Women, but not men, who decided against having children were expected to "find fulfillment elsewhere" (Dw:GD3) other than via the expected path of motherhood. The empirical expectations for women who did not have their own children included that they would "have an attitude" (Aw:GD3) of not wanting to have children, and that they should have a comprehensible reason and a story of legitimation for their childlessness. In the focus groups, the discussants assumed that these women had at least gone through a process of intensive reflection followed by a conscious decision not to have children. They discussed cases in which a woman did not want to have her own children and searched for reasons and justifications for her lack of desire for childbearing, as such cases triggered astonishment, and questions like: "Is it only okay now or has it always been like this?" (Aw:GD3). The lack of desire to have children, as well as the desire to be childless, were cited as potential justifications for childlessness. Accordingly, the discussants expressed the expectation that women, but not men, who did not want to have their own children would not – and even should not – become a parent.

The analysis indicated that women, both in the group discussions and in the interviews, adhered to this normative expectation of legitimating their childlessness. While one of the male discussants also mentioned that he likes "raising children, but I don't like having children of my own" (Bm:GD4), it was mainly women who were concerned with or who introduced arguments regarding the reasons for not having children. They justified not wanting to have their own children and formulated their reasons in a manner that was factual, well-founded, resolute, constant, stable, and relatively unemotional, with most arguing very clearly and convincingly. Some of the women reported that they had "of course" reflected on this issue frequently (GD3, GD4). For example, one of these women argued that she had noticed "that for many people children are part of a fulfilled life, [...] I personally never had that" (Cw:GD3), while others repeatedly emphasized that they "never" had a desire to have children, or "had no connection to children" (IP9w and Cw:GD3). Likewise, these women reported either that they anticipated that they would not be able to be a good, emotionally devoted, responsible, and "loving mother" (e.g., Dw:GD1), or that they "did not want to be a mother" (Dw:GD3) at all. For example, IP1w, a woman in her eighties, said that her fear of becoming a "hard mother" ultimately resulted in her decision not to have a child. IP9w cited her impressions that children are "not exciting," and that they "whine" and "just lie around" to justify why she had not wanted to become a mother for a long time, until this desire slowly evolved and was realized in a new partnership. Similarly, IP4w justified her lack of desire to have her own children by recounting her mother's negative statements about her own mothering and her negative experiences of caring for multiple siblings, which led her to decide not to have a second child.

Moreover, the social norm of women wanting to have their own children was reproduced when the discussants framed a decision not to have children and to "do something different" as being a "very brave decision" (Dw:GD3) for women – but not for men. Accordingly, with reference to individual responsibility, the discussants pointed to the danger that these women could come to regret their decision, with some even predicting, for example, "that you regret what you did not do" (Bm:GD5), which "only turns out later" (Cf:GD4). IP1w and IP2w, the two interviewed childless women, reflected this normative expectation themselves when talking about their fear of regretting their childlessness at some point. In a similar vein, while IP4w "thanked God" in the interview that she had finally become a mother, and IP9w admitted that she could now even imagine having four children, both women indicated they had initially not wanted to have children. Similar fears among men appeared in the data only when some of the interviewed women talked about their partner struggling with the interviewees' lack of desire to have children (e.g., IP9w, IP2w).

7. Discussion: Relationalities of childbearing desires

This study aimed to explore collective orientations and individual meanings regarding childbearing in biographies, and to improve our understanding of which social norms regarding childbearing relate to and shape women's and men's desires and decisions to have their own children, and how they do so. Over the past several decades, increasing autonomy, optimization demands, and optionality have shaped biographies (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2012; Lewis, 2006; Nehring & Röcke, 2023); the “monthly fear of pregnancy” has been replaced by the vision of a “planned child” (as IP4w put it); and changing societal values have led to declining fertility and non-marital childbearing (Lesthaeghe, 2010). In particular, the spread of gender egalitarian values has been found to influence and explain fertility decisions (Goldscheider et al., 2015; Lappegård et al., 2021; Raybould & Sear, 2021). Thus, despite increasing contingencies, social norms remain strong reference points influencing people's individual life decisions and life satisfaction (Bernardi et al., 2015; Schröder, 2018), and social interactions and networks have been found to be highly relevant for individuals who are in the process of deciding for or against childbearing (Albertini & Brini, 2021; Bernardi & Klärner, 2014; Bernardi & Klein, 2017). In Austria, the study's country context, gender norms have remained markedly traditional, family policies have emphasized freedom of choice, and fertility has stabilized at a low level (Auer & Welte, 2007; Berghammer & Schmidt, 2019; Gietel-Basten et al., 2022; Rille-Pfeiffer & Kapella, 2017).

This study defined social norms as behavioral expectations that individuals have of others (empirical expectations), but that individuals also assume others have of them (normative expectations) (Bicchieri, 2006; 2017). Furthermore, it considered the relationality of individual lives in developing and realizing the desire to have their own children (Horne, 2014; Roseneil & Ketokivi, 2016; Twamley et al., 2021). According to this relational approach, we reconstructed empirical expectations from interactions and discussions in social networks as collective orientations in focus groups (Bohnsack, 2010a; Mannheim, 1980), and the analysis of normative expectations was based on data from biographical interviews (Rosenthal, 2008; Schütze, 1983). We asked the participants in a very open-ended manner what constitutes a fulfilled life, and, in line with premises of qualitative and reconstructive social research, we attempted to prioritize the issues of relevance to them and to avoid structuring the analysis along predefined concepts, dimensions, or specific aspects (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014). The analysis yielded both collective orientations and individual meanings (Bohnsack, 2017; 2010a) around social norms of gendered childbearing desires and decisions. The results reflected how childbearing desires are relational to a wider frame of social norms and structures.

First, childbearing desires were shown to be relational to social norms of individual self-optimization and self-responsibility. On a manifest level, the collective orientations and individual biographies reflected how people are expected to be empowered, and, at the same time, are forced to choose from a growing pool of options (Giddens, 1991; Hitzler & Honer, 2012) for how they live their lives, and for whether and when they choose to have children. Moreover, the reconstructed collective orientations and individual meanings reflected how individuals are assumed to be ultimately responsible for their decisions and for achieving personal fulfilment and life satisfaction (Adkins, 2018; Trnka & Trundle, 2014). If having children was constructed as a component of a fulfilled life, it was framed as a highly responsible task and an individual conscious decision (Bernardi et al., 2015; Cornelißen et al., 2017; Ruckdeschel, 2015). These results thus contribute to our understanding of the decreasing share of people who agree with the statement that a person must have children to lead a fulfilled life (Inglehart et al., 2011; Schmidt & Neuwirth, 2023).

However, on the latent level of collective orientations and subjective meanings, the social norm – that is, the empirical and normative expectation – of wanting to have one's own children was evident in the discussions, and was of taken-for-granted significance. In times characterized by unclear guidelines, unstable relationships, and unreliable ideas about what constitutes a fulfilled life, people have to deal with disorientation (Hitzler & Honer, 2012; Lewis, 2006), and might therefore long for stable and clear expectations, albeit implicitly. Thus, the empirical expectation that people would want to have their own children at some point was a continuous reference point in the discussions. The biographical interviewees also discussed this social norm as a normative expectation. Hence, not adhering to this norm required justification. These results suggest that individual decisions regarding the desire to have children and to become a parent were not as free or as individual as the participants in the group discussions explicitly asserted, or as the policies in Austria purport (Auer & Welte, 2009; Rille-Pfeiffer & Kapella, 2017).

Second, childbearing desires and, in particular, subsequent childbearing decisions were strongly relational to gender and social norms of gendered parenting responsibilities that have been prevalent for decades and across generations (Diabaté, 2015; Evertsson & Grunow, 2019; Schütze, 1991; Suppes, 2020). Even though the sample was diverse with regard to generation, age, gender, and the stage of life in which they were invited to talk about what constitutes a fulfilled life, the reconstructive analysis revealed that (desired) childbearing and (expectant) parenthood were consistently and much more strongly empirically expected of and associated with women than with men. As normative expectations, these social norms became relevant much earlier and were much more significant and “normal” in women’s individual life stories than in men’s biographies. Indeed, these norms were relevant for women long before they were even thinking about whether they wanted to have children (Baumgarten et al., 2020; Bernardi & Klein, 2017).

Furthermore, whether a woman decided for or against having a child and was ultimately happy with her decision was strongly related to social norms of good motherhood (Diabaté & Beringer, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2023), including expectations that a woman must be prepared to invest in and dedicate time and emotional resources to parenting, to lovingly and patiently care for her children, and to make sacrifices to do so – and that if a woman does not find this kind of mothering fulfilling, she “wouldn’t need a child” (IP2w). Women in the sample displayed awareness of the responsibilities associated with motherhood, and, accordingly, demonstrated that they had thought very carefully about the decision to have children, had reflected on all the short- and long-term consequences, and had made the decision consciously. They legitimized their decision not to have children by saying that they had lacked these characteristics of emotionality and motherliness, and made factual or even dismissive arguments against having children. Similar expectations and justifications could not be reconstructed for men in the group discussions or the interview data. These manifold considerations might help to understand the significant decline in values that associate a woman’s fulfilled life with motherhood (Schmidt & Neuwirth, 2023).

Relationality to social norms of good fatherhood also became obvious, but was not accompanied by similar requirements to justify and carefully consider the decision to have children. Instead, men were thematized and presented themselves as individuals who had a family and were expected to provide financial security when starting a family (Schmidt, 2018). This suggests that a stronger representative status orientation was attributed to and expected of men. The analysis revealed that compared to the transition to motherhood, the transition to fatherhood was less likely to be explicitly reflected upon, or to be based on an individual desire to have children. For men, having children was also viewed as a key component of leading a fulfilled and happy life, but it was less associated with the expectation of having to provide time-intensive care or to form an emotional bond with children. Consequently, having children was expected to have fewer consequences for the individual lives of men than for the individual lives of women (Diabaté & Beringer, 2018). Men making greater investments in caregiving and housework constitutes the second half of the gender revolution, which has the potential to increase fertility. However, there is little evidence that men in Austria have substantially increased their contributions in either area (Goldscheider et al., 2015; Riederer & Berghammer, 2020; Schmidt & Schmidt, 2023). These results might help to understand the less pronounced decline in values that associate a man’s fulfilled life with fatherhood, particularly among men (Schmidt & Neuwirth, 2023).

8. Conclusions

This qualitative study revealed how, for men as well as for women, individual life choices like realizing the desire to have one’s own children are related to a bundle of social norms: that is, social norms regarding gendered childbearing desires, neoliberal self-optimization, and gendered parenting. In addition, the results illustrated that these normative expectations partly conflict, and that these conflicts can restrict the scope of individual women’s and men’s needs, desires, and decisions in relation to wanting to have and having children. Thus, this qualitative study contributed to our understanding of the low fertility pattern in a country context like Austria (Gietel-Basten et al., 2022; Sobotka, 2012; Zeman & Sobotka, 2023). It explored social norms, and their relationalities and relevancies (Bernardi et al., 2015; Bicchieri, 2017; Roseneil & Ketokivi, 2016), by focusing on social interactions and individual lives, instead of relying on the prevalence of a particular behavior (Brzozowska, 2021; Yu & Liang, 2022).

We conclude, first, that these normative expectations and relationalities have an entirely different meaning and impact for women than they do for men. Social norms around the desire to have children conflict with the demands stemming from social norms around gendered parenthood. The women who participated in this study faced greater pressure than the men to want to have their own children or to explain their behavior when they deviated from this norm, and were simultaneously required to deal with normative expectations about how they should behave as good mothers (Diabaté, 2015; Diabaté & Beringer, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2023). For women, but not for men, this discrepancy in normative expectations is relevant long before they even start to develop a desire to have children (Baumgarten et al., 2020; Bernardi & Klein, 2017; Ruckdeschel, 2007).

Furthermore, social norms around the desire to have children conflict with neoliberal ideas of an economically productive, entrepreneurial, and independent ideal citizen (Adkins, 2018; Connell, 2009; Hamilton, 2016; Ruckdeschel, 2015; Wilson & Yochim, 2017) who is striving for self-optimization and accepting self-responsibility (Giddens, 1991; Nehring & Röcke, 2023). Against this background, every decision a woman makes is potentially fraught: if she decides to realize her desire to have children, she has to worry about regretting it at some point due to the incompatibility of motherhood with economic independence (Donath, 2017; Heffernan & Stone, 2021); if, however she decides against motherhood, she might be afraid that she will regret it at some point in time, especially as this decision cannot be reversed or optimized later, even though the logic of lifelong neoliberal optimization would appear to promise otherwise. These expectations, consequences, and assumptions about the future did not apply to the men in the study sample. However, deciding whether to have children was difficult for the men as well, because they were still faced with the normative expectations of being responsible for the financial security of the family and of having a suitable job, which were often difficult to achieve given the precarious labor market conditions associated with neoliberalism.

Second, we conclude that these contradictions continue to be resolved by women and men at an individual level. Unclear, gendered, and conflicting attributions, expectations, and demands, as well as politically unclear objectives (Gietel-Basten et al., 2022; Rille-Pfeiffer & Kapella, 2017) emphasizing individuals' freedom of choice (Auer & Welte, 2009), have made the decision about whether to have children increasingly difficult for women in Austria. The individual reflections reconstructed in this qualitative study illustrate that compared to men, women are facing completely different, double, and conflicting burdens (Han et al., 2023; Raybould & Sear, 2021). Women are held individually responsible for the consequences of any decision they make that might hamper the decision to have their own child (Beaujouan et al., 2016; Goldscheider et al., 2015; Hudde & Engelhardt, 2023; Raybould & Sear, 2021; van Bavel et al., 2018). Thus, aiming for the completion of the gender revolution by expecting men to invest similar amounts of time in nurturing and caregiving might make it easier for women and men in Austria to realize their fertility intentions.

Acknowledgments

The author wants to thank her colleagues Sabine Buchebner-Ferstl and Olaf Kapella for their assistance in conducting this research and commenting on earlier versions of this manuscript; and the Federal Chancellery Austria/Women, Family, Integration, and Media for funding this research. The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

Data are not publicly available; the anonymised transcripts (in German) of all focus groups and interviews can be requested by email from the corresponding author.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Kein erfülltes Leben ohne Kind? Zur Relevanz sozialer Normen rund um den Kinderwunsch in kollektiven und individuellen Orientierungsmustern

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Die Studie untersuchte kollektive Orientierungen und individuelle Vorstellungen zum erfüllten Leben mit dem Ziel, die Frage zu beantworten, welche sozialen Normen rund um den Kinderwunsch bei biografischen Fertilitätsentscheidungen von Frauen und Männern relevant werden.

Hintergrund: Soziale Normen haben eine hohe Relevanz für Individuen, wenn diese sich für oder gegen ein Kind entscheiden. Diese Studie liefert einen Beitrag zu diesem Forschungsfeld, indem sie soziale Normen rund um den Kinderwunsch als normative und als empirische Erwartungen untersucht.

Methode: Die Beantwortung der Forschungsfrage erfolgte über die Triangulation von Daten aus fünf Fokusgruppen (n=22) mit biografischen Interviews (n=9) mit Frauen und Männern unterschiedlichen Alters und mit unterschiedlichem Familienstatus aus ganz Österreich, sowie über rekonstruktive Analysemethoden.

Ergebnisse: Der Kinderwunsch wurde als soziale Norm rekonstruiert, jedoch als stark geschlechtsspezifisch gerahmte. Sowohl in kollektiven Orientierungen als auch in individuellen Bedeutungen wurde diese in Form von normativen und empirischen Erwartungen relevant; für Frauen lange bevor und nachdem Fertilitätsentscheidungen getroffen werden. Der starke Zusammenhang mit Normen geschlechtsspezifischer Verantwortlichkeiten für (werdende) Eltern prägte die individuellen Wünsche und Entscheidungen.

Schlussfolgerung: Die Relationalität von Normen rund um Kinderwunsch und Elternschaft bringt deutlich geschlechtsspezifische Herausforderungen mit sich. Diese verschärfen sich zusätzlich durch neoliberale Anforderungen individueller Selbstoptimierung und Selbstverantwortung und haben so das Potenzial, Entscheidungen für eigene Kinder zu erschweren.

Schlagwörter: normative und empirische Erwartungen, Relationalität, Elternschaft, kollektive Orientierungsmuster, individuelle Bedeutung, neoliberale Anforderungen, erfülltes Leben

JFR – Journal of Family Research, 2024, vol. 36, pp. 5–24.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-942>

Submitted: April 25, 2023

Accepted: January 8, 2024

Published online: January 17, 2024

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