Two is best? The persistence of a two-child family ideal in Europe

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Introduction & Motivation

“There is a remarkably pervasive desire (and supporting norms) for a family size of two children”
(Hagewen and Morgan’s 2005: 510) on the United States

Is it the case in Europe as well?

Why study ideal family size?

• The ‘Low Fertility Trap’ hypothesis (Lutz, Skirbekk and Testa 2006)
  – Testa & Grilli (2006): importance of regional context; link between cohort fertility in parental gen. and family size ideals of younger women

• Low reproductive ideals in Chinese cities (Basten & Gu 2013)

• Goldstein, Lutz and Testa (2003): Austria & Germany first countries showing falls in ideal family size to low levels (1.6-1.8)
  – new trend that may spread to more countries?
Aims

Systematic analysis of trends in ideal family size in Europe

• How persistent and universal is the two child family ideal?

• Emerging preference for small family size (0 or 1 child) in countries with long history of sub-replacement fertility?
Data

European surveys in 1979-2012

- 170 surveys, 37 countries
- Women aged 15-49
- Focus on ideal family size: mean and the share of respondents with a 2-child ideal

Surveys

- World Value Survey (WVS), European Values Study (EVS), International Social Survey (ISSP), and Eurobarometer (EB) surveys; few additional datasets (Swiss SHP, Austrian GGS, RHS/DHS, French surveys on family)
Data

Question in most datasets

“What do you think is the ideal size of a family - how many children, if any?”

Survey selection

• surveys with <18% missing and non-numerical responses
• N > 100, countries with population above 1 million
• Eastern & western Germany studied separately
Trends in ideal family size, 1979-2012
Mean ideal family size in Europe, 1979-2012

- Mean ideal family size (MIFS)
- 75% (upper quartile)
- Mean
- 25% (Lower quartile)
- Minimum

Countries included: Ireland, Italy, East Germany, Romania, Finland, Albania, Czech Rep., and Ireland.
Share of respondents with a two-child ideal family size, 1979-2012
Share of women with a two-child ideal in European regions
The (tentative) link between low completed fertility and low ideal family size

Completed fertility of women born in 1975 and mean ideal family size at age 18-49 in most recent survey; 10 countries with the CTFR below 1.6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>CTFR cohort 1975</th>
<th>Survey year</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1.37-1.41</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>1.42-45</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany _East</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany_West</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>1.55-58</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>1.57-58</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: CTFR observed until age 37, fertility after that age projected

Sources: Prioux and Barbieri 2012: 537, Table A7; Myrskylä et al. 2013; European Demographic Data Sheet 2014 (computed by K. Zeman)
Additional results

- Broad stabilization in ideal family size at lower levels? Yes, to some degree
- No clear link between early cohort fertility decline < 1.8 and ideal family size in 2011
- Gradual rise in the share of women with an ideal of 1 and a declining share of women with an ideal of 3+ children
- One-child ideal spreading faster in Southern, Eastern and South-eastern Europe
Focus on Austria and Germany
Focus on Austria and Germany

Western Germany: MIFS at 2.10 in 1979 (EB), 1990 (EVS), and 2011 (EB)
Current evidence of sub-replacement ideals based on societal ideal family size?

*No evidence*

- Remarkably stable mean around 2
- Dominant ideal of having two children, 60-70% in 2011
- Share with 3+ ideal not decreasing
- Some past fluctuations possibly due to high non-response, non-numeric responses and small sample in EB 2001, 2006
Conclusions & discussion
Summary: remarkable stability (1)

A two-child ideal has become nearly universal among women in Europe

- Societal mean ideal family size remains closely clustered around 2.2 in most countries.
- A majority of women consider two children as ideal.
- This share is stable around 60% in all regions.
- Outside Europe, a two-child ideal becoming dominant in many countries, including Brazil, India, Morocco, Bangladesh (not shown here).
Summary: remarkable stability (2)

No evidence of decline of mean ideal family size considerably below replacement levels

But the share with ideals of 0 or 1 child is gradually increasing
  – will it become more prominent?
Why not an ideal of one?

Parenthood perceived by most people as a unique, valuable and desired experience (Rotkirch et al, 2011)

• But can't this desire be satisfied by having one child?
• Lowest impact on parents leisure & employment, “cheapest way to become a parent” (Jefferies 2001)

What sustains an ideal of having two children?

• Having one child of each sex (a distinct experience?)
• Giving a companion to the first child
• Continuing norms, prejudices and misperceptions against having one child (Blake 1981, Mancilas 2006)
• Two children as an “insurance strategy”? 
Acknowledgements

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The paper is available as a VID Working Paper 2014/03 www.oeaw.ac.at/vid/download/WP2014_03.pdf or at www.eurrep.org

A Research Brief covering the topic is available at www.eurrep.org