

# **Understandings of Responsible Parenthood Among University Educated: 'Listening to Our Conscience is a Very Demanding Vocation'**

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## **Abstract**

Motivated by some recent studies that emphasised the plurality of different factors that cause the common trend of very low fertility in Europe, the author in her essay considers the unquestioned and widely accepted idea of general diminishing importance of children to parents presumed by the second demographic transition theory. In this regard, the author confronts this assumption grounded in Ariès' notion on motivations for fertility decline with recent elaborations on changing context of parenthood in contemporary societies. She outlines some roots of the notion of parental responsibility as created by some social actors to explain the background of low fertility motivations, which was overlooked in Ariès' arguments. On the basis of her own case study, the author also presents some preliminary results related to the understanding of responsible parenthood in the university-educated. The results of her case study reveal the complexity of current understandings of parenting and indicate the need towards precise contextualisation of notions used so automatically in demographic research.

KEYWORDS: responsible parenthood, university-educated, Slovenia, qualitative approach

## **Introduction**

The most frequently mentioned explanation of the appearance and persistence of low and very low fertility in 'industrialised countries' in Europe and also worldwide is the theory of second demographic transition (SDT). The authors (Ron Lesthaeghe and Dirk J. van de Kaa) of this theory, that was launched in 1986 (Van de Kaa 2002), presumed that industrialised countries reached a new stage in demographic development in the mid-1960s due to full control of individuals over their reproductive capacity in relation to their

decreasing motivation for more than one or two children. This lack of motivation was to be a consequence of a 'general' changed attitude of parents towards their children; and parents' increased striving for their own 'self-fulfilment – the desire to realise more of one's own potentials' (Van de Kaa 1987: 6) on various life domains (e.g. education, professional career, leisure, partnership relations). This assumption of the SDT theory is based on the idea of French historian Philippe Ariès, known as the author of sound work *Centuries of Childhood* (1979). The authors of the SDT were inspired by Ariès' explanation of the relationship between the long-term pattern of the birth rate and attitudes towards children, which he developed in depth in his essay *Two Successive Motivations for the Declining Birth Rate in the West* (1980).

Inspired by some recent critiques of SDT that emphasised the plurality of different factors that cause the otherwise common trend of very low fertility in Europe (e.g. Douglass et al. 2005), I consider in this essay the unquestioned and widely accepted idea of the general diminishing importance of children to parents presumed by the SDT. I question the explanatory power of main assumption of SDT – a radical value change towards children – in explaining various and different patterns that underlie very low fertility in Europe.

In this vein, I at first confront the assumption of SDT grounded in Ariès' notion of motivations for fertility decline with recent elaborations on the changing context of parenthood in contemporary societies. Secondly, I outline some roots of the notion of parental responsibility as created by some social actors (especially Protestant Church) to explain the background of low fertility motivations, which was overlooked in Ariès' arguments. Finally, I present some preliminary results of a case study related to the understanding of responsible parenthood in the university-educated – a segment of population that is, according to SDT, particularly aimed at 'self-actualisation'. I attempted to find out whether the value of children to parents is indeed low and/or declining.

### **Brief excursion into Ariès' arguments**

According to Ariès (1980), the fertility decline in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, and the other decline that was observed in the 1960s in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, which brought fertility in many European countries below the level of population replacement, sprang from two distinguished individuals' motivations or outlooks on life that explicitly refer to children. Ariès argued that in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in France, and in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the rest of Western Europe, a new ideal model of family was coming into effect. At first, it was identified in the upper social classes; parents were to plan consciously the number of children and intervals between their births by sexual continence or *coitus interruptus*. Gradually, this practice spread among lower social classes. Ariès insisted that this model reflected a continuation of particular social pattern of family formation that had begun already in North-Western Europe in the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> Ariès explained that this pattern was based on rigorous control over young people's sexuality and reduction of fertility of

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<sup>1</sup> Registered 'late marriages' and rare illegitimate births were recognised as a particular demographic system (regime) defined as European Marriage Pattern by John Hajnal (1965).

married couples by continence. In this system, child abandonment and infanticide were also frequent means of fertility reduction; however, fertility had still remained high in spite of those practices. As Ariès explained, considerable changes had begun when married couples started to plan their own lives and births of their children: '[parents] introduce foresight and organisation where formally there had been only automatic, unplanned behaviour and resigned surrender to impulse and destiny' (1980: 646). As Ariès stated, this change coincided with the Industrial Revolution that gave incentive to individuals to organise their families according to a plan, similarly to the way they organised their business, factories, investments. According to Ariès, this period also coincided with 'the revolution in sensitivity' that installed the central locus of affection to the family and the child. Family was to turn strongly inward upon itself; children became parents' main psychological and material investments and to put it with his words, 'this society could be categorised as "child-centred"' (1980: 646).

Ariès further argued that in relation to increased sentimental and material concern, the number of children could not be left to chance anymore; it had to correspond to the family's financial capacity. Otherwise, the desire of parents to ensure their children a better economic and social status as their own has increased.

The reasons that began to motivate the continuation of fertility decline after 1960 were, as Ariès noted, a reduction of the enormous emotional and financial investments in the child. On the contrary, the existent birth rate had been seen as 'being provoked by exactly the opposite attitude. The days of the child-king are over [...] the child, to say the least, occupies a smaller place' (1980: 649). An important new phenomenon was to be the people's refusal to have an undesired child; if this happened, an abortion was chosen. This idea of Ariès was unquestionably incorporated into the theory of SDT as its cornerstone. Its authors explicitly referred to the work of Ariès: 'Two keywords which best characterised the norm and attitudes behind the first and second demographic transition were "altruistic" and "individualistic", respectively' (Van de Kaa 1987: 5).

However, was it justifiable to accept and integrate this idea without any additional verification? In Ariès elaboration, a convincing explanation of the main causes of changes in attitudes towards children is lacking. He explained the changes in people's perceptions and attitudes as mere adaptations to external processes and events, i.e. 'the Industrial and Bourgeois Revolution'. The manner in which Ariès explained the everyday people's lives in the past had frequently been criticised among historians themselves (e.g. Mount 1982; Pollock 1988). They accused him of jumping to conclusions about adults' behaviour and attitudes towards children in past times, grounded exclusively on evidences pertaining to the history of art: paintings, sculptures, clothing, playthings, furniture, etc., of royalty particular. The critics of Ariès argued that he should have taken into account ordinary people's narratives and writings about their children, and children's narratives and writings (diaries, autobiographies, letters, court testimonies) about their parents. Thus, the deduction of social change from purely aesthetic revolution in representation of adults and children was seen as a problematic undertaking (Mount 1982).

The deduction of increased striving for individual self-fulfilment, recognition and personal freedom of contemporary generations from merely statistical and survey

data on marriages, cohabitation unions, divorces, type of living arrangement also seems problematic. The same holds for the decreasing importance of children to parents and the weakening of the family as an institution only on the basis of illegitimate birth rate and abortion records, which the authors and the followers of the SDT theory mainly apply.

### **Surveys' limits in explaining the diminishing importance of children to parents**

In spite of the centrality of the idea of changing attitude of parents towards children, and the relatively long tradition of research on demographic change, not much attention has yet been given to the empirical investigation of the importance of children to parents among demographers and proponents of SDT.<sup>2</sup> The selection of evidence concerning ideational changes (e.g. from 'conservative' to 'progressive' orientation, or from 'materialism' to postmodernism'), which according to this theory influence the fertility behaviour of recent young generations, pertains mostly to very general indicators of values (e.g. European Value Survey) from a single point in time. That might lead to limited strength of survey results. For instance, in the case of studying the relationship between the course of family formation (indicated by selected living arrangements) and value orientations of individuals, the authors admit that due to limitations of simple cross-sectional data they could not reveal the dynamics of the process, which generate divergent values among those choosing different living arrangements (Surkin and Lesthaeghe 2004). Moreover, in this study only two value items out of fifteen pertaining to family and marriage domain were indicated as relevant predictors of living arrangements. The first was, 'parents should not sacrifice themselves for children' and the second item was, 'acceptance of abortion'.<sup>3</sup> However, from the point of view of this survey result (the importance of just two static indicators), the diminishing meaning of children to parents is not evident, and the assumptions of SDT not very convincing.

### **Changing context of parenthood from the perspective of rational choice theory**

Rational choice theory is by no means a widely accepted theory in demographic literature. According to this theory, individuals are rational beings led by preferences (Becker 1976). In this view, the extant changes in population behaviour (e.g. the lowest low fertility) could be interpreted as the result of individuals' deliberate decisions between different sets of alternatives. The chosen one is to be the one that the best fulfils individual preferences at the

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<sup>2</sup> In this regard, the research of James T. Fawcett on value of children (1973) is an exception. His long lasting investigation revealed important differences in meanings of children to parents (e.g. psychological against economic) by social class, place of residence, geographical region. However, he did not indicate any diminishing importance of children to parents at all. For the present time, these results should be re-examined.

<sup>3</sup> In the marriage and family sets the following items also were included: 'marriage is an outdated institution'; 'children not necessary for life fulfilment'; 'acceptable casual sex', 'adultery', 'divorce'; 'important for marriage: tolerance and understanding', 'sharing chores', 'talking', 'time together', 'happy sexual relationship', 'not very important for the success in marriage: faithfulness', 'children'; 'single motherhood acceptability' (Surkin and Lesthaeghe 2004: 59).

given moment. As SDT theory indicates, self-actualisation is an alternative to having children. However, the vast evidence gathered by social sciences indicates that the process of decision-making is not that simple and individuals are rarely autonomous and unconstrained in their decisions. According to the classics of sociology of knowledge, each individual is embedded into her/his complex social life, which forms her/his frame of behaviour and thoughts:

The life world is social in its origins and in its ongoing maintenance: the meaningful order it provides has been established collectively and is kept going by collective consent [...] In order to understand fully the everyday reality of any human group, it is not enough to understand the particular symbols or interaction patterns of individual situations. One must also understand the overall structure of meaning within which these particular patterns and symbols are located and from which they derive their collective shared significance (Berger et al. 1973: 63).

This holds no less true for decision-making and practising parenting. As a parent or a potential parent, an individual receives the messages from a pertaining social world through social meanings. However, these messages are not unidirectional; they rather give 'the way that parents adapt to the changing conditions of the social and economic worlds' (Daly 2004: 4), which may lead to changing the social context of parenting.

Our society is to be interested in self reproduction, but at the same time, also in prospering economically. Focussing on this assumption, Larry Bumpass (1998) emphasizes that due to the interplay between individualism and market economies, the social context of parenting and childhood in the United States<sup>4</sup> is changing. He insists that the changing context of parenthood<sup>5</sup> is the consequence of the increasing legitimacy of self-interest as a criterion of decisions opposed to the interests of collectivity.<sup>6</sup> He further argues that legitimacy resulting in competing values; personal freedom, development and empowerment are as important as family relations. However, the needs of the market economy are endless and 'as a result occupational roles [needs for better payments] take priority over the family roles', since 'the marketplace is addressing a population that is unmarried and sexually active' (Bumpass 1998: 4; comments added by Černič Istenič). As a final result of this value competition, Bumpass sees the decreasing willingness to make long-term commitments together with lowering attractiveness of obligatory nature of family life; e.g. the sense that parents are obliged to stay together for the children's sake. The market forces in view of 'relative preference' that place vocational over family priorities (particularly by women) are to be the main driving force of changing context of parenting - diminishing value of stable relationships. Because it seems impossible to reverse the

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<sup>4</sup> With regard to rather similar statistics and trends observed in the US and Europe, it could be supposed that Bumpass's statements about changing parental context could be also valid for Europe.

<sup>5</sup> Bumpass denotes the changing context of parenthood as increased instability of family for children indicated in divorces, cohabitation, the separation of sexual activity from marriage, single parenthood by choice, and delayed marriage. The correlated outcomes are physiological effects, teen sex, teen pregnancies, substance abuse, and unmarried childbearing.

<sup>6</sup> Thus, he follows very similar assumption as the proponents of the SDT do.

dynamic of the competitive market economy, he proposed 'creative ways of investment in children more heavily' (1998: 6) as a suitable way out from inconvenient context of parenting.

Recommendations for family life are always delicate issue, particularly in the frame of legitimated individual's rights. From this point of view, Bumpass's proposal seems unproblematic at the first glance; more investments would change the difficulty and would help to create a more appropriate context for children's development. However, his definition and explanation of the observed 'crisis' pertaining to the new context of parenting has to be more precisely discussed. His definition of context of new parenting is indeed the consequence of behaviour behind which deeper reasons lie than just the various preferences combined with the individualistic orientations in a society. As previously indicated, the behaviour, life events and statuses are not autonomously chosen by individuals (e.g. being employed, being divorced, having or not having children etc.), and are also not 'freely' chosen on the basis of just one single factor (preferred durables that have to be earned by long working hours). Bumpass's suggestion that the market economy plays a decisive role in the organisation of everyday life could be acceptable conditionally. The principles of the market economy and working environment have already been criticised (e.g. Jensen 1998; Beck 1992; Hewlett 1986). These critics mainly pertain to the considerations which implicitly take individuals merely as abstract beings without family ties and obligations. In this view, reconciliation between family and working life is a matter of one's more or less wise strategies. However, the market economy and its derivatives are not the only reasons for perceived family instability as Bumpass supposes. Specifically, what constitutes the parenthood as a social phenomenon are not merely economic principles, but also social standards, (un)written norms defined by social agencies that go beyond the self-interest of individuals.

### **The development of the notion of responsible parenthood**

The relationships of parents and children were and are greatly influenced by various social agencies. Among them the religion almost traditionally influences people's thoughts about who children are - their meaning, their desirability, and their rights. From the beginning of Christianity, the Church did not show any explicit interest for the family, especially of ordinary people. For the early Christians, virginity<sup>7</sup> was the supreme value. However, since the Renaissance, particularly in the battle with the emerging nation-states that accused the Church of greed (its collection of indulgences, particularly for 'sinful sensual pleasures'), the Church has lost its position of supreme political force, and consequently has turned its attention to the sphere of privacy (Goody 1983). Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, both

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<sup>7</sup> Christianity, primarily oriented towards the community, brotherhood and sisterhood as general community attitude, saw family as the obstacle for its enforcement. Marriage and family life were considered as an expression of human weakness and limitations. Only those who mastered their emotions and instincts (accepted the celibate) were recognised as real Christians. The limitation of expression of love did not pertain only to husband and wife, but also to emotions between parents and children. The Church recommended 'a friendship relationship between parents and children, not love', and insisted that 'too much love between parents and children was a humiliation of God' (Mount 1982: 24). Family as a place of individuality was perceived by the new Church as a threat to broader community.

Catholic and Protestant moral reform of the family has been developed in close relation to sexuality, but from significantly different point of view. Contrary to Catholic doctrine, which considers procreation to be the exclusive purpose of sexual act, the Protestant view reaffirmed sexual pleasure; 'Procreation was not the prime purpose of marriage, but one of its consequences' (Chrisman 1983: 192-193). Regarding this view, Protestant married couples were allowed to limit their procreation with abstinence for the benefit (survival) of their already born children (Flandrin 1986). This attitude significantly distinguished the Protestant view from the Catholic, which required their believers to fulfil their conjugal obligations regularly and without any 'interference' in order to prevent adultery.

Despite the fact that the main aim of marriage was not the procreation of children, the Protestant priests taught that the upbringing of children was the primary family function. The family was the place where 'every child experiences the conversion of assignment among those reborn' (Chrisman 1983: 192-193). For Protestant moralists, the ideal upbringing of children was somewhere between repression and permissiveness; a combination of strong discipline linked with the ideology of Original Sin (children are by their nature sinful beings and for that reason they have to be socialised by frightening them with death and eternal damnation), and parental love. Contrary to the Ten Commandments that prescribed obedience and submission of children to parents, but did not mention the parent's responsibilities towards children, Protestant catechisms from the 16<sup>th</sup> century taught: 'Do not live according to the principles of your parents neither obey their orders [...] The Christ bespoke us to respect our fathers and mothers, but not to trust them or believe them' (Ozment 1983: 174). With such a message, the Protestant authorities implicitly pointed to the main contours of responsible parenthood<sup>8</sup> (recognition of children's rights and person's individuality) that were further developed centuries later.

The view which Protestants shared towards the procreation significantly determined the development of their concept of responsible parenthood in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1930, the Protestant church's cautious and still very conservative acceptance of use of birth control for merely 'serious reasons'<sup>9</sup> originated from the fact that married women in the church were also performing these 'shameful' activities. It was the life circumstances of Christian spouses in the period between the world wars (the Depression) that urged a re-evaluation of the Protestant condemnation of conception prevention. During that time, it was accepted that 'if spouses were called to exercise responsibility for their marriage and family, they must be allowed the pre-condition of responsible decision making, one of which was the choice' (Appleby 1999: 143).

An important further stage in the process of changing Protestant views towards marriage and parenthood that led to explicit definition of responsible parenthood, took place between 1948 and 1965 in the frame of the World Council of Churches, a large

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<sup>8</sup> At that time, when child mortality was still very high, Catholic priests taught parents, especially mothers about their responsibility for the souls and survival of their children from their catechisms (Flandrin 1986).

<sup>9</sup> It was emphasised that any method of conception-control due to selfishness, luxury, or mere convenience was strongly condemned.

ecumenical movement with the ambition of contributing with its reaction to rapid social changes: rapid world population growth in the 'Third World' that was anticipated as a serious threat to the world's prospects.<sup>10</sup> In this context, the family was recognised as the agent of population increases and declines. At the same time, the Protestant Church argued for 'very strong moral-theological grounds for regarding the responsible use of contraception by married persons as moral right' (Church of England: The family in Contemporary Society 1958 in *ibid.*). In this direction, in 1959, Protestant officials accentuated responsible parenthood as an act of conscience:

A knowledge of the relation of sexual life to the procreative process gives a couple the power, and therefore the responsibility, to lift the begetting of children out of realm of biological accident, of "fate" in to the realm of grace, where [humanity] is free to wait upon God and consciously to respect [God's] will (Mansfield conference report on Responsible Parenthood and Population Problem in *ibid.*: 156).

Further, the sphere of responsibility also included following decision: Marital partners were responsible for deciding "the number of children", using means that were "mutually acceptable" to husband and wife in Christian conscience. This was the basic principle of responsible parenthood (*ibid.*: 156).

Moreover, the responsible parenthood meant also the recognition of children's claims to parental care and education, wise stewardship of family resources, attention to the needs and problems of broader society and the consideration of claims of future generations. In this regard, 'irresponsible parenthood' meant having more children than one could care and provide for, the absence of taking thought for society, neglecting needy countries and future generations, and limiting the number of children for purely selfish reasons and using abortion as a mean of birth control (*ibid.*: 156).

In this vein, the notion of responsible parenthood was an important foundation for family planning legislation in the 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s all over the world, even in Roman Catholic countries. In that period, several significant developments in Catholic teaching of marriage and birth regulation were also carried out (e.g. stronger emphasis on education in parental responsibilities). However, the doctrine of responsible parenthood as established by the Protestants was not accepted by the Roman Catholic Church. Actually, it reaffirmed its condemnation of any alternation of intercourse that would render it non-procreative. In supporting the decriminalisation of conception prevention, as in the case of Canada, the Roman Catholic Church spoke in favour of distinction between the rights and responsibilities of the citizen and the church member. In this way, it represented the view that the specific duty of legislator was to contribute to common welfare of all citizens (*ibid.*: 197).

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<sup>10</sup> During that period, the United Nations also began to work on population explosion. The UN convened two international conferences on population; first in Rome in 1954 and the second one in Belgrade in 1965. On the first conference there was no study group on family planning, whereas on the second one in the section on family planning the delegates had supported a 'basic right of families to have access to information for responsible parenthood' (Proceedings of the World Population Conference, 1965, quoted by Appleby 1999).



A somewhat longer overview of the development of the idea of responsible parenthood in Protestant view indicates that parenting has been constructed by the political and social interests of the Church (its elites) that had rarely had much in common with the real needs of children and parents in a given time. It has to be particularly accentuated that with acceptance of this meaning of parenthood,

The parents become fully responsible for the existence of the child [and not somebody else], children are no more gift of God [and acceptance of legislation] and the invention of the pill has made this guilt [of irresponsible parenting] definitive (Van Nijnatten 1993: 21; comments added by Černič Istenič).

The notion of responsible parenthood has been implicitly or explicitly embedded in civil institutions<sup>11</sup> dealing with parents and children issues.

However, the church was not the only agent that could take credit for the emergence of the notion of responsible parenthood. The state as powerful bureaucratic agent also enhanced criteria and standards of parental responsibility by conferring authority to several professionals over the family issues. With the rise of 'bourgeois society' the family was explicitly addressed as a 'refuge, the seat of civic virtue, the guardian of morality' mainly against the 'demoralising effect of "civilisation", the growth of crime and violence, and cut throat competition that prevail in the market place' (Lasch 1979: 169). Now, the family must be guided and supported by professionals. The modern state erased the plurality of previous ways of family living by the establishment of various social agencies such as schools, juvenile courts, child-welfare agencies, as well as medical, psychological and pedagogical professional expertises. The professionals have acquired a legitimised position to define what the responsibilities of parents were. Thus, parent's life world was colonised, successfully moralised, medicalised, psychologised, psychiatrised and legalised (Ambert 1994: 530). For instance, legal institutions formalised the meaning of parenthood with the number of laws in the sphere of family relations<sup>12</sup>. With dictating what is 'in the best interest of child', with less emphasis on the basis of what is naturally unavoidable for children's survival and well-being, the state and its officials negate varieties of parenting styles<sup>13</sup> and create uniform standards of reasonable parenting (Van Nijnatten 1993: 20.). Therefore, with changing social control on parental behaviour in the form of 'making the family over-responsible for the upbringing and well-being of children,

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, other parts of the world for which this concept was initially created to limit their population growth, did not follow its message with great eagerness, while it was fully accepted in institutions of Catholic and Protestant countries.

<sup>12</sup> According to the assumption of the inconvertible nexus between 'bad' children and 'bad' parent, the latter must take a responsibility. In the US, more than 40 states have some form of law designed to punish parents for delinquent behaviour of their children (Tyler et al. 2000: 85).

<sup>13</sup> The 'Westernized' focus on the individual mother at the core of child's development is not universal. In many societies (e.g. Caribbean and Polynesian communities), mothers initiate very few nurturing activities. Instead, multiple parenting takes place, where several women share the care and supervision of children, where all members of the community are responsible for all children, and where older siblings or other youngsters are often children's caretakers as well as their main source of psychological comfort and discomfort (Ambert 1999: 530-531).

and therefore in the event of failure to do this, an important source of social problems' (Martin 2004: 8) and not with the greater individuality (personal freedom), the context of parenthood has radically changed.

### **Shifts in contemporary parenthood**

According to many scholars, contemporary parenthood is going through significant shifts in several domains. The dominant family form nowadays is to be a dual earner family, not only because paid work has become a great social value (Daly 2004: 5), but because the employment has shifted from being an option to being a necessity in which both parents must work (Jensen 1998: 62). It is supposed that most parents wish for their children to be socially mobile and to reach a social position at least similar to theirs:

To enable social mobility, responsible parenthood implies meeting a standard of child-related costs, which are above the absolute minimum. Items like sport equipment, music education, and organisational activities may enhance the child's achievement potential [in order to ensure optimal development, as professionals argue] and are thus cultural necessities (Jensen 1998: 61; comments added by Černič Istenič).

In this respect, responsible parenthood involves much investment, contrary to Ariès' statements. These investments increase the cost of having children and accentuate the need for more income. Parenthood has been increasingly steeped in paid work, caught in a trap of cross-pressures of 'responsible economic parenthood' and 'responsible practical parenthood' (Jensen 1998: 62), which was visible in emergence of a discourse of growing time famine in families in the late 1990s. However, as national time studies in Canada, the US and Australia in the early 2000s (Zuzanek; Bianchi et. al.; Bittman in Daly 2004) showed, in spite of the above observation parents were actually spending more time with their children. In fact their time with children has become more goal-oriented, structured and saturated with activities. The duty of parents was to be 'active parents' and not boring to their children (White in Bonner 1999). Consequently, parents were supposed to have less time for their own interests and self-actualisation. Social class proved to play an important role in subordination of adult leisure preferences to children's preferences (it is more common among middle than working class),<sup>14</sup> which clearly indicates that there are class differences in the 'culture of parenting' (Daly 2004: 10).

Recent surveys on time spent in households indicated that within the changing context of parenthood, a redefinition of motherhood and fatherhood has also been taking place; for instance, the way men and women carried out their parental responsibility. Demands for equal gender engagement at home, work and community were to involve the redefinition of tasks and contributions among genders. Prevalent trends in the contributions that men and women made to parenting and domestic work showed the convergence of women doing less

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<sup>14</sup> A Canadian survey showed that in contrast to middle class families, parents in working class families were less concerned with optimising their children's talents and more concerned with the 'accomplishment of natural growth', and provided care and safeguard for their children with less emphasis on externally organised activities. Working class parents were also more likely to see their children as subordinate to adults, to maintain distinctions between adult's and children's entitlements and to emphasise discipline over the expression of ideas (Lareau 2002).

and men doing more (Duxbury and Higgins; Zuzanek in Daly 2004: 12). Nevertheless, women still provided more direct childcare (feeding, washing and dressing children), reported higher levels of role overload and time stress compared to fathers, and continued to carry the most responsibilities (planning, scheduling, orchestration and coordination) of family activities. While mothers were controlling the arrangements of the family, fathers were providing execution of tasks (Daly 2004: 13). Some other surveys (e.g. McBride and Millis 1993; Stropnik, Černič Istenič 2001) also indicated that fathers had changed their involvement with children, but they saw themselves as participating in household activities more than mothers would ascribe to them. A similar persistence of these gendered territories, which are rooted in the male sole breadwinner position, and the female position as a 'gatekeepers', has been already discussed in studies that particularly stressed that this persistence led to traditional gender division of parental responsibilities, particularly to the 'feminisation of childhood' (Jensen 1998: 58) or feminisation of parental responsibilities.

In her essay *An international perspective on parenting; social change and social constructs*, Ambert supposed that 'contemporary children' were dominated not only by one or two parents, but were strongly influenced by many real and virtual relationships that took over the authority of parents. Youth subcultures were often in opposition to parents' values and beliefs. Youth supposedly received an increasingly 'consumerist socialisation' via mass markets and media that also significantly affect parenting. Parents strongly subsidised this socialisation that benefited society and its profit-oriented economy and peer groups more than parents. This consumerism might contribute to parents being more burdened and helpless. Parents were also to be frequently confronted with the necessity of supporting older adolescents and even younger adults who were either unemployed or precariously employed, or had to prolong their education in order to improve prospects for their future (Ambert 1994: 536).

It seems that parenthood today is quite demanding and responsible occupation, or with words of Shelton and Johnson (2006), 'a double-edged sword'; but, what do my collocutors say about it?

## **A case study**

This case study was carried out within the basic project *Social background of low fertility in university-educated in Slovenia (2004-2007)*. I interviewed eight couples that live in Ljubljana and have at least a university degree. This selection criterion well fitted my research intention to check the importance of children to parents in those individuals for whom SDT supposes higher inclinations towards self-fulfilment. I analysed the life histories of four younger couples and four couples of their parents' generation. All younger couples are employed and have one (pre)school child. Among older couples, many are already retired (six of them), have two children who are already grown-up and live independently on their own. All interviews were carried out in May and June 2006.

In this essay, I limited my presentation to those parts of their narratives that pertain to their experience of parenthood. The contents of these parts of their life histories show quite diverse understandings of the notion of responsible parenthood. They can be classified into the following six categories.

### **Care and safety**

The majority of collocutors emphasised that parental care, as described by themselves, as 'constant parental physical presence', 'psychological closeness', and 'timely noticing and solving child's problems', is their fundamental obligation towards their children. This responsibility begins with the decision to have children and lasts until they become adults. Even after that, parents preserve a feeling of dedication towards their children. Some collocutors were very illustrative: 'Being a fully responsible parent means that absolutely nothing physically happens to the child' (male, 31 years, with a two-year-old daughter); 'You are responsible when you take time for the child when he needs you, when he wishes to be with you, although you are tired' (male, 39 years, with an eight-year-old son); 'For me, the responsibility is to love your children, listen to them, solving their problems from day to day, and to care for them' (female, 32 years, with a one-and-a-half-year old daughter); 'I do not want to have children and leave them alone, no. I would not forgive myself something like this, to leave children all alone' (male, 40 years, with an eleven-year-old son).

One of the collocutors presented his experiences of caring for his son, now aged eleven, in rather unusual way:

When he was younger, I devoted enormous amount of time to him. Practically we spent together all the time I had outside the house. [...] If he did not want to sleep I took him into the car and drove around, so that he could fall asleep. So what? You could imagine both of us always together; father and son. Wherever we went, people were asking: "Do you know how to change a baby's nappy?" Of course I knew. Who else was going to do that? He [the child] by himself (male, 40 years)?

As to caring practices and safety assurances, rather critical views were expressed. Some of them argued that too much protective treatment can harm children's development, their independence and therefore, it seems this practice could be irresponsible:

In my opinion, being too protective, you strain the natural curiosity of your child. You should allow them more freedom. This is one of the things parents are doing, yes. I often observe how my colleagues are treating their children. Like they are their pets [...] They are explaining to them what they can do and what they can not do all along [...] When I had a puppy I behaved like that [...] If you force your child time and again to bring you this and give you that [...] I get a headache [...] Yes, these guided children get on my nerves (female, 32 years, with a one-and-a-half-year-old daughter).

However some parts of interviewees' stories clearly show that parents cannot completely protect their children:

Let's consider the educational system. Our daughter treats him [the grandchild] very nicely; she gave him a bow tie when he had a theatre performance. And he got beaten there, well almost beaten [...] and grand-daddy had to come to school and take him back home [...] this is now very frequent in primary schools, and probably in high schools as well. What a style of life, isn't it (male, 69 years)?

### **Socialisation**

All collocutors believe that responsible parents have to fulfil a number of tasks in order to properly socialise their children. They are obligated to prepare them for life in society,<sup>15</sup> to give them as good as possible starting basis to enable them to make proper decisions in their adulthood. They have to set limits<sup>16</sup> for them, teach them what is right and what is wrong, teach them order and discipline, and also encourage their critical views. In this regard, parents must approach their children with consideration, consistency, confidence and without impulsiveness, giving them themselves as a good example. All these tasks are the parents' exclusive obligation, since nobody else, especially not the institutions, is able to do this:

If you have chaos in your family then you cannot create in your child a feeling of safety. And in my opinion, only parents can provide this, nobody else. Of course, it is very good if there are also others, for example, if there is order in school, if it is known what is right and what is wrong. But you can not rely on this; therefore you are responsible completely by yourself (female, 33 years, with a two-year-old daughter).

The neglect of fulfilment of these tasks can lead to undesirable consequences: socially problematic, delinquent adults. In this view, a large number of children and an inappropriate age of parent at childbirth, even late parenthood, can correlate with this lack of responsibility. The compromise could be to have only one child: 'You can have many children, but the question is whether you can give them enough? Could you really offer everything a child needs to more children' (male, 40 years, with an eleven-year-old son)?

He [the interviewee's acquaintance] is almost of my age, and has a child of the same age as my grandson has. This does not affect on a child well. He cannot control him [the child], and it is not sure whether he will successfully finish this class (male, 69 years).

### **Basic conditions**

Among the basic conditions parents are obliged to give their children, the most important is education. In this regard, suitable education is at least university education. Therefore, all of collocutors wished/wish the same possibilities of social promotion for their child as they had, if not even better. To reach this goal, parents would invest everything. Besides regular schooling, they are willing to promote other forms of educations (courses, lectures, trainings) in order to extend their child's views as broadly as possible:

Firstly, you care for your children by guiding them, to help them to realise their aims. For example, I gave priority to education, and I would do the same today. As I said, it was no problem, no problem to pay for studying (female, 65 years).

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<sup>15</sup> In this regard, a very important parental task is teaching children honesty but, according to some of older collocutors' views, today this value is unfortunately no longer very respected or useful. Some younger collocutors, however, argued that teaching children to make compromises is the most important aim of socialisation.

<sup>16</sup> Also to prevent development of consumerism.

The next most important obligation concerning basic conditions is that parents are obliged to offer their children help when children are getting on their own feet; i.e. to help them to solve the housing problem:

Promoting independence. Well, such a norm, which I set for myself as a task, which I am not sure if I be able to fulfil as my parents did when I began to study, [...] here you have a flat and pocket money as long as you study regularly (male, 40 years, with an eleven-year-old son).

Related to this task, the issue of telling the children to go on their own was discussed as well. It seems that this obligation pertains mainly to men. Children should live their adult life separately from their parents, and parents are obliged to assist their children with their resources as they were themselves helped by their parents. Indeed, all younger collocutors received this kind of help from their parents. Yet among the older generation, this was not always the case. The state and the employers substituted for parental support.

### ***Importance of others***

As indicated above, all collocutors understand responsible parenthood as their individual obligation. Some believe that one should not relocate his/her responsibilities to the others (their own or partners' parents, babysitters), even if certain difficulties regarding reconciliation between family and working life hinder the fulfilment of a desire for another child:

We are postponing and postponing [another child] [...] yes, job, [...] because we are responsible, we don't want to transfer these obligations to babysitters or to overload our parents. [...] Of course, we shift our obligations to parents, but if this is my child then I have to be occupied with him by myself (male, 39 years, with an eight-year-old son).

However, some collocutors saw also other persons as important for the execution of their parental tasks: relatives, friends, and professionals. Concerning the impact and capacities of professionals as useful parental advisers, some interviewees expressed considerable criticism:

Well, today I was listening to a conversation on the radio. One mother asked a psychologist how to deal with increasing physical and psychological violence among school pupils. But the psychologist was completely useless, not capable to say anything definite (male, 69 years).

### ***Children's responsibilities toward parents***

The view that each generation gives back what it had received from the previous generation seems fairly normal for the majority of collocutors. Some expressed the view that children are not responsible to care for their aged parents. This does not automatically mean that they would not be willing to help their parents in their needs, but this would be just the expression of their good will, because obligations to their present family have priority compared to the parents' family. Therefore, the parents alone should think about it in advance, and prepare themselves for that situation in time; for instance, by reserving a place in a retirement home:

Maybe I will buy a safety flat for myself [...] I do not want to bother my child when I am in need of help [...] I did not beget him for that purpose

[...] perhaps I did teach him about these kind of values, but this is not his task [...] And this is also not my task, but I am prepared. And I will help my parents but not [...] if my current family is burdened too much (male, 39 years, with an eight-year-old son).

However, the interviews also revealed that this issue is not that simple. Some who already had such experiences, especially women of older generation, who had to choose between caring for their parents or their grandchildren, admitted that making a decision about whom to make a priority is difficult due to emotional ties with both.

Being in between could be very hard in certain age. Especially for my generation, when I am looking now, they are in between their grandchildren for whom they care and their parents, who lie helplessly in bed or are ill, but have no place to go to (female, 58 years).

## **Reflections on practising of parenting**

Many interviewees said that they were trying to be as good parents as possible, and that they were aware they could make mistakes because they were not perfect. However, some expect quite a lot from themselves. They feel parental commitment should be of high quality, in terms of assuring and at the same time having a good time with their children. Consequently, for some, the accomplishment of parental obligations is not a big issue. But for some others it is a very demanding vocation, the most difficult one. Much more demanding and serious than other activities, e.g. professional work, because it includes 'listening to our own conscience'; sensing what was properly and what was wrongly done for children in this modern world.

As I said at the beginning, it is not difficult to give birth to a child. But eighteen years and even more of upbringing him and raising him into a being with a human soul, into a good citizen, a cosmopolitan inhabitant of the world, whatever [...] I think this is indeed difficult, very difficult, and one of the most difficult task we have, isn't it (female, 40 years, with an eleven-year-old son)?

On the basis of their own experiences, the majority of older collocutors emphasised that the generation of their parents did not care and invest in their lives. Neither in terms of material resources nor in terms of time compared to them and their children's generation. Yet some of older collocutors also criticised the generation of their children who spoil their own children by fulfilling all of their endless consumption needs: 'You know, his [his grandson's] surroundings offers him too much, absolutely too much of everything' (male, 80 years).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

With the overview of historical backgrounds of responsible parenthood and some recent representations of modern parenthood, I tried to reveal that the meaning of children to parents is a very complex social phenomenon, which could not be understood on the basis of just one or two generalised indicators. All presented evidence shows parenting as a socially defined phenomenon; constructed according to the ideologies and the para-

digms of those actors that happened to dominate at any point in time in terms of declaring what is good for the parent-child relationship. Through this overview, it was shown that the meaning of children to parents is not shaped only according to individuals' peculiarities (their greater or lesser benevolence towards children) or some particular factors (e.g. market economy or greater individualism), but that it is a social message constructed through a complex interplay of interests of various social actors. Last but not least, this message is built also by an individual parent who, according to given circumstances, modifies commonly accepted messages and encourages social change. For instance, as the overview of the Protestant view of responsible parenthood indicated, severe existential circumstances forced parents to start practicing contraception that was later on accepted by the church establishment. On the basis of the selected evidence presented in this essay, it can be argued that the concept of parental responsibility does not indicate any diminishing value of children in our society. Quite the contrary, today parenting is subjected to very high standards and rules that require increased investments of parents. With changing social contexts, it becomes even more demanding.

Contrary to the main presumption of the SDT theory, the collocutors' understandings of responsible parenthood also reveal that the significance of children is not low and declining. The analysis shows that children are very important and valuable to today's parents. Moreover, the interviews indicated that children in contemporary families often have a priority *vis-à-vis* the older generations regarding receiving care and safety. The collocutors agreed that for a suitable start in life, children need, in addition to care and safety, high investments in terms of material goods as well as in terms of time and feelings. Interviewees did not mention the responsibility regarding family planning, but the births of all children of younger generation were planned. Presumably, nowadays this issue is self-evident. Interviews also revealed that parental obligations are more and more long-lasting; they do not pertain only to the time when children are young and immature, but extend even to the period of children's adulthood. Parents are obliged to assist their children at solving their housing problem. In my case study, the interviewees are taking over many responsibilities of other institutions. The state should provide more suitable conditions for family formation through its housing policy, for instance, to enable younger generation an independent life by their own earned resources. Understandings of parental responsibility in collocutors refer to many aspects and phases of child's life, from his/her conception, childhood to adulthood. This is quite a long period of time for carrying out the bulk of obligations, especially when there are more children in the family. I did not analyse the association between the meaning of parental responsibility and the participants' number of children due to the completely homogeneous sample. However, on the basis of some other surveys in Slovenia (Ule and Kuhar 2002) and my case study, one could agree that very high criteria and social expectations embedded in the norm of responsible parenthood mainly have a negative impact on fertility behaviour. For a half of younger generation's collocutors, one child is enough.

On the basis of presented results, it could be said that lack of attention and diminishing value of children are not the reason for very low fertility in my case study. Quite on the contrary, even the university-educated, for whom high needs of self-fulfilment and individuality are presumed, accentuated very high standards and criteria of their parental accomplishments. Therefore, increasing criteria and standards that are guiding individuals in their paren-



tal practices seem more conducive to their decisions to have only one child than their diminishing assessment of children. These standards are not the inventions and caprices of individuals, but they are commonly accepted messages, actually grounded in long-term developed notions on parental responsibility by some social actors (the church and the state) who are now the most concerned with the population's low fertility. Are they aware of their own contribution to today's notion on parenthood as a very demanding task for nowadays' generations? This pretentiousness and complexity of today's parenting is not sufficiently accentuated in demographic analysis. By using statistical and survey data only, demographers reveal changes and paths of population with corresponding social processes. However, in order to avoid overly simplistic interpretations of these trends and changes, they should rely more on the wide range of scientific approaches that are currently employed in social sciences and humanities. Phenomena like parenthood, motherhood, fatherhood, childhood, self-fulfilment and individualisation require patient and careful contextualisation.

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## **Povzetek**

Na podlagi novejših raziskav, ki poudarjajo mnogovrstnost različnih dejavnikov sicer enotnega trenda nizke rodnosti v Evropi, avtorica v svoji razpravi obravnava široko sprejeto, a ne dovolj preverjeno predpostavko teorije drugega demografskega prehoda o splošnem zmanjševanju pomena otrok za starše. Omenjeno predpostavko, ki temelji na ideji Philippa Arièsa o dveh različnih motivacijah upadanja rodnosti, avtorica sooča z novejšimi razpravami o spreminjanju konteksta starševstva v sodobnih družbah. Pri pojasnjevanju ozadij nizke rodnosti, ki jih je Ariès spregledal v svojih argumentacijah, avtorica predstavi izvore pojmovanja odgovornega starševstva, oblikovanega s strani nekaterih socialnih akterjev. Na podlagi svoje študije primera avtorica predstavi tudi nekatere preliminarne rezultate, ki se nanašajo na razumevanje odgovornega starševstva med univerzitetno izobraženimi posamezniki. Rezultati njene študije opozarjajo na kompleksnost današnjega razumevanja odgovornega starševstva in nakazujejo potrebo po bolj natančni kontekstualizaciji pojmov, uporabljenih v demografskih preučevanjih.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** odgovorno starševstvo, univerzitetno izobraženi, Slovenija, kvalitativni pristop