

A Cross-national Comparison of the Value of Children

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1. What is the value of children?

The value of children (VOC) refers to the perceived benefits and costs of having children. The VOC has been used as a predictor for fertility motivations and trends. Arnold *et al.*, in their *The Value of Children* (1975), examined the perceptions people have of having children in economic, social and psychological dimensions. Economic value refers to the material benefits and costs individuals can expect from having children. Social value represents the perceived social advantages and disadvantages from having children. Psychological value refers to emotional states which parents expect from having children. This study looks at the cross-national differences in the VOC and factors affecting it.

2. Data and estimation

The data used in this study is from the Family and the Changing Gender Roles Module (2012) of the International Social Survey Program. A total of 9 countries were selected for this study. In selecting these countries, we considered the criteria that they: (i) represent the various types of welfare states; (ii) include countries that Korea often makes reference to in policymaking, and (iii) include some East Asian countries for comparison. Thus, the 9 countries are: the US and the UK (liberal); Germany and France (corporatist); Sweden (social democratic); Japan, China, Taiwan and Korea (East Asian). The VOC in this study is estimated in terms of 6 items, each measured based on a 5-point scale. The higher the composite score, the more positive the VOC.

3. Results

Sociodemographic features of the surveyed (18,063 individuals)

The surveyed on average were in their late 40's, with those aged 65 and over taking up much more than 20 percent in the respondents from the UK, Germany, France, Sweden, Japan, and Korea. The rate of women was just north of 50 percent on average. The figure for France was high at 65 percent, while it was as low as 48 percent for China. The most common marital status across the countries was "married," with China having the highest rate of married respondents (80.1 percent) and the least proportion of unmarried individuals (8.6 percent). The rates of divorce and separation were higher in the US than in any other country.

<Table 1> Sociodemographic characteristics of the surveyed population

	US	UK	Germany	France	Sweden	Japan	China	Taiwan	Korea	All
All	1,300	949	1,761	2,409	1,060	1,170	5,946	2,072	1,396	18,063
Average age	45.1	50.3	47.6	49.9	50.2	49.7	47.4	43.1	47.7	47.5
Women (%)	54.4	53.9	51.5	64.7	54.2	55.4	47.9	49.1	55.8	52.9
Marriage status										
Unmarried	27.6	25.6	27.7	22.0	29.8	22.9	8.6	29.7	20.3	20.0
Married	44.7	46.7	55.3	54.7	52.0	65.6	80.1	57.7	59.7	63.3
Widowed	8.4	10.7	7.3	9.6	6.2	6.6	9.0	8.6	14.9	9.0
Divorced or separated	19.2	16.9	9.7	13.7	12.0	5.0	2.3	4.1	5.0	7.7

Years of schooling	13.6	12.4	12.2	13.9	12.8	12.7	8.3	11.6	10.8	11.2
Employed (%)	58.0	49.6	57.7	56.1	64.8	63.0	39.5	64.2	54.2	52.2
Religious (%)	50.2	21.9	20.1	13.9	9.5	15.5	5.8	12.8	35.6	16.0
Ideal number of children	2.55	2.34	2.26	2.43	2.41	2.65	1.80	2.38	2.72	2.25
TFR ('11)	1.89	1.91	1.39	2.00	1.90	1.39	1.66	1.11	1.24	1.61

Note: Cohabitation is not included; the TRF figures are from the OECD Family Database (2012); the TFR for Taiwan is from google.com (2013)

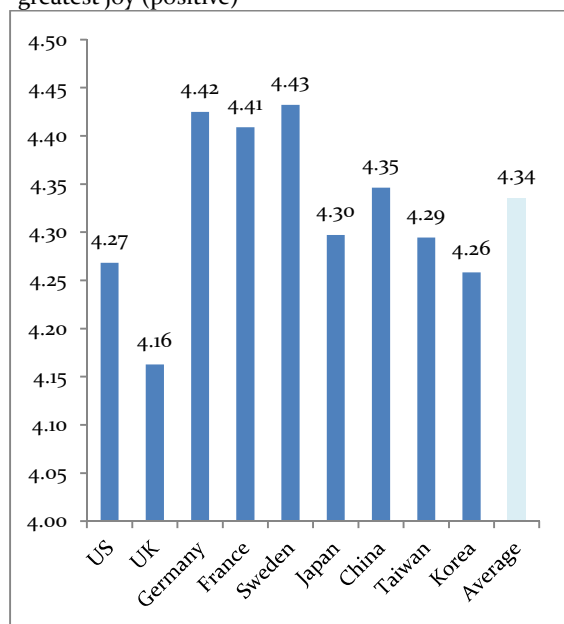
Source: Family and Changing Gender Roles Module, ISSP (2012)

The surveyed had an average of 11.2 years of schooling. Those in France and the US had more than 13 years of school education, while those in China had the least number of years of education. The employment rate, 52.2 percent on average, ranged from Sweden's (highest) 64.8 percent to China's (lowest) 39.5 percent. The ideal number of children was highest for Korea (2.72), followed by Japan (2.65), the US (2.55) and France (2.43).

Comparison of individual VOC

"Watching children grow up is life's greatest joy" was the item which received the highest evaluated outcome at 4.34. The outcome was high especially in Sweden, Germany and France. Korea's score on this count was one of the lowest at 4.26. The surveyed gave an average rating of 2.84 on the item "Having children interferes too much with the freedom of parents." The country with the highest score with respect to this item was Korea, followed by Taiwan, China, France, and Japan.

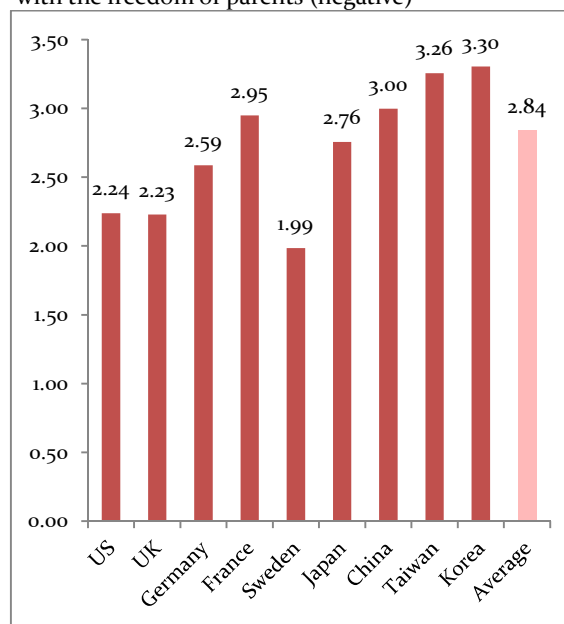
<Figure 1> Watching children grow up is life's greatest joy (positive)



Note: Values are averages based on a 5-point scale (the higher the value, the more positive the attitude)/ $F=20.360^{***}$

Source: Family and Changing Gender Roles Module, ISSP (2012)

<Figure 2> Having children interferes too much with the freedom of parents (negative)

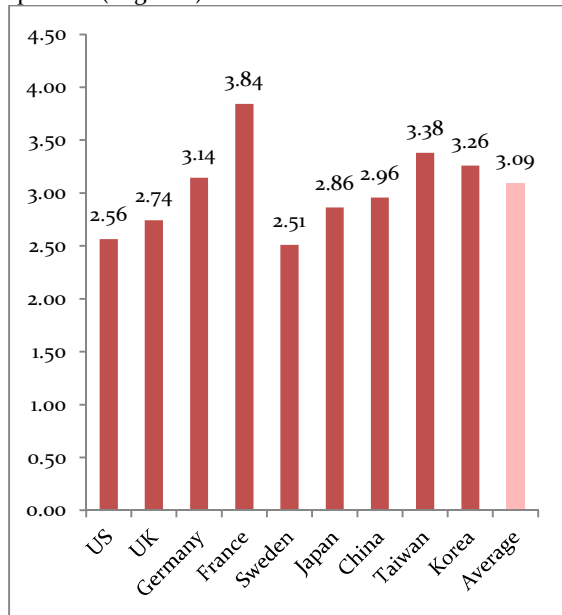


Note: Values are averages based on a 5-point scale (the higher the value, the more negative the attitude)/ $F=258.227^{***}$ (***) $p<.001$

The responses to the item "Children are a financial burden on their parents" averaged at 3.09. The attitude of seeing children as a financial burden was strongest in France (3.84) and least pronounced in Sweden (2.51). Korea's score in this respect was 3.26, 3rd highest after France's

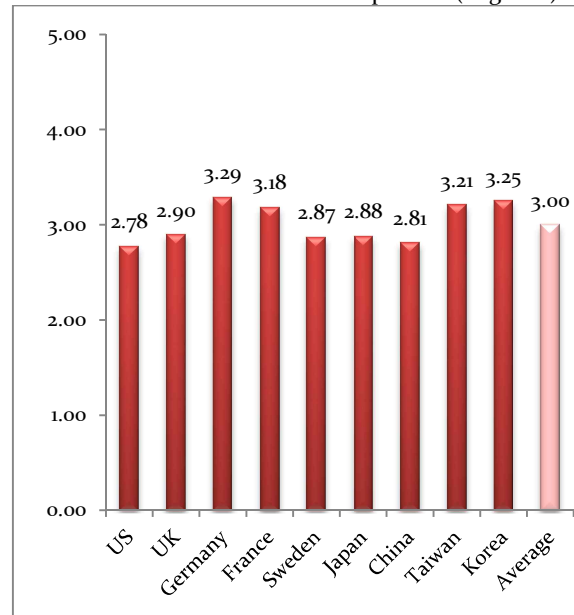
and Taiwan's. To the item "Having children restricts the employment and career chances of one or both parents," the surveyed responded with an average score of 3.00. Respondents in Germany, Korea, Taiwan, and France thought of children as more of an impediment to the parents' career than did their counterparts in the US, the UK, China, Sweden, and Japan.

<Figure 3> Children are a financial burden on their parents (negative)



Note: Values are averages based on a 5-point scale (the higher the value, the more negative the attitude)/ $F=244.654^{***}$ ($*** p<.001$)
 Source: Family and Changing Gender Roles Module, ISSP (2012)

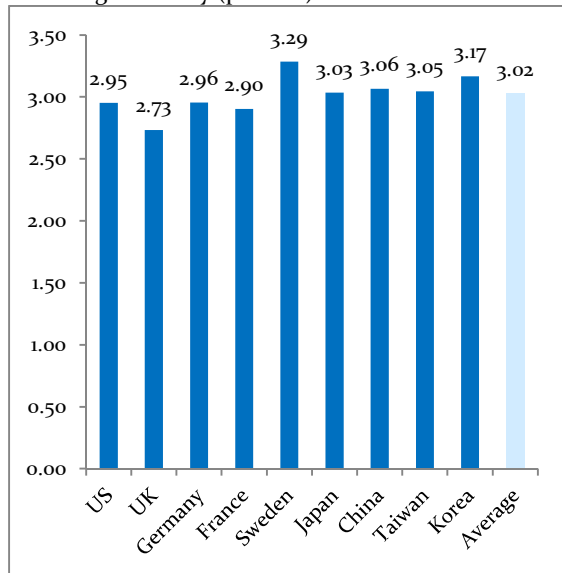
<Figure 4> Having children restricts the employment and career chances of one or both parents (negative)



Note: Values are averages based on a 5-point scale (the higher the value, the more negative the attitude)/ $F=74.744^{***}$ ($*** p<.001$)

With respect to the item "Having Children increases people's social standing in society," the surveyed gave an average score of 3.02. Sweden was most positive, with its score at 3.29, about the effect that having children has on one's social standing. Korea fared well on this count with the 2nd highest score (3.17). The surveyed responded with an average score of 3.74 to the item "Adult children are an important source of help for elderly parents." The countries with a higher-than-average score were the US (4.00), China, Japan, Sweden and Germany. Korea came in 3rd from the bottom on this measure.

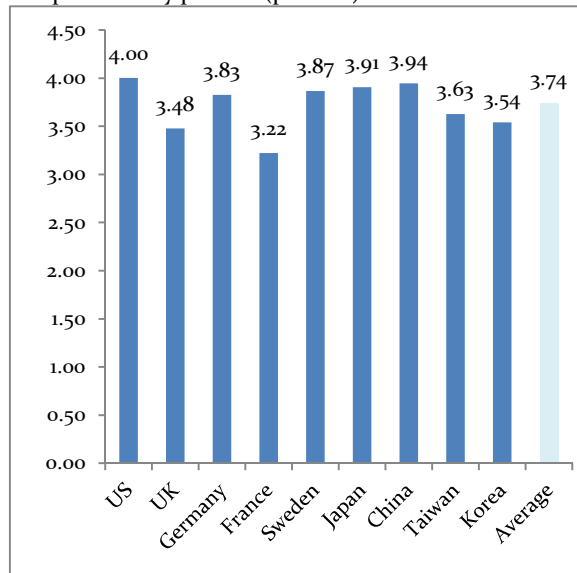
<Figure 5> Having children increases people's social standing in society (positive)



Note: Values are averages based on a 5-point scale (the higher the value, the more positive the attitude)/ $F=26.544^{***}$ (***) $p<.001$

Source: Family and Changing Gender Roles Module, ISSP (2012)

<Figure 6> Having children are an important source of help for elderly parents (positive)

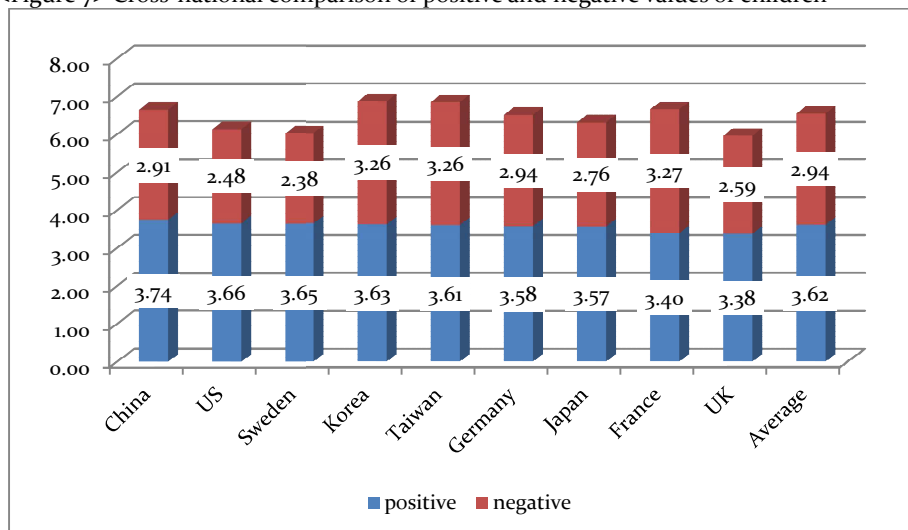


Note: Values are averages based on a 5-point scale (the higher the value, the more positive the attitude)/ $F=158.735^{***}$ (***) $p<.001$

Comparison of the composite VOC

When the six values were grouped into two categories, positive and negative, the positive value of having children was highest in China, the US and Sweden, while the negative value was its highest in France, Korea and Taiwan. The US and Sweden showed a high-level positive value accompanied by a low-level negative value, while for Korea and Taiwan both positive and negative values were high. The composite VOC for the 9 countries ranged from the lowest at 3.00 (France) to the highest at 3.52 (the US), averaging at 3.29.

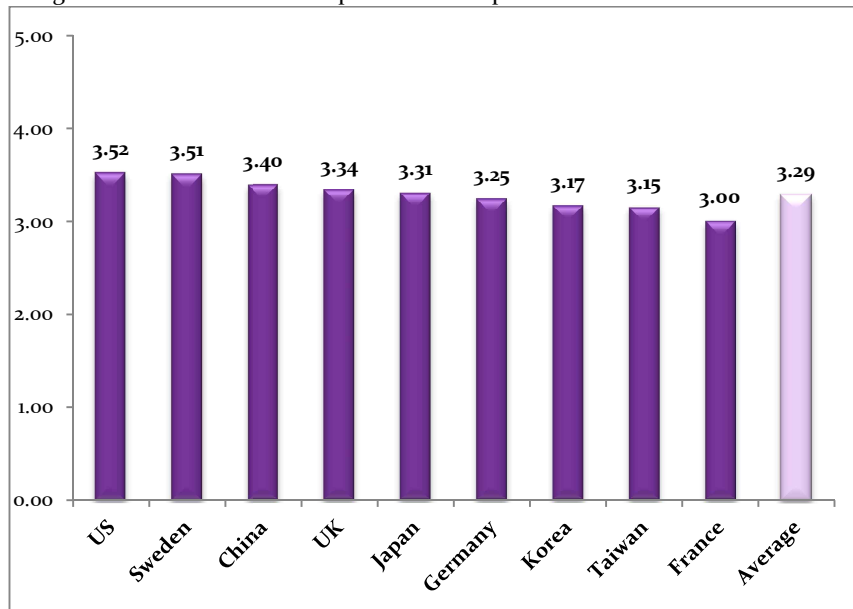
<Figure 7> Cross-national comparison of positive and negative values of children



Note: positivity $F=48.582^{***}$ negativity= 72.305^{***} (***) $p<0.001$

Source: Family and Changing Gender Roles Module, ISSP (2012)

<Figure 8> Cross-national comparison of composite value of children



Note: Figures are the national averages of the six item values; based on 5-point scale; the higher the value, the more positive the attitude/ $F = 160.670^{***}$

The US, Sweden, China, and the UK were the countries with a high-level VOC and a high-level TFR. France was an interesting case where a high-level TFR was associated with a low-level VOC. Both VOC and TFR levels were low in Taiwan, Korea, Germany, and Japan. There was a positive association between the VOC and TFR: the higher the VOC, the higher the TFR.

Factors affecting the VOC

We constructed three different models for multiple regression analysis. In Model 1, there were significant differences in the value of children between the US (the base country) and all the rest, except for Sweden. Model 2 confirmed that age was a significant factor, as the VOC, when measured with those aged 18~24 as the base age cohort, was higher in all the other age cohorts. In short, the VOC increased with age. When age was entered into the model, the significance of the cross-national differences persisted. This is to say that even with age controlled, the differences in the VOC between the countries remained significant. For Model 3, we factored in such independent socioeconomic variables as sex, marital status, years of schooling, employment status, and religiosity. The significance of age in this model was gone, except for the case of those aged 65 and older. The effect of all the other independent variables turned out to be significant. The findings also include that women's VOC was lower (more negative) than men's, and that the VOC was lower in the unmarried than in married, widowed, divorced, or separated individuals; the more years of schooling, the more negative the VOC; the VOC was lower in unemployed individuals than in employed and was higher in those with a religion than in those without.

<Table 2> Regression analysis of factors affecting the VOC

(Variable)	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Country (US=0)			
UK	3.523***	3.392***	3.430***
Germany	-.178***	-.191***	-.142***
France	-.277***	-.284***	-.235***
Sweden	-.519***	-.533***	-.462***
Japan	-.012	-.026	.041
China	-.215***	-.224***	-.197***
Taiwan	-.125***	-.133***	-.126***
Korea	-.369***	-.365***	-.340***
Korea	-.350***	-.357***	-.357***
Age (18~24=0)			
25~34		.077***	.004
35~44		.134***	.014
45~54		.159***	.017
55~64		.170***	.015
65+		.186***	.031
Women			-.030**
Marital status(unmarried=0)			
Married			.147***
Widowed			.141***
Divorced or separated			.096***
Years of schooling			-.008***
Employed (unemployed=0)			.046***
Religious			.136***
N	18,005	18,005	15,070
F	160.670***	110.885***	75.83***
R ²	0.067	0.074	0.092

Note: The figures are non-standardized regression coefficients. ** p<.01, ***p<.001
 Source: Family and Changing Gender Roles Module, ISSP(2012).

4. Policy implications

Korea presents itself as an unusual case where its VOC is high in both positivity and negativity. Children for the parents are seen on one hand as both a source of life's joy and a boost to social standing. On the other hand, they are regarded as an economic burden, something of an impediment that limits the parents' career chances. At the same time, the view that children are a potential source of economic security for their parents in old age is no longer as widely shared in Korea as it used to be. Circumstances such as these call for the development of policy measures that respond to the needs especially of those aged 35~44 who have been responsible for having children and raising them. Focused support for this age group may help to bring changes for the better to the perceptions people have of having children, thereby raising the TFR. Also, the higher one's educational attainment, the more one tends to see raising children as a financial burden and an impediment to one's work. Meanwhile, the US showed no significant relationship between educational attainment and the VOC, with women showing more positive VOC than men. France is an exemplary case where effective family policy has helped to surmount negative values of children. These cases suggest how government support can help parents reduce the cost of, and time spent on, raising children.