

## **Preference Theory and Low Fertility: A Comparative Perspective**

Agnese Vitali\*

Francesco C. Billari\*\*

Alexia Prskawetz\*\*\*

Maria Rita Testa\*\*\*

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\* Carlo F. Dondena Centre for Research on Social Dynamics, Università Bocconi, Milan, Italy

\*\* Carlo F. Dondena Centre for Research on Social Dynamics, IMQ and IGER, Università Bocconi, Milan, Italy

\*\*\* Vienna Institute of Demography, Austrian Academy of Sciences

## **Abstract**

The discussion on the causes of the most recent fertility decline in Europe, and in particular on the emergence of lowest low fertility, emphasises the relevance of cultural factors in addition to economic ones. Being part of such a cultural framework, the heterogeneity of preferences concerning the “career vs. family” dichotomy has been systematised in the “Preference Theory” approach developed by Catherine Hakim. So far, however, this heterogeneity in preferences has been underinvestigated in a comparative framework. This paper makes use of new comparative data from the 2004/05 Round of the European Social Survey to test the links between individual-level preferences and both fertility outcomes and intentions in a variety of social settings. Results confirm a link between work-family lifestyle preferences and realised fertility in a variety of European countries, while they do not support the relevance of lifestyle preferences for fertility intentions.

**Keywords:** Preference Theory, low and lowest low fertility, Europe, European Social Survey, welfare regime.

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*European Demographic Research Papers* are working papers that deal with all-European issues or with issues that are important to a large number of countries. All contributions have received only limited review.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The emergence of very low and lowest low fertility in Europe during the 1990s and in South Eastern Asia during the early 2000s has posed several challenges to scholars who use international comparison as a way of illuminating the causes of the difference in fertility patterns (see, e.g., Caldwell and Schindlmayr 2003; Kohler et al. 2002). Moreover, the increasing importance of low fertility levels in the policy debate in Europe and elsewhere has triggered the need to better understand the relevance of the various determinants of fertility choices as they might imply different policy choices (Demeny 2003; Castles 2003; Commission of the European Communities 2005; McDonald 2002; Stark and Kohler 2002). Roughly speaking, contributions that aim at explaining the causes of very low and lowest low fertility may be grouped into two main categories: (a) a structural approach, which provides explanations based on such economic factors as rising female education and labour supply, policy changes, and responses to actual and expected unemployment as well as general economic conditions (see, e.g., Adsera 2005; Ahn and Mira, 2002; Butz and Ward, 1979) and (b) a cultural approach centred around the notion of the Second Demographic Transition, which stresses such ideational factors as changing values and attitudes, female autonomy and independence as the main driving forces of the fertility decline (see, e.g., Lesthaeghe 1983; Van de Kaa 1987; 2001). Some authors have emphasised the need to simultaneously stress structural and cultural determinants (see, e.g., Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988; Stark and Kohler 2002). Nevertheless, so far, no comparative study has been conducted with the aim of weighing the relative importance of the two sets of factors in different European countries. To this aim, it is necessary to exploit the heterogeneity in fertility behaviour that exists across countries and to have access to comparative micro-level data that contain both structural and cultural variables.

In this paper, we rely on a new source of data that has become available very recently—the 2004/05 Round 2 of the European Social Survey (ESS-2)—in order to do a comparative analysis of fertility choices

and intentions for 11 European countries belonging to different societies, which we group according to a well-known classification based on the idea of welfare regimes. Our analysis starts from Hakim's (2000) proposal of "Preference Theory". In Preference Theory, the heterogeneity of lifestyle preferences within a population plays a central role in explaining family and fertility choices, and, in general, choices that affect the work-family link. More specifically, our paper investigates the connection between women's lifestyle preferences and fertility outcomes and intentions. Subsequently, we briefly review Preference Theory and the critical discussion it has originated in recent sociological and demographic research. We then describe the ESS-2 data on which our empirical analyses are based and discuss the links between Preference Theory and the ESS-2 survey instruments. After providing some descriptive evidence and illustrating our analytical approach, we present the main results. Finally, we offer some concluding remarks and a general discussion.

## **2 PREFERENCE THEORY AND FERTILITY CHOICES**

Catherine Hakim's "Preference Theory" (Hakim 2000; see also Hakim 2003a) is a sociological theory, which aims to explain the changes that women have experienced in contemporary societies regarding two main lifecycle patterns: fertility and employment. Preference Theory considers lifestyle preferences and values to be the principal determinants of women's fertility choices and outcomes. It emphasises the importance of cultural aspects as the key factors behind the recent changes in family and fertility that have occurred in all modern industrialised societies. Preferences obviously also shape men's decisions, but "attitudes have an especially strong impact on women's behaviour because women have genuine choices to make regarding employment versus home-making" (Hakim 2002: 432).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An attempt to apply the Preference Theory explicitly to the male universe can be found in Rabusic and Manea (2006).

According to Hakim, in modern industrialised societies women are heterogeneous and this heterogeneity should be explicitly considered when explaining their behaviour and designing public policies. More specifically, we can distinguish different “types” of women as far as their lifestyle preferences with respect to the trade off between family and work are concerned. The idea is that, in industrialised countries, women are more or less evenly distributed across the three groups. On the two extremes, both accounting for 10 to 30 per cent of the total, we find the family-oriented and career-oriented women, while the great majority (between 40 and 80 per cent of the total) are defined as “adaptive women”. Preference Theory provides a detailed description of these three types of identity.

Family-oriented women regard family life and children as the main priorities in life, and therefore decide not to work, unless economic needs force them to enter the labour market. As some of these women obtain high levels of education, this can be interpreted as a means to get a better position on the partnership market and, more generally, to acquire some kind of cultural capital. Being career-oriented, on the other hand, means giving value to a life devoted to work, either in paid employment or in the public arena. Career-oriented women strive for a high level of education and frequently remain unmarried and/or childless. Finally, adaptive women have no prevailing preference orientation. They usually want to get the best of both worlds, combining work and family. Adaptive women are therefore fully engaged in the trade off between family and career. The group of adaptive women usually also includes women with unplanned future, who simply use opportunities fostering their career or family as they present themselves or when public policies change in favour of one or the other extreme group. Women in this group get educated and obtain qualifications as an insurance policy and usually stop working or move to part-time work after a birth. This is the category researchers usually refer to when they assume that women in a given society are a homogenous group.

According to Preference Theory, the three lifestyle orientations originated within a new scenario that resulted from five historical changes:

the contraceptive revolution, the equal opportunities revolution, the expansion of white-collar occupations, the creation of jobs for secondary earners and, finally, the increasing attention that is paid to personal values and preferences when making individual choices. In other words, the emergence of this new scenario can be seen as a result of the Second Demographic Transition, as outlined by Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa in a series of contributions, with the difference that Hakim specifically emphasises the heterogeneity of preferences this produces within a society rather than the commonality of trends.

Hakim points out that not all modern societies have achieved the new scenario yet.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, she explains that the relative size of the three groups could vary in countries where public policies favour one specific group. Within the European environment, Britain seems to be a special case, in which the labour market, the legal system and the background acceptance of differences in values and cultures have all contributed to the emergence of the new scenario for women. Moreover, Britain can also be regarded as a most suitable backdrop for testing Preference Theory because the British welfare state only offers a low level of welfare policies and the Government's intervention in the private sphere hence does not bias individual decisions. Indeed, Hakim provides evidence that her classification fits the British case and that it also fits actual fertility in Britain: family and work-centred women prove to be the most and the least fertile, respectively.

Hakim's Preference Theory has attracted great interest in the literature, including critical views. The main criticism concerns the causality

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<sup>2</sup> "The US, Britain and probably the Netherlands currently provide the prime examples of societies that have achieved the new scenario for women. [...] Most European countries still have little or nothing to actively enforce equal opportunities legislation. [...] For example, in Greece, Italy, and Spain, there is evidence of informal barriers to women's access to the labor market: female unemployment rates are more than double those of males [...] Within the European Union, only Britain, Ireland, and the Netherlands have a public body responsible for enforcing equal pay and equal opportunities laws" (Hakim 2003a: 360).

link, i.e., whether heterogeneous preferences are actually causing heterogeneous behaviour. Instead, Hakim's critics suggest that the causality nexus acts the other way round, i.e., that person-specific circumstances and background factors are decisive for a person's orientation in life and thus determine decisions, while preferences do not causally explain behaviour but just shape and influence choices (Crompton and Harris 1998; Fagan 2001; Proctor and Padfield 1999; Rose 2001). It is well known from literature that actual fertility might trigger changes in values and preferences (see, e.g., Beets et al. 1999). In other words, family-oriented women might not tend to marry more frequently and have children; it might well be that motherhood is the root of their preference to be oriented towards a family-centred lifestyle. In this respect, McRae's critique (2003a, b) underlines that Preference Theory does not sufficiently take into account the fact that situational, structural and normative constraints might bias women's choices. The same concept was outlined by Tomlinson (2006), who observes that care networks, work status and the welfare policy context are three powerful forces which can either facilitate or impede the realisation of women's work preferences and make them opt for part-time or full-time work when they have a child. Focusing on a sub-sample of female returners<sup>3</sup> and analysing women's orientations toward work—i.e., different reasons driving women's (re)entrance into the labour market—Doorewaard et al. (2004) have demonstrated a strong link between personal, financial and family constraints and women's work orientations.

Hakim reacted by pointing out that Preference Theory does not deny the influence of situational and structural factors on behavioural outcomes but states that preferences as such “have a strong impact on behaviour: on employment rates, hours worked, fertility, and patterns of marriage and divorce” (Hakim 2003b: 342). Contextual social, structural and institutional

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<sup>3</sup> The expression “female returners” refers to “women who seek to re-enter the workforce after a few years of unpaid care-taking responsibilities” (Doorewaard et al. 2004: 8).



factors influence different groups of women in different ways: adaptive women are very responsive to any kind of public policies and to institutional factors in general, while the other two groups are only influenced by factors related to their inner preference orientation, i.e., family-oriented women are not responsive to employment policies and career-oriented women are not responsive to social family policies.

In the following section, we shall try to apply Hakim's categories for women to our sample and investigate whether we can identify three different types of women when extending the analysis to European countries other than Great Britain. Subsequently, we shall test whether actual and intended fertility are different across these three groups as is suggested by Preference Theory.

### **3 COMPARATIVE SURVEY DATA AND THE CLASSIFICATION OF WOMEN ACCORDING TO WORK-FAMILY PREFERENCES**

Our empirical analyses are based on the European Social Survey Round 2 2004/5, second edition (in the following called ESS-2).<sup>4</sup> The ESS is a biennial social survey that aims at measuring values and behaviours of European populations and at understanding how and why such patterns can vary over time. The questionnaire for each round consists of a core module, which is identical for each round, plus rotating modules, which are repeated at intervals and each time devoted to different topics. The core module monitors change and continuity in socio-economic, political and demographic variables and provides background variables for the analysis of the rotating modules, whose aim is to investigate particular themes in more depth. The European Social Survey proves to be useful for our analysis of

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<sup>4</sup> Edition 2.0, with data released on 8 March 2006. The original dataset includes all countries for which data were deposited before 1 June 2005: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, France, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Slovakia and the Ukraine.

lifestyle preferences since the second round (ESS-2) contains a rotating module providing information on family, work and wellbeing. Hence, it contains specific questions about family-work balance as well as general questions on family and fertility choices. Particular attention was paid to making the ESS internationally comparable: the data were collected in the form of a cross-sectional survey conducted by face-to-face interviews in the national languages with a strict methodology that ensures the comparability of national samples and the careful translation of questionnaires.

ESS-2 permits us to design a classification of women that reproduces the one developed by Hakim by looking at their expressed preferences for combining family and work instead of distinguishing women according to such observable variables as the work history of first-time mothers proposed by McRae (2003a). In the latter case, behaviour is used to predict preferences, and not, as Preference Theory suggests, the other way round. Hakim's original classification of women into the three groups, namely family-oriented, career-oriented and adaptive, is based on three survey questions. She referred to the 1999 British Survey, a project carried out for the Economic and Social Research Programme on the Future of Work in order to test the Preference Theory. Based on a question on ideal family models, Hakim identified home-centred women as those preferring a complete role segregation within marriage, with the man as the breadwinner.<sup>5</sup> Career-oriented women were identified by combining their

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<sup>5</sup> The survey question used was as follows: "People talk about the changing roles of husband and wife in the family. Here are three kinds of family. Which of them corresponds best with your ideas about the family?"

- A family where the two partners each have an equally demanding job and where housework and the care of the children are shared equally between them.
- A family where the wife has a less demanding job than her husband and where she does the larger share of housework and caring for the children.
- A family where only the husband has a job and the wife runs the home.
- None of these three cases."

preference for the egalitarian family model with two other questions.<sup>6</sup> First, Hakim used an indicator of work commitment, namely the statement that the woman would continue with paid work in the absence of economic need.<sup>7</sup> Then she combined the previous information with the status of being a primary earner, i.e., the sole or joint main earner in the household.<sup>8</sup> Adaptive women were defined as the residual category.

Within the ESS-2 (which was not explicitly designed to conform to Hakim's categorisation) we used a set of three questions to build a classification of women's lifestyle preferences. More specifically, we used a question about the male versus female eligibility to enter the labour market when jobs are scarce and coded as family-oriented those women agreeing or strongly agreeing with the following statement: "When jobs are scarce men should have more right to job than women". We coded as "committed to work" those women who disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement: "A woman should be prepared to cut down on her paid work for the sake of her family". Then, following Hakim, we used a question asking the proportion of the household income provided by the respondent, and coded as primary earners those answering they provide from about half to all of their household income. Combining the previous information, we defined

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<sup>6</sup> The present classification is the one presented by Hakim (2002: 442). In subsequent articles (see, for example, Hakim 2003a: 362), however, she omits the reference to the choice of a particular family model when identifying career-oriented women.

<sup>7</sup> The survey question used was as follows: "If without having to work you had what you would regard as a reasonable living income, would you still prefer to have a paid job, or wouldn't you bother?"

<sup>8</sup> The survey question used was as follows: "Who is the main income-earner in your household? Is it yourself? Your partner/spouse? Both of you jointly? Or someone else?"

the work-centred group. We then classified the other respondents as adaptive.<sup>9</sup>

Two of the three questions involved in our classification concern attitudes about the gender roles regarding family and paid work. Using them in this connection could thus be criticised, because preferences may be not properly caught when we take general beliefs and approvals as indicators of personal goals and attitudes. Nonetheless, this study demonstrates a link between the orientations expressed by answering these questions—although they could be driven by public morality suggestions—and a series of observable characteristics in a woman’s family and working life. Moreover, this study confirms Hakim’s findings about the existing heterogeneity in preferences among women in modern societies.

Our classification of preferences seems to be a good replication of Hakim’s classification for Britain. In fact, the 2004 ESS-2-based results for Britain—obtained by considering the same sample restrictions as Hakim (1999)—are very similar to the ones of the 1999 British survey developed by Hakim (Table 1).

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<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, 40 respondents were classified as both family-oriented and career-oriented. Actually, the questions involved for classifying women are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, all three questions are opinion questions, so the answers could be driven by social norms rather than by subjective ideals of the respondents. For instance, while men usually define themselves as primary earners even when they are actually not, women sometimes answer in the opposite direction—cf. Hakim (2003a: 363) for similar reasons. The 40 problematic cases may indicate wrongly reported answers or mistakes by the interviewer. For the remainder of this analysis, these 40 cases will be excluded.

**Table 1** Classification of women according to work-family preferences: a comparison of frequencies using the ESS-2 for Britain (2004) and Hakim’s (1999) survey (column percentages)

	Britain: ESS-2, 2004	Hakim’s findings for Britain: ESRC, <sup>10</sup> 1999
Family-oriented	16	14
Adaptive	68	70
Career-oriented	16	16
N. cases	601	1,235

**Note:** To make the data more comparable with Hakim’s results, we replicated her sample restrictions by referring to women aged 20-59 who have completed their full-time education.

#### 4 COMPARATIVE SETTING AND DESCRIPTIVE EVIDENCE

Our comparative analyses focused exclusively on western Europe. In order to grasp the link between preferences and behaviour as mediated by the policy environment, we referred to the widely used “three worlds” classification of western European countries according to their welfare regimes originally developed by Esping-Andersen (1990). In line with common practice (see, among others, Ferrera (1998), Ferrera et al. (2000), Esping-Andersen et al. (2002) and Gauthier (2002)), we modified this typology to create a specific fourth group for southern European countries. We used data from the following 11 European countries: Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Sweden, Denmark and Norway. We thus worked with four groups of countries:

- Liberal welfare regime: Great Britain and Ireland. Such countries offer relatively low welfare coverage. Active employment policies play an important role, but, as a whole, this welfare regime focuses primarily on

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<sup>10</sup> Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Research Programme on the Future of Work, run from 1998-2003 in Britain.

cases of extreme poverty and needs, verifying eligibility by means testing. As this system relies on the market as the main provider of welfare services besides the family, Hakim says it does not bias individual choices within Preference Theory.

- Social democratic welfare regime: Sweden, Denmark and Norway. These countries are characterised by a universalistic regime that aims at promoting equality between individuals in general and between men and women in particular. This regime offers social services and benefits as well as specific rights related to employment to all citizens. Compared to other welfare regimes, it devotes the highest proportion of public expenditure to welfare, which makes the State the main provider of welfare services.

- Conservative welfare regime: Austria, Germany and Switzerland. These continental countries provide an “intermediate” level of welfare policies, differentiated with respect to marital status or the years people contributed to the social security system, frequently linking the provision of welfare services to citizens’ working status. In this regime, the family is seen as the main welfare provider and the family concept adheres to the traditional gender division of tasks and the “male breadwinner” model.

- Southern European (familialistic) welfare regime: Spain, Portugal and Greece. In these countries, welfare relies both on public and private services and provides a very fragmented set of policies, which usually depend on the individual’s working status. These countries have similarities with conservative regimes (and are therefore rated as such in the original “three worlds” classification by Esping-Andersen), but they attach even more relevance to the family as a welfare provider and lack a guaranteed minimum income scheme. We know that lowest low fertility emerged in this cluster during the 1990s (Kohler et al., 2002).<sup>11</sup>

We restricted our analyses to the ESS-2 sub-sample of female respondents aged 45 years or below. As we knew the short-term fertility

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<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, we could not consider Italy in this study, since the Italian data were not comparable with other ESS-2 data.

plans of these women, we could use the same sample to analyse both actual and intended fertility.<sup>12</sup> The final sample included 5,569 female respondents for 11 countries. Let us first discuss some descriptive results. According to Hakim's classification, the percentage of home and work-centred groups should vary between 10 and 30 per cent, while adaptive women are in the range of 40-80 per cent. By applying the ESS-2-based classification to all 11 European countries considered in the analysis we found a distribution that is, on average, within the ranges suggested by Hakim (Table 2).

At the country level, the distribution of women's preferences was outside the predicted range or very close to its bounds. These "deviations" can be considered as being consistent with Preference Theory, since they support Hakim's hypothesis that, in some countries, public policies might trigger the distribution of preferences towards giving more weight to a specific group. Indeed, this seemed to be the case in all countries belonging to the "social democratic" and "southern European" welfare regimes. The former group had the highest percentage of career-oriented women, who accounted for 26 to 38 per cent of all women in the sample. At the same time, the proportion of family-oriented women in countries belonging to this

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<sup>12</sup> Only women aged 45 or below were asked about their fertility intentions. We also excluded from our analyses observations for which the relationship of the respondent with other household members was missing, when the respondent was not the only person in the household.

**Table 2** Classification of women according to work-family preferences using the ESS-2 (column percentages)

		Family-oriented	Adaptive	Career-oriented	N. cases
Liberal	Britain	12	71	17	472
	Ireland	13	76	11	525
Social democratic	Denmark	3	59	38	370
	Sweden	2	65	33	442
	Norway	4	70	26	417
Conservative	Germany	12	72	16	675
	Austria	10	76	14	617
	Switzerland	12	78	10	534
Southern European	Greece	28	57	15	571
	Spain	21	66	13	400
	Portugal	27	63	10	506
	Entire Sample	14	69	17	5,529

**Note:** Within each regime, countries are listed in descending order according to their share of work-centred women.

welfare regime was the smallest. As suggested by the Preference Theory, it was lower than 10 per cent. Hakim suggests that Sweden lacks genuine choices because two of the five structural changes that occurred in all modern societies have slowed down, namely job creation for secondary earners and the importance of values and attitudes. Indeed, it is easy to conclude that all countries with social democratic regimes have public policies that favour women's entrance in the labour market in a context of gender equality. This has facilitated and supported the combination of childrearing and labour market participation. Moreover, social norms and values have fostered the establishment and acceptance of these policies.

The proportion of family-oriented women in the three southern European countries was concentrated around the upper bound, varying between 21 and 28 per cent. In this case, the size of the work-oriented group showed no difference with respect to other European countries: it was the percentage of adaptive women that was smaller. According to Preference



Theory, the idea is that labour market conditions and social norms have contributed to slowing down historical changes: what matters here is the presence of “informal barriers to women’s access to the labour market” (Hakim, 2000: 455) and the slow change in values and attitudes. Indeed, in southern European countries, women’s lifestyle choices are still largely shaped by tradition, social habits and mental architectures embedded in culture and in daily life—see, e.g., the “strong family” tradition (Reher 1998). Overcoming these family-oriented constraints might take more time than in other European countries.

To sum up, Hakim’s classification is consistent with the peculiarities of social democratic and southern European countries as discussed in the literature on welfare regimes. However, no specific difference can be discerned between the preference distribution in liberal and conservative countries.

The question whether Hakim’s categories are linked with actual behaviour in our data can be answered affirmatively: Hakim’s classification seems suitable to identify three distinct groups of women who differ with respect to several items (see Table 3). The proportion of women doing paid work was highest within the work-oriented group (81 per cent), while only less than half of all women classified as family-oriented worked (46 per cent). The values for adaptive women ranged somewhere in between. At the country level, this seemed to differ in some cases: Denmark had identical percentages for both career and family-oriented women, while in Norway and in Switzerland the percentage of family-oriented women who were currently employed was (slightly) higher than that of adaptive women. Beside the above mentioned ease for women to enter the labour force in these countries, we also have to consider another fact documented by Hakim, namely that some women take on paid work even against their preferences because they need the money. When considering the mean number of years of completed full-time education, career-oriented women, on average, studied one year longer than adaptive women and three years longer than family-oriented women. The differences were not too pronounced, however,

confirming Hakim's idea that the three divergent lifestyle preferences can be found at all educational levels and in all social classes. The great majority of family-oriented women were married or cohabiting (69 per cent within the entire sample), while only half of all work-centred women currently lived with a partner (50 per cent). Again, the adaptive group was in between. Once more, Denmark deviated from the general pattern, since no clear difference between the three groups could be discerned. On average, the majority of family-oriented women (62 per cent) contributed more than half of the total hours the entire household spent on housework. This proportion gradually decreased when considering adaptive (48 per cent) and work-oriented women (32 per cent). At the country level, the only exception was Denmark. Finally, the percentage of family-oriented women who claimed to have improved their knowledge or skills in the past year was as low as an average 23 per cent. This percentage increased by 20 points for adaptive women and reached 58 per cent for career-oriented women.

**Table 3** Descriptive analysis of the three different groups of women

)*	Liberal		Social democratic			Conservative			Southern European			Whole Sample
	UK	IE	DK	SE	NO	DE	AT	CH	EL	ES	PT	
Doing paid work (%)												
Family-oriented	41	40	77	54	62	46	59	71	30	48	45	46
Adaptive	58	60	61	57	61	51	52	64	37	54	62	56
Career-oriented	68	83	77	74	84	83	76	89	91	92	94	81
All	58	60	68	63	67	55	56	68	43	57	61	59
Education (mean no. years)												
Family-oriented	13	13	12	13	13	11	12	11	10	11	9	11
Adaptive	13	14	14	13	14	13	12	11	13	14	10	13
Career-oriented	13	13	15	14	15	14	13	13	14	15	12	14
All	13	14	14	13	14	13	12	11	12	13	10	13
Living with partner (%)												
Family-oriented	70	62	61	64	75	74	65	69	81	65	62	69
Adaptive	53	54	68	64	65	61	54	61	60	54	56	59
Career-oriented	35	47	62	57	53	45	37	35	53	47	57	50
All	52	54	65	62	62	60	53	59	65	55	58	59
Relevant contribution to housework (%)												
Family-oriented	53	59	38	54	62	64	57	58	78	56	57	62
Adaptive	43	44	50	48	52	49	44	51	55	43	52	48
Career-oriented	23	37	36	34	34	29	26	28	41	24	41	32
All	41	45	44	48	44	47	43	50	59	43	52	47
Updating skills (%)												
Family-oriented	43	25	31	54	44	21	39	43	8	17	14	23
Adaptive	51	47	56	57	52	36	45	54	21	29	21	43
Career-oriented	58	49	68	65	71	63	62	74	21	41	40	58
All	51	45	59	60	57	39	46	55	17	28	21	43
N. cases	472	525	370	442	417	675	617	534	571	400	506	5,529

**Note:** Within each regime, countries are listed in descending order according to the share of work-centred women. By relevant contribution to housework (%) we mean the percentage of women who contribute more than half of the total hours the entire household spends on housework. By updating skills (%) we mean the percentage of women who improved their knowledge and skills in the past year.

)\* Country codes: UK: Britain, IE: Ireland, DK: Denmark, SE: Sweden, NO: Norway, DE: Germany, AT: Austria, CH: Switzerland, EL: Greece, ES: Spain, PT: Portugal

## 5 LIFESTYLE PREFERENCES AND FERTILITY: HYPOTHESES AND METHODS

We have demonstrated that the classification of women according to lifestyle preferences shows consistent patterns of association with behaviour and is linked with welfare regimes. Now we turn to our main research question, namely whether Preference Theory can help explain differences in actual and intended fertility. We expected family-oriented women to have the largest families and/or to be the most willing to have a(nother) child, since they define family life and children to be their main priority in life. On the other hand, we expected career-oriented to be the least fertile—Preference Theory predicts childless women to be concentrated within this group—and the least willing to have a(nother) child, since, by definition, this group focuses on work. Adaptive women should be in between.

To test whether Hakim’s classification is associated with actual and intended fertility we carried out multivariate regression analyses. In order to study the link with actual fertility, we estimated an ordered logistic model separately for each country, where the dependent variable was the number of children ever had (0,1,2,3+, with retrospective reporting).<sup>13</sup> Whenever this model turned out to violate the parallel regression assumption (i.e., the effect was not parity-specific), we applied a generalised ordinal logistic model (with parity-specific effects). In a first set of models (labelled Model 1) we only included Hakim’s classification of women as an explanatory variable. In all models, adaptive women constituted the reference category. In a second set of models (Model 2), we added further explanatory variables: age, educational level (i.e., number of years of completed full-time education centred around the respective country mean, thus controlling for country-specific educational systems), work status, educational enrolment and partnership status.

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<sup>13</sup> Respondents for whom the information on “children ever had” is missing are not included in our analyses.

To study the link with intended fertility, we used a logistic regression model to determine the probability that the respondent intends to have a child within the next three years (vs. not intending to have a child).<sup>14</sup> The exact question used in the survey was: “Do you plan to have a child within the next three years?” Respondents could choose between four answers: “definitely not”, “probably not”, “probably yes” and “definitely yes”, or they could refuse to answer, or simply answer they did not know.<sup>15</sup> We collapsed the answers into two categories: the probability of not intending to have a child within the next three years, which encompasses the answers: “definitely not” and “probably not” into one negative answer. The remaining two answers, “probably yes” and “definitely yes”, were collapsed into a second category that indicates the intention to have a child within the next three years. In a first set of models (Model 1) fertility intentions were studied as a function of lifestyle preferences, while controlling for parity (we distinguished between childless women, women with one child (reference category), and women who already had two or more births). In a second set of models (Model 2), we added the set of co-variates that we also included in the models for actual fertility. In all regressions, we applied weights that were inverse to the probability of being included in the sample.

## **6 LIFESTYLE PREFERENCES AND FERTILITY: RESULTS**

### **6.1 Lifestyle Preferences and Actual Fertility**

The following results have to be interpreted carefully, in terms of links between lifestyle preferences and actual fertility, rather than in terms of a causal relationship between preferences and actual fertility. However, we expected the sign and the strength of patterns of correlation to be consistent

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<sup>14</sup> A greater correspondence between fertility intentions and behaviours may be achieved when intentions refer to an explicit time interval (Miller and Pasta 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Respondents for whom the information on “fertility intentions” is missing are not included in our analyses.

with Preference Theory. As Surkyn and Lesthaeghe (2004) say, we should be able to find the “footprints” of lifestyle preferences on actual fertility. Descriptive results are shown in Table 4. According to Preference Theory, childlessness should, on average, be higher in the group of career-oriented women as compared to the family-oriented women and, to a smaller extent, also to adaptive women. Indeed, the proportion of childless women in the work-oriented group was more than 10 per cent higher than that of women in the family-oriented group. However, our data suggest that there is no relevant difference in the proportion of childlessness between adaptive and work-oriented women: for both categories, 47 per cent of all respondents turned out to be childless. Similarly, women with one child were represented with 21 and 23 per cent in the family and career-oriented category, respectively, while the proportion was slightly lower in the adaptive group (19 per cent). Lifestyle preferences were better associated with higher parities. The proportion of women with “large” families, i.e., three or more children, was higher among the family-centred than among the other two types: 16 vs. 11 per cent among the adaptive group, and only 8 per cent among the careerists.

Table 5 shows the estimates from the ordered logit models, where the response variable is the actual number of children. Part *a* refers to the countries where the ordered logit model is applied, while part *b* gives the estimates of generalised ordered logit models used for the countries where the hypothesis of proportional regressions turns out to be violated (i.e., covariates have a parity-specific effect).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> We found that the parallel regression assumption is not violated if the ordered logit models are run on the sub-sample of women with at least one child, thus suggesting that passing from parity zero to parity 1 is very different to experiencing other transitions, as shown in other studies (Testa and Grilli 2006). However, this solution implies a considerable reduction of the sample size and excludes from the analysis a significant proportion of work-oriented women who, according to Preference Theory, are frequently childless. We therefore decided to estimate generalised ordered models, which do not impose the constraints of parallel regression.

In Model 1, being family-oriented was almost always positively linked with actual family size. The only exceptions were Ireland, where both work and family orientations were positively associated with actual fertility, and Denmark, where the link with preference, although consistent with the “footprints” of Preference Theory, was not statistically significant. Great Britain was the only country, for which the hypothesis of parallel regression was violated, and the negative association between being career-oriented and actual family size was significant only for higher parities, i.e., two or more children.

**Table 4** Distribution of women with different lifestyle preferences by current parity

	)*	Liberal		Social Democratic			Conservative			Southern European			Whole Sample
		UK	IE	DK	SE	NO	DE	AT	CH	EL	ES	PT	
<b>Family-oriented</b>	<b>0</b>	36	31	46	46	25	27	30	31	31	44	41	35
	<b>1</b>	21	16	15	18	6	28	18	16	22	23	26	21
	<b>2</b>	27	18	8	9	56	30	38	35	34	24	22	28
	<b>3+</b>	15	35	31	27	13	15	14	18	13	9	11	16
<b>Adaptive</b>	<b>0</b>	33	45	45	49	42	45	51	52	47	58	49	47
	<b>1</b>	26	11	16	14	20	21	14	20	19	16	27	19
	<b>2</b>	29	22	27	23	24	26	26	21	26	22	19	23
	<b>3+</b>	12	22	12	14	14	8	9	7	8	4	5	11
<b>Career-oriented</b>	<b>0</b>	44	37	45	48	41	49	55	67	44	58	43	47
	<b>1</b>	33	22	20	14	24	27	22	13	27	21	32	23
	<b>2</b>	22	17	23	26	21	22	21	17	23	19	19	22
	<b>3+</b>	1	24	12	12	14	2	2	4	6	2	6	8
<b>All</b>	<b>0</b>	35	42	45	48	41	43	49	51	42	55	46	45
	<b>1</b>	26	13	18	14	20	23	16	19	21	18	27	20
	<b>2</b>	28	21	25	24	25	26	27	22	28	22	20	24
	<b>3+</b>	11	24	12	14	14	8	8	8	9	5	7	11
N. cases		472	525	370	442	417	675	617	534	571	400	506	5,529

)\* Country codes: UK: Britain, IE: Ireland, DK: Denmark, SE: Sweden, NO: Norway, DE: Germany, AT: Austria, CH: Switzerland, EL: Greece, ES: Spain, PT: Portugal

In the second set of models (Model 2), the association between lifestyle preferences and actual fertility ran as expected in Norway, Austria, and Germany. However, the parameters of the model were statistically significant only for family-oriented women in Norway, and for career-oriented women in Germany. In the other countries, parameter estimates ran in a direction that was (even) opposite to the one we expected according to Preference Theory, but they did not significantly differ from zero. Results consistent with Hakim's theory were found for Great Britain, Sweden, and Germany. In this latter group of countries, career oriented-women were significantly less likely to have large families as compared to the adaptive group. The results were consistent with Preference Theory also for Norway, Portugal and Switzerland, where family-oriented women were more likely to have families with many children.

These results reveal that in some European countries lifestyle preferences are significantly associated with actual fertility, while in some other countries they are not. In many cases, the significant main effect of lifestyle preferences disappears once other socio-demographic covariates are taken into account, suggesting that lifestyle preferences do not contain additional information with respect to other variables that measure "structural" socio-demographic factors, or that the effect of lifestyle preferences is mediated by other life course choices. Additional variables, like union status, educational attainment, employment status or educational enrolment are all consistently associated with actual fertility.



**Table 5a** Ordered logit model for actual number of children

	Denmark	Norway	Austria	Spain	Greece	Portugal
<b>Model 1</b>						
Family-oriented	0.24	0.72 *	0.64 *	0.49 **	0.59 ***	0.39 *
Career-oriented	-0.08	-0.04	0.07	-0.12	0.38	0.38
<b>Model 2</b>						
Family-oriented	-0.08	0.96 **	0.17	-0.08	-0.16	0.42 *
Career-oriented	-0.27	-0.09	-0.4	-0.29	0.46	0.34
Age	1.18 ***	1.04 ***	0.97 ***	0.67 **	0.66 ***	0.46 **
Age <sup>2</sup>	-0.01 ***	-0.01 ***	-0.01 ***	-0.01 **	-0.01 ***	-0.005 **
Education	-0.11 ***	-0.05	-0.05	-0.10 ***	-0.19 ***	-0.06 **
Educational enrolment	-0.62	-0.59	-1.55 **	-37.13 ***	-32.11 ***	-1.99 *
Employed	-0.15	-0.88 ***	-1.34 ***	-0.2	-0.61 ***	-0.27
Living with partner	1.08 ***	1.17 ***	1.56 ***	2.25 ***	2.26 ***	1.66 ***
N. cases	369	417	617	397	571	501

\*\*\* p<.01; \*\* p<.05; \* p<.1 **Note:** Sample size may be smaller from that presented in Table 4 because of missing values, which are not considered in the models.

**Table 5b** Generalised ordered logit models for actual number of children

		Britain	Ireland	Switzerl.	Sweden	Germany
<b>Model 1</b>						
Family-oriented		0.25	0.80***	1.16***	0.24	0.66***
Career-oriented	-		0.71**	0.006	-0.006	-0.51**
	c.0	-0.32				
	c.1	-0.81***				
	c.2	-2.80***				
<b>Model 2</b>						
Family-oriented		-0.21	0.28	0.94***	-0.19	0.27
Career-oriented		-0.85***	0.47	0.42	-0.50**	-0.53**
Age	-	0.75***		0.73***	1.39***	0.56***
	c.0		0.82***			
	c.1		0.93***			
	c.2		0.91***			
Age <sup>2</sup>	-		-0.01***	-0.008***	-0.02***	-0.007***
	c.0	-0.01***				
	c.1	-0.01***				
	c.2	-0.11***				
Education	-			-0.10***	-0.09**	-0.04
	c.0	-0.21***	-0.12***			
	c.1	-0.06	-0.03			
	c.2	-0.01	-0.01			
Educational enrolment	-	-0.71	-1.43		0.30	
	c.0			-0.41		-1.30***
	c.1			0.53		-0.93
	c.2			-12.06***		-12.44***
Employed	-	-1.07***		-1.04***	-0.30	-1.02***
	c.0		-2.09***			
	c.1		-1.08***			
	c.2		-0.89***			
Living with partner	-	0.58***		1.19***		1.17***
	c.0		2.18***		1.41***	
	c.1		1.58***		0.76**	
	c.2		0.83**		0.19	
N. cases		472	514	534	442	672

\*\*\* p<.01; \*\* p<.05; \* p<.1 **Note:** In the generalised ordered logit models the coefficients of the variables are allowed to change for each of the j-1 categories of the response variable, if they do not satisfy the parallel regression assumption. In the Table above, c.0 indicates the coefficient for the contrast zero versus one or more children; c.1 is the coefficient for the contrast fewer than two versus two or more children; c.2 is the coefficient for the contrast fewer than three versus three or more children. Sample sizes may be smaller than those presented in Table 4 because of missing values, which are not considered in the models.

## 6.2 Lifestyle Preferences and Intended Fertility

As fertility intentions can be considered a prerequisite for fertility behaviour, we expect lifestyle preferences to have an effect on intended fertility, if there is a causal link between preferences and behaviour. We therefore consider the test of Preference Theory on fertility intentions to be more stringent than the one with actual fertility. Table 6 shows the proportion of different women, as classified according to lifestyle preferences, by their intention to have a child within the next three years.

Interestingly, only in Great Britain family-oriented respondents more often intended to have a child in the near future, as compared to their peers with other lifestyle preferences. In contrast with our expectations and with Preference Theory, all other countries had a higher proportion of career-oriented women who had short-term fertility plans, as compared to the adaptive and family-oriented groups. This finding should be taken with some caution as the selection process may cause career-oriented women to postpone actual childbearing more often than other women. Postponing actual childbearing would explain why a larger share of the career-oriented women (a group that also tends to be at lower parities) wants to have a child. Indeed, when we analysed childless women and women with at least one child separately, we got results that were more consistent with the Preference Theory: family-oriented women were more prone to plan a child than career-oriented women.<sup>17</sup>

Descriptive data showed relevant differences between the three groups of women. The only remarkable exception was Great Britain, the country in which career-oriented women, and especially childless women, seemed to be less likely to intend to have a child within the next three years. Multivariate regressions are needed for a more thorough analysis. When we look at

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<sup>17</sup> The information on fertility intentions of both partners is not available in the ESS data, thus it is not possible to check for possible agreement or disagreement within the couple. However, separate analyses not shown here on men's fertility intentions give results that are consistent with those obtained for women.

estimates from the logit model (Table 7), we get a similar picture. Covariates related to lifestyle preferences are neither statistically significant in models that control for parity only (Model 1) nor in models that control for several socio-demographic factors (Model 2). The only relevant exceptions were Denmark and Great Britain. Once we controlled for the effect of background variables, family-oriented women in Denmark were more likely to intend to have a (an additional) child within the next three years, while the British career-oriented women were less likely to intend to have a child within the next three years.<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that unlike in Britain, in Denmark the percentage of women with positive short-term fertility intentions showed no significant differences across the three groups of women (Table 6). In the same way, the percentages of Danish women at different parities showed no significant differences across the three groups (Table 4). Moreover, Denmark also deviated regarding the identification of the three divergent types of women according to a variety of external characteristics (Table 3). For this reason, the case of Denmark cannot be considered as being consistent with Preference Theory.

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<sup>18</sup> The negative effect of being career-oriented on fertility intentions in Britain becomes even higher if we run the same set of models only on the sub-sample of women living in a union, who—according to Hakim—should also have clearer life preferences. In other words, among married or cohabiting women, the consistency of the Preference Theory increases in the case of Britain, while the effect is lost in the case of Denmark. Results for these models are not shown because of the considerable reduction of the sample size they involve.

**Table 6** Distribution of women with different lifestyle preferences and positive short-term fertility intentions

		Family-oriented			Adaptive			Career-oriented			All			N. cases
		All	0	1+	All	0	1+	All	0	1+	All	0	1+	
Liberal	Britain	21	40	11	20	33	14	15	17	14	20	30	14	472
	Ireland	13	9	15	17	16	19	27	45	16	18	18	18	525
Social democratic	Denmark	23	33	14	22	30	17	29	46	16	25	36	16	370
	Sweden	27	40	17	25	27	22	28	36	21	26	30	22	442
	Norway	12	0	17	28	32	26	27	38	19	27	33	24	417
Conservative	Germany	11	18	8	14	20	9	20	27	13	15	21	10	675
	Austria	17	5	23	18	23	13	18	27	8	18	23	14	617
	Switzerland	18	37	9	28	33	23	23	33	17	27	33	21	534
Southern European	Greece	30	55	18	20	22	18	33	51	19	25	33	18	571
	Spain	25	24	25	23	26	19	34	45	18	25	29	21	400
	Portugal	18	16	19	22	31	13	26	30	23	21	27	16	506
Whole sample		20	27	17	21	26	17	26	36	17	22	28	17	5,529

**Note:** Women with positive fertility intentions are those answering “probably yes” or “definitely yes” to the survey question on the intention to have a child within the next three years. Sample sizes may be smaller than those presented in Table 4 because of missing values.

**Table 7** Logit model on intended fertility in the next three years

	Liberal		Social democratic			Conservative			Southern European		
	Britain	Ireland	Denmark	Sweden	Norway	Germany	Austria	Switzerl.	Greece	Spain	Portugal
<b>Model 1</b>											
Family-oriented	-0.02	-0.42	0.03	0.08	-0.61	-0.18	0.17	-0.32	0.89***	0.13	-0.08
Career-oriented	-0.49	0.58	0.33	0.20	-0.17**	-0.005	0.10	0.26	0.77**	0.49	0.75*
No child	-0.15	-1.35***	-0.09	-0.83***	-0.59***	0.43	-0.30	-0.84***	-0.19	-0.25	0.11
2+ children	-0.91***	-1.94***	-2.30***	-2.05***	-1.85	-1.16***	-1.28***	-2.88***	-2.38***	-1.40***	-1.42***
<b>Model 2</b>											
Family-oriented	-0.08	-0.07	2.06**	0.67	-0.51	-0.02	0.19	-0.45	0.26	0.45	0.54
Career-oriented	-0.84*	-0.14	0.11	-0.38	-0.09	0.05	-0.26	-0.40	0.80*	0.10	0.22
Age	1.24***	1.08***	2.05***	1.38***	1.08***	0.77***	0.64***	1.39***	1.04***	1.16***	0.94***
Age <sup>2</sup>	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.04***	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.01***	-0.01***	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.02***
Education	0.03	0.07	0.20***	0.07	0.09*	0.14***	0.12***	0.17***	-0.03	0.34	0.13***
Educational enrolm.	-0.86	-1.34	-1.84**	-0.81	-1.12*	-1.61***	-1.49***	-0.59	-0.94	-0.83	-2.95***
Employed	-0.94**	0.36	-0.31	0.39	-0.59	-0.27	-0.86**	0.61*	-0.45	0.19	-0.58
Living with partner	1.39***	2.38***	1.50***	0.67*	1.41***	0.32	0.81**	0.68**	3.57***	2.11***	1.92***
No child	0.22	-0.22	0.66	-0.55	0.09	0.69**	0.90**	-0.65*	2.04***	0.92**	0.71**
2+ children	-2.62***	-2.07***	-2.17***	-2.21***	-2.13***	-1.17***	-1.57***	-2.88***	-2.70***	-1.47***	-1.66***
N. cases	470	514	369	442	417	672	612	534	571	397	501

\*\*\* p<.01; \*\* p<.05; \* p<.1 **Note** Sample sizes may be smaller than those presented in Table 4 because of missing values, which are not considered in the models.

## **7 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In this paper we studied the Preference Theory approach proposed by Catherine Hakim to explain the causes of low and lowest low fertility levels observed in Europe in the past decades. We provided some evidence that Hakim's Preference Theory can be used to identify three different categories of women based on their lifestyle preferences towards family or work in a variety of European societies. The Preference Theory approach is also consistent with our results when it states that welfare policies may bias feminine preference orientations in modern industrialised societies, as the cases of both social democratic and southern European countries demonstrate.

We documented a link between women's lifestyle preferences as described by Hakim's Preference Theory and actual fertility in all European settings considered in the analysis. Family-oriented women are the most fertile, while work-oriented women are the least fertile if compared to other women in the sample, even though the effect of lifestyle preferences on achieved fertility was absorbed by other factors in some cases when we controlled for other background variables.

When evaluating the importance of this scheme in the fertility decision-making process by analysing the determinants of fertility intentions, our results do not support the view that lifestyle preferences explain current fertility choices in the European setting, with the exception of Britain and Denmark. The positive relationship between preferences towards the family and short-term fertility plans found in the Danish sample might, however, be misleading, since Denmark does not display the other implications preferences involved in other countries of our sample.

Great Britain, precisely the country where Hakim tested her Theory, is different from any other country involved in this study. Exceptional results obtained for Britain, we may conclude, are consistent with Preference Theory since lifestyle preferences not only seem to characterise three distinct groups of women, but can also explain both actual and intended fertility

within the British population, thus confirming Hakim's Theory in all aspects. The reason why this happens in Britain but not elsewhere in Europe might simply be that Britain is the most suitable environment to test the Theory, since it is the only country in Europe, which has already achieved the new scenario for women and provides neutral public policies that do not bias the distribution of individual preferences.

A more general reason for the unexpected finding regarding intended fertility might be the selection process: childlessness is prevalent among career-oriented women and these women are also more willing to have a (an additional) child in the near future. This suggests that careerists could have short-term fertility plans because they have not yet had a child due to the fact that they postponed childbearing more often than family-oriented women, who do not intend to have a child within a short-time period, since they already have children and maybe have already reached their ideal family size.

Another explanation of our results might be that lifestyle preferences are more influenced by actual fertility than vice versa. Work-family preferences could be the result and not the cause of fertility. In this case, it would be consistent that we only find a relation between lifestyle preferences and realised fertility intentions—this would explain the difference between the results on actual and intended fertility. To fully test this hypothesis, we would need longitudinal data in order to identify the formation of lifestyle preferences during the life course, and in particular as a possible consequence of fertility choices.



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