

## **Q & A about my dissertation**

Tomáš Sobotka, November 2004

**Title:** Postponement of childbearing and low fertility in Europe

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**Electronic version** can be accessed online at: [www.ub.rug.nl/eldoc/dis/rw/t.sobotka/](http://www.ub.rug.nl/eldoc/dis/rw/t.sobotka/)

### **Brief description**

Fertility rates in many parts of Europe have reached extremely low levels, raising concerns about their future consequences in terms of the potential magnitude of population decline, massive population ageing, and the ability of governments to finance social security systems. This dissertation argues that extremely low levels of period fertility are closely connected with the ongoing postponement of parenthood towards higher ages, recorded in all European societies. Once the process of fertility postponement stops, fertility rates are likely to increase above the extremely low threshold, although almost all European societies will retain low fertility that is not sufficient for generational replacement.

The dissertation addresses the most pertinent features of contemporary fertility trends in European countries, with occasional comparisons with other advanced societies, especially Japan and the United States. It utilises a broad array of data to map the progression of fertility postponement in Europe and its influence on trends in period fertility rates. Another two topics thoroughly addressed in this study—the precipitous fertility changes in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s and the analysis of final childlessness—are also closely linked with the effects of the ongoing deferment of parenthood. Methodological discussion in this study has concentrated on the measurement of period fertility, in particular on the possibilities of how to take into account tempo-effects, i.e., distortions which fertility postponement or advancement causes in the period fertility indicators commonly used.

### **What is the problem definition of your research?**

To explore the process of the postponement of childbearing across European countries and its implications for fertility rates and other trends in fertility. Furthermore, to provide a detailed comparative analysis of changes in fertility rates and fertility timing, including methodological and measurement issues, which will eventually serve as a basis for a formulation of scenarios of the future population change in Europe.

### **In which way has your research been carried out?**

Comparative analysis and collection of data on various aspects of fertility and family changes in Europe, combined with a literature research.

### **What are the most important results of your doctoral research and which conclusions do you draw from them?**

*Here is a summary of major results & conclusions. See also next question, where I elaborate more on some of the issues sketched here.*

1) By the late 1990s, women in all European societies except the Netherlands were postponing childbearing towards later ages. Spanish and Italian women, closely followed by Dutch women, have become the oldest 'first-time mothers' in Europe and arguably in the world: Spanish women give birth to their first child at the age of 30 on average. Late parenthood has become a commonly pursued strategy, which enables men and women to reconcile their different life goals related to education, employment, partnership and leisure-time activities with parenthood.

2) Despite the general shift of childbearing towards later reproductive ages, social differences in first birth timing have increased considerably. In particular women with different educational attainment have children at different ages. While highly educated women postpone first birth to ever-later ages, and fertility rates are increasing even among women past age 40, a sizeable minority of women in many countries still bears first child during their teenage years. This 'polarisation' in first birth timing is strongest in Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

3) Extremely low levels of period fertility, represented by a total fertility rates below 1.3 children per woman, appear to be temporary effects of the ongoing postponement of childbearing. Thus, the fears of extremely low fertility rates prevailing for very long period of time appear unsubstantiated at present. In many countries, including the Netherlands and Sweden, women show a good ability to realise their postponed fertility after age 30. Late timing of motherhood is thus not necessarily related to very low levels of cohort fertility and very high childlessness.

4) Childlessness will gradually increase in almost all European societies—more rapidly in Central and Eastern Europe, where it has been fairly uncommon until recently. However, final childlessness in any European country is unlikely to reach the record-high levels of 30% or more, reached in many countries among women born in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Childlessness trends for the United States depict a surprising contrast to European countries: the projection envisions a gradual decline in childlessness among the U.S. women born after 1960

5) In contrast to the common arguments, linking fertility postponement in Central and Eastern Europe to the economic crisis and growing uncertainty, the intensity of first birth postponement was strongest in the countries that experienced the most successful social and economic transformation.

**Do you think that a wide audience could be interested in these results? If so, why?**

Some of these results are certainly interesting for a wider audience. Most of all, the issue of low and very low fertility rates is widely debated in many European societies. Researchers, media and politicians alike express concerns about their possible consequences, such as declining population size, collapsing social security system, rapidly aging population with very few children, or the skyrocketing costs of health care. This dissertation provides a nuanced picture on the issue of low and very low fertility in Europe. First, it argues that extremely low levels of fertility rates are likely to be temporary. Second, it outlines relatively large regional differences across Europe, with some regions having low fertility levels that are well below generational replacement (e.g. Southern European countries, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine), while other societies have comparatively higher fertility levels (especially Northern European countries, France, Ireland and the United Kingdom). While the former group of countries may indeed experience negative societal consequences of very low fertility, including the eventual population decline, for the latter group of countries, to which the Netherlands comes close to, low fertility does not constitute an important societal problem. A modest migration growth, typical of most European societies, will partly help to offset negative consequences of low fertility.

Further topics explored in the thesis are of an interest for a wider public as well. The age when women have children is becoming an important issue, given increasing health complications and foetus deformations among mothers past age 35 as well as infertility problems among women past that age. On the positive side, the dissertation has shown that in many countries, including the Netherlands, most women who postponed childbearing until their early thirties, still eventually become mothers. In other words, given the established low family size preferences, typically centred at two children, most men and women had a large flexibility in their decision on when to become parents.

Finally, the issue of childlessness is important as well. While in the past childlessness was typically involuntary, most often associated with unmarried single-living women, it has acquired a different character now. Voluntary childlessness has become a matter of personal choice and lost much of its negative connotation. Although the distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness has become more blurred, more women than in the past takes it for granted that childbearing is a matter of individual

decision, rather than a self-understanding outcome of marriage or partnership. In the light of this development, increasing childlessness levels across Europe come as no surprise. When seen from a historical perspective, levels of childlessness projected for women born in the 1960s and 1970s do not appear particularly high. In European countries with highest childlessness levels, namely Austria, England and Wales and Germany, around a quarter of women may remain childless. In the lowest-childlessness countries, less than 15% of women will remain childless. The levels of childlessness recorded among Dutch women belonged to relatively high in the past, but the projection presented here envisions a stabilisation of childlessness below 20% among women born in the first half of the 1970s. Motivation for parenthood clearly remains high in Western societies and large majority of women will become mothers during their reproductive period. The most surprising finding is a projected decline in childlessness among women in the United States, which clearly contrasts with European trends.

**At which department/institute did you carry out your doctoral research?**

At the Population Research Centre, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen (the Netherlands). Link: [www.rug.nl/prc/index](http://www.rug.nl/prc/index)

**What is the research project?**

The project was titled “Towards a dynamic scenario-model of European population dynamics”. The goal of this project is to improve our understanding of determinants of demographic processes (fertility, mortality, internal and external migration, and the interactions between them) in order to formulate theoretically and empirically informed scenarios of future demographic development in European countries and regions.

**By whom was your Ph.D. research financed?**

By the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), project number A 510-03-901. Link: [www.nwo.nl/nwohome.nsf/pages/NWOP\\_5SME25\\_Eng](http://www.nwo.nl/nwohome.nsf/pages/NWOP_5SME25_Eng)

**Is your thesis published in a commercial edition?**

It is published in the Population Studies series of the Dutch University Press / Rozenberg Publishers, Amsterdam. ISBN 90 3619 102 5, price 24.50 EUR. Link:

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