

Childlessness in Europe

Research Report to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) on the project funded by research grant RES-000-23-0074, running December 2002-July 2003.

Background

High levels of voluntary childlessness are a relatively new social phenomenon in the prosperous societies of western Europe, and they remain poorly understood. This project explores the causes and correlates of childlessness and the implications for policy.

Childlessness itself is not new. In the past, up to 20% of women remained childless in the USA and Britain, for example. But childlessness in the past was due primarily to extreme poverty and poor nutrition, or to low marriage rates resulting from wars or emigration. Childlessness today, among healthy, sexually active women living in relative prosperity is a new phenomenon. Demographers and sociologists are now predicting that around 20% of women will in future remain childless in affluent modern societies. Childlessness of around 20% seems to be a stable plateau following the contraceptive revolution of the early 1960s that gave women, for the first time in history, reliable methods of contraception that women can control themselves, if necessary without a partner's cooperation.

Demographers have been slow to acknowledge or measure the steady increase in childlessness, because they focus on measures of average fertility across all women of childbearing age. One exception is Coleman (1996), and he points out that demographers have been unable to explain it. None of the variables usually employed by demographers help to explain cross-national variations in fertility. He concludes that attitudes and values could be far more important than demographers have so far thought (Coleman 1996: 40). He also points out that childlessness is not the main cause of declining fertility rates, so requires a separate explanation.

Addressing the question from a sociological perspective, Hakim (2000, 2003b) explains a stable plateau of around 20% childlessness by preference theory. She argues that in modern societies that have achieved the new scenario giving women genuine choices as to how to live their lives, around 20% of women will be work-centred in the same way as men, giving priority to career over family life. A high proportion of these women will remain childless by choice. In addition, some proportion of other working women will remain childless, through a combination of circumstances that leads them to prioritise career over motherhood (Hakim 2000: 6, 50). Unpublished ONS data on fertility patterns in Britain indicate that around 50% of women in the higher professional and managerial occupations remain childless. Case studies of women in particular professions and in senior management jobs regularly find that around half remain childless by choice, often despite several marriages. Preference theory has been tested and developed through an ESRC Future of Work Research Programme project which confirmed predictions regarding market work (Hakim 2002, 2003a, 2003d). That project was not intended to address childbearing preferences and outcomes. In practice, further analyses of the dataset subsequently showed

that preference theory was just as successful in predicting fertility patterns as women's employment patterns (Hakim, 2002, 2003b)

What is certain is that primary infertility cannot account for the rise in childlessness. The United Nations-sponsored World Fertility Survey concluded that primary infertility affects only 2%-3% of women aged 25-50 (Vaessen 1984). Social and economic factors are clearly more important than infertility, so a sociological approach to the issue is more appropriate.

A review of the research literature on childlessness (Hakim 2000: 54-6) reveals that almost all research projects have been based on depth interviews and case study designs. Following the path-breaking study by Veevers (1980) in Canada, researchers typically interview 20-80 childless women to elucidate any common characteristics or life experiences. Samples are generally snowball samples, or recruited through media campaigns, and their representativeness is not known. The so-called 'national sample' of voluntary childless in Britain reported in McAllister and Clarke (1998) consisted of only 30 women plus 9 of their male partners. One of the rare studies to employ a nationally representative dataset is Kiernan's (1989) study based on the 1946 British cohort study. She analysed data for 1982, when the cohort was aged 36 years. As she points out, this cohort had a particularly low level of childlessness. Her results suggest that childless men and women were making a lifestyle choice, valuing careers and leisure activities over family life. There was no strong association with education or occupation for women. Among men, the childless tended to be high achievers. These results are consistent with those from case studies: childless women do not appear to be a distinctive group in terms of their social and economic characteristics. However there have been no large studies to test these tentative conclusions more thoroughly with nationally representative data. The scope for taking this research further has depended crucially on the availability of appropriate nationally representative datasets. This project planned to utilise two new databases that provide unique information on the childless. In the event, the project was expanded to include a third national database, and a wider range of modern societies than originally planned. Thus, new theoretically informed statistical analyses have been based on a much larger volume of data than in the original proposal.

The datasets

The principal database for the study is the United Nations-coordinated series of Family and Fertility Surveys (FFS) carried out in the mid-1990s across western and eastern Europe. A central focus of the surveys was declining fertility in Europe, and explanations for it. The surveys thus provide information directly relevant to decisions about childbearing, and they collect unusually detailed information about adopted, foster and stepchildren as well as men and women's own children, and whether pregnancies were intended or unwanted. A particular advantage of the surveys is that a standardised questionnaire was used across all participating countries, so that comparable data was obtained for all countries in the FFS series. In addition, the Population Activity Unit (PAU) in Geneva made available, and eventually published, a set of standard tables of aggregate statistics for all countries to

facilitate cross-national comparisons. The model survey questionnaire consisted of nine core topics, plus four optional additional modules, on contraception history, values and beliefs, acceptance of population policy, and migration history. The core topics included views on having children, other attitudes and values, partner characteristics, education, occupation, detailed data on fertility histories, and social and economic characteristics. The surveys cover men as well as women, using almost identical questionnaires, but in most countries the samples for women are larger. Both women and men are asked about the education and employment of their partner, and about their partner's attitude to children.

The original plan was to analyse FFS data for 15 European countries, using another source for Britain, the 16th country in the proposal. In practice, the project was expanded to include data for all 24 countries participating in the FFS series. These are: Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Canada, the USA and New Zealand. However PAU was unable to provide microdata for the Netherlands (because the Dutch authorities refuse to release the data for further analysis, possibly due to the low response rate), for Greece (because the survey was carried out too late for PAU involvement), and Estonia (no clear reason). The microdata files for Switzerland and Sweden were only supplied after direct application to the respective national statistical offices. This reduced the total number of FFS countries to 21. Our analyses of the data for Latvia, the Czech Republic and Slovenia revealed very small base numbers of childless people, and even smaller numbers of voluntarily childless people (partly because the total survey samples were smaller in these countries), so that these countries are not included in the more detailed analyses. For some parts of the analysis, this also applied to Lithuania.

However the principal factor shaping the number of countries included in any particular analysis is the questionnaire content for each country. The PAU model survey questionnaire was split into 13 modules, and countries did not necessarily include all 13 modules in their FFS survey. In addition, some countries carried out their surveys before the PAU model survey questionnaire was completed, so their topics and questions are not always the same. In addition, we discovered that countries had dropped certain questions, or even parts of questions, from modules in an unpredictable manner. Furthermore, it became clear that particular questions had been modified to suit national concerns, for example to improve comparability with a previous national fertility survey. Finally, and most problematically, some countries ruined the comparability of survey questions by adding additional response categories, which in practice absorbed the majority of responses. Unfortunately, these additional response options are not documented, and PAU in Geneva ceased to support the FFS datasets a year ago, considering the project complete, especially as another, larger one has been started. All this made the task of comparative analysis rather more difficult and time-consuming than was expected. It also means that parts of the analysis focus on particular countries, simply because there is more complete, and comparable, data for these societies. For example, FFS analyses of attitudes, values, life goals and priorities (which are central to our study) focus especially on Belgium, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria. These countries also provide the most

complete, and comparative data on family-friendly policies and their impact.

The PAU FFS project resulted in a two-volume report on key findings and methodological issues in the data (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2002a, 2002b). However this, quite naturally, addressed conventional issues in fertility research, and the topic of childlessness was rarely mentioned, except as an example of low fertility expectations. While this comparative report has certainly been useful to our project, the focus of our analyses has been quite different from those of the demographers attracted to the FFS dataset.

Unfortunately, Britain did not participate in the FFS. This discouraged British researchers from analysing these data. Kiernan is one exception, partly because she sat on the Steering Committee for the FFS and knows the data well (Kiernan 1999). Since Britain already has one of the highest levels of childlessness in the EU, the inclusion of Britain was important for our study. For data on Britain, we turned to the NCDS which had recently released data from the ESRC-funded sixth sweep carried out in 2000/2001 when the cohort was aged 42 years. After this age, women are very unlikely to have a first child, although men can still father a child by a younger woman. Analyses of the NCDS-6 are thus comparable with data for the 40-50 age group in the FFS.

The NCDS-6 was carried out at the same time as the fifth sweep of the British Cohort Study 1970 (BCS70), and the two surveys used almost identical questionnaires. It was thus decided to expand the project to include the BCS70 data for 30-year-olds as well as the NCDS data for people aged 42 years. This ensured that a wider age range was presented for Britain, increasing comparability with the FFS results.

The NCDS (National Child Development Study) is a continuing multidisciplinary longitudinal study of people living in Britain who were born in one week of March 1958. The 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) is a continuing, multidisciplinary longitudinal study of people born in one week of April 1970 and currently living in Britain. Both cohort studies are funded by the ESRC. The NCDS-6 dataset provides information for 11,130 people aged 42 and the BCS dataset covers 10,700 people aged 30 in 2000.

The NCDS-6 and BCS-5 surveys did not focus specifically on fertility issues, and the British data is not exactly comparable to the FFS data, although there are some common topics - such as the sexual division of labour in couple households. However there are compensating advantages, in particular in the great wealth of longitudinal data available in the NCDS and BCS databases. The NCDS and BCS collected a wide range of data on attitudes and values in the 2000 sweeps, so there is sufficient information on the dimension of particular interest for this study. Furthermore, I was already familiar with the NCDS dataset (Hakim 2000: 130-149).

The NCDS and BCS provide our study with the largest nationally-representative samples of childless people ever studied, certainly far larger than the samples available in the FFS country datasets. The NCDS-6 identified 2,685 childless people, 1143 women and 1542 men. The BCS-5 identified 5711 childless people, 3093 men and 2618 women. The FFS surveys typically had achieved survey sample sizes of 6000 (4500 women and 1500 men) and the childless subsamples are typically just a few hundred people, but they vary from less than 50 in the smallest surveys to around 600 in Belgium and 1,900 in Germany, at

the maximum.

The first report on the NCDS and BCS 2000 surveys has now been published (Ferri, Bynner, and Wadsworth, 2003). It notes that these surveys would be good sources for a study of childlessness, but the topic is not addressed in the original team's analyses.

As a result of expanding the project, parts of the analysis cover 25 modern countries, instead of the original 16 intended, and we analyse two British cohort studies instead of one, as originally intended. This represents a substantial enrichment in the evidence available but has certainly increased the volume of work and complexity of the analyses. While the eventual book will be of wider international interest than initially planned, it is also taking longer to produce.

Results: the prevalence of voluntary childlessness

A first finding is that the FFS surveys reveal voluntary childlessness to be at rather lower levels than had been expected. The FFS allow us to distinguish between two groups of childless people:

A - voluntary **Childfree**: childless people who definitely never wanted (do not want) a pregnancy or children of their own, ever. They are consistently negative on all questions on intended childbearing

B - uncertain **Childless**: childless people who gave a Don't Know reply on at least one question concerning the desire for children of their own.

We classified as **Parents** people who already have at least one child, plus those who plan to have children. People who enjoy proxy parenthood, through adoption, fostering or by having stepchildren, are also classified in the Parent group.

Childless women aged 40-50 are unlikely to have a first child of their own in the future. Men aged 40-50 may still father children through marriage to a younger woman. Most studies of childlessness focus on this older age group, for obvious reasons. Our focus on childbearing desires and intentions, or the lack of them, allows us to analyse data for the complete childbearing age group as well as for the conventional older age group. However the only age group covered by all FFS surveys (in particular Belgium and Germany) is people aged 20-39 years.

On this basis, and focusing on people aged 20-39 years, we found voluntary childlessness falling below 10% of men and women in all countries except Belgium and Austria, where 14% and 10% of men respectively are certain they do not want children. In Slovenia and Latvia, voluntary childlessness falls to less than 1% of men and women. The proportion of uncertain childless is even more variable, ranging from nothing in Austria and 1% of men and women in Belgium, to 11% of women and 19% of men in Germany, 5% of women and 18% of men in Poland. The contrasts between Poland and Hungary, between Austria and Germany, are the focus of particular attention in the analyses.

In Britain, using the NCDS and BCS, we find only 7%-8% voluntary childlessness at age 42, but 12% voluntary childlessness at age 30. The childless group that is uncertain or ambivalent about (not) having children is much larger: 12% of women and 21% of men at age 42, but one-third of women and almost half of men at age 30. We also identified a

group of parents who could be classified as reluctant, or regretful, parents: 12% of women and 6% of men at age 42.

Voluntary childlessness is generally higher among men than among women, in all countries. Despite the fact that childbearing generally has a bigger impact on women's lives, women are more keen on having children – although they also seem to be most likely to regret it.

Whatever the indicators used, the size of the group that is uncertain or ambivalent about having any children in the future is much larger than the size of the group that is already clear-cut about their preference for remaining childfree. This is generally true for all countries, men and women, with a few exceptions (such as Austria). This suggests that childbearing is now very susceptible to situational factors (such as changes in the incidence of marriage) and to the social, economic and policy environment.

Other results

The central hypothesis tested by our study is that the childless, more specifically the voluntary childfree, are a distinctive group in terms of attitudes and values, but far less so in terms of social and economic characteristics. In essence, the childless are making a lifestyle choice, prioritising careers, personal development and material wellbeing over family life. In other respects, we expected them to differ little from people who are (or who expect to become) parents, and be widely distributed across the social spectrum, albeit with a concentration in the higher grades of professional and managerial work due to a greater investment in employment careers.

In broad terms, the research results are consistent with this thesis. However the differences between the childfree, childless and parents, in terms of attitudes, values and life goals are less pronounced than we expected. Differences between the childfree/less and parents are always more pronounced among women than among men, indicating that remaining childless involves a much stronger change of life priorities and values for women than for men. In large part, this is because childfree women, and childless women generally, are more involved with, and focused on careers than are mothers, whereas careers and income-earning remain central life priorities for men, whether they do or do not get married, whether they do or do not have children. The most fundamental difference between childfree women and mothers is in their employment patterns, and this difference shows up very clearly at all ages, because some women have children early, while others postpone motherhood until their late 30s and 40s, so the sharp difference in workrates is no longer concentrated in any single age group, as in the past.

Second, the study sought to resolve two apparently contradictory research findings in the current literature: that a high proportion of professional/managerial women remain childless, yet that childless women are not necessarily career-oriented. We found that the contradiction is in practice more apparent than real, given the small proportion of women in professional/managerial occupations even in modern societies. Although a high proportion of women in higher grade occupations (Social Classes I and II in the British classification) are childfree/childless, they still constitute a tiny fraction of all prime age women. As a

result the majority of childfree and childless women, in absolute numbers, are found in the middle and lower grade occupations that absorb the majority of working women (and men). Thus the childfree/childless are not typically members of what Goldthorpe would call the Service Class, even though this group provides the most publicly visible examples.

Third, we had hoped to investigate the relative importance of couples' educational and occupational profiles. It was expected that childlessness would be more common among couples who have very similar educational and occupational levels, and thus enjoy relationships with little or no differentiation of roles, interests and activities. In practice, on this issue, our analysis was restricted by the fact that marriage rates are much lower among the childfree and childless, thus restricting sample sizes. There was no clear evidence of greater homogamy among the childless. What came through very clearly, however, was that the conventional sexual division of labour in the household is maintained just as much by childless couples as by parents. The only notable difference in behaviour patterns between parents and the childfree/childless is that couples in the latter group are more likely to enjoy leisure activities together, as well as both being in employment. Otherwise, role differentiation seems to be no weaker among the childless than among parents, as a group.

Fourth, we expected that the (voluntary) childless would differ little across EU countries, whatever the relative size of this subgroup in the population in each country. Data on attitudes and values in this group were expected to indicate little or no sensitivity to social and economic circumstances, no sensitivity to national family policies or to employers' family-friendly arrangements, and a strong emphasis on personal goals and achievements. In contrast, people who are (or expect to become) parents were expected to reveal far greater ideological heterogeneity, and substantial sensitivity to national family policy, social policy, employer's family-friendly policies, and housing, in short to the social and economic environment in all its manifestations.

This hypothesis was contradicted by results. The childless and childfree regarded family policy and social policy in much the same way as parents, and underlined its importance almost as often as parents. In a sense, the three groups share the same family values, but adopt different personal choices for their own lives.

The peculiar nature of the childless lifestyle has consequences which should be reflected in the survey data. Childless people, especially the voluntary childless, should have slightly higher social and economic status, on average, compared to the parent group. This should be reflected in better housing, on average, higher educational and occupational attainments, and greater geographical mobility (as reflected in migration histories).

In practice the migration history module was never included in the FFS surveys. The research results do not confirm these expectations about the childfree lifestyle. It is possible that qualitative research has so far focused on self-selected and unrepresentative cases of childfree couples.

Fifth, the original proposal intended that analyses should be guided by preference theory (Hakim 2000, 2002, 2003a), and also by a broader concern to retest and recheck the key findings on the new phenomenon of voluntary childlessness already available from qualitative research, especially the apparently contradictory findings. This second objective proved far more feasible than the first. In the event, the key survey questions that provided

the necessary indicators for a classification of lifestyle preferences in the FFS were simply not available in too many cases: the module was excluded, the individual question had been dropped, or the question was substantively altered by changing response categories. In addition, many relevant questions were of the ‘opinion poll’ variety, measuring approval rather than choice, and were thus not valid indicators of personal preferences. This distinction has also hampered other researchers who have attempted to test preference theory, as illustrated by the recent debate in the *British Journal of Sociology* (McRae, 2003; Hakim, 2003c).

A key feature of the research design is that analyses are replicated across up to 25 modern countries, including large former socialist countries of eastern Europe as well as western Europe and north America. This provides a far more rigorous testing of hypotheses than analyses for any single country in isolation. Our conclusions do not rest on data for any one country, although some of the analyses to be published will focus on one country, or a few particular countries, for illustrative purposes. Of necessity, published analyses will comprise only a small proportion of the total undertaken.

Policy implications

Demographers and policy-makers have generally claimed that pronatalist and family-friendly policies have only weak impacts on fertility rates. This project clarifies that employers’ family-friendly policies and government family-friendly policies are unlikely to have any impact on the voluntary childfree, whose decision is rooted in a personal lifestyle choice, and hence lies well beyond the public policy sphere. However such policies can influence the behaviour of the very much larger group of people who are uncertain or ambivalent about future childbearing plans, as well as parents choosing smaller than hoped for families, as these groups are very conscious of, and resentful of, the absence of government support for families with children.

Outputs

Results of the project will be presented in a book, provisionally entitled *Voluntary Childlessness in 25 Modern Societies*. One publisher has already expressed an interest in publishing it. There will also be articles in academic journals to publicise the book. Key findings will also be disseminated through seminars, conferences, formal and informal meetings with interested policymakers in the Cabinet Office Women's Unit, the National Institute for Parenting and the Family, the Centre for Policy Studies, and any other interested policy organisations.

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