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Value of children and fertility: Results from a cross-cultural comparative survey in eighteen areas in Asia, Africa, Europe and America[☆]

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ABSTRACT

For explaining cross-cultural differences in fertility behavior, this paper conjoins three complementary approaches: the ‘demand’-based economic theory of fertility (ETF), a revised version of the ‘supply’-based ‘value-of-children’ (VOC)-approach as a special theory of the general social theory of social production functions and the framing theory of variable rationality. A comprehensive model is specified that encompasses the variable efficiency of having children for the optimization of physical well-being and of social esteem of (potential) parents; it also accounts for the variable rationality of fertility decisions. The model is tested with a data set that comprises information on VOC and fertility of women within the social settings of 18 areas (Peoples Republic of China, North and South India, Indonesia, Palestine, Israel, Turkey, Ghana, South Africa, East and West Germany, the Czech Republic, France, Russia, Poland, Estonia, the United States and Jamaica). Latent class analysis is used to establish a measurement model for the costs and benefits of children and to analyze area differences by a two-level multinomial-model. Two-level Cox-regressions are used to estimate the effects of perceived costs and benefits of children, individual resources and context opportunities, with births of different parity as dependents. This simultaneous test in a cross-cultural context goes beyond the current state of fertility research and provides evidence about the cross-cultural validity of the model, the systematic effects of VOC on fertility and the changing rationality of fertility decisions during demographic transition and socio-economic change.

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1. Problem

Recent assessments of the value of children approach (VOC) affirm that it complements usefully the economic theories of fertility behavior (ETF) in the tradition of [Becker \(1960\)](#) but criticize that its theoretical arguments are in some respects more advanced than the measurements and data available for testing them ([Nauck, in press](#)). From a social science perspective, then, ETF in this tradition must be considered incomplete. The fertility models it yields are exclusively driven by *price theory* ([Braun, 2000](#); [Lesthaghe & Surkyn, 1988](#); [Robinson, 1997](#)), in as much as they only refer to the individually variable but generally increasing costs of children, specifically in affluent societies. Accordingly, the strength of these models lies in the explanation of fertility decline in modern societies, whereas the variable conditions of the *supply* side of children are widely neglected. They are treated as model-exogenous constant preferences or “tastes”, being themselves not subject to these theories.

This gap is nicely filled by the VOC-approach, which emphasizes the *supply* side of children, as it refers to the benefits of children for their (potential) parents under variable social and economic conditions ([Hoffman & Hoffman, 1973](#)), and as such offers a coherent, methodologically complete explanation of generative behavior. In its current state, it provides an explanatory program, which combines an *action-based theoretical model of generative behavior*, based on the principles of methodological individualism ([Coleman, 1990](#)) in a multi-level framework, with assumptions drawn from the theory of social production functions ([Lindenberg, 1989, 1996](#); [Ormel, Lindenberg, Steverink, & Verbrugge, 1999](#)) that individuals maximize their welfare, i.e., their physical well-being and their social approval in particular. It provides the first – and up to now only – approach for an international comparison of variations in fertility decision-making by explicitly taking cultural factors into account ([Trommsdorff & Nauck, 2010](#)).

ETF and VOC both take a cost–benefit approach based on assumptions about rationally calculating actors. This approach focuses on the costs and rewards of the outcomes of any action alternative, including the number of children. Of course, one may question on theoretical grounds whether the underlying “rational-choice” assumption is valid for *any* action, including fertility decisions in any historical period and under any societal conditions. The most potent argument along these lines consistent with the theory is that rationally calculated decisions themselves impose costs (especially for information seeking), which are avoided if other, less costly decision making modes seem feasible.

Previous empirical analyses have in fact demonstrated that “country” effects on fertility do not disappear when context opportunities, individual resources and VOC are controlled for ([Nauck, 2007](#)), which contradicts both the ETF and even the revised VOC approach. If one or both approaches described fit empirical reality well, then fertility decisions should be directly related to an individual’s cost–benefit structure as defined by resources, opportunities and alternatives. Consequently, if opportunities and individual

alternatives are controlled for, no differences in fertility should occur, i.e., “cultural” differences between the respective societies in cross-cultural comparison should vanish and “path dependencies” of culture-specific traditions should not exist.

The following empirical analysis tries to isolate the specific conditions under which the rational decision making model applies by augmenting the VOC-approach with arguments from framing theory ([Esser, 2001, 268ff.](#); [Kroneberg, 2011, 119ff.](#)), which argues that rational-choice decision making is a mode (“reflective-calculating” = rc-mode) that occurs only under specific conditions, whereas the alternate mode of “conventional” or “spontaneous” decisions (“automatic-spontaneous” = as-mode) is prevalent when decisions are so strictly framed culturally that further individual reasoning is perceived to be superficial and “un-economic” ([Kroneberg, 2005, p. 347](#)). This spontaneous mode is based on routinized action-alternatives stored in the memory of the individual, and these reflect “evolutionarily successful and *therefore* habituated processes of problem solving” ([Esser, 1996, p. 14](#)). This mode is chosen if the individual perceives the situation to be familiar and if the expected costs as well as the risk of a wrong decision are thought to be low. Thus the choice of the mode is a very efficient strategy of minimizing decision making costs, especially with regard to information seeking and so may be considered as evolutionarily successful.

Accordingly, “rational” calculations of the costs and benefits of children become prevalent if a situation is new or the expected costs of the action alternatives are perceived as being high. The specific conditions of fertility decisions must be taken into account here. On the one hand, on the individual level, the decision for parenthood implies a rather rare “high-gain-high-cost-high-risk” decision in the life course; on the other hand, on the societal level, decisions for parenthood are (still) rather widespread and common, which makes them prone to institutional regulations. The high gains of parenthood are to be seen in the multi-functionality (“diffuseness”) of intergenerational relationships, while the high costs are related to the increasingly high investments in the offspring together with an extreme uncertainty about the returns because many of the outcomes are revealed much later in life. Both aspects make it likely that fertility behavior is strongly culturally framed in the rule and may be additionally regulated by social norms. In this case, individual decisions would be mostly conventional and typically not calculated, as the “spontaneous” mode in the framing model prescribes. Accordingly, variations across societies should be more extensive than variations within, and changes across generations should be slow and relatively “inelastic” (i.e., not immediately responsive to contextual changes), whereas the “rational” mode should become prevalent (only) under specific conditions, such as in times of rapid social change, during extensive intergenerational mobility both spatially and social-structurally or within a heterogeneous social network composition ([Nauck, 2007, p. 628](#)).

The following empirical analysis is a contribution to cumulative research ([Nauck, 2006, 2007, 2010](#); [Nauck &](#)

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