

# **Interconnections between mothers' working patterns after childbirth and fertility intentions.**

## **A comparison between France, Hungary, and Italy**

Zsuzsanna Stefán-Makay, [zsuzsanna.stefan-makay@ined.fr](mailto:zsuzsanna.stefan-makay@ined.fr)

Arianna Caporali, [arianna.caporali@gmail.com](mailto:arianna.caporali@gmail.com)

### **INTRODUCTION**

Period total fertility rate is low and similar in Hungary (1.3) and in Italy (1.4). France has higher fertility: the total fertility rate has reached the level of 2 in 2008 (Pison 2009). However fertility desires are very similar in the three countries: in the all of them women wish to have at least two children. The desired number of children is about 2.4 in Hungary (Demográfiai Portré 2009), 2.6 in France (Toulemon, Leridon 1999), and 2.0 in Italy (Vignoli, Loilier 2009). Therefore the differences in total fertility rates between these countries may be attributed to the realisation of the intentions (which seems to be more difficult in Italy and in Hungary than in France) rather than to different fertility intentions.

Research has pointed out that fertility tends to be higher in contexts where social policies and governmental programs make women's work and childbearing more compatible (Neyer 2006, OECD 2007, Ahn, Mira 2002). The main objective of the French family policy – as specified on the government homepage (<http://www.travail-solidarite.gouv.fr>) – is to facilitate the conciliation between work and family life. Much effort has been devoted to increase the availability of public childcare, and to let women adjust their working hours to family needs. As a result, in this country womens' employment rates are not so much affected by the arrival of children, especially until the birth of the third child (Letablier 2008, Toulemon *et al.* 2008). On the contrary, after the arrival of children women's employment rates decrease much more in Hungary and in Italy. This suggests that in these countries the traditional "male breadwinner" model is still widespread. In these countries, the level of state support to combine work and family life is lower than in France. In Hungary, state support provides long paid parental leaves of 2-3 years, which are taken by the majority of mothers, so that only about 11% of children aged below 3 are looked after outside the family (KSH 2002). In Italy, state involvement in family issues is less important because of strong family ties between different generations. The state provides very few public childcare centres and a parental leave of up to 10 months. Women's employment rates are lower than in Hungary and France,

and they decrease dramatically with the arrival of children. Only about 6% of children below 3 years old go to a public day-care centre (Fondazione degli Innocenti 2002).

These facts suggest that family life after the arrival of children changes much more in Hungary and in Italy than in France. These changes may also play a role in determining couples' fertility intentions.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This paper aims at comparing family life changes after the arrival of children in France, Hungary and Italy. Our research questions are: How family life patterns change (or don't change) after childbearing in these three European countries? To which extent the possible change is the result of a choice? To which extent families are satisfied with possible changes? What is the role played by these factors in determining couples' fertility intentions? Our empirical material consists of three datasets of semi-structured interviews taken respectively in France, Hungary, and Italy.

In particular, we focus on women's motivations for staying at home after childbearing or for going back to labour market after maternity leave. We compare the different attitudes in the different countries concerning mothers' obligations (or supposed obligations) concerning childcare in the first years of the child. We expect that in Hungary and in Italy couples prefer young children to be looked after by their own mothers, instead of taking them to a day-care centre or to a paid childminder, as it happens often in France. How Hungarians and Italians envisage women's work interruptions and return to work? Are women satisfied with their housewife-life during these years or would they have preferred to combine work and family life? What about men's attitudes about these issues? Who looked after the child in the case women wanted or were obliged to return to work after maternity leave? Attitudes towards external childcare during working hours may play a role in couples' fertility intentions and decision about their life patterns after the birth of the child. In France, where provisions on childcare are generous and mother's work is facilitated with legally permitted and widely used part-time work contracts, (further) fertility intentions may mainly depend on the possibility of using these arrangements.

Several studies have analysed the changes in parents' working lives after the arrival of children, but few studies have investigated how individuals live these changes and the ways in which these changes affect individuals' fertility projects. Such an analysis is only possible with qualitative data, or very precise quantitative data, hardly available on this subject in the three countries.

## DATA AND METHODS

We make secondary use of 121 semi-structured interviews, of which 27 were carried out in France (Poitiers) in 2006-07, 45 in Hungary (Budapest) in 2004-05, and 49 in Italy (Naples) in 2004-05. The respondents are women and men in reproductive age, with or without children. In some cases, the men are female respondents' partners. The sample includes variation in respondents' age, education, employment, parity, and civil status. The majority of respondents are aged between 25 and 37 years, which are the main childbearing years in all of the three countries. Respondents were contacted through an indirect snowball procedure with multiple entries and independently selected initial contacts. In France Internet sites of high school classes were used to gain first contacts.

In all the three contexts, the interviews explored respondents' life course developments since their adolescence, with particular focus on family formation and fertility intentions. Specific interview questions dealt with respondents' realised and expected childbearing, education and employment trajectories, and pasted and present romantic relationships. Particular focus was devoted to respondents' attitudes, values and norms towards mothers' employment and, in general, issues concerning reconciliation between work and family life. Some questions also regarded respondents' gender beliefs and attitudes towards partners' division of tasks. Others considered respondents' family of origin and peer groups, their educational and residential histories, and their religiosity.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed with informants' consent. We carry out content analysis of interview transcripts. A co-author fluent in Hungarian and French is in charge of analysing the French and Hungarian datasets; the other co-author, fluent in Italian, is in charge of the Italian dataset. Each interview is summarised to systematize the data and develop a coding scheme. To index the data and chart the codes, we use Excel. We focus on respondents' representations of mothers' work patterns after childbirth, and we investigate the interconnections between respondents' fertility intentions and attitudes towards mothers' work after childbirth. Analysis of both female and male respondents allows to consider gender differences concerning these issues. Discussion and comparisons of emerging themes and codes in the different datasets is an ongoing process during the analysis of the data.

Firstly, we apply a typology of ideal mothers' work patterns after childbirth, developed for France by Salles *et al.* (forthcoming). Three possible typologies are identified, depending on whether mothers should return to work after maternity leave, prolong their stay at home taking a parental leave, or become "stay-at-home mothers". Different family, gender, work

and religious attitudes and value help explaining each of the typologies. An important role is played by respondents' attitudes towards external childcare. Secondly, we explore respondents' expressions of (dis)satisfaction with their actual (or expected) arrangements. Thirdly, we code for ideal number of children, and we distinguish between positive and negative intention to have a(nother) child. Finally, we look at how respondents relate their ideal and actual (or expected) mothers' work to their fertility intentions. We elaborate on how they compromise on mothers' work or rather on fertility intentions in case there are problems in carrying on both at the same time.

## **EXPECTED RESULTS**

We expect to identify differences between France, Hungary and Italy concerning how family life changes after the birth of a child. We also expect differences in the way in which parents are satisfied with these life changes. In France most respondents wish to conciliate work and family life soon after childbirth. The possibility of this conciliation depends mainly on availability of childcare for children below 3 years old, because it is acceptable for parents to leave their children to day-care centre or paid childminders. Unavailability of childcare centres may lead some French respondents in our sample to reduce their fertility intentions. For instance, a stay-at-home mother respondent would not have another child unless she finds a solution for childcare, which would allow her returning to work. Work is not only important for financial reasons, but also because it allows parents to fulfil themselves.

In Hungary, respondents in our sample regard as absolutely necessary that during the first years of the child the mother stays at home. At the mean time, this is difficult because of financial reasons (even if there is a paid parental leave) and because of the difficulties to return to the labour market after several years of interruption. So respondents delay childbearing because "this isn't the good moment", or because "the deal just got off to a good start". So the fact that women have the feeling that they are required to stay at home for several years may negatively affect their fertility.

In Italy, childcare is mainly a family matter. Kin (grandparents in particular) are expected to take care of the youngest family members, when mothers have to work outside home. Public as well as private sector childcare is very low developed. Parents who don't get along with their families or whose family lives far away, have difficulties in reconciling work and family life. At the mean time, the situation after the birth of a child seems to depend to a large extent on the mother's situation on the labour market: only those who are legally employed by the state or by semi-private firm take parental leave and return to work afterwards. The others

often lose their job. The fear of this loss is at the basis of some respondents' unwillingness to have a(nother) child.

## REFERENCES

Ahn Namkee, Mira Pedro, 2002, "A note of changing relationship between fertility and female employment rates in developed countries", *Journal of Population Economics*, 15. 4. p. 667-682.

De Rose Alessandra, Racioppi Filomena, Zanatta Anna Laura, 2009, "Italy: delayed adaptation of social institutions to changes in family behaviour", *Demographic Research*, vol. 19, p. 665-704.

Fondazione degli Innocenti, 2002, *I servizi educativi per la prima infanzia*.

KSH-NKI, 2009, *Demográfiai Portré 2009. Jelentés a magyar népesség helyzetéről*.

Letablier Marie-Thérèse, 2008, "Why France has high fertility: The impact of policies supporting parents", *The Japanese Journal of Social Security Policy*, vol. 7 (2), p. 41-56.

Neyer Gerda, 2006, "Family policies and fertility in Europe. Fertility policies at the intersection of gender policies, employment policies and care policies", *MPIDR Working paper*, 2006-010.

OECD, 2007, *Babies and Bosses - Reconciling Work and Family Life. A Synthesis of Findings for OECD Countries*, OECD Publishing.

Pison Gilles, 2009, "Tous les pays du monde", *Population et Sociétés*, n°458.

Toulemon Laurent, Pailhé Ariane, Rossier Clémentine, 2008, "France: high and stable fertility", *Demographic Research*, vol. 19, p. 503-556.

Toulemon Laurent, Leridon Henri, 1999, "La famille idéale: combien d'enfants, à quel âge ?", *INSEE Première*, n°652.

Vignoli Daniele, Régnier-Loilier Arnaud, 2009, "Chi non desidera due figli? Uno studio comparativo tra Francia e Italia", *Rivista di Studi Familiari*, n°1, p. 19-39.