Starting a family at your parents’ house: Multigenerational households and childbearing in Bulgaria

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A little history ... *in fieri*

- Comparative qualitative interviews based case studies « Fertility Choices in Central and Eastern Europe » (BU, HU, PL)

- Bulgaria specificity was lower age at first birth and higher rates of non marital childbearing compared to the other two countries
Relationship between mean age at first birth and the proportion of non-marital births in selected European countries, 1980 - 2000

Mean age at first birth women 1980 - 2000 (RM: FR, EX-GDR, EX-FRG, UK)

Proportion of non-marital births

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(source: Council of Europe 2001)
Empirical Background

Percentage of births out-of-wedlock over calendar time in Bulgaria

Source Koytcheva (2007)
Total fertility rate and mean age at first birth in Bulgaria

Source: Koytcheva (2007)
Family formation

• Declared ideal: nuclear family and independent residence

• Pragmatic choice: new unions formed while remaining at (his) parents’ home

• Stylized phases of this union formation involve:
  - Moving in when involved in a stable relationship
  - Staying in until enough resources have been saved to provide an own flat (in rural areas built on the top of parents’ house)
  - Having a first child while childcare is provided by the grandmother
  - Expected to move out before the second child (space, siblings’ children...)

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Data

- Semi-structured interviews
  - Sample from the Bu-GGS survey
  - Context: Sofia 2004-2005
  - 22 women between 20 and 33
    - rather highly educated
    - parity 0 or 1
    - married or cohabiting
  - 18 of their partners and 3 of their mothers
  - Couples were married, cohabiting, or involved

- Ethnographic fieldwork between 1999 and 2009
  - Rural and urban areas of Bulgaria
Interviews focus

• five key areas:
  – family background and memories of childhood,
  – the history of the respondents’ past romantic relationship and the background of the present union
  – the decision making process surrounding fertility intentions and expectations/experiences of parenthood
  – opinions about raising children before 1989 compared to the present day,
  – hopes, fears and expectations for the future.
Multigenerational residence: a long-lasting practice

- Patrivirilocal family tradition in Bulgaria survived during the 45 years of communist regime (Spasovska 2000).

- The new wife became a member of her husband’s extended family, referring to her new in-laws as mother (maiko) and father (tatko).

- Mother-in-laws had customary obligations to look after any grandchildren produced by the new union freeing the mother up for other agricultural or household responsibilities.

- The young couple (and particularly the young daughter-in-law) were traditionally expected to look after the husband’s parents in their old age.

- Parents therefore expected their sons’ wives to provide elder care and expected that their own daughters would have to look after the parents of their husbands.
Multigenerational residence: a long-lasting practice?

- Debate:

  - In several circumstances young Bulgarian couples moved to their own independent dwellings after marriage and formed European-style nuclear families (Todorova M. 1993); nuclear families were more prevalent in the urban areas where European values and ideals held more sway (Todorova V. 2000).

  - multigenerational household is a fundamental part of the Bulgarian cultural heritage, and more importantly, as a key strategy for surviving times of economic uncertainly (Botcheva and Feldman 2004; Barova 2008; Ahmed and Emigh 2004).
Evdokia’s story (57 years old)

- Lived 17 years with her parents, her husband and her children
- She lived in a traditional Bulgarian multigenerational household whole life-long even if being a full-time employee and agronomist.
- Interval of more than 5 years between first and second child because her husband felt that their living space was too small and was reluctant to have a second child.
- Even after the second child, they continued to cohabit with her parents and relentlessly petitioned the communist government for their own apartment to no avail.
- After waiting many years to be put on the lists for an apartment, they finally agreed to bribe the local communist officials in order to have a home of their own. Her two sons were almost fully-grown when she finally had an independent flat.
- Soon after the death of her mother, however, her father came to live with her in this new flat and she found herself “cooking for four men”: her father, her husband and her two sons.
- At the time of the interview in 2005, her father and husband had passed away, but Evdokia was cohabiting with one of her grown sons, his wife and their newborn baby.
Multigenerational residence in Sofia in 2005

- 37% households in Bulgaria are vertically extended – three generations (Ahmed and Emigh 2004)

- Of our 22 couples interviewed
  - 13 living at parents’ house (3 married, 4 cohabiting, 6 living with parents or LATAPs)
    - In the case of LATAPs often couples were living in multigenerational households
  - 2 lived nearby their parents
  - 2 had recently moved out of a multigenerational household
  - 5 « independent » households
    - In all 5 cases parents lived outside Sofia and 3 couples were childless
Getting along with in laws: Dimiter age 34 and Desislava age 29

- married secondary school graduates with one six-year-old son.
- They had a very traditional engagement where Dimitar’s parents brought bread to Desislava’s parents and officially asked permission for her to be engaged.
- Desislava then went to live with Dimitar and his parents for a year before their wedding.
- She was already four months pregnant when they had a church wedding, and they have been living together with his parents for about seven years as a married couple.
- Although the son now attends a kindergarten, Dimitar and Desislava have shared childcare responsibilities with his parents.
- Now that their son is about to start school, they are hoping to move out into an apartment of their own.
Getting along with in-laws: Hana age 24...

- a young married woman living with her in-laws and trying to get pregnant. When asked how she got along with her husband’s parents she explained:
- “We definitely get along well. Still there are always compromises from our side or from theirs, because it is not possible for four people who live in one place to get along perfectly. After all, we each have four different characters...but our relations are definitely good. Either we will compromise or they will compromise. In general, we find some balance between us and we get along”.
Petar age 27 and Magdalena age 30

- University educated couple. Petar’s parents lived outside of Sofia and so they cohabited in Magdalena’s family home for three years before moving into their own place just six months before the interview. Magdalena explains.

- “We were all living together then. We were living in a two-room apartment, let me tell you how many people were there. [Counting on her fingers] One, two, three, four, five, six, seven… Myself, [Petar], my grandmother… my mother, my brother, my sister-in-law, and their child. How many were we? Yes, seven people! And so it was like the Grandfather’s Glove!”
Lyubomir (age 25) and Maria (age 24)

- A pair of University-educated high school sweethearts that had been together for nine years at the time of the interview.
- Maria had been raised in an intergenerational household with her mother, father and grandmother.
- Lyubomir lived in an apartment with his mother, his father, his older brother, his brother’s wife and their child.
- It was the lack of space at Lyubomir’s parent’s home that prevented Lyubomir and Maria from cohabiting. To remedy this situation, his parents had recently bought him a small apartment near their own so that he and Maria could move in together.

- **PS there was no mention of his brother’s family moving into the new apartment even though they were already married and had a child.**
Discussion

• Bulgarian strategy to face economic uncertainty seems to be a living arrangement strategy: namely, resource pooling by multigenerational co-residence.

  – Also in other Eastern European contexts economic uncertainty did not translate immediately in postponement of first birth (late-1990s-early 2000s)
Discussion

- Eastern Germany (Bernardi et al, EJP 2008): « While job security is crucial to the western Germans’ idea of achievement and as a foundation for family formation in a sequential pattern, in eastern Germany, job security is only one of the parallel paths in one’s life course and thus investments in one’s job and private life are conducted in parallel » (307)

- Ukraine (Perelli-Harris, PDR 2005): “...when faced with such hardships as unemployment or lack of housing, couples do not usually delay first births, although they may delay or forgo additional childbearing. Because they do not believe that their economic situation will improve later, Ukrainian women decide to give birth close to the optimal physiological age. On the other hand, economic factors may make a second child prohibitively expensive for the average family” (68)
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- Growing literature on multigenerational households as an optimal living arrangement for single mothers and their children in the US
Discussion

• Bulgarian unions in multigenerational households and Italian LATAP unions as pre-conditions for first birth

• In both cases parental investment is considerable (economic support and childcare provision)

• However:
  – Co-residence adult children couple -> non-marital childbirthing
  – Co-residence of own adult children -> parenthood postponement

• What cultural dynamics are at play when individual family reproduction is under stress?
Share of households headed by people aged 60 and older in total households 2005 in %

Source: Schulz & Maselli (2008), Eurostat data
Thank you for your attention

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First birth intensities by calendar year

![Graph showing changes in first birth intensities by calendar year](image)

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Second birth intensity by calendar year

![Graph showing second birth intensity by calendar year from 1975 to 2000. The intensity decreases from around 0.45 in 1975 to below 0.1 in 2000.]
Mean ages of first birth and first marriage for women in Bulgaria

Source: Koytcheva (2007)
• Living together as a necessity

• Grandmothers’ childcare is necessary

• Granparents’ care and family bonds