

POST-SOCIALIST UNCERTAINTY: CHILDBEARING DECISIONS IN HUNGARY



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Using a set of in-depth interviews from Budapest, Hungary, research focused on reproductive decision-making under personal, economic, and the social uncertainty in the post-socialist transition resulting in unclear behavioral alternatives and unpredictable outcomes. Falling birthrates throughout the region reflect these uncertainties. The subjects' responses to uncertain conditions are one of the ways by which demographic behavior is affected in the post-socialist context of institutional change. (Post-socialist Hungary, economic uncertainty, marriage and family postponements)

Almost 20 years after the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe, birth rates continue to decline. By the end of the twentieth century, fertility in several of these countries reached a level considerably below 2.1, the replacement level at which classic demographic theory assumed that fertility would stabilize. Hungary, one of these countries, exhibited a drop in the total fertility rate from 1.87 in 1990 to 1.29 in 1999 (Council of Europe 2000).

Falling birthrates are indicators of the way broad scale social change unfolds in the intimate area of reproduction. As the neoliberal capitalist ideology, with its different versions of morality and goals, collides in these countries with old socialist values, reproduction becomes a central issue that is being contested and reconfigured to fit with the new conditions and identities. Reproduction can therefore be seen as a kind of collective representation, “the shared images and symbols, through which a society represents itself to itself” (Delaney 2004:14). “It is in large measure through imagining reproduction that individual families and social groups conceive of the future towards which they aspire for themselves and the next generation” (Rapp 1999:317).

Previous attempts to explain the phenomenon of falling fertility rates in the region focused on various factors. The explanations by sociologists and economists fall into two categories. One relies primarily on economic determinants, primary among which is the economic hardship created by the transition to a capitalist regime (Brewster and Rindfuss 2000, S. Molnar 1999, Speder 2006),

notions of post-transition “economic crisis” (Macura et al. 1999, 2000), and “social anomie” (Philipov 2003; Philipov et al. 2006). Other arguments for the primacy of economic factors include a proposed link between fertility behavior and factors such as income uncertainty (Ranjan 1999), the rise in unemployment, particularly among females (Molnar 1999; Kotowska 1999; Rajkiewicz 2004), the growth of the public welfare state (Carlson and Omori 1998; Graniewska 2003), and withdrawal of state support for childcare and maternity leave (S. Molnar 1999; Pongracz 2001; Aassve et al. 2006; Speder and Kamaras 2008).

A second category of explanations takes ideational changes as the cause of these trends in demographic behavior. They have been associated with the “second demographic transition theory” (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa 1986) which proposed that the demographic changes observed in Europe were related to changes in value orientation, including individualization and secularization (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1998). Factors in Eastern Europe that are considered related to these ideational changes include increased female education, increased female labor force participation, women having better-paying jobs (S. Molnar and Kapitany 2002), changes in lifestyle (Sanocka and Kurpisz 2003), adjustment to social upheaval (Caldwell 2004), and individualization (Kotowska et al. 2008).

While acknowledging the importance of economic and ideational factors, anthropologists rely on integrating population processes within locally specific historical, political, and cultural frameworks (Rivkin-Fish 2003; Kertzer et al. 2009). Such explanations have been attempted by anthropologists working in Central and East European countries. Their findings include post-transition job insecurity and lack of state support for parenting in Germany (Erikson 2005) and in Poland (Galbraith 2008), the interplay of global economic dynamics with local Russian cultural systems (Gabriel 2005), the consideration of low birth rates as a sign of modernity in the Czech Republic (Nash 2005), and changing social identities and gender roles in Bulgaria (Stoilkova 2005).

An explanation suggested by Frejka (2008) is that the cause of the decline is the replacement of the state socialist regimes by market economies and fledgling democratic institutions of governance, ushering in not only economic hardship but a great deal of uncertainty and risk. Previously, the state socialist authoritarian and centrally planned regimes were favorable for early and higher rates of childbearing. These included a relatively risk-free environment for young people created by virtually free education, free health care, and guaranteed employment, many of which entitlements were curtailed or disappeared after the transition.

Uncertainty became a dominant characteristic of the post-socialist society and economy. It resulted from the drastic and rapid transformations in social

institutions, and was particularly salient in regions with a long socialist period of “high certainty,” which came with limited choices. (Philipov and Dorbritz 2003). The premise of the subsequent neoliberal economy emphasized individual freedom, which came with economic deregulation, privatization, and limited social provisions. At first, the response to the radical transition from the affected countries was that of optimism. The breakdown of the socialist system was welcomed as one that would usher in democracy, civil society, and economic prosperity. It soon became clear, however, that the “concept of the transition and its imagery of linear, evolutionary change as a paradigm for capturing post-socialist processes” (Rivkin-Fish 2005:8), had to be reconsidered in the face of emerging difficult economic and social conditions.

The intent of this essay is not to evaluate the validity of the various explanations of low fertility in Eastern Europe, but rather to suggest that uncertainty in the social and economic spheres may have affected attitudes toward childbearing. That is, to understand low fertility and its meaning, it is important to include a perspective that focuses on how individuals respond to the conditions that emerged in the post-transition society. How does reproduction apply to the everyday life of individuals, what does their view of reproduction tell us about their view of their social world? Do they view this world with optimism or pessimism? Most important, what is the relation between their intentions and desires and the outcome of their actions and behaviors. The voices of young couples and their perception of their lives after the transition provide an understanding of issues of reproduction and of the society that is coming into being. Research for this article used in-depth interviews to examine how young couples in Budapest, Hungary, respond to the post-transition developments in the country in regard to their childbearing attitudes and decisions.

UNCERTAINTY IN FAMILY FORMATION AND PARENTING

In past decades young people worldwide have had to make life altering decisions in a context of uncertainty. Whether the uncertainty is due to globalization (Blossfeld et al. 2005), social and economic change (Robert and Bukodi 2005), economic crisis (Johnson-Hanks 2005), or poverty (Schnaiberg and Reed 1974), its effects are basically similar: whether pertaining to schooling or employment, the possible outcome of decisions are difficult to determine, for in a “runaway world structural conditions and social norms provide less and less support or guidelines for taking decisions” (Giddens 1999: 20). Uncertainties in education and labor market conditions have important consequences for other areas of life including family formation and entry into parenthood. The

demographic outcomes when decisions are made under conditions of uncertainty serve as the background against which to view the data from Budapest.

The clearest connection between decisions made under uncertain conditions and demographic outcomes is made in the theoretical framework regarding the effect of globalization on the early life course by Mills and Blossfeld (2005). To understand individual decision-making under uncertainty, Mills and Blossfeld use a "dynamic rational choice" model, which assumes "that typical actors try to act rationally" (Blossfeld and Prein 1998) in "trying to achieve three optimizations: (1) finding the best action that fits with their given beliefs and desires, (2) developing the most appropriate belief given the evidence at hand; and (3) collecting the correct amount of evidence" (Mills and Blossfeld 2005:16). Under conditions of uncertainty, however, these are difficult to achieve, given the uncertainty about the behavioral alternatives, the uncertainty about the probability of behavioral outcomes, and the uncertainty about the amount of information needed for a particular decision. Therefore, the hypothesized effect of the uncertainty generated by globalization on the social-structural level is a reduction or delay in the propensity of youth to enter into long-term commitments such as partnerships and parenthood, which require a secure economic base and confidence in a stable future.

The concept of a "risk society" (Giddens 1990, 1999) shares some features with the Mills and Blossfeld's (2005) model. For example, "one of the major consequences of modernization has been a tremendous intensification of real and perceived or socially mediated risk" (Hall 2002:175). Giddens and other sociologists, including Beck (1992, 1999), claim that a "heightened awareness and knowledge of risk and sustained effort to manage and contain risk, are defining features of modernity" (Hall 2002:175). They attribute the emergence of a risk society to the decline of tradition and formal religion, the rise of globalization, and the mass media. In such a context, risk has emerged as a preoccupation of modernity "because there are so few aspects of a person's life that follow anything resembling a socially preordained or proscribed path." A "risk awareness involving self and family are likely to cause decisions in these two areas to be strongly influenced by anxiety" (Wilkinson 2001:92). With reflexivity and anxiety playing a key role in family decisions, important life choices such as marriage and parenting require planning and anticipation and the management of the risks and anxieties associated with them. Assuming risk assessment under uncertain conditions would explain the rise of cohabitation (as opposed to marriage), an older age of entry into intimate relationships, and lower fertility rates, all of which can be considered as strategies to mitigate or reduce risk and anxiety.

Johnson-Hanks (2005) has a different view on the process of decision-making under uncertain conditions. Based on Cameroonian women's responses to demographic survey questions regarding reproductive intentions, she rejects the rational choice model and argues that in response to a "routinized state of crisis" in the country, plans (whether concerning marriage, reproduction, employment, or schooling), are not made in advance. Cameroonian women seize on whatever opportunities are available to them (Johnson-Hanks 2005:366). She calls this mode of engagement "judicious opportunism," because it "is not to develop a good plan and follow it but rather to respond effectively to the contingent, sudden and surprising offers that life can make. Under extreme uncertainty, when all the rules are changing, what works is not the best strategy but the most flexible one" (Johnson-Hanks 2005:377). The net effect of this kind of decision making is an extreme variability in the timing of life events such as schooling, marriage, first birth, and moving away from the parental home.

Johnson-Hanks is critical of rational-choice theory because it assumes that "the actor chooses between alternative means to achieve some desired ends. At the limit, these models assume that actors are maximizing something – whether utility or prestige or material gain" (Johnson-Hanks 2005:377). Under conditions of uncertainty, where the choices and alternatives are not clear, are constantly shifting, and where the ends that people aspire to are being revised, this mode of analysis is not adequate, she claims, whether in the Cameroon or elsewhere.

A radically different view of delayed marriage, family formation, and childbearing proposes that under conditions of uncertainty people cannot use a utilitarian calculus to guide their behavior. They do, however, wish to reduce uncertainty and given that few strategies are available to most individuals, they enter into commitments that embed them into irrevocable and irreversible social relations. "The impetus for parenthood is greatest among those whose alternative pathways for reducing uncertainty are limited or blocked. Having a child changes life from uncertainty to relatively certain" (Friedman et al. 1994:383).

These alternative models stimulate the following questions: How do young Hungarian couples respond to the uncertain conditions they face in terms of family formation and the assumption of parenthood? In uncertain times, do they have a specific plan they follow concerning family formation and child bearing? If so, what are the effects of the uncertain conditions on these plans? Can their behavior be characterized more as "judicious opportunism" in which they grasp opportunities as they come along? If this is the case, how might this affect the sequencing of events in their life plans?

POST-SOCIALIST SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN HUNGARY

The 1990s witnessed enormous economic and political changes in Hungary. While the socialist system was plagued by inefficiency, shortages, and distribution problems, it also was a welfare state (Gal and Kligman 2000:68). Housing, education, medical care, and food were heavily subsidized and the state provided full employment, maternity benefits, and inexpensive childcare. It also “legislated social rights for their populace and took responsibility, at least in principle, for securing the basic needs of citizens with the aim of easing the economic consequences of inequality” (Gal and Kligman 2000:70). After switching to a market economy, the national and local political organization was restructured along with the legal and welfare systems.

The immediate consequence of the economic transition was a recession with a dramatic drop in the GDP. The population experienced a strong increase in income inequality and a sharp increase in poverty. Especially demoralizing were the developments in the labor market, characterized by a rise in unemployment for both men and women, but especially for women. The changes in public and family policy were sudden and unexpected. Particularly harsh was the 1995 “Bokros austerity package,” a government program which instituted fees for higher education and made family allowances and maternity leave means tested. This meant that couples with higher incomes, usually tied to higher education, were no longer eligible for family support. Additionally, there was a sharp decline in the real value of the family allowance, the nominal value of which was not increased under an artificially accelerated inflation. The Bokros package also abolished the GYED (child care stipend) which was 65-75 percent of one’s former salary, and which enabled those eligible to stay at home with their child until it reached two years of age. Although the new government in 1998 abolished the system of means testing and family allowances were again made universal, the psychological effects of the policy change were long lasting, with individuals losing their trust in the stability of family policies. The issue of abortion also caused confusion. While the post-transition abortion policy was actually more liberal than the socialist one, the debate in the media bewildered everyone and led to a heightened uncertainty regarding childbearing decisions.

An important consequence of the changes in economic conditions was the rise in social inequality, with growing numbers of families living below the poverty line and the development of a new wealthy class, primarily made up of entrepreneurs. While under state socialism “sponsored mobility never fully succeeded and was gradually abandoned” (Ferge 2000:276), social class differences and poverty were “less than in other countries” (Ferge 2000). Market mechanisms, however, increased inequalities present under the socialist regime,

resulting in a “new class of entrepreneurs [which] had arisen by the mid-1980’s, forming a new elite whose privilege was based on capital assets” (Szelenyi and Manchin 1987:117). After the post-socialist transition, the income position of these new elites strongly improved (Andorka and Speder 1996). A survey found the class hierarchy after the transition to have at one extreme a very thin topmost tier, an extremely wealthy elite, and at the lower extreme, about 30 percent of the population, living at a subsistence level (Szivos and Toth 1999). The rules for social mobility and success also changed. These negative consequences overshadowed the positive changes that included a parliamentary system and free elections.

Some sociologists (e.g., Nemenyi and Toth 1998) claim that, as in other post-socialist countries, the position of women in Hungary became weaker after the transition, but others (e.g., Speder 2006) found that unemployment affected both genders but most severely men. This was because the strongest effects of the transition were in heavy industry and agriculture, with the service sector, the bastion of female employment, relatively unaffected. Opportunities for part-time work diminished after the transition, making it difficult for women to combine wage labor and family obligations. It was also women who were most strongly affected economically by the reduction or elimination of social welfare provisions. With the lessening of state subsidies for health care and child care facilities, and with the virtual disappearance of child care facilities maintained by companies, many women increasingly became domestic caregivers while others elected to pursue career opportunities that led them away from motherhood and family.

While the Hungarian socialist government never had an explicit policy regarding birth rates, it was a regime which supported reproduction by its family policies. The succeeding post-socialist governments were inconsistent in their ideology and did not provide significant support services. For example, the government had no pronatalist policy between 1994 and 1998 and between 2004 and 2008, but did between 1998 and 2004.

The demographic consequences of the transition were far reaching for marriage and fertility. Hungary, like all countries of the former socialist block, experienced fundamental changes in fertility-related behaviors. Cohabitation became widespread among young adults, marriage rates decreased, the proportion of extramarital births further increased, the divorce rate increased from the previous high levels that characterized the socialist period, and there has been a sharp postponement in leaving the parental home. (Aassve et al. 2006). In Hungary, particularly, an analysis of fertility trends shows that prior to the transition, the proportion of childless women, women with one child, and women with more than two children decreased, making the two-child family model

dominant. Post-transition trends reversed this tendency, and childlessness or a one-child family became most common. Hungary thus joined the ranks of the “lowest low” fertility countries (Speder and Kamaras 2008: 609).

DATA AND METHODS

Research included semi-structured interviews based on a background questionnaire and an interview guide. The interviews focused on five topics, arranged in a chronological sequence of turning points in the life course: (1) childhood and social background, (2) history of partnership and intimate relations, (3) history of fertility intentions and parenthood experience, (4) the social state of the country before and after the transition, and (5) intentions, plans, and fears.

Participants were recruited by posting notices at bus stops, educational institutions, and places of entertainment. The criteria for selecting the sample included age, marital status, and educational level. Because demographic changes occur earlier in urban areas, the study was limited to residents of the capital city, Budapest. All of the respondents were born during the socialist era and were raised in the context of the values and expectations of that period. They came of age, however, at the time of the transition to the new system and represent a generation which had to adjust and re-evaluate its expectations and goals in that new context.

There are two levels of education in the sample. “Low education” refers to individuals having completed secondary education or lower and “high education” means college students or university graduates. The marital statuses are “single,” “married,” “cohabiting” or “living apart together” (LAT). “Living apart” means that the respondent has a non-conjugal partner in a stable relationship but without sharing a household. “Apart” refers to the geographic dimension and “together” to the social dimension of the relationship.

The present paper uses interview data from 38 individuals (19 couples). Seven of the couples were married, nine cohabited, and three were LAT. Five couples had one child, the rest were childless. The ages in the interview sample ranged from 20 to 42, with the majority of the young people born between 1973 and 1975, the youngest person in 1980 and the oldest in 1962. Thus, most of them were in their early teens at the time of the transition. Twenty-eight individuals were higher educated and 12 were lower. The over-representation of the higher educated is not by chance but intended to target the group that is said to have more expectations from the regime change. The expansion of the educational system launched by the government and the growing levels of unemployment and competition “marked an increasing awareness of the

importance of education and the need for relevant professional qualifications. In these circumstances, the labor market system imposed higher demands on the labor force and this most likely changed many individuals' preference in favor of acquiring higher education and qualifications" (Aassve et al. 2006:135). Interviews with childless couples represent the majority of the sample. Given our interest in the considerations of young people concerning the transition to parenthood, this seems to be the right target. In each case, both members of a couple were interviewed.

The interviews were conducted by a Hungarian anthropology graduate student who participated in designing the project. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed in Hungarian, and thematically coded following a bottom-up approach (Strauss 1987). During this phase of the analysis, respondents' answers were grouped into categories related to childbearing, life goals and expectations on family formation, employment, and other dimension. For example, for any preconditions associated with the intention to have a child, we selected the salient categories that emerged in conversation. Following the constant comparative method, we systematically compared within each category statements of the same individual and of different individuals to extract their general significance. In a further step, we compared categories to understand their relations and to map the complexity of childbearing considerations. The analyses focused on questions related to childbearing intentions, preconditions, and timing, views on the social state of the country before and after the transition, the psychological consequences of living under the current uncertain conditions, their fears, and their concept of "home."

DISCUSSION OF THE DATA

Childbearing Intentions

The childbearing desires and intentions of the young couples reflect their views on children and childbearing in general. The analysis of these intentions showed that almost without exception the informants desired to have children and, regardless of their marital status, most of them said that they could not imagine their lives without a child. These findings are similar to the results of the Population and Policy Acceptance Surveys, conducted on a representative sample in 2003, which show that in Hungary only 7.8 percent of the women and 14.8 percent of the men intend to remain childless.

In the childless group, both cohabiting and married couples and both men and women equally expressed a desire to have children. Emese, a 26-year-old college graduate cohabiting with her boyfriend said, "I think children are extremely

Table
Interview Subjects' Characteristics

ID Couple	Living arrang. or Civil status	Parity	Age	Education	Employment
1 Eva Feri	cohabiting	Childless	25 28	University High School	Graduate student University student
2 Emese Karoly	cohabiting	Childless	26 26	University University	Transporting company Counselor
3 Piroska Janos	cohabiting	Childless	25 31	Vocational High school Vocational High school	Student Technician
4 Eszter Tamas	LAT	Childless	20 28	Vocational High school Vocational High school	Student Shop assistant
5 Anna Gabor	cohabiting	Childless	29 29	University Masters degree	Graduate student Researcher
6 Kati Sandor	cohabiting	Childless	23 36	Vocational High school University	Unemployed Unemployed
7 Marta Peter	married	Childless	24 31	University PhD	PhD student Researcher
8 Julia Pali	LAT	Childless	32 42	University University	Teacher Teacher
9 Lilian Gyuri	cohabiting	Childless	31 31	University Masters degree	Guide Senior consultant
10 Anna Szabolcs	cohabiting	Childless	26 25	High school High school	University student Part-time salesman
11 Teri Miklos	married	Childless	27 28	Masters degree University	Market researcher Designer and architect
12 Rozsa Krisztian	cohabiting	Childless	25 31	High school Vocational High school	Waitress Waiter/cook
13 Agi Robi	married	Childless	29 33	University University	Bank manager Engineer/production mgr.
14 Sara Jozsi	LAT	Childless	26 32	High school University	University student Police officer
15 Zsuzsa Laci	married	1 child	28 28	Technical college University	Unemployed (maternity lv.) Entrepreneur
16 Dora Elemer	married	1 child	30 31	University PhD	Translator Scientific assistant
17 Ilonka Matyi	cohabiting	1 child	30 33	University Vocational High school	Accountant Glass technical worker
18 Nora Zsolt	married	1 child	27 31	Vocational High school High school	Clerk Carpenter/entrepreneur
19 Mari Otto	married	1 child	30 29	University University	Clerk (on maternity leave) Head of company

important. I would give birth tomorrow if I could.” Her partner, 26-year-old Karoly, shared her wish to have children, as did 28-year-old Feri, a university student, who said, “We are already picking out names and have been talking about the timing.” Eva, a student, commented:

without a child, it isn't love. A marriage is not a marriage where there are no children. There is nobody else who looks at you like your children and nobody relies on you like them. I also feel that what I received from my mother, I can only repay by having children. If I have no child, I defaulted on my debt to my mother.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Tamas and Piroska, a cohabiting couple with a lower level of education. Although their occupation—wait-staff on cruise ships—was ill suited for raising children, they both felt that their lives would be meaningless without children.

When asked what they would do if they were unable to bear children, there was agreement on trying all means. Peter said, “we would go to a doctor, we would try artificial insemination.” Emese said, “I would fall into deep depression, if I found this out. I think eventually I would want to adopt but only as a last resort.” The number of children the young people desired was surprising in this low fertility context. With the exception of Karoly, who wanted “one, maximum two children,” the answers of the others ranged from two to three.

The respondents who have children, both married and cohabiting couples, were without exception enthusiastic about having a child, and most of the cohabiting couples intended to marry sooner or later. While they expressed happiness with having a child, several of them said that it had not been planned. “But once you have your child you realize that this is the most wonderful thing in the world.” None of the couples with a child said that they wanted to stop at one. The two-child family is a normative ideal in Hungary, but these couples were better aware of the financial burden children represented than the childless group. Plans for a second child were widely discussed and in some cases actively pursued. “I wouldn't want this one to be lonely as a singleton,” said Zsolt. His wife Nora concurred, and added “we don't want too much of an age gap between the children.” Ilonka said that she wanted her second child soon. Others, however, disagreed about the timing.

Preconditions for Having Children

In spite of an enthusiastic and general desire for children, the respondents listed preconditions that had to be met before they were ready for parenthood. There was unanimous agreement that adequate housing is of prime importance. Elemer said “I would definitely not have had a child if I lived in a sublet.” Nora

said her precondition was “at least two rooms, so that we wouldn’t have to live on top of each other.” “It can’t be a sublet but your own place,” said Kati, a college drop-out cohabiting with Sandor, a university student. “It has to be your own flat, not shared with your parents,” commented Gyuri, a programmer living with his girlfriend in his parents’ apartment. Feri wanted living conditions to include “fresh air, a yard, and a dog.”

Other preconditions included a steady income and financial security. “Without guaranteed employment, it would be irresponsible to have a child,” said Pali, a teacher cohabiting with Julia, also a teacher. Karoly said that in addition to security, the most important precondition was mental readiness and maturity. Marta said that a good and happy relationship with a partner was important, as well as “a childcare facility without having to pay horrendous amounts.” Completing one’s education was also important. The couples with children, although older and financially more stable than the childless group, agreed with the younger group on the preconditions for having a child.

A final precondition for having children was a stable partnership. “When everything is uncertain and you cannot count on the government to help you, it is most important that you have a partner who will stand by you,” said Marta. Dora agreed and stated, “in the current circumstances, it would be irresponsible to have a child whom you have to raise alone. You need the psychological support of a partner to be able to raise a child.” Similarly, Elemer said that “a stable and happy relationship made us realize that this will lead to a wedding,” and they stopped precautions after they married.

None of the female interviewees mentioned gender equality and the partner’s help in household chores and childcare as a prerequisite for having children. This may be due to their perception that gender equality has already been established in their relationship or to their acceptance of the prevailing “breadwinner model” (Haas and Hartel 2004) in Hungarian society.

The consequence of satisfying these preconditions is a postponement of childbearing. Somewhat surprisingly, there was little concern in this group of being under time pressure or with the “biological clock.” Only two of the women mentioned or implied a concern about running out of time. This finding on postponement is consistent with the data on Hungary which show that postponing childbearing was substantial after the transition, with an average age at first marriage at 25.5 years and the mean age for first birth at 26 years in 2002 (Council of Europe 2002) which increased to 27.7 years in 2008 (Kapitany 2010).

There were differences between men and women regarding timing. Some women felt that they were ready to have a child right away, but their partners wanted to wait. One man, a university graduate, for example, said having a child

is a huge responsibility for which he was not quite ready, whereas his partner, also a graduate, worried about the biological clock at age 26. The opposite was true for Peter and Marta, who have been married for about a year. Peter strongly wanted to move forward with a pregnancy, but Marta argued that he has his PhD and “I just now started graduate work and I want to concentrate on that. It doesn’t mean that I don’t want a child, but just not right now.”

Images of Society Past and Present

How do these young couples view the social realities of post-transition Hungary, and how are these views shaped by their ideas of the socialist past? When asked about having children under current social and economic situation, the couples talked at length about their fear of uncertainty and unpredictability. Although most of them were teenagers at the time of the demise of socialism, they readily compared the two systems as if the stark realities of the present were seen by them against a more benign past. They claimed that one of the major differences between the two systems was reliability and feeling safe during socialism, and their lack in the current system. The images of safety in the socialist years, and of insecurity and uncertainty at present, pervaded all aspects of life. Julia, for example, said, “people don’t know exactly what to expect, who to trust, who not to trust.” Peter pointed out that during the socialist years “there was a comparatively stronger social safety net.” Szabolcs said that it is now more difficult for people to find work, and it may not be in one’s field. Rozsa complained about job security, saying that if she went on maternity leave, she might lose her job. The result is an unwillingness to experiment, to investigate different avenues, and to take risks. The paradox here is that while neoliberal ideology promotes the “value of choosing and planning among expanded material goods and life options” (Galbraith 2008:16), the perception of the young couples is quite the opposite. The uncertain conditions raise a feeling of limited choices and narrowed options in which individuals must cling to whatever safety measure they can find.

While they acknowledged that more goods are available now, the couples also expressed concern with the materialism and competition for goods nationwide. Laci felt that “now people want other things before they consider having children. People want to have apartments, a car, and everything before they think about children.” Jozsi added that during socialism you had fewer things than you might have wanted, “but people were a lot happier about the things that every ordinary person could get. Now stuff just gets tossed around . . . and the children want it and . . . this is not good.” The couples believed that competition for goods

led to inequality, which in their minds contrasts sharply with equality under socialism. Lilian said:

What is also different between that period and today is that there are a lot more opportunities, there are a lot more things, enormous shop windows, with beautiful stock, for example, only you have to make money to be able to buy it. In the past we got support, it wasn't such a big question of what to buy, what to eat, because you had what you had. Now on the other hand, the frustration of this abundance is that it enables some people to buy all these things, but who are not really better than me, they don't work more than me.

Robi agreed, commenting that "previously everybody was on the middle level, . . . which was good for possessing a TV . . . but nothing extra." Now," said Anna, "hundreds of thousands of families live under the subsistence level." These comments imply that bringing up children today and trying to survive is frightening.

Another concern was the loss of a sense of community, which in the minds of these young people characterized the socialist system. In this community raising children was much easier, since there were childcare facilities provided by the state and the associations for children and youth created a setting shared by everybody equally. The current emphasis on consumerism destroyed this sense of community. Now the social classes are separated. "The children only get in touch with their own circles, which is not good. There were those common institutes, and common concepts . . . Everybody had the same amount of money, there wasn't this spitefulness, which there is today. There was the . . . KISz (Youth Association), there were pioneer camps, so there were associations where you belonged," said Zsolt. Teri said, "the human relations we used to have were different . . . Relationships and connections are not so tight anymore, unfortunately." Feri added "I think they didn't let families, people, get lost in the socialist system."

The couples considered the new conditions to be deleterious for the education and moral values of children. Peter was critical of the current main values of society and compared it invidiously with the previous dictatorship. "A worse circumstance for having children is the wild capitalism of this kind of emerging market economy. It is immoral." "You should educate your child in the old fashioned way, educate him for honesty which is absolutely moral and not for what we have now," said Jozsi. They felt that children today get much less education in school. Julia complained that there were too many private schools and that this results in a different kind of education for children. "I was educated in a state school and became a normal person," she said. Tamas agreed and added, "People work like dogs to provide for their families and then think that they should send their children to the private schools because in most Hungarian

elementary schools the conditions are disgraceful and I don't want my children to go there."

The couples also disparaged the government's family policy and support system, and their comments showed that they were not clear about what was available to them. With the exception of Peter and Marta who were aware of subsidized loans, the other couples knew little about the government's current social policy. Feri, for example, did not know whether the maternity leave policy still exists. Eva said, "you absolutely can't count on governmental support for childbearing and childcare. This society is not child friendly, nor is it friendly to women and especially not to women with children." Elemer was unaware that any support system existed, and if it did, it was a politically motivated issue with which he did not want to be involved.

Regarding any financial help they may receive, Dora said, "It's garbage. . . . This GYED [child care stipend] in my opinion is an embarrassment. The total package, including the family allowance, will amount to about 240 Euros, which, as everybody knows, will buy you diapers and nothing else." Matyi called the government's help "catastrophically weak," and added, "the goal should be that people can support their families without any government involved." Others commented that the government provided a stronger safety net in the past and that the inadequate support today makes people not want to have children.

In addition to these issues, the couples with children raised concerns about violence on TV, terrorism, the rising crime rate, and the abundance of drugs and pornography. "Being a child in the old system was a lot better, it was safer" said Laci. "The smaller community in the old days provided a safe environment for the child. What you have here in Pest now, it's tough," commented Szabolcs. According to Nora, "the addiction to television is terrible because of the violent programs and on the Internet children are exposed to very dirty language. When I was small, this didn't exist. I used to read a lot."

The Psychological Consequences of Uncertainty

The psychological consequence of living with uncertainty and not knowing if there will be satisfactory conditions for childbearing, creates a high level of stress, according to the couples. "Absolutely everything is corrupt, nothing really works above board, to arrange this or that is impossible, life is stressful and everybody is stressed out," said Zsolt. In the previous system, "there wasn't so much stress and running about as we do nowadays because otherwise we are going to have nothing," commented Rozsa; and in Otto's opinion, "they treat you like a racehorse . . . which is always being driven and driven, whereas in the previous system we had more peace and a quiet."

When asked what they feared most, the respondents talked about sickness, pain, debilitation, and helplessness. Examples of these comments are those of Emese, "I have this fear of illnesses"; Lilian, "health is my biggest concern"; and Peter, "the illness and death of my loved ones is what worries me most." Pali was afraid of becoming depressed and staying at home, "lying in my bed, staring at the ceiling, and drinking six beers in the evening instead of two." Lilian said she worried that she would be unable to help those close to her "if they need something and I couldn't do it psychologically or financially, if they have a problem and I cannot comfort them because I am not in shape to do so."

Financial insecurity, work instability, and unemployment, were also frequently mentioned as a cause for anxiety. "The uncertainty of remaining at work gives me nightmares," said Matyi. "Financial security, that you won't have a salary in the future," said Otto, and "that my salary will not be enough. . . . I will earn less than what my parents collected," said Jozsi. Marta worried that she could "end up homeless."

The Concept of Home

Home is the one stable point that seems to be a refuge. It is valued as the place where people live their meaningful lives, where they can escape from the vagaries of state policies, and from economic difficulties. This is similar to what was depicted in the literature for the socialist years (e.g., Gal and Kligman 2000) and contrary to the current discourse on individualization during the Second Demographic Transition, these views persist. It seems that individuals continue to rely on personal relationships to face insecurity and that family and home remain the safe havens.

The vast majority of the interviewees equated home with security. "Home is the safe point you can go to" and "it just means something that I am safe only there." The second most frequent depiction included the idea of peace and calm. For example, "home is where I can shut everything out, where I can be calm; I can withdraw, I do what I want. Peace, tranquility, more or less, that's all." Many informants linked home with family.

"Home, philosophically or theoretically, means the family, where it's good to go and where you feel good" or "that dad-mom-and-kids thing, so it was usually like this around us, even if I grew up without a father." "Home is warmth and goodness . . . lunch every Sunday, and a good family atmosphere." "Home means a family atmosphere which is happy, peaceful, where there is more than one child, and everybody is healthy. Such an atmosphere gives me good reason to go to work, and why I sweat away in my job. . . ." However, the safety and

security of the home is a small part of the total social reality of an individual, and does not provide sufficient preconditions for having a child.

CONCLUSIONS

This article examined people's views regarding reproductive decisions in post-socialist Hungary. The findings from this sample are that virtually all young Budapest couples desire to have children. Moreover, they would not limit the number to one child, which is the standard practice among couples of reproductive age in the country. Nonetheless, these couples find it difficult to reconcile these desires with the realities of the post-socialist world. Consequently, they delay childbearing and, with very few exceptions, express no urgency to enter into parenthood. This concurs with the conclusions of Aassve, Billari and Speder (2006:148) whose recent analysis of the Hungarian Generations and Gender Survey found little sign of reversing the delay in childbearing and family formation. They suggest that this trend is a "postponement transition," a change of attitudes and norms among the young (Kohler et al. 2002).

Concerns about uncertain conditions, including the unstable labor market, the disappearance of the safety nets provided by the former socialist regime, and the emergence of a new value system, dominates the thinking of the respondents. For these young couples, the post-socialist world is an insecure and unpredictable place, especially when contrasted with an idealized socialist past. This idealized past is the background against which reproductive decisions are made. In this past, there were social services, a social safety net, equality, and community. The neoliberal capitalist economy, which encourages people to regard themselves as independent agents, is not seen as providing opportunities for advancement, but is considered as immoral, and where competition gives rise to inequality.

These nostalgic statements echo those depicted for post-Soviet Russia (Boym 2002), who finds that in Russia,

the campaign for recovery of memory gave way to a new longing for the imaginary ahistorical past, the age of stability and normalcy. This mass nostalgia is a kind of nationwide midlife crisis—many are longing for a time of their childhood and youth, projecting personal affective memories onto the larger historical picture and partaking collectively in selective forgetting. . . . In the mid 1990s nostalgia became a defense mechanism against the accelerated rhythm of change and economic shock therapy. With such interest in the past, future aspirations began to shrink. (Boym 2002:66)

What is striking about the nostalgia of the young Hungarian subjects is that it is second-hand nostalgia. Since the communist past was not actually experienced by any of them, their views on the past very likely were transmitted from their parental generation, to whom the transformation of the system came as somewhat

of a shock. Nevertheless, these feelings and longings are real and reinforced by everyday realities. The result is a mistrust of new institutions and developments and a fear of the future.

The views of this relatively small purposive sample echo some of the findings derived from two large data sets in Hungary, the Way of Life and the Time Use Survey, carried out in 1999–2000, and the General Youth Survey, in 2000 (Robert and Bukodi 2005). These surveys found that globalization and the uncertain conditions in post-communist Hungary impacted on behaviors in the transition to adulthood of those born between 1971 and 1985, the “globalization generation.” With regard to entering the labor market, they found that “young people tried to remain in the school system as long as possible” (Robert and Bukodi 2005:210), assuming that higher education increased the odds of finding a better first job. However, due to the increasing uncertainty of the labor market in the 1990s, more and more young job seekers could enter the labor market only through self-employment, and many of them managed to find only fixed-term (temporary) employment. The effect of job insecurity on partner formation was that individuals in short or fixed-term jobs were more likely to choose cohabitation over marriage. Reducing insecurity by steady employment career and educational capital accelerated the conversion of cohabitation to marriage. As far as entry into first parenthood is concerned, women “with poor economic resources and uncertain employment prospects tend[ed] to choose the secure motherhood instead of labor market career, while better educated women tend[ed] to postpone motherhood or remain childless” (Robert and Bukodi 2005:211).

The way the young couples envision their life course is in keeping with the findings of this larger study, particularly their ideas about parenthood, which in their view should occur only after certain prerequisites are met. These include the completion of education, secure employment, the acquisition of independent housing, and a stable relationship, whether marital or cohabiting. The Budapest sample is similar to a West German sample from Lubeck (Bernardi et al. 2008), where the prevalent pattern in family formation was characterized as “sequential.” In this pattern, “the prospects of parenthood are strongly related to the perceptions of job instability and biographical uncertainties” (Bernardi et al. 2008:304). The Lubeck pattern is characterized by the notion that stability in work, financial security, and a solid partnership are prerequisites to having children, and by the perception that children are a risk to a desired personal lifestyle. This latter consideration is not shared by the Budapest sample, where individuals say they desire and cherish children. However, the importance of job stability, financial security, and a solid partnership as precursors to parenthood are just as important in Budapest as in Lubeck. The strategy of the Budapest couples at

this point in their life course is a focus on education and career, which, they consider as necessary for a stable future which includes permanent commitments and children.

On the effects of uncertainty on family formation and entry into parenting, the Budapest young people behave as predicted by the Mills and Blissfield model and by Giddens. Their plans to marry and have children are often delayed as they find commitments to permanent partnerships and childbearing difficult to make. Their strategy therefore is to focus on schooling and career in order to lay the foundation for a stable future of permanent commitments and children. This particular sample shows little evidence of “judicious opportunism” (Johnson-Hanks 2005) or “ad hocking” as opportunities arise. With one or two exceptions, switching jobs and looking for better positions are not found among these couples, who cling to safety by not changing positions or taking advantage of challenging opportunities. This possibly is at least partially due to the character of the sample, which is urban, relatively well educated, and which has been socialized to regard education as a vital precursor to a stable and secure career and life. These young people did not choose the strategy of uncertainty reduction proposed by Friedman et al. (1994) by entering into early commitments of marriage and childbearing. These were postponed, often indefinitely. While these findings, based on a purposive sample, cannot be generalized to different cohorts or locations, they do point to the contradiction between fertility desires and restrictions in the post-socialist context.

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