

## **Fertility Choices in Poland: Quality, Quantity and Individualisation**

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**Extended abstract for the European Population Conference, 9-12 July, Barcelona.**

**(Preliminary version – please do not quote)**

The profound decline in birth rates across Europe remains the focal point for many demographers nowadays. Today, almost all European countries record fertility levels too low for intergenerational replacement and almost half of the countries are regarded as having the “lowest-low” fertility (TFR 1.3 or less, Kohler, Billari and Ortega 2002). The fertility decline, however, does not progress at the same pace across Europe, it is also accompanied by various fertility and family related behaviours. For instance, there are huge differences across Europe as to the timing of childbearing and the levels of childlessness (e.g. Billari 2005, Coleman 2005, Sobotka 2004).

Unsurprisingly, there are numerous factors and influences behind these various fertility trends (de Bruijn 1999, Lesthaeghe 2001, Sobotka 2004, van de Kaa 1996). There is a common agreement that economic as well as ideational factors jointly attribute here (e.g.: Billari 2005, Kohler 2001, Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2002, Philipov 2003). Moreover, in post-socialist countries, where the number of births is particularly alarming, the economic, political and social transformation is another powerful factor that influences individual fertility choices (Aassve, Billari and Speder 2004, Frątczak 1999, Philipov, Speder and Billari 2006, Sztompka 2000, Strzelecki 2004).

Many reasons for fertility decline are presented in the literature in a great detail. Nevertheless, it remains an open question how these influences act in various contexts, producing different fertility patterns between countries. It is a relatively unexplored field, how various factors affect each other, interplay and work together (Caldwell 2005, de Bruijn 1999, McNicoll 1992, Sobotka 2004).

Through our study, we would like to improve our understanding of how economic factors impact fertility patterns in the context of political, economic and social

transformation. In order to do so, we apply qualitative methodology and explore the individual fertility choices in the context of Poland. We focused our attention on this country in a particularly interesting moment: 15 years after the socialistic regime broke down and the free market economy was introduced, and immediately after the country has joined European Union. This is the context of the rapid economic changes, unemployment and uncertainty, but also of the new hopes and opportunities.

In our study we analyse 48 qualitative interviews, conducted in 2004/2005, with young couples at the early stage of the family formation process\*. First, we investigate what men and women speak of the economic resources in relation to the childbearing experiences and expectations. Unsurprisingly, we find that financial means are perceived crucial for fertility choices. They are, however, considered and evaluated differently in relation to first and second child.

We find that a first child is universally treated as a natural and inevitable step in individual's and couple's development. The respondents do not even consider a possibility to remain childless because of a difficult economic situation. One should have a child regardless of their material status. According to our respondents, economic hardship or uncertainty may lead to the postponement of fertility, but never to childlessness.

When it comes to the choice of having a second child, the economic resources are evaluated differently and they play much more decisive role. Even though a wish to have two children is most common among the people, they tend to ask themselves whether they can afford it. They are aware that children means expenditures and they also strongly emphasize that the costs of childrearing are growing. Therefore, when the respondents speak of a second child, they consider whether they are able to provide equally good conditions and opportunities for both of their offspring. A negative answer to this question forces them to abandon plans for a second child. A relation between the quality and quantity of children (Becker 1993, Becker and Lewis 1973, 1974) is clearly visible in the interviewee's narrations: they prefer to have less children of higher quality.

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\* The data have been collected thanks to the funds and support of Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research. The analyses have been conducted while our stay at MPIDR Independent Research Group on the Culture on Reproduction in years 2004-2007.

The considerations regarding the child's quality are revealed the strongest in relation to the new chances and opportunities, appearing in Poland. The respondents repeatedly point out that currently young people have much more options than they used to have before 1990. These options include a wide access to education and various leisure time activities, a possibility to develop own interests and travel freely around the world, an access to modern technology as well as to fashionable clothes, colourful toys and various luxury goods. At the same time, however, the respondents acknowledge that in order to fully use these options one needs to have a substantial amount of money. There is a clash between the variety of opportunities and the economic uncertainty. According to our respondents this clash is even greater: not only more money is needed to provide children with a good start, but also more time and parental care is required to bring kids up well and protect them from various threats of modern life: drugs, alcohol, violence, etc. This situation seems to be a vicious circle. On the one hand, in order to use the existing opportunities and increase children's quality, parents need to work hard to earn more. On the other hand, working more means lesser time at home and consequently it brings the risk of decreasing children's quality. As voluntary childlessness is out of the question, the most reasonable course of action in these circumstances is to substantially limit the number of offspring.

The new chances and opportunities, which we have had already mentioned, open the door for a process, which the proponents of the Second Demographic Transition model (Lesthaeghe, 1995, 2001, van de Kaa 1987, 1996) would call: individualisation. People see that they can live their life in a more interesting way, they pay more attention to their standard of living, to the personal development and so forth. Still, facing some economic limitations and uncertainty they have to make a choice: in whom and how much to invest? As the result, the respondents speak of their self-realization and individual development only to a relatively narrow extent. They dwell on the development and the self-realization of their children in a greater degree. The generation, represented by our respondents, still remains focused more on investing in their offspring rather than in realisation of their own goals, dreams and wishes. Individualism appears to be indirect here and connected to the quality of children: people most of all want a success of their children.

Summarising, Poland clearly is a country of “strong family ties”, where childbearing is one of the most important values. Difficult material situation or economic uncertainty do not prevent people from entering parenthood. The circumstances, however, are making them to limit a number of children, especially that the young parents wish to invest a lot in their offspring. On the one hand, people see a lot of new opportunities, on the other hand they are aware that they are very high-priced. Based on our data we are able to capture and reconstruct this complex mechanism, in which macro level context (economic transition, which produces a lot of uncertainty but also many attractive options) translates into individual fertility choices (a relation between a quality and quantity of children).

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