

**UNDERSTANDING LOW FERTILITY IN ATHENS  
AND LONDON: A COMPARATIVE  
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY**

**BY**

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I, Katerina Georgiadis, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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## ABSTRACT

The pan-European decline in birth rates and its outcome, below replacement fertility, give the impression that there are uniform driving forces at play. Europe, however, is not a homogeneous cultural entity. Despite shared history, open borders, and relentless efforts to achieve political and economic unity, it remains divided and heterogeneous. There is now ample evidence to show that comparable fertility rates are a product of widely disparate traditions and modes of conduct. In light of these findings and in a bid to draw on the accomplishments of anthropological demography this thesis presents results from two ethnographic studies in Athens and London exploring female middle-class attitudes towards having children and experiences of family formation. Through an investigation of similar analytic concepts in each, including motherhood, mothering, identity and gendered personhood, it reveals a range of differences between how Athenians and Londoners approach childbearing. These variations are not of degree but rather of character. In middle-class Athens, for example, motherhood is essential to being a 'complete' Greek woman and childlessness is shameful, whereas among white, British, middle-class women living in London, becoming a mother entails the adoption of guilt and a loss of identity, status and independence, while being 'childfree' is acceptable. Key to shaping the two groups of informants' impressions and practices in this regard is the socio-economic context in which they live. In comparison to London, childcare facilities in Athens are scarce and the provision of state support for families is minimal. However, middle-class Athenian grandparents, unlike their counterparts in London, play a crucial role in helping look after their grandchildren. The print media is another important influence on reproduction. Consequently, this study also explores the degree of correspondence between each group of informants' narrative accounts of childbearing with Greek and British newspapers' discourse on the causes of low fertility.



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## GLOSSARY

<i>adiparohi</i>	system of housing construction
<i>adikatastati (f.)</i>	irreplaceable
<i>afendis (m.), afendra (f.)</i>	master/mistress of the household
<i>afksanesthe kai plithynesthe</i>	be fruitful and multiply
<i>afthyparktoi (pl.)</i>	self-existent
<i>aitia (pl.)</i>	causes
<i>allodapoi</i>	foreign immigrants
<i>amvlosi (f), amvloseis (pl.), ektrosi</i>	abortion(s)
<i>anadelfou</i>	without siblings
<i>Anatolitis (m.)</i>	Eastern male
<i>anatrofi</i>	upbringing
<i>andras</i>	man
<i>anesi</i>	comfort
<i>aneksartittoi (pl.)</i>	independent
<i>anthropos</i>	human being
<i>arrostimeni (f.)</i>	unhealthy, sick
<i>astoi (pl.)</i>	bourgeois
<i>astikopoiïsi</i>	urbanisation
<i>atomismos</i>	individualism
<i>demos (m), demoï (pl.)</i>	municipality (-ties), borough(s)
<i>demosioi ypalliloi (pl.)</i>	civil servants
<i>dimiourgia</i>	creation, creativity
<i>dropi</i>	shame
<i>egoïsmos</i>	selfishness, pride, self-respect
<i>epaggelmatiki apokatastasi</i>	to settle in a career
<i>eparhia</i>	province
<i>epikoinonia</i>	communication
<i>erethismata (pl.)</i>	incentives
<i>ethnos</i>	nation
<i>filotimo</i>	the love of honour

<i>filotomarismos</i>	the love of one's own skin
<i>frontisteria</i> (pl.)	tuition centres
<i>fytozoei</i> (third person singular)	to scrape a living
<i>galouxithi</i> (third person singular)	suckling, nursing
<i>genniseis</i>	births
<i>gennitikotita</i>	fertility
<i>gineka</i>	woman
<i>gomena</i> (f.)	lay, steady
<i>hirafetisi</i> (tis ginekas)	(female) emancipation
<i>hamili gennitikotita</i>	low fertility
<i>ikanopoiïsi</i>	satisfaction
<i>kafeneio</i>	coffeehouse
<i>kerdoskopia</i>	profiteering
<i>koinotita</i> (f.), <i>koinotites</i> (pl.)	community (-ties)
<i>koinoniki pronoia</i>	social welfare
<i>kyria</i>	lady
<i>laiki agora</i>	weekly neighbourhood market
<i>ligoteknoi</i> (pl.)	those with 'few' children
<i>malakas</i>	wanker
<i>mamothrefta</i> (pl.)	mummy's boys
<i>Megali Idea</i>	Great Idea
<i>meson</i>	a go-between, a contact
<i>mitera</i>	mother
<i>mitriko filtro</i>	maternal filter
<i>mitrotita</i>	maternity
<i>nikokirei</i>	original Athenian middle-classes
<i>noikokyra, noikokyres</i>	mistress (-es) of the house
<i>noötropia</i>	mentality
<i>oikogenia</i>	family
<i>oikogeniarhis</i>	head of the family, householder
<i>oikismos prosfygon</i>	refugee settlement
<i>oloklirosi</i>	completion



<i>orama</i>	vision
<i>Panayia</i>	the All-Holy
<i>paragogi</i>	production
<i>patrotita</i>	paternity
<i>polis</i>	city
<i>polykatoikia (f.), polykatoikies (f. pl.)</i>	high-rise apartment blocks
<i>polytekni (f.), polyteknoi (pl.)</i>	persons with 4 or more children
<i>polyteknes oikogeneies</i>	large families
<i>poutanizoun (third person f. plural)</i>	to act like whores
<i>prosopikotita</i>	personality
<i>sholes goneon</i>	parenting schools
<i>skyla</i>	bitch
<i>soma</i>	body
<i>spataloi (pl.)</i>	spendthrifts
<i>spiti</i>	home, house
<i>ta thelo mou</i>	my needs, wants
<i>teknopoiïsi, teknopoiïta, teknogonia</i>	the process of making children
<i>theosis</i>	to achieve likeness with God
<i>to demografiko</i>	the demographic issue
<i>to oikonomiko</i>	the economic problem
<i>vathis kapitalismos</i>	deep capitalism
<i>yperkatanalotismos</i>	hyper-consumption
<i>yperprostateytikoi (pl.)</i>	overprotective
<i>ypogennitikotita</i>	underfertility
<i>ypogonimotita</i>	infertility
<i>yennovolane (third person plural)</i>	to breed

# 1 INTRODUCTION

'One child does not prevent me from doing the things that I want to do,' explained Anthi, a Greek woman in her late 30s, as she, her mother and I sat in the lounge of her typically middle-class, Athenian apartment located in the heart of *Nea Smyrni*. 'I mean, it does not take up so much of my time; whereas if I had two children my responsibilities would have been greater. Moreover, there is the financial element. I knew that my financial situation would be of a certain level, so that in order for me to be able to give to my child the things that I have in mind, I cannot give to two, only to one.' Anthi's mother, Maria, disagreed. 'She could have had two. I think she should have had at least two.' 'Did you consider having none?' I asked Anthi. 'No, I never did. That was not what I wanted,' she replied with certainty. 'You feel it as a need. I believe those who say that you become complete through your child. Anyhow, a couple does not make up a family. Family means having a child.' 'The truth is,' Maria added, 'children are a huge responsibility. It's a fact: the higher up you are socially, the fewer children you have. Hardly any people with lots of money also have many children. Rarely do you see that.' 'Yes, most of my friends have one child, not even two,' Anthi contended.

Almost exactly a year after my encounter with Anthi and Maria, I was sitting with Susan, a white, British 38-year-old mother of two boys, aged two and four, who was pregnant with her third child. I met Susan in Pebbles<sup>1</sup>, a playgroup in *The Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham* in London. 'I knew I wanted at least two children and always more than one. My husband is one of six and I am one of two. I always knew I didn't want just one child but I was surprised to find how easy it was to stay with one. I worried that I would not be able to love another as much but I don't know many people who have one. Maybe some who have had them later in life, at 40 or something, and can't have another but it's either none at all or three usually. My husband would even like a fourth.' 'Deciding to have children,' Susan asserted, 'was not difficult, it was more a case of when to have them.' Susan was unable to rationalise why she had not stopped at two children. She said simply that her two boys were 'very mild mannered' and that she thought she would be able to cope with a third child. Unlike Anthi, Susan had given up her career after the birth of her first son and claimed that she did not intend to go back. 'In the first few months, I was mind numbingly bored. Your social scene goes completely. There is no you time anymore; me, as a person, doesn't really exist. It will do, when they grow up, then there'll be time for me but I miss being spontaneous because I have to think of their welfare first and then when I do go out I feel guilty leaving them with my

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<sup>1</sup> 'Pebbles' is a pseudonym. I have changed all the names of places and informants to prevent their identification.

husband. He assures me it's not a problem but still it's my responsibility because I look after them. I don't know why, that's just my job, I guess.'

These two accounts are typical of those I collected from the two different groups of people who participated in this study. The first by Anthi matches the overall picture drawn by the predominantly female, middle-class Athenians whom I interviewed in Athens, Greece between January and October 2003. The second by Susan is consistent with the views, and partly also the experiences of the white, British informants, comprised mainly of women, whom I met between November 2003 and August 2004 in London, UK. Both provide answers to the questions I posed in the hope of gaining a deeper understanding of their attitudes towards having children and experiences of family-formation. Although their patterns of childbearing are different, each is also illustrative of the diversity of pathways towards low fertility, a pan-European phenomenon defined by a birth rate of below 2.1 children per woman.

### **1.1 The 'second demographic transition'**

In the aftermath of the Second World War, following a short 'baby boom' that peaked in the mid-1960s, many European countries began to experience a fertility decline of unprecedented scale and pace. This trend first made its mark in central, eastern and northern Europe in the 1950s and 1960s, then in western Europe, including the United Kingdom, in the 1970s, next in southern European countries, such as Greece, in the 1980s, and finally in the countries of the former Soviet Republic in the 1990s (Frejka and Ross 2001). In 2004, the estimated EU-25 average total fertility rate was 1.50 children per woman, while among the EU-15 it was 1.52 children per woman (<http://epp.eurostat.ec.eu.int>). According to van de Kaa (1987), these changes amount to a 'second demographic transition' because they have transpired in conjunction with patterns of behaviour different to those allegedly responsible for the 'first demographic transition', the last phase of which occurred at the turn of the twentieth century. While the first shift towards smaller families was, van de Kaa argues, largely due to growing concern for the provision of an increasingly costly family and non-productive offspring, the second is the result of growing emphasis upon 'self-fulfilment' and personal liberties; in other words, emancipation from 'traditional' forms of behaviour, particularly in relation to sex and marriage.

'Two key words characterize the norms and attitudes behind the first and second demographic transitions, and highlight the contrasts between them: *altruistic* and *individualistic*,' van de Kaa contends (1987, p.5). In sum, there is a move from 'the golden age of marriage to the dawn of cohabitation,' from 'the era of the king-child with parents to that of the king-pair with child,' from 'preventive contraception to self-fulfilling conception' and from 'uniform to pluralistic families and households' (van de Kaa 1987,

p.11). The 'second demographic transition' theory supposes that despite considerable variation in the timing and prevalence of this cluster of demographic changes, they will gradually gain momentum almost everywhere in the 'developed' world. Moreover, once experienced they are irreversible.

Despite the dominance of the 'second demographic transition' theory in the demographic community, it has not escaped criticism from demographers (Coleman 2004). In addition, recent fertility trends appear to challenge some of its central tenets. As Billari and Kohler (2004) recently showed, by the end of the 1990s several of the assumed links between low fertility, marriage, the timing of leaving the parental home, extra-marital childbearing, and women's labour force participation had been reversed. For example, in 1975 European countries with a higher divorce rate tended to have lower fertility. By 1999, however, those with a higher divorce rate displayed higher fertility. Similarly, between 1975 and 1999 the negative correlation between levels of extra-marital childbearing and total fertility had become positive, as had the relationship between women's labour force participation and total fertility. The reversal of previously existing associations relates to the emergence of 'lowest-low' fertility, defined as a birth rate at or below 1.3 children per woman (Kohler et al. 2002), and manifest in southern, central, and eastern Europe.

Greece is characteristic of countries with exceptionally low fertility (1.29 children per woman in 2004), yet also a below average divorce rate, a high total female first marriage rate, very low extra-marital childbearing, a late pattern of independence from the parental home, a moderate level of female labour force participation, a postponement of first births and few higher order ones. In contrast, the United Kingdom has a total fertility rate that is above average for European standards (in 2004, 1.77 children per woman). Yet compared to Greece it has a high divorce rate and low total female first marriage rate, considerable extra-marital childbearing, an early pattern of parental home leaving, a high level of female labour force participation, and though also an inclination towards the postponement of first births, a better recovery rate at older ages (Table 1).

**Table 1. Selective demographic differences between Greece and the UK**  
 (Source: Frejka et al. 2001; Iacovou 2001; Eurostat 2004; Berrington 2004;  
 Sardon 2004; Council of Europe 2005; [www.un.org](http://www.un.org))

	<b>Greece</b>	<b>England and Wales</b>
<b>Total fertility rate</b>	1.29 (2004)	1.77 (2004) (UK)
<b>Mean age of women at first birth</b>	27.3 (2002)	26.7 (2002)
<b>Extra-marital childbearing</b>	3.9% (2002)	40.6% (2002)
<b>Proportion of 4+ births</b>	5% (1960 birth cohort)	10% (1960 birth cohort)
<b>Total first marriage rate for females</b>	70% (1999)	53% (1999) (UK)
<b>Total divorce rate</b>	15.7% (1999)	43.5% (2000)
<b>Age at which 50 per cent of young people are living away from home</b>	22.9 years (women) 28.2 years (men)	21.2 years (women) 23.5 years (men) (UK)
<b>Women as % of labour force</b>	37.8% (2000)	44.1% (2000) (UK)

As Billari and Kohler (2004) assert, therefore, contrary to the 'second demographic transition' theory's suggestion, European fertility is showing signs of divergence rather than convergence, with considerable differences both between and within low and 'lowest-low' fertility countries. Yet the reasons behind this diversity remain poorly theorised. While demographers have attempted to explain below-replacement fertility and its variations (Lesthaeghe 1983; Lesthaeghe and Meekers 1986; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988; McDonald 2000; Livi-Bacci 2001; Dalla Zuanna 2001, 2004), in general, demography is strong on description but weak on explanation (Townsend 1997). According to Greenhalgh (1995), demographic transition theories are characteristically ahistorical, conflating individual countries' histories into one grand History divided into 'traditional' and 'modern' phases. 'The central *problematique* of virtually all demographic theories of fertility change ... is clearly formulated in terms of modernization theory's evolutionary view of societal development' (Greenhalgh 1996, p.27). The basic premise of the 'second demographic transition' theory was, for example, that more 'traditional' and 'conservative' European societies, such as Greece, Italy and Spain, will gradually follow in the footsteps of more 'advanced', 'modern', 'liberal' societies, such as the UK. However, this has already proved erroneous since fertility rates in the latter group of countries appear to have followed a different trajectory than those in the former and are now generally higher than theirs.

In a review of half a century of research into the determinants of fertility, even van de Kaa (1996, p.390) admits that 'there does not yet exist a single "good story", accepted by all knowledgeable scholars, about the setting and conditions necessary and sufficient to generate the central action of fertility change.' Yet one of the major problems with demographic explanations of fertility transitions is their assumption that they have a common cause (Mason 1997). Likewise, the trouble with theories about the derivation of differences between low and 'lowest-low' fertility is that they tend to disregard the potentially diverse reasons for each. McDonald's 'gender equity' theory, for instance, postulates that exceptionally low birth rates are a product of conflict between the way that social institutions, such as the labour market, and private institutions, such as the family, treat women with respect to men. 'Institutions which deal with women as individuals are more advanced in terms of gender equity than institutions which deal with women as mothers or members of families' (McDonald 2000, p.11). Absent from this hypothesis is a reflection of the disparities in gender relations between countries with 'lowest-low' fertility, as well as among those with higher fertility. Present, on the contrary, is a 'modernist preoccupation' (Greenhalgh 1995, p.10), as countries with greater 'gender equity' are deemed more 'advanced' than those with less (perhaps with the exception of countries such as Germany which has 'lowest-low' fertility but is considered further 'advanced' than countries such as Greece).

As Anthi and Susan's accounts illustrate, childbearing involves a series of both morally and practically motivated considerations particular to the context in which they transpire. To explore material such as this and assess its relevance my research draws on the depth and detail to be derived from a small sample. It thus treats such narratives as illustrative rather than representative. With the wider context of the study and of the understanding I attempted to gain, through the extended interviews, of other aspects of women's own lives, such accounts offer a wealth of evidence against some of the key assumptions of demographic explanations of below-replacement fertility, and point to a set of issues that demographers have a tendency to ignore. Firstly, they reveal the hollowness of the claim that what separates low and 'lowest-low' fertility is the degree to which countries belonging to either group exhibit certain characteristics or patterns of behaviour. Anthi and Susan were both equally committed to motherhood but managed their reproductive lives in their own distinct ways, given the constraints and opportunities that they each had to face in their individual environments, and their values regarding mothering. They also challenge the supposition that very low birth rates are an outcome of 'Mediterranean' countries' 'familism', in other words 'strong' as opposed to 'weak' family ties (Dalla Zuanna 2001; Livi-Bacci 2001). Both women were keen to have a family but they had different views with respect to how many children made a family

‘complete.’ For Anthi at least, a childless couple did not constitute a family unit, and while Susan agreed, her sense of family did not involve an only child but ‘at least two.’

In addition, their narratives question the view that societies with ‘lowest-low’ fertility are backward in terms of women’s social status (McDonald 2000). Both informants faced difficulties balancing their responsibilities at work and at home, and both took on the bulk of childcare. Yet each had to deal with distinctly structured labour markets and expectations as to the ‘proper’ way in which to perform their multiple tasks. Finally, Anthi and Susan’s accounts hint at the important presence of others in the process of negotiating fertility, and point to differences concerning the extent to which third parties are able to have an impact upon the course of a woman’s reproductive life. Maria thought her daughter should have a second child but Anthi disagreed and stuck to her original plan of having just one, whereas Susan’s husband wanted more children than his wife, possibly convincing her to have a third.

## **1.2 Aims and objectives**

Anthi and Susan’s accounts point to the limitations of demographic approaches and the potential of anthropology to capture fully the complexity of issues with which people engage in the course of thinking about having children and managing their reproductive lives. However, they also hint at the possibility of bridging the gap between anthropology and demography. While both narratives provide an in-depth look at some of the concerns that spring from participating in the process of family-formation, it is the wider context in which they are set that makes them especially interesting. In other words, Anthi and Susan’s perspectives on childbearing acquire special significance when considered in light of recent European fertility trends. Without systematic demographic analyses of patterns of behaviour pertaining to reproduction, anthropological investigations of attitudes towards and experiences of family building would not only fail to establish the broader implications of their findings but would also lack focus. This is because they would be missing vital, population-level demographic observations essential to the process of elucidating patterns of individual or sub-group level fertility behaviour.

For example, demographic data reveal that ‘lowest-low’ fertility in Greece is concurrent with an exceptionally low proportion of extra-marital births. Being aware of this co-existence, one line of enquiry I chose to follow was into Athenian informants’ views on marriage in the hope of gaining a deeper understanding of their approaches to childbearing. If the majority of Greek births occur within a marital union - as did those of my informants - then, are beliefs about and experiences

of marriage indicative of ideas about having children? Likewise, demographic data shows that together with low fertility in the UK, there is a growing proportion of childlessness, which is not exclusively due to rising levels of involuntary infertility. As a result, not only did I seek out individuals who described themselves as 'childfree' but I also invited informants to share their opinions on those who 'chose' not to have children. Both lines of enquiry were useful in helping me build a more comprehensive picture of the values and conditions underlying British and Athenian informants' attitudes towards and experiences of family-formation.

The excerpts from Anthi and Susan's interviews encapsulate the aims and objectives of this thesis. Anthropological demography is now a recognized inter-disciplinary field (Greenhalgh 1995; Kertzer and Fricke 1997; Johnson-Hanks 2005). Yet attempts to study reproduction through the perspectives of anthropology with the intention of improving understanding of demographic trends in Europe are relatively recent (Douglass 2005). This thesis will add to these latest efforts by presenting the findings of a comparative ethnographic study of attitudes and approaches to reproduction based in Athens and London. More specifically, it analyses a series of interviews conducted among predominantly well-educated Greek and white British women (and to a small extent men) between the beginning of 2003 and the end of 2004. While each investigation took place independently of the other, the focus of both is to understand the constraints and opportunities to childbearing perceived and/or experienced by middle-class women in two different, low fertility capitals of Europe (see Chapters 4 and 8 for definitions of the term 'middle-class' in Athens and London respectively).

In particular, this research seeks to establish the extent to which ideas about motherhood and womanhood permeate informants' narratives of the conditions favourable and unfavourable to having children, and hence contribute to the production of the specific patterns of low fertility in each city. Central to this thesis are the following questions:

1. To what extent do beliefs about the value of motherhood influence Athenians and white middle-class Londoners' thinking about whether or not to have children, the timing of the transition to parenthood, and family size?
2. How do women's personal experiences prior to becoming mothers affect their approaches toward the start of family-formation, and how do their experiences of motherhood impinge upon the way they progress from the first to the second and subsequent births?



3. To what degree do local, class-specific understandings of what it means to be a woman, have an impact on perceptions of motherhood and the process of childbearing?
4. How compatible or incompatible is being a mother with being a woman in middle-class Athens and London, and how is reproduction affected by the position and appraisal of motherhood relative to definitions of womanhood?
5. What are the main structural conditions (employment opportunities, childcare facilities, and the character of the welfare system etc) in each city moulding informants' ideas about and experiences of motherhood and womanhood, and ultimately their attitudes and approaches towards reproduction?
6. How important is the issue of below-replacement fertility in the Greek and British popular imagination, and do group-level perceptions of this phenomenon affect and equate with how individual women evaluate the significance of their own childbearing? If so, in what way do they do so?
7. What is the print media's contribution to the low fertility debate, and are the causes of low fertility presented by the press reflected in informants' personal narratives of family-formation?
8. Finally, what can answers to all of the above reveal about population-level differences in European low fertility? Do they challenge or complement demographic explanations?

All of these questions were subject to scrutiny in both field sites. While I concentrated on drawing out the differences between the Athenian and London-based accounts, I was also on the lookout for similarities between them. In order to do both, I chose to focus on two comparable middle-class areas of Athens and London where I felt that I had a better chance of speaking to native-born Greek and white British well-educated and, in all likelihood, professional women of reproductive age; women, that is, who have been the driving force behind low fertility in both countries. After making contact with various individuals in each place, I conducted a series of open-ended and semi-structured interviews designed to generate details of their reproductive lives (see Chapter 2 for details).

While this study does not purport to reveal the overall causes of below-replacement fertility and its variations in Europe, it does contribute to the academic debate on the subject. Although the issues faced by London-based and Athenian informants cannot be identical to those encountered by other population sub-groups, the theoretical and methodological channels employed to identify and assess them are not applicable only to them. The same analytic concepts and research methods used to shed light on the family-formation practices of women in this study are employable in others elsewhere. They are also useful in challenging some of the existing demographic assumptions about low

fertility, by drawing attention to discrepancies between demographers' models of reproductive behaviour and informants' conduct. For example, do women have clear reproductive goals or 'preferences' (Hakim 2003) in mind when they start the process of family-formation, and is a total family size of one or two children indicative of a rise in selfishness and individualism, as the 'second demographic transition' theory suggests? Using concrete examples, responses to these and other queries are obtainable.

### **1.3 Key themes**

In order to answer the questions listed above, I use a number of themes. The first set encompasses the concepts of gendered personhood, identity and the self, all crucial to shaping informants' understandings of themselves as mothers and women. The next group, 'structure, agency and reproductive decision-making', intends to shed light on the process of negotiating fertility by examining individuals' perceptions of their ability to manage their reproductive lives under structural conditions not of their own making, and in contexts where others have vested interests in their reproduction. The third and final collection of key themes contains the issues of motherhood and mothering, whose locally-specific meanings were vital influences upon women's experiences of family-formation. Below, I introduce each set of key themes in more depth.

#### ***1.3.1 Gendered personhood, identity and the self***

The concept of a 'person' is socially constructed; it is, as McCall (1990) suggests, a 'public entity', a collective understanding of the nature of the living being. This is not to be confused, Morris (1994) argues, with the human being as a biological species or with notions of self. All societies recognise the human as a generic creature and as a being capable of self-reflection but this is not enough to make her or him into a 'person'. While some social groups, for instance, view members of another clan, community or society as 'human', they do not always see them as 'persons'. Moreover, among certain groups not all 'persons' are human beings – they are also spirits or animals. Different groups or societies, therefore, have different ideas about who is and who is not a 'person'. Many of the properties attributable to persons are only meaningful when examined in relation to gender and the body. Persons are neither gender-neutral (Moore 1994) nor independent of bodies (Lambek and Strathern 1998), though there is no obvious or simple correlation between them. Personhood is also not a stable category with permanent features but is constantly in the process of transformation and re-evaluation (McCall 1990). 'Persons are constituted, de-constituted, maintained and altered in social practices through life and after death. This process can be described as the ongoing attainment of personhood' (Fowler 2004, p.7).

Definitions of personhood provide valuable insight into female informants' approaches to childbearing because they are central to the construction of meanings and experiences relating to motherhood and womanhood. As Brand (2001) notes, to a certain extent collective and public senses of personhood, even if articulated indirectly, contribute to individuals' understandings of what is 'proper' behaviour, particularly in accordance with their gender. Both men and women, she argues, must perform in a manner appropriate to their gender in order to become full persons. In Bamako, Mali, for instance, women who remain unmarried and/or childless fail to qualify as persons. I ask, therefore, to what extent is having a child important to achieving full personhood among middle-class women (and, to a lesser extent, men) in Athens and London. Given the substantial amount of anthropological literature on the subject in relation to both Greece and England (see Chapters 7 and 11 respectively), how do local perceptions of female personhood affect family size and the timing of the transition to motherhood in each field site? For example, how does the English definition of persons as 'individuals' (Macfarlane 1978, 1992 and 1995) influence British women's views on motherhood versus having a career, and is female personhood among urban, middle-class Greek women still largely dependent upon their roles as mothers and wives, as Loizos and Papataxiarchis (1991b) claimed it was for rural Greek women in the past?

Human beings also possess a sense of self. According to Morris (1994), the self is a process, a means of organising experience and making sense of the world and ourselves. It involves self-awareness and reflective thought and is essentially a psychological concept. In an insightful critique of anthropological uses of the concept of self, Cohen (1994) calls for the differentiation between the terms 'selfhood' and 'personhood'. While the latter is a socially imposed definition of 'me' - in other words, a description of who 'I am' as a social entity - the former refers to an individual's consciousness and reflects awareness of one's self. The notion of the self captures individuals' capacity as human beings to think about their practices and reflect upon their environment. In other words, the self is 'a repository of experience' whereas personhood is only a 'selective version of me' that is culturally and socially determined, and enforced with varying degrees of success (Cohen 1994, p.57 & p.68). Therefore, while conceptions of personhood impinge upon notions of selfhood, individuals can resist externally-imposed definitions of who they are. This is because they possess agency and a sense of self, so that no matter how oppressive the contexts individuals find themselves in, they are always able to deliberate upon their circumstances and to maintain a critical distance between themselves and the collective definitions of themselves as persons.

According to Sokefeld (1999), without recognising the existence of the self, there can be no way of understanding identity. It is due to humans' ability for self-reflection, he argues, that individuals are able to 'embrace' and simultaneously 'manage' their diverse identities. Key to the composition of identity are gender, class and personhood (Fowler 2004). Each one of us has multiple and conflicting identities that are constantly changing and that frequently acquire new meanings in different contexts. Identities are crucial to reproduction because they determine the extent to which becoming a parent fits in with other ways of being. In addition, the transition to parenthood leads to the adoption of a completely new set of identities that are not accessible to those who remain childless. It also results in the suppression of previously dominant identities, an eventuality that may cause new mothers to feel unsettled. How female informants in Athens and London managed their various identities in response to different conceptions of personhood, and how this process of negotiation affected their approaches to childbearing is a key focus of this study.

### *1.3.2 Structure, agency and 'reproductive decision-making'*

A dominant assumption in the demographic literature is that fertility behaviour is the outcome of 'reproductive decision-making.' According to Carter (1995), demographic accounts of 'modern' societies, also tellingly referred to as 'controlled fertility populations,' perceive reproductive agents as 'active,' 'rational,' unconstrained by 'culture,' with the ability to exercise 'choice' over how many children they want, when and how frequently. 'Preference theory' (Hakim 2003) is a recent example of an approach to explaining fertility patterns in 'modern societies' that contains these assumptions. While 'preference theory' claims to offer a break from perspectives that envision low fertility as a product of homogeneous values and attitudes, it also maintains that childbearing is a consequence of 'women's choice' and different 'lifestyle' decisions or 'preferences' (Hakim 2003). Decision-making models of reproductive behaviour, especially those that take rational agents as their basic units of analysis, disregard the complex character of decision-making and neglect the non-cognitive processes or unconscious thoughts that determine human conduct. The idea that individuals act only once they have carefully contemplated the consequences of their next move and that they then 'choose' to do whatever is most likely to give them the greatest return is open to question.

Firstly, it is important to distinguish between intentions, desires and outcomes. Fertility preferences do not translate into actual offspring (Crosbie 1986), and desires and intentions are not always identical. A woman might say she 'desires' four children but only ever intends to have two, for example. Secondly, apparently pre-formulated intentions

are frequently post-hoc constructions, developed after evaluating existing conditions (Johnson-Hanks and Thayer 2005). Thirdly, as Greenhalgh (1995) points out, any decisions that are made in connection with fertility are not fixed - in other words, 'once-and-for-all.' People are not 'timeless strategisers who never change their minds,' Greenhalgh (1995, p.22) argues. Thinking of them as such leads us to 'neglect the ambiguity, spontaneity, and improvisation, the bungling, changing-of-mind, and full-scale about-faces that characterize most peoples' lives, reproductive and otherwise.' A model of fertility decision-making would have to recognise, at least, that opinions formed about family-formation prior to conception are sometimes different from those made during pregnancy and may even differ from verdicts reached in the post-natal stage (Shedlin and Hollerbach 1981).

Demography's reluctance to embrace less static approaches to childbearing stems from its links with policy-making and, inevitably, its use of quantitative methods. Yet, as Petchesky (1984, p.9) notes, 'a woman does not simply get pregnant and give birth like the flowing of tides and seasons.' Reproduction occurs 'under the constraint of material conditions' and 'within a specific network of social relations and social arrangements involving herself, her sexual partner(s), her children and kin, neighbours, doctors, family planners, birth control providers and manufacturers, employers, the church and the state.' The individuals and processes involved in a woman's reproductive life course are neither easy to recognize nor to measure. Furthermore, their impact upon fertility is never unidirectional but rather an outcome of the interplay between structure and agency; that is between externally imposed conditions (such as family policies, childcare facilities, and a flexible labour market suitable for parents) and subjective, sometimes sub-conscious, coping strategies. This exchange is subject to investigation in both Athens and London.

### ***1.3.3 The 'institution' of motherhood and ideologies of mothering***

Two major interrelated themes explored in both the Athenian- and London-based studies are motherhood and mothering. While there is an intimate connection between motherhood and mothering, these concepts are neither identical nor interchangeable. Whereas motherhood refers to the state or condition of being a mother, mothering is synonymous with the act of caring for, nurturing, rearing and protecting someone. As Silva (1996a, p.2) notes, 'although motherhood is not necessarily derived from biology and is a social construction, mothering *per se* is absolutely disconnected from biology.' Therefore, mothering is a separate aspect of different kinds of motherhood, be it by adoption, biological, lone and so on (Silva 1996a). 'Mothering,' Silva (1996b, p.12) asserts, 'can either be attached to motherhood, shared between the mother and other persons,

or done in the place of the mother. Motherhood is female, mothering need not be.' Motherhood is also an 'institution' (Rich 1976) because the experience of being a mother is never under the control of women alone but subject to rules and regulations, often devised by men. Shaping women's experiences of motherhood are numerous 'ideologies of mothering' (Glenn 1994), or conventions about how to mother. Both the institution of motherhood and ideologies of mothering intersect and overlap to shape and constrain reproduction.

Individuals' experiences of mothering and decisions about childcare arrangements are not just a product of circumstances and material resources but also of moral considerations. 'Ideologies of mothering' (Glenn 1994, p.12) structure how women perform and feel about being their children's carers. As Rothman (1994, p.139-140) argues, an 'ideology is the way a group looks at the world, the way it organises its thinking about the world. An ideology can let us see things, but it can also blind us, close our eyes to our own lived reality, our own experiences, our own bodies.' Within a particular social context, ideologies of mothering affect the lives of women belonging to different classes (Duncan 2005) and/or ethnic groups (Collins 1994) in diverse ways. As a result, they also face various kinds and levels of resistance, leading to the emergence of 'microideologies' (Uttal 1996). As Everingham (1994, p.7) notes, children do not have 'objective needs' that mothers simply learn to recognise and manage. A child's wants are the result of a 'process of interpretation and judgment carried out by the mother in a particular "mothering" culture' in which she too has certain desires and interests. As Duncan et al. (2004, p.263) suggest, choices over how children should be looked after are derivative of socially and geographically varied 'complex moral and emotional processes in assessing both children's needs, and the mother's own, and the balance between the two.' In other words, they are subject to 'gendered moral rationalities.'

Beliefs about what constitutes 'proper' care for children, of course, also stem from place-specific government policies (Ball et al. 2004) and the social organisation of non-parental educational childcare provision (Holloway 1998). However, as Holloway (1998) argues knowledge and use of benefits and services on offer in particular contexts depend on the resources available to different groups. 'Childcare cultures' are, therefore, constantly in the process of being produced and reproduced, leading to the reinforcement of mothering ideologies. This means that parents will not always take advantage of childcare services after making careful financial calculations, weighing the economic costs and benefits involved in using particular kinds of provision, but will instead make decisions with reference to moral and socially negotiated views about what behaviour is right and proper' (Duncan et al. 2004, p. 256). According to Duncan et al. (2004), 'when it comes to dependent children,

there can be non-negotiable and deeply gendered, moral requirements to take responsibility for children's needs and to place these first.'

For a white, middle-class woman living in Europe motherhood can be a particularly isolating experience and has been so ever since the eighteenth century when the domestic unit ceased to be the site of both production and reproduction, and became a 'haven' solely for the latter (Glenn 1994). This gave rise to what Chodorow and Contratto (1992) describe as 'the fantasy of the perfect mother', who is 'ever-bountiful', 'ever-giving', and 'self-sacrificing' (Bassin, Honey and Kaplan 1994, p.2), yet also responsible for how her children and, therefore, humanity turn out (Chodorow and Contratto 1992). This investigation takes account of historical and contemporary understandings of motherhood and mothering, and seeks to determine their effects on Greek and British middle-class women's approaches to childbearing in Athens and London. For example, what do informants consider 'good' childcare to be and how do such ideas affect the way in which they experience motherhood? Is there a consequent effect on their family size aspirations and practices?

#### **1.4 Structure of the thesis**

The thesis begins with a detailed description of the methods used to undertake fieldwork in Athens and London and the rationale behind their employment. It also explains the reasons for the distinctive character (age, gender, stage in family building process and so on) of the people I interviewed in each city. Chapter 3 gives a brief overview of the key characteristics of below-replacement fertility in Greece and the United Kingdom relative to other members of the European Union. This chapter aims to put the fertility situation of the two countries into perspective by assessing the position of each in comparison with the other but also within Europe as a whole. The thesis then divides into two parts: the first, concerns itself entirely with Athens and Greek informants' attitudes towards reproduction and their childbearing approaches, while the second deals exclusively with London and British informants' narratives. Each part consists of four, more or less comparable, chapters.

Chapters 4 and 8, introduce each field setting in detail. The former begins with an historical outline of the Greek capital and its inhabitants ever since the formation of Greece as a nation-state. It proceeds with a portrayal of *Nea Smyrni*, the Athenian municipality in which I 'situated' myself and conducted the majority of my interviews. This chapter ends with a brief description of the rise and present-day make-up of the Greek, largely Athenian, middle-class. Chapter 8 contains similar information, though it is not as historical as Chapter 4, for reasons that I will defend therein. It also includes a section on the National Childbirth Trust that is absent from the corresponding chapter in Part 1 simply because an equivalent organisation was non-existent in Athens. Chapters 5 and 9,

focus on 'popular' representations of the low fertility issue between 2001 and 2005 in a select number of Greek and British newspapers respectively. Both chapters centre on the manner in which each country's print media reported on the causes of the national, as opposed to international, character of below-replacement fertility, or 'underfertility', as it is commonly known in Greece. Unlike Chapter 9, however, which concentrates exclusively on press coverage of trends in the UK's birth rate, Chapter 5 includes informants' views on 'underfertility' in conjunction with those of journalists. This is due to the unparalleled level of concern that exists about low fertility in Greece and the extraordinary willingness of Athenian informants to discuss it.

Following analysis of the Greek and British press and popular debates on below-replacement fertility, the two parts diverge slightly in terms of their arrangement, although both remain firmly focused on exploring the themes introduced above via informants' accounts. Chapter 6, examines Athenians' narratives concerning their experiences and perceptions of motherhood, and considers how these influence their thinking on family size and affect their approaches to family building. The final chapter of Part 1, Chapter 7, takes this analysis one step further by looking beyond motherhood at how changes in ideas about female personhood have had an impact on Athenian informants' sense of themselves as women, and consequently also on their attitudes towards and experiences of reproduction. All the issues examined in Chapters 6 and 7 are subject to discussion in relation to British informants in Chapter 11, following an examination of the 'pathways to childbearing' (Chapter 10), exclusive to Part 2. The concluding chapter of this thesis brings the two parts of the study together to examine the similarities and differences between them. In the process, it provides answers to the central questions posed by this research (see Section 1.2).

While it would have been possible to structure this thesis in a number of different ways, I decided that the clearest and most effective method of presenting the two studies was to introduce each one separately and compare them only at the end. An alternative strategy would have been to analyse both the Athenian and London findings concurrently in every chapter by addressing the manner in which each related to the key themes and central research questions set out above. However, this line of approach would not have been as appropriate as the one used, since many of the issues of relevance to Athenians and Londoners' childbearing attitudes and practices were unique only to them, as were several of the structural conditions affecting their perspectives and experiences of reproduction. The first reason for not pursuing such an alternative arrangement, therefore, relates to the incomparability of certain concerns and situations between the two groups of informants. The second reason has to do with the matter of



context. Extracting interview excerpts from each study and placing them side by side within different chapters would involve having to exclude significant amounts of information about the source of their ideas and actions. Consequently, in order to offer a coherent picture of the context(s) in which middle-class Athenians and Londoners approached the process of family-formation, it was best to analyse their narratives, and the conditions in which these developed, separately.

## 2 METHODS

### 2.1 Introduction

A comparative ethnographic study of low fertility, embarked on in two different urban European settings, both equally familiar to the researcher, leads to a distinct set of methodological challenges. The purpose of this chapter is to reveal and discuss the issues encountered during twenty months of fieldwork, between January 2003 and August 2004, in Athens and London, which I spent listening to white, British and Greek middle-class women's views about reproduction, and recording their experiences of family-formation. Throughout this chapter, I address the need to forge a closer relationship between the anthropology and demography of Europe and suggest why and how the exploration of a small number of individuals' approaches to childbearing and opinions about family building can make a valuable contribution towards understanding a pan-European yet highly diverse phenomenon, below-replacement fertility. I also explain the purpose of focusing on two locations instead of one; in other words, I offer a justification for the *comparative* nature of this study. Thus, I begin with an explanation of the research design, followed by an account of the means, or methods, used to put it into effect, and finally a description of the process employed to analyse its findings.

### 2.2 Ethnography in two places

The comparative method is quintessential for demography, routinely applied to determine idiosyncrasies both between and within populations. For a demographer, however, a comparative ethnographic study is likely to seem unsustainable given that the participants from each research site, though similar in terms of their age, gender, education and professional background, are too few to form a representative sample of their respective populations. Since informants' views are not necessarily widespread, demographers might wonder what lessons these individual cases can teach us about childbearing elsewhere in Greece and the UK, or concerning the differences between the two countries' fertility profiles. Anthropologists might also have reservations about the aims of a comparative ethnographic study, but not for the same reasons as demographers. For an anthropologist, research of this kind risks de-contextualising human behaviour in search of units of comparison in the form of underlying structures or principles of conduct. An anthropologist may also be hesitant about making general statements regarding the phenomenon of low fertility in Europe and its cross-cultural variations based on the findings of one or two in-depth but small-scale investigations.

Anthropologists and demographers, therefore, may have difficulties recognising the value of a comparative ethnographic study, but on different grounds. This is because they have a distinct understanding of

what comparison entails. As Greenhalgh (1997, p.820) argues, 'methods that share formal properties may mean different things in different disciplines because of the varying intellectual histories and cultures in which the methods are embedded.' In this sense, the term 'comparison' does not have the same connotations when employed in the service of anthropological research as when utilised in a demographic project. 'Methods that share formal properties but that mean different things to those using them are in fact different methods' (Greenhalgh 1997, p.823). Misunderstanding or disagreement regarding the make-up and purpose of particular methods also occurs within disciplines themselves, owing to the development of novel theoretical orientations.

Given the existence of such a range of approaches both within and between disciplines, in order to demonstrate the legitimacy and benefit of conducting a comparative ethnographic study it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the term 'comparison' as used in this context. To begin with, this research does not aim to explain low fertility or its cross-cultural variations based on observations of the fertility behaviour of my informants. It also does not intend to uncover underlying principles of conduct or structures common to low and 'lowest-low' fertility countries. Each enquiry has illustrative rather than representative status, and the Athenian investigation is entirely independent of the one conducted in London, and therefore subject to its own strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless, both studies have a common aim, which is to use a combination of conceptual tools and themes (Introduction, Section 1.3) to explore how a particular group of people living in two different low fertility settings think about and approach the process of childbearing. It is these conceptual tools and themes, which are the units of comparison.

In essence, the rationale used to design this research is similar to that employed in putting together an anthropological edited volume: to gather a set of studies, often with very different geographical, historical, cultural and social backdrops, in order to shed light on a single phenomenon or question. While every chapter within a collection of this kind is autonomous from the other, and a reader may choose to look at each one separately, all the chapters fulfil a mutual task. Either they present a unique theoretical vantage point, or set of themes, from which to investigate the topic under consideration or they illustrate the diverse ways in which the same phenomenon takes shape in different settings; oftentimes they do both. An edited volume, of course, typically includes more than just two studies and contains chapters written by multiple authors. Yet its purpose is similar to mine: to suggest a comparative framework, in this case a set of themes or analytic concepts, within which to pull together highly individual ethnographic accounts.

This strategy then raises the possibility of making a series of general statements about below-replacement fertility. A long while ago, Radcliffe-Brown (1951, p.16) warned that without 'comparative studies anthropology will become only historiography and ethnography.' In fact, it is precisely because of their understanding of cultural specificity and cultural diversity that anthropologists can make general observations about a broad range of large-scale phenomena. The problem with demographic theories of low fertility is that the variables contained within them have been defined prior to use and irrespective of the context(s) they are destined to explain. As a result, their meanings are hypothetical not evidence-based. In addition, demographers tend to ignore the ideational or value changes that accompany fertility behaviour, preferring to focus on the structural instead because it is more easily quantifiable<sup>2</sup>. Anthropologists, on the contrary, are able to attend to both the structural and ideational forces underlying fertility behaviour, be it on a smaller-scale. What they lose in scope, however, they make up for with rich data. Unlike demographers, anthropologists also take advantage of the opportunity afforded by fieldwork to acquaint themselves with the meanings informants attach to processes such as motherhood, marriage or childbearing, and the relationships between them.

For all these reasons, anthropologists can use their knowledge to comment on forces underlying trends or events beyond those directly observed in their individual field sites. In addition, they can overturn or critique established theories concerning such phenomena. By illustrating how one population sub-group deals with the process of family-formation, and comparing it with another's approaches, using certain anthropologically informed themes, I will show that it is possible to discern influences on fertility behaviour that demographers, due to their distinct methodological style, have so far been unable or unwilling to investigate. In particular, I will argue that without information about women's perceptions of themselves as gendered persons, without awareness of the ideologies that shape their views on mothering, and without an understanding of their experiences as mothers, an important chain of reasons for low fertility and its idiosyncratic character remains hidden.

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<sup>2</sup> Lesthaeghe (1983), Lesthaeghe and Meekers (1986), Lesthaeghe and Surkyn (1988) and van de Kaa (1987; 2001) are all exceptions because they do focus on the relationship between fertility and value or ideational changes. However, their attempts are also unsatisfactory because they hold a single set of ideas or values (e.g. post-materialism) responsible for the development and persistence of low fertility, and its variations.

### 2.3 Anthropological demography 'at home'

Conducting ethnographic research in familiar places involves overcoming a series of obstacles, different to those that researchers who choose to conduct fieldwork in 'foreign' or less familiar settings have to surmount. 'Native' anthropologists do not possess the advantage of comprehending 'others' through difference, since the 'other' is akin to the 'self'. This is especially true in cases where the focus of study is not only the same 'society' or 'culture' but also the same 'social group', in terms of class, education, ethnic background, and so on. Having been born and raised in Athens until the age of eight, at which time I came to live in London, I felt equally 'at home' in both my chosen field sites and among both sets of informants. While this was advantageous in several ways, it was also the root cause of considerable disquiet, particularly given the subject matter of my investigations. For example, I found it difficult, at times, to distance myself from those I interviewed when they expressed to me their concerns over having children. After all, the issue had crossed my mind also. Like my educated, middle-class London-based informants, I too had career aspirations that I wanted to fulfil before starting a family, and I too felt that becoming a mother before my late 20s or early 30s would be 'a waste' of my education. Yet my Greek, middle class parents had also instilled in me the idea that getting married and having a family would be crucial to my future happiness, a thought that was equally at the forefront of my Athenian informants' minds. Therefore, frequently, I worried that I was asking questions the answers to which were obvious to both my informants and, more disturbingly, to myself.

Despite often feeling this way, there were also moments during my time in the field when I felt 'different' from the people with whom I engaged and a 'stranger' to both cities. As Narayan (1993) argues, the term 'native' anthropologist or the dichotomy 'outsider/insider', 'observer/observed', is not constructive. Anthropologists, like their informants, have multiple identities and backgrounds (education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race), including that of ethnographer, and cannot possibly possess knowledge of all that goes on within their societies. Globalisation also ensures that communities are neither isolated from others nor untouched by power relations but that they are constantly in a state of flux (Narayan 1993, p.671-2). Regardless of my best efforts to fit in with my informants, I could not hide the fact that, unlike the majority of those whose narratives I gathered, I was 24 years old, unmarried and childless. Spending time in 'parent and toddler' groups was not my usual pastime, and never had I attended post-natal meetings before embarking upon this research. Most of my informants in both Athens and London were mothers in their 30s and 40s, age groups with which I had little contact prior to fieldwork. Secondly, in both cities I could not help but give away my 'semi-native' status; that is, my dual-

nationality or 'halfie' self (Abu-Lughod 1991). In London, my 'foreign' accent and non-English name combined to reveal my Greek identity, while in Athens my imperfect vocabulary and, apparently, 'un-Greek' mannerisms were revealing of my British influences. Therefore, whether I liked it or not, in both cities informants themselves 'positioned me' as both 'insider' and 'outsider' (Halstead 2001).

Of course, there were benefits to doing anthropology 'at home', irrespective of the extent to which I felt, or my informants perceived me to be, a 'native'. The most convenient aspect of all was that I spoke both Greek and English, more or less, fluently, which helped me make contacts in each field site quickly despite the limited time I had available in each. Speaking both languages well was crucial to understanding and translating local terms, and I was careful not to lose sight of their nuances in the course of translation. Moreover, awareness of the impossibility of converting certain words or phrases from Greek into English, and vice versa, was constructive in the process of identifying ideas and beliefs about childbearing specific to each group. In Greece, for example, below-replacement fertility is widely referred to by the term 'underfertility' (*ypogennitikotita*). In the Greek popular imagination this word is far from neutral, since it implies that the country's birth rate is lower than it 'ought' to be. Although an ageing population is one of the reasons Greeks 'should' be having more babies, the main cause of concern expressed by the term 'underfertility' is over the potential loss of the Greek 'nation' (*ethnos*). Translating *ypogennitikotita* as 'low' or 'below-replacement' fertility would not convey the original meaning of the word. While such inquisitiveness does not arise only in the minds of 'native' anthropologists - Keesing (1987) asks himself the same question with regard to Kwaio expressions - a good command of a language or languages is an aptitude that takes time to develop.

## **2.4 Urban encounters: in search of informants**

There are several complexities involved in conducting fieldwork in urban settings. Endeavouring to develop relations of intimacy and trust with strangers is not easy in an environment where inter-personal interactions occur in a diversity of venues, where friendships mature behind closed doors and where a sense of community does not always develop from partaking in local but extra-local activities, including virtual space. Therefore, my attempt to make contact with Londoners by taking up residence in a street in a central area of the borough in which I conducted the second half of my fieldwork, proved futile. In London, as in Athens, privacy was closely guarded, a tendency exacerbated by the nature of my research topic. As Petchesky (1980; 1984) notes, control over the goals and methods of reproduction is a highly contested matter, especially between men and women. For that reason, finding persons willing to talk about their experiences of family-formation was not straightforward.

Although only a handful of individuals I got in touch with in each city refused to co-operate, many seemed reluctant to meet me a second time. I suspect that this disinclination, along with the majority of women's propensity to insist that their husbands were in agreement with them over issues pertaining to childbearing, partly, signalled a desire to conserve their privacy.

Nonetheless, it is misguided to suggest that urban, as opposed to rural, fieldwork provides anthropologists with a single research experience. Athens and London, like other cities around the world, are unique in terms of their histories, design, social, cultural and demographic make-up, as well as with regard to their wealth and systems of government. Consequently, the methods employed to conduct fieldwork in Athens were not the same as those used in London, for they simply could not be. Athens contains a population of around three million, which is less than half of London's seven million. The latter is also a multi-cultural city, and has been so for many decades, whereas Athens has become home to non-Greeks more recently (1990s). In London, searching for an area composed of persons with common origins or similar backgrounds is unproductive, since there are no neat groupings - ethnic, religious or otherwise - arranged in orderly geographical pockets, anywhere in the capital. Athens, though considerably less ethnically diverse than London, is also not divided into districts comprising of individuals bound by class or regional origins. However, there are Athenian neighbourhoods whose inhabitants are mainly middle-class and Greek Orthodox.

In searching for informants in each capital city, therefore, it was necessary to employ different strategies. While geographical location could not fully serve the purposes of my research in either field site, I decided it was important to identify a single area in which to 'situate' myself in each. For that reason, I purposely chose one borough in either city that consisted of a large proportion of people with characteristics matching those I had anticipated (educated, professional women of reproductive age). In Athens, I selected the municipality of *Nea Smyrni*, located just a short distance south of the city centre and home to a population of 73,986 inhabitants (ESYE 2001). *Nea Smyrni* was a suitable choice because it was both typically 'middle-class' (Hatzatourian 1999) and largely Greek (93% of residents were Greek nationals). In London, I opted to concentrate on *The Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham*, which has a population of 165,242 residents (ONS 2001) and is located on the western periphery of Inner London. According to the Census, in 2001 the majority of its residents were White (78%), Christian (64%) and British (66%). Hammersmith and Fulham is the fourth smallest of the capital's 32 boroughs and since the 1980s has become home to many young, affluent, urban professionals, educated to degree level. Although the

borough, overall, does not contain many couples with children, this is typical of Inner London as a whole. In fact, Hammersmith and Fulham houses some of the best private secondary schools in the capital and has plenty of playgroups, nurseries and primary schools. Therefore, it also had plenty of middle-class couples with dependent children.

After singling out the areas that appeared most likely to contain a sufficient pool of potential research participants, the next step was to find an effective way of recruiting them. With few contacts in each place, I had decided not to restrict myself to a single age group or family type, and I was open to the idea of interviewing both men and women. Despite this flexibility, however, my initial efforts to make contacts in Athens, where my fieldwork began, were to no avail. Standing outside local schools, asking parents if they were interested in participating in a study about 'underfertility' was not constructive. Contacting residents from the membership list of a local library also proved unrewarding. In the end, four main sources were responsible for setting the research process in motion. The starting point was a local, privately-run playgroup, *Lollipop*<sup>3</sup>, whose management kindly agreed to allow me to conduct interviews on their premises during weekday afternoons. The second source was the *Nea Smyrni Parents' Association*, which put me in contact with a few of their board members. Thirdly, I got in touch with the Athenian branch of an organisation called the *Supreme Confederation of Large Families of Greece* (A.S.P.E.) who willingly gave out the names of some of their associates in *Nea Smyrni*. Finally, I arranged to speak to friends' acquaintances.

All of these initial links triggered a series of encounters with individuals not in the original list of contacts (the 'snowball' effect), and I ended up carrying out 106 interviews (equivalent to 127 informants), the length of which ranged from approximately 20 minutes to three hours. I also managed to organise a focus group session after contacting a local social club. The use of the 'snowball' method meant that, although *Nea Smyrni* was the primary focus of my Athenian study, I also met with residents of neighbouring boroughs such as *Kallithea*, *Paleo Faliro* and *Agios Dimitrios*. In addition, due to the nature of the networks I penetrated, the majority of those with whom I spoke were female (90 women as opposed to 37 men) in their thirties (28%) and forties (29%). The largest proportion of Greek informants was in a marital union (approximately 76%); though quite a high number was divorced (in the region of 13%). Most were working full-time (56%) and had a university degree, or equivalent (55.1%). Around 50 per cent of my Athenian informants had two children, and no less than 34 per cent had one child. Given that the bulk of the interviews occurred in *Lollipop*, most of the

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<sup>3</sup> This is a pseudonym.



parents who participated in the study had children under the age of eleven<sup>4</sup>.

The techniques employed to activate the research process in Athens, however, were not suitable for London; though, they did suggest a series of strategies with which to experiment. The profile of Athenians whom I encountered also provided a rough sketch of informants to look for in London. Nevertheless, differences in the nature of civil society<sup>5</sup> between Athens and London challenged any attempt to utilise identical methods. A dynamic civil society is less visible in Greece than it is in the UK, giving rise to a distinct set of opportunities and constraints for research. Key to the process of finding informants in London, therefore, was the *National Childbirth Trust* (NCT), a charity organisation, mainly attractive to middle-class women, that offers them support during pregnancy, childbirth and early parenthood. Its local branch in Hammersmith and Fulham was invaluable to my investigation and put me in touch with numerous well-educated, professional, white British women (see Chapter 8, Section 8.4). The strength of civil society in London, also guaranteed a ready supply of voluntary playgroups. Whereas in Athens playgroups were scarce (I only found evidence of three in *Nea Smyrni*), Hammersmith and Fulham contained numerous playgroups, parent-and-toddler groups as well as under-5s centres, a few of which I frequented regularly in search of informants. Finally, I was able to make contact with a series of online social clubs catering to the 'childfree' (*Kidding Aside, No Kidding* and the *British Organisation of Non-Parents*), a category notable for its absence in Athens.

Nevertheless, certain techniques were appropriate in both London and Athens. For instance, the 'snowball' effect was as valuable in one

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<sup>4</sup> Due to the brevity of some interviews in the playgroups, I do not have a full set of data on the profile of all my informants. Therefore, the percentages cited here as well as in relation to my London informants, only refer to those whose details I did manage to gather.

<sup>5</sup> 'Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy group' (LSE Centre for Civil Society 2004).

field site as in the other, leading to the infiltration of a wide range of networks, including a few in boroughs close to or bordering Hammersmith and Fulham, such as Putney, Chiswick and Ealing. Equally helpful in both field sites was the internet. In the end, via word-of-mouth and organisations belonging to civil society, I managed to carry out a total of 79 interviews and 1 focus group in London. Excluding the focus group participants, this means that I spoke to 82 informants, 76 of whom were female. These were mainly in their early and late 30s (56%), though some were in their 40s (18%). The majority were married (80.5%) and employed (at least 50% in total), though 43 per cent were unemployed. Most were also educated to university degree level (at least 65.9%). An almost equal share had one child and two children (approximately 40 per cent), and the majority had children aged five years or under (73.1%). I also spoke to four 'childfree' individuals whom I contacted via the above-mentioned specialist websites.

Whilst inconvenient at times, the uniqueness of the experience of implementing the research in each field site was also extremely insightful. The kind of changes mandatory to the project's design in each context revealed a great deal about the attitudes of the people whom I had chosen to study, and the conditions that structured their experiences of family-formation. For example, the presence of organisations such as the NCT, gave white, British, middle-class mothers living in London a lot more support than was available to middle-class Greek women in Athens during the early years of their children's lives. On the other hand, my London-based informants did not receive the same degree of assistance from family members as the Athenian women I met. This was evident from a difference in the presence of nannies between *Lollipop* in *Nea Smyrni* and the playgroups I attended in Hammersmith and Fulham. While grandparents frequently accompanied their grandchildren to the former, nannies were entirely absent. In London, on the contrary, nannies were in abundance whereas grandparents were rarely present. As a result, even the use of comparable methods in both field sites revealed differences between them.

Anthropological methods are themselves part of research findings. Rather than ignoring the suitability of their tools of investigation to the context from which they seek to extract information, anthropologists allow themselves to engage with their chosen research location(s) from the very beginning of their enquiries, adapting their methodological approaches according to the particularities of the field site(s) in question, and not the reverse. For example, by pursuing different leads in Athens and London in the course of looking for informants, I stumbled upon the 'childfree' and the *polyteknoi* ('families with many children') respectively, neither of which I knew about prior to setting off for the field. Subsequently, I discerned that each group was unique to its locale; in

other words, there were no 'childfree' websites or social clubs in existence in Athens, just as there were no organisations in favour of the *polyteknoi* in London. Unexpectedly, then, this discrepancy became an important focus of my investigation.

Likewise, though in both cities I aimed to employ comparable techniques for recruiting informants, the distinct childcare arrangements on offer in Athens and London, hence accessible to me, made it both difficult and unnecessary to seek interviewees with identical characteristics. The women with whom I engaged in London, therefore, were more likely to be in their 30s and to have slightly younger children than those I met in Athens. This is because they were the ones to which the NCT and the day-playgroups catered. Yet rather than judging this variance as an obstacle to or 'bias' inherent in my research study, I consider it instructive because it illuminates the difference in options available to women who are or who may potentially become mothers in each city. In the same way, it was neither possible nor important to speak to equal numbers of London-based and Athenian women (or men). Once again, due to the distinct opportunities available in each field site, the final pool of interviewees was larger in Athens than in London. On the other hand, the Greek interviews were generally of shorter duration than the British ones, since a greater proportion of them took place in *Lollipop* rather than people's homes. Both methods of interview, however, ultimately served their purpose of providing information on informants' distinct approaches to childbearing.

## 2.5 Asking questions

Asking direct and preconceived questions in an interview-format is not a favoured anthropological method of enquiry, for a number of well-founded reasons. Questions that have been determined in advance to entering the field inevitably consist of various prejudgements. Every researcher anticipates certain results after reviewing the literature on his or her chosen field site(s) and a degree of familiarity with the research location may bias the interview. In addition, asking individuals directly about a particular subject may lead to rationalisations rather than explanations. However, participant observation is sometimes difficult to achieve in an urban setting (Firth et al. 1969), and I had few opportunities to make use of this method. Although my frequent attendance at playgroups or at the ante-natal and post-natal classes of the NCT in London, afforded the chance to both observe and participate in casual conversations, I could not guarantee that such exchanges would take place on a regular basis and, therefore, that I would be present to witness them. Consequently, I had to adopt a more structured method of approach than that typical of ethnographic investigations. After all, both in Athens and in London informants themselves expected a certain degree of formality and orderliness from our meetings, and, during our

encounters, I had to work hard to convince them why my only prop was a tape-recorder or a small notebook instead of a questionnaire.

All the data I gathered, therefore, were a product of semi-structured and open-ended interviews, conducted in playgroups, coffee-shops, restaurants, places of residence or offices. While for reasons of comfort, quiet and confidentiality, I tried to arrange as many meetings as possible in informants' homes, it was not always convenient or welcomed. In the end, 17 out of 106 interviews in Athens and 27 out of 79 interviews in London were home-based. In total, 83 per cent of Athenian interviews were logged in a notebook and the rest were tape-recorded, whereas in London 73 per cent were noted by hand, 27 per cent were taped and only one was chronicled after the event. The variation between the two settings in terms of the total number of interviews I managed to conduct, the manner in which I was able to record them and the location where I carried them out is indicative of the different methodological constraints I experienced in each. For example, due the fact that in London I depended, largely, on the NCT to make contacts, I had more opportunities than in Athens to visit British informants' houses and make greater use of the tape-recorder.

In both settings, I prepared a list of key questions and themes that would guide my interviews. These were subject to constant revision, as I sought to explore new ideas and topics determined from each conversation. In order to reduce the formality of the exchange, I would commit these guidelines to memory rather than have them in front of me on a piece of paper during the course of the interview. Asking questions regarding reproduction is particularly challenging due to the assumption that it is a 'natural', biologically-driven act and that decisions about family-formation are private. Therefore, requests for information concerning the timing and spacing of fertility or about family size were not particularly insightful or warmly received in either field site. Consequently, in both Athens and London I would kick off interviews with 'grand-tour questions' (Spradley and McCurdy 1972), such as, 'tell me about how you felt when you found out that you were pregnant with your first child' or 'what do you think a woman needs to have in place before she goes on to have a child?' Only then would I begin to ask for more details concerning situations, feelings and/or values expressed in response to the opening questions. This method of interviewing was productive because it was a two-way process. Although, inevitably, I was introducing the themes for discussion (such as motherhood, career, childcare, childrearing, partners' views), it was entirely up to informants to provide its content, to determine its pace and direction and, even, to suggest alternative topics about which to talk.

As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) maintain, it is misleading to regard 'solicited accounts', gathered either formally or informally, through direct or indirect questioning, as 'biased'. The researcher's presence as audience is part of the investigation process and it is impossible to remove him or her from it. In talking to informants, therefore, the ethnographer should not expect to collect unbiased or 'pure data', for all accounts are subjective. To gain a deep understanding of interviewees' stories it is merely necessary to learn about the 'context' in which they tell them (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, p. 112). One of the benefits of conducting an ethnographic study is that the methods an anthropologist can employ to gather information are not predetermined and unchangeable but adaptable to the research site. In this case, interviewing was the most effective way of learning about informants' reproductive lives and attitudes toward having children. However, in order to learn about the larger 'context' in which my informants' lives were unfolding, I had to broaden my focus, as the following section explains.

## **2.6 Popular discourse and the print media**

Aside from collecting personal narratives of childbearing, I decided to examine the Greek and British print media's portrayal of the issue of below-replacement fertility. As a recent article by Stark and Kohler (2002) demonstrates, across Europe there is widespread popular concern over low birth rates. However, press coverage on the matter varies considerably between countries. While in some the emphasis is on its causes, in others it is on its consequences. Moreover, cross-culturally, there is a variable degree of alarm over the reduction in family size and in how it might be possible to deal with it. In a similar vein to that described by Stark and Kohler, the Greek and British national press had noticeably distinct styles of reporting on the subject of low fertility. Yet, in each setting, I also noted a difference between how newspapers and informants debated the issue – an occurrence that I sought to explore further. This then prompted me to examine the extent to which, in each field site, the 'factors' perceived to be responsible for low birth rates by the former were similar to those raised in connection with family-formation by the latter. In particular, I was interested in finding out whether the 'causes' of below-replacement fertility presented in the Greek and British press, also emerged in middle-class Athenians and Londoners' personal accounts of childbearing. In case they did, I wanted to know why and how.

In another article, focusing specifically on the coverage of low fertility in the German press, Stark and Kohler (2004) contend that paying close attention to how the print media report and deliberate upon the subject can assist in the process of policy formation and help raise awareness among professionals of issues that are of importance to the

public. While I agree with Stark and Kohler's assertion that studying press debates over below-replacement fertility is important, I believe that it is unwise to base 'policy decisions and professional conversations' (Stark and Kohler 2004, p.294) on the print media's representations of the matter without, additionally, taking account of 'ordinary' citizens' views of it, as well as their experiences of family-formation. Firstly, as Misiti (2000) claims, it is now widely acknowledged that media audiences are not passive recipients but active interpreters of media messages. Therefore, the mass media neither represents nor shapes public opinion. The realities and characters they describe are always subject to contestation and reformulation. Secondly, as Spitulnik (1993, p.293) argues, 'mass media ... are at once artefacts, experiences, practices, and processes. They are economically and politically driven, linked to developments in science and technology, and like most domains of human life, their existence is inextricably bound up with the use of language.' Consequently, they do not reflect their audience's perceptions of their own lived realities. Finally, I would add, that the media tend to generalise about events, practices and values in order to construct more sensationalist arguments, saying little about differences either within or between distinct social groups.

An analysis of the media's debate over low fertility in a specific location, therefore, is significant not because it can provide academics and policy-makers with accurate insight about the issues that matter to the public but because it is one of the sites responsible for the construction of meaning surrounding reproduction. This is worthy of investigation in its own right, not as a window to 'ordinary' persons' views and experiences but as a discourse. As Fowler (1991, p.2) asserts, 'news is socially constructed.' Events are not inherently 'newsworthy'; they turn into 'news' by the media. While audiences are critical of what they see, hear or read, the media have considerable influence over the range and content of the material they present. As a result, the media are one of the key social institutions engaged in the process of creating and distributing 'particular forms of knowledge' (Lynn and Lea 2003, p.428). Empowering the media is language; and from language develops discourse, which Fowler (1991, p.42) describes as 'socially and institutionally originating ideology, encoded in language': that is, habitual, organised and, ultimately, controlled ways of talking about events, issues or people, demonstrative of the meanings and values of an institution. In this sense, media stories are discursive rather than factual.

While newspaper articles about low fertility may not motivate readers to have more children, they are largely responsible for how many of them understand the issue, because it is via the media that lay persons are most likely to hear about it. Of greater influence on readers' ways of thinking about childbearing and reproductive behaviour can be

newspaper accounts concerning issues peripheral to low fertility. In both Athens and London, therefore, I paid close attention to reports about reproduction and family life in general, from stories about the costs of childcare, to post-natal depression, to infertility, to the question of work-life balance and so on. As some of these topics also featured in informants' narratives, I was interested in comparing the perspectives on each offered by both sources. In gathering newspaper articles, once again the internet proved to be an indispensable resource.

## **2.7 Analysing findings**

'Qualitative analysis,' Bernard (1995, p.360) argues, 'is the search for patterns in data and for ideas that help explain the existence of those patterns. It begins even before you go to the field and continues throughout the research effort ... If you're doing it right, it never stops.' Indeed, my analysis of research findings started early on and is ongoing. The most consistent analytical effort, however, began once I returned from the field and started transcribing, verbatim, the 39 tapes I had collected in total. Once this process was complete, I proceeded to enter these and the rest of the interviews into MAXQDA, a software programme for qualitative data analysis, which can accommodate both Greek and English typescript. Next, I started to code them according to themes and sub-themes by looking for recurrent mention of topics in each group of interviews. In the process, I also made sure to highlight key terms.

Following, multiple readings and attempts at re-coding, I finally settled on the central list of themes emanating from each research site, and embarked upon the process of finding connections between them. While I did not seek to conduct a full-scale narrative analysis, I perceive informants' accounts to be narratives of the self (Ochs and Capps 1996) and, in particular, 'moral tales' (McCarthy et al. 2000). As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) suggest, accounts gathered in the field, are readable in two ways: as 'information' or as 'perspective'. In other words, either we comprehend what informants tell us as simple 'representations', giving us access to knowledge about the persons, events or beliefs of their group, or we view them 'as part of the world they describe ... shaped by the contexts in which they occur,' therefore, as object of analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, p.107). I interpret my informants' accounts as both 'information' and 'perspective'.

## **3 BELOW-REPLACEMENT FERTILITY IN GREECE AND THE UK**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents a brief summary of the key characteristics of below replacement fertility in Greece and the United Kingdom relative to other European countries and to the European Union as a whole. Its purpose is to provide an overview of the wider context in which each group of informants' views on childbearing and experiences of family building were set. While in Europe birth rates have dropped to unprecedented levels in the post-World War II period, the degree of divergence in fertility patterns between countries is also plain to see. The heterogeneous nature of low fertility has puzzled demographers and others interested on the subject of European demography. It has also provided the inspiration for this research. While the opinions and conduct of those whom I encountered in the field cannot account for the aggregate-level trends and patterns described below, or explain the overall differences between Greek and British fertility, they are illustrative of a tiny spectrum of local attitudes and practices that contribute towards low fertility in each of the two countries.

### **3.2 Population size, structure and change**

The estimated population of the 25 countries of the European Union was 459.5 million at the beginning of 2005 and of the EU-15 countries 385.4 million (<http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int>). Although there are more people living in Europe today than 46 years ago, between 1960 and 2002 the contribution of the EU-25 to the world's population declined from 12 to 7 per cent and of the EU-15 from 10 to 6 per cent (Eurostat 2004). Therefore, whereas global population has more than doubled in the last four and a half decades, from three to 6.4 billion, over 90 per cent of this increase has been in 'less developed countries' while only 2.4 per cent was due to population growth among the EU-25 (Pearce and Bovagnet 2005). Nevertheless, both Greece and the United Kingdom grew in size between 1960 and 2003. The Greek population rose by 2.7 million, from 8.3 to 11 million, while in the UK there were an additional 7.2 million people, from 52.2 to 59.4 million (Council of Europe 2005). Latest figures reveal that the total population of the UK has surpassed 60 million and that Greece has continued to grow beyond 11 million (<http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int>). Forecasts suggest that the population of the United Kingdom will continue to expand, reaching 65 million in 2023 and 67 million by 2031 (Babb et al. 2006). Population projections for Greece, however, indicate that in 2010 there will be an extra 170,000 people only living in the country, and another 99,000 by 2020, at which point the population will reach a peak of 11.3 million (<http://www.statistics.gr>). From then on, the General Secretariat of the



National Statistical Service of Greece estimates, the population will start to decline. By 2030, it will shrink to 11.2 million, by 2040 it will be roughly the same size as it was in 2005 (11 million) and by 2050 it will be even lower, 10.8 million (<http://www.statistics.gr>).

Population change refers to the difference between the size of the population at the end and the beginning of a given period, and so depends upon net natural change – the difference between the number of births and deaths – and the net effect of people migrating to and from the country. There is negative change when both of these components are negative or when one is negative and has a higher absolute value than the other. Pearce and Bovagnet (2005) argue that in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s the principal reason for Europe's annual population increase was an excess of births over deaths. In the last 15 years, however, net international migration has started to dominate the picture. The Population and Demography Division of the Office for National Statistics in the UK (2005) claim that, until the mid-1990s the UK's population growth was also largely a product of natural increase. Since the end of that decade, however, although the number of births continue to surpass the number of deaths, net international migration into the UK from abroad has played an increasingly important role in population growth. Between 2001 and 2004, the same source suggests that two thirds of the rise was attributable to net in-migration. In the future, the contribution of net migration to population growth in the UK will be even greater. For example, between 2004 and 2031, 43 per cent of the projected increase of 7.2 million people will be due to natural increase while 57 per cent will be thanks to net migration (Babb et al. 2006)<sup>6</sup>. In Greece, Drettakis (2001) shows, the period 1961-1995 was characterised by natural population increase; that is, there were more births than deaths in the country. However, he argues, since the 1970s the number of births has been in general decline while the number of deaths has been on the rise. In 1996, for the first time in the history of the country, excluding periods of famine and war, there was evidence of more deaths than births. In the last decade, with the exception of 1997, Greece has experienced negative natural change, while in 2004 the difference between the number of births and deaths was zero (Eurostat 1996). In the mean time, positive net migration, though in decline since 1993, has been responsible for keeping the country's population growing (<http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int>).

A final feature of any population that, partially, relates to fertility is its structure. Europe is the most aged continent in the world. The median age of its population is 37.7 years, compared to a global median

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, much of the natural increase is due to migrant children because they are often in their peak reproductive years when they arrive in the UK and many come from higher fertility countries.

age of 26.4 years (Council of Europe 2005). This situation is due to a reduction in the proportion of those aged under 16 and an increase in the number of people who are aged 65 and over. The proportion of young people relative to old people ratio varies considerably for each of the EU-25 countries (Figure 1). Cyprus and Ireland, for example, have a higher proportion of young people and a lower proportion of older people, whereas countries like Italy, Germany and Greece have the reverse (Pearce and Bovagnet 2005). In 2004, Babb et al. (2006) show Greece comprised the third highest proportion of people aged 65 and over (17.8%) among the EU-25 countries (average 16.5%). At the same time, 14.5 per cent of the Greek population was under 16 (EU-25 average 16.4%) (Figure 2). By contrast, 16 per cent of the total population in the UK in 2004 was over 65 years old while 18.2 per cent was under 16 (Figure 3). In both countries, the percentage of young people has fallen steadily over time while the proportion of old people has gradually risen (Eurostat 2004). However, both developments have occurred at a faster pace in Greece than in the UK.

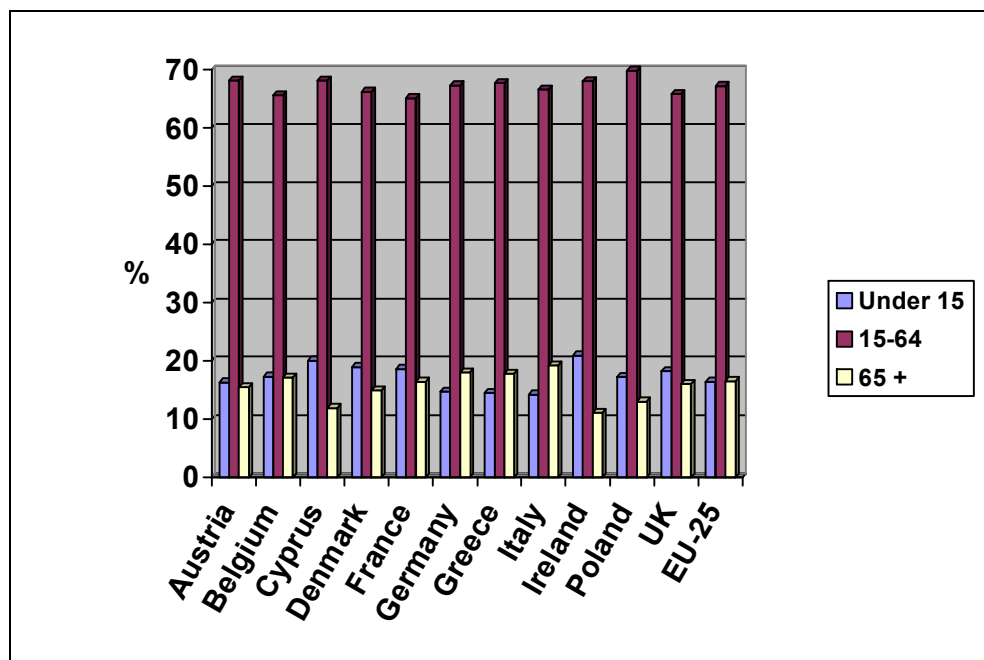


Figure 1. Population by age, EU comparison, 2004 (Source: Babb et al. 2006)

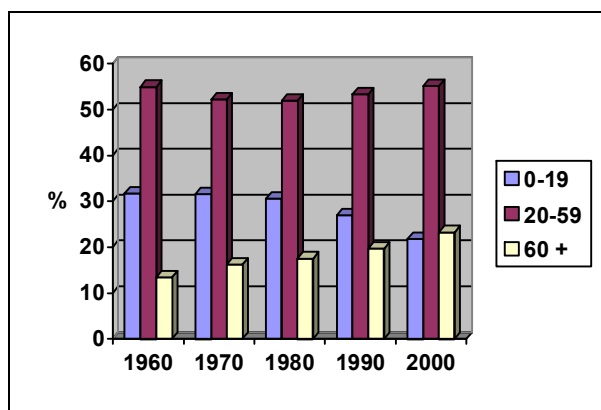


Figure 2. Population by age, Greece, 1960-2000 (Source: <http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int>)

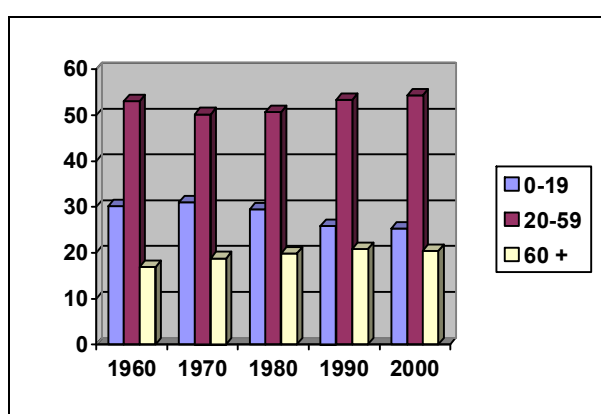


Figure 3. Population by age, UK, 1960-2000 (Source: <http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int>)

### 3.3 Fertility rates

The post-WWII period in Europe has been characterised by a unique blend of fertility patterns and trends. Across Europe, without exception, the numbers of children born per woman are not sufficient to replace existing generations. Below-replacement fertility (under 2.1 children per woman) prevails. Coleman (1996) describes how after the Second World War, Western European countries experienced a rise in their birth rates, followed by a brief slump during the reconstruction years in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Then, suddenly, fertility increased again, reaching a peak in most countries in the middle of the 1960s. Once the 'baby boom' ended, however, birth rates began to fall at an unprecedented pace. By 1972, most of Western Europe had reached below-replacement fertility. Yet, as Pearce et al. (1999, p.34) note, 'at the individual country level ... the picture, in terms of the timing of the decline, the level to which annual fertility rates have dropped, and whether or not there has been some recovery, is more variable.' Diversity is also apparent at the regional level (Frejka and Ross 2001).

Both types of heterogeneity are manifest through changes in the total fertility rate (TFR) of different countries since the 1960s (Figure 4). The total fertility rate reflects, 'the mean number of children that would be born alive to a woman during her lifetime if she were to pass through her childbearing years conforming to the fertility rates by age of a given year' (<http://epp.eurostat.ec.eu.int>). It is, therefore, the completed fertility of a hypothetical generation. Regionally-speaking, a shift in the

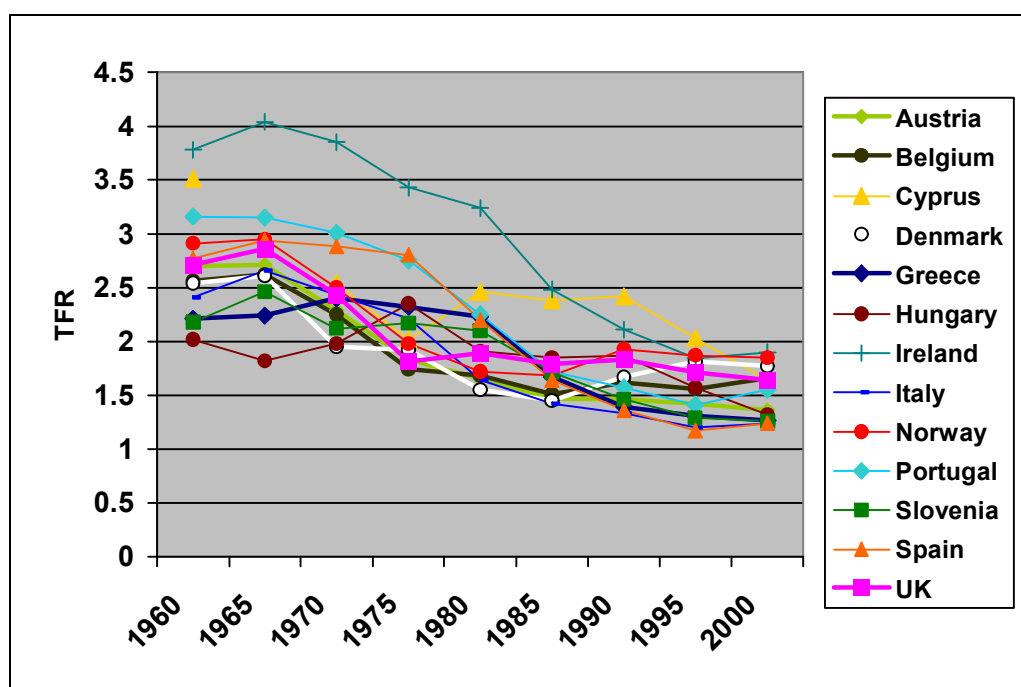


Figure 4. Total fertility rates, selected European countries, 1960-2000 (Source: Council of Europe 2005)

TFR first appeared in the 1950s and 1960s in the countries of Central, Eastern and Northern Europe; then in Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, and finally in Southern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet republics in the 1980s and 1990s respectively (Frejka and Ross 2001). According to Schoenmaeckers and Lodewijckx (1999), between 1960-65 and 1990-95 the TFR dropped, on average, by almost 40 per cent across Europe. The highest plunge (47%) in the TFR value was in Southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain) and the lowest (30%) in the Scandinavian (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) and Central-Eastern (Bulgaria, Estonia, Poland and Romania) regions. In Western Europe, which includes the UK, Austria and France, the decline (40%) was moderate.

The total fertility rate of Greece and the United Kingdom, therefore, has followed a rather different trajectory during the period 1960 to the present (Figure 5). In the UK, from a peak in 1964 (2.95) the TFR declined rapidly up until 1977 (1.69), after which there was a short-term recovery,

followed by relative stability in the 1980s (Pearce et al. 1999). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a slight increase in the birth rate as the 'baby boom' generation of women entered their childbearing years (Babb et al. 2006). After that, however, fertility began falling again. In 2001, the UK's TFR plummeted to a record low of just 1.63 children per woman (ONS 2005). Since then, there has been some recovery. By 2003, the TFR had risen to 1.71 and a year later to 1.77 children per woman (ONS 2005). Greece, did not experience a substantial 'baby boom' in the post-WWII period, and its TFR was lower than that of the UK throughout the 1960s (Coleman 1996). It then hovered above replacement, at relative constancy, during the 1970s. In 1981, however, it suddenly dropped below 2.1 children per woman. Unlike in other European countries, including the UK, its TFR continues to decline. In 2004, it was 1.29 children per woman, well under the EU-15 and EU-25 averages (1.52 and 1.50 children per woman respectively). Only a number of Central and Eastern European countries have lower total fertility rates.

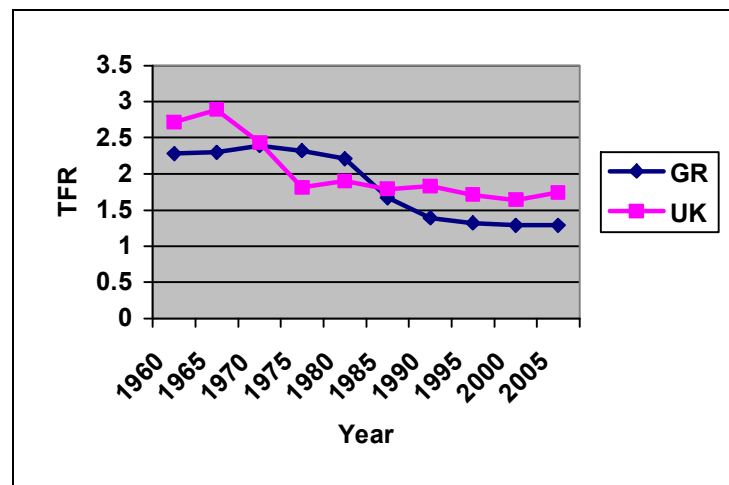


Figure 5. Total fertility rates of Greece and the UK, 1960-2005 (Source: <http://epp.eurostat.ec.eu.int>)

The total fertility rate is the number of children that would be born to a woman if current patterns of childbearing persisted throughout her reproductive life. This measurement groups together the experiences of women of different ages into one imaginary lifetime and therefore reflects both the levels and timing of fertility of several generations at once. A more accurate and stable way to measure fertility is to look at data on completed average family size. The cohort total fertility rate (CTFR) describes the fertility experience of women born in specific years. In general, the cohort data confirm the trend of below-replacement fertility in Europe (Höpfinger 1984). As Pearce and Bovagnet (2005) show, for women born in 1930 (who were reproducing between the late 1940s and around 1980) in all EU-15 member states, except Luxemburg, the CTFR was above the current replacement level of 2.1. In contrast, the

completed family size of women born in 1963 (who had children at the end of the 1970s until now) in any of the EU-25 countries, except Ireland and the Slovak Republic, was either at or below replacement.

According to Sardon (2004), in Greece the CTFR was at replacement among women born in 1940 (2.10) but fell below it among those born five years later (2.00), where it remained, more or less, until the 1955 birth cohort. Greek women born in 1960, however, had a CTFR of 1.93 children per woman, while those belonging to the 1965 generation had an average of 1.75 children per woman (Figure 6). In England and Wales, the CTFR was 2.35 (1940 birth cohort), 2.16 (1945 birth cohort), 2.02 (1955 birth cohort), 1.97 (1960 birth cohort) and 1.89 among women born in 1965 (Sardon 2004). As Figure 6 shows, however, the differences in cohort total fertility rates between Greece and the UK are not as acute as those exhibited by the total fertility rates (see Figure 5 above). It is also apparent that women born between 1950 and 1960 in Greece and the United Kingdom had very similar birth rates, just under replacement level. While the cohort total fertility rates among women born in 1965 were less comparable, the gap between them was not as striking as that displayed by the total fertility rates.

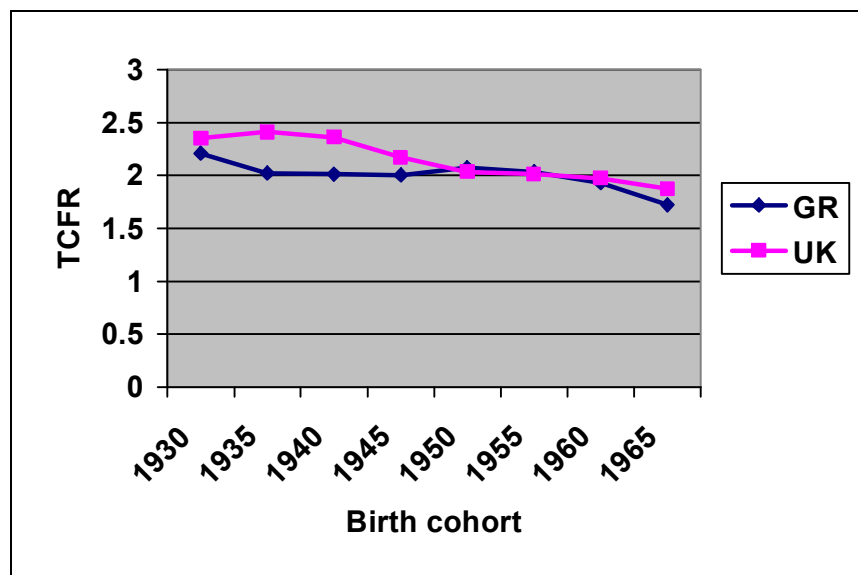


Figure 6. Cohort total fertility rates for Greece and the UK, 1930-1965 (Source: <http://epp.eurostat.ec.eu.int>)

In order to grasp fully the European fertility situation, however, it is also necessary to take into account completed fertility data along with the mortality rates faced by a cohort of women until the end of their reproductive lives. As Sardon (1991) contends, replacement fertility is not uniform though time and space but varies depending on changes in mortality conditions. As a result, throughout the twentieth-century,

Sardon claims, generation replacement fertility has been the exception rather than the norm for most European countries. In England and Wales, for instance, since the beginning of the 1900s, generations of women have been having fewer children than necessary to replenish the population. Only the 1930-1945 generations have ensured replacement. Greece, like Italy and Sweden, has probably never been guaranteed generation replacement during the twentieth century. According to Smallwood and Chamberlain (2005), however, the year of birth of the last generation to achieve fertility of an average 2.1 children or more per woman in the UK was 1949 and pre-1935 in Greece. By the 1960 cohort, they argue, only France, Ireland, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Norway, Serbia Montenegro and Romania had above replacement fertility in Europe. Despite slight variability in ideas about which generation in different countries last had enough children to supplant itself, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that below-replacement fertility is not as recent a phenomenon as the 'second demographic theory' suggests.

### **3.4 Age patterns of childbearing**

The postponement of childbearing has been a defining feature of many low fertility countries for the past few decades (Figure 7). According to Prioux (1990), mean age at childbirth has been increasing across Europe, beginning in Northern European countries at the end of the 1960s, followed by Central and Western European countries in the 1970s and Southern Europe during the late 1970s and early 1980s. As Prioux further notes, across Europe, except in the Southern region, women born around 1945 are those who had children earliest (between 25.2 and 26.8 years old). As Figure 7 shows, the mean age at which women are having children has risen further among the 1960-65 birth cohorts, exceeding 29 years in a handful of countries (such as Denmark and the Netherlands), hovering around 28 years in England and Wales, Sweden, France and Germany, and reaching the 27 year mark in Greece. The earliest mean age at childbirth among women born in 1965 was in Central and Eastern Europe (between 23.5 and 27.2 years), while in the rest of Europe the 1965 birth cohort had a mean age at childbirth that ranged between 26.8 (Cyprus) and 30 years (Ireland and the Netherlands) (Sardon 2004). Therefore, compared to the difference between Central-Eastern European countries and the rest of Europe, women born in Greece and the UK in 1965 have a relatively similar mean age at childbirth, which may converge even further in the near future.

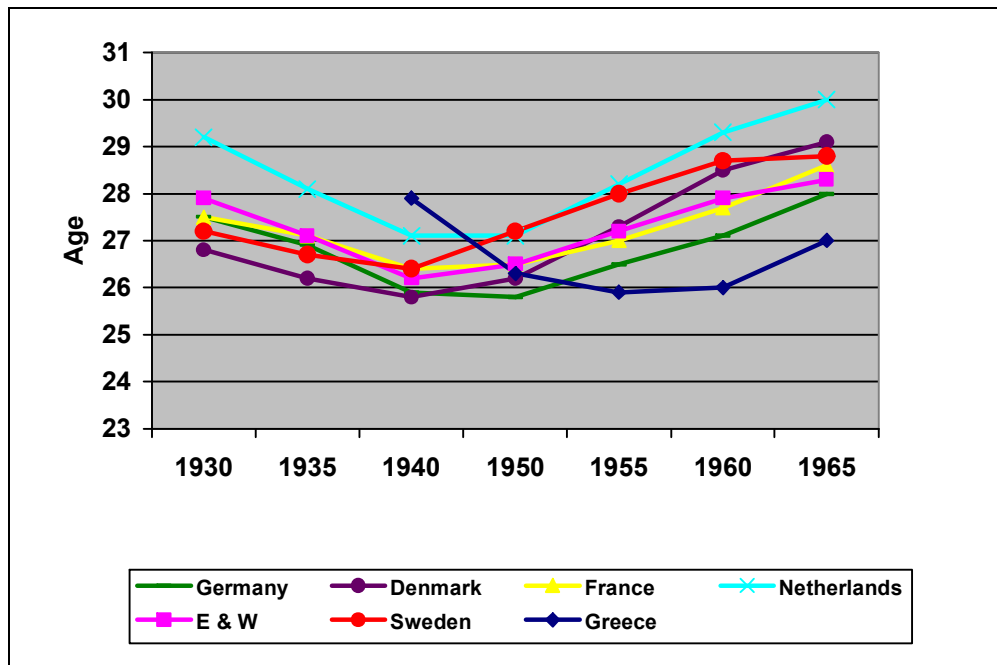


Figure 7. Mean age at childbirth, selected European countries, 1930-1965 birth cohorts (Source: Sardon 2004)

A rise in the mean age at childbirth is due to a reduction in the number of higher parity births (three children or more; see next section) and a rise in the mean age at first birth (Pearce et al. 1999). Except in Central-Eastern European countries, among recent birth cohorts the mean age at first birth has risen considerably across Europe (Figure 8). The postponement of mean age at first birth began in the Scandinavian countries, then in the Western region and finally in Southern Europe (Schoenmaeckers and Lodewijckx 1999). According to Sardon (2004), the mean age at first birth among women born in the mid-1960s is lowest in Central and Eastern Europe (22.1-24.4 years) and highest in the Netherlands (28.4 years). The 1965 birth cohort has a mean age at first birth of 25.3 years in Greece and 26.3 years in England and Wales (Sardon 2004). Kohler et al. (2002) contend that in Southern European countries annual increases in the mean age at first birth have exceeded 0.2 per year between 1990 and 1999, with Greece experiencing a rise of 1.7 years from a mean age at first birth of 25.5 years in 1990 to 27.3 years in 1999.



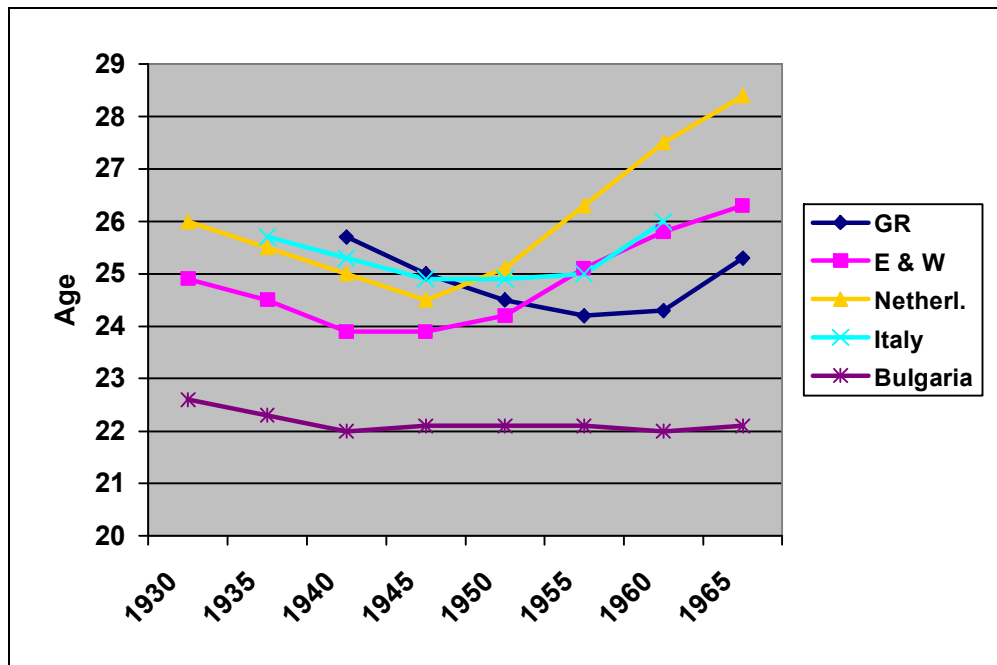


Figure 8. Mean age at first birth, selected European countries, 1930-1965 cohorts (Source: Sardon 2004)

Age-specific fertility data – that is, fertility rates at different age groups – add weight to the above observations. Frejka and Calot (2001) show that women born during the 1930s in Western Europe, who had children just after the Second World War, had high fertility at a young age, whereas those born in the 1940s and 1950s had relatively fewer children when they were in their 20s and more, compared to earlier cohorts, when in their 30s. The 1960s and early 1970s female birth cohorts, Frejka and Calot maintain, have lower fertility at comparable ages than women born earlier. Frejka and Ross (2001) argue that, in general, in low fertility countries, childbearing now occurs in the middle of women's reproductive lifespan. They add that in Western and Northern Europe, between 1960 and 1996 fertility declined faster than the total fertility rate both in the ages above 40 and in those under 25, except in Great Britain where the fertility of the 15-19 age group did not fall as rapidly. Among 25-39 year olds and 30-34 years, the fertility decline was smaller than the TFR decline. In Southern Europe, Frejka and Ross claim, the fertility decline for ages 20-39 was almost equal to the TFR decline; however, in Greece and Spain birth rates dropped very slowly among women aged 15-20 years.

According to Pearce et al (1999), in the UK there has been a rapid fall in the age-specific fertility rate for women between the ages of 20 and 24, and an increase among those aged 30-34 (Figure 9). In fact, the latter age group now has a higher fertility rate than the former, and there has been an increase in the rate for women aged 35-39 years. Botting and Dunnell (2000) note that between 1976 and 1998 in England and Wales

there was a 31 per cent decrease in live birth rates for women aged 20-24 and a 19 per cent decrease for women aged 25-29. For women aged 30-34 years there was a 54 per cent increase in live birth rates and a 110 per cent rise for women between the ages of 35 and 39 years. Between 1976 and 1998, the proportion of live births to women in their twenties fell from 69 per cent to 48 per cent, while for women in their thirties it rose from 20 per cent of all births to 42 per cent (Botting and Dunnell 2000). In Greece, there has been a considerable drop in the age-specific fertility rates of the young age groups since the 1980s (Siampos 1991) and in the 1990s there has been a rise in the rates of women aged 30-34 and 35-39 (Figure 10). As a result, whereas in 1979 the proportion of live births to mothers aged 30 and over comprised 22.5 per cent of the total and 25.7 per cent in 1989, in 1999 it represented 41.9 per cent (Drettakis 2002), which is almost identical to women of the same age group from England and Wales.

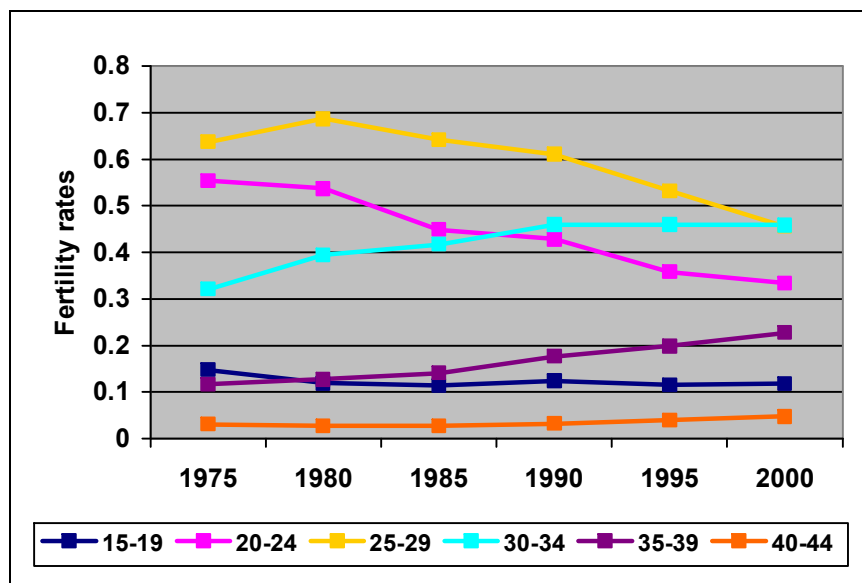


Figure 9. Fertility rates by age, UK, 1975-2000 (Source: <http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int>)

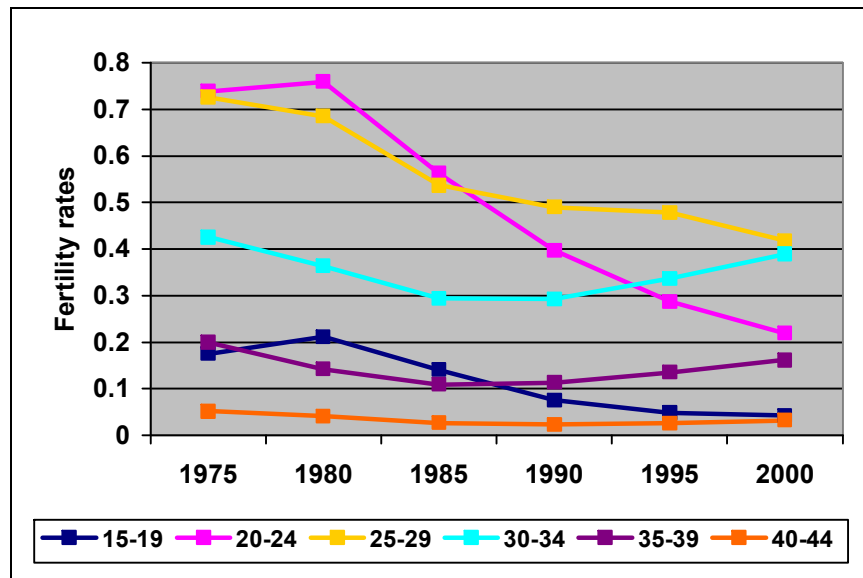


Figure 10. Fertility rate by age, Greece, 1975-2000 (Source: <http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int>)

There is widespread consensus in the demographic literature that the postponement of childbearing to very late ages leads to particularly low cohort fertility because it allows little time for recovery (Frejka and Ross 2001; Kohler et al. 2002). However, there are exceptions to the rule. Firstly, countries with an early mean age at childbearing and mean age at first birth do not necessarily have higher fertility than those where postponement is greater. In a recent article, for example, Perelli-Harris (2005) reveals that in the Ukraine, which has one of the lowest total fertility rates in the world – 1.1 children per woman in 2001 – childbearing occurs mainly between the ages of 20 and 24, while the mean age at first birth was 22.8 years in 2000. In addition, according to Frejka and Calot (2001), in a few low-fertility countries – for instance, Norway – the ‘fertility deficits’ incurred at young ages by women in certain birth cohorts (particularly the 1940s and 1950s ones) – were offset by higher fertility at older ages. On the other hand, Frejka and Calot also show that in England and Wales among the 1960-61 birth cohorts, only 55 per cent of the birth dearth incurred by women when they were young was compensated by a ‘fertility surplus’ when they were older. Among women born in the mid-to-late 1960s and in the 1970s in low-fertility countries, Frejka and Calot conclude, the shortfall in childbearing at younger ages is likely to be even more marked and, as a result, only a small part will be recompensed at older ages.

### 3.5 Childlessness and family size

In a recent study, however, Billari and Kohler (2004) refute the idea that ‘lowest-low’ fertility is due to low birth rates in women’s early reproductive years (up to the mid-20s). Some of the youngest cohorts (up to 1975) in countries with especially low fertility, such as Italy, have an

equal, or even greater, number of first births as women born in the same cohorts in European countries with higher total fertility, such as the Netherlands. The reason for 'lowest-low' fertility in some countries and low fertility in others, they argue, is not due to a reduced proclivity among women in the former to become mothers or to have particularly low fertility in early adulthood. Rather, it is because of a lower probability of progressing to second or higher parity births. As Table 2 shows, the differences in parity distributions between Greece and England and Wales appear to substantiate these claims.

**Table 2. Family size at age 40 for women born in 1960 in Greece & England and Wales (Source: Frejka et al. 2001; Smallwood 2002; Berrington 2004)**

	<b>Greece</b>	<b>England and Wales</b>
<b>0 children</b>	11%	19%
<b>1 child</b>	17%	12%
<b>2 children</b>	52%	39%
<b>3 children</b>	15%	19%
<b>4+ children</b>	5%	10%

Patterns of childlessness also differ between European countries but the proportions of women staying permanently childless have increased across most of Europe (Figure 11). In general, among women born around 1945 in Northern and Western Europe (slightly later in Southern Europe) childlessness was the lowest ever recorded (Prioux 1990). After that, it increased almost everywhere. According to the ONS (2005), in England and Wales, 21 per cent of women born in 1920 remained childless for the duration of their reproductive lives, while only 9 per cent of those belonging to the 1944 and 1945 cohorts (who were having children in the 1960s) did the same. The latest figures show that 18 per cent of women currently completing their childbearing years will be childless. In other words, while around one in ten women born in 1950 had no children upon completion of their reproductive years, it is likely that around one in five born in the early 1960s will never have children (Rendall and Smallwood 2003). Berrington (2004, p.9) argues that 'the increase in childlessness has been the driving force behind the decline in average completed family size in England and Wales, at least up until the 1960 cohort.'

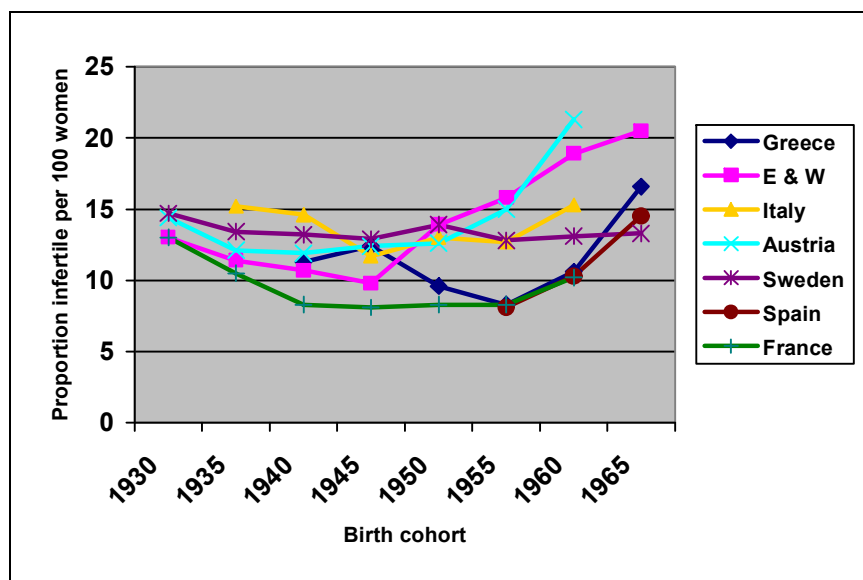


Figure 11. Permanent infertility in female birth cohorts, selected European countries, 1930-1965 (Source: Sardon 2004)

In Southern Europe, among couples formed immediately after the war, Italy had the greatest levels of childlessness, topping those of Spain and Portugal (Munoz-Perez 1989). Among female cohorts born in the late 1960s in Southern European countries, with the exception of Portugal, around 20 per cent will remain childless, with Italy still in the lead (Frejka et al. 2001). In Greece, childlessness increased steadily among generations of women born in the post-WWII period, with 16.6 per 100 women born in 1965 likely to remain childless throughout their lifetime and 19.7 per 100 women born in 1968 expected to do likewise (Sardon 2004). This means that permanent infertility in Greece is gradually catching up with levels in England and Wales. For example, Sardon shows that 20.9 per 100 women born in 1968 in England and Wales have also stayed childless. However, in both countries the late 1960s female birth cohorts still have time to have children before the end of their reproductive years, and therefore might start to display less convergence.

### 3.6 Extra-marital childbearing

Extra-marital childbearing is another feature of European below-replacement fertility in the post-WWII period that varies enormously between countries (Figure 12). In the Scandinavian region over 40 per cent of births in 1997 were outside marriage, in most of Western Europe the proportion was between 10 and 40 per cent while in Italy, Greece and Switzerland 10 per cent or fewer births were extra-marital (Kiernan 1999). In 2002, just over 40 per cent of live births in the UK took place outside marriage. In England and Wales, between 1977 and 1993, the contribution of extra-marital births to total fertility grew three and a half-fold from 97 births per 1000 to 322 births per 1000, with mean age at extra-marital birth increasing from 23.4 years to 25.5 over the same period

(Hobcraft 1996). Cooper and Jones (1992) show that between 1980 and 1990 the rise in the percentage of births outside marriage was less for first births than for those of higher orders. According to Smallwood (2002) more than half (51%) of births outside marriage are now second or higher order births. This suggests either that an increasing number of women are having some or all of their children outside a marital union, or that a growing number of such births are due to divorced or separated women starting a second family following a failed marriage (Cooper and Jones 1992).

In Greece, extra-marital childbearing is very uncommon. In fact, Greece has the second lowest proportion of births outside marriage in the 'developed world', after Cyprus (Sardon 2004). Although extra-marital births have increased slightly since 1970, in 2002 just over four per cent of Greek children were illegitimate, compared to the EU-25 average of around 29 per cent (<http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int>). As Kiernan (1999) points out, one of the reasons behind the rise in non-marital childbearing is the increase in cohabitation. Typically, countries with high levels of cohabitating unions also manifest higher rates of births outside marriage and vice versa. In Greece, both cohabitation and extra-marital childbearing is rare. The UK, however, has a higher percentage of births outside marriage relative to its levels of cohabitation, and an unusually high proportion of women who have babies outside even a cohabiting union, that is, pre-partnership formation (Kiernan 1999).

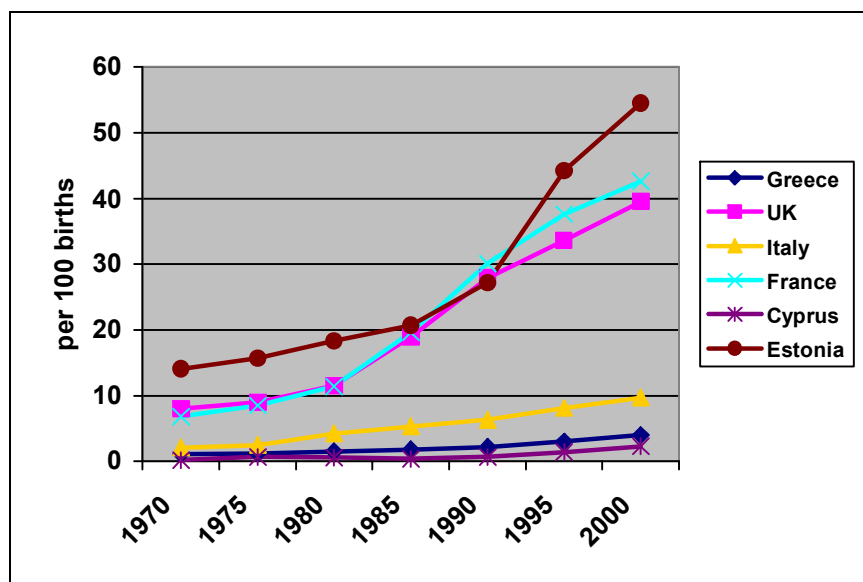


Figure 12. Proportion of births outside marriage, selected European countries, 1970-2000 (Source: Sardon 2004)

A number of additional differences to the ones pointed out in this chapter exist between low-fertility countries, as well as between Greece and the United Kingdom. Considerable variations are also present

within each population, according to such variables as education, social class, and ethnic group. However, the above description offers an overview of some of the key features of below-replacement fertility in Europe and each of the two countries in question. While there are certain similarities between Greece and the United Kingdom (or England and Wales) in relation to fertility, and some converging trends, there are also considerable differences and patterns of divergence. Irrespective of past and future fertility developments in the two countries, it is the contemporary conditions described above that provide the backdrop to the ethnographic accounts about to follow.

## **PART 1 - ATHENS**



## 4 THE GREEK FIELDWORK SETTING

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the formation and character of three contexts that played a significant role in shaping the attitudes and experiences of my Greek informants in relation to reproduction. While the term 'context' is difficult to delineate and many different, overlapping 'contexts' (political, economic, social and historical) are crucial in influencing fertility, I have chosen to highlight those dominant in the narrative accounts that I recorded. The first and broadest of these 'contexts' is Athens, the city in which my informants resided, though were not necessarily born or raised. The second is *Nea Smyrni*, the municipality where the majority of them lived. Finally, I offer a portrayal of the Greek middle-class, the social group to which most of those I interviewed belonged. The remainder of the chapters in Part 1, provide insight about further 'contexts' important to the research, yet the three presented below are the broadest with the potential to elucidate the specificity of my informants' ideas and practices about childbearing. The intention, however, is not for them to act simply as a backdrop. Athens, *Nea Smyrni* and the Greek middle-class all form part of the framework in which every single one of my informants had to consider and perform the process of family-formation. In this way, all had a profound rather than a superficial effect on their attitudes towards childbearing and their reproductive practices, the nature of which I highlight in each section.

### 4.2 Athens and its inhabitants

Athens became the capital of the newly established Greek nation-state in 1834. In 1805, it had a population of just 12,000 out of a total 600,000 Greeks (Margaritis 2005). Its character today, like that of Greece as a whole, has more to do with Western ideals than the traditions of the ancient Greeks who inhabited its lands centuries ago. As Prevelakis (2001) notes, Athens' selection as capital city was odd, given that at the time of its formation it was of little significance either commercially or agriculturally compared to other Greek cities, such as Ermoupolis on the island of Syros. It was also strange because it was not as populated as other areas of the country. In 1806, for instance, Thessalonica had 65,000 residents, while in 1809 Larisa had 25,000 inhabitants, after Ioannina whose population in the same year numbered 30,000 (Margaritis 2005). The foreign powers of Britain, France and Russia, entrusted with the country's transition to independence, chose Athens as the seat of administrative and political rule, however, because its historical importance suited the new ideology upon which they wished to found the Greek nation-state as a whole. According to this ideology, if Athens was to be a 'modern' city, in line with other European cities of the nineteenth century, it had to forge a homogeneous identity with a

common history originating in antiquity, in particular classical Athens (Panourgia 1995).

Nevertheless, reality could not be further removed from that ideal. In the early 1830s, Athens was 'little more than a dusty village' (Clogg 1992, p.50). While the Greeks who resided in the shadow of the Acropolis upon liberation from Ottoman rule may not have been peasants, like those who lived in the rest of the country, they were no closer to the ancient Greeks. At the time, Sant Cassia (1992) maintains, Athens consisted of 'ordinary townspeople', some of whom were craftsmen but most of whom were migrants with close links to surrounding villages, making a living out of domestic industrial activity, income from smallholdings and some animal husbandry. They were largely of Arvanite, Vlach and Cycladean origin (Panourgia 1995). There was also an elite group of landowning Athenians, who emerged during the Venetian occupation, with above average political power and access to resources relative to the times. Yet this group gradually disappeared, as a new breed of economically able, mercantile-oriented families, known as the *nikokirei*, gained prominence (Sant Cassia 1992).

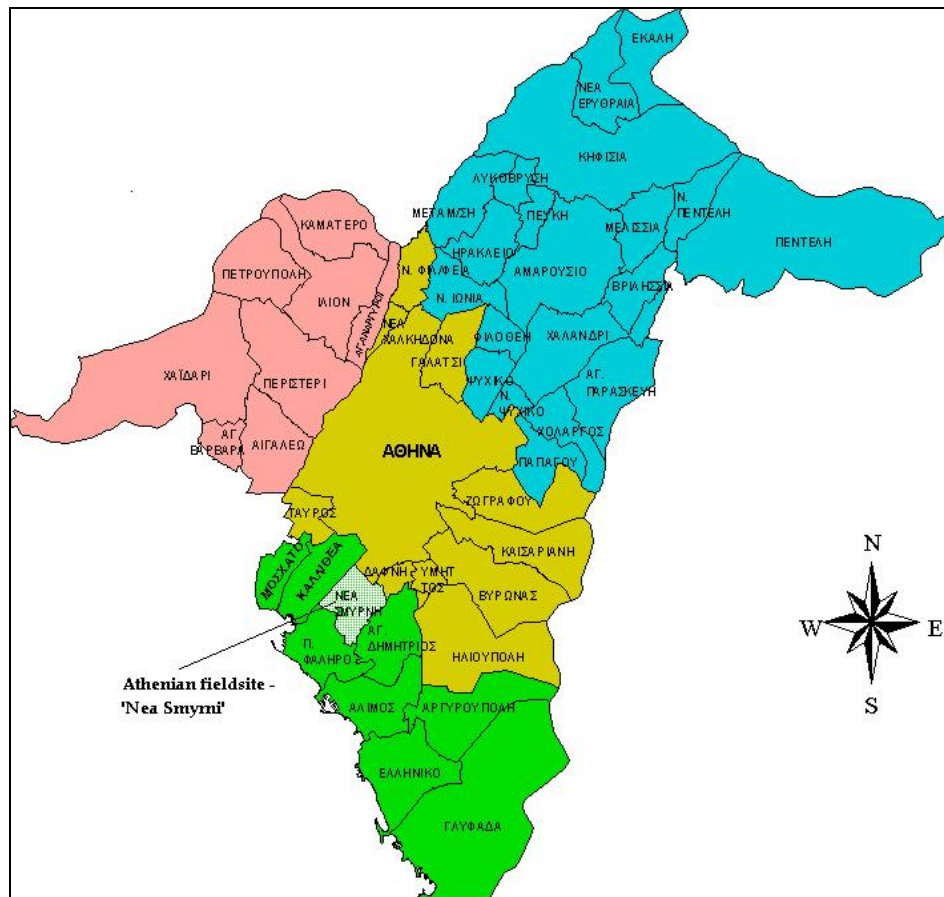
In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Athens went through a major demographic and social 'rebirth' due to considerable economic expansion. From a population of 12,000 in 1805, it rose to 63,000 in 1879, 114,000 in 1889 and 168,000 in 1907 (Margaritis 2005), while two years before the Asia Minor Catastrophe (1922) it had increased to 317,000 (Polydoras 2002). During this period, professional and salaried clerks working in commercial, government and financial institutions, as well as intellectuals and politicians settled in Athens. As a result, according to Doumanis (1983), up until 1920 the two main characteristics of the urbanisation process in Greece were the growth of the capital, which led to the stagnation of other cities, and the non-productive nature of its economy. 'At the end of the nineteenth century,' Doumanis (1983, p.131) claims, 'Greece appears to have had the highest percentage of civil servants in the world.' Consequently, clientelism developed, as wealthy merchants and landowners moved to Athens to take advantage of new opportunities, promising those left behind that in return for their loyalty back home they would receive a share of any benefits acquired in the capital. At the same time, many patriots, some of whom were Greeks of the diaspora, helped to turn Athens into a city worthy of western Europe's much longed for recognition; for example, giving money to help found such institutions as the University of Athens in 1837 (Polydoras 2002).

The face of Athens underwent further transformation following the Asia Minor Catastrophe, exacerbating the enormity of the task for which the country's founders were responsible; that is, uniting people from

diverse backgrounds, as well as different regional affinities, under the banner of a Greek nation, as opposed to simply a Greek state (Clogg 1992). The forced exchange of populations between Turkey and Greece, following the failure of the latter's irredentist aspirations, meant that more than one million refugees had to be accommodated on Greek soil<sup>7</sup>, half of whom went to Athens and Thessalonica (Doumanis 1983). According to Burgel (1976), the settlement of so many refugees from Asia Minor, within the space of a few years, in a country of approximately five million, remains the most important event in the history of 'modern' Greece. The same is true of Athens. The 1928 Census shows that 230,000 refugees established themselves in the capital, making up 30 per cent of the total population of the city at the time (Burgel 1976). While the refugees brought with them new skills that were to prove extremely useful to the development of industry in and around Athens in the years subsequent to their arrival, they also caused much disorder because of their sheer number and distinctive identity. As Woodhouse (1977) suggests, their presence was both advantageous and disadvantageous to the new kingdom. On the one hand, the textile and tobacco industries blossomed as a direct result of the expertise carried by the new settlers and a series of satellite cities were created around central Athens, such as *Nea Smyrni*, *Nea Ionia*, *Vyron*, *Kaisariani*, *Kokkinia*, *Peristeri*, *Philadelphia* and *Tavros* (Map 1). On the other hand, many of the refugees suffered from economic hardship and cultural displacement, and exerted great pressure on the city's limited resources and infrastructure. According to Burgel (1976), the new settlers also increased Athens' fertility, especially in the 1930s, putting even more strain on the capital.

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<sup>7</sup> 1.3 million Greek Orthodox residents left the shores of Anatolia in exchange for 350,000 Muslim residents of Greece (Faubion 1990).



Map 1. Athens and its municipalities, including Nea Smyrni (Source: [www.nomaxia.gr](http://www.nomaxia.gr))

Mainly, however, they helped to turn Athens during the 1930s from a predominantly consumerist centre into an important hub of production, with a new proletariat and, inevitably, communist sympathisers (Prevelakis 2001). While the Metaxas dictatorship (1936-1941), the Second World War (1940-1944) and the Civil War (1946-1949) interrupted the course of this transition, it resumed in the 1950s, marking the beginning of an age of great economic expansion and rapid creation of wealth that lasted until the early 1970s. It was during this time that a large part of the construction of Athens took place. As Kairofylas (1993) argues, the reason for this was, partly, due to a pressing need to house the vast number of people who came to the capital from the countryside in search of safety and shelter during 1940-1949 (WWII and Civil War period). While the State did participate in this process, housing construction was largely a product of private initiative (Kairofylas 1993), and it occurred using a system known as *adiparohi* (Prevelakis 2001)<sup>8</sup>. This system of

<sup>8</sup> *Antiparohi* is an exchange process through which property is developed in return for conceded land. A contractor receives an assignment to build on a private plot. Once he has built it he keeps some of the property's apartments for himself and gives the rest to the owner of the land.

housing construction led to the demolition of many neoclassical buildings and the creation of seven-storey apartment blocks known as the *polykatoikia*, which now house the majority of the city's dwellers but also businesses and government offices (Sarkis 1997). According to Kairofylas (1993), between 1945 and 1955, 91,161 new apartments were available to Athenians, the majority of which (62,658) had been built within four years, between 1950 and 1954.

Many of my informants expressed their disappointment with city life through reference to the *polykatoikia*, complaining of the solitude it encouraged through lack of neighbourly contact and the absence of communal space. For them it symbolised the end of family life, as they knew or had imagined it to be, and signalled the end of an era of 'desire' for many children. Kairofylas (1997) echoes the view that architecture plays a major role in structuring the shape of the family and suggests that the *polykatoikia* apartments in which Athenians have had to live ever since the 1950s and 1960s hardly have room for more than one or two children and their parents. Prevelakis (2001) argues that the systematic destruction of buildings from the 19th century, their replacement with bland high-rise blocks and the lack of quality architectural plans expressed the lack of ideology in post-war Athens. The failure of irredentism, known locally as the *Megali Idea* (the 'Great Idea'), he contends, changed the course of Athenian urban planning. Whereas the original aim was to represent historical continuity from antiquity to modernity through the construction of neoclassical buildings, after 1922 there was no clear direction in terms of the expression of values, other than the desire to make money (Plates 1 and 2).



**Plate 1. A view of Athens from Lycabettus hill**





**Plate 2. High rise office blocks amid residential *polykatoikies***

Athens' period of prosperity ceased again, briefly, because of the 1967-74 dictatorship headed by a group of Colonels. Once democratic rule was back, however, the capital resumed its expansion across the Attic plain. It now has a population of just over 3.7 million. This means that well over a third of the total population of Greece currently reside in the capital. As Burgel (1976) notes, although between 1820 and 1923 Greece's borders kept expanding (see Appendix II), Athens in 1848 comprised only 3.1 per cent of the total Greek population and 60 years later just under 10 per cent. In the following 50 years (1920-1971), the city continued to grow so that by 1971 it already encompassed about 29 per cent of the overall population of the country. 'The sleepy village,' as Faubion (1993, p.25) contends, 'had grown into a metropolis.' As Panourgia (1995, p.48) points out, 'Athens is now a pastiche of identities, multifaceted and not always at ease with each other.' This assortment of identities has much to do with Athens' migration history. While there were two important waves of mass emigration (the first in the late 19th to early 20th centuries and the second following World War II) from the capital to countries such as the United States, Egypt, Germany, Australia and Canada (Kasimis and Kasimi 2004), it is mainly immigration that has changed the character of the existing Athenian populace.

The movement of people from the countryside to the towns started as early as the nineteenth century, becoming especially regular towards the end of that period and accelerating during the inter-war years (Mouzelis 1978). In the post-WWII epoch, Athens was again the destination for masses of people from rural and semi-rural areas. In the 1950s, Siampos (1993) notes, as many as 382,000 people moved to the capital, followed by 502,000 in the 1960s and 360,000 in the 1970s. The growth of communication networks, the development of the cinema and

the spread of television encouraged this journey by making Athens more easily accessible, showing people in areas all over the country what it had to offer (Prevelakis 2001). The majority of my informants either had parents who had been born and raised in a rural or semi-rural area, or were themselves from the provinces.

More recently, predominantly in the 1990s, Athens and the whole of Greece have become hosts to a huge number of immigrants from abroad. In 2004, there were around 586,044 foreign citizens living in the country legally, most of whom were from Europe, in particular Central and Eastern European countries (518,293). According to the 1999 Greek Fertility and Family Survey (FFS), 26.9 per cent of immigrants in 1998 were from the EU, 33.4 per cent from other European countries, 18.5 per cent were from Asia, 12 per cent from America, and 8 per cent from Africa (Symeonidou 2002). In addition, there are an estimated half a million foreigners living illegally in the country (OECD 1999). While in the 1980s, Faubion (1993, p.70-1) observed that Athens 'had no true ghettos, whether religious, ethnic, cultural, valuational, or even gustatorial,' making it 'relatively ethnically simple,' with no 'foreign restaurants' in sight, in 2003-4 the Greek capital embraced a variety of peoples, as well as their cuisines, from all over the world.

Compared to such cities as London, however, Athens remains relatively homogeneous, as does the country overall. The 1999 FFS, for example, revealed that out of the total sample, 92 per cent of interviewees were Christian Orthodox whereas only 1.4 per cent of respondents belonged to other religions and 6.5 per cent did not respond (Symeonidou 2002). One year ahead of hosting the XXVIII Olympic Games, Athens was in the midst of a makeover. Eagerly awaited public works were in their final stages of preparation. While Athenians were excited by the prospect of the construction of new bridges, roads, highways and buildings, and the restoration of old ones, however, they were also fearful of the aftermath of the Games, when all the visitors had gone home and they were left to cover the costs of the most expensive Olympic Games ever organised. It was an interesting time to be in Athens, as Athenians raced to prove to the world that their city was worthy of attention equal to that received by other European capitals. While many proudly pointed to the rapid progress that the capital had made in recent decades, others expressed a sense of nostalgia about its past and the life some of them had once known beyond its borders.

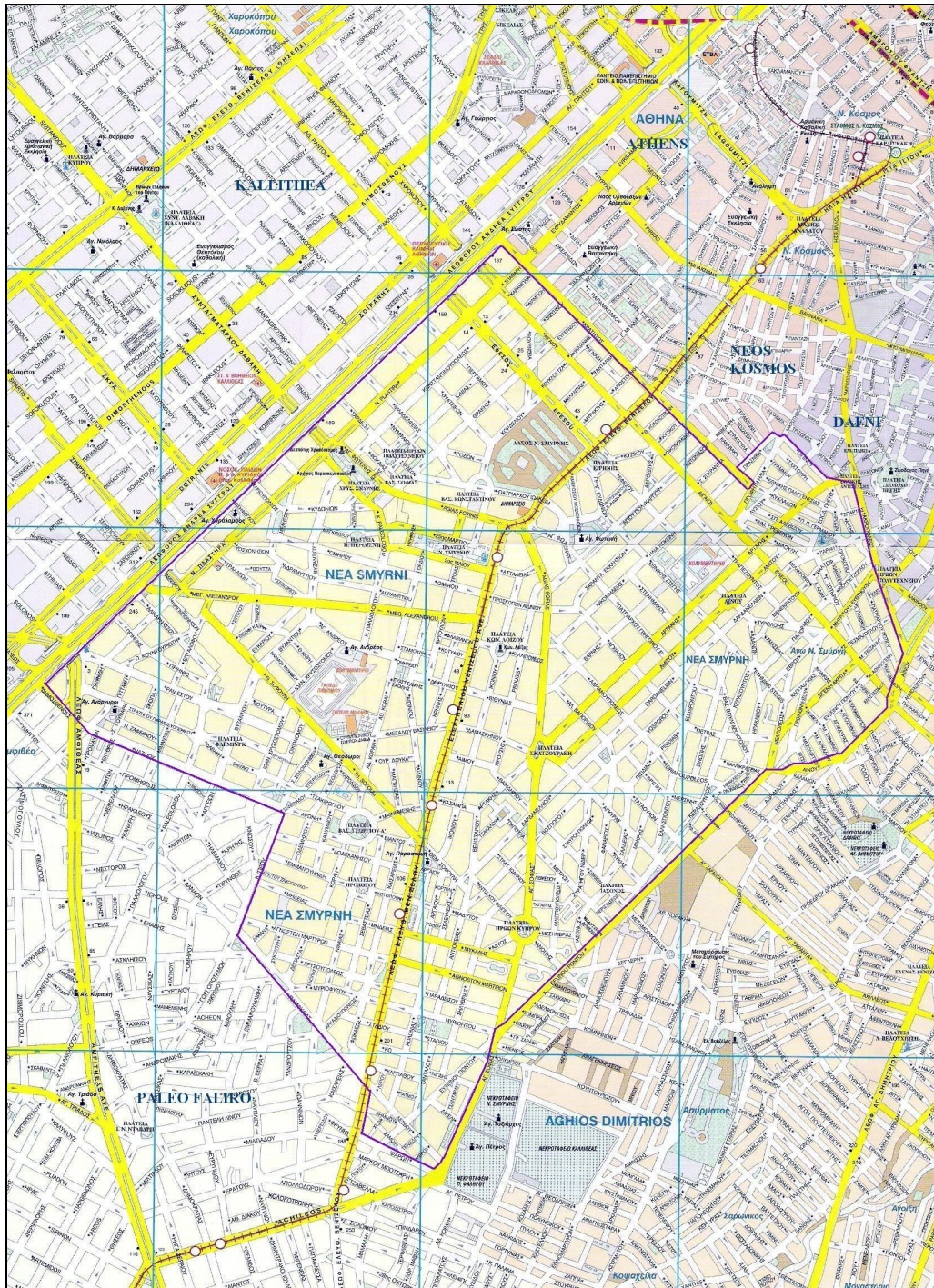
### 4.3 *Nea Smyrni*<sup>9</sup>

Today *Nea Smyrni* has a population of 76,508 inhabitants spread over an area of 865 acres (Map 2). Out of the total population, the majority (71,377) of those who live there are nationals while most of the rest are citizens of non-EU countries. Out of the 76,508 residents of *Nea Smyrni*, the majority (31,002) are educated to secondary, second stage and post-secondary level, 17,666 have reached tertiary level education and 27,840 have been to secondary school, first stage or less. From the 34,906 inhabitants in the population who are economically active, 73 per cent work in the tertiary sector, that is, the service industries, and 15 per cent in the secondary sector. Only 7.5 per cent of people in the borough belonging to the economically active population are unemployed. The largest age group in *Nea Smyrni* is the 25 to 39-year-olds (17,967 out of 76,508 residents), while 40 to 54-year-olds form the second largest age group (17,223 out of 76,508 residents). This means that a substantial number of people in the area were either at the stage where they might be starting to think about forming a family, may have recently had children or were nearing the end of their reproductive cycle.

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<sup>9</sup> Information on the 45 boroughs (*demoi*) and three communities (*koinotites*) that make up the prefecture of Athens (*Nomarchia Athinon*) is extremely difficult to find. Most of the relevant literature focuses on the history of central Athens, which is now also a borough (*demos*), rather than on the areas that grew out of it. However, a few key sources do exist. One is *Greater Athens* by Polydoras (2002) and the other is *Nea Smyrni: a photographic voyage through its architectural development* by Hatzatourian (1999). Both proved indispensable to constructing a profile of the municipality, as did two websites dedicated exclusively to the area. Also useful was a statistical survey of *Nea Smyrni* compiled from the 2001 Census (ESYE 2001). This section builds on the evidence found in all these sources.





**Map 2. *Nea Smyrni* (located within the purple line) and its neighbouring municipalities (Scale 1:12,000) (Source: Road Editions)**

While *Nea Smyrni* today is typical of other middle-class areas in the prefecture of Athens, its history is far from common. The formation of *Nea Smyrni* began a few months after the signing of the Lausanne Treaty in 1923 that put an end to the 'Great Idea' and set off the exchange of populations between the two recently formed nation-states, Greece and Turkey. Refugees from the coastal city of Smyrna were just some of those forced to flee their homes on the shores of Asia Minor to Greece, and



many ended up in Athens. In 1924, plans delineated the spot in which they were to settle: a rocky and barren stretch of land, overrun by streams, between Athens and Piraeus, just off Syggrou Avenue (Hatzatourian 2001). The first houses in the area appeared between 1923 and 1924, but it was not until 1926 that there were real efforts at construction ([www.neasmyrni.gr](http://www.neasmyrni.gr)). According to the census, in 1928 only 210 residents lived formally in the area. It was really during the 1930s that Nea Smyrni turned from a 'refugee' settlement' (*oikismos prosfygon*) into a proper 'city' (*polis*), its population growing from 6,500 in 1934 to 15,000 on the eve of the Second World War ([www.neasmyrni.net.gr](http://www.neasmyrni.net.gr)). Founded at that time were many of the institutions that today characterise *Nea Smyrni*. In 1930, for instance, the 'Clubhouse of *Nea Smyrni*' (*Leshi Neas Smyrnis*), now renamed the 'Centre of *Nea Smyrni*' (*Estia Neas Smyrnis*), was built at the entrance to the municipality in homage to its first inhabitants (plate 3). Today it houses archives and books related to the Greek civilisation of Asia Minor and plays host to a series of lectures regarding that period of Greek history. The foundations of the largest Church in the municipality, *Agia Fotini*, were also laid in the 1930s while the church itself was completed in 1940 (plate 4), finally replacing the old wooden structure that the area's early settlers had used as their place of worship in 1929. Later, as a reminder of the area's origins, an exact replica of the bell-tower from *Agia Fotini* in Smyrna was situated adjacent to the temple in *Nea Smyrni* (plate 5).



**Plate 3. The 'Clubhouse of *Nea Smyrni*'**



**Plate 4. *Nea Smyrni's largest church, Agia Fotini***



**Plate 5. The replica bell tower from Smyrna**

The years of the Metaxas dictatorship (1936-1940) proved to be advantageous for *Nea Smyrni* ([www.neasmyrni.net.gr](http://www.neasmyrni.net.gr)). Money flooded into the area, leading to the completion of many public works. Just before that, *Nea Smyrni* was separated from the borough of Athens and had come to be regarded as a 'community' (*koinotita*), consisting mainly of civil servants, traders and businessmen who worked in Athens and Piraeus (Hatzatourian 1999). Occupations such as these have remained dominant among those living in the area today, which might be because in the late 1920s, when *Nea Smyrni* was still a 'city', responsibility for its development fell in the hands of a French company that planned to turn it into a 'garden city' (Hatzatourian 1999). Many refugees living there at the time felt that they would not be able to afford to build their own houses if the plans went ahead, and so sold their plots of land to prosperous Athenians in search of a suburban life. *Nea Smyrni* never did turn into a 'garden city' because the French company in charge of it went bankrupt in 1932 (Hatzatourian 1999). However, as was evident from the

architectural style of the houses built subsequent to the announcement of the plans, even at their preliminary stage, news of the changes had the effect of selling the image of *Nea Smyrni* to citizens that were more affluent (Hatzatourian 1999). It is still possible to see one- or two-storey villas, trapped among a group of high-rise apartment blocks, depicting their original owners' fortunes (plate 6).



**Plate 6. Original two-storey villa amid *Nea Smyrni* high-rise blocks of flats**

When the Germans invaded Greece, *Nea Smyrni* became notorious as a breeding ground for Communists (Woodhouse 1977), and much street fighting took place (Polydoras 2002). In 1944, once the war was over, *Nea Smyrni* finally became a municipality (*demos*). After that, it gradually lost its individual character, expanding mainly to the south and to the east ([www.neasmyrni.net](http://www.neasmyrni.net)). Since the 1950s, *Nea Smyrni* has experienced rapid population growth and a sharp increase in traffic, shops, businesses and high-rise apartment buildings (plates 7 and 8), as an increasing number of Athenians seek a life away from the hassle and bustle of the city centre. In the last decade alone, there has been a 5.6 per cent increase in its population (Polydoras 2002). According to the 2001 Census, there are 28,885 households in *Nea Smyrni*, the bulk of which contain two-persons (8,301). One-person households make up the second largest category (7,344), followed by three-person households (6,536) and those including four-persons (5,402). The vast majority of residents in the municipality are nationals (71,377), while 4,728 and 402 of the total population are citizens of non-EU and other EU countries respectively. Today, a two-bedroom apartment in *Nea Smyrni* costs between 200,000€-300,000€ and a three-bedroom between 300,000€-400,000€ ([www.neasmyrni.net.gr](http://www.neasmyrni.net.gr)).





**Plate 7. Typical middle-class high rise apartment blocks in *Nea Smyrni***



**Plate 8. A typical *polykatoikia* in one of the streets of *Nea Smyrni***

#### **4.4 The Greek middle-class**

The Greek nation-state entered into the industrialisation process relatively late in comparison to other western European countries. As a result, there was considerable delay in the construction of a Greek middle-class. As Woodhouse (1977) notes, after the Ottomans left Greece there was no social class system in place. According to Koliopoulos (2002), under Ottoman rule, Greek society consisted of a large group of land-owning or landless peasants and shepherds, artisans organised in guilds and an upper class of functionaries in the service of the foreign overlord. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a powerful set of

wealthy Greek merchants who lived abroad also emerged (Mouzelis 1978). Following liberation, however, all these groups changed in either shape or direction. The wealthy merchants, who formed a major element of the Greek diaspora, stayed abroad - although they continued to be very influential in the life of the new kingdom (Koliopoulos 2002). The upper class of functionaries working for the Ottomans gradually disappeared as a distinct group, and merged with the up-and-coming *nikokirei* group (Sant Cassia 1992). Finally, the local landowners and peasants either moved to Athens to pursue a life filled with novel promises or, following the 1871 land distribution laws under Prime Minister Koumoundouros, acquired some landed property of their own and remained in the countryside (Mouzelis 1978). Eventually, with the expansion of Athenian society, the State and industry, space did open up for the creation of a middle-class, comprised of merchants, bankers, clerks and, above all, civil servants working for the government. Unlike in other parts of western Europe, including the United Kingdom (see Chapter 8, Section 8.3), however, these 'city dwellers' or 'bourgeois' (*astoi*) did not grow in opposition to state authority but in support of it; in other words, they were 'state-subsidised' (Koliopoulos 2002). It was in the period between 1922 and 1960, therefore, with the rise in dominance of a capitalist mode of production, that Greek politics for the first time also acquired a more pronounced class character rather than one based on clientelism (Mouzelis 1978).

The Greek middle-class today, can trace its origins back to the peasant population that moved to the urban centres of the new nation-state in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries as well as in the 1950s and 1960s, and to the refugees from Asia Minor. The Greek middle-class of the present-day, however, does not have much in common with its rural predecessors. As Sant Cassia (1992) argues, urbanisation and commoditisation from the nineteenth century onwards did not result in the continuation of a traditional, rural ethic of family, work and kinship, at least in Athens, but to completely new patterns of family organisation and, more importantly, of property transmission. Rural migrants faced new resources, novel circumstances and unknown neighbours on arrival to such cities as Athens. Moreover, the emerging Athenian middle-class, although uniformly rural in origin, was actually a rather diverse group, as one of my informants, Soula, pointed out. The provinces (*eparhia*), from where rural families came, were very different in outlook, custom, social and family make-up from each other. A particularly wide gap in *noötropia* ('mentality') between those who arrived in Athens from the islands and those who were from rural areas on the mainland is apparent even today, Soula insisted.

While new arrivals to the city did not form a homogeneous group in terms of origin, they did have similar aspirations. Since, for example,

Greece did not have a strong industrial base until recently, the ever-growing middle-class population sought to make investments in housing, a trend especially visible in the 1950s-1970s via the construction of numerous high-rise apartment blocks (Doumanis 1983). In addition, education became a prime objective for the middle-classes and the main means of social mobility. As Sant Cassia (1992) suggests, education and wealth continue to be synonymous in Greece to the present day. In general, information about the development and character of the Greek middle-class is scant, especially in comparison with the volume that is available in relation to the English middle-classes (Chapter 8, Section 8.3). This is, partly, due to the relatively recent emergence of the Greek middle-class but also because of the absence of a rigid and hierarchical class system, similar to that present in the UK. Greece, in particular Athens, does contain a small group of exceptionally wealthy families, whose fortunes derive, primarily, from shipping (most famously, the Onassis, Niarhos, Vardinoyiannis and Latsis families). There is also a recent class of *nouveaux-riches*, which includes bankers, businessmen and celebrities. However, most of the wealthiest members of society cannot trace their riches back to noble or aristocratic lineage. Only a tiny proportion of Greeks, known as the Phanariotes because their ancestors' lived near the Ecumenical Patriarchate's seat in the Phanar district of Constantinople, are of aristocratic lineage, but they are hardly visible in contemporary Greece.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers who struggle to make ends meet. Yet, the majority of people find themselves somewhere between these two extremes. According to an article in the centrist newspaper *Ta Nea* (02/02/2006), today the Greek middle-class amounts to 70 per cent of the total population of Greece. Therefore, the majority of Greek people living in Greece, and Athens in particular, are middle-class. This group, *Ta Nea* claims, may not be as anxious as the poorer social strata about how they are going to put food on their family's table, but they do feel increasingly insecure. They expect the government to reimburse them some of the money that they put into their children's education and to provide them with employment opportunities. They are also, I would add, the driving force behind the country's 'lowest-low' fertility. Their aspirations combined with the constraints that they face as parents in a city that is becoming increasingly expensive and overcrowded result in a unique approach to childbearing. The following chapters explore why and how that is through an in-depth look at a small sub-group of relatively affluent, well-educated and professional middle-class Athenians, living in or close to the municipality of *Nea Smyrni*.

## 5 CAUSES OF 'UNDERFERTILITY' IN THE GREEK POPULAR IMAGINATION AND PRESS

### 5.1 Introduction

The Greek press refers to the country's low birth rate as 'underfertility' (*ypogennitikotita*) or 'the demographic issue' (*to demografiko*). Unlike the concept of 'low fertility' (*hamili gennitikotita*), these terms articulate the idea that the number of children Greeks are having constitutes a major national problem. Despite their connotations, however, 'underfertility' and 'the demographic issue' are the most popular expressions used to describe the phenomenon of below-replacement fertility and both were familiar to my Athenian informants. As a result, though I did not wish to examine the subject of Greek nationalism and consciously avoided describing 'underfertility' or 'the demographic issue' as 'problems' (*to provlima tis ypogennitikotitas* or *to demografiko provlima*), as is often done in the press, I found the terms useful in introducing my research and starting interviews. Nevertheless, I was aware of the need to exercise caution. Under no circumstances did I want to suggest that I was interested in finding out why Greeks were not having 'enough' babies to 'save' the nation; in other words, that I had a nationalist agenda. Once a discussion with an informant was underway, therefore, I would encourage him or her to talk about the 'causes' (*ta aitia*) of Greece's 'underfertility' as opposed to its consequences and implications for the nation. Informants were so confident that they knew the factors responsible for the Greek 'demographic issue' that one woman declined the offer of an interview because she did not feel the subject merited a whole study: 'Why are you wondering why Greeks are not having children?' she retorted 'The reasons for underfertility are obvious. You are wasting your time.'

Overall, with the exception of the above instance, employing local terminology to enter into a discussion about the country's low birth rate facilitated the research process and led to lively debate. It also generated a series of research questions. Was I indeed 'wasting my time,' searching for answers regarding a trend whose origins were straightforward and clear to all but me? If not, then to what extent did the factors to which informants attributed 'underfertility' in Greece also appear to shape their attitudes towards having children? How many, if any, featured in their narratives of family-formation, and in what way? If there were differences, to what were they owed? In this chapter, I present the explanations that informants gave in response to my questioning about the causes of 'underfertility'. I also include excerpts from Greek newspaper articles gathered between 2001 and 2005 on the subject in



order to give a broader picture of the discourse surrounding it<sup>10</sup>. Throughout this chapter, I explore the extent to which the reasons for the existence of the Greek 'demographic issue' talked about in the press were consistent with informants' accounts of it, leaving the comparison with their personal experiences for the forthcoming chapters.

## 5.2 'The economic issue'

Top in the list of factors responsible for 'underfertility', according to informants, was *to oikonomiko* ('the economic issue'). The financial burden of having children in Athens was heavy, apparent from the moment a woman became pregnant. Since state hospitals lacked the means to provide a 'good' service, often there was little choice but to go private, which could prove a costly alternative. Once a baby was born, there was childcare to consider. 'Playgroups are expensive,' parents at *Lollipop* told me. Yet their biggest source of financial worry came later, when it was time for their children to go to school. Tsoukalas (1976) argues that 'over-education' or 'over-scholarisation' is characteristic of 'modern' Greeks, especially Athenians. According to informants, however, it was an increasingly competitive job market that was forcing them to spend a substantial amount of money on educating their children. While in the past, a school diploma or, at most, a university degree would suffice for getting a job, today neither provided a guarantee against unemployment, especially for women.

Hence the widespread demand for out-of-school tuition met by a series of private institutes, known as *frontisteria* ('tuition centres'), in evidence all over the capital, including *Nea Smyrni*, and the sharp rise in demand for private schools. As Clark (2002, p.19) argues, 'education is one of the many areas of Greek life where a flourishing but shadowy private sector thrives on the inadequacies of an over-protected, over regulated public sector.' Poorly equipped, badly staffed and, increasingly, populated with foreign immigrants - a considerable source of discontent among native Athenians - the capital's state schools did little to alleviate the situation. Consequently, informants argued, in order to give each child a 'good' education it was necessary to spend a great deal of money, making it difficult to afford a large family.

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<sup>10</sup> The newspaper articles used in this chapter mainly come from four major national Greek newspapers, which I bought on a regular basis whilst in the field. They are *Eleftherotypia* (left-wing), *To Vima* (centre), *Ta Nea* (centre) and *Kathimerini* (right-wing). To ensure a more thorough search, I also scanned each newspaper's online archive for relevant articles published between January 2001 to December 2005, using the keywords 'underfertility' (*ypogennitikotita*), 'the demographic issue' (*to demografiko*), 'fertility' (*gennitikotita*) and 'births' (*genniseis*).

Echoing their line of reasoning was an article in the centrist national daily *To Vima* (21/01/2001), which began by informing readers that, according to the latest statistics from Eurostat, Greece is among European countries with the lowest birth rates, registering 'just 9.8 births per 1000 inhabitants.' Starting from conception, the article claimed that 'the economic cost' entailed in having children is a root cause of Greeks' reluctance to reproduce. 'In our time and age, the coming of the stork bears a heavy price,' it stated. For example, given that 'three in four Greek women' choose to give birth in a private hospital, the average four-day stay can set them back anything from 851 to 7,337 euros. In the first few years of a child's life, parents are also likely to spend a considerable sum on decorating the baby's room, clothing and other accessories (baby bottles, push chair, car seat etc.). Day nurseries are expensive too. 'Depending on the service offered, the average monthly charge per child is between 88 and 8,804 euros!' In a letter published by another major centrist national daily, *Ta Nea* (14/03/2003), a male Athenian reader estimated that the education of each child from primary school to university ends up costing, on average, around 3,000 euros a year, 'this means that over 20 years, each child's education costs about 60,000 euros.' For a middle-class family, he contended, this is a considerable sum. Greece's 'serious demographic problem' is 'not pathological' but founded, above all, 'on economic reasons.'

*To oikonomiko*, however, did not only refer to the price of education. 'Underfertility' was also a by-product of a sharp rise in living expenses. According to informants, the introduction of the euro in Greece (January 2002) had a profound effect on the price of goods and services traded at street level. Throughout my year of fieldwork in Athens, televised news reports focused on the exorbitant price of fruit and vegetables sold at the *laiki agora*, the weekly market that occurs in every neighbourhood across the capital. In one such broadcast, a shopper questioned why the government lamented the country's 'underfertility' when the average householder could not afford to buy even the most basic goods. In a similar vein, a Professor Emeritus for the University of Ioannina writing for *Ta Nea* (22/04/2005) recently proclaimed, 'we are a society in utter confusion.'

Ever since the expansion of the European Union, the abolition of the drachma, the Olympic Games (which cost 3.5 billion drachmas), the cost of living in our country has reached European standards, while our wages remain at the same level as Turkey's ... So: Why should 'our youth' get married? And if they do marry, why should they have children? And if they have children, what are they going to do with them? Who will look after them? (*Ta Nea* 22/04/2005)

A 30-something, educated, working couple making on average 1,000 euros a month in total can only scrape a living (*fytozoei*), the Professor

argued. Given this reality, 'the clergy and politicians should stop whimpering about the "ageing" of our "brotherless/sisterless" (*anadelfou*) Nation!' he concluded.

Not everyone agreed with the idea that *to oikonomiko* was a key cause of the country's low birth rate, however. A number of informants argued that economic pressures were merely an excuse for other motives. For example, whereas Fotini claimed that 'without *to oikonomiko* you cannot make a correct family,' Adonia contended that:

*To oikonomiko* is not an important reason for the existence of underfertility. You can see that people with money don't have many children whereas those who have fewer economic means are constantly reproducing (*yennovolane*). They have learnt a different way of communicating. When you only think of 'me' then *to oikonomiko* gets in the way. It is completely psychological. It is then that you start to hear excuses about having to make too many sacrifices and so on (Adonia, 40, one child, no degree).

The Greek press did not share Adonia's scepticism. For example, a headline for a detailed article by Drettakis, ex-vice president of the Greek Parliament, MP and professor at A.S.O.E.E., as well as a regular commentator on the Greek demographic situation across a range of national newspapers, declared, 'Low fertility in poor regions' (*Kathimerini* 06/01/2002). Based on statistics by Eurostat and the National Statistical Service of Greece (ESYE), the article reported that in 11 out of 18 regions in Greece (in other words, among 89 per cent of the population) fertility is closely tied to per capita income. Consequently, Drettakis posited:

It is clear that a political policy that will contribute to the economic development of the country's least economically favoured regions, apart from having a direct benefit on the population (increasing employment opportunities, improving their way of life etc.), in the medium term will also contribute towards dealing with underfertility, which is the country's number one problem. That is, regional development will contribute towards the demographic revival of the native land (*Kathimerini* 06/01/2002).

Regardless of opinion about whether 'the economic issue' was a direct reason for Greece's below-replacement fertility or a cover for a set of values simply incompatible with having many children, both the print media and my informants believed that there were other reasons for 'underfertility' apart from financial ones. One of them was 'hyper-consumption'.

### **5.3 'Hyper-consumption'**

In spite of complaints about the rise in the price of commodities and the escalation of living costs, informants and the press also pointed to Greeks' newly inflated fondness for spending. 'Hyper-consumption'

(*yperkatanalotismos*) was a term they frequently alluded to in relation to 'underfertility', while characterising Greeks in general as 'spendthrifts' (*spataloi*). For example, the same reader, cited above, who sent a letter to *Ta Nea*, making a case for the close relation between 'the demographic issue' and the cost of Greek education, ended his communication by saying that this link alone was not enough to explain 'underfertility'.

Unfortunately, in the last few decades in our country there exists a mentality, never before witnessed, of hyper-consumption (*yperkatanalotiki noötropia*), which leads precisely to underfertility since the majority of couples do not have more than 1-2 children so as not to spoil their lives. Merely because we want to have a good time ... (*Ta Nea* 14/03/2003)

Another article in *Eleftherotypia* (18/08/2002), in which there was mention of 'underfertility', described Greeks as 'poor but intent on having a good time' (*ftoxoi alla kaloperasakides*). 'A Greek does not have a lot of money, but s/he allocates as much as s/he can to consumption, for food but also for entertainment,' noted the article's opening paragraph. In contrast to the European average (56.9%), Greeks spend 71 per cent of their income, according to evidence from Eurostat cited in the article. While they use most of it to purchase food, a share of it (8.6%), the largest of all other European Union countries, goes towards buying clothes and shoes. The assumed link between 'hyper-consumption' and 'underfertility' was also highlighted in an earlier piece in the same newspaper, entitled 'We eat, but we do not give birth' (*Eleftherotypia* 13/06/2001), which argued that, 'although Greeks consume the greatest number of calories, they neglect reproduction.' Greek men, according to the article, hold the 'record for obesity' in the EU-15 while Greek women are the second most overweight European females along with the British.

To a degree, among informants at least, the belief was that the source of 'hyper-consumption' was 'deep capitalism' (*vathis kapitalismos*) and the adoption of a western European or American lifestyle to which there was increasing exposure. As Hara argued, the effects were pitiable:

We Greeks, we like to imitate others but we do so badly. We are like America was a few years ago. I went to Switzerland at Easter last year and things there were a lot more controlled. They served us a small chicken and some salad and nothing else. At Easter, we load up with turkeys, apples, potatoes and then we throw everything away. I do not know why. Are we not satisfied? My daughter gives away piles of her clothes and shoes to the foreign women who work for her at home. There exists this strange form of wastefulness (Hara, 60s, two children, widow, retired, no degree).

However, equally blameworthy for what one of the Athenians I met described as his compatriots' increasing 'enslavement to consumption'

was 'urbanisation' (*astikopoiisi*), a development about which another informant, Alexis, expressed the following view:

Why is there underfertility in Greece? Life has changed; reality has changed, how can I put it? People left their villages and came to the cities ... city life makes a lot of demands on people. There are different expenses here and a different way of life. You want to buy that car, you want to dress better and you want to move around differently. It is not like in the past (Alexis, 40, one child, married).

For women who grew up in the post-war period, many of whom were from the countryside, consumerism was especially alien. Informants aged in their 60s and 70s claimed that they embarked upon married life and parenthood with nothing other than the bare necessities, grateful at the opportunities with which they were occasionally presented to buy a few 'luxuries', such as a car or a refrigerator. Yet they also felt responsible for spawning a spoilt generation used to a life of lavish possessions. Hence, they wondered whether their hardship had made them 'overprotective' (*yperprosteytikoi*) as parents as well as excessively generous. As Anastasia, a 65-year-old grandmother told me, 'have you not heard the phrase "one generation is responsible for creating, the next one for destroying"? My generation was the most creative of all. This one is careless.' In her view, the prevalence of 'underfertility' was a consequence of this recklessness.

Nonetheless, as with regards to 'the economic issue', there was ambiguity concerning the significance of 'hyper-consumption' and, therefore, its impact upon 'underfertility', as I found out in a discussion with Myrto, her mother, Mairoula, and her mother's two sisters, Nina and Yianna.

Myrto: Shall I tell you something? Yesterday, I was with a group of friends and one of them was going on about how she is having to spend all this money to make her newborn infant's room look nice but the baby doesn't care, does it?

Mairoula: It is so that it can feel good.

Myrto: It should be so that the baby can feel good, not me, because all this is just for show, for you, for the parents ...

Nina: And for the husband ...

Myrto: Exactly, it is completely selfish. When I told them this, they all said 'oh, we don't recognise you anymore. How can you say that?' and they are my friends, she is my friend. 'How can you speak in this way? What is your psychology right now? Are you not well? You are about to give birth to a baby! Don't you want to have a nicely decorated room ready to welcome the infant?' and I said, 'I'm sorry but is it really for welcoming the baby or is it so as to make you feel better? The baby cannot even see. It will not even be able to distinguish between the different colours. It is amazing that you waste so much money when there are other things to worry about.'

Mairoula: Look, only people who can afford it actually do these things.

Myrto: It is not that I cannot do it. I can do it. I can do it but I just think you are throwing money away. So many gifts wasted, so many toys ... a child cannot appreciate these things.

Nina: It ends up playing with boxes.

(Myrto, 30s, pregnant, married, on maternity leave; Mairoula, 60s, 2 children, married, not working; Nina, 60s, 2 children, married, not working)

While Myrto was appalled at her friend's fixation with embellishing her expectant baby's room and felt it was wasteful, her friend, in turn, was dismayed with Myrto's lack of enthusiasm and her disinterested approach to the matter. Myrto's aunt, Nina, agreed with her niece but Myrto's mother, Mairoula, cautiously suggested that decorating a baby's room was important but that only the well-off were likely to be able to afford to engage in an activity of this kind. As I later found out, underlying Myrto's resentment about her friend's display of 'hyper-consumption' was another, more deep-seated cultural anxiety, upon which I shall focus in the next section.

#### **5.4 The demise of the family**

Along with 'the economic issue' and 'hyper-consumption', a key cause of 'underfertility' was a change in the structure and values of the family. 'The classic Greek family is no longer in existence,' one informant exclaimed. 'The shape of the family has changed,' someone else added. 'Family ties have loosened,' another alleged. In spite of Greece's low divorce rate relative to other European countries, the more frequent dissolution of Greek marriages often featured in conversations about the country's low birth rate. As Panos, a father of two in his 30s, maintained, 'the issue is not underfertility. The issue is that there is no longer a family.' Christina, a 45-year-old mother of two, agreed: 'The meaning of the family as defined in the past has been lost.' While certain transformations in familial relationships and in the organisation of the family were positive, such as that 'man the master' (*o andras afendis*) no longer dominated the household, the higher frequency with which couples were getting divorced was regrettable. According to informants, 'urbanisation' and the impact of 'western European' values upon Greek society had led to a reduction in levels of loyalty between family members, while parents failed to bestow a sense of security upon their children and couples no longer collaborated or compromised in an effort to save their marriages.

While the press did concern itself with the rise in the country's divorce rate and transformations in the character of the Greek family, I did not come across any articles suggesting that the increasing dissolution of marriages or changes to the family unit were responsible for 'underfertility'. In fact, in a piece in *To Vima* (19/09/2003), headlined 'One in three marriages ends in divorce - infidelity and the emancipation of women are key causes,' findings from a study by EKKE were

presented to show that couples, and women particularly, typically wait until their children have grown up before they decide to file for divorce. Nevertheless, I did find articles regarding the postponement of marriage and its relationship to 'the demographic issue'. For instance, in yet another contribution to *Kathimerini* (31/03/2002) on the subject of Greek 'underfertility', Drettakis argued that one of the consequences of the rise in the age at which men and women in Greece marry is that they have fewer children. 'Consequently,' Drettakis asserted, 'the concentration of marriages and births in older age groups reinforces our demographic problem' (*Kathimerini* 31/03/2002).

Yet, despite further reports that Greeks continue to get married in high numbers; that they have one of the lowest proportions of extra-marital births and that they have a low divorce rate compared to other European countries, the prevailing view among informants was that the demise of the family was real, contributing towards 'underfertility'. Myrto's account is instructive here:

All couples have now come to realize that food is missing from their homes. All divorces are due to this reason this is what I believe. They get lost. Couples split up because there is no longer a family nucleus and because the child no longer has memories. I remember my mother preparing for my birthday at home. Now all my friends have their children's parties in playgroups where they eat plastic foods. They do not have anything to remember apart from a world paid for and a hall that just happens to have been decorated - nothing else. I have plenty of good memories, from my aunt to my cousins being at my parties. What I want to say is that in my house, I was in my own space. It was completely different. Memories of this kind provide the foundation stones for the family (Myrto, 30s, pregnant, married, on maternity leave).

Myrto's nostalgic recollection of her childhood and her sadness at seeing her friends' children experience a different kind of upbringing to her own expressed the view that the institution of the family was presently in ruins and that it was accountable for bringing about 'underfertility'. Myrto's focus on food is particularly revealing. For Myrto, the absence of cooked food from the contemporary Athenian home and its substitution with artificial substances consumed outside of the domestic domain signalled the end of traditional family ties and obliterated the memories that, according to her, epitomised family life. This supposition echoes the idea, familiar to anthropologists, that food is a symbol of commensality whilst the process of eating together is central to the creation and sustenance of kinship ties (Carsten 1997). Denied the opportunity to share a home-cooked meal, one of the key ingredients in the formation and preservation of the Greek family was, in Myrto's eyes, quite literally, missing, while the consumption of foods prepared externally to the home represented an invasion of external and disagreeable family morals.

Despite echoes of Myrto's outlook in the narratives of other Athenians with whom I spoke, there was also an unshakable faith in the superiority of the Greek *oikogenia* ('family'). In comparison to other families in Europe, informants maintained that Greek family ties remained strong, though weaker than in the past. 'In Greece they are still pro-family,' Lydia explained. A group of forty- and fifty year-old women and one man elaborated upon this point further in a focus-group discussion I orchestrated on the subject of 'underfertility'.

KG: Last time we met one of you told me that the relationship between Greek parents and their children was unhealthy (*arrostimeni*) and that this was the reason for Greece's demographic issue. Do you all agree?

Valli: Yes, I said it. I believe it is true.

All: No, it is not!

Jenny: I think Greek women are the best mothers in the world.

Margarita: We have the best family.

Valli: Wait a minute, let me explain what I mean by unhealthy. I mean that our children are 30 years old and we still want them in the house. We do not let them become independent.

Kitsa: We live through our children ...

Rita: Valli, you behave this way towards them. I do not behave like that with my own children. I tell them 'you will make your own house.' Ok? How can I put it? I give them incentives to move on with their lives, not to provide for me.

Valli: Is your daughter not 27 years old?

Rita: Yes.

Valli: Do you not support her?

Rita: Yes.

Valli: In England and America, nobody does that for their children at the age of 27.

Rita: Yes, but I would never want my children to behave the way they do in England: for them to be alone at the age of 16 and to be pushing a pram at 18 so that they can get 150,000 drachmas. I would never want that. Why should a child have to suffer such hardship, why?

Nelly: [pointing to me] Careful, she lives in England.

Rita: I do not care. I saw it and I think that is unhealthy...

Frosso: Parents here are close to their children; they want them close. Ok, so sometimes it might be a bit too much, as Valli says, they are 30 years old and they do not let them go. However, it's not that we don't let them go. It is that they cannot live on their own. What I am saying is that we do not let our children have a hard time.

Rita: Our children are less prone to drugs, alcoholism etc. because they are very close to their families; because you are concerned about your child's problem rather than about whether or not you should or shouldn't provide for it financially. You care about what it believes in, what it says, what it does. These things are all interlinked - it is the only thing keeping Greek society alive. If it was my child, or your child, let's put it like that, who was on drugs in one corner, my other daughter was drinking a bottle of beer or whiskey from dusk till dawn in all the bars, and my other daughter was trying to figure out what to do, eh, the whole thing would be a total mess. However, it doesn't happen because they have a mother who runs after them. You might think that is sick, I call that being interested ... (Focus group, 29/05/2003)



This exchange reveals informants' anxiety that the 'traditional' Greek family would undergo an invasion by foreign morals and alien behaviour - a disturbance that they believed was potentially destructive since the family was the only entity 'keeping Greek society alive.' Focus-group participants argued that without it their children could not cope since the Greek state provided minimal welfare (see section 5.6). Therefore, while Valli believed that the level of support parents gave to their children in Greece was excessive compared to that offered by other Europeans and that this was a major cause of 'underfertility', the others in the group disagreed, blaming the country's low birth rate on a lack of alternatives.

### 5.5 The 'crisis' in gender and sexuality

Despite being 'the best mothers in the world,' according to both male and female informants, as well as the national press, women were answerable for changes in the family and, therefore, also for 'underfertility'. For that reason, 'female emancipation' (*i hirafetisi tis ginekas*) was double-edged. While the general view was that women's entry into the labour force was encouraging, there was also a feeling that this development had had a negative impact upon childbearing. On the one hand, informants acknowledged that the middle-class Athenian domestic unit could no longer survive on the husband's income alone and that women were obliged to work. On the other hand, they also claimed that for a family to 'take root' women had to be 'in the home' (*sto spiti*) and in control of family affairs. As a mother whom I overheard mutter in a taxi ride to *Nea Smyrni* pointed out, 'in Greece the man might be the head of the family but the woman is the neck.' Today, however, Greek females had ambitions other than looking after 'the home', which made them less attentive as wives and, more importantly, as mothers. As Lila, a married mother of two and a full-time midwife, told me at *Lollipop*, 'there is no underfertility in Greece, but which family has been able to survive? The mother has stopped feeling like a mother. Now women want this and that - divorce, freedom, a career ...' While in the past, Lila argued, women desired motherhood, presently they had other aspirations. Lila's comment, highlights the idea, already discussed, that the Greek family was in ruins but adds to it by pointing the finger for its gradual break-up at Greek women. Interestingly, she argues that Greece does not suffer from 'underfertility', by which, I assume, she meant that Greeks were having as many children as they were able to cope with.

Over dinner with a group of young, well-educated, middle-class Athenians, Giorgos also blamed his female compatriots for their part in the spread of the country's low birth rate:

It is no wonder there is a demographic problem in the country. All Greek women do nowadays is act like whores (*poutanizoun*) and all they care about is finding a rich man to marry. Greek women have more of a complex today, although there is no doubt they have also become a lot

more beautiful. Every day I go into the metro and I do not know which way to look. They are all stunning. They all look like models but they are whores (Giorgos, late 20s, working full-time, single, childless).

The idea that Greek women were prostituting themselves, although extreme, had resonance in arguments I heard later on in the course of my fieldwork in Athens. On 'coming out into society' (*vgenontas sti koinonia*), women had lost their way. In Soula's opinion, a 46-year-old, mother of two teenage sons, this was because the circumstances Greek women faced upon gaining their independence in the 1960s were radically different from those they had to confront a decade earlier. 'Whereas before man was the *afendis* ('the master') and woman was the *noikokyra* ('the mistress of the house'), afterwards women were free to do as they pleased, and so they went crazy.'

During my research experience in Greece, I began to grasp the origins of both Giorgos' and Soula's reasoning. On television, for example, it was customary to see women wearing tight and extremely revealing clothing, irrespective of the time of day. On the streets of Athens, though a more varied style was discernible, young Athenian women did sometimes dress provocatively when out socialising in clubs and bars, especially in the trendiest district of the capital, *Kolonaki*. They also seemed to enter freely in and out of relationships prior to marriage (and reportedly also, sometimes during it), they talked openly about sex and they frequented the same places (restaurants, cafeterias, nightclubs etc.) as men. Athenian females were certainly very different from the women I had read about in classic Greek ethnographies, such as Campbell's (1964) *Honour, Family and Patronage*, which argued that 'modesty' in dress and movement, and 'shame', especially 'sexual shame', were critical to the display of femininity and in order to protect female 'honour'. Even in light of these differences, however, Giorgos' remarks seemed harsh.

On the other hand, men were also held responsible for 'underfertility' because they did not help relieve women of their increasingly multiple roles, as Soula explained: 'Although women entered the market and gained independence, men still expect them to act as before and so, they still do all the cooking, the cleaning and the ironing.' As a result, male sexuality was also in question. This was clear in the course of a conversation that took place in the taxi ride to *Nea Smyrni* noted earlier. The trigger for the discussion was a young man in his 30s who was sitting at the back seat when I got in the vehicle. After dropping him off, as is customary in Greece another passenger, the woman in her 50s also cited above, joined us. It was then that the 61-year-old taxi driver, whom I shall call Mihalis, started to talk.

According to Mihalīs, the young man, whom I had only briefly encountered in the taxi, was on drugs and, most likely, a homosexual too. 'You know what?' Mihalīs asked rhetorically, 'Ninety out of a hundred women who get into my taxi are women but I would say ninety out of a hundred men who get into my taxi are not men. That's women's fault, of course.' 'Why do you say that?' I asked. In response, Mihalīs suggested that Greek women's independence had made them more 'like men.' Greek men, on the other hand, had started to act 'like women', that is why the majority of them were homosexuals. 'I see women in the back of my taxi doing and saying all sorts of things. You will not believe the filth that comes out of their mouths. They even call each other *malakas* (a word used frequently in everyday talk, literally meaning 'wanker') and this is not all, they also treat men like men used to treat them. They pay for their ride home, they buy them dinner and they even pay the bills! Men nowadays are *mamothrefta* ('mummies' boys),' Mihalīs explained. All this, he argued, was antithetical to reproduction and, therefore, causal of 'underfertility'. Concurring with the taxi driver's ideas was Soula's 16-year-old son, present on my initial meeting with his mother, who, on hearing of the topic of my research, mumbled, half-jokingly, under his breath, that 'underfertility' was due to men's increasingly 'non-male' demeanour.

In the Greek press, attention to alleged changes in gender and sexuality in relation to 'the demographic issue' was minor compared to its focus on the role of *to oikonomiko* or, as I will shortly discuss, social welfare and unemployment. The only direct reference I encountered concerning the relationship between gender and 'underfertility' was in an article in *Kathimerini* (15/07/2001), headlined 'A difficult life for *noikokyres*<sup>11</sup> and pensioners.' The incentive for this piece was the publication of findings by the University of Athens based on a European-wide study, whose aim was to survey its citizens' quality of life. According to this research, as conveyed by a female journalist, a Greek woman has a lower quality of life than does a Greek man because she has 'to fulfil a double and triple role as a worker, a mother and an *afendra*<sup>12</sup>, as is the common description of her household responsibilities.' The lack of part-time jobs available to Greek women in comparison to 'Northern

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<sup>11</sup> In the *Oxford Greek-English Learner's Dictionary* (Stavropoulos 1988), the term *noikokya* is translated as 'landlady', 'hostess', 'housewife', and 'housekeeper'. A more precise translation, however, is 'mistress of the house'. In fact, the male equivalent term *noikyris* is translated in the same dictionary as 'master of the house', as well as 'householder' and 'the head of the family'.

<sup>12</sup> The term *afendra* is very unusual and I have never come across it before. Clearly, it derives from the male word *afendis*, which means 'lord', 'master' or 'rich man' (Stavropoulos 1988).

Europe', and the persistence of 'old-fashioned social perceptions' (*koinonikes adilipseis*), as a result of which women are still expected to take on the main share of house- and childcare-related chores, has a profound 'emotional cost' on the country's female population. 'It is not surprising that the traditional Greek family has shrunk and that often-time couples refuse to have a child. A child is expensive and it needs time and care, and deep-down a woman knows that her quality of life will decline as a result.' 'The demographic problem,' the article ended by saying, 'and women's low quality of life' will only be resolved with the support of the state.

## 5.6 The absent state

A major cause of complaint in relation to 'underfertility' by informants and the press alike revolved around the issue of welfare (*koinoniki pronoia*). The government, both sources argued, gave people few, if any, incentives (*erethismata*) to reproduce, and childcare provisions were negligible. A number of Athenians with whom I spoke complained, for example, that in order to guarantee their child a place in a state subsidised day-care centre, a *meson* ('a go-between' or 'a person who pulls some strings') often had to be employed. Alternatively, they had to make use of scarce and expensive private childcare services. The relationship between welfare and 'the demographic issue' attracted extensive press coverage as well. A headline in *Kathimerini* (24/10/2004), for example, read: 'The demographic issue: we are ageing but we do not care - the measures for dealing with underfertility in Greece are the most inadequate in the EU.' Another declared, 'A policy of benefits for fewer children!' (*Eleftherotypia* 24/10/2004). It then went on to argue:

A lot of money is required to raise a child, while state support is scant. The result: Greek women and men are the most cautious in Europe when it comes to bringing a child into the world. The consequence: the country is ageing, since we have the smallest proportion of children, the cost of the insurance system is continuously rising and the future of the country looks bleak. Faced with this problem, the government ... is slow to react. We give family allowances that are twenty times lower in comparison to other members of the EU. The quality of our nurseries and schools is poor and the concept of a support programme for working women is alien (*Eleftherotypia* 24/10/2004).

Almost without exception, in newspaper articles there was a comparison drawn between the benefits offered by the Greek government in relation to childcare and the family and those of other European countries.

In *Ta Nea* (13/03/2004), for example, a feature piece entitled, 'Having children is not "worth it",' gave a detailed comparative account of allowances and incentives that exist across Europe with the aim of 'combating underfertility.' Whereas in most European Union member states, it argued, there is plenty of financial assistance for couples to

encourage them to have children in Greece the benefits are few and 'poor'. In France, for instance, fifteen different types of aid are on offer to cover all stages of family life, from pregnancy until the child leaves home. In contrast, the article claimed, in Greece there are only two or three equivalent forms of assistance. While in 'Northern European' countries, allowances make up 25-30 per cent of a family's monthly income, in Greece they add up to no more than five per cent. Public sector employees (*demosioi ypalliloi*), for instance, receive a family allowance of 35 euros a month plus 18-118 euros for 1-4 children and 73 euros for every child from the fifth one and above. Private sector employees get 5.87-48.13 euros per month for 1-4 children plus 8.07 euros per month for every child from the fifth one and above. Based on similar figures, the article cited earlier calculated that 'a Greek family with one child receives on average just 70 euros a year, as opposed to 1,676 euros in Germany, 1,476 in Denmark, 1,388 euros in Austria and 1,284 euros in Sweden' (*Eleftherotypia* 24/10/2004). 'A family with four children,' it then estimated, 'gets 576 euros per annum whereas in Belgium the equivalent allowance is almost 7,020 euros, in Germany 7,296 euros and in Sweden 6,168 euros.'

Compensating for the government's meagre support, informants argued, was inevitably the family. Relatives, however, could not always act as a stable source of assistance. For example, the extent to which grandparents and in-laws were available to help with childcare depended on how far they lived from their grandchildren. Indeed, on occasion, I met individuals who had no family to rely upon at all, since their parents did not live in Athens but in the provinces. Yet other times, on my visits to informants' homes, the mother of my (female) host was often there to greet me. Now and then, women would tell me that their parents lived within the same block of flats as them or in a nearby apartment block. In her study of the family in Athens conducted in the late 1960s, Safilios-Rothschild (1976) contends that the extent to which grandparents would help look after their grandchildren, the sort of assistance they were likely to offer and whether or not they lived with their children, depended upon the residence patterns of the wife's parents and the wife's regional origin. This also affected family size, with native Athenian women more commonly having none, one or two children than women from places like the Cyclades who tended to have three or more. Nonetheless, the extended family, or what Safilios-Rothschild calls the 'modified extended family model', was still in evidence in Athens at the time, while kinship relations continued to be relatively close. Whether or not this was still true today, informants were in no doubt that gradually grandparents' ability as well as desire to care for their grandchildren was waning - yet another reason for 'underfertility'.

Readers' letters to newspapers voiced all of the above discontents, as this one, by a man living in Piraeus, headlined simply 'underfertility', stated:

Over time I have been reading in your newspaper various articles and statistics about how young people are not having children and that we are an aged country. I would like to ask the prime minister and ministerial officials: I, who has three under-age children, seven, four and one years old, what must I do to raise them properly? I work in a factory and earn 587 euros a month; my wife gave up her work after giving birth to the third child because her mother could no longer look after them. And nobody dare ask me, 'What did you want a third child for?' You cannot, on the one hand, tell us 'why don't you have more children' and, on the other, 'deal with your own survival.' What is the government doing to wipe out underfertility? (*Eleftherotypia* 22/10/2002)

Perhaps in response to such complaints, or as a way to gain votes, in 2004, on its re-election to power, the Greek Conservative Party, *Nea Demokratia*, announced that it would give extra benefits and make concessions to couples with three or more children. Consequently, these families would also be labelled *polyteknes oikogeneies* ('large families'), a title previously applicable to those with four or more children. According to an article in *Ta Nea* (13/04/2004), this would assist the 176,000 Greek families with three children. However, '35 euros a month per child,' a mother of three quoted in the article said, 'is not going to make a difference' unless there is also an increase in the number of public nurseries and other spaces in which children can be looked after. 'The government needs to make a more rounded examination of the matter,' the woman concluded.

## **5.7 Job insecurity and unemployment**

Another area in which informants were hoping for improvements was in relation to the labour market. Longer working hours, low wages in comparison to the cost of living, a shortage of employment opportunities, jobs awarded as result of *meson* (a 'go-between') rather than on merit, and unemployment were all obstacles to childbearing that affected men and women in different ways, according to the Athenians with whom I talked. For the female population, they argued, the conditions of the labour market were especially problematic and played a major role in delaying the start of family-formation. Women I spoke to feared that taking time out for maternity leave would result either in the loss of their position or in demotion, especially if they worked in the private sector. Moreover, the benefits they received for each child were negligible and they worried about their loss of income if, after having children, they could not return to work.

You cannot deny money to a mother. People with two or three children cannot survive nowadays. You cannot support a family if the woman does

not work. All the children in this world have to face this sacrifice unfortunately. Perhaps we should not have started working in the first place and accepted things just as they were (Myrto, married, early 30s, pregnant with her first child).

Men also expressed concern about the circumstances surrounding work and maintained that one of the key reasons for young Athenian males' aversion to starting a family was the current lack of job security. Finding a stable career (*epaggelmatiki apokatastasi*) was an arduous task before which there was little hope of having children. Achilles, a man in his late 60s looking after his daughter's two children in *Lollipop*, spoke to me of the difficulties that his son was having with work and starting a family.

My son is 37 and is unmarried. He is afraid of unemployment. In my time, there were plenty of jobs out there. Today there is a lot of competition with regard to work. 'How can I get married?' he asks me. They do not decide easily. Every parent worries about what his child is going to do, especially now with the euro! The other day, did you know that I saw a grandfather crying on television because he could not afford to buy his grandsons' chocolate? Everybody is in debt. People have lost control. Do you know you can get a loan to go on holiday or to buy furniture? Men have changed for the better. They no longer go to the *kafeneio*, nowadays they go to the cafeterias. The problem is work. Do you know that there are taxi drivers with Masters' degrees? When will they be able to afford to have a family? (Achilles, 60s, married, 2 children, retired)

Achilles' account of his son's experience was instructive. While men were now equal to women (signalled by the fact that they frequented the more European-based cafeterias, patronised by males and females, rather than the traditional all-male, Greek coffee shops or *kafeneio*), they were still reluctant to start a family because of their inability to find work and their money squandering.

Despite the less than favourable conditions that middle-class Athenians said they had to cope with during their working lives, entering the labour market in the first place was of equal complexity. Maria, a 31 year-old single female living in *Nea Smyrni*, had been a qualified lawyer since 1998. Her ideal was to have three children but she was aware that the chances of her having more than two were slight. She and her boyfriend were not yet married and both were still living with their parents. Maria told me that she longed to be independent yet she was having immense difficulties finding a job and, therefore, did not earn enough money to live on her own or with her long-term boyfriend. As a result, she worked for her father who also was a lawyer, running his own practice. 'In Greece,' Maria asserted, 'employers expect that your family will look after you.' Only those who are believed to be 'in real need' are likely to be hired according to their own merits, the rest are expected to rely for their survival upon their acquaintances and, more importantly, on members of their extended family. While this is true of young men

and women in general, it is especially applicable to the latter, Maria said, particularly at her age. In one job interview, for example, Maria remembers mentioning the fact that her father was a lawyer. At that stage, the interviewer stopped, looked at her and questioned why she had even contemplated applying for the post. Why did she not work for her father? In another interview, Maria had to say whether she intended to have children. 'What could I say?' she asked me, 'That I am not going to have a family? That I don't want to get married?' When I asked her how she responded she said, 'well, I had to lie. I told them that I didn't want children and that I was not planning to marry. Of course, they didn't believe me and I didn't get the job.' In Maria's view, 'underfertility' was, without a doubt, a consequence of unemployment and an unjust process of job recruitment.

Accounts in the press matched Maria's belief. Unemployment and job insecurity received frequent mention (either on their own or in combination with other causes) in Greek newspapers in connection with 'the demographic issue'. Articles focused particularly on young people's difficulties in acquiring and keeping jobs, as did readers' letters. 'The state supposedly laments its demographic problem,' one reader wrote, 'but it does not help the young to create a family because it keeps them unemployed' (*Eleftherotypia* 14/03/2001). 'One in two Greeks worries whether he will lose his job in the next 12 months,' revealed a national survey reported in *Kathimerini* (15/10/2005). 'The same study,' the journalist added, 'also explains, to a certain extent, the demographic problem of Greece, since 30 per cent [of respondents] believe that children inhibit their career, while one in four believes that family life has a negative influence on career development!' (*Kathimerini* 15/10/2005). According to reports in the press, backed by demographers, Greeks did want children but the character of the labour market prevented them from realising their ambitions, as the following excerpt suggests:

The experience of unemployment and job insecurity that young people face today deters them from deciding to create a family. Relevant studies have shown that the actual number of children in Greek families does not correspond with the desired number of children ... According to the Greek Centre for Demographic Research, it is with this in mind that a national demographic policy must be developed (*To Vima* 17/02/2002).

The press also reported that the labour market was especially inhospitable to women. Citing demographic research, articles claimed that faced with an inflexible market in which part-time jobs were scarce, mothers had to give up work altogether resulting in a reduction of the total household income and exacerbating the 'demographic problem' of Greece, since these women 'would not dare have more than one or two children' (*Kathimerini* 21/03/2004).



## 5.8 Lifestyle and the Greek 'mentality'

Another reason for 'underfertility' was a general transformation in Greeks' lifestyle choices. Busy schedules, informants claimed, partly made up of work engagements but also increasingly of leisure pursuits, reduced the amount of time that middle-class Athenians had available to dedicate to family life. Thus, while certain changes in lifestyle were positive, others were not. For example, the desire for 'comfort' (*anesi*), the force of 'individualism' (*atomismos*) and deterioration in 'communication skills' (*epikoinonia*) were constraints to childbearing, having given rise to novel 'needs' (*ta thelo mou*) and an obsession with 'profiteering' (*kerdoskopia*) or 'the hunt for money' (*to kynigi toy xrimatos*). As Panos explained, 'underfertility is not just a practical matter; it also has to do with a particular way of thinking; a Greek mentality (*noötropia*).' 'Greeks, they like to have a good time (*einai kaloperasakides*),' which Nikos believed made the idea of having children seem particularly burdensome. In a letter entitled 'Concerning vulgarity,' a reader expressed similar views to the above.

For many years now in this land, people have been talking about a crisis in values, even though we have not realized who is mainly responsible for this. It is the country itself, which has not managed to differentiate right from wrong. The education system does not pass on principles and ideals, but even if it wanted to pass them on, it fears accusations of being ... anachronistic. I mean there is no respect anywhere, even a large percentage of traffic accidents is a product of this. We say that our vocabulary has grown poorer, we allowed tradition to fade and so much more ... generally, we do not know why we are alive ... We postulate that economic reasons are responsible for underfertility. That is a big mistake. It is a confused ... lifestyle that is our biggest crime. Everyone is wondering into what kind of world he or she will bring his or her children. Let's, each of us, sit down in front of the television one day, zapping through the channels, to see and to realize what nonsense, what vanity, what vulgarity, what obscenity, what dialogue in serials and what ... plot ... they transmit to us ... it is unbelievable (*Eleftherotypia* 04/11/2004).

I quoted this letter extensively because it highlights the idea that in the Greek popular imagination 'underfertility' has, at least partially, to do with a general decline in 'tradition' and 'morality', and the emergence of a new kind of 'lifestyle'<sup>13</sup>. The writer of this letter does not explain what it is about this 'lifestyle', apparently reflected through Greek television, which is directly relevant to 'underfertility'. Instead, he expresses a general dissatisfaction with the content of television programmes and the state of Greek values. Interestingly, he accuses the Greek education system of failing to teach children what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' for fear of being accused that it is 'anachronistic', while to him, it is the 'modern' that seems to be the root of the problem.

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<sup>13</sup> Incidentally, the man who wrote this letter used the word 'lifestyle', spelled in English, rather than the Greek equivalent *tropos zois*.

## 5.9 Infertility and abortions

A consequence of lifestyle changes and so, indirectly, of 'the demographic issue,' were various types of health problems. Informants cited stress, pollution and the environment as likely reasons for growing levels of *ypogonimotita* ('infertility') among Greeks. Moreover, Athenian women claimed they were fully aware that the window of opportunity for having children was small and that the 'biological clock' was ticking. In other words, they appreciated that, medically-speaking, it was best to reproduce before their mid-30s, after which they had less chance of having a baby. While men, they claimed, did not have similar concerns, infertility was not a purely female-related problem. More than once, I was told that, in no small measure, 'underfertility' was caused by the drop in men's sperm count, a phenomenon that informants believed was rooted in a vague yet broad range of factors from unclean water to pollutants in the air. The press served to verify these ideas. One newspaper article claimed that there are '300,000 infertile couples' in Greece, which is one of the reasons for the country's 'underfertility' (*Kathimerini* 29/01/2003). *Ta Nea* (15/11/2002) confirmed the figure and added that there are 45 centres for assisted reproduction operating in Greece, only six of which are state-run. Yet still, according to 'scientists', in 1991-2001 one in five Greek primary schools shut down because of a lack of students - a sign of the growing problem of infertility and 'underfertility'. Suggesting the link between infertility and a low birth rate was the following headline: 'Smoking, alcohol, stress impede the perpetuation of the species' (*Kathimerini* 15/11/2002).

In the print media's view, however, the environment and a 'modern lifestyle' were not the only factors responsible for the relationship between infertility and 'underfertility'. Another major reason was abortion. Interestingly, informants never mentioned abortions in relation to 'the demographic issue', yet the subject received considerable press coverage on its own as well as in connection with both infertility and/or 'underfertility'. For example, one article claimed that 'abortions' lead to 'serious complications' and are a principal cause of infertility and 'underfertility' (*Kathimerini* 13/04/2002). A few days later, the same newspaper published a piece amusingly entitled 'Forecasts for "Hellas, the old people's home",' which argued that 'an important factor for the increase in underfertility are abortions, which are estimated to exceed 250,000 a year, but also infertility, which many couples are now facing' (*Kathimerini* 09/04/2002). Abortion in relation to 'underfertility' also concerned the papers' readers, as this letter clearly illustrates:

Every so often, we see articles in the Press more or less relevant to 'underfertility' - a disastrous issue for the nation (*me tin ethnoktonon ypogennitikotita*) - but no suggestion at all concerning how to deal with it. In my humble opinion, the people do not suffer from a shortage of productivity, but the state is lacking measures to help crack down on the

merciless genocide of 300,000 to 400,000 embryos that happens every year as result of abortions (*amvloseis kai ektrorseis*). Measures, such as the creation of a fund for assisting couples with many children (*ton polyteknon zeygarion*), or special taxation for all Greeks according to their income, must immediately be taken (*Ta Nea* 03/05/2003).

The Greek print media's concern with abortion in relation to 'the demographic issue' is so widespread that it has captured the imagination of scholars. In a recent book, Halkias (2004) argues that the press's interest in abortions (*amvloseis* or *ektrorseis*) as a cause of the country's low birth rate is surprising given that there is little knowledge of the exact number performed. While Halkias claims that figures could be anything from 100,000 to 400,000 abortions a year, the articles above reported a range of between 250,000 to 400,000 abortions per annum, a large though smaller variation than the former. An equally questionable assumption, due to a lack of both data and evidence of its significance, concerns the link, also noted above, between infertility, abortion and 'underfertility'.

### 5.10 Conclusions

The Greek print media and popular discourse on the reasons for below-replacement fertility, or 'underfertility', included a long list of interrelated factors. Most were important to both the press and my informants (particularly the 'economic issue', welfare and unemployment); others received an uneven level of attention by each (for example, 'hyper-consumption' and the transformation in gender and sexuality mainly worried my informants rather than the newspapers), while only abortion troubled the media exclusively<sup>14</sup>. Apparent throughout this chapter is that according to press and popular opinion the 'demographic issue' in Greece was an outcome of both structural and ideational changes - the latter, related, in turn, to transformations in perceptions of motherhood, mothering and gender identity. For example, a dominant cause of low fertility in the view of the press as well as in the minds of informants was a lack of state support for the family, in the form of childcare facilities and tax breaks. Another was unemployment and the rise in the cost of living. While these were all conditions about which Athenians felt they could do little to improve, the impression I got was that other concerns were self-inflicted.

An exaggerated passion to consume, a desire to have a good time, a loss of interest in the family, along with a breakdown in 'traditional' gender boundaries, all pointed to changes in Athenians' (particularly women's) priorities in life and future aspirations. However, the lack of consensus regarding the scope of these developments and the extent to

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<sup>14</sup> Given, however, that some articles on abortion included readers' letters, it seems that 'ordinary' Greeks, other than my informants, were concerned about it too.

which they were responsible for the Greek 'demographic problem' hinted at the need to look beyond press and popular perspectives on the subject and focus instead on informants' personal accounts of reproduction. Despite the widespread concern with 'underfertility' in the Greek press and in the Greek popular imagination, and a general willingness to discuss it, informants maintained that the country's low birth rate was not sufficient reason for them to have more children than they were thinking of having or than they already had. 'Everybody knows about it,' Kitsa, a 38-year-old teacher and mother of one explained, 'but nobody had children because of "underfertility".' If middle-class Athenians were not reproducing for the 'nation', then why were they? Were the reasons they attributed to 'the demographic issue' present in their narratives of family-formation? The following chapters attempt to provide answers to these and other closely related questions.

## 6 THE DUTY OF MOTHERHOOD AND THE CREATIVITY OF CHILDBEARING

### 6.1 Introduction

In the Greek press and in the Greek popular imagination, as the previous chapter showed, ‘underfertility’ was, partially, a product of changes in female behaviour. According to both informants and the print media, Greek women’s increasing engagement within the labour market and their desire to pursue activities outside the home increased their reluctance to mother. In this chapter, I turn to informants’ personal narratives of family-formation and their attitudes towards having children in order to examine the extent to which their approaches were in agreement with those dominant in the public sphere. Did my middle-class Athenian informants’ commitment to motherhood appear to be in decline? Were the women I spoke to less inclined to mother because they were otherwise preoccupied? If not, what, in their view, constituted good mothering? Ideas about motherhood and experiences of being a mother featured highly in my discussions with middle-class Athenian informants, as they did among those with whom I spoke in London (see Chapter 11), and appeared to be important determinants of childbearing or *teknogonia*<sup>15</sup>.

### 6.2 The ‘cult of motherhood’

In *The Making of the Modern Greek Family*, Sant Cassia (1992, p.220) argues that in late nineteenth-century Athens motherhood achieved a ‘semi-sacred state.’ Admiration for the mother figure and respect for the act of mothering were not remnants from the past but originated in urbanisation and the rise of the Athenian middle-class. Contrary to expectations, the Church, whilst supportive and encouraging of this phenomenon, was not the principal inspiration behind what Sant Cassia refers to as the ‘cult of motherhood’. Chiefly responsible, instead, were a series of changes in the social and spatial organisation of people’s behaviour, such as the preference for neolocality, the separation of the private and public spheres and the subsequent seclusion of women in the home. Western European models of the ideal family were, also, likely to have played their part in this development, and nationalist discourse, along with the spread of literacy, was especially influential in promoting an association between maternity and the nation-state.

According to Sant Cassia, the ‘ruralisation of the city’ was, therefore, only partly accountable for the ideological significance of motherhood in the urban Greek context. In rural Greece, key symbols of womanhood

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<sup>15</sup> Childbearing in Greek is also translatable as *teknopoiia* or *teknopoiisi*, both terms literally meaning ‘the making of children’.

were the 'Mother of God' (*Panayia*), who represented the good and caring side of women, and Eve, who symbolized their sinful and morally corrupt nature. In urban Greece, however, the *Panayia* alone became the principal model for directing the behaviour of 'modern' Greek women in the latter part of nineteenth-century. The growth of pilgrimage, throughout Greece, to monasteries associated with the 'Mother of God' (such as on the island of Tinos) and the extensive circulation of low-cost, mass-produced icons for display within the home provide proof of this shift in symbolic emphasis. Accordingly, worship of the mortal or human character of the 'Most Holy One' (*Panayia*), began during this period. As a result, there also developed less regard for the divine, virginal nature of Mary and more for her role as the mother of the child Christ. Consequently:

In an urban context, motherhood itself becomes the problem that hardly appears in rural contexts. The 'evil' that they are capable of causing is not so much an outcome of women's 'natural weakness' (as Eves), but rather of their failure to successfully perform their duties as mothers. It is a result of their failure to uphold the ideals of motherhood and housewife which the culture expects and which they have internalized according to a private ideal which is not fully resolved, as in rural areas (Sant Cassia 1992, p.225).

In other words, rural societies concerned themselves with how to reconcile the tainted and malevolent side to women with their sacred role as child bearers. In urban contexts, however, women's childrearing skills and their aptitude for maintaining an orderly and tidy home became crucial components of their gender identity and the key qualities against which others judged them.

Among the middle-class Athenians I met, motherhood appeared not to have lost the significance it gained in the late nineteenth century. As Cowan (1990) notes in reference to the construction of gender roles and relations in a Greek provincial town, processes and ideologies of modernisation, frequently believed to provide a challenge to traditional ways of organising behaviour and thought, actually, often, end up reinforcing them. Motherhood was still as crucial a precondition for the 'completion' (*oloklirosi*) of a woman living in Athens at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as it had become for one in the closing stages of the nineteenth century. As Paxson (2004) argues, becoming a mother in contemporary Athenian society continues to form a critical component of female identity. Young Athenian women, she suggests, do not question whether they want to have children; they only ponder over when to have them and, I would add, over how many to have. In order to understand this situation further and to assess its potential effects upon family size, in the following sections of this chapter I examine the sentiments that motherhood roused among my informants at the opening stages of the

twenty-first century, and reflect upon their consequences for the process of family-formation.

### 6.3 The 'completion' of woman

The 'completion' of the female person through the production of offspring was a premise expressed frequently by the middle-class Athenians with whom I engaged. Other anthropologists (Halkias 2004; Paxson 2004) whose research concentrates on Athens also note the prevalence of this saying. Mothers often told me that they did not expect anything from their children but that without them they would feel incomplete.

I had the sense that I discovered the true meaning of the world, of my existence. You feel complete (Lila, 37, married, 2 children, working full-time).

While both male and female informants agreed with Lila, they did not believe that both men and women achieved 'completion' upon having children. Though men had a duty to protect and provide for their families, I found no evidence in favour of the view that a Greek man became 'complete' as a person through procreation *per se*. This was, in part, attributable to men and women's different physiological make-up.

It is a matter of completion ... it was then that I understood, for instance, the reason for which my body, my breasts exist ... (Alexandra, 28, 1 child, divorced)

According to Alexandra, the purpose of the design of women's bodies was reproduction and childrearing. It was for this reason, that informants also claimed that women were armed with features essential to being effective mothers; qualities that men, incidentally, did not possess, as a young woman I met in 'Lollipop' articulated most clearly. A while after wrapping up our discussion, Annoula came back to tell me that although she used to smoke three packets of cigarettes a day, from the moment she fell pregnant she quit. 'A man,' she said, 'could not do the same.' While she knew of men who had given up smoking, none, she insisted, could have stuck to their guns with the same fervour as she had. Becoming a mother, she claimed, both required and conferred incredible strength. 'Resilience', 'patience' and 'sensitivity' were, therefore, virtues characteristic of women, originating from deep within their bodies - 'motherhood comes out of her spleen,' a 32-year-old father of one told me - hence a mother was 'irreplaceable' (*adikatastati*). In light of these views, a woman was unlikely to feel fulfilled without children because she was by nature designed to reproduce. In fact, I neither met nor heard of many Greek women who had chosen to abstain from motherhood (see section 6.7 for exception). As Era said, 'girls are born mothers.'

Women's nature also made it likely that mothers would have stronger bonds with their children than fathers. The great sense of 'satisfaction' (*ikanopoiisi*) that female informants claimed to have felt upon the arrival of each of their children, for example, was attributable to the *mitriko filtro* ('maternal filter' or 'maternal instinct' in English). While women had 'maternity' (*mitrotita*), men lacked 'paternity' (*patrotita*), that is, the equivalent feature that would instinctively propel them towards a life devoted to the family. As a result, according to a few of my male informants the realisation of being a father (*patrotita*) came later than the recognition of being a mother. 'For men, first the events happen and then the emotions ... the reverse is true of women,' Carolos, a 48-year-old IT consultant, told me. Another man, agreed.

Motherhood is definitely a sentiment that I know nothing about. I imagine it is something stronger than fatherhood because a woman carries a child inside her. It becomes one with her self, with her body, right? In essence, she sacrifices her body for the creation of a child. It is completely different. Of course, there are negative sides to it too ... For paternity you do not really do anything special ... I have sex in both instances. In one instance, there is a child, in the other there is no child. There is no difference ... he [a man] cannot understand it. Why should he feel more of a father in the one case and not in the other? In both instances, he had sex, finished. Eh, from the moment a woman gets pregnant, however, she starts to feel completely different things. There is a hormonal ... um, a hormonal inversion in her body, which on its own makes her crazy ... Until this hormonal upset eases again, some time has to pass. I mean she spends at least two years for this pregnancy. Nine months for carrying the baby, for the birth and until her organism finds its balance again it is at least two full years ... What paternity should I feel? (Constantinos, 40s, divorced, one child, self-employed)

The idea that women's physiological make-up guaranteed a stronger bond between a mother and her child than between a father and his child, to a certain extent justified the role of women as the household's primary caregivers according to men, as Filippou's account demonstrates.

A woman is usually the one who looks after the children and this comes out why? Because that is her natural role - what do I mean by natural? I mean that because it is Ada [my wife] who gets pregnant, Ada who gives birth, the woman I mean not Ada specifically ... her relationship with the children is a lot more intense than a man's is. No matter what, the bond is different ... Consequently, a woman from her nature has a different function to a man and this, via Greek society, develops so that she is the one mainly responsible for looking after the children (Filippou, 47, married, 2 children, working full-time).

Filippou's argument suggests that 'woman' (*gineka*), 'body' (*soma*) and 'nurture' (*anatrofi*) are interdependent. Although 'Greek society' promotes the labour division between men and women, nature determines it originally, according to Filippou. This contention



complements the view of Andreas, who claimed that a woman is the 'binding ring' (*syndetikos krikos*) between other members of the family and made 'a home, homely' (*i gineka kanei to spiti spitiko*) and 'full of warmth' (*gemato zestasia*).

#### **6.4 The angst of motherhood**

While women agreed with the general principle of the above men's assertions, they insisted that it took time for them to become accustomed to the role entailed in mothering, casting doubt on the idea that they had an inbuilt aptitude to be 'good' mothers. Female informants, therefore, also asserted that a 'mother' is not one who has given birth to a child but one who has raised it. As a result, a few of the women I met viewed adoption in a favourable light, though I was unable to determine the extent to which adopting children was popular in practice. Pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding were processes that gave women the opportunity to get to grips with motherhood gradually. While nature helped women on the road to motherhood, according to my female informants, it did not certify that they would be mothers or that they would be competent mothers.

As Paxson (2004) argues, 'modern' Athenian women felt that motherhood had to be 'achieved'. In other words, while women had the natural propensity to become mothers, in order to be 'good' mothers they had to exert themselves. A number of my female informants, for instance, claimed to have consulted amateur psychology books in order to recognise their children's needs and to be able to meet them in a more efficient way. As Angela, a 40 year old mother of one teenage girl, told me when I asked her why she had not had a second child despite her husband's wishes, 'Out of fear - having a child is such a huge responsibility,' she said. 'Already I think I have messed up with my daughter. I wouldn't dream of having another one.' The insecurity that women like Angela felt about their abilities to mother intensified, as Doumanis (1983, p.101) suggests, by the 'loneliness of the urban flat' and the 'self-doubt she experiences due to a lack of consensus about her everyday acts.' This is in contrast to the rural Greek mother who, according to Doumanis, was not acquainted with the notion of 'faulty maternal behaviour' since motherhood and childcare was a more communal experience.

The anxiety that the middle-class Athenian women expressed about being mothers makes sense when contrasted, as above, with the experience of motherhood in a rural Greek context. The transformation in Greek women's approaches to mothering that Doumanis claims occurs from a rural to an urban locale is not unique to Greece. Collier (1997, p.142) also describes how in the mid-1960s, among village women in western Andalusia, 'babies are in great demand and the mother who gets

tired of hers can always take him to a willing relative.’ By contrast, the women that had migrated to urban areas from Los Olivos, whom Collier met in the 1980s, despite their possession of labour-saving household appliances, felt imprisoned in their own homes by the constant need to keep an eye on their children.

Doumanis and Collier’s observations were echoed in a conversation between Xenia and Stefania, both of whose parents were from the ‘provinces’ (*eparhia*) and both of whom had been born outside Athens, though they had moved to the capital while still children.

Stefania: My mother was wiser than I am. She trusted me more. We are more anxious. We are afraid.

Xenia: However, I would also say that we are more honest. I mean in comparison to the past ... If I compare the older generation with ours, they had more clear-cut roles. This is a man, this is a woman, these are the children ... they knew where they were heading. They didn’t hesitate, as we do. For example, we ask ourselves, ‘are we doing our jobs well?’ My parents did not doubt that they were good parents. They would say, ‘everything is for my child. I am sacrificing everything for my children. They were not filled with remorse. We are ... our parents suppressed us, our children suppress us, our children are dragging us along, and we drag our children along ... We go to parenting schools (*sholes goneon*) ... I went to a parenting school. In the end, I said to my son, ‘son, I don’t know if I raised you well; all I know is that I loved you with all my heart - nothing else.

Stefania: Yes, that’s what I was going to say ... the older generation also loved us but the fact that you told him, ‘I don’t know if I raised you well,’ that shows a greater degree of honesty ...

Xenia: I mean our parents believed that what they said was the truth, something which stemmed from religion, from society ... we feel weak ... Our parents had the whole of society on their side, and all the centuries of tradition to back them up ... They believed that what they said was the truth ...

Xenia: Whereas we doubt ourselves ...

Stefania: We do not know. We have doubts. At least, I tell my children that my opinion is subjective (Stefania, 43, married, 2 children, working full-time and Xenia, 55, widowed, 2 children, working full-time).

The conversation between Xenia and Stefania is revealing for two reasons. Firstly, it shows that my informants, like those of Doumanis and Collier, experienced a greater degree of seclusion and uncertainty about their mothering skills than did their rural predecessors and, therefore, I add, sought counsel and reassurance from impersonal rather than personal sources (parenting schools or psychology books rather than friends, neighbours and relatives). Exacerbating their sense of isolation was the lack of childcare facilities and parenting networks, such as those available in London (see Chapter 8). On the other hand, the discussion between Xenia and Stefania also reveals that while middle-class Athenian women felt less secure about their parenting skills, they were also pleased

that, unlike their parents, they were able to be more 'honest' about their failures and mistakes as mothers. 'Honesty', however, did not alleviate their angst over their children's well-being and their sense of responsibility for how they turned out as adults in the future.

One reason why Athenian women perceived motherhood to be such a huge responsibility relates to its role in fulfilling another important purpose. The efficiency with which a mother carried out her mothering tasks had implications beyond the private realm of her existence, as the following two excerpts reveal.

A child's balance in the first few years of its life depends on the mother and she must manage that balance. Therefore, a woman must be more complete ... more complete as a personality to be able to play her roles well and they are nice roles. I mean when you understand ... when you realize how important a role you play in the family, that you are raising this little person, this tiny thing, and that it depends on you whether or not this person will be problematic in the future and, by extension, whether or not you will contribute to a balanced society, it is then that you understand how important a responsibility it is. I mean you should feel in awe when you realize how important a role you are playing but, on the other hand, it should also arm you with strength (Zina, 51, married, 2 children, not working).

It was as if they had told me that you have an obligation to give birth and since I paid my debt I felt ... liberated, how can I put it? ... Every family, whether explicitly or implicitly, passes on certain advice to its children, compliant with the parents' values. My parents, for example, believed it was imperative for a woman to have children (Rita, 44, married, 1 son, self-employed).

In contrast to the rigid separation between the public and the private realms conceived by ethnographers as typical of Greece (Friedl 1986), Zina's account reveals how women's childbearing activities were not solely of private but also of public concern. In addition, Rita's excerpt suggests that becoming a mother was a daughter's duty. Both statements provide evidence in favour of the view that a 'cult of motherhood' continues to prevail in Athens today. They also account for why female informants claimed to feel a sense of 'completion' upon becoming mothers. If a woman was indebted to her family and to society to reproduce then the transition to motherhood relieved her of that duty.

### **6.5 Pro-creation: childbearing as an act of creativity**

Consonant with the idea that motherhood, through the hard work it entails, brings about the 'completion' of a middle-class Athenian woman was the notion that having children was a creative process, an act of *dimiourgia*, translatable in English as both 'creation' and 'creativity', a detail whose implications will be discussed below. On an empty bedroom floor of her newly purchased apartment in *Nea Smyrni*, Xenia,

her friend Stefania (cited above) and I sat to discuss the highs and lows of parenthood, marriage and childbearing. As darkness fell, the conversation turned to the issue of the value of children. I asked Xenia what advice she would give to a friend uncertain about starting a family.

Xenia: I would tell her and I do say ... that in this world, the only thing we, who are not artists, who are not creators, can do is to have children. It is the biggest joy, how can I put it, in spite of all the problems ...

Stefania: And our offering ...

Xenia: Our offering - that is creation, that is what eternity means. Do you understand? Without thinking about it or anything, of course she should have children.

Stefania: I see it as having a little garden that you do not cultivate. Is it not a sin?

Xenia: Exactly, exactly.

Stefania: Let me put it to you again using the botanical example. A child is like the trees. What do the poor little ones ask for? All they want is a little water; that is all and they give you their shade and their freshness and their beauty, life itself and what do they ask of you? That every so often you pour them a little water ... what they give you - I say this now and I shudder - is a lot more (Stefania, 43, married, 2 children, working full-time and Xenia, 55, widowed, 2 children, working full-time).

Procreation, according to Xenia and Stefania, was a creative act and a means of immortality; the only thing that 'ordinary' folk could do to leave their mark in the world. A fulfilling experience that required little effort in comparison to the benefits anticipated in return. Stefania and Xenia's conversation acquires special meaning when viewed in the context of Greek Orthodoxy. According to Dimopoulou (2000), a Greek Orthodox preacher, in *The Child: Our Great Treasure*, God gave humans the capacity to be His co-creators and to co-operate with Him. This is what He meant when He said, 'be fruitful and multiply' (*afksanesthe kai plithynesthe*). It was at that moment that God endowed men and women with the power to generate new persons and, therefore, to participate in the renewal of society.

Viewed in this light, through procreation, middle-class Athenians were engaging in the re-enactment of the original Creation. This might explain why a number of informants were adamant to point out that in Greek the word for 'human being' or 'man', *anthropos*, really meant *anō thriskon*, that is, he who looks up to God; in other words, he who is supposed to follow God's commands. Though I never found this etymological description in any dictionary of the modern Greek language, it seemed to me indicative of a particular lay understanding of a person's place in the world and of the purpose of bringing new life into it. The reproduction of the species was a duty and an honour bestowed upon human beings by God. Therefore, those who chose to defy God's request, and who rejected co-operation with Him - that is, to be His co-creators - were committing a sin, as Stefania observed, and were liable to

punishment. It is fitting, in fact, that *dimiourgia* is translatable in English as both 'creativity', a secular term referring to one's ability to produce something original, as well as 'creation', a notion with religious connotations.

Today, Xenia speculated, people lacked a broader 'vision' (*orama*) of the social order and their position within it and thought only of themselves. That is, young couples did not think of childbearing as a sacred, creative act, which both men and women, under God's watchful eye, ought to perform. They were, therefore, short of a particular notion of personhood, described most succinctly by Zina, a 51-year-old mother of two children in their 20s. 'Individualism' (*atomismos*) and 'the love of one's own skin' (*filotimarismos*), Zina argued, are antithetical to the essence of human beings. 'God made us different from animals,' she claimed, 'superior to them.' Humans have to strive to be close to God, the most 'supreme being' of all, because that is what *anthropos* ('human' or 'man') means. Since we are above other animals, however, we have to prove our superiority over them. While 'freedom' is good in many respects, it also goes against our responsibility as human beings and, ultimately, can lead to our destruction. 'If everyone thought only of themselves it would be like living in the jungle,' Zina alleged. Therefore, along with being 'independent' (*aneksartitoi*) and 'self-existing' (*afhthyparktoi*) as persons we must also show respect for those around us. 'I mean each one of us must know our role and our place in the family and in society,' Zina said.

According to Ware (1997), Orthodox man was created in the 'image and likeness' of God. When God made man, He did not make him in the same way as other animals but modelled him upon Himself, that is, in His image. Unlike animals that react merely according to instinct, man can think, reason, make decisions and plan, a point reiterated by Zina. Humans were made for fellowship with God too and were given the ability to communicate with Him since they are, in fact, His offspring. If humans make proper communion with God, they can become like Him; in a sense, they can become deified. To reach this point of 'likeness' with God, however, to become like Him, they must work very hard and this is because all of mankind, as exemplified by Adam, was led astray by deception. 'However sinful we may be,' Ware (1997, p.219) argues, 'we never lose the image; but the likeness depends upon our moral choice, upon our 'virtue' and so it is destroyed by sin.' The idea that each of us is made in God's image, that we each mirror God within us, is very clear in Orthodox religious thought but there is also the understanding that humans will never reach full union with God, though they are modelled on Him, due to Adam's disobedience of His will and his ultimate fall. Unlike Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox Christians believe that although humans have to take on board Adam's corruption and mortality

they do not have to inherit his guilt. In any case, the whole aim or thrust of Greek Orthodox life is to achieve *theosis*, that is, 'likeness' with God.

Xenia and Stefania did not make direct reference to man's creation in the 'image and likeness' of God. In fact, both claimed not be 'religious'. Their accounts, however, contain references to the standing of humans in relation to God and to childlessness as a 'sin'. Zina mentioned God in a more explicit way than Xenia and Stefania and believed that human beings had a responsibility to perpetuate the species because He had bestowed that power upon them. In the opinion of all three women, then, motherhood did not only fulfil a duty to the family and to society but also to God. Middle-class Athenian mothers often said that the feeling of satisfaction they experienced in raising children was not due to the expectation that one day they would get something in return from them; it derived solely from 'moulding' a human being and seeing him or her grow. This did not mean that children did not compensate their parents' for their efforts. On the contrary, whatever you give to a child, Soula said, you get back with interest.

Whatever you give to a child, Katerina, it is proven, whatever you give to him that is what he will give to you. Will you give him love? Love is what he will give you. Will you show him malice or hatred? Hatred he will show to you. Of course, a child is born with a particular character but the environment also has a decisive role to play. That is a fact or, at least, that's what life has taught us (Soula, 46, married, 2 children, working part-time).

The benefits received by one's offspring were not material but emotional, primarily in the form of 'love' and 'joy'. Children were independent beings but also a part (*kommati*) of their mothers, since they come directly from the woman's body. A child was also the fruit that solidified the union of two people. Children were expected to bring 'happiness' and enabled parents to see the world 'with fresh eyes,' that is, they 'gave life meaning.' They were described as a 'gift', a 'miracle', a 'blessing', giving life 'purpose' and were the only way to achieve 'immortality'. These expressions, once again, echo the Greek Orthodox view of children, but they also reflect a broader transformation in the meaning and worth of children not exclusive to urban Greek society. Since the nineteenth century throughout most of Europe and America, the 'economically "worthless" but emotionally "priceless" child' has been in existence (Zelizer 1994 p.3).

## 6.6 The *polytekni* mother

According to a recent article in the leftist newspaper *Eleftherotypia* (17/09/2005), there are 140,000 families with three children currently living in Greece. Almost exactly a year earlier, the same newspaper reported that the figure was 176,000 (*Eleftherotypia* 27/09/2004).

Regardless of their true number, families of this size, or bigger, carry the label *polyteknoi*, translatable into English as ‘families with many children.’ The *polyteknoi* receive a number of benefits from the state, from cheaper travel to various tax breaks. In 2003, the year in which I conducted my fieldwork in Athens, *polyteknes oikogeneies* (‘families with many children’) were defined as those with four or more children, of which there were approximately 160,000 in total according to *Eleftherotypia* (29/04/2001), including 36,000 living within the Attic plain. In 2004, the newly-elected, conservative government, *Nea Demokratia* (‘New Democracy’), announced plans to extend the privileges granted to couples with four or more children to those with three children and over, thus expanding the meaning of the term ‘large families’. A series of associations devoted to the *polyteknoi* are in existence all over Greece. Two of them - the *Supreme Confederation of Large Families of Greece* (*Anotati Synomospondia Polyteknon Ellados*), or A.S.P.E., and *Ethniki Organosi Polyteknon Athinon* (*National Organisation of Large Families of Athens*), or E.O.P.A. - have their base in the capital.

Upon my arrival in Athens, I arranged to meet the President of A.S.P.E., hoping that through him, I would be able to get in touch with the *polyteknoi* of *Nea Smyrni*. Knowing little about the organisation and the purpose of its existence, I asked the President, a father of more than four children himself, to tell me a few words about it and the nature of its campaign. During the course of our conversation, it became apparent that the association’s philosophy and mission was broader than I had originally assumed. ‘Greek culture and the Greek nation are in danger of disappearing,’ the President of A.S.P.E. alleged. ‘The people of this country,’ he told me, ‘refuse to accept responsibility for raising more than two children and the government offers few incentives to those wishing to have large families.’ A mother of four or more children, he claimed, deserves to have equal status and rights as a civil servant. ‘Underfertility,’ he added, was a major concern, particularly since foreigners (*allodapoi*) were coming into the country at an ever-worrying pace. ‘Did you know,’ he asked me, ‘the other day, at a school on one of our islands, an Albanian burnt the Greek flag and shouted, “long live Albania”?’ I thanked the President for his time and for giving me the contact details of two of the organisation’s members who were residents of *Nea Smyrni*. As I was leaving, he handed me a small selection of magazines published by A.S.P.E. every trimester, which he felt would help me gain a deeper understanding concerning the aims of the association.

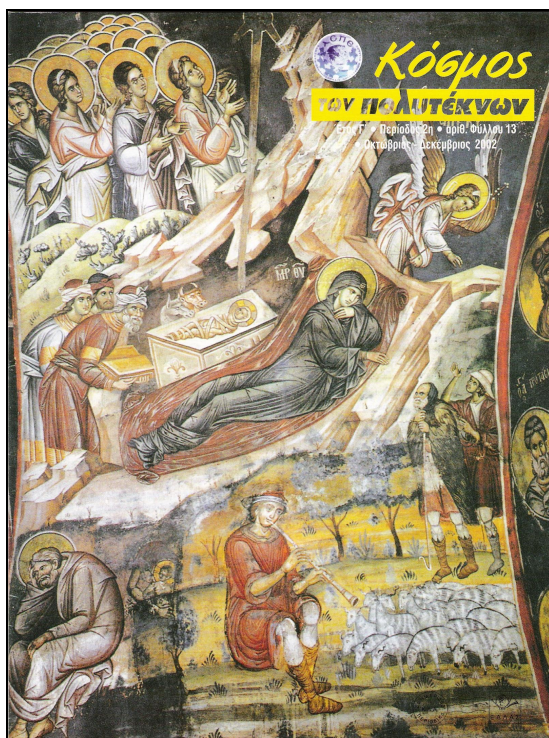
Flicking through the magazines on my way home, I noticed the depiction of a link between the plight of the *polyteknoi*, nationalism, and the Greek Orthodox Church and faith. The April-June 2000 issue of *The World of the Polyteknoi*, for example, included articles with the following

headings: ‘*Polyteknoi* and the children of the *polyteknoi* are the defenders of our national struggles,’ ‘The demographic problem – the *polytekni* family,’ ‘God will provide’ and ‘The decrease of native students.’ One of the magazine’s front covers contained a portrait of a Greek national hero, Ioannis Makrygiannis, who had fought in the War of Independence (Plate 9), while another pictured a mural entitled ‘The birth of Christ,’ belonging to one of the monasteries of *Agion Oros* in Northern Greece (Plate 10). Inside each issue, members from various A.S.P.E. branches, dispersed throughout Greece, reported on local events honouring the families of the *polyteknoi* in their vicinity. Others wrote about the need to campaign for further benefits. However, A.S.P.E. members were not the sole contributors to the magazine; journalists, clergymen, politicians, lawyers, doctors and university professors, including demographers, also made frequent, written contributions to *The World of the Polyteknoi*. In 2004, for instance, to mark the occasion of the Day of the *Polyteknoi*, one issue published messages sent to A.S.P.E. with greetings from the President of Greece, the leaders of the country’s two main political parties, as well as the Archbishop of Athens and the whole of Greece, Christodoulos.



**Plate 9. Ioannis Makrygiannis, a Greek freedom fighter in the War of Independence, depicted on the cover of the January-March Issue 2001 of *The World of the Polyteknoi***





**Plate 10. The 'Birth of Jesus Christ,' a mural in one of the monasteries at Agion Oros, depicted on the front cover of the October-December 2002 Issue of *The World of the Polyteknoi***

Attitudes towards the *polyteknoi* varied within contemporary Greek society. For some, the *polyteknoi*, and the *polytekni* mother in particular, were 'heroes'. In 2003, for example, a prime-time television chat show entitled *Boro* ('I can'), hosted by the popular TV presenter Anna Drouza, devoted its hour-long programme to the 'heroic *polytekni* mother.' An article in *Eleftherotypia* (07/11/2003) also described the *polyteknoi* as the 'heroes of everyday life.' A philologist-historian wrote an article for A.S.P.E. magazine headlined 'The heroism of childbearing' (Kargakos 2000). Yet, while some admired the *polytekni* mother, others questioned her sense of responsibility. Marina, a married woman in her 40s, mother to four children who worked part-time and had a Master's degree, was well aware of the scepticism that surrounded her 'choice' of family size. I asked Marina what people's reactions were to her having what was, according to Greek standards, a large family.

Marina: Oh yes, I did experience some negative reactions because the environment I grew up in was not one with many children nor were they very Church-oriented people who would say ... who would accept whatever God sends. So, I had to face many battles with my mother.

KG: What were some of the things she would tell you?

Marina: Well, every time she would find out I was pregnant she would start shouting, 'you're not thinking of your health! How will you raise this child?' and she would present me with all the problems in their worst form. So, sometimes, I would hide from her the fact that I was pregnant until I

could no longer do so ... the same with the majority of my uncles and aunts.

KG: How about other people, like non-family members, perhaps?

Marina: Yes, there were comments from colleagues; even from gynaecologists ... I remember the gynaecologist I had gone to when I had an extra-uterine miscarriage. Because he heard I had other children, he said in a sarcastic tone something like, 'oh you're so very active.'

KG: How did you react to that?

Marina: I didn't say anything. I thought, 'if that's how he treats his best customers, he will not have much of a future!' (Marina, 40s, married, 4 children, working part-time).

Of particular interest in Marina's account is the description of her mother's reaction to her multiple pregnancies because it reveals that the limitation of family size transcends generational differences. In fact, Marina's mother was more likely to be in agreement with Soula, a woman roughly the same age as Marina.

Soula was married with two teenage sons and was, at the time of our encounter, 46 years old. Soula had experienced difficulties conceiving her first child but did eventually manage to get pregnant with Grigoris, her eldest son. Following his arrival, her husband insisted they should have a second child. Though Soula was not as keen, she finally agreed with her husband that having a sibling for Grigoris was the right thing to do, and so Takis was born just over a year later. I asked Soula whether she or her husband had ever considered having a third child. Her response, reproduced partially below, was instructive:

We didn't talk about having another child. In any case, don't forget ... you have to be able to offer certain things to children. So, you have certain obligations. You cannot have an uncontrollable amount of children, without being able to offer them the basics ... In the past, back in our grandmothers' generation they had twenty children, ok? Today you can't do that. To have ten children, for example, and for them to suffer is silly, right? They didn't ask to be born so you have to be able to provide them with the basics ... I mean, I couldn't imagine having six children and be able to give to all six. I would rather have none. I wouldn't have them out of control, just so I could say that I had a child. When I wanted one, I did it consciously. I knew why I wanted it and what I could give to it, right? Like I knew about the second one also ... and I am not talking about families who have only one or two children but about those who have more. Of course, it's your choice, right? Since you know what kind of country you live in, to choose to have six you are choosing to make them suffer. That is why underfertility exists, because proper couples think, plan and then act (Soula, 46, married, 2 children, working part-time).

Soula's response reveals the rationale against the behaviour of the *polyteknoi*. To have many children, according to Soula, was a sign of irrationality, irresponsibility and a lack of foresight, given awareness of the less than favourable conditions in which contemporary Athenians had to raise the next generation. 'If logic ruled,' I once heard, everyone

would 'choose' to have a maximum of two children. On the face of it, this supposition was straightforward: why should Athenians have more children than they could afford to look after? Yet Marina was in no better a financial situation than Soula. Both Marina's and Soula's children attended state schools local to *Nea Smyrni* and both displayed equal levels of anxiety over managing the household resources and monitoring their children's regular demands for the latest fashionable accessories.

The difference between Marina and Soula, I suggest, was more deep-seated. The lack of correspondence in the number of children that Marina and Soula each thought was necessary to make them feel 'complete' as women lay in the ideologies that cultivated their sense of maternal duty. Soula's narrative exposes the rhetoric typical of liberal theories of subjectivity while Marina's outlook is more akin to the values expressed in the Christian Orthodox faith and by the Greek Orthodox Church. According to Ruhl (2002), the dominant 'procreative ideology' in advanced liberal states is that of the 'willed pregnancy'. While the drive to manage fertility has always been a feature of humankind, the way that societies contemplate and manage reproduction has varied over time and across space, she claims. Characteristic of the 'willed pregnancy' is the idea that human beings, irrespective of the circumstances in which they find themselves, have the capacity to reason. 'Liberalism,' Ruhl (2002, p.646) claims, 'is posited on the notion of an ahistorical, disembodied, and hyper-rational individual.' Those living in a modern liberal context have to make use of their rationality in order to overcome their animalistic urges and become adept at self-control. Through careful planning and the use of foresight, they then acquire the freedom to choose what is best for them and, ultimately, to control what is not. Their reward is autonomy, especially from the burden of childbearing.

The similarities between Soula's account and Ruhl's description are clear. According to the liberal ideology of the 'willed pregnancy', it is simply not 'proper' to have children without due consideration of the consequences. Every child must be a wanted child and, as Soula asserted, one must know why s/he wants it. Adherence to such a philosophy neither precludes unplanned pregnancies nor suggests that middle-class Athenians consciously plan the birth of each of their children. The 'willed pregnancy' is an ideal model of conduct to which women like Soula aspired, and whose terms they drew on to make sense of their actions. As Kanaaneh (2002, p.82) argues, having fewer, spaced, planned children is a 'prime signifier of modernity' and reflects modernisation theory's 'rational, economic, calculating individual.' By having a small family, parents hope they will be able to provide it with all the necessities essential to being 'modern'. Among middle-class Athenians, the most important of these was a good education but it also included other, more

material or consumer goods, such as fashionable clothing. A childless, married teacher in her 40s, for example, told me that she felt sorry for the children of the *polyteknoi* because they could not enjoy the same material goods as others in their age-group.

In contrast, according to the Greek Orthodox faith, planning a family is antithetical to the will of God (Dimopoulou 2000). Unlike Soula, Marina claimed that she was not fearful of not being able to look after her children because God would provide for them - an assumption that most Athenians, like most Galileans, believed was 'backward', 'old-fashioned', 'fatalistic' and 'not modern' (Kanaaneh 2002, p.89). The majority of my informants claimed to want a maximum of two children, while many of those who already had two believed they were unlikely to have a third. According to most, 'completion' was not dependent upon the number of children a woman had nor was the amount of children she gave birth to a measure of her success as a mother. As long as she had experienced motherhood at least once, a woman would feel 'complete'.

I just wanted to have a child. I would have felt incomplete if I didn't have even just one child ... it fulfils me as a woman (Toula, 33, married, 2 children, working full-time).

We would have felt complete with one, two or three children. It's not about the number ... from children you get only satisfaction, nothing else (Panos, 40s, married, 2 children, working full-time).

Informants often recalled the saying 'one child is like having none at all,' yet they also maintained that it was increasingly difficult to have even two children. In some ways, then, it was better to have one child than to have more than they could cope with. Although not ideal, such an act did not violate most women's understandings of 'responsible' motherhood, for its principal motivation was the welfare of the child.

Another way in which I was able to access people's opinion of the *polyteknoi* was through articles written about them in the press. While most were simply educational, containing details of the latest benefits that the government proposed to offer those with 'many children', a small selection was clearly judgmental. The following two excerpts stem from two mainstream national newspapers, *Eleftherotypia* and *To Vima*. The first is a letter sent by a young reader, the other a feature article written by a Professor of Political Economy from the University of Athens. Each has its own take on why the *polyteknoi* should not receive special benefits just because they have more children than the rest of the population.

I am a college graduate and I am looking for work. I am in the process of filling in the forms for ASEP<sup>16</sup> and I see: 1) extra points for the *polyteknoi*, 2) extra points for expatriate Greeks, 3) extra points for those with special needs etc. I too made sacrifices in order to get an education – like thousands of others – and I have one brother, so why should I gain fewer points than another candidate, who has two siblings, and is, therefore, a *polytekno*s? Enough already with the *polyteknoi* ... Do the benefits they receive not suffice? Is it not enough that they can earn 20,000 euros without paying tax? Why all these exceptions? I mean, when will I, and thousands of other young people like me, find a job, get married and have a family? And then they talk about underfertility. If someone does not have a stable job, really, is marriage what he needs? (*Eleftherotypia* 08/08/2005).

The fifth reason why I am against the benefits that the *polyteknoi* enjoy is that to have many children does not constitute a national achievement (*ethniko ergo*), nor even an achievement. A national achievement is to make good citizens and that is something that both those with many children (*polyteknoi*) and those with few children (*ligoteknoi*) do. Additionally, there is no need to receive payment for that because it is one of our responsibilities (*To Vima* 26/01/2003).

The first excerpt reveals the frustration that some people felt over the favouritism shown to the offspring of *polyteknes oikogeneies* ('families with many children') in the labour market. It is interesting to note that the young man complaining refers to the issue of 'underfertility' at the end of his letter. This is ironic because, on the one hand, he is claiming that the government's focus on helping the *polyteknoi* is preventing the non-*polyteknoi* from finding gainful employment and so from getting married and having children, while, on the other hand, he is against the idea of assisting the very people who might help solve 'the demographic issue'. Equally noteworthy is that he sees having a job, marriage and childbearing as being inseparable, echoing the view held by the majority of Greeks that having children is a process that has to occur inside marriage (see Chapter 2, Section 2.6), and within an environment of economic security (see Chapter 5, Section 5.7).

The second excerpt is also against the benefits that the government bestows upon the *polyteknoi*, yet one of the reasons Prof. Lianos cites in support of his argument relates to the contribution of those with 'large families' to the overall good of the nation. The notable aspect of Prof. Lianos' line of reasoning is that he thinks childbearing is indeed a national 'responsibility' but that it is satisfied by raising 'good', as opposed to simply numerous, Greek citizens. Underlying this assertion are liberal notions of subjectivity, as described above, and nationalist sentiment. While I did not come across any such explicit statements in

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<sup>16</sup> An independent body that is responsible for the recruitment of civil servants.

my interviews with informants, there is evidence to suggest that 'ordinary' Athenians agree with the Professor's viewpoint. In her study of abortion and attitudes towards the *demografiko* ('the demographic problem') among 120 Athenian women, Halkias (2003) observes that while her informants disagreed with the idea that in order to be 'good Greek citizens' they had to have more children, they believed that women needed to have at least one child in order to be 'good Greek citizens.'

Compulsory motherhood of one child emerges as an uncontested victory of the nationalist discourses animating the *demografiko*. What stands as contested territory is women's *increased* reproduction ... These Greek women's narratives reveal both that reproduction and national identity are intimately affiliated and, at the same time, that this process is not seamless (Halkias 2003, p.224).

When I set off to investigate low fertility in Athens, and even during the course of my fieldwork, I was convinced that, although 'underfertility' was a concept infused with nationalistic connotations, 'ordinary' Athenians did not 'plan' their families with the fate of the nation in mind. As already mentioned in Chapter 5, informants claimed that while the 'demographic problem' was a worrisome development, they themselves did not have children in order to save the Greek *ethnos* ('nation'). Even if they wanted to assist in re-populating it, they felt powerless doing so because of the enormous cost of having children and the lack of support (primarily by the state) in raising them. I also felt that the connection between Greek nationalist ideology and 'underfertility' had already been examined (Halkias 2004, 2003, 2002, 1998; Paxson 2004). I wanted to study the 'real' reasons behind the country's 1.27 children per woman; a 'reality' that I believed was a cause not a consequence of alarm over the loss of the Greek 'race'. Yet, in hindsight, I was somewhat mistaken.

Although the support of the government and the Greek Orthodox Church, in their efforts to combat 'underfertility' was, partly, why the *polyteknoi*, a minority group, received such a great deal of publicity, their existence attests to the presence of a strong connection between childbearing and nationalism in contemporary Athenian society. Furthermore, the expressions of ambivalence towards them, articulated both in the print media but also by my own informants, did not provide a challenge to the above association. Childbearing was still a national 'responsibility' but it had to adapt to the times, which at present were not accommodating to large families according to my non-*polyteknoi* informants. While the women with whom I spoke would, if questioned, most likely have denied the suggestion that their family-formation practices were fashioned by nationalist ideology, their perspectives on motherhood imply otherwise. As Paxson (2004, p.48, my emphasis) contends, motherhood completes a woman in Greece because by

becoming mothers, Athenian women are demonstrating that they are skilful at being 'proper *Greek* women.' In this sense, motherhood was not just a middle-class women's duty to her family, to society, and to God but also to the nation.

## 6.7 Childlessness

During my research in Athens, I came across only a single informant who claimed to have remained 'voluntarily' childless. Although in the last few decades childlessness has been on the rise in Greece (See Chapter 2, Section 2.5), judging from my own fieldwork experience as well as that of others (Halkias 2004, Paxson 2004), this trend is more likely to be due to an increase in infertility, instigated by the postponement of childbearing, rather than 'voluntary childlessness'. Indeed, a longitudinal study by Symeonidou (2000) reveals that the percentage of women in her sample who intended to remain childless was negligible and that among those who did have such intentions, all actually ended up having at least one child. Moreover, both in the original study (1983) by Symeonidou and the follow-up (1997), merely 0.4 and 0.6 per cent of women respectively considered not having children as 'ideal'. While in Greece, more women end up having just one child than they originally set out to do, overall a greater proportion of Greek women 'desire', 'expect' and actually have a single child than no children at all (Symeonidou 2000).

Dina was a 51-year-old divorcee who had decided not to have a child because of what she described as an 'irresponsible' and occasionally 'abusive' husband. Dina approached me following the focus group interview I had conducted in a social club local to *Nea Smyrni*. We decided to meet the following week for an afternoon coffee at a near-by cafe. Dina told me that she had decided not to have children because she alone would have to provide for them, given her husband's general lack of interest in family affairs. While she thought she would be able to offer a child the protection and care that it would need, she knew she would require the financial support of her husband if she were to do her job well as a mother. Dina felt deprived of motherhood, and told me that after she filed for divorce she entered into what was to be a brief relationship with another man. Although by then she had put aside all thoughts of having a child, she told her new partner that she secretly wished to fall pregnant. While she would not keep the baby, she told me, she wanted to feel the sensations that accompany carrying a child. A short-lived pregnancy would have been sufficient to compensate for her sense of incompleteness at that stage in her life. Although she had felt considerable contentment by looking after her nephews and nieces she described her experience as 'the loss of my soul in the mirror,' a poignant reminder that children are often regarded as a reflection - a mirror image - of the self; their absence, therefore, a stark realisation of the definitive ending of the person.

Dina's story suggests that it was better to have no children at all under circumstances that would most likely prove unfavourable for the child. This complements the vision of 'responsible' motherhood advocated by informants such as Soula, above. Her 'choice' to remain childless, given her husband's behaviour, also reveals the strong preference for reproduction within a stable heterosexual union in which the man provides, if not emotional, than at least financial support. The prospect of single motherhood was unthinkable. Interestingly, Dina also confesses to feeling a strong desire to want to experience pregnancy, though not to full term. In other words, in order for Dina to feel like a 'complete' woman, she felt the needed to undergo the bodily process of carrying a child. At first, this wish seems to contradict the view expressed by a number of my female informants, noted in Section 6.4, that motherhood entails nurturing rather than simply giving birth to a child. Yet, on closer inspection, Dina's assertion does not counter this view. For Dina, her nephews and nieces afforded the opportunity to play a nurturing role, satisfying some of the sensations required to feel 'complete'. Yet, as also mentioned earlier, 'nature' had designed the female body for reproduction. Dina's yearning, therefore, suggests a curiosity to experience what she considered a defining characteristic of femininity.

Dina claimed that she could not recall facing any negative comments about her childlessness. Yet Dina had not 'chosen' to remain childless because she disliked children or due to wanting to devote her attention to other activities or experiences. Halkias (2004, p.186) argues that 'women who simply do not want to have children are an invisible, and practically unimaginable, part of modern Greece.' According to Paxson (2004, p.18), childless women are held to be 'morally irresponsible' for they have failed to live up to a social duty. While Halkias and Paxson are, in principle, correct in assuming that in Greek society such women are in the minority because they do not conform to 'proper' female behaviour, I believe that the attitudes towards the voluntarily childless were slightly more diverse than these two authors assume. The passing of judgement over a woman's decision to remain childless depended primarily upon what others believed were her motives. As Dina's story has already demonstrated, if a childless woman's reason for not wanting children was 'legitimate', for instance because it was 'better' for the welfare of the unborn child, then she was cleared of acting selfishly. If her reasons were 'illegitimate', then she was condemned for being egotistical.

Yet again, the interview with Xenia and Stefania proved insightful on this account. The issue of childlessness emerged on two different occasions during our lengthy conversation. In the first instance, Xenia and Stefania were talking about a colleague from work that they both



knew. According to Stefania, one day their colleague announced that she and her husband did not want children. When another male co-worker asked why, the alleged woman said that it was because she wanted 'to get married in order to get married, not in order to have children.' Upon recounting the story, Stefania said that she considered this woman a 'selfish creature' (*egoistiko plasma*), though she wondered whether she was covering up an infertility problem. While she could empathise with a woman who did not want to admit that she was infertile, she could not sympathise with her female co-worker, characterising her as a 'bitch' (*skyla*). When I asked Stefania whether that meant she thought women who did not want to have children were generally egotistical, she again retorted that she did not believe her colleague was telling the truth. However, she then said that the only person she believed was honest about wanting to remain childless was a child psychiatrist friend of hers. 'Eleni,' according to Stefania, 'must have had good reason not to want to have children' and, Xenia intervened, 'had really given it a lot of thought, perhaps because of what she had experienced as a child psychiatrist.'

At a later stage in the conversation, the issue of childlessness re-emerged. This time, I initiated the discussion by asking both informants whether either one of them felt that a woman who did not have children could feel 'complete'. 'If *she* feels it then yes; you could feel miserable and yet have a dozen children.' 'Irene Papas and Melina Merkouri<sup>17</sup> did not have children and they were complete,' said Stefania. 'But these people,' Xenia added, 'will not live on forever. They say that people die when the living forget them. That is when people die, do you understand?' 'If I could not have children,' Stefania finally said, 'I would probably be fine and be complete ... I would probably adopt.' The first point of interest in this discussion is that Stefania refuses to accept that her female colleague was indeed against the idea of having children. This lays bare her inability to conceive of 'voluntary' childlessness as a genuine option. The second interesting feature of the conversation, however, complicates the issue because it indicates that for some women, like their child psychiatrist friend, the 'choice' not to have children, even under regular circumstances, may be justifiable. This seems to be the case when the would-be child's well being is at stake.

The third notable point pertains to the matter of 'completion'. While most informants told me that motherhood 'completes' a woman, according to Stefania some women can feel 'complete' without having children. Yet the two women that she mentions are both eminent figures in Greek society. Therefore, it appears that only exceptional personalities can make up for the loss entailed in not having children. This is consistent with Stefania's belief, noted earlier (Section 6.5), that

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<sup>17</sup> Both are famous Greek actresses.

childbearing is the only 'creative' act 'ordinary' as opposed to 'gifted' women can accomplish. Finally, Stefania claims that if she were unable to reproduce she would feel 'complete'. This line of reasoning again highlights the importance of having a 'legitimate' reason for remaining childless. Infertility, while unfortunate, is not a product of selfishness but bad luck. Nevertheless, Stefania still concludes by saying that though she would probably be able to find fulfilment through other means, if she were unable to conceive she would most likely adopt, thereby satisfying what she seems to believe is every 'ordinary' woman's most important contribution in life: to nurture.

## 6.8 Conclusions

Motherhood and raising a 'good' Greek child fulfil a duty to the family, society, God and the nation. To refute motherhood under more or less 'favourable' circumstances is to reject the Greek nation and to contribute to the degeneration of Greek society and the Greek family. Conversely, by raising a 'well-behaved' and 'good' child, a woman also involves herself in reproducing an orderly society and a respectable nation, the foundation of both of which is a stable family. Yet being a mother in contemporary Athenian society was a demanding experience. Women felt anxious about motherhood and questioned their abilities as mothers. While many relied on their parents for childcare support, others could not, which left them feeling trapped inside their small Athenian apartments and isolated from other mothers. In combination, having no more than one or two children made good sense to the majority of informants. Consequently, the figure of the *polytekni* mother prompted mixed reactions. In the popular imagination, having a 'large family' was a brave decision but few were willing to take it in practice. Contrary to popular and press discourse, however, the Greek family was not showing signs of demise and 'underfertility' was not a product of women's reluctance to mother (see Chapter 5, Sections 5.4 and 5.5). Yet, as Xenia hinted, the 'cult of motherhood' had to compete with novel female aspirations. The reconciliation of maternal duties with other forms of female preoccupations and its effects on women's attitudes towards having children and experiences of family formation will be subject to discussion in the proceeding chapter.

## **7 FROM 'MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE' TO 'MISTRESS OF THE SELF': THE IMPACT OF CHANGES TO FEMALE IDENTITY ON FERTILITY NEGOTIATIONS IN ATHENS**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The middle-class Athenian women who participated in this study perceived the process of family-formation as a life-altering experience. As the previous chapter showed, becoming a mother was a necessary step in the 'completion' of being a woman and thus a highly significant event in the female life course. Yet the changes involved in the transition to motherhood were also the cause of considerable conflict for women. Therefore, a dominant focus in the interviews I gathered concerned the impact of childbearing upon women's senses of self and vice versa. In the following sections, I trace female informants' 'multiple narratives of self' (McKinnon 1997) or identities, and the ideologies of personhood that informed them, and explore how these shaped the process of negotiating fertility.

### **7.2 Female personhood in Greek ethnographies**

In *Contested Identities*, Loizos and Papataxiarchis (1991a) describe the model of personhood that has dominated in ethnographic accounts of Greece. In acknowledgement of Collier and Yanagisako (1987), they demonstrate that key to the constitution of Greek personhood have been the 'mixed metaphors' of kinship and gender. Women, in particular, they argue, have realized their standing as persons mainly through being meticulous in their undertaking of tasks in the domestic domain and by successfully fulfilling their duties as mothers, wives and daughters. It is primarily through their relationship to kin and in terms of domesticity, therefore, that Greek society has defined women as persons. In *Portrait of a Greek Mountain Village*, du Boulay (1974) argues that Ambeliots derived a sense of themselves only through the enactment of roles prescribed by society. In other words, self-worth emanated solely from successfully accomplishing tasks recognized in the social context and, of course, specific to each gender. Since the dominant roles of society related to the family, it was through marriage and, therefore, by being 'good' wives, mothers and house mistresses that women in Ambeli attained personhood. Hirschon (1989) describes a similar set of values among a group of Asia Minor refugees living in Athens in the 1970s. In order to be a 'proper' person, a woman in Kokkinia had to pass from the role of daughter or sister to that of wife and mother.

The aforementioned studies all draw comparisons between Greek notions of personhood and those originating in countries typically grouped together under the banner of 'Western' Europe. Both du Boulay

and Hirschon point out that at the time of their fieldwork in Greece there was little scope for the development of the individual who was accountable only to and for him or herself. In fact, individuality or acting with a view to gaining personal gratification rather than with the aim of fulfilling one's responsibilities to others was damaging to the reputation of both men and women.

Indeed, I would argue that the notion of the single individual as it is understood in the West may still be inappropriate for understanding contemporary Greek society, even with the rapid changes which have occurred in the 1980s (Hirschon 1989, p.141).

Thus, to the extent that the villager's personal integrity is identified with that of his family, he is correspondingly involved in a type of self-awareness more extrovert than introvert. He acts more as the protagonist of his family group than as a person with his own individual moral existence (du Boulay 1974, p.74-75).

Scholars outside the field of anthropology have also noted the distinction between Greek and 'Western' European conceptualisations of personhood. Pollis (1965; 1987), for example, a political scientist, has written extensively and in detail on the differences between the Greek and the 'Western' view of 'self'<sup>18</sup>. In Greece, she argues, the notion of individualism in the Anglo-Saxon sense is largely absent. In the Greek view, a person does not exist as an autonomous being but is defined by his or her relationships to specific people (usually belonging to his or her extended family) and particular groups (typically, the community and the local Church). Whereas in the Anglo-Saxon and mainly Protestant perception of the self responsibility lies with the individual, according to the Greek perspective a person is accountable to society for his/her actions and decisions. This helps clarify, she contends, why, in Greece, deviation from socially-imposed sanctions does not result in feelings of 'guilt' but in those of 'shame'. It also explains why such abstract concepts as justice, equality and uniform laws applied independently of personal relationships have been slow to appear in Greek legal terminology and why *filotimo* (the 'love of honour'), instead of personal integrity, has been the key guiding force of behaviour among Greeks. Finally, it shed lights on the idea that for Greeks self-fulfilment stems from the successful implementation of one's role within the greater whole whereas in the 'West' it is through the achievement of personally formulated goals. Pollis claims that a highly centralised and regulative state, the late development of capitalism and industrialisation, widespread nationalism, and persistently strong bonds to local political and social groupings, ensured that the idea of the individual as a being separate

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<sup>18</sup> Pollis uses the word 'self' instead of 'person' interchangeably in her work. However, she is referring to personhood as defined in the Introduction of my thesis.

from society and against the state did not develop in Greece until recently.

The ethnographies cited above, however, also note the existence of an alternative sense of personhood to that just described - one more akin to the 'Western' European or Anglo-Saxon perception. According to Loizos and Papataxiarchis (1991b), gendered personhood occasionally developed in contrast to or separate from kinship. These alternative discourses of gender and personhood most frequently appeared outside marriage; that is, beyond the hold of the 'dominant conjugal model', which was the primary guiding force of Greeks' everyday activities. In *Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece*, Cowan (1990) also describes a space in which the basis of what her informants did depended not on ideas of personhood defined by women's positions within the family but by the rhetoric of individualism. The *kafeteria* was, according to Cowan (1990, p.86), a chiefly female space where women saw men as their equals and claimed to make decisions not mindful of their reputation in the community but based on their 'own needs, desires and interests.'

This nonconforming definition of female personhood accompanied a unique perception of female sexuality. While according to the dominant ideology of female personhood, a woman's sexuality was attributable to her kinship role and, via procreation, directed towards the perpetuation of the family, in the alternative model, expressed within the *kafeteria*, a woman was simply a 'human being'. There, others viewed her capacity to bear children as separate from her status as a person and her sexuality as positive and under her full control, as was her body. Such conceptions of female personhood, Cowan (1990, p.87) argues, provided 'a discursive space' in which 'hegemonic ideas about women's nature and women's place' were contested, though not necessarily overthrown. In part, they stemmed from a feminist discourse that embraced the idea of the female person as 'autonomous' and 'self-determining'.

### **7.3 'Women have their own personalities now'**

The subdominant ideology of female personhood, described in these ethnographies, was highly visible in Athens during my fieldwork<sup>19</sup>. In fact, it was clear that this previously minor model of personhood had now gained prominence and was influencing female informants' senses

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<sup>19</sup> On my numerous visits to the Greek island of Andros, I have often heard the question asked to members of the younger generation, 'whose are you?' (*tinós eisai?*) as opposed to 'who are you?' This question exemplifies the difference between the model of personhood that defines persons as, above all, members of particular kin and social groups and one that characterises them as individuals. I have never come across that question in Athens.

of self or subjectivities, and consequently, their approaches to family-formation. Informants would frequently tell me that, a 'woman has her own personality (*prosopikotita*) now,' meaning that she acted with regard for her own well-being and without feeling accountable to others (particularly, her husband and father). While 'motherhood' was still essential to being a 'good' Greek woman, the terms 'woman' and 'person' were no longer synonymous with the word 'mother'. Male informants agreed. For example, I asked Constantinos what would make him most proud about his teenage daughter when she grew up. This was his response:

I want her to be strong. I want her to be able to have a personality, to be a mature personality. That's what I'd like. That's why I'm telling you: I would admire any woman who was beautiful as a woman, as nature, as a personality *and* as a mother. If she can achieve all of that, I think she is worth it (Constantinos, 40s, divorced, one child, self-employed).

According to Constantinos, an admirable woman is one who has a 'personality' but who is also a 'mother'. By making this distinction, Constantinos suggests that motherhood and being a self-assertive 'individual' are different yet equally important aspects of female identity. However, it also means that being a mother in the service of others does not meet the requirements necessary for developing a 'personality' (*prosopikotita*) and vice versa. As a result, Constantinos distinguishes between being a 'woman' (*gineka*) with a 'personality' and being a 'mother' (*mitera*).

This line of reasoning was also evident in women's narratives of family-formation. For example, Magdalena, a married, 35-year-old, mother of two children, rationalised her lack of intention to have a third child by telling me that after having two, 'I am not going to go through the same again, especially now that I have started feeling like more of a person.' Vicky, a married 39-year-old mother of one child, who worked as a teacher in a private Athenian school and had a Master's degree, also noted the importance of remembering that, 'you don't stop being a woman or a person because you have a child.' Finally, Eleni, a married 29-year-old with no children of her own yet, pointed out: 'a woman is not just there to give birth.' Although all three informants valued the role of the mother, they also believed that womanhood and motherhood were separate states of being; in other words, they felt that kinship did not define female personhood exclusively.

As Chapter 6 showed, the 'cult of motherhood' was responsible for generating the belief that middle-class Athenian women had a duty to reproduce. The definition of 'modern personhood', however, demands that individuals be proprietors of their own selves, self-conscious, autonomous, willing, desiring, and ambitious (Collier et al. 1997).

Accordingly, women who sacrifice themselves entirely for their children do not possess the characteristics that define 'modern personhood'. Childbearing alone did not, indeed could not, define my female informants as 'modern' persons. As Bordo (1993) argues, this notion of personhood also upholds the Cartesian separation of consciousness from the body, and assumes the subordination of 'mere bodies' to the mind. As a result, women whose defining quality is a product of their bodily functions – for example, motherhood – rather than of their mental abilities are not persons in the 'modern' sense of the term. For this reason, informants assumed that older generations of women did not possess a 'personality' because they were 'just' mothers.

When my mother became a mother, she became a mother, that's it. However, I want to live. I have needs too and temptations. Things are different now; perhaps that is why there are so many divorces (Era, age unknown, married, 2 children, working full-time).

According to Era, previous cohorts of women lacked 'needs' and 'temptations', and therefore, ultimately, a sense of self. Her mother, for example, simply fulfilled a role prescribed by society. Yet, as Collier (1997, p.6) argues, shifts in narratives of personal motivations for action reveal 'less a change in people's willingness or ability to act out their inner desires than a subtle difference in the concepts and practices people used for managing their presentations of self and for interpreting the actions of others.' As the following sections will show in more detail, Athenian women were in the midst of experiencing opportunities, as well as constraints, unique to their age groups. Like Collier, I do not believe that this had given them a greater degree of self-consciousness than that possessed by their predecessors. Rather, it had equipped them with a set of ideas about personhood, sexuality, gender and the body, which drove them to make sense of their practices and beliefs (including those pertaining to childbearing), and those of others, in terms of 'personal initiative and abilities' (Collier 1986, p.105).

In distinguishing between motherhood and womanhood, informants engaged in the construction of two separate identities – being a mother and being a woman – both of which they were constantly in the process of trying to accommodate in their everyday lives.

One big problem that you face when you are raising children is that you forget yourself a little bit. This is something that creates conflict inside of me because I am also very dynamic. I want things for myself too and this constantly creates conflict inside of me ... Sometimes I feel like I outdo myself and that is the moment at which the conflict occurs. That is why women with children go mad. At some point we forgot that we ... they forget that they are also women. Somewhere along the line, they forget that they are also career women; they forget that they want to have fun. Or, the other thing that happens – I've seen this happen: they start

searching for a big romance ... Other women leave their children completely and run off with someone else, but that's also natural under the circumstances (Voula, 43, married, 2 children, not working).

According to Voula, being a mother was difficult to reconcile with being a woman. While, to a certain extent, she felt able to accept the loss of her self in order to concentrate on her maternal duties (she gave up her job after having her second child), others, she claimed, were unable to do the same, taking drastic measures to escape the 'insanity' they suffered as a result.

The internal strife described by Voula appeared to affect the process of negotiating fertility both prior to the initiation of family-formation and once it had already begun. A number of female informants, for example, claimed to have deferred the process of starting a family in anticipation of having to deal with these conflicting identities. For example, when I asked Sofia, a 30-year-old, childless woman, why she had not yet had children, she told me: 'I don't want to change. I don't want to leave myself behind.' In order to embark upon the process of *teknogonia* ('childbearing') a woman had to be prepared to let go of her self.

A person must be willing to give up a part of herself, of her life before she decides to have children (Artemis, 56, married, 2 children).

Really you shouldn't even have one [child] ... You don't take care of yourself, your personal life is over, you end up going backwards, especially when you don't have help from your husband ... I would advise them [people] not to have any if they're not ready to give themselves up (Theano, 30s, married, 2 children, working).

Theano was the only female informant with children that I met who openly claimed to have regretted having them (the other was a male informant). When I asked her whether she thought becoming a mother had 'completed' her as a woman, she was also one of the few who said 'no', telling me instead that 'having a good time completes me.' While atypical, Theano's response provides a warning against seeing motherhood as an experience that all middle-class Athenian women longed for and enjoyed. It also points to a growing appreciation of the value of self-fulfilment, a by-product of 'modern' personhood. Yet the fact that Theano had children, despite claiming not to want them, also signals the importance of distinguishing between personal aspirations and practice.

During the course of our conversation, Theano told me that she had never given motherhood a lot of thought and had not imagined what it might be like to have children. Eventually, however, her husband had convinced her that it would be the right thing for them to do. Her mother-in-law, she added, had persuaded him to think in this way. As



Theano's story reveals, while informants claimed to 'have their own personalities now,' in reality, their actions were always a result of compromise and negotiation, rather than 'autonomous' and derivative from 'within' their selves. In the following sections, I describe further the challenges faced by them in trying to realise their aspirations as 'modern' women. In each section, I also trace the effect these had on their attitudes towards having children and their approaches to childbearing.

#### 7.4 Money, work and women

Financial independence through entry into the labour market was the key change that had endowed women with a 'personality' (*prosopikotita*). All of those with whom I spoke held financial independence in high esteem. 'We now have our own money in our pockets,' they told me. While many women felt they were obliged to work in order to make ends meet, employment was also valued for other reasons. For example, Theano maintained that working was the only time she felt she was doing 'something for me' and she would never contemplate giving up her job in order to look after her children on a full-time basis. Other mothers worked in order to 'unwind'. This made them 'better as mothers' by giving them the opportunity to get out of the house and spend quality time with their children upon their return.

If I stay at home, I will have nothing new to tell him, that is why I consider it imperative to work. Women who are not happy when they have children are those who stay at home 24 hours a day, those who stay with their kids all day (Alexandra, 28-year-old, divorcee with a 2-year-old son).

My own mother was traditional ... she gave herself completely and that is not good. She didn't have a vision. Twenty-four hours a day, she was by her children's side. That was bad for her self and it made her overprotective ... I don't like passive people ... I don't like to ask for money. I am more dignified than my mother was. I have a much more developed personality. I have the power of speech (*eho logo*). When you have financial independence, you are better off. You can take initiative. I don't like a woman that sits in the corner (Aphrodite, 58, married, 1 child, self-employed).

As the above examples illustrate, Athenian women expressed feeling a lack of contentment solely from executing the roles of *noikokyra* ('mistress of the house') and mother, and appeared willing either to shed some of the tasks involved in 'keeping a home' or to relinquish some of the responsibilities to professional housekeepers. Whilst a few decades earlier, status was conferred on a woman in Athens through the fulfilment of her household duties - that is, by being a good *noikokyra* - and women who went out to work were looked down upon (Hirschon 1989), today being house-bound was a less welcomed option. That said, maintaining a tidy home was still important. A messy house was an embarrassment, a sign of familial disorder, especially in the presence of

strangers. On my numerous visits to informants' households, therefore, clutter, even in the form of children's toys, was imperceptible.

For those women without any children yet, being a working mother was a desirable prospect. I asked Vasso, a 22-year-old student, to imagine what her life might be like as a mother.

Well, first, I would like to be a working mother. Why? Because comparing the character that my friends' mothers, who don't work, and that my own mother, who does work, have formed with that of others, eh, I believe that a job offers you many more opportunities. Opportunities not just in terms of enabling you to develop or build a career or financially but in another way also, primarily by helping you to develop a personality, and other criteria. And more generally, it gives you the chance to pass onto another spiritual and, of course, social level ... whereas when you close yourself inside the home, your interests are limited. Someone will not criticize a working woman who chooses to go out for a walk, who will not come back home to cook but who will, instead, order some take-away, but a woman who doesn't work is obliged to keep a house spick-and-span. Since no house can ever be perfect, even if you spend 24-hours a day cleaning it, the result is that this woman will never have time to herself. Yes, there are many benefits for a woman that works ... In any case, if you don't have anywhere else to release your energy, I think that most mothers become overprotective, destroying every chance they have to enable their children to develop their own personality and to stand on their own two feet (Vasso, 22, single, no children, student).

Vasso reaffirms many of the ideas already noted. Women engaged in some form of employment have more 'character' and are 'better' mothers than those who are unemployed. In addition, working women have the excuse not to carry out as many domestic tasks. This implies that, unless they have a valid reason, middle-class Athenian society still expected women to be the principal minders of their homes. The claim that a non-working woman could not be 'seen' to be walking about the city in abandonment of her household duties is surprising coming from a girl of Vasso's age. Yet it shows that the role of the *noikokyra* ('mistress of the house') was still fundamental to a being a 'proper' Greek woman and, perhaps more importantly, to be 'seen' to be one (Paxson 2004).

Financial independence was also synonymous with 'freedom' and 'autonomy'. Those coming of age in Athens in the 1960s claimed to be the first generation of women granted the opportunity to work without feeling castigated. Moreover, they were the first women given the chance to carry on working following marriage and childbearing, though there is evidence to suggest that many did not do so (Sutton 1986). Earning money, they claimed, was something that they were encouraged to do by their own mothers, especially by those who lived in the provinces. Artemis, a 56-year-old married woman with two children, aged 25 and 26, was originally from Crete. Along with the majority of her female

school friends, Artemis' mother and father sent her to Athens from Crete in the 1960s in order to get an education. Her parents were aware that there were better opportunities for girls in the capital and education was the only way to have a chance at savouring them. 'Feminist movements were just beginning to gain some recognition,' Artemis explained. While her grandmother would never have encouraged her own daughter to migrate to Athens to study and look for work, Artemis' mother believed that village life was full of hardship and that this was likely to be even more the case for her daughter. As a result, she encouraged Artemis to create a different future for herself.

My mother used to tell me, 'so that you can be the mistress of your self,' (*kyria toy eaftou sou*) she would tell me, 'first you find a job, first you will work, so that you can have your own money and then nobody will be able to do what they want with you'; 'so that you can be independent.' My mother used to tell me this from a young age; she would say, 'you must have your own money' (Artemis, 56, married, 2 children).

Artemis' account hints at a radical shift in attitudes towards female employment; a transformation explained partially, it seems, by urbanisation. While Artemis' mother also worked, she was an *agrotissa* (a 'farmer'). According to Artemis, this did not prevent her from being financially dependent on her husband, Artemis' father. 'Even if she wanted to buy a dress, she would have to ask him for money; even if she wanted to buy a pair of socks, she had to ask my father to give her some drachmas. This bothered her I assume and she would always tell us to be sure to have our own money.'

The women I engaged with, however, also described the advantages of working in a broader sense, not just in terms of personal benefit. According to many, work, like motherhood, was a key channel through which they could contribute to society.

When you work, you just feel that you are contributing something to the whole. A woman's role does not become confined exclusively to the home as a mother, wife and *noikokyra*. I, at least, feel that I am contributing something, um, to society. I mean, I understand that I am useful to some people. They come, they ask me, they seek my advice, and I take on certain responsibilities. That gives me satisfaction (Margarita, 47, re-married, 1 daughter, working full-time).

I mean it is very important to, on the one hand, be an energetic member of a society. I mean to be where ... where the kneading takes place; to be included in the production process; to participate. That is very important and it is alluring too. It is not all bad; I mean it's not only tiresome. Work doesn't just make you tired, it also has its charm, right? Because the role of the *noikokyra* ... it's something that you do alone, trapped inside four walls. You do the same thing day in, day out. Whereas 'coming out' [into society] you have a job - you work in a ministry - you see people, you get up, you get dressed, you put on your make-up, you fix your hair, you say

good morning, you get out of your house. You are in the centre of things, inside the production process (*mesa sti paragogi*) and that is very important, isn't it? (Artemis, 56, married, 2 children)

Margarita and Artemis both deemed communication with the world beyond the home and participation in the labour force vital. The derivation of self-worth from involvement with the means of production (*paragogi*) points to the spread of a capitalist work ethic. The role of the *noikokyra* ('mistress of the house') was, informants were aware, not valued in the same way as that of the employee, and created few opportunities for meaningful exchange with other adults. Female informants, therefore, referred to the *noikokyra* with growing contempt. In fact, the term had started to take on a more deprecating meaning, similar to the English term 'housewife', which itself has been frowned upon only recently (since the 1960s).

Working life, unlike an existence confined to the domestic domain, was a generally rewarding experience for middle-class Athenian women. Yet, it also had a negative side. Many of my female informants expressed resentment at having to divide their time between work and home, especially after spending numerous years in education. Some were unable to find the right work-life balance and had to give up their jobs once they had children. According to the *Greek Fertility and Family Survey* (Symeonidou 2002, p.6), an inflexible labour market either seriously impedes women from returning to the workforce upon having children (especially after the birth of their first child) or prevents them from interrupting it for 'any serious length of time.' In fact, the recent increase in the employment rate for Greek women is the lowest among the EU countries. Nevertheless, the opportunity to enter and participate in the labour market had changed women's perception of themselves and their 'wants' (*ta thelo mou*), as Eugenia told me. Women had fresh demands now and having money had taught them to 'manage themselves' in a different way and to have 'a changed air' (Lena, late 40s, married with 2 grown-up children). Although they were finding it increasingly hard to maintain equilibrium between being 'responsible' mothers and 'good' workers, from being 'mistresses of their homes,' middle-class Athenian women now sought to become 'mistresses of their selves.'

## 7.5 Marriage and divorce

In the Greek popular imagination, as Chapter 5 (Sections 5.4 and 5.5) demonstrated, both male and female informants regarded women's financial liberation as a major cause of animosity between them with detrimental effects on the family and, more generally, the desire to reproduce. For many of the women I spoke to, however, working was essential to achieving a sense of security in what they perceived to be an increasingly insecure world. As a result, women's admiration for their own mothers, some of whom had been dedicated entirely to the role of

motherhood, went hand in hand with discomfort at the thought of not having any money to call one's own. This was particularly since personal wealth conferred power and a woman without 'her own money in her pocket' was in danger of putting herself in a subordinate position to her husband.

I wanted to have my own job so that I would not be dependent on anybody. I saw women around me relying financially on their husbands. I wanted to be financially independent and then find a suitable man and have children. I saw women making many concessions because they could not do otherwise. You never know what the future holds. I wanted to have my own money (Kirki, 30s, married, 2 children, working full-time).

Families are no longer patriarchal. Men engage much more in their children's upbringing ... There is equality, a man's *logos* ('word') is not above that of a woman's. Now that women entered the labour market, they are more independent and it is not possible for men not to help (Era, 30s, married, 2 children, working full-time).

Not only was financial independence considered a safeguard against divorce, it was also believed to be the seed that should ideally bring to fruition a relationship of equality between husband and wife. Couples that contributed an equal share to the household's overall income, female informants believed, were more likely to maintain a level balance than those where the wife was financially dependent on her husband. The 'traditional' model of the family in which the husband was the *afendis* ('master of the household') and the wife the *noikokyra* ('mistress of the household') had been replaced by that in which husbands and wives are in partnership with an equivalent load of household chores to carry out.

In contemporary Athenian society, therefore, the marital union was not 'a social and symbolic unit ... in which each one may realize his or her own social personality according to its ideal role' (du Boulay 1974, p.90). Ideally, marriage was a means to display the affection that a man and a woman, as two autonomous beings, felt for each other. Accordingly, if the love between two people faded, divorce was the right option.

Marriage forces two autonomous persons to live in the same house ... the decision to get married is a difficult one. Marriage is a form of oppression (Christina, 45, married, 2 children, working full-time).

You know what happens - at least as I see it - you marry as Ada or Katerina, as Philip, and through marriage, if you are not fully ready to change and to become half Ada, half Philip and you'd rather stay what you were, you can't do it. You shouldn't do it. I mean ultimately you leave behind the identity that you once had. That absolute identity you once had. You are no longer alone. If you are not ready to face this, then you're destined for a divorce ... For example, I am not Ada. At this particular moment in time, I am in four pieces. I mean I have one piece for

three others and myself. If you, for example, want to stay whole and you say 'me' and 'my life,' 'the life I once had' and 'who is going to respect it' and who this and that ... then egoism (*egoïsmos*) enters into it, which is excusable, in some instances (Ada, 42, married, 2 children, working full-time).

In order for marriage to work, according to Ada, it was necessary to accept the partial loss of one's individual identity. By extension, the grounds for divorce were legitimate when the infringement upon a person's 'wholeness' or individuality had become unbearable. After all, as Christina said, 'marriage was a form of oppression.' In other words, the responsibilities formed by virtue of being a wife, or a husband, were burdensome, destructive rather than constructive of gendered identities.

Despite this perception of marriage, relative to other European countries, the Greek divorce rate remains low while its marriage rate is high. In 2001, for instance, the crude divorce rate in Greece was 1.1 per 1000 inhabitants, compared to 2.6 per 1000 inhabitants in the UK (Eurostat 2004). By comparison, the Greek crude marriage rate was 4.6 per 1000 inhabitants in 2000, while in the UK it was 5.1 per 1000 inhabitants (Eurostat 2004)<sup>20</sup>. Cohort marriage data reveal that although among those born between 1960 and 1966 the proportion ever married dropped slightly (3%), the figure is still over 90 per cent (Eurostat 2004). In the UK, in contrast, among the same female cohorts the proportion of women ever married fell from 86 to 77 per cent (Eurostat 2004).

Despite the inconsistency of these figures with informants' ideas about marriage and divorce, they do make sense when looked at in the context of some of their experiences. For a few of my informants, the reality of marriage was very different to how they thought it ideally ought to be. Lia was originally from the provinces but moved to Athens with her family as a young girl.

I got married at 21 ... I didn't choose the time in which to get married. Look, my family did not favour the idea of me being free at home, to go out I mean, to have friends; it was not permitted. So, either I had to get married or leave the house and go live by myself, somewhere where nobody could find me. Otherwise they would kill me ... My parents wouldn't say anything but I could see for myself, I didn't feel comfortable; I didn't have my own space. I couldn't leave by myself, so I had to get married ... Socially, for a woman to rise she had to get married to become a lady (*kyria*). She became a lady when she was by the side of a man. Now it's not like that. A woman becomes a lady on her own. She emancipates herself, she studies, and she works. She wants a man for company and to have children (Lia, 40s, married, 2 children, not working).

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<sup>20</sup> This is partly due to a higher rate of re-marriage in the UK.

Lia's marriage was the route to independence from parental control and the only way to achieve adult status. In contrast, she claimed, a young woman today did not need to be married in order to be her own person because she was financially independent. While for Lia's generation, it seems, husbands had assisted women 'to come out into society' (Hirschon 1993), for the more recent ones marriage was to be postponed until one's life 'had been lived' and after as many experiences as possible had been accumulated.

Calliope, a 53-year-old woman with a 21-year-old daughter, was also in a marital union that turned out to be different to how she had imagined it to be, even though she had always been financially independent from her husband. Calliope had grown up in one of the industrial districts of Piraeus, which she described as 'like a small village.' She got married aged 30, following a period of studying business as well as working. Although she admitted to marrying late by her own generation's standards she also claimed that getting married was a way of escaping from her parents' control. Unfortunately, her marriage had not been a happy one as her husband had failed in what she perceived to be his duties as a husband and, most importantly, as a father. He was not 'attentive to her needs,' he 'lacked responsibility towards what they call family,' he was not 'the pillar of the home' and his financial contribution to the household was minimal. As a result, Calliope decided to have only one child, though she felt that even having one was 'selfish' under the circumstances. Over coffee in one of the numerous cafeterias surrounding the square of *Nea Smyrni* I asked Calliope why she, a well-educated, self-sufficient and, up until recently, working woman, had not decided to leave her husband.

I overlooked my beliefs in order to hold together a marriage ... I followed a life different to the one I had dreamt of in order to keep a family together as best as possible. I ended up sustaining a marriage that was not harmonious ... I would never get a divorce because I do not want to upset my family, even though I know that I would lead a better life if I did ... So as not to upset my father I stayed in a relationship that did not fulfil me. I never told my parents about the troubles I was having so that I did not pass any of my worries onto them ... I created a fantasy marriage based on lies ... As a mother I should have guaranteed for my daughter an ideal father. That is something that burns inside of me ... It is a role that I should have played as a woman (Calliope, 53, married, 1 child, retired).

According to Calliope, her husband was not a 'proper' 'head of the family' (*oikogeniarhis*) in the same way that her father had been. Yet divorce was not preferable to staying married because she could lead 'an autonomous existence' within her marriage while shielding her parents from what she assumed would be extremely distressing news. Calliope's story suggests that for her and her parents' generation familial disharmony was shameful (Hirschon 1989). For Calliope to admit that

her marriage was not a success would be to show that she had been unsuccessful in her socially-ascribed roles of wife and mother that still largely defined her as a person. It is extremely revealing that towards the end of the above account Calliope speaks of her remorse at failing to ensure that her daughter had a 'good' father. She then goes on to say that not only as a 'mother' but as a 'woman' too it was her most important 'role'; one which she felt she had neglected. In Calliope's understanding, therefore, being a 'good' woman and being a 'good' mother were synonymous. Moreover, guaranteeing a 'good' father was a 'good' mother's job and, by extension, also that of a 'good' woman.

Therefore, alongside idealistic portrayals of contemporary Athenian marriages based on a 'modern' conception of personhood, lay an apparently different reality, at least for women in their 40s and 50s. To begin with, it was clear that equality between husbands and wives, which female informants assumed would be a consequence of their financial independence, was not always achievable. In reality, informants often told me, Athenian men had not yet accepted their changed status within the family and had trouble adjusting to it. According to popular belief men were 'like children', expecting their wives to behave in a manner similar to their mothers; that is, at their disposal at all times. Magdalena, for instance, who was even younger than Lia and Calliope, recounted how her husband did not like her being 'so reactionary.'

He'd like me to be less outspoken. He wants to be the centre of attention. He'd like it if I cooked a warm meal for him from time to time but I don't do it. If you're hungry, go and fix your own meal. He doesn't say anything but sometimes it comes out, 'you don't look after me' (Magdalena, 35, married, 2 children, working full-time).

Underlying men's behaviour was the *Anatolitiko stihio* ('Eastern element'), according to informants. 'In Greece,' Carolina, in her early 30s, explained, 'men do not generally have the mentality of Europeans ... my husband is a classic *Anatolitis* ('an Easterner').' Equating men with the 'East' was revealing of the deep-rooted tension in contemporary Athenian gender relations. While women modelled their marriages upon 'Western' European ideals of, in Carolina's words, 'mutual help' and 'mutual understanding', apparently men were still acting in a way women thought typical of an 'Eastern' mentality; that is, based on the conjugal model of 'man the master' and woman the 'mistress of the house.'

Throughout my fieldwork, I wondered whether Athenian women were generally reluctant to marry because they knew that in practice marriage was far from what they ideally hoped it would be. Since childbearing was inconceivable outside a marital union, I also wondered whether their readiness to postpone childbearing was largely due to their



unwillingness to marry. Indeed, the mean age of Greek women at first marriage (below age 50) had increased from 23.6 years in 1975 to 27.3 years in 2002, while the mean age of women at first birth had risen from 24.5 years in 1975 to 27.9 in 2002 (Council of Europe 2005). Judging from informants' accounts there was certainly a mismatch between existing ideologies of female personhood outside and within marriage. Whereas outside the marital union the idea of woman as an autonomous being prevailed, inside it men still expected their wives to act in compliance with the notion of gendered personhood according to which womanhood was synonymous with motherhood and the *noikokyra* ('mistress of the house'). While informants, like Lia and Calliope, were prepared to conform to the latter, others, like Magdalena, appeared less willing. Both groups of women, however, negotiated between these two ideal models of personhood by limiting family size to a maximum of one or two children.

### 7.6 Sex, beauty and consumer culture

Contrary to Greek Orthodox doctrine, contemporary middle-class Athenians acknowledged that sex before marriage was an inevitable consequence of 'modern' life. According to the *Greek Fertility and Family Survey* (Symeonidou 2002), the age at first sexual intercourse in Greece has not changed significantly during the last few decades. From those born in the first half of the 1950s to those born between 1980 and 1981, the median age at first sexual encounter has remained around 19 years for women and 17 years for men<sup>21</sup>. However, the same survey shows that over a matching period of time the median age at first marriage has risen, widening the gap between first sexual experience and matrimony. For example, women born between 1955 and 1959 married for the first time at the age of 22.5 years whereas those born between 1965 and 1969 did so at the median age of 23.1 years. At the same time, a growing proportion of sexual relationships do not lead to marriage. Therefore, female sexuality no longer has an explicitly procreative end that can only be expressed within the bounds of the marital union - as it did in Kokkinia in the 1970s (Hirschon 1993) - nor does the open pursuit of pre-marital relationships

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<sup>21</sup> A recent survey conducted in Athens and Thessalonica by the research firm Alco for the Female Sexual Health Institute shows a slightly lower average age for women at first sexual contact. Just over 43 per cent of the women polled said they lost their virginity between the ages of 15 and 18. About 38.3 per cent said they had sex for the first time between the ages of 19 and 22. Four per cent waited until after the age of 26, while nine per cent said their first sexual encounter was before the age of 15 (*Athens News* 01/10/2004). The difference in the survey and FFS results is partly explicable by the fact that the former refers solely to cosmopolitan urban environments, rather than the country as a whole.

bring shame upon a family's honour, as it did among Dubisch's (1993) informants in a village in rural Greece.

In any case, among middle-class Athenians female sexuality was separate from procreation and there was less emphasis on its control, once demonstrated via the display of modesty and shame (*dropi*) in 'movement, speech, gesture and associations' (Hirschon 1993, p.54). This shift partially relates to the rise of consumer culture in Greece, which exhibits and promotes a particular kind of female sexuality. While excessive consumption or 'hyper-consumption' (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3), was a vice, most middle-class Athenians displayed a great deal of concern about their outward appearance. Far from being a sign of vanity, 'dress ... is, manifestly, a means of symbolic display, a way of giving external form to narratives of self-identity' (Giddens 1991, p.62). Different outfits promote 'a different awareness of one's self,' reflecting and reinforcing the "'person" we wish to be at that time' (Nippert-Eng 1995, p.51). In addition, consuming is a deeply 'passionate experience, an expressive act' (Tomlinson 1990, p.17) from which derives identity and a sense of self (Jagger 2000). Whereas 'consumption is an act, consumerism is a way of life' (Miles 1998, p.4). People do not consume commodities merely because of their functional worth but for what they denote. When a person purchases a car or a piece of clothing s/he is not just buying a lifeless object but an image with which s/he partly constructs his or her identity, that is who he or she is or wants to be. As Tomlinson (1990, p.9) says, 'the commodity has acquired, in late consumer culture, an aura beyond just its function.' In the words of Jagger (2000, p.50), 'consumption, then, is far from being simply about the satisfaction of fixed needs; it is about desires and dreams.'

In Athens, consumerism has become a matter of necessity precisely because of its promise to fulfil certain wishes and imaginings. As a result, Greece has transformed from 'a saving culture' to 'a debt culture' (*Athens News* 25/02/2005). While Greeks' per capita income is only 65 per cent of the EU average, consumer prices are at the same level as those of the most expensive European capitals (*Athens News* 25/02/2005). On one level, for middle-class Athenians, as for Galileans, 'style and keeping up with it had become a major marker of modernity and class' (Kanaaneh 2002, p.95). Through wearing the latest 'Western' fashion, informants were defining themselves as 'Europeans' and distancing themselves both from their provincial predecessors and 'Eastern' (that is, Ottoman) past. On another, more personal level, however, as Dubisch (1993) anticipated<sup>22</sup>, through paying close attention to their attire and

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<sup>22</sup> 'In particular, one might ask whether women are becoming less significant as representations of communities, as well as whether they themselves are less concerned with reputation in a bounded social group

purchasing the most up-to-date commodities, my female Athenian informants displayed theirs and their family's status. In their opinion, it was not only important for them to look good but for their children too. In a system where school uniforms do not exist, the women I spoke with often claimed that keeping up their children's appearances had become an almost daily struggle. Despite their complaints, however, they seemed quite happy to participate in it. For example, Arleta, a married 41-year-old mother with two children, and a regular at *Lollipop*, told me that when her second son, now a toddler, was born she never thought of passing her eldest son's clothes onto him, and found it strange that I assumed she would have. Given the huge boom in the exchange, sale and purchase of second-hand (children's) clothing in the UK, I was surprised at Arleta's response. However, her actions were in tune with the 'modern' conception of personhood and a middle-class Athenian understanding of 'good' mothering, according to which each child is 'unique' (Doumanis 1983), deserving of his or her parents' undivided attention and so, also, of his or her exclusive material possessions.

While the spread of a 'consumption ethic' (Jagger 2000) affects both men and women, it does so in different ways. In Athens consumption, expressed primarily through the beautification of self, took on special significance for women, coinciding with a shift in notions of female personhood and therefore, also, perceptions of female sexuality. As Anthi explained, beauty was not only skin-deep.

I like looking after myself. I mean when you respect yourself you want there to be ... you want to portray a good image to the outside world. I mean I wouldn't dream of going to the office without make-up and not well groomed, never. Not as I am now. When I go out food shopping or I want to relax at home I want to feel more free but I believe that when you respect yourself you want the image that you present to the outside world to be analogous (Anthi, late 30s, married, 1 child).

According to Anthi, looking attractive was a sign of self-respect - her external appearance reflecting her internal state. As Collier says:

A woman's physical appearance is always open to being interpreted as a statement about her moral and social worth ... Whatever a woman's appearance it is never without significance. The woman who takes care of her body and dresses attractively, particularly as she grows older, displays

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and more concerned with demonstrating 'modernity' in an urban setting (see, for example, Collier 1986) and with establishing their own senses of personhood (Cowan 1990). With increasing affluence, does Greek women's maintenance of family reputation now rest more on their role as consumers, demonstrating a family's material status in both urban and village settings, and less on the control of sexuality and the maintenance of the integrity of the 'inside'? (Dubisch 1993, p.282)

her 'womanliness' ... The woman of slovenly appearance, on the other hand, suggests both inward and outward failure (Collier 1986, p.104).

In a context where 'gender proficiency' (Paxson 2004) prevails - that is where femininity and masculinity have to be 'displayed' - where a woman is the guardian of the family and the home but also where she is an 'individual', consumption and body adornment have become key defining features of being a 'woman'. Just as the Virgin Mary had lost her prominent place as the archetypal model of womanhood in the minds of the female residents of Los Olivos studied by Collier (1986), and had been replaced instead by the 'Modern Woman' shown in advertisements and television, so too the *Panayia*. While the All-Holy Mother of God remained the archetypal figure of motherhood in Athens, she did not provide the role model of womanhood.

Indeed, being a 'mother' and being a 'woman' stood in sharp contrast to each other. For example, female informants argued that pregnancy was damaging to their bodies and having children reduced their sexual appetite, spoilt their physical appearance and, ultimately, made them less attractive to their husbands. The defining features of being a 'woman' or a *gomena* (roughly translatable as a sexually alluring female), as Athena, a 37-year-old mother of twins described herself as being prior to having children, radically diverged from those that characterised a mother. For Athena, being a 'woman' or a *gomena* meant 'from having a bath to ... instead of wearing large pants for example, to put on a string, to dress provocatively, to be brave ... to go out with a friend.' While Athena claimed she had not completely abandoned 'the role of woman,' when she became a mother her appearance changed and she temporarily 'let herself go' physically. As a result, she claimed, she lost her ability to 'act the bully' (*exasa ton tsabouka mou*), meaning that she lost her confidence, and she became depressed (*epatha psyxoplakoma*), especially since her husband did little 'to reassure her.' According to Athena, it was important for a woman not to lose the respect of her husband as a 'woman' during their marriage and especially after becoming a mother. Her father, she told me, was unfaithful to her mother because, though he loved her, he did not see her as a 'woman' but only as a mother, who would 'iron and clean' after him and their three children.

In the Greek press and in the Greek popular imagination, 'hyper-consumption' was an important cause of 'underfertility'. While informants did not explicitly purport to be excessive consumers themselves, both in appearance and in their personal accounts of family-formation, there were signs that material possessions used up a considerable proportion of the household income, as did going out to restaurants, bars and clubs. Although 'hyper-consumption' was negative, individuals seemed to be under its spell. Not only was there

great pressure through advertising to own certain types of goods, especially for one's children, but there were also an extraordinary number of outlets in which to spend money. Since the late 1980s, I had personally witnessed great transformations in Athens' commercial landscape. Retail stores of the same calibre as those found in other major European capitals had gradually appeared, opening initially in the city's wealthiest districts such as *Kolonaki* and *Kifisia* but soon spreading to areas all over Athens. The fashion sense of both Athenian men and women started to reflect the modes of dress advocated in the latest foreign style magazines, while the widespread development of an industry devoted to health and beauty mirrored a growing interest in physical appearance.

To a certain extent, therefore, consumerism did appear to be a source of competition for resources that could otherwise go towards having additional children. Yet Athenians' fondness for spending was possibly a manifestation rather a cause of their disinclination for *teknopoiia* ('making children'). In other words, indulging in the purchase of goods and services reflected an underlying shift in informants' sources of fulfilment and, ultimately, senses of self. While motherhood still completed a woman, it did not express her autonomy and individuality, both attributes necessary to qualifying as a 'modern' person. It was also not enough to display her and her family's status. This was evident in Athenians' choice of consumer products. Unlike the British women that I met and observed in London, in general Athenians preferred to buy and wear brand names, a tendency which suggests that they had a penchant for displaying personal wealth rather than a unique style, developed irrespective of cost. For example, wearing Levis jeans, Ralph Lauren shirts and Timberland boots has been especially popular among young, old, male and female Athenians since the 1990s, a combination of clothing described humorously as making up Greece's new 'national costume'. Ironically, therefore, despite their efforts to exhibit their individuality through fashion, many Athenians ended up resembling each other.

## 7.7 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have shown that beneath contemporary, Greek middle-class women's attitudes towards having children and practices of family-formation were a series of previously subdominant perceptions of female personhood, sexuality, gender and the body. These had changed women's senses of self, directing their attention away from their domestically-defined roles towards the pursuit of personal pleasure and individual self-fulfilment, expressed most visibly in their enthusiasm for consumption and the beautification of their bodies. These perceptions had also altered the dynamics of male-female relations, transforming women's ideas about marriage and lifting the moral ban that existed on divorce. However, formerly dominant perspectives on personhood,

sexuality, gender and the body continued to have an impact on women's everyday struggles to be 'modern'. In fact, it was clear that informants were attempting to fulfil a duty both to their selves, by indulging in self-gratifying activities such as work, but also to their families, society, God and the nation, by reproducing. As Nico pointed out, 'Children are not accessories; you can't have children just because you feel like it. But first you also have a duty to your self' (Nico, late 30s, childless, in partnership, self employed).

The multiple roles, which female informants had to juggle with today, were unmanageable, they claimed. Whereas once, a woman was content to be a *noikokyra*, a mother and a wife, now she aspired to play all of those roles in combination with having a career and being an 'independent' woman. As Athena told me, 'it's hard to perform all our roles perfectly; to be beautiful; to be the perfect wife, the perfect lover, the perfect worker, the perfect mother.' For many women, it seems that limiting family size was a key strategy in managing the pressures exerted by the demands of these conflicting identities.

Look, I just think I wouldn't be able to offer much, to offer as much as I wanted, to more than two [children] and I am not just talking about material goods, ok? I'm even talking about my ability to love and to care, ok. When I would have already raised two kids or I will still be raising two kids, to raise another one would mean that my love, my care, my affection would have to be shared out between three. You know it is not a coincidence that we have two hands with which to hug ... the third [child] someone else would have to care for and I wouldn't want that nor would I want one of the three children to suffer. You know, it is a bit like puppies, if they all have to drink milk from the same bowl, it is inevitable that one of them will die (Vasso, 22, student, single, childless).

For Vasso, having two children was not only 'logical' but also 'natural'. Like most of the women whose stories and views have featured in Part 1, Vasso had ambitions beyond motherhood yet also felt compelled to become an affectionate and caring mother; a 'good' Greek mother who did not outsource the task of childrearing to outsiders. In order to fulfil both sets of aspirations, according to her, it was only sensible to have a maximum of two children. Vasso's reasoning, as well as that of other informants, captures the essence of middle-class Athenian women's childbearing influences.

As this chapter has argued, being a mother and being a woman were different sources of identity that were difficult to reconcile. Yet, to a degree, they were compatible. Motherhood was still essential to the completion of women, even though there were now other activities implicated in the formation of feminine identity. The difficulty of reconciling motherhood and womanhood, therefore, did not lie in informants' inability to conceive of themselves simultaneously as dutiful

mothers and 'modern' women, but in their capacity to be both at the same time. As Chapters 5 and 6 mentioned, neither the state nor civil society provided informants with the infrastructure and support necessary to combine effectively both their duty to themselves and to their children. In attempting to manage on their own, compared to the London-based informants (as Part II will reveal next), middle-class Athenian women expressed no alternative but to keep the size of their families to, at most, one or two children.

## **PART 2 – LONDON**



## 8 THE ENGLISH FIELDWORK SETTING

### 8.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to offer a description of the English fieldwork setting in which the second half of this research study was undertaken. This, however, is not a straightforward task. London is a 'world city' (Underhill 2005, p.57), home to thousands of people from outside the United Kingdom. In addition, its origins stretch back to thousands of years. As a result, it would be impractical to attempt an historical overview of London comparable to the one I composed for Athens in Chapter 4. While the Greek capital also has a lengthy and rich past, its naissance in 1834 as the administrative and governmental seat of the 'modern' Greek nation-state is a clearly identifiable starting point for a synopsis of its recent history. Although the Industrial Revolution in some ways marks the origins of 'modern' English society, it is impossible to identify a single moment in time when England and its capital underwent a major 'rebirth'. Consequently, this chapter has a slightly different layout to that implemented in Chapter 4. Instead of a brief historical account of the city, I begin with a short description of London's population make-up. Next, I consider what characterises the English middle-classes, to whose ranks my informants belonged. In this section, I give a short account of the genesis of the English middle-classes, as well as of their present-day features. After that, I introduce the National Childbirth Trust, an organisation that proved crucial to the progress of my fieldwork in London. I end with a presentation of *The Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham*, the area in and around which I recruited the majority of those I interviewed. In this section, instead of an historical approach, similar to that used to portray the municipality of *Nea Smyrni*, I focus solely on the area's current situation.

### 8.2 London and its inhabitants<sup>23</sup>

In mid-2004, the UK was home to 59.8 million people, of which 50.1 million lived in England (ONS 2005). In 2001, London had a population of just over 7 million residents (12% of the total population), making it the most populous city in the European Union and one of the most densely packed. In 1999, for example, there were 4,486 people per sq km living in London compared to 906 people per sq km in Athens. The population of London reached a peak in 1939 with 8.6 million. After that, it experienced a decline. In 1988, it reached its nadir with 6.73 million

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<sup>23</sup> Unless otherwise stated, this section has been compiled using information published in *Focus on London 2003* (Virdee and Williams 2003), the most comprehensive statistical digest of the capital's demographic, social, industrial and economic make-up, put together by the Greater London Authority, the Government Office for London, the London Development Agency and the Office for National Statistics.

residents. Since then, however, its population has recovered and today there is an annual average increase of about 19,000 people. In 2011, London could have close to 7.5 million inhabitants and in 2021 just over 7.7 million. The capital consists of Inner and Outer London. In 1901, the former was home to 4.9 million people while only 1.6 million lived in the latter. Today, the situation is very different. In 2001, Inner London had 2.77 million residents and Outer London 4.42 million. This shift occurred mainly in the 1920s and 1930s, as the city expanded. Central London, which includes the City of London, Camden, Kensington and Chelsea, and the City of Westminster, had 546,000 inhabitants in 2001.

In sharp contrast to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when there was an excess of deaths over births, the capital has recently been experiencing a natural population increase. In 2001, for example, there were 104,200 live births and 58,600 deaths, a natural population increase of 45,600 people. This means that London accounted for 70 per cent of the total natural growth of the UK – an impressive proportion, given that it possesses only 12 per cent of the country's total population. Compared to the rest of the UK, London also has a high proportion of women of childbearing age. As a result, in 1999 its crude birth rate was approximately 15 live births per 1000 residents, which is high in comparison to most other European cities. In Athens, for example, the crude birth rate in the same year was 10.6 live births per 1000 inhabitants. London's crude death rate (8.2 deaths per 1000 population), on the other hand, is comparable to that recorded in the majority of cities in mainland Europe, including Athens, where the crude death rate was 9.9 deaths per 1000 residents in 1999.

In 2001, the total fertility rate (TFR) in London was 1.62 children per woman, comparable to the UK rate of 1.63. Since 1971, however, there has been an overall decline in the capital's TFR, dropping from 2.09 children per woman to 1.71 in 1981, rising to 1.74 in 1991 before falling to current levels. Of course, total fertility rates vary considerably within London. In 2001, for example, a number of boroughs, including Hammersmith and Fulham, had a TFR around 1.4 children per woman, while Hackney (2.08) and Newham (2.19) had among the highest total fertility rates in the country. Age-specific fertility rates (ASFRs) differ slightly between London and the UK. Teenagers and women in their twenties, living in the capital, have had lower fertility rates than those residing in other parts of the country. Yet, females in their thirties and forties who live in London have higher ASFRs than do their counterparts elsewhere in the UK. In 2001, for instance, there were 94 live births per 1000 women between the ages of 30 and 34 living in London, whereas in the UK there were 88 live births per 1000 women from the same age group. For those between 35 and 39 years old, ASFRs were also higher in

London than in other parts of the UK (59 live births per 1000 women compared to 41 live births per 1000 women respectively).

In general, the capital has a younger age structure than the UK overall, with proportionately more children under five and more adults aged between 20 and 44. In contrast, London has relatively fewer people between the ages of 5 and 15, and 45 and over, compared to the UK as a whole. Responsible for these disparities are, to a certain extent, migration patterns. London is a city that attracts individuals both from within and outside the UK. Many of those who settle in the capital are young adults between the ages of 16 and 44. At the same time, a number of men and women in their thirties and forties, who wish to settle down and start a family, either go to live in Outer London or elsewhere in the country. Those of retirement age are equally likely to leave the capital. Approximately 60 to 65 per cent of the total that decide to move away from the city go to the South East and East of England regions. In fact, London's annual net migration loss to the rest of the UK grew from approximately 69,000 in 1999/2000 to 98,000 in 2001/2002. However, in 2001, 147,800 people also moved to the capital from outside the country while only 81,200 left to go abroad. In that year, therefore, London became home to an extra 67,000 people from outside the UK. According to the 2001 Census, 29 per cent of the city's population are from a minority ethnic background while the rest are White (of whom 60% are White British).

Finally, Londoners have an average household size of 2.3 people, as do those living in England and Wales, the North East and the South West. Inner Londoners, however, have a slightly lower average (2.2 persons) than Outer Londoners (2.4 persons). They also are more likely than those who live in boroughs on the periphery to cohabit, to be lone parents and to live alone. In contrast, people living in Outer London are more likely to be married. Throughout the capital, the most common type of household is that comprising of one-person (35%; that is, five per cent higher than the proportion characteristic of the UK as a whole), followed by the married couple household (29%). Lone parent households are also quite widespread (11%), while cohabiting couples occupy 8 per cent of the total number of households. Despite enormous variability between them, in 1999-2002, households in London had an average gross weekly income of £711, around £200 more than that of the average UK household.

### **8.3 The English middle-classes**

Social class is an important cause of variation in fertility within countries. Haines (1989), for instance, has shown that fertility decline in England and Wales did not occur at the same time and with equal speed among the working-, middle- and upper classes. Instead, class fertility

differentials widened during the early stages of the fertility drop (late 19<sup>th</sup> century), with the middle- and upper classes having a lower birth rate than the working classes, possibly also beginning at an earlier period. In a recent article, Buxton et al. (2005) show that parental social class and own social class, along with educational attainment, played an important role in determining the timing of first birth among women in England and Wales, aged between 25 and 29 in 2001. For example, nearly three quarters (73%) of the daughters of professional and managerial parents had not had a child by age 25-29 compared with 46 per cent of women whose parents were part skilled or unskilled, and 39 per cent of those with economically inactive parents. Of those who had a child in their teens, only 12 per cent had a parent from the top social classes while 29 per cent had a parent or parents who were either unemployed or economically inactive. Among women with a degree or equivalent qualification, 85 per cent had not had a child, 1 per cent had become a mother as a teenager and 6 per cent when in their early 20s.

Despite evidence showing that social class influences fertility, there is still widespread disagreement over its precise meaning. Sociologists have long struggled over the definition of class, yielding a variety of ways to characterise it. Opinions on the subject are diverse and divided. In addition, British sociologists and historians have placed disproportionate emphasis on the working classes, leaving the middle-classes relatively under-theorised. While I do not aim to enter into the class analysis debate, it is necessary to justify the manner in which I conceptualise the term 'middle-class', since that is how I define the majority of my informants. As Gunn (2005, p.62) argues, 'middle-class' is, above all, 'a historical category, the result of accumulated "middles" or spaces between - between aristocracy and working class, land and labour, highbrow and lowbrow, provincial marginality and metropolitan power - the balance of which has altered over time.' It is, therefore, difficult to understand the middle-classes without some knowledge of why and how they came into existence. Their origins, however, lie back to English society in the second half of the eighteenth century. While some of their original features remain, their meaning has undergone such considerable transformation over the last two hundred years that it is feasible to speak and make sense of the post-WWII middle-classes without extensive reference to their character in earlier epochs.

Initially, Gunn and Bell (2002) explain, the term 'middle-classes' or 'middling' groups applied to tradesmen, merchants, manufacturers, attorneys and shopkeepers whose only unifying feature was that they were against the aristocracy and the Church of England, and in favour of moderate reform of the constitution. Unlike today, in the 1830s and 1840s this group was a moral and political entity rather than a socio-economic category with occupation, status, income or lifestyle in common. It was

only in the 1911 Census, Gunn and Bell contend, that a system of classifying the British population according to occupation developed. As a result, Class I comprised the upper and middle classes (large landowners, professionals, scientists, writers, insurance officials, mine owners and businessmen), and Class II encompassed tradesmen and the lower middle-class (shopkeepers, publicans, actors, boarding-house keepers, municipal officers and seed merchants), while the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled formed the remaining three classes. By 1900, almost 25 per cent of the UK's working population had a non-manual occupation (Gunn and Bell 2002).

During the late nineteenth (late Victorian) and early twentieth centuries, the middle-classes gradually expanded. According to Roberts (2001), key to their development was The Northcote Trevelyan Report, put into practice in the 1870s, which suggested that government positions become available via competitive examinations rather than by patronage and the purchase of office. From that period onwards, Roberts argues, a number of other professions<sup>24</sup> came into being and universities introduced matriculation (entrance) examinations; though it was not until after WWII that the majority of occupations (including engineers, accountants, solicitors and journalists) required the possession of an academic qualification. As Gunn and Bell (2002) add, it was in the late Victorian era that 'mental' as opposed to 'manual' culture developed. This, they suggest, gave rise to the notion of a 'career', based on knowledge and expertise, fashioning, in turn, a uniquely middle-class perception of time and the future. The idea that life had to follow a plan, beginning with schooling, followed by university and then entry into a profession, itself consisting of different stages, led to a belief in 'deferred gratification', 'savings' and the value of 'children's education'.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the growth of the middle-classes was mainly due to the increase in government employment (Roberts 2001). It was then that suburbia became associated with 'middle' England (Gunn and Bell 2002). Whereas previously the dominant middle-class figure was the industrialist, the banker and the 'lady' whose role was to manage the household's servants, between the death of Queen Victoria in 1901 and 1939, the middle-classes became synonymous with the office worker, the salary earner and the 'housewife', living in their personally owned 'home'<sup>25</sup> in the suburbs

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<sup>24</sup> According to the *Penguin English Dictionary* (1965), a profession is an occupation requiring training and intellectual abilities, practised to earn a living, or a body of persons practising such an occupation.

<sup>25</sup> Gunn and Bell (2002) argue that in the inter-war years (1918-1939) there was a housing boom in the country, led by the middle-classes and encouraged by the government through a series of Housing Acts.

(Gunn and Bell 2002). However, the spread of the middle-classes, whose form would be recognisable today, really took off, Roberts claims, after WWII with the expansion of higher education and the growth of the corporate economy. As Gunn and Bell (2002) explain, in the 1950s and 1960s, 'organisation man' appeared. He (characteristically male) was a white-collar employee in a technical, managerial or administrative post of a large business enterprise (bank, insurance company or industrial firm). In exchange for his loyalty to the same organisation, he enjoyed a life-long, financially secure and stable career, moving up the corporation's hierarchy until retirement age when he could finally reap the benefits of his pension plan. In the 1970s, a combination of political and economic events (oil crisis, miners' strike, Thatcher), however, spelled the end of 'organisation man'.

According to Gunn and Bell (2002), the decline of manufacturing and economic stability resulted in a new work ethic and an 'entrepreneurial revolution', which made the professions competitive, while simultaneously subjecting them to external regulation. 'Individualism' succeeded 'corporate loyalty' and the City was, for the first time, open to women and those without a public school education. This led to the creation of 'yuppies' (young urban professionals) in the 1980s. In the 1990s, unemployment and the threat of it, intensified competition in the workplace and career and 'home' became increasingly separate and incompatible spheres of life, especially for women (Gunn and Bell 2002). This led to a renewed tendency among the middle-classes, similar to nineteenth century practice, to outsource childcare and housekeeping tasks by employing nannies and cleaners (Gregson and Lowe 1995). Today, the British middle-classes form the second largest group in the country after the working-class, comprising almost a third of the population (Roberts 2001). In Inner London, they represent approximately 20 per cent of the population (Butler with Robson 2003). Whereas once they used to be concentrated in the suburbs, London and the whole of the South East have become 'escalator' regions for many of those who wish to pursue a managerial or professional career (Fielding 1995, p.176).

Butler (1995) suggests that three sub-groups make up the contemporary middle-classes: the routine white-collar workers, a service class of professionals and managers, and a distinct class of self-employed

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Whereas in 1914, only 10 per cent of the national housing stock was owner-occupied and renting was most common, by 1939 the figure had risen to 31 per cent. As a result, the 'home' became the pride and joy of the middle-classes, central to which was the 'housewife' whose role was to look after her husband and nurture her children. Servants, ceased to be a symbol of middle-class status, as they could no longer be afforded.

*petite bourgeoisie*. According to Abercrombie and Warde (1988), the first group (routine white collar workers) consists mainly of clerical workers, sales assistants, personal care assistants, waiting staff in restaurants, and secretaries. The second group, professionals, typically includes judges, lawyers and solicitors, accountants, scientists, doctors and dentists, engineers, architects, air pilots, higher education lecturers and teachers. Managers, on the other hand, are those in marketing and sales, production, building and mining, wholesale and retail, as well as the service and leisure industry. Finally, the *petite bourgeoisie* is self-employed owners of small businesses and people working on their own account. Characteristic of this group are shopkeepers, traders, but also independent business consultants, farmers, and self-employed plumbers.

While there is widespread agreement about the existence of these three middle-class sub-groups, there is little consensus about what it is that actually separates them and, conversely, unites them. In *Property, Bureaucracy and Culture*, for example, Savage et al. (1992) challenge the idea that inter- and intra-class differences are occupational or employment-based. Instead, they believe that social classes are 'stable social collectivities' with 'shared levels of income and remuneration, lifestyles, cultures, political orientations and so forth' (Savage et al. 1992, p.5). According to Savage et al., therefore, membership to the middle-classes depends upon the ownership and interplay of three types of assets. Firstly, organisational assets, that is, the collection of advantages that result from being an employee in a large organisation where the chance of promotion is high, jobs are subject to generous rewards and, in principal, are under the employee's control. Secondly, cultural assets, namely a certain kind of lifestyle, taste and educational qualifications. Finally, it hinges on the control of property assets; in other words, home ownership. The ability to store and transmit each of these assets under different circumstances, Savage et al. contend, determines the stability and security of each middle-class sub-group and accounts for many of the behavioural and attitudinal differences between them, especially those between professionals and managers. Whereas professionals rely more heavily on cultural assets, for example, managers are almost wholly dependent on organisation assets, while the *petite bourgeoisie*, especially shopkeepers, are entirely reliant on property assets<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> In a climate of economic restructuring, however, Savage et al. (1992) maintain that each group has had to reassess its situation and rearrange its assets. Large firms, for example, now need the services of specialists and professionally qualified workers. As a result, their customary policy of recruiting personnel with the intention of keeping them for life is no longer profitable. Consequently, nowadays managers do not expect to stay in the same job forever and have had to trade their organisational assets for other more reliable ones, such as cultural assets (e.g. gaining

In spite of these differences, Savage et al. insist that the middle-classes are a cohesive social collectivity. Firstly, all three groups depend, in one way or another, on the state and its policies. For example, the state regulates and structures the assets of the middle-classes, especially education. Secondly, the formation and unity of the middle-classes is due to the durability of a specific mix of gender relations. Key to the development of the British middle-classes has been the separation between the male (public) and the female (private) spheres, because of which men have been able to focus on their careers, leaving domestic responsibilities and childcare in the hands of women. As a result, women participating in the workforce, traditionally, have taken on junior level, routine or clerical work, while their husbands have been able to focus on climbing up the career ladder to senior-level posts. The third and final unifying force among the British middle-classes and key to their formation is geographical mobility (less marked among the *petite bourgeoisie*). Neither managers nor professionals are dependent on locally based information. Their success lies in their ability to adapt quickly to different geographical locales and in their willingness to move to wherever their services are required.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the features that unify the middle-classes and, in turn, distinguish them from the upper- and working classes, remain subject to dispute. Recently, for example, a media agency's annual guide to the new middle-class claimed that in 'contemporary Britain, almost everyone, from the Chelsea dilettante to the Chav delinquent, can now be said to be middle-class' (*The Fish Can Sing* 2005). However, what defines the middle-classes is now more difficult than ever, the report adds. Education, accent, profession or skin colour no longer distinguishes the middle-classes. If anything marks them out as different, it is taste, especially for consumer products or brands, such as Lavazza coffee, shopping at Selfridges, Gap and Primark, drinking Amstel beer, and Bugaboo buggies for babies. According to Roberts (2001, p.157), 'the present-day middle classes are distinguished by the fact that there are so many lifestyle variations among them, some related to age, gender, ethnicity and education.' Middle-class individuals, for example, tend to go on holidays, play sport, visit the theatre and the countryside, and eat at restaurants more regularly than anyone else. 'It is their omnivorousness rather than any specific tastes that sets the contemporary middle class apart from the working class' (Roberts 2001, p.158).

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specialist qualifications, of the kind possessed by professionals). They have had to ensure the same for their children.



## **8.4 The National Childbirth Trust**

The National Childbirth Trust (NCT) is a charity that aims to offer support in pregnancy, childbirth and early parenthood. It is run predominantly by women for women, though men are encouraged to participate on certain occasions, such as during the course of their partners' antenatal classes. According to its website, the NCT has approximately 400 branches throughout the UK and every year claims to be in contact with 300,000 parents and parents-to-be. As an organisation, the NCT provides a wide range of information and services to parents and parents-to-be through its website and various support lines, such as the Breastfeeding Line which mothers can call seven days a week in order to speak to a trained breastfeeding counsellor. At a local level, a group of volunteers, some with professional training and expertise and others without, organise weekly NCT group meetings with pregnant women and mothers. Most of these gatherings are in the shape of antenatal and postnatal classes led by trained NCT antenatal and postnatal teachers who offer attendees advice on preparing for birth and the early stages of being a parent respectively. Others, however, have an even less formal format: a group of mothers or mothers-to-be who live in close proximity to each other arrange to get together in one of their homes to chat and share their feelings and experiences surrounding this particular phase in their lives.

Whilst a few of the gatherings organise themselves around a specific theme, such as the 'Working Mothers' groups, the majority have a more general character, such as the 'Bumps and Babies' groups. Through these meetings, long-term friendships often develop and an informal but essential support network becomes established between women who often encounter difficulties adjusting to motherhood. Although the NCT welcomes individuals from all socio-economic groups and any cultural or ethnic background, it remains a predominantly white, British, middle-class organisation. While this varies considerably depending on the location, from the numerous meetings that I attended in West London only a handful of women were non-white, non-British and from a working-class background. For the purposes of the research under consideration, this made the NCT an invaluable resource. Not only did its members fit perfectly the criteria of those whose opinions and experiences I sought to record but also its style of organisation made it extremely approachable. As a result, I met numerous informants via the NCT groups operating in West London, particularly in and around *The Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham*.

## **8.5 The Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham**

Each one of London's 32 boroughs and the City Corporation reflects the diversity of the capital and its inhabitants. Hammersmith and Fulham, from which the majority of data for this study derive, is no exception. In

comparison to other boroughs, however, it is characterised by many of the features deemed important to the research in question. The limitations it posed, therefore, were trivial when weighed against its merits. Located on the western periphery of Inner London (Map 3), *The Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham* is both geographically (6.34 square miles) and demographically (165,242 according to the 2001 Census) the fourth smallest of all the capital's boroughs. As a result, the task of finding suitable informants was considerably easier than it would have been in a larger borough. It also made the process of moving around it much more manageable, and I soon became familiar with its main streets and attractions. An additional benefit was that, like *Nea Smyrni*, Hammersmith and Fulham is a complete municipality and not an area contained within a larger borough, as is East Finchley or Hampstead for example, both of which would also have been suitable research sites. Moreover, *Nea Smyrni* and Hammersmith and Fulham are both close enough to their respective city centres so as not to be considered suburbs.



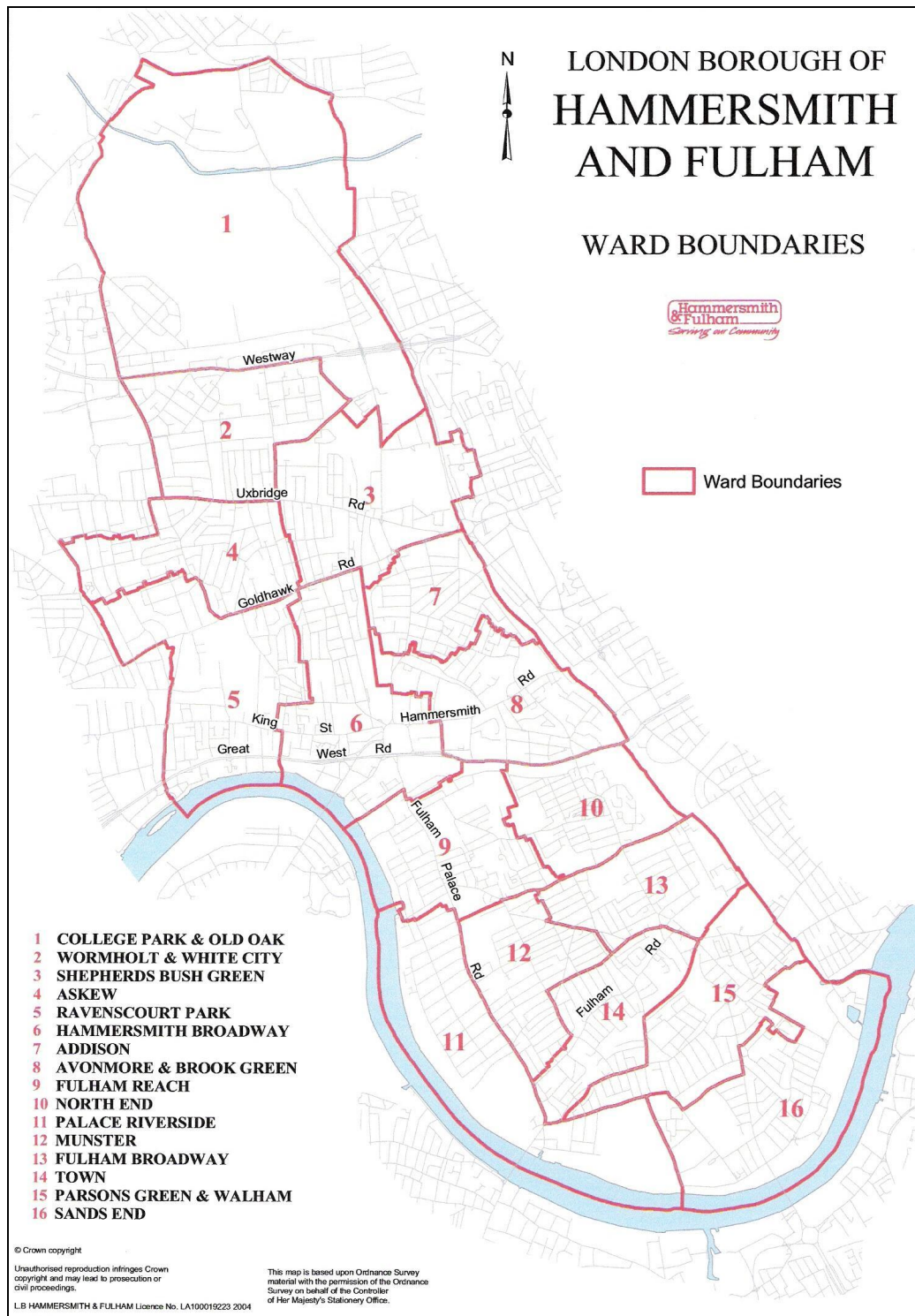
Map 3. London divided into boroughs (Source: [www.ukstudentlife.com](http://www.ukstudentlife.com))

Entering the borough from the east via the Hammersmith Road leads to an encounter with Hammersmith and Fulham's busiest location, its business district. Sprawling out from the Hammersmith Broadway - a vast structure incorporating one of the area's main underground stations, a large bus station/interchange and a shopping centre - are a series of offices and commercial spaces. Although the borough's manufacturing activities have been in long-term decline, the huge influx of service

industries has more than compensated for the loss. Reportedly, 11.61 million square feet is office-space, although some of it, primarily in the College Park and Old Oak ward, the Askew ward and the Sands End ward (Map 4), is still devoted to manufacturing<sup>27</sup>. Accounting for the borough's successful large-scale redevelopment, especially around the Hammersmith Broadway, is its strategic location, with good links to Heathrow and an extensive public transport network. In 2000, there were 105,000 people employed in the borough along with an additional 14,500 self-employed. Most of those who work in Hammersmith and Fulham do not reside in the borough. Conversely, the majority of residents have jobs elsewhere.

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<sup>27</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all the data (including those from the Census) relating to Hammersmith and Fulham in this section come from *Borough Profile (Hammersmith and Fulham 2002)*, the only comprehensive guide to the area, published by the local Council.



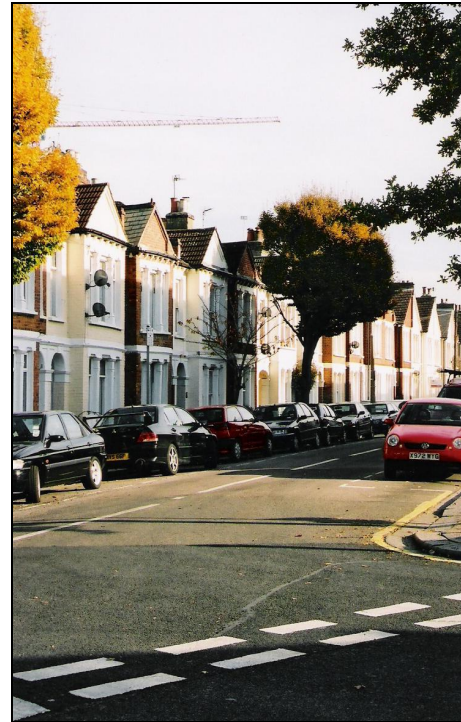
**Map 4. The wards of *The Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham* (printed with permission from the borough)**

Despite the hustle and bustle in the centre of Hammersmith, there are also pockets of residential districts. Rows of Edwardian and Victorian houses - detached, semi-detached and terraced - kept as family homes or divided into flats, line the small streets to the left and to the right of the main roads extending outwards from the Broadway Centre in a web-like

fashion (Plate 11 and 12). It is here, in an area re-branded by estate agents as a 'village', a definite selling point, that a number of my informants lived. Brackenbury Village, bordered by Ravenscourt Park to the west, Hammersmith Grove to the east, the Goldhawk Road to the north and Glenthorne Road to the south, consists of an array of pretty, 2- and 3-bed early Victorian terraced cottages, small villas and larger family houses, sometimes split into flats. A hundred and fifty years ago, most of the area consisted of market gardens and brickfields but by 1890, it had turned into a residential quarter. Following WWII, it was so run-down that it narrowly avoided demolition. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, the area underwent a process of regeneration and in the 1980s, young city professionals with well-paid jobs in the City and generally affluent lifestyles, moved in from Notting Hill and Kensington in search of family homes.

Demand for houses in Brackenbury Village is now at its peak, as reflected in property prices: a 2-bedroom terrace costs on average £400,000, while the bigger 3- or 4-bed houses can fetch between £475,000 and £700,000 (*The London Property Guide* 2004). The residents of Brackenbury Village were certainly one of the wealthiest groups in the borough and those most likely to be married with children. Dispersed throughout the Askew, Ravenscourt Park and Shepherds Bush Green wards, however, resided many more middle-class, married or cohabiting couples with dependent children. This was also the case in the wards south of the A4 Hammersmith Flyover, particularly off the Fulham Palace Road. In contrast to Athenian informants, the residents of Hammersmith and Fulham lived in relatively spacious accommodation, with bedrooms fit for a family of two or three children – even with an ideology of one room per child. Most houses also had a garden, unlike in Athens.





**Plate 11. Typical residential streets in Hammersmith and Fulham**

Although between the 1991 and 2001 Censuses there had been a slight drop (4.8%) in the percentage of employed residents aged 16 to 74, the majority of those who did work continued to be engaged in typically middle-class activities. In 2000, 21 per cent of residents were professionals (such as solicitors, doctors, teachers, accountants or architects), and 13 per cent were administrators and secretaries. Twelve

per cent were managers and senior officials (civil service executives, army officers and company managers), 11 per cent were associate professionals (such as nurses, computer programmers and journalists), and 9 per cent were in sales and customer services. Only 8 per cent of residents were engaged in the skilled trades (such as builder, skilled machine operator, mechanic and tailor). The majority of those who were employers, managers and professionals lived in such wards as Avonmore and Brook Green, Addison, Askew, Munster, Fulham Reach, Town as well as the more affluent parts of the borough, like Parsons Green and Palace Riverside. More women than men were in administrative and secretarial occupations while there was a higher concentration of male managers and senior officials. In 1991, of the 71,173 residents in employment three quarters were working full-time, almost half of whom (49%) were women, but there were approximately four times more female part-time employees than male. In 2002, only 5.4 per cent of residents were unemployed, one of the lowest rates for Inner London, the average being 7.1 per cent.

The ACORN profiles<sup>28</sup> for Hammersmith and Fulham, also show that residents are likely to be 'highly' to 'very highly' educated, that they have above average interest in current affairs and that they are avid readers of *The Guardian* and *Independent* newspapers. According to ACORN, persons living in central Fulham are 'affluent urban professionals' with 'highly disposable incomes'. They are also the 'type most likely to go skiing,' to attend the theatre, 'enjoy good food and wine both at home and in restaurants,' with investments in 'a broad range of products including high interest accounts, ISAs, and stocks and shares,' 'highly qualified' and 'spending long hours at work'. Although the same source contends that residents of central Hammersmith are 'multi-ethnic, young,' living in converted flats or purpose built estates, my own experience tells me that there are pockets of individuals similar to those living in central Fulham. As indicated by ACORN, neither part of the borough consists of many couples with children. However, as explained above, this is a feature typical of Inner London.

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<sup>28</sup> ACORN profiles are available in [www.upmystreet.com](http://www.upmystreet.com). They are a classification system that illustrates likely consumer preferences and behaviour according to postcode.





**Plate 12. Typical family homes in Hammersmith and Fulham**

In 2001, 45.1 per cent of residents were qualified to degree level or higher, whereas only 17.9 per cent had no qualifications at all. In addition, while two thirds of the borough's householders live in flats, maisonettes or bed-sits, and one third resides in single-family houses, there has been a notable increase in owner occupation in the last two decades, particularly between 1981 and 1991. Although many people live on low incomes, Hammersmith and Fulham is a very high cost housing area, partly, due to its proximity to Central London. In 2001, it had the fourth highest average residential property prices in the capital, behind only Kensington and Chelsea, the City of Westminster and Camden. Rents have also risen in recent years but prices for both sales and lettings generally vary depending on the area within the borough, with the north being more affordable than the centre or south. In 2004/05, the average price of a 2-bed flat in Hammersmith and Fulham was between £200-£400,000, while a 3-bed house cost an average of £350-£750,000 (*The London Property Guide* 2004)



While the good transport links are part of the reason for the area's appeal to the affluent middle-classes, also responsible for its pulling force are the open spaces and education facilities, ideal for those wishing to raise a family. There are 227 hectares of parks and open spaces in the borough, with Ravenscourt Park in Hammersmith and Bishops Park in Fulham being two of the most popular. Besides the private schools, there are three nurseries (but also 30 primary schools with nursery classes), 2 early years' centres, 36 primary schools and 9 secondary schools spread across the borough, along with five special day schools. All of them cater for 17,722 pupils in total. After-school care and holiday care is also available for children aged 5 to 12 years and there are six main children's centres that operate all year round, with various satellite after-school centres offering term-time care and a number of under-fives drop-in sessions taking place in some of the community's main education centres.

The borough as a whole does contain a diverse mix of people. For example, according to the 2001 Census, 54.7 per cent of the total resident population of Hammersmith and Fulham were single (never married), with the modal household (40.3%) containing only one person, most of whom were under pension age. Those married or re-married (29%) formed only the second largest group of inhabitants in the borough with a mere 13,908 out of just over 75,000 households consisting of a married couple and 6,850 of a cohabiting couple. Additionally, Hammersmith and Fulham consists of a smaller proportion of children aged 0-16 than do other Inner or Greater London boroughs, although the amount of children has increased and is projected to grow, partly as a result of a rise in the proportion of women of childbearing age in the population. Conversely, almost half the borough's population (47%) consists of younger adults aged 17-39, a significantly higher proportion than that recorded in other areas. In contrast, those aged 40 or over are less numerous than elsewhere in the capital. In 2001, the majority of Hammersmith and Fulham's residents were White (78%), Christian (64%) and British (66%). In London terms, therefore, the proportion of ethnic minority groups in the borough is not particularly high, although there are more Irish residents than is usual in other areas. Despite its diversity, however, *The Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham* embraced many of those whose profile suited the purposes of this study. It is upon their narratives that most of the following chapters rest.

## 9 FERTILE DEBATES: AN OVERVIEW OF THE REASONS FOR LOW FERTILITY ACCORDING TO THE BRITISH PRESS

### 9.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5, I presented an outline of the issues that dominated Greek popular opinion and the Greek press on the subject of below-replacement fertility. 'Underfertility' or 'the demographic issue' emerged as powerful constructs through which the Greek print media and 'ordinary' middle-class Athenians debated the reasons behind the country's birth 'shortage'. This chapter details the findings of an analogous exploration, this time relating to low fertility in the UK. Unlike in Chapter 5, however, I do not consider both press reports and informants' perspectives on the topic but, instead, focus only on the former. This is because the absence of politically charged terms in the English language equivalent to *ypogennitikotita* ('underfertility') or *to demografiko* ('the demographic issue') rendered awkward any attempt to raise the subject of low fertility during the course of interviews in London. Although there are a number of suitable expressions that capture the concept (such as 'below-replacement fertility', 'low fertility', 'fertility decline', 'low birth rate' and 'birth rate decline'), they are more commonly used in academic or formal exchange than in everyday talk.

In addition, on occasions when I did broach the issue using any of the above terms, informants seemed to have little to say. In general, white, British, middle-class women living in London were very demographically unaware. This contrasted sharply with my experience in Athens where I frequently employed the word 'underfertility' as an 'ice-breaker' at the start of an interview and as a way to get my informants to talk about their own lives. Whereas middle-class Athenians appeared well versed on the general topic of below-replacement fertility, their counterparts in London did not seem conditioned to talking about it in the abstract. Consequently, the following discussion centres exclusively on the causes of low fertility assumed by a cross-section of the British press.

The articles on which this analysis rests come from a wide range of newspapers, namely *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Independent*, the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Evening Standard*. A number of reasons were behind this selection. To begin with, I believed it was important to include those newspapers with wide circulation among the middle-classes and, therefore, most likely to be read by my informants. This instantly led to the exclusion of most tabloid newspapers (except the *Daily Mail*) and the inclusion of the majority of

broadsheets, in the form of national dailies and their weekend editions. Secondly, it was necessary to capture views from both sides of the political spectrum. While *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* offered a conservative outlook, *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday* provided more centre- to left-wing perspectives. Finally, although there are numerous local papers reporting on news specific to different areas of the capital, I chose the *Evening Standard* to represent all of them.

In order to identify relevant articles published between 2001 and 2005 in the above newspapers, I used Lexis-Nexis<sup>29</sup>. Initially, I searched for the keywords 'birth rate', 'population' and 'fertility rate' in the headline and then looked for major mention of the words 'birth rate', 'fertility rate' and 'population decline'. Finally, I carried out an index search of the words 'births, birth rates and demographics'. All of these terms were selected following a number of failed attempts to find an adequate amount of articles using the words 'low fertility', 'fertility decline' or 'below-replacement fertility' either in the headline or as major mention – further proof of the infrequency with which these expressions are used in the public sphere. The keywords chosen, therefore, were the ones that achieved the best results. From the final collection, I decided to leave out from the analysis articles about worldwide or pan-European fertility trends and concentrate on ones specifically about the United Kingdom. Of those, I left out pieces explicitly about Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as each region has unique demographic characteristics. However, I did include articles that were about the UK overall and England in particular.

In a cross-national study, Stark and Kohler (2002) reveal that in comparison to such countries as Italy and France, newspapers in the UK are relatively silent on the subject of low fertility. For example, between 1998 and 1999, Stark and Kohler found just 37 articles in the national press on low fertility *per se*. Of those, 73 per cent identified it as a negative phenomenon, 5 per cent as a positive one, while 22 per cent were neutral in perspective. Most articles showed above average concern over the consequences rather than the causes of low fertility. However, the UK press was one of the few with an 'outward' focus regarding the former; in other words, it discussed how low fertility might also affect other countries and minority groups not just the UK. Articles that did refer to the origins of low fertility at least once (11 out of 37) mainly cited the role of women and cultural attitudes, followed by economics,

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<sup>29</sup> Lexis-Nexis is an online database from which it is possible to search and access full-text articles published between specified dates in the British press and a selection of foreign newspapers.

contraceptive knowledge and costs; a minority alluded to family policies and other issues. Finally, only 32 per cent of articles suggested interventions for changing low fertility while an equal share proposed ways to accommodate it.

Stark and Kohler's findings are extremely insightful and provide a useful overview of the low fertility debate in the UK relative to other countries. As a result, I do not wish to replicate their approach or refute their conclusions. Instead, I want to use their study as a starting point for my own investigation. Unlike Stark and Kohler, I do not intend to present a quantitative account of the causes of low fertility debated in the British press. In other words, I do not aim to determine the frequency with which newspapers raised a particular issue or to establish whether certain newspapers favoured a specific reason over others. Rather, I would like to take a qualitative approach, treating the content of the articles I gathered as discourse (see Chapter 2, Section 2.6). In doing so, I ask whether the factors that, according to Stark and Kohler, the British press held responsible for the national 'birth dearth' in the late 1990s were the same as those debated in 2001 to 2005. Moreover, I explore how newspapers during the latter period talked about each reason (as opposed to how regularly) and examine whether different newspapers debated the same cause in a distinctive way. As Fowler (1991) asserts, journalists writing for a particular paper adopt a style appropriate to it. Since newspapers are commercial institutions with political motives, the style that they expect their writers to assume 'encodes' an ideology (Fowler 1991, p.46). By using the language that already embodies that ideology, Fowler argues, print media communicate a set of values that they, and they assume their readers also, hold about the world. In the ensuing paragraphs, therefore, I attempt to point to some of the values that different newspapers appear to embrace in connection with the causes of low fertility.

## **9.2 Childcare and the cost of childrearing**

Extensively discussed in the press throughout my fieldwork was the financial burden of bringing up children, attributed especially to the cost of childcare. While newspapers often reported on this issue independently of the low fertility debate, there was no scarcity of articles proposing a direct association between a decline in the national birth rate and the increasing expense of raising children in the UK. One of the arguments underlying such reports was that the drain on household income caused by having a family was responsible for a growing unmet demand for children. 'We have to acknowledge that a small human being has a market price,' journalist, Christina Odone, asserted, and although many women long to be mothers, children are simply 'out of their price range' (*The Observer* 09/05/2004). As the following two

extracts reveal, this was a widespread belief, articulated by others in the industry.

David and Claire Webster are well-educated, successful professionals in their mid-thirties living in London. Between them, they earn well over £100,000 a year, so you might expect them to ski in St Moritz and summer in Juan-les Pins. They would love to, but they cannot afford it. The reason is not some outrageous drug habit but another weakness: a fondness for children. The Websters already have two under the age of five and would like to have another. They cannot afford this, either. They already pay £1,500 a month in childcare and when Claire goes back to work part-time, this will increase by £500. In a couple of years' time, when both girls are at nursery school their parents will be paying £1,800 in school fees and £972 a month for the nanny who takes them to school, picks them up and looks after them before their parents come home from work. 'Financial concerns are the number one thing hindering me from having another baby,' said Claire, a commercial property agent. 'It is a very depressing situation.' (*The Sunday Times* 25/09/2005)

Kate Harris and Tony Yeo are grappling with an age-old problem: they would like to have another baby but they cannot afford to ... Mr Yeo and Ms Harris are among thousands of couples going through this dismal exercise. Consequently, Britain's birth rate is plummeting. The number of children per woman has dropped from 2.4 to 1.6 in the past 30 years, which means we are not replacing ourselves (*The Independent* 27/09/2003).

The inclination to report on the value of parenthood in economic terms communicated a profoundly negative message to readers. Having children, was a resource depleting and, therefore, emotionally draining experience. 'You thought children would make you happy? Not really - just poorer,' read one headline in *The Observer* (16/11/2003). 'The average cost of the first five years of a child's life is more than £20,000,' claimed a special report in *The Sunday Times magazine* (15/02/2004). The idea that low fertility was due to Britons' inability to afford a family also generated the impression that reproduction was a product of rational economic decision-making; a process engaged in either jointly by the couple or by the woman alone.

### **9.3 House prices**

Together with childcare costs, the value of property received a great deal of attention in the British press in relation to low fertility during 2001 to 2005. In part, this was due to Conservative MP and shadow work and pensions' secretary, David Willets' proclamation in September 2003 that 'high house prices are a very powerful contraceptive,' preventing young couples from owning a home in which they could begin to form a family (*The Daily Telegraph* 23/09/2003; *The Guardian* 06/10/2003). Yet the print media's impression that there is a link between the cost of property and fertility long preceded Willets' public statement. In 2001, for example, *The Sunday Times* (01/04/2001) carried an article entitled, 'Hot market

may have cooled birth rate,' an assumption echoed fourteen months later in a piece by *The Sunday Telegraph* (12/05/2002) headlined, 'Price boom, baby bust: as house prices keep rising, so the numbers of children being born in Britain keep falling. Could there be a connection?' According to journalist Ross Clark, who authored the article, the answer is a resounding 'yes', since richer areas in the capital have lower birth rates than poorer ones in which houses are, still, relatively inexpensive. However, Clark overlooks the fact that the relationship between house prices and fertility rates may be due to association rather than causation.

Interestingly, the effect of property costs on birth rates attracted attention from the whole range of mainstream national newspapers, including the *Sunday Telegraph*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Observer* and *The Guardian*. However, each presented the issue in a distinctive way. For example, below are two extracts: the first is from *The Sunday Telegraph*, the second from *The Sunday Times* article briefly mentioned already.

There is little doubt that the Government's failure to control house-price inflation is acting as a brake on the birth rate. Save for a miniscule rise last year, the birth rate has been falling steadily since the current property boom began in 1996 ... What is more, a disproportionate number of births are taking place among poor immigrant populations and in areas where social housing is prevalent, such as the London Borough of Newham, which has the highest birth rate in the country. Middle-class areas, where house prices are highest, have the fastest-falling birth rates; even in Wandsworth, once nicknamed 'Nappy Valley', the birth rate is now below-replacement. So dramatic has been the fall in births that one wonders whether the Government is using housing policy as a form of birth control (*The Sunday Telegraph* 23/11/2003).

Society is changing as people who cannot afford a mortgage or spiraling rents stay at home. For generations, it was the same old story: boy meets girl, falls in love, gets married, finds home, meets bank manager, buys home, has kids. These days, the boy meets girl, falls in love, get married, finds home, sees bank manager, wrings hands, and instead buys a fast car. The new story has no children, sometimes no marriage and, often, no move beyond the childhood bedroom first provided by mum and dad. Is it feasible to blame house prices for all of the above, in addition to falling birth rates, late marriages, and what European sociologists are now calling 'living together apart' marital arrangements? Figures from property studies and estate agencies tell us that our population profile will continue to support a buoyant property market. But consider another argument: that the property market itself has a part to play in reducing the population (*The Sunday Times* 01/04/2001).

Although both articles argue that property prices are directly responsible for the UK's low birth rate, *The Sunday Telegraph* attempts to incite resentment among its readers by suggesting that, while immigrants are becoming ever more populous, white, British, middle-class Londoners are unable to reach their desired family size due to the Government's

unwillingness to help them purchase a home. Immigrants, on the other hand, can afford to have children because they live in social housing, handed to them by the Government. In essence, the newspaper asks readers to consider the view that the Labour Party (which *The Sunday Telegraph* readers are unlikely to have voted into government) is keeping white, British middle-class fertility rates low through its open immigration policy. *The Sunday Times* article is less provocative and avoids the introduction of conspiracy theories. However, it chooses to grab its readers' attention by simplifying the issue with a 'boy meets girl' story and by linking the rise in house prices with 'population decline' rather than low fertility. This ignores evidence reported in the same year by *The Times* (23/11/2001), as well as other national broadsheet dailies, including *The Guardian* (16/11/2001), *The Independent* (16/11/2001) and *The Daily Telegraph* (16/11/2001), showing that, thanks to immigration, the UK's population is growing despite below-replacement fertility, and will continue to grow in the future.

#### **9.4 Female education**

The timing of intense media coverage of a particular issue is often attributable to the publication of an 'expert' survey or academic research on the same topic. In April 2003, the Office for National Statistics made available to the public a report maintaining that female graduates are 50 per cent more likely than non-graduates to remain childless throughout their lives. The news caught the attention of most major national newspapers, including *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *The Daily Telegraph*. Although the print media had stated its suspicion that the rise in female education was responsible for lower birth rates a while before the emergence of the ONS report (the *Daily Mail* 17/05/2002), once it appeared, different newspapers treated its findings in distinct ways. A closer look at two excerpts from *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, published on the same day, serve to illustrate this point.

Women with university degrees are 50 per cent more likely to remain childless than those who do not pursue further education. Those who do become mothers have their first child at around the age of 29; five years later than less qualified women. But they have their second child faster. The findings are in a report which, for the first time, shows the strength of the link between educational qualifications and late motherhood. It explains how, with feminism and the contraceptive pill, Britain's birth rate has come to fall to an average of 1.74 per woman. Experts say greater access to higher education will mean fewer women having children as they pursue careers and take longer to find a husband or partner – often encountering fertility problems when they do settle down ... While fewer children will be born to these women, however, Britain's population will rise because of migrants (*The Daily Telegraph* 25/04/2003).

Women graduates are 50% more likely than non-graduates to remain childless throughout their lives, the Office for National Statistics said yesterday in a report which may explain the decline in Britain's birth rate

... Graduate mothers who delayed having children until after 25 tended to have them in quick succession, and their experience of higher education made little difference to the size of their families. At any given age of childbearing, mothers with a higher qualification were more likely than those without to have another child, and were more likely to do so quickly ... Steve Smallwood, one of the authors of the report, said it could not be proved that the expansion of higher education had caused the decline in national fertility rates over this period, but it was possible that there was a link (*The Guardian* 25/04/2003).

Although there are a number of overlapping statements in the above excerpts, the overall presentation of the findings from the ONS report is not identical between the two. For example, it is evident that each newspaper has chosen to include and exclude a unique set of points from the publication. This has led each to a different conclusion. Both *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* begin with a similar declaration: women who graduate from university are more likely than those who do not to remain childless. From this point on, however, the two articles diverge in focus. Despite inconclusive evidence in the publication that there is an association between higher levels of education and lower fertility rates, *The Daily Telegraph* asserts that the report 'shows the strength of the link between educational qualifications and late motherhood.' *The Guardian*, in contrast, chooses not to ignore this point, citing one of the authors of the report to emphasise that further education does not necessarily lead to smaller families; in fact, it is just as likely to lead to larger ones.

Therefore, while both articles suggest that there is a connection between the rise in female education and the decline in 'Britain's birth rate,' by asserting that there is a definite rather than a potential link between them, *The Daily Telegraph* appears to condemn women graduates. In a more overt fashion than *The Guardian*, it accuses female university degree-holders for not having enough children to prevent a fall in the national birth rate. The accusatory tone of *The Daily Telegraph* is also clearly manifest in the article's headline: 'Graduates less likely to become mothers'; as opposed to *The Guardian's* more gender-neutral wording: 'Graduates less likely to bear children.' In addition, *The Daily Telegraph* indirectly assigns blame to women with university degrees for an impending growth in immigration, by mentioning, midway through the article that in spite of low fertility the British population will grow 'because of migrants.' *The Guardian* also refers to immigration; however, it does so briefly and at the very end of the piece, along with other data regarding Britain's demographic make-up, such as dependency ratios and marriage rates. Finally, it is worth pointing out that both newspapers erroneously assume that Britain's birth rate has been in constant decline, when in fact total period fertility rates have been relatively stable since 1975.



## 9.5 The work-life balance: career versus family

A further cause of below replacement fertility debated in the British press, closely allied to female education, was the issue of work-life balance. The popular view among newspapers was that as greater numbers of British women graduate from university so more of them are entering the labour market and becoming financially independent. Consequently, they are delaying the start of family-formation. The longer they leave it, the less likely they are to be able to conceive. If they can have children, the complexity of combining work with motherhood is so great that they are either unlikely to have a large family or they will forgo childbearing altogether, thus keeping birth rates low. In spite of widespread consensus over the contribution of the 'career versus family' challenge to the UK's fertility situation, not all newspapers agreed over the force driving it forward.

Increasing numbers of women are putting off having a family until they are in their thirties, figures showed yesterday. According to a breakdown of birth rates by the Office for National Statistics, women aged 30 to 34 are now bearing more children than those in their late 20s. The maturing childbearing age reflects ever-greater number of girls taking advantage of educational opportunities and going on to careers that have become increasingly open to women. More young women appear to be placing a greater importance on developing their careers than starting a family (*Daily Mail* 16/12/2005).

*Birthrate at record low as women opt for jobs:* Better career opportunities and greater lifestyle choices for women have helped to push the birthrate down to 1.64 children per women, the lowest level since records began in 1924 ... Greater choice in contraception and the increase in women postponing children until later in life or remaining childless are largely responsible for the decline, experts said (*The Times* 17/05/2002).

Clearly, some women feel that work and children don't mix. Yet the facts contradict this. That same study at Bristol University found that only a quarter of the women interviewed thought the ideal family set up was for the woman not to work ... Britain still has poor childcare by many continental standards; and anyone who has struggled to bring up small children, juggling them with a full-time job, knows how hard it can be (*The Guardian* 01/05/2003).

Female fertility rates are down, the number of single mothers up. Perhaps this is the ultimate sign of female emancipation. Educated women opting for careers are no longer bound to have children. Independent women opting to have children are no longer bound to have a spouse. But scratch below the surface and it is clear that lack of choice, not wider choice, fuels these trends. The government's tax, benefit and work policies leave women juggling work and motherhood, unfulfilled by either (*The Observer* 26/06/2005).

The difference between the four articles is in the degree to which they regard women as playing an active role in the construction of the work-

life balance conundrum. While the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* both suggest that women are actively choosing to work rather than to reproduce, *The Guardian* and *The Observer* imply that they are passive victims of a weak childcare support system, which leaves them 'juggling' incompatible home and office tasks. Accordingly, low birth rates are either expressive of too much or too little 'choice'. Whatever the case may be, the press assumes that childbearing is ultimately a matter of preference, particularly that of females.

## 9.6 Individualism, hedonism and selfishness

Complementary to the print media's view that the UK's birth rate is below-replacement because educated, working women are opting to either postpone the process of family-formation or abstain from childbearing forever, was the idea that a new set of values, adverse to reproduction, currently underlies young British people's outlook on life. In 2001, Laurie Taylor and his son, Matthew, wrote an article in *Prospect* magazine in response to the question 'what are children for?' According to a piece in *The Guardian* (06/06/2001), the Taylors argued that parenthood is now 'counter-intuitive' and that men and women have fallen victim to 'the central tenet of liberal modernity: individual self-fulfilment.' At the time, both *The Sunday Times* (27/05/2001) and *The Guardian* (06/06/2001) took a critical view of the Taylors' premise. Yet, the relationship between individualism, selfishness, hedonism and low fertility remained in the headlines throughout the duration of my fieldwork. Especially vocal in connection with this issue, and in support of the proposed link, were the right-wing dailies: the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph*. In an article entitled 'Sex and the selfish society,' journalist, Melanie Phillips, said the following:

... the Office for National Statistics revealed that birth rates in Britain have now dropped to a historic low, with women having an average of 1.6 children ... So it appears that sex is no longer being used by our society to reproduce itself through having children. Instead, it is producing promiscuous children who are contracting sexually transmitted diseases (not to mention our appalling teenage pregnancy rate). How can we have got ourselves into such a disturbing situation, which poses such grave dangers for the well-being and even the survival of our society? The answer lies in the revolution that has occurred in the way we look at birth, marriage, family life and the relations between men and women. Sex has become detached from reproduction. Instead, it has been turned into a recreational sport denuded of any moral or social constraints. These are symptoms of a society, which now worships at the shrine of personal fulfilment and instant gratification, producing a profound change in sexual behaviour (*Daily Mail* 14/12/2002).

Three years later, Phillips reaffirmed her views in a similarly themed article (*Daily Mail* 22/06/2005). Britain, she claimed, has become a 'hedonistic culture' and 'appears to have lost any sense of its collective

and long-term interests.' Young women and men are living for the present with no regard for the future. Consequently, Phillips argued, women no longer consider children essential to self-fulfilment. 'In our industrialised, highly individualistic welfare states' and 'affluent consumer society,' she claimed, 'children have turned from a necessity into an obstacle to adult self-realisation.' While women might like to have children, it is only 'as an adjunct to lives that are much more interesting and fulfilling, centred on work, playing the sexual field and generally having a good time ...' she argued.

Sarah Womack, Social Affairs Correspondent for *The Daily Telegraph*, also proposed a link between low fertility and the values listed by Phillips and the Taylors. In reaction to the publication of 'The Family Report 2003: Choosing happiness?' (Stanley et al. 2003), Womack, like Phillips, attributed the shift in the nation's birth rate chiefly to changes in British females' aspirations.

Britain's birth rate has fallen to a historic low, because professional thirty-somethings want to enjoy the good life for longer, says new research. Labelled 'later maters', they believe children are mixed blessings with clear penalties for parents, especially women. They say the prospect of sacrificing a hard-earned quality of life makes them cautious ... Women said that if children were to enhance their relationship, there needed to be fewer 'trade-offs' between parenthood and lifestyle ... In response to the question: 'Do you think that a woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled?' fewer than one in eight British women said 'yes' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 14/11/2003).

Unlike her counterpart in the *Daily Mail*, however, Womack was less overtly hostile to women in the wake of yet another publication suggesting that the phenomenon of low fertility was a by-product of an ever-growing female desire for self-gratification. The female 'late maters', according to Womack, are justified for not finding children fulfilling any longer, since childbearing entails 'sacrificing a hard-earned quality of life.'

Yet not only the right-wing, conservative press had taken part in the debate over values and low birth rates. In a feature article in *The Guardian* entitled, 'No kids please, we're selfish: The population is shrinking, but why should I care ... My life is far too interesting to spoil it with children,' Lionel Shriver, childless author of the controversial book *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003)<sup>30</sup>, offered her own thoughts on the subject.

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<sup>30</sup> *We need to talk about Kevin* is a novel about a mother's desperate attempt to understand why her son, 15-year-old Kevin, murdered seven of his fellow-classmates, a cafeteria worker and an English teacher in a Columbine-style school massacre.

I propose that we have now experienced a second demographic transition. Rather than economics, the engine driving Europe's 'birth dearth' is existential. To be almost ridiculously sweeping: baby boomers and their offspring have shifted emphasis from the communal to the individual, from the future to the present, from virtue to personal satisfaction. Increasingly secular, we pledge allegiance to lower-case gods of our private devising. We are less concerned with leading a good life than the good life. We are less likely than our predecessors to ask ourselves whether we serve a greater social purpose; we are more likely to ask if we are happy. We shun values such as self-sacrifice and duty as the pitfalls of suckers. We give little thought to the perpetuation of lineage, culture or nation; we take our heritage for granted. We are ahistorical. We measure the value of our lives within the brackets of our own births and deaths, and don't especially care what happens once we're dead. As we age – oh, so reluctantly! – we are apt to look back on our pasts and ask not 'Did I serve family, God and country?' but 'Did I ever get to Cuba, or run a marathon? Did I take up landscape painting? Was I fat?' We will assess the success of our lives in accordance not with whether they were righteous, but with whether they were interesting and fun (*The Guardian* 17/09/2005).

In linking individualism, selfishness and hedonism to low fertility, via women in particular, Shriver, Phillips and Womack imply that high fertility is a consequence of (female) conformity, selflessness and self-denial. Excluded from all these accounts are men. Equally missing is an attempt to differentiate values according to class, ethnic group, regional origin and other social categories.

### **9.7 Cohabitation and the breakdown of marriage**

In the opinion of the British press, the population's growing desire to lead a hedonistic lifestyle, in pursuit of self-gratification and independence, has both a direct and an indirect effect on the number of children born in the UK. On the one hand, these values reduce people's willingness to procreate because they are simply incompatible with the kind of existence that accompanies family life: looking after children entails self-sacrifice and responsibility rather than self-centredness and recklessness. On the other hand, individualism results in the growth of cohabitation and the decline in marital unions; trends that the press wrongly assumed are, ultimately, a reason for low birth rates.

There have been other changes too. In the UK the marriage rate has been falling by 34% annually since the early 1970s ... At the same time brides have been growing older ... The most obvious reason is an increase in cohabitation ... Though 'illegitimacy' is no longer the taboo it was for modern women's grandmothers, and 'bastard' has all but lost its meaning, cohabitation still does not rival marriage as an engine of procreation. 'Living together' is still seen as a temporary state, always vulnerable to breakdown (*The Sunday Times magazine* 15/02/2004).

Demographic data, however, do not entirely support the view expressed by *The Sunday Times*. In certain European countries where cohabitation is

frequent and extra-marital births are common, fertility rates are close to replacement level, whereas among populations in which marriage is still popular and only a small proportion of children are born outside the confines of marital unions, birth rates are relatively low. In Nordic countries, for example, there are high levels of cohabitation and high rates of non-marital childbearing (Kiernan 1999). In this region, in 2002 total fertility rates were between 1.65 and 1.75 (Eurostat 2004). In contrast, in southern Europe, where total fertility rates have been characterized as 'lowest-low' (Kohler et al. 2002), both cohabitation and extra-marital births are uncommon (Kiernan 1999). Cohabitation, therefore, does not always 'rival marriage as an engine to procreation.' Rather, marriage can often obstruct the path to high fertility.

## 9.8 Infertility and abortions

The supposition that abortion and infertility are associated with the state of the UK's birth rate was not a dominant feature of the low fertility debate, although both issues received considerable and widespread press coverage outside its frame. The three excerpts cited below, therefore, are unusual in that they assume a direct link between below-replacement fertility and either abortion or infertility.

Britain is sitting on an infertility time bomb. A leading fertility expert, Professor Bill Ledger, has warned that within the next ten years the number of couples experiencing problems conceiving children is expected to double ... He blames this looming crisis on modern lifestyle factors such as delays in starting a family, obesity, falling sperm counts and rising rates of sexually transmitted diseases. His warning compounds a deep and increasing anxiety about low fertility rates not just in Britain but across the whole of Europe and beyond ... (*Daily Mail* 22/06/2005)

I am, as Tony Blair might say, deeply passionately personally deeply personally opposed to abortion. But, unlike him, I think it ought to be an election issue. Not because of my personal beliefs ... the point about abortion is not that it's a 'matter of conscience' for individuals to 'wrestle with', but that it's a crucial part of the central political challenge of our time. Almost every issue facing the EU - from immigration to crippling state pension liabilities - has at its heart the same glaringly plain root cause: a huge lack of babies (*The Daily Telegraph* 22/03/2005).

It is a sign of the rather crazy society we live in that there should be general rejoicing last week at the news that, despite all the worries about the economy, house prices are continuing to rise. On the same day, it was reported that in 2001, there were 170,000 abortions - in other words, about one in four pregnancies is now ending in termination. The statistic excited little interest that I could see ... It may be tempting to put the blame on the permissive society and the late Lord Jenkins but the real explanation, I suspect, is an economic one, namely that many couples simply cannot afford to have children. And the reason for that is the point I referred to at the beginning, namely the ever-increasing price of housing. This in turn involves both parties in a relationship having to work in order

to keep up with the never-ending mortgage repayments. The prospect of the birth of a child, which could force the mother to stop earning, is seen not as a happy event (as it should be) but a disaster for which abortion may be the only answer (*The Observer*, 02/02/2003).

Despite their distinct focus, the first two excerpts describe below-replacement fertility as an alarming development: 'Britain is sitting on an infertility *time bomb*'; Abortion is a 'crucial part of the *central political challenge* of our time.' They are also explicitly pronatalist. Having an abortion or leaving childbearing until it is too late exacerbates the baby 'shortage'. Thus, indirectly, both the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* urge their readers to take this state of affairs as a serious threat and reproduce. *The Observer* assumes a different approach to the matter by depicting a chain reaction between high house prices, abortion and low birth rates. Women, it alleges, are rational, economic decision-makers who may resort to an abortion after realising that they cannot afford to have both a child and a mortgage. While they are active in their decision to abort, however, ultimately, they are the victims of circumstances (a strong housing market) beyond their control. This conjecture is the opposite of that supposed in the articles from the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph*, both of which imply that individuals' irresponsible behaviour is having a negative effect on society at large. Yet *The Observer* also disregards evidence suggesting that the majority of abortions take place outside marriage and that a major reason for the termination of pregnancies is because they are unplanned; in other words due to ineffective contraceptive use.

## **9.9 Childlessness and the rise of the only child**

All of the issues described above are, in large measure, keeping the birth rate low by delaying the start of family-formation, according to the British press. 'Birth rate drops to the lowest ever; As mothers leave it late, average family has 1.64 children,' reported the *Daily Mail* (13/12/2002). Moreover, some women are abstaining from motherhood for such a lengthy period that they find themselves 'involuntarily' childless or with only one child, as their 'biological clock' eventually stops ticking. Exacerbating the problem, newspapers maintained, is British women's ever-increasing difficulty of finding a partner with whom to have children. This is the 'Bridget Jones' generation, the press declared between 2001 and 2005, after the popular British comedy film hit depicting a single, childless woman in her early-30s desperately seeking love in the hope of settling down.

Women in their twenties and thirties who want to marry and start a family could struggle to find a husband of similar age. The 2001 Census figures show that females in their twenties outnumber men of the same age by 81,300 in England and Wales, confirming the picture of a 'Bridget Jones' Britain ... The figures go some way to explaining Britain's plunging birth

rate, with women taking longer to find a partner and leaving it later to have children (*The Daily Telegraph* 08/05/2003).

*Birth rate plunges for Bridget Jones and her sisters:* The Bridget Jones generation of young women who are more likely to remain single and childless means that within the next decade the birthrate will fall to only 1.66 per woman, experts predict ... The birth rate has been falling consistently since the late Seventies, with women leaving it later and later to have children or choosing not to have them at all (*Evening Standard* 31/12/2001).

Although successive cohorts of women in England and Wales born since WWII wait longer before starting a family, and there has been a rise in the number of females remaining childless at the end of their reproductive lives, there is no conclusive evidence to show that later entry to motherhood leads to lower cohort fertility (Rendall and Smallwood 2003). It is possible, for example, for a woman to become a first-time mother in her early thirties, then go on to have a second and perhaps even a third child in the rest of her thirties, assuming that she continues to be able to conceive. Accordingly, it is also likely that a woman who has her first baby at the age of 25 does not have another one until her late twenties or early thirties, subsequent to which she does not have a third child. In fact, Rendall and Smallwood (2003) found that British females with a higher qualification, who tend to start childbearing five years later than those without the same level of education, at any given age of childbearing are more likely than the latter to have another child and to do so quickly.

The above excerpts, however, advocate the view that 'plunging birth rates' are, unambiguously, due to increasing delays in family formation<sup>31</sup>. Supplementary to this perspective is the belief that the 'Bridget Jones' generation of women want to marry and have children but that they are unable to do so in time to realize their wishes. This hypothesis is even more explicit in an article in *The Times*, excerpted below:

A generation of British women is pining for babies that they will never have, research reveals. Figures published yesterday show that growing numbers of women are becoming so preoccupied with their education and careers and are finding it so hard to find Mr Right that they never get round to having the children they always longed for. Although 20 per cent of women remain childless by the time they reach their late thirties, the figures show that only 15 per cent of women intended this to happen. The finding suggests that a quarter of women who find themselves childless

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<sup>31</sup> Yet again, both *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Evening Standard* wrongly assume that Britain's birth rate is falling when in reality total period fertility rates have been relatively stable for the last 30 years.

toward the end of their childbearing years are not happy about it (*The Times*, 27/06/2003).

As Brown and Ferree (2005, p.14) found in a study of the British print media's framing of the issue of falling fertility and rising immigration, the press supposes that all women 'naturally' want to reproduce, and that their inability to do so results in both a 'personal' and a 'national' crisis. Moreover, the idea that women yearn to have children but that they leave it too late suggests that they are inattentive to their biological 'drives' or 'clocks'. Men, on the other hand, never appear to be as neglectful; in fact, newspapers hardly ever define them as 'reproducers', Brown and Ferree argue. This is clear in *The Times* article quoted. The idea that women are 'preoccupied' with education and their careers, and that most of them do not 'intend' to be childless, gives readers the impression that British females are not in control of their lives; if they are, it suggests that they do not plan them carefully. As a result, *they* do not guarantee meeting 'Mr Right' and *they* do not reproduce; men's participation in either process is deemed irrelevant.

While some women are 'pining for babies,' however, according to the British press others are actively denying motherhood, as an article in *The Observer*, entitled 'Wanted: a baby boom,' suggests.

The evidence is now conclusive: women are turning their backs on childbirth and marriage in unprecedented numbers as part of a radical redefinition of the female role in society. Against a backdrop of sweeping social change, new figures reveal that around one in four women is now taking a conscious decision not to conceive, preferring the freedom and career opportunities of a child-free life ... According to predictions in the Office of National Statistics' latest Population Trends report, about 22 per cent of women are now choosing not to have children, compared with just nine per cent of women born half a century ago ... (*The Observer* 14/12/2003).

Articles on the 'childfree' were ample throughout the four years that I monitored the issue of below-replacement fertility in the print media (see Chapter 11, Section 11.5). Nevertheless, they were not frequently present within news reports on the state of the national birth rate. This suggests that the prevailing view among the press was that the majority of women in the country still aspire to become mothers, even though they might never do so. In this sense, the 'childfree' are an exception to the rule and motherhood is the 'norm'. This is a problematic assumption, which conceals a diversity of attitudes towards motherhood and countless approaches to family-formation. It is also difficult to know, and there is yet no way of finding out, what proportion of those without children are 'childless' ('involuntarily') and how many are 'voluntarily childless' or 'childfree' (Houseknecht 1987). In addition, even though individuals may say that they do not want children at a given time, it is possible for



them to change their minds. Others, may be less clear as to whether or not their childless status is indeed 'voluntary' or 'involuntary'; in other words, if it is what they 'truly' want. The British press, however, did not seem prepared to delve into any of these issues at the time of this investigation.

They were equally adamant that although most British women want to reproduce, an increasing number do not intend to do it more than once. 'One-child families are now commonplace,' *The Guardian* (18/12/2002) stated, having a direct and negative effect on the birth rate, as others concurred.

With fertility rates falling across Europe, the United States and even parts of Latin America, siblings are fast becoming an endangered species. In tomorrow's world, like it or not, the only child will reign supreme ... Even in Britain, with a comparatively healthy birth rate of 1.7 children per woman, the trend is set firmly in the same direction as the rest of Europe. An estimated 17 per cent of British couples with children currently have one child, in contrast to just 4 per cent who have three or more ... While the one-child family will be a deliberate choice for some parents, for many others it will be the result of their age and fertility, quite against their will. Women are leaving it later and later to have their first child (*The Daily Telegraph*, 30/06/2001).

The reasons may be varied – a desire to give the child everything, an inability to conceive more than one, or financial restrictions – but it appears that one-child families are becoming more common ... A majority still say they want two children, but key findings from one recent study suggested that the proportion that think they will only have one child has risen in recent years ... The social aspect of a rise in only children is not usually discussed. The common concerns of low fertility rates are more economic in nature ... It is clear that many women are now choosing not to have any children or just to have one child. But some are finding that, although they would like to have more than one, it just doesn't happen (*The Guardian*, 18/02/2004).

Yet the only-child phenomenon is not as widespread as the print media claimed. In a recent article, Berrington (2004, p.9) argues that 'in contrast to other European countries, the one child family has not yet become significantly more common in England and Wales.' Few British men and women, also, intend to stick to only one child. Berrington does claim, however, that females with a university degree, as opposed to those without any educational qualifications, are more likely to have a one-child family - a point that neither of the articles cited above mention<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Ironically, *The Daily Telegraph* article states that the British birth rate is relatively 'healthy'. This is unusual given newspapers' overall tendency to maintain (wrongly) that the country's fertility has been unhealthily declining for decades (see previous articles).

## 9.10 Conclusions

The reasons for low fertility cited above were those most prominent in the articles that I gathered between 2001 and 2005 in the British press. For the purpose of clarity, I introduced and discussed each one separately, although multiple causes were often included in a single account. Despite the diversity of explanations for the existence of below-replacement fertility in the UK assumed by the British press, and in spite of the variable emphasis given to each by different newspapers, a number of approaches to the issue were common in all reports. This is partly evident from the recurrence of keywords in the articles examined, one of which was 'choice'. Irrespective of underlying motive, the print media argued that individuals or couples were consciously and actively deciding whether to have children and if so, how many and when. 'Modern women choosing to have smaller families,' wrote John Carvel, social affairs editor for *The Guardian* (17/05/2002). While certain articles described low fertility as a product of excessive 'choice', others claimed it was due to an insufficient amount of available options. The cost of childcare and property, for example, put people off having large families and delayed the start of family-formation, as did the difficulty of combining a career with motherhood. In contrast, education and financial independence, had given women the opportunity to experience a range of lifestyles, some of which were hard to sacrifice in favour of childbearing.

In addition to a consensual approach over the issue of 'choice', press coverage was also, uniformly, female-centred. In other words, the debate over the causes of low fertility was, above all, about women. Men were either entirely ignored or they featured as peripheral characters only<sup>33</sup>. In contrast, newspapers treated changes in female behaviour as a reason for the state of the UK's birth rate, and regarded women as the chief reproductive decision-makers. Particularly scrutinised and, consequently, stigmatised in this debate were 'career women'. 'Professional women or female graduates' most frequently remained childless and infertile because of the intricacies involved in sustaining a work-life balance. Therefore, it was they who caused fertility to decline in the first place, and they who were currently responsible for keeping birth rates below-replacement level.

The chapters that follow are equally partial since they only take into account the views of a tiny section of the British female population: white, middle-class, educated women, living in a particular area of London. Unlike the articles extracted from the British print media between 2001 and 2005, however, I do not treat the opinions or

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<sup>33</sup> In 2006, however, articles regarding 'late fatherhood' have been more frequent in the national press.

experiences of those whom I interviewed as representative of British women in general. Whilst I also cannot claim that the narratives I collected give a more accurate account of the causes of low fertility in the UK, I can utilise them to point to areas where the print media misguides its readers in its assessment of the situation. In fact, a striking feature of British press coverage of the causes of low fertility is how ill-informed it is regarding Britain's latest demographic developments, which in turn appears to be an outcome of journalists' misreading and misunderstanding of demographic data. Despite the media's insistence, for example, the UK's fertility rate is not currently in decline and the British population is not falling.

In the chapters that follow, I question whether it is appropriate to talk about low fertility as a product of 'choice' (either too little or too much), and whether it is accurate to suggest that reproduction is an exclusively female concern. Is below-replacement fertility female-driven? Are there certain issues that affect only the middle-classes in their approach to family-formation? While these and other questions shape the remainder of Part II, in the ensuing chapters I also seek to assess the degree to which informants' accounts contained the language used in the press about low fertility *per se* and issues proximate to it. Finally, in the Conclusion I compare the focus of British and Greek newspapers on the subject of below-replacement fertility.

## **10 PATHWAYS TO CHILDBEARING: FROM 'PLANNED ACCIDENTS' TO 'ACCIDENTAL PLANS'**

### **10.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the pathways of entry to family-formation described by my London-based informants. In particular, it looks at the extent to which those with whom I engaged had thought about having children prior to putting the wheels of the process in motion. Were their actions conscious and premeditated? Was childbearing the outcome of purely rational motives, based on abstract calculations of 'costs' and 'benefits', unaffected by emotions, uncertainty and improvisation? Moreover, to what degree did informants appear to be able to exercise 'choice' over the course of their reproductive lives? Divided into three sections, the chapter begins with an account of informants' thoughts and experiences leading up to the event of having a first child. In this section, I conclude that, despite the need to refine and re-evaluate the concept of 'reproductive decision-making', and to re-assess agents' control over the direction of their reproductive futures, it is also necessary to focus our attention away from the individual. This leads on to the second part of this chapter in which I introduce evidence found within informants' narratives, of where persons, other than the narrator, appear to have played a formidable role in the configuration of events linked to the birth of the first child. In the third section of this chapter, I concentrate on informants' assessments of the 'right time' to have children, an expression that they frequently resorted to when discussing the reasons for the timing of their entry to motherhood.

### **10.2 Deliberating the start of family-formation**

Enquiries into the question of family-formation instigated a series of responses among informants that ranged widely in emphasis. While some women described having made a conscious effort to plan the timing of their first pregnancy, others claimed they had no strategy in place. These observations are akin to a qualitative study conducted by Currie (1988) in relation to the postponement and rejection of motherhood among women living in London. According to Currie (1988, p.237), her respondents' accounts of their reproductive lives were characterised by 'ambivalence, conflict, and indecision.' Whereas some had deliberated a great deal about the prospect of having children, others seemed to have become 'childless by default' (Currie 1988, p.237), or to have experienced considerable uncertainty over whether or not to become parents. Almost two decades later, I discovered that approaches to the start of family-formation were no less heterogeneous. Contrary to the dominant assumption in the demographic literature and in the print media (see previous Chapter), I found that informants' transition to motherhood was

not strictly the result of 'reproductive decision-making', and that the term 'choice' failed to capture the experience leading to the birth of their first child.

Jane was a 35-year-old, non-working woman with two young children. For her, becoming a mother was never in question. Once married, therefore, she and her husband, George, had started trying for a family. Though it took a while for her to conceive, Jane eventually became pregnant with her son, Jake. Approximately two years later her daughter, Hazel, was born. During the course of the interview, Jane claimed she was seriously considering having a third child sometime in the near future.

I've wanted children ever since I can remember, you know, certainly all my adult life ... at the age of 18 or 16 or whatever, or old enough to be able to think about things, what I wanted in life was to be a mother and a wife. I was busy being a schoolgirl and a student and a graduate but, um, I've always wanted to be a mother and a wife probably in that order, um, and I went to university 'cause that's what everyone does, you know, sort of, but I always had a job, it was never a career. I never saw myself going down that path to the detriment of family life. Family life was what I wanted and George was aware of that ... from my point of view I'm doing what I was destined to do (Jane, 35, 2 children, married, not working).

When asked to elaborate, Jane claimed that having children 'really felt like a biological need.' The above passage, however, reveals that she was never fully in control of her reproduction. Although she wanted to be a mother and a wife from her late teens, she had to go to university and then find work, as this was the 'proper' thing to do within her peer group (because 'that's what everyone does'). Educated at a private, independent school in London, Jane recalled the pressure exerted upon her within that environment to get a degree and, subsequently, pursue a career. In Chapter 8, I described how the concept of a 'career', as opposed to a 'job', has been a defining feature of the English middle-classes. While a 'job' is a means to earn a living, 'the term "career" implies some long-term progression within an occupation, or through a series of occupations involving increasing levels of responsibility at each stage' (Hardill et al. 1997, p.316). A 'career' is an essential component of the identity of British middle-class men and, increasingly, women (see next Chapter). The same is also true of higher education (see Chapter 8). Therefore, despite feeling that her work was 'never a career,' to a certain extent, Jane was compelled to conform to the expectations specific to her social class. As a result, she had children later than she originally hoped.

Another setback to Jane's goal of becoming a mother, however, was her temporary experience of infertility. *Planning gone wrong* was a

recurrent theme in informants' narratives of the process of childbearing, and infertility was often the cause.

It was absolutely planned; I calculated the days exactly but in the end I found it difficult getting pregnant and we went to an infertility clinic. I used to think that you just decided to have a child and that was it, but it's not like that (Susie, 35, 2 children, married, not working).  
It took me 18 months to get pregnant. I was very irritated. Up until then everything in my life was planned and I got everything I wanted, but this was out of my control. I was pissed off (Wendy, 38, 2 children, married, working part-time).

That reproduction was not in their grasp was especially traumatic for Susie and Wendy, as it had been for Jane. No matter how much energy these women had invested in creating the 'right' conditions for starting a family (see Section 10.4), they were not prepared to have trouble conceiving and to hear there was a chance they would remain childless. This is despite the intense media attention that the subject of infertility and the 'biological clock' received during the period of my fieldwork (Chapter 9, Sections 9.8 and 9.9). Yet, it is not surprising given that all three women claimed they were accustomed to feeling a sense of control over their lives. Informants often told me that if faced with a problem at work, they usually knew of a way to fix it. Pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, on the other hand, were sometimes beyond their command; an eventuality that well-educated, professional middle-class women like Susie, Wendy and Jane had not anticipated.

Plans to start a family could also change owing to forces beyond the realm of biology (see Section 10.4). More commonly, however, there was no strategy to be disturbed. In fact, the majority of informants expressed having had a casual attitude towards their reproductive futures.

I was never, you know, I'd read about women who were desperate to have children. I just never felt like that, not ever. You know, I had a good job, a career, um, and until I met my husband, although I'd been with various people, I'd never really, it'd never been on my agenda particularly. To be honest even when my husband and I got married it wasn't particularly high on our agenda. I was kind of like, 'if it happens it will be fine and if it doesn't it will be fine' (laughs). So, no, I'd never thought about it before ... and, to be honest, when I found out I was pregnant I was quite shocked ... we never really made a conscious decision ... I mean I didn't go all out to stop it but nor did I, you know, make the decision this is going to be it now, kind of thing. I'd been on the pill for quite a long time and didn't really want to continue that, you know, the health part of that, but then I was thinking 'whatever else I do is not going to be as reliable. Does that bother me or not?' And I kind of figured, 'well, probably not,' so if it happens, it happens (Nancy, 41, 1 child, married, not working).

Nancy's approach to childbearing counters the assumed subjectivity of individuals living in 'modern' societies, according to which fertility is a

product of 'rational' and 'active' decision-making (Carter 1995). In other words, it challenges the 'procreative ideology' that is dominant in Euro-American contexts, described by Ruhl (2002) as the 'willed pregnancy'. Instead, Nancy's transition to motherhood entailed a gradual process of coming to terms with the idea of having children and allowing herself to get pregnant without actively pursuing it. This tactic is similar in kind to a 'non-decision' (Finch and Mason 1993). Fjellman (1976, p.89-90) first coined the phrase 'non-decision decisions' in order to define 'situations in which one lets the flow of time take the decision out of one's hand by making no explicit choice at all.' Finch and Mason (1993) refine this idea by suggesting that 'non-decisions' encompass acts that are neither the outcome of purposeful intentions nor obvious elusion, but of an unspoken means of 'reaching an understanding' via a series of subtle, more or less unconscious negotiations with one's self or others.

Another way to characterize Nancy's experience would be to use the phrase *planned accident*. While she made no explicit effort to have a child, Nancy did not fall pregnant entirely by chance either because she stopped using contraception, knowing what the consequences might be. The term *planned accident* does not imply that informants had a predetermined strategy in mind, which they implemented under supposedly unscheduled circumstances. Instead, it aims to encapsulate the view that individuals possess agency but that they do not always exercise it in a straightforward, rational or explicit manner. Childbearing, and particularly the start of family-formation, for reasons that will become apparent in the remainder of Part II, is a major life-change for white, well-educated and professional middle-class women, residing in London. Having children is an event that my female informants believed would permanently alter their way of life; an impression that the print media helped to reinforce. It would seem that for some of them the changes ahead were, potentially, too colossal and tumultuous to contemplate and intentionally consent to. One way of confronting the issue without having to make a decision *per se* was by leaving it up to fate to decide for them.

While the phrase *planned accident* best describes a number of informants' modes of approach to the start of family-formation, the expression *accidental plan* depicts more accurately the manner in which others entered the transition to motherhood.

We didn't really want children; we just thought we had to have them. We lived in a nice flat; we always stayed in nice places; we travelled; we went skiing, and we had a lovely life. But suddenly, at 30, I thought 'we should have a family' ... But it was a big step and we hadn't really thought about it very much ... Life has to move on, it's natural ... It gives you a reason. Physically your body is meant to go through things like this (Zadie, 31, 1 child, married, on maternity leave).

Laura: I didn't intend to have children ... I was 29 years old when I did and was well established as a civil servant. It felt right though. There was no decision to be made. I had some moments of doubt but nothing serious. It's funny, I still see an old boyfriend of mine from when I was young and he keeps telling me that I never really wanted to have children. I never thought I particularly wanted them but I know I would have been disappointed if I couldn't have any. I wanted to have the choice (Laura, 50, 2 daughters, in long-term partnership, working full-time).

I thought I'd wait to have children until I got broody. When I was in my 30s, I realized I would never get broody (Zoë, 42, 2 children, married, not working).

For Zadie having children was not a long-held ambition. In fact, she did not particularly yearn to be a parent, nor did her husband. For a while, therefore, she did not plan to get pregnant. Turning 30 years old, however, made her rethink her future and, in the end, she concluded that she 'ought' to have a child. All of a sudden, then, childbearing became a desirable prospect. Laura also never really planned to have children but she had not ruled out the possibility either. However, when she fell pregnant unexpectedly with her first child she felt it was 'right' to keep it. Zoë, on the other hand, hoped that one day she could crave motherhood. When that moment never arrived, she imposed it upon herself. None of the three women, therefore, had expected to have a child when they did but, for different reasons, there arrived an instant in each of their lives when starting a family seemed like the 'right' thing to do. The next section discusses the influence that persons close to my informants had on shaping the timing of their entry to motherhood, and the final section of this chapter explores the events that conspired to make it 'suitable'.

### 10.3 Social influences

An upshot of the tradition of liberal individualism is that it imagines people not only as *rational decision-makers* but also as *autonomous decision-makers*, that is, as self-governing individuals who are free to act without obligatory regard for the opinions and authority of others (Meyers 2001). Biological reproduction, however, is inherently social (Petchesky 1984). This means that the power relations operating between people (especially between men and women), as well as between individuals and institutions, in any particular context, determine reproductive behaviour and, ultimately, influence fertility rates (Petchesky 1980; Petchesky 1984; Browner 2001). This happens at all stages of the reproductive process, from its very beginnings, when contemplating whether to have children, to its final stages, when thinking about completing the process of family-formation. Depending on the nature of social relations therefore, control over the methods and goals of reproduction may be hotly contested (Browner 2001). To paraphrase Ouroussoff (1993), the 'western' individual as master of his or her own reproductive fate is a myth. Women are neither 'agents acting solely of their own free will' nor



persons 'completely constrained by the actions of men' (Browner 2001, p.784). Rather, their identities and practices are 'relationally' determined (Mason 2004).

Although people may like to believe that they are or that they ought to be in control of their own agency, they can never escape their entanglement in a web of relationships. This is also the case concerning activities pertaining to reproduction, as Bernardi (2003) illustrates in a study of attitudes towards having children and experiences of family-formation based in the northern Italian region of Lombardy. Despite the belief that childbearing is a strictly private matter, Bernardi found that her interviews were full of references to persons other than the interviewee. Their influence on reproduction, however, was far from straightforward, ranging from the explicit to the implicit. In certain cases, for example, starting a family was a process instigated because of social pressure from parents but, at other times, it was something that individuals felt they should do, like everybody else. My informants also denied that their fertility behaviour was, in any way, shape or form, subject to the influence of others. In fact, if asked directly, they vehemently opposed the speculation. Yet, their narratives were replete with references to persons both within and outside their immediate family circle. Especially visible were their friends and siblings but parents, parents-in-law and partners were discernible too. Crucially, none of the evidence cited below transpired because of overt questioning concerning the subject of social influences on reproduction. Rather, I identified and extracted relevant passages in the coding and analysis phase of the research process. Whereas some of my informants gave lengthy accounts of the impact of others upon their efforts to start a family, a few referred to influential characters only in passing and with minimal explanation.

### **10.3.1 Friends**

Friends were at the forefront of informants' accounts of family-formation. However, their impact was not singular or uniform. Friends' experiences both encouraged and discouraged the process of initiating childbearing. The first time I became aware of the influence of friends upon the timing of each other's transition to motherhood was during my focus group interview.

Fiona: ... as you get older, more and more of your friends around you are having children, and I think when you're young and you see other people with children, it looks like really hard work and you kind of think, 'oh, can I face that?' But when you get older and your friends around you are having children ... I mean we came to a point where we couldn't go on holiday with friends any more unless we had their children as well ... so you kind of think, after a while, 'well, if I'm going to have to have a holiday with their children I might as well have my own!'

Gloria: If you can't beat them, join them (everyone laughs).

Once the 'right' circumstances were in place, news of a pregnancy within a friendship network stimulated the interest of others in the group, as Zadie illustrates:

Everyone else was doing it. All our friends were, so why not us? We didn't want to be in our 40s and have no children ... I was 30 last year. I just said, 'shall we do it?' Our best friends had just fallen pregnant, a couple, and I thought if they can do it, we can too ... Three friends of ours had babies one year after we had gotten married and now most of our friends are pregnant and have one child already. I think what's going on in your friendship circles really plays a part. Those friends of ours without children feel excluded. I can see that they feel out of place. We think they're having a great time but they're not ... In fact, two friends decided to have children because we managed to do it, and like I'd thought about my other friends, 'if they can do it, we can do it too,' so they thought about us, 'if they can do it, we can too' (Zadie, 31, 1 child, married, on maternity leave).

Zadie's claim is particularly interesting given that earlier she had admitted that she did not especially want to have children but felt that she 'ought' to have them (see Section 10.2). While 'subjective beliefs' or 'individual perception of what others may think are sometimes sufficient to affect behaviour' (Bernardi 2003, p.538), the execution of an act is also likely to provoke a similar reaction among peers. In Zadie's case, both were crucial. For others, the negative experience of friends prompted them to begin trying for a family. For example, Rosie, a 34-year-old, non-working mother of two, expecting her third child with husband Elliot, had considered launching herself into a new profession but after hearing that a few of her friends had difficulties conceiving, at the age of 29, she decided to have children first and a new career later.

Of course, not everyone I met had children at the same time as a friend or because of their influence. Even they, however, mentioned the importance of having shared experiences with others in the same friendship network. Kimberly was aged 31 when we met and already had two children that she was looking after on a full-time basis at home with the help of her husband, Tim. When she became a mother, Kimberly was relatively young compared to her friends, though many of them, she claimed, soon caught up with her. Being the youngest in her group to have children was difficult, according to Kimberly, not least because the transition to motherhood brought about a change in lifestyle. Her friends' 'carefree, very sort of affluent, nice London' existence made it difficult for her to remain in contact with them during the early years of her children's lives. While Kimberly had no regrets for having formed a family 'early', she contended that it 'makes a huge difference to do things roughly at the same time as everyone else.'

### *10.3.2 Siblings and other kin*

A common complaint in London, which I did not hear in Athens, concerned the general lack of contact with children and families prior to reproducing. The capital's size, as well as the diversity of informants' origins from across the British Isles, meant that many of their family members lived far away. All this intensified their sense of isolation from children and left them ignorant of the responsibilities involved in looking after them, as Amber explains:

Amber: I knew time was running out and it was really only prompted by this sister of mine turning up [that I thought] it was human to have children and I was really sort of shocked because I was working in an environment where people weren't discussing children. None of the people I knew had children.

KG: So, you thought it was normal not to have children.

Amber: Totally and, in fact, none of our friends had children. It was only when just before I got pregnant that two close friends of ours got pregnant ... it was quite odd, it really was quite odd ... (Amber, 39, 3 children, married, not working)

Amber's experience, prior to her émigré sister's visit from Australia, was typical of many of my informants who, like her, had highly paid jobs in the City before leaving to have children. As a high-ranking employee in a large commercial firm, Amber claimed to have known few female co-workers of her standing who were also mothers. This, and the fact that her friends at the time had not yet reproduced, meant that she was unaccustomed to thinking that having children was 'normal'. However, her sister's arrival triggered a response in her that, as she recalls, made her consider that it was the 'right' time for her to start a family.

Amber, in fact, had four sisters and a brother, all of whom had married at a young age and had children. When I asked Amber why she claimed not to have spent much time interacting with children when so many of her siblings had families before her, she told me that they all lived in different parts of the world and so they had little contact on an everyday basis. Having brothers and sisters who had experienced the transition to parenthood was, therefore, not the sole ingredient necessary to inspire childbearing. Close proximity, frequent communication and a degree of participant observation were also useful stimuli. This means that it was not just the existence but also the nature of the relationship between siblings that was important in determining whether one would influence the other in starting a family.

Jill, 37 years old, a resident of Putney, married with two children and on maternity leave at the time of our meeting, was originally very reluctant to reproduce. In a local coffee shop chain near her home, I sat with Jill and her baby daughter for what turned into a lengthy and captivating conversation. Jill was born in Birmingham, raised in

Cambridge, studied in Essex, where she met her husband, Phil, and, after a brief spell in York, came to live and work in the capital. She was the youngest of five children. When Jill moved to London, two of her sisters and her older brother already had families of their own but at 28 years old, with none of her friends in the 'reproduction phase,' she did not feel under any pressure to start a family, even though she was in a long-term relationship with Phil.

Jill: Then, my brother called me and said he was expecting their first child, and that hit me. I was sort of jealous ... simultaneously my friends were getting married and so the penny dropped, and we decided we should be doing it next. I never felt maternal or anything, unlike my sister who said she had felt this huge maternal urge ...

KG: Tell me a bit more about why you felt compelled to have children when you found out that your brother was expecting his first child?

Jill: I wanted to strengthen my connection with him. I really admire him. He's a really kind person and has lots of integrity. I always looked up to him so ... he was also the nearest sibling to me (Jill, 37, 2 children, married, on maternity leave).

Jill's relationship with her brother, Mark, made her want to imitate him. This coincided with some of her friends getting married. Although her other siblings already had children, it was Mark, the closest one to her, both in age and in emotional terms, that inspired her. A further point that Jill raises above is that by having children at roughly the same time as her brother she hoped their relationship would strengthen. This belief is noteworthy because it highlights another aspect of the social nature of reproduction: having children reinforces relationships.

It also creates fresh ones. This observation extends beyond the sibling network to other kin and to friends. For example, informants frequently mentioned that, since becoming mothers, they had formed numerous new friendships. The pre- and post-natal NCT groups as well as the various independent playgroups they attended provided the perfect space in which to bond with others who were also experiencing the highs and lows of early parenthood. Having children also enhanced relations with parents. According to some informants, this was an unexpected effect of childbearing, yet others claimed to have purposely brought forward the timing of conception in order to ensure that their parents were still alive when their grandchildren were born.

Well, if you have children when you're older they have less of a chance of meeting their grandparents. It's personal (Martha, 39, 2 children, married, working part-time).

I was very conscious of the fact that I wanted to have children when my parents were still alive. I hadn't been close to my grandparents and I felt that I also wanted my children to be close to my brother's children. It was not that I felt family pressure but I saw the big picture and I wanted my

children to know their grandparents and to be close to their cousins (Jill, 37, 2 children, married, on maternity leave).

I'd never been into kids before. I never wanted to hold a baby or anything like that. I never had a maternal urge at all. At the same time, I knew I wanted the life my parents had. I didn't want it to be just Greg and me. I knew it was the next step and I didn't want to be an older mother. It's a compromise you have to make ... My mother always wanted a grandchild. She's gone on at me about having a baby since the age of 19 or 20. She had to wait a long time! ... So mentally I was not ready but I felt I had to be ready ... my mother had always given me lectures how I shouldn't leave it too late. Neither of my siblings had children (Claire, 33, 1 child, married, not working).

The creation and re-creation of kin and friendship ties was, therefore, a crucial component of reproduction, and while informants claimed that overt pressure from parents, siblings or friends to procreate was not effective, their narratives of family-formation suggested otherwise.

### *10.3.3 Husbands and partners*

During the course of fieldwork, I began to wonder about the extent to which there was a difference between how informants felt they ought to present their agency to others (including the anthropologist) and how they employed it in practice. This is not an easy divergence to explore, as I discovered when analysing husbands or partners' influence upon the timing of the transition to parenthood. In the vast majority of cases, my female informants were adamant that their husbands/partners agreed over when to begin trying for a first child. As a result, I did not record any consistent patterns of discord between spouses over matters pertaining to the start of childbearing. Female informants presented themselves and their husbands/partners as a team with roughly equal weight of authority in negotiations over the initiation of the process of family-formation. Indeed, it often struck me how little informants claimed they had discussed the issue of starting a family with them prior to conceiving. This is akin to Fisher's (2000) observations with regard to family planning among British working-class couples born in the early decades of the twentieth century. Most of her respondents, Fisher asserts, recalled rarely having had explicit conversations with their spouse about the use of birth control or even family size. The majority claimed to have reached easy consensus while only a handful had not. These were the only occasions when an open dialogue between a couple transpired, according to Fisher.

The same apparent lack of inclination to talk about matters concerning the start of family-formation was evident among my informants and their husbands/partners. Likewise, the only instance I recorded of an explicit verbal exchange between a couple about when to

begin trying for a baby was the same as that in which there was a major conflict of opinion on the subject. The reason that I did not come across any cases, except one, of marital discord over the timing of family-formation may be due to a tendency for couples whose views on the issue diverge to either split up or not have children at all. In addition, those who have experienced or who continue to experience problems over the timing of fertility or family size may not be willing to speak about them to outsiders, especially anthropologists. A further explanation relates to issues discussed in the previous section. Childbearing is not always subject to debate or a product of explicit decision-making but rather the result of tacit and possibly extended negotiations. It is likely, for example, that individuals who end up getting married or cohabiting also have similar opinions about whether or not to have children and if so, when the 'right' time might be to start trying for them. Occasionally, informants did state that they felt a sense of obligation to their husbands/partners to instigate family-formation, similar to that which they sensed in relation to their parents.

I felt that it was difficult to deprive George and his parents and my parents of, you know, having children, um, so I did feel a pressure from that side, um, and it's a question of how long you put yourself first really, I suppose ... (Germaine, 50s, 1 child aged 10, married, not working).

More frequently, however, my female informants (unlike Fisher's) claimed to have had the upper hand concerning the timing of first childbearing, and that their husbands or partners had no objections. The proclivity to present a united front, though potentially reflective of practice, might also have been due to imaginary rather than actual equality in 'decision-making' between spouses or partners. As Hardill et al. (1997, p.324) argue, in middle-class, dual-career households<sup>34</sup> while there is an 'ideological commitment' to egalitarianism, when it comes to 'important, infrequent, lifestyle decisions' it is common to find that one person usually takes the lead.

Yet studies also show that husbands' or male partners' preferences with regard to having children and the timing of the transition to parenthood sometimes differ from those of their wives or female partners, and that disagreements over fertility desires among couples in low fertility settings tend to reduce birth rates below average (Thomson et al. 1990; Voas 2003). While the suggestion that men and women have specific fertility 'preferences' or 'desires' is problematic for the reasons discussed in Section 10.2, it is important to acknowledge that male and

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<sup>34</sup> Dual-career households are defined as 'those households containing two or more adults living as a couple, with or without household members, where both partners are working in managerial, professional or associate professional occupations' (Hardill et al. 2001, p.316).

female attitudes towards family-formation, as well as their experiences of parenthood, are not identical. This was evident in the only case of open spousal conflict regarding childbearing that I heard about during my fieldwork in London. Fiona and Gregory were both in their mid-30s. They lived in Hammersmith with their one son, Nicholas, who was almost two years old. Gregory was a doctor while Fiona had a part-time career in business. Fiona and Gregory had been in a long-term relationship before deciding to get married in their mid-20s. It was approximately five years into their marriage that they started to quarrel over when to have children. According to Fiona, early on in her life she became aware that she was 'programmed to have a baby.' When many of her female friends started falling pregnant in their early 30s, she began to think that it was time for her to do the same. Gregory, on the other hand, never had 'the same burning desire' to become a father until one morning he hoped he would 'wake up' and feel ready. Unable to envision the day that this would happen, Fiona started to worry that Gregory would postpone the process *ad infinitum*. An endless round of arguments ensued, which eventually led the couple to seek counselling. Soon after, Gregory agreed to set a month when they could start trying for a baby. It was not long before Fiona was pregnant. I asked Gregory what had made him change his mind.

Gregory: Um ... well, I suppose it was two things really. One was that if I kept waiting for something, for this mythical event, you know, this sort of realisation, it was probably never going to come so, I was probably just going to have to shut my eyes and do it, and secondly ... arguing about it was not making us happy so, um, if we continued to argue about it, it would continue to make things very unpleasant. So it was that really, um, and I don't regret it at all ...

Fiona: Yeah, I don't think you were won round by argument. I mean I don't think I persuaded him it was the right thing to do. He just, it was kind of almost, there was no option really ... (Gregory, 30s, married, 1 child, working full-time)

Although Fiona claimed that in the end Gregory had no alternative but to comply with her wishes (by which I assume she meant that the marriage would have ended had Gregory refused to have a child), she claims she had not managed to persuade him. Therefore, while Fiona and Gregory ended up having a child, Gregory's reluctance to become a father had led to the postponement of their transition to parenthood as a couple. A year and a half after our meeting, I found out that Fiona and Gregory were expecting their second child.

For the purpose of clarity, in this section I have discussed separately each of the most prominent figures to appear in informants' accounts of family-formation. In reality, however, a combination of characters affects the course of a person's reproductive behaviour at any one time. It is also likely that friends, family and partners have different levels of influence

over a woman's life course and under novel circumstances, though I was unable to confirm this among my informants after spending only a year in the field. Regardless of how 'decisions' or 'non-decisions' about fertility were reached, by whom and under whose influence, for the majority of women in my study there came a moment when it seemed appropriate to have children. The next section explores the meaning behind the phrase 'the right time.'

#### 10.4 The 'right' time

Judgments regarding the 'right' or 'wrong' time to become a mother entail both moral and practical reasoning. While informants were reluctant to speculate about whether there was an 'ideal' moment in a woman's life to experience motherhood, they were less hesitant to discuss when it felt 'right' for them to have children. As Currie (1988) argues, among her respondents the 'right' instant for starting a family was not attributable to a specific age or phase in their life-course. Rather, 'time' referred to 'a configuration of material circumstances' (Currie 1988, p.243) which, once deemed to be in place, enabled women to envision motherhood as a 'viable alternative' (Currie 1988, p. 244). Although Currie suggests that questions concerning the 'right' time to procreate are 'individualised or personal solutions to structural processes' (Currie 1988, p.245), she does not mention the practice of interpretation and moral reckoning in which agents engage when situated within a specific social setting. While my informants faced more or less similar structural constraints, they also shared a moral outlook with regard to the 'correct' conditions under which to enter the transition to motherhood.

Yet, what exactly did feeling 'ready' mean? How did informants know that a particular instant was indeed appropriate for setting in motion the process of family-formation? Miriam and Barbara were able to give the most concise answers to the above questions.

KG: What do you mean you felt 'ready'?

Miriam: It's suddenly on your radar. The fact that you even notice baby clothes are cute ... it's weird, before I never saw it as related to me at all. Slightly ridiculous for a 30-year-old to say but it's true. Then friends started getting pregnant and you start thinking of the possibility it might be the right time for you. For me it was also feeling ready for a new challenge at work and at home. Let's mix it all up! (Miriam, 32, 1 child, married, working part-time)

I just started thinking, 'well actually everything in my life at the moment is okay to have children.' Like, you know, you go through like kind of your teens and your early twenties and you think, 'oh, if I have children now it would be a bit of the disaster.' It would, you know, either my parents would be angry or, you know, my education would suffer,' and then suddenly I thought, 'well, actually none of that really applies now.' Now it wouldn't be a disaster if I had children, now it would actually be quite nice (Barbara, 28, 1 child, married, not working).



In the rest of this section, I offer a more in-depth look at the state of affairs that constituted the 'right' time for my informants to have children, showing, where relevant, the diversity of ways in which different people reacted to them. As in the previous section, I separate out the various circumstances that constituted the 'right' time though they were not distinct within informants' accounts.

#### *10.4.1 Financial and career considerations*

One of the most consistent themes to emerge from women's accounts of family-formation concerned the issue of money and employment. British females' labour market participation has increased over recent years and their employment rates have risen (Hibbett and Meager 2003). Increased opportunities for flexible working, including part-time employment have played a crucial role in generating these trends and in assisting an ever-greater proportion of women to return to work following childbirth. In 1979, for example, only 24 per cent of women were back in employment eight to eleven months after having a baby, whereas in 1996 there were 67 per cent (Hibbett and Meager 2003). Prior to having children, all of my informants had been engaged in some form of employment and during my fieldwork many of them were in the course of maternity leave, still working or intending to go back to work (either part-time or full-time) at some point in the near future (see Appendix I). As a result, their narratives were awash with references about the relationship between fertility and employment. While many of them touched on the subject of working-women's struggle to maintain a work-life balance (see next Chapter), others centred on the impact that their experiences in the labour market had in shaping their perceptions of the 'right' time for starting a family. As the two extracts below illustrate, the 'decision' to have a first child sometimes coincided with a longing for a career-break or a career-change.

I always thought I wanted children. I was bored with working really. I was either going to change my job or have a family (Susan, 38, 2 children and pregnant, married, not working).

I guess it took us a long time to have children because we wanted careers. We wanted to get into a financial position when one of us could give up work and look after the children ... I started my career when I was 23. I did a languages degree, so it took a bit more than the standard three years because I went abroad for a while. So, I had 10 years at my career. At 10 years a huge change occurs. I think you will find that with other women too. It's at 10 years that you ask yourself, 'do I carry on doing this? Shall I change or shall I have children?' For me it all happened when I was almost 35. I was bored with my job, so I thought either I'd have to change my job or have children (Leila, 39, 2 children, married, not working).

Guaranteed maternity pay after working for a number of years, informants claimed to have been keen to seize the opportunity to take a respite from their jobs for six months to a year. To do so, however, was not always easy. First, there were economic issues to consider, that is, whether it made financial sense for them to give up work or to go on maternity leave knowing that they may never return. On more than one occasion, I met women who, though initially intending to go back to their employers, found it impossible to do so after having a baby. On the other hand, many of my contacts came from relatively affluent backgrounds, either because their partners/husbands had well-paid jobs or because they were in a position to cope for a while without pay after building successful careers themselves. While important, therefore, money was not at the forefront of these middle-class women's minds when recalling the onset of the 'right' time for them to start a family.

Equally decisive was their willingness to desert their careers. For example, Jane, mentioned earlier, was happy to stop working in order to have children.

I felt settled in my mind, with my job. I wasn't out there trying to do the best job anymore. I'd never been in a career, it was just a job and I was really enjoying it at the 24-25 mark and ... it wasn't that I stopped enjoying it but I felt that I'd got enough from it by the time I was 29ish. Whereas previous to that I'd been busy being me ... (Jane, 35, 2 children, married, not working)

In contrast, Barbara, who had recently given birth to a baby girl, experienced serious conflict when thinking about getting pregnant because, unlike Jane, she described her work as a 'career'.

Um, growing up, um, the sort of thinking amongst my friends was that you should always have your career first, get yourself established in a career, and then it will be easier and then you can have children. Whereas if you have children first then you won't then be able to get into a career, your opportunities will pass and, um, that kind of, um, thinking. And, and I wasn't a sort of, we didn't, I didn't know how difficult it would be to do that option biologically. I just always thought that it would be easy at 42, if I wanted to have a child I'd have a child. I didn't realize that it wouldn't be as easy as at 25, um, and I just started thinking that ... that biologically it wasn't going to be a good option and that actually what did I actually want with my life? Do I want a good career? Yes, I did. And did I want a family? Yes, I did. But if it came to a choice, which one would I rather have? Would I be prepared to sacrifice having a good career for a family? Yes. Would I be prepared to do it the other way around? No ... I just thought everything is set up for me to have a family now so, let's just go for it and if a career hit the skids then hopefully it will pick up afterwards. I still feel that ... that, um, I mean a lot ... about two or three of my friends have also done the same thing, have sort of had good careers that they've sort of spent a long time working towards, like getting Masters or whatever

and then ... then suddenly decided to have a family so ... but by and large most people my age probably say, 'what are you doing?' You know, it doesn't yet seem to be the ... the right ... the normal way of thinking (Barbara, 28, married, 1 child, on maternity leave).

Contrary to her friends and most other interviewees, Barbara took the unorthodox approach of having a child first and attempting to build a career later. Fearful of infertility and aware that the nature of her profession was not favourable to working mothers, particularly those who were hoping to reach higher-level positions, compelled her to give priority to building a family. For her peers, as for a number of my informants, this was not a wise move. In part, their reluctance stemmed from their ambition to reach a certain level of financial independence. To some extent, it was also dependent on the structure of the profession in question. For example, Susie, a 35-year-old mother of two young children argued that in her profession, law, there were few windows of opportunity available for women to have children. To a degree, however, middle-class women's opposition to starting a family at the beginning of their career cycle derived from, what some of them described as, a pressure not to 'squander' their educational and professional achievements. Consequently, the 'right' time for them was after having reached a stage in which their qualifications had translated into considerable advantage.

#### ***10.4.2 Relationships***

A neglected dimension in analyses of fertility behaviour concerns the significance of relationships. To what extent does the timing of meeting a suitable partner affect the onset of childbearing? How important is it to be in a stable, long-term relationship when thinking about having children? What sorts of relationships do different people deem acceptable in order for family-formation to take effect? Is a relationship as vital a criterion in the timing of reproduction as other criteria? Does the nature of a relationship have to change prior to the birth of a child, for example, to turn from a cohabiting union into a marital union? According to Nancy and Jenny, being in a stable relationship was a key prerequisite to having children:

Well, as I said in the beginning I was never really in a position to have children. I wouldn't have had a child with someone that I didn't feel I was going to be with you know forever, for a long time, you know, whatever, and so although I'd have boyfriends and stuff I wouldn't have ever have had a child with any of them. So, I was never really in a position to do it. But, I often say now that if I had been in a position in my late 20s or early 30s to have children, especially with someone that hadn't had children before I would probably have had three. You know, I think I've ended up with one 'cause of circumstances. If I had started when I was younger with a partner who was younger, I probably would have had three (Nancy, 41, 1 son, married, not working).

If I'd met my partner five years earlier then maybe I'd have them younger. It's better to have a child at a younger age: physically, mentally ... but it was a good time for our relationship. We were seven years together before then. We'd had our holidays, our partying; we'd got it out of our system. So maybe if we had had them earlier we'd be frustrated now. OK, so we can't go skiing twice a year any more but we've done that ... We'd got over the initial honeymoon period of the relationship and the falling out period too. We felt we knew each other well enough. Everything had been said and done. I don't understand how people who've known each other for only one or two years can get married and have a baby. After seven years, I knew we'd be fine. He wasn't going to be a slacker (Jenny, 37, 2 children, in partnership, not working).

A surprising finding to emerge from the field relates to informants' stance on marriage. In Great Britain, cohabitation is widespread (Haskey 2001) and is closely associated with extra-marital childbearing (Kiernan 1996). Given the popularity of such unions, therefore, I expected my informants to have less regard for marriage than they did and to be more open to the idea of having children outside a marital union. Out of 82 informants, however, 66 that I knew of were married. Yet, marriage on its own was not enough to activate the 'right' time for childbearing. A number of my informants claimed they did not want to start a family immediately after exchanging their vows. Some wanted to test the relationship prior to getting pregnant while others wished to enjoy married life before becoming parents.

I was married for four years, so it was the right time in my relationship to extend the family ... I always thought it was the natural progression after being married (Jessica, married, 28, 2 children, not working).

Jessica's account illustrates that although, in her mind, marriage and having children were closely associated practices - childbearing had to occur within the marital union - the two states were different. She wanted to experience the pleasures of married life independently of parenthood. In this sense, marriage was a worthwhile pursuit in and of itself.

Yet the middle-class ideal of having children within a marital or cohabiting union was not a reality for all my informants. Anastasia was a 43-year-old single mother of a baby girl who was only a few months old. At the age of 30, she learnt she had endometriosis, a painful and chronic gynaecological disease that makes it difficult or impossible for the sufferer to conceive. At the time, Anastasia was not in a relationship and alleged not to have even considered the idea of becoming a parent at that stage, although she 'loved children.'

KG: Perhaps we can start from the moment you found out that you might possibly never have children.

Anastasia: Yes, yes, so, when you're told something like that, um, well, and, also, I was told, 'well, the best thing is actually to go and try and get pregnant' and I thought, 'well that is so ridiculous, how irresponsible.' I'm not with anybody, there's nobody, you know, around and I don't want a baby for the baby's sake ... I always believed that you needed a committed relationship in order to bring up a child. So, you know, it was out of the question and it was completely out of the question for many years because I wasn't in a relationship and I didn't think it was appropriate ... [and then I] entered this mad sort of relationship with this man that I've known for years and sort of literally, almost spontaneously ... well, I mean immediately in a sense, I got pregnant and I couldn't believe it. I thought, 'no, this cannot be! How can I have just got pregnant like this at 42?' (Anastasia, 43, 1 child, single mother, not working)

Anastasia both expected and wanted to have children within the context of a relationship. To start a family outside 'a committed relationship' was 'irresponsible'. On the other hand, both her endometriosis and the fact that she had not met anyone with whom she could settle down, meant that she ended up getting pregnant unexpectedly outside the confines of a stable relationship. Despite conditions being different to what she had imagined, she decided to keep the baby. Her daughter's father now lived in Austria and only saw them both occasionally. Anastasia's experience reveals that being in a stable relationship or marriage prior to having children is, in practice, not always achievable even among the affluent middle-classes. However, it also highlights the persistence of a domestic ideal that is middle-class in origin and, as Crow and Allan (1990, p.11) argue, 'contains notions about equality and companionship within marriage; it perceives children as being a focal life interest; and it sees the home as a comfortable relaxed environment in which personally fulfilling family relationships can grow and develop.'

#### *10.4.3 The 'biological clock' and the fear of infertility*

Nowhere was the lack of control that informants felt they had over the 'right' time for family-formation more vividly expressed than when they discussed the issue of age. Ideally, having children 'too young' (on average below the age of 26) or 'too old' (over the age of 35) was best avoided. The 'right' age for female reproduction was the late 20s or early 30s. The fear of infertility or the 'biological clock' ticking away had a strong presence in informants' narratives, as it did in the print media. However, each woman I spoke with seemed to have dealt with it in a different way. As with all the conditions involved in making up the 'right' time, ultimately, the onset of childbearing was the result of compromise, reached following a process of negotiation. In this case, what had to be resolved was the conflict between perceived bodily demands and personal wishes.

My brain was not ready to have kids before then but at the same time, I knew I was getting older (Claire, married, 33, 1 child, not working).

For some, the route to reconciliation was easy because their bodies were 'telling' them it was the 'right' time. Overwhelming feelings of 'broodiness' were often explained in this way. For others, the intention to have a certain number of children coupled with knowledge of the 35-year age limit urged them to consider having children earlier than they would have perhaps liked. A few, however, did not feel rushed by the 'biological clock'. Instead, they were opposed to the idea of being 'old' mothers, out of touch with their children's lives because of generational distance. Regardless of opinion and the chosen mode of negotiation, perceptions of the 'right' time for family-formation were never separate from ideas about the body. This is easy to forget in a 'disembodied ethics' or 'ethics of modernity, in which the subject ideally acts independently of interests, bodily desire, others, prejudice or tradition' (Colebrook 1997, p.21). As Petchesky (1984) reminds us, however, while reproduction is a 'social activity,' pregnancies still occur within women's bodies.

#### *10.4.4 Lifestyle and the 'home'*

Informants would not always point to concise reasons, events or processes in reference to what made it seem the 'right' time for them to have children. Instead, they spoke about a combination of coincidences and a general shift in lifestyle. The start of family building, however, was also a consequence of more existential motives; that is, of issues based on experience and relating to or dealing with existence. As Leila, a married 39-year-old non-working mother of two children told me, at some point she thought, 'is this all there is to life? Work, the fantastic holidays, the nice restaurants?' In this sense, informants believed that children would fill the void that pleasure-seeking activities, or the opposite, abstemious pursuits, such as work, could not satisfy. In order for an informant to arrive at the stage where she was willing to relinquish her previous lifestyle in favour of motherhood, it was necessary to have obtained an adequate level of confidence and independence both financial and in the sense of carefree living.

I think you have to be ready in yourself. You have to have done everything you wanted to have done. I was ready emotionally, and financially (Emma, 37, 2 children, married, not working).

This was tantamount to a series of shifts, including that from being 'selfish' to being 'selfless' and from being 'irresponsible' to being 'responsible'. Symbolising these shifts was the purchase of a house. Although practical on one level, owning a house was a sign of maturity and adulthood as well as the material manifestation of a new beginning. It also expressed an important facet of middle-class status: 'having a home of one's own' (Crow and Allan 1990, p.19).

Therefore, while leaving a certain lifestyle behind was not easy, becoming a parent also signalled a new phase in life or the realisation of a manner of living long anticipated.

Just wanting a baby is quite hard, sort of, to explain as a biological urge. But I would also say that there was quite a strong desire for a change of lifestyle because, not that my job was particularly high powered, but nonetheless it had certain stresses and a certain way of being which in a way I didn't like that much. I always liked being at home. Although I'm a well educated, middle-class person and all that kind of thing, I'm quite homely and I like, um, the home lifestyle. So, I think it was almost the change of lifestyle that I wanted as much as a baby (Rachel, early 30s, 1 child, not working).

Interestingly, for Rachel having a child was a legitimate excuse for her to stay at home and escape the pressures of work, which suggests that she needed a reason to justify her time out of the labour market. As the next chapter will show, while a career is a typically middle-class ideal, an equally dominant belief among white, British middle-class women living in London is that a mother provides the best form of care for her children and that the 'home' is the idyllic setting in which she must raise them (Vincent and Ball 2001).

## 10.5 Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated that, contrary to claims in the print media and in a sizeable section of the demographic literature, the start of family-formation is not a self-originating, self-interested, rational and economic process. As Johnson-Hanks (2005b, p.364) argues, 'action has been commonly theorized as the fulfilment of a prior intention' but 'social action everywhere combines intentional strategy and judicious opportunism; only the relative proportions change with time and context.' Though less uncertain about the future than Johnson-Hanks' educated, Cameroonian women, the highly educated, professional, middle-class women whom I met in London had equally vague plans concerning the timing of initial childbearing. Instead of recalling detailed reproductive strategies, they preferred to explain, as did Johnson-Hanks' informants, why, in hindsight, a specific moment in their lives seemed 'right' to either begin trying for a family or to carry an unplanned pregnancy to term. Judging from their accounts, 'judicious opportunism' - in other words, the ability 'to adapt to the moment, to be calm and supple, recognising the difference between a promising and an unpromising offer,' (Johnson-Hanks 2005b, p.370) - is a much more apt characterisation of informants' approaches to the start of family-formation than 'rational choice'. This chapter also calls for the need to recognise that women do not usually make individual and autonomous 'decisions' when it comes to having children, but are, to a substantial degree, influenced and pressured into reproducing by persons both

within and beyond their immediate family circle. As Meyers (2001, p.752) contends, 'if women were autonomously becoming mothers or declining to, we would expect to hear a splendid chorus of distinctive, confident voices, but instead we are hearing a shrill cacophony of trite tunes.' In the next chapter, I investigate the reasons behind the ambiguity and uncertainty in informants' narrative accounts of family-formation by exploring the relationship between motherhood, identity and reproduction. In doing so, I look at the ideological and structural context of childbearing and propose an explanation with regard to why some women are willing and able to forgo motherhood altogether.



# 11 GUILT, MOTHERHOOD AND THE 'CHILDFREE'

## 11.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I look at the manner in which the interplay of ideas and experiences of motherhood, mothering and womanhood shaped British informants' approaches to childbearing and their attitudes towards having children. Regardless of the manner in which the women I met deliberated over whether or not to have children and if so, how many and when, ultimately the outcome of their deliberations was a product of negotiating between and managing conflicting and competing sources of identity specific to their gender, age and social class. A leading theme in this chapter is guilt. Narratives of British informants' transitions to motherhood were awash with references to it. Accounts of their efforts to reconcile paid work and nurturing, their attempts to organise childcare, and their decisions over how to mother were constantly discussed in tandem with feeling guilty. Although the notion of guilt (*tipsis*) exists in Greek society also, Athenian informants rarely expressed feeling guilty in relation to motherhood. According to Giddens (1991, p.67), guilt derives from a 'feeling of wrongdoing towards a respected or loved other' and anxiety over having failed to behave in a 'proper' way, in accordance with established moral precepts. Giddens believes that shame rather than guilt characterises 'conditions of modernity.' Yet the women I met in London never referred to the former. Creighton (1990, p.297) argues that guilt is found in cultures that perceive human beings as inherently evil and sinful, and that view morality in 'absolute terms based on principles of right and wrong that are not considered to vary with the situation.' He also contends that guilt, as opposed to shame, is likely to emerge as a chief mechanism of both social and self-control in cultures that emphasise autonomy and individuality.

While all societies possess a concept of the 'individual' as a person distinct from others (Macfarlane 1995), English society has held 'individualism' in high esteem since before industrialisation, possibly even as far back as the mid-thirteenth century (Macfarlane 1978; 1992). As Strathern (1992, p.14) points out, this does not mean that English society is composed of persons disengaged from relationships with each other; on the contrary, 'the individuality of persons' is 'the first fact of English kinship,' and originates *in* rather than beyond relationships. The English, however, greatly value self-reliance and autonomy as opposed to dependence on others, especially one's kin group. Parents, therefore, regard their children not simply by virtue of their 'genealogical positions' but as 'unique individuals' (Strathern 1992). As a result, in English society, there are no specific rules of conduct or obligation among kin but simply 'guidelines' for action (Firth et al. 1969; Finch 1989; Finch and Mason 1991, 1993). In cultures that prize the development of an

'independent' adult, the emphasis is on teaching children to be self-sufficient from an early age. 'Good parenting' in English society, according to Finch and Mason (2000, p. 176), rests on the 'concept of independence between generations and, specifically, the responsibility of the older generation for fostering and facilitating the independence of the next, either by giving them a "good start" or by helping them to learn to fend for themselves.' The pursuit of individualism also has a bearing on a person's sense of self in ways that conflict with the enactment of familial roles, but it can also encourage childbearing, as the following discussion will demonstrate.

## 11.2 Motherhood as 'choice'

In Chapter 6, I described Athenian informants' attitudes towards motherhood and argued that the majority appeared to consider it a duty. Among London-based informants, I came across an entirely different outlook. Motherhood was not a 'duty' nor did it 'complete' a woman. Instead, having children was a 'personal choice', one driven by the 'desire' to reproduce and to be part of a family unit. The British press corroborated the view that children were not an individual's duty, as reaction to the remarks made by the country's Trade Secretary, Patricia Hewitt, demonstrates. 'Children are not a duty, nor a right. They are a blessing,' stated journalist, Amanda Platell in the *Daily Mail* (23/09/2004), in the days following Hewitt's proclamation that everyone had a 'duty' to have babies for the social and economic success of the country. In the same article, broadcaster, Anne Diamond, said, 'Don't look at me – I've done my bit for Britain! But I did it out of love, not duty, and a belief that children were a gift from God and motherhood an honour and a blessing.' 'As if I didn't have enough to feel guilty about,' added another female broadcaster and columnist from London in the same article, while a former editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine contended, 'Having a baby isn't a duty, Ms Hewitt, it's a luxury.' 'If childbearing is a woman's duty,' writer, Rachel Royce, finally asserted, 'it's a duty to herself. Women who deny themselves that joy in life are in danger of hurting themselves.'

While *The Daily Mail's* criticism of the then Trade Secretary's proposal is particularly scathing, it reveals the basic premise in defence of which the print media reacted against her, and on account of which informants considered childbearing as driven by a personal 'desire' rather than a 'duty' to mother.

One of the hallmarks of a free society is that deciding whether to have children is a private matter, of interest solely to the prospective parents. It should be of no concern whatsoever to the Government ... To regard having children as a public matter is to believe that the individual is essentially a tool of the state. The production and rearing of children lie at the very core of personal liberty ... [According to Hewitt] children are

regarded simply as units of production and usefulness, to be valued by the state merely as participants in a workforce or as carers of the older generation (*The Daily Mail* 22/09/2004).

According to this line of reasoning, the Minister's proposition encouraged an infringement on individual freedom and the right to reproduce independently of state control (Plate 13). For the British, Hewitt's suggestion was highly undesirable, not least because it interfered with the dominant ideology of English personhood – individualism.



**Plate 13. Cartoon in reaction to Patricia Hewitt's remarks (*Daily Mail* 22/09/2004)**

More in tune with London informants' way of thinking was Selena's (39, married, 2 children, working full-time) view that motherhood was 'an opportunity to reinvent yourself; [to change] all the things you didn't like in your own past; to be someone else.' One of the reasons for which reinvention was necessary was to escape what many perceived to be a negative offshoot of individualism and personal choice – selfishness.

I guess you can't go on being self-indulgent forever, and I do like it; I really do; I like having a baby. It's a bit more practical, a bit more mundane but life has to move on. It's not natural to go on forever as you were. I think having a baby is the most natural thing in the world but there are sacrifices. When I reached that 25-30 stage I was ready in my mind for that step, I was ready to, if you like, start caring for somebody else or stop being so selfish; being so me, me, me. And it took till then because I suppose I was having such a good time being me (Jane, 35, married, 2 children, not working).

The idea that motherhood was, in some ways, a personal quest for self-improvement, reinforces the hypothesis that among the British becoming a mother was a wholly private affair. Although Jane describes the transition to motherhood as an opportunity to become more altruistic, she still assumes that the process is of personal rather than social consequence. That becoming a mother was subject to individual initiative rather than a sense of duty, however, did not diminish London-based women's sense of responsibility towards their children's upbringing, as the next section will show.

### **11.3 Mummy knows best but nanny knows too**

Childcare featured highly in informants' narratives of their experiences of motherhood. In order to guarantee the development of a self-reliant and independent adult, parents felt a huge burden of responsibility. Exacerbating that sense of accountability was the ever-increasing commercialisation of childrearing – specialised books and magazines, television programmes (such as 'Supernanny'), parenting classes, shops and advisory centres – a process that begun in Britain during the inter-war years and intensified during the post-war years (Richardson 1993). A dominant belief among British informants was that mothers are the ones best able to take care of the 'needs' of their children. This partly mirrors the fact that almost half of the women with whom I spoke were not in employment at the time of our encounter (see Appendix I). As Collins (1994) reminds us, not all women possess the financial security required to take time off work or to stop working altogether in order to focus exclusively on childcare.

Yet looking after a child on a full-time basis was an option that most of my London-based informants could afford to take advantage of owing to their or their husbands' relative affluence.

I hadn't realized how much with a baby ... how much the person who looks after them shapes them ... I thought, 'oh yeah,' you know, 'someone looks after your house, looks after your cat ...' But someone looking after her two or three days a week is going to have such a big impact on her life that even if there were hundreds of great choices - maybe if my mum was a lot younger and a lot more similar to me, maybe that would be an option. But I can't see it being something I could really entrust somebody with. It's a bit like saying you trust someone to live with your husband or ... it's just kind of difficult to imagine (Moir, 33, married, 1 child, not working).

KG: Did you consider hiring someone to help you out with childcare?

Caroline: The thought of anyone else looking after my children was ... the fact that they are getting paid to look after someone ... they will not give the same care as I would. I couldn't do it and my husband feels the same way (Caroline, 34, married, 2 children, not working).

I think childcare is really a horridly difficult issue ... [I] just increasingly came to the conclusion that the standard of care that I wanted to give to

my children I couldn't pay for actually. It wasn't a question of money. I just wanted to bring up my own children. I didn't want someone else to be doing that and I just felt a huge responsibility to bring them up. I felt, you know, we've had them, my husband works, you know, till one in the morning most nights, he travels all the time, he's mostly here at weekends but he works so hard. I just thought, 'if we've had children and neither of us is actually going to be here apart from the beginning and end of every day then what's the point, you know, why have we had them?' And so, um, I just, I just realized that no nanny or childcare situation was actually ever going to be perfect for me and I would always not really like it. I just felt a responsibility to my children, to give them the best that I could and I thought that that was me (Kimberly, 31, 2 children, married, not working).

A running theme in all three excerpts is that childcare is suspect because it involves a stranger. Care offered in exchange for money and, more importantly, by someone other than a close member of the family is inferior to that given in exchange for love, a natural by-product of the mother-child bond (Vincent and Ball 2001). While Caroline, Kimberly and Moira could afford to pay for some form of childcare, they were morally against it. As Kimberly said, 'it wasn't a question of money.' According to another informant, Rosie, the idea that 'mother knows best' was a consequence of mothers wanting 'to be in control.' All of these ideas reflect the view that the bond between mother and child is the strongest possible and that as a result the former are instinctively capable of assessing and dealing with the latter's 'needs' better than 'outsiders'. Smart (1996) argues that a 'naturalistic chain' that links sexual activity to pregnancy, pregnancy to birth, birth to mothering and mothering to motherhood is responsible for the assumption that the mother-child relationship is both natural and superior. Yet this sequence is historically and culturally specific, with roots in the late nineteenth century. It is also class-based (see Chapter 8, Section 8.3). Moreover, contrary to the print media's impression (Chapter 9, Section 9.2), childcare was not an issue driven solely by economic considerations but also, and perhaps more importantly, by moral reflections.

While many of the women I spoke with in London were not in the labour market at the time, over a third were self-employed or engaged in either part-time or full-time employment, and an additional 12 per cent were intending to return to work once their maternity leave was over (see Appendix I). Unlike Athenians, London-based mothers who did rely on some form of external childcare did not depend on it from their own parents. I never encountered any grandparents living next door to their grandchildren in London as I did in Athens, nor was any such arrangement ever described to me. The majority of those who sought help in looking after their children (most of whom were also working) were paying for it. The most popular choice of paid childcare seemed to be nannies or au pairs. In their study of the role of spatiality in the production of home space and social reproduction in middle-class

Britain, Gregson and Lowe (1995) argue that many of the householders whom they interviewed also chose to place their child in the care of a nanny. The first reason related to the 'organizational advantages' on offer. By employing a nanny, Gregson and Lowe's study-participants could carry on using the same 'time-space schedules' as before without needing to make many adjustments. A second, more important reason however was that a nanny remains in the parental home. 'Quite simply,' Gregson and Lowe (1995, p.230) argue, 'the parental home was cited time and time again as the *best place* for the care of young children, whilst the nanny (by virtue of her location within the parental home) was presented to us as the closest approximation to maternal care and therefore as the *best substitute* for this maternal care.' A third and final reason was financial. Hiring a nanny was cheaper than sending two children to nursery, since the cost of a nanny does not increase with the number of children in her care.

Among my own interviews, all three reasons emerged as important. 'You can take them to nursery, but a nanny can deal with everything,' Wendy, a working 38-year-old married mother of two, told me. Leila (39, married, 2 children, not working), on the other hand, thought that 'society was pushing childcare too far,' and although she had decided to stay at home in order to look after her son on a full-time basis, she believed recruiting a nanny was 'better than being sent to childcare.' 'It's human nature,' she explained to me. A few of the women I met, preferred to take their children to nurseries or to employ a cleaner rather than a nanny, outsourcing the domestic tasks involved in looking after a family, while they continued to be responsible for the 'educational' or 'fun' side to looking after children. For example, Hillary's (32, married, 1 child, on maternity leave) 'dream' was to hire a Filipino, live-in housekeeper who would look after her children, clean, iron 'and just be part of the family,' while she either went out to work part-time or spent 'quality time' with her son. This approach is reminiscent of what Uttal (1996) calls 'custodial care', where mothers maintain that they are the primary adults responsible for childrearing, covering their children's emotional and educational 'needs' while the childcare provider is there to do the rest.

However, while in comparison to Athenians, London informants were a lot more open to the idea of handing over aspects of childcare to others, unlike them, they felt guilty irrespective of the degree to which they retained control over their children's upbringing. Working mothers partly experienced guilt because of their reservations concerning the sort of care that their children were receiving in their absence.

I'm going to put her in a nursery, which I've already reserved and it's great because [my company] will subsidise it. In this area, nurseries cost over £1000 a month. It's a little less with the subsidy ... However, I do worry

about sending him to nursery ... I do feel slightly guilty (Hailey, 33, in partnership, 1 child, on maternity leave).

Women who remained at home on a full-time basis also worried about their mothering skills and the kind of influence that they were having on their children. For instance, Hillary became certain she would return to work once her maternity leave was over after realising that her son was 'getting clingier and clingier.' Rosie felt likewise, though she hoped to go back to work at a later stage in her children's lives than Hillary.

I want to be there one hundred per cent for my children but the whole point is that they become autonomous, self reliant and independent. If you want to have healthy teenagers, you don't want me around all the time and I don't want to be left alone at home. Their need won't be nearly as great then and I'll need something to fill my time. I'll only be 39 when my youngest goes to school. To do nothing else would be terrible. I mean the past few years I have been intellectually starved (Rosie, 34, married, 2 children & pregnant, not working).

Hillary and Rosie's reluctance to devote themselves permanently to their children's upbringing makes sense when viewed in relation to the principles of English personhood. As mentioned earlier (Section 11.1), independence is a key attribute to be in possession of in the process of becoming a person in English society. According to this line of thinking, Hillary and Rosie feared that personally involving themselves for too long with childrearing would hinder their children's chances of becoming fully qualified persons because it would make them dependent rather than self-reliant, which in turn would make both mothers feel guilty.



**Plate 14. Depiction of the association of childcare with guilt in the British press (*The Times* 04/02/2005)**

Amber, a married 39-year-old mother of twins and a third child, all of whom were under the age of 10, also felt guilty about her mothering skills, even though she had given up a highly-paid job in the City to look after them every day.

I feel ... I always feel guilty about the amount of time that the children have with me singularly. So I always feel this huge amount of sharing and because the youngest does five mornings at nursery, she gets all of the afternoon with me. But the other two do full days at school now and so when they come home, neither of them gets to spend enough time with me (Amber, 39, married, 3 children, not working).

Amber's narrative shows that despite the fact that non-working mothers were displaying their commitment to the ideology that 'mother knows best,' they were still uncertain about whether they were being 'good' at being full-time mothers. As a result, while Amber did not feel guilty about her decision to look after her children on a permanent basis she could not help but experience a sense of guilt about her particular approach to mothering.

Responsible for exacerbating informants' sense of guilt over their childcare preferences was the press (Figure 14). Throughout my



fieldwork in London, newspapers printed reports on the benefits of but also the injury caused by different forms of childcare provision. In 2005 alone, the following headlines appeared: 'Why granny's a bad babysitter' (*Daily Mail* 22/08/2005), 'Why nurseries can help cut the stress in children's lives' (*The Daily Telegraph* 21/11/2005), 'Free nursery scheme could be bad for young children, says study: home-based care "better for babies and toddlers": findings raise questions over government policy' (*The Guardian* 04/10/2005), 'How busy mothers can pass on stress to their children' (*Daily Mail* 21/11/2005). The contradictory messages contained within these articles were an extra source of anxiety for British informants, adding to the confusion already generated by an overabundance of childrearing manuals, and affecting anyone irrespective of their childcare choices. Yet the guilt suffered by the mothers with whom I spoke did not derive exclusively from their uncertainty over what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' parenting. It also, in large measure, originated in their attitudes towards and relationship with the labour market; in other words, their career experiences and aspirations.

#### **11.4 Careers, identity and motherhood**

The idea that childbearing was 'natural' to being a woman gave shape to informants' expectations of motherhood. Coupled with their previous lack of contact with children, most claimed to have had a relatively 'romantic image' of what the process of becoming a mother entailed. Yet reality was very different, resulting in the loss of confidence and control, as well as an unexpected sense of failure and guilt.

The change is so drastic that there is no 'me' left. It's easier to accept that when you are older ... You open up to so much pain, fear and responsibility. The responsibility of keeping someone alive everyday ... I ended up taking anti-depressants. I didn't feel worthy looking after my baby. I had no time to myself. If I was not feeding him, I was getting ready to feed him. Everything you do with your body you do for your child ... You have to sleep so you can have good milk, you have to eat so you can produce good milk, everything. Unfortunately, you still have a husband, you still have to do the housework; everything else still has to be achieved. It's overwhelming (Emma, 37, married, 2 children, not working).

Helping to generate such apparently misleading portrayals of motherhood was, once again, the media, as Rachel asserted.

I think one of the things that's difficult with pregnancy and with having a baby is that when you read magazines you are very much told how you should feel. 'Oh you'll be overwhelmed,' 'oh you'll be overjoyed,' and if you don't feel like those things you sort of think, 'what's wrong with me?' (Rachel, early 30s, 1 child, not working)

Martin (1990) suggests that middle-class women often sense a loss of control over reproductive matters because of their relationship to the

labour market. In her study of attitudes towards giving birth among middle- and working-class American women, she noticed how the former were more concerned about being in control during the birthing process than the latter. Middle-class women, Martin argues, are used to being in charge (as managers, supervisors and professionals), whereas working-class women are typically under the command of others (as clerks, factory workers etc.). The physical dependence of young children on their mothers further exacerbates the former group's impression of losing control. As Rothman (1994, p.146) contends, motherhood is 'the physical embodiment of connectedness.' Individuals 'do not enter the world as autonomous, atomistic, isolated beings, but begin connected' to their mothers. 'Motherhood is,' therefore, 'the embodied challenge to liberal philosophy, and that, I fear, is why a society founded on and committed to liberal philosophical principles cannot deal well with motherhood.'

In addition, Rothman maintains, the emphasis of liberal philosophy on the separation between body and mind leads women to conceive of their bodies as machines or resources available for use. Since the mind is seen as superior to the body, middle-class women, such as Emma - for whom, moreover, a lengthy period of breastfeeding was an essential feature of 'good' mothering (Stearns 1999; Murphy 2000; Wall 2001) - feel hopeless when their sole purpose becomes their infant's survival. Emma's body was no longer 'a physical marker of individuality' (Bailey 1999) but a vessel commandeered by another being. As Martin (1984, p. 1204) argues, 'perhaps we no longer see women as so enslaved by their reproductive organs. But we are still a long way from seeing quintessentially female functions as acts women *do* with body, mind and emotional states working together or at least affecting one another.'

In my interviews, it was clear that informants' sense of loss but also guilt stemmed, in large part, from the perceived difference between the working and mothering experience. Irrespective of whether or not the women were in employment at the time of our encounter, a comparison between having a career and being a mother frequently transpired.

Well, the British attitude is, if you're not working, you're shirking. You're not contributing to the economy and to society, so it takes a very confident person not to feel sensitive about it. You are not valued at all by society if you're just a mother. People tend to write you off a little bit. I found myself having to affirm my image by talking about my past career and a lot of people did talk about what they used to do (Leila, 39, married, 2 children, not working).

KG: Why does working make you feel more confident?

Hillary: I think ... for me it's something to do. Somebody says you need to be somewhere at nine. You get up for a purpose. You get dressed, you

think, 'what shall I wear to work in a library, or to work, to look smart' instead of, 'what shall I just put on?' Um, talking to other people, helping somebody else gives you confidence ... um, earning some money. Um, it's nice to have your own money in your wallet rather than your husband's ... you see new people ... getting out of the house makes you get a more outward looking approach and realize there are other people with problems, it's not just you. And you know that famous expression, 'a change is as good as a rest'? I remember a much more confident person. I mean I think that's gonna come back with getting help and going back to work ... but, um, much more confident, much more happy go lucky, um ... yeah, I think I felt I could do anything and now I sort of think, 'oh God, got a baby.' I think there's a lot more guilt in motherhood 'cause a lot of what happens is a result of what you've done or what you've perceived you've done. Whereas at work if something happens you're not thinking, 'oh my God, why did I do that?' You think, 'oh, let's solve the problem and move on,' which if you came in to look after Jamie for the day you'd probably do exactly the same (laughs) because you just haven't got that tie, emotion or guilt. For example, I've discovered that Jamie's allergic to cow's milk and goat's milk. Now everyone else would say, 'ok, not to worry, he just won't have it.' But I start thinking, 'oh my God, if I hadn't done this when I was pregnant and maybe if I hadn't had any dairy products when I was pregnant, it might have made a difference,' and that's a pretty bad starting point (Hillary, 32, married, 1 child, on maternity leave).

Leila and Hillary's accounts reveal some of the reasons why motherhood was associated with a sense of guilt and a loss of autonomy, confidence and control, whereas work gave them the impression of being in charge. According to Bailey (2000, p.61), 'work is constructed ... as important not just for financial reward, status or social interaction, but as a means of contributing value to society and allowing expression of ethical aspects of the self.' Both of the above excerpts suggest likewise. Yet they also confirm the argument presented in the previous section that in contrast to work, British informants deemed motherhood a private experience of limited significance in the public sphere.

To ease their sense of guilt, British women often described motherhood as a 'job' - one that, despite its complications, was extremely rewarding. Some expressed a sense of satisfaction at being their 'own boss' (Jessica, 28, full-time mother, 2 children, married) while others described childcare and childrearing as a challenging 'project' (Susie, 35, full-time mother, 2 children, married).

This is my job now and this is my working day. It takes a while to get your head around that. It's a job (Jenny, 37, full-time mother, 2 children, in partnership).

It's a tough journey, it's a sacrifice if you want to do it well but as with all sacrifices, there is a reward at the end: you produce a more stable child, who is better at school etc. No work is ever without its rewards (Sadie, age unknown, full-time mother, 3 children, married).

I value the work of raising children. It's the most rewarding job. I think it is. No job will ever be as rewarding or challenging, I'm sure of it ... (Rosie, full-time mother, 2 & pregnant, married).

As a career woman it was difficult ... you feel competitive about motherhood just as you do about your career (Melanie, 35, married, 1 child & pregnant, not working).

According to Bailey (2000), seeing mothering as a 'job' helps women to bridge the gap between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of employment, or their mothering and working identities. As a result, I would emphasise that it also assists them in regaining a sense of being in control of their lives.

For British informants, therefore, employment was a central aspect of their identities and many had battled long and hard to succeed in their careers. Unsurprisingly, returning to work after having a child, either part-time or full-time, was essential to their well-being.

I feel I've worked really hard to be where I am and to give it up for five years, essentially until the children start school, would be difficult. Women find it difficult to get back to work; so I decided, regardless of the hardship ... I don't feel I missed out. Women who stay at home feel quite noble doing it. But you're not necessarily engaging with the child if you're at home full-time as opposed to working three times a week (Selena, 39, married, 2 children, working full-time).

Zadie: The problem is being seen as a housewife and a mother and nothing else. I'm going back to work. It's part of my identity. I'm not sure I could cope with just being a wife or a mother. I feel too young to be written off as, 'your life is over.'

KG: Is that how you feel? Do you feel that your life is over?

Zadie: Not at all. Once I go back to work I will get my identity back (Zadie, 31, married, 1 child, on maternity leave).

Dan wants me to go back to work. He doesn't want me to turn into his mum and I want to have intellectual conversations with him. We want to be whom we set out to be. We want to keep our independence ... I do feel slightly guilty but I have to go back to work for my sanity (Hailey, 33, on maternity leave, 1 child, in partnership).

In all of the above excerpts work is the means to personal fulfillment, a source of female autonomy and therefore key to the construction of feminine identity. While work is 'challenging', encouraging the use of one's 'brain', motherhood is boring and mind numbing. Whereas by working, informants felt appreciated, mothering did not occasion praise. Interestingly, Hailey maintains that her partner and she wished to remain self-sufficient and to 'be whom we set out to be.' This objective is in line with ideas about English personhood. Neither Hailey nor her partner

wanted to be dependent on the other, and their ultimate goal was to become autonomous individuals.

Despite such ambitions, however, female informants often felt cheated into thinking that they could achieve their career aspirations at the same time as motherhood.

In a way, I think that it's really misleading for women all those years spent in education and working. I know it's a very anti-feminist thing to say, but if you want to have children why go through all that? I have a friend who got married when she was 21 and had children soon after and I remember thinking, 'how could she possibly enjoy it?' We totally drifted apart as a result but now I feel that I have given myself an experience that is always going to make being a parent more difficult. It would have been better if someone had warned me. Basically, I think that having had an education and a job has made it harder to accept being a mother. Then again, if I had been told that I should have a child at 18, I wouldn't have listened. When my husband and I started going out, I was more qualified than he was but now the gap between us is massive. It's the same with my colleagues at work. They have progressed whilst I am here doing, basically, the same job I did when I started working (Jill, 37, 2 children, on maternity leave, married).

Jill highlights the class and gender-specific nature of her inability to see motherhood and work as compatible. As Segura (1994, p.212) argues, 'the notion of a private-public dichotomy largely rests on the experiences of white, leisured women, and lacks immediate relevance to less privileged women (for instance, immigrant women, women of color), who have historically been important economic actors both inside and outside the home.' The Mexican immigrant women she interviewed, for example, perceived employment and motherhood as harmonious rather than conflicting, irreconcilable experiences and, incidentally, reported a higher fertility rate than Chicanas, or U.S.-born Mexican women for whom motherhood was mutually exclusive from work outside the home. Whereas Mexicanas saw employment as a way of helping the family, Chicanas, like the British women in this study, expressed feeling 'guilty' about being working mothers.

Due to this rigid separation between home and work, some informants tried to maintain a considerable distance between their lives as workers and as mothers.

It took me seven months to say anything [about being pregnant] at work because it would have been construed as a betrayal. I work in a museum where the people at the top are male and the rest are female. I try to maintain a degree of professionalism apart from if I have to leave. I try to keep a separation. There are no pictures of my children in the office. I try to minimise that. You've made a decision to have children, not anybody else ... (Selena, 39, married, 2 children, working full-time).

Selena's decision not to display any photographs of her children in her office is expressive of her wish to keep her 'work' and 'home' identities (or 'public' and 'private' self) strictly apart. As Nippert-Eng (1995, p.35) argues, 'physical appearances, certain artifacts and activities, and the people surrounding us are particularly important reflections of who we are ... Through the visible presence of a variety of living and inanimate "props", we enhance and attenuate the mental distinctions between realms and selves.' Placing a family member's photograph on one's office desk, she suggests, is a common act workers execute to try to overcome the mythical boundary that exists between home and work. Selena's conscious decision not to do so is thus indicative of her need to create and maintain two distinct 'territories of the self' (Nippert-Eng 1995, p.34). She was, in other words, an 'extreme segmentor,' seeking to preserve 'different aspects of self in their appropriate places by keeping associated realm contents to their mutually exclusive locations' (Nippert-Eng 1995, p.36). While not all of my informants needed to keep their private selves separate from their working selves, many did claim to have hidden the fact that they were pregnant from their work-colleagues, and particularly their employers<sup>35</sup>.

Consequently, British informants felt they were unlikely ever to achieve the perfect work-life balance without making considerable sacrifices. A few came to this realisation early on in their lives, others later, adjusting their career plans accordingly. Some, like Lucy, were relatively successful in achieving a degree of stability.

Lucy: I took a step down in status in order to be at home some of the time but it was too much of a compromise, so I looked for another job and now I have the perfect job in advertising. I knew I was capable of doing the job but I told them that I didn't want to work long hours. I still work 28 hours a week, four days a week and sometimes 40 hours but I can juggle the hours I work around my daughter rather than the other way round. It's a fantastic job.

KG: Why did you feel the first job you got after you had your daughter was too much of a compromise?

Lucy: When you start to work part-time it means that compared to men or full-time people you end up having to prove yourself. You have to prove to them that working part-time is ok. They pay lip service to you for work-life balance but in reality, it's not the same. I told them I would do anything as long as it's not at the last minute. I felt I was not doing the childcare very well, or the wife bit very well, or the job bit. When you start something from a blank piece of paper, you can negotiate the contract around what you can and cannot do. It's said and agreed. I explored many different opportunities in many areas. I expected to get something, which would be of lower status not at all at senior level. It turned out beautifully. It's a permanent contract as well. It has worked but it was a risk leaving the job I

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<sup>35</sup> Another reason for doing so was in order to ensure that they would get their full maternity benefits.

had. I'd rather do that though than something boring. I expected to have a boring job (Lucy, 48, married, 1 child, working full-time).

Lucy's narrative highlights the gendered nature of the work-life balance issue. Lucy did not expect to get as high a status position as she did because she was aware of how difficult it is for working mothers to progress along the same career paths as before they had children. Absent from their accounts are their husbands. Lucy never questioned why it was she and not her spouse who had to reconsider her career options. As a result, she felt guilty for her perceived inadequacies as a wife, mother and worker.

Working mothers could both defend their decision to stay in or return to the labour market in terms of their children. This suggests that they were trying to accommodate two conflicting middle-class ideologies: one contending that 'mothers know best,' the other that working is the most important measure of personal fulfilment.

Now I go out to work to be a good mother whereas before I did it for myself and I do it so that I can have something in the future when my son goes to school. If I was with him all the time, I would get bored with him. Absence makes the heart grow fonder (Fiona, 34, works part-time, 1 child, married).

I think I'm a better mother by being away from my children, even for a little while (Wendy, 38, works part-time, 2 children, married).

Spending all day with one's children did not constitute 'good' mothering, according to Fiona and Wendy. Going out to work not only furthered their careers but also helped them become 'better' mothers. By feeling good about their selves through work, they felt good about themselves as mothers because what mattered was not the quantity but the 'quality' of time that they spent with their children. In justifying their actions in this way, Fiona and Wendy were attempting to deal with a 'double bind' in which they had to be both 'ideal workers' and 'ideal parents' (Stone and Lovejoy 2004, p.62).

Yet despite their best efforts, working mothers were especially hard-hit by feelings of guilt, as Lucy suggested earlier.

I mean everybody says, 'oh, you know, you will always have guilt when you're a working mother.' I just didn't realize how much guilt, and how it would actually tip the balance when it came to decisions. That living with the guilt might actually lead you to decide not to return to work (Barbara, 28, married, 1 child, on maternity leave).

Jill: I am planning to go back to work in September but it's bad because my son starts school and I have to find a childminder for him for six hours

a day two days a week. I feel sorry for the childminder. I can't imagine anyone else coping with him.

KG: Why do you want to go back to work?

Jill: It's a different compulsion than being with my son. On a practical level, I wouldn't be able to find another job like it. It's very accommodating and it's hard to find. I also feel like I'm expected to go back and I'd feel odd if I didn't, like there is no end in sight to this ... There's no justification for me not working if he's at nursery and she goes too ... I hope I'll work following the role of my mother. She went to work when I was eight years old. I'll go when it becomes practical. I'd love to go work in some stress-free sociable role. I enjoy working; I feel useful; I enjoy it; I enjoy being appreciated. I don't feel I do a very good job with my son. You got me on a very negative day. I've created an extra-person who needs looking after and it could go terribly wrong. I hope he doesn't get into too much trouble (Jill, 37, married, 2 children, married, on maternity leave).

Jill and Barbara experienced guilt because of deciding to return to work. Interestingly, Jill claims that she would need to justify herself if she were to decide to look after her children on a full-time basis. This reinforces Leila's point that in Britain, 'if you're not working, you're shirking.'

The majority of informants believed that, as their children grew older, they would be able regain control of their lives and their selves, particularly since most planned to go back to work. Yet the clash between their working and mothering identities, and the guilt they suffered as a result, combined to influence their attitudes towards as well as their experiences of family-formation. The majority of my informants had postponed the initiation of childbearing until their late 20s and 30s owing to their educational and professional obligations. Upon becoming mothers, few felt they could cope with having a 'large family.'

KG: Would you like to have more children in the future?

Hillary: Yeah, I'd love to have six children. I think I've realized financially that's quite tricky, physically it's exhausting and to ... I know I need help to make me feel confident. To go out to work or just to go out do my own thing to keep confident, to keep, um, things going we need to have or I need to have an income that I can do that. Even if I just earn enough money to pay for the nanny, so I have to be able to do that and in order to give all the other little extras I have to have a lot of money ... so I suddenly realized it is all about compromise. I mean you can have twenty kids all squished into the house but that's not the quality of life that you might want them to have so I've probably scaled down to four ... My husband comes from one of four and I come from one of three. My husband's father is one of six, his mother is one of four, my mum is one of four, and my dad is one of two (Hillary, 32, married, 1 son, on maternity leave).

In order for Hillary to consider having the six children that she 'ideally' wanted, she felt she would have to abandon her plans to return to work and compromise on the nature of care that she felt would be appropriate for her children. The lack of value attached to motherhood in comparison to work, along with her standards regarding childcare, therefore



combined to reduce the prospective size of her family to four children, at least in theory.

Nevertheless, only a small number of women had or seemed likely to want to stop reproducing after having one child, and some even appeared reluctant to end family-formation after having two children. Although, as chapter 10 showed, fertility desires and intentions do not always translate into actual numbers of children, contrary to reports in the print media (Chapter 9, Sections 9.4, 9.5 and 9.6), the highly-educated, professional women I spoke to were not opposed to the idea of having children and intended to have them in relatively quick succession.

KG: So how soon would you like to have another child?

Hillary: We were talking about that the other day. 'Do we just go for it, one, two, three, and four?' but I think one or two-year gaps is good. My mum's quite into amateur psychology and she always says, 'oh well, two is a very good gap or three is a very good gap.' She keeps telling but I think two is quite a good gap and I also have to think about how old I am. If I'm 32 now, then I'll be 39 or something, nearly 40, so I had better hurry up ... I think for me it would purely depend on the help I could get, if we can afford it. If my husband is still in the City and we can get help then I'd feel fine, but if we can't get help, well I don't know what we'll do.

KG: So, the financial element is quite important.

Hillary: It will come into it. I don't think it will be about having a child; it will be about things like educating the child, or things like, um, will Johnny go to Eton or not (laughs)? I mean that will be a major, how'd you afford that? So, it comes into it but I think if it came down to the fact we couldn't afford to live in London we'd move to the country and have another baby (Hillary, 32, married, 1 son, on maternity leave).

For Hillary, as for other informants, a two-year gap between children was ideal, though not always feasible. Despite the difficulties involved in maintaining a work-life balance and the strict separation between their working and mothering identities, therefore, London-based women keen to have children experienced higher fertility aspirations than those expressed by Athenians (other than the *polyteknoi*), as well as a better chance of realising them. The centrality of work in informants' lives, though guilt inducing, was also a source of income, which, combined with that of their husbands or partners (who were often lawyers, doctors and bankers), enabled them to afford childcare provision. In addition, the childcare services on offer were relatively generous compared to Athens, as were the support networks for mothers, in the form of NCT post-natal groups among others. These were available to women both in and out of employment. For those who chose to remain in the labour market, the option to work part-time afforded them the opportunity and the flexibility to consider having a second or third child.

Alternatively, the rigid separation between work and home, while disliked by many, drove some women out of the workforce and into full-

time motherhood, giving them the time to dedicate to the process of family building, with the backing and financial support of their husbands or partners. Moreover, the value that all women placed on individualism made mothering a less intense experience than it appeared to be for Athenian mothers, and childcare beyond the home, in playgroups, nurseries, as well as by nannies and au pairs, more acceptable. Children were encouraged to be independent from their parents from a young age and the guilt that mothers could potentially suffer from raising a needy child, paradoxically, worked in favour of fertility. In order to promote the social skills necessary for independence, such as sharing, compromise and negotiating, British informants believed that children needed siblings. The more they had, the greater their capacity to learn to communicate with others, and the better they would be able to handle being in the company of people with a diverse range of characters. Although for many a family with four, five or more children was impossible for practical reasons (for example, lack of time, space and money), having three was both feasible and desirable. Yet, the obstacles to childbearing presented by the work-life balance issue, in combination with faith in the principle of individualism, were also sufficient reason for a number of my British informants to either consider or pursue a 'childfree' existence, as the next section will show.

### **11.5 'Child-freedom'**

Journeying back to their pre-motherhood existence, a number of British informants recalled having contemplated remaining childless. Taken aback by the frequency of this admission, I started to ponder whether being a mother was as essential to the identity of those I encountered in London as it had been to the Greek middle-class women I met in Athens.

KG: Did you ever consider not having children?

Selena: Yes, definitely, I had such a fantastic lifestyle, lots of disposable income. It was two years before I broached the subject with my husband and it was me not him who brought it up ... I used to be completely blank about children. I must say that at first I was quite adamant not to have children. Before we married, I actually told him (Selena, 39, married, 2 children, working full-time).

I think if somebody doesn't really want to do it or they're not sure ... I don't know, that's a very difficult one. But ... I think, fundamentally, when you have children for the next ten, twenty years you're going to spend a huge amount of your time focusing on them, 'cause you have to, and that's a lot of time that you could otherwise be spending doing something which actually was much more outward looking and that contributed much more to society. So actually, I think it would be more selfless not to have them, maybe, for some people. I mean I remember hearing Janet Baker, the opera singer, talking about how she really wanted children [but] she just knew that if she had children she wouldn't be able to sing ... so she made a conscious choice not to and I, you know, I think the world is a richer

place because of that probably. The world doesn't need more children (Fiona, 34, 1 child, works part-time, married).

According to Selena and Fiona, not having children conferred personal, social and financial benefits. Not surprisingly, the percentage of women remaining childless in the UK has grown in recent decades and continues to do so (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5). According to Jefferies (2001), among women born in England and Wales in the 1950s and even more recently, the proportion that had no children by age 45 exceeded the proportion that had only one child by the same age.

As the print media acknowledges, childlessness is on the increase and not only because of the growth in the number of women 'leaving it too late' (see Chapter 9, Section 9.9). While exact figures are unknown, many of those who end up childless in the UK are physically able to have children but do not 'want' to reproduce. The 'childfree' or 'voluntarily childless' have received considerable coverage in both mainstream British newspapers and the tabloids, though largely independently of the low fertility debate. The reasons for remaining 'childfree' are numerous according to the press. 'For some, it's about lifestyle and their relationships. For others, it's about money. A few feel the world is overpopulated enough' (*The Sunday Times magazine* 29/01/2006, p.16). 'Freedom,' 'spontaneity,' 'careers,' the 'possibility to take risks,' spending 'quality time' with husbands or partners, occasions to go on 'holiday' and 'weekend breaks on a whim,' an aversion to 'nurturing,' the sense that children are an enormous 'responsibility,' and a lack of 'yearning' to be a mother, were all reasons newspapers cited a number of women were 'choosing' childlessness.

A common grievance expressed in articles written by the 'childfree' was that parents, otherwise known as 'breeders' (*Sunday Times* 07/03/2004) or the 'mummy mafia' (*The Daily Telegraph* 26/05/2005), were receiving unwarranted amounts of concessions at work and beyond, leaving their 'childless' or 'childfree' colleagues with either an extra workload or exorbitant taxes. This, they believed, was unjustifiable because parenthood is a 'lifestyle choice' (*The Daily Telegraph* 25/03/2005; *The Evening Standard* 22/11/2005; *Sunday Times* 11/11/2001; *The Times* 21/05/2001).

Having children is a lifestyle choice and while I have no objection to contributing to basic schooling for the next generation, people who choose not to have children should not be expected to subsidise those who do, outside this minimum requirement (Letter to the Editor, *The Daily Telegraph* 13/09/2004).

While disparaging comments about parents by the 'childfree' were frequent, adding to the guilt of motherhood, retorts by the non-'childfree'

were scarce in the print media. In fact, most articles were sympathetic both to their 'decision' not to have children and to their requests not to be 'treated as second-class citizens' (*Sunday Times* 07/03/2004). Journalist, Laura Tennant, writing for the *Independent on Sunday* (07/03/2004) argued, for instance, that those who 'decide' not to have children are making a 'wholly rational choice,' whereas 'choosing' to procreate, like she had done, was 'for far from altruistic reasons.'

In a rare counter-attack on the 'childfree', journalist Jay Rayner, angered by an interview with Jonathan McCalmont, chairman of *Kidding Aside*, an organisation representing the 'childfree', said:

I think about trying to argue with him. I think about telling him that without children, without my children, there will be nobody to look after the miserable, lonely gits that people like him will doubtless become in their old age, but then decide I really have much better things to do. It's late afternoon, and Eddie has proposed that I take him and Daniel to the playground (*Observer Magazine* 05/06/2005).

Despite the infrequency of articles such as the above, those written in support of the 'childfree', largely authored by persons who themselves had 'chosen' not to procreate, were noticeably defensive. The fear of stigma was plain to see. In particular, the 'childfree' were keen to dispel the 'myth' that they were selfish 'child-haters' (*The Guardian* 18/10/2003), 'single' and 'forging ahead in our careers, earning buckets of money and dressing head-to-toe in designer gear' (*The Guardian* 22/08/2002).

Intrigued by press coverage on the 'childfree', I tried to find out more about them. Attempting to locate them in Hammersmith and Fulham or neighbouring boroughs proved futile, however, as they had no structured groups or networks in the area, similar to those the NCT and other organisations had for parents. As a result, I turned to the internet where I discovered numerous international and British-based social clubs, including *Kidding Aside: the British Childfree Association*, *No Kidding*, and *The British Organisation of Non-Parents (BON)*. Anxious not to receive negative press and for fear that my presence would make members feel uncomfortable, all of them rejected my request to join their occasional meetings. The only way to make contact with the 'childfree', the clubs' organisers told me, was to place an advert on their websites and wait for a response. In the end, I managed to arrange four interviews, three of which I conducted in person, and one over the telephone<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> It is worth pointing out that comments by the 'childfree' women I spoke with may have been more radical than among other 'voluntarily childless' women who did not belong to these social clubs and networks, and who may not even describe themselves as 'childfree'.

The first notable difference between the print media's portrayals of the 'childfree' and the narratives of the women with whom I spoke revolved around the issue of 'choice'. All four 'childfree' informants denied ever having made a conscious 'decision' not to reproduce, as Vera explained.

Well, this is the interesting thing because I can't pinpoint a decision moment. It's just that by the time I was turning thirty, I realised that I had never wanted to have a child and that I might as well make that clear in any form of my life where that was important ... For me, it was just a slow dawning of recognition ... I mean it's not like I go around saying, 'I'm childfree,' you know? It's a word I use maybe once in six months but it's something about my life that I know, just like I know I have a British passport and some day, you know, they could take it away from me, somehow, just like some day I could wake up with this huge desire to have a baby. But they are not likely; it's not something that I would expect to happen ... I don't feel that I sat down and made a choice. I came to a realisation of something that I had just been building within me all along (Vera, 36, single, full-time teacher).

In the same way that informants who were mothers did not always claim to have made an active decision to have children, Vera reveals that not having children can equally be a 'non-decision' (Finch and Mason 1993). According to Morell (1994, p.69), although 'commonly constructed as a choice or decision,' few women actually define their status as such, while Bartlett (1994) argues that the majority of her female interviewees described having no children as a point at which they arrived after a lengthy process involving a series of ongoing 'decisions' made over the course of their lifetime.

The second of my 'childfree' informants, Frances, a 36-year-old single woman who worked full-time in PR and marketing, had 'always known' she did not want to have children. While 'being able to do whatever you want when you want' was a major reason for her not wishing to become a mother, another more important cause related to how she envisioned herself as one. 'There is nothing special about me to make me a good parent and quite a lot about me that I think would probably make me a bad parent,' she told me. Vera expressed a similar concern.

Every child deserves the best ... I can't really imagine a situation under which I would want to have a child but I can sort of put on a fantasy hat and imagine winning the lottery and having a big beautiful house in the countryside. But it's not just about the money; it's a question of social support and social structures and stuff as well. You know, I read Victorian novels where in the wealthy households even the doting parents spent quality time with the children for a couple of hours a day and the rest was done by paid help ... but I don't have the resources to be a good parent. I've seen excellent parenting among my friends and extended family and that is what children deserve and I know I don't have it in me. I don't think

that I could do it well. I could do it adequately, you know. I wouldn't kill my child but I would hate it and then I would love it again, and then I would feel guilty and everything, you know, not being the perfect parent (Vera, 36, single, full-time teacher).

While the vast majority of Athenian informants were willing to limit their fertility to one child if they perceived the conditions in which they lived unfavourable to having more, London-based informants were prepared to forego motherhood altogether if they did not deem their circumstances suitable for bringing a child into the world. This is because the 'cult of motherhood' (Sant Cassia 1992) dictated to middle-class Athenians that they 'ought' to reproduce at least once in order to be 'complete' as women, whereas the 'cult of individualism' enabled middle-class Londoners, like Vera and Frances, to evade motherhood in favour of expressing their 'individuality'.

While Rich (1976, p.255) claims that throughout history, societies have envisioned the childless woman as a 'failed woman,' among British informants, both parents and non-parents, those who 'chose' not to procreate were believed to be exercising their 'choice'. Contrary to suggestions in the press and elsewhere (Houseknecht 1987), it seems that 'voluntarily childless' adults' impression that they were stigmatised or perceived negatively by society were largely unfounded. Moreover, as journalist, Jane Phillimore, pointed out in *The Observer* (05/05/2002), 'the question is not about why childless women don't have children, but about the honest reasons why some women do.' By casting doubt on dominant conceptions of femininity, which 'conflate woman with mother' (Gillespie 2003, p.133), the 'childfree' exposed the underlying cause of the majority of informants' inclination to mother: the expectation that if they did not, they would be foregoing an experience fundamental to being a woman.

I never thought, 'I really, really want to have children.' In the back of my mind, there was always a question that I would be missing out on something ... a huge experience that lots of other people were having. And it wasn't a burning issue for me but that was always at the back of my mind: 'if I don't do this, you know, I might be missing out on things without realising' ... that is absolutely right - I would have missed out on a huge amount. Um, so yeah ... As I say, when I look back I am so glad that I did it but if - I guess I am quite different to other people - but, um, if I had not had children it would never have bothered me ... if you decide not to have them, you will find fulfilment, you know, in your lives in other ways, and I would never say to people, 'oh yes you should have a child.' I would never say that. I would say, 'whatever decision you make will be the right decision for you.' Yes, you will miss out on things by not having them but equally you will be able to do things that those of us who do have children will not be able to do (Nancy, 41, married, 1 child, not working).

I mean like I say, I was very much focused on just enjoying life ... and very much unconsciously, at the back of my mind, I must have thought, 'oh, I'll probably be like most people. I probably will have children at some point. 'Cause, I remember reading – this is probably later – but I was reading somewhere that 92 per cent of all people do have children and that made me think, 'well, if most people do it, it probably is a good thing. I don't know enough about it to be really anti-it, so I'll go with the crowd. If that's what most people do then there must a reason for it, you know? I don't know enough to say, 'no, I'm not doing it. To go against the majority you must have a good reason (Moira, 33, married, 1 child, not working).

Unlike Nancy and Moira, the 'childfree' women I met problematised the idea that motherhood is the 'sine qua non of womanhood' (Meyers 2001, p.760). For example, Iris, a married 41-year-old 'childfree' woman, rejected the notion that motherhood 'completes' a woman. 'I think you are complete when you are born,' she told me. 'I don't think that motherhood defines you. My job, my family and my friends complete me and I think I have a better marriage, in many ways, than people who have children.' While the 'childfree' women Gillespie (2003, p.133) interviewed partly explained their motivation to remain childless by highlighting the 'pull' of the freedom and the opportunities associated with their lifestyle, they mainly emphasised 'the push away from motherhood as a normative female gender marker.' 'These women,' Gillespie (2003, p.133) argues, 'reflect a radical departure from hegemonic understandings that to be a woman is inextricably bound to motherhood.' Iris, and the other 'childfree' women I spoke with, expressed a similar defiance.

## 11.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have attempted to give a comprehensive account of British informants' attitudes towards motherhood and, where appropriate, their experiences of it. While motherhood and mothering are often subject to academic scrutiny, researchers rarely consider them in order to understand fertility levels. Yet women's expectations of motherhood and their feelings about mothering play a key role in shaping their approaches to childbearing, often in counter-intuitive ways. Compared to Athenian informants, the London-based women I interviewed, both with and without children, painted a rather negative picture of the role of the mother. Although, to a certain extent, this distinction may be due to cultural differences in the manner in which each group chose to present itself, it also corresponds to a divergence in the value of motherhood attributed by the society to which each cluster of women belonged.

The British mothers with whom I spoke said they felt isolated and overwhelmed by the task of looking after their children, as a result of which many felt the need to share some of their childcare responsibilities with others (nurseries, playgroups, nannies etc). They also presented a

radical irreconcilable schism between their identities as mothers and as (career-) women and most longed to remain in or return to the workforce as quickly as possible in order to regain a sense of control over their lives. At the same time, they felt guilty for not living up to the middle-class 'ideal' of the content 'stay-at-home mother' or 'worker'. The anxiety caused by these competing ideologies, seemed to make British informants more accepting of the idea of 'voluntary childlessness' or the 'childfree', but also more willing than their Greek counterparts to have an average of two or three children in order to offset their feelings of guilt. In order to make sense of these and previous findings, it is necessary to review the differences and similarities between Greek and British informants' attitudes towards childbearing and experiences of family-formation in relation to their ideas about motherhood and womanhood. This is the aim of the ensuing and concluding chapter in this thesis.



## 12 CONCLUSION

The ethnographies presented in the first and second part of this thesis, examined the influences upon the family-formation practices of two distinct groups of middle-class women living in contemporary Athens and London respectively. The focus of both investigations was the interplay of ideas and experiences relating to motherhood, mothering, womanhood and reproduction. The findings from each research site were subject to independent appraisal in a bid to provide a holistic picture of the forces operational in each one. While it is possible to discern a great deal about low and 'lowest-low' fertility by considering the Greek and British interviews separately, at this stage of the analysis a more instructive approach is to compare the outcomes of both enquiries. Even here, however, the purpose is not to overlook the idiosyncrasies of the two groups in favour of the similarities between them. Instead, the aim is to assess why and how the particular meanings that Athenians and Londoners attach to such concepts as motherhood and womanhood result in distinctive understandings of childbearing, and what lessons these distinctions can teach us about fertility behaviour in general and in Europe more specifically.

### 12.1 A tale of two cities: revisiting the key themes

A dominant theme throughout this thesis has been that of motherhood. As Chapters 6 and 11 demonstrated, ideas and experiences pertaining to being a mother differed considerably among Greek and British informants, with profound implications upon their attitudes and approaches to childbearing. While female residents of *Nea Smyrni* and neighbouring municipalities, perceived motherhood as a 'duty' to their families, society, God and the nation, those living in and around Hammersmith and Fulham described it as a 'choice'. Consequently, whereas Athenian mothers deemed the act of childrearing to be of social significance, those in London defined it in terms of personal value. Accordingly, Greek women experienced anxiety over their mothering skills and not, as their British counterparts, guilt. These differences hint at the presence of two distinct 'cultures of responsibility'. The London study participants appeared to believe that they were only answerable to themselves for their actions, and thus blamed themselves for any perceived wrongdoing in relation to their conduct as mothers. In contrast, Athenians seemed to feel accountable to others (ranging from their family to society to God and the nation) and not to hold themselves wholly responsible for any perceived misconduct pertaining to their parenting; hence the absence of guilt in their narratives.

The divergence in British and Greek informants' sense of accountability and, by implication, blameworthiness, seemed to shape their perceptions and experiences of reproduction. Whereas Athenians

felt a compulsion to have children, they did not blame themselves for the difficulties involved in being mothers. This led to a distinct attitude toward childcare and childrearing. In fact, Athenians, like the Andalusians studied by Collier (1997), did not speak of 'childcare'. The word is actually absent from the Greek language, which suggests that in the minds of informants caring for children was not as highly structured an activity as it was for the British. Like the women from Los Olivos, Athenians believed that 'a good mother ... kept her children clean, well fed, safe from harm, and provided with encouragement to discover and develop their abilities. But she did not have to "rear" them. Children grew by themselves' (Collier 1997, p.175). Although Greek women felt anxious about their children's upbringing, their duty was to raise as many 'good' and responsible Greek citizens as their circumstances permitted. Given the lack of state support for families and the absence of childcare facilities, as well as the expense involved in raising children, they believed that having one or at most two offspring fulfilled their duties as 'good' Greek mothers. At the same time, they were reluctant to forego childbearing altogether and inclined to frown on the concept of 'voluntary' childlessness because, under the spell of the 'cult' of motherhood, they felt obliged to procreate at least once. British women, on the contrary, were sympathetic to the idea of and willing to embrace a 'childfree' life because it was not their duty to mother. The sense of guilt that enveloped those who did 'choose' to reproduce, however, made motherhood a stressful experience and childcare a highly demanding undertaking. At the same time, having one child was 'wrong' and most strove to have at least two or three children in order to ensure that they, as responsible mothers, gave their children the best start in life possible.

Yet, the distinct 'cultures of responsibility' observed between the two groups was not the only source of difference in their approaches to reproduction. Ideas relating to gendered personhood and gender identity were also influential. As Chapter 7 showed, for Greek informants having children was essential to becoming 'complete' persons. Equally important, however, was being a 'good' woman - autonomous, self-sufficient and pleasure-seeking. Athenians believed that motherhood and womanhood were complimentary states of being, at least in theory; in other words, being a mother was as fundamental to the completion of female personhood and the construction of feminine identity as being a self-reliant woman. Among British informants, on the other hand, motherhood was less critical to achieving female personhood; that is, being a mother was not central to being 'complete' as a person. A much more significant step on the road to fulfilment was becoming independent, both emotionally and financially. The value British middle-class women attached to having a career was an upshot of this conviction, as were the negative connotations that informants claimed adhered to

being 'just' mothers. Nevertheless, on a practical level, motherhood and womanhood were more easily reconcilable in London than in Athens.

In the Greek capital, part-time work or flexible employment was hard to obtain in the private sector, and few such positions were available in the first place. Yet, as Maria's story illustrated in Chapter 5 (Section 5.7), women of all ages even had trouble getting full-time jobs. While the public sector offered flexible working hours, the pay was considerably lower than in private companies and the entry process fiercely competitive, and often subject to having a *meson* ('contacts'). In addition, voluntary organisations or networks catering for parents and families were almost non-existent, presenting few alternatives to state or private childcare facilities, of which, in any case, there were only a small number. Although British informants were critical of the nature of the labour market too, claiming that it continued to discriminate against mothers and families by developing few opportunities for flexible and part-time work, professional women in London had a greater chance of working while their children were in their care than their Athenian counterparts. Civil society was also very different in Athens and London with organisations such as the National Childbirth Trust and other parenting networks, such as mother and toddler groups, providing an invaluable source of support for British middle-class mothers, especially straight after their transition to motherhood.

Ideas pertaining to the person in general, also appeared to have an effect upon women's attitudes towards childcare and mothering. As argued in the opening paragraphs of Chapter 11, 'individualism' is central to the construction of English personhood. For British mothers, therefore, the ideal is to raise self-determining adults. It is possible to hypothesize that partly due to this reason, London informants, contrary to those based in Athens, were not as accepting of the idea of stopping childbearing after having their first child. Parents, they feared, were much more likely to spoil only children and therefore obstruct their path to independence. In addition, they worried that without siblings children would grow up lacking the social skills necessary to cope with society at large (Chapter 11, Section 11.4). In contrast, as the conversation between the focus-group participants from *Nea Smyrni* suggested (Chapter 5, Section 5.4), prolonged and intensive childcare was not conceptualised as a sign of bad but of good mothering among middle-class Athenians. Moreover, the dependence of children on their parents well into their twenties and early thirties was not subject to disapproval because it was both desirable and a perceived consequence of unfavourable socio-economic conditions – yet another sign of how differently the two groups chose to attribute blame.

In combination, these differences explain variations in informants' attitudes towards having children and family building practices. That motherhood and womanhood were essential components of female personhood and, theoretically, compatible aspects of feminine identity made 'voluntary' childlessness all the more unpopular among Athenians. However, the lack of support for mothers and, in particular, those fortunate to be working mothers, was a major obstacle to the process of family-formation and a constraint upon family size, as were expectations of long-term childcare. Among British informants, the non-compulsory character of motherhood, the importance of careers to the construction of feminine identity, and the dominant model of personhood, which celebrated the 'individual', all resulted in a more positive stance towards 'child-freedom'. Ironically, however, the London women had a better chance of combining their lives as mothers and workers effectively. Even those who had taken the decision to abandon their careers upon having children felt less isolated than their Athenian equals and less pressured into providing long-term childcare, although they may not always themselves have perceived their lives from this perspective. This gave those willing, the opportunity to consider having a third child – a prospect deemed unthinkable by the majority of women in Athens.

While a family consisting of three or more children was a more frequent phenomenon in the past, today only a few Athenians, currently known as the *polyteknoi*, claimed to want or to have more than two offspring. Like the 'childfree,' the *polyteknoi*, provided a window through which to assess mainstream perceptions and experiences of reproduction. The re-definition, a year after my fieldwork, of a *polytekni oikogenia* ('large family') as one with three rather than four or more children, points to the rarity of families with high parity births and to mounting government fears that 'underfertility' was becoming a major national problem. Yet the mixed response to the presence of and concessions to the *polyteknoi* by the non-*polyteknoi* also alludes to the co-existence of competing notions of 'good' motherhood in contemporary Athenian society, and to two different reproductive ideologies. Although both groups appeared to deviate from the principles supposed to inform their actions, the *polyteknoi* claimed to believe that God would provide for them and their children, and that family-formation best remained in the hands of God, while the non-*polyteknoi* assumed that each pregnancy had to be wanted and, therefore, planned. Yet if the *polyteknoi* had truly left reproduction up to God's will, without using any form of contraception, they would have had far more than three, four or five children. Likewise, the non-*polyteknoi* were not always able to plan their pregnancies, thus not all them were 'wanted.' In addition, while the former placed less emphasis on material goods, the latter did not discard their importance. Moreover, unlike mothers of 'large families' for whom motherhood and womanhood were synonymous, those with 'few' children appeared to

adhere to the belief that a woman and a mother were separate states of being and female sexuality independent from reproduction.

The *polyteknoi* and the non-*polyteknoi* were not altogether different, however. Although the *polyteknoi* were much more vocal about their concern over the loss of the Greek nation (Chapter 6, Section 6.6), it seemed likely that the *ligoteknoi* ('those with few children') were also driven by the idea that it was better to produce few 'good' Greek citizens rather than many 'bad' ones. This places a question mark on Kitsa's suggestion (Chapter 5, Section 5.10) that national and private interests in relation to reproduction are entirely divorced from each other. Finally, the absence of a term equivalent to the *polyteknoi* among British informants suggests less anxiety about the phenomenon of low fertility as well as a greater frequency of families with above two children.

Irrespective of Greek and British informants' distinct perceptions and experiences of motherhood, mothering and womanhood, their views and approaches to reproduction did not always differ. Both groups appeared to agree that everyone ought to try to have two children (although this was the maximum number for the Athenians and the minimum number for the Londoners). I could also discern little variation in terms of women's ideal and actual timing of the transition to motherhood, as well as the manner in which they deliberated over when to enter into the process of family building. Many of the arguments in Chapter 10, in fact apply to both sets of study participants, hence the absence of an equivalent chapter in Part 1. According to female informants in Athens and London, the best time for a woman to have children was in her late twenties or early thirties, and among those I spoke with who already had children those were the age groups at which most had initiated the start of childbearing.

Similarly, both groups of mothers arrived at the process of family-formation with expectations about motherhood but not full control over the events leading it up to it. While Athenian informants were less likely to ponder over whether or not to have children, they were as prone to hesitation, conflict and uncertainty as regards the 'right' time to become pregnant and the 'right' number of children to have, as those I interviewed in London. Therefore, stories of 'planned accidents' and 'accidental plans' were present in equal measure in the narratives I gathered from both cities. Likewise, both Greek and British women's reproductive practices, particularly the timing of the transition to motherhood, were subject to influence by their husbands or partners and other individuals, mainly friends and family members. Even a propos the conditions necessary to have ready prior to initiating the start of family-formation were comparable in each city. Athenians and Londoners alike claimed that the completion of their studies, financial

security, a steady job, a stable relationship (preferably in the form of a marital union), a roof over their head, and a period of living a carefree existence, ideally had to have been in place before the creation of a family. While such circumstances were often beyond the control of either group, both were equally determined to establish them before becoming parents.

## **12.2 The Greek and British media debates**

Yet according to the Greek and British print media, plenty of reasons were responsible for why individuals were unable to plan for their families in the ways that they deemed suitable, and why ultimately they ended up having fewer children than they might originally have hoped for. While some reasons presented in the Greek and British press were comparable, others were not. Featuring in Chapters 5 and 9, for example, was the cost involved in raising children, the rise in infertility and abortions, and changes to the organisation of the family. In the Greek and British print media, as well as Greek popular opinion, the breakdown of marriage and the rise in the divorce rate were seen to play a significant role in diverting people from having children. For all three, this was due, in turn, to the excessive pursuit of pleasure (see Chapter 5, Section 5.8 and Chapter 9, Section 9.6). Yet 'hyper-consumption', job insecurity and unemployment, the role of the state, as well as the 'crisis' in gender and sexuality were exclusively Greek concerns, while the rise in female higher education, the work-life balance, childlessness and the rise of one-child families troubled only the British press. These disparities are, in part, a reflection of the idiosyncratic character of the populations in question and of the differences in the socio-economic environment in which each debate transpired, but they also reveal differences in disquiet over the source and direction of societal and demographic change.

To begin with, in both countries, press reports regarding fertility trends but also the factors associated with them, were largely erroneous if compared with the 'truth' of academic articles reporting on the same issues. Therefore, rather than a reflection of circumstances pertaining to reproduction, they demonstrated a misunderstanding of fertility and fertility-related topics. On the one hand, this highlights the lack of public instruction in the reading of demographic data and reports, as well as the tendency of the press to exaggerate and distort events and situations to suit their interests and to provoke their readers. On the other hand, it is an expression of deep-seated popular trepidations. For example, both 'hyper-consumption' and the 'crisis' in gender and sexuality that the Greek press as well as Athenian informants described as being two of the main causes of 'underfertility', are suggestive of a general fear in the loss of 'tradition' and the demise of Greek culture in exchange for foreign morals. The idea that 'underfertility' was a product of changes in gender roles and relations also reflects public anxiety over male homosexuality

and the sidetracking of females away from their responsibilities as mothers and, consequently, as guardians of the family, society and, ultimately, the nation.

Similarly, emphasis on one-child families by the British press was unwarranted, exposing a deep-rooted concern by the media in only children rather than a growing trend. Contrary to what newspapers assumed (Chapter 9, Section 9.9) one-child families in England and Wales are less common among the most recent female cohorts than they were among women born in the 1920s. Yet as mentioned above, only children are problematic since they threaten to contravene the principle of English 'individualism'. Ironically, I never came across any articles in the Greek press about one child families, even though demographic data reveal that only children are on the increase in Greece. Likewise, the idea that high house prices have a negative impact on fertility derives from the print media's and perhaps the public's angst over the rising cost of housing rather than empirical evidence of a relationship between smaller families and a booming property market.

Considerable divergence between the Greek and British print media debates was also discernible regarding the extent to which low fertility was an outcome of government policies. Both informants and the press in Greece, for instance, believed that the state was largely to blame for the country's 'underfertility' (Chapter 5, Section 5.6). While family-friendly policies and assistance with childcare costs of the kind available in France received positive press coverage in the UK, I found modest evidence in the British press holding the government or its policies responsible for the country's below-replacement fertility. Although government assistance for families appeared to be negligible in Greece in comparison to the UK, the disproportionate level of grievance between the British and the Greeks was not attributable to differences in state intervention alone. To a certain extent, this discrepancy was a further expression of different 'cultures of responsibility'. As the Patricia Hewitt incident discussed in Chapter 11 (Section 11.2) demonstrated, in the British print media's view government involvement in reproductive matters was wholly unacceptable because it was an infringement upon personal freedom.

Looked at from a broader perspective, this variance is also a sign of unequal degrees of public anguish over the issue of below-replacement fertility. As argued throughout this thesis, low fertility did not appear to worry London-based informants to the same extent as it did Athenians. In fact, in comparison to the latter, the former lacked awareness of the subject, and were disinclined to express an opinion when asked about it. The press in either country was also concerned in different ways. While both sets of newspapers reported on the issue, the Greek print media had more detailed coverage than did the British. They were also much more

inclined to discuss it in terms of its effects on the fate of the nation. Since 'underfertility' was of disastrous national consequence, according to the Greek press and informants it was the responsibility of the state to do something about it. If the Greek government was interested to raise the country's birth rate, Athenians told me, it had to present them with enough incentives to reproduce.

The causes of low fertility or 'underfertility' debated in Greek and British newspapers diverged not only from each other but also from informants' personal narratives of family-formation. Not only were certain issues absent altogether from the interviews I recorded, but the relevance to fertility of those issues present in both informants' and the print media's accounts differed when discussed in the abstract than when placed in the context of individuals' lives. For example, the opinions and experiences of informants in both cities did not appear to reflect the idea that low fertility was a product of a breakdown in the family unit. The majority of middle-class women I met in Athens and London were married and believed that a marital union provided the most suitable environment in which to raise children. Moreover, although both sets of female interviewees had aspirations beyond motherhood, for most of them creating a family was a desirable prospect that they were not intending to sacrifice in favour of a hedonistic lifestyle, as the press alleged. Although this is largely because of the nature of my sample, it does question the argument that female higher education and women's greater work engagements unavoidably lead to lower fertility.

Other causes mentioned in the print media debates over low fertility did appear to be in evidence in informants' narratives. Yet their presentation was not identical in both contexts. Overall, both sets of newspapers assumed that deliberations over whether or not to have children, and if so, when and how many, were always the outcome of conscious and rational decision-making. As Chapter 10 clearly demonstrated this was not always the case among informants based in London, and the same applies in Athens. Consequently, the suggestion in both the Greek and the British print media, as well as Athenians' popular opinion, that low fertility was largely a product of the exorbitant cost of childcare and childrearing, or *to oikonomiko* (the 'economic issue'), as Athenians preferred to call it, is partially flawed. This is because it centres on the idea that prior to initiating the start of family-formation individuals or couples assess the financial costs they are likely to incur upon having children. As women in both field sites told me, the expense involved in raising a family becomes apparent during the course of its creation not before. Moreover, financial considerations did not appear to be at the forefront of their minds when considering whether to have additional children. While this is not a sign that economic factors are unimportant to the process of family building, it does indicate that the



cost involved in raising children is in large measure subject to personal circumstances and value judgements, not all of which, in turn, depend on conscious or rational calculations.

The notion that low fertility was an outcome of planning and choice was also responsible for shaping the print media's perceptions of women's attitudes towards having children and approaches to reproduction. Yet set against informants' personal narratives of family-formation they too appeared erroneous. For example, the dominant view in the British press was that the 'work-life' balance issue was a major cause of low fertility, driven by women 'opting for careers' rather than motherhood, thus delaying the process of childbearing and ending up with fewer children than they might otherwise have done. As argued in Chapter 11 (Section 11.4), postponing motherhood does not necessarily lead to lower fertility. In addition, the obstacles to family formation created by having a career were a product of far less 'choice' than suggested by the British press. While informants did claim to want to fulfil their career aspirations, it was not at the expense of motherhood. At the same time, women's engagement in the labour market was not the sole reason that they delayed having children until their late twenties and thirties, or even later. The lack of suitable partners and the feeling that they were simply not 'ready' were equally important barriers to family building.

In addition, as cross-cultural evidence cited in Chapter 11 (Section 11.4) indicates, and as a comparison with Athenian women's perceptions also suggests, the conflict assumed by London-based informants between their professional and family lives was not simply a product of their struggle to manage two incompatible loads of responsibilities. Work is not by its nature irreconcilable with motherhood. While some jobs may be less accommodating to family life than others, it is often the perceived separation between work and home that makes them incongruous. For many of the British women I met, the different values attributed to their roles as workers and mothers, and the guilt they suffered from attempting to combine the two through childcare, points to the severe discord between notions of work and motherhood. At the same time, few Londoners described having a career or a baby as 'optional' because for most, combining both was important to their identities as women, as well as often being economically essential.

The 'work-life' balance issue was absent from the Greek popular imagination and the Greek press. Although women's 'emancipation' was a cause of 'underfertility', the premise that women's loyalties were divided between work and home was not widely subject to debate. Female informants, on the other hand, did talk about the difficulties involved in combining work with family life but they did not appear as

torn about multi-tasking as did their British counterparts. While Greek women expressed feeling worn-out trying to fulfil simultaneously their responsibilities to their families and their employers, they did not experience guilt on account of the compromises they felt they had to make as workers and mothers. This was partly because grandparents - a trusted source of support - often assisted with childcare, but it also relates to Athenians' perceptions of work and home. Perhaps due to the low proportion of Greek women in the workforce relative to other European countries but possibly also because of the high social value attributed to motherhood, neither the press nor female informants expressed a sense of divided loyalty between work and home. Women were, above all, mothers and their engagement in the labour market was essential as an extra source of income at a time when life in the capital had become very expensive. In a way, Athenian women's labour force participation was necessary to being 'good' modern-day mothers.

Far more difficult to reconcile with motherhood were Athenians' roles as consumers. A common belief among informants and the Greek press was that 'hyper-consumption' was a major cause of 'underfertility'. Concern with appearance and material goods also emerged as significant in my encounters with women in Athens and it did appear to affect their attitudes towards reproduction. Yet, contrary to the Greek print media's belief and Greek popular opinion, consumerism was neither enforced nor trivial, and it was not always a source of pleasure but of anxiety. In addition, a fondness for consumption among Athenian women was not necessarily at odds with their attempts to be 'good' mothers but rather with their potential to care for more than one or two children. As argued in Chapter 7 (Section 7.6), looking after their appearance was a means to achieving 'modern' personhood and a way to display their family's affluence. It was also a method used to demonstrate their children's well-being. However, keeping up appearances was not always easy to do whilst also trying to stay on top of their duties as mothers, as Athena revealed (Chapter 7, Section 7.6). In sum, while British mothers claimed to lose their identities when having to put their careers on hold, be it temporarily, Greek mothers claimed to feel a lack of confidence in their abilities and in their selves upon having less time to make themselves look attractive.

### **12.3 Lessons regarding low and 'lowest-low' fertility**

The constraints and opportunities to family-formation faced by informants in Athens and London are not the same as those confronted by individuals in below-replacement fertility regimes everywhere. They are, above all, dependent on issues specific to their class and gender, and the particular meanings attached to them in each setting. Therefore, while it is impossible to explain low and 'lowest-low' fertility based on the ideas and experiences of the women interviewed in this study, it is

possible to learn from them. To begin with, evidence that informants' approaches to childbearing varied because of their educational and professional background, suggests that explanations of below-replacement fertility cannot but incorporate such variables as class, education and employment status. Therefore, theories concerning the forces that have led to the European fertility decline and that continue to result in falling birth rates in some regions of Europe, cannot assume that the ideological and practical constraints to childbearing are the same both across and within the societies in question.

Yet even taking into account such broad characteristics as class is not enough to account for low fertility differentials. As the Greek and British women demonstrated, though both educated to more or less equally high level and in comparable professions (such as doctors, lawyers and teachers), they still had relatively different perspectives on reproduction. This is because they continued to face structural constraints unique to the context in which they lived, and to hold historically-specific ideas concerning motherhood, mothering and womanhood, which informed their attitudes towards and experiences of family building. This does not mean, of course, that the two groups of women I interviewed in Athens and London did not share certain ideas and practices pertaining to childbearing or, for that matter, motherhood, mothering and womanhood. After all, they did have, to a certain extent, mutual sources of influence, both in the present and over time, as would individuals from other European countries. Nevertheless, they remained attached to locally-developed and locally-interpreted values and experiences, as remains the case for most other Europeans.

A fundamental lesson learnt from this comparative ethnographic investigation, therefore, concerns the manner in which demographic explanations of low and 'lowest-low' fertility treat the variables they choose in order to support their hypotheses. As shown throughout this thesis, the same concepts looked at in both field sites contained rather different meanings for Greek and British informants, with distinct implications upon their attitudes and approaches towards having children. Similar concepts within each group also had a unique relationship to each other. As the previous section argued, for example, although work and motherhood were equally important aspects of feminine identity in Athens and London, unlike the British women interviewed, Greek women did not perceive motherhood as entirely opposed to working nor as of inferior social value.

Finally, due to demographers' insistence in perceiving variations in below-replacement fertility in terms of differences in quantity rather than quality, their explanations remain focused on the individual or couple and their characteristics. This is a function of the survey methodology

intrinsic to demography. Unlike ethnographic approaches, surveys rely on information largely based on their respondents in order to build a picture of the environment in which their research is set. They also depend on the more normative level of experience rather than what people actually do when observed or what they reveal they do when permitted to talk about their lives in an open-ended discussion. Anthropologists, in contrast, use evidence stemming from both informants' and their own personal observations, and from other sources (such as the media), to understand the context from which certain ideas and practices derive. They are thus able to understand what people actually do rather than what they think they *ought* to do, the latter being what surveys typically manage to establish. Like other processes, reproduction does not occur in a vacuum, subject to the whim of individuals and their partners. Childbearing is the outcome of influences from a range of persons, including friends, parents and siblings, and of numerous structural conditions. The ethnographic nature of this research made it possible to see why and how this occurred in two different urban European low fertility settings. Therefore, while population-level patterns remain important to directing research, it is by listening to people's experiences first-hand and by observing their behaviour that broad-scale trends can begin to make sense.

#### **12.4 Future research**

Findings from this study bring to light a series of issues and questions in need of further investigation. While these stem from and, therefore, relate specifically to the middle-class informants from Athens and London, some of them are relevant to groups other than the two looked at in this enquiry.

1. **Men:** Absent from this investigation were men. Although I attempted to speak to as many men as possible in each field site, the methods I used and the contacts I made in each city resulted in this being a predominantly female-centred study. Yet the following questions are of interest: What are middle-class Greek and British men's perceptions and experiences of reproduction in Athens and London respectively? Do men and women from each group have similar attitudes towards having children and comparable feelings about parenthood? To what extent do fertility outcomes depend on these men's attitudes to family-formation? What is the link between fatherhood, fathering and reproduction among each set of informants? Do middle-class Athenian men's ideas about and experiences of reproduction differ from those based in London? Are there similar expectations of men in each city to become fathers, and does the number of children they have matter? What are men's thoughts on women's approaches to childbearing? Finally, what are Greek and British men's views on

- ‘voluntary childlessness’ and are there ‘childfree’ men in each place? What are their views on fatherhood and having children?
2. **Inter-generational differences:** Throughout the course of both studies, I wondered about the inter-generational differences in the attitudes and experiences of reproduction of each group. Due to the nature of this study, I ended up speaking to mothers mainly in their 30s and 40s rather than older mothers or women in their 20s who did not yet have children. Are there differences in perceptions and experiences of family-formation among middle-class women (and men) belonging to different age groups in contemporary Athens and London, and do they show up in the fertility behaviour of each? What aspect of fertility behaviour do variations in such opinions affect? What are young, single and childless Greek and British middle-class women’s (and men’s) fertility aspirations, if any? How well thought-out are their reproductive ambitions? Do Athenian and Londoners’ views differ considerably? To what extent is remaining childless acceptable among each group? Do older generations of women (and men) appear to influence the reproductive aspirations of their children and grandchildren? If so, in what way do they do so? Is it in a manner encouraging or discouraging of ‘large’ families?
  3. **Polyteknoi:** Given that I spoke to only a few of the *polyteknoi* (‘those with many children’) in Athens, I would like to know more about their history as a group. When did the term first appear and why? How many different organisations of *polyteknoi* are there and how similar are they? What are their aims and objectives? What do they think about the shift in the definition of the term *polytekni oikogenia* from one that consists of four or more children to one containing three and above? How do families with more than two children feel about the label *polyteknoi*? Do they all have attachments to these formal organisations? What are the attitudes of the *polyteknoi* towards the *ligoteknoi* (‘those with few children’)? How different are their perceptions and experiences of reproduction?
  4. **‘Childfree’:** Just as I did not manage to interview many *polyteknoi* in Athens, so I was not able to find and converse with a large number of ‘childfree’ Londoners. Numerous questions therefore remain unanswered with respect to the ‘childfree’: When did the term start gaining popularity and how do ‘voluntarily childless’ men and women feel about using it? How do ‘childfree’ individuals come to the realisation that they do not want to have children? What are the initial reactions of family, friends and work colleagues to that recognition? How does being ‘childfree’ affect their relationships with friends, family, and work colleagues? How far are they willing to go to guarantee that they

remain 'childfree'? What do the 'childfree' think about representations of themselves in the media?

5. **Media:** What are Greek and British mothers and fathers' reactions in general to the media's suggestions of their respective contributions to low fertility? Do they feel that the constraints to childbearing that they face are subject to just representation and discussion in the media? How affected are they by what they read in the press regarding matters pertaining to reproduction, such as the 'biological clock', 'infertility', 'the work-life balance' and 'the postponement of parenthood'? How do young, childless women and men react to the same stories? Do they take any notice of them? If so, do they make them feel anxious about their own reproductive futures?

Ethnographic studies inspired by European demographic trends present anthropologists with many challenges but also with plenty of opportunities to test, re-evaluate and improve the theoretical and methodological tools at their disposal. They also provide them with occasions to enrich the field of anthropology at 'home' and to demonstrate the discipline's potential to contribute to the assumptions of demography. As this thesis has shown, and as the further questions it has generated demonstrate, the anthropological demography of Europe is a promising field with endless potential to grow. Most importantly, it is proof of the value of inter-disciplinary research.

## APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW AND INFORMANT CHARACTERISTICS

		Athens	London
Types of interview	Total number of interviews	106	79
	Focus groups	1 (0.94%)	1 (1.3%)
	Taped interviews	18 (including focus group) (17%)	21 (including focus group) (26.6%)
	Interviews recorded by hand	88 (83%)	58 (73.4%)
	Interviews memorised	1 (0.94%)	1 (1.3%)
	Interviews at home	17 (16%)	27 (including focus group)
	Interviews in playgroups	76 (71.6%)	42 (53.2%)
	Interviews elsewhere	13 (including focus group) 12.3%)	11 (14%)
	Interviews with couples	13 (12.3%)	3 (3.8%)
Informants	Total number of informants	127 (excluding focus group)	82 (excluding focus group)
Sex	Female informants	90 (70.9%)	76 (92.7%)
	Male informants	37 (29.1%)	6 (7.3%)
Age	20-29	8 (6.3%)	7 (8.5%)
	30-35	23 (18.1%)	26 (31.7%)
	36-39	12 (9.4%)	20 (24.4%)
	40-49	37 (29.1%)	15 (18.3%)
	50+	17 (13.4%)	9 (11%)
	Age unknown	30 (23.6%)	5 (6.1%)
Marital status	Married	97 (76.4%)	66 (80.5%)
	Cohabiting	0 (0%)	8 (9.8%)

	Single	6 (4.7%)	5 (6.1%)
	Divorced	17 (13.4%)	1 (1.2%)
	Remarried	2 (1.6%)	0 (0%)
	Widowed	3 (2.4%)	1 (1.2%)
	Marital status unknown	2 (1.6%)	1 (1.2%)
Employment status	F/T employment	72 (48 of whom women) (56%)	15 (18.3%)
	P/T employment	4 (3 of whom women) (3.1%)	15 (18.3%)
	On maternity leave	1 (0.78%)	10 (12.2%)
	Not employed	9 (7.1%)	35 (42.7%)
	Self-employed	5 (2 of whom women) (3.9%)	1 (1.2%)
	Student	1 (female) (0.78%)	1 (1.2%)
	Retired	5 (4 of whom women) (3.9%)	3 (3.7%)
	Unknown employment status	30 (23.6%)	2 (2.4%)
Education	University degree or above	70 (55.1%)	54 (65.9%)
	No university degree	17 (13.4%)	16 (19.5%)
	Education unknown	40 (31.5%)	12 (14.6%)
Number of children	One child	44 (2 of whom also pregnant) (34.6%)	33 (2 of whom also pregnant) (40.2%)
	Two children	62 (1 of whom also pregnant) (48.8%)	36 (5 of whom also pregnant) (43.9%)
	Three children	4 (3.1%)	6 (7.3%)
	Four or > children	4 (3.1%)	1 (1.2%)
	No children/'childfree'	9 (one of whom pregnant) (7%)	4 (all of whom 'childfree') (4.9%)
	Unknown number of children	4 (3.1%)	2 (2.4%)



Age of youngest child	Five years old and under	22 (17.3%)	60 (73.1%)
	Over five years old	28 (22%)	11 (13.4%)
	Unknown	68 (53.5%)	7 (8.5%)
	No children/‘childfree’	9 (one of whom pregnant) (7%)	4 (all of whom ‘childfree’) (4.9%)

## APPENDIX II: SIZE, AREA AND DENSITY OF THE POPULATION OF GREECE, CENSUSES AND ESTIMATIONS 1821-2001

Year	Population	Surface area	Density	Comments
1821	938,765	47.516	19.8	Estimate according to population census carried out in 1828
1828	753,400	47.516	15.9	
1838	752,077	47.516	15.8	
1839	823,773	47.516	17.3	
1840	850,246	47.516	17.9	
1841	861,019	47.516	18.1	
1842	853,005	47.516	18	
1843	915,059	47.516	19.3	
1844	930,295	47.516	19.6	
1845	960,236	47.516	20.2	
1848	986,731	47.516	20.8	
1853	1,035,527	47.516	21.8	
1856	1,062,627	47.516	22.4	
1861	1,096,810	47.516	23.1	
1870	1,457,894	50.211	29	Following the annexation of the Ionian islands in 1864
1879	1,679,470	50.211	33.4	
1889	2,187,208	63.606	34.4	Following the annexation of Thessaly and Arta in 1881
1896	2,433,806	63.606	38.3	
1907	2,631,952	63.211	41.6	Following the annexation of a small piece of land in Thessaly in 1897
1920	5,016,889	127	39.5	Following the Lausanne Treaty in 1923.

1928	6,204,684	129.281	48	
1940	7,344,860	129.281	56.8	
1951	7,632,801	131.957	65.4	Following the annexation of the Dodecanese islands in 1947
1961	8,338,553	131.957	63.6	
1971	8,768,641	131.957	66.5	
1981	9,740,417	131.957	73.8	
1991	10,259,900	131.957	77.8	
2001	10,964,020	131.957	83.1	

Source: Papadakis and Tsimpos (2004)

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