Family Ideals Across Cultures

Arnstein Aassve[a,b], Alícia Adserà[c,d], Paul Y. Chang[e], Letizia Mencarini[a,b], Hyunjoon Park[f], Chen Peng[a], Samuel Plach[a], James M. Raymo[c,g], Senhu Wang[h,i], and Jean Yeung Wei-Jun[h,j]

[a]Department of Social and Political Sciences, Università Commerciale Luigi Bocconi, 20136 Milan, IT; [b]Carlo F. Dondena Centre for Research on Social Dynamics and Public Policy, Università Commerciale Luigi Bocconi, 20136 Milan, IT; [c]Department of Sociology and Office of Population Research, Princeton University, Princeton, USA; [d]Office of Population Research, Princeton University, Princeton, USA; [e]Department of Sociology, Harvard University, 580 William James Hall 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, United States; [f]Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA; [g]Tokyo College, University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan; [h]Department of Sociology and Anthropology, National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore; [i]Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, Mill Lane 16, Cambridge CB2 1SB, UK; [j]Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, NationalUniversity of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore

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In all cultures, the family serves as a fundamental pillar where its functioning through respective social norms and values also play a crucial role for the broader societal organization. Yet, we do not know much about what constitutes individuals' ideal family - let alone how it may differ across cultures. Moreover, in modern societies the family institution has undergone dramatic change. Whereas there is considerable research on the components of the family, such as children, marriage and its less tangible characteristics, like communication and gender role attitudes, there is limited research on how individuals view family ideals. This study is the first of its kind to construct a measure of family ideals taking into accont its multidimensionality. It does so by implementing a vignette study in China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, United States, Italy, Spain and Norway. With randomization of the factors, thereby ensuring independence of the factors, and every respondent answering to six different vignettes, we compare and contrast the relative importance of its components. The analysis shows both expected and unexpected results. First, divorce is viewed negatively in all countries (including Norway and the US where divorce rates are high). Childlessness is also viewed negatively, but there is no discernible gradient with respect to the actual number of children. Gender roles and work-life balance are relatively less important, whereas being respected in the community, good communication between family members and grandparents, are all highly relevant in individuals' family ideals. Income status matters in all countries bar Norway. Whereas there are important gradients in the estimated effects across countries, they all go in the same direction, suggesting that family ideals are a universal concept.

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The family is undoubtedly the oldest institution in our societies. In all cultures, the family serves as a fundamental pillar where its functioning through respective social norms and values also play a crucial role for the broader societal organization. Yet, in modern societies, there is ample evidence that the family institution is changing. This is perhaps best summarized by what is termed the Second Demographic Transition. Inspired by Inglehart intergenerational and culture shift (1977, 1990), Van de Kaa and Leasthague (1986) argued that value changes and a new focus on self-realization have weakened the traditional role of the family in industrial societies. Empirically, this is manifested through marriage being replaced by cohabitation, an increase in divorce and re-partnering, postponement of childbearing and a decline in fertility more generally. But there is diversity in this family change: the increase in cohabitation and marital dissolution is not taking place everywhere (or, at least, at the same speed), and there are substantial differences in fertility across countries. All of this raises a set of pertinent questions. First, how can we best conceptualize family ideals? Second, with a conceptual framework in place, how can one possibly construct a unified measure of a concept that is inherently multidimensional? Third, to what extent do family ideals vary across societies that differ tremendously through cultural traditions and their policy institutions?

The key challenge when thinking of family ideals comes from its multidimensional nature. It is illuminating to start from a much simpler kind of ideal, namely that of children. This concept is well known and empirically implemented through several comparative surveys, where individuals are simply asked what their ideal number of children would be. Even though not easy, this is a more straightforward question that few find problematic to answer. But with a focus on family ideals, a range of dimensions enter the picture. Marriage and companionship as well as partners' respective roles in the household structures the functioning of the family unit. These, in turn, matter when family obligations, such as household chores, have to be held up against work obligations and career priorities. Communication matters a great deal then: between partners for sure, but also between extended family members, such as grandparents. Children are the other pivotal aspect. In the end, one fundamental role of the family is to bring up children. Still, with the rise of childlessness and broad fertility decline globally, the role children play as part of family ideals is no longer obvious. Similarly, when the broader needs and obligations are held up against each other when forming one's idea of family ideals, the actual number of desired children may be rather different from the more traditional measure of fertility ideals. Clearly, communication with one's children also matters. Likewise, parental investment in children may matter in important ways. Here saving directed towards one's children may matter, not least in terms of the level of education

Significance Statement

Authors must submit a 120-word maximum statement about the significance of their research paper written at a level understandable to an undergraduate educated scientist outside their field of speciality. The primary goal of the significance statement is to explain the relevance of the work in broad context to a broad readership. The significance statement appears in the paper itself and is required for all research papers.

Please provide details of author contributions here.

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[1]A.O.(Author One) contributed equally to this work with A.T. (Author Two) (remove if not applicable).

[2]To whom correspondence should be addressed. E-mail: author.twoemail.com

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they eventually can achieve. As such, the family can be viewed as an instrument for economic advancement. Thus, income and wealth may matter in individuals' assessment of family ideals, as will the respect the family exercise in the community where they live.

The inherent multi-dimensionality poses a considerable challenge in the conceptual construction of family ideals. Whereas, every individual may have certain ideas about its components, a measure of family ideals requires a trade-off between the components that characterizes the family. For instance, a person, if asked, may have certain preferences with respect to the number of children. If a person considers the ideal number of children to be three, say, then that would also contribute to the overall family ideal. But held together with the other dimensions, we do not know the relative importance of these components (such as three children, for example) in forming an overall measure of family ideals. Past research is extremely limited, and to the best of our knowledge, there is no systematic analysis of its theoretical and empirical implications. Instead, the literature is extensive when it comes to the components of the family, such as marriage and cohabitation (or divorce), childbearing and fertility, or investment in children, or gender roles of partners and so on. To exemplify, with fertility decline, a large amount of studies have sought to understand why individuals and families have less children. The same can be said about studies on union formation and dissolution. These studies are rather silent however, about the extent children or union formation matter for their valuation of what makes a family ideal. Do children matter more than being married (as opposed to living in a cohabiting union, say)?

A deeper understanding of perceived family ideals is important because it allows us to think through how mechanisms governing micro-level intimate family contexts scale up to partially explain macro-level trends in family patterns (e.g. national level trends). Families will presumably face trade-offs here. A family may decide to pursue a strategy of investing more (quality) in fewer children. Child advancement may then help explain the downward trends in fertility rates we are witnessing across advanced capitalist societies. These tradeoffs, however, will be reflected by individuals' stated family ideals. On the other hand, in gender-inegalitarian societies, the social and economic advancement of children may justify the division of labor within families and help explain the relatively low-levels of female labor force participation, which again would be reflected through individuals' reported family ideals.

Family ideals will also depend on the expected roles individuals play in the family unit. These roles – father, mother, children, grandparents, etc. – may include specific responsibilities. For example, in societies where gender specialization is still prevalent (Ono 2003), responsibilities may be divided between fathers (e.g. financially providers for the family) versus mothers (e.g. educating children). Extended members of the family – grandparents, uncles, and aunts – may also be differentially integrated into the focal family unit, depending on cultural differences defined by "strong and weak familism" (Anderson and Kohler 2013; Suzuki 2008). These varying integration models may influence the responsibilities extended family members bear: expectations for intergenerational wealth transfers, informal childcare, etc. (Pilkauskas and Cross 2018).

People may also view family ideals through certain "functions" that the family is supposed to fulfill. An important thread in family studies emphasizes the "external functions" that families play in society. From Engels's (2010 [1884]) study of the relationship between family structures and economic production to Parsons's (1943; 1949) inclusion of the family as a basic "productive unit" in his grand structural-functional theory, the idea that families satisfy important social and economic functions has a long rich history. Of course, families also carry out important "internal functions" as well. Salient in the developmental psychology literature, families are the central mechanism socializing children and preparing them for a place in public life (see for example, Taylor, Clayton, and Rowley 2004). Concepts and arguments related to this literature may be important for the extent family ideals are connected with these sorts of external and internal functions.

In this backdrop, this study sets out to establish empirically the concept of family ideals across a set of very diverse cultural settings. We define family ideals over ten factors and perform a conjoint analysis for samples taken from China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, United States, Italy, Spain and Norway in December, 2021.

Materials and Methods

Research Design. This study designed a factorial survey experiment (FSE) consisting of an online survey and a vignette experiment, which was carried out in China, United States, Norway, Italy, Spain, South-Korea, Japan and Singapore. Combining advantages of survey and experiment, FSE has been increasingly used to better understand the multi-dimensionality of individuals' values, goals and decision-making processes (Auspurg et al., 2017; Shi Wang, 2021). There are at least three advantages of using FSE to study family ideals in this study. First, in a vignette experiment where all respondent features are controlled for in the experimental design, the estimates of the effect of family dimensions on individual ratings are unbiased. The complete control over vignettes' characteristics also ensures a higher level of internal validity compared to traditional survey methods. Second, respondents in FSE can be asked to evaluate a larger number of vignettes, which vary in multiple dimensions. This has the advantage of allowing us to test for various combinations, including some which occur only rarely in reality (Auspurg Hinz, 2014). Third, the multi-dimensionality of the FSE could help prevent respondents from giving socially desirable answers because the simultaneously changing vignette dimensions make it difficult for them to know the study's purposes (McDonald, 2019).

Survey Design. The survey was conducted online on Qualtrics composed of a factorial survey experiment (FSE), close-ended questions of participants' demographic and socioeconomic background, and close-ended questions assessing people's subjective experience and preferences related to family life.

Participants start the questionnaire with demographic and socioeconomic information about themselves, move on to reviewing the vignettes, then to answering to rank-order questions on family characteristics and children's quality, following by answering questions about their partner, parents, and partner's parents, and lastly, they answer questions about their children. By starting with more standard demographic and socioeconomic questions about oneself, we aim to warm up participants with survey taking, and yet not to prime them with information about their own family, nor to overload them with questions related to information processing and judgment.

Demographic and socioeconomic questions are composed of sex, birth year, birthplace (at the city or state level), education, employment status, contract type, occupation, working hours, city of residence, household size and income, marital status, consensual and cohabitation history, number of brothers and sisters, fertility

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histories with number, sex and parity of children, fertility plan, and son preference. In addition to demographic information about the family, we also ask the employment and occupation status of parents at 14 years old, contact frequency with parents and in-laws, living arrangement and distance with parents and in-laws. Regarding each individual child, we ask if she/he is currently receiving formal education, lives in the same household, receives private extra-curricular lessons, receives hobby lessons, how much household income was put toward such lessons, and how much time parents engage with their child(ren) during weekdays and at the weekend. We also ask if the participants receive (unpaid) help from extended family or paid childcare in taking care of the children, and if they provide financial assistance to their adult child(ren).

Taking into consideration the subjective lived experience of the participants in shaping their family preferences, we assess life satisfaction with one statement "I am satisfied with my life" on a Likert scale from 0 to 10. We ask about their own relationship, their parents' relation, and their home atmosphere while growing up on a scale from 0 to 10 ranging from very bad or very cold (0) to very good or very warm (10). We also ask participants to assess their own, their parents', and in-laws' subjective level of wealth in the society from 0 to 10 while 0 being the least wealthy in the society and 10 being the wealthiest in the society. Lastly, we ask how much the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on their family life and financial life on a scale from 0 to 10 while 0 being very negatively influenced, 5 being not influenced, and 10 being very positively influenced.

Lastly, we also assess family-related preferences with a rank-order question. The rank-order statements consist of 7 factors, namely union status, fertility, household income, family communication, support for self-realization, intergenerational mobility and familism. A pilot study was conducted and a series of quality checks (e.g., survey speedsters, attention checks) were conducted to ensure the data quality.

Experimental Design. Each factorial vignette describes a hypothetical family profile. Respondents were randomly assigned to view six vignettes and then asked about the extent to which the respondent thinks the family profile described is (1) a successful family (hereafter "successful family"), (2) a family that he or she would like to have (hereafter "desired family") and (3) a family that people in his/her parents' generation would consider successful, on a scale ranging from 0 (the least successful/desired) to 10 (the most successful/desired). Each hypothetical family profile is constructed by randomly combining a range of the following ten family characteristics: 1) the relative household income in the country, 2) marital status, 3) presence of children, 4) gender division of labor, 5) work-life conflict, 6) the level of respect the family receives in the community, 7) communication in the nuclear family, 8) communication with extended family, 9) expected child educational attainment level, and 10) financial savings to support children (see Figure A1 for a vignette example). However, a vignette describing a family with no children, cannot have measures of children's outcomes. As a result, the experiment is defined over two universes. Universe A describes only cohabiting and married couples with or without children, whereas Universe B describes family with children (including divorced couples), and therefore child outcomes. The following is an example of a vignette from Universe B.

This means that the vignette universe A includes the first eight experimental variables and enables us to examine the extent to which whether or not having children is considered a successful family or a family that the respondent wants. The vignette universe B consists of all ten experimental variables with all family profiles including those pertaining to children – namely, the expected educational attainment level for the children and whether families are saving for children's future, thereby allowing us to examine the effects of child characteristics on the ratings. It does not, however, include family descriptions where there are no children. The vignette factors and their respective levels are described in Table 1.

In the vignette universe A, the full number of combinations crossing all vignette levels of the 8 factors is 2,304 (3 x 2 x 4 x 2 x 2 x 3 x 3 x 4). In the vignette universe B, the full number of combinations crossing all vignette levels of the 10 factors is 15,552 (3 x 2 x 3 x 3 x 2 x 2 x 3 x 4 x 3 x 2). Specifically, we used the D-efficiency fractional factorial design to draw a sample of 576 from universe A, and 864 from universe B. The D-efficiency at resolution V is 99.88 for universe A and is 97.04 for universe B where all main effects and two-way interactions are estimable independent of each other. This exceeds the commonly accepted D-efficiency value of 90, ensuring sufficient statistical power to obtain precise estimates (Auspurg Hinz, 2014). Among the 921 (864 + 576) unique vignettes, 240 (144 + 96) decks (i.e., questionnaire versions) were randomly constructed with each containing 6 random vignettes. Pooling across 8 countries, each vignette was rated by 85.92 (SD = 4.97) respondents. For each country, each vignette was rated by 10.75 (SD = 3.85) respondents, which exceeds the common suggestion of 5 in the literature and thus ensures the robustness of the results (Auspurg Hinz, 2014). For more details about a description of experimental variables and statistics for both vignette universes, see Table 1. A key feature of FSE is randomization, which allows us to produced unbiased estimates and ensures high internal validity of the results. To test the randomization of our experimental design in both vignette universes, we first conducted correlation analyses and find that the correlation coefficients between different experimental variables are very close to zero, indicating the different vignette dimensions are orthogonal (see Appendix). Similarly, we find that there are no correlations between experimental variables and respondents' sociodemographic characteristics, indicating that respondents were randomly assigned to rather than self-selected into different vignettes (see Appendix).

Table 1. Vignette factors and levels.

	Universe A		Universe B	
Factors	#	Content	#	Content
Union status	2	– Cohabiting Married	3	Divorced Cohabiting Married
Fertility	4	No children 1 child 2 children 3 children	3	– 1 child 2 children 3 children
Household income	3	Below average Around average Above average	3	Below average Around average Above average
Community respect	2	Well-respected Not well-resp.	2	Well-respected Not well-resp.
Family communication	2	Open Not Open	2	Open Not Open
Contact to extended fam.	2	Frequently Not frequently	2	Frequently Not frequently
Gender roles	3	Traditional Commonplace Egalitarian	3	Traditional Commonplace Egalitarian
Work-life balance	4	Fem. not conflicted & male conflicted Fem. conflicted & male not conflicted Neither fem. nor male conflicted Both fem. & male conflicted	4	Fem. not conflicted & male conflicted Fem. conflicted & male not conflicted Neither fem. nor male conflicted Both fem. & male conflicted
Children's expected education	–	– – –	3	High school Bachelor's Postgraduate
Fin. supp. to children	–	– –	2	Saving for it Not saving for it

Analytic Strategy. The data are hierarchically structured since vignettes are embedded within the respondents, who are embed-

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ded in each country. Treating the dependent variables as continuous, we proceed by estimating random intercept multilevel linear regression models. Due to the successful randomization in the experimental design, the assumption of exogeneity is satisfied. We therefore adopt a multilevel model rather than a fixed-effects model in order to maximize statistical efficiency. The multilevel model can be expressed in the following equation: $Rating_{ijc} = \alpha_{ijc} + \sum_{i=1} \beta_i \ FamilyVignette_{ijc} + e_c + u_{jk} + v_{ijc}$. $Rating_{ijc}$ is the dependent variable measuring the extent to which a respondent rates the specific family profile presented as "successful" or "desired" (vignette i for respondent j). $FamilyVignette_{ijc}$ are explanatory variables measuring different family characteristics of the vignette i for respondent j in country c. In addition, α_{ijc} is the random intercept; e_c is the country-level error term; u_{jk} is the respondent-level error term; and v_{ijc} is the vignette-level error term.

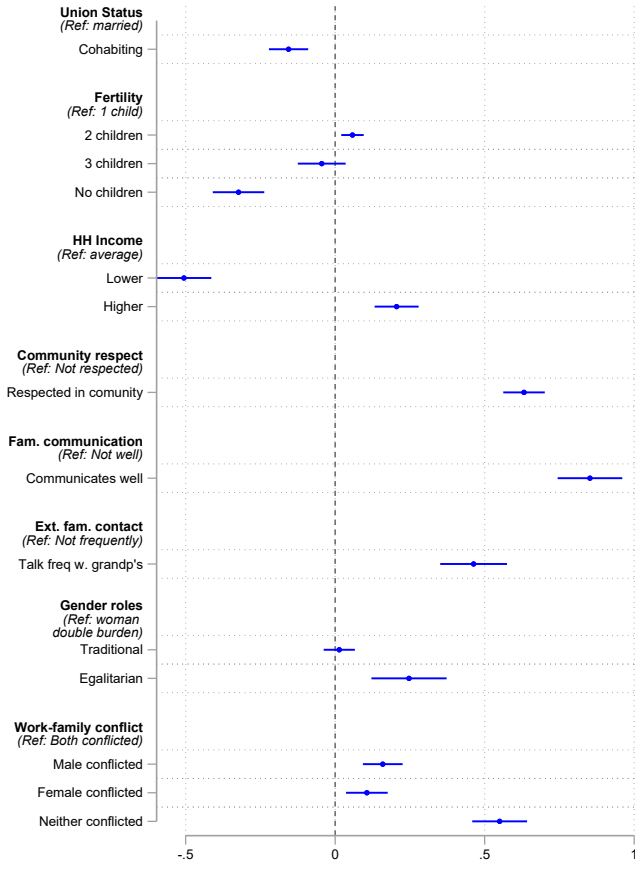
Sample. We recruited participants through Kantar as our panel participant provider with quota sampling between age and sex for each country: one fourth of the sample is made by women aged 25-39, one fourth men of the same age, one fourth of women aged 40-50 and the last fourth by men of the same age. We initially recruited 22,574 participants, among which 8.13% (N= 1836) gave identical responses to each of the 6 different vignettes that they reviewed. The responses from these 1836 participants were deleted. The retained sample description is summarized in Table 2. While age and gender composition are similar across countries, participants' other demographic characteristics vary. The overall average educational level is having a short-cycle tertiary education, 5.1 years on the ISCED 1-8 scale. Specifically, 51.8% of the Japanese participants, 52.8% of the Singaporean participants, 66.7% of the Korean participants, 67.8% of the Chinese participants, 32.9% of the Norwegian participants, 43.4% of the Italian participants, 54.5% of the Spanish participants, and 33% of the American participants have an educational level of bachelor's degree or higher. Monthly household income was adjusted to a three-person household in euro value, and it varies between 2330 euro for Spain and 6,761 euro for Singapore. Moreover, all Asian countries have more participants married than having children, while there are more participants with children than married in the European and American countries. For an average age between 37 to 39 years, 79% participants in China vs. 43% participants in Italy were married, and 75% participants in China vs. 35% participants in Italy have child(ren). For those participants that have at least one child, they on average have 1.22 (China) to 2.24 children in the US. children ever born up to the survey in the sample varies between the average of 0.63 for Japan to 1.85 for the US. The link between marriage and having children is much stronger in the Asian countries: 88.2% (6.9%), 91% (4.1%), 92.6% (3.6%), and 96.8% (1.8%) of participants that have child(ren) in Japan, Singapore, Korea and China are married (or divorced in brackets), compared to 71.1% (5.4%), 68.2% (3%), 64.6% (7.8%), 51.1% (4.6%) in Spain, Italy, the US, and Norway.

Results

Main Effects — Pooled estimates of eight countries. We first show the main effect of factors on the perceived successfulness and desirability of the families in the vignettes. Figure 1 and Table 3 show the result of a three-level random intercept model. Being married, having one or two children, having higher than average income, being respected in the community, taking frequently contacts with grandparents, good communication among family members, having an egalitarian couple's gender roles, neither of the members of the couple feeling conflicted between work and family, child(ren) expected to completing higher education, and parents saving up to support the children, are considered favorable aspects of a family life. On the contrary, divorce (-0.96 -1.33 compared to being married) is the least preferred scenario, followed lower than average household income (-0.33 -0.50 compared to average income), having no children (-0.30 -0.36 compared to having 1 child), and cohabiting (-0.17 -0.38). Having 2 children compared to having 1 child is slightly (0.05 0.09) more preferable than having 1 child, and having 3 children is only slightly (0.05 0-.07) more preferable than having 1 child only for the parents' generation. We also observe inter-generational differences on the favorability of cohabitation, family communication, and gender role. Cohabitating is considered more negative for parents' generation, while good communication and egalitarian gender roles (especially compared to traditional gender roles) are not perceived as more appreciated for the parents' generation than of the current generation. Also, note that the slight preference on 2 or 3 children over 1 child is not personally desired (the green dots), but rather seen as something more socially approved (blue and red dots). The result also shows a decreasing marginal return on income and children's expected education attainment, i.e.: the difference between the middle level and lower level is bigger than the one between the middle and higher level.

In general, relational outcomes outweigh factual outcomes. As long as a family is not divorced and having one child, having a good relationship within the nuclear family, with the extended family, with the outside community is more important than having more children, having higher income, children achieving a very high education level, or having a certain kind of gender role.

Fig. 1. Family ideals pooled sample – Universe A (incl. "no children").



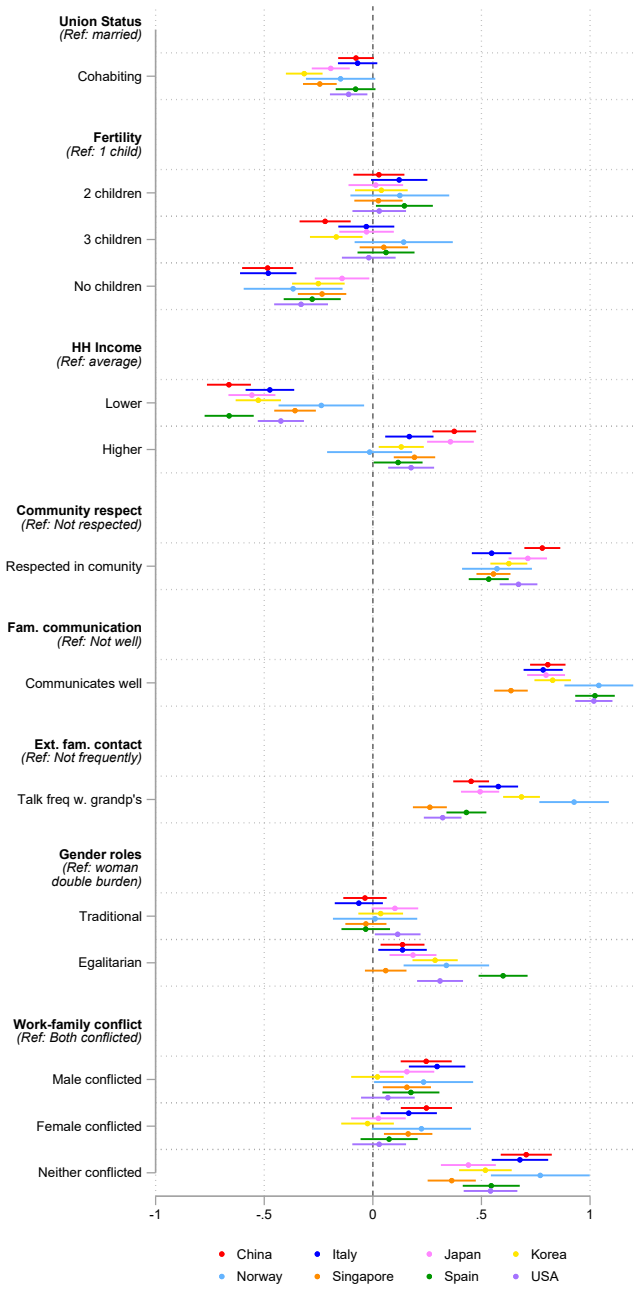
Main Effects by country. In Figure 2 (Universe A) and 3 (Universe B), we show the estimates by countries. For the ten factors, we see considerable difference in the estimated coefficients. Cohabitation is considered less successful in Italy, Japan and Korea, whereas there are no statistical differences for the other countries. Figure 2 and 3 also confirms the finding concerning childlessness as it associates with less success in all countries. Moreover, we see no discernible effect between the number of children. There is one interesting exception however: in China, having three children is associated with lower family success, a feature that most likely comes about the long standing one-child policy. The estimates for income also reflect differences between countries: low income associates with lower success - higher income with higher successful family. There is an exception for Norway, where the effect of high income is not statistically significant. This might be a result derived from the fact that among these countries, Norway is by far the one with the lowest income inequality and the country with the most generous public

Fig. 2. Family ideals pooled sample – Universe B (excl. "no children").



support. As we have seen from Figure 1, being respected in the community, good communication and contact with grandparents are associated with higher perceived family success. Whereas the estimated effects of respect are not so different across countries, the differences are substantial when it comes to communication between family members. Its importance is strongest in Norway. Here we see quite some heterogeneity. Perhaps surprising, Norway is the country where family being respected is the strongest. Egalitarian attitudes are important for family success, whereas we also see a positive association for neither parents having their career conflicted. The pattern of these effects are present also for Universe B, which is the sub-sample for whom the presence of children is always included in the vignettes. It is clear that for all countries, divorce is associated with low family success. The effect of the number of children confirms the pattern we saw in Universe A: there really is no difference between having one child, as opposed to two or three. In other words, having children is associated with family success, but the actual number of children does not. Also here, low income associates with lower family success - though this is not the case for Norway. Finally, given that Universe B always includes vignettes with children, we add factors referring to values put on those children. Again, there are differences between countries, but the estimates suggest that saving for one's children is associated with family success in all countries. Also the value attached to the education of children goes in the same direction in all the countries. In particular, there is no difference between countries in terms of college education as opposed to pursuing graduate studies, but there is a clear difference compared to children having only high school. But for the latter we see differences across countries. Curiously the negative effect is strongest for China and Spain.

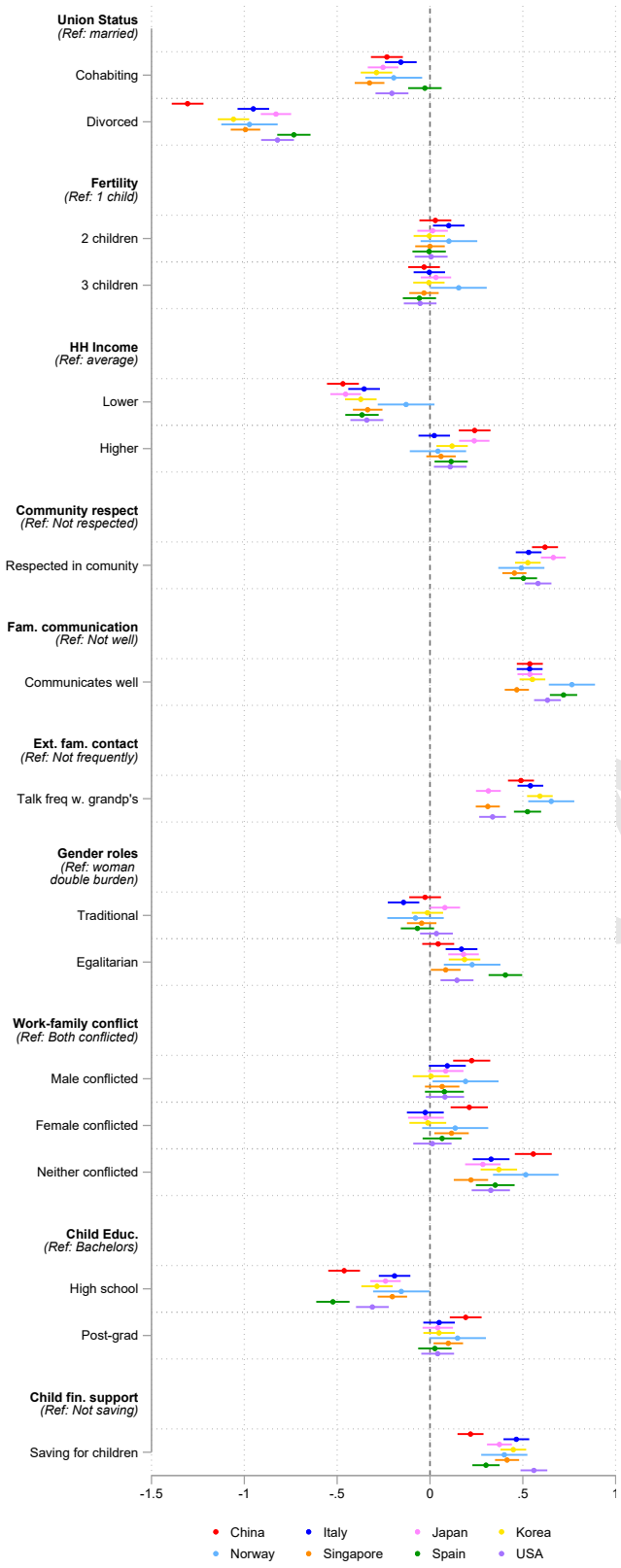
Fig. 3. Family ideals by country – Universe A (incl. "no children").



The heterogeneity of family ideals. (TO BE completed)

The results from these basic models are intriguing. For instance, being a parent matters for the perceived success of a family, whereas the actual number of children does not, and this appears to be the case across all countries. It is important to note that given the research design and given the standardization of the factors, we can compare the relative importance of these factors. What then emerges is that divorce is clearly something that goes against family ideals in all countries. On the other hand, communication between family members and with extended family members appears rather

Fig. 4. Family ideals by country – Universe B (excl. "no children").



important. These results reflect another important insight: despite differences among countries, it is quite remarkable that family success measured over these ten factors always go in the same direction for all countries, which suggests that the concept of family ideals is universal. The survey includes a range of background information about the respondent answering to the vignettes, allowing us to deepen the analysis on the heterogeneity of family ideals not only across countries but also within countries. We can have extended the analysis to include gender differences, differences by education, but also by the demographic status of the respondents. Indeed, gender differences appear to be more important that educational differences. Women value more than men that there is smooth communication in the family, egalitarian relationships and no work-family conflict. When looking at the actual fertility behavior of the respondents, we observe that those without children and no plans of having any do not penalize childlessness, while those with two or three children are the ones who more negatively value lack of children.

Discussion

(TO BE completed) The main takeaway points of our finds are that there seems to be some universal concept of family ideals. We find remarkable consistency across countries despite differences in cultures and some outcomes. Consistently, across all countries, childlessness negative, but there are not significant differences in the number of children beyond having at least one. In terms of the relative importance of factors, divorce is the most penalized. Communication within family members and with extended family as well as egalitarianism are highly valued (especially among women). The final version of the paper will include further heterogeneity analysis.

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