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Fertility pattern and living arrangements in Germany – Results from the German Microcensus 2008

Extended Abstract

Data basis

The data basis for the presentation is formed by the Microcensus in Germany from 2008, with approx. 80 thousand cases. Women were asked in this survey for the first time as to the number of children born. In place of estimates, for the first time in a long time Germany has secure data on average numbers of children, on the parity distribution of live births and in particular on the childlessness of birth years. This provides a dataset which facilitates differentiated research into generative conduct.

Problems and goals of the article

1. The stable, low birth level

With total fertility rates which from a point of view of Germany as a whole fluctuate around values from 1.3 to 1.4, Germany is among those countries with a very low fertility rate in an international comparison. This situation is also a result of the very high level of childlessness, at least in Western Germany. Whilst it can be observed in the new Federal *Länder* that the birth level is on the rise again, the low-fertility situation in the former Federal territory has remained stable.

2. Changing living arrangements

The fall in the birth rate came at the same time as a change in living arrangements. Germany has become a plural society in which living arrangements have become diverged. What is more, there is no longer a standard biography with regard to family development. In particular the once-typical female biography of school – training – starting work – marriage – children – leaving work is no longer considered to be the only path, even in such a wealthy conservative-corporatist state as Germany. The fundamental model of marriage with children has been expanded to include a broader range of living arrangements including singles, non-marital partnerships, time-limited communities, lone parents, patchwork families or living-apart-together. A model of living arrangements is used which takes account of attitudes towards marriage, of the availability of a partner and of the number of children or of childlessness. The result is that it is possible to distinguish between twelve different living arrangements.

3. Different fertility patterns in Western and Eastern Germany

The fertility patterns in the former GDR (early birth of children, low level of childlessness, virtually complete marriage of the generations) were manifestly different in comparison to the Western German patterns. It was therefore necessary to ask whether the differences have persisted or if there has been a convergence. It is revealed that there are still different family-formation patterns, which however lead to very similar final numbers of children in the birth years.

The article portrays the specific links between living arrangements and final numbers of children of various birth years in a comparison between Western and Eastern Germany. The results are supplemented by differential, in particular socio-structural views. The level of education, couple-specific income models, socio-economic status and regional differences are considered.

Theoretical background

A seemingly enduring low birth level has emerged in Germany as a result of the second fall in the birth rate (referred to by van de Kaa as: Europe's Second Demographic Transition), which is one of the precursors to long-term demographic ageing. The low birth level is accompanied by an ever-later start to the family-development phase, the decoupling of marriage and the birth of children, a high level of childlessness in an international comparison and different patterns of family development in the former Federal territory and the new Federal *Länder*.

The causes of this situation are multifarious. One main cause can be considered to lie in the fact that, as a result of a general change in values the self-evidence of marriage and parenthood has been replaced by an individualistic model of partnership, parenthood, marriage and family. Individualisation has considerably increased people's potential for self-realisation, also with regard to the course and pattern of family development, and they are also faced by a whole series of problems in this regard. This includes a family policy which has only just begun to promote the reconciliation of family and work, the resulting obligation for women to choose between family and work, a model of gender roles in which the role of the man has retained its traditional orientation, a devaluation of traditional models with regard to parenthood, high demands as to the parental roles and fears of not being able to meet them, a worsening of the economic situation with the birth of children and a combination of biographical events around the time of family formation (the "rush-hour" of life), in particular among the highly qualified.

The demographic problems of the family however include not only the low birth level, but also the change in the living arrangements and family forms with the fall in the significance of living arrangements based on marriage, the increase in the number of one-parent families, of non-marital partnerships and of living-apart-together, the increasing childlessness, a high divorce rate, ever-later family formation, the development of second or third families, the late moving out of children from their parents' home, as well as living arrangements spanning different households, in particular vertically in relationships between generations, but also horizontally in further family relationships.

Families are dynamic, adaptable social structures which in terms of their forms and functions become integrated into the respective societal systems. Families therefore take on a large number of manifestations. Germany and a large number of other countries have been in the middle of a further

process of such change in living arrangements and family forms since the beginning of Europe's Second Demographic Transition, and this is frequently characterised with the terms individualisation and pluralisation, as well as deinstitutionalisation. This means that the institution only has a weakened impact in providing an orientation for conduct. Such a situation is also to be understood as a precondition for the pluralisation of living arrangements. The consequence is not a new diversity of living arrangements, but a changed distribution. The population continues to live in living arrangements and family forms which have been acknowledged for a considerable time. There has merely been a re-distribution in favour of non-marital and childless living arrangements. Individuals have therefore become freer in the selection of their biographies, which in turn forms the basis for contradictory options being selected and leading to the tendencies described.

Selected empirical results

West-East differences in the fall in the birth rate

A considerable reduction took place in the average numbers of children in both regions of Germany, from the women's birth years between 1933 to 1938 and 1969 to 1973. A fall from 2.04 to 1.37 (new *Länder*: 2.01 to 1.41) was recorded in the former Federal territory.

The similarities with the average numbers of children are however based on highly-differing fertility patterns in Germany's two regions which have formed in the past as a result of the different conditions of family formation. The parity distributions in the birth years 1933 – 1938 were still very similar. Childlessness was low; two-child families were predominant, and virtually one-third of all women had three or more children. It is however found that childlessness in the West and the share of women with one child in the East already showed higher values which become the key differentiation criteria among the later birth years.

The fall in the average numbers of children was initiated in both regions by the fall in shares of third and fourth children. Four-child families form the exception today in the birth years 1969 – 1973, at 3.3 and 2.1 %, respectively. The shares of families with three children have also fallen considerably, to 10.5 (West) and 7.5 % (East). By contrast, different trends have emerged with childlessness and with one-child families. Childlessness first rose slowly in the West, then accelerated and now reaches a value of 27.9 % in the birth years 1969 – 1973 (35 to 39 years old in 2008) (Fig. 1). It is possible that this may be placed into perspective by late births, but no fundamental change in the situation can be anticipated. Childlessness initially remained constant in Eastern Germany. Only 7.9 % of the birth years 1959 to 1963 will remain childless. After that, an increase will also set in with the younger cohorts. The value of 16.3 % in the women's birth years 1969 to 1973 is however still far below the value of Western German comparison years. In contradistinction to this, a considerable increase can be observed among women with only one child, from 25.9 % (birth years: 1933 to 1938) to 38.0 % (birth years 1969 – 1972). Since this birth year was only 35 to 39 years old at the time of the questionnaire, changes in the parity distribution may still occur as a result of late births. The development of a fundamentally new fertility situation can however not be anticipated.

One therefore finds two diverging fertility patterns in Western and Eastern Germany (Fig. 1), that is a high level of childlessness in the West and the dominance of the one-child family in the East. The two

patterns of generative conduct lead to the same result: a low birth level. It is furthermore worthy of note at this point that the numbers of children in the West and the East in birth years 1964 to 1973 do not differ. This means that the Eastern German birth years who experienced a considerable section of their child-bearing age during the birth crisis in the new Federal *Länder* after 1990 have compensated for this through later births.

Living arrangements and numbers of children

The average numbers of children and the parity distribution ascertained so far are now distinguished between in the additional distinction by living arrangements, a distinction being made between married women, women in non-marital partnerships and living alone, and this being further differentiated by civil status. Only women of the birth years 1964 – 1968 (40 to 44 years old) are included in the analysis.

The connection between parenthood and marriage has been retained in Germany, but is much stronger in Western Germany than in Eastern Germany. Married women in the West have an average of 1.82 children, whilst in the East it is 1.69. The similar final numbers of children are reached on the whole by the higher numbers of children of non-marital living arrangements in the East and the lower ones in the West. At the time of the 2008 Microcensus questionnaire, women living alone or in a non-marital partnership in the West each had 0.91 children on average. In the East it is 1.28 (living alone) and 1.27 (non-marital living arrangements). The differentiating impact of civil status on the number of children over a lifespan is revealed if those living alone are viewed in terms of civil status. Those who were living alone at the time of the Microcensus survey but had already been married once (married, separated, divorced, widowed) are less likely to be childless and have had more children on average than those who live alone and are single. This group has the fewest children, at an average of 0.3 (West) and 0.58 children (East).

Some particularities are also shown in the parity distribution. Larger families with three and more children are not rare among married people in Western Germany, at 21.6 %. With unmarried people, the reverse picture is however shown. With those living alone and women in a non-marital partnership, the share of childlessness is 47.8 and 47.2 %, respectively. In Eastern Germany, by contrast, extremely low values of childlessness are found among the married (5.2 %). Childlessness is higher among the unmarried than among the married, but much lower than in the Western German comparison groups (living alone: 25.9 %, non-married partnerships: 13.7 %). Extreme values can be found among those who are single and live alone. Childlessness in this group is 78.0 % (West) and 54.0 % (East).

Finally, the data show a stronger decoupling of marriage and parenthood for the new Federal *Länder*, which is also evident in the shares of roughly 60 % among non-marital live births. Demographers have so far had a hard time explaining this situation. It is unclear whether it is related to a historic fertility pattern or is a knock-on effect of GDR ideas about parenthood. Possible explanations are a lack of affinity with the changed social institutions (the accession of the GDR meant a change in all social institutions in sociological terms) and the greater economic independence of women in combination with better childcare facilities, and hence greater independence in opting for the birth of a child. There

is an urgent need for further research. The Federal Institute for Population Research will be devoting itself to this subject in future in its research on family-related models.

Numbers of children by level of education and living arrangements

The interaction between the level of education and living arrangements potentiates the social-structural differentiations in the patterns of the parity distributions and the average numbers of children (Tab. 3). This portrays the results for Germany. Two extremes serve to illustrate the situation: Married women with a low level of education have had an average of 2.17 children. Only 7.4 % of them are childless; 40.4 % of them have three and more children. The opposite extreme is formed by women with a high level of education living on their own. The average number of children in this group is 0.68, and childlessness reaches a value of 56.8 %.

This situation comes about as a result of mutually-amplifying impacts of the connections between being married and having children and the level of education and having children. In general terms, it is married women who have the most children. This also applies to those with a high level of education, who reached the third-largest number of children, averaging 1.69 children, after married women with a medium level of education (1.75) and those with a low level of education (2.17). Childlessness is also very low in this group, at 12.5 %, in comparison to other women with a high level of education. In addition to the positive effect, a negative effect is also shown with regard to being unmarried and education. Childlessness increases very significantly as the level of education increases, particularly among the unmarried. It is approx. 40 % among women with a medium level of education, and increases among those with a high level of education to 46.9 and 56.8 %, respectively. By contrast, 33.9 % of women living on their own with a low level of education are childless (non-marital partnership: 25.8 %).

Discussion of the results

The first important finding of this article is that different fertility patterns are still dominant in Western and Eastern Germany. A low level of childlessness is combined in the East with a high share of one-child families. The West, by contrast, is typified by a high level of childlessness and somewhat larger shares of families with three and more children.

This difference also applies to the younger birth years, who experienced their family development phase in the period after 1990. The birth year 1973, which turned 17 in 1990, should be named as an example. There are nonetheless unambiguous differences in the conduct pattern. It can be presumed that the parents' orientations towards generative conduct were adopted, thus retaining the importance of having children; the implementation of this orientation however took place in the majority of cases with the birth of only one child.

The West-East differences are also interesting in terms of the changes taking place to the institution of marriage and the processes of institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation. This is ultimately related to deinstitutionalisation processes of differing types. The situation in the East can be referred to as deinstitutionalised familism. There is a decoupling of marriage and having children and an increase in the significance of non-marital living arrangements for generative conduct. Familism expresses itself in a low level of childlessness, and deinstitutionalisation in the fall in the significance of marriage

as a basis for living together with children. The designation 'familialised institutionalisation' is fitting for the West, albeit deinstitutionalisation can be observed here too. There is a close link between marriage and having children. Familialism is shown in the continued existence of the conceptual link expressed as: 'if children, then marriage'. At the same time, one can observe a lack of affinity to marriage which is shown in the increased selection of non-marital and then frequently childless living arrangements (deinstitutionalisation).

The second major finding relates to the differentiating influence of the level of education on the average number of children and the parity distribution. The higher the level of education, the lower is the number of children, and hence the higher the level of childlessness. This link is more pronounced in the West than in the East. Effects arise in the combination between level of education and living arrangements which amplify one another. The highest average numbers of children are found among married people with a low level of education. Married people with a low level of education and unmarried people (in particular single people) with a high level of education have extremely divergent fertility patterns.