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Values, culture, and national identity in economics

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CHAPTER 5

Implications and general conclusions



In this thesis, I took an interdisciplinary perspective to study values, norms, culture, and national identity. Each chapter dealt with a different theme, yet always related to the relationship of the individual and the collective. In this final chapter I summarize the findings of each chapter, explore new research opportunities, and draw some general conclusions about the broader relevance of this thesis.

In Chapter 2, I combined insights from social philosophy and economics to study the difference between personal beliefs and “other-regarding” beliefs for civic norm conformity. The upshot of the chapter is that an individual’s beliefs regarding civic behaviour of others is critical for civic norm conformity, yet it is not included in most quantitative (economic) studies on civic norm compliance. The main findings illustrate that these so-called empirical expectations do matter. While empirical expectations are correlated with normative expectations—which capture personal beliefs regarding the justification of certain behaviour—these two types of expectations capture distinct dimensions of civic norms. Moreover, when investigating their economic consequences, I showed that their relative importance differs. I found it is especially the presence of empirical expectations that drives people’s behaviour. *Contributions towards the common good thus mainly depend on our expectations towards others.*

The results of Chapter 2 indicate that, in the case where normative and empirical expectations are not simultaneously present, empirical expectations motivate behaviour. This finding not only calls for a re-evaluation and reconsideration of methods to measure civic norm compliance, but also has similar implications for empirical studies that examine other norms—such as norms of generosity or solidarity (Beine et al., 2013; Burda et al., 2013; Helliwell et al., 2016). These norms qualify as social norms—following the theoretical definition of social norms (Bicchieri, 2006)—yet their operationalization focuses mainly on normative beliefs or stated preferences. While I have not investigated other norms than civic norms in Chapter 2, the chapter motivates efforts to examine such other types in the proposed directions.

The chapter does not answer the question of why in some cases empirical expectations are relatively more important than normative expectations. Future research is needed that differentiates between the various types of expectations and beliefs, such that their interaction with norm conformity and economic decision making can be further investigated. An analysis of cross-country differences can yield important insights as to the importance of contextual (cultural) factors. Other promising extensions of the analyses of Chapter 2 lie in the generation of new social survey data that follow Bicchieri’s definition of social norms more closely. Such methods can potentially be combined with the experimental designs that we find in philosophy or sociology. In this way, the complexity of survey research (based on stated preferences) can be combined with measures of revealed preferences in experimental settings.

From civic norms I moved to social norms and values in Chapter 3. In this chapter I examined the difference between national culture and individual values and norms. Central to Chapter 3 is the key concern that is leveraged against all national cultural frameworks, namely the tension between the national cultural level and the individual level. The goal of this chapter was therefore to take a configurational approach to model individuals' values and norms, with the ambition to compare countries without imposing national cultural homogeneity. This approach resulted in three individual level value types, that I labelled the *liberal*, the *traditionalist*, and the *conservative-collectivist*. By construction, individual respondents are a combination of these three value types. I established that each value type has its own socio-demographic characteristics. The findings suggested, among others, generational displacement of conservative-collectivists by liberals, and a relatively stable presence of traditionalists over time. At the national level, I found that each country has its own center of gravity which is determined by the distribution of individuals' value configurations. *Countries are not culturally homogenous, and the overall cultural profile of a country is determined by the relative salience of the three value types.*

Chapter 3 gives several take-aways to researchers who study values and culture, or who are interested in using cross-cultural models in empirical applications. Firstly, researchers should look beyond the assumption that country equals culture in cross-country comparisons. Between-country differences arise from a host of (non)cultural factors, and, as shown in Chapter 3, within-country diversity is large. Secondly, cultural borders might differ from country borders. Analyses at the individual, regional, or supra-national level can be interesting avenues for further research. Thirdly, even though researchers' awareness of the ecological fallacy has increased, it is oftentimes still an issue in empirical studies. A profound theoretical understanding of the social constructs investigated could mitigate this issue in various ways (see Brewer & Venaik (2014) for a discussion of the ecological fallacy in culture research). To illustrate, the conceptualization of a construct often depends, amongst others, on the level of analysis (individual, group, or country level). Understanding the theoretical difference between the levels of analysis will therefore help to interpret results and draw conclusions. When working at the aggregate level, for example, there is a difference between interpreting the research findings as existing at the aggregate level or as a characteristic that also holds at the individual level. Analyses that combine the individual and country level, as explored in Chapter 3, can be useful to examine the relationship between these two levels of analysis in more detail.

Fourthly, the conceptualization of national culture as configurational or patterned construct has consequences for the operationalization and use of cross-cultural models. Many users focus on a subset of individual dimensions, in which a country is either "individualist" or "masculine" but not necessarily both. This is not without empirical consequences, which is why the relations between dimensions should be taken into account even when interested in only one of these

dimensions. Alternatively, it can be fruitful to explore methods that operationalize the configurational aspect, such as archetypal analysis. Altogether, these four points suggest that researchers should be aware of (hidden) theoretical assumptions and adjust their empirical methods accordingly.

The findings of Chapter 4 further underscore some of the aforementioned take-aways. The assumption of cultural homogeneity relies on the notion that each nation has a shared culture and a national identity that differs from other nations. According to many scholars, historical ties with a nation's territory and other commonalities shape a unified national identity and culture. The investigation of the sources of identification with the nation state in Chapter 4 indicates that national identification is diverse at the individual level. Rather than following the predominant literature in which national identity is conceptualized as a dichotomous construct, I assumed that individuals' identification is configurational. I established that there are three ideal typical ways that capture the sources of identification with the nation state: an ethnic, civic, and indifferent ideal type. The three ideal types together configure the majority of respondents' sources of identification with the Netherlands. Only a very limited fraction of the respondents in my sample fully identifies with one of the three types.

The research findings of Chapter 4 further indicate that the sources of national identification are linked to a host of other individual level characteristics. The stronger individuals identify with one source of national identification, the stronger opinions polarize. Individuals that identify with the nation state based on traditions and customs (what is called "ethnic" sources of identification) are afraid of changes to the community via immigration and internationalization. They are more likely than other respondents to vote for a (authoritarian-) populist party. Civic adherents (those that predominantly identify with the nation state on the basis of freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and democracy) perceive immigration and internationalization as strengthening and as enriching their community. These respondents are more likely to vote for parties positioned towards the economic left and cosmopolitan liberal values. *Overall, I found a strong and persistent tension between the ethnic and civic ideal types that suggests a clash of two normative world views.*

The three chapters together give rise to several relevant avenues for future research. First, the current study of values, social norms, and identification with the nation state at the individual level opens opportunities for additional analyses at the individual level. A logical extension of the current work lies in the analysis of age, period, and cohort effects. Such research could yield valuable insights into the nature of value change. Whereas models that incorporate cultural change already exist (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2019; Inglehart, 1977, 1997), they only examine change at the aggregate country level. Such models cannot fully disentangle the age, period, and cohort effects, whereas individual level models can do so.

Second, the findings of Chapters 3 and 4 can be combined to gain a more profound understanding of the complexity of our contemporary world. Phenomena such as public opinion polarization and populism, to mention a few, are likely to be linked to individual level value profiles. The sources of national identification can play an important explanatory role in this respect. Of course, the ideal types are currently constructed and analysed in the context of the Netherlands due to data availability. Yet there are opportunities to link the ideal types to European data (via the EVS) or to develop new survey questions that are inspired by the analyses in Chapter 4.

Third, insights from Chapter 2 can also be fruitful to study public opinion. The balance between personal and “other-regarding” beliefs might be critical for the way people express themselves in the public domain, as this depends on perceptions of prevailing social norms. Some people might feel pressured to conform depending on their expectations towards others, whereas others do not. The distinction between normative and empirical expectations, as well as methodology developed in Chapter 2, could yield useful and interesting insights into the way that public opinion takes shape and changes over time. For example via the identification of so-called tipping points that influence the direction of public opinion.

To conclude, I would like to devote some attention to the general implications of this thesis for the social sciences. As our technology advances, there are increasingly new methods to examine social constructs. Big data, or large-scale social surveys as used in this thesis, pose challenges for the social sciences, but also many opportunities that are yet to be explored. For example, there are ample opportunities for large-scale, individual level analyses. Novel techniques, such as archetypal analysis, can advance our understanding of various topics and trends. At the same time, such methodological advances cannot operate in a theoretical vacuum. Our theoretical understanding should therefore move in accordance. Empirical researchers should be aware of the fact that the theoretical understanding of a construct is an essential step towards its operationalization and measurement. Vice versa, operationalization and measurement can affect the theoretical understanding of a construct, as the availability of data can, for example, pose constraints. The current work motivates efforts to re-evaluate and, if needed, adjust existing social surveys.

In this thesis, I have explored various ways in which state of the art methodology can be combined with a profound theoretical understanding of the investigated subjects. I hope that my work motivates other scholars to take similar approaches. To fully understand the complexity of our contemporary societies, I view an interdisciplinary approach as the most promising.

