SESSION I: THEORETICAL CONCEPTS IN STUDYING FAMILIES AND FAMILY RESEARCH METHODS

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CULTURAL CONCEPTIONS OF FAMILY AS RETARDANTS OF CHANGE IN FAMILY LIVES. NEW RESULTS FROM “LEITBILD” RESEARCH

Keywords: leitbild, culture, stability, theoretical concepts, family research methods

Description of the theoretical framework

Judging from an economic theoretical perspective, social change in family lives should proceed as fast as the circumstances, determining family related behaviour, are changing. What we observe empirically, however, is that there is a strong inertia: In many aspects social change is occurring slower and less consequent than the circumstances for economic behaviour do. The division of paid and unpaid work within couples, for example, has shifted somewhat towards more gender equality, but not very far, considering that women’s educational degrees have drawn level with men’s degrees in many European societies and human capital is no longer a convincing explanation for women being principally responsible for childcare and housework.

For explaining this inertia it seems promising to supplement the economic by a cultural theoretical perspective. Inspired by Katharina D. Giesel (2007), a research team at the German Federal Institute for Population Research proposes the theoretical concept of “leitbilder” (Diabaté & Lück 2014). It assumes that individuals have pictured conceptions of guiding role models in mind, such as pictures of the “normal” composition of a family, a “typical” number of children, the “perfect” timing when to have children or the “right” way how to distribute paid and unpaid work within a couple. It further assumes that these conceptions are collectively shared within societies, social groups and generations. And it assumes that individual behaviour tends to follow these conceptions, especially when actors don not have enough time or information to rationally reflect their options.

Regarding family related decisions “leitbilder” are likely to be relevant because young adults in fact often are unable to estimate the costs and benefits of various family career tracks: Will I be happy
with this person as my partner? Will I be happier with or without children? Will I regret not to have spent more time with my child if I keep working fulltime for pay? Will my partner earn enough money to support our family? Will he loose his job and be unemployed for some time during the next 15 years? Will we stay together as a couple? Facing the long list of questions like these with uncertain answers, a common strategy may be to forego a rational decision and instead follow one’s family “leitbild”: one’s concept of how things should be normally. The family related “leitbilder”, again, are likely to be much more stable over time than economic or political circumstances and thereby retard the social change of family lives that changing circumstances are initiating.

**Research hypotheses**

The paper tries to find evidence for the theoretical concept of “leitbilder” by answering three research questions:

1. Do people in fact have pictured conceptions of a “normal” family in mind? (Hypothesis: They do.)
2. What do these family related “leitbilder” look like? (Hypothesis: They at least partially correspond to a reality of family lives of the previous generation.)
3. Do the cultural-normative conceptions people have in mind correspond to their family related decisions and behaviour? (Hypothesis: They do to a certain degree – and thereby complement structural circumstances for economic rational decision making.)

**Description of the data and the research methods**

For analysing “leitbilder” the German Federal Institute for Population Research has conducted the survey “Familienleitbilder” in Germany in 2012 with n=5,000 (Lück et al. 2013). It is representative for the population, aged 20 to 39. The paper is going to use these data and conduct descriptive multivariate factor analyses as well as multivariate regression analyses for testing the hypotheses above.

**Most important findings**

The analyses have not been completed yet. First findings indicate an ambivalent picture: Partly “leitbilder” do correspond to a reality of family lives that lies back several decades. Partly they are quite up-to-date. This result may be caused by a bias and reflect social expectations; it may indicate that “leitbilder” also can be updated from time to time. “Leitbilder” certainly do correspond to people's family reality.

**Conclusions & discussion**

Due to the lack of a longitudinal design a causal relationship between family related “leitbilder” and family lives cannot be tested. However, also the cross-sectional analyses provide some evidence for the existence of family related “leitbilder”, for an influence of family related “leitbilder” on individual family careers as well as for a lag between family related “leitbilder” and structural circumstances. Therefore it is plausible that “leitbilder” work as retardants for change in family lives.

**References**

