

# DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

*A peer-reviewed, open-access journal of population sciences*

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## ***DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH***

**VOLUME 42, ARTICLE 29, PAGES 799–826**

**PUBLISHED 6 MAY 2020**

<http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol42/29/>

DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2020.42.29

*Research Article*

### **Entrance into parenthood at the onset of low fertility in Ukraine: The role of family relationships and perceived security**

**Yuliya Hilevych**

This publication is part of the Special Collection on “The Power of the Family,” organized by Guest Editors Hilde A.J. Bras and Rebecca Sear.

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## **Entrance into parenthood at the onset of low fertility in Ukraine: The role of family relationships and perceived security**

**Yuliya Hilevych<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

#### **BACKGROUND**

In post-Soviet countries, low fertility has been achieved through postponement of second birth, while entrance into parenthood still takes place relatively early in life and within marriage. Studies suggest that grandparental support with childcare drives this reproductive behaviour. However, we still know little about the exact way in which decisions about first parenthood are shaped by family relationships, especially with respect to the expected and actual support they exert.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

This paper explores how family relationships – spousal and intergenerational – influenced decisions to enter parenthood in Ukraine between 1950 and 1975, when fertility there declined below the replacement level for the first time.

#### **METHODS**

A total of 66 qualitative life-history interviews were conducted with women and men from the Ukrainian cities of Lviv (west) and Kharkiv (east); age-specific fertility rates and the total fertility rate in 1960 were measured for the two provinces.

#### **RESULTS**

The informants shared their notions about the right timing for first parenthood, which parents(-in-law) helped them to navigate. This guidance, in turn, created expectations about the provision of help with childcare, which facilitated a feeling of security when entering parenthood in economically insecure circumstances, which are defined as perceived security. The actual provision of childcare by parents(-in-law), however, was contingent on spousal relationships, which differed between the two cities. These differences are important for understanding postponement of second birth and regional variation in achieving low fertility in Ukraine.

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## **CONTRIBUTION**

The study argues that perceived security – guided by specific intergenerational and spousal relationships – is crucial for understanding universal and relatively early entrance into parenthood in Ukraine.

## **1. Introduction**

One of the major peculiarities of the lowest-low fertility regime in post-Soviet countries is that it has been achieved through postponement of second birth, while entrance into parenthood still takes place relatively early in life and often within marriage. For example, in Ukraine, the total fertility rate (1.2), women's average age at first birth (25.4), and proportion of live births outside marriage (20.5) are still among the lowest in Europe (Eurostat 2018). To explain this fertility regime, scholars have suggested that uncertain economic conditions and social anomie have facilitated postponement of second birth since the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent political and economic crises (Billingsley 2010; Fahlén and Oláh 2018; Frejka 2008; Gabriel 2005; Ghodsee and Bernardi 2012; Hollos and Bernardi 2009; Perelli-Harris 2005, 2008; Sobotka 2004). However, it is still unclear why social and economic uncertainty has had little impact on the timing of first birth in this context.

The pronatalist family policy argument can only partially explain the persistence of early entrance into parenthood in the region. The free childcare facilities and housing that were available during the Soviet era were curtailed after the regime collapsed, but the pattern of relatively early and universal entrance into parenthood taking place within marriage has prevailed. Furthermore, postponement of second birth in Ukraine started as early as the post-war decades, as fertility declined below the replacement level in the eastern part of Ukraine, and access to grandparental support with childcare – or lack of thereof – was crucial for the onset of this decline (Hilevych 2016a). More convincing, therefore, is the argument that grandparental support with childcare has also played an important role in the prevalence of early and universal entrance into parenthood in the region (Gabriel 2005; Ghodsee and Bernardi 2012; Perelli-Harris 2005, 2008; Rotkirch 2000; Rotkirch and Kesseli 2010). For example, scholars have suggested that if grandparents are still young, they may provide more financial and physical help with childcare that, in turn, motivates couples to enter into parenthood at a fairly early age (Gabriel 2005; Perelli-Harris 2005). At the same time, we still do not know the mechanisms through which intergenerational relationships shape decisions around early entrance into parenthood in the region. Specifically, whether it is expected or actual intergenerational support that matters for reproductive decisions, as suggested by recent

demographic studies on low fertility contexts (Pink 2018; Schaffnit and Sear 2017; Tanskanen and Rotkirch 2014). Furthermore, it is also important to understand how intergenerational relations are interrelated with spousal power dynamics, primarily because achieving gender equality is often presented as the best way to enhance fertility in the region (Armitage and Sobotka 2019).

In this paper, I explore the role of family relationships – intergenerational and spousal – in shaping individual decisions on entrance into parenthood in Ukraine during the onset of low fertility in the 1960s. This historical period is significant, as pronatalist policies were first introduced in the region at that point, which also allows us to trace the response and adaptation of family relationships to this context. As the fertility decline in Ukraine has been both recent and rapid, people who witnessed and participated in this sociodemographic change through their own reproductive decisions can still be interviewed (Fisher 2006; Hilevych 2016b; Hilevych and Rusterholz 2018; Rusterholz 2017; Szreter 2011; Szreter and Fisher 2010). This study has utilised this opportunity and is based on the analysis of 66 life-history interviews with men and women who became parents between 1950 and 1975 in the cities of Lviv and Kharkiv. The cities – situated in western and eastern Ukraine, respectively – are often used as sites of comparison, as they frequently resemble contrasting views on social, historical, and demographic processes up to the present day. To study these family relationships, I employ the framework of social influences on reproductive decisions (Bernardi 2003; Bernardi and Klärner 2014). Through this framework, I also ascertain which family relationships are important at different stages of individual reproductive careers (Hilevych 2016b).

In the following section, I provide an overview of theoretical debates around the role of family relationships in reproductive decisions in low fertility contexts. I then discuss my data collection and data analysis. In the findings section, I will discuss specific aspects of family influences on decisions about first parenthood. First, I will illustrate how family and other social relationships shape couples' understanding of the right timing for first parenthood. Then, I will show how the interdependency of family relationships formed around this reproductive logic create an overall feeling of perceived security for couples to enter into parenthood at a point in life when they are still economically dependent on their parents. Lastly, I will illustrate how this feeling of security creates specific expectations about both intergenerational and spousal childcare support and the ways these are met. I will conclude with the main implications of my findings for further research and policy.

## 2. Family relationships and reproductive decisions in low fertility contexts

In her book *Mothers and Others*, Hrdy (2009) argues that, exceptionally for the human species, mothers require help from other kin to raise their children, as they cannot do it alone. For a long time, this hypothesis has been explored by evolutionary demographers in hunter-gatherer societies and high fertility contexts (for an overview see: Sear 2018; Sear and Coall 2011). Recent qualitative and quantitative studies have illuminated the fact that family and kin support, especially that provided by grandparents, also has a significant effect on parity progression in low fertility contexts (Ghodsee and Bernardi 2012; Hilevych 2016b; Mathews and Sear 2013; Mönkediek 2016, 2020; Pink 2018; Schaffnit and Sear 2017; Tanskanen et al. 2014; Tanskanen and Rotkirch 2014; Waynforth 2011). Scholars also find differences in influences of maternal and paternal grandparents on progression towards births in low fertility contexts: The presence of paternal grandparents is associated with the higher probability of having a second child, while the presence of a maternal grandmother is linked to a lower probability of having a third or subsequent births (Tanskanen et al. 2014).

To unpack the exact mechanisms through which these intergenerational relationships work in a low fertility context, recent research has begun to distinguish between anticipated and actual grandparental support and how this can make a difference to the timing of birth. Schaffnit and Sear (2017), for example, find that in a high-income Western context with low fertility, such as the Netherlands, emotional support is more relevant to second and later births, while practical support is more important when entering parenthood. Similarly, Pink (2018) also finds that anticipated grandmaternal support leads to faster entrance into motherhood in Germany. Another study finds that Lithuanian women who received grandparental help with childcare were less likely to try for another child (Tanskanen and Rotkirch 2014). Altogether, these findings suggest that depending on the context and reproductive event, feelings and expectations of support may be more important than actual provision of support (Schaffnit and Sear 2017; Sear 2018).

Receiving support at earlier stages of life may also create expectations about whether such support will continue to be available. In their qualitative study on Bulgaria's low fertility, Ghodsee and Bernardi (2012) find that women preferred and expected grandparental help with childcare. These expectations, however, were often so strong that if actual help did not become available, women were less likely to have a second child. Similarly, in the context of Soviet Ukraine, I also found that in the eastern part of the country, women decided to postpone a second birth, often through frequent abortions, if they were not able to secure childcare support from their parents(-in-law), usually mothers (Hilevych 2015, 2016a). Importantly, I also found that those women

who postponed second birth often did so because they did not perceive their husbands as adequate helpers with childcare. Instead, they relied on and waited for help from their mothers(-in-law) to become available, perceiving them as their main childcare providers. When this help was not available, they had to rely on themselves, as well as state-provided childcare facilities. Rotkirch (2000:118) identifies another side of this: what she called “extended mothering” arrangements among women living in urban post-Soviet Russia. She argues that there, maternal care implied not only taking care of biological children but also “grandchildren, children of relatives and friends, husband, elderly parents and parents-in-law.”

In this study, I take the debate on expected and actual family support with childcare in a low fertility regime one step further by placing it in the context of entrance into parenthood. While there is a unique continuity in the demographics of early parenthood that makes Ukraine an interesting context for closer investigation, this reproductive life transition is also notable for another reason. At this point in the life course, interdependencies in intergenerational and spousal relationships around reproductive decisions are practically experienced, exercised, and established for the first time. This, in turn, forms specific expectations not only for these two types of relationships for later in life but also for interactions when generations live together.

To study these interdependencies, I explore how family relationships – both intergenerational and spousal – influenced individual decisions relating to the entrance into parenthood, including childcare provision. I draw on the analytical framework of social influences on reproductive decisions (Bernardi 2003; Bernardi and Klärner 2014). According to this framework, there are four mechanisms that influence reproductive decisions: social learning and social contagion, which are indirect influences, and social pressure and social support, which are direct influences. In my analysis, I will specifically focus on the two direct influences, as they can also be anticipated: social pressure, that is, the force leading an individual to conform to another person’s expectations; and social support, which refers to the provision and social exchange of tangible and/or intangible resources. Importantly, while social influences are often traced from the perspective of the couple or a woman (Bernardi 2003; Bernardi and White 2010; Kavas and de Jong 2020; Keim, Klärner, and Bernardi 2009, 2012), in this study I treat the spousal relationship as part of family relationships. This aspect is important because it allows me to also trace influences of a wife and husband on each other and, as such, to account for spousal power dynamics in reproductive decisions alongside the intergenerational ones.

### 3. Research methodology

This study is based on an analysis of 66 life-history interviews with men and women. The informants were born before World War II and resided in the cities of Lviv and Kharkiv, where they became parents between 1950 and 1975. Life-history interviewing is often used to collect retrospective data on parts of, or complete, individual life courses (Miller 2000), and in this study the specific focus has been on reproductive experiences. I spent 10 months in total conducting fieldwork, between July 2012 and April 2015. At first the interviews were conducted solely by myself; after November 2013, when the political crisis started in Ukraine, I worked with a research assistant in the city of Kharkiv.

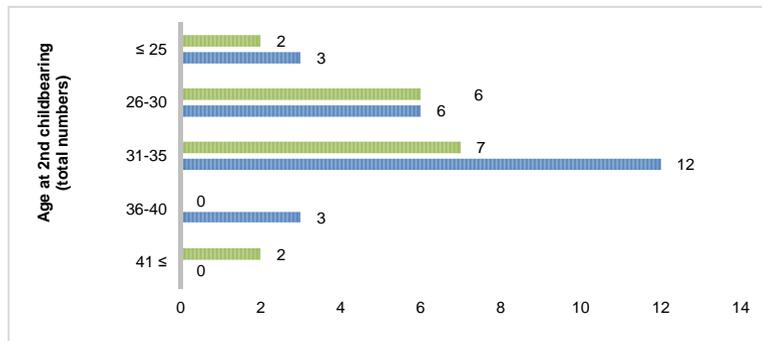
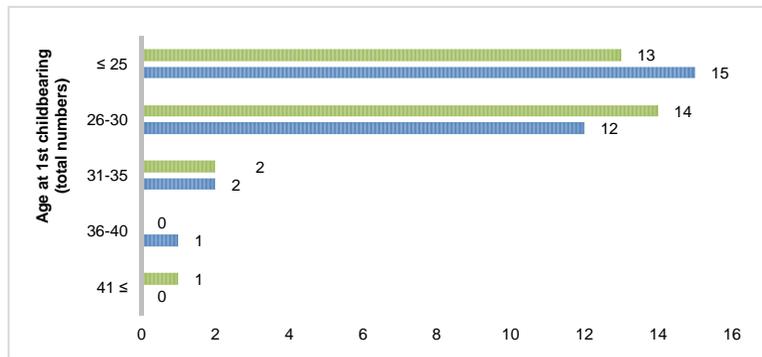
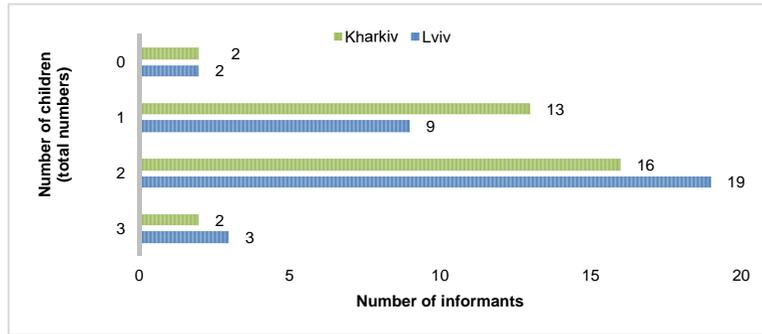
The interviews were open-ended, direct, and personal conversations that, on average, lasted for two hours. In every interview, individuals' experiences of various reproductive events, including courtship, marriage, childbearing(s), miscarriages, and birth control were uncovered. I interviewed women and men who did not have children as well. The interviews also addressed the meanings that participants attached to significant others, namely those who influenced, helped with, or prevented them from making specific reproductive decisions. Finally, it was important that the informants put their reproductive decisions into the broader context of influential historical events and policy regulations, such as the (re)legalisation of abortion, introduction of maternity leave, and tax on childlessness, among other socioeconomic conditions.

Snowball sampling was used as a practical way of recruiting informants. This was combined with purposive sampling in order to ensure that the informants' economic and educational backgrounds were as diverse as possible (for the informants' characteristics, see Table 1 and Figure 1).

**Table 1: Characteristics of informants**

	Kharkiv	Lviv
Number of informants	33	33
male informants	8	9
female informants	25	24
couples	4	6
Rural origin	10	13
Urban origin	23	20
Working class	13	12
Civil servants	13	17
Scientific elite	7	3

**Figure 1: Informants' total number of children, and age at first and second births**



That said, this sample is not representative of the entire populations of the two cities. Moreover, because of its diversity and thus the relatively small numbers of individuals belonging to certain ethnic and religious groups, the sample does not allow for exploring differences between them in this study. With regard to class and rural or urban origin, I did not observe any differences among these around entrance into parenthood. Finally, I collected descriptive population statistics on birth and population numbers. Figure 2 shows age-specific fertility rates and the total fertility rate in 1960 for the two provinces.

To carry out the coding and analysis, I used Atlas.ti qualitative software. I applied two coding strategies to analyse the interviews. First, I carried out structural coding (Saldaña 2012), aiming to identify reproductive events and their sequences in every interview. Second, I performed domain and values coding (Saldaña 2012) of the reproductive transitions relating to first parenthood: pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, miscarriage, and childcare. From the coding, certain subcategories emerged, such as “right timing of parenthood,” “expectations of parental support,” and “actual provision on childcare” among the main ones. I then used the query tool to select the quotations according to the groups of documents that were created beforehand: origin (Lviv or Kharkiv) and gender (male or female) of the informants. In my analysis, I did not try to detect the exact reality or the truth behind each event; rather, I aimed to identify the logics and rationales that individuals attached to their decisions and that surrounded these family and other social relationships.

#### **4. Fertility and Soviet family policy**

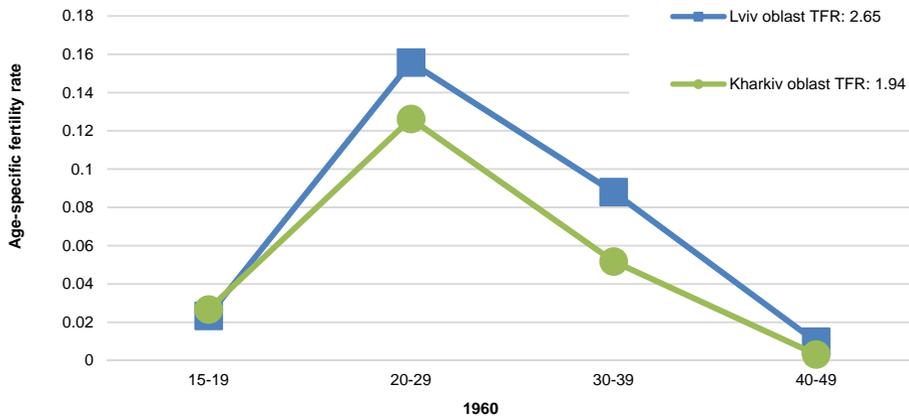
As Figure 1 shows, women and men interviewed in this study had on average one or two children. The informants themselves, however, were often born into families with more than five children. The generation on which I focus in this study therefore provides a unique lens on the historic fertility decline, as they underwent it through their own reproductive experiences between the 1950s and 1970s. Ukraine is also a country where fertility decline has been so recent and has taken place within just several generations that people can still be interviewed about it (Hilevych 2016b; Szreter 2011), an opportunity that this study utilised. Furthermore, the speed of the decline was so rapid that in some regions, such as Kharkiv, fertility had already declined to below replacement level (less than 2.1 children per woman) by the 1960s. Figure 2 illustrates that in 1960, the total fertility rate in Kharkiv oblast (province) was 1.94, while in Lviv oblast it was 2.65.

Calculating regional trends in total fertility rates for the studied period in Ukraine is challenging. Statistics on the total number of women per age-specific group were

mainly collected by the Soviet general censuses, such as the 1959 census, on which Figure 2 is based. The previous census was collected in 1939. Nevertheless, the crude birth rates (CBR) calculations capture this rapid decline and regional differences. In Kharkiv region, CBR per 1,000 population declined from just around 40 births in the 1930s to 13 to 15 births in the 1960s (Hilevych 2016a). In Lviv region, the fertility decline started earlier, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it was more prolonged. In the post-war decades, CBR in Lviv was already under 25 births in the 1940s and declined to just under 20 births by the 1960s (Hilevych 2016a). The below-replacement fertility there was reached in the 1990s (Perelli-Harris 2005).

The post-war fertility decline in Ukraine occurred due to the tendency for considerable spacing between births and stopping reproductive activity after the first birth (Hilevych 2016a; Steshenko 2010). However, in the post-war decades, entrance into parenthood took place at an earlier age, typically by 25 (Steshenko 2010). Figure 2 illustrates that in 1960 the majority of all births took place before the age of 30 in both Kharkiv and Lviv oblasts, which is consistent with the characteristics of the informants in this study (Figure 1).

**Figure 2: Age-specific fertility rates (ASFR) in 1960 in Kharkiv and Lviv oblasts (provinces), including total fertility rate (TFR)**



Notes: Calculated by the author. Sources: Lviv oblasts – Department of Statistics of Lviv Statistical Office, acquired on 9 September and 15 September 2015; Kharkiv oblasts – Department of Statistics of Kharkiv Statistical Office, acquired on 5 April 2013, and Kharkiv state archive funds 5231.

Soviet family policy during the post-war years took pronatalist measures, primarily by encouraging early first parenthood. The relegalisation of abortion in 1955

unofficially became one of those measures. Although legalised due to the ideological premise of incorporating women into the labour market, abortion was discouraged, especially in relation to first pregnancy, as it was suggested that it could lead to permanent infertility (Hilevych and Sato 2018). This rhetoric was combined with a limited availability of other effective birth control methods, as well as knowledge of these methods (Hilevych 2015).

Alongside abortion legalisation, the 1950s and 1960s also witnessed the introduction of significant parental benefits. For the first time, the working mothers were granted 56 days of fully paid maternity leave before delivery and the same number of days afterwards, constituting 112 days in total, and additional days could be added in cases of complications (Lapidus 1978). In contrast, non-working mothers did not have any limits on maternity leave, but it was unpaid. Officially, the state also granted any mother with children a priority in the labour market (Lapidus 1978). This measure was meant to encourage women not to delay parenthood but to enter it during or soon after finishing their education. An additional legal mechanism that encouraged early age at first parenthood was that married couples with children had a priority in receiving housing from the state. The square metres of a state-issued apartment were calculated based on the size of the family, which also encouraged newly married couples to have a first child soon thereafter. In some cases, it was also possible to live in a temporary apartment before moving to a permanent one, as it would often take several years for a housing application to be processed. Because of this, newly married couples often lived with their parents during the first few years.

The post-war period also faced accelerated industrialisation, which led to rapid urbanisation and inclusion of women in the labour market in Ukraine. In the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, which had been part of the Soviet Union since 1919, industrial developments started during the interwar years and continued into the 1950s and 1960s. The city became one of the largest in Ukraine, with a population of 950,000 people in 1959 (Rachkov 2011:213) and female labour force participation among the highest in the country. In 1950, the proportion of women among blue-collar and white-collar workers was already 46.9%.<sup>2</sup> In Lviv, the city's population had reached almost half a million people (411,000) by 1959, which made it the biggest city in western Ukraine (Bodnar 2010:41). Female labour force participation in Lviv also increased rapidly, from just 12.9% in 1950 to 42.2% in 1960 (Statistical Office 1987). It should also be noted that while Lviv officially became part of the Soviet Union in 1939, reforms started in practice only after World War II. Due to Soviet and German occupations during the war, the population of Lviv also changed drastically, with the Polish and Jewish populations being largely exterminated from the city and region. As a result, the city's population became more homogeneous after the war following a rapid

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<sup>2</sup> Kharkiv State Archive, email request on 2 April 2014.

influx of migrants from neighbouring rural areas and small towns, which meant that Ukrainians came to constitute the city's majority (60% in 1959) (Hrytsak 2007:41).

Overall, the post-war period signified the Soviet state's return to preserving family "as a fundamental agency of socialisation, as a supplier of essential productive, reproductive and emotional services, and as a basic unit of decision-making that mediates the relation between public and private domains" (Lapidus 1978:234). In practice, strong intergenerational relationships and reciprocal support between colleagues and neighbours continued to be an essential part of people's everyday lives in the urban areas of Soviet Russia and Ukraine (Semenova and Thompson 2005; Vinokurova 2007). Studies on western Ukraine similarly illustrate that in the 1950s and 1960s, the patterns of family relationships that existed in the city of Lviv were also based on local family values – often brought by migrants from neighbouring rural areas – which often clashed with state ideology (Bodnar 2010). These developments additionally suggest that the role of family relationships might have been more important in individual lives than is often assumed for the Soviet Ukrainian context.

## **5. Results**

The women and men in this study made their decisions about first parenthood not before but after conception occurred, which was the point in life at which abortion could be considered and sought. This reproductive logic was in contrast to the ideology of family planning that was being popularised at the same time in Western contexts. However, for my Ukrainian informants, this allowed them to form certain expectations about family support and sense whether these expectations could be met. In this section, I discuss three main aspects underlying the entrance into parenthood and the role of spousal, intergenerational, and other social relationships. Namely, I discuss (1) how the 'right' timing of first parenthood was not realised via individual 'planning' strategies but instead through the guidance of parents(-in-law), siblings, and peers; (2) how family relationships, particularly those with parents and spouses, formed certain expectations around receiving support with childcare and the impact this had on the actual decision about first childbearing; and (3) how these expectations were fulfilled, or not, and the role this played in subsequent reproductive decisions.

### 5.1 Achieving the ‘right’ timing without planning: entrance into parenthood and cultivating intergenerational dependency

Similarly to other studies on (post-)socialist contexts (Gabriel 2005; Larivaara 2011; Mynarska 2010; Rotkirch and Kesseli 2010), I found that among my informants, the first birth was not (meant to be) planned. In practice, this implies that spouses typically did not use birth control. Additionally, the informants often expressed that they felt opposed to the very notion of ‘planning’ a first birth and claimed that it was not an appropriate term to describe their reproductive decisions. Indeed, as the ideology of family planning in its direct sense was not introduced and was even condemned in the Soviet context (Hilevych and Sato 2018), this rationalising was legitimate for that period. At the same time, having an unplanned or spontaneous first birth conversely implies that there was a very clear understanding of the ‘right’ timing for reproductive events. Among my informants, there was a vivid notion that the first birth should take place within a few years of marriage and of what following this timing – or not – would entail on the part of both spouses.

One of my informants, for example, when reflecting on her first birth, said that in her view, “It was supposed to be like that: once you are married, you have a child. If there is nothing, then you may start worrying.” (Natalka, female, born in 1945, civil servant, Lviv). This response was typical among both male and female informants; it was as if there was a common logic that they shared and attached to the first birth. Therefore, to understand this reproductive logic, it is necessary to explore what deviation from this reproductive behaviour entailed – that is, when first birth did not take place within one year of marriage. Quotations from two female informants illustrate these experiences:

*Sveta [first child] was born in 1957. But I did not get pregnant during the first year [after marriage]. It worried me, and so I decided to consult my gynaecologist, who said that everything was fine and I just had to try more. (Evgenija, female, born in 1930, civil servant, Kharkiv)*

*I wanted to have a child soon after the marriage, but I did not get pregnant for some time. His parents also worried. They worried that I may not have children. But later I gave birth to Andriy. (Oksana, female, born in 1932, unskilled worker, Lviv)*

Both Evgenija and Oksana identified that the common concern with a delayed first pregnancy was that one of the spouses, typically the wife, could be infertile. Such a diagnosis tended to be seen as “a tragedy” (Rotkirch 2000:79) in this social context. This was because children acted as the main care providers for their parents when the

latter grew older, and having no children meant being highly disadvantaged in society (Hilevych 2016b). Importantly, the issue of potential infertility was a worry not only for the spouses but also for their parents and in-laws, as mentioned by Oksana. While the first pregnancy was typically not discussed, and some women stated that they were too shy to tell anyone until the pregnancy had become visible, delayed pregnancy provoked communication on the topic and could even cause spousal and intergenerational tensions. These tensions were particularly apparent when it was not immediately clear whether delayed first parenthood was linked to a health problem or was intentional. At this stage, parents and in-laws would closely supervise their children, as the quotations below illustrate:

*It seems that ... they [parents-in-law] talked about it to him [her husband], because once he told me, "We have been living [together] already for such a long time, but nothing has yet happened."* (Sofia, female, born in 1935, civil servant, Lviv)

*She [his wife] did not want to have a child right after marriage. And my mother suspected her. ... But my wife knew all these tricks. First, she wanted to finish her education training, and then she started her [first] job.* (Maxim, male, born in 1935, civil servant, Kharkiv)

Similarly to Maxim's wife, some women purposefully decided to delay their first pregnancy for a short period; the most common factors were completing education and settling into a new job. However, this was often considered selfish, and informants typically expressed judgemental views on using any means of birth control to delay the first pregnancy. This behaviour was perceived as not acceptable if practised among couples. Furthermore, if a husband did not support his wife's position, he might also be unsupportive in terms of cooperation in using birth control, which most commonly were withdrawal or condoms. Therefore, a married woman trying to delay a first pregnancy was very likely to be exposed to social pressure from both her husband and her in-laws to submit to the 'right' timing for parenthood.

At the same time, if the postponement of parenthood was either initiated by a husband or favoured by both spouses, less social pressure tended to be put on the couple from the parents(-in-law), within certain time limits. This was often the case if the couple based their decision on lacking their own place to live (e.g., when residing with parents was not possible), having to live separately after marriage (e.g., the husband was in military service or worked in a different city), or needing some time to settle down as a couple, as the quotations below illustrate:

*We did not want to have children right after marriage, as life only starts at this stage, so we wanted to wait a bit. [...] But when we were ready for it, it was our mutual decision. Our daughter was born in 1954 [one year after marriage]. (Markian, male, born in 1929, unskilled worker, Lviv)*

*The first one was born two years after we got married. It was not strict that it should happen right away, and moreover we did not have a place to live. We did not have an apartment yet. But when Lena was born, we received a room in a shared apartment. (Raja, female, born in 1934, skilled worker, Kharkiv)*

Some informants mentioned that they wanted to enjoy the beginning of their marital lives by themselves and wait before having children. Markian's example illustrates this notion, though in practice his first child was born within the first year of marriage. As such, it should be remembered that in the Soviet context, entrance into parenthood reinforced certain legal possibilities: ability to apply for an apartment and even an increased chance of getting a job. These possibilities were mainly available to married couples with children who would be "considered a family," as one informant put it (Maria, female, born in 1936, qualified worker, Lviv). As such, despite the parental pressure to have children soon after marriage, the idea of housing being linked to becoming a family was creating a new logic to which everyone could relate and rationalise, including parents. In other words, postponement of first birth had to be justifiable, and economic factors were often seen as very convincing by both spouses and their parents(-in-law).

In addition to spousal and intergenerational relationships, peers and siblings also exerted social influence, favouring the notion of first parenthood taking place soon after marriage. At the moment of marriage and entrance into parenthood, many male and female informants were often close to completion of their studies or had just started to work, and thus they often had close relationships with their peers. In addition, some couples resided with their parents or other relatives, such as aunts or older siblings, during the first years of marriage, which also contributed to closer relationships. Within peer and sibling environments, the informants could observe how marriage and first parenthood were being experienced by other couples and could compare these experiences to their own. The accounts of Svetlana and Kateryna below illustrate that, indirectly – through communication, support, and spending leisure time with peers and siblings – they were able to observe, understand better, and internalise the advantages of the 'right' timing of first parenthood.

*Within three years of graduating from the institute, we all got married. My friends also gave birth and we had many common interests, like children. For*

*example, my friends [showing pictures of them]. ... This friend, Lida, gave birth to Sergey a bit earlier. And all my friends were giving birth, and we lived through that together.* (Svetlana, female, born in 1941, civil servant, Kharkiv)

*During the first few months we still lived with his parents and with his siblings and their families. As sisters-in-law we used to help each other and sometimes took care of each other's children. [...] The oldest son of one my sisters-in-law was half a year older than my son, and children of other sisters-in-law were also born very close to each other, so it was easy for us to help each other out. However, soon thereafter we received our own place.* (Kateryna, female, born in 1942, skilled worker, Lviv)

Overall, the advantages of having a first child soon after marriage were linked to the social and economic benefits that couples received if they submitted to the norm of the 'right' timing. Spousal, intergenerational, and other social relations resembled some of these benefits, such as continuing to be part of a social environment and, more importantly, receiving support with childcare. In the following sections, I discuss how close parental supervision around the 'right' timing of first parenthood resulted in expectations of childcare support from grandparents.

## **5.2 Perceived security around first birth: the role of a mother(-in-law)**

Rotkirch and Kesseli (2010), in their study on post-Soviet Russia, underline that for Russian women, entrance into motherhood signifies the achievement of womanhood. Other scholars additionally indicate that in both Soviet and post-Soviet contexts, marriage and parenthood preceded the stages of leaving the parental home, establishing financial independence, and finishing educational training (Carlbäck, Gradszkova, and Kravchenko 2012; Gabriel 2005; Kesseli 2008; Perelli-Harris 2008; Shlapentokh 1984). Similarly, for my informants in Soviet Ukraine, entrance into parenthood signified the transition from youth to adulthood, and this was of equal importance to both men and women.

In their testimonies of first parenthood, my informants generally expressed that they had felt confident and secure in proceeding with it, though many were still in a situation where they did not have their own apartment or even a job, and some also had to finish their studies. This attitude stands in contrast to those surrounding transition to the second birth, as material uncertainty was seen as the major obstacle for proceeding with a second pregnancy (Hilevych 2016a). The informants factually experienced economic uncertainty during both transitions, but there seemed to be certain premises

on which they relied when first entering parenthood, which compensated for the uncertain material conditions. A vivid illustration of such premises can be observed in cases where abortion of first pregnancy was considered, as the quotations below illustrate:

*I told my husband that I got pregnant, and right away I asked, "What shall we do? You live there, and I live here. But once the child is born, what then?" At that time, I did not live in Lviv yet. And I worried a lot about how we were going to arrange everything. I even thought about not giving birth at that time. [...] But he said, "You will definitely give birth." He discussed it with his parents: "What shall we do? We do not have a place to live in Lviv." I also did not have any work in Lviv. "Maybe we can stay in here, in Malynivka [fictional name of a town in Lviv province]?" I thought. But he had to stay in Lviv because of his work. So his parents said, "Immediately move to Lviv." They were so wise. And then he found a job for me, and so I moved. (Halyna, female, born in 1943, civil servant, Lviv)*

*Zoya: "We talked about my first pregnancy with my mother-in-law."*

*Interviewer: "Did you discuss it?"*

*Zoya: "Of course, it was necessary!"*

*Interviewer: "Can you describe what it was like?"*

*Zoya: "On the 14<sup>th</sup> of April [1954] we got married. We did not live together yet. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of May [1954] we went to my village, and there I got pregnant. Then there was a question: whether to abort it or not? [...] We gathered with the three of us: my husband, my mother-in-law, and I. We thought, 'So, what to do?' She said, 'Of course, to give birth.' And I said, 'But how? I still have to write my thesis. It is not only about the university attendance. Lectures and writing the thesis, how will I cope with all of these?' And she said, 'Don't worry, I will help you. You should not do it [abortion].' And I did not do it." (Zoya, female, born in 1931, civil servant, Kharkiv)*

As Halyna's and Zoya's testimonies reveal, considering terminating the pregnancy constituted the actual moment of making a decision on entrance into parenthood. The moment of deciding whether to terminate a first pregnancy was also the point at which practical matters around the event were discussed, including with parents, as Halyna and Zoya described. This implies that, at the decision stage, a couple or woman would seek cooperation with parents. In consulting parents, the couple or woman sought both advice and support with childcare. In most of the cases in this study, the promise of support with childcare seemed to be an important factor in not terminating a first

pregnancy but instead proceeding with it. If these expectations were not met, an abortion was likely to be sought; among my informants, it happened in only a few cases.

More importantly, expectations of receiving grandparental support with childcare could also be observed among the informants who did not consider termination, who constituted the majority in my study. These informants indicated that they typically did not plan either the pregnancy or childcare arrangements in advance, which may sound risky given that they often still had to finish educational training or did not have a place to live. The reason for the absence of such planning was often that there existed an implicit agreement that parents would always help, as the following excerpts from the interviews illustrate:

*You know, at that time we did not plan far into the future, not really. I knew that the child would be born, but how life would go afterward, whether I would defend my kandydatska [equivalent of PhD thesis] and build my career, I did not think about it. I knew that I would have a child that I need to take care of. Besides, I thought that I might have some help. My mother would help for sure, and maybe my parents-in-law could also help. (Daryna, female, born in 1939, scientific elite, Lviv)*

*During the first year after the marriage, we were renting the flat. We wanted to enjoy life [laughing]. Later, our son was born and we moved back in with my parents. We lived with them for some time until we received our own apartment. (Andrei, male, born in 1934, scientific elite, Kharkiv)*

As the accounts of Daryna and Andrei indicate, the expectation of parental support with childcare was assumed and indeed facilitated a feeling of security – what I call perceived security – when entering parenthood. Importantly, some of the women in my study tended to assume that they would have the support of their mothers but had to agree and negotiate the support of their mothers-in-law, even if they lived together. These expectations, in turn, had an impact on the way support with childcare was actually fulfilled and what kind of expectations it created with regard to other childbearing decisions, which, as I show below, differed between the two localities.

### 5.3 Provision of childcare and (un)met expectations: differences between the two cities

Frequent post-marital residence with or close to parents or in-laws made access to support easier for couples. Even when residing separately, parents or in-laws were still able to provide some support, although not on a daily basis. In this way, post-marital residence defined the degree of parents' or in-laws' involvement in childcare, which differed between Lviv and Kharkiv.

In Lviv, western Ukraine, it was common for couples in this study to have resided separately from their parents since before or shortly after marriage. Neolocal post-marital residence helped couples to exercise their primary responsibility for childcare through practising complementary gender roles. The husband would provide the main source of income for the family, while the wife would stay with the child during the first year(s). Some informants arranged for a part-time working schedule or resigned from work for this period, which in fact was not a very common practice in the Soviet context at that time. When the wife had to return to work following her (extended) maternity leave, the couple hired a nanny or placed the child in nursery. In this respect, both spouses aimed to contribute equally to childrearing by sharing the time and material costs spent on it.

Even though it was parents who were primarily responsible for childcare, the role of grandparents and other family was also very important in this process. During the first months after childbirth, my female informants typically either resided with their families (separately from their husbands) or had their mothers visit them during the first few weeks. Bodnar (2010) indicates that the habit of staying with maternal grandparents was especially common among couples of a rural origin in Lviv. Either way, the role of the grandmother and other female relatives was to assist a mother with childcare; this was common among my Lviv informants, as the following quotations illustrate:

*After delivery, my cousin took me to her place, and I stayed with her for a few days. After that, I went to my sister in the village and stayed with her for three weeks. My husband was in Lviv at that time, and he visited me often. [...] When I returned to Lviv, I took care of my daughter until she turned eight months old, and then we handed her over to the nursery.* (Maria, female, born in 1936, qualified worker, Lviv)

*My mother came to help me at the beginning. She was with us for around one month, and she showed me some essential things, like how to bath and swaddle and what I should or should not do during this process.* (Olena, female, born in 1925, civil servant, Lviv)

The role of maternal family was especially essential in the early stages of childcare; this included helping with bathing, swaddling, and breastfeeding, which complemented the role of the hospital midwives, who also helped women with these issues. The female informants very much valued these family experiences. This assistance, however, rarely implied that a grandmother or other relative would provide all the care for the child if the mother stayed at home.

Infrequently, some of my Lviv informants resided with their parents after marriage (patrilocal residence), and so a mother-in-law would assist with childcare in a more intensive way and for an extended period of time. The female informants who practised this arrangement stated that they were still expected to carry out most of the childcare duties and that their mothers-in-law took over this duty at later stages (i.e., after maternity leave).

*My in-laws stayed with the child afterwards. She [the mother-in-law] would stay with her [the child] during the day, and I would come to feed her [the child] during the lunch break. (Lybov, female, born in 1932, civil servant, Lviv)*

*I intended to take maternity leave for eight months, and I was going to take some holiday hours for this. But my mother-in-law said, “Why should both of us take care of one child?” So eventually she took care of my first and also of my second one. (Nadia, female, born in 1938, civil servant, Lviv)*

A similar method of arranging childcare was more common among my Kharkiv informants, who more often practiced post-marital patrilocal residence before and after first birth. The female informants stated that they had returned to work after maternity leave but were still also expected to carry out most of the household and childcare responsibilities. The support of a mother-in-law was essential under these conditions, especially with the birth of another child, as the burden on a young wife would double (Hilevych 2016a). Often, the mother-in-law would take over all of the childcare duties after the wife’s maternity leave ended.

*My children [twins] were born in May, so I had my maternity leave throughout June, July, and August, as I did not have to teach during these months. [...] When I returned to work, I had to teach both day and evening classes, but I still could come home in between to feed them. My mother-in-law was my greatest supporter at that time. We lived with her, and she stayed with them all the time. (Larisa, female, born in 1939, scientific elite, Kharkiv)*

*I had maternity leave, and I also saved some holiday hours. So, in total I had three months of maternity leave after the delivery. After those three months, I had to go back to work, and my mother-in-law took care of my children, both of them actually. [...] Some women took their children to nurseries, of course, but that is because they did not have anyone to help them. (Naida, female, born in 1936, unskilled worker, Kharkiv)*

As the quotations above illustrate, grandparental support with childcare was preferred in Kharkiv, especially by women, while nurseries were considered as a backup. In other words, if grandparents were available, putting a child into nursery after maternity leave was rare and considered inappropriate and even disrespectful towards the older generation. My Kharkiv informants acknowledged that they tried not to put their children into nursery at an early age if at all possible. Instead, they tried to arrange for a grandmother to be with a child, even if they lived in different cities. If no grandparental support was available, they could ask their husband or neighbours to help. The intensive involvement of a husband in childcare was not expected and hence was not very common among my Kharkiv informants. The female informants felt that men were not capable of handling children properly and may even have needed to be cared for themselves; other scholars (Ashwin and Lytkina 2004; Rotkirch 2000) have also noted this in the Russian context. Altogether, this attitude should be seen as an integral part of extended mothering arrangements (Rotkirch 2000), where although logic undermined the practice of gender equality, it relied on intergenerational solidarity in reproductive issues.

## 6. Conclusions

This study has illustrated that at the onset of low fertility in 1960s Ukraine, entering parenthood in one's early to mid-20s – a life stage that is seemingly one of the least secure within the life course – was linked to a feeling of perceived security that family relationships helped to cultivate. The informants understood and rationalised the benefits of entering parenthood early, as well as the downsides of not doing so – with the worst of these being fears of infertility. I illustrated that in order to internalise this reproductive logic, social pressure from parents(-in-law) played a key role by cultivating dependency and expectation on the part of the younger generation about the provision of grandparental support with childcare.

Although these findings provide support for the conclusions of other studies suggesting that anticipated practical family support with childcare is important in early entrance into parenthood (Pink 2018; Schaffnit and Sear 2017), my results also

complicate this argument. Specifically, this study showed that the expectations of support depended on who was seen as the main childcare provider: whether it is solely the couple or also their parents. In this light, my findings illustrate that expectations of spousal support – whether a husband was perceived to be an adequate counterpart in childcare – were contingent on grandparental support. In this respect, there were differences between the two cities, Lviv and Kharkiv. In Kharkiv, in eastern Ukraine, my female informants expected that it was their mothers-in-law, rather than their husbands, who would help with childcare, which at early stages of the life course was achieved through the frequent practice of patrilocal residence. In Lviv, in western Ukraine, my informants perceived the couple to have primary responsibility for childrearing, while help from the wife’s mother and female relatives was seen as complementary. This finding also supports my earlier argument that family relationships are crucial to understanding how and why transition to second birth – and with it the low fertility regime – was achieved differently in the two Ukrainian cities in the 1960s, namely through the postponement of second birth in Kharkiv and spacing of second birth in Lviv (Hilevych 2016a).

Drawing on this and other findings from previous studies (Ghodsee and Bernardi 2012; Tanskanen et al. 2014) that consistently suggest that expectations of grandparental support may have had negative effects on the transition to second birth in former socialist countries, future research should focus on whether the contingencies between intergenerational and spousal support with childcare can explain subnational differences in low fertility. Similarly, future studies should also account for the contingencies pertaining to the availability of maternal and paternal family. For example, this study showed that when grandmaternal support with childcare was expected, women tended to take the support of their mothers for granted but had to agree and negotiate for support from their mothers-in-law, even if they resided together. An inability to negotiate this support in the context of Ukraine resulted in women delaying the transition to second birth, often through the frequent practice of abortion. This provides another question for future studies to explore – whether access to grandparental childcare in the case of the most mobile subpopulations, such as those emigrating and those being forcedly moved (both of which characterise the current demographic situation in Ukraine), has an impact on reproductive decisions and whether access to grandparental support constitutes a new form of reproductive inequalities. On a policy level, my findings suggest that in order to both normalise fertility rates and achieve gender equality in the region, more effort should be put into helping families to maintain intergenerational solidarity (Hilevych 2018; Pooley and Qureshi 2016).

## **7. Acknowledgments**

The study was conducted with the support of Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (contract grant number 452-10-013). The final submission was prepared while the author was funded by the British Academy Newton International Fellowship (NF170487). The author would like to thank the guest editors and external reviewers for their critical and helpful feedback on the earlier versions of the manuscript.

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