The Determinants of Fertility in the Second Polish Republic
A Macro Level Analysis

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Introduction

The debate about whether fertility diversity in interwar Poland was a typical East-West division and which socio-economic and cultural determinants were crucial for shaping this situation began in the 1930s (Glikson 1994). Contemporary authors as well as later studies attributed differences in fertility to the unequal economic development in a rather speculative manner. This explanation coincided with the contrast between the industrialized and agrarian East-West divide (e.g., of the Vistula River, and backward “Poland B,” in the east). Consequently to the cases of Czechoslovakia, Hungary or Bulgaria (Faláva et al. 1990; Boter 1995; Bela 2002; Rouza 2012) the fertility of the Polish population has not been thoroughly studied.

Most notably, the population of the Second Polish Republic shows remarkable internal heterogeneity in both fertility itself and its potential determinants. Thus, research on the interwar demography of Poland could add important arguments to the more general discussion on the causes and course of the historical decline in fertility in Europe.

Research Problem

Due to the lack of studies on the spatial distribution of fertility decline in interwar Poland, the basic objective of this research is to identify and describe fertility patterns on the sub-national level. Secondly, the levels of fertility are scrutinized in relation to a set of determinants that roughly corresponds to the classical adaptation vs diffusion discussion (Carlsson 1966).

Since the analysed population is characterized by a remarkable heterogeneity of household arrangements and family forms (Sztobyński 2015), the question arises about the role of family systems in the fertility transition. More complex family forms could hinder the development of the new fertility trends (Mason 2001).

Finally, the geographical context is taken into account following the intuition that over a vast area of study the meaning of the specific variables and their effect on fertility levels can differ. This applies most notably to the phenomena that could serve as proxies for the diffusion processes.

Data and Methods

All the data used for the study was extracted from the official publications of the Main Statistical Office of the II Polish Republic (Gliński Urząd Statystyczny [USG]) to measure the analysed phenomena on the sub-national level in 241 districts (powiats). The dependent variable of GFR represents the local fertility levels while the set of independent variables reflects their determinants according to the adaptation and diffusion perspectives, as well the family systems. Two modeling approaches were used and compared to determine the main fertility decline drivers in the analysed population – a standard OLS procedure and Geographically Weighted Regression. GWR is a statistical technique that allows for variations in relationships between predictors and outcome variable over space to be measured within a single modelling framework (Fotheringham et al., 2003; Wheeler & Páez, 2010).

Due to the high variability in the sizes of districts an adaptive bandwidth was chosen as it provides optimal size for the local regressions based on the density of spatial points across areas and ensures sufficient (and constant) local information for each local calibration (Fotheringham et al. 2003; Genin et al., 2013). Relying on the optimisation procedure for the Gaussian kernel function with both CV and AIC approaches, the number of 20 nearest neighbours was chosen to bear the highest weights in the local models.

The distribution of the GFR represents the spatial heterogeneity of fertility decline (Figure 1). The apparent but simplistic East-West divide finds partial confirmation in the LISA analysis, although some of the districts diverge from that pattern. The global Moran’s I reaches a highly significant value of 0.51. Surprisingly, the potential traces of the legal, administrative and cultural differences, that could be attributed to the period of partitions, are hardly present in the GFR levels, as the within-partition Theil Index of inequality equals 0.024 and the between one is 0.005.

The West-East divide of the country can be traced among many economic and social aspects of the analysed population (Figure 2), especially those that reflect the levels of modernisation (Percentage of population in mining and industry, Percentage of Literates), but also cultural one (Percentage of Polish speaking population) and the one proxying the households systems (Percentage of multifamilial farm units). On the other hand, some variables oppose this traditional geographic distribution – most notably the percentage of woman active on the non-agricultural labor market, the percentage of votes for social parties and the percentage of the Jewish population (as a religious denomination).

Results

The results of the OLS regression (Table 1) yields significant and substantial effect for both structural (Percentage of population in mining and industry, Percentage of Literates) and cultural (Percentage of Polish speaking population, Distance to the nearest big city). The strong and positive impact on the household complexity on the GFR is only marginally significant. These results however have to be treated with caution as the model residuals are highly spatially autocorrelated. The GWR results confirm the doubts about the potential bias in the linear model. Both, interquartile ranges and F statistics prove the non-stationarity of some main variables. Interestingly, these are mostly of the diffusion related characteristics (Percentage of votes for social parties, Distance to the big city, Percentage of Polish speaking population). The significant local parameter estimates from the GWR model are presented on Figure 3.

Conclusions

The general distribution of fertility in interwar Poland follows an East-West divide, with two contrasting classes – the high fertility in the East (Wielkopolska and Polesia) and low fertility in the West (Wielkopolska and Łódź regions). Despite the fact that both structural and cultural determinants turned out to significantly affect fertility levels, those associated with diffusion processes are more context-specific. While the effects of modernisation differ, locally only in magnitude, the ones related to secularisation, spread of innovation and communication are more polarised, driving the fertility levels to opposite directions depending on the geographic settings.

Surprisingly, the very effect of the household systems on fertility decline seems, at most, mediocre. Research on the contemporary populations shows a superiority of the GWR method over linear models when analysing sub-national fertility over large areas (Ips and Pirani 2006; Vollai and Billari 2010). This study proves that it is also true for historical populations undergoing their first demographic transition.

References


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