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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hämäläinen, H., Tanskanen, A. O., Kääriäinen, J., & Danielsbacka, M. (2024). Research note: Family structure and attitudes toward filial obligations among younger and middle-aged adults. *JFR - Journal of Family Research*, 36, 178-191. <https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-972>

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## Research note: Family structure and attitudes toward filial obligations among younger and middle-aged adults

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The study investigates the association between family structures and general attitudes toward adult children's responsibilities to care for older parents.

**Background:** Despite remarkable changes in family structures in recent decades (e.g., the increasing share of stepfamilies), only a few studies have explored the association between family structures and perceived filial obligations. This study seeks to fill this gap.

**Method:** Using data from the German Family Panel (pairfam) (N = 8,709) collected from younger and middle-aged Germans, the study examined general attitudes toward adult children's responsibilities to support parents in need. Linear regression models were used to investigate the association between family structure (i.e., respondents without parents and with biological and/or stepparents) and perceived filial obligation.

**Results:** Respondents with stepparents were less likely to support the idea of filial obligations compared to those without stepparents. In contrast, respondents without living biological parents were more inclined to agree with filial obligations than individuals with living biological parents. Moreover, filial obligations found stronger agreement among males than females and among the younger age cohort compared to older cohorts, regardless of family structure.

**Conclusion:** The findings highlight how the complexity of the family structures in contemporary society shapes perceived filial obligations.

**Key words:** filial obligations, intergenerational relations, stepparent, stepchild



## 1. Introduction

Family is a key social institution and a source of social support across societies (Tanskanen & Danielsbacka, 2019). In recent decades, Western countries have witnessed remarkable changes in family structures (Thomson, 2014). One of the most significant changes is the increase in the number of stepfamilies due to higher rates of divorce and re-partnering. For instance, in present-day Germany, approximately 14% of all families are stepfamilies (Steinbach, et al., 2016). Simultaneously, Western countries are experiencing fertility decline and population ageing (OECD, 2023a; 2023b), posing structural and fiscal challenges to welfare states. After World War II, welfare states have considerably reduced individuals' dependence on family support by taking many responsibilities off the shoulders of the family (Kujala & Danielsbacka, 2018). If welfare states' support for older people were to diminish, responsibility would shift back to families, particularly adult children, as they are the most common informal source of support for older adults outside their households (e.g., Attias-Donfut et al., 2005; Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). Whether family structure influences perceived filial responsibilities is a salient question in aging societies.

From the viewpoint of social norms, later referred to as the "social norms effect", important elements regulating intergenerational solidarity are the social expectations and obligations to help family members (Bengtson, 2001; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). However, notable disparities might arise in the expected roles of adult children due to their family structures (Noël-Miller, 2013; Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). While the traditional nuclear family can be viewed as a "complete institution" in the sense that it poses well-defined institutionalized familial roles and mutual relationships, the stepfamily can be described as an "incomplete institution" because it lacks such established guidelines (Cherlin, 1978; Ganong & Coleman, 1997). As a result, the norms that encourage commitments to filial obligations can be weaker among adult children with stepparents compared to those with biological parents (Hämäläinen et al., 2024; van Houdt et al., 2018).

In the studies using vignette methods, respondents were presented with hypothetical situations related to parents and stepparents, enabling the measurement of their attitudes toward filial responsibility (Coleman et al., 2005; Ganong & Coleman, 2006; van Houdt et al., 2018). These studies showed that the attitudes toward filial responsibility were more positive if the parent appearing in the vignette was a biological parent rather than a stepparent. However, the respondents in those investigations did not necessarily have any personal stepfamily experience, and the studies did not compare attitudes of individuals with and without stepparents. As personal real-life experiences shape attitudes (Pettigrew et al., 2011), having a stepparent may affect the attitudes toward filial obligations.

Furthermore, previous studies indicate that support for filial obligations tends to decrease when the risk of becoming a caregiver increases, later referred to as the "risk of becoming a caregiver effect." According to prior studies, support for filial responsibilities is lower among females compared to males (Daatland et al., 2011; Daatland et al., 2012), and it tends to diminish with age (Daatland et al., 2012; Gans & Silverstein, 2006). It has been suggested that age and gender are important predictors of agreement with filial obligations because attitudes are related to personal experiences and self-interest (Daatland et al., 2012). In general, older individuals and females are likely to be more aware of the personal sacrifices related to caring for a family member compared to younger individuals and males (e.g., Daatland et al., 2012; Gans & Silverstein, 2006). For instance, due to socio-cultural, psychological, and biological reasons, females are more likely than males to take on the role of primary caregiver in families (e.g., Hrdy, 2009; Hämäläinen & Tanskanen, 2021), which may be reflected in the gendered attitudes towards the responsibilities of caring for older parents.

## 2. Study aims

This study investigates the association between family structure and general attitudes toward adult children's responsibilities to care for parents. The novelty of our approach is that we examine, for the first time, whether the family composition of individuals (i.e., those without parents and with biological and/or stepparents) is associated with the general attitudes of younger and middle-aged adults toward filial responsibilities. Based on the "social norms effect", which suggests that stepfamilies lack institutionalized guidelines for supporting stepparents, we assume:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals without stepparents perceive filial obligations more positively than those with stepparents.

Individuals with living parents face the risk of becoming caregivers to them as they age, while those without parents do not have a similar concern. Furthermore, females are more likely than males to be the primary caregivers for parents, and older respondents are more likely than younger ones to take on this role. Hence, based on “risk of becoming a caregiver effect”, we predict:

Hypothesis 2a: Individuals without parents perceive filial obligations more positively than those with parents.

Hypothesis 2b: Despite the family structure, males perceive filial obligations more positively than females.

Hypothesis 2c: Despite the family structure, younger respondents perceive filial obligations more positively than older individuals.

### 3. Data and methods

This study utilized data from the German Family Panel (pairfam), providing extensive information on family relations and attitudes toward informal help in Germany (Brüderl et al., 2022; Huinink et al., 2011). Pairfam’s longitudinal survey data were collected from nationwide random samples across three birth cohorts: 1991–1993, 1981–1983, and 1971–1973. The initial data collection was conducted in 2008–2009, with subsequent annual collections. For this study, we used data from the second wave (2009–2010) (N=9069) as it included questions on filial obligations, whereas these questions were not asked in the first wave.

In the analyses, the dependent variables measured general attitudes toward filial obligations. All respondents, regardless of their own family situation, were presented with two statements related to filial obligations and asked to report how strongly they personally agreed with the statements, using a scale from 1 (disagree completely) to 5 (agree completely). The statements were: “Children should accommodate their parents if they cannot take care of themselves” and “Children should arrange their work so as to be able to care for their sick parents.” The distributions of the dependent variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics: dependent variables

|  |                       | n    | %    |
|--|-----------------------|------|------|
| <b>Statement 1:</b><br>Children should accommodate their parents<br>if parents cannot take care for themselves | 1 Disagree completely | 309  | 3.6  |
|  | 2                     | 693  | 8.0  |
|  | 3                     | 2594 | 29.8 |
|  | 4                     | 2827 | 32.5 |
|  | 5 Agree completely    | 2286 | 26.3 |
| <b>Statement 2:</b><br>Children should manage their work<br>so that they can care for their sick parents       | 1 Disagree completely | 978  | 11.3 |
|  | 2                     | 1847 | 21.3 |
|  | 3                     | 2879 | 33.1 |
|  | 4                     | 1962 | 22.6 |
|  | 5 Agree completely    | 1021 | 11.8 |

Source: Pairfam wave 2 (2009–2010), own calculations

Our main explanatory variable concerned respondents’ family structure, that is, different (step)parent–child constellations. During the interview, respondents were asked multiple questions regarding their biological parents, and if the biological parents were not together, the questions were also asked regarding their possible new partners (i.e., stepfathers and stepmothers). For the analyses, we constructed a new variable containing the information about respondents’ parents (1 = Parents are together, 2 = Parents are separated, and the respondent does not have stepparent(s), 3 = Parents are separated, and the respondent

does have stepparent(s), 4 = Parents are not alive/present). Respondents with only one biological parent present are included among those whose parents were separated (i.e., categories 2 and 3).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics (n = 8709)

|   | n    | %    |
|---|------|------|
| <b>Gender</b>                             |      |      |
| Male                                      | 4215 | 48.4 |
| Female                                    | 4494 | 51.6 |
| <b>Cohort</b>                             |      |      |
| 1991–1993                                 | 3431 | 39.4 |
| 1981–1983                                 | 2530 | 29.1 |
| 1971–1973                                 | 2748 | 31.6 |
| <b>Ethnic background</b>                  |      |      |
| German native                             | 6730 | 77.3 |
| Half-German                               | 496  | 5.7  |
| Ethnic-German immigrant                   | 467  | 5.4  |
| Non-German background                     | 1016 | 11.7 |
| <b>Marital status</b>                     |      |      |
| Never married                             | 5878 | 67.5 |
| Married/civil union                       | 2511 | 28.8 |
| Divorced or widowed                       | 320  | 3.7  |
| <b>Biological children</b>                |      |      |
| No  | 5834 | 67.0 |
| Yes                                       | 2875 | 33.0 |
| <b>Siblings</b>                           |      |      |
| No  | 1075 | 12.3 |
| Yes                                       | 7634 | 87.7 |
| <b>Education</b>                          |      |      |
| Currently enrolled                        | 3499 | 40.2 |
| Low                                       | 648  | 7.4  |
| Middle                                    | 2999 | 34.4 |
| High                                      | 1563 | 18.0 |
| <b>Labor force status</b>                 |      |      |
| Employed                                  | 3991 | 45.8 |
| In education                              | 3511 | 40.3 |
| Not employed or in education              | 1207 | 13.9 |
| <b>Parental composition</b>               |      |      |
| Parents are couple                        | 5451 | 62.6 |
| Parents are not couple; no stepparents    | 1167 | 13.4 |
| Parents are not couple; stepparents exist | 1936 | 22.2 |
| No parents                                | 155  | 1.8  |

Source: Pairfam wave 2 (2009–2010), own calculations

Linear regression was used to investigate the association between parental composition and perceived filial obligation. As previous studies have shown that filial obligations can be associated with several individual characteristics (e.g., Daatland et al., 2011; Daatland et al., 2012), we considered multiple potential confounding variables. We constructed four regression models, each adding a set of variables, to examine the robustness of our main results—whether different confounders affect the effect of the main explanatory variable. Model 1 is a base model including only the main explanatory variable, i.e., family structure. For Model 2, we added a set of variables related to respondents' personal characteristics: gender, age cohort, and ethnic background. Model 3 consisted of variables related to family relationships: the respondents' marital status and whether they had children or siblings. Finally, Model 4, included variables related to socioeconomic status: level of education and labor force status. The descriptive statistics of all explanatory

variables are presented in Table 2. Findings of the final regression model were illustrated by calculating predictive margins and 95% confidence intervals (CIs). All analyses were performed using Stata version 17.

#### 4. Results

The results regarding parental composition and agreement with statement 1 are presented in Table 3. Model 1 shows the unadjusted association between our main explanatory and dependent variables; those whose parents were together were significantly more likely to report a higher level of agreement with statement 1 than those whose parents were not together (with or without stepparents). Instead, in the group of ‘no parents,’ no significant association was detected.

Table 3: Results from regression models: Statement 1

|   | Model 1  |       |       |       | Model 2  |       |       |       | Model 3  |       |       |       | Model 4  |       |       |       |  |
|---|----------|-------|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------|-------|--|
|   | coef.    | p     | lb    | ub    | coef.    | p     | lb    | ub    | coef.    | p     | lb    | ub    | coef.    | p     | lb    | ub    |  |
| <b>Parental composition</b>                     |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |  |
| Parents are couple                              | ref.     |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |  |
| Parents are not couple; no steps                | -0.09*   | 0.010 | -0.15 | -0.02 | 0.01     | 0.754 | -0.06 | 0.08  | 0.01     | 0.761 | -0.06 | 0.08  | -0.01    | 0.808 | -0.07 | 0.06  |  |
| Parents are not couple; steps exist             | -0.11*** | 0.000 | -0.17 | -0.06 | -0.06*   | 0.022 | -0.12 | -0.01 | -0.06*   | 0.032 | -0.11 | 0.00  | -0.07**  | 0.008 | -0.13 | -0.02 |  |
| No parents                                      | 0.02     | 0.824 | -0.15 | 0.19  | 0.24**   | 0.004 | 0.08  | 0.41  | 0.24**   | 0.004 | 0.07  | 0.41  | 0.20*    | 0.018 | 0.03  | 0.37  |  |
| <b>Gender (ref. = male)</b>                     |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |  |
| Female  |          |       |       |       | -0.09*** | 0.000 | -0.14 | -0.05 | -0.09*** | 0.000 | -0.13 | -0.04 | -0.09*** | 0.000 | -0.13 | -0.04 |  |
| <b>Age cohort (ref. 1991-1993)</b>              |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |  |
| 1981–1983                                       |          |       |       |       | -0.19*** | 0.000 | -0.24 | -0.14 | -0.16*** | 0.000 | -0.22 | -0.11 | -0.14**  | 0.004 | -0.24 | -0.04 |  |
| 1971–1973                                       |          |       |       |       | -0.48*** | 0.000 | -0.53 | -0.42 | -0.40*** | 0.000 | -0.47 | -0.32 | -0.35*** | 0.000 | -0.47 | -0.23 |  |
| <b>Ethnic background (ref. = German native)</b> |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |  |
| Half-German                                     |          |       |       |       | 0.02     | 0.725 | -0.08 | 0.11  | 0.02     | 0.742 | -0.08 | 0.11  | 0.02     | 0.704 | -0.07 | 0.11  |  |
| Ethnic-German immigrant                         |          |       |       |       | 0.36***  | 0.000 | 0.26  | 0.45  | 0.37***  | 0.000 | 0.27  | 0.46  | 0.35***  | 0.000 | 0.26  | 0.45  |  |
| Non-German background                           |          |       |       |       | 0.45***  | 0.000 | 0.38  | 0.52  | 0.46***  | 0.000 | 0.39  | 0.53  | 0.44***  | 0.000 | 0.37  | 0.51  |  |
| <b>Marital status (ref. never married)</b>      |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |  |
| Married/civil union                             |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | -0.12**  | 0.002 | -0.20 | -0.05 | -0.11**  | 0.005 | -0.18 | -0.03 |  |
| Divorced or widowed                             |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | -0.12    | 0.082 | -0.25 | 0.01  | -0.14*   | 0.034 | -0.27 | -0.01 |  |
| <b>Biological children (ref. = No)</b>          |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |  |
| Has a child                                     |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | 0.02     | 0.622 | -0.06 | 0.09  | -0.01    | 0.737 | -0.09 | 0.06  |  |
| <b>Siblings (ref. = No)</b>                     |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |  |
| Has a sibling                                   |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | 0.07*    | 0.034 | 0.01  | 0.14  | 0.07*    | 0.050 | 0.00  | 0.13  |  |
| <b>Education (ref. currently enrolled)</b>      |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |  |
| Low   |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | 0.20**   | 0.005 | 0.06  | 0.34  |  |
| Middle  |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | 0.02     | 0.744 | -0.11 | 0.15  |  |
| High  |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | -0.11    | 0.093 | -0.25 | 0.02  |  |
| <b>Labor force status (ref. employed)</b>       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |  |
| In education                                    |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | 0.01     | 0.895 | -0.10 | 0.11  |  |
| Not employed or in education                    |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | 0.00     | 0.984 | -0.07 | 0.07  |  |
| N   | 8709     |       |       |       | 8709     |       |       |       | 8709     |       |       |       | 8709     |       |       |       |  |

Note: CI = confidence interval, lb = lower bound, ub = upper bound, ref = reference category; \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

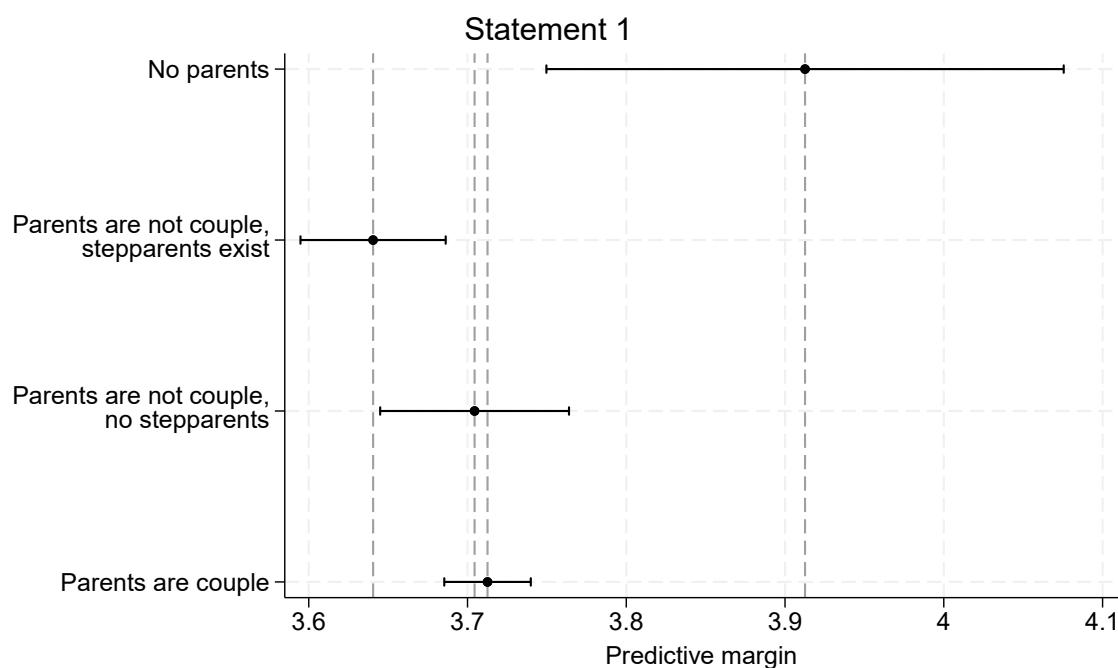
In Model 2, variables measuring the respondents’ personal characteristics were added, such as their gender, age cohort, and ethnic background. Introducing these variables into the model removed the significant difference between the groups—‘parents are couple’ and ‘parents are not couple; no stepparents.’ The significant difference between the groups—‘parents are couple’ and ‘parents are not couple; stepparents exist’—remained statistically significant, although the magnitude of the regression coefficient was reduced by almost half. Instead, a significant positive association was detected in the group of ‘no parents,’ meaning that individuals without parents were predicted to report a higher level of agreement with the statement 1 than those whose parents were together.

Furthermore, Model 3 controlled for variables related to other family relationships, namely respondents’ marital status and whether they had biological children or siblings. Introducing these variables did not change the associations between the main variables, and the results were nearly identical to Model 2.

Finally, Model 4 included variables measuring socioeconomic status: level of education and labor force status. After controlling for the socioeconomic status, the main results remained practically unchanged. Next, the predictive margins were calculated using the final regression Model 4. The predictive margins by parental composition are illustrated in Figure 1, and the results for all variables are presented in [Appendix](#)

**Table 1.** Those whose parents were separated and who had stepparents (predictive margin = 3.64) were predicted to report lower levels of agreement with statement 1 than those without living parents (contrast = -0.27,  $p = 0.002$ ); those whose parents were together (contrast = -0.07,  $p = 0.008$ ); and those whose parents were separated but without new spouses, although this difference did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance (contrast = -0.06,  $p=0.096$ ). Those without living parents (predictive margin = 3.91) were predicted to agree more strongly with statement 1 than those whose parents were together (contrast = 0.20,  $p = 0.018$ ) and those whose parents were separated but did not have new spouses (contrast = 0.21,  $p = 0.017$ ). Instead, no significant difference was detected between the groups of ‘parents are together’ and ‘parents are not together; no stepparents’ (contrast = -0.01,  $p = 0.808$ ).

**Figure 1:** Predictive margins (with 95% CI) of Statement 1 by parental composition



Source: Pairfam wave 2 (2009–2010), own calculations

Next, the association between parental composition and statement 2 was studied (Table 4). These results are similar to those regarding statement 1. In Model 1, those whose parents were separated (with or without stepparents) were predicted to report a lower level of agreement with statement 2 than those whose parents were together, whereas no significant association was detected among those whose parents were not alive. However, after controlling for the personal characteristics (Model 2), family relations (Model 3) and socioeconomic status (Model 4) variables, the significant difference between the groups—‘parents are couple’ and ‘parents are not couple; stepparents exist’—remained, although the magnitude of the coefficient was reduced. Respectively, owing to the addition of the confounders in the model, the results show that those who had ‘no parents’ were likely to report higher levels of agreement with the statement 2 than those whose parents were together.

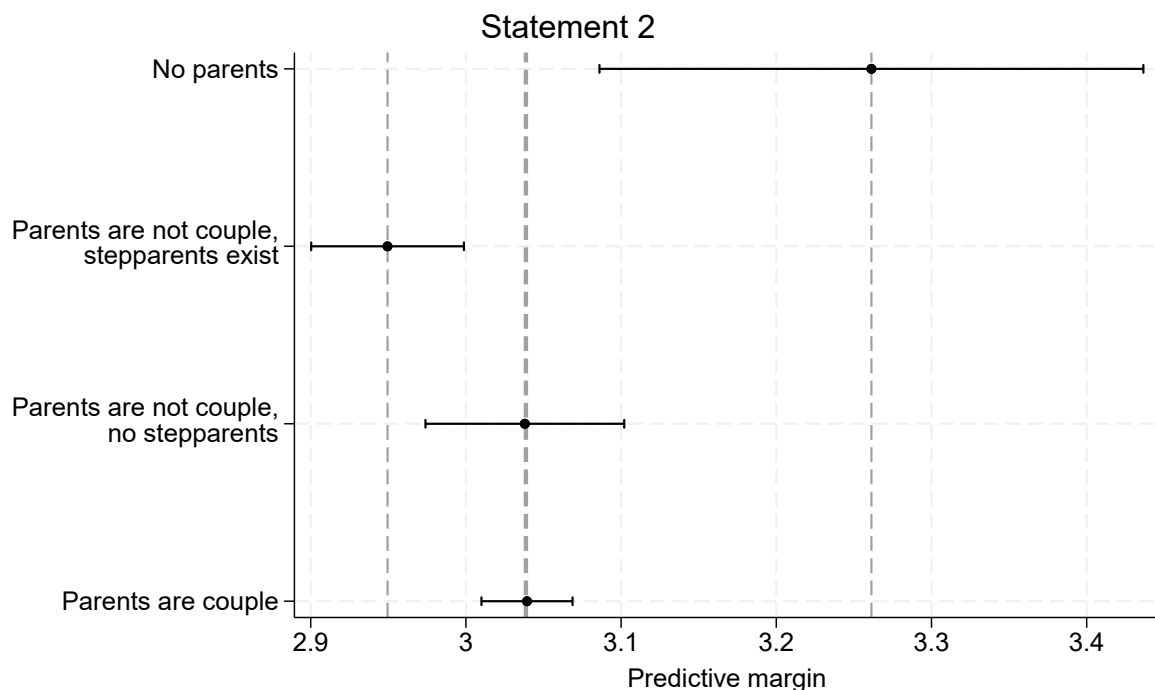
Again, we calculated the predictive margins from the final regression Model 4 (Appendix Table 1). The main results are illustrated in Figure 2, showing that those whose parents were separated and had stepparents (predictive margin = 2.95) were predicted to agree less strongly with statement 2 than those whose parents were together (contrast = -0.09,  $p = 0.002$ ); those whose parents were separated but without new spouses (contrast = -0.09,  $p = 0.032$ ); and those without living parents (contrast = -0.31,  $p = 0.001$ ). Those whose parents were not alive (predictive margin = 3.26) were predicted to agree more strongly with statement 2 than those whose parents were together (contrast = 0.22,  $p = 0.015$ ), and those whose parents were separated but without new spouses (contrast = 0.22,  $p = 0.018$ ). No significant difference was found between the groups—‘parents are together’ and ‘parents are not together; no stepparents’ (contrast = 0.00,  $p = 0.969$ ).

Table 4: Results from regression models: Statement 2

|   | Model 1  |       |       |       | Model 2  |       |       |       | Model 3  |       |       |       | Model 4  |       |       |       |
|---|----------|-------|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------|-------|
|   | coef.    | p     | lb    | ub    | coef.    | p     | lb    | ub    | coef.    | p     | lb    | ub    | coef.    | p     | lb    | ub    |
| <b>Parental composition</b>                     |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |
| Parents are couple                              | ref.     |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |
| Parents are not couple; no steps                | -0.11**  | 0.003 | -0.18 | -0.04 | 0.02     | 0.664 | -0.06 | 0.09  | 0.02     | 0.600 | -0.05 | 0.09  | 0.00     | 0.969 | -0.07 | 0.07  |
| Parents are not couple; steps exist             | -0.16*** | 0.000 | -0.22 | -0.10 | -0.08**  | 0.005 | -0.14 | -0.03 | -0.08**  | 0.008 | -0.13 | -0.02 | -0.09**  | 0.002 | -0.15 | -0.03 |
| No parents                                      | -0.02    | 0.806 | -0.21 | 0.16  | 0.26**   | 0.004 | 0.08  | 0.44  | 0.27**   | 0.003 | 0.09  | 0.45  | 0.22*    | 0.015 | 0.04  | 0.40  |
| <b>Gender (ref. = male)</b>                     |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |
| Female  |          |       |       |       | -0.26*** | 0.000 | -0.31 | -0.22 | -0.23*** | 0.000 | -0.28 | -0.19 | -0.24*** | 0.000 | -0.28 | -0.19 |
| <b>Age cohort (ref. 1991-1993)</b>              |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |
| 1981-1983                                       |          |       |       |       | -0.43*** | 0.000 | -0.49 | -0.37 | -0.35*** | 0.000 | -0.41 | -0.29 | -0.29*** | 0.000 | -0.40 | -0.19 |
| 1971-1973                                       |          |       |       |       | -0.66*** | 0.000 | -0.72 | -0.60 | -0.45*** | 0.000 | -0.53 | -0.37 | -0.35*** | 0.000 | -0.48 | -0.22 |
| <b>Ethnic background (ref. = German native)</b> |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |
| Half-German                                     |          |       |       |       | 0.07     | 0.202 | -0.04 | 0.17  | 0.06     | 0.243 | -0.04 | 0.16  | 0.06     | 0.273 | -0.04 | 0.16  |
| Ethnic-German immigrant                         |          |       |       |       | 0.46***  | 0.000 | 0.36  | 0.57  | 0.49***  | 0.000 | 0.39  | 0.60  | 0.48***  | 0.000 | 0.37  | 0.58  |
| Non-German background                           |          |       |       |       | 0.66***  | 0.000 | 0.59  | 0.74  | 0.69***  | 0.000 | 0.62  | 0.76  | 0.65***  | 0.000 | 0.57  | 0.72  |
| <b>Marital status (ref. never married)</b>      |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |
| Married/civil union                             |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | -0.11**  | 0.008 | -0.19 | -0.03 | -0.09*   | 0.022 | -0.18 | -0.01 |
| Divorced or widowed                             |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | -0.04    | 0.538 | -0.18 | 0.10  | -0.07    | 0.328 | -0.21 | 0.07  |
| <b>Biological children (ref. = No)</b>          |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |
| Has a child (ren)                               |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | -0.18*** | 0.000 | -0.26 | -0.10 | -0.22*** | 0.000 | -0.30 | -0.14 |
| <b>Siblings (ref. = No)</b>                     |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |
| Has a sibling                                   |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | 0.04     | 0.312 | -0.03 | 0.11  | 0.03     | 0.363 | -0.04 | 0.10  |
| <b>Education (ref. currently enrolled)</b>      |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |
| Low   |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | 0.26***  | 0.001 | 0.11  | 0.41  |
| Middle  |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | -0.03    | 0.683 | -0.17 | 0.11  |
| High  |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | -0.05    | 0.501 | -0.19 | 0.09  |
| <b>Labor force status (ref. employed)</b>       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |
| In education                                    |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | 0.06     | 0.294 | -0.05 | 0.18  |
| Not employed or in education                    |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       |          |       |       |       | 0.08*    | 0.029 | 0.01  | 0.16  |
| N   | 8684     |       |       |       | 8684     |       |       |       | 8684     |       |       |       | 8684     |       |       |       |

Note: CI = confidence interval, lb = lower bound, ub = upper bound, ref = reference category; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Figure 2: Predictive margins (with 95% CI) of Statement 2 by parental composition



Source: Pairfam wave 2 (2009-2010), own calculations

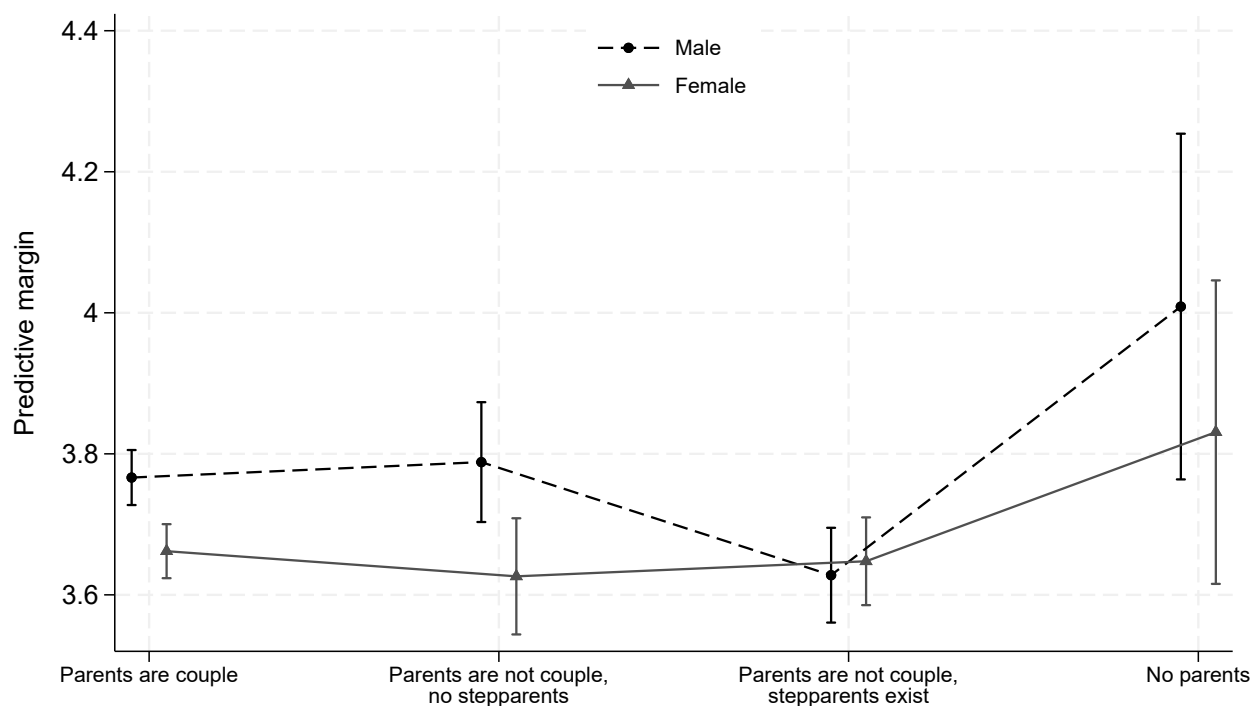
The final regression model (Model 4) in both multivariate regressions (Tables 3 and 4) showed how several other factors were associated with the perceived filial obligations. In both statements, filial



obligations were predicted to be supported more strongly by males than females, by the youngest cohort than older cohorts, by respondents with low educational attainment than those who were still enrolled, and by respondents with immigration or non-German backgrounds than German natives. Further, in the case of both statements, married respondents were less likely to agree than those who had never been married; in the case of statement 1, divorced or widowed respondents were less likely to agree. Respondents with siblings were more likely to agree with statement 1 than those without siblings. Moreover, two variables were associated with statistically significant differences only in the case of statement 2: respondents with children compared to those without children and employed compared to those who were not employed or in education were less likely to agree with statement 2.

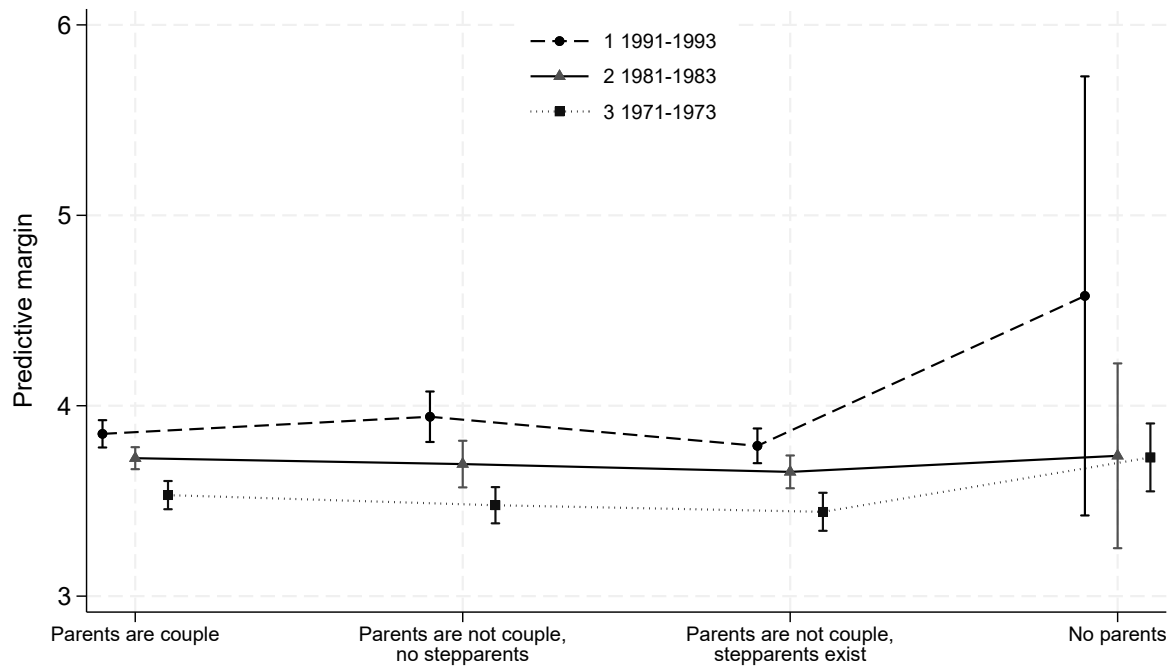
According to the main results presented above, filial obligations were agreed upon more strongly by males than by females, and by the younger cohorts compared to the older cohorts. We further explored the effects of gender and cohort separately by including interaction terms between each of them and parental composition in the final regression models. These analyses mainly confirmed the above-mentioned results, with a few exceptions. The results of the interaction models are illustrated in Figures 3–6 (statistical details are shown in [Appendix Table 2](#)). For statement 1, a significant interaction effect between gender and parental composition was found: among those who had stepparents, no significant difference was detected between females and males (Figure 3). Additionally, Figure 3 indicates that among females the differences between parental groups were not statistically significant, whereas among males the results conformed to the main results presented above. However, the results did not reveal any significant interaction effects by age cohort (Figure 4). Regarding Statement 2, no statistically significant interaction effects by gender were detected (Figure 5). In contrast, the results showed a significant interaction between age cohort and parental composition: among those without parents, the youngest cohort agreed less with the statement than did the oldest cohort (Figure 6).

Figure 3: Interaction between parental composition and respondents' gender (Statement 1)



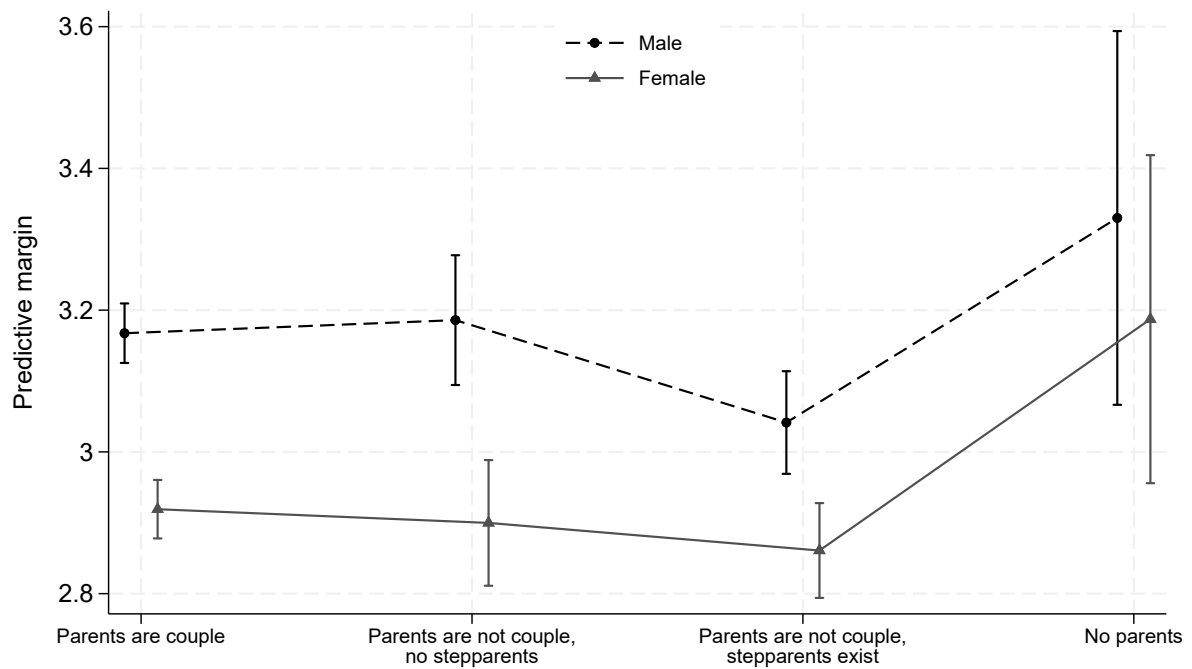
Source: Pairfam wave 2 (2009–2010), own calculations

Figure 4: Interaction between parental composition and birth cohort (Statement 1)



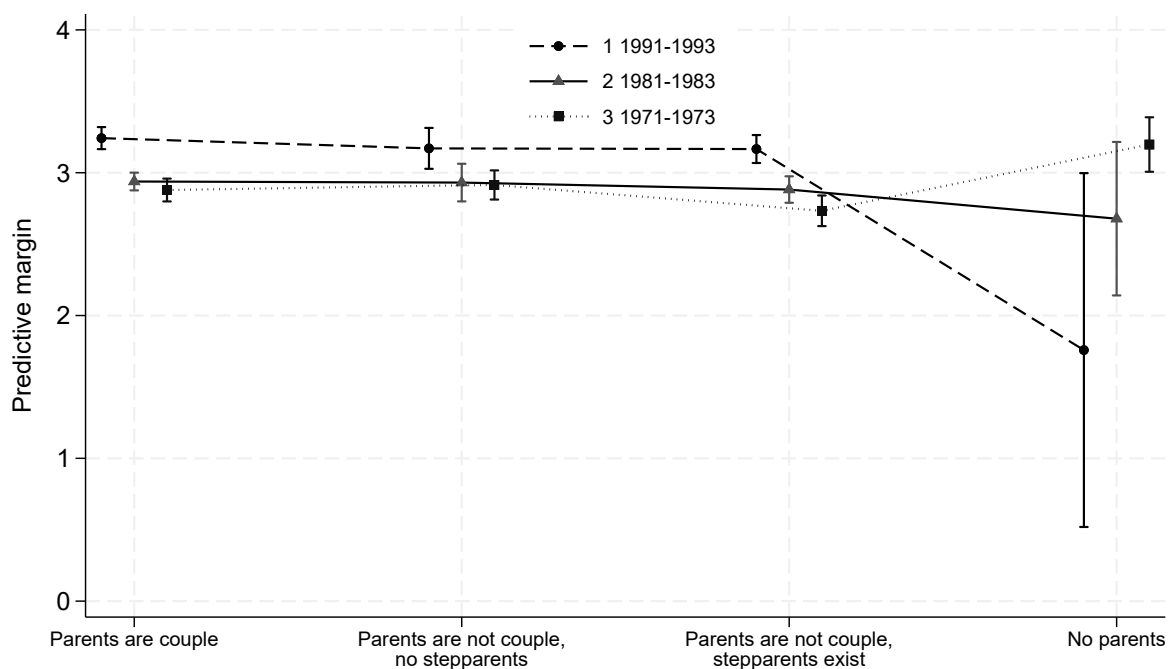
Source: Pairfam wave 2 (2009–2010), own calculations

Figure 5: Interaction between parental composition and respondents' gender (Statement 2)



Source: Pairfam wave 2 (2009–2010), own calculations

Figure 6: Interaction between parental composition and birth cohort (Statement 2)



Source: Pairfam wave 2 (2009–2010), own calculations

## 5. Discussion

We detected that individuals with stepparents were less likely than other groups to think that children should take care of their parents. This is in line with the “social norms effect”, suggesting that the norms encouraging commitments to filial obligations are weaker among adult children with stepparents compared to those with biological parents only (Hämäläinen et al., 2024; van Houdt et al., 2018). Moreover, in line with the “risk of becoming a caregiver effect”, assuming that the support for filial obligations tends to decrease when the individual’s risk of becoming a caregiver increases, we found that individuals without living parents supported filial obligations more than those with parents present. All these findings held after we controlled for variables related to respondents’ personal characteristics (e.g., ethnic background), family relations (e.g., having their own children), and socioeconomic status (e.g., level of education).

Our results align with previous vignette studies, showing more positive attitudes toward filial responsibility for biological parents than stepparents in hypothetical situations (Coleman et al., 2005; Ganong & Coleman, 2006; van Houdt et al., 2018). However, our results revealed that respondents’ real-life family structures were associated with general attitudes toward filial obligation. Moreover, in line with the “risk of becoming a caregiver effect”, we found that attitudes toward filial obligations were more negative among females than males and among older than younger respondents, that is, among those who are more likely to care for older parents (e.g., Hrdy, 2009; Hämäläinen & Tanskanen, 2021). Although in general males held more positive attitudes toward filial responsibilities regardless of the parental composition, in the case of the statement 1 (“Children should accommodate their parents if needed”) there was no significant difference between the genders among respondents with stepparents. Moreover, regarding the statement 2 (“Children should arrange work to care for sick parents”), among respondents without parents, the youngest cohort agreed less with the statement than did the oldest cohort, contrasting with the overall trend where younger respondents were more in agreement with filial obligations. This may indicate a change in attitudes across generations. However, these results should be interpreted with caution, because the number of respondents without parents was small, especially among the youngest cohort, which weakens the robustness of the findings.

Generally, individuals have had less shared time with stepparents than with biological parents, as stepparents usually join the family when the children are older (e.g. Hämäläinen et al., 2024; Pettay et al., 2023). Therefore, on average, stepchildren and stepparents have had less time to establish their relationship and to internalize norms of filial responsibility, which may lead to lower levels of perceived filial obligations (Cherlin, 1978; Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Future studies should explore whether the length of shared time between stepparents and stepchildren affects attitudes toward filial obligations in adulthood. In addition, our findings indicate that the more parental transitions adult children have experienced, the less favorable the attitudes about helping parents. Hence, studies should explore how parental transitions are associated with filial obligations. Finally, future research should investigate whether the number of parents is associated with filial obligations as the more parents are present, the higher the risk of becoming a family caregiver.

Our study highlights the important role of family composition in shaping perceived filial obligations. This emphasizes the importance of considering the diversity of family structures that influence attitudes toward filial obligations when studying public opinion and designing policies directed toward ensuring the well-being of older adults.

## Acknowledgments

The study is part of NetResilience consortium funded by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland (grant number 345183) and INVEST flagship funded by the Academy of Finland (grant number 320162). There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

## Data availability statement

The study uses data from the German Family Panel (Pairfam, v13.0; doi: <https://doi.org/10.4232/pairfam.5678.13.0.0>). The data can be accessed through GESIS ([https://search.gesis.org/research\\_data/ZA5678](https://search.gesis.org/research_data/ZA5678)).

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## Information in German

### Deutscher Titel

Forschungsnotiz: Familienstruktur und Einstellungen zu kindlichen Verpflichtungen im jungen und mittleren Erwachsenenalter

### Zusammenfassung

**Fragestellung:** Die Studie untersucht den Zusammenhang zwischen der Familienstruktur und der subjektiven normativen Verpflichtung erwachsener Kinder, sich um ältere Eltern zu kümmern.

**Hintergrund:** Trotz bemerkenswerter Veränderungen in den Familienstrukturen in den letzten Jahrzehnten (z.B. der zunehmende Anteil von Stieffamilien) haben nur wenige Studien den Zusammenhang zwischen Familienstrukturen und kindlichen Verpflichtungen zur Elternpflege erforscht. Diese Studie versucht diese Lücke zu schließen.

**Methode:** Die Studie nutzt Daten von 8,709 Personen im jungen und mittleren Erwachsenenalter, die im Rahmen des Deutschen Familienpanels (pairfam) befragt wurden. Mithilfe von linearen Regressionsmodellen wurde der Zusammenhang zwischen Familienstruktur (d.h. Befragte ohne Eltern und mit biologischen und/oder Stiefeltern) und der subjektiven normativen Verpflichtung zur Pflege der Eltern untersucht.

**Ergebnisse:** Die Zustimmung zur normativen Verpflichtung zur Elternpflege war bei Befragten mit Stiefeltern schwächer ausgeprägt als bei Befragten ohne Stiefeltern. Befragte ohne lebende leibliche Eltern berichteten hingegen höhere Zustimmungswerte. Unabhängig von der Familienstruktur zeigten sich zudem im Geschlechter- und Kohortenvergleich stärkere Zustimmungswerte bei Männern und bei Befragten aus jüngeren Kohorten.

**Schlussfolgerung:** Die Ergebnisse verdeutlichen, wie die Komplexität von Familienstrukturen zeitgenössischer Gesellschaften die wahrgenommene normative Verpflichtung zur Pflege der Eltern prägt.

**Schlagwörter:** Kindliche Verpflichtungen, Generationenbeziehungen, Stiefeltern, Stiefkind

JFR – Journal of Family Research, 2024, vol. 36, pp. 178–191.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-972>

Submitted: July 7, 2023

Accepted: June 10, 2024

Published online: June 18, 2024

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