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*Research Article*

### **Anthropological demography in Europe: Methodological lessons from a comparative ethnographic study in Athens and London**

**Katerina Georgiadis**

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## **Anthropological demography in Europe: Methodological lessons from a comparative ethnographic study in Athens and London**

**Katerina Georgiadis <sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

This paper offers a descriptive account of the methods used to conduct a comparative ethnographic study of below-replacement fertility in Athens, Greece and London, UK. It argues that in order for anthropology and demography to forge a closer relationship each discipline first needs to gain a deeper appreciation of the other's methodological perspectives. The following discussion presents the key anthropological approaches employed to realize a research project on low fertility in Europe, and provides justification for their use. While the practices described in this paper might be familiar to anthropologists and qualitative demographers, they are less well-known in the wider demographic community. Those convinced of the benefits of the ethnographic approach to the study of fertility are also invited to consider the specific obstacles encountered in the course of this enquiry. This paper reaches the following methodological conclusions: 1) Findings from two ethnographic studies of low fertility can be compared and generalised if such concepts as 'comparison' and 'generalisation' are understood in the anthropological sense. 2) Those investigating fertility in Europe must remain critical of their position relative to their study participants, even if they are undertaking research 'at home'. 3) Exploring attitudes towards reproduction and experiences of family-formation in an urban setting presents unique challenges as does 4) asking women about their childbearing beliefs and practices. 5) Analysing press perspectives on low fertility must involve treating media representations as 'discourse' and 6) qualitative studies are invaluable to the low fertility debate because of their thematic contributions.

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## 1. Introduction

A comparative ethnographic study of low fertility embarked on in two different urban European settings leads to a distinct set of methodological challenges. This paper reveals and discusses the issues encountered on such a study conducted during twenty months of fieldwork in Athens and London. Between January 2003 and August 2004 I listened to British and Athenian middle-class white women's views about reproduction, and recorded their experiences of family-formation. I begin this paper by suggesting why and how the exploration of individual approaches to childbearing and people's personal opinions about building a family can make a valuable contribution towards understanding a phenomenon that is both pan-European and highly diverse: below-replacement fertility. I also explain the purpose of focusing on two locations instead of one and offer a justification for entitling this effort a *comparative* ethnographic study. I then proceed to describe the means, or methods, used to realise this endeavour. Finally, I present the process employed to analyse my findings. Throughout the article I include, where appropriate, a selection of the research results in order to demonstrate the reasons for and effectiveness of the methods I employed to reach certain conclusions.

## 2. A tale of two cities

The comparative method, routinely applied to determine idiosyncrasies both between and within populations, is central to the discipline of demography. For a demographer, however, a comparative ethnographic study is likely to be viewed with suspicion given that the participants from each research site are too few to be representative, despite their similarities in age, gender, education and professional background. The demographer would wonder what lessons such a small sample can tell us about childbearing elsewhere in Greece and the UK, and how that casts light on the differences between the two countries' fertility profiles. However, an anthropologist might also have difficulties recognising the value of a comparative ethnographic study but for different reasons. Not only does research of this kind risk de-contextualising human behaviour in search of units of comparison and underlying structures or principles of conduct, but also it is dangerous to make general statements based on the findings of one or two in-depth but small-scale investigations.

At the heart of this issue is a semantic debate about 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 other words, 'comparison' does not

have the same connotation when employed in anthropological research as when utilised in a demographic context. 'Methods that share formal properties but that mean different things to those using them are in fact different methods' (Greenhalgh 1997, p.823). Misunderstandings or disagreements regarding the make-up and purpose of particular methods also occur within disciplines themselves, owing to the development of novel theoretical orientations. Given the existence of such a range of approaches, in order to demonstrate the legitimacy and benefit of conducting a comparative ethnographic study it is, therefore, necessary to clarify the meaning of 'comparison'.

The aim of this research was neither to provide an explanation for low fertility in Europe and its cross-cultural variations based on observations of the fertility behaviour of informants, nor to uncover principles of conduct or structures common to low and 'lowest-low' fertility countries in Europe. Each enquiry had illustrative rather than representative status and as the Athenian investigation was entirely independent of the one conducted in London, it was subject to its own strengths and weaknesses. Instead both studies used a combination of conceptual tools or themes to explore how a particular group of people within two different low fertility settings thought about and approached the process of childbearing. It was these that were being compared rather than the two study sites.

In essence, the rationale used to design this enquiry is comparable to an anthropological edited volume whose purpose is to provide thematic unity through otherwise unconnected studies. While every chapter within a collection of this kind is independent of the other, each with contrasting geographical or cultural focal points, in combination they fulfil a mutual task: using a common set of thematic principles they examine the diverse ways in which the behaviour(s) or event(s) under investigation take shape in different settings. So too in my own study, a comparative thematic framework is pieced together through highly individual ethnographic accounts. The key themes I selected for this purpose can be grouped together under the following three headings: 'gendered personhood, identity and the self', 'structure, agency and reproductive decision-making', and 'the institution of motherhood and ideologies of mothering.'

In contrast to standard demographic research, the above themes were not all selected prior to the start of the investigation. As knowledge of the issues pertaining to each group of informants increased, new themes were incorporated into the ambit of the enquiry. This method of approach led to a deeper appreciation of the reasons behind each group of women's unique attitudes toward childbearing and experiences of family-formation. Importantly, it did not impede the process of reaching certain conclusions about low fertility in general. As Brannen (2005, p. 175) argues, the idea 'that qualitative research lacks quantitative research's power to generalize' is defensible 'if generalizability is taken to refer only to statistical inference, that is when the findings of a research sample are generalized to the parent population.' Yet just as the method of

comparison conceals a different set of assumptions when used in the anthropological rather than the demographic sense, so too does the meaning of ‘generalization.’ ‘Qualitative findings,’ Brannen points out, ‘may be generalized in a different sense [to quantitative findings]; they may be generalized to other settings or contexts or they may involve theoretical generalization.’ Therefore, not only is it possible to use the themes from this study to shed light on the family-formation practices of women elsewhere but it is also feasible to utilize them in critically assessing both demographic and anthropological theories of low fertility.

For example, I take issue with theoretical explanations that attribute differences between countries manifesting ‘low’ and ‘lowest-low’ fertility to variations in the *degree* to which they possess certain ‘variables’, such as ‘gender equity’ (McDonald 2000), ‘familism’ (Dalla Zuana 2001; Dalla Zuana 2004; Livi-Bacci 2001; Lesthaeghe and Meekers 1986) or ‘religiosity’ (Lesthaeghe 1983; van de Kaa 1987). The reasons behind diverse low fertility patterns are not so easily quantifiable nor are they uniform across cultures. As my fieldwork progressed, I started to realise that what would best account for low fertility and its diverse character would be theories that focused not on *how much* gender equality a country or social group possesses, or whether it is characterised by *strong or weak* family ties, for example, but on what is the nature of gender or kinship relations prevalent within each and why. This is achievable using in-depth ethnographic fieldwork and comparison in the anthropological sense: to understand how different groups of people within specific socio-economic, political, cultural and historical contexts think about, give meaning to and act upon such concepts as gender and family, and how these, in turn, influence reproduction.

As mentioned above, the themes of motherhood and mothering featured prominently in my analysis of below-replacement fertility in Athens and London. Before I set out for the field, I was confident that one reason behind the divergence in British and Greek women’s approaches toward childbearing was the latter’s intensive childrearing practices and enormous respect for the mother figure in comparison to that of the former. Yet upon concluding my interviews, I realised that my original convictions did not paint the most accurate picture of each group’s understandings and experiences – being a mother did not have a different level of intensity but distinct implications, which in turn produced a unique set of standards in the minds of Greek and British women about how best to look after their children.

For example, Athenian informants spoke of motherhood as a social ‘duty’, necessary to the ‘completion’ of being a woman. At the same time, the Greek print media, the Greek Orthodox Church and the dominant discourse surrounding ‘underfertility’ (*ypogennitikotita* – as the current state of the Greek birth rate is known), all extended this depiction to imply that motherhood is also a duty both to the nation and to God. Consequently, to refuse to mother under ‘favourable’ circumstances was to

reject the Greek nation and the Greek Orthodox faith (adherence to which was essential to being 'Greek') and thus contribute to the degeneration of Greek society and the Greek family. But while 'voluntary childlessness' was unthinkable among the majority of middle-class Athenians I spoke to, limiting childbearing to one or two children was a 'logical' course of action. However strong one's duty to nation, society, God and the family, there had to be a balance against a duty to one's self as an 'individual' and as a woman defined independently of her relationships to others, particularly her kin. Consequently, although those with 'many children' (the *polyteknoi*) were often praised for their courage, they were also perceived as 'irresponsible'. Most Greek women believed that they were compelled to raise as many 'good' Greek citizens as their circumstances permitted. Given the lack of state support for families, the near absence of childcare facilities and the general expense of childrearing in Athens, looking after one or at most two children was the most conscientious reproductive strategy a woman could conceive of pursuing.

In 2004, the UK's Trade Secretary Patricia Hewitt proclaimed that it was the 'duty' of all citizens to bear children for the economic and social success of the country. Such a proclamation would have passed without comment in Athens, but British mothers and the press were enraged. In London, I met informants for whom reproduction was a strictly private affair and for whom motherhood had personal rather than social value. Motherhood was frequently described as a 'lifestyle choice.' I met a number of women, known as 'the childfree', who claimed to have 'chosen' to forgo motherhood altogether. For those who did become mothers, the transition entailed a loss of control, isolation and a lack of self-confidence, sentiments of the exact opposite nature to those they attributed to their careers (as lawyers, doctors and teachers) and to those that Athenians ascribed to motherhood. Consequently, British informants expressed feeling racked with guilt in trying simultaneously to fulfil the demands presented by their roles as mothers and workers. Yet despite their grievances, the majority of women I met in London were open to the idea of having a greater number of children than their Athenian counterparts (at least two and often three). While this partly reflected their and their husbands' earning capacity, it was also due to their ideas about mothering and personhood. For middle-class British parents, the most valuable qualities to pass on to a child were 'self-reliance' and 'independence'. British children were encouraged to be less demanding of their parents' resources and to learn the social skills required to become a self-sufficient adult through interaction with one's siblings. Coupled with the range of childcare options available to women in London relative to those in Athens, many of my British informants were both willing and able to have more than two children.

In sum, the different meanings attached to motherhood, womanhood, and personhood, and consequently childbearing point to the importance of such themes in

understanding low fertility. They also provide evidence against those theories which attribute import to degree rather than difference.

### **3. Investigating fertility ‘at home’**

Conducting research in familiar places involves overcoming a series of well-documented obstacles for anthropologists (Jackson 1987; Peirano 1998; Ryang 2000, 2005) – ones that demographers may either not come across or feel to be of relevance to their research objectives. In this section, I will show how these obstacles manifested in this investigation, how I faced them and also how, in fact, there are reasons for demographers to reflect upon their relationship with the environment in which their research is situated. The argument that ‘native’ anthropologists do not possess the advantage of comprehending ‘others’ through difference, as ‘other’ is akin to the ‘self’, is particularly made in cases where the focus of study is both the same society or culture and the same social group, whether in terms of education, ethnic background or other variables. 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 concern, particularly given the subject matter of my investigation. For example, I found it difficult at times to achieve the critical distance necessary to turn an academic eye to those I was interviewing. 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 middle-class, Greek Athenian 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, I was frequently confronted by the dilemma of whether the questions I was asking were either too obvious or not searching enough. Rather than letting this discourage me from carrying on with my enquiries, the anxiety caused by this dilemma prompted me to dig deeper into the reasons behind each group’s revelations.

Despite my uncomfortable proximity to Athenians and Londoners’ ways of thinking, there were also numerous 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, ethnicity) and cannot possibly possess knowledge of all that goes on



within their societies. The impact of 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 was gathering, I was 24-25 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 the British influences in my life. As a result, in both cities informants themselves 'positioned me' as both 'insider' and 'outsider' (Halstead 2001).

Coast, Hampshire and Randall (2007) point out that unlike demographers anthropologists are very concerned about how their presence is likely to affect the research process. While the former may not feel their methods of collecting data merit the same degree of caution and reflection as the latter, their questions and findings are not value-free, even if they are familiar with the population they are studying. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005) suggest that the tendency to conduct 'mono-method research' and teaching either quantitative or qualitative approaches, rather than both in tandem, leads to a 'false dichotomy' between the two and a tendency to exaggerate their differences rather than their similarities. For example, Onwuegbuzie and Leech argue that since quantitative and qualitative researchers make attempts to explain their findings, both engage in the process of interpreting their results to some degree. This means that subjective beliefs cannot help but permeate demographic and anthropological research design, data collection and analysis. Consequently, the 'proximity' or 'distance' between the researcher and the people s/he is trying to study is no less important a matter for the demographer to reflect upon. Moreover gathering data on fertility in Europe is equally problematic for a European researcher as it would be if s/he were to conduct a study in a non-European context. As my early experience of carrying out interviews in Athens and London revealed, there is a risk that respondents' answers are under-interpreted or taken-for-granted on occasions when the researcher feels 'at home' in the research setting.

Of course, there were also many benefits to doing anthropology 'close to 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 fluently. Since I had decided to conduct fieldwork in two places instead of one, the

time I had available to immerse myself in each field site was limited in anthropological terms (ten months in each place). Speaking both languages was crucial to understanding and translating local terms, and I was careful not to lose sight of their nuances in the course of translation. 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 is an aptitude that takes time to develop. 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. For example, in the Greek popular imagination, the term *ypogennitikotita* ('underfertility') is deeply nuanced in comparison to *hamili gennitikotita* ('low fertility'). Translating either as 'below-replacement fertility' is a very easy trap for a researcher to fall into and would erroneously ignore the prevalent concern that the country's birth rate is lower than it 'ought' to be and the effect that this has on the survival of the Greek 'nation' (*ethnos*).

The language used to describe birth rates in a particular setting has a considerable impact on researchers' investigations. As Sporton (1999, p.71) argues, 'if reproduction is viewed as a socially constructed process then we need to move beyond the calculation of fertility rates *to understand* the nature of these constructions by exploring, for example the discourses which shape them.' Since demographers are less interested in the diverse manner in which fertility is described in different contexts, they run a greater risk of asking questions that are shaped by local dominant discourses and are consequently in more danger of accepting answers that are influenced by prevailing attitudes.

For example, when I started questioning middle-class Athenian women about their family-formation aspirations and experiences, I would introduce the subject of my investigation as being about the issue of *ypogennitikotita*. While using the local terminology to describe my research was useful because it facilitated the process of convincing women to participate in my study, I soon realised that it was also detrimental to my aims. When asked to discuss the causes for *ypogennitikotita*, informants would immediately recycle the same concepts, with the same key words cropping up time and time again. Almost in unison, they would list: *to oikonomiko* ('financial considerations'), *i yperkatalanosi* ('hyperconsumption'), *to kratos* ('the absence of state support for Greek families'), *i Elliniki notropia* (a 'change in Greek mentality lifestyle aspirations'), the 'demise of the family', the 'crisis' in gender and sexuality, job insecurity and unemployment, infertility and abortion.

Although these reasons were insightful, it became apparent through their repetition, that they revealed more about the over-riding social response to this issue, often reflected in the media, than about my informants' individual beliefs and

childbearing practices. I also noticed a similar response to the use of *to demografiko* (the 'demographic problem of Greece'). As these terms had reached their limit as useful concepts, I tried to think of different ways of introducing my research topic and alternative means of posing questions. This immediately led to an increase in the range of issues that Athenian women touched on in their accounts of family-formation and, as a consequence, broadened my own perspective on the subject.

#### **4. Urban encounters: in search of informants**

Undertaking fieldwork in urban settings can be a challenge (Hannerz 1980) as endeavouring to develop relations of intimacy and trust with strangers is not easy in an environment where 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 activities. My attempt to make contact with Londoners by taking up residence in 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 and finding persons willing to talk about their experiences of family-formation was not straightforward.

Nonetheless, urban fieldwork provides anthropologists more than a single research experience. Athens and London are very different cities – the former has a population of less than half of the latter's seven million. For decades, London has been a multi-cultural city; Athens is still struggling to come to terms with its increasing immigration. Subsequently, finding an area comprising of persons with common origins or similar backgrounds in London is impossible, since there are no neat groupings - ethnic, religious or otherwise – arranged in orderly geographical pockets, anywhere in the capital. Even though Athens is also not divided into districts comprising of individuals bound by class or regional origins, there is no shortage of neighbourhoods populated by a majority of middle-class and Christian Orthodox Greeks. It was necessary, therefore, to employ different strategies in searching for informants in each capital city.

While in both Athens and London I situated myself in an area with a sufficiently large population of well-educated, professional, white women of reproductive age, the steps I took to meet and persuade them to participate in my study were not identical. Unlike for demographers, it is not only improbable but also undesirable for anthropologists to use analogous research strategies in different settings. Differences

in the nature of civil society<sup>2</sup> between Athens and London, for example, challenged any attempt to utilise identical methods of recruiting study participants. In the former, four main sources were responsible for setting the research process in motion: a privately-run playgroup, a local parents' association, an Athenian branch of the *Supreme Confederation of Large Families of Greece* (A.S.P.E.), and acquaintances introduced by friends. In contrast, key to the process of finding informants in London were a variety of parent-and-toddler groups, under-5s centres and playgroups, a series of online social clubs catering to the 'childfree' (*Kidding Aside*, *No Kidding* and the *British Organisation of Non-Parents*), and the *National Childbirth Trust* (NCT), a charity organisation that offers support during pregnancy, childbirth and early parenthood, which primarily attracts well-educated, professional, middle-class white women.

It was on account of my flexible approach that I unearthed a variety of experiences of family-formation and attitudes towards reproduction, including, for example, the 'childfree' in London and the *polyteknoi* ('people with many children')<sup>3</sup> in Athens, neither of whom I was familiar with prior to entering the field. The realisation that each group was unique to its locale became an important focus of my investigation. Likewise, the distinct childcare arrangements on offer in each city pointed to the fact that young Athenian mothers had very little contact with each other compared with their British counterparts. This meant that the women with whom I engaged in London were on average younger and with slightly younger children. It was not uncommon to come across first-time mothers with newborn babies, whereas it was significantly harder to identify and contact such women in Athens. Rather than this being an obstacle or a 'bias' inherent in my study, I considered it instructive because it illuminated the difference in options available to the two groups.

Of course, certain tools were useful in both urban centres, with the internet playing an integral part in locating various organisations, and much of my research relied on making contact with one informant via another. Even though snowball sampling has its limitations as a way of recruiting informants, as Browne (2005) suggests it is an

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<sup>2</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 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labor\\_union](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labor_union), self-help groups, social movements [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_movement), business associations, coalitions and advocacy group' (LSE Centre for Civil Society 2004).

<sup>3</sup> While I was in the field, the *polyteknoi* were those families with four or more children. A year after my departure from Athens, the new political party in power, *New Democracy*, decreed that *polyteknoi* would be those with three or more children.

effective means of accessing either difficult to reach populations or individuals willing to be questioned on matters deemed sensitive or private. Asking contacts to introduce me to friends, acquaintances or neighbours also proved effective as a means of meeting parents. A proper discussion of the method's advantages and disadvantages are beyond the scope of this paper (see Biernacki and Waldorf 1981; Faugier and Sargeant 1997; Tuomainen 1999; Browne 2005), but there is no doubt that for my purposes developing social networks was a very helpful method of recruiting informants. In the final analysis, 27 per cent of interviews in Athens and 48 per cent in London were arranged exclusively on account of snowball sampling. However non-random and non-representative, its use prevented the 'categorization of groups' (Browne 2005, p.49) and facilitated the establishment of trust between myself as researcher and my informants.

Sporton (1999) may argue that it is the 'conceptual framework' of a study that should determine the choice of methods and data sources to be used, but my approach seems to indicate that the reverse can also yield results. Though this does not comply with what most demographers would regard as good practice, the tactics employed in this comparative ethnographic study were those most suited to the environments I chose to focus on, especially given the need to build rapport with individuals rather than simply to recruit them as survey or questionnaire respondents. Opposition to such approaches has to cease to exist if there is ever to be a fusion of anthropology and demography.

## **5. Interviewing women about reproduction**

It is fair to say that demographers are increasingly incorporating in-depth interviews into their studies, but only in a peripheral manner. For those who choose to supplement their work with this method, the idea is simply to clarify or to verify findings derived from a survey or questionnaire. It is considered both too time intensive and unable to ascertain how prevalent a set of beliefs is or how common a type of behaviour. And yet, despite using the method on a much more regular basis, anthropologists also have their concerns. Suspicions are raised when research is wholly reliant upon the interview method (whether it is in-depth or not, unstructured, semi-structured or structured) unless it is coupled with participant observation. What people say they do and what they actually do may diverge a great deal, and asking individuals directly about a particular issue may lead to rationalisations rather than explanations. It may also lead to insincere responses as interviewees have a tendency to tell the interviewer what they believe s/he wants to hear (Bernard 1995). However, questionnaires and surveys are also subject to the same inconsistencies and insincerities. Moreover, finding out the reasons behind people's perceptions of their activities and motives are as interesting as

observing them in practice. 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'. No interviewer should expect to collect unbiased or 'pure data', for all accounts are subjective. To gain an in-depth understanding of interviewees' viewpoints it is merely necessary to learn about the 'context' in which they are expressed (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, p. 112).

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 regular attendance at playgroups or at the NCT ante-natal and post-natal classes in London, afforded the occasion to carry out conversations, I could not guarantee that such exchanges would take place on a regular basis. Consequently, I had to adopt a more structured method of approach than I would have in the course of a typical ethnographic investigation, even though this involved significantly less structure than a demographic survey or questionnaire. Interestingly, both sets of informants expected a certain degree of formality and orderliness from our meetings, closer to the demographic than to the anthropological approach to research, so I often had to work hard to convince them why my only prop was a tape-recorder and a small notebook instead of a survey or a questionnaire.

Regardless of this preconception, the interview method was the most effective way of finding out about informants' reproductive lives and attitudes towards having children. In the end, I managed to conduct 106 interviews in Athens and 79 in London, as well as a group interview in each city. All interviews usually lasted between 20 minutes and two and a half hours each, although the Athenian ones were on average shorter in duration because in comparison to the London-based ones more of them were carried out in a playgroup (72 per cent as opposed to 53 per cent), where the interviewee was usually pressed for time. Although the majority of interviews in both cities were with individuals, in Athens around 12 per cent were conducted with couples as opposed to only three per cent in London. In all cases, the interviews were either semi-structured or unstructured and took place in a range of settings including coffee-shops, restaurants and people's homes or offices.

Statistically 16 per cent of interviews in Athens and 34 per cent in London were home-based; 84 per cent of Athenian interviews and 73 per cent of London ones were recorded by hand and almost all the rest were tape-recorded. Only one interview in each location was chronicled after the event. Differences in the total number of interviews carried out, the manner in which they were documented and the location in which they were conducted are, once again, indicative of the constraints I experienced in each field site. In London, for example, I was able to interview informants in their homes and to use a tape-recorder more frequently because I depended largely on the NCT to introduce me to individual members. In Athens, the absence of an equivalent

organisation meant that I had greater success in finding informants in the local playgroup. Given the noise levels there, it would have been impractical and intrusive to use a tape recorder. In both settings, to make the interviews as informal as possible, I would memorise a list of key questions and themes to guide me. These were subject to constant revision as I sought to explore new ideas and topics determined from each conversation.

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. Direct requests for information concerning women's perceived motivations behind the timing and spacing of their fertility or family size were neither insightful nor warmly received. Consequently, I would start my 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 the timing of events or the number of children. This method of interviewing was more engaging. Although at times I was introducing the themes for discussion, it was entirely up to informants to determine the pace and direction of the conversation, and to suggest alternative topics for debate. As Oakley (1981, p.49) observes, the best interviews are achieved when they switch from being 'a data-collecting instrument for researchers to being a data-collecting instrument for those whose lives are being researched,' that is when the interviewee is no longer treated as a 'passive' object of study and the interviewer stops acting like a dominating, emotionally detached and impartial information seeker. In other words, interviews are most effective 'when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship' (Oakley 1981, p.41). This is especially the case, Oakley notes, when the interviewees are women at a difficult and often stressful stage in their lives.

## **6. Popular discourse and the print media**

Since I could not really become a participant observer during my time in the field, in order to learn about the larger 'context' in which my informants' lives were unfolding I decided to broaden my research focus. Therefore, not only did I consult the relevant demographic and ethnographic literature about Athens and London but I also examined the print media and its understanding of issues pertaining to low fertility.

As a recent article by Stark and Kohler (2002) demonstrates, across Europe there is widespread popular concern over below-replacement fertility. However, press coverage on the matter varies considerably between countries. While some emphasise the causes,

others prefer to focus on the consequences. 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 this subject. 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 press also emerged in my informants’ personal accounts of childbearing.

While British papers tended to focus on over-riding social issues (increased house prices, maintaining a work-life balance, childlessness and the rise of the only child, female education, hedonism, the rise of cohabitation and the breakdown of marriage), in Greece the argument was much more personalised (the demise of the family, increased abortions, changing gender relations, and above all, the lack of state support). Common to both sets was an emphasis on the financial burden of having children and the issue of infertility. Weighing British newspapers’ understanding against British informants’ narratives of family-formation exposed further differences, the most prominent of which was the concept of ‘choice’. Irrespective of underlying motives, the British print media argued that individuals or couples were consciously and actively deciding whether to have children and if so, how many and when. Yet British informants rarely described reproduction as a product of ‘choice’ based on rational, calculated and conscious decisions. Instead, mothers recalled the ‘right’ and the ‘wrong’ time for entering the process of family-formation, while the ‘childfree’ spoke of the ‘slow dawning of recognition’ that they did not want to have children. Greek newspapers also presented a rather unique medley of issues that were not contained within Athenian informants’ accounts of their experiences of childbearing. It was argued, for example, that low fertility was due to a decrease in women’s willingness to mother, which informants challenged both in their appraisals of motherhood and through their reluctance to remain childless.

In another article by Stark and Kohler (2004), focusing specifically on the coverage of low fertility in the German press, they contend that paying close attention to how the print media reports and deliberates 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 their assertion that studying popular 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 taking into account the views and



experiences of 'ordinary' citizens'. 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 fully 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.' I would also add that as the media tends to generalise about events, practices and values in order to construct more sensationalist arguments, it ends up saying very little about differences either within or between social groups.

For instance, the debate presented in the mainstream British press highlighted issues that were mainly of relevance to the middle-classes, not to those from lower economic strata or to minority ethnic groups. The expense of private school education and the cost and quality of nannies are not issues that a large section of the population would have to contend with. Likewise, the argument that careers and family are competing domains that hinder reproduction rests on very middle-class attitudes to work and family. In contrast, some women from ethnic minorities do not experience the public and the private as distinct and conflicting spheres of life, but as inter-dependent and harmonious, compatible with large families, as Collins (1994) and Segura (1994) illustrate.

Fowler (1991, p.2) asserts that 'news is socially constructed'. Events are not inherently 'newsworthy'; they are turned into 'news' by the media. While audiences are critical of what they see, hear and read, the media has considerable influence over the range and content of the material that is presented, and is constantly 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.' An analysis of the popular debate over low fertility in a specific location is not significant because it can provide academics and policy-makers with an insight on issues that matter to the public at large. Instead, the media offers a perspective on reproductive practices that is often very different to a reader's actual views and experiences. Consequently, it is important to examine media sources for additional data, not to fall into the trap of treating the media as another type of survey.

## **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’. My analysis, although now over, could never be described as complete. The most consistent analytical effort was made once I returned from the field and began to transcribe verbatim the 39 interview tapes I had managed to record. Once this process had ended, 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. I only translated from Greek into English interview sections intended for use in the final thesis. Next, I started to code each group of transcripts by looking for recurrent mention of topics. In the process, I also made sure to highlight key terms. Following multiple readings and attempts at re-coding I settled on a central list of codes emanating from each research site and embarked upon the process of finding connections between them. This finally led to the development of a set of research themes. Those themes that arose from field data from both research sites I was then able to compare. Since I presented my results from each field site separately in my thesis, and only discussed them jointly in the conclusion, I was able to focus on incomparable themes in their rightful contexts. While I did not conduct a full-scale narrative analysis, I interpreted informants’ accounts both as ‘narratives of the self’ (Ochs and Capps 1996) and as ‘moral tales’ (McCarthy et al. 2000).

## **8. Conclusion**

While there is literature on the benefits and means of integrating qualitative and quantitative research methods (Sieber 1973; Sporton 1999; Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2005; Brannen 2005), I have tried to show specifically the value of ethnographic inquiry and how, potentially, it can be of service to the understanding of demographic phenomena. My thesis was an example of how to conduct an anthropological study of a subject more commonly tackled by demographers. I hope to have raised in this article some of the methodological problems that I faced in the process and the solutions I used while trying to remain faithful to my discipline. It would be wrong of me not to acknowledge the influence of the well-known recommendations of how to use qualitative research tools for understanding demographic behaviour (Greenhalgh 1995; Kertzer and Fricke 1997; Obermeyer 1997; Basu and Aaby 1998), but I decided not to refer to them here so as to highlight the need for sensitivity to the challenges generated, unique to my research.

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