

REPRODUCTION, PARENTHOOD AND GENDER AS EXPERIENCED IN CONTEMPORARY CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPE: INTRODUCTORY

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This monothematic issue on reproduction, parenthood and gender as experienced in contemporary Central Eastern Europe is the late child of the multi-faceted collaboration on an extensive and comprehensive research project entitled *Sustainable reproduction in Slovakia: a psycho-social inquiry* (APVV060410) that was completed earlier this year (2014).

It is important to note that the concept of “sustainable reproduction” in Central Eastern Europe is quite different from that in, for instance, China or India, since the concern here is not about having too many children, but about having too few and too late. Panic discourses about an ageing/ dying out population are rife in the Slovak media and, interestingly, unsustainability is primarily mentioned in relation to the future of the old-age pension system rather than in the context of immigrants or someone else “taking over” Slovakia as is sometimes the case in “Western” countries (for the popularized discourse see e.g. Buchanan, 2002—a New York Times bestseller).

It was against this background that we became interested in what happens on the micro level, far below the macro level of national statistics—why is it that people are having children later and fewer of them (in Slovakia, and also elsewhere in Europe since the differences between post-socialist and non-post-socialist states seem to have diminished very quickly)? Being psychologists, we were mainly interested in the perspectives, attitudes, experiences and arguments of lay people—parents, parents-to-be and the childfree—about reproduction and parenting. We explored these using a combination of focus group discussions, individual interviews and a representative quantitative survey. But being *social* psychologists, we also did not believe that it was possible to completely distinguish between the micro and macro levels. Instead we assumed that the reproductive decisions individual women, men and couples make occur within a broader societal context (see also Bernardi, & Klärner, 2014; Testa, Sobotka, & Morgan, 2011), where different, and sometime contradictory cultural, normative, legislative, structural and media frames concerning parenting coexist

and interact. So these were also part of the investigation (for more details, see Lukšík, & Marková, 2013; Petrjánošová, 2012, 2013a; Popper, 2013). In this respect, Slovakia is an interesting example because, as part of post-socialist Central Eastern Europe (CEE), the country is caught somewhere between adopting a “western” lifestyle in which childbearing is postponed and maintaining the pro-familial attitudes typical of (and strengthened in) the state socialist era, with a specific conservative pro-Catholic twist.

From a historical perspective, under state socialism early marriage and childbearing along with the norm of a two-child family was almost universally adopted across the region now known as Central Eastern Europe (for more details, see Sobotka, 2011). The limited social freedoms and career opportunities meant that family life was considered one of the few areas of people’s lives worth investing in (Šmídová, 1999). This was boosted by state pronatalist agendas encompassing maternity leave, birth allowances and widely available childcare. As housing was mainly owned by the state and the pronatalist mix included the construction of dedicated family housing, it is somewhat paradoxical that early marriage and childbearing were a means of living independently for many young people. Thus the golden age of the family that was typical in the Western Europe of the 1960s continued right up into the late 1980s in Central and Eastern Europe (Sobotka, *ibid.*). The normative situation was quite contradictory with a proclaimed gender equality coupled with the almost universal labour participation of women and traditional norms and attitudes about the family and household roles resulting in the much greater involvement of women in the household and childcare compared to men.

Following the collapse of the state socialist system in Central Eastern Europe in 1989, the stagnating stability came to an end and people had to adapt their individual lives to uncertainties, poverty, unemployment and political chaos. Within a decade fertility rates had plummeted, creating the phenomenon of “lowest-low fertility”, where total fertility rates fell to below 1.3 (Sobotka, *ibid.*). This was partly caused by the postponement of childbearing. The mean age of mothers at first birth rose from 22 years under state socialism to a new mean of around 28 years within the space of two decades. Moreover, weddings have been postponed creating a whole generation of single “30 somethings”, which is typical of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) that had been described in Western societies in the 1970s (see more details in Lestaege, & van de Kaa, 1986).

The characteristics now shared by the entire CEE region are negative attitudes to voluntary childlessness, very positive attitudes to parenthood and the family and a more traditional division of gender roles (Sobotka, *ibid.*); however, the region is quite diverse in terms of levels of cohabitation, non-marital fertility and single motherhood. It would appear that some differences can be accounted for by the influence of religious values in predominantly Catholic countries (e.g. Slovakia, Poland), in predominantly Protestant countries (e.g. Estonia, Latvia) or predominantly atheist countries (e.g. the Czech Republic), but the picture is not that simple. For instance, in Slovakia, one of the most pro-catholic countries in the region (for more details, see Tížik, 2006) a set of secular values from the state socialist era have survived—manifested in the high acceptance of divorce, premarital sex and contraception as well as legalized abortion (Petrjánošová, Moolin-Doos, & Plichtová, 2008).

In order to truly understand the broader societal context within which individuals make reproductive and parenting decisions in Slovakia today, we had to look at the historical

and normative influences I have tried to briefly outline here in addition to considering the structural and legislative framework—the laws, regulations, state benefits and real life practices concerning crèches, kindergartens, maternal and parental leave, and also the laws and costs regulating abortion, assisted reproduction, adoption, etc. (see Petrjánošová, 2013a). In the explorative part of the project we also asked people about their attitudes and experiences of preschool childcare (see Petrjánošová, 2013b); however, we did not further explore issues relating to, for instance, assisted reproduction technologies or work-family balance issues once parental leave had come to an end. Instead we were very happy to meet other experts from the Central Eastern Europe region (demographers, sociologists, doctors from centers of assisted reproduction, organizational psychologists, health psychologists, etc.) who did explore these subjects further and whose findings, we feel, are like additional pieces in the complicated mosaic of the subject of sustainable reproduction as broadly conceived. Unfortunately, complications and delays in the reviewing process have meant that we were unable to include all their papers in this somewhat shorter than planned monothematic issue, and so their papers will be found in later issues of *Human Affairs: Postdisciplinary Humanities & Social Sciences Quarterly*.

In the first paper of this monothematic section, *Can a magic wand plausibly be used in serious psychological research? The complications of researching the ideal age at which to be a parent through the eyes of the child*, Hana Konečná and her colleagues explore the familiar trend of postponed parenthood from a new perspective, from the viewpoint of the children. The long-term trend of postponed childbearing, together with the recent increase in the use of assisted reproduction technologies (ART), raises questions around the acceptable age for childbearing and, as the technology progresses, around whether it should be restricted by law. According to the authors, the ART legislation across Europe as well as the age limits for treatment (or their nonexistence) vary considerably. Furthermore, the legislative norms take into account the preferences of potential parents but not those of the potential children. The authors are very interested in what children in the Czech Republic consider to be the ideal age of their parents, and what their reasons for this might be, and so they researched this issue using a survey for older children and young adults. However, they were also concerned about the potential harm these questions could induce in the children, in the sense of their not being content with their parents, and so they gave the formulation of the questions a lot of thought. Finally they came up with a hypothetically formulated question set in the future when the child is 20 or 25 years old. As someone who is interested in questions surrounding parenthood, and being almost allergic to the simplistic approach of reducing the whole issue to the issue of motherhood, I am very glad that the authors also asked the children about their preferred age for the father, despite the fact that, to my knowledge, insofar as the ART legislation imposes limits, it does so only in relation to the age of the potential mother.

In the second paper, *Infertility and assisted reproduction technologies through a gender lens*, Karolína Davidová and Olga Pechová present research conducted via semi-structured interviews with Czech heterosexual couples, which contribute to attempts to understand gender differences in experiences of infertility and of coping with infertility and ART treatment. They found that there are gender differences not only in experiences of infertility, but also in how it is understood, and how ART treatment is handled. According to their findings, the central aspect of the experience of infertility in the women interviewed was a

desire for a child, but in the case of the men it was perceived more as a socially imposed obligation to fulfill the male role. Being interested in the ways the available discourses interact with the ideas people are able and willing to express and stand for, I personally would be intrigued by the rather over smooth overlap, in my eyes, between the desire for a child expressed by the women interviewed and the norm of womanhood realized (only) through realized motherhood that perhaps operates here in background without being challenged on a more conscious level (in general on norms around fertility, having children and childlessness see Hašková, & Zamykalová, 2006).

The third paper, *Unemployed, employed & care-giving mothers: Quality of partner & family relations*, Adriana WYROBKOVÁ and Petr OKRAJEK compared the findings from a large retrospective study concerning three groups of women, all mothers of three-year-old children: 1) employed, 2) voluntarily unemployed, and 3) involuntarily unemployed. The authors were interested mainly in subjective perceptions of the quality of partnerships and family relationships. Their results showed the group of involuntarily unemployed women had the lowest quality family life, while the employed women also experienced some family problems and those who were most satisfied with their family life were the voluntarily unemployed women. They interpreted the findings in terms of the distress produced by involuntary unemployment and took into account the predominant double burden of the female role in the Czech Republic. As I explained above, in both Slovakia and the Czech Republic there exists a strong social norm of female participation in the labor force, but also of caring for under-threes at home, which is a hangover from the state socialist era in which proclaimed gender equality was paired with traditional norms and attitudes about family and household roles. At the same time, in both countries a two-income household is not only the norm, but it is also the only long-term option for the majority if the household is to survive financially. But in households that can afford it, it is still easier for all if it is the woman who stays at home and the breadwinner is the man because that fits the traditional division of labor, which is still a very strong social norm that is changing only slowly.¹

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