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Overview Chapter 8: The impact of public policies on European fertility

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Overview Chapter 8: The impact of public policies on European fertility

Jan M. Hoem¹

Abstract

This chapter outlines the positions in the current debate about the possibility of using public policies to influence fertility. We note the polarization between, on the one hand, those who view public policies as obvious means for lifting the currently low fertility levels in Europe, in line with the role of economic policies in a modern society; and, on the other hand, those who feel that family policies are inefficient, and perhaps even unnecessary. We place the contributions of the national chapters of this book in this framework and describe the formidable methodological difficulties that face those who seek to investigate policy impacts on fertility behavior. While properly conducted empirical investigations have overcome such problems and have clearly demonstrated policy effects in specific circumstances, we conclude that, in general, national fertility is possibly best seen as a systemic outcome that depends more on broader attributes, such as the degree of family-friendliness of a society, and less on the presence and detailed construction of monetary benefits.

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1. Introduction, the polarization of demographic opinion

The recent sharp decline in fertility and the subsequent stability of low-level fertility in many European countries have generated a new interest in identifying means to counteract further declines, and, if possible, to induce an increase in fertility back toward the replacement level. The discovery of these developments has served to concentrate people's minds, both in the media and among policymakers, on the national as well as the international level. (For a typical case from the press, see *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2006. For national and international contributions, see, for example, the accounts in the chapters in this book on Austria, the Czech Republic or Italy, and papers from the European Commission 2005, 2006.) In many countries, it is possible to detect a re-awakened willingness to adopt instrumental considerations, and to pay less attention to the moral stance that once dominated the attitudes of policymakers in the shadow of past abuses by fascist and other authoritarian regimes. (See our chapters on Germany, Spain, Italy, and Romania. See also Prskawetz et al. 2006, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2006, Kühn and Palme 2005, and Auth and Holland-Cunz 2006.) There is now more talk about the need to prevent the rapid aging of the population, and less about how the unique sanctity of private life pre-empts policies that can increase fertility.

Many demographers are impatient with what they see as inadequately strong or inconsistent government policies. (See our chapters on Austria, Italy, Lithuania, and Poland.) Such impatience is interesting in view of the current polarization of opinion concerning the possibility of using fertility politics to affect childbearing behavior. A conviction that public policies can correct for recent fertility decreases (see below) has been countered with the argument that the types of pronatalist policies that would be considered acceptable in modern democratic societies are both expensive and ineffective. The latter opinion has actually long been held by many professional demographers. The futility of using public policies as a tool to raise long-run fertility in Europe (and elsewhere) has been asserted particularly eloquently by Paul Demeny (1986, 2003, 2005), who has, in addition, maintained in recent conference discussions that natural mechanisms of homeostasis will make deliberate pronatalist efforts unnecessary. The view that family policies have little impact has also been repeated most recently by Gauthier (2007, p. 339), who finds it difficult to understand why baby bonus schemes are so popular among governments, given her interpretation of the evidence she presents in an extensive literature review. In Gauthier's opinion, the effects of public policies tend to be small, and any effect they may have works on the *timing* of fertility (which she seems to regard as less important), rather than on *completed family size* (which many regard as the ultimate goal of family policies). Similarly, several chapters in this book maintain that public policies have influenced

fertility only mildly, or have been quite inefficient. (See in particular the chapters on France, Russia, Slovakia, and the Ukraine.)

Western society would have been quite different if economists were equally timid in offering their opinions about the usefulness of *economic* policies. The pessimism shared by so many demographers flies in the face of such basic facts as the systematic differences in fertility levels and fertility trends in the various parts of Western Europe. (See Esping Andersen 1999, Lewis 1992, Gornick et al. 1997, Sainsbury 1999, Anttonen and Sipilä 1996, Castles 2003; for a recent overview, see Neyer 2003a.) One would assume that the higher fertility rates observed in France and in the Nordic countries are neither innate to these cultures nor a gift from heaven, but are somehow related to their deliberate public policies. French policies have long been explicitly pronatalist, as is made evident in the chapter on France included in this book. By contrast, the motivations behind corresponding policies in the Nordic countries have been formulated as considerations for social justice, gender equality and women's empowerment; they have also been seen as efforts to further diminish remaining differentials in income and wealth. The policies are pronatalist in effect, but not by stated intention. (See the chapter on Sweden in this book. Many of our chapters for countries in Central and Eastern Europe contain accounts of pronatalist policies that also go hand-in-hand with gender equality aspirations.) In both cases, the end product is a fertility rate (specifically, a total cohort fertility rate, CFR) that is high by European standards. Conversely, one would assume that the low fertility rates of the Mediterranean countries are, in part, a consequence of the lack of operational attention effectively paid to the need for systematic support of the family in a modern society, as is made clear in the corresponding chapters in this book. Automatic mechanisms of homeostasis are not easily visible, but, if they were present, would not public policies be a necessary part of any system to regulate fertility developments?

Typically, the gloomy view that dismisses the possibility of influencing fertility is not shared by economists like Björklund (2006), who claims that his results suggest that the policies "raised the level of fertility, shortened the spacing of births, and induced fluctuations in the period fertility rates". The pessimistic view also loses credibility as the weight of evidence, as interpreted by demographers like McDonald (2002, 2006) and others,² indicates that policies that are pronatalist in effect have indeed had an impact. It is possible that the contradictory readings of the facts may be rooted in different understandings of what aspects of fertility one should focus on, and which public policies one should count. A further issue is how an impact should be measured. We now turn to a discussion of such issues.

² For a further overview, see, for example, Neyer (2003b, Appendix). For additional contributions concerning the much-studied policy effects in Sweden and their contrasts with other countries, see Neyer (2006a), Neyer et al. (2006b) and Andersson (2005).

2. Methodological issues

Empirical investigations use a variety of data sources and a range of methodologies. Also, even well-founded empirical studies of policy effects are up against a number of difficulties. Let us spell out problematic issues connected to (1) *methodology*, (2) *endogeneity*, (3) the (im)possibility of providing *counterfactual examples* and (4) *context* as follows:

(1) The first major issue that the analyst of policy effects is confronted with is the choice of *statistical methodology*. This pertains both to the choice of dependent variable and to the selection of covariates when any “independent variables” are available. Here are some considerations:

(a) Despite the well-known weaknesses of a statistic like the period TFR as a temporal measure of the fertility level, this is used as the outcome variable in many investigations, in a tradition going back to the beginning of modern studies of the fertility-level/family-policy nexus. Conclusions about fertility effects could be firmer if more adequate statistics were used for analysis.

(b) When more complete statistics *are* available, fertility analysis is normally based on cohort data by preference, and statistics such as the cohort-based, age-accumulated completed fertility rate (CFR) are used. More complete analyses use age-partial CFRs (which are cohort-based, age-specific fertility rates cumulated up to strategically chosen ages, sometimes separately by birth order; see, for example, Frejka and Sardon 2004 and 2007).

(c) Moreover, demographers actually disagree about the absolute supremacy of cohort data over period data (Ní Bhrolcháin 1992). Period data reflect short-term effects, including policy effects of the kind the analyst is looking for, while cohort data are complementary and reflect longer-term developments. For example, the analysis of period data (Andersson 2005, Hoem 2005) has revealed that an ideologically motivated rigidity in the Swedish family policy rules has created great swings in Swedish fertility rates, while in Finland the swings may have been avoided through countervailing effects of a home care allowance (Vikat 2004). Because of the priority given to policies that induce mothers to avoid leaving their jobs even temporarily to work as homemakers, Sweden has not had such an allowance, except as a brief experiment during a short-lived center right government in the mid-1990s. Otherwise, motherhood benefits in Sweden have been closely linked to a woman’s own labor income. In such a system, benefits fluctuate as incomes rise and fall, and fertility oscillates correspondingly. Such swings may have serious consequences for society: the school system, for example, would have to adjust to greatly varying cohort sizes. It has not been shown that such swings are related to the ultimate level of fertility for a birth cohort, but it is apparent that policy regulations do influence other aspects of fertility. It

is important to note that policy impacts on fertility extend beyond the impact on ultimate cohort fertility. Indeed, exclusive concentration on the CFR may lead to a different fallacy, namely, to a fixation on the lifetime end product of childbearing (the “quantum of fertility”), and to a lack of attention to important timing effects.

(d) Ultimately, the causal structure of policy effects cannot be determined by aggregate statistics alone.³ With aggregate statistics, the analyst is confined to aggregate-level variation in time and space, and that is far from enough for causal conclusions. If individual-level childbearing histories are available, the options are much wider. (See, for example, Kravdal 1996 and Hank and Kreyenfeld 2003, and many other more recent papers.) For example, analyses of individual-level data have demonstrated that so-called speed-premium effects have reduced birth intervals noticeably in Sweden.⁴ (In classical demographic reasoning, this should work toward increasing aggregate ultimate fertility, or, at least, of helping to prevent a further decline.) A second case in point is the most thorough empirical paper on the effects of childcare availability that we have seen to date (Rindfuss et al. 2007), in which the authors suggest that there may be local factors that affect *both* fertility and childcare supply. They demonstrate that policy effects may even come out with the wrong sign if local confounders are not taken into account. The authors conclude that it is essential to pay attention to model specification when conducting studies of policy effects on fertility.

(2) The last paper mentioned illuminates the problem that, in principle, *endogeneity* may dog any investigation of cause-and-effect in demography. This means that even when a first-blush hypothesis posits that policies influence behavior, it may also be necessary to allow for the possibility of a causal influence in the reverse direction, i.e., for the possibility that demographic behavior may influence public policies. For example, policies might respond to an actual or anticipated trend in birth behavior. Thus, while it is commonly assumed that the availability and quality of public childcare influence childbearing behavior, it may instead be the case that regions with high levels of childbearing tend to develop more and better childcare institutions.⁵ Politicians naturally cater to their constituencies, and regions with many children may be able to attract more political attention than other regions, with consequences for financial allocation. This may then, in turn, attract more families who want children. In principle, potential parents may migrate to take advantage of the availability of childcare facilities if they are unevenly allocated across locations. This would make

³ For a concurring position, see, for example, Neyer and Andersson (2007).

⁴ The latest contribution about this feature was given by Andersson, Hoem, and Duvander (2006).

⁵ In this connection it is important to realize that the availability of care should not be measured by the absolute number of daycare slots, but by the provision *rate*. That rate standardizes for the number of children. Therefore one needs to argue that regions with high fertility expand public daycare over-proportionally. We are grateful to Michaela Kreyenfeld for underlining this distinction to us in a private communication.

such migration endogenous to fertility, and, presumably, it would work to exaggerate policy effects unless the role of migration as an intermediate process is accounted for in the analysis. Forgetting about two-way influences almost always results in biased conclusions.

Another example of the dangers of ignoring endogeneity has appeared in connection with regulations concerning non-marital births.⁶ In 1998, the German government started allowing unmarried parents to have joint custody of their children; non-marital parenthood increased subsequently. It is unclear, however, whether the changed regulations caused non-marital fertility to increase, or whether the government just responded to the general trend in non-marital childbearing.

(3) A third difficulty inherent in any kind of demographic study is that the analyst rarely has any *counterfactuals* at hand to demonstrate effects. If a counterfactual is not available, it is impossible to know what would have happened if a policy had not been implemented, or if it had been formulated in a different manner. A pronatalist policy can, therefore, easily be judged ineffective when, in reality, the policy may have counteracted a fertility decline that would have occurred in its absence, in which case the policy should have been counted as a success. Fortunately, natural experiments do occur when, for example, neighboring populations are subject to closely similar economic trends but have different public policies, as was the case in the comparison between Sweden and Finland mentioned in item 1c above. Differentials between social groups in reaction to the Swedish speed premium may be another example. (See Andersson, Hoem, and Duvander, 2006, and their predecessors.) A further opportunity for comparison can be found in a before-and-after analysis when a major reform is introduced in a country, as when the three-year parental leave (the APE) for mothers of two children was introduced in France. (See the chapter on France in this book.) There may also be unexpected side effects of reforms made with quite different intentions, such as the peak in marriages following the Swedish widow's pension reform in 1989 (Hoem 1991), or the increase in marriages that occurred in France in 1996 after a change in the tax system for unmarried couples with children. The law was intended to discourage tax evasion among unmarried *couples* who had been making use of measures designed to support *single* parents. When the tax advantages these measures had once conferred disappeared for unmarried couples, marriages increased not only among the wealthy, but also among people who were not paying any income tax, and for whom there was no change at all in the amount of tax owed. It would be easy to underestimate the effect of a policy that was supposed to be limited to a targeted population.

(4) Finally, another difficulty that arises in conducting an empirical analysis is that family policies do not operate in a societal vacuum; the effect of a given policy may be

⁶ We owe this example also to Michaela Kreyenfeld.

strongly dependent upon the social *context* in which it is implemented. Depending upon the policy constellation, economic trends in particular can interact closely with family policies in influencing fertility. By extension, fertility may be influenced by developments in areas well beyond those in the realm of core family policies. (In addition to economic policies, factors affecting fertility rates may include housing policies, gender policies, social equity, tax rules, school opening hours, and even the overall structure of the educational system, as mentioned by Hoem, Neyer, and Andersson 2006.) Public policies may even serve to change the context in which childbearing behavior operates, and may therefore also have an *indirect* impact on fertility. While each element may have only an incremental influence, together they may add up to something other than the constituent parts. Whether this “something other” is *more* than the parts depends upon how the elements fit into the social system (Neyer and Andersson 2007). As McDonald (2002, p. 442) has stated, “the effectiveness of any policy will depend on the broader setting. ... it is not so much the individual policies that matter as the nature of the society as a whole”. Thus, in effectiveness studies, consideration of the whole policy package may be more relevant than attention to stand-alone policy details. An important consequence of this understanding is the recognition that these policies should not be evaluated only on the basis of their demographic consequences. For example, it may be shown that policy measures intended to increase fertility tend to encourage or discourage female labor force participation. Technically, studies of policy effects may need to contain context indicators, including indicators of public policies other than core family policies, otherwise biased conclusions may again be reached. Context indicators may be particularly important in international comparisons. (Gauthier and Hatzius 1997 courageously include indicators of a welfare state type in their extensive regression analysis.) A holistic approach is advisable regardless of the method of analysis one uses, whether it is a plain verbal description, hazard or linear regression, or yet another method. Neyer (2003a, 2006ab; also Neyer and Andersson 2007) has strongly emphasized the need to take into account both the policy context and the symbolic meaning of public policies, in addition to considering the specification of concrete policy parameters.

In a different take on these issues, McDonald (2006; also Sleebos 2003) has highlighted the need for insecurity reduction as part of a fertility recovery program, and posits that it is incumbent on governments to work toward achieving fertility recovery in its own right. (He thus picks up a thread from Hobcraft and Kiernan 1995, and Hobcraft 1996.) Such a program would include policies that promote healthy labor arrangements and economic stability. (It is notable how many of our chapters for countries in Central and Eastern Europe highlight economic insecurity as a fertility

depressant.) An assessment of the efficiency of a program for insecurity reduction would indeed require a comprehensive approach to achieve reliable results.

3. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let us consider what our reflections on research methodology can tell us about the likely efficacy of public policies as instruments to steer developments of ultimate fertility, deliberately or without intention. The evidence from France and the Nordic countries suggest that it should be possible to maintain a reasonably high ultimate fertility rate by a coordinated use of public policies in a range of interlocking areas (economic policy, employment policy, housing policy, gender policy, core family policy, and more) that are implemented in a spirit that furthers childbearing in general, and do not just consist of making more money available to married families in selected situations (Neyer and Andersson 2007; our chapter on Lithuania contains a particularly explicit call for focused and consistent policies). Fertility regulation will remain an ephemeral goal where such coordination is lacking. Generous arrangements for parental leave, child benefits, and childcare may be considered desirable in their own right, but such policies *alone* are unlikely to succeed in raising the fertility level on a grand scale; they must be embedded in a family-friendly culture deliberately nurtured by the state (McDonald 2002; Neyer and Andersson 2007). (For the same reasons, a culture that is friendly to working mothers would not hurt.) Developing such a culture takes time, so any government that wants to increase ultimate fertility needs to realize that it faces a long-term commitment to broadly conceived policies that go far beyond core family policies alone. Even *with* such policies in place, there is no guarantee that an increase in fertility will result. Given the difficulty of pinpointing policy effects, we cannot even be sure whether we will ever know in detail which particular policies are successful, and which are not. What we can observe may be the effect of a whole policy program. Since these kinds of limitations have seldom stopped states from implementing public policies in other fields, there should be no reason to be particularly reticent when policies in support of the family are designed.

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