Attitudes About Childlessness:
Cross National Comparisons and Methodological Observations

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Abstract

Sustained, below-replacement fertility in many European societies has raised concerns about population decline and about values that may now favor very low fertility, or even childlessness, over the longer term. Recent research has highlighted the variations in ideal numbers of children across European societies and possible implications for fertility delays and permanent childlessness (Testa, 2006). In addition, scholars have noted the potential role of attitudes about childbearing in influencing the future behavior of young adult cohorts (Goldstein, Lutz, & Testa, 2003). Within this context, the current paper has three major aims: 1) to review the available evidence on attitudes about childlessness in Europe (and comparisons with the U.S.); 2) to assess the content and utility of different measures of attitudes that have been used in various cross-national survey projects; and 3) to identify the micro- and macro-level factors related to greater support of (or preference for) childlessness. We review existing research based on Eurobarometer, European Social Surveys (ISSP), Family and Fertility Surveys, and World Values Surveys. We discuss the relative merits of different kinds of attitudinal questions, including direct survey items as well as indirect vignette methods that have been used in smaller survey projects. Our analyses of micro- and macro-level correlates of attitudes utilize data from the World Values Surveys, focusing on questions about childbearing and childlessness. These multi-level models examine individual-level correlates of attitudes (including gender, age, education, urban residence, and employment) as well as country-level economic, demographic, and social variables. Our aim is to highlight and explore the subjective components -- attitudes and values – that both shape and reflect contemporary social trends in Europe and North America.

The vast literature on fertility and values in Europe has tended to focus on general issues of secularization and individualism, while demographers have specifically focused on measuring and predicting fertility behaviours. Within the mix of existing studies, some have emphasized values, whereas others have paid closer attention to larger economic, structural, labour force, or institutional factors that might promote or suppress childbearing. In general, economic instability and limited institutional or governmental supports for working mothers have been linked with greater fertility delays, and a resulting higher proportion of childless men and women. The connection between childlessness and marriage patterns is more complicated as fertility and marriage have been decoupled in many European societies, with more than half of babies being born outside of formal marriage in many countries, particularly the Scandinavian countries of Northern Europe.

Within this literature, childlessness has been discussed in terms of estimating the prevalence of childlessness (e.g., Hakim), predicting future fertility among currently childless women, and examining ideal numbers of children (e.g., Testa, 2006). Recent studies have also noted the significance of changing social norms about fertility more generally (e.g., Goldstein, Lutz, and Testa, 2003). Research in the United States has found more accepting attitudes about childlessness among women (compared to men) and those with higher levels of education, among other characteristics (Koropeckyj-Cox and Pendell, 2007a, 2007b), but less is known about attitudes about childlessness in Europe.

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preference for) childlessness. We review existing research based on Eurobarometer, European Social Surveys (ISSP), Family and Fertility Surveys, and World Values Surveys. We discuss the relative merits of different kinds of attitudinal questions, including direct survey items as well as indirect, hypothetical vignette methods we have used in smaller survey projects (Koropeckyj-Cox and Copur, 2009). Our analyses of micro- and macro-level correlates of attitudes utilize data from the World Values Surveys, focusing on questions about childbearing and childlessness. These multi-level models examine individual-level correlates of attitudes (including gender, age, education, urban residence, and employment) as well as country-level economic, demographic, and social variables. Our aim is to highlight and explore the subjective components -- attitudes and values – that both shape and reflect contemporary social trends in Europe and the U.S.

The current research builds on the on-going research activities of the three co-authors. Koropeckyj-Cox has used regression analyses with national data for the United States to explore correlates of attitudes about childlessness. Koropeckyj-Cox and Copur have been engaged in a cross-cultural comparison of original data collected among college students in the United States and Turkey regarding attitudes about childlessness as well as perceptions of childless couples and parents. Copur has also used World Value Survey data for analyses of attitudes about gender and family issues. Ceobanu and Koropeckyj-Cox have been analyzing attitudes about replacement migration using multi-level analyses of data from a 2006 Eurobarameter survey of 27 countries, and Ceobanu has been conducting extensive analyses of attitudes regarding immigration across Europe. We bring together our combined and varied expertise in preparing this comprehensive review of attitudes about childlessness, measures of attitudes in various surveys and data collection methods, and correlates of supportive attitudes toward childlessness across Europe and North America. Although the current draft does not include regression results

yet, we have downloaded subsets of the data and run some preliminary analyses. Given our expertise and on-going collaborative relationship, we expect to have the substantive results from the multi-level analyses completed and available for review by mid- to late February, and more refined analyses completed before the summer, well in advance of the European Population Conference.

<u>Data and Measures</u>

The individual-level data used in this study are from the World Values Surveys from around 2000 (actual years of the surveys vary by country). Data from the following countries are included in preliminary analyses: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany (West and East), Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, United States, and Turkey. These countries differ in terms of fertility levels and patterns, marriage patterns, and a variety of economic, social, and demographic characteristics. The individual-level data on attitudes about childlessness are used to construct the dependent variables and the micro-level predictors. Independent of the individual-level data, we have assembled a set of contextual-level measures, drawing on the Eurostat database and other published sources, to reflect the demographic and economic circumstances, as well as social benefits provided by the state, for each country included in the study.

The dependent variables in these analyses are based on individual responses to the following items: 1) A woman needs a child to be fulfilled; 2) A man needs a child to be fulfilled; and 3) How important are children for a successful marriage. We examine these dependent variables as dichotomous indicators of children not being necessary for a woman's fulfullment; disagreeing

or strongly disagreeing that a man needs a child to be fulfilled; and indicating that children are very important for a successful marriage

The country-based proportions for the three dependent variables are graphed in Figures 1, 2, and 3, and reveal substantial variation among countries and specific questionnaire items. The countries with the highest proportions of people reporting that children are not necessary for a woman's fulfilment include Belgium, Great Britain, Ireland, Canada, the United States, Finland, and the Netherlands. The lowest proportions are found among countries in Eastern and Southern Europe, including Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Greece, and Bulgaria, although Denmark also appears at the lower end of this list. We find similar patterns with regard to whether children are necessary for men's fulfilment; variations between these questions will be explored with regard to their connection more generally to measures of gender ideology in each country. Interestingly, there is less correlation between attitudes about how necessary childbearing may be for individual fulfilment compared to its importance for a successful marriage, as shown in Figure 3. We will explore these differences in individual compared to couple considerations for having children.

In exploring the potential predictors of attitudes about childlessness, we examine several socio-demographic and labour force status measures. The individual socio-demographic variables include the following: sex, age (measured in years), marital or partner status, and having no children (coded 1, having one or more coded 0). We will also explore the extent to which WVS data are available at the individual level in comparable form regarding urban or rural residence, level of educational attainment, and labour force status.

At the macro-level, country-specific measures for the year 2000 serve as independent variables in our multi-level analyses. These contextual variables reflect cross-country differences

in economic circumstances (unemployment rate and GDP per capita), demographic characteristics that may be related to attitudes about fertility and childlessness (e.g., percent of population aged 65 years or older, population growth rate, population density, sex ratio, and fertility rate), and social benefits granted by the state. We will also explore country-level measures of gender ideology, using mean country levels on items in the WVS as well as other potential measures.

Analytical Models

     To assess the relations of the individual and contextual characteristics with the dependent variables on attitudes about childlessness, the analysis is modelled as a two-level structure, with individuals nested within countries. Using multilevel logit modelling (Snijders and Bosker 1999; Guo and Zhao 2000; Raudenbush and Bryk 2002), we will specify several models. The first model enters the individual-level predictors, while the subsequent four models enter several clusters of macro-level factors in addition to the micro-level variables. In the final model, all micro- and macro-level predicting variables are entered together in the analysis, with all of the country-level measures being grand-mean centred.[1]

     At the individual-level of analysis the mathematical equation is:

$$p_{ij} = \Pr(Y_{ij} = 1), \tag{1}$$

$$\log[p_{ij}/(1-p_{ij})] = \beta_{0j} + \sum_{q=1}^{8} \beta_{qj} * X_{qij} + r_{ij}, \tag{2}$$

where Y_{ij} is the answer of a respondent i ($i = 1, 2,\ldots, n_j$) in the jth ($j = 1, 2,\ldots,27$) country on the outcome variable public views of replacement migration, X_{qij} ($q = 1, 2,\ldots, 7$) is an individual

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[1] The procedure of grand-mean centering eases the interpretation of the coefficients. See, for example, Raudenbush and Bryk (2002:34-5) and Hox (2002:54-7).

variable q for case i in unit j, β_{0j} is a level-1 intercept, β_{qj} is a level-1 vector of slopes, and r_{ij} is a level-1 error term.

The level-2 equation is expressed as:

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \sum_{s=1}^{9} \gamma_{0s} * W_{0sj} + u_{0j}, \tag{3}$$

where β_{0j} is the intercept estimated in equation (2), W_{0sj} ($s = 1,\ldots, 9$) is a contextual variable, γ_{00} is a level-2 intercept, γ_{0s} is a vector of slopes for the contextual variables, and u_{0j} is a level-2 error term.

Results and Discussion

Our descriptive examination of attitudes about childlessness show the wide variability in attitudes across European societies. The two items on fulfilment for men and women will be analyzed as a combined indicator of the significance of parenthood, while divergences between the two items will be assessed in light of potential gender differences in views of childlessness. We would expect that childlessness may be perceived as more problematic for women compared to men, especially in societies with more traditional gender ideologies. The WVS will allow us to explore the relations between attitudes about childlessness and more general attitudes about gender and mothers' employment. The separate question on the significance of children within marriage provides a somewhat different perspective – moving from individualistic to more traditional or relational considerations. Finally, we will discuss findings from our cross-cultural study of college students' attitudes in the United States and Turkey, including the value of asking about childlessness in a variety of direct and indirect ways and asking about both prescriptive (e.g., expectations about childbearing) and proscriptive norms (e.g., admonitions about negative consequences) with regard to childlessness.

Figure 1. Proportions of Respondents Who Report that a Women Does Not Necessarily Have to Have Children to be Fulfilled, World Values Surveys c. 2001
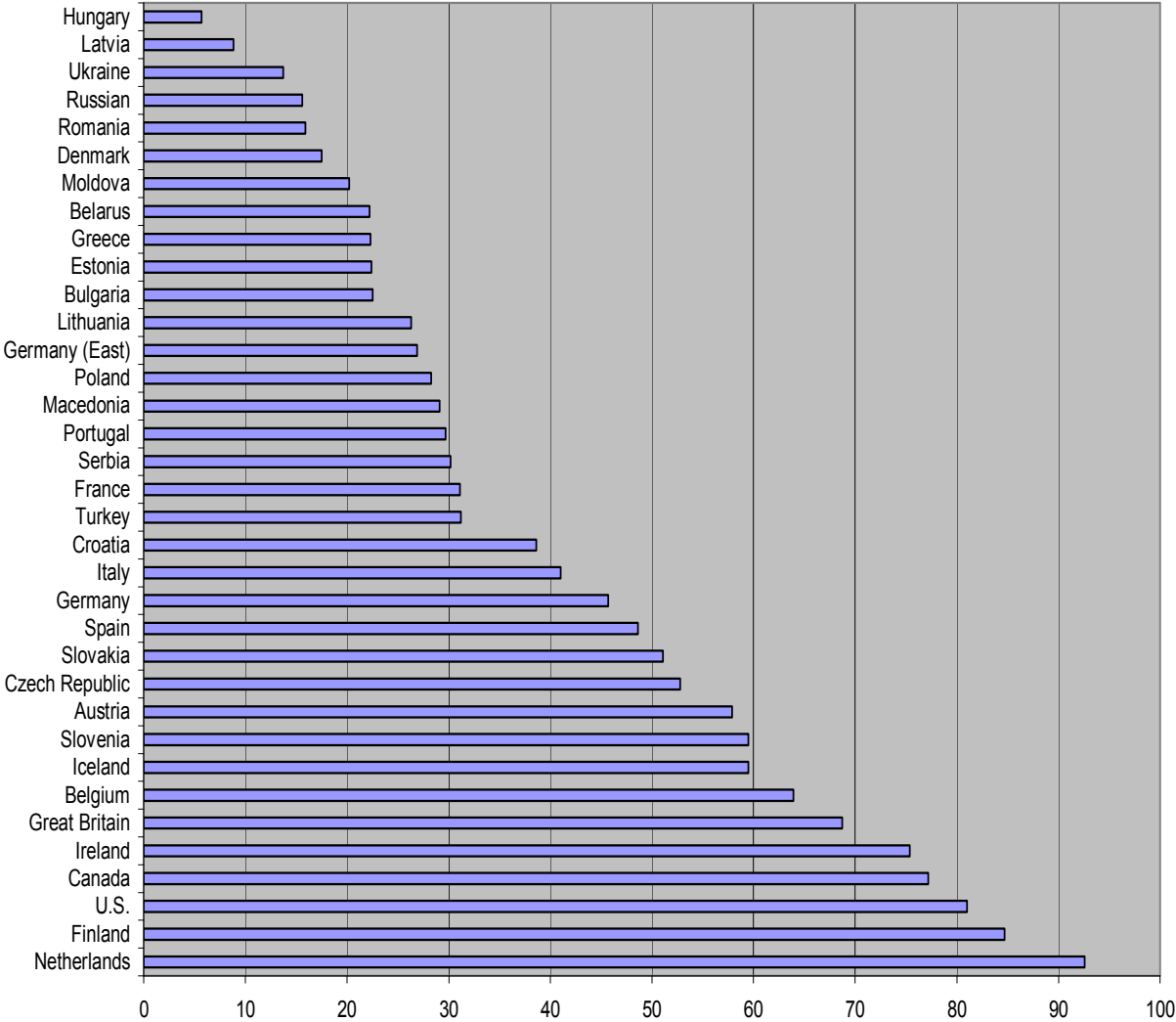
Figure 2. Proportions of Respondents Who Disagree or Disagree Strongly That a Man Needs to Have a Child to be Fulfilled, World Values Surveys c. 2001
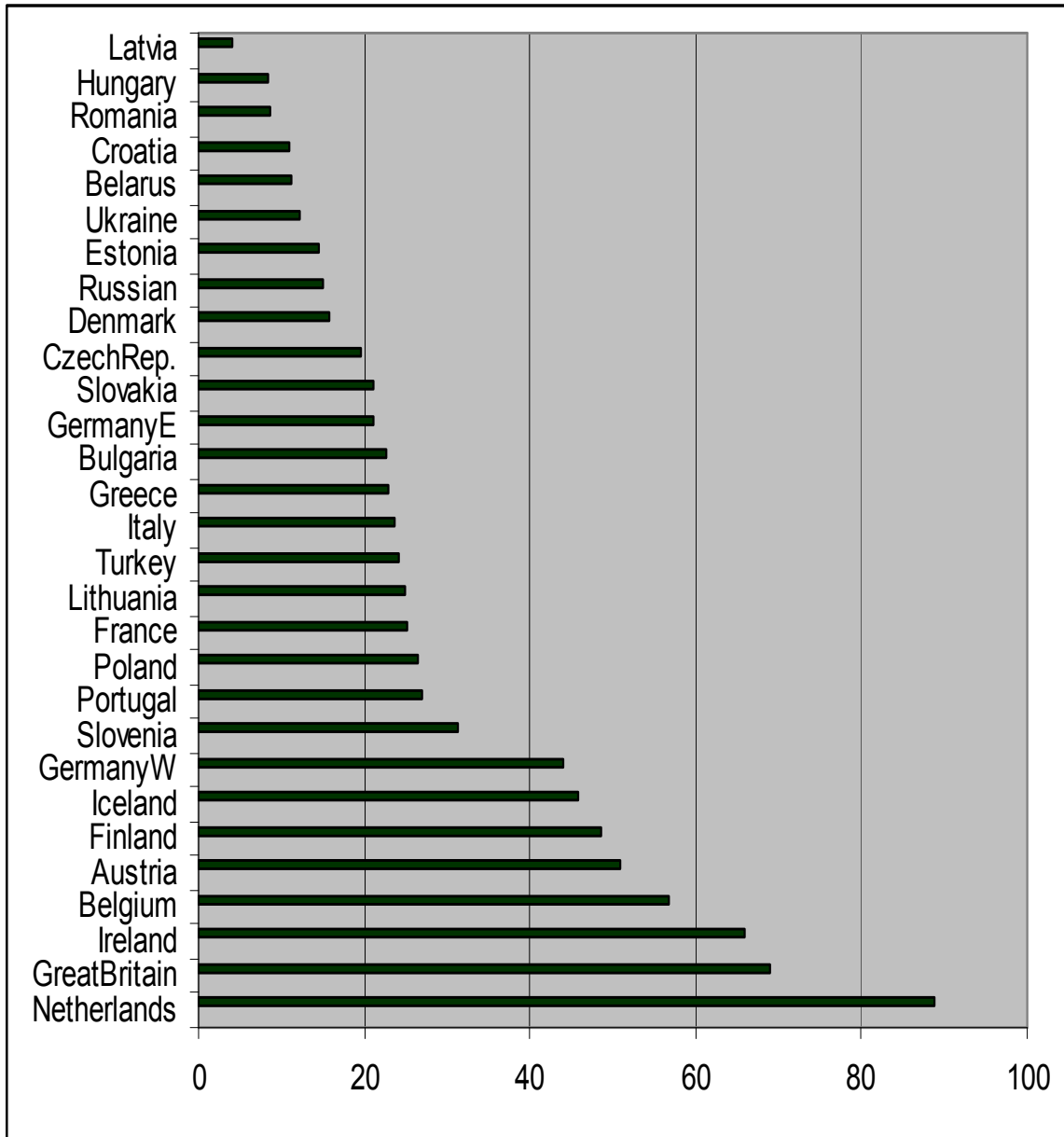
Figure 3. Proportions of Respondents Who Report That Children are Very Important for a Successful Marriage, World Values Surveys c. 2001