Less Family or More Security?

A Qualitative Analysis of Fertility Ideals and Intentions in Spain

Xiana Bueno and Mary C. Brinton
Department of Sociology, Harvard University

ABSTRACT

An extensive body of literature has focused on explaining fertility behaviors in postindustrial societies. In contrast to focusing on one overarching explanatory theory, scholars have recently asserted the need for an integrated approach that simultaneously takes into account country-specific characteristics in explaining reproductive behaviors. This paper seeks to contribute to a richer understanding of fertility in Spain, a “lowest-low” fertility country, by analyzing the reasoning of young adult men and women regarding their plans to transition to parenthood as well as their ideal and intended family sizes. We use structured in-depth interviews with 83 young men and women in urban Spain to examine how the logic of young adults’ discourse about family formation maps onto existing theoretical approaches. Our preliminary results demonstrate the impact of the economic crisis in shaping ways of thinking. But together with economic uncertainty we nevertheless find the strong prevalence of a two-child norm. Further analyses will explore differences by gender and life-course stage.
1. Introduction

Few postindustrial societies remain overwhelmingly dominated by a traditional gendered division of labor. The transition to more egalitarian gender roles in both the public and private domains is continuing, albeit at different paces in various countries. One of the natural consequences of educational expansion and the greater entrance of women into the labor market has been smaller family sizes; few couples or individuals in postindustrial countries in Europe, North America, or East Asia currently desire to have three or more children. But while fertility in some countries has stabilized around replacement-level (approximately two children per woman), fertility in other countries has declined to a much lower level (under 1.3 children per woman). The macro-level consequences of very low fertility have been extensively articulated in the demographic literature. But is very low fertility a problem at the micro level, i.e. for individuals and couples? One way to assess this is to examine whether young adults envision being able to achieve their fertility aspirations.

This paper considers the case of Spain, a lowest-low fertility country, and investigates young urban adults’ fertility ideals and intentions, the match between the two, and the reasoning individuals offer in the case of a gap between ideals and intentions. As one of the countries with the lowest fertility in the world (Billari and Kohler 2004), Spain appears to be moving closer to the gender equity levels of Northern European countries (Arpino et al. 2015) and to be halfway between the gender values of the lowest-low fertility countries (especially those in East Asia) and those in countries with replacement-level fertility. Recent forecasts for 1975 cohort fertility predict a slight increase for Spain up to 1.41 children per woman (Myrskylä et al. 2013), similar to predictions for other low-fertility countries in Europe (Bongarts 2002). These circumstances make Spain a very interesting case. Both greater gender equality and a strong economic climate are positive correlates of cohort fertility (Myrskylä, Goldstein, and Cheng 2012). In fact, the economic crisis experienced by Spain since 2008 cannot be ignored, and labor market inflexibility and economic uncertainty have been found to be important determinants of the postponement of second births in Spain (Adserà 2011).
The present paper asks to what extent Spanish young adults’ fertility behavior and the reasoning behind their decisions is driven by factors associated with the principal theories that demographers have employed to understand the emergence and continuation of very low fertility. Are young adults’ preferences mainly driven by individualistic postmodern values (as would be predicted by Second Demographic Transition theory), by continued gender inequality (as would be predicted by McDonald’s gender equity theory), or by constraints inherent in the economic context? Are young adults’ fertility intentions consistent with their ideals? To examine these questions we draw on structured in-depth interviews that probe the family formation decisions and reasoning of 83 Spanish men and women aged 24-35 years old. Their discourses provide a window through which to view existing theoretical perspectives on the phenomenon of low fertility and to assess the relevance of those perspectives for the case of Spain. We use the interviews to inductively generate the different types of reasoning individuals use to explain their future fertility decisions, paying particular attention to whether Spanish young adults at the initial stages of the family formation process believe that they will be able to have the family size they desire and if not, what they see as the reasons for the gap.

The paper is innovative in three ways. First, our qualitative analysis allows us to apply a micro-level perspective, which is unusual in studies of low fertility. Most theories explaining changes in fertility levels adopt a macro-level perspective and take into account societal characteristics at the country level. Tests of these theories are mainly carried out through the analysis of quantitative survey data or aggregate data. While these studies are highly valuable, it is very difficult for them to reveal the reasoning that individuals use to explain their preferences and decision-making. We contribute by directly asking young adults to explain their reasoning, and then inductively generating the dominant modes of reasoning that emerge from their discourses. Second, while studies that include men’s fertility ideals and intentions have become more prevalent in the literature, the number of such studies remains small (Goldscheider 2000; Goldscheider et al. 2010; Puur et al. 2008). Contrary to some theoretical frameworks that focus almost exclusively on women (Hakim 2003), we argue that fertility decisions are better considered as a joint decision of the couple (Thomson 1997), especially in postindustrial
contexts such as Spain where parenthood is less and less an unintended path. Third, we query individuals about their fertility ideals as well as their intentions, and ask them to explain whatever differences exist. Many demographic studies implicitly attempt to measure the distance between fertility preferences and outcomes. At the aggregate level, this is generally done by using the total fertility rate (TFR) as the outcome, which does take into account changes in the timing of births. Completed fertility is more preferable, but comparisons of completed fertility across groups are naturally affected by differences in cohort exposure to different social, economic, and value contexts. Some studies compare the completed fertility of women 45 years or older with their retrospective fertility preferences; such a comparison is of course fraught with all the problems of retrospective questioning (Liefbroer 2009). Our work utilizes an alternative measure by asking men and women to think about both their fertility ideals and intentions and to explain the reasons behind their thinking.

We focus on a delimited group: highly-educated urban native-born Spanish adults age 24-35. Our target group is the college-educated urban population for several reasons. First, this group tends to represent the trendsetters of fertility decline. Second, their higher human capital positions them better in the labor market than their less-educated counterparts; consequently, they are likely to have greater economic resources and fewer constraints. Third, the highly-educated are the most likely to embrace the postmodern, individualistic values championed by ideational theories of fertility decline such as Second Demographic Transition theory. At the same time, little is known about the reasoning, experiences, and meanings behind decisions and uncertainty regarding parenthood among individuals supposedly better positioned on the socioeconomic scale. Fertility levels in urban centers are lower than in suburbs and rural areas (Kulu and Boyle 2008; Kulu et.al. 2009). This is also true in Spain for Madrid and Barcelona, where total fertility was significantly lower than the provincial and national average during the period 2000-2010 (Gil et.al. 2013). Our interviewees are drawn from these two cities.
We chose individuals age 24-35 so as to interview people in an early stage of the family formation process and to capture their reasoning about anticipated behaviors (ideals and intentions). Further, we required interviewees to be in one of the three following family formation stages: 1) not in union; 2) in union, childless; or 3) in union with one child. We opted to include only native-born young adults. Literature on the fertility behaviors of migrants has pointed to the role of socialization in explaining their higher fertility, suggesting that the first generation of migrants may preserve the dominant fertility patterns of their origin countries (Kulu 2005). This may be especially true in Spain, given the higher fertility level of African and Latin-American women who have dominated the immigration flows since the early 2000s (Devolder and Bueno 2011; Castro-Martín and Rosero-Bixby 2011).

The paper is organized as follows. The second section explains in greater depth our research objectives. In the third section we briefly review recent fertility history in Spain. Fourth, we explain our data and methodology. In the fifth section we present our preliminary results. We close with a discussion and implications for future research.

2. Theoretical background

During the last few decades fertility decline has been a leading topic in demographers’ research agenda, especially in Europe. One of the first and most-widely utilized theoretical frameworks was Becker’s theory of fertility (1960), or the New Household Economics, based on the idea that fertility decisions are made after considering the opportunity costs of having an additional child, especially for women in relation to labor market participation. Within this framework, low fertility is the result of a shift in the costs of children for couples. Other authors have argued that this shift is caused by a change towards values and attitudes that prioritize goods or experiences over children. Such values are considered to be individualistic post-modern values, as outlined in Second Demographic Transition theory (Van de Kaa 1987; Lesthaeghe 1995). Second Demographic Transition theory posits the broad use of contraceptive measures, an increase in the incidence of separation and divorce, changing perceptions toward single motherhood, and increased non-marital cohabitation and other new family models.
McDonald’s (2000b, 2013) gender equity theory introduces the gender dimension as a key element explaining fertility change. McDonald argues that while the increase in women’s labor force participation has led to higher gender equity levels in the public sphere, the private sphere has not yet experienced a similar rebalancing. Accordingly, fertility is not expected to recover until gender equity is achieved in the private sphere as well, that is, until men and women more equally share housework and childcare.

Overall, all of these theories suggest that young cohorts demonstrate a clear commitment to evolve towards a “less family” scenario (Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015). However, recent fertility patterns in northern European countries and the US challenge these theories. Highly educated young adults, the ones who once drove fertility change in post-industrial societies, are no longer necessarily the group with the lowest fertility. In a number of countries, it is the case that highly educated women are once again demonstrating similar fertility rates similar to or higher than those of the less-educated group. This outcome has been found in Sweden (Andersson 2000), Norway (Kravdal and Rindfuss 2008), and the US (Shang and Weingberg 2013). Some analysts have explained this reversal in the previous relationship between education and fertility by the spread of gender egalitarianism at the macro or societal level, where egalitarian family and labor policies and institutions are crucial; and at the micro (or individual) level, through the adoption of egalitarian norms by men and women. A number of demographers have asserted that this outcome is due to arrive. For example, Esping-Andersen and Billari (2015) postulate that by meeting these conditions a “mature female revolution” will be completed, similar to what Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård (2015) refer to as “the second half of the gender revolution.” For McDonald (2000b), such an eventuality would herald that gender equity has finally been accomplished in the private sphere of the household.

This paper aims to discern how the logics derived from young adults’ narratives of their own preference formation and reasoning map onto the principal theoretical perspectives offered to explain fertility preferences.
3. The toboggan of fertility in Spain and the role of education

4. Data and methodology

5. Preliminary results

Fertility ideals, intentions, and the gap

Empirical evidence on ideal and intended family size in postindustrial societies has shown a clear two-child norm (Boongarts 2002: Hagewen and Morgan 2005; Sobotka and Beaujouan 2014). The preferences from our interviewees are in line with that statement (61 percent) when they were asked how many children they hope to have. The main reasons interviewees mentioned to explain their ideal family size were a combination of preference-based and obstacles-based reasoning. Natal family considerations are usually what came first to interviewees’ minds. It is frequent that they desire to replicate their own childhood experience (or their partner’s childhood experience), taking their own family as a model. Cases of not replicating their own or their partner’s childhood experiences strongly conform to the two-child ideal. If the interviewee is an only child, there is a strong tendency for him or her to aspire to having two children; if the interviewee comes from a large family, it is likely that he or she wants to have fewer children. In this sense the second most-mentioned reason is the belief that an only child is lonely. This idea comes often together with the idea that only children are selfish, do not have good character, etc. These reasons are related to each other and express what is considered appropriate for the well-being of children, attributing a strong value to the sibling bond.

But do individuals’ intended family size coincide with their ideal? For nearly half of our sample (46 percent), this is the case. But for the other half, fertility aspirations are higher than intentions. Two or three children is the average ideal family size (2.48) while expected fertility is situated under the replacement level (1.99). Among our interviewees women seem to have slightly higher preferences than men, and one-child parents have higher fertility intentions. This observation leads us to think that those who already became parents might place less weight on
the conditions and obstacles for having a child than individuals who were childless at the moment of the interview.

For those interviewees whose fertility aspirations are greater than their intentions, we asked the reasons why they think they cannot achieve their ideal number of children (that is, the reason for the gap). Financial considerations is the factor most frequently mentioned by interviewees as a constraint to become parents. In particular, job security for either or both partners emerges as a principal issue. The global 2008 economic crisis seriously affected Spain and has continued to do so, and the time of the interview (2012) was a period of high unemployment, especially for young adults. For this reason the fact that a number of interviewees assigned importance to wanting either themselves or their partners to develop their work and career can be understood not only as an individualistic preference but as clear evidence of how labor market instability constrains parenthood decisions.

**Preliminary results for this PAA proposal have been done looking at the reasoning of the total sample. Further results for the final version of the manuscript will focus on differences by gender and familyformation stage**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


