

A New Approach to Explaining Fertility Patterns: Preference Theory

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CHANGING PATTERNS of family life and declining fertility in modern societies have attracted substantial research attention and policy debate, yet we seem no nearer to a full understanding of current trends, nor to explanations that are adequate enough to provide the basis for predictions. Preference theory was elaborated by the author in *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century* (2000). This article shows how it provides a new theoretical framework for understanding current changes in modern societies and for predicting future developments; constitutes a qualitative break from economic theories of fertility change; and provides an alternative basis for the development of family policy. It presents findings from a national survey in Britain designed to test preference theory's predictions regarding fertility and employment, with positive results.

One notable feature of current research in demography and the sociology of the family is the absence of any central guiding theory on the relative importance of childbearing in women's lives. Some argue there is convergence on the nuclear (or conjugal) family, while others claim that urbanization, industrialization, and changes in women's economic position are fragmenting the family. Economists insist that economic factors are the engine driving social change, while some sociologists and demographers suggest that ideological factors are now crucial. One common theme is rising female employment and changes in the status of women, but this is variously treated as both cause and effect. Some studies posit that women's economic independence is the cause of declining marriage rates (and hence lower fertility), while others show that marriage rates are higher for college-educated women with high-grade occupations and good earnings (Oppenheimer 1977, 1988, 1994, 1997; Oppenheimer and Lew 1995; Mason and Jensen 1995; Brewster and Rindfuss 2000; McDonald 2000).

Two coterminous trends—rising female employment rates and falling fertility—are linked in economic theories (Easterlin 1976; Becker 1981; Lesthaeghe 1998; Lesthaeghe and Willems 1999) and lead to the plausible idea that more family-friendly employment policies could solve the problem of declining fertility (Chesnais 1996; McDonald 2000; Castles 2003). The search for the social, economic, and institutional determinants of fertility has led to research on the macro-level correlates of (declining) fertility in cross-national comparisons (OECD 2001; Kohler, Billari, and Ortega 2002; Castles 2003).¹ There are few longitudinal studies, and few qualitative studies of micro-level processes—Gerson's (1985) brilliant study of women's choices between career and family life being a rare exception.

Some social scientists are now emphasizing the role of ideological factors in family change and fertility trends. The results of the World Fertility Survey led Cleland to conclude that an ideational theory of change was more appropriate than a structural theory of change in family formation and use of birth control (Cleland 1985: 243)—a conclusion that was criticized on the ground that it ignored the massive structural transformation accompanying these changes (Demeny 1987: 345–346). However, Lesthaeghe and Meekers (1986) as well as Lesthaeghe (1995) and other contributors to Mason and Jensen's (1995) collection also focus on changing attitudes and values as the driving force in contemporary developments. At least one sociologist explains low fertility in Spain by attitude change rather than the usual economic factors of high unemployment and housing costs (Díez-Nicolás 2001). This theoretical perspective has also led Mason and Jensen (1995: 7–9) to criticize researchers who treat entire nations as a meaningful unit of analysis instead of adopting a micro-level focus on individual actors and their goals.

In contrast with much recent research on explaining fertility patterns, preference theory emphasizes personal values and decisionmaking at the micro-level. However, it also specifies for the first time in the theoretical literature the particular social, economic, and institutional contexts within which preferences become the primary determinant of women's choices. The key break with other theories is that women are understood to be heterogeneous in lifestyle preferences, whereas economic theories always assume (often implicitly) that women are homogeneous within countries and across Western societies, so that one-size-fits-all theories and policies work well. Even theories that emphasize ideational factors usually assume the relative homogeneity of values, or claim that preferences cannot be measured.

Preference theory breaks with current perspectives in several other ways as well. Where fertility rates have fallen in the past, this has been largely a consequence of male decisionmaking. After the contraceptive revolution of the 1960s, female control of fertility replaces male control. Women's views, perspectives, and goals become the key to understanding current and

future changes in women's position in society and changing patterns of fertility. This fundamental change requires new types of research as well as new theories.

There are three striking features of demographic research and debates on fertility decline. First, they are all variable-centered. For example, writers discuss whether delayed age of marriage or longer years of education are a cause of lower fertility rates, with almost no reference to the social processes and the motivations of the women and men behind these statistical measures. In contrast, preference theory relies on person-centered analysis. A key feature of this approach is that it reveals how variables may have a hugely different impact, depending on the context (social group or situation) in which they occur. Person-centered analysis recognizes the heterogeneity of respondents; denies that people are homogeneous in their responses to social and economic influences and experiences; and often focuses on extreme cases, which can amount to 20 percent at either end of a distribution (Magnusson and Bergman 1988; Cairns, Bergman, and Kagan 1998; Magnusson 1998).

Second, all variables, including time, are treated as continuous, unmarked by historical time, and equivalent across countries. This feature follows from variable-centered analysis. Substantive differences between countries or between time periods are reduced to variations on a series of variables that measure fragments of social reality and social change. In contrast, preference theory insists on case-by-case analysis of countries, to identify whether they have achieved the new scenario for women (as defined in Table 2).

Third, with rare exceptions, almost no attention is paid to women's intentions, values, and motivations, and to how these differ from those of men. The emphasis is usually on social institutions and public policy, macro-level factors that policymakers believe they can influence (McDonald 2000 is one example). In contrast, preference theory places attitudes and values at the center of causal explanations.

Unfortunately, most large studies continue to focus on process variables rather than causal factors. Just one example is the series of Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS) organized in the 1990s by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. A brilliant research design and model questionnaire were ignored by most of the participating countries, which collected process variables in exhaustive detail, but generally omitted the "unessential" attitudinal questions that would have enabled them to explain their results. Spain was one of the few countries to implement the model questionnaire unaltered, and one of the few to offer any explanation for declining fertility (Delgado and Castro Martín 1998). Most FFS national reports are essentially descriptive statistical compendia. This adherence to routine demographic statistics is all the more remarkable given that

a solid base of empirical evidence on the long-term impact of values and life goals is already available.

The long-term impact of values and personal goals

From the 1960s onward, the National Longitudinal Surveys (NLS) in the United States provided longitudinal data that allowed the long-term influence, or insignificance, of aspirations and life goals to be measured rigorously—in this case preferences for a life centered on marriage and children or an employment career. Of particular interest is the cohort of young women aged 14–24 in 1968, who were interviewed almost every year up to 1983 when aged 29–39 years. This cohort was asked in 1968, and again at every subsequent interview, what they would like to be doing when they were 35 years old, whether they planned to be working at age 35, or whether they planned to marry, keep house, and raise a family at age 35.² Compared to the length and complexity of work-commitment questions included in some surveys (Bielby and Bielby 1984), the question is crude and conflates preferences and plans. But because it asked about women’s personal plans, rather than generalized approval/disapproval attitudes on sex-role ideology (Hakim 2003b, 2003c), the question turned out to have strong analytical and predictive power, and it was used again in the second United States youth cohort study initiated in 1979.

There are a number of independent analyses of the extent to which early work plans were fulfilled by age 35 in the United States in the 1980s. They all show that women achieved their objectives for the most part, resulting in dramatic “mark-ups” to career planners in terms of occupational grade and earnings (Mott 1982; Rexroat and Shehan 1984; Shaw and Shapiro 1987). Furthermore, career planners were more likely to choose typically male jobs, had lower job satisfaction than other women (like men generally),³ and adapted their fertility behavior to their work plans (Waite and Stolzenberg 1976; Stolzenberg and Waite 1977; Spitze and Waite 1980). Work plans were a significant independent predictor of actual work behavior. After controlling for other factors affecting labor force participation, a woman who consistently planned to work had a probability of working that was 30 percentage points higher than did a woman who consistently planned not to work. Of the women who held consistently to their work plans, four-fifths were actually working in 1980, at age 35, compared to only half of the women who consistently intended to devote themselves exclusively to homemaker activities. Women who planned to be working at age 35 were likely to do so unless they had large families or a preschool child. Women who had planned a “marriage career” nevertheless were obliged to work by economic factors in half the cases: their husband’s low income, divorce, or

the opportunity cost of not working led half to be at work despite aiming for a full-time homemaker role.

Planning to work yielded a significant wage advantage. Women who had consistently planned to work had wages 30 percent higher than those of women who never planned to work. Those women who had planned to work in the occupation they actually held at age 35 had even higher wages than women whose occupational plans were not realized. Women who made realistic plans and acquired necessary skills fared best in the labor market. Those who fared worst were women who planned an exclusive homemaking career but ended up working for economic reasons. However, career planners were only one-quarter of the cohort of young women; the vast majority of the cohort had unplanned careers (Table 1), as did women in the older NLS cohort aged 30–44 years at the start of the study in the late 1960s (Mott 1978, 1982; Shaw 1983). One-quarter of women planned, or aspired to, a marriage career,⁴ but as usual this group was not analyzed in any detail.

As far back as the 1980s, the NLS longitudinal data overturned the results of cross-sectional studies suggesting that women’s work behavior is heavily determined by the number and ages of any children, rather than the other way round. Those who work only if their family responsibilities permit them to do so are in effect fulfilling a prior choice of emphasis on the homemaker career. Fertility expectations have only a small negative effect on young women’s work plans, whereas work plans exert a powerful negative effect on young women’s childbearing plans (Waite and Stolzenberg 1976; Stolzenberg and Waite 1977; Sproat, Churchill, and Sheets 1985: 78). Factors that have long been held to determine women’s labor force participation, such as other family income, educational qualifications, marital sta-

TABLE 1 Young women’s work plans and outcomes in the United States

	Distribution of sample	Percent working at age 35
Homemaker career: consistently indicates no plans for work; aim is marriage, family, and homemaking activities	28	49
Drifters and unplanned careers:	47	64
(a) highly variable responses over time, no clear pattern in plans for age 35	35	
(b) switch to having future work expectations at some point in their 20s	12	
Career planners: consistently anticipate working at age 35 throughout their 20s	25	82

SOURCE: Derived from Tables 2 and 3, reporting National Longitudinal Surveys data for the cohort of young women first interviewed in 1968, when aged 14–24 years, in Shaw and Shapiro (1987: 8–9).

tus, and age of youngest child, were revealed as being most important in relation to women with little or no work commitment, who have so far been in the majority. The minority of women with definite career plans manifested a rather inelastic labor supply, similar to that of men (Shaw and Shapiro 1987).⁵

Overall the NLS results have repeatedly shown the importance of motivations, values, and attitudes as key determinants of employment patterns, occupational status, and even earnings, an influence that is independent of conventional human capital factors and frequently exceeds the influence of behavioral factors (Parnes 1975; Andrisani 1978; Mott 1982; Sproat, Churchill, and Sheets 1985). These “psychological” variables are usually omitted from sociological and economic research, so their importance has been overlooked,⁶ and they are never studied for women who pursue the marriage career.

Similar results emerge from other longitudinal studies, on the rare occasions when researchers address the long-term impact of values and life goals. Attitudes have a specially strong impact on women’s behavior today, because women have gained genuine choices regarding employment versus homemaking. But attitudes and values have also been shown to have a major impact among men as well. For example, Szekelyi and Tardos analyzed 20 years of Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) microdata for 1968–88 to show that people who plan ahead and express confidence and optimism about their plans subsequently earn significantly higher incomes than those who do not, after controls. The long-term effects of attitudes were stronger than short-term effects. Attitudes affected the earnings of both male heads of households and their wives (Szekelyi and Tardos 1993).

Similar results are reported by Duncan and Dunifon (1998) from another analysis of 24 years of PSID data, this time covering men only. Motivation (as measured in the respondents’ early 20s) had a large impact on long-term success (as measured by hourly earnings 16–20 years later), and the effect remained after controlling for other factors. Only a small part of the impact of motivation worked through its effect on greater investment in training and education; a substantial part remained after this control. The study showed that values commonly found among women, such as religiosity (as measured by church attendance) and a preference for affiliation (as measured by a preference for friendly and sociable work settings rather than challenging work settings) both had a negative effect on earnings. Work orientations that emphasized challenge rather than affiliation and a clear sense of personal efficacy boosted earnings in the early 40s.

In sum, there is already substantial evidence that attitudes, values, and life goals have an important impact on outcomes in adult life, for men as well as women, in modern societies. However, there has so far been no attempt to integrate this new knowledge into social scientific theory, and empirical studies routinely ignore these substantive findings.⁷ Preference theory builds on these

results to provide a new model of women's life goals and priorities that helps to predict employment patterns and fertility patterns.

Preference theory

Preference theory is a new approach to explaining and predicting women's choices between market work and family work, a theory that is historically informed, empirically based, multidisciplinary, prospective rather than retrospective in orientation, and applicable in all rich modern societies (Hakim 2000). Lifestyle preferences are defined as causal factors that need to be monitored in modern societies. In contrast, other social attitudes (such as patriarchal values and sex-role ideology) are either unimportant as predictors of behavior or else have only a very small impact in creating a particular climate of public opinion on women's roles (Hakim 2003b, 2003c).

Preference theory specifies the historical context in which core values become important predictors of behavior. It notes that five historical changes collectively produce a qualitatively new scenario for women in rich modern societies in the twenty-first century, giving them options that were not previously available (Table 2). Small elites of women born into wealthy families or into prosperous families with liberal ideas sometimes had real choices in the past, just as their brothers did. Today, genuine choices are open to women in the sense that the vast majority of women have choices, not only particular subgroups in the population. The five social and economic changes started in the late twentieth century and are now producing a qualitatively different scenario of options and opportunities for women in the twenty-first century.

These changes are historically specific developments in any society. They are not automatic and do not necessarily occur in all modern societies. They may not occur together, at a single point in time in a country. The timing of the five changes varies greatly between countries. The effects of the five changes are cumulative. The two revolutions—the contraceptive revolution and the equal opportunities revolution—are essential and constitute the core of the social revolution for women. The five changes collectively are necessary to create a new scenario in which women have genuine choices and female heterogeneity is revealed to its full extent.

With rare exceptions (Cleland 1985; Murphy 1993; Castles 2002), male demographers have generally overlooked the social and psychological significance *for women* of what Westoff and Ryder (1977) term the contraceptive revolution. Demographers discuss the use of contraception without distinguishing between the methods controlled by men and those controlled by women. Modern forms of contraception (the pill, IUD, and female sterilization) are thus defined primarily by their greater reliability, overlooking the crucial fact that they transfer control over reproduction from men to

TABLE 2 The central tenets of preference theory

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1. Five separate historical changes in society and in the labor market that started in the late twentieth century are producing a qualitatively different and new scenario of options and opportunities for women. The five changes do not necessarily occur in all modern societies and do not always occur together. Their effects are cumulative. The five causes of a new scenario are:
 - the contraceptive revolution, which, from about 1965 onward, gave sexually active women reliable control over their own fertility for the first time in history;
 - the equal opportunities revolution, which ensured that for the first time in history women had equal access to all positions, occupations, and careers in the labor market. In some countries, legislation prohibiting sex discrimination went further, to give women equal access to housing, financial services, public services, and public posts;
 - the expansion of white-collar occupations, which are far more attractive to women than most blue-collar occupations;
 - the creation of jobs for secondary earners, people who do not want to give priority to paid work at the expense of other life interests; and
 - the increasing importance of attitudes, values, and personal preferences in the lifestyle choices of affluent modern societies.
 2. Women are heterogeneous in their preferences and priorities vis-à-vis the conflict between family and employment. In the new scenario they are therefore heterogeneous also in their employment patterns and work histories. These preferences are set out, as ideal types, in Table 3. The size of the three groups varies in rich modern societies because public policies usually favor one or another group.
 3. The heterogeneity of women's preferences and priorities creates conflicting interests between groups of women: sometimes between home-centered women and work-centered women, sometimes between the middle group of adaptive women and women who have one firm priority (whether for family work or employment). The conflicting interests of women have given a great advantage to men, whose interests are comparatively homogeneous; this is one cause of patriarchy and its disproportionate success.
 4. Women's heterogeneity is the main cause of their variable responses to social engineering policies in the new scenario of modern societies. This variability of response has been less evident in the past, but it has still impeded attempts to predict women's fertility and employment patterns. Policy research and future predictions of women's choices will be more successful if they adopt the preference theory perspective and first establish the distribution of preferences between family work and employment in each society.
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SOURCE: Hakim (2000).

women. Control over their fertility produces a change of perspective among women, even a psychological change, creating a sense of autonomy, responsibility, and personal freedom that is not achieved with contraception controlled by men. The contraceptive revolution is thus an essential precondi-

tion in order for the equal opportunities revolution and other changes to have any substantial effect on women's lives. Qualitative studies of contraceptive practice using the old methods show clearly that women did not feel they had any control over their childbearing and had fatalistic rather than calculating attitudes (Fisher 2000). It follows that fertility decline prior to the contraceptive revolution of the 1960s is attributable primarily to changes in male values and priorities, *inter alia*, rather than to female values. As Greene and Biddlecom (2000) point out, it is odd that demographers have focused on women in fertility research, even in periods and countries where men were the crucial decisionmakers responsible for contraceptive practice.

In Western Europe, North America, and other modern societies, these five changes only took place from the 1960s onward. The timing and pace of change have varied, even between countries in Europe. However, the strong social, cultural, economic, and political links between modern countries suggest that no country will lag behind on any of the changes indefinitely. All five changes were completed early in the United States and Britain, so that the new scenario was well established by the last two decades of the twentieth century in these two countries. Thus they provide the main illustration of the consequences of the new scenario for women. Reviews of recent research evidence (Hakim 1996, 2000) show that once genuine choices are open to them, women choose among three different lifestyles: adaptive, work-centered, or home-centered (Table 3). These divergent lifestyle preferences are found at all levels of education and in all social classes.

Adaptive women prefer to combine employment and family work without giving a fixed priority to either. They want to enjoy the best of both worlds. Adaptive women are generally the largest group and will be found in substantial numbers in most occupations. Certain occupations, such as schoolteaching, are attractive to women because they facilitate a more even work-family balance. The great majority of women who transfer to part-time work after they have children are adaptive women, who seek to devote as much time and effort to their family work as to their paid jobs. In some countries (such as the United States and southern European countries) and in certain occupations, part-time jobs are still rare, so other types of job are chosen. For example, seasonal jobs, temporary work, or school-term-time jobs all offer a better work-family balance than the typical full-time job, especially if commuting is also involved. *Faute de mieux*, adaptive women sometimes take ordinary full-time jobs.

Work-centered women are in a minority, despite the massive influx of women into higher education and into professional and managerial occupations in the last three decades. Work-centered people (men and women) are focused on competitive activities in the public sphere—in careers, sports, politics, or the arts. Family life is fitted around their work, and many of these women remain childless, even when married. Qualifications and train-

TABLE 3 Classification of women's work and lifestyle preferences in the twenty-first century

Home-centered	Adaptive	Work-centered
20% of women varies 10%–30%	60% of women varies 40%–80%	20% of women varies 10%–30%
Family life and children are the main priorities throughout life.	This group is most diverse and includes women who want to combine work and family, plus drifters and those with unplanned careers.	Childless women are concentrated here. Main priority in life is employment or equivalent activities in the public arena: politics, sports, arts, etc.
Prefer not to work.	Want to work, but not totally committed to work career.	Committed to work or equivalent activities.
Qualifications obtained as cultural capital.	Qualifications obtained with the intention of working.	Large investment in qualifications/training for employment or other activities.
Number of children is affected by government social policy, family wealth, etc. Not responsive to employment policy.	This group is very responsive to government social policy, employment policy, equal opportunities policy, economic cycle/recession/growth, etc. Such as: income tax and social welfare benefits educational policies school timetables childcare services public attitude toward working women legislation promoting female employment trade union attitudes toward working women availability of part-time work and similar work flexibility economic growth and prosperity and institutional factors generally.	Responsive to economic opportunity, political opportunity, artistic opportunity, etc. Not responsive to social/family policy.

SOURCE: Hakim (2000).

ing are obtained as a career investment rather than as an insurance policy, as in the adaptive group. The majority of men are work-centered, compared to only a minority of women, even women in professional occupa-

tions (Hakim 1998: 221–234, 2003a: 183–184). Preference theory predicts that men will retain their dominance in the labor market, politics, and other competitive activities, because only a minority of women are prepared to prioritize their jobs (or other activities in the public sphere) in the same way as men. This is unwelcome news to many feminists, who have assumed that women would be just as likely as men to be work-centered once opportunities were opened to them, and that sex discrimination alone has so far held women back from the top jobs in any society.

The third group, *home-centered* or *family-centered women*, is also a minority, and a relatively invisible one in the Western world, given the current political and media focus on working women and high achievers. Home-centered women prefer to give priority to private life and family life after they marry. They are most inclined to have larger families, and these women avoid paid work after marriage unless the family is experiencing financial problems. They do not necessarily invest less in acquiring qualifications, because the educational system functions as a marriage market as well as a training institution. Despite the elimination of the sex differential in educational attainment, an increasing proportion of wives in the United States and Europe are now marrying men with substantially better qualifications, and the likelihood of marrying a graduate spouse is greatly increased if the woman herself has obtained a degree (Hakim 2000: 193–222). This may be why women remain less likely to choose vocational courses with a direct economic value, and are more likely to take courses in the arts, humanities, or languages, which provide cultural capital but have lower earnings potential.

The three preference groups are set out, as sociological ideal-types, in Table 3, with estimates of the relative sizes of the three groups in societies, such as Britain and the United States, where public policy does not bias the distribution. In this case, the distribution of women across the three groups corresponds to a “normal” distribution of responses to the family–work conflict. In practice, in most societies, public policy favors one group or another, by accident or by design, so that the percentages vary between modern societies, with a bias toward work-centered women or toward home-centered women.

Each of the three lifestyle preference groups has a substantively different value system, as well as differing life goals. These differences sometimes bring women into conflict with each other—for example, on whether public childcare services are necessary or not, whether positive discrimination in favor of women for promotion to top jobs is a good thing or not. In a sense, there is no single, representative group of women in modern society, but three contrasting, even conflicting groups with sharply differentiated work and lifestyle preferences. In the United States, the conflict between work-centered and home-centered women has been expressed through the

two women's movements: the feminist women's liberation movement and the maternalist movement, with conflict often focused on the issues of abortion and the proposed Equal Rights Amendment.

The United States, Britain, and probably also the Netherlands currently provide the prime examples of societies that have achieved the new scenario for women. This does not mean that sex discrimination has been entirely eliminated in these countries. As definitions of sex discrimination keep expanding, from direct discrimination to increasingly arcane forms of indirect discrimination, this battle is arguably never won. However, these countries have trenchant equal opportunities legislation, backed up and enforced by a system of tribunals, equal opportunities commissions, and other tangible public and political support for converting the letter of the law into reality. Most European countries still have little or nothing to actively enforce equal opportunities legislation, so that little has changed in practice. For example, in Greece, Italy, and Spain, there is evidence of informal barriers to women's access to the labor market: female unemployment rates are more than double those of males, and there is some evidence of the disparity widening over time rather than falling. Within the European Union, only Britain, Ireland, and the Netherlands have a public body responsible for enforcing equal pay and equal opportunities laws. Equally important, Britain and the United States both have large and diverse populations, ensuring that cultural diversity and differences in values become accepted and even welcomed. Some European countries (notably the Scandinavian countries) have not yet come to terms with the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity that generally ensues from decades of immigration, and they have low acceptance of diversity in values and lifestyles.

Identifying Britain and the United States as two countries that have achieved the new scenario for women does not mean we expect convergence in employment rates and lifestyle choices in these countries. Even the most liberal society and *laissez faire* polity still has institutions, laws, customs, national policies, and cultures that shape and structure behavior. Choices are not made in a vacuum. Social and economic factors still matter, and will produce national variations in employment patterns and lifestyle choices. In addition, the choices people make are molded by an unpredictable constellation of events: economic recessions and booms, wars, changes of government, as well as events in private lives, individual ability, accidents or ill health, "disastrous" marriages, and "brilliant" marriages. For example, Britain and the United States differ in the size and character of their part-time workforce. Universal and free access to health care in Britain means that people are free to choose their job and working hours, and even whether to work at all, without regard to any health benefits offered by employers. In the United States, health insurance benefits are a key feature of full-time jobs that biases choices away from part-time work, or non-work. As a re-

sult of these differences, some adaptive women in Britain will choose permanent part-time jobs or decide not to be employed at all, while some of their counterparts in the United States will choose full-time jobs. Jobless single mothers and their children receive exactly the same health care as everyone else in Britain. A variety of social and economic factors guarantee there will always be differences between the new scenario countries in patterns of fertility and employment.

In sum, lifestyle preferences determine:

- women's employment pattern over the life cycle: choices between careers and jobs, full-time and part-time work, and associated job values;
- women's fertility: the incidence of childlessness and, for the majority who do have children, family sizes;
- women's responsiveness to public policies, employer policies, economic and social circumstances, including pronatalist policies.

Preferences do not predict outcomes with complete certainty, even when women have genuine choices, because of variations in individual abilities and factors in the social and economic environment. However, in prosperous modern societies, preferences become a much more important determinant, maybe even the primary determinant of women's behavior.

The three lifestyle preference groups differ in values, goals, and aspirations. That is, they are defined by their contrasting lifestyle preferences rather than by behavioral outcomes. The three groups also differ in *consistency* of aspirations and values, not by strong versus weak preferences. People who argue that women's choices are always shaped by external events and the situation around them are describing adaptive women, who are in the majority. The distinctive feature of the two polar groups of women (and equivalent men) is that they do not waver in their goals, even when they fail to achieve them. Work-centered people are defined by prioritizing market work (or other competitive activities in the public sphere) over family work and family life, not by exceptional success in the public sphere.

The 1999 British survey

Preference theory is empirically based, in that it was built up from a review and synthesis of hundreds of social science studies in several disciplines using a variety of research methods (Hakim 1996, 2000). To test the impact of lifestyle preferences on employment and fertility, a new survey was carried out in 1999. The aim was to select the smallest possible number of survey questions and indicators appropriate to a structured interview survey that could be used to identify the three lifestyle preference groups among women. This had previously been done most effectively by qualitative studies based on in-depth interviews, as illustrated by Gerson's landmark study of how women decide about motherhood and careers (Gerson 1985: Table C22;

Hakim 2000: 149–154). Our aim was to identify classificatory questions and variables that might be included in any large survey.

The survey was carried out as one of 27 projects selected for an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Research Programme on the Future of Work running over five years 1998–2003 in Britain. The interview survey was carried out for the author by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in Britain in January and February 1999.

The survey was based on a probability random sample of households and face-to-face interviews with one person aged 16 and older chosen randomly within each household. The proportion of households in which the selected informant was the head of household or spouse was 81 percent in our sample. From a sample of 5,388 eligible addresses, an overall response rate of 68 percent was achieved, producing data for a nationally representative sample of 3,651 persons aged 16 and older in Britain. The final sample included 1,691 men and 1,960 women, with a substantial proportion (20 percent) aged 65 and older. Excluding the pensioners reduces the sample for the population of working age to 2,900, including 2,345 married and cohabiting couples.

The survey was used to operationalize the identification of lifestyle preferences in the context of a large-scale structured interview survey, to test the classification against women's lifestyle choices and behavior, and to explore further applications of the taxonomy in sociological research on women's employment.⁸

The tables presented in the following sections are from the 1999 British survey.⁹

Preferences and lifestyle choices

Three questions were used to operationalize lifestyle preferences. Two questions were taken from the Eurobarometer series.¹⁰ The third, a question on work commitment, has been widely used, in slightly different versions, in research on work orientations in the United States and Britain. All three questions produced results in line with those obtained in Eurobarometer and other surveys.

A question on ideal family models identifies home-centered women: women who prefer to focus their time and energy on home and family work, and thus seek a marriage with complete role segregation. Just under one-fifth of the sample fell into this category.

Two questions on work orientations identify people for whom market work is central to their identities and lifestyle. A question on work commitment identifies people who claim they would continue with paid work (not necessarily in the same job) in the absence of economic necessity. The introduction of a national lottery in Britain in the 1990s made this hypothetical situation more realistic than previously. Primary and secondary earners

were identified by a question asking about the main income-earner(s) in the household. People who classified themselves as sole or joint main earner(s) were classified as primary earners; all others were classified as secondary earners. The question was treated as an opinion question, and analyses of responses show clearly that that is what it is. For example, married men adopt the identity of primary (co)earner irrespective of income level and even when they are not in employment. In contrast, women who regard themselves as primary earners when single switch immediately to the secondary earner identity after marriage, almost irrespective of their income level. Work centrality is defined as a combination of adopting a primary earner identity and having nonfinancial commitment to one’s paid work. For married women, this means in practice those who regard themselves as joint main earners as well as being committed to their employment activities. Less than one-fifth of married women passed this test, and overall only one-quarter of women (compared to half of men) were classified as work-centered. The residual group of women with more complex, or contradictory, values was classified as adaptive.

The distribution of lifestyle preferences among women of working age (Table 4) and wives of working age (Table 5) is close to that suggested by preference theory (Table 3). The distribution varies slightly according to the population base. For example, among wives and cohabitants aged 20–59 years, the distribution becomes 13 percent home-centered, 77 percent adaptive, and only 10 percent work-centered.

TABLE 4 Characteristics of women in the three lifestyle preference groups

	Home-centered	Adaptive	Work-centered
% employed			
full-time	40	35	63
part-time	16	37	15
% not in employment	44	28	22
% married/cohabiting	71	80	45
average number of children aged <16 at home	1.28	1.02	.61
% left full-time education			
by age 16	54	55	42
17–20 years	28	28	32
age 21+	18	17	26
Base=100%	171	870	194
National distribution of the three groups (%)	14	70	16

NOTES: Women aged 20–59 who have completed their full-time education. The fertility indicator is shown for married and cohabiting women aged 20–54 years.

In line with preference theory, Table 4 shows that lifestyle choices differ substantially between the three preference groups. Two-thirds of work-centered women are in full-time employment. In contrast, two-thirds of adaptive women work part-time or not at all. Almost half of the home-centered women are not in employment, and a small minority have never had a job. A relatively high 40 percent of home-centered women have full-time jobs. The reasons for this unexpected result are explored in the full report, and show that in certain circumstances economic necessity can override personal preferences (Hakim 2003a: Chapters 5 and 8).

Home-centered and adaptive women are most likely to marry or cohabit and to stay married. This is not surprising, as their preferred lifestyle is heavily dependent on having a breadwinner spouse who is in regular employment. Work-centered women are least likely to marry and most likely to be separated or divorced. Women who regard themselves as financially independent anyway have less motive to marry and to stay married. Most important, home-centered women have twice as many children as work-centered women, many of whom seem to be childless. The fertility measure here is the “own child” measure: the average number of children below age 16 years living at home per woman aged 20–54 years. It does not include older children (who may no longer live at home anyway), so it understates total fertility. The measure shows clearly that fertility levels vary markedly between the three preference groups, along with marriage rates and employment patterns.

Educational standards differ between the three preference groups, but not widely. Work-centered women are slightly more likely to have higher education: 26 percent compared to about 18 percent in each of the other two groups. The difference is small enough to be explained by differential self-selection into higher education. As predicted by preference theory, lifestyle preferences cut across education groups as well as socioeconomic and income groups. Overall, the key features of the three lifestyle preference groups are in line with preference theory. In broad terms, preferences predict outcomes. Further analysis (Hakim 2003a: 134–137, 153–160) shows that attitudes predict behavior, but that behavior does not predict attitudes. That is, attitudes are not a post hoc rationalization for decisions already taken.

Careers and fertility

Analysis of the British survey shows that lifestyle preferences are even more important than educational qualifications in shaping women’s choice between market work and a life centered on family and children. The theses that women’s fertility declines with increasing social status and that higher education invariably leads women to become career-oriented are not supported by the evidence.

TABLE 5 The relative importance of lifestyle preferences and education: Full-time employment rates

	Percent working full time		Distribution	
	Highly qualified	Other women	Highly qualified	Other women
Lifestyle preferences:				
home-centered	(28) ^a	34	11	14
adaptive	48	26	71	78
work-centered	93	65	18	8
All wives 20–54	54	30	100	100
Base=100%	119	589	119	589

^a() indicates small base numbers.

NOTES: Married women aged 20–54 who have completed their full-time education. In the absence of information on educational qualifications, the highly qualified are defined as those completing their full-time education at age 21 and later, because in Britain first degrees are normally completed by age 21. People completing full-time education at age 20 or earlier are assumed to have qualifications below tertiary education level.

The analysis in Tables 5 and 6 is restricted to wives because women’s choices only become sharply defined, and can only be implemented, after marriage to a breadwinner spouse.¹¹ The analysis is also restricted to wives aged 20–54 years because women aged 55 and older rarely have children below age 16 at home, and because many women (and men) quit the labor market from age 55 onward. We focus on the choice between a career, as indicated by full-time employment (Table 5), and a life centered on family work, as indicated by the fertility measure (Table 6).

The possession of higher education qualifications is a good general indicator of women’s social status. It is an indicator of women’s self-confi-

TABLE 6 The relative importance of lifestyle preferences and education: Fertility

	Average number of children <16 years at home			Percent with no children at home		
	Highly qualified	Other women	All women	Highly qualified	Other women	All women
Lifestyle preferences:						
home-centered	(2.0) ^a	1.18	1.29	(8) ^a	42	37
adaptive	1.00	1.09	1.08	39	42	42
work-centered	.71	.62	.65	68	64	65
All wives 20–54	1.08	1.08	1.08	41	44	44
Base=100%	119	589	708	119	589	708

^a() indicates small base numbers.

NOTES: Married women aged 20–54 who have completed their full-time education. See notes to Table 5.

dence and self-assertiveness; of their potential earnings if they choose to work; and a rough indicator of their socioeconomic status, either through their own job or through their husband's status. Tables 5 and 6 show virtually no effect of education or social status on wives' career orientation and fertility levels.

Education does have an effect on employment: full-time employment rates are 24 percentage points higher among highly qualified women. However, lifestyle preferences are far more important—as a determinant of both employment and fertility levels. Work-centered wives have much higher full-time employment rates than home-centered (or adaptive) wives, whether they are highly educated or not. Small base numbers mean the results for the home-centered highly qualified women are not entirely reliable, but the pattern is consistent and strong in both groups of women.

Fertility among home-centered women is double the level among work-centered women. Again the differences are even larger among highly qualified women, with our index of fertility almost tripled compared with work-centered wives. Overall, lifestyle preferences are more important than the variables more commonly measured in surveys, such as education or social status. It appears that lifestyle preferences are the hidden, unmeasured factor that determines women's behavior to a very large extent.

The bifurcated results in Tables 5 and 6 are supported by other studies displaying the polarization of women's lifestyle preferences and activities (Hakim 1996, 2000: 84–156). Most recently, a study of childbearing patterns among young women with and without higher education qualifications found a polarization of childbearing behavior that is most pronounced among highly qualified women, who generally began motherhood some five years later than others. Graduate women were most likely to remain childless: 23 percent compared to 15 percent of the nongraduate women. However, graduate women were also more likely than nongraduate women to have a second and third child, and to do so quickly (Rendall and Smallwood 2003).

Policy implications

Preference theory offers a new approach to policy development, one that takes account of the diversity of lifestyle preferences instead of adopting the usual one-size-fits-all approach. Policies that treat women as a homogeneous group are bound to fail or to work poorly. In contrast, policies that are designed to be neutral between the three preference groups, offering each of them a flexible benefit, are likely to be highly successful in terms of take-up rates and political popularity. The policy implications of preference theory are set out more fully elsewhere (Hakim 2000: 223–253). Here, we consider those policies that might slow or reverse declining fertility rates.

At present, social policy and family policy generally focus on the working mother and ignore home-centered women. It is often argued that maternity leave (unpaid or paid) helps women to combine paid work with having children. However, a preference theory perspective clarifies that it is mainly work-centered women (and to a lesser extent adaptive women) who benefit from maternity leave and related job rights—that is, women who have the lowest fertility and the lowest probability of increasing it.

Governments that are serious about raising fertility rates (and few are, as Demeny [1987] points out) should focus instead on policies to support home-centered women, who have the highest fertility rates and can most easily be persuaded to increase their family size. Such policies would also benefit those adaptive women who lean toward the family, rather than toward market work, as their main priority. In practice, the focus of social and family policy has swung so far toward the working mother that there is now a systematic policy bias against nonworking mothers in most modern societies—most obviously in relation to single mothers.

Until recently, policymakers accepted that it was in children's best interest for the sole parent to be a full-time parent, even if this meant long-term dependence on welfare, social housing, and other benefits. Policy has now swung against full-time mothers. Single mothers in the United States are pressed to accept low-paid and unrewarding jobs in Welfare-to-Work schemes. In Britain, similar pressures push single mothers into jobs on the grounds that they are "better off" psychologically and financially. Publicity for such schemes underlines the low public esteem accorded to full-time mothers and parenting work generally, and reinforces the idea that full-rights citizenship is dependent on gainful employment, however low-status and low-paid. Crittenden (2001) maintains that in the United States full-time parenting tends to be equated with "doing nothing."

Governments find it difficult to accord reproductive work the same status, dignity, and value as productive work. This is probably because governments and public policy are still male-dominated, even in modern societies, and men insist on treating women's unpaid reproductive work as taken-for-granted, "natural" women's work that does not merit the same valuation and rewards as male-style productive work. The bottom line in public policy is that women should provide reproductive services for free. Unfortunately many women have absorbed this phallogocentric thesis, leading to policies that deny professional fees to surrogate mothers, denigrate sex workers, deride couples who pay to adopt children, and disdain other activities involved in the industrialization of sexual and reproductive work.¹² Similarly, many governments have fiscal policies that discriminate against single-earner families, including Britain and Sweden.

Preference theory exposes the bias against motherhood in current fiscal, social, and family policies. It also helps us to identify policies that are

neutral between the three preference groups. One example is the homecare allowance introduced in various forms in the 1990s in Finland, Norway, and France (Ilmakunnas 1997; Hakim 2000: 232–235). The homecare allowance is a salary paid to the mother (or any parent) who stays at home to care for children without using public daycare nurseries. It is separate from financial benefits paid for dependent children, which are intended to help parents with the extra costs of children. The homecare allowance can be regarded as a wage for childcare at home—as a partial replacement for earnings forgone—or it can be used as a subsidy for purchased childcare services that enable the parent to return to work, whether full-time or part-time. The scheme has been hugely popular wherever it is introduced, with take-up rates close to 100 percent even in the early years, unlike the much-publicized parental leave rights. The value of the homecare allowance varies between countries and schemes, but is never nominal. For example, in Finland the homecare allowance for one child amounts to 40 percent of the average monthly earnings of female employees. The allowance is a public statement of the social value accorded to full-time parenting and the dignity of motherhood. By raising the social status of motherhood as compared with paid jobs, it redresses the bias against motherhood as an activity and can affect fertility rates.

Conclusions

There is no shortage of empirical research on current trends in family formation and family arrangements, fertility rates, and women's employment. What has been lacking is a theoretical framework that helps us to understand social processes and foresee future developments, including responses to changes in public policy. Preference theory does all this. The initial formulation (Hakim 2000) is open to further revision and development in the light of new research (Hakim 2003a).

Preference theory breaks with contemporary demographic theory in two ways. Its first distinctive feature is the recognition that the contraceptive revolution of the 1960s, and several other recent social and economic changes, create a new scenario of opportunities and options for women. This is a fundamental and radical change in women's position in society and the lifestyle choices open to them. Male demographers (and many other social scientists) have tended to assume that motherhood is a natural, even biologically determined choice for women, and that the high levels of fertility seen in the past were "normal." They have failed to recognize that sexually active heterosexual women had no direct control over their fertility, and thus had little choice about the shape of their lives, prior to the introduction of modern methods of contraception. The contraceptive revolution gave women independent control of their fertility, if necessary without the agreement or cooperation of male partners, for the first time in history.

The current emphasis on the first and second demographic transitions overlooks the fundamental importance of the recent sea change in fertility control. When women control their own fertility, it is their preferences and values that shape responses to public policy. And public policy has not, in practice, paid much attention to women's wishes. All the evidence is that most women in modern societies want two, or at most three, children (Chesnais 1996: 736; Fahey 2001). The large families and high fertility levels of the past were unavoidable rather than chosen, or were chosen by men, and are unlikely to recur naturally. New theories are needed for this new situation. Romantics like to believe that couples decide jointly, but in practice one partner has always had the overriding vote. Women have now become the deciding factor, and replacement fertility levels will only be achieved if women are satisfied with the terms and conditions offered for their reproductive and childrearing role—an activity that spans 20–30 years rather than the 3–4 years that are the narrow focus of preschool childcare policy debates. Sharp falls in fertility even in familistic societies such as Spain, Italy, and Greece demonstrate that in many countries public policy has not yet produced the right terms and conditions for motherhood, once women can choose to avoid it.

The second distinctive feature of preference theory is the recognition of female heterogeneity in preferences for a life centered, like that of men, on employment or other competitive activities in the public sphere or else a life centered on the noncompetitive activities of private life. It is this heterogeneity of lifestyle preferences that impedes attempts to predict fertility after the contraceptive revolution and the equal opportunities revolution have given women genuine choices over the shape of their lives for the first time in history.

The appearance of voluntary childlessness after the contraceptive revolution, raising childlessness to around 20 percent in most modern societies, has generally been ignored by demographers. It disproves the unstated assumption that women will always want to have and rear children. Some do not. Similarly there are women who want to pursue careers in the same way as men, but again they are a minority rather than typical. The typical woman is adaptive and is highly responsive to social pressures and policy signals. At the moment, all the signals point to paid employment as the favored activity. The equal opportunities revolution has hugely improved the rewards, terms, and conditions in the labor market. In contrast, the social status and rewards of motherhood have stood still (at best) or, more often, declined. The social stigma of solo motherhood has vanished, only to be replaced by the social and economic stigma of female joblessness. In this context, work-centered women often choose childlessness, adaptive women are not encouraged to have children, and home-centered women feel themselves to be ignored or belittled.

It is possible to reverse the decline in fertility in modern societies, but policymakers will have to start with a reevaluation of motherhood and re-

productive work, and change the emphasis in public policy. The bias toward support for working mothers needs to be balanced by new measures to support home-centered women. The emphasis on family-friendly employment policies should be replaced by a diversity of policies supporting all groups of women.

Notes

1 Unfortunately cross-national comparisons can lead to the ecological fallacy, as illustrated by Castles's (2002, 2003) conclusion that high fertility and high female employment rates are causally linked at the individual level because they appear to be linked in analyses of national, aggregate datasets that include the Scandinavian countries. Macro-level analyses are inappropriate for social policies that will operate at the micro-level; such analyses need direct information on social processes and decisionmaking at the individual level.

2 Two versions of the question have been used in the NLS. In the initial 1968 survey, respondents were asked "Now I would like to talk to you about your future plans. What would you like to be doing when you are 35 years old?" From 1969 onward the question was modified to read "Now I would like to talk to you about your future job plans. What kind of work would you like to be doing when you are 35 years old?" In both versions, keeping house or raising a family was a possible response. This particular question was omitted when the NLS was administered to women aged 35 years and older.

3 In all modern societies, studies invariably show higher levels of job satisfaction among women than among men, even when women are in jobs that have lower status and lower pay than men's jobs. Preference theory explains these results by the qualitative difference between men's and women's work and lifestyle priorities (Hakim 1996: 70, 100–101). It is thus not surprising that the minority of women who adopt the typically male careerist approach to employment have *lower* levels of job satisfaction, like men generally, even though they are generally in higher grade and higher paid jobs than are typical for women.

4 The large new youth cohort survey initiated in 1979 showed that the cohort of young

women entering the labor market in the 1980s had stronger work expectations and work commitment than did previous cohorts. In 1979, young women were only half as likely as young women in 1968 to say they expected to be housewives not in the paid labor force at age 35, with only one-quarter planning to be housewives (Sproat, Churchill, and Sheets 1985: 76–78, 318, 335–336).

5 An even larger American study, the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS72), has produced results that corroborate those of the NLS. It showed, for example, that young women who subsequently became mothers before the age of 25 differed significantly from those who remained childless: they were less work-oriented, more likely to plan to be homemakers at age 30, less likely to plan a professional career, and held more traditional sex-role attitudes and aspirations *before* they gave birth. Parenthood strengthens preexisting traditional attitudes in young white men and women alike (Waite, Haggstrom, and Kanouse 1986; Morgan and Waite 1987). None of these results is acknowledged or reflected in recent analyses of NLS72, which compare men's and women's occupational aspirations while ignoring sex-role attitudes, to the point that women hoping to be full-time homemakers at age 30 are simply excluded from analyses (e.g., in Rindfuss, Cooksey, and Sutterlin 1999).

6 Some studies have shown work commitment to have a much bigger effect among married women than other social structural factors, especially when the husband's attitudes are also taken into account. Geerken and Gove show that these two factors produce a 50–70 percentage point increase in economic activity rates of wives in the United States (Geerken and Gove 1983: 66). A study of Canadian working wives also found strong associations

between work commitment, higher-status jobs, and husband's support for his wife's employment (Chappell 1980).

7 For example, recent NLS analyses continue to treat childcare responsibilities as a key determinant of women's labor force participation, as illustrated by Charles et al. (2001).

8 A full report on the 1999 British survey and an equivalent 1999 Spanish survey is given in Hakim (2003a). This report includes data for men and analyses of sex differences.

9 Tests of statistical significance are not reported. These tests indicate whether the sample size was large enough for a small percentage difference to be reliable. We know that our survey was large enough to produce reliable results. More to the point, we are only interested in large and substantively important differences between the three preference groups, not in small but statistically significant differences, which can be ignored. Too often, as noted by Morrison and Henkel (1970), researchers use tests of statistical significance as a substitute for addressing the

substantive importance of their results, which may be minimal.

10 The Eurobarometer series of surveys are run by the European Commission to inform European Union policymaking. They cover all EU member states and focus on social and political attitudes.

11 The analysis was repeated for women who were neither married nor cohabiting. In this subgroup, there is little variation in full-time employment rates and fertility between preference groups. Only in the context of marriage do the three preference groups show differentiated behavior patterns.

12 One reason women resist the industrialization and commercialization of sexual and reproductive work is that such steps introduce competitive values into an area of social life currently dominated by cooperative and caring values. These contrasting value systems are features of the market economy and the domestic economy respectively and not, as some sociologists have assumed, characteristics of men and women per se.

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A New Approach to Explaining Fertility Patterns: Preference Theory

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Preference theory is a new approach to explaining current and future patterns of employment and fertility among women in modern societies. Although economists usually claim that preferences cannot be measured, methods for identifying women's and men's lifestyle preferences were developed and applied in British (and Spanish) national surveys, confirming the results of previous British and American studies showing three distinct lifestyle preference groups. The results confirm the heterogeneity of women's preferences and suggest that preferences are the primary determinant of fertility and employment decisions. The implications for policies to raise fertility are discussed.

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