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Modern family attitudes, more childbearing: Exploring a low-fertility paradox

Women who work full time are more open to the idea of starting a family outside marriage than other women – or than men - according to sociologists Amir Erfani and Roderic Beaujot.

As in most developed countries, Canada's total fertility rate is well below replacement level and has been for over 25 years. The proportion of non-marital births has also risen steadily during the period; by the early 2000s, close to one-third of Canada's babies were born "out-of-wedlock".

Paradoxically, in low-fertility societies, fertility levels tend to be highest in countries where non-marital births are more common – in countries, in other words, with less traditional attitudes towards gender roles and family.

What affects attitudes towards the family, and therefore towards childbearing? Are our values absorbed from the world around us? Do they depend on our past behaviour? How much are they determined by our age or gender, education or religion?

Erfani and Beaujot look for insights into these questions using data from the 2000 *Survey of Orientations to Marriage, Relationships and Childbearing,* a survey designed to measure attitudes toward marriage and partnership, bearing and rearing children, division of work within family, and family programs and policies.

A representative sample of close to nine hundred men and women living in and around London, Ontario, completed self-administered questionnaires. The survey included six questions about attitudes to non-marital child-bearing (see Table). Responses to these questions were combined into a single measure representing each individual's openness towards new family forms.

Percentage distribution of items used in the scale on attitudes toward non-marital childbearing, by gender London and Surrounding areas, 2000

Attitude items	Women Agree	Women Dis-agree	Men Agree	Men Dis-agree
1. It is acceptable for a divorced person to live with his or her children and a new partner without being married to that person	50	50	56	44
2. Government should initiate giving the right for same sex couples to adopt [children]	43	57	30	70
3. A single woman should never choose to have a child	25	75	36	64
4. A single man should never choose to have a child	29	71	42	58
5. A child needs a home with both a father and a mother to grow up happily	44	56	56	44
6. When two people decide to have children, they should first get married	75	25	67	33

On most questions, women were more open-minded than men. Not so when asked directly whether couples who decide to have children should first get married, however. Three-quarters of women thought couples ought to marry before having children, compared with two-thirds of men.

The multiple regression model confirmed that London-area women have more modern attitudes than men towards family formation. As expected, the analysis also showed that older, less educated and actively religious individuals tend to hold more traditional values, whereas individuals who have experienced a cohabiting union are more open to non-marital childbearing.

Unmarried women, and women in full time employment, are more open to childbearing outside marriage than married women and those not working full time. The opposite is true for men. Unmarried men, and those who are employed full-time have the most negative views on non-marital childbearing.

Working appears to give women more choice over childbearing, whereas men appear to opt for alternatives that have more likelihood of continued interaction with their children.

Join us at the Western RDC Brown Bag on Wednesday, March 11, 2009, 12:30-1:30 at the Social Science Centre, Room 5220, and find out more about this study, appearing shortly in *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, and discuss, among other things, how these findings fit with the quasi-disappearance of marital births from many of Quebec's most francophone regions. (See http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/donstat/societe/demographie/naisn_deces/naissance/5p3.htm)

Note: Summary prepared by Heather Juby, RDC Knowledge Transfer Coordinator, based on Amir Erfani and Roderic Beaujot..Attitude toward Childbearing outside of Marriage in Canada. Forthcoming in 2009 in *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*. For more information or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality in this study please contact Amir Erfani (Amire@nipissingu.ca) or Roderic Beaujot (Rbeaujot@uwo.ca).

Part of the analysis was carried out at the University of Western Ontario Research Data Centre. The Research Data Centre program is part of an initiative by Statistics Canada, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and university consortia to strengthen Canada's social research capacity.