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The End of Children?
Changing Trends in Childbearing
and Childhood



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For Amy, Ezra, and Sheila, with love

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The End of Children?

Introduction

Nathanael Lauster and Graham Allan

In 1900, Ellen Key (1900), the Swedish educationalist and writer, proclaimed the coming twentieth century as “The Century of the Child.” In many ways, this contention can be seen as highly prescient. Throughout the twentieth century, there was a far greater concern for the physical, moral, and economic welfare of children than there had been in earlier eras. Particularly, but not only, in Western societies, the rise of educational provision clearly reflected changed understandings of children’s social and economic location. However, changes in the social organization of motherhood, the creation of new legal protections for children, and later the extension of “childhood” into a new phase of “adolescence” all served equally to highlight the greater attention and prominence bestowed on “pre-adult” life phases across the twentieth century. By the time the UN’s *Convention on the Rights of the Child* was published by the United Nations in 1989, the special significance of childhood in twentieth-century thought and practice had become firmly established (United Nations 1989).

These changes in understandings of children’s place – or, better still, places – within society reveal the analytical importance of viewing childhood as a social, rather than as a natural, construction. The value placed on children, what is expected of them, how they are treated, what protections they are granted, and the like vary significantly depending at least in part on the economic contributions required of the young within the family to sustain normative lifestyles. Moreover, the social positioning of children and the social construction of childhood continue to alter. In the period that Anthony Giddens (1991) characterizes as late modernity – broadly speaking the period since 1975 – widespread demographic shifts have occurred, especially, though not only, within industrialized societies. For example, divorce rates have grown, marriage rates

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have fallen, and the incidence of cohabitation and lone parenthood have increased. In addition, birth rates and the age at which people first become parents have also changed, representing altered pathways into adulthood and greater diversity in the structure of the life course.

The origins of the current volume can be traced back to the numerous and wide-ranging discussions that the editors had with their colleagues in the Family Studies group at the University of British Columbia about these demographic and social changes, especially as they affect children and childhood. As a result of these discussions, we decided to solicit papers for a collected volume from scholars with different backgrounds – including sociology, demography, history, anthropology, family studies, social work, and education – with the goal of encouraging an interdisciplinary debate about the implications and significance of children in contemporary life. Borrowing from the title of Arthur C. Clarke's science fiction novel *Childhood's End* (1953), in which the children of Earth are taken and transformed by aliens, leaving their forlorn parents behind, and P.D. James's similarly futuristic *The Children of Men* (1992), in which children simply stop being born, we asked our contributors to focus their essays broadly on the theme of "The End of Children?: Changing Trends in Childbearing and Childhood." Our intention was to look critically – hence, the question mark in the title – at what is happening to children and childhood, given declining birth rates and public concerns over perceived dangers to children's well-being and "natural" innocence. In the main, the chapters that follow concentrate on children and childhood in a North American context, but cases from outside Canada and the United States are also considered in a number of the chapters. Along the way to producing the book, we were able to gain the support of the University of British Columbia to organize a two-day symposium to bring contributors and others together to discuss the various issues raised in their chapters. Prior to this symposium, we had some concern that the different disciplinary discourses around issues of fertility and childhood might lead to disparate papers from which little discussion would emerge. However, throughout the symposium the debate was extremely lively, with specialists from the different areas engaging fully in the range of subjects being presented.

Notwithstanding their different theoretical and methodological approaches, it was apparent that individuals schooled in different disciplinary traditions "connected" with one another in stimulating and productive ways. Despite their differences, there was a resonance in the knowledge and understanding brought to the various themes and topics being addressed. As many of the authors have told us, the development

of their chapters undoubtedly benefited from the debates that were generated during the symposium.

Of course, each discipline and field provides unique insights into the issues surrounding childbearing and childrearing. The questions they ask and the mode of analysis they develop are rooted in the intellectual concerns that define their subject and discipline. This makes it all the more striking that a number of common themes emerge from the works contained here. Scholars seeking to understand changes in childbearing trends speak to many of the same concerns as those working to understand changes in the construction and experience of childhood. We hope the chapters we have included in this volume capture for the reader the “connectivities” apparent in the symposium and the value of considering the issues we address from different disciplinary perspectives. For this reason, we also hope readers will delve into the different chapters rather than just those that are most directly relevant to their own disciplinary base. To be clear, the volume is “multidisciplinary” rather than “interdisciplinary.” Each chapter addresses its concerns from its own disciplinary perspective, but, collectively, we think the book illustrates the advantages that can be gained from a willingness to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue.

Before outlining some of the integrative themes of the book and the contents of the chapters included, we want to clarify our use of the terms “children” and “childhood.” In talking of children, we are referring both to children as embodied individuals and to their generational position. Normally, when we use the term “child,” we are implicitly referencing someone who is considered “pre-adult,” according to whatever social and cultural criteria are conventionally used in the relevant society to define adulthood. However, at times, “child” may be used solely to convey a generational status, irrespective of the age of the individual concerned. That is, a daughter or son remains her or his parents’ child no matter what age the child happens to be.

In contrast, “childhood” is not directly about embodied individuals or generational connections. Instead, it refers to the general social position assigned to those who are considered pre-adult in a given society. It concerns the social construction of a particular age category – the rights, responsibilities, protections, and understandings that define what it means to be pre-adult. The construction of childhood is not uniform; it varies across societies and across time. It varies in the length of time a child is considered dependent; it varies in the constitution of that dependence; and it varies in the social arrangements devised to protect the child while he or she is seen as dependent. For example, in contemporary

Western society, part of being pre-adult is that you go to school for a given period. This practice has not always been the case, but now education is a major business. Similarly, the legal system now understands children and their capabilities quite differently from the ways they were understood a century or so ago. In a simple sense, the child has not altered, but what has changed is his or her childhood – the set of experiences seen as normative for those who are pre-adult.

The End of Children?

Until quite recently, the bearing of many children was an expected part of life for most people. People could expect to replace themselves and more through their children. “Replacement fertility” is a concept invented by demographers to describe the replenishment of populations through childbearing. The total fertility rate (TFR) represents an estimate of the number of children a woman is likely to have over the course of her lifetime. Approximately 2.1 children are needed for a couple to replace themselves under conditions of low mortality (the extra 0.1 being needed to make up for child mortality). At the extreme, women among the early French-Canadian colonists (born before 1660) tended to bear between eleven and twelve children during their lifetimes, one of the highest completed fertility rates ever recorded (Livi-Bacci 2007). TFRs of six to seven children per woman have been far more common historically, and they continue through the present in some countries such as Yemen, Afghanistan, Niger, and Mali. However, for most of the world’s population, children are no longer quite so inevitable. Indeed, according to the Population Reference Bureau (2008), populations are no longer successfully replacing themselves (TFR < 2.1) in some seventy-one countries, which contain approximately 2.5 billion of the world’s 6.7 billion people.

Indeed, across the course of the twentieth century, most countries around the world have experienced dramatic declines in childbearing. While widespread baby booms in the post-Second World War decades garnered significant attention, in reality they were deviations from the long-term trends. Declines in fertility that began in Europe and North America well before 1900 reached new lows by the last quarter of the twentieth century. In both Canada and the United States, the TFR first dropped below the rate at which couples replace themselves by 1972. The United States recently rebounded to replacement level again for the first time in 2006. By contrast, Canada’s childbearing rates have remained quite low, with a TFR of approximately 1.6.

Despite fertility declines, we are clearly not experiencing the end of children, at least not in the sense that they have all disappeared, as in the novel *The Children of Men* (James 1992). While fertility rates have decreased nearly everywhere quite dramatically, most people alive today, even in North America and Europe, have had, or will have, one or more children at some point in their lives. However, the decline of childbearing to the point where generations are no longer replacing themselves through their children remains a cause of concern for many. Declining fertility rates mean that there are fewer workers to replenish workforces, to provide tax bases for governments, and to support aging populations. Fewer children also mean fewer consumers in the long run, challenging a variety of industries and institutions – including universities! Overall, some forty-five countries estimate their fertility rates are too low and are adopting policies aimed at boosting childbearing (Population Reference Bureau 2006). Many countries, such as Canada and the United States, are also turning to immigration as a possible solution to concerns over declining labour forces.

For others, declining fertility rates are a cause for celebration. The publications entitled *The Population Bomb* (Ehrlich 1968) and *The Limits of Growth* (Meadows and Meadows 1972) have contributed to widespread concern about the negative impacts of overpopulation toward the latter third of the twentieth century. Too many children were thought to constitute a barrier to development, a position prominently adopted by China (see the Conclusion in this volume). Similarly, high birth rates have been seen by many as an environmental problem, following concerns that the Earth may be exceeding its human “carrying capacity.” More nuanced analyses have emphasized that consumption patterns matter at least as much as family size as determinants of environmental impact (Curran and de Sherbinin 2004). In this sense, the low fertility rates of high-income countries, where most of the world’s consumption takes place, may be particularly encouraging for environmentalists. The authors in this volume speak to questions of fertility decline – a concept that has implications beyond demography and the replenishment of populations. They attempt to forward explanations, interpretations, and implications of this decline. At the same time, they often address related questions about changes in the social construction of childhood.

The End of Childhood?

A host of authors bemoan the state of childhood today, ranging from popular accounts, such as Neil Postman’s *The Disappearance of Childhood*

(1994) to more academic accounts, such as Anne-Marie Ambert's Vanier Institute report *The Rise in the Number of Children and Adolescents Who Exhibit Problematic Behaviours: Multiple Causes* (2007). As documented by Scott Coltrane and Michele Adams (2003), a specialized cottage industry has sprung up inside and outside academia detailing the challenges faced by children from so-called "broken" homes (for examples, see Popenoe 1996; Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee 2000; and Marquardt 2005). Other proposed threats to childhood include advertisers intent on turning children into mindless consumers (Schor 2004) or forcing girls to grow up and embrace their sexuality too soon (Ward 2003), schools that fail to allow boys to be boys or adequately prepare them to become adults (Tyre 2008), the decline of religion (Zhai et al. 2007), the rise of new drugs (Degrandpre 2000), and the omnipresent dangers of predatory adults (Kincaid 1998).

Contrary to many reports, by most measures, children do not seem to be doing worse and worse. In a basic sense, children in most places are far more likely to survive childhood today than ever before (Bongaarts 2006). According to time-use studies in the United States, parents seem to be spending as much or more time with their children today as in the heyday of the stay-at-home housewife (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2007; though also see Edward Kruk's arguments in Chapter 7 of this volume). In their longitudinal study of generational change, Vern Bengtson, Timothy Biblarz, and Robert Roberts (2002) note that youth today have greater aspirations than their parents and often have better relationships with family members. Youth crime rates do not seem to be rising, and they have dropped considerably since the 1990s (Snyder 2005; Gannon 2006). As revealed in Allison Pugh's *Longing and Belonging* (2009), children's consumption is more complicated than most analysts have considered, driven by the very old desire to belong rather than by new forms of advertising. Trends in sexual debut appear to be changing in North America such that young adults are postponing sex more often now than ten or twenty years ago (Biddlecom 2004; Rotermann 2008). Yet despite much evidence to the contrary, the idea that a normative childhood is under threat remains powerful. As argued by Coltrane and Adams (2003), the moral panic generated by declaring childhood under threat can be used to rally popular action and influence policy. As Mona Gleason and Anita Garey suggest in Chapters 8 and 9 in this volume, ideas of the normative childhood being under threat can also be used to discipline real children in disturbing ways.

Common Themes

Overall, this collection of essays is premised on the idea that researchers concerned with declines in fertility and with changes in the ways in which childhood is experienced and understood have much to say to each other. A number of common themes are worth drawing out here.

Heterogeneity

One of the most striking themes sounded by the contributors to this volume, and a prominent critique of discourses promoting the idea of an end to children or childhood, is the fact that circumstances differ for different people. Speaking to the disappearance of children, fertility has tended to be in a decline across the globe. Yet global trends, and even national trends, mask substantial variation in fertility rates. Many populations are continuing to replace themselves and even grow in size through the addition of their offspring, even as other populations have begun to decline. Historical patterns also differ. Many nations seem to be on a steady downward trajectory, but some, such as the United States, Sweden, and France, have seen fertility rates decline since the 1970s only to rise once again, if modestly, in more recent years.

Heterogeneity in fertility trends is mirrored by heterogeneity in ideas about what childhood should entail. Few people would honestly suggest that a singular notion of childhood could capture all of the diverse ways childhood is imagined or experienced. Yet positing an end to childhood entails imagining such a singular experience. This sort of imagining ignores the diversity of childhood experiences. It further ignores the diversity of opinion concerning what childhood should be like. One notion of childhood may fall into decline without dooming all notions of childhood – indeed, the decline of one notion of childhood is usually accompanied by and/or caused by the rise of another. Similarly, one set of experiences thought to characterize childhood may change for one population (say Midwestern, middle-class, suburban White children) without changing similarly for another (East coast, urban, minority children).

The Idea of the Child

Children exist as ideas in their parents' minds before they are born and often (but not always) before they are even conceived (see Chapter 3 by Rebecca Upton in this volume). The idea of the child, then, informs whether or not prospective parents act in such a way as to bring a child

into the world. In short, the idea of the child matters for fertility. Conversely, of course, concerns about the end of children are as often as not really concerns about the end of a particular idea of the child. Moreover, echoing the theme of heterogeneity, the idea of the child differs for different people at different times. Context matters. At one point in time, the idea of a child might frighten a person away from any sort of behaviour that even remotely carries a risk of pregnancy. At another point in time, the idea of a child might be so compelling to the same person that he or she would spend enormous amounts of energy, time, and money to see that idea made flesh.

The changing meaning of the child as an idea is a central preoccupation of all the chapters that follow as well as being key to understanding the ongoing and massive changes in fertility around the world. In this way, the child is a symbol that may be adopted or avoided, depending on the meaning attached. Childbearing breathes life into the symbol, providing children with an agency of their own. Yet the agency of children is carefully circumscribed by their relationships with those more powerful others around them. As such, to be a child is to occupy a particular social role. Children actively navigate their ways through this role, transitioning in the process from childhood into adulthood (see, as an example of this idea, Chapter 6 by Adena Miller in this volume). Childhood and adulthood exist in opposition to one another, yet everyone is expected to cross the boundary between the two at some point or another. In this sense, the changing meaning of the child is also key to understanding the changing world of adults.

Any tour of the idea of the child must begin by wrestling with how children once seemed inevitable and unavoidable. Thomas Malthus (1826), for instance, saw children as the by-products of deeply ingrained human desires. Only by taking control of human desires, by subjecting them to rational consideration of costs and benefits, and by planning accordingly could humanity avoid creating too many mouths to feed. Malthus advocated abstinence. These days, other more erotically enabling options are available for most people to avoiding childbearing.

If children are not inevitable, then a child becomes a decision. As such, having a child may entail costs and benefits. The rational choice framework has become particularly powerful in demographic research as a means of thinking about changes in childbearing. Various authors have forwarded the notion that the costs of children have risen over time, while the benefits have declined. In particular, it costs more to educate children, to house them (see Chapter 4 by Nathanael Lauster in this volume), and to look after them than in the past. Yet they provide less

labour, less remuneration, and less financial protection as an old age security system (in comparison to pension systems) than ever before. Mira Whyman, Megan Lemmon, and Jay Teachman discuss many of the relevant demographic theories in Chapter 1 of this volume.

While demographers tend to discuss the benefits of children in terms of their economic costs and benefits, it seems obvious that the symbolic value of children cannot be entirely translated into monetary terms. This notion has a variety of implications. First, if children have symbolic value, then this value has to be understood within the context of culture – a point that is developed strongly in Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 of this volume. Culture is that which provides symbols with meaning. Second, the value of children is attached to the value of parents. A child imbues its maker and/or caretaker with the status of parent, and parents, like children, can be good or bad. In this way, children can make their parents better or worse people through their own performance. Finally, this moral element to the meaning of the child is accompanied by an emotional element. Children are usually seen as providing a source of much happiness for parents, although a recent study by Hans-Peter Kohler, Jere Behrman, and Axel Skytthe (2005) has indicated that this effect may be limited, and they are, of course, equally capable of generating a good deal of sadness.

The Child We Live By and the Child We Live With

The idea of the child becomes manifest in the creation of children. As many authors suggest, the contrast between the child as imagined and the child as manifest may be stark. Evoking John Gillis's (1997) distinction between the mythical families we live by and the very real families we live with, the ideas of the child that we profess may be quite distinct from the way children actually intrude on our realities. This notion can have important implications for fertility. As parents take on a first child, they may feel unready for any more (see Upton's analysis in Chapter 3 in this volume), but the implications for the lives of children already born may be even more important.

What happens when parents find discrepancies between the idea of the child motivating their childbearing decisions and the reality of the child they bear? Only parents with a high tolerance for cognitive dissonance might be able to ignore these discrepancies. Otherwise, such dissonance tends to push parents in one of two directions. They can adjust their ideas of children so they better fit parental experiences of interacting with children, or they can attempt to adjust their children to better fit with their ideas of what a child should be like. The latter

solution speaks to the profound differences in power between parent and child. The agency of the child to shape his or her own circumstances is reduced as the potency of the idea of the child increases in the parental imagination.

Ideas about the child, or the children we live by, do not just affect the relationship between parents and children. Ideas about the child also become manifest in a variety of institutional relationships. These ideas may be detached from the reality of children's circumstances, resulting in a sort of social dissonance. Policy makers may ignore resulting discrepancies, as Kruk discusses in Chapter 7 in this volume. Various agents may also act to bring children in line with social expectations or ideas about what a child should be like. The courts and medical professionals are particularly key actors in this regard, as Gleason and Garey illustrate in Chapters 8 and 9 respectively in this volume.

Chapters Ahead

While there are connections made throughout the book, the next five chapters tend to concern questions about the end of children, while Chapters 6 to 9 focus more on questions about the end of childhood. In this way, the book begins by thinking about how the child as an idea relates to whether or not people have children and ends by thinking about how the child as an idea takes on (or fails to take on) institutional forms, contrasting with and informing the lives of real children. In Chapter 1, Whyman, Lemmon, and Teachman provide an introduction to common demographic perspectives that inform discussions of the end of children. They discuss the demographics of fertility decline, with special focus on recent trends in North America. They also detail basic changes in fertility patterns by age and discuss the impact of abortion, contraception, and marriage patterns. In examining the links between childbearing and marriage for self-identified Black and White populations in the United States, they raise the issue of heterogeneity within nations. This chapter sets the stage for further attempts to understand childbearing trends and helps inform the chapters that follow.

In Chapter 2, Nathanael Lauster, Todd Martin, and James White consider the intersection of immigration and fertility, both expanding and dissecting in the process the discussion of heterogeneity in demographic patterns opened by Whyman, Lemmon, and Teachman in the previous chapter. Their focus is on the extent to which immigration can help reverse fertility declines, which is a matter of major consequence for population policies in Canada and other receiving countries. Drawing on data from the Canadian Ethnic Diversity Survey, Lauster, Martin, and

White demonstrate how the different conceptualizations of culture embedded in Canadian multiculturalism – specifically with regard to language, ethnicity, racialized grouping, and religion – have led to different conclusions about fertility trends among immigrant populations. Ironically, given population policy objectives, they find that it may be only where immigrant children are less accepted as belonging that immigrants are likely to maintain higher fertility rates.

The decisions people make about childbearing clearly involve agency. However, in line with the underlying premises of Chapter 2, this agency is structured by cultural understandings, not least of which, as we have argued earlier, are those informing people's ideas of the child at different life-course phases. This is a theme developed further in Chapter 3 where Upton highlights the centrality of discourses of actively planning fertility and the informal pressures that operate in this context. Drawing on her ethnographic research in the United States, she analyzes how childbearing norms can become burdensome for some people, especially in the face of competing work demands and the high financial costs of childbearing. A revealing facet of her study is how some respondents drew – misleadingly – on the discourses of physiological infertility to resist informal pressure to meet American norms of the two-child family.

Like Upton, Lauster in Chapter 4 also addresses questions of why and when people choose to have – or not to have – children, questions that are core to the themes of this book. However, he adopts a quite different theoretical and methodological approach from Upton, although like her he is concerned with the social pressures encouraging people to conform to prevailing cultural standards. He focuses particularly on the idea of performance, theorizing that privileged parents set the performance standards for everyone else. Using US census data from 1900 to 2005, he explores how over time parents in materially advantaged positions have progressively raised the bar on what is taken to constitute good parenting to a point where many others with fewer resources have difficulty attaining it. He argues that increased expectations governing good parenting represent an important, though so far under-examined, explanation for contemporary fertility declines. If young adults do not feel adequately equipped to perform parenthood properly, they may well be choosing not to perform it at all.

In exploring when and why people choose to have children, Upton and Lauster both address, albeit from quite different perspectives, the interplay of moral and economic considerations in these decisions. In Chapter 5, Nicholas Townsend, an anthropologist, draws on a generational framework to assess further the symbolic benefit of children for

parents. In making this assessment, he focuses on childhood not as a phase of personal and social development but, instead, as one of a set of positions, or roles, within a social structure. In this sense, the category “childhood” needs to be understood in the context of the notion “parenthood.” Thus, the disappearance of childhood also implies the disappearance of parenthood, with all of the implications that this carries for our conceptions of “adulthood.” Drawing on his fieldwork in South Africa, Townsend expands our understanding of the idea of the child, in part by focusing on children as signifiers of our inevitable death while also offering the possibility of immortality through their celebration of our lives.

In the volume’s final four chapters, we turn to consider the end of childhood, both as a distinct stage in any individual life course (how do we know when someone becomes an adult?) and as a singular notion of what youth experience. In Chapter 6, Miller addresses a core element within contemporary notions of childhood’s ending – leaving the parental home. Children can leave home relatively early, on time, or relatively late – hence, beginning the entry into adulthood and the ending of childhood at different ages. The categories of early, on time, and late reveal both the heterogeneity of childhood experiences (and transitions to adulthood) and the normative elements that can bind people to certain common expectations. Using a Canadian data set, Miller focuses in detail on the relationship between the timing of leaving home and the experience of parental divorce. In doing so, she illustrates how different childhoods can structure different pathways into adulthood and thereby signify different endings to childhood.

As we argued earlier, childhood altered dramatically during the twentieth century, with many of the changes becoming established through legislative action. The state, in other words, played a significant part in creating modern childhood, with both education and child welfare programs being key components. In Chapter 7, Kruk examines what contemporary Canadian child welfare policies reveal about the state’s support for parental involvement in childhood. He analyzes three different sets of child welfare policies – those concerning child care, child custody, and child protection – and argues that in each sphere the state has implicitly endorsed the disappearance of at least some children from parental involvement. Kruk is not arguing that such parental disengagement from the lives of children represents an explicit and clearly formulated idea of the child constructed by those involved in Canadian policy formation. Rather, he points to the surprising absence of an explicit idea of the child in these different policies.

In Chapter 8, Gleason is also concerned with how the idea of the child is represented and utilized in social welfare, this time from a historical perspective. She focuses specifically on early to mid-twentieth-century responses to childhood disabilities in Canada, examining the manner in which discourses drawn on by health and educational professionals at the time pathologized disabled children as “defective.” Notwithstanding the good intentions of the professionals involved, the children were defined as “abnormal” and thus in need of “normalizing.” Frequently, these actions involved their removal for different lengths of time and in different ways from other children and thus, somewhat paradoxically, from the ordinary experiences and modes of participation of “normal” childhood. In this regard, disability represented a particular end of childhood, one in which the child was separated from the institutionalized social arrangements that had become central for signifying childhood as a special phase of life.

In the final substantive chapter, Chapter 9, Garey continues with the exploration of how specific state policies impact on the experiences of children. She draws on ethnographic fieldwork on truancy courts in the United States to explore how the boundaries of childhood are constructed and policed in the routine procedures of the official agencies involved. Her research connects in interesting ways with Gleason’s analysis in the previous chapter, in that both are explicitly concerned with the processes of pathologizing children. However, the understanding of childhood’s end that she draws on in her chapter is distinct from those that are used in the previous chapters. Garey focuses on childhood’s end in the sense of childhood’s purpose and benefits. The argument she develops is that while childhood is no longer productive in terms of familial economic contribution, the therapeutic perspective that has come to dominate official responses to children who are seen as experiencing problematic childhoods benefits adult actors within the therapeutic professions. In this regard, her analysis explores the mobilization of resources when the actions of particular children cross the boundaries of acceptable childhood and compromise normatively constructed ideas of the child.

Conclusion

As we hope can be seen from the chapters included in this volume, there are numerous ways in which ideas about “the end of children” can be interpreted and understood. Our starting point comprised demographic questions of fertility decline and population replacement levels. As various commentators have recognized, the social and economic

consequences of such decline are both intriguing and imperative. As an example, in the week that we were first drafting this introduction, David Brooks (2009), the *New York Times* columnist, wrote a speculative piece on the potential impact of a declining birth rate on the social fabric. Interestingly, while he recognized the long-term dangers to people's material and religious well-being of such a decline, he emphasized most heavily the consequences of losing generational connection. In this observation, he is surely right. Any population decline would inevitably alter the structure of relationships between the generations, and in the process modify our ideas of the child.

There is, of course, nothing new in this idea. In all eras, our ideas of the child are emergent, shaped by a variety of complex factors. Across the twentieth century, the increasing institutionalization of childhood in Canada, the United States, and other Western countries has been particularly significant. There are two key elements at play in this development, which both reflect a sense of the appropriate separateness of childhood. First, there has been the growth of social institutions – some private, some public – that are concerned specifically with catering to the perceived (and changing) needs of the child. The school remains the primary example, but the growth of specialist health care, judicial provision, leisure activities, and the like all attest to a social recognition that the needs of adults and children are distinct. Second, the social institutions that have been developed to cater to these emergent needs of children help to constitute prevailing ideas of the child that, in iterative fashion, inform public policies. Thus, as the later chapters of the book argue, the practices of these social institutions themselves signify the end of childhood, in the sense of constituting the boundaries between understandings of normal and pathological childhoods.

We are well aware that the topic of “the end of children” offers numerous research avenues, only some of which have been addressed in this volume. Many interesting and important questions about the constitution of social relationships come to the fore through an analysis of potential changes in the ways that children and childhood are situated in contemporary societies. We are also aware that many of these research avenues can be approached from different directions. One of the exciting aspects of the symposium that accompanied this volume was the interdisciplinary debates that flourished in it. While the individual chapters in this volume are written from particular disciplinary perspectives, we hope that the potential of interdisciplinary research is apparent from the different ways our contributors have addressed their research concerns. As editors, we are certainly aware of the benefits that an interdisciplinary

focus can bestow on the research issues addressed in the chapters that follow and hope that this volume serves to encourage further collaborations in these areas.

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1

Fertility Change in North America, 1950-2000

Mira Whyman, Megan Lemmon, and Jay Teachman

There have been many changes in the structure of fertility in Canada and the United States over the past fifty years, and the current demographic profile of fertility suggests a future that is much different from that previously predicted. In our analysis of changing fertility, we focus on aggregate trends rather than subgroup differentials, although such differentials are present and are sometimes substantial. Two shifts characterize the change in fertility. The first change is the considerable decline in overall fertility experienced over the last half of the twentieth century. The second shift is a weakening of the formerly strong link between marriage and childbearing. Fifty years ago, a birth in North America almost certainly occurred within a marriage. This is not the case today, as non-marital fertility has increased substantially. As a consequence, the United States and Canada are now experiencing low birth rates, with a substantial fraction of those births occurring outside of marriage.

The United States and Canada are far from being alone in the world as nations with fertility near or below replacement level, generally a total fertility rate (TFR) of less than 2.1. Indeed, about one-half of the world's population now lives in a country with fertility that is sufficiently low to imply an absolute population decline (see Table 1.1), at least in terms of natural processes. In low-fertility nations, international immigration has therefore assumed a more important role in demographic change than in nations with high fertility. It is important to note that low fertility does not come without consequences, and we list several of the most important societal-wide implications of sub-replacement fertility. We also discuss the implications of a shift in the births outside of marriage and the growing importance of international migration for countries with low birth rates.

Table 1.1

Low-fertility countries in the world

Country	Total fertility rate 2000-5	Implied growth rate (%)	Implied years to halve	Years with sub-replacement fertility
<i>Europe</i>				
Germany	1.32	-1.5	46	30
France	1.87	-0.4	196	25
Russia	1.33	-1.6	43	35
Spain	1.27	-1.6	42	20
Italy	1.28	-1.6	42	25
Greece	1.25	-1.7	41	20
Sweden	1.64	-0.8	88	30
<i>Asia</i>				
China	1.7	-0.9	75	10
Japan	1.33	-1.5	46	45
Australia	1.75	-0.1	119	25
United States	2.04	-0.4	196	25
Canada	1.61	-0.8	88	35

Source: Morgan and Taylor (2006).

Theories of Fertility Decline

Many theories of fertility decline emphasize that with economic development children become economically disadvantageous to families (Kirk 1996). The most commonly cited theory that follows this perspective is the demographic transition argument, which is largely built on the assumption that economic changes associated with industrialization have rendered previous family functions incompatible with new economic institutions (Davis 1997). For example, the specialization of labour that occurred during the industrial revolution triggered a change in women's roles, within and outside of the home, contributing to incompatibility with traditional childbearing patterns and reducing the number of children that women bore. Opportunity cost theory is complementary to demographic transition theory. It states that as changes in women's roles enable them to acquire income by working outside the home, the opportunity costs of having children increase. In contrast, women who are secluded in the home and do not have the opportunity to be gainfully employed lose little by having children (Mason 1987). These opportunity costs increase as women's wage levels increase because they

are sacrificing a higher potential income to bear and raise children, leading to further fertility decline. Consequently, as a country develops economically and gives women the potential to acquire income outside of the home, fertility rates decrease. As a result of changing economic conditions, the direct costs of having children also increase, providing another potential deterrent to having children. One notable example is the dramatic increases in the length and cost of education that children must receive to enter the labour force successfully.

Another, more distinct, theoretical perspective emphasizes the role that is played by ideological change in the form of shifts in dominant cultural schema that interpret contemporary contexts in ways that produce low fertility (Morgan and Taylor 2006). The primary ideological shift responsible for lower fertility involves a greater emphasis on individualism, replacing an altruistic theme in which children were the centre of family life. As these individualistic norms become more common, men and women are allowed to pursue a life that they find fulfilling, which need not include children and the necessary sacrifices they entail. The diffusion of fertility trends that occur along language and cultural lines is often cited as evidence of ideological influences on fertility. Diffusion occurs when individuals within certain linguistic and cultural groups adhere to the dominant fertility norms of their group, regardless of dissimilar economic conditions and the dominant fertility norms of the country in which they reside (Kirk 1996).

Another perspective focuses on how changes in institutions, such as the family and the state, contribute to decreasing fertility. Within the family, gender equity, and the changing roles that it entails, is often cited as a reason for lower fertility, which occurs because shared family tasks and increasing incompatibility between home and work tasks generate less motivation to have children. Changes that affect the fertility rate within the family are slow to occur because the family system is strongly linked to conservative institutions such as religion (McDonald 2000). At the state level, factors such as the availability and cost of child care also influence decisions to have children (Blau and Robins 1989). In addition, national laws concerning family leave policies impact the costs and benefits of having children (Caldwell and Schindlmayr 2003).

A final perspective on declining fertility is associated with technological change, which argues that technological innovations are important to consider when explaining declining fertility. Although technologies include those operating in the workplace or in the home that have altered the costs and benefits of having children, major consideration is also given to contraceptive technologies that sever the link between sex and

reproduction. In turn, the ability to easily limit reproduction has allowed women to devote more time to intensive and extensive investments in their human capital, such as their own education or career, which further increase the cost of childbearing (Mason 1987). Furthermore, if a woman were to experience an unwanted or unplanned pregnancy, the availability and safety of abortion procedures has increased greatly since *Roe v. Wade* legalized the procedure in 1973.¹ In fact, the ratio of legal abortions to live births increased from 0.24 abortions per live birth in 1973 to 0.43 abortions per live birth in 1981 in the United States (Preston 1986). Although the legalization of abortion does not drastically affect fertility rates, it is an important component of the cultural schema surrounding fertility to consider when examining fertility in the United States, Canada, and other countries that have legalized the procedure.

Although these theoretical mechanisms are sometimes presented as having unique influences on fertility rates, it is more likely that they exert influence interdependently. Indeed, it would be difficult to understand any large-scale decline in fertility as the result of anything less than a combination of each of these theories. What might differ from case to case is the importance of the given factors and the order in which they interact and unfold.

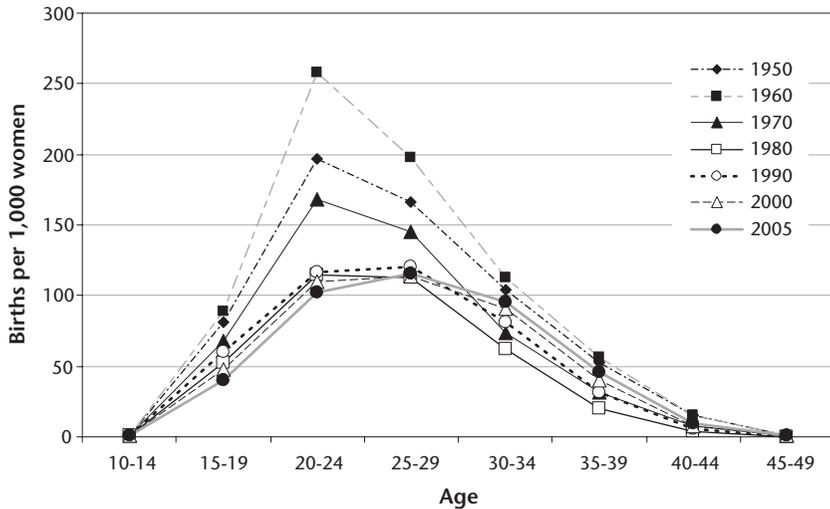
Describing the Fertility Decline in the United States

The focus of this chapter is fertility decline in North America, but Table 1.1 (p. 18) is included for international comparison.² Table 1.1 shows the TFR values for a selected set of countries with sub-replacement fertility. The TFR represents the average number of children that would be born to a woman over her lifetime if she were to experience current age-specific fertility rates throughout her lifetime. Since China is included, about one-half of the world's population now lives in a country with fertility low enough to imply population decline in the absence of international migration (Morgan and Taylor 2006). Most of Europe is experiencing a period of sub-replacement fertility, and, in some countries such as Germany, Russia, Spain, Italy, and Greece, the fertility rate is so low that it would take less than fifty years for the population to halve without in-migration (*ibid.*). It is also interesting to note that below-replacement fertility is not just a recent phenomenon. For many countries, low fertility has been in place for at least a generation.

Since the late 1970s, Canada's fertility has dropped below that of the United States. Nevertheless, the long-range trend in fertility has been broadly similar between the two countries (see Bélanger and Ouellet 2001, for a more in-depth treatment). Focusing on the United States for

Figure 1.1

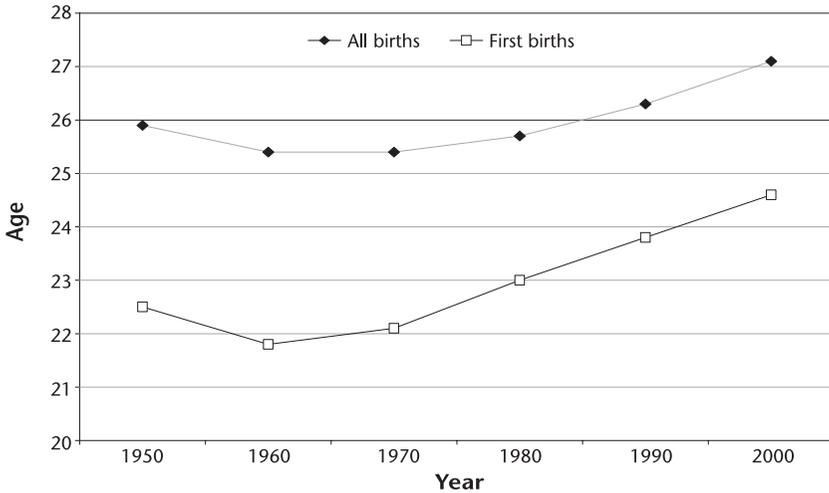
Synthetic cohort fertility rates by age for US women, 1950-2005



illustration, the timing and number of children that women chose to have greatly affected the fertility decline experienced from 1950 to 2005. We recognize that beginning with 1950 provides a somewhat artificial image of US history, given the magnitude of the baby boom that followed the Second World War. Yet the pattern still reflects the fact that fertility in the United States has generally fallen since the nation was formed. Figure 1.1, which plots fertility rates for women by age from 1950 to 2005, illustrates two important points about recent change in US fertility. First, overall fertility has fallen considerably, from a TFR of approximately 3.5 in 1960 to a TFR of approximately 2.04 in 2005. This is most clearly indicated by the sharp decline in peak fertility rates experienced by women aged twenty to twenty-nine. Second, the distinctive age gradient associated with baby boom fertility has altered. There has been a dramatic decrease in fertility among women aged twenty to twenty-nine and a more modest, but still pronounced, increase in fertility among women aged thirty to thirty-nine. Thus, women are having fewer children and having them later in life. Changes in both number and timing of having children affect the TFR. For example, 1980 stands out as a period of very low fertility with a synthetic cohort TFR of 1.8. In part, however, the 1980 fertility rate was artificially low, representing

Figure 1.2

Median age for all births and median age at first birth



a shift in the timing of births from younger to older ages as well as a decrease in the number of births. After 1980, following the substantial change in the timing of fertility, fertility rates have rebounded slightly but still remain slightly below replacement levels.

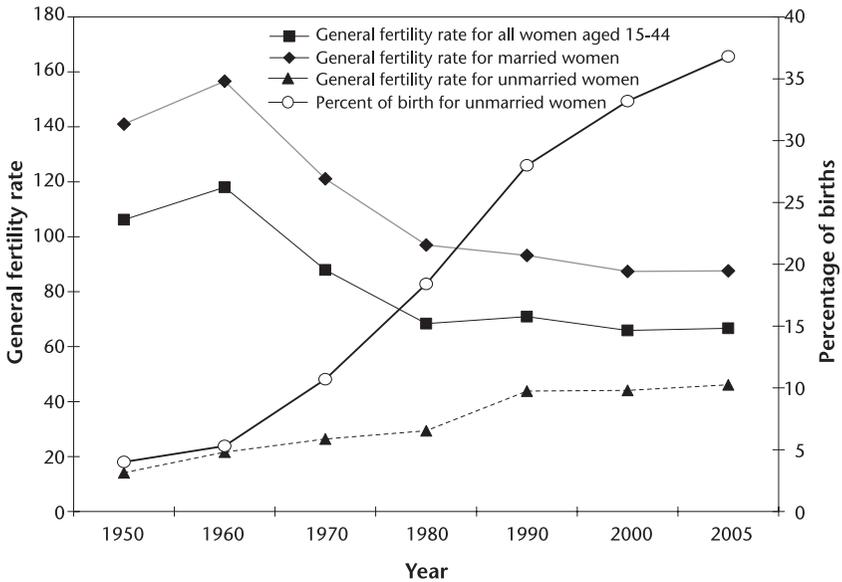
Figure 1.2 provides another view of the striking delay in fertility experienced by US women over the past half-century. Two lines are shown: the median age of women at any birth and the median age of women at first birth. Both lines have shifted sharply upward since 1960, with the changes in age at first birth being particularly noticeable. The median age at first birth is now more than two years older than it was in 1960. The median age at any birth has increased by approximately one-and-a-half years. These trends are important because throughout history delayed fertility is a strong indicator of lower fertility.

The Weakening Link between Fertility and Marriage in the United States

Fertility and marriage are no longer as strongly linked as they used to be. It used to be the case that marriage came first, followed soon after by children. Consequently, almost all children were born within marriage. Out-of-wedlock childbearing was not unknown, but it was relatively

Figure 1.3

General fertility rate and percentage of births to unmarried US women, 1950-2005

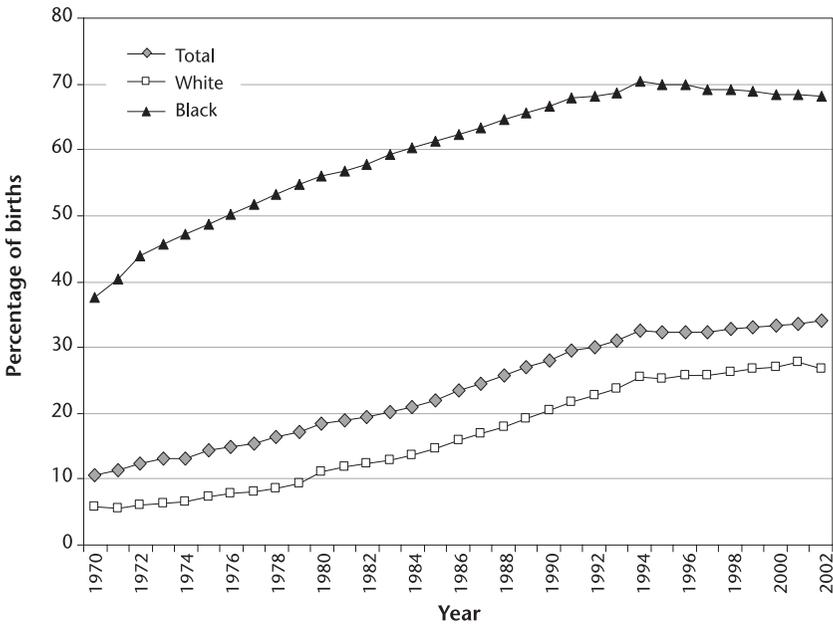


uncommon. If a single woman became pregnant, the event usually spurred a marriage.

Using the general fertility rate (GFR) rather than the TFR, Figure 1.3 demonstrates that the link between marriage and fertility is weakening. Although the two measures of fertility are closely related, we use the GFR, which measures the rate of births to women between the ages of fifteen and forty-four, because it most easily relates changes in fertility to changes in marriage. In particular, the fertility of both married and unmarried women can be easily shown using the GFR. Figure 1.3 plots the GFR for married and unmarried women from 1950 to 2005. The figure demonstrates the rise in the percentage of births occurring to unmarried women in the United States over the past fifty years. It demonstrates that the GFR for married women has fallen dramatically, whereas the GFR for unmarried women has escalated rapidly (but not enough to offset the decline in marital fertility). As a consequence, by 2005, over one-third of all births in the United States occurred to unmarried women. Clearly, marriage and childbearing have become

Figure 1.4

Percentage of births to unmarried women



decoupled over time. Of course, because cohabitation rates have increased dramatically since 1950, some of these births have occurred to women in stable cohabiting unions, but we do not have the data to take the effect of this cultural shift into account (Smock 2000).

Overall, marriage rates have declined, with this trend being particularly pronounced for the Black population in the United States. Consequently, the disassociation between marriage and childbearing has been strongest in the Black population (Bumpass and McLanahan 1989). Figure 1.4 illustrates the weakened link between marriage and fertility in the United States, especially for Black women. Almost 70 percent of the births to Black women in 2000 occurred outside of marriage compared to approximately 27 percent of births to White women.

Consequences of Changes in Fertility, and Why Mortality Is Important

We are just now beginning to understand the social impact of pronounced and widespread changes in demographic processes. There have

been many well-documented societal-wide implications of changes in fertility. However, in order to better understand the demographic impact of changing fertility, we must also consider the effect of changes in mortality. Historically, mortality and fertility have both declined, albeit at different rates and starting at different points in time. A shift in the way mortality declines, however, has important implications for the social consequences of demographic change. In the past, mortality generally declined more rapidly at the youngest ages and has resisted change at the oldest ages. Thus, until recently, increases in life expectancy have largely resulted from declines in infant mortality. This pattern has changed over recent decades, starting in 1950 when declines in mortality slowly shifted from younger to older ages. Since then, mortality has continued to decline at all ages, but it is now declining most rapidly at older ages. In the United States, during the decade from 1950 to 1960, about 40 percent of the decline in mortality occurred at older ages. During the decade from 1990 to 2000, this figure was 80 percent, indicating the growing importance of mortality decline at older ages (US Census Bureau 2008).

Lower fertility, in conjunction with the shift in the nature of mortality decline, has led to populations that are rapidly aging. Declining and low fertility ages a population because fewer people are born each year, decreasing the number of young persons in a population. Declining mortality at older ages increases the number of older persons in a population, further enhancing aging. What is occurring in Canada is instructive in this instance. Since 1950, the median age of Canadians has risen from 27.2 to 38.8 years, and the percentage of persons aged sixty-five and older has increased from 7.7 to 13.2 (Foot 2008). By mid-century, these percentages are expected to increase to 46.8 and 26.4 respectively.

In turn, an aging population, particularly in the policy context of entitlement programs indexed by age, places a considerable burden on younger cohorts. The provision of health and social benefits to a growing elderly population can severely tax the ability of a nation to invest in required infrastructure needed for subsequent growth. In Canada, for the year 2001-2, 43 percent of the \$95 billion spent on health care went to the 13.2 percent of Canadians aged sixty-five and older (Health Canada 2002). As the proportion of Canadians who are older than sixty-five years of age continues to grow, health expenditures will also grow, stressing other programs that will compete for limited resources. A similar scenario appears with respect to old age pension plans, which are on the point of being stressed by the bulge of retiring baby boomers (Foot 2008).

Thus, declining fertility and mortality are likely to redefine the implicit bargain that has long existed between generations. Parents are increasingly likely to live most of their adult years without childrearing responsibilities and are more likely to need their accumulated resources to live a relatively long period of time following retirement (King 1999; Schrier 2010). Consequently, younger cohorts of men and women will be forced to pay higher levels of tax to support an aging population, reducing their ability to invest in their own future (Grant et al. 2004).

An aging population also means that labour shortages are possible, if not inevitable. When populations fail to reproduce themselves, yet still need a viable work force to support an elderly population, the pressure and need for immigration increases. Already, Europe, the United States, and Canada have attracted vast numbers of immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In part, the flow of immigration is spurred by poor living conditions and the lack of opportunities in countries of origin. At the same time, declining populations in more developed countries often count on a cheap source of unskilled labour drawn from these migration streams. Many European nations such as France and Germany have long relied on immigrants to fill needs in their labour force (Martin and Zurcher 2008). As a result, there is likely to be continued tension between pro- and anti-immigration groups in many nations with declining populations. The situation in France has been particularly illustrative of this issue, as clashes between immigrants and native inhabitants spiked as the French economy stagnated. In part, this tension led to the rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen's party, the Front National, in the 2002 presidential election. Running on a platform advocating strict limits on immigration, Le Pen's campaign made it to the second round of the presidential election, displacing the socialist party, which was much more progressive and better established.

Another implication of declining fertility and mortality is the fact that the family has become a less central component of everyday life. In part, this situation is a function of the declining role played by children in adults' lives. As noted earlier, nearly two-thirds of an adult's lifespan in North America is spent without childrearing responsibilities (Morgan and Taylor 2006). Without the demands and structure that having children entails, adults are freer to pursue their own interests. In addition, without the added constraints of having to care for children, most nations with declining populations have also experienced rapid rises in rates of divorce and cohabitation (Preston 1986; Kiernan 2000). In the United States, nearly one out of every two marriages will end in divorce, and more than half of all marriages will be preceded by a period

of cohabitation, with an even higher fraction of second marriages preceded by cohabitation (Smock 2000). On the global stage, the United States has the highest divorce rate among more developed countries, although Canada and many countries in Europe have higher cohabitation rates (Furstenberg 1994; Kiernan 2000; Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004).

Another consequence of these shifts in fertility and mortality is that children are increasingly likely to experience some form of disruption in their family life. Despite declines in the risk of becoming an orphan, greater numbers of children witness a parental divorce, parental marriage, and non-marital cohabitation. Greater instability in the adult life course has meant that children are more likely to have multiple parental figures throughout their childhood. And because poverty is closely linked to marital status, particularly statuses other than marriage, children are increasingly likely to experience economic instability (Iceland 2003; Amato and Maynard 2007). Such instability in childhood living arrangements, along with poverty, are in turn linked to poorer socio-economic outcomes for children such as dropping out of school, engaging in sex at an earlier age, and having children out of wedlock (Furstenberg 1994; Amato and Maynard 2007).

Hence, a very delicate relationship exists between fertility and mortality, and once the balance has been disturbed the resulting demographic changes inevitably spur changes in social relationships. At the most basic level, these changes are the result of norms and roles linked to our most basic demographic characteristics such as age, sex, race, and marital status. Several authors have noted that demographic shifts in sex ratios affect social functioning and can affect patterns of marriage and divorce (Guttentag and Secord 1983; Blau and Schwartz 1984). Shifts in age structure have also been linked to change in social relationships, largely because organizations and individuals interact based on age (Ryder 1965; Gordon and Longino 2000). For example, shifts in age structure affect the number of workers available to an economy or the number of students heading to college. And, as noted earlier, the growth of the elderly population substantially impacts costs for health care and social insurance programs.

Of course, social institutions are not immutable, and policy shifts can alter the linkages between population structure and social organizations. As David Foot (2008) notes, various proposals have been suggested to keep workers in the workforce longer in Canada. In the United States, the aging of the baby boom cohorts has led to many proposed changes in social security. For example, in his 2005 State of the Union

address, President George W. Bush proposed a partial privatization of social security as one means of addressing the looming shortfall in social security revenues associated with the impending retirement of baby boomers. The same projected shortfall has led to recent increases in the age at which full retirement benefits can be received (from age sixty-five to age sixty-seven). Projected deficits associated with Medicare are one of the stated reasons for President Obama's call for health care reform.

Conclusion

Fertility rates have drastically changed in North America over the last half-century, decreasing almost to the point of causing overall natural population decline. The United States and Canada are not alone in experiencing this phenomenon. Countries such as Germany, France, Spain, Russia, Italy, Greece, and Australia would all be experiencing rapid population declines due to sub-replacement fertility rates without immigration. In an attempt to explain these changes, many competing theories exist, but they are complementary at best because no one theory is able to entirely account for declining fertility. In both Canada and the United States, as well as in many European countries, the declining fertility rate can be largely attributed to changes in the timing and number of children that women are choosing to have. It is obvious that such drastic changes in fertility and related changes in mortality unavoidably spur additional demographic changes. Across North America, the population must adapt to accommodate an aging population, placing considerable strain on younger cohorts. Such changes will inevitably have a widespread effect, which will influence many aspects of daily life ranging from marital behaviours to immigration policies.

Notes

- 1 *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all data presented in this chapter are taken from various issues of the National Vital Statistics reports available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/nvsr.htm>.

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