Understanding the Spatiality of Family and Fertility Change: A Policy Perspective

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This paper draws upon research undertaken in eight EU member states (France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Sweden, UK) and three applicant states (Estonia, Hungary and Poland) to assess the relationship between changing family structures and policy. It begins with an examination of statistical data since the late 1960s, incorporating the second demographic transition, outlining the extent of changes observed in population decline and ageing, changing patterns of marriage, cohabitation and divorce, growth of lone parenthood, and the growing proportion of reconstituted families and one-person households. It compares the extent of changes observed, and shows how the timing and pace of change vary from one state to another posing a range of policy challenges at both European and national level. For example, while falling fertility rates and greater life expectancy leading to population ageing has been observed across the EU member and applicant states, Italy, Sweden and Greece are currently most affected by population ageing, while the three applicant states have low fertility rates but a low life expectancy, and show less evidence of population ageing.

Having highlighted why and how these changing socio-demographic phenomena pose challenges, the paper goes on to examine policy responses. The paper argues that while policy in general would seem to respond to demographic changes, there is sometimes a mismatch between actual policy interest and potential demands. Furthermore, it argues that specific family policy measures may not provide a sufficient incentive to bring about lasting changes in family formation and lifestyles. The available evidence suggests that most governments are reactive rather than proactive in dealing with demographic change. However, the paper concludes that without further investigation of the ways in which families take account of policy when making family life decisions, it is not possible to say whether, and in what way, policy impacts upon families at a micro level.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, Europe has been experiencing far-reaching socio-economic and demographic changes that, among other things, have been interpreted as responses to changes in beliefs and attitudes, technological advances and processes of globalization, commonly referred to as the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa, 1986). Across Europe, fertility rates have declined, and, in combination with greater life expectancy, there has been a significant ageing of the population. Marriage rates have fallen, age at first childbirth has been postponed and unmarried cohabitation and divorce are becoming more widespread. These socio-demographic changes, however, are not uniform. They are taking place at different times and at different rates across (and even within) different countries (Coleman, 1996; Gauthier, 1996; Appleton, 2000).

The combined effects of these demographic trends are placing strains on families, which are demanding responses from policy makers. Under various guises, family policy is being implemented in countries across Europe and at EU level to respond to the growing needs of families in the twenty-first century. However, while demographic trends appear to be moving in the same direction across Europe, the response by policy makers is far from unidirectional. What accounts for this spatial variability will be the main focus of this paper. Before moving on to this account, however, I will place the paper in the broader context of the project of which it is a part.

IPROSEC Project

The present paper is a review of the first stage of a three-year project being undertaken by Loughborough University in conjunction with partners in 10 other countries (figure 1). The countries involved have been selected for their association with the EU (as member or applicant states). They represent different waves of membership, including first wave members (France, Germany, Italy), second wave members (UK and Ireland), third wave members (Greece and Spain), fourth wave members (Sweden), and applicant states (Estonia, Hungary and Poland).

Figure 1: IPROSEC countries by EU membership
In addition, the geographical features and their influence on population size and distribution vary between the countries selected for inclusion in the study. Germany and France are both large countries (357 and 544 thousand square kilometres respectively) supporting large population sizes (82 and 58.6 million respectively) that are relatively evenly distributed. Sweden, on the other hand, is territorially large, covering 411 thousand square kilometres, but with a much smaller population of 8 million that is clustered around the metropolitan and more temperate south of the country. Ireland, while supporting a relatively large rural population (42%) has 70% of its population living within 50 Km of Dublin, while in Greece there is a similarly large rural population (41%) but the geographical terrain, composed of many islands as well as a mainland, supports a less clustered population (CIA, 2000). Italy and Spain have variable geographical features, such as mountain ranges that divide the countries. The applicant states, meanwhile, are also geographically and politically very variable, in their land size, population size and population densities and their relation to the Russian Federation on the one hand and EU and western nations on the other. The countries have also been selected to represent different political economies, patterns of welfare provision and concepts of civil society, thereby providing potential for a particularly fruitful cross-national comparative analysis of policy responses.

The project is investigating the multiple interlocking dimensions of socio-demographic change and their relationship to policy. By examining the changing social situation, particularly the changing family structures of member and applicant states, the project aims to highlight the challenges posed for policy formation at EU and national level, political responses, and the possible social and economic impacts of policy implementation. The project ultimately seeks to enhance the decision-making capability of policy actors by examining whether there is scope for transferring policy practice from one country to another. This project involves several different perspectives, from the macro to the micro-level, using European, national and sub-national data. The first stage of the research, which will be discussed in this paper, is concerned with a macro-scale analysis, and as the geographer in the research team, I am interested in the spatial variability of policy responses across the countries in the project. It is this macro-scale spatial perspective that will be used to examine the policy responses to socio-demographic change in this paper (for a more complete review of this project, see Appleton, 2001).

The spatiality of family and fertility change: a policy perspective

This cross-national comparison of policy responses covers the first stage of the project. In this paper, I am drawing on the analyses of national materials presented by the partners involved on the team throughout the first year, and here I provide a comparative analysis of this material from a European perspective. I present this material in two stages. Firstly, by analysing demographic data from EU member and applicant states, I illustrate the spatial variation between countries and trace the development of their demographic situations over recent decades by paying particular attention to the rate and pace of change. From this brief sketch, I suggest some of the ways in which these developments pose challenges to policy makers in different EU member and applicant states. The second part of the paper provides a comparative analysis of the ways in which policy have been formulated by the state to respond to these challenges in the different countries involved in this research project. Based on an understanding of the policy contexts of each country, and their social and political climates over time, I offer an interpretation of some of the reasons for this spatial variability. I suggest that the perceptions of problems and the legitimacy of state intervention in family life that differ between countries, the intended outcome of policy measures according to policy areas and different national social and political climates are some of the reasons for this spatial variability.
The scale of analysis used here is therefore that of the nation state. However, I should say from the outset that this is not necessarily the scale at which problems faced by families can be best observed, or at which policy can be best implemented. By scale I refer to a geographical understanding of the term as a social construction of space, created in the relationships between political, economic, social and cultural processes (Smith, 1992; Howitt, 1998; Marston, 2000; Appleton, 1999). By taking this scalar perspective, I maintain that the political operations of the state superimpose a geographical alignment of certain parameters over very fluid and multiple social geographies that do not necessarily coincide with the geopolitical space of the nation. At best, the nation state moulds those social geographies into a straightjacket by treating the nation as a homogeneous bloc. At worst, however, in masking the heterogeneity of society, a national scale perspective misses the finer detail of society’s needs and prevents policy makers from developing effective targeted policy responses (see Appleton, 2000 for a detailed discussion of these issues). Hence the need to talk about other scales.

Nonetheless, the benefit of using a national scale perspective in this paper is that it facilitates an analysis of trends and general issues faced by people within a particular system of governance, which a cross-national comparison requires. Furthermore, given that the countries considered share in common a commitment to the EU and EU social policy (though admittedly to varying degrees), it is anticipated that there will be some convergence of interest among policy actors in response to EU directives which a national-scale perspective will be able to consider. The national scale is therefore useful in this context for making comparisons, and it is this perspective that I adopt in this paper.

However, I do so with the proviso that, because of the many differences within nations, it is not desirable to seek to provide a reductionist account of the influence of national policy on demography, and nor is it possible because of the inability to isolate individual policies and extra-political processes that impact upon people in their daily lives. Instead, what I propose is an understanding of the relationship between socio-demographic change and policy.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

From a theoretical perspective, therefore, the project starts from the premise that state policies and socio-demographic behaviour are related, but the impact of the state on families is varied and complex and difficult to measure. The purpose of this paper is to look at this combined effect of different forms of state intervention on demographic change. I do not purport to offer a universal explanation of demographic change through policy, but instead offer an understanding of directional trends and demographic change from a policy perspective. This is only one part of understanding demographic change in Europe, however, because like Morgan and Berkowitz King (2001), we contend that to obtain a clearer picture of the reasons for changes in fertility and family structure in recent decades, a micro-level perspective is also required that would analyse individual behaviour and lifestyle choices in addition to, and in conjunction with, the macro-level policy perspective. Furthermore, if western European nations and the western world in general show similar demographic trends yet have very different policy environments, this suggests that other factors could also be in operation, with the policy perspective being just one area of investigation to understand socio-demographic change.

1. STATISTICAL DATA: POLICY CHALLENGES POSED
In the macro-level analysis of socio-demographic trends, Eurostat and Council of Europe data have been used, covering the period from 1960 to 1999 (where possible). Before analysing this statistical data in more detail to illustrate the variation in trends over space and time, however, it is worth noting that this part of the research has highlighted a number of methodological issues of which those involved in cross-national comparative research between member and applicant states are well aware.

Firstly, a problem routinely encountered in cross-national comparative research is how to deal with conceptual equivalence across different cultural and linguistic settings. In previous work these issues had been examined within the context of the EU (see Hantrais and Letablier, 1995), but in this research, the applicant states have brought a new dimension. The concept of biological ageing, for example, is less salient in societies where life expectancy after the age of retirement is relatively low, as was the case in the 1990s in the applicant states (Appleton and Hantrais, 2000, 20).

As well as issues of conceptualizing socio-demographic change, the applicant states offered interesting accounts of the problems of using data from Soviet times in comparison with more recent data that have been collected adopting international measurement criteria (Kutsar and Tiit, 2000). Because of differences in definitions, data handling and collection techniques, the integrity of data, and the lack of data on some sensitive social indicators such as abortion rates and alternative family forms (namely consensual unions), Kutsar and Tiit argue that comparison of data within applicant states and between applicant and member states over time is not straightforward. Before 1991, for example, Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union as one of the Soviet Socialist Republics. Consequently, data for Estonia as a separate country are available only from 1991, and the data before 1991 were collated under different statistical rules, with some political bias, and omitting some important, if controversial, variables.

1.1 Population decline and ageing

The combination of declining fertility, greater life expectancy and the slowing down of net migration is raising policy issues concerned with the social, economic and political impact of population decline and ageing. Indicators such as fertility rates, life expectancy, age distribution, net migration, and childlessness, show that falling fertility rates across Western Europe have been occurring at the same time as increases in life expectancy, without immigration compensating for population decline. However, despite the overall similarity in the direction of trends, the extent and rate of change differ between member states.

By 1999, total fertility rates had reached very low levels in Germany, especially in the East, and also in Spain and Italy, coupled with a marked decline in the Mediterranean states of third and higher order births (Table 1; Council of Europe, 2001, T3.3; 1997, T5). The pace of decline in East Germany has been particularly rapid, but at the end of the 1990s there was a small increase in the total fertility rate, and third and higher order births but they still remained low compared with the rest of Europe (Table 2). Germany as a whole has had a relatively high, positive net migration flow since the 1980s, particularly throughout the early 1990s, but since then it has continued to slow to around the EU average. Combined with low and declining fertility rates, population decline is a key feature of the German demographic situation.

The three applicant states fall below the EU average in terms of total fertility, and unlike the East German case, these are continuing to decline. Philipov and Kohler (2001) argue that this continuous decline in fertility rates in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly since 1990, is due in part to the economic difficulties of transition and its effect of postponing births rather than reducing them. It
could be that in the future, if economic uncertainty diminishes, there would be an upturn in fertility levels similar to the trend presently occurring in East Germany (see Lechner, 2001 on the East German situation).

Ireland, France, Sweden and UK have the highest total fertility rates at the close of the twentieth century, and the proportion of third and higher order births is also highest in Ireland where, since 1960 and particularly 1980, they have been declining rapidly (Tables 1 and 2). Ireland is one of the few countries with an increasing net inward migration rate, having experienced economic emigration since the mid-nineteenth century, and its relatively youthful population suggests that population decline and ageing are not yet so severe in Ireland as elsewhere in Europe (Table 3). The picture is similar for completed fertility rates in the EU, but the applicant countries maintain higher levels (Table 4) (see Pennec, 2001, for more detail on the differences between total and completed fertility rates).

Life expectancy rose throughout the last several decades across the EU, especially in Italy, Greece and Spain, and among women (Table 5). In addition, Italy, Sweden and Greece are the countries most affected by population ageing, with the largest proportion of the population aged over 65 (Table 6; Council of Europe, 2001, T1.6). However, projections for future trends suggest that Italy and Greece will continue to have an ageing population that will be characterised by the greatest proportion of the population over 60 by 2050 throughout Europe. Eurostat predicts, on the other hand, that Sweden’s ageing population problem will have declined, and by 2050, it will have the lowest proportion of its population in the over 60 age category in Europe (Eurostat, 1997/7, tables 2 and 5).

In comparison, the three applicant states have life expectancies well below the EU average for both men and women, and especially among Estonian men (Sardon, 2001). They have also experienced the smallest rate of increase in life expectancies over the last several decades. However, although starting from a lower level, the rate of increase in life expectancies over the last ten years since transition has seen more rapid improvement compared with other EU member states, especially among women. Poland in particular has seen the most rapid rate of growth in life expectancies comparable with those of other EU member states throughout the last decade of the twentieth century. In addition, the applicant states also have low fertility rates. Population ageing is therefore not so severe, and data suggest it will not become an issue by 2050 (unlike in other European countries). However, they are facing the prospect of negative natural population growth that is already being experienced in countries such as Italy, Germany and Spain, particularly because of the combined effects of low fertility rates and negative net migration rates (Council of Europe, 2001, T. 1.4).

When the combined effects of population decline and ageing are considered, Sweden, Italy and Spain can be said to be most affected by population ageing, with Ireland and the applicant states least affected. Germany is most affected by population decline. France and Greece, while experiencing an ageing population are also growing, whereas the UK is more youthful (cf. Hantrais, 1999). Though I began this section by suggesting that trends were moving in the same direction, it can be seen that there are marked differences between the IPROSEC countries in the rate and pace of change in population decline and ageing.

1.2 Changing family structure

The indicators for family structure again present a problem for cross-national comparisons because of conceptual inconsistencies between countries in definitions of families and households (Hantrais
and Letablier, 1996). Nonetheless, using the most complete datasets available, similar trends can be observed across the IPROSEC countries. Since the mid-1970s there has been a general trend towards falling marriage rates, postponement of age at marriage and first childbirth, and the increased incidence of unmarried cohabitation and divorce throughout Europe in terms of national averages. The result is that alternative family forms and non-family households are becoming more widespread, and household size is declining. There are disparities across countries, however, which cannot be explained solely by differences in data collection methods.

Marriage rates are lowest in Sweden, Estonia and East Germany, and the most rapid decline since 1990 has been witnessed in the post-Communist states in the project, except Poland. Although marriage rates had been falling across the EU during the 1990s, in several countries there was a slight increase at the end of the century, as in Poland, Ireland and East Germany. Marriage rates are still highest in Greece, Spain, West Germany and Poland (Table 7).

The overall decline in the frequency of marriage is being accompanied by an increase in the age at first marriage (Tables 8 and 9). In 1960, for example, the European man would embark on his first marriage at age 26.8 years, but in 1995 this was 28.7 years. However, the applicant states distinguish themselves from the EU member states by their lower mean age of marriage, with equivalent figures for Hungary of 25.3 years and 25 years respectively. The applicant states also have a lower age for women at the birth of the first child (Tables 10 and 11), higher marriage rates, and higher fertility rates, suggesting marriage is more often a precondition for childbirth. Estonia is particularly interesting because it is different from Hungary and Poland in terms of family structures. In Estonia there has been a rapid decline in the marriage rate since 1990 and a marked increase in the number of extra-marital births, suggesting that perhaps the traditional link between marriage and childbirth found in the other applicant states is becoming less important in Estonia (Table 12). However, this could also be explained by the fact that extra-marital births would have constituted sensitive data under the Soviet regime and pre-1991 figures may not have been accurate.

Estonia and Sweden now have low marriage rates, and also have the highest divorce rates (along with UK) compared with the other IPROSEC countries Table 13). In both Estonia and Sweden the number of extra-marital births has reached more than 50% of all live births (Table 12). However, it would be incorrect to assume that high numbers of extra-marital births imply high numbers of lone mothers, particularly in Sweden, because unmarried partnerships have replaced conventional marriage. In Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain, however, extra-marital births remain the exception.

The deinstitutionalization of family life has been taken furthest in the Nordic states, France, UK and Estonia. For example, Sweden, France and the UK are characterised by comparatively widespread alternative living arrangements, including a high number of unmarried cohabiting couples, lone parents, and one-person households (Tables 14, 15). The Mediterranean countries and Poland exhibit more traditional family structures, with two-parent, often male-headed and extended households most prevalent, and divorce rates relatively low.

Household size has also tended to decrease across Europe (Table 16). In the mid-1980s, Sweden was recording the smallest average household size, followed by Germany, and Ireland had the largest, closely followed by Poland. By the mid-1990s, little had changed in terms of rank, but the average number of people per household had declined everywhere. The number of one-person households over the same period, meanwhile, increased from an average of 25% of all households, to 28% in the EU15, and in the applicant states more marked increases were recorded. However, Poland still has a relatively small number of one-person households (19.7% in 1995), similar to
figures in Greece and Italy, while Hungary and Estonia recorded figures of 26% and 30% respectively, similar to those in UK and France.

From the above discussion the data analysed by the IPROSEC team suggest that, while there are similar trends identifiable in the demographic data across Europe regarding changes in family structure, the rate and pace of change vary across different member and applicant states. Sweden, and to a lesser degree UK and France are places where the greatest extent of the deinstitutionalization of family forms has been witnessed, with Estonia also tending towards this pattern. Germany displays a conventional family form, matched closely by Hungary, while Ireland, Spain, Italy, Greece and Poland exhibit more traditional family forms.

2. CHALLENGES AND POLICY RESPONSES TO DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

The aim of this part of the paper is to indicate whether and how policy makers have responded to the problems faced by European families as a result of demographic change. This section draws heavily on secondary analyses of media reports, policy statements and academic literature by the partners in the project that were used to answer a series of questions designed to articulate the policy context in the participating countries. It also draws upon the preliminary findings of elite interviews conducted in the project countries by the partners with policy makers from the political, economic and civil society spheres. The aim was to see how closely the perceptions of challenges posed by socio-demographic change were related to actual trends observed in the data that were discussed in the previous section, and to compare these responses across the project countries. The research showed that policy responses to socio-demographic change vary from one country to another, and that these responses cannot necessarily be predicted from the statistical data. The policy interest in this paper, however, is not limited to population policies specifically but instead it is concerned with family policy more generally, in which we include all policies that have a direct or indirect impact on families and their lifestyle choices.

2.1 Population decline and ageing

For policy makers, the trend towards population decline and ageing presents challenges associated with the increased costs of pensions and pressures on the health care system, as well as prospects for adjustments to the labour market. However, different countries have responded to these challenges in different ways.

The countries where population decline and ageing has been greatest are Germany, Italy and Spain, where the prospect of negative natural population growth in the long term is most apparent. In Germany, the unexpectedly steep fall in fertility rates in East Germany after reunification depressed the rate for the whole of the country (Ranjan, 1999). Policy responses to this issue, rather than being directly aimed at increasing population growth, have been unintended consequences of other policies. In 1994, for example, revisions were made to the legislation on abortion to harmonize the two laws in East and West Germany. This legislation, while not primarily intended to have a direct impact on the rates of population decline or ageing, reduced eligibility for abortions to the first 12 weeks of pregnancy (this was a reduction for East German women where abortion law had been more liberal before reunification). Despite an initial rise in abortion rates in 1995 to 278.9, attributable in part to the strict legal requirement that was new to East German doctors to register all abortions, by 1998 the abortion rate had fallen to 168 per 1000 births for the whole of Germany. This fall was due to a significant reduction in legal abortions in the East rather than the West where
an increase was seen, and can be understood as one example where the unintended consequences of a policy might be able to provide some response to problems of population decline, but only if abortion has replaced birth control. (Sardon, 2001, table 64).

Migration has also helped to offset population decline in Germany for most of the 1990s. However, after reaching a peak in 1990 (8.3), net migration rates have declined substantially and in 1998 were just below the EU average at 1.0, reducing the impact of immigration on rates of population decline (Council of Europe, 2001, T. 1.4). The importance of migration to the demographic situation in Germany in dealing with its problems of population decline and ageing has been recently acknowledged by the German government in one of its forthcoming initiatives. The government has proposed legislation later this year to work more closely in monitoring and managing migration. What the outcome of these debates will be for dealing with the current demographic problem will be interesting to see (Eißel and Traeger).

In Italy, the issue of population ageing has been on the agenda since the 1970s when presidential decrees (no. 4, 14/01/1972 and no. 9, 15/01/1972) were promulgated, transferring administrative responsibility for health and caring from the central state to the regions. Since then, population ageing has been considered from a social and economic perspective with regard to the labour market and the pension system. Concern over population renewal, however, has been minimal, despite the fact that Italy has a negative natural population growth rate. However, Del Re has indicated that some new legislation on abortion has been proposed in Italy under the new Burslusconi government, which would mean that women would be given financial incentives not to have an abortion. This could be seen as a response to concerns over population renewal, but may also be associated with the strength of the Catholic Church in Italy, particularly in the area of family policy. Difficulties with implementing this kind of policy, however, could prevent its realization in Italy.

Meanwhile in Spain, both population decline and ageing, while of serious magnitude compared with other European countries, has been marginalized in the campaign to deal with the more immediate issue of the social and economic problems of high unemployment (Valiente).

From this group of three, therefore, while all are experiencing population decline and ageing, policy responses vary from recognition that there is a problem and a required form of policy response, to marginalization of the issue in the context of other more pressing social problems. This suggests that demographic data alone cannot predict the policy response and that other factors are at work that influence the way policy is formulated and implemented in the interest of families and/or society.

These varied policy initiatives can be understood in the first instance through the differing perceptions of legitimacy of intervention by the state to influence demographic trends. In Germany, for example, there is a general acceptability of state intervention in the family, while in contrast in Italy and Spain, family matters are treated as belonging to the private domain (Hantrais and Letablier, 1996). Families in Spain, Italy and other Southern Mediterranean countries have a much more critical role to play both in care and material provision, which makes a policy response to familial problems less legitimate than in Germany, or the Nordic states for example. It has been argued that this situation is due to the prevalence of the Catholic Church in Spain and Italy, which promotes a strong familism. ‘Family members of different generations are dependent on each other in a very real way ... and the family has remained the most important provider of welfare’. Thus, in practical terms, ‘those functions that are state’s responsibilities in the more advanced welfare states are family responsibilities in [countries like] Spain’ (Oinonen, 2000, 9, 25).
Valiente (1997) argues that in Spain this strong aversion to state intervention in the family is a legacy of the Franco regime that has fuelled a rejection of state initiatives in the private domain. Post-Franco policy makers have wanted to distance themselves from the policies of the former regime that were associated with political propaganda, patriarchy and anti-feminism. Politicians, as well as Spanish feminists, have therefore considered non-policy as the best family policy. In addition, the Spanish non-policy response to population decline and ageing could be due to attempts to justify to the taxpayer how money is being publicly spent. Martin (1997, 327) argues that social welfare systems in Spain are targeted at workers and those who are or have been in the formal sector because it is employers who are the principal contributors to social protection. The Spanish government therefore prioritizes this area for social spending rather than the more private domain of the family.

In Greece and Sweden, the data suggest that there have been relatively low fertility rates throughout the last decade. Policy concerns have been expressed about falling numbers in schools and the impact on local communities, particularly in rural communities in Greece (Moussourou and Stratigaki). The Greek government provides tax relief for large families, and child benefits increase with each child up to the fourth, so that benefits for the first are EUR6.06 per month, and for the fourth, the parent receives EUR50 per month (MISSOC). The Federation of Large Families remains a politically influential lobby group, and works with the government to ensure large families are well provided for in legislation. How much of an impact this might have is dependent on both the generosity of tax relief and the number of families paying tax, but nonetheless, this provides some indication of the interest of the state in supporting families and maintaining a buoyant population growth rate. As in the case of other Mediterranean countries, the prominence of the Church in Greece might explain this support for increasing the number of children per family, despite the relatively high birth rates. Meanwhile, increasing life expectancy and the consequences of population ageing have been highlighted in Greece as a problem for the social protection system, and a proposal has been made to revise the social security system by reducing compulsory pension contributions and increasing private health and social security contributions. Moussourou and Stratigaki suggest that these adjustments are being made to handle the increased pressures on pension system as the population ages.

The Swedish government’s explicit objective has not been to intervene directly to increase the low birth rate of the 1990s. However, measures have been taken to improve the living conditions of families with children following the realization that despite the improvement in the economic climate of the country since the mid-1990s, the expected rise in the birth rate had not materialized. Sweden’s new policy objective, announced on 7 December 2000, will raise child allowances, particularly for the third and subsequent child, and set childcare costs at a fixed rate. In addition, a variety of policies have been implemented to reconcile work and family life (such as extended rights to fathers for parental leave and work-time flexibility) with the aim of improving gender equality in parental leave provision. However, what is clear from policy actors in Sweden is that it is not the declining fertility rate per se that is at issue (a view that the data support since the low fertility rate is not so severe as in other parts of the Union) but instead the problem this will have on the rate of population ageing currently experienced in Sweden. These policy choices are therefore dealing with the ageing problem from below. A further point to note about these policy initiatives is that, as well as responding to population issues, these are responses to pressures from the electorate to improve public services. It is difficult to say categorically what the intention of policy is (Jönsson and Kittel).
Sweden is also tackling the problem of population ageing more directly from the top end of the age spectrum. The Swedish government is making changes to the pension system, which came into effect in January 2001, and which also includes increasing the retirement age. These changes will enable pension rates and contributions to take account of demographic variations and economic growth, by encouraging workers to work beyond the flexible retirement age of 61 and the legal retirement age of 65 until they reach 67, thereby reducing the burden on the state budget for pensions (Jönsson and Kittel). The success of Sweden’s policies is difficult to measure, but the UN predicts that by 2050 its ageing population will be the least problematic among European countries. In Greece and Sweden, which are rather different countries in most respects, policies appear to be responding directly to an issue that is pressing in both countries (population ageing), which may have a positive impact on an alternative issue (population decline).

Similarly in the applicant states, even though total fertility rates are higher than the EU average, the falling fertility rate has attracted much political attention particularly because it is accompanied by low life expectancies, resulting in population decline. State intervention to influence population growth is considered necessary and legitimate. In Poland, policies have been designed to reduce population decline, such as the restrictive law on abortion and the removal of subsidies on contraceptives, a measure which governments in most EU member states would be reluctant to promulgate, as well as greater tax reductions for large families (Warzywoda-Kruszynska, Krzysztkowski and Potoczna). The strong influence of the Catholic Church in Poland might also be a reason for these policy initiatives. In Estonia, population decline was seen as a major threat to the survival of the nation, and a proposal by the World Bank to replace universal child benefits with targeted and means-tested benefits was rejected earlier in 2001 to prevent discouragement of childbearing that would accelerate the rate of population decline (Kutsar and Karelson). In Hungary, low fertility rates were interpreted in media reports as a sign of low morale and regarded as a cause for concern, and political discussions centred on how to influence population growth (Neményi, Kende, Takács and Toth). In the Hungarian case, this argument has been made, particularly by right wing policy actors, in relation to fears about the erosion of Hungarian culture because of the higher birth rates of Gypsies compared with the lower birth rates of the non-Gypsies (Vörös, 1999; Kende, 2000).

In the case of the applicant states, politicians appear to be talking about problems in need of policy responses that are not so severe as those in other parts of the Union. The need to promote national prestige and demonstrate national credibility following years of Soviet rule provides some indication to the reasons why there is such a level of interest in maintaining high population growth rates. The failure to address the issue of lowering life expectancy, however, which appears to be a more serious issue in relation to the rest of Europe, and which could have the similar effect of reducing the rate of population decline, warrants special mention therefore. In the interviews with elite policy actors in the applicant states, the question of economic pressures of transition were raised consistently, particularly in Poland and Estonia, where costs of policies were central to the type of policies formulated and implemented (see the next section for further evidence of this). This non-policy response to low life expectancy in the applicant states could be associated with the fear of incurring additional costs to the healthcare system as the population ages, which these post-communist states would not be able to afford.

As well as in the applicant states, there is also concern expressed about population decline in French policy initiatives and public opinion, despite the relatively stable population growth rate. Again, to understand why there is this mismatch between the statistical evidence and the policy interest in France, it is necessary to look beyond politics and into the cultural sphere. One possible explanation is that French governments have a long history of intervention in family policy and a concern with
In terms of population decline and ageing then, policy responses have varied across different countries. These responses have been related in part to the severity of the problems indicated in the data, but not in all countries as the applicant states have shown. Furthermore, the variation in reactions to demographic issues does not account for the many ways in which policy has responded (or not) to the challenges of population decline and ageing. This variation has been explained, in part, by the differences in policy environments, the perceived legitimacy of state intervention in family life, the relation of demographic concerns to other national policy issues, unintended consequences of other policy initiatives, the political future of nations and their appearance on the international stage, cultural legacies of the Church and aversion of policies associated with authoritarian rule, and the tight budget constraints of states experiencing slow economic development. The next part of this paper will consider challenges posed to policy makers by changes in family structure to see whether any patterns emerge.

2.2 Changing family structure: family instability

In several countries changes in family structure have been interpreted as signs of family de-institutionalization, resulting in the de-stabilization of family unites, posing a threat to a social order founded on marriage and the family as a basic social institution, and placing the most vulnerable groups (dependent women and children) at risk (Hantrais, 1999, 28). However, these issues are experienced to different degrees in different countries, with variable policy responses.

As stated in the first section, the statistical analysis demonstrated that the development of alternative, less institutionalized living arrangements were most prevalent in Nordic states, France and the UK. However, these were not the countries where most concern was expressed in the literature over the risks to family stability. In Sweden, for example, alternative living arrangements to the married-couple and male-breadwinner family had resulted in stable living arrangements supported by the state. Since 1987, specific legislation has been introduced regulating unmarried cohabitation, and since 1994, it has been possible for same-sex couples to register partnerships (Jönsson and Kittel). However, analyses of policies indicated that the issues being addressed focus more specifically on the situation of children living in same-sex couples. While the rights of a child are universal, irrespective of the legal status of its parent(s), same-sex couples may not jointly or individually adopt children, be a guardian to a child, or have the right to medically-assisted reproduction.

Similarly in France, public opinion and politicians state an interest in modernizing family law to bring it into line with changing behaviour and the deinstitutionalization of family life. For example, it has been proposed that the reference to family in the Code de la famille should be removed in favour of a more encompassing term Code de l’action sociale. In addition, family law is constantly under review and current proposals for change include updating regulations for nullifying marriage, simplification of divorce law procedures, ensuring that custody for children should be shared as standard practice, and providing fathers with two weeks leave on full pay at the birth of their child (Letablier and Pennec). Sweden and France are thus implementing policies in response to, and in support of, the deinstitutionalization of families.
In the UK, by contrast, while alternative family forms are increasing, governments are concerned to demonstrate their support for the stability of the family unit. The UK government has traditionally adopted a 'hands-off' approach to the private domain of the family, and public opinion regarding the use of family policies intended to influence family formation and structure has found state intervention unacceptable. However, there is evidence to suggest that the socio-demographic challenges related to changing marriage, cohabitation, divorce and separation patterns, including the breakdown of traditional family life, are conflicting with this public policy philosophy that ‘has been traditionally cautious about its role in relationship matters’ (Clarke and Berrington, 1999, 27). The 1998 Green Paper *Supporting the Family*, compiled by the then relatively New Labour government (following 16 years of Conservative rule), took the step of making family life a more political issue by arguing for the strengthening and encouragement of marriage as a preferred structure for parenting. Nonetheless, the paper made clear in its opening statement by Jack Straw (Home Secretary) that the government’s initiative was ‘not about pressuring people into one type of relationship or forcing them to stay together’ (1998, 3). Policy interests, however, continue to focus on ways of minimizing the consequences of family breakdown for children, reducing the number of teenage pregnancies and ensuring the financial viability of families through work rather than through benefits (Such). It can be said, therefore, that the UK has taken both a permissive and reactive approach to the challenges posed by changes in family structure, but has responded by focusing its attention on the economic consequences of family change rather than social consequences. I would argue that this change in emphasis could be a means of generating public acceptability for the legitimacy of state intervention in the private domain that the New Labour government seems to be accomplishing successfully.

In Ireland, the political actors’ response to changing family form differs from those of economic and non-government policy actors (Garry and Mc Gauran). Concerned by the growing high rate of extramarital births, the government has continued to promote the two-parent family and marriage as the ideal in the policy tradition of the country. The legalization of divorce in 1995 suggests a softening of the government’s approach to family breakdown, but media reports suggest that this law has not had the destructive effects on the family that many opponents predicted. It has not, therefore, contradicted the government’s traditionally strong position on marriage and the two-parent family, perhaps, some argue, because divorce remains difficult, due to its prohibition before a couple has been married for four years and because it is expensive. Hence couples are dissuaded from obtaining legal divorces when they could be legally separated. On the other hand, there has been muted pressure over recent years from Trade Unions for legislative reform to improve the rights of cohabiting couples in relation to inheritance tax and taxation issues in general; while media commentators have been extremely vocal in calling for equal rights for men in the aftermath of divorce or separation, where women remain more likely to gain custody of any children. The Irish government therefore appears to be reluctant to respond to changing demographic trends, while non-governmental policy actors and campaigners are urging reform.

Meanwhile in Greece, policy appears to be more pro-active in terms of changing family structures. While alternative family forms are much less developed in Greece, policy makers are preparing reforms to family law to take account of changing relationships between married couples. For example, legislation has been introduced on child custody and the payment of alimony by the absent parent (Moussourou and Stratigaki). This proactive policy response is similar to the case in Spain, where cohabitation is a rare phenomenon; yet cohabiting couples (and even same-sex couples) are, to a certain extent, taken into account in the legislation. For example, the law *La ley de parejas de hecho* treats heterosexual and homosexual couples the same concerning their rights to inheritance, pension and compensation in the case of the break-up of the relationship; in terms of taxation, both married and cohabiting couples are taxed individually; and social benefits and services are
determined by the mutual income of cohabiting as well as married partners, even if they do not have mutual children and even though they are not obliged to support one another according to civil legislation (Oinonen, 2000, 15, 20). In addition, the constitution in Spain refuses to distinguish between children born in or out of wedlock or according to the civil status of their mothers, yet the proportion of live births outside marriage is, along with Italy and Greece, among the smallest in Europe. In Greece and in Spain, therefore, the development of modern legislation is ahead of people’s actual behaviour. One reason for this new policy approach to a demographic situation that has changed little over recent decades is the political histories of these countries. In Spain, for example, there was a shift away from providing a strict normative framework for family law in reaction to authoritarian regimes, and this more liberal attitude towards family forms is a direct consequence of post-Franco attitudes to family policy (Valiente, 1997).

In contrast in Germany, where the high incidence of separation and remarriage and the high number of lone parents has meant that 25% of German children are brought up by only one or neither of their natural parents (Peuckert, 1999, p. 190), the conjugal family continues to be upheld as the symbol of social stability. The provision of a widow’s pension and tax incentives for couples have institutionalized the conjugal family in Germany. Debate continues over the legal rights and status of unmarried cohabiting couples, particularly same-sex couples. There appears to be some movement towards the liberalization of political attitudes towards alternative living arrangements with the passing of the Lebenspartnerschaft (life partnership) law in November 2000. The new law gives same-sex couples many, but not all, of the same rights as married couples. For example, cohabiting couples are unable to adopt or enjoy the advantage of joint tax returns (Ehegattensplitting). However, priority rests with ensuring the protection and well-being of children, and therefore government provides additional support to encourage family stability (Eißel and Traeger).

As in Germany, Poland also supports the traditional married-couple family. This is being more radically endorsed through the reinstating of restrictive legislation on divorce, which, it is hoped, will curb family breakdown. For example, in 1999, Poland introduced separation as a legal institution and alternative to divorce. However, unlike in Germany, the Polish family is largely traditional in form. The policy response to, and the degree of intervention in, an issue that does not appear to have reached problematic proportions, is surprising, particularly since research demonstrates that the Polish population is supportive of marriage, with 70% stating that they would not like to be in a cohabiting relationship (Kwak, 1995; Rydzewski, 1999). Policy appears to be reacting to a problem that is on a small scale or attempting to prevent it from happening in the first instance.

However, the Polish policy initiative in relation to changing family forms might not be as surprising as it at first appears, for an alternative interpretation can be made about family form. Given that 90% of children born to women below the age of 25 are born within the first 9 months of marriage, this suggests that that there continues to be a cultural expectation that pregnancy will result in marriage in Poland. The prominent position of the Catholic Church and the cultural expectations of Polish society currently keep in check the rate of extra-marital births appearing in official statistics. Should these influences diminish, however, then it is likely that extra-marital births would increase in official statistics, with a growth in alternative family forms such as lone parenting. The Polish government could, it seems, be responding to a situation of the high rate of extra-marital conceptions without drawing attention to this sensitive issue and the real objectives of the policies.

Poland is also interesting because, while it endorses traditional family values, and supports large conjugal families, financial constraints limit the policy measures that would fully implement this
policy agenda. For example, while, in principle, child benefits increase with the number of children and there has been the introduction of an annual payment before the beginning of the school year for families with three or more children, the Polish government has removed universal child benefits and replaced them with targeted ones aimed at low-income families. Policy intentions, therefore, are not always followed through and fully implemented through policies because of limiting factors such as finance.

In terms of family structure, therefore, there appear to be a range of policy measures implemented to respond to the demographic changes witnessed across Europe, but these are not always the ones that would be expected from the demographic data alone. There are policy responses where there appears to be no need for intervention such as in Greece, Spain and Poland, and lack of intervention where it appears to be needed according to the statistical data such as in Sweden, UK and Germany. However, Sweden is a good example of a situation where society has adapted and where the institutional structure has lost its importance, without it being considered as a crisis. Furthermore, where policy intervention does appear to be required, the responses are far from uniform. The type of policy response is difficult to determine from demographic data alone, and other motives influence the level and approach to the types of policy measures adopted in response to challenges from changing family structures. These include the traditional policy environments, the social acceptability of family policy intervention in issues of family structure, the cultural background of the country and the influence of other institutions such as the Church, and the affordability of policy measures.

CONCLUSION

The paper has shown that, while Europe has been experiencing similar demographic trends, the rate and pace of change has varied considerably between countries. The problems and challenges that arise from these trends are differently perceived and experienced. The contributions from partners in the project show how policy has been mobilized to counter these challenges in different policy contexts. Policy responses have been very variable. At times they appear to correspond with the socio-demographic data but at other times the policy expectations revealed by the data do not always relate to the policy initiatives adopted by the country involved. This suggests that one cannot predict from statistical data alone what the policy response will be.

Indeed, there is no reason why one should be able to predict from the statistical data alone what the likely policy response will be because statistics have to be analysed and interpreted in relation to other factors. From the analyses of these factors, a variety of reasons have been put forward to try to understand the mismatch, but a further explanation, indicated in the opening section to this paper, could be the scale at which this research has been undertaken. In this paper, relationships between socio-demographic change and policy at the national scale have been identified, but the data used only provide an aggregate figure of the macro-level trends and relationships between different social, political, economic and cultural processes. Little is understood of the complexity of the picture at the sub-national scale unless sub-national data can be used. It could be that policies implemented at national level are responding to demographic challenges at the sub-national scale that are difficult to discern from our nationally aggregated data. This could be the case, for example, in the applicant states where financial constraints have limited the universality of policies (such as child benefit in Poland) that are instead targeted and/or means-tested. There would therefore appear a mismatch between policy responses to a seemingly minor problem. However, it is difficult to isolate policies and responses to them to make any valid statement about the impact of particular policies on European societies. To obtain a more complete understanding of the relationship between socio-demographic change and policy one must also take the sub-national perspective to
see how policy affects and is affected by real people at grass-roots level in variable social, economic and cultural backgrounds. Only then can we begin to see a more (though not conclusively) complete picture of the relationship between people and policy and the likely efficacy of the implementation of policies for different population groups.

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