

# Birth rate depends on cultural models as much as income and childcare facilities

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World Children's Day 2014 in Fürth: the Association "Alliance for Families" in Fürth promotes a better work-family balance and solidarity and responsibility between generations. Also, families should not be economically disadvantaged. Credit: Fürther Bündnis für Familien/Oswald Gebhardt

Germany is mostly considered a low-fertility nation, at least in the public debate, the birth rate having been stagnating at an average of 1.39

children per woman since the 1990s. This figure gives the impression that couples everywhere in Germany are deciding for or against having children on the basis of similar patterns of behaviour and attitudes. But birth rates vary from region to region, in some cases dramatically. Sociologist Barbara Fulda explains the influence of regional cultural norms.

Young working couples are having fewer and fewer children. The difficulties of balancing parenthood with a career are often cited as reasons for falling birth rates in Western nations. But can we really generalise it to that degree? "A two-income family does not necessarily have few or no children," says sociologist Barbara Fulda from the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne. "Nor does the traditional family set-up with just one breadwinner guarantee numerous children."

In the interests of improving people's ability to combine their working lives with parenthood, growing amounts of investment have been poured into increasing childcare availability since 2008. But despite the efforts of policymakers, the mantra "more childcare, more children" does not hold true everywhere: in many parts of Germany the number of births is higher than the amount of available public childcare provision might indicate. "More money, more children" is not a phrase that appears to apply either, given the stable nature of regional differences in birth rates. The district of Osterode am Harz, for example, has one of the lowest birth rates, at 1.4 to 1.49, despite being an area with a nominal gross domestic product per employed person in excess of 65,000 euros.

## **New approach in demographic research**

"Regional differences in gender role perceptions affect the acceptance of family policy measures. As such, structural circumstances like number of nursery places can only influence a family's decision to have

children indirectly," says Fulda. By opening up this new perspective in demographic research, the sociologist also offers up new approaches for the interpretation of family policy: drawing on the influence of cultural norms, particularly family models, she is able to explain why government incentives in the sphere of social policy have different effects on people's decisions to start a family or have more children in different areas of the country, and also why they are sometimes completely and utterly ineffective.

Different regions exhibit major differences in the concept of family and family life, for instance. One possible indicator of this is the number of fathers claiming parental benefit: according to the Federal Statistical Office, there is a "clear regional concentration" in southern and south-eastern Germany, in Bavaria, Saxony and Thuringia. But even in almost all districts of Brandenburg, more than a quarter of fathers claimed parental benefit in 2012.

"It is my belief that a culturally traditional concept of the family – or as we sociologists call it, a family model – and the context of a person's life which it influences is what's behind these regional discrepancies," says Fulda, explaining her research hypothesis. What induced her to undertake this study was not the variation in birth rates alone, but the fact that – in spite of growing support from the state – these regional differences had not changed for several decades: "The socio-structural composition of the regional population and structural factors did not go far enough towards explaining the phenomenon for my liking."

## **Regional differences in the family model may undermine government family policy**

Barbara Fulda posed her research question based on these conspicuous regional differences. In doing so, she is not casting doubt on factors cited

in fertility research, such as nursery places or economic conditions, being important considerations in starting a family, but is adding another factor to their number. "Compared with the speed of structural transformation, cultural influences change very slowly. This may explain the lack of movement in regional [birth rate](#) differences and be a reason why family policy support is not accepted to the desired degree everywhere."

Fulda selected two areas featuring similar social structures in the south of Germany for her field study. Although Waldshut in Baden-Württemberg and Fürth in Bavaria are comparable in this respect, Waldshut has a much lower birth rate and Fürth a higher birth rate than would normally be expected. The study found that the two cases differ in their regional cultures in one particular aspect, namely their concept of family – the culture in Waldshut being rather traditional and conscious of values and Fürth exhibiting more "modern" attributes.

However, the popularly held positive correlation between regional traditional concepts of family and number of children does not apply here, as Fulda demonstrates. Indeed, there is actually a positive correlation between the concept of a family of equals and the number of births. This can be explained by a similarly egalitarian concept of gender in the world of employment and the family. If, like in Fürth, both partners have similarly extensive rights and duties in both spheres, having children and a career is a balance that can be achieved even in an era of rising female employment and loose partnerships. This regionally widespread concept of family in Fürth also has an impact on the level of parenting support provided outside of the family: the fact that the family takes on the bulk of child-rearing duties in traditional areas means that organised structures and publicly available childcare are less focused on supporting families with their parenting. In Fürth, on the other hand, the idea of non-family organisations and state-sponsored childcare facilities supporting families on a fairly large scale is accepted, and therefore

realisable.

All in all, it is thus only the social context to which individuals belong that really explains why many areas see more or less [children](#) born than the structural circumstances would lead one to expect. "Given that the national model of the working woman with its positive connotations and pertinent family policy support may clash with the regional model of motherhood, historically grown cultural family models in different regions are an important element in arriving at a better explanation of significant regional differences in birth rates, on the one hand, and individual birth patterns in general, on the other." Fulda is therefore in favour of regional cultural considerations being taken into account in the design of [family](#) policy measures in future. Family policy measures have greater prospects of success if they acknowledge regional circumstances and involve local decision makers.

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