

Couple disagreement about fertility preferences and family-friendly policy measures in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

This article describes some findings of an ad-hoc survey “Marriage, Work and Family” conducted in the Czech Republic in 2005. The analysis is focused on couple disagreement about childbearing attitudes, ideals and intentions as well as on the partners’ negotiation process in reproductive decision-making. The results indicate that around one-fifth of Czech couples disagree about the intended number of children. The relatively high share of concordance between partners is the final outcome of a negotiation process within the couple in most cases. The more general the childbearing preferences measures, the higher the level of couple disagreement: one-third of the couples disagree about the family size ideals and two-thirds of them disagree about the reasons for having children. Moreover, one-fourth of Czech partners disagree about the impact of different policy measures on their own reproductive behaviour. This suggests that the potential for a couple’s conflict is quite high and that policy-makers willing to implement effective family-friendly policy measures should target their intervention not only to women but to men as well.

1 Introduction

Demographic and sociological studies on fertility have been traditionally focused on women only, with just a handful adopting a couple approach. These studies have shown that men and women do not necessarily have the same fertility attitudes and intentions and that the joint decision to have a child implies a prior couple’s negotiation process (Becker 1996, 1999; Thomson 1997; Thomson and Hoem 1998; DaVanzo et al. 2003; Voas 2003; Berrington 2009). The present article presents some descriptive findings of a unique dataset provided by an

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ad-hoc survey which was specifically designed to test the lifestyle preference theory by Hakim (2003). The empirical application of preference theory in the Czech context deals with three issues: 1) whether the same distribution of different types of life-style preferences can be found in the Czech Republic; 2) whether different levels of fertility are to be found for each type of life-style preferences; 3) whether women with different life-style preferences perceive various family and social policy measures in different ways. One drawback of Hakim's theory is that it does not contemplate couple dynamics and its possible influence on fertility and the family formation process. To this aim the theory of conflicting preferences by Voas (2003) could be usefully implemented. Both theories were tested by using the Czech survey data (see Chromková Manea et al. 2006; Rabušic and Chromková Manea 2007; Chromková Manea and Fučík 2007; Fučík and Chromková Manea 2008). The current contribution partially stems from these previous analyses.

2 The survey

The ad-hoc survey "Marriage, work and family" was carried out in the Czech Republic at the end of 2005. A private research agency collected the data by administering a standardised questionnaire to a random sample of the population made up of women between the ages of 20 and 40, and also their husbands or partners if they shared the same household, the men's age not being restricted to 20-40. If the woman lived alone and was in the defined age group she was included in the sample. If the interviewers came across a man between 20 and 40 who lived alone, he was also included in the sample.¹ Data was collected from a total of 2546 respondents (1284 women and 1262 men). In this article, we focus on 838 couples where both spouses/partners were interviewed.

Questionnaires for women and men were phrased in the same way, but partners were interviewed separately. The sample was designed to closely map the life stages linked to setting up and expanding family. Respondents were selected within given localities by the method of random selection with quota ending. In the sample, 41.6% respondents were in age group 20-29, 26.7% in 30-34 and 31.7% in 35-40.

One out of three respondents was not married (38.7% men and 34.1% women), while one-half of the respondents (51.6 % men and 51.1% women) were legally married. The 'divorced' category came third in our sample, with a total of 11.2% respondents (9.2 % men and 13.2% women). Only 5.4% of respondents had primary education, 41% had secondary school without GCSE² and 44% had

¹ If interviewers came across a man aged 20-40 living with a female partner aged 40+, only the man was interviewed.

² GCSE – general certificate of secondary education

secondary education with GCSE. 9% of the interviewed persons were university educated. Our dataset is not representative for the whole Czech population in the chosen age group. Representativeness applies only to couples where women are aged 20-40 years. The questionnaire included different questions covering several areas of interest which were grouped in the following modules: Marriage and partnership, Gender roles, Children, Reproductive problems, Child care and Labour market. For the purpose of this article, we selected only the ones that deal with fertility issues.

Respondents were asked to report their ideal number of children by answering the following question: *“If you were to have the best conditions in your life, how many children would you like to have?”* They were also asked about whether they wanted to have a(nother) child in the future and, if yes, how many. The question was worded as follows: *Do you consider having a(nother) child in the future? If yes, how many?* Two additional questions concerned the reasons for having or not having a(nother) child, respectively. They were phrased as follows: *“Could you tell us what are the reasons for wanting a(nother) child? Please choose three reasons from the following list and rank them by importance. Please also state which one is the least important”* and *“Could you tell us what are the reasons for not wanting a(nother) child? Please choose three reasons from the following list and rank them by importance. Please also state which one is the least important”*. The interviewed people were offered a battery of 18 reasons for each question (see Table 1).

Furthermore, respondents were asked to report whether they had mutually negotiated with their partner the number of children they planned to have. The exact formulation of the question was *“Did you or do you negotiate with your partner the number of children to have?”* Response options were: 1) *No, we did not negotiate*, 2) *Yes, we negotiated, but we did not agree*, 3) *Yes, we negotiated and agreed*, 4) *We are negotiating, but we will see*.

Eventually, respondents were asked to report what family policy measures would better help them to fulfil their own fertility plans. The question was worded as follows: *“If those policy measures that you considered important were introduced, how would it affect your personal life?”* The following response options were provided: 1) *It would be easier for me to have as many children as I intended*, 2) *It would be possible for me to have a(nother) child soon*, 3) *I would consider the possibility to have a(nother) child*, 4) *I'd probably decide to have a(nother) child*, 5) *It would ease my present situation in raising my children*. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with each of them.

Table 1:
Reasons for wanting/not wanting a(nother) child/more children according to the order given in the questionnaire

Reasons for wanting a(nother) child/more children
Children give a meaning to life
I think it is right to have at least one child in life
Having children is economically advantageous
One becomes immortal by having children
Children help to deepen a relationship
I am long-term unemployed, so I have got the time to have a child
My partner wants to have a(nother) child
I expect my child will take care of me when I am old
I am afraid of loneliness when I will be old
I get more social contacts this way
I feel the pressure from my surroundings
Children should have siblings
I have only daughters/sons and I would like to have at least one son/one daughter
A new child will make my partner happier
I want a change in my life - to take a break from work
I do not like my current job
Children bring joy to our lives
I come from a big family

Reasons for not wanting a(nother) child/more children
I already have the number of children I want to have in life
My health condition does not allow it
I live alone and I have no permanent partner
My work and professional activities do not allow to have a(nother) child/more children
I would have to sacrifice the time that I could devote to my own interests
It would seriously threaten the standard of living of my family/we would have serious existential problems
To be honest, I think I would not be a good mother/father
I am too afraid of what the future of my children would be
I might lose my present work position or become unemployed
I could not enjoy the life I have as much as today
I'm too old to have children
My partner is too old to have children
Having children has no meaning today
My partner does not want to have children/a(nother) child
Childbirth and parenting are challenging

It is worth noting that this question was asked after an item in which respondents were required to evaluate the importance of different social and family policies that could facilitate childbearing, childrearing and reconciliation of work and family life. Sixteen policy measures were contemplated and respondents were asked to rank the four most important ones and to indicate the least important one.³

³ The question was phrased as follows: "Within the framework of social policy there are policy measures that facilitate childbearing, childrearing and reconciliation of work and family life. Here is a list of them. Please choose four policy measures that you consider to be important and

Several other questions included in the questionnaire were aimed at measuring the attitudes towards gender equality and the preferred model of family and life-style preferences as outlined by Hakim (2000, 2003).⁴ The questionnaire contained the exact questions used by Hakim in her study, namely: three items aimed at building the typology of life-style preferences, which were focused on female work commitment, preferred ideal family models and the main income earner in the respondent's household, respectively; and three questions aimed at validating Hakim's proposed typology, which measured role-segregation within the family as well as in the labour market.

3 Couple disagreement about different childbearing issues

Ideal and intended number of children. First, we looked at the level of couple agreement/disagreement about fertility ideals and intentions by computing the share of partners who gave exactly the same responses to these two survey questions. Different levels of couple agreement were observed for the ideal and the intended family size: 64% of the couples expressed agreement on the ideal number of children, while around 80% of the couples reported the same intended number of children (Figure 1, left- and right-hand graph, respectively). Women's reported intend and ideal family sizes were larger than those of their partners more frequently than the other way around. In almost 19% of the cases women's reported ideal family sizes were larger than those of their partners, in 15% of the cases the difference was one child, while in 4% of the cases the difference concerned two children, bigger differences were negligible.

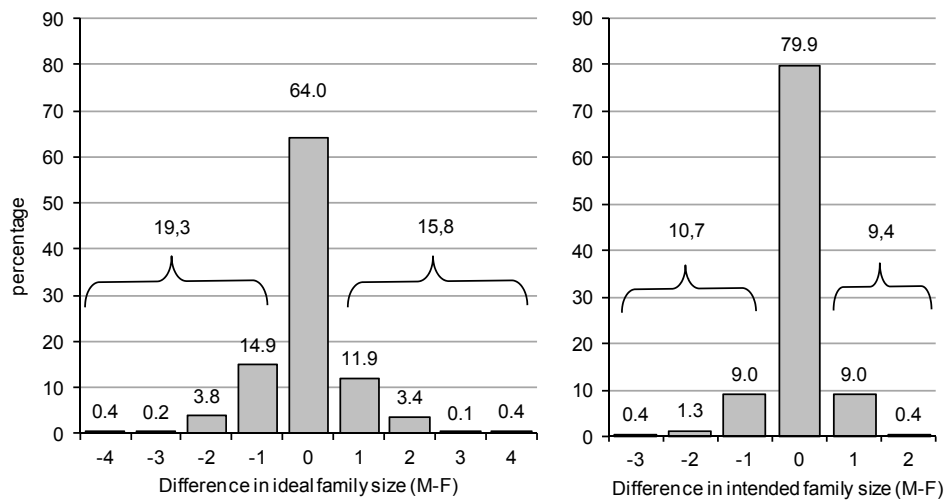
About 11% of the women indicated a larger intended family size than their partners, in 9% of the cases the difference concerned one child, in slightly more than 1% the difference was two children while bigger differences were negligible.

rank them by importance. Which one do you consider to be the least important?" List of policy measures: prolonged maternity leave with allowance up to 90% of the previous income; a substantial rise in child allowance; support for creating job positions with flexible or reduced working hours; lower income tax for people with dependent children; a substantial decrease in the costs of education for children; financially more available housing for families with children; an increase in the number of day-care and nursery school facilities; better measures against unemployment; child care facilities for school children within the schools; an increase in the allowance at the birth of each child; better legal work protection for parents; provision of loans for newlywed couples; employers should offer 1-2 days off every month; decrease in parental leave and increase in parental allowances; opportunity for fathers to take parental leave instead of mothers; financially more available day-care and nursery school facilities.

⁴ The relevant typology of life-style preferences was done in cooperation with Hakim using the same set of questions that British sociologist used when testing the proposed theoretical framework.

Figure 1:

The difference in answers: “If you were to have the best conditions in your life, how many children would you like to have?” and “Do you consider having a(nother) child in the future? If yes, how many?” (in percent)

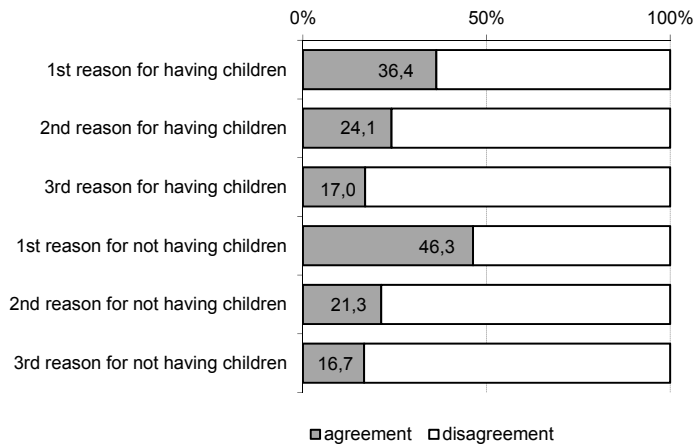


Note: The graph on the left-hand side refers to ideal family size and the graph on the right-hand side refers to the intended family size. The figures shown in the x-axis refer to the difference between the ideal family size, or the intended family size, as reported by the male partner and the corresponding ideal or intended family size, as reported by the female partner. Negative values imply that the female partner reported higher ideal or intended family size than the male partner.

Reasons for having or not having a(nother) child. Second, we examined both partners' answers on the three most important reasons for having or not having a(nother) child in the future (Figure 2). Here we define agreement as a concordance between partners not only in the type but also in the order of response options selected. Most of the respondents wanted to have a(nother) child or more children because *children give a meaning to life*. At the aggregate⁵ level, this was the most common answer for both men and women (46% and 50% of responses, respectively). However, if we compare the reasons within each couple, we find that partners agree (and choose the same reason at the first place) in 36% of the couples. The situation is similar when analysing the reasons for not having a(nother) child. Men and women often declare that they do not want to have a(nother) child/more children because *they already have the number of children they want* (54% and 52% of responses, respectively), while when analysing couples' responses, the rate of agreement on the first reason is about 46% of all couples.

⁵ Aggregate-level analysis was done without using the link between partners, that is, by considering men and women separately. The statistical unit was here the individual (N=1676) while in the couple level analysis the statistical unit was the couple (N=838).

Figure 2:
Couple agreement/disagreement about the reasons for having or not having a(nother) child



Negotiation on the intended number of children. Next, we analysed the share of men and women who reported that they negotiated, or were still negotiating, with their partner about the number of children they wanted to have. About 80% of three respondents reported a negotiation process with the partner about the childbearing decision, more specifically, 57% and 60% of the men and women respondents, respectively, stated that their fertility preferences were mutually negotiated within the couple and ended up with an agreement; 10% and 8% of the male and female respondents, respectively, stated that such negotiation did not bring them to an agreement and 12% of the interviewed men and women said that they had negotiated but were not decided yet (Figure 3, graph on the left-hand side). About 61% of the couples agreed that they negotiated or were still negotiating the number of children, while 13% agreed that there was no negotiation about this topic among them. One couple in four disagreed on the answer to the question on negotiation (see Figure 3, graph on the right-hand side).

Family-friendly policy measures. Eventually, we looked at the consistency between partners' responses to the item on the effect of family-friendly policy measures. The proportion of couples agreeing on the impact of family-friendly policy measures was relatively high and balanced for all the five response options considered, ranging between 71% for the answer: "It would possible for me to have a(nother) child soon" and 75% for: "It would ease my present situation in raising my child" (Figure 4, left-hand panel). The share of agreeing couples declined considerably once we separated the partners' concordant answers into affirmative (both agree) and negative (both disagree) ones (Figure 4, right-hand panel). We did some more in-depth analysis and we found that the level of couple disagreement did not depend on the age and education of the partners. Additional rounds of analysis should be carried out to confirm these provisional findings.

Figure 3:
Negotiation on the number of children: Did you negotiate or do you negotiate with your partner about the number of children to have?⁶

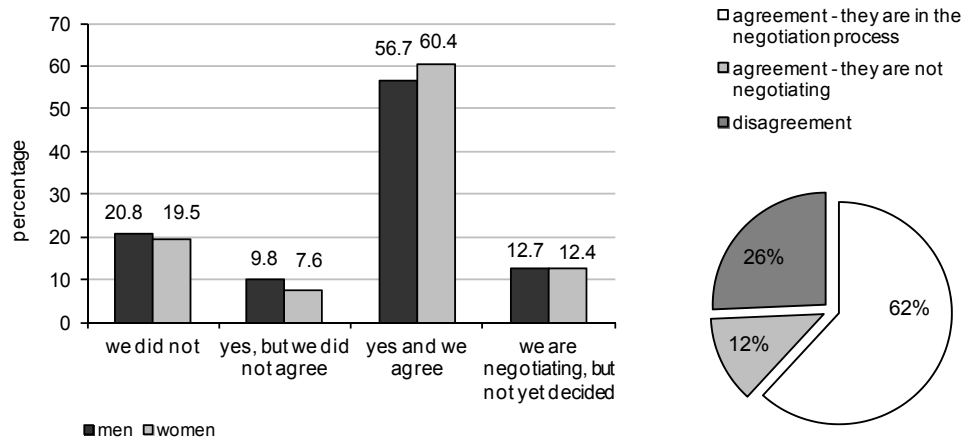
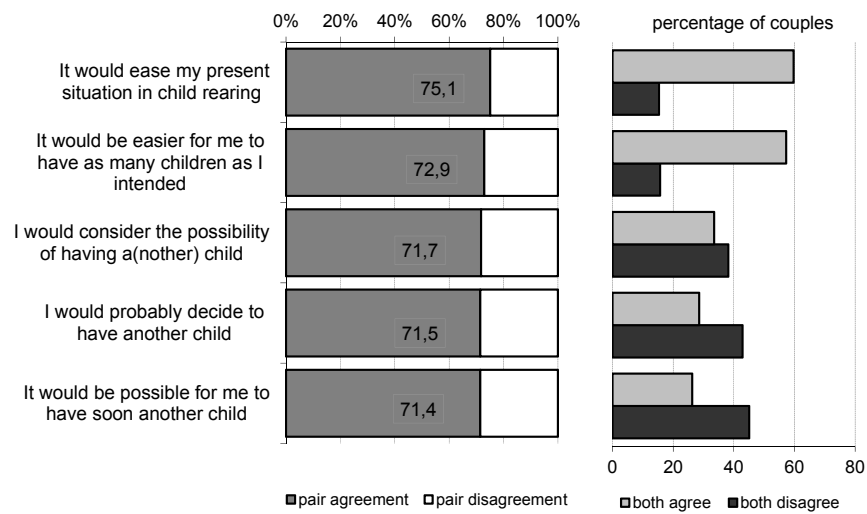


Figure 4:
The impact of policy measure - partners' agreement or disagreement



⁶ The plotted categories represent the response options offered by the questionnaire.

4 Summary

Conflicting fertility intentions among partners are observed for about one-fifth of the couples in the Czech Republic. However, the share of couple disagreement increases to one-third and one-half of the couples if family size ideals and motivations for having a(nother) child, respectively, are considered. Moreover, the agreement about prospective childbearing achieved within the couple at the time of the survey does not imply the absence of a negotiation between the partners. On the contrary, in most cases agreement is only reached after discussing the reproductive plans with the other member of the couple. This result suggests that conventional measures used to analyse partners' conflict in childbearing issues may underestimate the effective level of couple disagreement. Moreover, it signals that measuring the couple's dynamic interaction at different points in time and in different stages of the reproductive decision-making sequence is a major challenge in the analysis of couples' fertility decisions. Eventually, around one-fourth of the Czech couples disagreed on the impact of different policy measures on their own reproductive behaviour, suggesting that the dyadic nature of reproduction should be considered by policy-makers who are willing to implement effective measures aimed at sustaining fertility levels.

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