

USING BIOGRAPHIES TO EXPLORE REPRODUCTIVE CAREERS OF SLOVAK WOMEN BEFORE AND AFTER THE FALL OF COMMUNISM¹

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Introduction

The change of reproductive behaviour of Slovak women after the fall of state socialism is apparent from the declining total fertility rate and a shifting pattern of the childbearing towards the higher age. The total fertility rate fell from the level of simple reproduction of 2,09 children per woman in 1990 to 1,19 in 2001–2003 being one of the lowest in Europe (with the TFR of the Czech Republic). The postponement of first and subsequent births became a widespread strategy and the mean age of women at first birth has risen from 22,7 to 24,9 years during the period 1990–2003. However, compared to the western European countries the mean age still remains low.

It is broadly agreed that the change in reproductive behaviour was caused by the fall of the social and economical system at the beginning of the 1990s and hence by a changed context in which women lived their reproductive lives. The response of women with different experience and belonging to different birth cohorts varied according to the situation they were in when the change occurred. Women born at the end of the 1960s who already had one child were less successful than their older counterparts in having a second child. Postponement of childbearing became a common strategy especially among childless women born during the 1970s (Potančoková, 2004). These women behave very differently from their mothers, for whom early childbearing and short intervals between the births were typical. The reproductive histories of women born in the late 1940s and 1950s were influenced by the state population policy that introduced new pronatalist measures at the beginning of the 1970s. These measures included loans for the newly weds, which encouraged couples to enter marriage. However, the population policy measures do not fully explain the pattern of early childbearing of the Slovak women, since the loans were available for all newly weds up to the age of 30. A further explanation can be the complicated access to modern contraception and also the norms that guided the sexual behaviour of individuals. During the early 1990s modern contraceptives became more widespread and hence women were given means to better control their fertility. This technological innovation made it possible also for young

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women at the beginning of their reproductive career to postpone childbearing to the higher age.

It was not only births and their timing that changed within the women's reproductive career. During the 1970s marriage and childbearing were early and universal and the bond between marriage and fertility was strong – only 5–7 % of births occurred out of wedlock. At the same time, premarital conceptions and pregnancies were common. Despite of the loose laws on abortion this did not seem to be an appropriate solution to premarital conception. Among married women with children abortions, however, were used as contraception *ex post* and as means for spacing of births and of control for the completed family size. During the 1990s abortion rates fell substantially after modern methods of contraception became widespread.

The processes underlying the change of reproductive behaviour so apparent from the cohort and period fertility measures are not fully understood and explained yet. The difference of reproductive histories of women experiencing childbearing during the 1970s and in fact their daughters being at the onset of their reproductive careers in the 1990s is striking. What are the reproductive careers of women experiencing childbearing under state socialism and nowadays and how do they differ? How do they perceive their experience and which categories do their mental schemes of childbearing include? What was relevant for them? There are many more questions that point to the need to explore different reproductive (hi)stories of women experiencing childbearing before and after the fall of state socialism looking at the processes on the individual level.

Theoretical framework

To explore the changing reproductive behaviour among the succeeding cohorts of Slovak women I employ the concept of reproductive career which can be defined as the “arrangement of reproductive life events along the life course beginning from menarche and ending at either menopause or sterilisation” (Runyan, 1984). It allows for the study of reproduction in its complexity and not only partially focusing on one of the events within the reproductive career (fertility, abortion, marriage etc.). The reproductive career also influences as well as is influenced by other careers – educational, occupational – that relate to particular domains of the life (Giele, Elder, 1998).

Within demography the life course approach is applied to the study of fertility mainly in the form of life history analysis based on quantitative data. Life histories are mostly studied as sequences of the events and states within a particular life career. Besides the life history a person's life can be expressed as a life story which includes on top of the events and experiences also a person's perceptions and mental representations attached to these. To understand the causality beneath the reported sequences of events one needs to make use of the life story approach. As a result both – life history and life story – should be studied jointly. Exploring life stories, however, needs qualitative methods to be applied since it deals with the subjective viewpoints, experiences and mental schemes.

In this paper, I am using life histories from the interviews as my informants reported them and I compare these. Then I focus on their perception of their reproductive career and of what was relevant for their subjective mental schemes related to childbearing. To interpret these I make use of the cognitive approach. Linking back to the life course perspective, “the cognitive scheme is one’s personal interpretation of the options one has, as determined by the context, consisting of both ‘location in time and space’ (period) and ‘linked lives’ (cohort)” (Matsuo, 2003).

Cognitive approaches focus on how these cognitive models of reality, which embrace the knowledge of an individual, are constructed and how information is learnt and processed by individuals. These cognitive models, or cognitive schemes, are then employed in the process of decision making and they guide the behaviour of individuals. “Rather than acting as a blueprint for behaviour, culture acts like a ‘toolkit’ of strategies which individuals use to choose among behavioural options depending on the momentary external circumstances” (DiMaggio, 1997). Cognitive models are not passively accepted from the network partners or other sources. As D’Andrade (1995) states “humans have an almost unlimited ability to “chunk” together bits of information into schematised models of particular domains of information”. When models developed through previous experience are unable to account adequately for new stimuli (changed context), “individuals switch from automatic to deliberative cognition which they use to actively and innovatively restructure their own models to better account for new stimuli” (DiMaggio, 1997).

Method of data collection and analysis

The life stories subjected to the analysis were acquired in in-depth biographical narrative interviews with two Slovak women living in Bratislava, one of them until recently. The interviews were conducted within a pilot study of the project. The interviewing method is based on receptive interviewing with minimal interventions of the interviewer until the main narration comes to its end. This allows the interviewee to talk only about what is relevant to her. Further questions on the narrative and also on other relevant topics previously not mentioned are asked by the interviewer after the main narration. Biographical interview was chosen because it is more or less the natural form in which one’s life can be communicated to the other person. It also keeps the chronology of the life span and goes along with the perspective of the life course. Receptive interviewing has its rationale in focusing on what is relevant for the interviewee, how the categories of meanings and topics are associated within her mental schemes. This then allows for the reconstruction of the personal semantic network.

During the analysing procedure life histories were reconstructed from the interviews and visualised in the form of life course schema with relevant events, experiences and turning points of lives. The interviews were analysed employing sequential analysis (Froschauer, 1992, Flick, 1999) and the coding procedure based on the grounded theory. Personal semantic networks were reconstructed following principles suggested by Strauss (1995).

Women's reproductive careers during the state socialism of the 1970s and nowadays

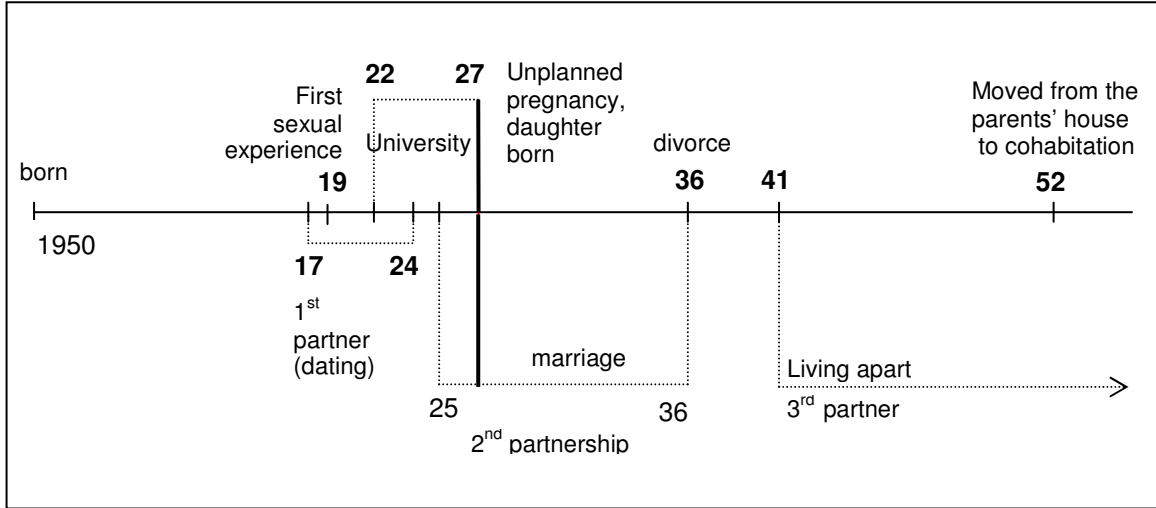
The reproductive career of a woman biologically starts with menarche and ends with menopause. The actual reproductive career then starts by the onset of sexual life, before or within the marriage or a consensual union. The reproductive careers of my interviewees are visualised in pictures 1 and 3. Erika, who was 54 at the time of the interview, represents the women bearing children in the mid-1970s, 28 years old Paula represents women born at that time, who are bearing children nowadays. Both of them have one child, which they gave birth to at a similar age – 27 and 26, respectively. Although Erika's timing of the first birth does not follow the widespread pattern of early childbearing so typical for her birth cohort but her unexpected pregnancy followed by marriage represents a typical pattern of behaviour in the 1970s. However, the life stories of these women can help us to see how the society influenced their reproductive lives and to come to a better understanding of the processes leading to particular pattern of reproductive behaviour.

In spite of the similar timing of the childbearing the reproductive careers of my interviewees were very different. While Erika married her second partner, Paula reported several short term partnerships before she met her current partner. She also had more sexual experience before meeting her husband. Erika on the other hand paid attention to stress that her sexual activity began after a longer period of dating and took place within a stable partnership. The important turning point of Erika's life was her unexpected and unplanned pregnancy, which, moreover, occurred at the time she wanted to break up with her partner. She quickly stepped into the marriage, finished university (she was just before graduation) and delivered the baby into wedlock. She got divorced after 9 years of married life and the marriage was "unhappy" as she reported. She was living in the parents' house also with her family until the age of 52.

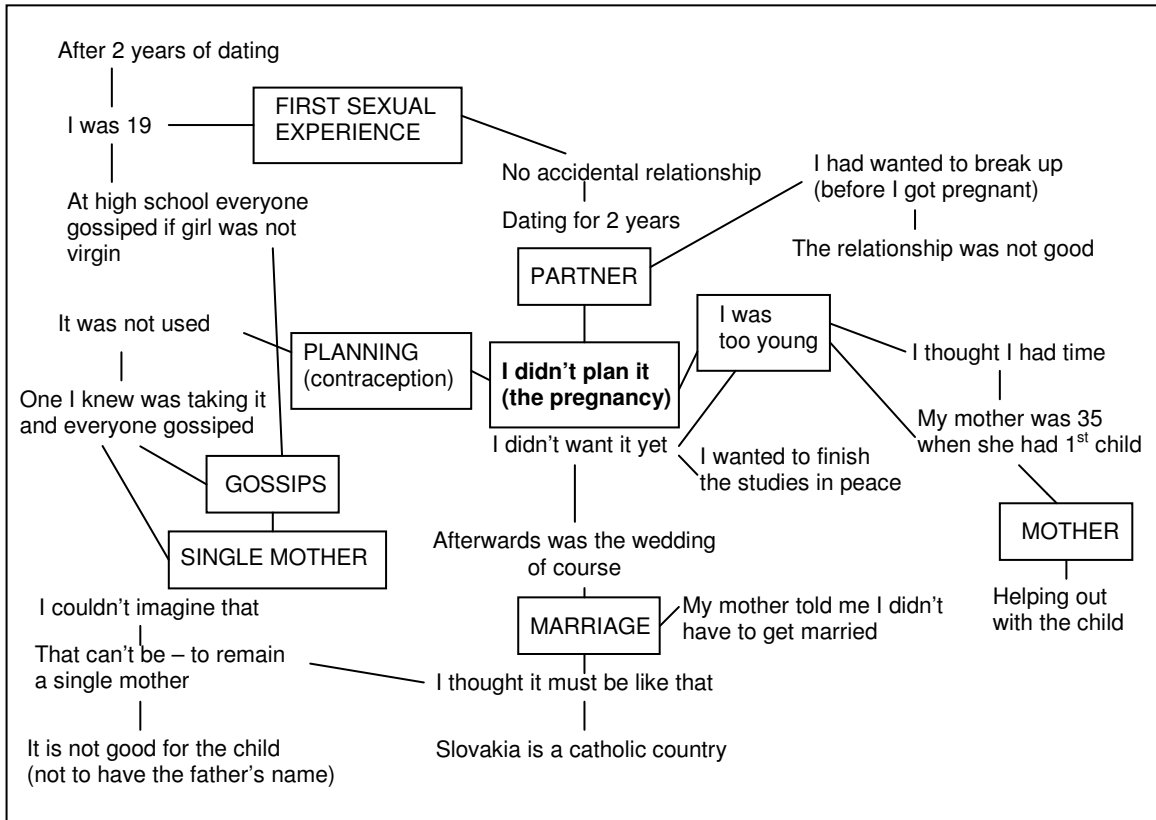
Paula was born in the 1976 to her mother who was 19 at that time, also as unexpected child conceived premaritally. Her parents married and then divorced shortly after Paula was born. Her mother remarried after 8 years and had another child. The life history of Paula's mother and Erika share the same pattern of the transition to motherhood and marriage. For these women we can schematise their reproductive career as a sequence of partnership – unplanned pregnancy – marriage – delivery and perhaps a divorce as a result of a fragile marital union. Later we put this pattern into the context based on the interpretation of the interviews as well as the relation of the unplanned pregnancies to the contraceptive practice.

In contrast to the unplanned pregnancies of the women belonging to the older cohorts Paula's pregnancy was planned and took place after 2 years of marriage. 3,5 years of cohabitation preceded the marriage. Paula reported that she had the intention to get married after some time, so the cohabitation in this case was not considered a full alternative to marriage, but rather as a trial marriage. She was postponing childbearing even after getting married and she decided to have a child only due to her health problems which could have resulted in permanent infertility. Postponement of marriage behaviour of the cohorts born in the 1970s according to the fertility and nuptiality rates.

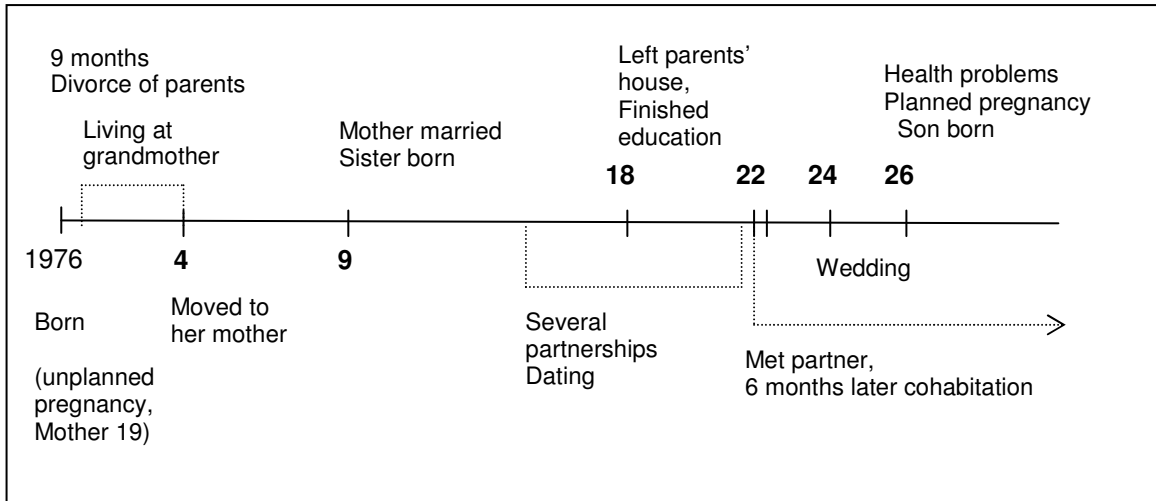
Picture 1: Life history of Erika, 54, daughter 27



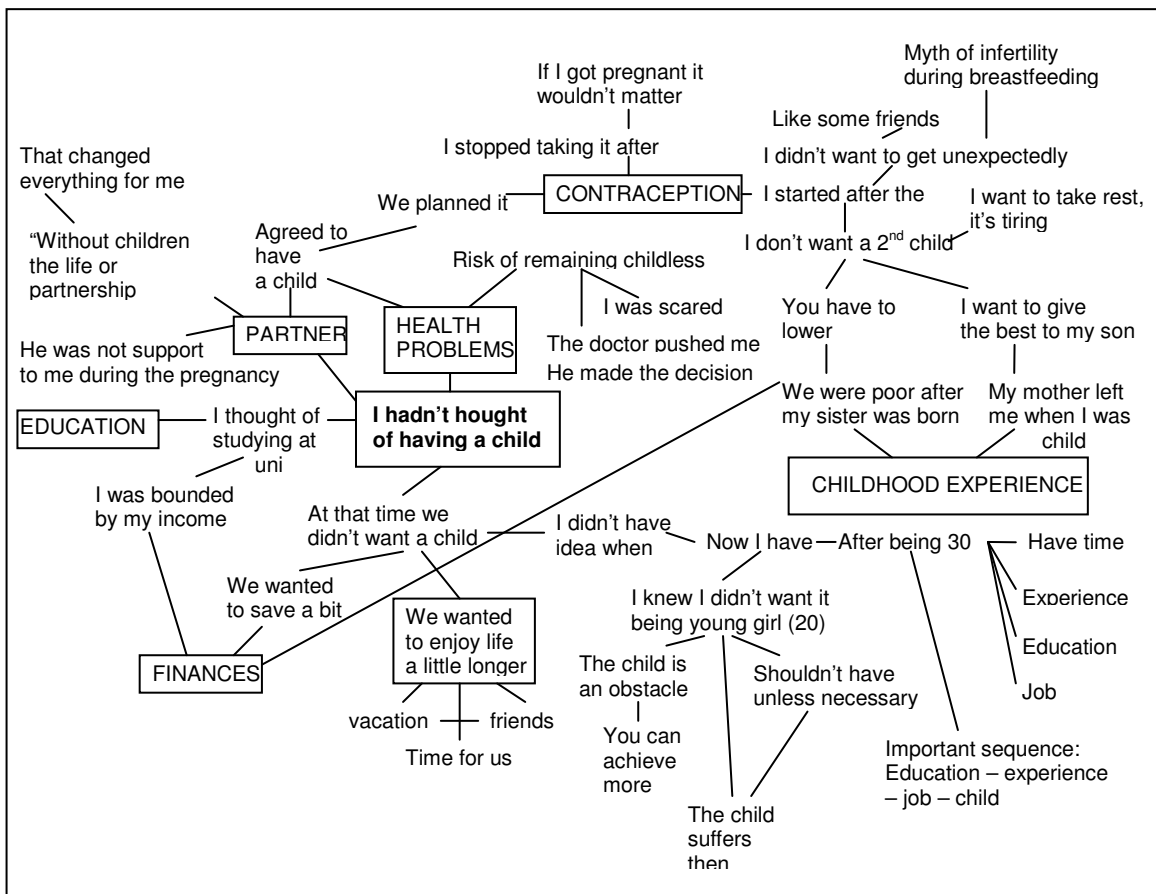
Picture 2: Semantic network for Erika, 54, daughter 27



Picture 3: Life history of Paula, 28, son 2,5 years



Picture 4: Semantic network for Paula, 28, son 2,5 years



The reproductive career includes several partnerships during young adulthood and cohabitation and the postponement of marriage and childbearing towards the older age being an innovation to the previous pattern.

Unfortunately there are no data available for Slovakia at this moment that would quantify the occurrence of the above described reproductive career patterns within the cohorts. However, the aim of this research project is to focus on the perceptions of women and on how the reproduction is embedded in the context which is time and society specific

Perceptions of women on their reproductive experience

Perceptions on the timing of childbearing

Both women reported they did not have the intention to have a child at the time they actually had it (see pictures 2 and 4 of the semantic networks for both interviewees). Their preferred strategy was to postpone childbearing towards higher age. In the mental schemes of both women the issue of when to have a first child is related to their perception of their mothers' experience. Erika clearly states at the very beginning of the interview

(1) *"...like TO PLAN IT SOMEHOW I didn't plan it actually, because I was, I was considering myself being too young then, though I wasn't that young, and because my mother was 35 when she had the first child, * so I was also thinking that I have time still,"*³

(2) *"I had a feeling that I have time. Maybe certainly. Now there may be someone who has a mother, who is 22 and is 27 already and thinks, God, my mother already had, I'm old already. But this was not my case, because I was always telling myself I have time."*

Paula's reference to her mother's experience is more indirect though. As a child she suffered from the mother's absence and emotionally distant relationship to her. Although she first says she did not have a clear idea when to have a child at the time before she decided to have one, she immediately adds that

(3) *"I knew before (I had a child) that I don't want to have it as a YOUNG GIRL ... Because like 20 year old girl * shouldn't have a child unless necessary. Because it's preventing her from achieving more. It's a FACT it does. And then the child suffers actually."*

The parallel with her childhood experience is definitely there. The mother then serves as a model daughters can naturally refer to although not in a uniform way. For Erika her mother was a model to follow while for Paula a model to avoid. This is closely related to the perception of good and bad personal experience like childhood memories.

³ Transcription signs: * a short pause up to 1 second, CAPITALS stressed words, wor- cut word in the middle, slip of the tongue, (words) my comments

The point at which both women meet is that they consider age 30 or more as an ideal age to have a child. Especially Paula is very explicit about that. The rational behind is not the age itself as the next quotation shows.

(4) *“Before I would for sure choose that sequence to keep. ... The one I skipped actually, to have the school (university), to have some experience with something else.”*

She gets back to this topic at several parts of the interview and includes also categories of having time to devote to the child, to be with the child the whole time and to work for some time before getting pregnant.

Her intention to postpone is based mostly on categories that can be related to self-fulfilling life style. The main reasons she gives is that they wanted to enjoy life a little longer, going on vacations, having time for themselves as a couple. She is also very aware of the issue of money, which is also based on her childhood experience. For the first child, however, this doesn't hold as much as for the second one. It seems that Slovak women see motherhood as an integral part of women's life course and hence by the first born child a woman attains the status of mother. For Paula it was the fear of losing the ability to have children that made her decide to have a child although she had not thought of having a child before her health problems started.

Perceptions on contraception and unplanned pregnancy

In both cases the unexpected event led to the first pregnancy earlier than wished. Apart from this the life stories of both women differ dramatically. For Erika it was an unplanned pregnancy that changed her life while Paula carefully planned hers after deciding with a partner what to do in her complicated situation. In order to plan pregnancies according to one's own wishes one has to have a means to control the fertility effectively and modern contraceptives are a technical means to achieve this. Unlike Erika Paula had experience with contraception that gave her the power also to engage in several partnerships without risking unexpected pregnancy. She also uses contraception to prevent her from having a second child she does not intend to have at all.

Unplanned pregnancies of women in the 1970s were the result not only of a lack of effective modern contraceptives but first of all of the inner obstacles to use contraceptives. By inner obstacles I mean the knowledge about various methods, beliefs about negative health outcomes of the use and gossips and social control that prevented especially single women to use them. Erika was very much aware of these gossips. Taking contraception meant that a woman has control over her body and can engage in sexual activities freely which was a violation of the moral code. Taking contraception implicitly meant that the person can be immoral (as was the single mother who “was taking it” she narrates about). Erika's statement that contraception “was not used at our times” does not refer to the inaccessibility of contraception but to the obstacles to use it.

Another apparent feature of the narrative is that traditional techniques (withdrawal) are not mentioned nor are condoms – a method available to men.

Bound between the childbearing and marriage

Erika's narrative is rich of phrases "I had to get married" and after I got pregnant "followed the weeding of course". The obviousness with which she refers to the connection pregnancy = wedding refers to the very strong bond between childbearing and marriage. When taking a more detailed look at her semantic network it is apparent that marriage had more important meanings. First, the status of a married woman was a proper one to the status of mother and single motherhood was a considered a delinquent behaviour violating this rule.

(5) *"somewhere it was like that it can't be to remain a single mother. They also didn't have also- in the street there was one, everyone talked about her. That is she, a single mother."*

From the statement again a social control is clearly apparent – the judging power of the society. Moreover, for her it is a matter of values. The second important meaning is that a child should be raised in the family because it is good for the child. This is the second violation if a woman stays a single mother.

(6) *"I think for instance that Slovakia is a catholic * country, yes? That means that it's somewhere in the heads of the people. * And * in any case I am even now of an opinion that when THE CHILD IS IN IT that those hus- they have to get married those partners. Because it's very unpleasant when the child has a different name, when those parents- Somehow I don't like it."*

The third is a violation of the moral code – she behaved immorally and that's why she got pregnant and did not get married. Here an important link is made by Erika when talking about a colleague who was a single mother "it was the one who was taking the contraception" and also the one who left her child to the institutional care.

In Erika's view it is society that creates pressure to follow the rule to get married in case of pregnancy and also society punishes those who do not do so by sanctions – bad reputation and certain social exclusion. Even in the case of unstable partnership it is better to get married because of the child. Legitimising the child by the father's name is also very important for her.

On the other hand, Paula was to some extent a victim of this kind of behaviour. Her parents got married because of the pregnancy and got divorced already 9 months after Paula was born. Anyway, her mother had a status of married woman when giving birth and also the status of divorced was higher than of a single mother of simply a single woman after a certain age.

Paula made the connection to the bound between the marriage and childbearing only once, also probably because it was not a topic for her since she was already married when she decided to have a child.

(7) *“I was taking contraception before the wedding, but then I decided to have a break and then well it wouldn’t matter if I even got pregnant BY ACCIDENT.”*

By the words it would not matter she expresses that it would if she got before the wedding and probably she would follow the same strategy as Erika did.

Conclusion

Comparing presented life stories the main difference was in the way women talked about their experience. Erika’s narrative is a narrative of social control – she is aware of how she should behave and she chooses conform behaviour. It is also a narrative of a victim of the situation and society she lived in – she stresses what she had to do or could not do and that it negatively influenced her life (unexpected pregnancy, unhappy marriage, problem to get divorced). On the other hand, Paula’s narrative is a narrative of choice. She uses a very active language and clearly demonstrates that she is the one who has her life fully in hands. Paula’s life is linked to nowadays society as well as to society of the state socialism during which she lived her childhood. Her childhood experiences of being a child born to a young mother, whose marriage collapsed quickly after the delivery of the child, constitute an important input for her childbearing intentions.

The mother and perception of her reproductive career is an important model for constituting the daughter’s own childbearing schema. The mother is not a model to adopt as a blueprint for behaviour in the words of DiMaggio (1997), but a model to adopt or avoid which depends of the perception on its acceptability. As Kennedy (2004) states, people accept the models that work, modify those that do not, and share these modifications back into their social network in a dynamic, continually evolving creative process (Kennedy, 2004). The perception of the mother’s reproductive experience hence represents only one “chunk” of the information included in the schemas besides information learnt from other sources, such as peers and friends in Paula’s case.

The social pressure towards acceptable behaviour is strongly perceived by Erika in the domain of sexual life. The rule of how a single woman should behave affected contraceptive practice and often led to unplanned premarital conception. At this point another behaviour guiding rule came into play – the rule to get married, and this rule is strongly linked with sanctions. Single motherhood was a stigma both on woman and a child. Being a single mother implicitly meant that the person is immoral because she violated a moral code. The link to the contraception then constitutes a meaning of contraception as a means to behave immorally. Paula on the other hand sees a contraception as practical means to control the timing and number of her children and contraception is not linked in her mental scheme to any category of morality.

The bond between the marriage and childbearing remains strong in perceptions of both women. Paula's decision to have a child under the threat of permanent infertility in the future points to the perception of motherhood as an integral part of women's lives. And since it is only the first child that makes a woman a mother, a second child does not make her a better mother just by the fact she has one, this schema applies only to the first pregnancy. Deciding about the second pregnancy is for Erika a matter of having a partner to have a child with and for Paula a matter of finances and her perception of the financial hardship. Although this idea is embedded in her childhood experience she frequently reflects to her family's current financial situation.

Erika's reproductive career was influenced by the restrictions of the choices due to the social control. She chose the conform behaviour. In her narrative childbearing is not in conflict with other life domains. On the other hand Paula sees and wants to take advantage of the other opportunities that are often in conflict (or at least she sees them being in conflict) with childbearing and she sees these as a way to the self-fulfillment. Many of these self-fulfilling activities – going on vacation abroad, freely choosing the job and education – were not possible or highly controlled under state socialism. The society of nowadays offers more choices often seen as competing to the childbearing and a possibility to chose makes young women question their childbearing planes.

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