

SEQUENCING AND AGE NORMS IN TRANSITION TO MOTHERHOOD IN TWO GENERATIONS OF SLOVAK WOMEN

Michaela Potancokova
Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic

Introduction

The body of research concerning postponement of childbearing has substantially grown over the recent years as it became an important issue in most European countries. Understanding postponement of the transition to parenthood and underlying mechanisms seems to be crucial to understand current and also future fertility trends.

Speaking about postponement, demographers most often mean postponement of the birth of the first child, which is an important life event within the reproductive life of a woman and an important life transition. Already several studies applied life course perspective in the study of the transition to parenthood (Billari, Kohler 2004, Corijn, Klijnzing 2001, Matsuo 2005, von der Lippe 2004). In demographic research, however, the focus is most often on the structure of the life course in transition to parenthood and less on revealing the mechanisms influencing the timing of the life events and less on the social meanings of these transitions. Life events such as marriage, becoming a parent, leaving parental home are not only a matter of the individual preference and perceived conditions, but also are influenced by socially and culturally shared preferences about when these events should take place in a person's life. Social norms and especially age norms are thought to be of the particular influence.

In our study we look at perceptions on the ideal life course in transition to motherhood in two generations of Slovak women: those who experienced transition to motherhood under state socialism and those who became mothers recently. We focus on the preferred sequences of the life events and perceptions on their timing within the individual life span of a woman. Based on the analysis of the interviews we challenge the concept of the age norms in the sense of the prescriptions on the timing of the life events in terms of age. We argue that norms are rather related to the sequential ordering of life events than to the nominal categories of age. Sequential perception on the life course in transition to motherhood, however, is more pronounced among younger generation of the interviewed women and seems to be influential on the postponement of motherhood towards more advanced age.

Theoretical framework: Life course and age norms

In the life course of an individual parenthood and especially birth of the first child is considered a part of and, when expressed in a sequence, often a terminal event in transition to adulthood. Having children and parenting belongs to adulthood. If especially women have children too early or too late it tends to be considered deviant or at least abnormal and parenting is perceived to collide with other roles women are expected to take in their age: being grandmothers or teenagers. Existence of the limits when men and women are expected to become parents points to the existence of age norms.

Within the body of the life course research age norms indeed play an important role (Elder 1975, Marini 1981). Individual life course consists of temporal stages which are

socioculturally defined and their timetables and age patterns are shaped by age norms (Elder, 1975). Age has a social meaning of appropriate social roles and activities attributed to it. Age norms express shared expectations on “the timing of events or role transitions in the life course” (ibid). The concept of the normative timing of the transitions in the life course implies the existence of preferred sequential order of life events. Hogan (1978) argues that norms are related rather to the patterns of ordering of the life events than to the particular age. Moreover, individuals tend to order life events in a normative fashion typical for birth cohorts they are members of (Elder, 1975). Consequently, normative ordering of the life events differs between the cohorts as members of the successive cohorts are innovating these norms and acceptance towards previously non-conform behaviour increases. Times of the radical changes in context – political, economical, social etc. – open broader possibilities for such innovations since individuals are challenged by the change in life conditions and often have to adjust their behaviour in order to adequately respond to the new circumstances.

Although social scientists assume that age norms guide the timing and ordering of the individual life course the empirical evidence is rather scarce (as criticized by Elder, 1975, Marini 1982, Elder, Giele 1998). Moreover, “regularity in preferred and actual behaviour constitutes the basis on which norms governing the transition to adulthood have been assumed to exist” (Marini, 1982) and statistically most widespread patterns of the order of events have been considered sufficient empirical evidence (for example see Hogan, 1978).

In our opinion, behaviour guiding norms refer to how the behaviour should be. Norms involve sharing of these preferences and also judging or informal sanctions to induce a particular behaviour. Therefore, norm is not a simple regularity in observed behaviour identical with statistically prevalent type of behaviour (see also Marini 1982). Norms also refer to the meanings of the behaviour they invoke or prohibit. Norms can be expressed in terms of ideal or preferred behaviour or a range of behaviour that is acceptable. The categories of preferred and acceptable, however, refer to slightly different meanings that have to be distinguished.

The preferred behaviour relates to the ideal how the behaviour should be performed, while the acceptable range of behaviour may be broader and may include behaviour guiding rules on how to behave in particular situations in order not to be sanctioned. For example, while the ideal order of the life course events in transition to motherhood may be expressed as stable partnership – marriage – first pregnancy, a deviance from this order in a sense of premarital pregnancy is accepted if a woman steps into marriage and gives birth to a child within wedlock. In that case she is not object to informal sanctions which would happen if the pregnancy was not followed by marriage.

In the paper, we address the issue of preferred or ideal sequences of life events in transition to motherhood and the timing of this transition. We argue that the sequential view of the life course influences the postponement of motherhood among younger generation of Slovak women.

Data and method of analysis

The topic of transition to motherhood is approached on the micro level by applying biographical method, which is one of the qualitative research methods. Unlike quantitative studies on the topic, we do not intend to investigate a set of determinants underlying postponement of childbearing or to provide statistical evidence on occurrence of the patterns

of women's trajectories in transition to motherhood. Instead, we focus on the meaning of events women experience in transition to motherhood and on the social and cultural embedment of these meanings.

The data we use were conducted in in-depth biographical interviews and informal topic-centred conversations, guided also in a biographical manner, with women of two generations. About half of the women are directly daughters and mothers related to each other, the rest of women are representatives of these generations. The sampling followed the principles of purposive theoretical sampling. First we started with a homogeneous group of women regarding their marital status, number of born and desired children and in the next steps we were including women with differing characteristics.

In Slovakia, similarly to other post-socialist countries, a pattern of early and universal childbearing and marriage and higher fertility was replaced by postponement of births and marriage into higher age and lowest-low period fertility of Slovak women over the 1990s. In the study we are investigating women's reproductive careers under state socialism and in recent transforming society. Women belonging to the first or "mothers" generation experienced their motherhood and family formation over the period of the 1970 when several measures of pronatalist population policy were introduced. Most of these women stepped into marriage and had their first child at age 21–22. They also fully participated in the labour force, usually working full time, since the labour participation was mandatory.

The second or "daughter" generation consists of women born over the 1970s and having children in recent years. These women were undergoing their family formation and motherhood in so called transforming society in very different economic, social and political conditions compared to their mothers. Possibilities of studying, travelling and building a professional career opened new dimensions of self-realisation previously conditioned by the obedience to the regime. The two social, economic and political contexts influenced aspirations and experiences of these women both in professional and private life domains. This is reflected also in the timing of the family formation and childbearing.

In this paper we base our analysis on 19 interviews conducted from April 2005 until January 2006 in the capital Bratislava. It is important to emphasise that with two exceptions all interviewed women were mothers themselves and had at least one child.

Oral biographies provide rich material for further analysis of interviewee's motivations, behaviours and interpretations of lived experiences. For the purpose of this paper we analysed the interviews and especially the passages related to the topic of the ideal and lived life course, transition to motherhood and ideas about the timing of the first child whether ideal or really experienced. In most cases interviewees came up with the topic on their own without direct asking or probing. Further we followed up with questions on the views on when is best to have a child, what is ideal age to have a child if there is any and what age is considered too early or too late to give birth to a child were placed and discussed.

Social prescriptions on the order of life events in transition to motherhood

Over the last 50 years we can speak about motherhood in a sense of almost universal experience among Slovak women (childlessness at the end of reproductive life was low – about 10 % and among married women only 3 %). The universality of motherhood is

connected to the widespread perception that each woman should experience motherhood at least once in life and being a mother became normative. In opposition to the normality of motherhood is the abnormality of childless women and couples, especially in case it is not caused by physiological infertility.

When speaking about when women became or thought it is the best to become mother, they rather spoke in terms of sequences of the life events and conditions that have to or should be fulfilled. Categories of nominal age were used less frequently or in perceptions of when is too late or too early to have a child. We also observe a difference among women who experienced childbearing over the state socialism and their daughters having children recently.

Norms on sequences of events in transition to motherhood

As previously stated, women of the older generation have experienced transition to motherhood in their early 20s in most cases. Unlike their daughters, they were not referring to any specific ordering of the life events before having the first child with exception of the finished education. During the time of studying or entering the first job women were expected to look for a partner and marriage and pregnancy often followed very quickly also as a result of low knowledge and use of contraceptives. Being married at certain age was a matter of status and women tried to get married definitely until age 30 and preferably before being about 25 years old as one interviewee points out:

*“I didn’t even had that panic * that I would not get married or * that I would not find someone, I don’t know it. (laughter) I had a friend who when I got married that she got such a shock * because of it, that she has asked her partner which she had ‘when will we get married?’.”* Erika, 54, first child at 26

Most women referred to becoming a mother in early age as natural. The naturalness was used also to describe the pace of life events until the transition to motherhood as well. By natural pace of life women mostly meant finishing education, having a partner and perhaps already the first job before they got pregnant or married. The natural pace of life usually was usually pronounced in a following way:

“We were simply going to school, then we met some- in between we met some guy as that was the case of the most women in my generation, most of my friends and also classmates, that we had gotten married after finishing the school and then naturally one child, second child and simply eeehm that life was bringing those obstacles we were overcoming.” Livia, 53, first child at 22

Residential autonomy was not considered necessary, which was very likely a response to impossibility to acquire an apartment before being married and having a family, since housing possibilities were scarce and married couples with children had priority in getting housing. Lives of women were strongly influenced by constraints of the regime and bounded within limits of possible, impossible and inevitable. To a large extent the order of life was given – after the education the compulsory fulltime job was attributed and professional career and possibilities of travelling were conditioned on the obedience to the regime. Hence women lived their private lives within these limits, which also influenced their decisions and position of not really deciding about their lives but mostly only reacting to the newly emerged problems “the life was bringing”. The atmosphere of the socialist regime contributed to certain fatalism in the views of women on their lives as the interviewee put it:

“You know, at that time, the life was, was very simplified. Because somehow, that one would have planned the career beforehand or that one could travel abroad that was, that was simply impossible. Ehm and all those necessary things for life were quite accessible. On the other hand, those more extra things were almost inaccessible, so we were not damaging our lives with [thinking about] that.”
Anka’s mother, 59, first child 29, brackets added

Women also often stressed the spontaneousness of getting pregnant and emphasised that one should always count with the possibility of getting pregnant and accepting it. This strategy was also conditioned by restrictions in the use of effective modern contraceptives and the fact women did not have power over their own bodies. This fact was translated into passivity in attempts to influence the trajectory of the life and in a strategy of acceptance. Most women also stressed that although nowadays the age at which they had children can be considered low, they have actually felt mature enough and prepared for motherhood.

Unlike their mothers, young women perceive the order of life events in transition to motherhood as a sequence of clear stages. Moreover, a woman should have a child only after passing through all required stages so that the conditions to have a child would be optimal. The sequence is seen as: finishing education – having first job, getting experiences and enjoying life (travelling, working abroad etc.) – having own housing and financial security – living or cohabiting with a partner – having the first child. Finding a partner is not included in this simplified sequence since it can happen at any stage. Marriage either precedes or follows birth of the first child, but discussion of the norms related to this would require a separate paper so we will not discuss it at this place.

The following quotations express how women speak about sequences of the events in transition to motherhood.

“We were both already employed, we had an apartment, age before being 30, so we had ideal conditions to have children.” Beata, 35, first child at 26

“I was working for 3 years after finishing the university, then I got married and after one year we had a child. Because first we had to get some housing, because you would be irresponsible to have a child just so, so first you have to work and have something, because otherwise it’s really irresponsible I think. To have a child and have nothing.” Regina, 31, first child at 29

“Well, we were actually waiting because of the apartment. If we have had a housing earlier we maybe had children sooner. But on the other hand, we enjoyed ourselves and that was good, because it did not come quickly [children] so we could also travel a bit, devote time to each other and to learn to live in harmony together. Especially the first year was very good that we could live together and to get used to each other.” Zuzka, 34, first child at 27

Life events such as separation from the family of origin, finishing of education, first job and own housing are seen as strong preconditions to have a child. While among women of the older generation many of these events happened in a close time interval and motherhood was perceived as compatible with the other transitions, younger women see motherhood only at the end of the chain of these events. Financial autonomy and own housing were especially emphasised, which was not the case among women of older generation, and it can be interpreted as a strategy of aversion to risk and seeking of the security before making an important decision of having a child.

Also mothers of the women having children nowadays in a transforming society accept the financial reasons for the postponement of motherhood. They often perceive it more difficult to have a child nowadays although they are also aware that young people have higher aspirations than they had.

Education is not only an important precondition but also seen as a reason negatively influencing postponement of the birth of the first child, since longer duration of education causes longer waiting time until all preconditions are met.

“I think it really depends on whether one goes to the university or just finishes a secondary school, because actually those secondary educated are 5 years ahead, they can work, make money. But when you finish the university you have to work, make money to have something if you want it or not. And those secondary educated are ahead, they can have it all earlier and have a child.” Regina, 31, first child at 29

Furthermore, the ideal sequence of the order of life events in transition to motherhood is attributed a meaning of being responsible. Being recognised as responsible person (behaving in a responsible way towards oneself and the others) means to have a child only if the necessary preconditions are met. The attached meaning of responsibility reveals the normative function of this sequence. Women who have children earlier than it is perceived ideal – while they are still living with parents, not having a stable job – are afraid of being judged as irresponsible by others, like one of the interviewees:

“It is like that today, I am considered young. Because people want [to have children] rather later, until they’re financially secure, until they finish the university. Even I wouldn’t have a child, but you know NOT THAT I AM IRRESPONSIBLE or something, but it was simply an accident.” Lara, 23, first child at 22, brackets added

Compared to their mothers, Slovak women nowadays plan their pregnancies actively. Similarly, planned motherhood is considered being a responsible behaviour. Planning is important also to keep the preferred sequence and to avoid being judged as irresponsible. Also, modern contraceptives are much better available and in more variety and better quality compared to the 1970s. Young women hence have more power over their own bodies and they are actively using their right to decide on their pregnancies. While young women perceive contraception positively, older women in some cases objected against full freedom the contraception gives to women in deciding on the timing of their motherhood.

*“But like that, to STOP taking the contraception, that, to do that one needs then really * and most of the time those women say and not now and now I must do this, and that to achieve and also this to achieve and not in the summer not in the winter, and the other summer also not...”* Erika, 54, first child at 26

The preferred sequential ordering of life events before being a mother per se does not mean postponement of childbearing. However, since much time elapses until women achieve all ideal conditions and decide on having a child they are in higher age than their mothers used to be when having the first child. In the next section we compare view of the women of both generation of ideal age at becoming a mother.

Timing of motherhood: perceptions on optimal, too early and too late

Although the mean age of women at first birth has risen from 22 towards 26 years over the last 15 years, Slovak women are still fairly young mothers compared to their counterparts from the Western Europe. The observed difference may be caused by different perceptions on the ideal age to become a mother.

Most of the women of the older generation perceived ideal age being between 20 and 25 years old. It is important to remark, however, that this age is mostly the age they had their first child at. Marini (1981) already points to the overlap of real and ideal age in retrospective studies. The reason may be in the ex-post rationalisations of the experienced events over the life, since to live a liveable life a person must keep a sense of continuity and reputability of the self.

According to the older generation of women the transition to motherhood should take place over the phase of the early adulthood, but not earlier. Being younger than 20, which means not being adult and mature enough yet, is perceived negatively also in consequences for the woman herself and the child as well. If a woman has the first child too early she is at risk of wanting to catch-up what she missed later on in her life which then affects the child.

Among younger generation of the interviewed women limit of the too early transition to motherhood rises towards about age 23 or 24. All interviewed women younger than 24 years also often started defending themselves and admitted they are younger than it is normal nowadays. Optimal age to have the first child is at about age 25 to 30 or even 35 years respectively. Most women spoke about age “deadline” they perceived as age until they want to become mothers. Most frequently the optimal age was the between 26 and 30, only few women reported age over 30 as optimal to have a first child. Age in terms of nominal category, however, was not always the way women expressed the ideal age. If given a number, it had either a character of a personal “deadline” or was arrived to as approximate age at which the sequence or the conditions optimal to have a child should be already achieved. Some women also stated only the fulfilment of the precondition and did not report any exact number at all.

When asking on the upper limit women consider for having a child almost universal answer was 35 years and some of the younger women reported age 40. The age 35 as a limit is influenced by the knowledge of increasing health risks for the mother and the child if especially the first pregnancy occurs after this age, which women are broadly very well aware of. Women also perceived disadvantages connected with having children too late: being more tired since taking care of children requires a lot of energy, being too accustomed to their own style of life and less flexible to accept changes in life style stemming from becoming a mother, being in a high age when the child is adult which then affects the quality of the relationship between the mother and the child.

We can conclude that although many women had problems to report an ideal age to become a mother since they perceive it very individual, younger women perceive ideal age being higher as their mothers do. While older women think that it is optimal to become mother in the early 20s, their daughters think rather of the late 20s and less frequently about early 30s as an ideal age to have a child. Lower limits are connected to the need for being mature and adult enough to be mother and this limit is also shifting towards older age. Upper limits, on the other hand, are influenced by the fear of the health-risks related to the pregnancy after age 35.

Unlike in the case of the sequences of life events in transition to motherhood we have not found any age norms in terms of nominal age that would influence the timing of motherhood. None of the women expressed idea until what age women should have the first child.

Conclusion

In the older generation of Slovak women events in transition to adulthood were often experienced within a short time interval and especially first job, marriage and birth of the first child followed in a close sequence. On the other hand, residential autonomy was often achieved only after several years. As a result, it was more frequently marriage and formation of own family of procreation that women perceive as events that gave them the status of being adult.

Younger women, on the other hand, see motherhood at the very end of the sequence of the life course events of leaving parental home and achieving a residential and financial autonomy. The sequence is seen as: finishing education – having first job, getting experiences and enjoying life (travelling, working abroad etc.) – having own housing and financial security – living or cohabiting with a partner – having the first child. The preferred sequence of the life events becomes a normative and only following the sequence gives the woman recognition of being responsible. Ideal perceptions on the order of the life events in transition to motherhood influence the timing of this transition. Perceived incompatibility of some life stages with motherhood contributes to the shifts in age when women want to become mothers. Postponing a child to the time all necessary preconditions are met translates into rising age women are becoming mothers for the first time.

Is motherhood still a part of transition to adulthood? Can it be regarded as a final event by which a person completes the status of being fully adult – becomes fully adult? We did not ask on the perceptions of the informants when they felt being finally adult. Since the timing of motherhood is now separated from other events in transition to adulthood and comes later than leaving parental home or achieving independence from the family of origin a question whether the meaning of it changed comes up.

Acknowledgements:

I thank for the financial support of the project to the Grant Agency of the Charles University, number of the project 394/2005/A-SP/PrF.

References:

- Billari, F., Kohler H.P. 2004. "Patterns of low and lowest-low fertility in Europe." *Population Studies*, 58 (2): 161-176
- Corijn, M., Klijzing, E. (eds.) 2001. *Transitions to adulthood in Europe*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Elder, G.H.Jr. 1975. "Age differentiation and the life course". *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol.1: 165-190
- Frejka, T., Sardon, J-P. 2003. "Fertility trends and prospects in Central and Eastern Europe: the cohort perspective." *Population of Central and Eastern Europe: challenges and opportunities*. Conference Volume. European Population Conference, Warsaw, august 2003
- Giele, J.Z., Elder, G.H.Jr. (eds.) 1998. *Methods of life course research. Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California

- Hogan, D.P. 1978. "The variable order of events in the life course." *American Sociological Review*, vol.13 (1): 573-586
- Marini, M.M. 1981. "Age and sequencing norms in the transition to adulthood." *Social Forces*, vol.63 (1): 229-243
- Matsuo, H. 2003. *The transition to motherhood in Japan. A comparison with the Netherlands.* Population Studies, Rozenberg Publishers, Amsterdam.
- Sobotka, T. 2004. „Postponement of childbearing and low fertility in Europe.“ Dutch University press.
- Teachman, J.D., Polonko, K.A. 1981. "Out of sequence: the timing of marriage following a premarital birth." *Social Forces*, vol.63 (1): 215-260
- Von der Lippe, H. 2004. *Transition to fatherhood in East Germany in the 1990s.* Dissertation. Universitaet Magdeburg