

*Economic and non-economic aspects of individual fertility choices –
an example from Poland*

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Introduction

Over the last quarter of the century the most prominent demographic change observed in Poland has been a decrease in Total Fertility Rate, which fell from 2.26 in 1980 down to 1.22 in 2003 (Central Statistical Office, 2004). This decline has been accompanied by a postponement of marriage and childbearing, as the mean age of women at first birth fell from 23.4 to 24.7 in the given period.

What are the reasons behind these trends? In the literature concerning this topic there are in general two groups of explanations: economic and non-economic ones (reflecting the division of fertility theories made by H-P. Kohler, 1997).

First of all scholars consider the economic aspects. The material situation strongly influences family planning (Graniewska, 2003). In a situation of high unemployment (18.1% total, 22.6% among age group 25-29 in 2002) and hence growing competition at the labour market, young people postpone their marriage and childbearing as obtaining a diploma, qualifications, and finding a job is of the first importance (Kowalska, 1999; Kotowska, 1999; Rajkiewicz, 2004).

Moreover, parents, aware of growing costs of living and education, and facing the lack of the support from the state (Balcerzak-Parandowska, 1999), limit the number of children (Kowalska, 1999; Kotowska, 1999). Additionally, the difficult housing market conditions and poverty of a considerable fraction of Polish families cannot be ignored as constrains for those wanting children (Frątczak, 1999; Graniewska, 2003). The costs of children increase – while the economic situation in Poland in general is not stable.

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Besides these economic aspects, young people's values and attitudes also influence fertility plans. Scholars refer to the processes of secularisation, individualisation, growing need for self-realisation, increasing consumerism and the wide acceptance of western family life models, promoted by mass media, as influencing family choices (e.g. Kotowska, 1999, Kowalska, 1999; Adamski 2002; Majkowski, 2003).

Explanations considering values are almost universally regarded together with explanations based on economic factors (not only in the Polish demographic literature, e.g.: Coleman, 2004; Billari, 2005; Hantris, 2005), still there is no agreement regarding the nature of their mutual relation.

This study contributes to the explanation of low fertility in Poland by reconstructing the processes, in which economic and non-economic factors are taken into consideration by young people, forming their families.

This reconstruction takes place at the individual level adopting a *methodological individualist approach* (Coleman, 1990) and from the individual perspective (life-story approach). In order to conceptualize the process leading to the family and fertility choices we use the *theory of planned behaviour* (Ajzen, 1985, 1991). This theoretical background provides an extensive model of a process, leading to social behaviour. As the core of the process, the model links beliefs, attitudes, norms, social pressure and perception of individual's control over the events (evaluation of available resources, including economical ones, and self-efficacy). It also allows relating these central elements to the wider context, incorporating into the process many other aspects such as social background, personal characteristics, personality traits, objectively available resources, financial means, social capital, skills and abilities etc.

This frame allows us investigating the economic and non-economic aspects of individual fertility choices in a wider perspective, enhancing our understanding of their mutual relations.

Method and Sample

In our research we apply a qualitative approach, as it allows comprehension and explanation of the processes leading to the observed event. It also allows identifying any unanticipated phenomena and influences that appear in the process (Maxwell, 1997).

The qualitative research label covers a wide range of methods. For the purposes of this study we conduct face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews.

The interview guideline consists of six topical areas:

1. *Respondent's biography and life situation*
2. *History of respondent's relationship(s)*
3. *History of respondent's fertility desires and intentions*
4. *Respondent's experiences and imaginations about having a child*
5. *Comparison of respondent's childhood and current situation*
6. *Respondent's plans and fears*

Because aspects influencing fertility choices and relations between them may vary at the different stages of the life-course, our research sample consists of young people at subsequent phases of their family and fertility careers:

- Singles or couples living apart (LAT) – age 20-30 – 11 interviews;
- Couples living together, married or in informal union, childless – female partner's age 22-30 – 23 interviews;
- Couples living together, married or in informal union, with one child – female partner's age 26-30 – 14 interviews.

Also educational level can influence fertility choices therefore our sample is differentiated as far as this characteristic is concerned. For each of the above groups of respondents two educational subgroups are defined with the cut off point at the high school exams (Polish “Matura”).

The study is limited also to the urban area, where the fertility rates are the lowest and the postponement of family formation most substantial.

The analysis of the interviews' text follows the logic of “grounded theory” (Strauss, Corbin, 1998).

Preliminary results

The analyses of the interviews allow identifying a wide range of both economic and non-economic aspects of fertility choices and they will be presented comprehensively in the paper. Here we would like to state some main relations between these two groups of factors, which we revealed in the initial analyses.

First of all we observe different relations between these aspects of fertility choices as far as the first and the second child is concerned. In both cases attitudes towards childbearing and available material means are taken into consideration, however we notice some remarkable variations.

With the first child norms and attitudes seem to be decisive factors when it comes to a decision *whether* one wants to have a child. Economic factors may be taken into consideration as far as the *timing* of childbearing is concerned:

“[Financial situation] is a good reason to put off, to postpone – but not to say ‘No’ definitely”

“Our financial situation was really bad then, so we postponed it by one year”

But in some cases economic constraints are even neglected:

“If one wanted to take all these factors into consideration (job, money, flat) – one would never decide for a child”

“One always finds some money for a child. There is no other option. Money is always found”

With a second child however the economic factors gain much more power and the consideration of available resources can lead not only to the postponement but also to the cancellation of fertility plans here:

„We want to have a second child, but I don’t know if we are able to afford it”

„Firstly we have to be able to provide for the first child, and then we can start considering the second one”

These results are in line with Fawcett’s conclusions (1991), concerning different perceptions of values and costs of the first and the second child. However our data allows more in-depth analyses of these differences. The preliminary outcomes of the study suggest that the behavioural control – in this case a confidence that one *can afford* to have a child – is constructed differently with the first and the second childbearing. These differences will be discussed in full details in the paper.

As far as behavioural control is concerned we also reveal striking differences in the opinions of what is a “satisfactory financial situation” for a childbearing. Whereas for

one respondent 500 EUR of monthly salary is enough – the other one calculates 5.000 EUR only to cover her stay in the hospital over the delivery of a child. These discrepancies indicate that *subjective* financial resources might have much stronger influence on the decision than the *actual* ones. They also point to materialistic attitudes as profoundly impacting the fertility choices, showing one of the ways in which economics and non-economics aspects may interact at the individual level.

However, material aspirations can on the one hand be connected to the personality traits or stem from the individual's family of origin (which underlies Easterlin's hypothesis, Easterlin, 1980), or they might be a product of an adaptation process. If this is a case they do not *influence* individual fertility choices but they *result* from them (compare e.g. Surkyn, Lesthaeghe, 2004). To investigate these issues we will analyse the discourse regarding fertility choices (first and second child) of young people at various stages of family formation, with different financial status and different material aspirations.

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