

Preference Theory and Low Fertility: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

The discussion on the causes of the most recent fertility decline in Europe, and in particular on the emergence of lowest low fertility, emphasizes the relevance of cultural factors as compared to economic ones. Within such framework, the heterogeneity of preferences concerning the “career vs. family” dichotomy has been systematized in the “Preference Theory” developed by Catherine Hakim. This heterogeneity, however, has been so far underinvestigated in a comparative framework. This paper makes use of new comparative data from the 2004/05 round of the European Social Survey to test the links between individual-level preferences and both fertility outcomes and fertility intentions, in a variety of societal settings. Results confirm an association between work-family lifestyle preferences and realized fertility in a variety of European countries, while they do not support the relevance of lifestyle preferences on fertility intentions concerning a 3-year interval.

Keywords: preference theory, low and lowest low fertility, Europe, European Social Survey, welfare regime.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of very low and lowest low fertility in Europe during the 1990s has posed several challenges to scholars willing to investigate its main causes also through the comparison of various national-level fertility patterns (see, e.g., Caldwell and Schindlmayr, 2003; Kohler et al., 2002). Moreover, the increasing relevance of low fertility levels for the European policy debate triggered the need to gain a deeper understanding on the relevance of the diverse determinants of fertility choices (Demeny, 2003; Castles, 2003; Commission of the European Communities, 2005; McDonald, 2002; Stark et al., 2002)

Roughly, contributions that aim at explaining the causes of low fertility may be grouped into two main categories. First, a “structural” approach, which provides explanations based on economic factors like rising female education and labor supply, responses to actual and expected unemployment and to the general economic conditions (see, e.g., Adsera, 2005; Ahn and Mira, 2002; Butz and Ward, 1979). Second, a “cultural” approach, centered on the notion of Second Demographic Transition, which stresses ideational factors like changing values and attitudes, increased female autonomy and independence as the main driving forces behind fertility decline (see, e.g., Lesthaeghe, 1983; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1888; Van de Kaa, 1987; 2001). Some authors have emphasized the need to stress simultaneously economic and cultural determinants of low fertility (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988; Kohler, 2002). Nevertheless, so far no comparative study has been conducted with the aim of weighing the relative importance of the two sets of factors (and especially of cultural ones) in different European countries. To this aim, it is necessary to exploit the heterogeneity in fertility behavior that exists within countries, and to have access to comparative micro-level data that contain both structural and cultural variables.

In this paper, we exploit a new source of data that has become available very recently—the 2004-05 Round 2 of the European Social Survey (ESS-2)—in order to conduct a comparative analysis of fertility choices for 11 European countries belonging to different societies, that we group according to “welfare regime”. Our analysis starts from Hakim’s (2000) proposal of a Preference Theory, which gives to the heterogeneity of lifestyle preferences within a population a central role in explaining family and fertility choices. More specifically, the paper investigates the link between women’s lifestyle orientations and fertility outcomes on the one side, and fertility intentions on the other side. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly introduces Preference Theory and reviews the critical discussion it has originated in recent research. Section 3 introduces the ESS-2 data on which analyses are based. Section 4 discusses the link between Preference Theory and the ESS-2 survey instruments and provide some descriptive evidence. Methods of analysis are introduced in Section 5, while Section 6 presents the main results. Some concluding remarks are introduced in Section 7.

2. Preference theory and fertility choices

Catherine Hakim’s “Preference Theory”, fully developed in the monograph “Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st century” (Hakim, 2000) is a new sociological theory with the aim of better explaining current changes in modern societies for women with respect to

two main lifecycle patterns: fertility and employment. Emphasizing the importance of cultural factors as the key to explaining recent changes in family formation and fertility patterns occurred in all modern industrialized societies, Preference Theory regards lifestyle preferences and values as the principal determinants of women's fertility choices and outcomes. Preferences obviously act shaping also men's decisions, but "attitudes have an especially strong impact on women's behaviour because women have genuine choices to make regarding employment versus home-making" (Hakim 2002: 432)¹.

According to Hakim, in modern industrialized societies women are heterogeneous and this heterogeneity should be considered explicitly in the explanation of behavior and in the design of public policies. More specifically, different "types" of women are identifiable as far as their lifestyle preferences with respect to the tradeoff between family and work are considered. The idea is that, within an industrialized country, the distribution of women between the three groups is roughly symmetric. On the two tails, both accounting for 10% to 30% of the total, there are, respectively, family oriented and career oriented women, while the great majority, between 40% and 80% of the total, are defined "adaptive women". Preference Theory provides a detailed description of the three types' identities.

Being family oriented means regarding family life and children as the main priorities in life, thus, deciding not to work, at least unless economic needs require entering the labor market. When these women obtain high levels of education, this can be interpreted as a means to earn a better position on the partnership market and, more generally, to earn some kind of cultural capital. Being career oriented, on the other hand, means giving value to a life devoted to work, either in paid employment or in the public arena. Career oriented women strive for achieving a high level of education, and they stay frequently unmarried and/or childless. Finally, adaptive women have no prevailing preference orientation. They usually want to "get the best of both worlds", combining work and family. Adaptive women are therefore fully in the middle of the trade off between family and work career. The group of adaptive women usually includes also women with unplanned future, who aim at catching opportunities toward career or family when either one of the two shows up, or when public policies change in favor of one extreme group or the other. Women in this group usually achieve education and qualifications as an insurance policy and usually quit working or move to part time work after a birth. This is the category that researchers usually refer to when they consider women in a given society as belonging to a homogeneous group.

According to Preference Theory, the three lifestyle orientations have originated within a new scenario that results from five historical changes: the contraceptive revolution, the equal opportunities revolution, the expansion of white-collar occupations, the creation of jobs for secondary earner and, finally, the increasing attention paid on personal values and preferences when individual choices are made. In other words, the emergence of this new scenario can be seen as a result of the Second Demographic Transition, as outlined by Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa in a series of contributions.

¹ An attempt to apply the Theory explicitly to the masculine universe can be found in Rabusic and Manea (2006).

Hakim points out that not all modern societies have achieved the new scenario yet². Moreover, she explains that the relative size of the three groups could vary in those countries where public policies act favoring one group or another. Within the European environment, Britain seems to be a special case where the labor market, the legal system and the background acceptance of differences in values and cultures all acted favoring the birth of the new scenario for women. Moreover, Britain can be regarded as the main suitable background for testing Preference Theory also because, since a low level of welfare polices is supplied, the Government's intervention in the private sphere acts without biasing individual decisions. Indeed, Hakim provides evidence that her classification fits well the British case, and that it also fits actual fertility in Britain: family and work-centered women result to be, respectively, the most and the least fertile.

Hakim's Preference Theory has attracted a peculiar interest in the literature, mostly from its critiques. The main critics to Preference Theory concern the causality link, i.e. whether heterogeneous preferences are actually causing heterogeneous behaviour. Instead, Hakim's critics suggest that the causality nexus acts in the other way round, i.e. that, generally, person-specific circumstances and background factors mostly account for a person's orientation in life and thus determine decisions, while preferences do not have a causing power on behaviour, but just act shaping and influencing choices (Crompton et al., 1998; Fagan, 2001; Proctor et al., 1999; Rose, 2001). It is well known from literature that actual fertility might trigger changes in values and preferences (see, e.g., Beets et al., 1999), i.e. not necessarily family oriented tend to be frequently married with children but it may be that the circumstance of being mothers with a big family size causes preferences to be oriented toward a family centred lifestyle. In this respect, McRae's critique (2003a,b) underlines that Preference Theory does not sufficiently take into account the fact that situational, structural and normative constraints might bias women's choices. The same concept has been outlined by Tomlinson (2006), who observes that care networks, work status and the welfare policy context are three powerful forces which can either facilitate or impede the realization of every woman's work preferences, driving female trajectories inside and outside part-time work following maternity. Doorewaard and coauthors (2004), focusing on a sub-sample of female returners³ and analyzing women's orientations toward work—i.e. different reasons driving women's (re)entrance in the labour market—demonstrate a strong association between personal, financial and family constraints and women's work orientations.

Hakim replied to critics by pointing out that Preference Theory does not deny the influence of situational and structural factors on behavioural outcomes, but it states that, on their own, preferences “have a strong impact on behaviour: on employment rates, hours worked, fertility, and patterns of marriage and divorce” (Hakim, 2003c: 342). More deeply, contextual social structural and institutional factors influence differently different

² “The US, Britain and probably the Netherlands currently provide the prime examples of societies that have achieved the new scenario for women. [...] Most European countries still have little or nothing to actively enforce equal opportunities legislation. [...] For example, in Greece, Italy, and Spain, there is evidence of informal barriers to women's access to the labor market: female unemployment rates are more than double those of males [...] Within the European Union, only Britain, Ireland, and the Netherlands have a public body responsible for enforcing equal pay and equal opportunities laws” – Hakim, 2003b: 360.

³ The expression “female returners” refers to “women who seek to re-enter the work-force after a few years of unpaid care-taking responsibilities” (Doorewaard et al. 2004: 8).

groups of women: adaptive women are very responsive to any kind of public policies and to institutional factors generally, but the other two extreme groups are influenced only by factors coping with their inner preference orientation, i.e. family oriented women are not responsive to employment policies as well as career oriented are not responsive to social family ones.

In what follows, we attempt to build a categorization of women that comes as close as possible to the one outlined by Hakim, and we investigate whether three different types of women are identifiable when extending the analysis to European countries other than Great Britain. Subsequently, we test whether actual and intended fertility are different across these three groups as suggested by Preference Theory.

3. Comparative survey data and the classification of women according to work-family preferences

Our empirical analyses are based on the ESS-2, i.e. the European Social Survey Round 2 2004/5, second edition⁴. A particular care has been put to develop the comparative aspect of the ESS-2. More specifically, the data are collected through a cross section survey, conducted through face-to-face interviews in national languages with a strict methodology that ensures comparability of national samples and careful translation of questionnaires. The ESS is a biennial social survey that generally aims at measuring values and behaviors of European populations and at understanding how and why such patterns can vary over time. The questionnaire for each round consists of a core module, constant from round to round, plus rotating modules, repeated at intervals and each time devoted to different topics. The core module aims at monitoring change and continuity in socio-economic-political and demographic variables, and to provide background variables for the analysis of the rotating modules, whose aim is investigating in depth some particular themes.

The European Social Survey proves to be useful for our analysis of lifestyle preferences since, within the second round, it contains a rotating module collecting information on family, work and wellbeing. Therefore, specific questions about family-work balance are asked, as well as some questions on family and fertility choices.

On the use of this dataset for the study of Preference Theory a discussion is in order. Hakim has already criticized the use of the European Social Survey for the test of her Theory, although it is not clear whether she referred to the special set of questions contained in ESS-2 (Hakim, 2003c: 340). According to Hakim, this survey asks almost exclusively about public morality statements, which she regards as inappropriate to actually catch the one-way causality nexus between preferences and outcomes, since “there is only a weak link between public morality attitudes and behaviours” (Hakim, 2003c: 340). Although the survey developed by Hakim has been built with the aim of testing Preference Theory, and thus explicitly asks about different family models at the

⁴ Edition 2.0, with data released on March 8, 2006. The original dataset includes all countries for which data have been deposited before June 1, 2005: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, France, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Netherlands, Slovakia, Ukraine.

personal level, we feel that the special module of ESS-2 is indeed useful for developing a classification according to women's preferences. In fact, ESS-2 allows to design a classification of women based on their expressed preferences about the combination of family and work, instead of distinguishing women according to observable variables, as can be, for example, the first time mothers' work history proposed by Mc Rae (2003a). In the latter case case, in fact, it is the behaviour which is tested to predict preferences, and not, as Preference Theory suggests, the other way round.

Hakim's original classification of women into the three groups, namely family oriented, career oriented and adaptive, has been based on three survey questions. She has referred to the 1999 British Survey, a project carried out for an Economic and Social Research Programme on the Future of Work and built up with the precise purpose of testing Preference Theory. Using a question on ideal family models, Hakim identifies home centred women as those preferring a complete role segregation within marriage, with the man as the breadwinner.⁵ Career oriented women are identified by combining their preference for the egalitarian family model with other two questions.⁶ Firstly, Hakim uses an indicator of work commitment: the statement that one will continue with paid work in the absence of economic need⁷. Then, she combines the previous information with the status of being a primary earner, i.e. the sole or joint main earner in the household⁸. Adaptive women are defined as the residual category.

Within the ESS-2, which was not explicitly designed to conform to Hakim's categorization, we used to a set of three questions to build a classification of women's lifestyle preferences. More specifically, we use a question about male versus female eligibility to enter the labor market when jobs are scarce and code as family oriented those women agreeing or strongly agreeing with the following statement "When jobs are scarce men should have more right to job than women". We code as "committed to work" those women who disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement: "A woman should be prepared to cut down on her paid work for the sake of her family". Then, following Hakim, we use a question asking the proportion of the household income provided by the respondent, and code as primary earners those answering they provide

⁵ The survey question used is the following: "People talk about the changing roles of husband and wife in the family. Here are three kinds of family. Which of them corresponds best with your ideas about the family?"

- A family where the two partners each have an equally demanding job and where housework and the care of the children are shared equally between them.

- A family where the wife has a less demanding job than her husband and where she does the larger share of housework and caring for the children.

- A family where only the husband has a job and the wife runs the home.

- None of these three cases"

⁶ The present classification is that presented by Hakim (2002: 442). In subsequent articles (see, for example, Hakim, 2003b: 362), however, she omits the reference to the choice of a particular family model when identifying career oriented women.

⁷ The survey question used is the following: "If without having to work you had what you would regard as a reasonable living income, would you still prefer to have a paid job, or wouldn't you bother?"

⁸ The survey question used is the following : "Who is the main income-earner in your household? Is it yourself? Your partner/spouse? Both of you jointly? Or someone else?"

from about half to all of their household income. Combining the previous information, we define the work-centered group. We then classify other respondents as adaptive⁹.

Two of the three questions involved in our classification are questions asking general agreement or disagreement with statements about the sex role division of tasks with respect to family- and market-work. Their use for this purpose could thus be criticized, because preferences may be not properly caught when general beliefs and approvals are asked in place of personal goals and attitudes. Nonetheless, this study demonstrates an association between the orientations expressed answering these questions—although they could be driven by public morality suggestions—and a series of observable characteristics in a woman’s family and working life and, what’s more, this study ends up confirming Hakim’s findings about the existence of heterogeneity in preferences between women in modern societies.

Our classification of preferences seems indeed to replicate well Hakim’s classification for Britain. In fact, 2004 ESS-2-based results for Britain—obtained by considering the same sample restrictions—are very similar to the ones of the 1999 British survey developed by Hakim (Table 1).

Table 1: Classification of women according to work-family preferences: a comparison of frequencies using the ESS-2 for Britain (2004) and Hakim’s (1999) survey (column percentages).

	Britain: ESS-2, 2004	Hakim’s findings for Britain: ESRC ¹⁰ , 1999
Family oriented	16	14
Adaptive	68	70
Career oriented	16	16
N. cases	601	1,235

NOTE.

To have a better comparison with Hakim’s result, we replicate her sample restrictions referring to women aged 20-59, having completed their full-time education.

4. The comparative setting and descriptive evidence

⁹ Unfortunately, 40 respondents were classified both as family oriented and as career oriented. Actually, the questions involved for classifying women are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, all the three questions used are opinion questions, so the answers could be driven by social norms rather than by subjective ideals of the respondents. For instance, while men usually define themselves as primary earner even when they are actually not, women sometimes answer in the opposite direction (cf. Hakim for a similar argument). The 40 problematic cases may indicate wrongly reported answers or mistakes by the interviewer. For the remainder of this analysis, these forty cases will be excluded.

¹⁰ Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Research Programme on the Future of Work, running over 1998-2003 in Britain.

Our comparative analyses focus on Western Europe only. In order to grasp the link between preferences and behavior as mediated by policies, we refer to the widely used classification of Western European countries according to welfare regime, originally developed by Esping-Andersen (1990)¹¹. The typology developed by Esping-Andersen is modified to include the additional group of Southern European countries, because of key differences with respect to the welfare policies supply and eligibility by subsequent studies: Ferrera (1998), Ferrera et al.(2000), Esping-Andersen et al. (2002) and Gauthier (2002) among others. More specifically, we use data from the following eleven European countries: Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Sweden, Denmark and Norway. Four clusters of countries are thus defined:

- Liberal welfare countries, i.e. Great Britain and Ireland. Such countries offer a relatively low welfare coverage. An important role is played by the active policies towards employment, but, as a whole, this regime focuses primarily on cases of extreme poverty and needs, whose eligibility is also verified through means testing. This system thus relies on the market as the main provider of welfare services, besides the family—for this reason it is said not to bias individual choices within Preference Theory.

- Social Democratic welfare countries, i.e. Sweden, Denmark and Norway. These countries are characterized by a universalistic regime that aims at promoting equality between individuals in general and between males and females in particular. This regime offers, to all its citizens, social services as well as employment related rights and living standard augmenting benefits. It shows the highest proportion of public expenses devoted to welfare, if compared to the other European welfare regimes. This regime, therefore, regards the State as the main provider of welfare services.

- Conservative welfare countries, i.e. Austria, Germany and Switzerland. These continental countries provide a “medium” level of welfare policies, differentiated with respect to the marriage status or to the contribution years to the social security systems, frequently linking the provision of welfare services to the working status of the citizens. In this regime the family is seen as the main welfare provider and the background view of the family agrees with the traditional gender division of tasks and with the man as the breadwinner.

- Southern European (Familialistic) welfare countries, i.e. Spain, Portugal and Greece. In these countries, welfare relies both on public and private services and provide a very fragmented set of policies dependent on the individual’s working status. These countries have similarities with the conservative ones, but they give an even more relevant importance on the family as welfare services provider and lack a guaranteed minimum income scheme. We know (Kohler et al., 2002) that lowest low fertility emerged during the 1990s in this cluster.

11

We restrict our analyses to the ESS-2 sub-sample of female respondents aged 45 years or less¹², for which the information on short-term fertility plans is available—this allows us to use the same sample for analyzing both actual and intended fertility. We leave out of the analysis those observations for which the relationship the respondent has with the other members of the household is missing, in case the respondent is not the only person in the household, considering these as key information for the whole analysis. The final sample includes 5,569 female respondents for 11 countries.

We now consider some descriptive results. According to Hakim’s classification’s guidelines, the percentage of home- and work-centered groups both varies between 10 and 30 percent, while adaptive women are in the range of 40-80 percent. Applying our classification of preference orientations to all the 11 European countries considered in the analysis, implies a distribution across the three groups of women that lies, on average, within the bounds suggested by Hakim (Table 2).

Table 2: Classification of women according to work-family preferences using the ESS-2 (column percentages).

	Liberal		Social Democratic			Conservative			Southern European			Whole Sample
	Britain	Ireland	Denmark	Sweden	Norway	Germany	Austria	Switzerland	Greece	Spain	Portugal	
Family oriented	12	13	3	2	4	12	10	12	28	21	27	14
Adaptive	71	76	59	65	70	72	76	78	57	66	63	69
Career oriented	17	11	38	33	26	16	14	10	15	13	10	17
N. cases	472	525	370	442	417	675	617	534	571	400	506	5,529

NOTE.

Within each regime, countries have been ordered with respect to the proportion of work-centered women in a descending order.

At the level of individual countries, however, sometimes the distribution of women’s preferences is outside the predicted range or very close to its bounds. These results are in line with Preference Theory, since they support Hakim’s hypothesis that in some countries public policy might trigger the distribution towards giving more weight to one group or another.

Indeed, this seems to be the case in all countries belonging to the “Social Democratic” and to the “Southern European” welfare regimes. In the first group the percentage of career oriented women is the highest, accounting for 26-38 percent of all women in the sample. At the same time, the proportion of family oriented women in countries belonging to the same welfare regime is the smallest and below the lower bound of 10 percent as suggest by the Theory. Hakim suggests that probably Sweden lacks genuine choices because of the slowdown of two of the five structural changes occurred in all modern societies: the creation of jobs for secondary earners and the importance of values and attitudes. Indeed, it is easy to conclude that all countries of the Social Democratic regime share public policies aiming at favouring women’s entrance in the labour market in a context of gender equality, which have facilitated and supported the combination of

¹² The survey question on intentions regarding fertility is asked only to women aged 45 years or less.

childrearing and labour market participation. Social norms and values have furthermore fostered the establishment and acceptance of those policies.

On the other hand, the proportion of home-centred women in all of the three Southern European countries in the sample is concentrated on the upper bound, varying between 21 and 28 percent. But in this case, the size of the work-centred group shows no difference with respect to the other European countries: it is the percentage of adaptive women that is reduced toward the lower bound. Labour market conditions and social norms contributed to slow down the same two historical changes as in the case of the Scandinavian welfare regime: what matters here are the presence of “informal barriers to women’s access to the labour market” (Hakim, 2000: 455) and the slow change in values and attitudes in lifestyle choices for women that are still closely shaped by tradition, social habits and mental architectures embedded in culture and in daily life that for them to be overcome it takes much more time than in other European countries. Thus, the preferences’ distribution obtained within both the Scandinavian and the Mediterranean countries is, in a sense, expected and in line with the Theory.

From the discussion above it emerges that Hakim’s classification coincides with the distinction of Social democratic and Southern European countries proposed by political scientists. However, no difference can be discerned between the preference distribution in the Liberal and in the Conservative clusters.

From a descriptive point of view, the classification by Hakim seems to well identify three distinct groups of women differing with respect to several items (see Table 3). On average, the proportion of women employed in paid work is the highest within the work-centered group (81 percent) while only less than half of the women classified as family oriented are currently supplying labor in paid work (46 percent). Adaptive women are in the middle. At the individual countries level, in some cases, this rank does not hold: in Denmark the same percentage is observed for both career- and family oriented, while in Norway and in Switzerland the percentage of family oriented currently employed is (slightly) higher than that of adaptive women. In this regard, beside the above mentioned ease to female entrance into the labour force experienced by these countries, it is necessary to consider the fact—documented also by Hakim—that sometimes women enter the labour market because of financial needs, even if their preferences would have suggested not to. When considering the mean number of years of full-time education completed, it comes out that career oriented women study, on average, one year more than adaptive women and three years more than family oriented women. The difference in value for this variable between groups is not so sensible, confirming Hakim’s statement that the three divergent lifestyle preferences can be found at all educational levels and in all social classes. The great majority of family oriented women are married or cohabiting (69 percent within the whole sample), while only half of women centering their life on working activities are currently living with a partner (50 percent). Again, the adaptive group is in the middle. With respect to this subject, Denmark departs from the general average behaviour, since no sensible difference between the three groups can be discerned. On average, a majority of home-centered women (62 percent) spends on housework more than half of the total time people in home spend on housework; this proportion gradually decreases when considering adaptive (48 percent) and work-centered women (32 percent). At the individual country level, only Denmark departs

from the expected relation between housework and the feminine classification. Finally, the percentage of family oriented women claiming they improved their knowledge or their skills in the last year only accounts for a share of 23%, on average. The same percentage increases by 20 points percent when considering adaptive women and reaches 58% when considering career oriented women.

Table 3: Descriptive analysis on the three different groups of women

	Liberal		Social Democratic			Conservative			Southern European			Whole Sample
	Britain	Ireland	Denmark	Sweden	Norway	Germany	Austria	Switzerland	Greece	Spain	Portugal	
EMPLOYED IN PAID WORK (%)												
Family oriented	41	40	77	54	62	46	59	71	30	48	45	46
Adaptive	58	60	61	57	61	51	52	64	37	54	62	56
Career oriented	68	83	77	74	84	83	76	89	91	92	94	81
All	58	60	68	63	67	55	56	68	43	57	61	59
EDUCATION (mean no. years)												
Family oriented	13	13	12	13	13	11	12	11	10	11	9	11
Adaptive	13	14	14	13	14	13	12	11	13	14	10	13
Career oriented	13	13	15	14	15	14	13	13	14	15	12	14
All	13	14	14	13	14	13	12	11	12	13	10	13
LIVING WITH PARTNER (%)												
Family oriented	70	62	61	64	75	74	65	69	81	65	62	69
Adaptive	53	54	68	64	65	61	54	61	60	54	56	59
Career oriented	35	47	62	57	53	45	37	35	53	47	57	50
All	52	54	65	62	62	60	53	59	65	55	58	59
RELEVANT CONTRIB. TO HOUSEWORK (%)												
Family oriented	53	59	38	54	62	64	57	58	78	56	57	62
Adaptive	43	44	50	48	52	49	44	51	55	43	52	48
Career oriented	23	37	36	34	34	29	26	28	41	24	41	32
All	41	45	44	48	44	47	43	50	59	43	52	47
UPDATING SKILLS (%)												
Family oriented	43	25	31	54	44	21	39	43	8	17	14	23
Adaptive	51	47	56	57	52	36	45	54	21	29	21	43
Career oriented	58	49	68	65	71	63	62	74	21	41	40	58
All	51	45	59	60	57	39	46	55	17	28	21	43
N. cases	472	525	370	442	417	675	617	534	571	400	506	5,529

NOTE.

Within each regime, countries have been ordered with respect to the proportion of work-centered women in a descending order.

By relevant contribution to housework (%) we mean the percentage of women spending on housework more than half of the total time people in home spend on housework.

By updating skills (%) we mean the percentage of women who have improved their knowledge and skills in the last year.

So far, the Preference Theory approach seems to classify women along various dimensions quite well. Our main research question is whether this classification could also help explaining differences in actual and intended fertility within and between countries. We expect family oriented women to have the largest number of children and/or to be the most willing to have a birth, since, by definition, they choose family life and children to be their main priority in life. On the other hand, we expect career oriented to be the least fertile—Preference Theory predicts childless women to be concentrated within this group—and the least willing to have a (an other) child, since, by definition, this group centers its life on working activities. For adaptive women we do not expect a definite patten of actual and intended fertility.

5. Analysis of fertility choices: methods

To test whether Hakim’s Preference Theory classification is associated with actual and intended fertility in the following we use multivariate analyses. In order to study the association with actual fertility, we estimate, for each country separately, an ordered logistic model using as dependent variable the number of children (0,1,2,3+) previously had. Whenever this model turns out to violate the parallel regression assumption, tested with the Brant test, we apply a generalized ordinal logistic model. In a first model (Model 1) we only include Hakim’s classification of women as a control variable. As a reference category we choose the share of adaptive women in a country. In a second model we add further control variables: age, the number of years of full time education completed (centered around the individual country mean – this helps to control for country specific educational systems), the status of working in paid work or that of being still in education.

To estimate the association with intended fertility we estimate a logistic regression for the binary dependent variable that indicates whether the respondent intends or does not intend to have a child within the next 3 years.¹³ The exact question used in the survey is: “Do you plan to have a child within the next three years?” Respondents could choose between four answers: “definitely not”, “probably not”, “probably yes” and “definitely yes”, or they could refuse to answer, or simply answer they did not know. All the respondents for whom the information is missed are dropped from the analysis¹⁴: even if it would be interesting to investigate the reasons for a missed answer to such a question, the survey does not offer additional information on this item. We collapse the answers into two categories: the probability of having a child within the next three years which encompasses the answers: “definitely not” and “probably not” into a unique negative answer. The remaining two answers, “probably yes” and “definitely yes” we collapse into a second category that indicates the intention to have a child within the next 3 years. In a first model (Model 1) we model fertility intentions as a function of Hakim’s preference classification of women. In addition we control for parity distinguishing between childless women, women with one child (reference category) and women who already

¹³ A greater correspondence between fertility intentions and behaviours may be achieved when the former are expressed within a defined time specification, documented by Miller and Pasta (1995).

¹⁴ The same sample restriction is applied also when estimating actual fertility in order to ease comparing the two analyses on the base of the same sample.

had two or more births. In a second model (Model 2) we add the set of further covariates as already discussed for the case of actual fertility. We apply probability weights in all regressions.

6. Analysis of fertility choices: results

6.1 Lifestyle preferences and actual fertility

The analysis of actual fertility and lifestyle preferences can be conducted in terms of association, as we cannot disentangle causality with our design. However, we expect associations to be consistent with Preference Theory. Table 4 shows the distribution of women according to lifestyle preferences and the actual number of children. Female respondents with more than three children are grouped together with those having exactly three children. According to the Preference Theory, childlessness should be, on average, much higher in the group of career oriented women as compared to the family oriented women and, to a smaller extent, also to adaptive women. Indeed the proportion of childless belonging to the work centred group is more than 10 points percent higher than that belonging to the home centred group. However, our data suggest that there is no relevant difference in the proportion of childlessness between adaptive and work centered women: in both typologies 47 percent of respondents turn out to be childless. Similarly, among females with only one child, these are respectively 21 and 23 percent in the family and career oriented category, while being slightly lower in the adaptive group (19 percent). The classification according to lifestyle preferences discriminates better women who are at higher parities. The proportion of women with large families, i.e., three or more children, is higher among family centered as compared to the other two types: 16 against 11 percent among the adaptive group, and only 8 percent among the careerists.

Table 5 shows the estimates coming of the series of ordered logit models, where the response variable is the actual number of children. Part *a* refers to the countries where the ordered logit model is applied, while part *b* gives the estimates of generalized ordered logit models used for the countries where the hypothesis of proportional regressions turns out to be violated.¹⁵

In the first set of models (Model 1) we include only lifestyle preferences as explanatory variables, while in the second set of models (Model 2) we also control for the effects of other socio-demographic variables. In Model 1, being family oriented is almost always positively associated with actual family size. The only exceptions are Ireland, where both work and family orientations are positively associated with actual fertility, and Denmark, where the association with preference, although consistent with the Theory, is not statistically significant. Great Britain is the only country where the hypothesis of parallel

¹⁵ We found that the parallel regression assumption is not violated if the ordered logit models are run on the sub-sample of women with at least one child, thus suggesting that passing from parity zero to parity 1 is much different than experiencing other transitions, confirming the hypothesis of Testa and Grilli (2006). However, this solution implies a considerable reduction of the sample size and excludes from the analysis a significant part of work centered women who, according to the Theory, are frequently childless, therefore it is preferable to estimate generalized ordered models, which do not impose the constraint of parallel regression, if needed.

regression is violated, and the association between being career oriented and lower fertility is significant only for higher parities (two or more children).

Table 4: Distribution of women with different lifestyle preferences by current parity

		Liberal		Social Democratic			Conservative			Southern European			Whole sample
		Britain	Ireland	Denmark	Sweden	Norway	Germany	Austria	Switzerland	Greece	Spain	Portugal	
Family oriented	Childless	36	31	46	46	25	27	30	31	31	44	41	35
	1 child	21	16	15	18	6	28	18	16	22	23	26	21
	2 children	27	18	8	9	56	30	38	35	34	24	22	28
	3+children	15	35	31	27	13	15	14	18	13	9	11	16
Adaptive	Childless	33	45	45	49	42	45	51	52	47	58	49	47
	1 child	26	11	16	14	20	21	14	20	19	16	27	19
	2 children	29	22	27	23	24	26	26	21	26	22	19	23
	3+children	12	22	12	14	14	8	9	7	8	4	5	11
Career oriented	Childless	44	37	45	48	41	49	55	67	44	58	43	47
	1 child	33	22	20	14	24	27	22	13	27	21	32	23
	2 children	22	17	23	26	21	22	21	17	23	19	19	22
	3+children	1	24	12	12	14	2	2	4	6	2	6	8
All	Childless	35	42	45	48	41	43	49	51	42	55	46	45
	1 child	26	13	18	14	20	23	16	19	21	18	27	20
	2 children	28	21	25	24	25	26	27	22	28	22	20	24
	3+children	11	24	12	14	14	8	8	8	9	5	7	11
N. cases		472	525	370	442	417	675	617	534	571	400	506	5,529

In the second set of models (Models 2), in Norway, Austria, and Germany the association between lifestyle preferences and actual fertility runs as expected, i.e., positive for family oriented and negative for career oriented women. However, the parameters of the model are statistically significant only for family oriented women in Norway, and career oriented women in Germany. In the other countries one of the two orientation covariates, or both of them, run in a direction that is opposite to that expected from Preference Theory, and they are not statistically significant. Results consistent with Hakim’s theory are found in Great Britain, Sweden, and Germany. In the latter group of countries, career oriented women are significantly less likely to have large families as compared to the adaptive group. Results are consistent with the theory also for Norway, Portugal, and Switzerland, where family oriented women are more likely to have families with many children.

These results reveal that in some countries lifestyle preferences are associated with actual fertility, while in some other countries they are not. In many cases, the significant main effect of lifestyle preferences disappears once other socio-demographic covariates are taken into account, suggesting that lifestyle preferences do not contain additional information with respect to other variables that measure “structural” socio-demographic factors. These variables, like the fact living in a union—which, as expected, is positively

associated with actual fertility—educational attainment, employment status or educational enrolment—all factors consistently associated with actual lower fertility.

Table 5a: Ordered logit model for the actual number of children.

	Denmark	Norway	Austria	Spain	Greece	Portugal
Model 1						
Family oriented	0.24	0.72 *	0.64 *	0.49 **	0.59 ***	0.39 *
Career oriented	-0.08	-0.04	0.07	-0.12	0.38	0.38
Model 2						
Family oriented	-0.08	0.96 **	0.17	-0.08	-0.16	0.42 *
Career oriented	-0.27	-0.09	-0.4	-0.29	0.46	0.34
Age	1.18 ***	1.04 ***	0.97 ***	0.67 **	0.66 ***	0.46 **
Agesq	-0.01 ***	-0.01 ***	-0.01 ***	-0.01 **	-0.01 ***	-0.005 **
Education	-0.11 ***	-0.05	-0.05	-0.10 ***	-0.19 ***	-0.06 **
Educational enrolment	-0.62	-0.59	-1.55 **	-37.13 ***	-32.11 ***	-1.99 *
Employed	-0.15	-0.88 ***	-1.34 ***	-0.2	-0.61 ***	-0.27
Living with partner	1.08 ***	1.17 ***	1.56 ***	2.25 ***	2.26 ***	1.66 ***
N. cases	369	417	617	397	571	501

*** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.1

NOTE.

Sample size may be smaller from that presented in Table 4 because of missing values, which are not considered in the models.

Table 5b: Generalized ordered logit models for the actual number of children.

	Britain	Ireland	Switzerland	Sweden	Germany
Model 1					
Family oriented	0.25	0.80 ***	1.16 ***	0.24	0.66 ***
Career oriented		0.71 **	0.006	-0.006	-0.51 **
-					
c.0	-0.32				
c.1	-0.81 ***				
c.2	-2.80 ***				
Model 2					
Family oriented	-0.21	0.28	0.94 ***	-0.19	0.27
Career oriented	-0.85 ***	0.47	0.42	-0.50 **	-0.53 **
Age					
-	0.75 ***		0.73 ***	1.39 ***	0.56 ***
c.0		0.82 ***			
c.1		0.93 ***			
c.2		0.91 ***			
Agesq		-0.01 ***	-0.008 ***	-0.02 ***	-0.007 ***
-					
c.0	-0.01 ***				
c.1	-0.01 ***				
c.2	-0.11 ***				
Education					
-			-0.10 ***	-0.09 **	-0.04
c.0	-0.21 ***	-0.12 ***			
c.1	-0.06	-0.03			
c.2	-0.01	-0.01			
Educational enrolment					
-	-0.71	-1.43		0.30	
c.0			-0.41		-1.30 ***
c.1			0.53		-0.93 ***
c.2			-12.06 ***		-12.44 ***
Employed					
-	-1.07 ***		-1.04 ***	-0.30	-1.02 ***
c.0		-2.09 ***			
c.1		-1.08 ***			
c.2		-0.89 ***			
Living with partner					
-	0.58 ***		1.19 ***		1.17 ***
c.0		2.18 ***		1.41 ***	
c.1		1.58 ***		0.76 **	
c.2		0.83 **		0.19	
N. cases	472	514	534	442	672

*** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.1

NOTE.

In the generalized ordered logit models the coefficients of the variables are allowed to change for each of the j-1 categories of the response variable, if they do not satisfy the parallel regression assumption. In the table above c.0 indicates the coefficient for the contrast zero versus one or more children; c.1 is the coefficient for the contrast less than two versus two or more children; c.2 is the coefficient for the contrast less than three versus three or more children. Sample sizes may be smaller than those presented in Table 4 because of missing values, which are not considered in the models.

6.2 Lifestyle preferences and intended fertility

As fertility intentions can be considered a prerequisite for fertility behavior, we expect lifestyle preferences to have an effect on intended fertility if a causal link is present from preferences to behavior. We therefore consider the test of Preference Theory on fertility intention as more stringent than the one with actual fertility, because of the prospective view. Table 6 shows the proportion of different women, as classified according to lifestyle preferences, by their intention to have a child within the next three years.¹⁶

Interestingly, only in Great Britain family oriented respondents are more often intending to have a child in the near future, as compared to women with different lifestyle preferences in the same country. In contrast with our expectations and with Preference Theory, in all other countries there is a higher proportion of career oriented women who have short term fertility plans, as compared to the other two groups (adaptive and family oriented). This finding should be taken with some caution due to the selection process that may cause career oriented women to postpone their actual childbearing more often than the other women. Postponement of actual childbearing would explain why there is a broader group within the career oriented women – that are also on average at lower parities – wanting a child. Indeed, when we analyze childless women and women with at least one child separately, we get results more consistent with the Preference Theory: family oriented are more prone to plan a child than career oriented women.¹⁷

Our data do not allow us to grasp relevant differences between the three groups of women in each country, as well as in the whole sample obtained by pooling all the countries together. Our results document a limited contribution of Preference Theory in the explanation of short-terms fertility intentions using ESS-2 data. The only remarkable exception is Great Britain, the country where career oriented women, especially childless women, seem to be less interested in making short-term fertility plans.

If we look at the estimates from the logit model on the intention to have a child in the next three years (Table 7), we get a similar picture. Covariates related to lifestyle preferences are not statistically significant in the models that controls for parity only (Model 1), neither in the models that control for several socio-demographic factors (Model 2). The only relevant exceptions are Denmark and Great Britain. In the first case, family oriented women are more likely to have a (an additional) birth in the next three years, while in Britain career oriented women are less likely to plan a birth in the next future, once the effect of background variables is controlled for.¹⁸ It is worth noting that in the case of Denmark, differently than in Britain, the percentages of women with positive short-term fertility intentions show no significant differences across the three

¹⁶ The item was addressed by the following question: “Do you plan to have a child within the next three years?”

¹⁷ The information on fertility intentions of the both partners is not available in the ESS data, thus it is not possible to check for possible agreement or disagreement within the couple. Analysis on men’s fertility intentions gives results consistent with those obtained for women.

¹⁸ This negative effect of being career oriented on fertility intentions in Britain becomes even higher if we run the same models only on the sub-sample of women living in a union, who – according to Hakim – should also have more clear life preferences. In other words, among married or cohabiting women, the consistency of the Preference Theory increases in the case of Britain, while the effect is lost in the case of Denmark. Results for these models are not shown because of the considerable reduction of the sample size they involve.

groups of women (Table 6); in the same way, the percentages of Danish women at different parities show no significant differences across the three groups (Table 4), moreover, Denmark departs also from the identification of the three divergent types of women according to a variety of external characteristics (Table 3). For this reason, the case of Denmark cannot really be considered consistent with Preference Theory. Some results are even inconsistent with the Theory, for example, in Greece work centered women are more likely to plan a child in the close future.

Table 6: Distribution of women with different lifestyle preferences and positive short-term fertility intentions

		Liberal		Social Democratic			Conservative			Southern European			Whole Sample
		Britain	Ireland	Denmark	Sweden	Norway	Germany	Austria	Switzerland	Greece	Spain	Portugal	
Family oriented	All parities	21	13	23	27	12	11	17	18	30	25	18	20
	Childless	40	9	33	40	0	18	5	37	55	24	16	27
	1+ children	11	15	14	17	17	8	23	9	18	25	19	17
Adaptive	All parities	20	17	22	25	28	14	18	28	20	23	22	21
	Childless	33	16	30	27	32	20	23	33	22	26	31	26
	1+ children	14	19	17	22	26	9	13	23	18	19	13	17
Career oriented	All parities	15	27	29	28	27	20	18	23	33	34	26	26
	Childless	17	45	46	36	38	27	27	33	51	45	30	36
	1+ children	14	16	16	21	19	13	8	17	19	18	23	17
All	All parities	20	18	25	26	27	15	18	27	25	25	21	22
	Childless	30	18	36	30	33	21	23	33	33	29	27	28
	1+ children	14	18	16	22	24	10	14	21	18	21	16	17
N. cases		472	525	370	442	417	675	617	534	571	400	506	5,529

NOTE.

Women with positive fertility intentions are those answering “probably yes” or “definitely yes” to the survey question on the intention to have a child within the next three years.

Sample sizes may be smaller than those presented in Table 4 because of missing values.

Table 7: Logit model on intended fertility in the next three years

	Liberal		Social Democratic				Conservative				Southern European		
	Britain	Ireland	Denmark	Sweden	Norway	Germany	Austria	Switzerland	Greece	Spain	Portugal		
Model 1													
Family oriented	-0.02	-0.42	0.03	0.08	-0.61	-0.18	0.17	-0.32	0.89 ***	0.13	-0.08		
Career oriented	-0.49	0.58	0.33	0.20	-0.17	-0.005	0.10	0.26	0.77 **	0.49	0.75 *		
No child	-0.15	-1.35 ***	-0.09	-0.83 ***	-0.59 **	0.43	-0.30	-0.84 ***	-0.19	-0.25	0.11		
2+ children	-0.91 ***	-1.94 ***	-2.30 ***	-2.05 ***	-1.85 ***	-1.16 ***	-1.28 ***	-2.88 ***	-2.38 ***	-1.40 ***	-1.42 ***		
Model 2													
Family oriented	-0.08	-0.07	2.06 **	0.67	-0.51	-0.02	0.19	-0.45	0.26	0.45	0.54		
Career oriented	-0.84 *	-0.14	0.11	-0.38	-0.09	0.05	-0.26	-0.40	0.80 *	0.10	0.22		
Age	1.24 ***	1.08 ***	2.05 ***	1.38 ***	1.08 ***	0.77 ***	0.64 ***	1.39 ***	1.04 ***	1.16 ***	0.94 ***		
Agesq	-0.02 ***	-0.02 ***	-0.04 ***	-0.02 ***	-0.02 ***	-0.01 ***	-0.01 ***	-0.02 ***	-0.02 ***	-0.02 ***	-0.02 ***		
Education	0.03	0.07	0.20 ***	0.07	0.09 *	0.14 ***	0.12 ***	0.17 ***	-0.03	0.34	0.13 ***		
Educational enrolment	-0.86	-1.34	-1.84 **	-0.81	-1.12 *	-1.61 ***	-1.49 ***	-0.59	-0.94	-0.83	-2.95 ***		
Employed	-0.94 **	0.36	-0.31	0.39	-0.59	-0.27	-0.86 **	0.61 *	-0.45	0.19	-0.58		
Living with partner	1.39 ***	2.38 ***	1.50 ***	0.67 *	1.41 ***	0.32	0.81 **	0.68 **	3.57 ***	2.11 ***	1.92 ***		
No child	0.22	-0.22	0.66	-0.55	0.09	0.69 **	0.90 **	-0.65 *	2.04 ***	0.92 **	0.71 **		
2+ children	-2.62 ***	-2.07 ***	-2.17 ***	-2.21 ***	-2.13 ***	-1.17 ***	-1.57 ***	-2.88 ***	-2.70 ***	-1.47 ***	-1.66 ***		
N: cases	470	514	369	442	417	672	612	534	571	397	501		

*** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.1

NOTE.

Sample sizes may be smaller than those presented in Table 4 because of missing values, which are not considered in the models.

7. Concluding remarks

In this paper we have studied an aspect of the “cultural” approach developed in the demographic literature to explain the causes of low and lowest low fertility levels occurred in Europe in last decades: the “Preference Theory” approach proposed by Catherine Hakim. We have provided some descriptive evidence that Hakim’s Preference Theory is able to identify three different typologies of women with respect to their lifestyle preferences toward family or work in a variety of European societies. The Preference Theory approach is also consistent with our results when it states that Government’s policies and the not yet achieved new scenario for women may bias feminine preference orientations in modern industrialized societies, as the cases of both Social Democratic and Southern European countries demonstrate.

Moreover, we have documented an association between women’s lifestyle preferences as described by Hakim’s Preference Theory and actual fertility in all the European settings considered in the analysis. Home centred women are the most fertile, while work centred women are the least fertile if compared to other women in the sample, even though, after controlling for other background variables, in some cases the effect of lifestyle preferences on achieved fertility is absorbed by other factors.

When our analysis aims at evaluating the importance of the same categorization in the fertility decision-making process, through an analysis of the determinants of fertility intentions, results do not support the view that lifestyle preferences explain current fertility choices in the European setting, with the exception of Britain and Denmark. The positive relationship found in the Danish sample between preferences toward the family and short term fertility plans could, however, be misleading since Denmark does not prove to support all the other implications preferences involve in other countries in the sample.

Thus, Great Britain – which is exactly the country where the Theory has been tested by Hakim – behaves differently from any other country involved in this study. Exceptional results obtained for Britain – one may conclude – are consistent with Preference Theory since lifestyle preferences not only seem to well identify three distinct groups of women, but they can also explain both actual and intended fertility within the British population, confirming Hakim’s Theory in all aspects. The reason why this happens in Britain, but not elsewhere in Europe – one may continue – is simply that Britain is the most suitable environment to test the Theory, since it is the only country in Europe which, at the moment, has already achieved the new scenario for women and provides neutral public policies that do not bias individual preferences’ distribution.

A more general reason for the unexpected finding regarding intentional fertility might be the selection process: childlessness is highly frequent within career oriented women and these women are also the more willing to have a (an additional) birth in the near future. This suggests that career oriented could have short term fertility plans because they do not have had a child yet, as a result of consequent postponements, more frequent for them than for family oriented women, who, instead, could not intend to have a short time birth, since they already have had children, and maybe they have already reached their ideal family size.

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