

CONTEXT UNDERLYING DECISION-MAKING ON PARENTHOOD AND REPRODUCTION

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Abstract: This article provides an overview of a number of research studies conducted within the field of parenthood and reproduction in a variety of Western cultures, including Slovakia and the countries of Eastern Europe. The main aim of this overview is to analyse two key indicators on Second Demographic Transition: delaying marriage and parenthood until later on in life and the growth in cohabitation as an alternative living arrangement and childbearing as part of that. The author points out that the majority of parents opt to have a first child and this brings normative and emotional fulfilment. Most young people do not reject this, but simply postpone it until later on in life. The hypothesis is postulated that the decision on whether to have further children is to a larger extent rationally based and is more dependent on weighing up the incentives available from the state. The article emphasises, on the basis of a comparison of the results of various empirical studies, that the same patterns of reproductive behaviour can produce markedly different consequences and outcomes within various subgroups of the population. It is recommended that current research into parenthood and reproduction should be extended so that studies are conducted into similar groups within subpopulations across different countries—in contrast to the current prevailing research that is focused on single countries or in comparing different countries as a whole. It is also recommended that the scope of the research be extended to compare a number of different subpopulations with similar value and life-style configurations as opposed to the majority of the current narrowly-focused approaches that concentrate on examining the differences in reproductive behaviour patterns of a section of the population selected on the basis of education.

Keywords: norms, parenthood, reproduction, cohabitation, structural context

Introduction

Current theories that attempt to explain changes in reproductive behaviour in European and North American populations can be divided into those that are normative, stressing

a shift in values and preferences and those that deal with rational choice, which focus on changes in structural conditions (Šprocha, Potančoková 2010). These two types of approaches reflect the fact that there are two fundamental factors that play a key role in decisions made regarding parenthood. The first embodies values, norms and role models, and is laden with the strong emotions of desire and unfulfilled needs. The second takes into account the actual options available (as perceived in subjective terms), for example the socio-economic situation, status, accommodation arrangements, the resources and services provided by the state and other structural variables. There is a strongly rational component involved in this and decision-making is deliberative¹.

Even though decision making is influenced by both of these factors, in the first part of this article we shall attempt to defend our hypothesis that in deciding whether to embark on parenthood in the sense of choosing whether or not to have children, the first factor—normativity—has a greater role to play. We can argue that although the number of children has been subject to change in various historical periods, the norm of not being childless is much more stable. In general people are more sensitive to stronger and steady norms and emotions play a crucial part in judging them. The norm of childbearing, is more or less the embodiment of universal human values linked primarily to survival, caring for others and cooperation. (Not) fulfilling these values is mostly an extremely emotional experience. Most people associate having children with the positive emotions of love, joy, and fulfilment, while not having children (ever) generally produces feelings of fear, insecurity, non-fulfilment and emptiness. Quality is crucial in terms of undergoing the transition from being childless to having children, i.e. switching from non-parenthood status to parenthood status. Once this new status is reached, the number of children is important more in terms of quantity so it may be legitimate to assume that in general it is less emotionally loaded. Therefore in making further decisions on the number of offspring, there is more room for rational consideration of all the advantages and disadvantages, opportunities and restrictions, that come with making this choice, and a greater role is played by the second—structural—factor than is the case with the first child². Recently, in Western cultures and European countries this factor has had a limiting rather than a supportive impact on plans to have a larger number of children.

In the second half of this article, we compare selected countries in terms of parenthood, marriage and cohabitation with the aim of supporting the view that emphasises that cohabiting and childbearing has different consequences for those of high social standing and for the less privileged in society.

Norms in parenthood and reproduction

Why is it important to view partnerships, marriages and parenthood through the prism of social norms? It is important since to a large extent it shapes our existence in this world. Norms represent shared ways of thinking, desiring, deciding and acting, which can be

¹ This article deals with the psychological dimension of decision-making only in terms of the normative and structural context.

² It would be useful to empirically confirm the assumption concerning the role of these two factors in the future.

observed in regularly repeated behaviour and are adopted since it is believed that thanks to them certain problems will be resolved (Critto 1999). Or, as Bicchieri (2006) puts it, norms are the embodiment of the values and collective desires of society. Understood in this way then norms operating on both conscious and subconscious levels influence our decisions relating to partnerships, parenthood and reproduction. We can also apply Horney's (2001) point concerning norms on a general level to this sphere, where she states that behaviour should be measured according to an orthogonal scale showing the losses and gains to be made by the agent versus the group or community.

As far as delaying reproduction to a later age (at least in Western countries) is concerned, there are various conceptions and justifications, which overlap on many key points. The greatest benefit young people derive from delaying reproduction is independence. Arnett (2000) refers to the period between the ages of 18 and 25 as *emerging adulthood*, which is characterised by a relative independence in terms of social roles and normative expectations and at the same time by being able to experiment with relationships, job opportunities and worldviews. Similarly, Fukuyama (2006) stresses that the period from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s is characterised in Western societies by a weakening of social bonds and common values, disruption of social norms and the decreasing status of the family. In addition, fertility fell to very low levels, there were fewer marriages and births, and out-of-wedlock childbearing increased substantially. One of the most comprehensive concepts is that known as Second Demographic Transition (SDT), first proposed by Lesthaeghe and Kaa (1986). In its current form it is primarily characterised by the following (Lesthaeghe 2010): a rise in the age of first marriages, in the level of divorce, cohabitation, parenthood within cohabitation, individual autonomy, self-actualisation, symmetry in gender roles, and at the same time a decline in the number of married couples, remarriages, fertility, social cohesion and acknowledgment of authority. The SDT began in the latter half of the twentieth century in the US and Scandinavia and gradually spread firstly to other Western European countries and later also to Central and Southern Europe and to Eastern Europe. However, the characteristics outlined above are not included in all countries to the same extent.

Extending the pre-reproductive period, one of the main features of the SDT, creates unprecedented freedom for young people and benefits them in two different areas. Since they are ever more independent from their own parents and at the same time do not have the responsibility of having children to care for they are able to take advantage of the opportunities to try out various different lifestyles, partnerships, explore other countries and cultures, and devote time to various hobbies. The other areas in which they gain concern opportunities for developing their own potential through study, education, and seeking satisfying professional activities. Yet, young people do not even take their initial entry into the workplace as seriously as the previous generation did and tend to try out different opportunities, whether in short succession, one after the other (serial employment), or simultaneously, through part-time jobs, temporary work and so forth. The implications for reproductive decision-making are clear. Young people are becoming immune to the warnings issuing from society about the declining workforce or the decay of Western civilisation. Once they have finished their studies they do not wish to adopt the norms that automatically guided the bulk of the previous generation—norms on creating long-term relationships, growing up inside a marriage and in extending the family by producing children.

It is, however, clear that the advantages of extending the pre-reproduction stage are not equally accessible to young people in different countries, and not even in the same country. This is connected to the overall economic and welfare situation in the country and the socio-economic status of the individual concerned. It is therefore very important that, in terms of planning partnerships and parenthood, we distinguish between “preferred” options in the sense of “I would do this or that if I could” and those that are “forced” upon people by the socio-economic situation, social status and actual living conditions.

In addition, choosing whether to conceive a child has different consequences for men and women and that is true even in the most gender-equal societies found in the Scandinavian countries. For instance, Kokko et al. (2009) in a long-term longitudinal study (begun in 1968) in Finland involving a sample of 173 women and 196 men between the ages of 8 and 42 discovered that relatively early parenthood (up to 25 years of age) in women is linked to many other significant changes: motherhood is associated with leaving the parental home, establishing an intimate relationship, and with education and work. Early parenthood is associated primarily with low levels of education, low job status and an unstable career. In contrast to women, early parenthood in men only corresponds to an early start to an intimate relationship. The authors, however, also point out that these days (in comparison to fifty years ago) society is far more tolerant of variation in life transitions in terms of normative views on timing.

It could be said that today it is women who have control of the reins and whose decision-making is more autonomous; they are under less pressure from both their closer and more distant social circles concerning if and when they want to establish a long-term relationship, if and when that will involve starting a family, and what level of education, and job and socio-economic status they wish to obtain before having a child. Again it is important to establish the social status and socio-economic position of the women who make these decisions on reproduction. If they are able to invest long-term into their own personal growth and achieve the highest level of education, which will to a certain extent ease the path to a better and more stable career, then extending the pre-reproductive period is a sensible alternative to having a child earlier. If, however, this is not an opportunity available to them or they do not attempt to follow this path, then the decision-making may be influenced by other criteria, such as health, physiological age, uniting the family and conceiving earlier, which might represent a better alternative. For instance, Friedman et al. (1994) draw attention to the fact that a primary human value is the need to reduce insecurity, and in Western cultures this can be achieved through having a stable career, but also by getting married and starting a family. For women, primarily, having children plays a key role in this since it also contributes to greater family solidarity for the (married) couple. Thus, according to the authors, two groups of people are more motivated towards parenthood: those that face greater insecurity in life and those that have limited access to other means of reducing insecurity. This can, in part, explain why people with lower levels of education and fewer opportunities to establish themselves on the labour market have a larger number of children and at an earlier age.

Qualitative research, in particular, can help us better understand what factors people consider when deciding to make the transition from being childless to having children. Although doubt has been expressed on more than one occasion as to the non-representative nature of research based on small samples, it has been shown that even when there is no

coordination over the nature and the form of the research, they can produce similar findings.

For instance, Purewal and Akker (2007) employed the individual interview method and an interpretative phenomenological analysis in their research conducted in the UK. The participants were asked about their reasons for choosing parenthood and the decisions they made concerning reproduction and above all about the kinds of experiences and influences from their past lives that led them to these decisions. They obtained five main topics which people consider when deliberating about whether to start a family. The first concerned *selflessness* in the sense of the ability to sacrifice one's own happiness and needs for the benefit of the children. While the participants who already had children stated that their own lives were oriented towards the needs of the children in the first place and they only considered their own needs and wishes after that, those without children described themselves as being too selfish to have children. The second theme was a *sense of fulfilment and satisfaction* and all the participants agreed that children really do provide this. The third theme concerning the *biological instinct and genetic tie* between parents and child produced certain ambivalence. On the one hand the participants rejected instinct as a reason for conceiving a child, yet on the other hand, they expressed a desire to have a child on the grounds that it would be part of them, furthermore they had a strong preference for having a child of their own rather than adopting and were convinced that they would feel a stronger bond to a child that was biologically theirs. The fourth theme emphasised the need for *joint decision-making* on the part of both partners/spouses on whether they wish to bring a child into the world. The participants were clearly afraid that not agreeing in advance on whether to have a child or not might put their relationship at risk. Finally, the fifth theme concerned the need for being *prepared to have a child* both mentally and materially.

Hašková a Zamykalová (2006) obtained similar findings in the Czech Republic, where they also employed the interview method, on a sample of 60 childless men and women. They found that discussions on childlessness were mostly influenced by four types of normative discourses. The first of these—*normative parenthood*—holds that the family is the norm while childlessness is described as abnormal. Women who are voluntarily childless do not deny either the existence of a maternal instinct or the value of biological motherhood and view themselves as being out of kilter in this respect. Most simply delay motherhood until a later date. The second discourse—the *norm of struggling at any cost*—assesses the limits to which people are willing to go in order to have a child. This means that involuntary childlessness is deserving of sympathy and assistance in contrast to voluntary childlessness, which is considered to be selfish and irresponsible. The third discourse—the *biological clock*—emphasises that there are age norms based on the physiological limits of the human body (mostly in relation to women) and highlights three crucial periods: (a) up to the age of 30 the use of contraception is considered as part of responsible planning for parenthood, but once the age of 30 is reached its use is considered irresponsible, since by this age it is high time a child was conceived; (b) at around 35 years of age the greatest social pressure is exerted on those who are childless; and (c) the period around 40 years of age is considered critical in terms of producing offspring, particularly for women. Later than this and childlessness is perceived to be a permanent state and women suffer mentally and physically. In the final discourse—the *norm of completeness and maturity*—women, particularly those who are involuntarily childless, describe themselves as feeling empty, unfulfilled, fearing growing

old, and on top of that they experience fears relating to their not having experienced motherhood.

On the basis of the findings of the research above we may state that the dominant norms on parenthood and reproduction relate to (un)selfishness, (un)fulfilment, (un)completeness and (non-) physiological age. The decision on whether to have children or not is to a large extent emotionally laden, be it in a positive or negative sense, as is also illustrated by further research conducted by LaRossa and Sinha (2006) in which 66 married or cohabiting couples with children attended at least one out of seven group sessions held to educate couples beginning from the second trimester of pregnancy until six months after the birth. The aim was to prepare the parents for the arrival of the new-born. They discovered four fundamental discourses which can be illustrated using two orthogonal axes: progressive (tomorrow will be better than yesterday)—regressive (today is worse than yesterday) and prospective—retrospective:

- (1) Prospective progressive refers to the joyful expectation of having a baby, looking forward to new emotions, experiences and psychological changes and changes in role.
- (2) Retrospective progressive describes contentment with the changes which occur after the birth of the child, such as the improved quality of life, marital/couple relations, a greater feeling of happiness and joy.
- (3) Prospective regressive refers to negative expectations associated with the birth of a child. These mostly concern fears of not having enough sleep and being tired, the high financial costs and for men fear of not having enough sex with their wife/partner (i.e. motherhood is desexualised).
- (4) Retrospective regressive refers to a nostalgic view of the past, before the child was born, and a feeling of regret that since the birth of the child the things that the couple used to enjoy doing have now had to be limited. These include travelling, lazing in bed talking at the weekend, trips, massages—things that they no longer do due to the lack of time and energy.

It appears that young people aged between 20 and 30 are much more susceptible to regressive rather than progressive discourses in terms of their reproductive behaviour and are more concerned with the potential of losing out if they start a family rather than the positive changes it might bring. This is one of the reasons why they attempt to use this period more for their own personal growth and in seeking their life goals and so they delay parenthood until later. At the same time, the majority of young people will in the end tend to fulfil the norm of parenthood.

What seems to be crucial in spreading norms of parenthood is that their content is dominantly focused on the transition from being childless to having children, rather than on the number of children. This significantly impacts on decisions made regarding reproduction. In spite of the various discourses introduced above, the ultimate decision for the majority of young people is not whether to have children or not, the real decision is about whether to delay having children until later. At the same time for many people having one child is an excellent compromise that allows them to devote sufficient time to their own self-development, their various interests, needs and hobbies, and also provides them with the joys and experiences associated with parenthood. Having one child may therefore substantially satisfy many people's fundamental biological, psychological and social

needs as far as parenthood is concerned. First and foremost, they are consequently able to satisfy their biological instinct, but also to experience the positive emotion of fulfilling and transcending themselves, and eliminating any notions of selfishness and egotistic behaviour. It can strengthen altruistic behaviour within the marriage/relationship. At the same time it satisfies any desires grandparents may have for grandchildren. It also reduces fears later in life of loneliness, old age, insecurity and being unfulfilled. Last but not least it enables parents to become members of the majority childbearing population. In other words, once the first child is born, the asymmetry is eliminated between the childless and the childbearing, between those with and those without experience of parenthood, with all the advantages and disadvantages that a child brings. The emotional gains linked with the transition from being childless to having a child are therefore high for the majority of people due to the fulfilment of the biological, psychological, social needs associated with parenthood. In deciding between having one or more children most parents probably experience more moderate normative and emotional pressure³. Further consideration is therefore directed more towards structural influences. Since Western cultures are highly competitive in terms of obtaining desirable or valued jobs and people face economic uncertainty and the risk of loss of employment, preparing a child for life as an adult—upbringing and education—requires substantial energy and financial resources. At the same time (in contrast to many Asian or African countries), there is a downward trend meaning that fewer children assist their parent financially (or otherwise) in later life, and this relates to the overall weakening of family ties. Therefore many parents are forced to consider very rationally the gains and losses associated with having larger families. They not only take into consideration their own resources but also assistance provided by the state for bringing up children, perhaps by different institutions (daycare, nursery, afterschool activities) and their availability or the different kinds of financial assistance on offer (for example, child benefit, tax breaks, etc).

Cohabitation and the different impacts it has on different subpopulations

Another significant characteristic associated with the SDT is the increase in cohabitation i.e. living together as partners outside marriage. It is useful in this case as well to distinguish between the social status and the socio-economic position of people who decide to cohabit and have children together. SDT theory has it that cohabitation is above all an expression of secular, anti-authoritarian, norms-challenging and independent values and attitudes of more educated young people in connection with more emphasis on self-actualization needs (Lesthaeghe, Neidert 2006). However, it has been shown that, in many countries, the rise in cohabitation and the growth in non-marital childbearing are higher amongst ethnic minorities and socially disadvantaged groups than in the majority population (see, for instance Lesthaeghe, Neidert 2006, Perelli-Haris, Gerber 2011).

It is precisely the relationship between the fertility rate (the drop in fertility), delay of birth, cohabitation and the percentage of children born out of wedlock that seems to be one of the main distinguishing indicators of reproduction patterns between as well as within

³ An indirect indicator of this assumption is the below replacement fertility rate found in many countries, which to a great extent is caused by the growing proportion of single-child families.

states. Let us consider more closely the indicators relating to some of the countries where this distinction is clear. For comparative purposes we have selected two world powers (the US and Russia) and an additional three European countries (Italy, Ukraine, and Slovakia) where the transition to the SDT was recorded later than in Northern European countries and where at the same time fertility was at its lowest-low (which means that total fertility dropped below 1.3) at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Russia also reached lowest-low fertility during this period. It is only in the US (among these countries) that the total fertility rate (TFR) continues to stay above 2.0, although this is achieved mainly because of the reproductive behaviour of the black and Hispanic populations (Lesthaeghe, Neidert 2006).

It is important to state that any kind of inter-country comparison is not and cannot be sufficiently precise if the research into parenthood and reproduction was conducted in different years. The situation regarding parenthood is relatively dynamic and thus a gap of two or three years between data collection can produce different results even within the same country. Moreover, the data we have from some countries is richer than that from other countries. The aim of this article, however, is not to provide a detailed and precise comparison of the situation between different countries using the available date, but to highlight some of the different trajectories seen in partnerships and parenthood, which may be present within individual countries, yet across many countries they may be influenced by the same or similar parameters. The only criterion on which we have comparable available data for the countries selected is the total fertility rate—TFR (see Table 1).

Table 1: Total fertility rate (children born/woman)

Country	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Italy	1.18	1.18	1.19	1.26	1.27	1.28	1.28	1.29	1.3	1.31	1.32	1.39
Russia	1.25	1.27	1.3	1.33	1.26	1.27	1.28	1.39	1.4	1.41	1.41	1.42
Slovakia	1.25	1.25	1.25	1.25	1.31	1.32	1.33	1.33	1.34	1.35	1.36	1.37
Ukraine	1.26	1.29	1.32	1.34	1.37	1.4	1.17	1.24	1.25	1.26	1.27	1.28
United States	2.06	2.06	2.07	2.07	2.07	2.08	2.09	2.09	2.1	2.05	2.06	2.06

Source: CIA World Factbook: <http://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?c=lo&v=31> (retrieved: February 6, 2012)

With the exception of the US, the lowest fertility rate (lowest-low fertility) was reached in these countries in 2000-2001. Since then fertility has gradually risen slightly in Italy, Russia and in Slovakia, passing the 1.3 mark in 2008, which could be a consequence of it recovering due to the postponement of childbearing to a later age. In Ukraine fertility first of all increased and then fell again and since 2006 it has been rising continuously, although it has not exceeded 1.3.

Other available data on these countries show that in Northern Italy cohabitation is rare, while the institution of marriage is still very common and important; however, it is being postponed together with the interval between marriage and the first birth (most often 3 to 5 years), which is increasing in direct relation to the later age at which couples first marry (Bernardi 2003).

In Ukraine, like in Italy, marriage is almost universal; however, unlike in Italy, it starts at a relatively young age (96 per cent of those aged over 25 years of age are married) and is soon followed by childbearing—on average women marry eight months before conception occurs (Perelli-Harris 2005). The early age at which people marry and consequently begin parenthood is specific to Ukraine compared to the majority of Western Europe countries. While in Ukraine 83 per cent of women give birth before the age of 30, in Western Europe it is the opposite—after the age of 30 (*ibid.*). Although non-marital births are gradually increasing, only 2 per cent of women giving birth outside marriage had higher education (Perelli-Harris 2008). Highly educated women marry almost immediately after they complete their university education and they comprise the only subgroup with delayed childbearing (*ibid.*).

As is the case in Western Europe, in the US the ages at which first marriages occur is increasing, as is the postponement of childbearing (in the non-Hispanic white population) and cohabitation. While 62 per cent of white non-Hispanic women born in 1950-55 were married by the age of 25 without having cohabited, only 32 per cent of this category of women born in 1965-69 were married by that age without having cohabited first (Lesthaeghe, Neidert 2006). However, this shift was more dramatic amongst the black population, where the proportion of women married without having cohabited in the same two age cohorts decreased from 44 per cent to 18 per cent (*ibid.*).

In Russia between 1980 and 2003 there was an increase in the percentage of non-marital births, primarily amongst the least-educated women and there was a growth in the number of children born within cohabitation, due to the improbability of their being able to legitimise non-marital conception; marriage signalizes greater opportunities and stability and is associated with higher education (Perelli-Harris, Gerber 2011). Older data indicates that the marriage rate (per 1000 population) gradually fell between 1987 (9.9) and 1994 (7.6) (Vishnevsky 2006).

In Slovakia there has been a fall in the number of marriages since 2008, although in the decade of interest, 2001-2010, the lowest number of marriages per 1000 inhabitants (4.4) occurred in 2001, as is illustrated in table 2. At the same time, we can see from the data evidence that marriage is being postponed until later since at the end of this decade in comparison to the beginning the average age at which both sexes marry is roughly three years later—in 2010 the average age for men was 31.9 and 28.8 for women. (portal.statistics.sk/files/informativna-sprava_demoograficky-vyvoj_2011.pdf).

A more detailed analysis provided by Šprocha and Potančoková (2010) for the period 2001-2009 shows that, in terms of education levels, those marrying for the first time were most likely to be university graduates and least likely to have the lowest level of education (primary or secondary school, no leaving certificate). As far as age is concerned (between 2005 and 2009) those who married latest were male university graduates (30.2 years), followed by female university graduates (28.1 years) (*ibid.*).

The postponing of the age at which marriage occurs is also reflected in the delay in the onset of motherhood. In the decade concerned, the average age at which marriage occurs increased annually by 0.2–0.3 years, reaching 28.8 years in 2010, while the average age of women at first birth increased by 0.4 years, reaching 27.3 years in 2010 (portal.statistics.sk/files/informativna-sprava_demoograficky-vyvoj_2011.pdf). Just as is the case with marriage,

Table 2: Statistics on marriages within the population in Slovakia, 2001-2010

Indicator	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
No. of marriages	23 795	25 062	26 002	27 885	26 149	25 939	27 437	28 293	26 356	25 415
No. of marriages per 1000 inhabitants	4.4	4.7	4.8	5.2	4.9	4.8	5.1	5.2	4.9	4.7
Av. age of marriage:										
Men	28.6	29.1	29.5	29.6	30.5	31.0	31.2	31.4	31.7	31.9
Women	25.6	26.1	26.5	26.7	27.4	27.9	28.2	28.4	28.6	28.8

Source: Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky: portal.statistics.sk/files/informativna-sprava_demograficky-vyvoj_2011.pdf.

motherhood is also being postponed particularly by more educated women. In 2005-2009 women with lower levels of education (primary and secondary school, no leaving certificate) continued to give birth at a relatively young age, on average 22.5–23.4 years, while women educated at university postponed motherhood until the ages of 27–30 (Šprocha, Potančoková 2010). At the same time, in 2009 almost 49 per cent of first-born children and 60 per cent of all children were born to female university graduates aged over 30 (*ibid.*).

All the indicators mentioned thus far correspond to the premises of SDT theory. The growing trend has also affected non-marital fertility and in 2010 the percentage of children born outside marriage was 33 per cent (portal.statistics.sk/files/informativna-sprava_demograficky-vyvoj_2011.pdf). However, as was the case in the other countries analysed, cohabitation did not follow the trends relating to education. Although university graduates display greater tolerance towards alternative forms of living together, they tend to favour marriage, and cohabitation is more widespread amongst individuals with low levels of education and amongst lower social groups. According to the census on population and households conducted in Slovakia in 2001, cohabitation was most common amongst the Roma population and amongst people with lower levels of education and training (Mládek 2003). The proportion of children born outside marriage in relation to the education of the mother is similar to that in the Czech Republic: a majority of non-marital children are born to women with lower levels of education (almost 64 per cent of non-marital births in 2008) and those born to female university graduates represent the smallest proportion (11 per cent of non-marital births in 2008) (Potančoková 2009). At the same time around five to six times more non-marital births, in comparison to the rest of the population, were recorded in women with lower education in the early 1990s and although since then the number of non-marital births has risen for all education levels, by 2008 the increase amongst female university graduates was only from 2 per cent to 11 per cent, which is six times less than the number of non-marital births amongst women with low education in 2008 (Šprocha, Potančoková 2010).

If we compare the different countries listed above, all the available statistics suggest that the age at which people enter into marriage is gradually increasing and at the same time

people are having children later; female university graduates have children latest. In Ukraine the trend towards marrying and giving birth at an older age is least in evidence. In Italy the delay in having children after marrying is most marked (3–5 years), while in Ukraine it is shortest (8 months). Cohabitation is gradually spreading and so is the number of children born outside wedlock. Nonetheless in Ukraine and in Italy marriage is an almost universal phenomenon and in the other countries cohabitation and non-marital births are most widespread amongst the less educated members of society. Yet, a greater degree of liberalism and acceptance of alternative lifestyles is associated with the most educated in society. The key to understanding this might lie in the degree to which parenthood is planned. In other words, the question is, are non-marital births amongst the low-educated planned and desired, or is it more the case that they are the only options open in real life, an inability to marry once pregnant? Cohabitation along with parenthood might be an expression of greater autonomy, independence, the shaping and acceptance of new norms, of a satisfying and stable form of partnership and family life. At the same time cohabitation and having non-marital children may be a sign of poverty, unemployment, and the impossibility of finding a partner and stability. Thus, according to Perelli-Harris and Gerber (2011) non-marital childbearing in people with the lowest levels of education and the worst socio-economic conditions and/or those from unprivileged minorities may reflect a pattern of disadvantage rather than the SDT. Non-marital conceptions can also lead to greater disparities between those who are educated with a greater amount of resources and those that are socially disadvantaged (McLanahan 2004). As unmarried parents may come from much more disadvantaged populations than married parents, non-marital childbearing in these circumstances reproduces class and racial disparities and is accompanied by higher levels of maternal (parental) stress and well-being, which leads to more health problems and reduces paternal investments (McLanahan 2009).

The data discussed illustrates the fact that most of the demographic research conducted into parenthood and reproduction focuses on educational discrepancies between the various levels in society and uses them to analyse the different life trajectories and their pros and cons. At the same time most aim to survey the situation in one country or another, or to compare two different countries, which is understandable from the perspective of keeping track of the growth or decline in inhabitants and the influence that has on the labour market, pension systems and so forth within individual countries. Given, however, that it is clear from the research findings that various behaviour patterns are similar across countries, there is a need to devote greater attention to cross-cultural comparisons of different subpopulations.

Conclusion

The amount of research conducted within Western cultures, but also within Eastern European countries, relatively unambiguously points to the fact that the vast majority of young people do not decide between whether to remain childless or to have children. In reality the reproduction stage is simply being shifted to a later period in life and there is a transformation in roles, expectations and norms relating to partnerships and parental relations. This is often linked to plans to have a smaller number of children. The increasing average lifespan means that even older people are able to care extensively for their children and provide them with all the comforts, emotional ties and education etc they require.

The first child the parents have satisfies their biological instincts and provides them with the positive emotions of self-transcendence and enables them to become members of the majority group of childbearers. Considerations as to whether to have further children are clearly much more rationally focused on weighing up the various positives and negatives and taking into account not only their own career potential but also state guarantees (access to the institutions designed to assist parents in bringing up and educating their children).

The challenge for further empirical research is to shed light on the way in which the quality of parenthood changes depending on the age of the parents when the child is born and to test the hypothesis that decisions regarding the first child are more normatively and emotionally influenced than decisions about subsequent children. More inspiring information concerning family planning and reproduction could be produced by comparing similar groups across countries: the disadvantaged, minorities, the privileged, those with a higher level of education, those on higher incomes, those that spent the majority of their free time chatting online, those with alternative lifestyles (with a marked preference for travel, ecology, leadership, rearing, humanism, hedonism and so forth), which could shed more light onto the different dimensions and contexts involved in decision-making. There is also a range of different value preferences within the basic lifestyles practiced (for instance, on marriage and the family or on one's own autonomy and career, but also relating to liberal, conservative and religious convictions). A combination of all these factors and the way they interact would be a relatively valid predictor of reproductive behaviour in the future.

Current research findings also show that the same patterns of reproductive behaviour can produce markedly different consequences and outcomes in various subgroups of the population. For those who are highly educated, there are benefits to be had in delaying having children until later in terms of achieving the highest level of education and/or obtaining an advantageous job. At the same time, cohabitation provides them with the option of an alternative lifestyle, associated either with changing partners more frequently, being childless, or having children but with a greater degree of financial security. On the other hand, for socially disadvantaged groups in society, it can be more advantageous to have children at an earlier age, when the parents are healthier, or there is a greater likelihood that the grandparents will be able to shoulder some of the burden (in terms of energy, time and finances) of bringing up children. Ultimately for the disadvantaged section of the population childbearing without marriage has rather negative consequences leading to a decrease in the quality of life for the parents and their children mainly due to a shortage of resources.⁴

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