

Is the Second Demographic Transition a useful concept for demography?

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It is generally agreed that the Second Demographic Transition is characterised by (1) a trend toward less committed and more fragile relations between men and women, and (2) the delayed and less likely transition to parenthood and a sharp reduction of higher-order births, or, in other words, postponement of marriage and first birth, more cohabitation and divorce, and declining fertility. According to Dirk van de Kaa (1987), the decline of fertility to below-replacement levels is the principal demographic feature of the Second Demographic Transition. Below-replacement level fertility is now found in virtually all European countries, and fertility rates in a number of countries in southern, central and eastern Europe are not only below-replacement, but at or below 1.3 children per women, and thus characterised by what has been called “lowest-low” fertility (Kohler et al 2002). In a recent overview of partnership and parenthood patterns and trends in the 1990s, Billari (2004) argues that low fertility is here to stay. This may be the case but, as he has also shown, it is not irrelevant whether low fertility means 1.2 or 1.5 or 1.8 children per woman. The long-term consequences of the choices young people make today with regard to tempo and quantum of fertility can be very different indeed, and they are of crucial importance for our demographic future. The Second Demographic Transition theory, as currently developed, does not contain any prediction as to how low the Total Fertility Rate can fall or what factors might determine the level in different countries.

According to the original statement about the Second Demographic Transition (van de Kaa 1987), a profound shift in norms and attitudes regarding personal relationships, fertility and the family is the driving force behind the dramatic changes in the demographic behaviour of Europeans (or European-origin populations). Ron Lesthaeghe and his collaborators have convincingly argued for the validity of a recursive model with (1) a values-based selection into alternative living arrangements, and (2) an event-based values adaptation. The empirical evidence for this comes mostly from American studies, but there are also some examples from European countries. Much more work is needed in this area.

Arguing for the importance of values in explaining demographic trends since the mid-1960s is not to say that structural factors are not important; economic and political forces of change may in certain specific situations even be more important (or at least as important) as shifts in norms and attitudes. Moreover, values do not operate in a social and political vacuum, but depend on current political, economic and demographic contexts. As these contexts change, values are reinforced or weakened. Thus, on a societal level, values are continuously constructed and reconstructed, in constant interplay with economic and social circumstances.

The importance of context-specific studies of fertility change is also underlined

by Simon Szreter (1993). His emphasis is on the first demographic transition, but his ideas may nevertheless have some relevance for the current debate about the usefulness of the Second Demographic Transition theory. According to Szreter, it is perceived relative costs of childrearing which constitute the central variable involved in fertility change. This is not a new idea, but one particularly interesting aspect of Szreter's framework is his emphasis on the changing meaning over time of motherhood, parenthood, childhood and adolescence as important dimensions of the concept of relative costs. I would add fatherhood to this list. The increases in divorce and cohabitation, crucial aspects of the Second Demographic Transition, seem to have made the father-child relationship much more complex than was previously the case. Fathers are increasingly unlikely to live with their own, biological children, but more likely to live with other children, i.e., those of their current partner (Goldscheider 2000). At the same time, there are indications that, at least in some countries, more men today are taking up active parental roles with their children and are involved in what Crittenden (2001) has called "hands-on fatherhood".

In his presentation at the recent conference on the Second Demographic Transition, John Hobcraft argued that low fertility is only transitory—due to the gender transition working itself through. The time frame here is a bit unclear—how many generations will it take before the gender transition has "worked itself through"? Nevertheless, it is clear that the Scandinavian countries, with more egalitarian gender structures than most other countries, have been more successful in stabilising fertility levels. It is also sometimes argued that the Scandinavian countries are the most advanced in the process of the Second Demographic Transition (some would even argue that they have come to the end of it—whatever that means). Recent survey data indicate that about two thirds of childless young adults in Sweden desire a family size of two (and only a few per cent say they want to remain childless). So the two-child norm appears to remain strong in Sweden—it seems that potential parents are convinced that the emotional satisfaction of parenthood requires two rather than one child, a distinction which may be of crucial importance for future fertility levels.

Analyses based on the Eurobarometer 2001 show that personal ideal family size among women aged 20 to 34 varies between 2.5 in Finland, Ireland, France and the United Kingdom, and 1.6–1.7 in Austria and Germany (Goldstein et al 2003). As actual, achieved fertility usually falls below family size ideals, the authors argue that we may be heading for an emergence of sub-replacement family size ideals in Europe, in particular in the German-speaking countries. If personal ideals decline, it is unlikely that we will see a rebound of fertility in the near future.

In my view, one of the shortcomings of the Second Demographic Transition theory is a lack of an explicit gender perspective. The importance to the individual of autonomy and self-actualisation is a crucial part of the Second Demographic Transition, underlying the revolutionary changes that we have witnessed in demographic behaviour. But autonomy and self-actualisation, and the transition from a bourgeois family model to a modern, individualistic one, are certainly more revolutionary for the lives of women, than for the lives of men. This is perhaps implicit in the early

statements about the Second Demographic Transition (for example van De Kaa's article from 1987), where he observes that "getting married and/or having children may involve considerable opportunity costs for—most often—the female partner". Women's self-realisation has more far-reaching consequences, I would argue, even in countries with a more egalitarian gender structure. Peter McDonald (2000) has argued for the need to distinguish between gender equity in individual-level institutions (such as the education system or the labour market) and gender equity in family-oriented institutions, and I think it would be useful to bring such concepts into the Second Demographic Transition theory.

McDonald's gender equity model has some similarity with the ideas expressed by Goldscheider (2000). She concurs with van de Kaa (1987) that the Second Demographic Transition in many ways is a consequence of the first, and has been following in its footsteps across the advanced, industrialised world. Goldscheider points to the fact that the decline in fertility and mortality (in the first demographic transition) re-shaped women's lives, because, with smaller families and longer lives, caring for the young was no longer a full-time career for them. So women followed men to employment outside the home. In virtually all societies, men share much fewer domestic responsibilities with their wives than women share economic tasks with men. This asymmetry in role obligations, she argues, has greatly contributed to one crucial aspect of the Second Demographic Transition, namely the growth in divorce and cohabitation. The first half of the gender revolution has meant that women in great numbers have entered the public spheres of education (especially at higher levels), employment, and political life; thus, what McDonald calls gender equity in individual-level institutions has been achieved.

But the gender revolution is incomplete—a second phase is required in which gender equity in family-oriented institutions is accomplished. While this phase is on its way in some countries, it remains virtually unknown in others. In this second phase, it is the attitudes (and the behaviour) of young *men* towards partnership, child-bearing and parenting that need to be revised, so that sharing of domestic as well as economic responsibilities becomes the natural foundation of male-female relationships in the future. In a way, one could view the Second Demographic Transition as the first phase of the gender revolution; if so, one could envisage a "third demographic transition", or a second phase of the second one, in which partnership and parenthood become strong positive options for both men and women, which would imply less fragile male-female relationships and the possibility of increasing fertility levels (although not necessarily to replacement levels).

So I think that the usefulness of the Second Demographic Transition theory would be enhanced by a stronger gender perspective. I would also make a plea for the need of better data. Macro-level changes in attitudes and their relationship to living arrangements have been studied using data from the European Value Study (EVS) which have many limitations, the most important one probably being that sample size. Nevertheless, EVS offers opportunities to analyse changes in values-orientation over time in different countries, and I would argue for more such studies, per-

haps also the exploration of other potential data sources for macro-level studies, such as the ISSP (International Social Survey Programme). For example, surveys on Family and Changing Gender Roles have been carried out in a substantial number of countries in 1988, 1994 and 2002. But most of all, I would argue for the implementation of the Gender and Generation Survey in as many countries as possible. Only with better data will we be able to make progress in understanding all the complex aspects of the Second Demographic Transition as it is currently unfolding itself in different parts of Europe (and European-origin countries).

To conclude, I am convinced that the Second Demographic Transition theory contains useful concepts for studying ongoing changes in family formation patterns in advanced, industrialised countries. However, I would argue that the term itself is actually somewhat misleading, since the word *transition* implies a dynamic change from one balance to another. I think that a better term would be a “revolution in family formation patterns”. But the Second Demographic Transition is such an established expression that it will probably continue to be used in the future. A more important point is that, in my view, there is plenty of room for improvements of the theory, most importantly the development of a clear gender perspective. The central concepts of autonomy and self-realisation are not gender-neutral, but have markedly different meanings—and implications—for men and women.

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