A theoretical and empirical assessment of the role of values and preferences in family behaviours in Europe

Raffaele Guetto Ruud Luijkx Stefani Scherer

Abstract

We want to understand to what extent “culture” may have important consequences in terms of family behaviours in Europe, especially as far as the rise in female labour market participation and the concomitant drop in fertility rates of the last decades are concerned. We address these research questions using data from three waves of the European Values Study (1990, 2000 and 2008). To cope with the issue of measurement invariance across time and space of our latent constructs we implement structural equation modeling, while we rely on instrumental variable regressions and migration histories for a causal assessment of our main results.

We show that most of the selected countries experienced a decrease in religiosity and traditional attitudes toward the gender roles and the latter, together with post-materialist values, are significant predictors of many demographic outcomes at the individual level. These findings corroborate those theories suggesting that ideational shifts might play an important role to understand recent demographic patterns such as low fertility and marital instability. Nevertheless, we show substantial cross-country heterogeneity in values and micro-level correlations between values and behaviours, with more “traditional” countries being the ones with lower female labour market participation and fertility rates and where values matter the most at the micro-level.

We discuss this macro-micro paradox in the light of national differences in family policies as well as family ties and cultures. While “modern” institutional settings can help women to reconcile work and family duties, the strength of family ties might be a clue to understand both the higher effectiveness of values in terms of behavioural consequences and the low fertility rates of “traditional” countries, as a result of the slow diffusion of new family forms, e.g. cohabitations and extra-marital births, and the very late age at leaving home.