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Why have people in eastern Turkey maintained their high fertility behaviour? Examining the channels of social interaction

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

Although cross-national comparisons of fertility change have more frequently focused on the global level, over time regional or spatial comparisons of fertility variations within countries have taken on increasing importance, in part due to the availability of more and better provincial data. When we explore geographic variations in fertility within a country, the cultural characteristics and social structures of communities may have powerful explanatory value for the causes of different transitional fertility patterns at the micro-geographic level.

Early in their lives, individuals accumulate beliefs, values, skills, social customs, and other cultural information by imitating and learning from members of older generations. As they too grow older and more experienced, some of them revise these values and viewpoints in light of their own circumstances. Others, however, maintain unchanged many cultural characteristics, obligations, and norms that began as adaptations to earlier, often-superseded circumstances.

2. Conceptual framework

Many studies of both developed and developing countries have demonstrated that fertility variations cannot be adequately explained on the basis of development alone. With economic development and ideational-cultural change, people begin to abandon the beliefs and values that encourage large families. After being exposed to new circumstances, they modify their reproductive preferences and behaviours. In this process, the diffusion of information and ideas promoting family planning and the evaluation of their meaning and social influence play a crucial role in reducing the demand for children and promoting behaviours toward limiting fertility. These processes, in fact, are far from simple, especially when the research area is a micro-geographic region. When we focus on the differentials in fertility levels within countries having heterogeneous populations, the national and, of course, local channels of social interaction may help to explain these variations in reproductive behaviours of different communities.

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Much social interaction occurs in the context of personal networks which include the exchange of information and ideas and their evaluation. Although the determinants of personal networks are not well understood, they are shaped by proximity, both geographic (spatial proximity) and social (ethnicity, language, education). Moreover, some of the channels of social interaction that connect communities are shaped by culture (language and ethnicity), as in eastern Turkey. In this respect, social influence may function as a critical factor in maintaining high fertility. The level of socioeconomic development and the uneven distribution of national channels of social interaction and development resources play a significant role in fertility variations within a country. Thus, the distribution of channels of social interaction (spatial and social proximity) at both the local and national levels is more likely than development levels alone to explain regional differentials in fertility within a country.

3. The scope and purpose of this study

As in most other developing countries, between the early 1960s and mid-1980s Turkey saw rapid fertility declines. More specifically, Turkey's total fertility rate (TFR) fell about 60% in this period, from 6.28 children per woman to just 2.29. Furthermore, by 2007, with its TFR of 2.17 children per woman, Turkey had nearly reached the population replacement level. Sharp fertility differences between the country's various regions, however, are conspicuous, with low fertility in the west and high fertility in the east. While in post- and late transitional provinces the TFRs were 1.9 and 2.5 children per woman, the mid-, pre- or early transitional provinces in Turkey's east more than doubled those figures, with TFRs of 3.8 to 5.9 children per woman in 2000.

It should be stressed that while the country's western and central provinces have been moving to low fertility patterns in a rather standard way, those in the eastern region have been displaying characteristics of the pre- or early stages of fertility transition. The dominance of traditional-patriarchal norms and the use of local languages in the undeveloped eastern region with a large Kurdish (and partially Arab) population have erected linguistic and cultural barriers. Thus, in this region, the local channels of social interaction have been shaped by the local norms and culture, which encourage large families. More specifically, as a result of socio-cultural norms, people living in eastern Turkey generally do not place much importance upon education, and most adult men consider educating girls to be unnecessary or even counter-productive. These viewpoints play an especially active role in restricting female education. Therefore, women's educational attainment is very low and their illiteracy rate in particular has remained very high due to traditional norms and the poor schooling infrastructure in these provinces.

As stated by Bongaarts and Watkins (1996: 669), 'further research is needed to pinpoint the precise role and nature of social interaction in different settings and to distinguish its effects from those of development', and we know that before the transition onset, as in Turkey's

eastern provinces, social interaction can inhibit substantial fertility declines in such a relatively homogeneous population. In light of this, the aim of the present study is to examine the social interaction processes at both the geographic and social levels which have led to persistent high fertility in eastern Turkey.

4. Data and method

This study is mainly based on 2000 Census data issued by the Turkish Statistical Institute. In order to present regional fertility differences at a provincial level, the country's 81 provinces are grouped into four categories according to their TFRs in 2000 and assigned to stages of fertility transition. Towards that end, the study also presents maps showing the provinces' transitional patterns. Then the focus turns to the high-fertility region of eastern Turkey, some of whose provinces show mid-transitional fertility patterns, while others show pre- or early transitional patterns. The study is also based on the 1998, 2003, and 2008 Turkish Demographic and Health Surveys, and in places, Turkey's Family Structure Survey. Moreover, the study explores the relationships between fertility and ethnicity (language-education), the human and socioeconomic development indices, gender empowerment measures, and the gross per capita income of the eastern provinces through correlations at the provincial level in order to explain the local channels of social interaction in eastern Turkey. Towards this end, it presents figures and tables graphically demonstrating the relationship between high fertility and the region's socio-cultural environment.

5. Results and discussion

The imbalanced diffusion of socioeconomic developmental initiatives to spread modernisation in Turkey has resulted in substantial regional inequalities, to the detriment of its eastern provinces. A large proportion of Turkey's second-largest ethnic group, its Kurdish population, inhabits the eastern provinces. The geographical concentration of this population, its underdevelopment, the prevalent usage of local language, and the dominance of patriarchal norms that subordinate women in families has led to the region's distinct socio-cultural environment. Thus, these non-Turkish speaking women are restricted to the influences of their male-dominated social environment and norms, which encourage having multiple children. In this closed-community structure, much of the social networks are kin-based, and most people shape their views of reproductive behaviour from their close relatives and neighbours on the basis of everyday conversations. Thereby, the diffusion theory and kin influence hypothesis seem well suited to explain the wide differentials in fertility between Turkey's regions. This study shows that social interaction processes are key for accounting for spatial differentials across communities within a country. In pre- or early transitional provinces in particular, social influence may inhibit substantial fertility declines, at least for a time. Furthermore, it can thus be concluded that

uneven development and deep socio-cultural differentials within a country can affect the extent and distribution of channels of social interaction between communities.

Keywords: *Fertility, social interaction, ethnicity, socio-cultural environment, Turkey*

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