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Family ideals in an era of low fertility

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Taking stock of individuals' perceived family ideals is particularly important in the current moment given unprecedented fertility declines and the diversification of households in advanced industrial societies. Study participants in urban China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, the United States, Italy, Spain, and Norway were asked to evaluate vignettes describing families whose characteristics vary on ten dimensions. In contrast to previous studies that focused on a single dimension, such as fertility ideals or gender roles, this holistic vignette approach identifies the relative importance of each dimension. Multilevel regression analysis reveals both expected and unexpected findings. Parenthood remains a positive ideal, but the number of children does not matter once other family dimensions are considered, a potentially important finding in light of conventional wisdom regarding the two-children ideal. When evaluating families with at least one child, respondents tend to positively evaluate more traditional arrangements, including valuing marriage relative to cohabitation and, particularly, divorce. Also, in addition to financial resources, good communication between immediate and extended family members, as well as maintaining respect in the larger community, are highly salient attributes of an ideal family. Notwithstanding some important cross-national differences, egalitarian gender roles and avoiding work–family conflict are also valued positively. Overall, even as the study reveals some notable variations between societies, respondents across countries identify similar components of an ideal family.

family ideals | low fertility | factorial survey experiment

Significance

This study conceptualizes and empirically measures family ideals across eight low-fertility countries that differ significantly in their institutional settings and cultural contexts. Marriage, children, and income are held up against several other dimensions captured in a set of family vignettes. Whereas childlessness is always considered a negative attribute of an ideal family, respondents did not prioritize families with multiple children over one child families. Good communication among family members and grandparents is highly valued, as is enjoying respect in the local community. Though there are important differences across countries, we also show that respondents think similarly about the relative importance of family domains, thereby demonstrating that family ideals are rather uniform across industrialized countries.

Although the family continues to serve as a fundamental unit of social organization, family patterns have changed dramatically in advanced industrialized societies. This is commonly referred to in the literature as the second demographic transition (SDT). Inspired by Inglehart (1, 2), Van de Kaa and Lesthaeghe (3) argued that fundamental shifts in values and a new focus on self-realization have weakened the position of the traditional family in industrial societies. This ideational shift is reflected in low fertility rates, the growing popularity of cohabitation and single-person households, increased rates of divorce and re-partnering, and a growing proportion of children born to nonmarried couples and single parents (4–8).

There are, however, important variations in these trends: Cohabitation, births outside of marriage, and single-parenthood are conspicuous in Western contexts but less visible in Asia (9). The pace of fertility decline also varies markedly, even between "lowest-low fertility" countries where the total fertility rate is below 1.3 (10–14). Given the posited role of ideational change in generating rapid and varied family change across industrial societies, this study examines perceptions of what constitutes an ideal family in multiple culturally distinct, low-fertility societies. Variation in family change across social and cultural contexts raises a set of pertinent questions. First, what are the perceived characteristics of an ideal family and their relative importance? Second, to what extent do perceptions of family ideals differ across societies that vary foundationally in cultural traditions, social and political institutions, and labor market structures? And finally, how do the findings regarding ideals correlate with actual individual demographic behavior (micro) and country-level trends (macro)?

The central difficulty when conceptualizing an ideal family derives from its multidimensional nature. How can we incorporate multiple family characteristics into a unified conceptual framework to better understand the relative importance of different family attributes, including partnering, childbearing and childrearing, various material constraints, the division of domestic work, and family and career obligations? To illustrate the challenge, we can start from the established concept of fertility ideals. This concept is well known and has been empirically evaluated in several comparative surveys, where individuals are asked about the number of children they consider ideal (for them personally or for families in general) (15–17).

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Although traditional survey research identified a general consensus around the two-children ideal, there are important limitations to this approach. First, traditional survey questions force respondents to state a single ideal number of children (e.g., one or two or three children), thus masking potential variation in the strength of such preferences. Second, because fertility ideals or preferences are not asked in direct relation to other dimensions of family life, the importance of fertility cannot be established relative to a host of other relevant family dimensions, including the division of labor within the family, career aspirations, financial resources, and the possibility of extended family support (18–21). Reported fertility ideals, in short, depend on respondents' implicit tradeoffs with other dimensions of family life, including material and social constraints (22).

Relatedly, parental investment in children's success matters in important ways. Whether supporting children's educational opportunities or engaging in direct wealth transfers, parental resources are instrumental for children's economic and social advancement and subsequently, for the maintenance of inter-generational inequality (23–25). Significant material investment in children, however, influences other choices that parents make, including decisions about their own careers, reallocating resources away from their own individual pursuits, and choices about residing near extended family or in particular neighborhoods if school quality is a concern. Although income and wealth may matter independently, the specific ways in which resources are allocated reflect how families prioritize multiple, and sometimes competing, goals and needs.

The problem remains that we do not know the relative importance of the various components that together comprise an overall picture of an ideal family. There is, to the best of our knowledge, no systematic comparative analysis of the theoretical and empirical implications of considering ideal family attributes holistically. Instead, there are extensive studies of specific elements, such as partnership arrangements (i.e., marriage, cohabitation, or divorce), gender roles and the division of labor, childbearing, and so on. There is, for example, a robust literature seeking to understand why individuals and families today are having fewer children compared to prior generations (e.g., ref. 26). The same can be said about trends in union formation and dissolution (27–29). These studies, however, are generally silent regarding the relative importance or value attached to fertility desires in relation to partnership arrangements or the constellation of other interrelated choices that families regularly make.

A clear recognition of the multidimensionality of family ideals is necessary to illuminate the tradeoffs families make, while providing a better understanding of how the mechanisms governing micro-level family decisions scale up to partially explain macro-level trends in family behavior. These considerations may vary across societies as tradeoffs are ultimately mediated by socioeconomic and institutional contexts. A family may, for example, decide to invest more resources in fewer children, in order to maximize the impact of limited assets. Child advancement and the goal of inter-generational mobility would then help explain the downward trends in fertility rates observed in advanced capitalist societies where hyper-competitive educational systems and family resources profoundly shape children's outcomes (30–32). Similarly, in societies where norms of gender specialization remain prevalent, beliefs about mothers' primary responsibility to ensure children's social and emotional development may justify the traditional division of labor within families, thus leading to lower levels of female labor force participation (33, 34).

The present study represents the first comprehensive exploration of the multidimensional characteristics of an ideal family across several countries. We defined family ideals over ten factors, motivated by classical theories of family behavior, and, in December 2021, conducted a factorial survey experiment (FSE) consisting of family vignettes with respondents from urban China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, the United States, Italy, Spain, and Norway. These countries were selected to ensure institutional and cultural variation as well as to incorporate differences in low fertility: Singapore and South Korea are just at or below 1 child per woman; Italy, Spain, Japan, and China are around the threshold of lowest-low fertility of 1.3; and the United States and Norway are above it. Importantly, the sampled cases differ along several relevant structural dimensions, including welfare policies (more generous in Norway than in the United States or Asian countries), income inequality (relatively low in Norway and much higher in China), and kinship ties, reputational concerns, and gender norms (more traditional in East Asia compared to Europe).

All respondents were exposed to six vignettes, each describing a different heterosexual couple and family characterized by random variations in the ten factors. Respondents were then asked whether the vignette described a family they considered to be successful, with ratings on a scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree).

We ran two separate experiments because we could not combine scenarios that involved having no children with dimensions concerning how the family made investments in their children or with scenarios including a divorced couple (see *Materials and Methods* for details). Experiment 1 included vignettes describing couples who were either married or cohabiting and did or did not have children. The vignettes in Experiment 2 were limited to families that had at least one child but included the possibility of divorce and the additional dimensions of children's educational aspirations and financial support. Descriptions of all factors are provided in Table 1. Because the six vignettes were nested within respondents, who in turn were nested within countries, we fit random intercept models with three levels to the data. Below, we first report results from models based on pooled samples across all eight countries. We then report findings from parallel models constructed from country-specific samples.

Results

Main Effects—Pooled Estimates of Eight Countries. Fig. 1 displays results from the pooled analysis for the first experiment. Estimates represent the average change in the rating of a family depending on the varying level of particular attributes, with zero representing the reference category (e.g., married couple in the case of union status). *SI Appendix*, Table S3 includes all coefficients from the multilevel linear regression models. Fig. 1 demonstrates that marriage is valued more than cohabitation. Further, childless families are considered less ideal than families with at least one child. Importantly, however, we do not find a discernible gradient with respect to the number of children beyond one. That is, families with two or three children are not valued more positively than families with only one child. Also, perhaps predictably, household income matters, with lower-than-average income families receiving lower scores.

Individual arrangements within the family also matter, with respondents valuing egalitarian gender roles over a situation where women bear the double burden of contributing to household income and having primary responsibility for domestic work. Interestingly, avoidance of work–family conflict for men

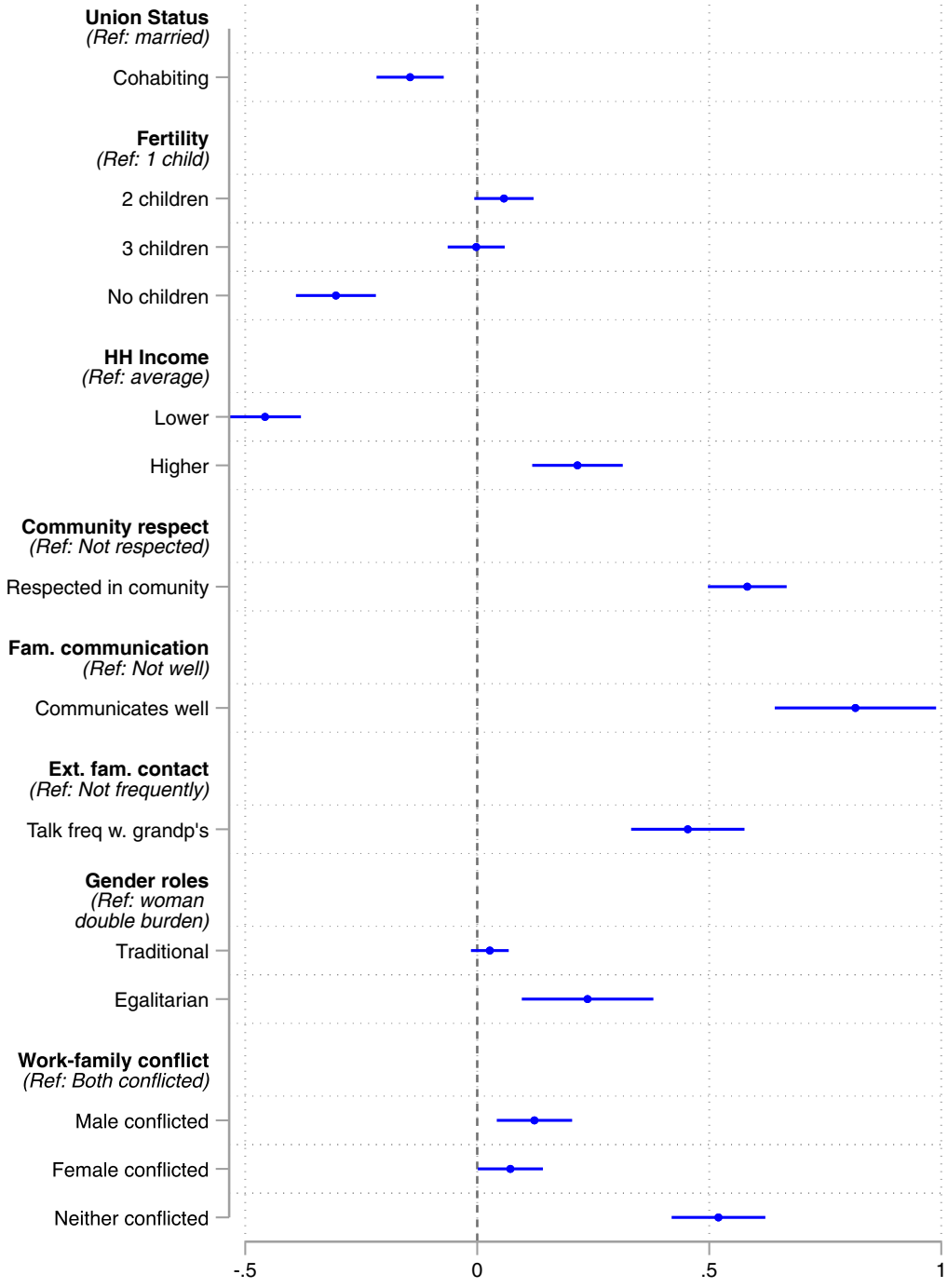

Fig. 1. Family ideals pooled sample—Experiment 1 (incl. "no children").

and women is prioritized more than the gender role dimension; that is, the particular work–family arrangement. Relational aspects feature prominently when individuals evaluate families: Good communication among immediate family members is considered the most important attribute. But also, frequent contact with grandparents, along with maintaining respect in one's community, is among the most highly valued features of an ideal family.

With these findings in mind, we move on to Experiment 2 (limited to families with at least one child), where we explore the possibility that educational aspirations for children and the related burden of financially supporting them alter respondents' views of an ideal family. Fig. 2 shows that divorce is a highly undesirable trait and cohabitation is also viewed negatively relative to marriage. Respondents evidently value traditional partnership arrangements more when a child(ren) is present and additional dimensions related to children's academic development are considered. It is crucial to highlight, however, that, as in the first experiment, the number of children does not change the evaluation of an ideal family.

The introduction of additional dimensions in Experiment 2 is likely to change the relative importance of other factors. Unsurprisingly, families that expect their children to obtain at least a bachelor's degree are rated higher than families that expect their children to graduate only from high school. Financially planning for children's futures is also valued positively

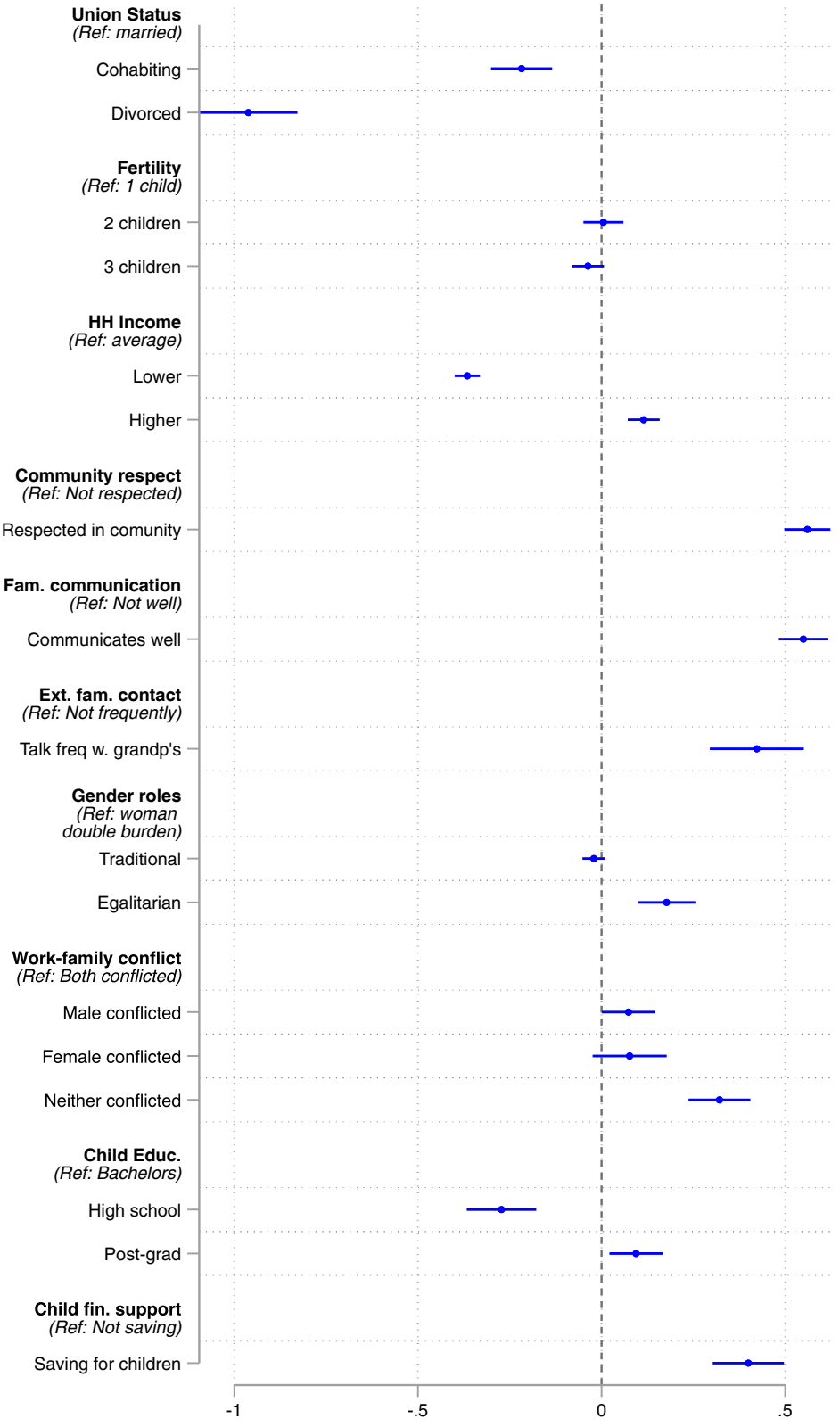

Fig. 2. Family ideals pooled sample—Experiment 2 (excl. "no children").

and to the same extent as communication within the family, frequent contact with grandparents, and being respected in one's community. Although still preferred over the situation where both men and women face conflicts balancing work and family, Experiment 2 revealed that in the presence of children, low work–family conflict for both parents was prioritized relatively less. We speculate that when primed about children's expected educational attainment and the responsibility to financially support them, respondents are more open to the possibility that some work–family conflict is inevitable.

Effects by Country. Figs. 3 and 4 report estimates by country for Experiments 1 and 2, respectively (model coefficients provided in *SI Appendix*, Tables S4 and S5). While results from the country-specific analysis mirror those of the pooled analysis for the most part, there are notable differences between the countries for some factors. In the first experiment, cohabitation is penalized in most of the Asian countries (except China), whereas there are no discernible differences between marriage and cohabitation in Europe and America. This pattern reflects the relative normalization of cohabitation in the West compared

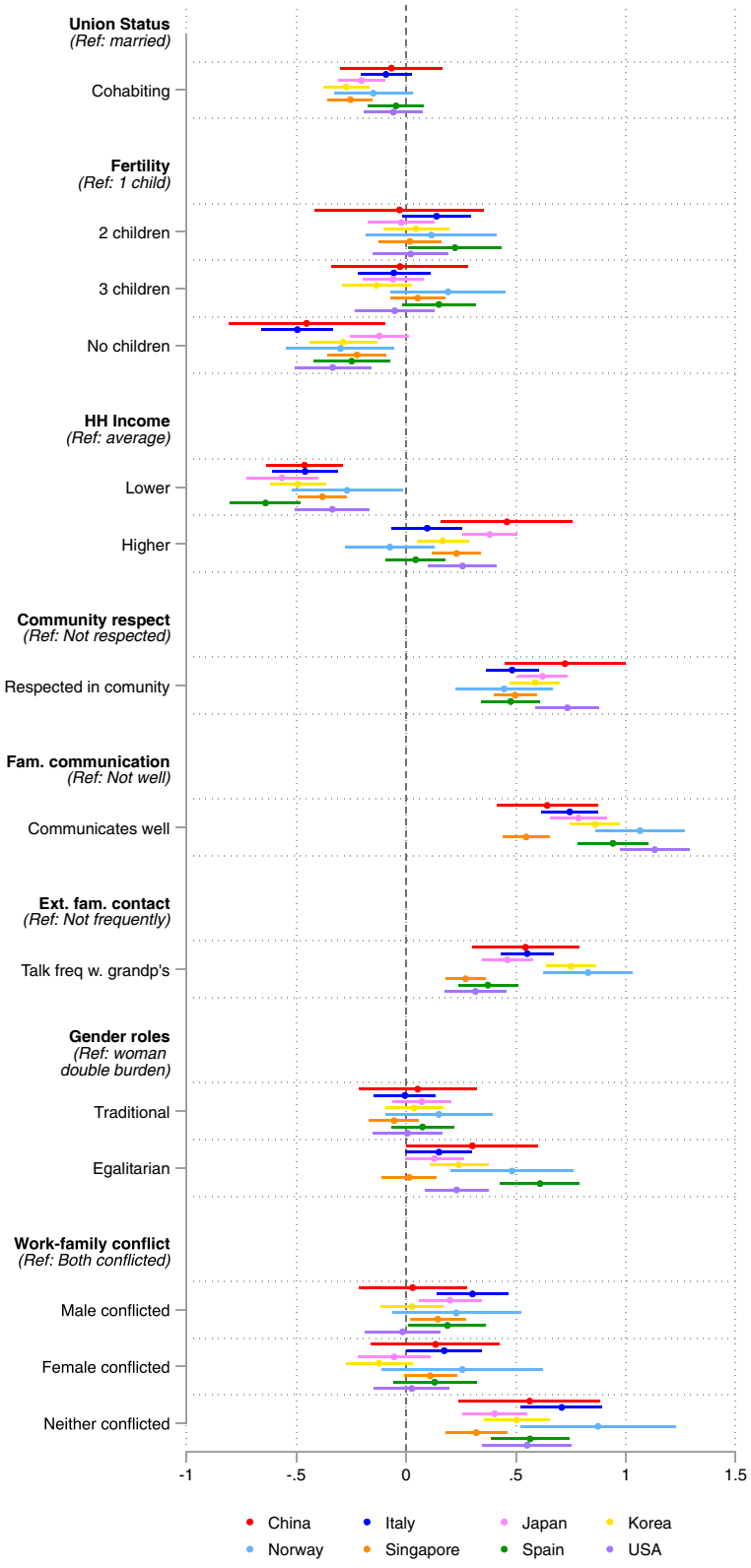

Fig. 3. Family ideals by country—Experiment 1 (incl. "no children").

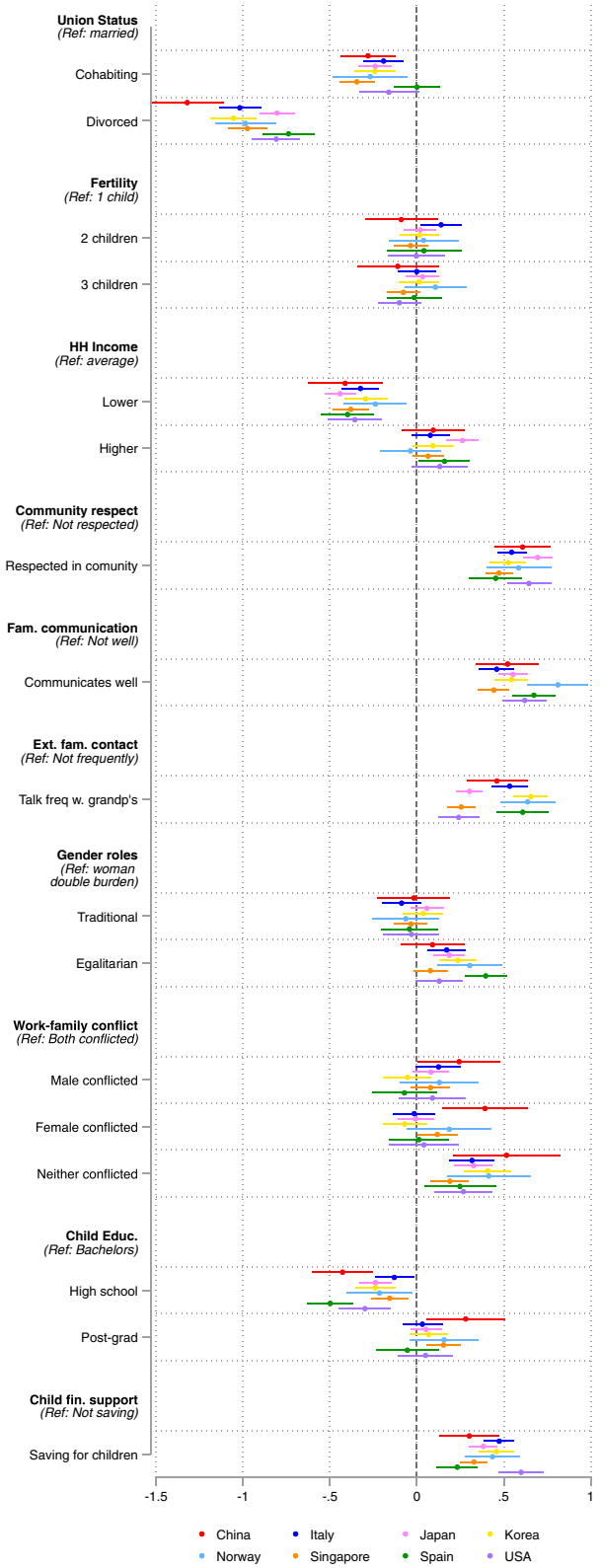

Fig. 4. Family ideals by country—Experiment 2 (excl. "no children").

to Asia where cohabitation is commonly understood as a short-duration stepping stone to marriage (30, 35–39). Also, even as lower-than-average household income is universally regarded as undesirable, Fig. 3 shows that families with higher-than-average income are rated more positively in every context except Europe (Italy, Norway, and Spain). The country-specific findings for Experiment 2 are generally similar, with some variations across countries. Cohabitation is penalized now in all countries except for Spain, compared to Experiment 1 when cohabitation was viewed negatively mostly in Asian countries. Divorce, importantly, is consistently viewed as the most undesirable family characteristic in all countries.

Notwithstanding these differences, our analysis reveals remarkable similarities across national samples. Overall, parenthood is always a valued aspect of an ideal family, but the actual number of children does not matter. Also, in all cases, relationship quality among immediate family members, frequent communication with grandparents, and respect in the community are among the most important attributes of an ideal family. Finally, below-average household income is evaluated negatively in all contexts and, if families have at least one child, children's educational attainment and saving for children's futures are universally valued traits.

Discussion

Recognizing that expectations for family life taken for granted in previous generations have less sway over family choices today, this study assessed the traits associated with ideal families in multiple national contexts. Family decisions are always made in the context of multiple competing demands, goals, and constraints. Departing from the convention of analyzing a specific family dimension in isolation, an approach that obfuscates implicit and necessary tradeoffs, the factorial experimental design allows us to assess the relative importance of different family characteristics in relation to each other.

Our holistic approach to evaluating family ideals sheds light on long-standing discrepancies in the literature. A large body of scholarship is concerned with understanding the gap between the ideal number of children and completed fertility (19, 20, 22). Our vignette study found that parenthood remains a valued family attribute. We did not, however, find that the number of children matters for what constitutes an ideal family. Although our study is not able to distinguish whether respondents were attributing ideals to the general public (e.g., generalized norms) or stating personal preferences, our findings provide additional insights into the two-child ideal commonly derived from traditional survey questions (16). Our experiments clearly show that individuals value multiple family attributes, which may conflict with each other when resources are limited. The relative indifference about the exact (ideal) number of children may result in couples, on average, opting for only one child in order to enhance some other family features. This explanation is consistent with observed fertility trends, which are significantly lower than what the traditional two-children ideal would suggest. Even in Norway, known for strong family support and egalitarian gender roles, there is no discernible difference when it comes to the number of children in an ideal family, which is in line with the recent fertility decline observed there (the Norwegian total fertility rate in 2022 stood at 1.42).

This study helps to explain the poor record of policies aimed at closing the gap between ideal and actual number of children and boosting total fertility rates more generally. The intervention that our findings suggest focuses attention on a holistic understanding of family formation in advanced industrial societies. Our results suggest that fertility decisions are not made independently of other priorities, such as a fair division of labor within the family, egalitarian gender roles, quality of relationships among family members, and the general respect families command in the larger

communities in which they are embedded. Furthermore, in line with this holistic approach, we argue that many of these challenges are relevant for union formation. Because past scholarship on East Asia has shown that declines in fertility among married couples have been much smaller than declines in total fertility, and parenthood outside of marriage is still rare, more effective policies in those countries might seek to facilitate marriage by supporting housing, work–life balance, and stable employment (30, 40, 41). We note, however, that our focus on families in this study precludes insights regarding evaluation of emerging nonfamily arrangements (e.g., solo living and lifelong singlehood) associated with low fertility in many countries.

Our findings are also consistent with arguments central to the SDT theory about the ideational shift toward self-realization and the increasing importance of the quality of individuals' lives (3). New competing demands necessarily alter the considerations of couples contemplating parenthood and it is notable that the role of children and marriage when defining an ideal family seems to be weaker today. Again, parenthood is idealized but it is not among the most important attributes, and greater numbers of children do not matter. Furthermore, although studies have found that cohabitation and divorce are now normalized in Western societies, compared to East Asia where some stigma around nonmarital partnerships remains (38, 42, 43), we found that marriage is still valued in all countries except for Spain. But while divorce is highly penalized, the relative prioritization of marriage over cohabitation is small in Western countries, even when demands related to children are considered.

Reflecting the emphasis on the quality of life and self-realization, we found that gender roles matter (44), especially as they relate to achieving a desirable work–life balance (45). Further, healthy communication with extended and immediate family members, in addition to broader social goals such as commanding the respect of the larger community, is highly prioritized.

Notwithstanding some cross-country differences, the overriding narrative that emerges from this study is the widely shared valuation of specific family attributes. That said, the juxtaposition between the rather striking similarities we found in regard to family ideals and the notable divergence in some demographic trends across industrialized countries suggest that ideational shifts are not the only drivers of family behavior. For example, we found that country-contexts matter for other material dimensions, most notably household income. Families with lower-than-average household income received lower ratings across all cases, but families with higher-than-average incomes are not rated better among respondents in Italy, Norway, and Spain. This is perhaps not surprising given that welfare support is relatively more extensive in Europe compared to Asia and the United States (46). These findings suggest that although ideals are shared across industrialized societies, the calculations governing the tradeoffs between different family dimensions are likely to vary depending on local economic, social, and institutional configurations.

Materials and Methods

Research Design. This study consists of an online survey that included a FSE in which respondents were presented with vignettes of families with different characteristics. The survey was implemented in urban China, the United States, Norway, Italy, Spain, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore. Combining the advantages of surveys and experimental design, FSE has been increasingly used to better understand the multidimensional aspects of individuals' values, goals, and decision-making processes (47, 48). There are at least three advantages of using FSE to analyze family ideals in this study. First, the experimental design ensures that respondents' characteristics are independent of the dimensions of the vignette they are asked to evaluate. As a result, the effects of varying family dimensions on individual ratings can be interpreted as causal. The complete control over vignette characteristics also ensures a higher level of internal validity compared to traditional survey methods. Second, respondents in FSE studies are asked to evaluate vignettes that vary along multiple dimensions. This has the advantage of allowing us to test various combinations, including some which occur only rarely in reality (49). Third, the multidimensionality of the FSE reduces concerns about respondents providing socially desirable answers because the variations across vignettes make it relatively more difficult to identify the purpose of the study (50).

Survey Design. The instrument is a population-based online survey, which was conducted from December 2021 to February 2022 by Kantar (except in Singapore where Toluna was used). Both Kantar and Toluna are leading international survey companies with extensive experience in each of our sampled countries. They maintain large national online panels by employing various recruitment methods such as e-newsletter campaigns, opt-in email, co-registration, social media, as well as both internal and external affiliate networks to ensure representative population coverage. In this study, a stratified quota sampling based on age and gender was used for each country: One fourth of the sample consists of women aged 25 to 39, one fourth is men of the same age, one fourth is women aged 40 to 50, and the last fourth is men of the same age. We also over-sampled by race and ethnicity in the United States and in Singapore.

The survey experiment was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards of Bocconi University, Princeton University, University of Pennsylvania, and National University of Singapore in October 2021.* Before participating in the study, respondents are informed about the research, procedure, duration, and compensation of the study and that participation was voluntary and that information would be published in an anonymous form. Respondents were also given the contact information of Bocconi Institutional Review Board (IRB) before they were asked to consent. Upon reviewing and agreeing to the informed consent form, participants first responded to the questions related to their demographic and socioeconomic information, before moving on to review six vignettes, and finally to questions about their partner, parents, and children (see *SI Appendix* for detailed order of survey questions). We ordered the survey in this way to avoid priming respondents with information about their own family.

We initially recruited 22,224 participants across the 8 countries but dropped 156 participants living in rural China (4.8% of Chinese recruits) and 109 participants in Singapore who reported their ethnicity as "Other" (2.9% of Singaporean recruits). We also deleted 1,818 respondents (8.27%) who gave identical responses to all six vignettes they reviewed. The original sample included around 2,500 individuals per country, with a larger US and Singapore sample ($N = 3{,}500$) and smaller Norway sample ($N = 750$). The final analytical sample consists of 20,141 respondents and 120,846 ($20{,}141 \times 6$) respondent-vignette observations.

We conducted a pilot study as well as a series of quality checks before implementing the survey to the full sample in each country (e.g., duplication of IP addresses, survey speedsters, attention check). Post-stratification probability weights based on gender, age group, education level, and race (for Singapore and the United States) were constructed using the most recent census data in each country as benchmarks. The sampling weights were used in all analyses in this paper. After weighting, the distributions of key sample characteristics–gender, race, age group, and education level–aligned closely with population distributions in each country's census data. This confirmed that our sample is generally representative of the corresponding population segments in each country, except for China as the sample was only recruited from urban areas.

Below, we briefly describe our sample after applying post-stratification weights to match the corresponding population segments in each country (see *SI Appendix*, Tables S1 and S2 for details). After adjusting for sample weights, 36.1% of the Japanese participants, 49.5% of the Singaporean participants, 45.6% of the Korean participants, 27.4% of the urban Chinese participants, 47.9% of the Norwegian participants, 25.9% of the Italian participants, 46.2%

*Bocconi University (ref. FA000246), Princeton University (ref. 13955), University of Pennsylvania (ref. 849862), and National University of Singapore (ref. 2021-297-V1-03092021).

of the Spanish participants, and 43.7% of the American participants obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. Monthly household income was adjusted to a three-person household in euro value, and it varies between 2,180 euros for Spain and 7,379 euros for Singapore. The average age in our weighted sample ranges between 37.2 y in the United States and China to 39.8 y in Italy; 71.6% of the participants in urban China vs. 39.3% in Italy were married, and 69.3% of the participants in urban China vs. 32.3% in Japan had child(ren). Excluding those who were childless, the average number of children who respondents had ranged between 1.33 in urban China to 2.18 children in the United States. The number of children ever born (up to the survey date) in the sample varied between the average of 0.60 in Singapore to 1.70 in the United States.

Experimental Design. Within the online survey, we conducted a factorial vignette experiment (programmed in Qualtrics) where each vignette describes a hypothetical family profile comprised of eight or ten randomly assigned factors. In all vignettes, we kept constant the age of the couple at 45 y. Respondents were randomly assigned to view a set of six vignettes and after each were asked "Based on this description, to what extent do you agree or disagree: This describes a successful family." on a scale ranging from 0 (the least successful) to 10 (the most successful). Each hypothetical family profile was constructed by randomly combining different levels of the following ten family characteristics: 1) union status, 2) number of children, 3) household income relative to the average in the respective country, 4) whether the family is respected in the community, 5) communication in the nuclear family, 6) communication with extended family, 7) gender division of labor, 8) work–family conflict, 9) child(ren)'s expected educational attainment level, and 10) saving to support children. The weighted means and SDs for the dependent variable for each country sample are reported in *SI Appendix*, Table S1, and the distributions of scores for the dependent variables for Experiments 1 and 2 are reported in *SI Appendix*, Fig. S3.

We conducted two separate experiments. Experiment 1 describes only cohabiting and married couples with or without children (excluding divorced couples): We assumed that divorced couples without children do not actually constitute a family. Vignettes in Experiment 1 include the first eight experimental variables (or factors) and enable us to examine the extent to which having children is considered an important attribute when rating families. Families described in Experiment 2 always include one or more children, and the vignettes are defined on all ten experimental variables (or factors), including the two factors related to children: the expected educational attainment level of the children and whether families are saving for children's future. Experiment 2 allows for family profiles with divorced couples, thereby enabling us to examine the effects of divorce and child characteristics on family ideals. The vignette factors and their respective levels are described in Table 1. *SI Appendix*, Figs. S1 and S2 present examples of each experiment. In Experiment 1, after adjusting for sampling weights, the overall ratings of family scenarios ranged from 4.85 (Japan) to 5.92 (USA), with a mean score of 5.35 (SD = 2.38) across eight countries. In Experiment 2, the ratings varied from 4.51 (Korea) to 5.70 (USA), and the mean score was 5.13 (SD = 2.44). For detailed ratings by country, refer to *SI Appendix*, Table S1.

In vignette Experiment 1, the total number of combinations crossing all vignette levels over eight factors is 2,304 ($3 \times 2 \times 4 \times 2 \times 2 \times 3 \times 3 \times 4$). In vignette Experiment 2, the total number of combinations crossing all vignette levels over 10 factors is 15,552 ($3 \times 2 \times 3 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2$). Given the large number of combinations, we used a D-efficiency fractional factorial design to draw a sample of 576 combinations from Experiment 1 and 864 from Experiment 2. D-efficiency measures how precisely the experimental design can estimate the effects of factors on the dependent variable, with a value of 100 implying all factors are completely orthogonal and balanced. The D-efficiency at resolution V is 99.88 for Experiment 1 and is 97.04 for Experiment 2 where all main effects and two-way interactions can be estimated independent of each other. This exceeds the commonly accepted D-efficiency value of 90, ensuring sufficient statistical power to obtain precise estimates (49).

Among the 1,440 (864 + 576) unique vignettes, 240 (144 + 96) decks (i.e., questionnaire versions) were constructed with each containing six randomly selected vignettes. Pooling across eight countries, each vignette was rated by 84.23 (SD = 5.11) respondents. For each country, each vignette was rated by 11.83 (SD = 3.03) respondents, which exceeds the common suggestion of 5 in the literature and thus ensures the robustness of the results (49).

Table 1. Vignette factors and levels

	Experiment 1		Experiment 2	
Factors	#	Content	#	Content
Union status	2	– Cohabiting Married	3	Divorced Cohabiting Married
Fertility	4	No children 1 child 2 children 3 children	3	– 1 child 2 children 3 children
Household income	3	Below average Around average Above average	3	Below average Around average Above average
Community respect	2	Well-respected Not well-resp.	2	Well-respected Not well-resp.
Family communication	2	Open Not Open	2	Open Not Open
Contact to extended fam.	2	Frequently Not frequently	2	Frequently Not frequently
Gender roles	3	Traditional Commonplace Egalitarian	3	Traditional Commonplace Egalitarian
Work–family balance	4	Fem. not conflicted & male conflicted Fem. conflicted & male not conflicted Neither fem. nor male conflicted Both fem. & male conflicted	4	Fem. not conflicted & male conflicted Fem. conflicted & male not conflicted Neither fem. nor male conflicted Both fem. & male conflicted
Children's expected education	–	– – –	3	High school Bachelor's Postgraduate
Fin. supp. to children	–	– –	2	Saving for it Not saving for it

A key feature of FSE is randomization, which allows us to identify causal effects and ensures high internal validity. To test the randomization of our experimental design in both vignette experiments, we first confirmed that correlations between different experimental variables are close to zero, indicating that the different vignette dimensions are orthogonal (*SI Appendix*, Tables S6 and S7). Similarly, we conducted balance checks and found that there are no significant associations between experimental variables and respondents' demographic characteristics, indicating that respondents were randomly assigned, rather than self-selected into different vignettes (*SI Appendix*, Tables S8 and S9).

Analytic Strategy. The data are hierarchically structured since vignettes are embedded within the respondents, who are embedded in countries. Treating the dependent variables as continuous, we proceeded by estimating random intercept multilevel linear regression models with weighted observations. Given the successful randomization in the experimental design, the assumption of exogeneity is satisfied. *SI Appendix*, Fig. S3 shows that the dependent variable approximates a normal distribution. Consequently, we adopt a multilevel model rather than a fixed-effects model in order to maximize statistical efficiency. The multilevel model can be expressed in the following equation: $Rating_{ijc} = \alpha_{jc} + \sum_{f=1}^{F} \beta_f \, VignetteFactor_{ijc}^{f} + e_c + u_{jc} + v_{ijc}$. $Rating_{ijc}$ is the dependent variable measuring to what extent a respondent rates the specific family profile as "successful." $VignetteFactor_{ijc}^{f}$ is one of the total F (8 or 10) explanatory variables measuring different family characteristics (or factors) of the vignette i for respondent j in country c. In addition, α_{jc} is the random intercept; e_c is the

country-level error term; u_{jc} is the respondent-level error term; and v_{jc} is the vignette-level error term.

Results are robust to either including country fixed effects or estimating a random coefficient model instead (*SI Appendix*, Tables S10 and S11).

Data, Materials, and Software Availability. We have deposited the data and the replication code that we used in our analysis here for public access https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/LR2B6Y (51). All of our analysis has been done with this publicly available dataset.

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