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Cross-national comparisons: a missing link in the relationship
between policies and fertility? A comparative study of fertility
decision making of Polish nationals in Poland and UK

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Context

Concerns about low fertility and population aging have triggered considerable policy and academic interests in whether and how family friendly policies can increase fertility. To understand the determinants of low fertility at the macro level demographers make reference to the importance of structural barriers to childbearing (see, for example, Billingsley, 2010; Morgan et al., 2010; Kotowska et. al. 2008; Sobotka, 2011) and the existence of ‘latent demand for family polices’ (Chesnais, 1998; 2000, p. 133). They suggest that direct and indirect fertility-friendly policies can create ‘broad supportive environments’ for raising children which, it is believed, could help individuals realise their childbearing intentions and in effect reverse low fertility trends (see, for example, Harknett et. al. 2014, Luci-Greulich et al. 2013; Sobotka 2011, Kotowska et al. 2008). Yet, the evidence on the impact of policies on fertility is mixed possibly because different fertility indicators and different policy variables are used in the research and also because many contextual factors unaccounted for in the models may play a role in the associations between policies and fertility.

Many governments in very low-fertility countries have expanded or introduced new family-friendly policies hoping to reverse low fertility and population aging. However, evidence from a number of Central and Eastern European countries suggests that more generous family policies and more supportive environments to raise children do not lead to increase in fertility. For example, in Poland very low fertility rates (TFR at around 1.3 between 2000-2014) have persisted regardless of the fact that numerous policies were introduced to help parents raise children (e.g. extended paid maternity/parental and paternity leaves, better childcare services and increase in financial transfers to families with children).

In examining demographic processes, such as fertility and migration, scholars often assume that individuals approach the decision making process rationally and respond to external incentives in making decisions. However, migration and fertility decisions tend to be researched separately and modelled differently. When studying fertility decisions, demographers tend to assume that individuals take into consideration incentives and factors (e.g. living standards, wages, employment, housing conditions, childcare, parental leaves etc.) solely within their country of residence. Migration scholars have offered alternative conceptualisations of decision making processes where individuals assess, compare and respond to incentives across-borders (Hagen-Zanker 2008). Notwithstanding the importance of cross-national comparisons in the migration research, there has been virtually no research to date on how cross-national comparisons might impact fertility decision making processes, which is especially surprising in the context of an increasingly mobile European population. Our aim in this article is to bridge these two ways of conceptualising demographic decision making and to ask whether and how considering cross-national comparisons may be pertinent for the way demographers conceptualise fertility decision making processes.

Aims

This paper investigates whether and how cross-national comparisons are important for individuals’ childbearing decisions and could add an explanatory power to research examining associations between fertility and family-friendly policies. The aims and research questions of this study are:

- Whether and how Polish migrants and non-migrants use cross-national comparisons of family-friendly policies and living standards to explain and rationalise their childbearing decisions?

- Whether and how are childbearing and migration decisions of Polish nationals linked?

If cross-national comparisons are important for individuals' childbearing decisions and if migration and childbearing decisions are linked in people's accounts, cross-national comparisons may be an important variable missing in demographic models attempting to explain fertility in modern societies. Such findings could help to better understand the relationship between policies and fertility in contemporary Europe.

Study design

By turning our attention to Polish nationals living in Poland and in the UK we have a uniquely informative comparative design where Polish TFR has remained at a very low level in spite of numerous family friendly policies, and the country experienced unprecedented levels of emigration in the last decade. Moreover, its socialist past exacerbated desires to catch up with Western lifestyles, whereas the fall of socialism and, later, the accession to the EU opened up new opportunities for Polish citizens to pursue western standards of living whether in Poland or through migration. The numbers of Polish migrants living in the UK increased substantially since 2004 when the British government abolished visa requirements for Polish nationals to work. The UK has been the main destination country for Polish migrants, many of them young and childless. Births to Polish-born women have increased from 0.5% to 3.2% of all UK births between 2005 and 2014 and the TFR of Polish migrants in the UK (2.1) is higher than TFR of UK born women (1.8) and higher than TFR in Poland (1.3).

Methods

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews (n=42) with mothers and fathers were conducted in Krakow and London in 2010/2011. The interviews provided confidential space to generate evidence on personal and often intimate issues such as childbearing choices. They allowed the interviewer to ask broad questions related to our research objectives, at the same time we avoided asking leading or closed questions so the content of the interviews was directed by informants and we were able to be open to respondents' perspectives. Moreover, the interviewer could probe and ask follow-up questions to clarify and elaborate on informants' responses; topics that informants found relevant were followed in depth whether they were in the question guide or not. This methodology enabled us to obtain rich data to gain fuller and deeper understanding of childbearing decision making processes. The collection, transcription and analysis of material was conducted in Polish, translation was conducted in the final stage of writing up to minimise any distortions in analysis related to the loss of nuance, concepts and meanings in translation. NVivo 8 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2008) was used to index parts of the text into themes and facilitated retrieving codes in an efficient way. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the content of the interviews by focusing on identification and reporting of patterns and themes to interpret the material. Encoding data comprised of organisation of information to develop themes, coding and themes were initially recognised in the explicit meanings of the raw material, the analytic process progressed from description to interpretation with an attempt to interpret their meanings and implications (Patton, 2002).

Findings

The data illustrate that respondents in Krakow and London spontaneously compared the levels of public support for parents, living standards and policy contexts favourable for raising children across different European nations in their childbearing decision making rationales. Expressed expectations regarding necessary policy support for parents and living standards in the country of residence were often framed in comparison to Western European countries.

Overall, western standard of living was often reported as ‘normal and necessary’ to have the desired number of children and conditions in Poland were evaluated in relation to such ‘normalcy’. Since the financial burden of having children in Poland was reported as heavy, while policy support for raising children, standard of living, housing conditions and wages were often reported to be much lower compared to Western European nations, it was often reported that it was difficult to have the desired number of children in Poland:

...if they [government] helped families more, I suspect there would be more children... in France the state gives all parents good benefits at the beginning of school year to buy books and all necessities... (Bartłomiej, 30 years old, Krakow)

...The money is still not enough [to have a second child]... if Poles earned three times as much we could afford to go somewhere on holidays, nothing special. Simply, wages are four times lower than anywhere abroad... (Maria, 32, Krakow)

Overall, our respondents’ narratives illustrate a profound understanding of disparities in living standards, economic and policy environments between different nations within the EU, partly due to widespread migration and unrestricted travel, partly due to extended media coverage of the differences in living standards and institutional settings in various European nations.

Through migration respondents in London already reported that they invested in their children and provided them with a certain type of Western capital which would facilitate their children’s future success. Their children spoke or would speak English, had opportunities to attend various classes, lived in a multicultural society and would gain British qualifications one day. This was reported as an important source of investment in their offspring relative to what they would be able to provide for them in Poland; which reduces the need for parental investment in offspring.

Moreover as respondents compared policy contexts and standard of living favourable for raising children across European countries, migrating to a setting considered as better for having children was considered as an option to realise childbearing intentions, particularly when migration was seen as relatively easy, acceptable and widespread. Respondents in our sample who seem to be more family oriented and more motivated to achieve their intended number of children seem also to be more likely to consider migration to countries which they consider as more ‘family-friendly’ within Europe even if such migration has a negative effect on their career prospects.

Conclusion

Presuming that individuals take into considerations solely conditions and incentives within their country of residence, scholars have found inconsistent and contradictory evidence on the impact of family friendly policy/incentives on fertility. The results in our study reveal that individuals frequently draw on cross-national comparisons of family-friendly policy packages, living standards and more broadly family-friendly contexts in rationalising their childbearing choices. These kind of cross-national comparisons could help to explain the weak, inconsistent and contradictory evidence of the importance of policy on fertility in previous studies.

Through cross-national comparisons individuals in our study construe what are necessary conditions for having children, and especially when referring to standard of living and/or to policy support for families such construal makes reference to (perceived) Western European standards, and thus fixes more affluent Western European countries as the hegemonically positive norm for many informants. Such conceptualisation of what is necessary to raise children based on Western standards may lead to relative deprivation in countries which still lag behind more affluent EU Member States and it may contribute to limiting the number of children individuals desire in order to invest more per child to provide offspring with certain

form of Western capital. Alternatively, cross-national comparisons motivated some individuals in our study to migrate to other countries which were believed to offer better conditions for raising children. When individuals compare family-friendly policy contexts across EU countries, particularly individuals who are family-oriented, thus who would be more likely to respond to family-friendly policies, may be also more willing to migrate to countries which they consider as better for raising offspring within the EU. The joint nature of migration and childbearing decisions, combined with the ageing of the population and its age structure, could have further implications for the relationship between policy and fertility in low-fertility countries such as Poland characterised by extensive migration of young individuals in childbearing ages.

Although our empirical findings focus on Polish nationals, we argue that this research has broader implications for researching and interpreting findings on the association between policies, context and low fertility. The social, cultural, economic and political exchanges between countries in an integrated Europe provide a plethora of opportunities for cross-border comparisons and for reconstituting the concepts of adequate living conditions and policy contexts for having children, which are not fixed. Moreover, as the spread of Western European standards has been reported to become ever present in shaping desired standard of living globally (e.g. Ger et al. 1996; Howes 1996; Wilk 1995), cross-national comparisons may be relevant for the way individuals approach their childbearing decisions in wider contexts. Taken together, our findings can be read primarily as an effort to stimulate discussion, debate, and further research into how childbearing decision making processes in contemporary societies are conceptualized, analyzed, and understood by demographers. In particular, we think that considering cross-national comparisons in examining macro-level predictors of childbearing decisions is important as otherwise demographers can misconstrue the link between family-friendly policies and fertility behaviour in different contexts which, in turn, could lead to erroneous interpretations of current findings and invalid policy recommendations.

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