PhD in Life Course Research

Socio-demographic curriculum | Academic year 2026–2027

Contemporary Fertility across Wealthy Countries

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Course objectives

This course introduces macro-level theories of fertility change, micro-level theories of fertility behaviour, and the interactions between individual decisions and broader social contexts. Fertility and childlessness are examined as related but distinct phenomena. The theories are situated within a life course framework that recognises how institutional contexts reflect economic, social, cultural and historical conditions. The course also examines fertility responses to technological change, economic development and rising uncertainty. By the end of the course, students should be able to explain major trends and patterns in fertility and childlessness, critically assess competing explanations, and apply theoretical perspectives to interpret differences in fertility and their drivers.

Course programme

Day 1 Monday 14 December 10:00–13:00
Contemporary Fertility: Trends and Explanations

Open seminar Monday 14 December 14:00–16:00
Gianpiero Dalla Zuanna will present "**Pochi bambini. Cinquant'anni di bassissima fecondità**", co-authored with Asher Colombo. The seminar is open to all and will take place in Room 205.

Day 2 Tuesday 15 December 10:00–13:00
Policies and Fertility
The lecture includes "**The gender equality debate**". Students will discuss the question: "Should governments in Europe be more aggressive in pushing for gender equality to raise fertility?"

Day 3 Wednesday 16 December 14:30–17:30
New topics in contemporary fertility
- Giammarco Alderotti (University of Florence): Families with a Migrant Background and Socio-Demographic Inequalities
- Marco Cozzani (University of Florence): Research on assisted reproduction

Day 4 Thursday 17 December 14:00–17:00
Research on childlessness, in collaboration with Chiara Comolli (University of Bologna)
The lecture includes "**The uncertainty debate**". Students will discuss the question: "To what extent has uncertainty contributed to declining fertility over recent decades? What other factors should be considered?"

Suggested readings

Day 1 readings on trends and explanations

Alderotti, Giammarco, Daniele Vignoli, Michela Baccini, Anna Matysiak (2021). Employment Instability and Fertility in Europe: A Meta-Analysis. Demography, 58(3): 871-900.

Esping-Andersen, G., Billari, F. 2015, Re-theorizing Family Demographics. Population and Development Review 41(1): 1–31

Goldscheider, F., Bernhardt, E. Lappegard, T. (2015). The Gender Revolution: A Framework for Understanding Changing Family and Demographic Behavior. Population and Development Review, 41(2), 207–239

Goldstein J.R., Sobotka T., Jasilioniene A. 2009. The end of lowest-low fertility? Population and Development Review 35(4): 663-699.

Matysiak, Anna, Daniele Vignoli (2024). Family Life Courses, Uncertain Futures, and the Changing World of Work: State-of-the-art and Prospects. European Journal of Population, 40.

Vignoli, Daniele, Raffaele Guetto, Giacomo Bazzani, Elena Pirani, Alessandra Minello (2020). A Reflection on Economic Uncertainty and Fertility in Europe: The Narrative Framework. Genus, 76, 28.

Day 2 readings on policies and fertility

Alderotti, Giammarco, Raffaele Guetto, Paolo Barbieri, Stefani Scherer, Daniele Vignoli (2024). Unstable employment careers and (quasi-)completed fertility: evidence from the labour market deregulation in Italy. European Sociological Review.

Gauthier, A. H. (2007). The impact of family policies on fertility in industrialized countries: a review of the literature. Population Research and Policy Review, 26, 323-346.

Gauthier, A. H. (2008). Some theoretical and methodological comments on the impact of policies on fertility. Vienna Yearbook of Population Research, 6, 25-28.

Guetto, Raffaele, Giammarco Alderotti, Daniele Vignoli (in press). Can Family Policies Enhance Fertility? An Ex-Ante Evaluation through Factorial Survey Experiments. Demography.

Wesolowski, K. and Ferrarini, T. (2018) 'Family policies and fertility: Examining the link between family policy institutions and fertility rates in 33 countries 1995-2011', International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, 38(11/12), 1057–1070.

Hoem, J. M. (2008). Overview Chapter 8: The impact of public policies on European fertility. Demographic Research, 19, 249-260.

Day 2 debate on gender equality

Demographic Research debate: "Should governments in Europe be more aggressive in pushing for gender equality to raise fertility?" https://www.demographic-research.org/articles/special/9

- Laurent Toulemon: The first YES
- Dimiter Philipov: The first NO
- Livia Sz. Oláh: The second YES
- Gerda Neyer: The second NO

Day 4 readings on childlessness

Kreyenfeld, M., & Konietzka, D. (2017). Childlessness in Europe: Contexts, causes, and consequences (p. 367). Springer Nature.

Tanturri, L. et al. (2015) State of the art report: Childlessness in Europe. Families and Societies Working Paper n. 32.

Tocchioni, V., Rybińska, A., Mynarska, M., Matysiak, A., & Vignoli, D. (2022). Life-course trajectories of childless women: Country-specific or universal? European Journal of Population, 38(5), 1315-1332.

Brini, E. (2020). Childlessness and low fertility in context: evidence from a multilevel analysis on 20 European countries. Genus, 76(1), 1-38.

Day 4 debate on uncertainty

Vignoli, D. et al. 2020. A Reflection on Economic Uncertainty and Fertility in Europe: The Narrative Framework. Genus, 76, 28.

Comolli, C. L. (2023). Social Climate, Uncertainty and Fertility Intentions: from the Great Recession to the Covid-19 Crisis. European Journal of Population, 39(1).

Bastianelli, E. (2024). Climate change worries and fertility intentions: Insights from three EU countries. Journal of Marriage and Family, 1–17.

Perelli-Harris, B., Gerber, T., & Hilevych, Y. (2024). Uncertainty and Fertility in Ukraine on the Eve of Russia's Full-Scale Invasion: The Impact of Armed Conflict and Economic Crisis. European Journal of Population, 40(1), 28.

Further reading on contemporary fertility research

Albertini, M., & Brini, E. (2021). I've changed my mind. The intentions to be childless, their stability and realisation. European Societies, 23(1), 119-160.

Barbieri, Paolo, R. Bozzon, S. Scherer with R. Grotti and M. Lugo (2015) The Rise of a Latin Model? Family and Fertility Consequences of Employment Instability in Italy and Spain, European Societies, 17(4), 423-446.

Barbieri, Paolo; Bozzon, Rossella (2016) Welfare, labour market deregulation and households' poverty risks: An analysis of the risk of entering poverty at childbirth in different European welfare clusters, Journal of European Social Policy, 26(2).

Bernardi, L., Huinink, J., Settersten R.A. (2019). The life course cube. A tool for studying lives. Advances in Life Course Research, 41.

Chudnovskaya, M. (2019). Trends in childlessness among highly educated men in Sweden. European Journal of Population, 35(5), 939-958.

De Graaf, N. D., & Wiertz, D. (2019). Societal Problems as Public Bads. Routledge. Chapter 2. https://www.routledge.com/Societal-Problems-as-Public-Bads-1st-Edition/de-Graaf-Wiertz/p/book/9781138480216

Guetto, R., Tocchioni, V., Vignoli, D. (2023b). The social impact of labour market flexibilization and its fertility consequences in Italy. Societal Impacts, 1(1-2).

Guetto, Raffaele, Maria Francesca Morabito, Matthias Vollbracht, Daniele Vignoli (2023). Fertility and Media Narratives of the Economy: Evidence from the Italian News Coverage. Demography, 60(2): 607-630.

Kalter, F., Kronenberg, C. (2014). Between Mechanism Talk and Mechanism Cult: New Emphases in Explanatory Sociology and Empirical Research. Koelner Zeitschrift fuer Soziologie und Sozialspychologie. 66:91–115.

Kohler H.-P., Billari F.C., Ortega J.A. 2002. The emergence of lowest-low fertility in Europe during the 1990s. Population and Development Review 28: 641-680.

Kreyenfeld, M. (2021). Causal Modelling in Fertility Research: A Review of the Literature and an Application to a Parental Leave Policy Reform. Comparative Population Studies, Vol. 46 (2021): 269-302

Matysiak, Anna, Tomas Sobotka, Daniele Vignoli (2021). The Great Recession and Fertility in Europe: A Sub-national Analysis. European Journal of Population 37(1): 29-64.

Raab, Marcel, and Emanuela Struffolino. "The heterogeneity of partnership trajectories to childlessness in Germany." European Journal of Population 36, no. 1 (2020): 53-70.

Rybińska, A. (2021). Trends in intentions to remain childless in the United States. Population Research and Policy Review, 40(4), 661-672.

Stegen, H., Switsers, L., & De Donder, L. (2021). Life stories of voluntarily childless older people: a retrospective view on their reasons and experiences. Journal of Family Issues, 42(7), 1536-1558.

Van Winkle, Zachary (2020) Family policies and family life course complexity across 20th-century Europe. Journal of European Social Policy, 30(3), 320–338.

Vignoli, Daniele, Letizia Mencarini, Giammarco Alderotti (2020). Is the Effect of Job Uncertainty on Fertility Intentions Channeled by Subjective Well-Being? Advances in Life Course Research, 46, 100343.

Vignoli, Daniele, Alessandra Minello, Giacomo Bazzani, Camilla Matera, Chiara Rapallini (2022). Narratives of the Future Affect Fertility: Evidence from a Laboratory Experiment. European Journal of Population, 38: 93-124.