Are family values multidimensional? Evidence from the last three decades in Europe

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Extended abstract

Motivation

Although family values and their changes lie at the heart of family research, their operationalisation has drawn rather scant attention of family demographers. The existing but scattered evidence suggests family values consist of several dimensions changing at various pace. For instance, in post-socialist countries of the 1990s attitudes towards parenthood tended to change more slowly than attitudes towards the institution of the family (Liefbroer and Fokkema 2008); German-speaking societies persistently stick to traditional gender-role attitudes towards parenthood despite their high acceptance of cohabitation and divorce.

Yet, most analyses have ignored the multidimensionality of family values: they are usually defined either very narrowly, as answers to single questions (Treas et al. 2014), or very broadly, as a combination of answers to a battery of more- and less-closely linked questions (Sobotka 2008). The former approach lacks conclusive synthesis, whereas the latter is imprecise and probably gives distorted results. This might contribute to the weak empirical fit of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) concept, the to-go framework in family demography.

This paper aims to test the following hypothesis: family values comprise separate (inter-correlated but clearly distinguishable) dimensions, and so reducing them to one single dimension leads to biased predictions of family change. It answers two research questions:

Q1: How coherent are family values?

Q2: How biased is the prediction of family changes when using one single family-value index as compared to separate indices for each dimension?

Data and Methods

Family values and attitudes are derived from four waves of the European Value Study, conducted in the years 1990, 1999, 2008 and 2017, and covering between 29 and 47 countries, depending on the wave. So far, I have included 24 countries in the analysis present in all four EVS waves. They represent five different regions in Europe: Northern (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden), Western (Austria, France, Germany, The Netherlands and Great Britain) Southern (Italy and Spain; data for Portugal will be available the near future as well), Central-Eastern (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) and Eastern (Belarus, Bulgaria, Romania and Russia).

Single questions as well as batteries of questions refer to different aspects of family life, e.g. gender relations within the family, factors necessary for a successful marriage, parenting styles or things that children should be taught by parents. I pick those known as relevant for the SDT (e.g. Surkyn and Lesthaeghe 2004). To address Q1, I perform exploratory factor analysis which generates factor-analysis based indices of family values for each respondent. These indices can be then aggregated at the country or region level.

In order to answer Q2, I apply OLS country-level regression models and compare the performance of two kinds of family-value indices as predictors of family changes: one-dimensional (as commonly used in previous literature) and multi-dimensional (as computed within Q1) ones. The family-change indicators come from Eurostat for years corresponding to each EVS wave. I am also planning to include some from the OECD and Human Fertility Database. Following (Sobotka 2008), I have constructed an index of family changes related to the SDT, which includes six demographic indicators for each of the four analysed years (1990, 1999, 2008 and 2017): age at first birth, share of non-marital births, teenage fertility rate, total first marriage rate, age at first marriage and divorce rate.

First results

Coherence of family values

First analyses suggest that family values are not coherent. The correlations between questions within as well as across question batteries (e.g. on parenthood or marriage) are usually weak. Nine questions on marriage and gender roles form three distinct dimensions of family values, thus creating three good-quality indices (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation at the level of 0.055): 1) gender roles related to work, 2) economic role of marriage and 3) traditional role of marriage. Figure 1 shows the median values of these three indices in five regions in Europe. The gender dimension shows a clear trend, very consistent with the SDT narrative: with time, all the regions are becoming more and more gender equal, with Nordic countries at the forefront of the changes and

Eastern Europe lagging behind. However, family values related to marriage present quite a different story. The importance of the traditional role of marriage largely exhibits the expected regional gradient but its development over time was neither consistent across regions nor unidirectional within regions. Most spectacular changes occurred between 2008 and 2017 when it substantially increased in Eastern, Southern as well as Northern Europe. By contrast, the value placed on the traditional aspects of marriage has not varied much across regions and has remained very stable except in Northern and Western Europe where it has slightly decreased.

Predicting family changes

The OLS model with the previously used one-dimensional value index composed of eight variables (Sobotka 2008) as a predictor of family changes yields R^2 of 0.36. An alternative model, which uses the three indices produced by the factor analysis as predictors of that same outcome variable, gives R^2 of 0.56. Thus, accounting for different dimensions of family values seems to substantially improve the fit between the SDT-related values and family changes.

Figure 1 Median values of three dimensions of family values in five regions in Europe, 1990-2017.
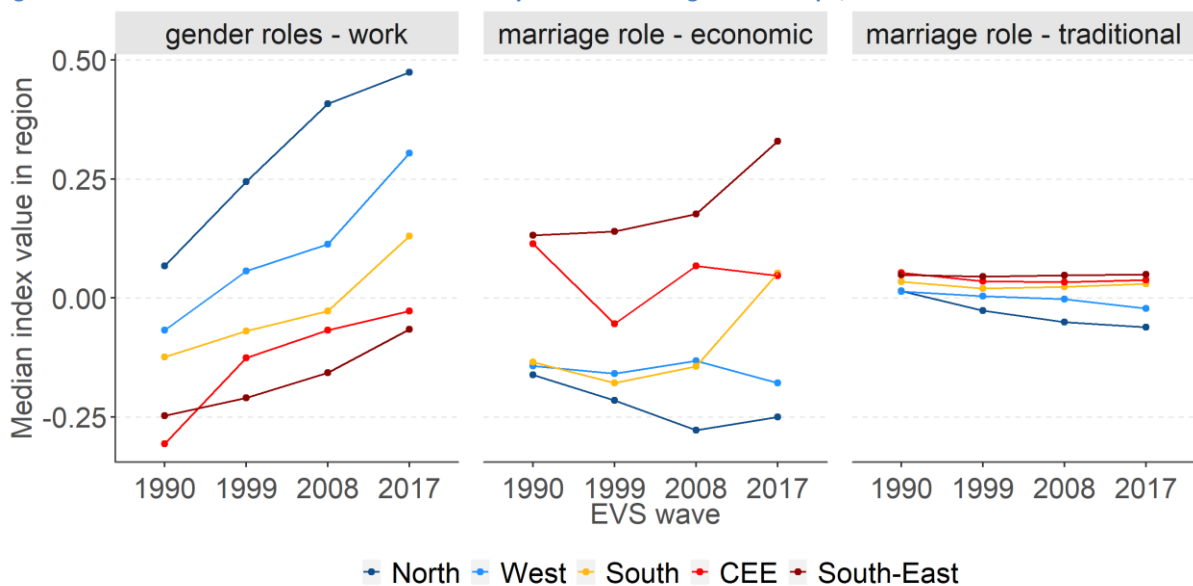
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