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**Panel on
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Various things have been written on low fertility, some of my chief sources of inspiration are indicated in the reference list. I am especially taking advantage of the 14-16 May Conference on “How Generations and Gender Shape Demographic Change: Toward policies based on better knowledge” sponsored by the Generations and Gender Program and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (see Beaujot, 2008). The Gender and Generations Survey, is being taken in some 17 countries in follow-up to the Family Surveys of the 1980s and 1990s.

Today, I will address the question of explanations, and the potential for sustaining the level of childbearing. My remarks are divided into four sections: proximate determinants, micro questions associated with the value and cost of children, macro structures of earning and caring, and policy questions.

Proximate Determinants

Two proximate determinants are relevant: contraception and abortion, and exposure to risk of conception in secure unions.

The title of the chapter on fertility in *La démographie québécoise : enjeux du XXIe siècle*, by Evelyne Lapierre-Adamcyk and Marie Hélène Lussier (2003) is particularly well chosen, ‘De la forte fécondité à la fécondité désirée’. That is, fertility should be desired and it is legitimate to use contraception and abortion to ensure that children are wanted. I suspect this is part of our difference with the United States, where we see higher fertility in the teen years and in the 20s, some of which is probably not desired, but the health system is less forthcoming to support contraception and abortion in the only OECD country that does not have some form of socialized medicine for persons under 65 years of age. It is often said that abortion was an indicator of inefficient contraception, and I am sure this is still the case. However, abortion rates remain high, and this could also be an indicator of efficient contraception. That is, we live in a world where pregnancies should be desired, and it is thus legitimate to use abortion to achieve this objective.

The second proximate determinant that is relevant is union status, which influences exposure to the risk of conception. With later entry into relationships, and more separations, more unstable relationships, there is a lower proportion of the population, especially at ages 20-35, who are in relationships that they consider sufficiently stable to have children. Peter McDonald (2006) proposes that young people are slow at starting their family lives partly because of the risks that they experience. The Gender and Generation Surveys from France, Germany and Russia indicate lower progression to a second child for women who have no partner, or when their partner is not employed (Kreyenfeld, 2008). Besides, the notion of having a child to stabilize a relationship has been largely excluded.

Value and cost of children

Of course, children are no longer an economic value. But children remain a value to most people, and it is important to theorize about the value that children represent. Some 25 years ago, I was asking respondents in Tunisia, “why do people have children.” The answers came fairly readily, people have children for (1) support in old age, and (2) because “children are the joy of life.” When I have since asked Canadian respondents this question, the answers are not so readily available, but in some ways one gets to the same ideas: people have children because it is enjoyable to interact with children, and to have someone who will be close to you for your whole life. It is interesting that the Generations and Gender Survey has included measurements of the two concepts “happiness” and “loneliness.” (see Billari, 2008 and Gierveld, 2008). That is, the “value of children” can probably be translated into the concepts of happiness and loneliness. These questions measure questions of social support, and the role of families and other structures in this support. Francesco Billari (2008) finds that people who perceive that children will make them happier are more likely to intend to have children.

It is easy to think of barriers to having children, but our theoretical thinking will be incomplete if it does not speak to why people have children. Our research is often too focused on an economic perspective that highlights the barriers and the costs, while giving inadequate attention to the value that children represent for individuals, families and societies.

Nonetheless, we also must talk about costs and barriers. My sense is that a variety of structures need to be in place for prospective parents to feel that they have support from the society in overcoming some of these costs: direct transfers, parental leave, child care and work-life balance features. I am impressed by the account that my colleague Danièle Bélanger gives of her sabbatical year in France with her children then aged one, three and seven. This includes a school system that provides a seamless day as of age three, with before and after school programs, and programs for children during the half days on Wednesday and Saturday when schooling does not occur. Also, families with three or more children have a ‘Carte de la famille nombreuse’ that provides access at reduced rates to various public transportation, recreational, sports and cultural events.

Structures of earning and caring

John Caldwell (2004) and others have theorized about the changing roles of families in stages of economic production. The structures of post-industrial production can more easily accommodate lower constraints on family and sexual behaviour.

The increased participation in production has been at the expense of reproduction. However, this inverse relation was especially applicable in the period of the 1960s to the mid-1980s. Across societies, we find since the mid-1980s that fertility is higher in countries where women’s labour force participation is higher (Never, 2008; Billari, 2008). At the individual level, the GGS shows that women without children have higher

labour force participation in Germany than France, but when they have one or more children it is women in France who have higher participation (Pailhé, 2008). Peter McDonald (2000) has theorized that fertility is particularly low when women have equal opportunities in education and work, but families remain traditional, allocating an excessive component of reproductive work to women. Eva Bernhardt (2005) proposes that low fertility is because the second half of the gender revolution has not been completed, in the private sphere. In effect, research from Sweden shows that wives are more likely to have a second child if their husbands had taken parental leave time for a previous birth (Olah, 2003).

Policy implications

As I make brief policy propositions, let me first observe that, across OECD countries, fertility is higher in less traditional societies where there are more women in the labour market, more extra-marital births, marriage has a less central role, divorce is more widespread (Beaujot and Muhammad, 2006; Billari, 2008). In Canada, it is of interest that fertility is rising most in Alberta and Quebec, that is in provinces where young families have the security of either good job opportunities or supportive social policy (Beaujot, McQuillan and Ravanera, 2007).

Propositions:

1. Reproductive health supported by the state so that children are desired.
2. State support to shoulder parts of the cost of children through direct subsidies, parental leaves, child care and a school system and associated programs that cover a larger part of the work day.
3. Work-life balance.
4. Promoting gender equality both outside and inside families. This may include reserving part of parental leave for men and abolishing existing measures, with grand-parenting features of course, like tax deductions for dependent spouses, pension splitting and widowhood benefits that are based on a traditional model of families.
5. Special provisions for children in lone parent families, such as advance maintenance payments and doubling the Child Tax Benefit for the first child of a lone parent family.
6. State support for reduced risks for young people, both men and women, so that they may get on with their work and family lives.
7. Reorganization of benefits so that they are less family based and follow the model of the three tiers of our retirement benefits, with a third tier that is flexible and based on individuals rather than employers and families.

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