



Twenty+ Futures

In a period of heightened awareness of global threats to orderly and predictable futures for people and planet – recession, climate change, peak oil, loss of biodiversity, terrorism – does this uncertainty impact on how young adults in their twenties think about their futures, particularly partnering and parenting? Exploratory interviews with childless young men and women in their twenties sought to investigate.

Key Points

- Recession dominates the discussion of young adults' futures; cited consequences include reduced prospects and insecurity in employment as well as delayed home ownership, travel, car driving, parenting and sometimes partnering.
- Other 'global threats' are perceived as of less personal significance; climate change, sustainability and environmental issues were sometimes raised spontaneously but not terrorism and security threats.
- Recession and awareness of climate change did not alter the typically desired and imagined ideal suburban-family-with-car future, albeit sustainability issues were sometimes cited as indicating responsibility to raise environmentally conscious children.
- Recession impacted on the transition into parenthood for this group with no interviewees having achieved 'the right circumstances' for children– a secure relationship along with stable employment, savings and an appropriate home.

Introduction

Economic recession can modify fertility behaviour, albeit disproportionately among particular groups. At a societal level, the overall impact of recession on fertility is typically short-term but, for individuals, impact varies by socio-economic and demographic characteristics, with young childless people most affected (Sobotka, Skirbekk, Philipov 2011). Economic insecurities modify fertility behaviour by contributing to delay in co-resident partnership and becoming parents. While the consequences of the ups and downs of economies have

been traced for decades, twenty-first century sources of uncertainty and future threats with a global reach, such as climate change and the discourse around terrorism, are not amenable to study in this way. Interviews with young people can, however, explore whether these issues intrude into current experiences of uncertainty and imagined futures

This small qualitative study of childless young adults aged 20-29 aimed to 1) explore the impact of economic recession on how childless young people with different types of employment prospects, and from different

social class backgrounds, are thinking about their futures as partners and parents 2) explore whether other 'global threats' (such as terrorism, climate change and sustainability/environmental issues) intrude into childless young people's thinking about their futures as partners and parents. The sample deliberately excluded parents, to focus on young adults for whom there is uncertainty about becoming parents. Similarly, those who were married, or in a civil partnership, were excluded. Cohabiting couples were included; although cohabiting can indicate life-long commitment, this is not always the case.

Participants were recruited through further and higher education institutions, employers, an unemployment agency and personal contacts. All interviewees were living in urban Scotland and received their school education in the UK. The sample was heterogeneous in educational qualifications, occupational histories and social class background. Following sensitising group discussions with young adults, 35 in-depth interviews were conducted. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and anonymised before being thematically analysed and coded.

Main findings

Employment and economic insecurity dominates other uncertainties

Other themes of global insecurity were muted in comparison. Climate change, sustainability and environmental issues were sometimes raised spontaneously but terrorism and security threats were only discussed as a result of direct questions. Many young people had a strong sense of the future being on hold because of economic insecurities. This was particularly so among those experiencing unemployment but many of those in jobs and higher education felt their career mobility and promotion prospects were diminished.

Comparisons with past generations

A sense of historical or generational time could modify how people saw recession with some referring to the cyclical nature of it and stressing it would pass, but others feeling that their generation was particularly unfavoured: *'we've got student debts to pay off, trying to save up for a house, trying to save up for our children's university fees'* (Fran, 26yr old, employed professional living with partner).

Housing

Very few of the interviewees owned their own homes although most wanted home ownership to be an aspect

of their future. Disappointment at not yet being 'on the property ladder' varied with social class background. For example, Sarah, a middle-class graduate in her late twenties in a career job and living with her boyfriend felt she should be a home owner. They had been unable to accumulate the *'quite horrendous'* amount of savings for a deposit as her boyfriend struggled to find an appropriate graduate job. On the other hand, Lynsey, working-class, in her early twenties, also employed and living with a partner, expressed relief at not having a mortgage to worry about during a period of recession.

Mobility

Plans for travel as well as car ownership were also modified by economic uncertainty. Only three of the interviewees were registered keepers of cars and over half of the participants lacked a full driving licence. Those who had learned to drive had typically done so with family support. All acknowledged the importance of driving, anticipating potential future disadvantage and social exclusion without this skill. Environmental reasons for choosing not to drive were rare although many respondents claimed that when they did come to drive they would be mindful of the environment.

The importance of family support

Young adults' families were often referred to as background security by interviewees, particularly parents' willingness to provide financial assistance and hospitality in the parental home. For example, unemployed Kate, who became an early home owner before losing her job, noted: *'even if the worst happened and I couldn't pay my mortgage and my house was repossessed, I wouldn't be homeless ever. Like, I know my mum would take me in'*. One interviewee was willing to take the risk of a career break for travel because of family support. The few interviewees who felt they could not turn to their family for support had neither a mortgage nor a car and were preoccupied with their vulnerability in the face of rising costs.

Imagined ideal futures; Partnering and parenting

The sense of delayed future created by recession impacted on parenting for this group. All but three wanted children. None had achieved what most saw as the right circumstances— a secure relationship, stable employment, savings and an appropriate home. Un-partnered unemployed respondents felt they had significantly reduced prospects of finding partners and some young men were particularly anxious because of

the conventional link between earnings and the male role. However, many interviewees remained optimistic that such difficulties would be resolved within five years.

For many the ideal place for future family life was in the countryside or leafy suburbs. A romantic image of childhood with access to space and safety from danger, enabling freedom to roam was a repeated element of this vision. A few acknowledged the contradiction of associated dependence on cars to transport children and commute to employment. A willingness to rethink this picture was occasionally in evidence, with some citing peers successfully bringing up a child outside the ideal. Only one respondent cited a view of the future of the planet as unsuited to 'bringing children into the world' whereas several respondents stressed a sense of duty to bring up children with heightened awareness of the need to sustain the planet.

Policy Implications

The economic uncertainty of recession is the only global threat that looms large in the accounts of these childless young adults in their twenties. It creates a sense of reduced prospects and insecurity in employment, and delay of home ownership, travel, car driving, parenting and sometimes partnering. Despite this, neither recession, nor a more muted awareness of climate change and sustainability issues, radically alters the imagined futures which are often seen as currently 'on hold'.

Young people's main priorities were securing or retaining employment and affordable housing.

While the support of parents provided a mitigating sense of security during economic uncertainty for most young adults, this was not so for all. The vulnerability of those who lack family support will be increased by policies which reduce young adults' entitlement to benefits and income support.

Those in jobs wishing to own their home in preparation for parenthood report struggling because of the size of deposit required and some, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, retreat from home ownership because of fear of redundancy, unmanageable debt and home repossession.

Delaying car driving contributes to achieving carbon reductions, albeit due to recession not environmentalism. Most young people anticipate future driving and fear social exclusion without this skill but, exceptionally, some are proud to manage without a car and some plan to become environmentally aware drivers. The ideal imagined future family home is premised on often unacknowledged-carbon-intensive commuting but willingness to rethink is occasionally in evidence. Policies supporting child safety and child friendliness in inner cities and on public transport might contribute to changing imagined ideal parenting environments with positive effects on carbon footprints and fertility.

Reference

Sobotka, T., Skirbekk, V. and Philipov, D. 'Economic Recession and Fertility in the Developed World'. *Population and Development Review* 37: 267-306.

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