

Preference theory – the case of the Czech Republic

The Czech Republic has been witnessing unprecedented low fertility for the last decade with its TFR ranging between 1.3-1.2. The deep decline in fertility has occurred despite the increasing number of young women, who as members of the baby boom cohorts of 1974-1978 have reached the age of highest fertility during the late 1990's. What are the exact reasons of these deep changes in the reproductive behaviour of the Czech population? Why do not young cohorts enter into marriage and why do they delay having children?

Czech scholars and experts have been looking for answers to these questions already for ten years, yet they have not reached decisive conclusions – the fact that the Western colleagues have been attempting the same for the past three decades with the same result may serve as a consolation to us. Opinions of Czechs authors differ, nonetheless, they basically range within the axis in which on the one hand, we find explanations based on the thesis of accelerated second demographic transition, and on the other hand explanations which lay in the accentuate economic transition and the crisis of social security that accompanies the transformation process of the Czech society.

Proponents of the first approach sustain the idea that there is an underlying deep transformation of values and value preferences which takes place within the young age cohorts of the Czech population born in the mid-1970's and early 1980's, and which was enabled by the political changes in 1989 (cultural, ideational factors). Proponents of the second approach believe that the reason behind the changes in the reproductive regime of the population is the threat of unemployment, the decreased standard of social security and the living standard of the population; thus the changed reproductive behaviour is a pragmatic reaction of the young to the high costs of transformation (structural factors).

In world literature, there are a number of researchers who stress the role of the ideational/cultural factor. For instance, one of the conclusions made on the basis of a series of studies in the framework of the World Fertility Survey is Cleland's conclusion that the ideational/cultural theory is more suitable for the explanation of changes than the structural theory. A similar conclusion is proposed by Lestaege.

Engelhardt (2001) argues that more children are born in those countries, which have a more balanced gender system at macro level and at micro level - within the family (where men share the household responsibilities and care for children with their partners). McDoland (2000) also argues that fertility decreases in those societies or within those social classes, where the public gender system evolved uniformly, but the private gender system (within the family) has remained tied to the old traditional gender roles division within the family.

However, Zuanna (2004) alleges that we cannot identify the exact factors, either structural/economic or cultural/ideational, which might explain the fertility decline and transition in Europe.

In 2000, a new cultural theory appeared. Her author, Catherine Hakim labelled it as preference theory. Preference theory attempts to explain and predict women's choice between paid work in the labour market and labour in the household and the resolution of the conflict between the family and employment. The same theory emphasizes personal values and decision making at the micro-level, putting them within the appropriate social, economic and institutional context. An important momentum of the theory is the fact that following the contraceptive revolution of the 1960's women became the decisive factor in the reproductive strategy of the married couples. Thus, the theory concentrates on the women's view, their perspectives and goals as they become the key to understand the current and future patterns of fertility, lifestyle

preferences are defined as causal factors. Three ideal-typical types of women have been resulted from the analysis: a) home-centred women; b) work-centred women and c) adaptive women who attempt to combine employment and household in the same time. According to Hakim, these divergent lifestyle preferences are identifiable within all social classes, in all educational categories and they crosscut occupations. The sizes of these groups in contemporary modern societies differ due to differences in public and social services in various countries. Hakim found about 20 % of family-centred women, 60 % of adaptive women and 20 % of work-centred women in Britain.

These three types of preferences determine the women's decision-making process about whether and when, respectively how many children they will have, what occupation they will choose, how sensitive they are towards offers and incentives of social and population policy, employment policy, and economic and social conditions as such. The same author argues that the heterogeneity of women's preferences and priorities creates conflicting interests among the three types of women.

Preference theory does not deny the influence of economic, social and institutional factors but puts the accent on the influence of (above all women's) motivations and aspirations, which are independent to a certain degree. Hakim alleges that when exploring the reasons of current low fertility, it is exactly these factors that should be subjected to thorough analysis. Hakim has already tested empirically her preference theory in Britain and Spain. We believe that this theory has a significant explicatory potential and therefore it will be also tested in the Czech environment.

In our paper, we shall pursue two aims:

1. By replicating Catherine Hakim's research in the Czech milieu (on national representative sample) we will test her preference theory – i.e. whether her classification of women's preferences related to the link between employment and lifestyles in the 21st century and reproductive strategies based on them are valid also in the Czech social and economic context.
2. We shall elaborate preference theory by adding types of reproductive strategies of Czech men and we will be interested in finding out who from the couple is actually the element determining the number of children the couple will or will not have.