

Can we draw on a common ‘European culture’ to deal with problems of ageing, low fertility, and developmental inequalities? Or are we facing persistent cultural differences stemming from the way in which divergent family forms have shaped elementary interpersonal relations? As family is a primary arena for socialization, economic cooperation, and transmission of values, many institutional barriers to social policies can relate to inherited family structures. The way contemporary European families are organized indeed differs markedly, and it is likely that this variation has important consequences for the status of women, inter-generational relations, and human capital formation. However, tracing the historical roots of this familial variation has never been successfully concluded, despite growing demand for such global accounts. Previous attempts to map historical family forms fell victim to limitations of case studies, selective methodologies and significant gaps in evidence. Neither the causes of the familial variation, nor the possible family influences on wider societal outcomes, have ever been systematically tested on a European scale.

This project addresses key societal challenges from a scientific perspective—i.e., cross-cultural variation in family patterns, their configurations in space, and their influences on developmental inequalities in the past, carrying out their analysis on a hitherto unprecedented scale. It consists in pioneering explorations of the patterns, causes and implications of European variation in historical family systems which are tackled via a systematic comparative approach, using the world’s largest public-use collections of historical census microdata from the Mosaic and North Atlantic Population projects. By mobilizing spatially organized data and drawing on recent advancements in comparative family demography and multi-disciplinary methodologies, the project addresses the questions of what these major variations were, what caused them, and what difference they could make in the European context between 1700 and 1918.

This multifaceted perspective of familial patterns and their correlates is tackled in three consecutive stages corresponding to three major research questions. *PATTERNS* provides a comprehensive investigation of the variation in family organization among nearly 300 regional populations from the North Atlantic to the Urals in terms of life course, marriage, and household formation patterns, as well as domestic group structures and individual living arrangements; maps these out in space and time, striving to establish spatial patterning in their patchiness across the continent. *CAUSES* links these fine-grained data on family patterns to geo-referenced contextual information and uses spatially-sensitive multivariate analyses to investigate how variations in the environmental, cultural and political-economic spheres affected different aspects of regional family systems across multiple settings. Finally, following the major threads of New Institutional Economic History, *IMPLICATIONS* explores some specific channels through which family variation could produce developmental disparities across European societies, by looking at gender- and age- inequalities in the life course and residential spheres, and by investigating the relationship between cross-cultural differences in familial organization and regional disparities in human capital levels in the past.

The project’s synthesis will be a new comprehensive history of the European family, with focus on the societal implications of regional variation and change over time, and will yield key breakthroughs leading to a radical re-thinking of previous mainstream ‘histories of family’. The new detailed geography of family types advanced in the project will become an omnibus reference study not only for social-, and family historians, but also for demographers, sociologists and economists alike, providing a fresh reservoir of policy-relevant insights into the persistence of and changes in basic patterns of human organization at the same time. It will also form a crucial building block for future comparative studies covering the whole of Eurasia.