Motivation and Realization of Childbearing: Analysis of Panel Data in Germany

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[Background and aim of this research]

The people's consciousness and social system changed drastically with the reunification of Germany in 1990. Citizens of former East Germany procrastinated or gave up having children at an early stage of their life course due to the worsening economic situation, and the number of births decreased significantly in the East. Even in the former West Germany, the birthrate decreased due to the social advancement and individuality of women. The government has switched from a traditional attitude of not intervening in family life, to a policy that supports a balance between family and work life. Now, after 10 years of this balance support, the fertility rate recorded 1.59 in 2016, recovering to the level as the EU average for the year. Surveys of youth have shown that more people want to have children than before. On the other hand, the number of people who do not (or cannot) have children has increased, and it has been shown that it is difficult to form a family.

This study looks at the determinants of the willingness to form families of people who have experienced such social changes and how individual values for children affect the defining factors of such actualization. We focus on those who had the unprecedented experience of selecting a profession and partner from adolescence during a period of reunification of a divided country and how this influenced the subsequent family formation.

[Methods]

In this study, out of “Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (pairfam)” we use Wave 1 (n= 5886) and Wave 8 (n= 2112). For Wave 8, only those who participated in previous surveys were included in the analysis. For the purpose of research to clarify the willingness and actualization of family formation, descriptive statistics and path analysis are used to analyze the determinants of willingness to have children; in the determinant analysis of actualization of whether or not to have children, descriptive statistics and binomial logistic regression analysis were performed.

[Results]

We analyzed the desire to have children in Cohort and the East-West differences. The analysis results showed that life satisfaction increased if they had a partner, their monthly income was higher, and the more years of education they had. In several Cohorts, this satisfaction increased their desire to have children. The value of children increased when they had an immigrant background or if they had many siblings. The number of years in education had an
opposite effect. Valuing children increased the desire to have children but feeling children to be a burden decreased the desire to have children. The feeling that children are burdens increased with the number of years in education, but having an immigrant background, having a partner, and having many siblings, etc., decreased the sense of burden. However, these tendencies fit the former Eastern bloc countries, so for Cohorts (C1&C3) in the East, the determinants of the value of children have not yet been made clear.

Regarding the tendency to actually have children in Wave 8, naturally those whose ideal number of children was large had an increased tendency to have children, if the ideal number increased, the tendency to have children increased even more. There is a strong tendency for working women not to have children, but there is an increased long-term tendency for women with high levels of education to have children. There is a tendency to not have children, if the sense of burden of having children increases, but it is hard to identify whether this is because the sense of burden decreases because they have a child, or they had a child because the sense of burden decreased. Furthermore, only in Cohort 2 did life satisfaction influence the realization of a desire to have children.

The value of children did not affect whether they actually have children, but in Wave 1, the ideal number of children increased, so it was clear that this indirectly affected the realization and directly related to the sense of burden of having children. In one portion, life satisfaction influenced the desire to have children, and in Cohort 2, it also had a hand in the realization of that desire. Life satisfaction is defined by SES variables that did not affect the sense of value of children. It appears that a rise in SES is associated with achieving the desire for children.

This analysis indicated that in the West attributes of Cohorts define a sense of well-being and the value of children and that these factors also influence the desire to have children and the realization of this desire. However, in the East, attributes, sense of well-being and the value children define the desire to have children and the realization of that desire, but in multiple Cohorts, attributes are not determinants of sense of well-being or sense of value of children, and it became clear that even though some time has passed since unification, there is still a large difference in consciousness between the East and the West.

This study showed that feeling that children are a burden lowers the desire to have children and lowers the tendency to actually have children, and that regional differences are strongly related to the determinants of the desire to have children. The results suggest that setting in place a social environment that lessens the burden of having children and establishing family policies suited to the characteristics of each region can reduce the barriers to having children. Then, future research challenges are to analyze an older age group or compare these results with those of another former socialist country and shed light on the determinants of the value of children in the former Eastern.