

Why is Fertility in Norway so High?

A brief outline of fertility differentials

Birth rates vary greatly across Europe. The lowest levels are seen in central Europe as well as in the east and south. The former Communist countries now have such low age-specific birth rates that if women were to experience these throughout their lives, they would bear only 1.3 children on average (the so-called ‘period total fertility’) (Sardon 2004; European Demographic Data Sheet 2006). Women’s ages when they give birth are increasing, which is typical in Europe. However, figures based on data for one or a few years give the wrong impression of how many



Professor Øystein Kravdal

Department of Economics,

University of Oslo, Norway

E-mail: oystein.kravdal@econ.uio.no

CAS Group Leader 2006/2007

children women who give birth during the period in question will actually end up with (‘cohort total fertility’ is defined as the completed fertility of women in one particular birth cohort, i.e. those born in one particular year). Based on certain adjustment formulae, it has been suggested that the completed fertility of Eastern European women who

are currently fairly young may be in the 1.5–1.6 range (Sobotka 2004). However, this is still far below the ‘replacement level’ of 2.08 needed to avoid population decline in the long run without net in-migration. Given its very high mortality rate, Russia, in particular, is facing quite a collapse: Its population size may be reduced by $\frac{1}{3}$ within half a century (Demery 2003).

Southern European countries currently have a period total fertility rate of around 1.3, and fertility has been low for so many years that a cohort total fertility rate of 1.5 is already about to be *observed*, e.g. in Italy, and not simply suggested as a possibility (Sardon 2004). The situation in the German-speaking countries bears some resemblance to the situation further south. In fact, Germany has a cohort total fertility that is even slightly below that in Italy.

Within Europe, fertility is highest in the Nordic countries (Andersson 2004), France, Be-Ne-Lux, the UK, and Ireland. Among these countries, only Iceland, Ireland and France are at higher levels than Norway, according to figures from 2002. In addition, the English-speaking countries outside Europe have fertility rates above the average for Europe, while another rich country, Japan, displays a very *low* period total fertility rate of 1.3, and will soon see cohort figures of about 1.7.

In Norway, the period total fertility rate was 1.84 in 2005 (Statistics Norway 2007a), and women born in the early 1960s who have recently completed childbearing, reached almost exactly the replacement level

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(Statistics Norway 2007b). Why is fertility in Norway so high by European standards? Is there a lesson to be learned for politicians in countries with much lower fertility rates? Many of them are concerned – rightly or not – about the consequences that this might have for the citizens’ well-being in the long run.

A theoretical framework

A brief review of the factors that generally determine a woman’s chance of having a child may precipitate a discussion of Norway’s typical ‘success story’. Obviously, the woman has to be in some sort of *sexual relationship* and be *physiologically able to conceive* (as must her partner) and to bring the pregnancy to term (i.e. be ‘fecund’).

Another key factor is whether she and her partner want a child. This *childbearing desire* in turn depends partly on their purchasing power and the expected costs of childbearing. There are two main components of the latter: ‘direct costs’ (e.g. clothes and food) and ‘opportunity costs’ (loss of labour income for the partner who has to stay home with the child (still largely the mother). Besides, given childbearing costs and purchasing power, there may be differences in the perceived emotional benefits from having and rearing children compared with the satisfaction one might get from an alternative use of time and money. Some people take great pleasure in being with children and seeing them grow up; others would prefer, for example, activities with friends, expensive hobbies or luxury goods. Naturally, these ‘preferences’ for childbearing also affect childbearing desire. Finally, people may feel pressure, at least if they are married, to have at least one and preferably two children. One may consider such norms about the number of children, or about appropriate timing, to be another determinant of childbearing desire. (In addition, there are norms about mothers working, for example, which has implications for childbearing costs.)

The third main determinant of the chance of having a child is the *access to and acceptance of abortion and various types of efficient effective contraception*.

Marriage and cohabitation affect fertility through most of these factors, though one should keep in mind that there also is an opposite causality: Couples may, for example, marry because they already have or are expecting a child.

Purchasing power

People who are wealthy will also feel that they should spend more than others on each child, and they may attach more value to the material luxuries that compete with childbearing. Thus, those with a stable high income do not necessarily have more children than those with a stable low income. However, a sharp *decline* in income as a result of unemployment, for example, is likely to depress fertility, because the aspirations may need time to change (Kravdal 2002). They may tend to reflect the higher incomes in years past, and perhaps the economic situation of other people, which may not have deteriorated. Similarly, insecurity about future income is likely to reduce fertility. One reason for Norway’s high birth rates is probably that families have fewer worries about their economic situation than is the case in many other European countries.

Childbearing costs

Variations in childbearing costs are probably an even more important reason for the European fertility differentials (DiPrete *et al.* 2003). Norway subsidizes childbearing heavily. Child allowances, which are likely to influence fertility (Gauthier and Hatzius 1997), are quite generous, and there is a 10-month parental leave with full wage compensation, which is longer than in most other countries (OECD 2001). Moreover, subsidized high-quality day care makes it more attractive for parents to resume work quickly after parental leave is over, reducing the opportunity costs of childbearing. (Since 1998, a cash benefit has been offered to those who cannot find or do not want a place in day care for their child.) In many other European countries, it is much harder to find reasonably priced full-time day care of adequate standards. Also, relatively good access to part-time work and the opportunity to stay at home with a sick child, and even to leave work for a couple of hours each day to breastfeed, make it possible to combine work and responsibility for young children in Norway (Rønsen 2004).

While it sounds plausible that good access to day care centres increases fertility, this has been difficult to demonstrate empirically. However, a recent Norwegian study has shown that women who live in municipalities where many children are enrolled in day care have higher birth rates than those living in municipalities with poorer day care coverage (Rindfuss *et al.* 2007).

Improved access to day care may also have contributed to the diminishing educational differentials in fertility that have been seen in Norway. For example, women who have quite recently completed childbearing and who have the equivalent of a Master's degree, have given birth to about 1.8 children, which is only 0.3 fewer than those with only compulsory education (Kravdal and Rindfuss 2007). This gap was twice as large among those born a couple of decades earlier (and it is probably also larger among young cohorts in most other countries, but we know little about that). If mothers have to stay home with children, the childbearing costs are highest for the better-educated, who typically have the highest wage potential, and they may respond by having fewer children. (There are also other factors behind the educational gradients in fertility, of course.) However, when good child care is available at a price that depends little on the family income, childbearing costs do not vary so much in proportion to the woman's education.

To summarize, the efforts to subsidize childbearing and help parents resume work quickly after birth have probably made Norwegian fertility higher than it would otherwise have been, and perhaps especially among better-educated women.

Other explanations?

Is it possible that childbearing preferences are generally stronger in Norway than elsewhere? Do Norwegians, for example, have more tolerance than others for seeing the house messed up with toys or being kept awake at night by babies who cry, or are they less distressed by having to forego some of their own leisure activities? While one cannot reject the possibility of certain cross-country differences in these types of attitudes, there is currently no basis for answering the questions in the affirmative.

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The attempts that have been made to measure the pleasure derived from family-life compared with alternative sources of satisfaction have rarely focused on international differentials (Crimmins *et al.* 1991).

Fathers' involvement may be a relevant issue when discussing child-bearing preferences. In particular, mothers may see childrearing as more of a pleasure and less of a burden if their partner plays a more active role. In Norway, fathers' involvement with children has been actively promoted in recent years by reserving one month of the parental leave for them. However, it is difficult to find good statistical evidence to support a hypothesis that fathers in this country are more involved in child-raising than fathers elsewhere.

A large majority of the Norwegian population lives in cities, but the cities are smaller than in many other countries, and the cities are interspersed with parks and green areas. This might make it somewhat easier to raise children, although the rural-urban differentials in fertility seen in Norway and other countries (Kulu *et al.* 2007) could also stem from factors related to the labour market.

It is hard to imagine that Norway's relatively high fertility can be attributed to poorer access to or acceptance of contraception or abortion. Many pregnancies are unintended also in this country, resulting in a large number of abortions (Sardon 2004) or 'mistimed' or 'unwanted' births, but the situation is certainly not particularly bad by European standards.

Is the high fertility rate a result of a large proportion being married? No, that is far from the case. On the contrary, Norway has experienced a particularly massive drift away from marriage. There has been a sharp increase in the proportion who never marry, those who marry do so at a later age, and divorce rates are higher than ever (Statistics Norway 2007cd). This trend may have been driven by, e.g. women's independence, the generous welfare system and generally liberal values. However, these changes in the entry and disruption of marriages are compensated for by informal cohabitation (Statistics Norway 2007e) to a larger extent than elsewhere, and many cohabitants have children. Thus, out-of-wedlock fertility is very high, as in the other Nordic countries. In 2005, cohabiting mothers accounted for 42 per cent of all births and single mothers for 10 per cent (Statistics Norway 2007f).

The high out-of-wedlock fertility

Many cohabitants report in interviews that they want a child, even if they have no plans to marry (Kravdal 1997). Moreover, it is firmly established statistically that cohabitants with children have a much higher disruption rate than married parents (Jensen and Clausen 2003). Thus, it may seem that Norway's high fertility partly stems from 'deliberate' childbearing outside marriage that is potentially problematic for children. Since children's welfare is one of our most important societal responsibilities, one might therefore argue that it is time for a political discussion about whether we need to send different signals to young potential parents. However, the knowledge basis for such a discussion is weak. There is great uncertainty about how harmful a break-up actually is for a child (Amato 2000), and we do not know whether there is a sharp causal effect ensuing from the type of union on the chance of disruption, or whether the statistical association is primarily driven by a common underlying factor. Many cohabitants report that one major reason for not marrying is that they

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want an easy way out, which may indicate a concern about the quality of the relationship (Kravdal 1997). If this concern is well founded and not merely a result of an excessively pessimistic attitude, the high disruption rate should come as no surprise. (Another issue is that a poor relationship between the parents may affect a child negatively regardless of union status.) However, there may well be completely different factors behind the instability of consensual unions. In particular, it has been suggested that changes in family behaviour over recent decades have been driven partly by increasing freedom to make choices based on rational individual considerations, as opposed to being pushed by (often religiously based) traditions (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988). Some of those with relatively liberal attitudes may prefer cohabitation to marriage because of the expense of a wedding (Kravdal 1999), for example, without any particular concern about the quality of the relationship. If the relationship *does* turn sour, their liberal attitude may also make them more likely to split up, which they might have done just as easily if they were formally married.

Summary

Norway is blessed with a very strong economy, which probably contributes to the country's relatively high fertility. Individual families tend to consider their economic prospects as bright, and the State can afford to be generous with parents, not least with a view to day care. In addition, there is political willingness to spend some of Norway's national wealth on family life. This may in turn hinge on ideas about public responsibility for individual well-being that are strongly rooted in the Nordic societies (Esping-Andersen 1999), accompanied by widely accepted gender-equality ideals. The rejection of marriage is more pronounced in Norway than in most other countries, but this is counteracted by a large number of births to cohabitants. One possible explanation for the latter phenomenon may be that women are not overly afraid of single motherhood because they have their own resources and the country has supportive policies. The wide acceptance of this behaviour may also be a key factor. In fact, there is currently little public concern about the high out-of-wedlock fertility, as opposed to in the US, where more of these births occur to *single* mothers and the chance of falling into poverty is high (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002). However, perhaps we should allow ourselves to discuss whether we may be *too* accepting of modern family forms when children are involved.

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