

Extended abstract: Values as Drivers of Fertility in Norway

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Over the past decades, fertility in Western Europe has declined. Increases in educational attainment, the cost of childbearing, institutional factors (e.g., legal rights for parental leave, employment security for parents), and the availability of contraception are all factors thought to have contributed to the observed fertility declines. So far, however, the potential impact of *values*—that is, people’s perceptions of what is right and wrong, and the relative importance of different, often competing superordinate goals—on fertility has been given insufficient attention. We therefore use survey data to explore how (changes in) values – including ideas about gender roles, marriage and family, as well as the importance of religion, tradition, and self-direction—are related to fertility in Norway.

What Are Values and Why Do They Matter for Fertility?

Values can be conceptualized at both the individual and group level. At the individual level, values are part of a person’s personality; each individual has a unique hierarchy of values and a somewhat different sense of right and wrong. At the group level, values are scripts or cultural ideals *shared* by members of a group [1].

A number of different value domains would seem to be relevant for fertility. Although not traditionally considered under the rubric of “values”, *religion* guides people’s ideas about what is right and wrong and about what is important in life. For instance, Abrahamic religions advocate sexual relations and procreation within marriages; ascribe great value to family and children, and emphasize women’s familial roles [2-4]. *Family values* (including people’s ideas about marriage and the importance of having children) can influence the likelihood that people establish a stable partnership and have children. Indeed, several studies have concluded that people who espouse more traditional family values tend to have relatively higher fertility [5-7], also in the Scandinavian setting, e.g., Swedish men with more traditional family norms are less likely to be childless [7]. Fertility preferences and behaviour are closely related to people’s ideas about appropriate *gender roles* (e.g., the importance of being a mother for women, the importance of ensuring that men and women have equal opportunity on the labor market). Couples with a more traditional work division, e.g., where women work less, often have higher levels of childbearing [8, 9]. Finally, Second Demographic Transition theory posits that values associated with individualism (e.g., the importance of self-direction), materialism, and traditionalism are associated with marriage, union stability and also fertility—specifically, that increases in individualistic and materialistic values and a decrease in traditional values are related to fertility decline [10, 11].

Values might influence fertility via several different mechanisms. One mechanism is via people’s educational and work careers. For instance, on average more religious people tend to be less educated and some may choose e.g., less career oriented positions because of their conviction that other life goals are more important [12, 13]. Values might also influence union formation and stability. Values might also influence people’s “pre- and post-requisites”

for childbearing. People who are more family-oriented may have fewer pre-requisites (such as first having a stable well-paid job, owning a house) before opting to have children [14], while people who highly value autonomy might need more assurances that they will be able to pursue their own individual interests (career, hobbies) post-childbearing.

Current Study: Values and Fertility in the Norwegian Context

Like many industrialized countries, Norway has experienced significant value change over the past twenty years, most obviously with regard to religion. The majority religion in Norway continues to be Christianity, although there is also a significant Muslim population (following high levels of immigration, higher fertility and lower rates of secularisation). Both Christian and Muslim religious institutions and communities celebrate family formation and childbearing (e.g., marriage rituals, baptism) and religious authorities implicitly and explicitly encourage members to marry and have children [15]. As in many industrialized countries, however, religiousness in Norway is decreasing: whereas the majority adhered to a religion in the 1980s, by the 2010s there was a 50/50 split between people who believed in god and those who do not [16]. Although widely considered a highly progressive and egalitarian society, evidence suggests that many Norwegians continue to espouse traditional values. For instance, a survey from 2008 found that seven out of ten Norwegian women preferred the man to be the main breadwinner in the family [17]. At the same time that normative pressure to marry and have children has decreased, the pressure to complete tertiary education and pursue a career is likely to have increased [14, 18-20].

Given its relatively high standard of living and permissive social norms, we argue that Norway is an ideal context for studying how values are related to fertility. Effective contraception is highly assessible and knowledge about fertility is high, so that fertility is generally planned as opposed to accidental. Universal social security reduces the pressure to marry or have children in order to ensure one's own material well-being. Norwegians can therefore behave according to their particular family preferences, including whether to have children at all, and if so, when, with whom, and how many, and under what conditions. Currently, Norwegians initiate childbearing later than people in almost every other country: in 2018, women were on average 29 and men were 31.5 when they had their first child. People's values, religious affiliation and social convictions tend to remain rather stable after early adulthood (~25 years) [21-23]. Hence, childbearing in Norway generally takes place *after* most individuals have established their religious (non-)beliefs and other values.

Method

We use descriptive and regression analyses to analyse the relationships between (changing) values and fertility based on the Norwegian data from the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), European Values Study (EVS), and European Social Survey (ESS). The analysis covers the time period 1982 to 2016. We used all available waves of the selected surveys, which include one round of GGS (2007/08), three rounds of EVS (1982, 1990, and 2008), and eight rounds of ESS (every second year starting from 2002 up to 2016). After deleting missing data, we have a final

sample of 13.1 thousand women (5.6 in GGS, 1.5 in EVS, and 6.0 in ESS) and almost 13.0 thousand of men (4.7 in GGS, 1.6 in EVS, and 6.6 in ESS). We divide the sample into 10-year birth cohorts. Not all value measures were available in all surveys. We therefore select items that maximize coverage across waves and data sets. Dependent variables are children ever born and parenthood (yes/no).

Selected First Results

Value Change Across Cohorts

The share of religiously unaffiliated has increased across birth cohorts. Whereas just about 5% of women and men born in 1930s were unaffiliated, more than 20% of men and 17% of women among those born in 1980s were unaffiliated. There has also been an overall decrease in the share of men and women with traditional family values. For instance, members of the youngest cohort are twice as likely to agree that marriage is outdated and thrice as likely to think that living together before marriage is all right than members of the oldest generation. Simultaneously, members of the youngest cohorts agree less often that marriage should never be ended or that children need both parents to grow up happy, and they also have more egalitarian ideas about appropriate gender roles. However, there has also been a slight shift among the youngest cohort toward more traditional views with regard to children and marriage (i.e., about a woman's need to have a child in order to be fulfilled, that marriage should never be ended).

Lower Fertility Among the Religiously Unaffiliated

Being unaffiliated with any religion significantly decreases the average number of children among both women and men by approximately 17% for women and 15% for men. The results hold after including socioeconomic characteristics and partnership status.

Marriage Values Differentially Related to Men and Women's Fertility

Men who believe that marriage should never be ended are more likely to become parents relative to their peers who disagree (odds ratio: 1.34), whereas women who believe that marriage should never be ended are *less* likely to become parents than their peers who disagree (odds ratio: 0.76).

Gender Roles Especially Related to Women's Fertility

Ideas about gender roles are significantly related to the chance of becoming a parent, especially for women. For instance, agreeing that women need a child to be fulfilled increases the chance of becoming a parent (odds ratios: 1.88 for women, 1.36 for men). Interestingly, men who endorse traditional gender roles with regard to the work place are *more* likely to be childless. Potentially, men who endorse traditional gender roles might have difficulties finding a female partner.

Values Matter Most for the Youngest Cohorts

Significant interactions between birth cohort and values suggest that values generally matter more for the fertility of the youngest cohorts: being unaffiliated, as well as the importance of tradition and self-direction were each most strongly related to the fertility of the youngest cohorts in the sample.

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