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**Working Paper**

## Culture's influence regionally differing social milieus and variations in fertility rates

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MPIfG Discussion Paper 15/4

**Culture's Influence**

Regionally Differing Social Milieus  
and Variations in Fertility Rates

Barbara Fulda



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**Culture's Influence: Regionally Differing Social Milieus and Variations in Fertility Rates**

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## **Abstract**

How can we understand subnational differences in fertility rates? The most common explanations see the key to these differences in the socio-structural composition of a region's population and its structural conditions. However, such explanations fail to account for fertility rate differences in regions with similar populations and structures. This paper analyzes two social milieus in southern Germany and argues that variations in their fertility rates can only be understood through their cultural differences. Family extension patterns as well as opportunity structures (such as the availability of childcare facilities) are substantially influenced by the regionally differing cultural norms formed and held by social milieu members. To better explain differences in fertility rates and to understand the regionally differing effects of family policy measures, demographic research therefore needs to include culture in its understanding of demographic behavior.

## **Zusammenfassung**

Warum unterscheiden sich regionale Geburtenraten in Deutschland? Die Forschung begründet die großen Unterschiede mit der soziostrukturellen Zusammensetzung der Bevölkerung und den strukturellen Bedingungen einer Region. Unterschiede der Fertilitätsraten zwischen Regionen, deren Bevölkerung und Struktur sich ähneln, können hierdurch jedoch nicht erklärt werden. Die Analyse zweier sozialer Milieus in Süddeutschland zeigt, dass kulturelle Unterschiede ein weiterer wichtiger Erklärungsfaktor sind. Erstens werden strukturelle Gegebenheiten (zum Beispiel Angebote der Kinderbetreuung und das Vereinsleben) durch die Angehörigen eines sozialen Milieus als Träger regionaler sozialer Normen ausgestaltet, was Auswirkungen auf die Lebensbedingungen von Familien hat. Zweitens werden Milieumitglieder durch diese kulturelle Normen in ihrem Familienerweiterungsverhalten beeinflusst. Um regional unterschiedliche Auswirkungen familienpolitischer Maßnahmen auf Fertilitätsraten zu verstehen, sollte zukünftige demografische Forschung kulturelle Unterschiede berücksichtigen.

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# Culture's Influence: Regionally Differing Social Milieus and Variations in Fertility Rates

## 1 Introduction

Across Germany, regional fertility rates differ substantially. For example, in 2009 regional fertility rates ranged from 0.9 to 1.89 children per woman. In Germany, which has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world, there are regions with fertility rates as high as those of Sweden or Norway, which are often regarded as high-fertility countries in the European context. The county of Cloppenburg, for example, had a fertility rate of 1.89 in 2005 (BBR 2011); Sweden's and Norway's fertility rates were 1.8 in the same year.<sup>1</sup> Why do regional fertility rates within a nation differ?

Fertility behavior has been explained from different disciplinary perspectives; each perspective has concentrated either on the factors influencing the collective (for example, Esping-Andersen 2009; McDonald 2000) or the individual (for example, Becker 1981; Birg/Flötzmann/Reiter 1991). Explanations concentrating on the collective level aim mainly to explain national differences in fertility levels and there has been little work on subnational, regional social contexts. Studying the role of the proximate social environment in people's fertility decisions not only sheds light on how decisions to have or not to have children are taken, it also helps us better understand the potential of family policy measures. Do social policy measures, such as the introduction of a family allowance in Germany in 2007, fail to have a uniform effect due to different regional cultures?

Most studies that seek to explain the influence of regional social contexts on people's decision-making behavior generally accept the assumptions associated with the neo-classic economic model of man. They name two factors to account for spatial fertility variation: first, the socio-structural composition of the local population; and, second, structural conditions, such as the regional economic situation or local childcare opportunities. They therefore assume that regional fertility levels vary because different sorts of people live in those regions or because of different local opportunities. In the latter case, it is assumed that rational individuals orient their behavior solely on regional opportunities and restrictions, whereas in the former case, it is assumed that rational agents will act similarly in similar situations.

In this paper I argue that family formation behavior is not determined by individual characteristics and regional opportunity structures. Instead, cultural regional traditions moderate the effect of both factors and all interact in bringing about social phenomena

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1 World Bank, 2014: *World Development Indicators: Fertility Rate, Total (Births per Woman)*. Retrieved from <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>>.

such as a high or low birth rate. Culture therefore does not determine regional family formation behavior either. As individuals are situated within different social contexts in which cultural norms are likely to vary, they take their decisions about children in an intermediate transformative process, which Lutz (2013) labels as “normative transformation,” in which proximate determinants such as structural opportunities in an individual’s surroundings are transformed into fertility relevant behavior. Culture is conceptualized here as “the dimension of societal ideas, meanings and values” (Pfau-Effinger 1998: 1352) diffused in a social living environment. A cultural system provides values, ideas, and stocks of knowledge, which apply to different aspects of life, among them the family or the economy (Pfau-Effinger 2005). As such a normative system is relatively stable and inflexible over time it therefore also seems reasonable to look back into the specific historical circumstances under which it originated.

As I aim to better understand regional culture and its influence on family formation behavior, I conducted qualitative research in the South-German regions of Waldshut and Fürth. To study culture’s influence, I chose both deviant cases in a quantitative analysis. Their fertility rates were poorly predicted by the indicators normally used, such as kindergarten places or the mean income of the population.

Qualitative research in these two regions revealed, first, that regional culture is reflected in specific values and ideas about the family and mother- and fatherhood, and second, that social-milieu members who share culturally defined role models shape the make-up of regional childcare and associative life. In sum, the common mind-sets of social-milieu members, as well as the make-up of regional opportunity structures differ substantially in the two social milieus. Both aspects influence people in their decision-making about children.

Why Waldshut’s fertility rate is much lower and Fürth’s is much higher than expected in light of, for example, their economic situation and the number of kindergarten places can be explained by placing their social milieus in the context of nationwide as well as global, economic, and social developments, such as rising women’s employment and individualization. These influences can sometimes contradict regional cultural norms in social milieus. In Waldshut, for example, the classic bourgeois family role model is not in line with these national developments and the role model of the “working mother,” which is advocated politically. Therefore, regional living conditions for families are unfavorable and Waldshut’s fertility rate is declining. As family role models and living conditions in Fürth are in line with these societal developments, Fürth’s fertility rate is increasing. The study thereby illustrates how differing speeds of social change at the national and regional levels affect regional social phenomena such as birth rates.

Empirical evidence from both cases supports the hypothesis that fertility and gender equality are positively correlated. This result solves an explanatory gap in demographic research as it, on the one hand, predicts low gender equality and high fertility at the sub-national level (Heaton et al. 1989; Snyder 2006; Sobotka/Adigüzel 2002; Spielauer 2005;

Trovato/Grindstaff 1980), while on the other hand ascertaining a negative correlation between both aspects at the national level (McDonald 2000; Oláh 2011; Toulemon 2011). This paper shows instead that low gender equality correlates with low fertility at both levels.

I will proceed as follows: First, I will review existing explanations of national and sub-national differences in fertility rates and show how and why local culture has an effect on regional social phenomena such as fertility rates. Moreover, I will explain why research on regional cultural differences sheds further light on variations in regional fertility rates. Second, I will present the mixed-methods design of my study. Third, I will show how regional cultures in both social milieus affect people in their decision-making processes and how this relates to both regions' unexplained fertility rates. After situating my findings in the context of national social and economic developments, I will ask under what conditions my results apply to national or subnational variations in fertility rates in general. Finally, I will discuss how my results help us better explain demographic behavior and how considering differences in regional cultures helps politicians to design better family policy measures.

## **2 Explanations of regional fertility variation**

Subnational variations in regional fertility rates are often explained either by differences in regional conditions or by the social environment having a differing influence on individuals. The former explanatory model is widespread in the literature, which is mainly due to the strong influence of the theoretical framework of family economics (Becker 1981). It has provided the underlying assumptions for the first group of explanations and is still very prominent in explanations of regional fertility variation. However, this framework has difficulties explaining the influence of the social environment – reflected in regionally differing cultural norms – on people's decision-making. The framework's assumption of objective rationality helps in explaining how rational individuals make their decisions based on costs and benefits resulting, *inter alia*, from structural conditions. This can be childcare opportunities or local housing conditions; factors that are often discussed in demographic research. However, this assumption leaves no space for subjectivity and contextualization. If one further assumes, as is often done, that rational individuals share similar preferences, individuals are highly independent of regionally differing cultural norms.

Several theoretical approaches have taken the critique of the neo-classical model of man and attempted to integrate the influence of cultural norms into their explanations of social macro phenomena. The macro-micro-macro model of sociological explanation asks how norms frame the decision scenario, thus altering the "logic of the situation," for example, an individual's perceived costs and benefits (Coleman 1990; Esser 1993).



In this model, which has proven to be true, collective phenomena are also seen as the result of aggregated individual action. The value-of-children approach explains decision-making for children by integrating the satisfaction they provide for their parents (for example, Friedman/Hechter/Kanazawa 1994). Declining fertility rates in “developed societies” are then explained by individuals’ decreasing benefit from having (more) children compared to other sources of satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> Here, scholars overlook how cultural norms structure an individual’s decision-making process or constrain the range of opportunities an individual faces. Network theory pursues a similar path: individual actors are assumed to be influenced in their decision-making on whether to have or not to have children by the social networks they belong to (Kohler/Bühler 2001); however, social norms are not assumed to structure their decision-making process. Life course theory (see Elder 2003) or the biography approach to theoretical demography (Birg 1987) add the dimension of timing: the moment within their life course when people choose to have children or take other steps.

However, “it is the nature of the structural arrangements within which they [individuals] act that determines the effect” (Mayntz 2003: 12). Structural arrangements, such as the social context that individuals are embedded in, are an integral part of the process generating social macro-phenomena, but are not explicitly featured in the micro-macro part of the model (ibid.). Therefore, the explanatory power of individual-level demographic theories, such as the approaches named above, remains unsatisfactory when it comes to understanding the role of contextual factors in the generation of social macro-phenomena. These approaches cannot give an answer to the question of how an individual’s embeddedness in a common social context relates to regional social phenomena such as fertility rates.

The focus of research on individual decision-making within the macro-micro-macro model of explanation translates into a vast amount of empirical research explaining regional fertility differences as a compositional effect. In this research it is argued that the composition of a region’s population matters, as individual-level characteristics such as educational level or income are related to individual behavior. Therefore, the regional concentration of individuals who share the same characteristics is an explanation for aggregate regional social phenomena. If, for example, the consumption of drugs is inversely related to income, then a regional concentration of poverty also leads to a regional concentration of drug activity (Dietz 2002). As it is not neighborhood exposure but their individual characteristics that influence people’s tendency to act in a certain way – for example, to consume drugs – a compositional effect is a non-causal neighborhood effect. The direction of a compositional effect on fertility can therefore

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2 With his concept of “competing pleasures” Brentano (1909) gives a similar explanation for declining fertility rates in welfare societies. The decision to have children competes with other personal needs, while at the same time the possibility of fulfilling these needs has increased. Due to the rising opportunities for consumption in welfare societies, and under a cultural norm where children represent high investment, the value of children declines. This results in declining birth rates (ibid.).

change only if the local population's socio-structural composition changes. One source of change in the socio-structural composition is selective migration, that is, individuals with specific reproductive preferences accumulate in a region over time. As individuals with specific characteristics choose to stay or leave a region, the composition of the population, with regard to their characteristics, changes. Proponents of selective migration approaches further argue that individuals with similar characteristics sometimes choose to live in the same suburbs or neighborhoods so that individuals' behavior in spatial proximity is often similar (Huinink/Wagner 1989). In this case compositional instead of contextual effects largely account for social phenomena such as regional birth rates. But although this argument certainly holds for urban suburbs, such strong segregation processes hardly occur in, for example, rural contexts. Kulu (2005) furthermore shows that selective migration only seems to play a role for individuals' behavior in the short term. In the long term, individuals adapt to the behavior of the native population.

Studies of contextual effects adapt the idea of an individual's embeddedness in social structure and its relevance for economic action (Granovetter 1985). Neighborhood or contextual effects arise as an individual's social environment has an effect on his or her intentions or action. As they share specific cultural norms and values, neighbors often share similar role models. This also implies that people in the same neighborhood might have similar norms when deciding about children.<sup>3</sup> Coale and Watkins (1986) discuss local variations in the timing of the demographic transition in Europe and state that regional fertility variation might be explained by variations in regional culture rooted deeply in local history.

Studies on distressed neighborhoods have shown that behavioral patterns are diffused in a neighborhood and thus so when individuals reside in spatial proximity. This diffusion could be because individuals share similar norms, and social mechanisms such as social learning also play a role in an individual's decision-making process for children. These mechanisms could be an important part of the explanation of the social context's relevance for fertility rates.

To sum up, compositional effects arise as people with certain characteristics accumulate in a region. Depending on their characteristics – for example, high income – people's intentions and actions are influenced by local opportunities. This implies that people with the same characteristics only react differently if their local opportunity structures are different. Yet, in the case of contextual effects, individuals' decision-making processes largely depend on the norms and values diffused in their environment.

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3 Here, I regard contextual effects as arising out of influences from one's social environment. However, Kulu (2012) also regards opportunity structures such as the level of urbanization of a region as a contextual effect, which I do not.

While uniform national family policy measures can have a profound influence if compositional effects apply, they can be largely ineffective if contextual effects have a strong influence. As, empirically, both effects happen simultaneously (Kulu/Boyle 2009; Kulu 2013), a multi-causal research approach best explains regional cultural differences. I therefore assume that factors such as the socio-economic composition of the population, the structural conditions in a region, and cultural factors interact. However, in my study of two social milieus in southern Germany, I found that contextual effects have a greater influence on regional fertility than previously assumed, which also sheds light on the potential of family policy measures.

In the relevant research, there are many different definitions of culture. I share both Hofstede's (1980: 9) and Neidhardt, Lepsius and Weiss's (1986: 11) definitions of culture as "collective programming of the mind," which is manifested primarily in values and norms (Hofstede: 1980: 9), or culture as a system of collective constructions of meaning by which man defines reality (Neidhardt/Lepsius/Weiss 1986: 11). Social norms are shared inter-subjectively (Oechsle 1998: 239) and culture cannot be defined on an individual level (Lutz 2013: 16). Both social norms and role models as ideal-typical constructs (Schütz 1971: 5) of an ideal way of life are assumed to be quite stable over time, so that the same person acts similarly in similar situations (Hofstede 1980: 1–2). In my analysis I therefore aim at examining social norms and role models as manifestations of regional culture. While role models have an influence on people's ways of life and their decisions about life events, such as the decision to have another child (Giesel 2007), individuals' actions and their role models are not necessarily congruent.

Examining social norms and values can shed further light on why individual behavior is not determined by, for example, regional socio-economic conditions. Lutz (2013) has explained that decisions are taken in a "normative transformation," an intermediate transformative process in which proximate determinants such as structural opportunities in an individual's surroundings are transformed into fertility relevant behavior.<sup>4</sup> Szreter (1996) argues that individuals learn and transmit social and cultural ideals, as well as gender role models within so-called "communication communities." Here, social reassurance and mutual appreciation within social networks play a major role. The diffusion of social norms within regional social groups is often also explained by the social mechanisms of social interaction and/or the observation of other people's behavior. However, concerning fertility behavior, there is no empirical evidence to indicate that these mechanisms apply here. As both social interaction and mutual observation imply that members of a social group reside in geographical proximity, it is likely that regionally differing mind-sets exist, which are manifested in, for example, regionally differing use of modern contraception or in differing opinions on the desirability of the "modern" family (Montgomery/Casterline 1993).

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4 Ajzen (1991: 179) however explains the nexus between subjective norms and behavior through intentions and states "intentions to perform behaviors of different kinds can be predicted with high accuracy from attitudes toward subjective norms."

While we can therefore induce from empirical evidence that individuals living in spatial proximity seem to have common mind-sets, there has been little scientific research into how regional cultures differ and how such differences are related to social phenomena such as different fertility rates in different regions. One reason for this gap in research could be the bias of demographic research towards quantitative analyses. Although some quantitative researchers have found that regional culture seems to play a decisive role in family formation behavior – for example, if the error term is large and many indicators have non-significant coefficients (for example, Hank 2001) – there has been little qualitative research explaining regional variation in mind-sets. Given the complex nature of the phenomenon, however, regional culture is best examined using qualitative analysis.

For this purpose I apply the concept of “social milieu” in my study which represents a combination of objective characteristics, such as individual adherence to a social stratum, and subjective characteristics, such as an individual’s mentality. As a response to processes of social declassification in the twentieth century, the term ceased to be associated only with distinct social strata and their members’ lifestyles and instead demarcates social groups whose ways of life and thinking are similar. Individuals who are members of the same social stratum can therefore belong to different social milieus. It is their way of thinking and mentality instead of their income and educational level that distinguishes members of one social milieu from those of another. By applying the concept, I take into account both the socio-structural composition of the population and differing mind-sets as they combine objective and subjective factors.

In what follows, I will examine the differing make-up of regional cultures and how people are influenced in their decision-making behavior by their social context. For this purpose, I look at two German regions in a comparative analysis in which culture probably accounts for their fertility rates because the usual indicators provide only a poor explanation.

### **3 Studying regional fertility variation**

As it is reasonable to assume that a mix of cultural and structural factors explain why regional fertility rates differ, I pursue a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative analysis of the social context’s influence is best conducted in regions in which well-known factors, such as the socio-structural composition of the local population and structural conditions, do not sufficiently explain regional differences in fertility rates. In those cases, regional cultural norms most likely exert a strong contrasting influence on family

formation processes vis-à-vis those well-known variables and they are therefore of special interest for the investigation of social context effects. The way in which social milieus influence individuals in their choice of action should be particularly visible here.<sup>5</sup>

This is why I selected regions that in a quantitative regression analysis are insufficiently explained by the “usual suspects.” Because the standard explanations – that is, structural conditions such as workplace conditions, employment opportunities, childcare availability, or the socio-structural composition of the population – largely fail to explain the level of fertility rates in these regions, it is difficult to account for the existence of such cases using existing models of explanation for regional differences in fertility rates. Analysis of these cases can therefore be especially useful in gaining new theoretical insights. As I describe in detail in what follows, I select the most similar pair differing only in their expected fertility rates via a matching procedure.

### Quantitative analysis

To find two outlier cases, I conducted a large N-analysis (LNA) of all counties in Germany, I used an aggregate data set called “INKAR,”<sup>6</sup> issued by the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning. This dataset is unique as it contains information on the structural conditions and the socio-economic composition of the population of all German counties (in German: *Landkreise*). I chose counties as the unit of analysis as they are the lowest level for which data in Germany are sufficiently available (see Magin/Freitag/Vatter 2009: 239). As the literature regards rural and urban ways of life as substantially different, cities were not considered for qualitative analysis. Ogden and Hall (2000: 386) conclude that there exists a “distinctive urban demography.” Therefore subcultures develop in cities rather than in “less populous places” due to the higher number of inhabitants (*ibid.*, see also Kulu 2013). Moreover, the socio-structural composition of the population differs between cities and rural regions; for example, the rate of immigrants is higher in cities than in rural regions. Just as the fertility rates of some immigrant groups are usually higher than the fertility rate of the native population so too is the fertility rate in cities higher (Basten/Huinink/Klüsener 2012; Kulu/Vikat/Andersson 2007: 267). I also concentrated on western German counties. This is due to western and eastern Germany’s differing dynamics in fertility behavior. Since Germany’s reunion in 1989, eastern Germany’s fertility rate has experienced massive

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5 As I am restricting myself to macro-level analysis, I intend to seek patterns on an aggregate level and to find causes for these patterns on the aggregate ecological level. Therefore, I do not aim to account for individual behavior, even though I draw on individual level research for the generation of my results.

6 *INKAR: Indikatoren und Karten zur Raum- und Stadtentwicklung*; an online atlas with maps, charts, and tables on regional living conditions in Germany and Europe (BBR 2011).

changes and is still changing. Furthermore, regional fertility rates differ much more among western than among eastern German counties. This is why I restrict my analysis to western German counties.

After choosing all western German counties for further analysis, I attempted to find stable outliers among them. First, I calculated the mean of all observations for all German *Landkreise* in the years 2003–2009. Within this dataset, I considered those regions as outliers that had much higher or lower fertility rates over several consecutive years than can be explained by the usual factors. In the linear regression model, I then included all structural and socio-structural factors named in the literature as being influential on fertility rates.<sup>7</sup> The model's outliers were those cases in which actual fertility rates differed substantially from those predicted by the indicators; that is, those cases that were more than two standard deviations from the mean.

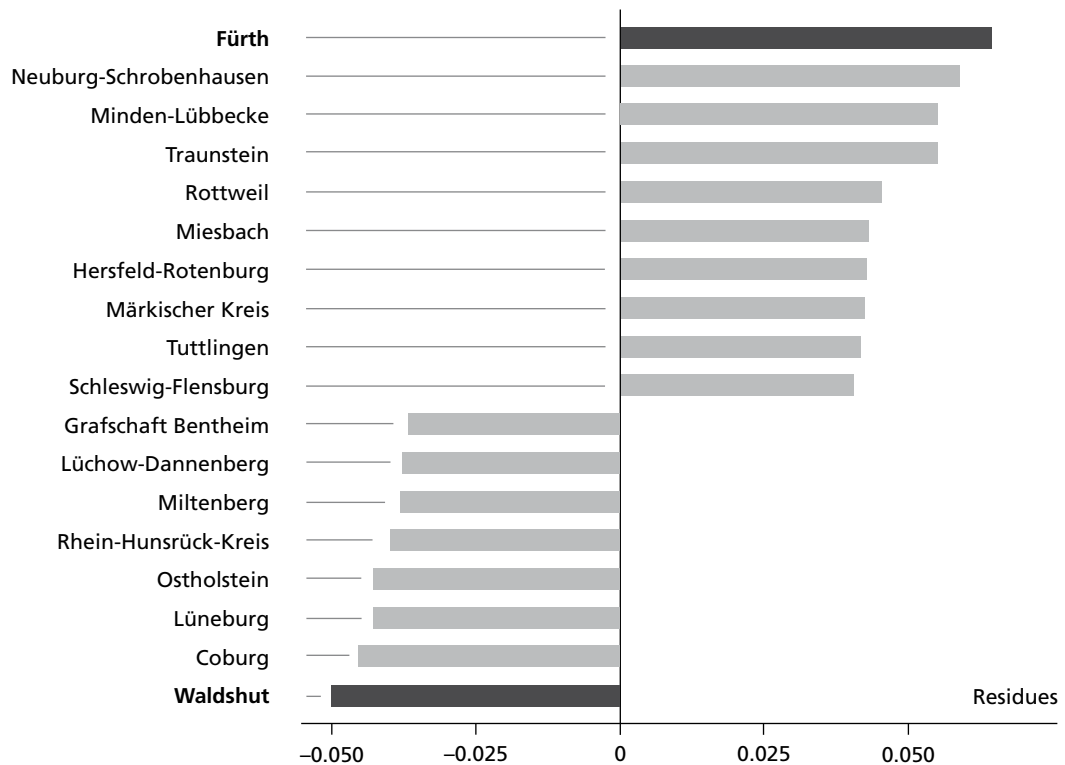
Among all outlier cases I then selected two regions. Studying the influence of two social milieus provides a stronger test of the above-named hypothesis than just examining one case. While the comparability of cases hinges on them being similar, their generalizability depends on differences in one or several dimensions (Rohlfing 2012: 125ff.). Here, both cases are comparable with regard to their spatial position within (southern) Germany and are examined at the same point in time. Furthermore, they are most similar in their structural characteristics and the socio-structural composition of the local population. Selective migration is not relevant as the in- and outflow of migrants are, first, low in both cases and, second, offset one another. However, they differ in one regard: their unexpectedly high or low fertility rate (see Figure 1).

Two cases in which social milieus exert a contrasting influence on family formation processes are especially apt to generalize from. Therefore, interviews and on-the-ground observations were conducted in two regions in which social milieus have a strong, negative or positive, influence on fertility rates. After finding outlier regions, I formed pairs

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7 By choosing outliers from a regression analysis, I am using large-N analysis to detect insufficiently explained cases to provide greater insight by subsequent qualitative analysis rather than using large-N analysis as a method for testing hypotheses. As I included a large number of variables in the model, they partly overlap content-wise. In this case, multicollinearity is present and reporting the sign, values, or significance of the model's coefficients does not make sense. However, the model's high adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.9155 shows, first, that the usually applied indicators provide valid explanations and, second, that structural variables also represent an effect of cultural factors, as I will present later. The regional fertility rate is the dependent variable. My independent variables cover the regional economic situation, the age structure of the population and its socio-economic structure in terms of, for example, the level of education, the public budget and land use of the region, the settlement structure, traffic and structural characteristics, including the living space per inhabitant, and whether it is a university city. The make-up of childcare facilities as well as public budgets provide other important variables.

Figure 1 Outliers exhibiting unexpectedly low or high fertility



Source: Data from BBR (2011).

of most-similar negative and positive cases by a matching procedure. Here, well-known explanatory factors such as selective migration do not explain why their expected fertility rates differ. The two are the southern German counties Waldshut and Fürth.<sup>8</sup>

Research suggests that spatial proximity plays a role for contextual effects, so counties are too large to be regarded as social milieus. By studying aggregate descriptive statistics of all local authorities within the counties of Waldshut and Fürth, I subsequently identified municipalities that are representative for the whole administrative district in terms of their structural characteristics, for example, the unemployment rate and the

8 By using several regional datasets such as INKAR 2011, county datasets of Waldshut and Fürth, and (scientific) publications on those counties (for example, Zauter 2010), I verified that both counties are similar in their structural characteristics and socio-economic composition. While they slightly differ in their population density, the rate of employees subject to social insurance, their divorce rate, and the mean level of education of their population, they are similar with regard to all other indicators including their net population balance, the economic situation of their population, their socio-structural composition, and marriage rate or voting behavior. Statistics and tables are available on request.

socio-structural composition of the population, such as mean age.<sup>9</sup> I therefore studied typical living environments in the municipalities of St. Blasien in Waldshut and Markt Cadolzburg in Fürth.

### Qualitative analysis: Taking into account the social embeddedness of individual action

Identifying the behaviorally relevant characteristics of regional socio-cultural milieus requires better data than those usually available from social scientific surveys. The second step of analysis in the mixed-method design is therefore a qualitative study within the two living environments. In each case, semi-structured interviews and on-the-ground observations were conducted during a one-month period of fieldwork. I also collected and read literature on regional culture and history, analyzed regional data, and collected information on the living conditions of families. As still “little is known about learning mechanisms and the formation of perceptions in respect to demographic behavior” (Montgomery/Casterline 1996: 159) – in other words, as it is not clear how the social context influences individual behavior – I pursued an inductive strategy of qualitative analysis. I therefore conducted semi-structured interviews in which the respondent can decide freely to go back to points already touched upon.

Using a theoretical sampling strategy (Strauss/Corbin 1990), I chose two groups of interviewees: families and experts. Here, I selected family members and experts based on their employment status, educational level, and marital status, i.e., I interviewed parents with a variety of backgrounds in employment status, educational level, and marital status and, for example, single mothers also formed part of my sample. Families are of interest as they not only provide insights into the situational context, but they also shed light on the social processes in which they are involved. They can convey knowledge of their living conditions and the make-up of the social influence in their areas. As fertility is influenced by individuals' past experiences, decisions, and activities (Buhr/Huinink 2014), they have therefore experienced the difficulties families potentially face in their environment. It is on this basis that they decide for or against having more children. As childless couples have not yet gained this experience, their decisions about children are less influenced by their social context. Choosing families rather than childless couples as a group of interviewees is also reasonable as they have high relevance for demographic change. Fuchs (2013: 178ff.) presents ample evidence that Germany's low fertility rate is best explained by the low number of families with more than two kids rather than by its high number of childless women. He points out that while industrialized low-fertility countries, such as Germany, and high-fertility countries, such as the USA, both have a comparably high rate of childlessness, it is the share of families with more

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9 Tables and graphs showing their comparability are also available on request.



than two kids that differs substantially between the two.<sup>10</sup> Understanding why more and more people in Germany are deciding to have two children at most is therefore crucial to understanding contextual effects on the number of children born in a region.<sup>11</sup> I therefore asked parents about their conceptualization of the ideal roles of mothers or fathers and of ideal life patterns. They were also asked about how they perceive families' living conditions in their social environment. Most family members I interviewed were mothers aged between 25 and 45. Both samples are similar with regard to their socioeconomic composition and I interviewed respondents with, for example, differing socio-economic backgrounds.

I also conducted expert interviews to gain insights into their views on general behavioral patterns in their social environments – for example, the different forms of families and the mean numbers of children – and to gather further information on families' living conditions in these environments. I define experts as people who work in an official capacity, for example, in administrative offices, or who use their free time to work with families or children. By being in contact with families in their daily work, experts gain impressions of regionally prevailing ways of life, the usual number of children in families, and of the role models and the lifestyles that are common to the majority of individuals within those regions. Finally, experts are also able to provide information on existing private associations and future projects for families. I also asked for information on changes in the daily lives of families and the problems most families faced in the past few years. Finally, experts were also asked to provide their opinions, for example, on how families combined work and child care.

In Fürth, I conducted fifteen expert interviews and five group expert interviews. Furthermore, I interviewed five parents and conducted two group interviews with parents (see Table 1). As well as observing daily life – for example, in schools and kindergartens – I also took part in local meetings on regional issues and in groups where parents meet, such as toddler groups. These observations were documented. In Waldshut, fifteen expert and five group expert interviews were conducted. I also interviewed ten parents and took part in regional meetings discussing the future situation of families –

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10 Some authors argue that the decreasing number of families with three or more children is one reason for demographic change (Fürnkranz-Prskawetz et al. 2012; Hollstein/Gall 2011).

11 Ignoring childless interviewees could create the pitfall of not knowing why they decided against children and which role the social context played for their non-decision. However, as Keizer, Dykstra, and Jansen (2008: 864) argue, “remaining childless is not the outcome of a single decision not to have children, but rather the outcome of never having made the decision to actually have children.” Of course this is not true for every childless person. However, the authors argue that it is only a small proportion of childless people who express that they do not want to have children at an early age. To draw adequate conclusions from childless interviewees statements on a) whether they will always remain childless and b) whether they have yet taken the decision to stay childless is therefore difficult. My study is restricted to families, so it does not cover the timing of family formation but it can be used to draw conclusions about the timing of extending families.

Table 1 Number of interviews

Interviews	Expert	Parents
<i>Fürth</i>		
Individual	15	5
Group	5	2
<i>Waldshut</i>		
Individual	15	10
Group	5	0

for example, on how they were coping with the declining number of kindergartens in the area (see Table 1). I also visited toddler group meetings and several fairs at which locals meet. Here, too, I documented my observations.

All interviews were transcribed, coded and interpreted. I attempted to identify each social milieu's role models for motherhood, fatherhood, and the family by identifying homologies in milieu members' statements. For this purpose, I applied grounded theory (Strauss/Corbin 1990) and the documentary method (Bohnsack 2010) to reconstruct milieu-specific concepts. While grounded theory helps us to approach the material in an unbiased manner, applying the documentary method helps us to identify shared knowledge within a social milieu. By comparing interviewees' statements, I was therefore able to detect central concepts in role models within each social milieu. In a comparative analysis of both social milieus' role models, I then established a typology in regard to mother- and fatherhood, as well as the ideal family, which I present in Section 4. By abstracting from the actions and motives of individuals I thus (re-)constructed each social milieu's system of meaning and identified ideal types (see Weber [1922] 1982: 191). Both ideal types reflect ideas of normality in each social milieu, which substantially affect families in their daily life.<sup>12</sup> From the characteristics I specified below, I label the social milieu of Fürth "modernized" and the social milieu of Waldshut "traditional."

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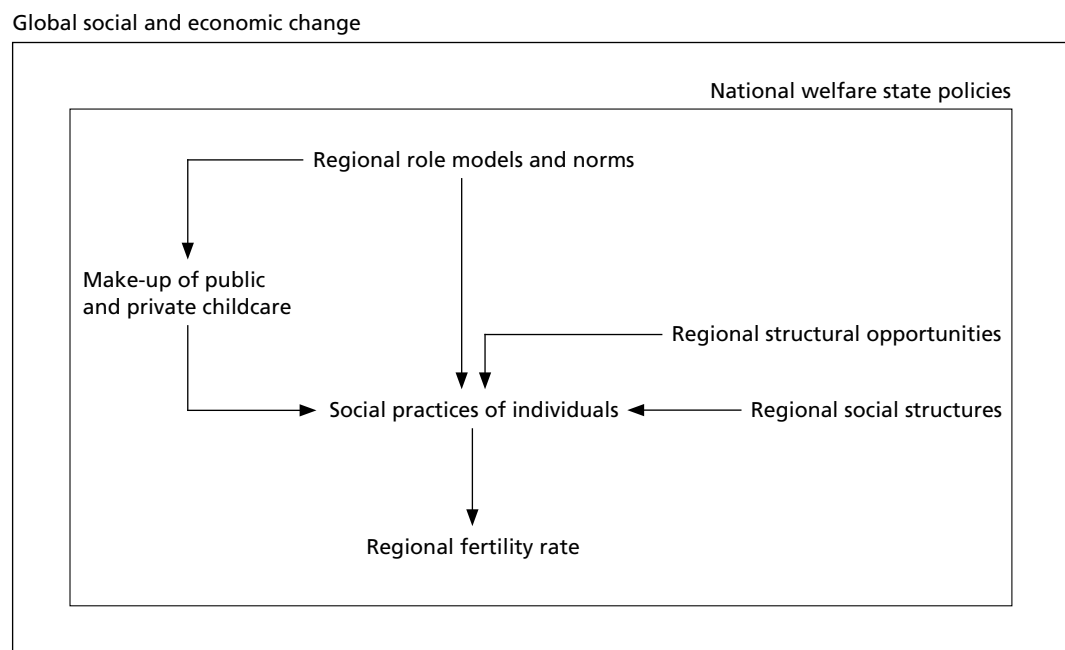
12 Please note the potential difference between typical behavior in a group and the judgment of its appropriateness, i.e., *conceptions* of normality and typical behavior (Marini 1984).

#### 4 The modernized and the traditional social milieu

Actors do not behave or decide as atoms outside a social context, nor do they adhere slavishly to a script written for them by the particular intersection of social categories that they happen to occupy. Their attempts at purposive action are instead embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations. (Granovetter 1985: 487)

Why is the fertility rate in Waldshut much lower than expected, while Fürth's fertility rate is much higher? To answer this question, I analyze each social milieu's respective character. This is done, first, by describing widely shared role models in those milieus and, second, by illustrating how these affect public childcare and associative life in each county. Social-milieu members share similar ideas concerning the role of the mother, the father, or the ideal family, and the make-up of opportunity structures in childcare arrangements and associative life is surprisingly congruent with those ideas. Differences in childcare arrangements can range from differing lengths of kindergarten opening hours to whether a kindergarten offers breakfast and/or lunch or whether pick-up times are organized flexibly. Parents therefore face different opportunity structures which are hard to grasp in a comparison of quantitative indices, such as the number of kindergarten places in an area. Both cultural norms and opportunity structures affect families in their decision-making behavior regarding further children. I define the effect through ideas on people's decision-making behavior as being direct, and the effect through the social

Figure 2 The embeddedness of regional social contexts in national welfare state institutions and global trends



context's opportunity structures as being indirect (see Figure 2). In Figure 2, I also illustrate the multi-level explanatory approach for regionally differing fertility rates that I pursue in this paper. Regional social contexts with specific role models and norms are embedded in a national welfare state context and are exposed to global social and economic change. However, those global trends or national institutions meet different regional contexts. Furthermore, regional structural opportunities also structure individuals' decision-making processes, and regional social structures, which are reflected in the socio-economic composition of a region's population, matter for the explanation of regional fertility rates. At the end of this section, I therefore situate the milieu's role models and the make-up of its opportunity structures in the context of national social and economic change. This provides the background for understanding both social milieus' unexpectedly high or low fertility rates.

### Role models in the traditional and modernized social milieus

Role models are people's normative notions of an ideal way of living. Below, I describe the motifs and common themes that I deduce from my qualitative data. In my description of role models in both social milieus, I distinguish between people's ideal role model in regard to the family, motherhood, fatherhood, and partnership. I also identify who is perceived as being primarily responsible for children's upbringing: the family or the state. An overview of people's ideas of normality in each social milieu, thus their ideas of normatively desired action, is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Key characteristics of the modernized and traditional social milieus' role models

<i>Role model</i>	<i>Traditional social milieu</i>	<i>Modernized social milieu</i>
<b>Family</b>		
Gender-specific division of labor	Male breadwinner model	Egalitarian
Way of living	Married couple	Both married and unmarried couples accepted
<b>Motherhood</b>		
Employment	Part-time or no employment	Full-time or part-time
Solicitousness	Out-of-home care rarely acceptable	A mother's role and out-of-home care are reconcilable
<b>Fatherhood</b>		
Employment	Full-time	Full-time or part time
Solicitousness	Specializes in gainful employment	Combines family care and gainful employment

Beginning with the traditional social milieu of Waldshut, its family role model corresponds in most regards to the classic role model of the bourgeois family. A gendered division of labor and the male-breadwinner model is regarded as desirable. It is also widely expected that two heterosexual parents are needed to form a family and that couples should be married for life. Getting a divorce is considered unacceptable.

Most social milieu members do not believe that being a mother is compatible with gainful employment. Instead, a mother should, ideally, concentrate on her children's well-being, invest most of her day in childcare and be involved in local associations. Public childcare is therefore a supplement, not a replacement for a mother's childcare. Mr. Wolf's<sup>13</sup> statement illustrates this widespread view in the social milieu.

Mr. Wolf: They [the working mothers] are certainly also viewed somewhat skeptically – in the sense of: “But you've got enough money”; “With three kids, you've got enough to do”; “Do you really have to?”; And even when it's just for four hours: “You leave your husband alone with the children and he has to drop everything so that you have four hours to do something.”

A father working full-time is the norm and it is considered unusual if he spends much of his time on childcare and housework.<sup>14</sup> Parents should live with their biological children; a patchwork family is not considered normal. To describe this milieu, I chose the name “traditional social milieu” in line with Max Weber's ([1921] 1972: 124) description of the traditional type of legitimate political leadership, domination, and authority. In this type, the authority of a ruling regime is largely tied to tradition or custom. The status quo is therefore legitimized by stating that it “has always been that way.”

Public childcare aims first and foremost at promoting children's wellbeing, not at supporting mothers in reconciling family and work. Milieu members in the traditional social milieu do not conceive of childcare for children under three as an alternative to childcare provided by the biological mother. The state should not intervene in the private sphere of the family; rather, the family has to be protected from the state's interference. Therefore, many parents themselves are not prepared to make extensive use of public childcare, as the following statement by Ms. Bach illustrates.

Ms. Bach: I really must say, for me, from a mother's point of view, I wouldn't do it. It wouldn't be necessary for me, (a) financially but also (b) emotionally because to hand over my child at such a young age would personally not be something for me.

In the modernized social milieu of Fürth, an egalitarian partnership is more and more often considered desirable, which generally means that both parents are gainfully employed. The male-breadwinner model is no longer regarded as the only desirable model

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13 Every name used in this paper is fictional and does not correspond with any interviewees' real name. Verbatim quotes were translated into English.

14 Even though some fathers take the minimum period of parental leave, both parents often maintain their traditional division of labor during this period: while the mother cares for their children and performs housework, he performs tasks such as repairing the family's home or car.

of family life. Although mothers usually work less than their partner, it is quite unusual for a mother not to work at all. In contrast to Waldshut, in Fürth housewives such as Ms. Graf believe their way of living is exceptional. This is, for example, apparent by milieu members sometimes asking her how she fills her time. Being a good mother and gainfully employed are not mutually exclusive categories in this modernized social milieu.

In this social milieu environment, people do not necessarily expect a couple to be married if they have children. Thus, marriage is no longer the only accepted form of partnership. Single parents or people living in a patchwork family report that they were not treated any differently by their social environment than parents in a marriage. Most milieu members in Fürth thus equally accept very different types of family form, such as married couples, unmarried couples, single parents, or patchwork families. Teachers in a county school stated that they did not even know the marital status of their pupils' parents and did not care about the difference.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, public associations such as *Alleinerziehenden Netzwerk Fürth*, *Fürther Bündnis für Familien* and *Mütterzentrum Fürth* sustain single parents in their daily life.

The family is no longer regarded as a private matter so that parents in this social milieu ask public authorities for full-day childcare and are at the same time willing to take advantage of an extensive offer of public childcare. Being a good mother does not mean that one cannot make use of extra-familial help in childcare, so performing the role of a good mother is less time-consuming than in the traditional social milieu with its above-described bourgeois model of motherhood. Attending all parents meetings at school and in the kindergarten and preparing cakes for parties are not necessarily only a mother's task. As it is considered normal for both parents to work,<sup>16</sup> it is widely accepted that fathers should also perform tasks, such as fetching their children from kindergarten or school. A father ideally invests a similar amount of time in childcare and housework as his partner. Ms. Graf's husband is, for example, complimented for changing his baby's diapers. In order to be regarded by other social milieu members as a good parent one does not have to spend a lot of money on new children's clothes and children's equipment. Instead, children's second-hand-clothing and equipment are widely accepted. As role models of the family, the mother and father are conceived of as egalitarian; I characterize this milieu as "modernized." I will now illustrate how their different conceptions of parenthood, a mother's and a father's role, and the dense social ties between its milieu members are echoed in the fabric of both social milieus' social life and associative structures.

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15 At the same time, Ms. Hoffmann, manager of a public child guidance office, observed that many people easily find a new partner after splitting up. She sees this as a widespread "willingness to make a commitment" (in German: *Bindungswilligkeit*).

16 Ms. Wolf, manager of a kindergarten, explains mothers' gainful employment by stating that most mothers feel more satisfied if they work than if they stay at home.

Table 3 Characteristics of the social life and public childcare of this study's modernized and the traditional social milieus

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Modernized social milieu</i>	<i>Traditional social milieu</i>
<b>Associations</b>		
Associative life	Associations take over responsibility for children's upbringing	Associations leave responsibility for children's upbringing to parents
Topics treated in associations	Current problematic issues of families	Preserves local traditions
<b>Social life</b>		
Initiatives supporting families	Many	Few
Civil engagement	Provides support for families and takes on responsibility for children's upbringing	Focuses on preserving traditions Does not aim at taking responsibility for children's upbringing
<b>Supportive actors</b>		
Single milieu members	Large commitment for families	Large commitment in local associations
Associations	Commitment for families	Commitment to preserving traditions
Companies	Low engagement with families	Low engagement with families
<b>Make-up of public childcare</b>		
Duration	Whole day	Half-day
Meals	Provides lunch	Does not provide lunch

### The make-up of opportunity structures and associative life

During my stay, I observed that regional childcare facilities – for example, the make-up of kindergarten places and associative life – were shaped differently and were surprisingly congruent with widespread role models. I call this the *indirect effect* of local social milieus. How milieu members shape regional facilities will become apparent in the evidence on the makeup of both social milieus' associative life, the characteristics of social life in each milieu, and the key supportive actors for families (see Table 3), as well as the details on the make-up of childcare opportunities.

In the modernized social milieu, it is not only the family but also milieu members who are actively committed to families, either alone or together as a group. Initiatives such as volunteers helping school children learn to read originated not only because of external impulses but also because of the dense social ties and high social capital of its members that make this milieu's social life fertile soil in which further initiatives can originate and grow. As new residents can easily get in contact with other inhabitants in their

daily life, their social capital is best characterized as “bridging.” According to Putnam (2000: 23), bridging social capital binds socially heterogeneous groups together, while “bonding” social capital connects socially homogeneous groups. Therefore “bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity” (Putnam 2000: 23). For an example of the modernized social milieu's social life, let us listen to Ms. Pfeiffer, a mother of two children, who reported that her neighbors spontaneously offered to help her with childcare and housework when she settled down in this social milieu:

Ms. Pfeiffer: I think that too because our neighbors here offered it [their help], didn't they. The neighbors, the other neighbors, the neighbors opposite. Interviewer: Really? That's great. And do they actually do it? Has it actually happened? Ms. Pfeiffer: Yes, we were away a lot. The plants were watered. Or the neighbor regularly looked in and reassured us: “I'll keep a look out.” Something like that. Ms. Thomas [a neighbor], said, “If the baby comes during the night, I'll come around.” I think they all do it and care about the children too. That's the way it is.

Ms. Pfeiffer's statement reflects the culture of responsibility social-milieu members sustain. It is not only public childcare facilities that help families but milieu members and families themselves are actively committed to childcare. As an example, parents themselves organized a bus to fetch their children from home to kindergarten and back, which was financed by campaigns that they organized.

Another example of how milieu members help out families is a project called *Schülercoach*, in which volunteers support pupils who have problems at school. Volunteers also help children in reading or prepare youngsters for job interviews. Most of these projects were initiated by individuals and then others joined in. These organizations are successful because, on one hand, they are accepted by most milieu members and, on the other hand, parents in this social milieu readily take advantage of this offer and more and more social-milieu members join them as volunteers. Due to these common initiatives, social ties within the social milieu have become more and more dense and it has become easier to initiate new projects. The family-friendliness of the social milieu therefore results from a high density of social ties, the high social capital of milieu members, and the widespread culture of self-responsibility that many milieu members share. People's commitment to families and the social milieu's dense social networks fit with Putnam's (2000: 346) observation that high social capital and individual commitment are also conditions for the existence of high-quality municipal services:

On the supply side, the performance of representative government is facilitated by the social infrastructure of civic communities and by the democratic values of both officials and citizens. In the language of economics, social capital lowers transaction costs and eases dilemmas of collective action. Where people know one another, interact with one another each week at choir practice or sports matches, and trust one another to behave honorably, they have a model and a moral foundation upon which to base further cooperative enterprises. ... When community involvement is lacking, the burdens on government employees – bureaucrats, social workers, teachers, and so forth – are that much greater and success that much more elusive.



Milieu members' dense social networks and their individual commitment also affect the make-up of regional childcare. When, as early as 1994, parents requested day-care facilities for schoolchildren, the councilman reacted promptly and introduced an all-day nursery. A first crèche followed in 2006, long before the federal *Kinderförderungsgesetz* was introduced in 2008. This law required that around 30 percent of all day-care places in each county be for children under three.<sup>17</sup> To realize the project the county's mayor reports that he did not receive extra financial help. Instead, the county gave priority to building new crèches over other projects. Nowadays, all kindergartens and crèches in the community are open the whole day and provide lunch. In 2012, children over three were cared for on average nine hours a day from Monday to Friday, while the under-threes were cared for the whole day in three crèches and two kindergartens. Of course, many grandparents still take care of their grandchildren. Intra-familial support has therefore not declined as a consequence of the extension of public childcare and more and more non-family members are supporting families in daily life.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, social life in the traditional social milieu is characterized by small-scale networks in local communities and these are only loosely connected with one another. Banfield's (1958) diagnosis of social life in the Italian city of Montegrano provides a nice illustration of this social milieu's social life. In Montegrano there were not many "community building institutions" and strong family bonds in nuclear families persisted. Due to this, family members and other community members did not develop a sense of community. As social networks among community members were not adequately developed, the population did not demand public services. In Montegrano, as in the traditional social milieu, the family was furthermore conceived of as the main provider of childcare, so that social milieu members' commitment to families was rather low, while the cohesion among family members was high.

Of course, associations also form an integral part of the traditional social milieu's social life. Yet the content of associative life in the two social milieus differs. Local associations' work is best described as "preserving tradition." Many people are actively engaged in music associations practicing traditional local music, for example, *Tschätter* as a traditional local style of music, and in bands where they play in traditional costumes (in German: *Trachtenkapelle*). Furthermore, some associations also keep alive the local tradition of *Fasnacht*, which is a form of carnival. The "Rural Women's Association" (in German: *Landfrauen*), an association which is widespread in Germany's rural areas, also plays an important role in this traditional social milieu's associative life. However, associations supporting parents with regard to childcare are rare.

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17 Federal Ministry for the Family, Seniors, Women, and Young People: <[www.bmfsfj.de/BMFSFJ/kinder-und-jugend,did=118992.html](http://www.bmfsfj.de/BMFSFJ/kinder-und-jugend,did=118992.html)>, September 30, 2014.

18 This observation contradicts conservative thinkers Riehl and Le Play's fear of a "crowding out" of the family as a consequence of an extensive welfare state (see Kohli 1997: 284).

Another characteristic of Waldshut's associative life is the abundance of associations that are geographically proximate to each other and which deal with similar topics. Here, the high density of local social networks and people's bonding social capital become apparent. Although demographic change means that municipalities have fewer and fewer inhabitants, there sometimes are still several fire brigades, music, or sports associations in one municipality. This corresponds to the dense social networks within one municipality and yet only rarely is there contact between individuals from these distinct, self-contained parts of the community. These dense social networks reflect widespread bonding social capital in this social milieu and, in contrast to Fürth, there are fewer associations that foster contact between individuals who live in different municipalities or parts of municipalities.

Being in an association makes it easier to make contact with other milieu members in the traditional social milieu, while new immigrants who are not actively taking part in associative life have a much harder time getting in contact with the indigenous population. As most people make new friends in local associations and are engaged in at least one of those associations, it is much harder to integrate into the local community when one is not a member of an association. Making new friends by meeting other family members in kindergarten and school is therefore less probable. Ms. Schwarz has lived in a small village in this county for several decades. However, she still has not become well acquainted with many of the indigenous population. She herself states that this is due to her not participating in local associations. Other occasions where she could meet natives are rare, she says, as only few natives take part in, for example, family education courses that are offered by the county. It is mostly family members who supervise children rather than local associations or non-family members. In contrast to the modernized social milieu, there are only a few initiatives for families, such as mother-child groups or toddlers groups. This coincides with the widespread view that the family is a private sphere, in which only family members should intervene.

The make-up of day-care facilities in the traditional social milieu also reflects the social milieu members' ideas on the family, that is, the conceptions of those who play a central role in their design, for example, due to their position as county officials. Most day-care facilities in this county provide half-day care. Ms. Kraus, mother of three children, states that what the public kindergartens offer is not extensive enough to help mothers combine their childcare with part-time employment. Furthermore, many do not offer lunch. This corresponds to the widespread view that it is rather the family, the mother in particular, and not public childcare facilities, who should care for children. On the other hand, officials do not expect there to be much demand for childcare facilities as social milieu members are usually less inclined to use these formal alternatives instead of the childcare provided by family members. As communities have to meet the requirements of the federal *Kinderförderungsgesetz* for more childcare arrangements, officials in this county preferred to engage child minders than build new kindergartens or crèches. One mayor, Mr. Jung, is even reported to have offended two mothers by his plans to establish a crèche in his municipality. Both stated that their children were being

“taken away from them” by public institutions such as a crèche. Furthermore, Ms. Becker, mother of one child, stated that she perceived it as unusual if families made extensive use of public childcare or babysitters. She therefore picks up her child long before the kindergarten closes. In this social milieu it is mostly the mothers, not the fathers, who fetch their children from kindergarten.

The family-friendliness of regional companies does not differ substantially between the two social milieus. In the modernized and in the traditional social milieu, interviewees stated that it is rather their family and/or social environment who sustain them in their daily life than companies’ family-friendly structure.

To sum up, both social milieus provide examples of how role models of the family have an impact on the social climate in a social milieu and structural opportunities. In my field-work it became apparent that role models are disseminated in local social milieus through the social interaction of individuals. Here, local associations play an important role as they provide an opportunity to exchange ideas. Furthermore, strong ties between social-milieu members are key in the dissemination of role models, as these spread more easily between members who share similar ideas and who are socially close to one another (Sutherland 1968). Another social mechanism for the dispersion of role models appears to be observing the behavior of other social milieu members.

### Why regional social milieus matter for the explanation of regionally differing fertility rates

[T]he norm complexes regulating work and those regulating family life display stark inconsistencies. ... [B]ut in the absence of successful provisions ensuring better compatibility, the weaker parties – often women – are expected to absorb the tensions and strains. (Rueschemeyer 2009: 214)

The next step in my analysis is to explain how regional cultural norms matter for fertility rates. Cultural norms on motherhood, fatherhood, and the family differ substantially between the two social milieus and, as I have shown, affect public social life such as regional associations and the make-up of childcare. These differences provide an answer to the question of why fertility rates in Waldshut and Fürth are higher or lower than would be expected according to the usual indicators. When the two social milieus are situated in the context of nationwide or global economic and social developments, such as rising women’s employment and individualization, it becomes apparent that both provide different social contexts and opportunity structures in regard to these unilateral developments. This leads to their unexpectedly high or low fertility rates.

For many years, more and more mothers in Germany have decided to work: while 63 percent of all mothers were employed in 2000, by 2011 this number had grown to 72 percent of all mothers (Hüther 2013). We do not need to ask whether this is a story of push or pull, of women being pushed into employment by growing partnership instability and economic constraints, or being pulled by the prospect of personal liberation (Streck 2009: 21). The important part here is that working mothers meet different conditions in the modernized and traditional social milieu. In the traditional social milieu, working mothers are confronted by highly contradictory demands from the work and family sphere: while they themselves and their social milieu support a traditional division of labor in the family, in which the mother has a much greater role to play with regard to childcare, they encounter similar exigencies concerning men and women in the work sphere. Being stuck between highly contradictory exigencies affecting themselves as mothers and as employees, working women such as Ms. Becker therefore often get the impression that they are “never doing it right.”

She says that “it doesn’t matter what you do as a woman: if you stay at home or go to work, you’ll be criticized.”<sup>19</sup> Here, the conservative family role model contradicts national developments and the politically advocated role model of the “working mother.” If familial cultural norms therefore promote low gender equality – i.e., a traditional division of labor within the family – while high gender equality is the dominant social norm in the work sphere, individuals struggle to handle these contradictory normative exigencies. As the decision for children is taken in an intermediate transformation process (Lutz 2013) guided by cultural norms and the living conditions in a social milieu, social milieu members are affected negatively in their decisions concerning children in the traditional social milieu. Waldshut’s fertility rate is therefore lower than expected.

McDonald (2000) gives a similar explanation for the low levels of fertility in several advanced countries, such as Italy and Spain: the levels of gender equity which exist in different social institutions are inconsistent. While the levels of gender equity in institutions that deal with people as individuals, such as education and market employment, are high, the levels of gender equity applying in institutions that deal with people as members of families, such as government transfers, services and the family itself, are low. Summing up, contradictory exigencies on individuals in family and work spheres are key to explaining why Waldshut’s fertility rate is much lower than expected by the well-known factors, such as their economic situation and the number of kindergarten places.

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19 The feeling of being torn between those contradictory exigencies is what Pfeil (1975) calls “an unevenly accomplished emancipation” (in German: *ungleichmäßig vollzogene Emanzipation*). Working mothers in the traditional social milieu face highly contradictory normative demands from both spheres. Their ideal role model of a mother differs markedly, as it has many more conservative features, from how they perceive themselves as mothers in real life. Meanwhile in the national public discourse working mothers are favored over housewives.

In the modernized social milieu, however, we observe that gender equity is high in both spheres: an equal division of labor is part of this family role model. Role models and living conditions in the modernized social milieu therefore fit those societal developments better. It is therefore much easier for mothers to remain financially and socially independent from their partner and be a good mother at the same time. I also examine a positive relationship between fertility and women's employment in the modernized social milieu, as other researchers observe at the national level (Brewster/Rindfuss 2000). This social milieu not only provides favorable structural opportunities for families but many milieu members also engage in children's supervision and associations support families in daily life to make families' living conditions favorable. This is why Fürth's fertility rate is higher than expected.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, I posed the question of how regional cultural differences are related to varying fertility rates in Germany. While different structural opportunities and varying socio-structural compositions of the population are naturally part of the explanation of regionally differing fertility rates, I have shown that cultural differences also play a substantial role. I examined the character of two social milieus and argue that people are substantially influenced by their social context in their decision on whether to have children. Social contexts influence people in two regards: first, through the content of cultural norms, such as family role models and role models on mother- and fatherhood diffused in a social milieu and, second, milieu members who share those role models shape regional opportunity structures, such as public social life and the make-up of childcare facilities. People are furthermore often only willing to take advantage of such public childcare that fits their own and their social milieu's role models. Social milieus therefore exert a direct influence because cultural norms govern the complete process in which the determination of fertility takes place, and an indirect influence through the differing make-up of childcare facilities, social, and associative life. The make-up of a social milieu's social and associative life is, however, not the result of the goodwill of social milieu members. Instead, regional social milieus are stable over time and resistant towards change, having their origins in specific regional historical conditions (Hank 2003).

I conclude from my analysis that the fabric of each social milieu explains why actual fertility rates deviate from expected fertility rates in both regions. In Waldshut, mothers face largely differing demands from the modernized sphere of their working environment versus the traditional sphere of the family; this tension is much lower in Fürth. Waldshut's fertility rate can therefore be explained by contradictory social norms in the spheres of work and family, which families find difficult to reconcile in their daily lives. Fürth's higher fertility rate than expected is explained by less contradictory social norms in both spheres. My analysis therefore shows why existing knowledge on the in-

fluence of factors such as structural opportunities on people's decision-making with regard to children cannot "fully explain (in a deterministic way) the causality that results in a certain number of children" (Lutz 2013: 15). I furthermore exemplify that divergent or even contradictory values and ideals exist inside the cultural system and culture is not forcibly a coherent entity (see Pfau-Effinger 2005).

Is it because of different regional cultures that social policy measures, such as the introduction of the family allowance in 2007 in Germany, fail to have a uniform effect? My evidence suggests that unilateral national family policy measures cannot always have the intended effect, as individuals evaluate those measures against the background of their internalized role models and ideal lifestyles. The expansion of childcare for the under-threes in Germany, which is progressing at highly differing speeds throughout the country, could provide an example here. Where whole-day care for kids above three years of age is less well established, there are also few day-care facilities for the under-threes (Fuchs 2013: 114). This coincidence and the regionally differing speeds of extension of childcare facilities are probably related to the influence of regional cultural differences. Existing research approaches are not able to explain why family policy measures do not have the same effect, as they still ignore the nature of the contextual arrangements within which individuals act.

One result to be drawn from my analysis is that family policy measures need to be adapted to regional needs and are best implemented by local officials. National policy measures can, however, accompany the national process of social and economic change by supporting individuals, especially women, who live in modernized family forms such as single mothers and divorced women. However, this would mean that political parties have to face the facts and that public opinion would need to adapt. Those who advocate the traditional model of the family are not going to be able to turn back the clock in regard to long-term societal trends.

By showing that cultural differences not only exist between cities and rural areas, but that rural areas also differ substantially in their cultural norms, this paper also goes beyond the traditional urban/rural dichotomy in the literature. My analysis further shows that existing knowledge on the relationship between the level of gender equality and national fertility rates can be transferred to the subnational level. The patterns of local variation in fertility and the level of modernity discovered in this paper resemble well-known contrasts in national fertility patterns of Scandinavian versus southern European countries. This clearly suggests that the level of modernity and fertility stand in a negative relationship at both the subnational and the national level. However, this paper shows how different spatial fertility rates emerge and explores different spatial fertility rates and explores the social mechanisms responsible for the interdependence of couples' reproductive preferences within each milieu. Future longitudinal research should now examine whether the once negative and now positive relationship between women's employment and fertility rates in several countries (Brewster/Rindfuss 2000)

can also be observed at the subnational level in other countries. More research is also needed on the exact size of social milieus to examine in what regard administrative spatial boundaries actually represent social boundaries.

Although both social milieus are singular cases that are unlikely to be found again, some of their characteristics might be transferrable to other regional social milieus in Germany. Here, research suggests that the traditional social milieu might be more common within Germany. Bertram (1992), for example, shows that traditional role models are shared by most of the population in northern and southern Germany. Kaufmann (2005) explains Germany's low fertility rate by contradictory normative exigencies in the spheres of work and family, which very much resemble conflicts mothers face in the traditional social milieu.

Another field of research concerns how cultural norms in social milieus change over time. Here, the study of individual thresholds as conditions for the diffusion of behavior in a milieu could lead to promising results.

Instead of concentrating on correlations, demographic research should in future take into account the moderating influence of the normative social context individuals are embedded in. To provide comprehensive explanations, it should therefore provide multi-causal explanations, which take into account structural opportunities, the socio-structural composition and cultural conditions. Multi-causality also calls for less deterministic, thick descriptions in future demographic research. By applying less "clean models" and conducting more "dirty hands" research the field would certainly gain fresh and innovative perspectives on fertility behavior.

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