

## 1. Introduction

The birth of a child is invariably regarded as a momentous, if not always desirable event both by its parents and the wider society wherever it occurs. The creation of a new life is an occurrence imbued with much meaning and is often surrounded by ritual, ceremony and myth. Of course, its precise significance varies. To an Indian farmer the birth of a son is an occasion for great rejoicing for sons provide essential labour to work the land. As one asserted, 'without sons, there is no living off the land. The more sons you have the less labour you need to hire, and the more savings you can have'.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, to an Icieen woman the birth of a child, though an occasion ideally requiring thanksgiving and celebration, in practice adds one more burden and difficulty, for a child makes demands on the supply of food which is almost always insufficient. Because of this a mother may leave her baby on the ground when she is gathering food 'almost hoping that some predator will come along and carry it off'.<sup>2</sup> To parents in our own society the birth of a child, especially the first, is normally a joyous and significant occasion, for children are widely regarded as an essential part of marriage and family life. As one woman said to us about having children, 'that is married life, really', whilst another commented, 'it's not a family unless you've got children'.

While the birth of a particular child may be significant only for the parents and family into which it is born, the birth of children in general is of great significance to the wider society to which the family belongs. *Rites de passage*, of which our society retains only a vestige in the christening ceremony, are the public recognition of the importance of new members to the social order. Society also recognises the importance of children in a rather different sense; leaders and rulers may, for instance, be interested in the size of the households of which their community is composed for purposes such as taxation; they may be interested in the number of births in the community, regarding the new members as potential manpower for military or economic purposes. At times such interests may take an extreme and striking form as when Hitler in 1935, desiring to perpetuate the Third Reich, proclaimed of women: 'Every child which she brings into the world is a battle which she wins for the existence or non-existence of her nation',<sup>3</sup> or when Mussolini in 1927 argued that:

To count for something in the world, Italy must have a population of at least 60 millions when she reaches the threshold of the second half of this century . . . It is a fact that the fate of nations is bound up with their demographic power . . . Let us be

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13447-7 - Thinking About Children: Sociology and Fertility in Post-War England

Joan Busfield and Michael Paddon

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 Introduction

frank with ourselves: what are 40 million Italians compared with 90 million Germans and 200 million Slavs?<sup>4</sup>

Nor have such chauvinist sentiments been restricted to avowed Fascists. Faced with the prospect of the declining birth rate in Britain in the 1930s Neville Chamberlain in 1935, when Chancellor of the Exchequer, had this to say:

I must say that I look upon the continued diminution of the birth rate in this country with considerable apprehension . . . the time may not be far distant . . . when . . . the countries of the British Empire will be crying out for more citizens of the right breed, and when we in this country shall not be able to supply the demand.<sup>5</sup>

It was from concerns like this about the size of population and the level of births, amongst others – though by no means always associated with such forceful nationalism – that a science of demography developed: a discipline concerned to record and measure numbers of persons, as well as the vital events of births and death, and the incidence of disease, marriage, migration and so forth, which constitute the dynamic forces that produce change and fluctuation in the size of populations (a concept itself first used in the seventeenth century).<sup>6</sup>

Our concern in this study is with one aspect of childbearing – with the quantity and tempo of childbearing in post-war England. In that sense our study is demographic. In other respects it is not. For demography is defined not only by its immediate subject matter but also by specific disciplinary traditions: traditions to which our own study does not conform. Demography has concentrated on, and been most successful in developing techniques of measurement and prediction (as its original name, political arithmetic, implied); in contrast the concern of our own study has been first and foremost with the *explanation* of demographic phenomena. The empirical data that we have collected does not (and was not intended to) match up to the standards of demographic measurement and compares unfavourably in this respect with data available from other sources.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, in focussing on the explanation of demographic phenomena rather than on measurement and prediction, we have drawn on ideas and ways of thinking that stem far more from sociology than from the traditions of economics and political economy to which demography has always been more closely bound.<sup>8</sup> More especially, in attempting to explain patterns of childbearing in post-war England we have found it necessary to turn back to, and examine the meaning and significance of children to the parents themselves, and to consider their ideas and beliefs about having children, as well as their ideas and beliefs about the family's social and economic circumstances and life more generally – concerns which demography, with its emphasis on aggregate phenomena and on techniques of measurement, has tended to eschew. Indeed the emphasis on measurement has not only meant that demography has given relatively low priority to

*Introduction* 3

explanatory questions, it has also influenced its approach to explanatory issues in other unfortunate ways.<sup>9</sup>

In the first place, demographers have tended to concentrate on producing *demographic* explanations of demographic phenomena. That is to say they have examined the influence of the conventional demographic variables (which can be measured relatively easily) on one another – such variables as age, population size, fertility, marriage and so on – rather than moving outside this set to other social and economic factors, even though most demographers recognise that in many cases there is a need to do so to produce satisfactory explanations of demographic phenomena. In that sense demographers have concentrated on the immediate correlates or causes of demographic phenomena and have often left others to concern themselves with extending the explanation beyond that point. Second, the concern with measurement has exacerbated, as well as reflected the empiricist orientation of the discipline; not only has measurement tended to become an end in itself, but ‘looking at the facts’, and preferably easily quantifiable facts, has often dominated any explanatory activity. Hence the atheoretical, survey-based approach of much of the research.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, and related to this, the emphasis on measurement has involved an atomistic and asocial approach to demographic phenomena which is antithetical to the more holistic and social approach that we argue in the following chapters is necessary for the task of explanation. From the point of view of measuring population growth it is reasonable to treat populations as sets of isolated individuals, to treat births and deaths, marriage and migration as events that happen to people, to abstract them from their social context, and to regard them as identical. Yet if one wants to explain changes in patterns of marriage and childbearing or even variations in the level of deaths, we have to accept that these events have both personal and social meaning which is not uniform in time and place, and we must accept that they often result from, and are affected by, the definite and intentional actions of those immediately concerned, and others. Of course, demographers do not always ignore action when dealing with explanation (it would be difficult to do so), yet neither of the two dominant theoretical traditions in the study of fertility, which we discuss in the following two chapters, pay much attention to the social and cultural context in which births occur.

Nonetheless, though we draw on sociological rather than demographic or economic traditions in this book, sociology does not provide us with much direct support, since, with the occasional significant exception, sociologists, especially in this country, have shown rather little interest in demographic phenomena. We have discussed elsewhere some of the few sociological theories in which population growth has been held to have an impact on the nature of social relationships.<sup>11</sup> But the task of explaining changes in

## 4 *Introduction*

population growth has attracted, if anything, even less sociological interest. What is especially surprising is the lack of interest shown in childbearing, as opposed to childrearing, by sociologists of the family. Presumably the sociologists' lack of interest must have resulted in part from the development of demography as a separate discipline, and must have been further exacerbated by, as well as reflected in, the fact that demography has been closely tied to economics: an example of the detrimental effects of disciplinary boundaries. Patterns of marriage and childbearing are just as much family and social phenomena as demographic and economic ones.

Demography must, however, provide the starting point of our explanatory activity for we need both to outline the changes that have occurred in the quantity and tempo of childbearing in post-war England, and to relate them to other demographic changes during the period and before. Let us, therefore, consider first the changes and variations in the birth rate in post-war England, and examine their immediate demographic origins.

### **I: The demographic changes**

The initial aim of our study was to account for changes in the crude birth rate in England since 1950; our dominant and more specific aim has been to account for differences in patterns of childbearing – in family size and the timing of births – within the population over the same period. The post-war period has been characterised by some marked fluctuations in the birth rate as Table 1:1 shows. After an immediate and expected post-war bulge in births the crude birth rate for England and Wales moved towards the level of the late 1930s (around 15.0 live births per thousand population) where it was expected to remain. But this did not happen. The first sign of a new increase became apparent in 1956 and the rate continued to rise steadily from then, reaching a peak of 18.7 in 1964, the highest level since 1947. Since then the birth rate for England and Wales has declined just as steadily and was 13.0 in 1974 the most recent year for which complete figures are available. (The provisional figures for the first two quarters of 1975 suggest that the overall rate for 1975 will be even lower.)<sup>12</sup> The figure for 1974 was the lowest ever recorded for England and Wales and the low level, which indicates, albeit imperfectly, a reduction in fertility, is already beginning to attract wider attention. Before that the lowest rates had been in the early years of the war (14.1 in 1940 and 13.9 in 1941) and around the height of the depression (14.4 in 1933).<sup>13</sup>

By comparison with the longer term changes in births over the previous century (the crude birth rate for the period 1871-80 was 35.3) neither the increase between 1956 and 1964 nor the subsequent decline appears to be of much demographic significance.<sup>14</sup> Were it not for the broader demographic

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13447-7 - Thinking About Children: Sociology and Fertility in Post-War England

Joan Busfield and Michael Paddon

Excerpt

[More information](#)TABLE 1:1 *Crude birth rate for England and Wales, 1945-1973*

Year	Total live births per 1,000 population of all ages	Year	Total live births per 1,000 population of all ages
1945	15.9	1960	17.1
1946	19.2	1961	17.6
1947	20.5	1962	18.0
1948	17.8	1963	18.2
1949	16.7	1964	18.5
1950	15.8	1965	18.1
1951	15.5	1966	17.7
1952	15.3	1967	17.2
1953	15.5	1968	16.9
1954	15.2	1969	16.3
1955	15.0	1970	16.0
1956	15.7	1971	16.0
1957	16.1	1972	14.8
1958	16.4	1973	13.7
1959	16.5	1974	13.0

Sources: *Statistical Review of England and Wales, 1972*, Part II, Table DI; H.M.S.O. 1974; *Population Trends*, 1, Table 12; H.M.S.O. 1975.

characteristics of England this might well be true. As it is the low death rates and the relatively low level of migration make changes even of this magnitude vital to overall population growth. From a demographic point of view the period in which we are interested falls within the third and final stage of the so-called 'demographic transition': the stage in which population growth, after a period of rapid expansion, slows down because both birth rates and death rates are relatively low. But though relatively low neither birth nor death rates are constant, and the precise level of births, in particular, can make a difference to the level of population growth that is far from insignificant.

A simple example shows the extent of the contribution that different *fertility* rates can now make. The report of the Population Panel made three different projections of population size in 2011 taking 1971 as the base year and making varying assumptions about future fertility rates.<sup>15</sup> On the assumption that fertility would fall below the 1971 level to reach replacement level by 1977 (the low model) the population in 2011 would be 60.7 million. If the rate were to remain at the 1971 level over the whole period to 2011 (the medium model) the population would be 66.1 million by that date. Were the rates to rise above the 1971 level to reach, by 1981, a gross reproduction rate of 1.37 (the high model) the figures would be 74.3 million. Differences of the order of 13.6 million (22%) are not insignificant. Of course these projections assume that the particular fertility rates are then

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13447-7 - Thinking About Children: Sociology and Fertility in Post-War England

Joan Busfield and Michael Paddon

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 Introduction

sustained at a constant level over a longish period of time which would be most unusual. It is the continuing fluctuations in the level of the different factors that makes the task of projection so notoriously difficult and erroneous.

When we examine the period since the eighteenth century we can see the full magnitude of the demographic changes that have occurred in the last three centuries. In the first decades of the eighteenth century both death rates and birth rates were relatively high, though it would be wrong to suppose that childbearing was at a maximum. Not only was the age at which women married relatively late, but by no means all women married, and there was also sporadic control of childbearing within marriage. A number of local studies indicate that some sort of birth control, almost certainly withdrawal, must have been used by married couples to restrict childbearing in the pre-industrial period.<sup>16</sup> Population growth during this, the first stage of the demographic transition was generally low. The size of the population of England and Wales in 1700 has been estimated at 5.8 million persons.<sup>17</sup>

The initial growth in population that marked the beginning of the second phase of demographic transition, the stage of rapid population growth, began in the 1740s, but only took on significance with hindsight. Initially the growth seemed to be part of a 'normal' fluctuation as Habbabkuk describes:

At first sight the growth was no more rapid than in many earlier periods. But the growth of earlier periods had sooner or later been reversed. The growth which started in the 1740s was not reversed. It was not only reversed; it accelerated.<sup>18</sup>

We can be almost certain that this new growth was not only the result of lowered death rates but also of somewhat higher birth rates than in the pre-industrial period. However, whilst the initial declines in the death rate were not exceptional, as the declines progressed it became clear that a radical change in the pattern of mortality was taking place. Between the period 1701-50 and the period 1801-30 the crude death rate in England and Wales declined from 32.8 to 22.5, according to one estimate.<sup>19</sup>

Declines in the birth rate followed a century later; though they did not become visible in the figures for the crude birth rate until the late 1870s there is evidence of some reduction in family size from the 1860s onwards.<sup>20</sup> The decline in the birth rate continued steadily until the 1930s to be followed by the fluctuations that we have already documented. The changes in the rate of population growth that resulted are shown in Table 1:2. From a growth rate of 1.4% per annum in the decade 1871-81 the rate declined 0.4% per annum in the period 1931-39.

Analysis of the patterns of marriage and childbearing in the period since 1850 shows that much of the initial decline in the birth rate was due to changes in the age at marriage. Though marriage already occurred at a late

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13447-7 - Thinking About Children: Sociology and Fertility in Post-War England

Joan Busfield and Michael Paddon

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction 7

TABLE 1:2 *Intercensal population changes for England and Wales 1801-1971*

Year	Population size	Mean annual rate of intercensal increase
1801	8,892,536	—
1811	10,164,256	1.32
1821	12,000,236	1.67
1831	13,896,797	1.48
1841	15,914,148	1.36
1851	17,927,609	1.22
1861	20,066,224	1.13
1871	22,712,266	1.25
1881	25,974,439	1.35
1891	29,002,525	1.11
1901	32,527,843	1.16
1911	36,070,492	1.04
1921	37,886,699	0.48
1931	39,952,377	0.54
1939	41,460,000	0.37
1951	43,757,888	0.54
1961	46,104,548	0.52
1971	48,749,575	0.56

Note: The figure for the population in 1939 is a mid-year estimate.

Source: Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, *Census 1971, Age, Marital Condition and General Tables*, Table 1 London H.M.S.O.; 1974

age by the standards of many other countries, in the last decades of the nineteenth century it was generally postponed even longer.<sup>21</sup> Control of childbearing within marriage remained episodic, though its use increased during the second half of the nineteenth century, and it has only been in the twentieth century that it has played a major role in producing low birth rates.<sup>22</sup> During this century, however, changes in the age at marriage have made little contribution to the declines in the birth rate; indeed, as Table 1:3 shows, the age at which men and women marry has declined over most of this century, especially since the 1930s, reductions and fluctuation in the birth rate notwithstanding. The long steady decline in age at first marriage marks a definite change from the pattern of preceding centuries.<sup>23</sup> Before this century the age at marriage had been relatively high, with both men and women commonly postponing marriage to the second half of their twenties. Furthermore, the decline has affected all social groups. The common pattern, at least for the last century, has been, with some interesting exceptions, that those with higher occupational status have married at later ages than those of lower occupational status, and this pattern has been maintained (with perhaps a small decline in the differentials) despite the overall reduction in age at marriage; thus those in lower status



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13447-7 - Thinking About Children: Sociology and Fertility in Post-War England

Joan Busfield and Michael Paddon

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 Introduction

occupations have experienced declines in age at marriage no less than those in the higher status occupations. The changes are documented in Table 1:4.

TABLE 1:3 *Mean age at first marriage, of men and women in England and Wales, 1901-1973*

Period	Bachelors	Spinsters
1901-5	26.90	25.37
1906-10	27.19	25.63
1911-15	27.49	25.75
1916-20	27.92	25.81
1921-25	27.47	25.57
1926-30	27.36	25.54
1931-35	27.43	25.53
1936-40	27.51	25.38
1941-45	26.76	24.58
1946-50	27.15	24.54
1951-55	26.55	24.18
1956-60	25.90	23.49
1961-65	25.36	22.90
1966-70	24.64	22.47
1971	24.60	22.59
1972	24.85	22.88
1973	24.86	22.72

Note: Before 1941 divorced men were included with bachelors and divorced women with spinsters.

Source: *Statistical Review of England and Wales, 1973*, Part II, Table L; H.M.S.O. 1975.

TABLE 1:4 *Average age at first marriage of grooms and brides in Britain by groom's occupational group, birth cohorts 1900-29*

Year of Birth	Profes- sional and managerial		Black- coated		Skilled manual		Other manual		Unknown occupations		All	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1900-09	30.1	27.2	27.6	26.2	27.3	24.9	26.6	24.0	26.3	23.9	27.4	25.1
1910-19	25.9	25.7	28.7	24.6	26.1	24.1	25.9	23.8	23.0	23.0	26.8	24.3
1920-24	26.7	25.6	25.8	24.2	24.8	22.7	24.1	22.3	21.7	20.0	24.9	23.1
1925-29	26.3	24.2	24.8	22.6	24.0	21.8	24.2	22.0	25.5	22.5	24.9	11.3

Source: E. Grebenik and G. Rowntree, 'Factors associated with the age at marriage in Britain', *Proceedings of the Royal Society, Series B*, December 1963, p. 186.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13447-7 - Thinking About Children: Sociology and Fertility in Post-War England

Joan Busfield and Michael Paddon

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction 9

Moreover the decline in age at marriage during this century has been paralleled by a less striking, but nonetheless significant, increase in the proportions of men and women marrying at some time in their lives as Table 1:5 shows.

TABLE 1:5 *Proportion of persons ever married (out of 1,000) in England and Wales, 1881-1960*

Age 40-44	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1946	1951	1956	1960
Males	878	871	861	852	863	887	888	881	891	897	890
Females	861	850	831	820	821	819	827	836	858	895	913

Source: *Statistical Review of England and Wales*, 1960, Part III, p. 23.

To a large extent, however, it has been changes in the quantity and tempo of childbearing within marriage that have made the greatest contribution to the reductions in the birth rate since the 1850s, especially to the reductions of the twentieth century. As Table 1:6 shows, over the last century family size has declined markedly, and the average number of children born to married women is now approximately half that of a hundred years ago. Of particular interest is the change that this has meant in the distribution of completed family sizes. Table 1:7 indicates that the proportions of women having families of five or more children has declined especially steeply. Since women still tend to start their childbearing early in marriage, one consequence of the reduction in family size has been a concentration of childbearing in the early years of marriage, and in many cases childbearing is completed within the first ten years.<sup>24</sup> As women are also marrying younger this typically means that childbearing is completed by the time a woman is thirty.

TABLE 1:6 *The decline in completed family size in England and Wales, marriage cohorts 1861-1939*

Marriage cohort	Family size	Marriage cohort	Family size
1861-9	6.16	1910-14	2.82
1871	5.94	1915-19	2.46
1876	5.62	1920-4	2.31
1881	5.27	1925-9	2.11
1896	4.81	1930-4	2.07
1900-9	3.30	1935-9	2.03

Note: Mean ultimate family size of marriages contracted when woman was under 45.

Sources: Table 5:17, Wrigley (1969) Table 5:7; *Statistical Review of England and Wales*, 1973, Part II, Table QQb. London H.M.S.O. 1975.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13447-7 - Thinking About Children: Sociology and Fertility in Post-War England

Joan Busfield and Michael Paddon

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 Introduction

TABLE 1:7 *The relative frequency of families of different sizes in Great Britain, for marriage cohorts 1870-1925*

Number of births	Marriage cohorts				
	1870-9	1890-9	1900-9	1915	1925
0	83	99	113	150	161
1	53	95	148	212	252
2	72	136	187	235	254
3	86	136	157	159	144
4	95	122	120	95	77
5	95	100	84	59	45
6	94	83	63	35	27
7	89	65	45	21	18
8	83	52	32	15	10
9	73	40	33	19	6
10	62	30	15	6	4
11 plus	115	42	14	6	2
	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000

Note: Live births to completed marriages contracted when woman was under 45.

Source: Wrigley (1969), p. 198.

The demographic picture in the post-war period has been more complex, as the fluctuation in the birth rate would lead us to expect. Although both the mean age at marriage for men and women continued to decline and the proportion marrying continued to increase after the war, recently there has been some change in these trends. On the one hand, when we examine the proportions marrying at different ages, rather than the overall mean age at marriage, we find that the increase in the proportions of men and women marrying before 20 was halted in 1966 and since then the proportions have fluctuated, though their most recent level has been higher than that of 1965.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand since 1971, the decline in the mean age of first marriage of both men and women has itself been halted and there have been some signs of a reverse.<sup>26</sup> In consequence over the period till 1965 the trends in marriage were favourable to, and must have contributed to the rise in the birth rate; since then, though the change in patterns of marriage did not coincide exactly with the change from an increasing birth rate to a decreasing one, there has been some reversal of previous trends, so that changing patterns of marriage may once more be making some contribution to the changes in the birth rate.

The changes in marital fertility that have played an important, though not exclusive part in producing the changes in the crude birth rate in the post-war period, are most unlikely to have been solely the result of changes in the tempo of childbearing within marriage. Although figures for completed family size for the period are mainly estimates, and involve a