

Intentions to Become a Parent after Societal Transition in Hungary

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Extended abstract

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Introduction

Recent data on completed cohort fertility indicate moderate or no rise in the proportion of ultimately childless women in Europe (Frejka & Sardon 2003), and increasing childlessness has not been a major source of fertility decline in most countries with lowest low period fertility (Billari & Kohler 2002). In countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), people remain committed to become a parent with all the long-term commitment involved, as voluntary childlessness there remains particularly low. At the same time, the postponement of parenthood has been one of the paramount demographic trends in Europe over a few last decades and in CEE countries as they went through their societal transition in the 1990s.

Hobcraft & Kiernan (1995) have outlined an interdisciplinary framework for the study of transition to parenthood, considering it as a special event among the births an individual may have through his or her life. They present how a partner, education, employment, housing, and security all play an important role in an individual's decision of whether or not to become a parent at a certain point of time. Ideas, tastes, and preferences contribute to this personal decision in their own right and determine the extent to which an individual perceives certain objective conditions as a constraint or an incentive.

In this study, we will analyze the relative importance of the effects of the components of this framework on the expressed intention to become a parent. Our investigation follows the main theoretical strands in demographic literature, with particular attention to the aspects emerging in a societal context after a transition from state socialist to market economy. By analyzing data on women and men, we explicitly address the gender aspect present in most of the theoretical approaches. In economic characteristics, like occupation, earnings, education, and time use, our data source also enables us to study interactive effects of both partners' characteristics on intentions to become a parent.

Our study focuses on Hungary, the first country to field a Generations and Gender Survey (GGS, in Hungary '*Turning Points of the Life Course*') in the framework of the Europe-wide Generations and Gender Program. In particular, our study aims to make use of the possibility these data have for analyzing a range of several pertinent theoretical perspectives simultaneously.

Like in other CEE countries, the societal transition in Hungary was accompanied by steep decline in period fertility from 1.9 in 1990 to 1.3 in 1998-2002 (Council of Europe 2003; Philipov & Kohler 2001), which places it among the countries with lowest low fertility. Using the Bongaarts-Feeney tempo-adjustment method of the TFR, Philipov & Kohler (2001) estimated that the observed fertility decline in the first half of the 1990s was related to postponement only (tempo-effect), whereas the decline in quantum took place in the second half of the 1990s. The TFR for first births also decreased a lot, but the Bongaarts-Feeney tempo-adjusted value decreased only slightly, from 0.86 in 1990 to 0.76 in 1997. Women's mean age at first birth was rising already before the transition. This accelerated in the 1990s: from 23.1 in 1990 to 25.6 in 2002 (Council of Europe 2003).

Theoretical considerations

Economic explanations

Increase in economic deprivation, both absolute and relative, have been seen as major factors behind the plummeting fertility in CEE countries in the first half of the 1990s (the economic crisis hypothesis) (Macura et al 2002). In accordance with this assumption, we expect those with the lowest absolute living standard or with the lowest assessment of own well-being be particularly inclined to remain childless. Since economic deprivation would also heavily select men out of marriage and co-residential partnerships, we expect some of this effect to be mediated by partnership status.

According to the micro-economic theory of the family (Becker 1991), we should be able to detect effects of both direct and indirect costs on the propensity of transition to parenthood. When a couple's current earnings and perceived perspective of the earning power is high, the perspective of being able to cope with the direct costs of children should increase the propensity of becoming a parent. In the post-transitional environment, higher education could also be assumed to provide a better perspective for future economic well-being than was the case in the socialist times. Therefore, net of other factors, the couple's total income and combined education level should be positively correlated with transition to parenthood.

The assumption that mothers take much more time out from gainful employment in connection with childbirth than fathers is the main source of gender-specificity in economic theory of the family. Although the micro-economic theory was initially developed in the context of the U.S. of the 1960s where gender division of employment and housework was sharp, the assumption of these gender differences in time use hold in most countries today, including those of CEE. However, the characteristics of CEE countries include a relatively well-developed system of public childcare and general acceptance of young children being in full-time day care, and the tradition of very high female labor force participation during the socialist times. The institutional support to motherhood in the form of entitlement to paid parental leave could also be expected to offset the price-of-time effect to some extent, although the monetary value of this support has been diminishing throughout the 1990s and is now quite low (reference). Nevertheless, we expect to find some price-of-time effect in that, net of couple's total income, earnings, education, and perceived economic prospects of the woman decrease her propensity of motherhood. In the case of men, literature suggests the classical breadwinner qualities of stable employment, upward career, and high income to correlate with his intention of fatherhood.

Societal transition and globalization

Former socialist countries experienced not only a "simple" economic downturn, but also a restructuring of the economic system at a time when globalization had reached a higher level. Furthermore, in parallel with the economic restructuring and recession people experienced changed in social institutions and social policy. Discontinuity of a social system and integration into global world inevitably results in less certainty in an individual's or couple's ability in assessing the circumstances where their children could be raised. Assuming a responsible view on parenthood as an irreversible commitment for some 15-20 years, an increase in uncertainty is likely to bring along postponement of parenthood. Our data are collected in 2001, the time that can be seen as a post-transition equilibrium where one could expect the uncertainty effects related to system discontinuity to have largely leveled off and elements of uncertainty giving way to predictability. From this point of view, those who have postponed their parenthood at uncertain times may feel more secure to make this commitment in the first decade of the millennium.

Ideational change

Another important domain is that of ideational change. Van de Kaa (1987) and Lesthaeghe (1995) have seen the change towards more individualistic and less child-oriented values, transformation of the cultural system and secularization behind the observed demographic change dubbed as the Second Demographic Transition in the West. When the socialist countries opened up, they were assumed to be exposed to the spread of the same value orientations. The institutional set-up of the societies also put individual achievements in higher regard than before, which would stimulate more individualistic attitudes. The infusion of western values into CEE countries has been seen as the other main explanation to the postponement of fertility and decline in period fertility. Although the explanations for fertility decline and postponement emerging from economic and ideational domains have been increasingly seen as complementing each other, there is still a considerable discussion on which of them is the primary driving force behind the change. We will be able to bring more clarity into this.

Preference theory

According to Hakim (2000), basic lifestyle preferences play an important role in a decision whether to become a parent or not. She argues that the increased freedom of women in their reproductive choices allows those who do not want to have children to stay childless (the work-oriented “pure” type) and various external incentives or constraints of parenthood would not have much influence on them. Similarly, women with a clear family orientation would strive for motherhood with little consideration of the constraints. The incentives and constraints are important, however, for most women whose basic lifestyle choice is to combine work and family careers. By analyzing combined information on value orientations and attitudes with that on education and work, and by modeling selectivity, we will attempt to understand the role of a basic lifestyle choice of remaining childless in the aggregate-level postponement of parenthood.

Data and Methods

We use data from the first wave of the Hungarian panel survey *Turning Points in the Life Course*, which is part of the Europe-wide Generations and Gender Program. The survey was conducted in 2001 and its second wave is taken this year. We analyze data from the 5175 men in age 18-49 and 4297 women at age 18-44 at the time of the survey, of whom 1561 men and 1198 women were childless and could express their intention to become a parent.

Our target variable is the intention to become a parent. Based on the answers to questions “*Would you like to have any children?*” and “*At what age would you like to have your next child?*” we created two dichotomous outcome variables: (1) for the intention to have a child within the next 18 months, and (2) for the intention to have a child within the next 36 months. We use logit models to analyze the association of our explanatory variables with these responses. Social-psychological literature, the theory of planned behavior in particular (Ajzen 1991) considers intentions as immediate determinants of the actual decision to have a child, and Miller & Pasta (1995) have underlined the importance of intentions in analyzing the timing of births. A sizable amount of unintended births may blur findings on a theoretically expected link between a determinant and fertility, while we do not have this problem when analyzing intentions.

We distinguish between four partnership statuses: married, living together with a partner, having a non-resident partner, no partner. In the multivariate models partnership status is always controlled for, however, we also study how the effects of our explanatory variables vary by partnership status. We use explanatory variables pertaining to the economic situation (activity, occupation, personal and household income, time devoted to income-generating activities, job satisfaction and perception of income size), education (highest level completed, time elapsed since completion), objective measures of well-being (index based on owning certain items,

accommodation size), subjective dimensions of well-being (satisfaction with living standard, satisfaction with living conditions and plans of change, perception of status tension and overall life-course development), value orientations (dimensions of post-materialism, religiosity, work and family, intergenerational relations, gender relations), and subjective assessments of partnership. Occupation, earnings, education, and time use are also known for the respondent's partner and will be used in some models. As control variables, we consider the demographic duration dependencies (age, duration of union and marriage), union order, age at home-leaving, and current household structure.

The group of childless people becomes increasingly selective with age. To control for this selectivity we fit simultaneously a hazard model of the transition to first birth and a logit model on expressed intention of first birth of childless men or women. Results will be available in early 2005.

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