

Socioeconomic Development and Changes in Life Values and Family Formation Attitudes

Introduction

This paper is motivated by an important argument in the demographic literature which posits that cultural and social systems sustain differentials in values and attitudes related to family, marriage, and fertility. The modernization theory suggests that socioeconomic modernization brings the objective capabilities that enable people to make free choices of their lives; thus, the transition in values and attitudes emerges. This theory emphasizes on the predictable direction of changes in values and attitudes under the socioeconomic modernization. The purpose of this study is to select and highlight some specific elements of this theoretical approach—values and attitudes pertaining to the emergence of a new family system in a society with rapid socioeconomic transformation. The analyses examine the influence of social changes on women's life values and attitudes toward family, marriage, and fertility in Taiwan. This paper integrates life-course approach and modernization framework to investigate if there are predictable trends in the life values and family formation attitudes of Taiwanese women and to explore if the trends can be predicted by the changes in socioeconomic structures.

Data and Analysis Method

We use data from two cross-sectional surveys of Taiwan Family and Fertility Study conducted by the Health Promotion Bureau of Taiwan in 1998 and 2005. The surveys were based on the same probability sampling design to represent the female population in Taiwan. The 1998 Survey interviewed 3,557 women between the ages of 20 to 59 and the 2005 Survey interviewed 4,086 women aged 20 to 49. These two surveys provide repeated measures of values and attitudes concerning family, marriage, and fertility. The pooled data of these two surveys provide us an excellent opportunity to examine the changes of values and attitudes over time along period and cohort dimensions. We apply OLS regression analysis in this study to examine the impact of social changes on women's values and attitudes.

Measurements

Life values

The respondents were asked to rate the importance of nine things that many people value. The nine important values are: being financially secure; not being disliked by people; having fun and enjoying life; being close to your spouse/family; having companionship or not being lonely; having a sense of accomplishment or doing things well; being remembered and cherished after you die; having a happy family; and continuing the family line. In addition to rating each of the nine values from very important, important, not so important, to not important at all, the respondents were asked to choose the two most important values. We examine both rating and ranking of these life values.

Family Formation Attitudes

(1) Desirable ages at marriage for men and women:

The respondents of the 1998 and 2005 surveys were asked, “What do you think is the best age for a girl to get married these days?” A similar question concerning the best age for a boy to get married was also asked in these two surveys.

(2) Marriage attitudes:

The respondents were asked to express their opinions about “Married people are happier” and “Getting married is better than remaining single.” For each statement, a four-point scale ranged from one to four is used to represent the answers for strongly disagree (one), disagree, agree, and strongly agree (four). The average of these two item-scores is used as an indicator of pro-marriage attitudes.

(3) Preferences for the number of Children and the gender of children:

We use the Coombs scale to measure the preferences for the number of children (IN scale) and the gender of children (IS scale). The respondents were asked a series of questions on preferences for family size and sex composition of children. The preference scales are ranged from 1 to 7 with higher number to represent increasing bias for larger family size and male children.

Predictors

The measurements of the individual experiences in socioeconomic changes are listed as the following.

(1) Farm background: the father's farm or non-farm occupation.

(2) Formal education: the highest educational level completed by the respondent.

(3) The first job: whether she worked outside the family.

(4) Marriage status: ever married or never married.

(5) Mass media exposure: frequencies of reading newspaper and magazines, and frequencies of watching TV.

(6) Urban residence: whether living in the city at the time of interview.

In addition, birth cohort and survey year are used as temporal markers in this study.

Preliminary Results

An earlier study examined data from the 1976 Value of Children Survey and reported that when respondents were forced to choose between the nine life values, financial security, a happy family, and maintaining the family line were the three most important life values of Taiwanese women. Using the data from two recent surveys, this study finds that financial security and having a happy family continuously stay in the top three important values; and enjoying life --instead of continuing the family line-- is ranked as one of the three most important values of life by the contemporary women in Taiwan. While having a happy family remains in the list of three most important life values, we observed its rank as the most important life value declines among women of later survey and more recent cohorts. On the other hand, the value of financial security is enduring over time. In addition to the change of life values, we also observe the changes in the traditional family formation attitudes. The data demonstrate the trends in the desires for later ages at marriage for women as well as for men among respondents of younger cohorts and later survey. The period and cohort trends in preferences for smaller family size and more balanced sex composition of children are also found. We do not find a clear pattern of change in pro-marriage attitude across cohorts, but the downward trend in pro-marriage attitude is apparent between two surveys.

Later, through regression analysis, we will test if there are important effects of women's experiences in socioeconomic modernization on the changes of these values and attitudes. We expect to find that significant parts of the temporal trends of life values and family attitudes are attributable to women's modern socioeconomic experiences.