

“Fertile debates: a comparative account of low fertility in the Greek and British national press”

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Introduction

In this paper, I focus on the ways in which the Greek and British print media approached the issue of low fertility over a period of four years (2001 - 2005). The mass media are one of the key social institutions engaged in the process of creating and distributing ‘particular forms of knowledge’ (Lynn and Lea 2003, p.428) about low fertility. They do not simply report on the public’s understanding of the issue but also tell it how it ought to think about or even act on it. As Fowler (1991, p.2) asserts, news is never purely factual but ‘socially constructed’; events are not inherently ‘newsworthy’ but rather turn into ‘news’ by the media. Yet the media are a relatively neglected source of study in demography, despite the fact that low fertility is an issue that carries with it controversy, and is often subject to what Teitelbaum (2004) has described as “garbled demography” in the “media marketplace”. An analysis of the print media’s views is significant not because it can provide academics and policymakers with accurate insight about the issues that matter to the public, as Stark and Kohler (2004) recently argued, but because it is one of the sites responsible for *how* the public, policymakers and even academics (mis)understand the phenomenon of below-replacement fertility.

In an earlier study, Stark and Kohler (2002) demonstrated that while there is widespread popular concern over low birth rates across Europe, press coverage on the subject differs considerably between countries. Whereas in some the emphasis is on its causes, in others it is on its consequences, and cross-culturally, there is a variable degree of alarm over the reduction in family size and in how best to deal with it. A comparison of the media’s response between countries is worthy of investigation because it brings to light the range of meanings that are being constructed around low fertility, as well as the variety of factors that make the issue significant in different contexts. In this paper, I provide a clear example of cross-cultural variability in how the print media reports on low fertility, by describing the manner in which the Greek and British press reported on the issue and the reasons for their relatively distinct approaches.

In addition, I show that the print media do not necessarily reflect their readers’ perceptions of their own lived realities. As Misiti (2000) argues, media audiences are not passive recipients but active interpreters of media messages. By comparing my findings with those based on a study of reproductive decision-making among a deliberately small sample of Greek and British middle-class women living in Athens and London respectively, I analyse the implications that print media debates have on the public’s understanding of low fertility, as well as its attitudes towards having children and experiences of family formation. In this way, I explore the degree and manner of compliance and resistance to the assumptions and images being communicated by the press in each country about the subject.

Methods

This paper rests on the analysis of articles published between January 2001 and December 2005. Greek articles containing the keywords ‘under-fertility’ (*ypogennitikotita*), ‘the demographic issue’ (*to demografiko*), ‘fertility’ (*gennitikotita*) or ‘births’ (*genniseis*) were drawn from the online archives of four major national newspapers and their weekend editions¹: *Eleftherotypia*, *To Vima*, *Ta Nea* and *Kathimerini*. British articles with the keywords ‘births & birth rates’ and ‘population & demographics’ in the indexing, ‘birth rate’ and ‘fertility rate’ in the headline or major mentions of the words ‘birth rate’, ‘fertility rate’ and ‘population decline’ were identified in the archives of five main national newspapers and their weekend editions (*The Guardian* and *The Observer*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday*, and the *Daily Mail*) and one paper exclusive to London (the *Evening Standard*), using the online database LexisNexis. In both countries, the chosen keywords were those that produced the best results in terms of number of articles. For example, the terms ‘low fertility’, ‘fertility decline’ or ‘below-replacement fertility’ failed to return an adequate number of articles in the British press. In the Greek press, words such as ‘low fertility’ were equally fruitless. Newspapers were selected on the basis that they reflected views from all sides of the political spectrum. While *Kathimerini*, *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* have a conservative outlook, *To Vima*, *Ta Nea*, *Eleftherotypia*, *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday* offer more centre to leftwing perspectives. Articles published in the Greek and British tabloids were not included.

Results

The Greek press frequently referred to below replacement fertility by the terms ‘under-fertility’ (*ipoyennitikotita*) or ‘the demographic problem’ (*to demografiko provlima*), despite the existence of more neutral-sounding expressions, such as ‘low fertility’ (*hamili gennitikotita*) or ‘low birth rate’ (*hamilos deiktis gonimotitas*). British newspapers, in contrast, never used such politically charged words, despite concentrating more on the consequences rather than the causes of low fertility (in contrast to Greek newspapers). This reveals that, compared to the Greek press, the British print media was more resigned to the existence of low birth rates and, as a result, was more eager to concern itself with its inevitable effects, such as an ageing population, rather than on how to put an end to it. Such was the case that British newspapers even reported on the potentially positive implications of below-replacement fertility, namely, its benefits to the environment. A curb in population growth was assumed to have the potential to reduce carbon emissions and therefore, also, the speed of environmental degradation and climate change. Low fertility as a solution to environmental problems was hardly ever discussed in the Greek print media. Not only was this a reflection of their focus on the causes rather than the

¹ I decided to leave articles about worldwide or pan-European fertility trends out of the analysis and concentrate on ones specifically about the United Kingdom or Greece. In the British search, I left out pieces explicitly about Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as each region has unique demographic characteristics.

consequences of low birth rates, but also an indication of their anxiety concerning the continued existence of the Greek nation over and above the survival of the environment.

The reasons attributed to low fertility by the Greek and British print media, however, did not necessarily reflect the fertility trends and patterns reported in the demographic literature in association with each country. In addition, the issues emphasised by the press in both countries did not always emerge as significant in the personal accounts of the Greek and British women I interviewed. Both Athenians and Londoners showed resistance to the print media's discourse on low fertility. For example, the former claimed they did not have children in order to "save the nation" while the latter presented less "choice" in their family-formation decisions than that which was presented as available to them by the media. Reproductive decision-making among both groups was inextricably linked with a number of constraints and factors that were not fully explored in the press and by drawing on specific moral frameworks.

On the other hand, the women I interviewed in Athens and London held a similar stance over the significance and origins of low fertility to that expressed by the Greek and British press, respectively. Whereas Athenian women were well-versed on the subject of 'under-fertility' (*ipoyennitikotita*), those living in London appeared both uninformed and disinterested about the issue. According to my Athenian informants, a low birth rate constituted a major national problem, as it signalled the potential loss of the 'nation' (*ethnos*). None of the interviews produced a discussion over the phenomenon's potential to benefit the environment. In discussing the issue of the country's birth rate, Athenians, spontaneously, focused on its causes rather than its consequences, most frequently mentioning the financial cost associated with having children, youth unemployment and the lack of government support for the family. Reasons that were less often referred to but that were considered to be equally important were the difficulties involved in balancing work and family commitments, changes in Greeks' lifestyle and mentality, a high abortion and infertility rate, and the degradation of the family. British informants never spontaneously mentioned the issue of below-replacement fertility whilst being interviewed. When pressed about its causes, they most frequently attributed it to the work-family balance and the financial burden of raising a family. In contrast to their Greek counterparts, however, some, particularly those who were "voluntarily" childless, did point to the advantages of low birth rates on the environment without being prompted. The full-length paper will provide a more detailed exegesis of these findings.