

## **AGE NORMS OF CHILDBEARING – EARLY, IDEAL AND LATE CHILDBEARING IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES –**

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the questions related to the timing of life events – particularly certain phases of becoming adults – in the third wave of European Social Survey. It focuses on the first cohabitation and marriage as well as the timing and the ideal age of becoming parents. Nowadays the timing of the first childbearing has shifted to older ages all over Europe; therefore, we consider it important to examine whether the attitudes toward the ideal age of childbearing have adjusted to this trend. First of all we analyze attitude-type questions, we focus on when people think it is ideal, too late or too early to become a mother or a father. We have examined the ideal time of childbearing not only from age aspect but also regarding when it would be ideal compared to other life events of becoming adults (cohabitation, marriage) in each of the countries. We have found out whether in Europe the first childbearing is actually considered part of the process of becoming adults or not. We have paid special attention to the Hungarian data: we have examined how the educational level, the age groups, the type of residence, the religion and the gender variables influence the attitudes towards age norms of childbearing in Hungary.

**Keywords:** childbearing, age norms, becoming adult

### **INTRODUCTION**

From among the significant life events this study analyzes the process of reaching adulthood, in particular the issue of becoming parents, i.e. the first childbearing.

In developed societies becoming adults takes up longer and longer periods in the lives of the young. According to scientific literature the following events may be considered the milestones of the process: graduation from school, the first employment for longer than three months, moving away from home, establishing the first permanent relationship and bearing the first child. First, we will demonstrate in what order and at what age the certain events of becoming adults – cohabitation without marriage, marriage, and childbearing – happen in the 23 European countries forming the subject of our examination. After that, on the one hand we examine to what extent

the event of becoming parents is regarded as a precondition to the process of becoming adults, and on the other, what variety of age norms related to first childbearing show in the 23 countries. We demonstrate what ages are thought to be ideal, too early, or too late for bearing the first child by the societies of the different countries. The results obtained for Hungary will be further analyzed according to educational level, region of residence, age group, religion and gender. In each section of the analysis we treat the issues of becoming a father or a mother separately.

For the analysis some variables of the rotating module of *Timing of life; the life course; timing of key life events, attitudes to ideal age, youngest age and oldest age of life events, planning for retirement* (European Social Survey 2006, Socio-demographic profile) were used in the face of the ordinary sociological underlying factors. The authors hereby wish to express their thanks to László Füstös (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Sociology) for his assistance in the analysis.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Apart from biological age we can also talk about chronological, psychological, social and so-called lived age. In social sciences it is not enough to study ages as they are, but a multidimensional approach is necessary: social-economic status, gender, age group, region of residence, religion, culture, history, etc. of the individuals and groups must also be considered. Age can only be interpreted relatively; chronological age alone is an insufficient indicator for this purpose as we must associate social meaning to it (Binstock and Shanas 1976).

Individuals are aware of age norms regarding their own timing patterns. Timing of life events (social timetable) and how age norms influence individual behavior and self-reflection play important roles in the analysis of life events. Individuals have mental maps in their minds about life events forecasting in which period each life event is to be realized. This does not mean that transitions happen when people think they have reached the ideal age or the certain event is due, nevertheless, they are able to reflect easily if it happened too early, too late, or at the right time. Members of society internalize the social clock as well as the age norms and behave accordingly (Binstock and Shanas 1976).

In scientific literature it is a subject of heated debate whether the answers given to the question “When is it ideal to have a child?” often asked in surveys can be considered the accepted age norms in society. Most sociologists believe that in order to regard a rule or expectation to be a norm, three criteria have to be fulfilled. Firstly, it has to prescribe certain behavior (or on the contrary, prohibit it). Secondly, society needs to share consensus about the rule in question. Finally, the third criterion is that the rule or expectation has to be of constraint character, i.e. its violation must be punished by some sanction (Settersten 2003). It is exactly sanctions that Marini (1984) misses in connection with age norms. Does it entail any sanctions if one has a baby at an age not considered ideal by most people? Sanctions may be informal as well, such as mocking, disdain and gossip. In Heckhausen’s (1999) argumentation it is unnecessary to propose sanctions connected to age norms since they are norms that have already been internalized by the majority of people. In this topic research by

Neugarten, Moore and Lowe (1965) carried out in the 1950s in Kansas City can be regarded as a milestone, which proves the existence of some age norms organizing people's lives. New research results are in line with those found by Neugarten and colleagues with the difference that transitions do not just occur later, but they also take up a longer period of life.

The social norms of life events not only determine which period each event should occur in, but influence the order of events as well. The phenomenon of life coaching called standardized life course by M. Kohli (1993) was established earlier during the development of European societies. The key idea was that life is a sequence of periods, and the phases are sharply separated by dividing lines. The younger generations, however, go through much more flexible phases. Both founding a family and choosing a career have shifted in time and are now modifiable. While self-reliance had been viewed as an outstanding value and signified the end of a period in life, nowadays the dividing lines may become blurred; run parallel or the phases might restart (Somlai 1999, 2000).

In Hungary the objective and subjective definition of becoming parents was studied by Olga Tóth (1993). Her research also confirmed that the subjective judging of timing is not determined by actual (biological) age only, but rather by a cultural value pattern prescribing to the members of society that if some time elapses after graduation from school (of any level) and getting married, the young couple is "supposed to" have children. Therefore, in case people had left school 'a long time ago' or have been married for a 'long time' and own a flat, they are likely to feel their childbearing is too late irrespective of their actual age.

Theories discussing the structure of life events emphasize that they are organized by two social processes: institutionalization and individualism (Kohli 1993), and that they have opposite effects. The institutionalization of life events is due to some macro factors influencing the timing of life events. Such important macro factors are e.g. the state and the market, especially the labor and the estate markets. Individualization is due to the fact that norms and expectations coming from the family or the religious communities are less and less determinant, while the value of individual decisions is appreciated. Resulting from all this the once standard life patterns have become loose. The two processes mentioned above are contradictory as the institutionalization of life courses generates their standardization, hence decreasing the possibility of individuals to shape their own courses of life. However, individualization has an adverse effect: it increases the variety of individual life courses<sup>1</sup>. Owing to the fact that the increasing European welfare overshadows financial problems, the individuals of the different societies have much bigger freedom to define their own needs. Although institutional frameworks such as household, the world of school and work remained, these institutions themselves are culturally determined (Billari 2001).

The decrease in the number of marriages, the spread of partnerships, the boom of births out of wedlock and the shift of childbearing to older ages are by no means new and unique phenomena in international comparison. The changes that were defined with the term 'second demographic transition' by Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa started

1 Beck (2003) believes that young people not following the outdated life patterns take a risk. The emergence of the risk society goes along and intertwines with the process of individualization.

much earlier in the majority of West European countries. The term was meant to refer to the industrialized societies entering a new phase of demographic development (van de Kaa and Lesthaeghe 1986). The process unfolding from the 1970s is characterized by the further decreasing of fertility in most countries: it permanently and significantly remains below the simple reproduction level. At the same time life expectancy continues to rise, hence the aging of the population together with a fall in its number is expected. Other characteristics of the transition are for instance the late reaching of adulthood, the rise in the number of divorces, the drop in the number of marriages, the significant increase in the number of extra-marital cohabitation and children from such relationships, the increase in the number of single person and single parent households, and the spread of deliberate childlessness.

Among specialists another subject of debate is whether the social-economic and cultural processes going on in Europe converge or diverge. According to Thornton the demographic transition and the long term social-economic development is related to the concept of convergence (Thornton 2001). On the other hand, Billari (2001) sees a unique explanation behind these socio-demographic changes and says that we need to build up theoretical structures to be able to make sense of the current multi-colour situation and cultural preferences. Today national figures have a bigger effect on the evolution of life events than at the beginning of the 1960s and 1970s, i.e. he believes that divergence among countries and heterogeneity within countries will continue to increase. Billari predicts heterogeneity for example in the process of reaching adulthood, which he supports by demonstrating and proving that on a macro level there is divergence in this process among countries and parts of Europe (Billari 2001). He quotes the example of the northern countries of Europe, where (especially in the Scandinavian states) young people leave their parents' house and become adults quite early. In southern Europe (mainly in Spain and Italy) the process of reaching adulthood is typically characterized by the young leaving the family home late. For this phenomenon Billari uses the expression 'latest late' in his studies (Billari 2002).

The findings of a survey carried out in the USA (Furstenberg 2003) show that the process of late reaching of adulthood involves economic independence, abandonment of the parent's house, graduation from school and taking up a full-time job. Marriage and childbearing are not necessarily parts of the process<sup>2</sup>. The study demonstrated that on the basis of the criteria listed above in the '60s 30% of 20-year-old women and 70% of 25-year-old women became adults, while in 2000 only 6% of 20-year-old women and 25% of 25-year-old women did so. Furstenberg's study also focused on the ideal time of abandoning the parents' house. Results showed that 80% of interviewees irrespective of their generation thought that the process of reaching adulthood must finish until about the age of 25. Moreover, 40% of elderly people and those with lower income thought that not only should young people become financially independent, leave home, finish school and find a full-time job until the age of 25, but they should also become parents. Furstenberg also demonstrated that they regard reaching adulthood before the age of 20 to be too early, since they feel young people under 20

2 Marriage and childbearing are considered important i.e. part of the process of becoming adults rather by the older generation and people with lower income.

and at the beginning of their careers were not yet able to provide sufficient financial background for founding and supporting a family.

One of the consequences of reaching adulthood late, specifically marrying late is late childbearing and the accompanying decrease of fertility. The 'postponing' attitude related to childbearing has a key role in the shortening of the fertility period (Billari 2005). One consequence of the shortened period is that the later people have children, the higher the probability they will only have a lower number of them. The age of becoming a mother does not only shift towards older age, but it becomes concentrated too – standard deviation decreases – i.e. the majority of women bear children within a short life period. This process is called rectangularization by Kohler and Billari and Ortega (2002).

Several different factors underlie the timing of childbearing by couples (or even singles). Factors responsible for the trend of late childbearing can be mainly the following: 1) demographic factors (postponed marriage, more and more divorces, lower number of births); 2) medical factors (more reliable contraception, better prenatal care, pregnancy of the middle-aged is more widely accepted); 3) social, political factors (changing norms, women's movements, legal regulations); 4) structural factors (higher educational and wage level, time of first employment is shifted).

From biological point of view there is an optimal age for childbearing, which carries the lowest health risk both for mother and child. Considering the biological characteristics of mothers this period falls between the ages of 20–34. Childbearing when mothers are either too young or too old increases health risks. Due to the continuous development of medical sciences these biological boundaries keep extending, that is why we can see more and more young mothers over 40 and young fathers at about 60. Between 1980 and 2004 in the 25 EU countries the average age of women at their first childbearing went up by 3 years (from 24.9 to 28), while in the meantime 10 new members decreased this value, although, in their case it also went up by 2 years (from 23 years to 25.1) (Population Statistics 2006).

The shifting of first childbearing to later ages is also a tendency in Hungary. The fertility of women between 20 and 24 dropped by two thirds during the past two decades, at the same time the phase of fertility has moved to the period between 25 and 30 years of age, and shows a slow increase between ages 30–39 (Spéder and Kapitány 2006). In 1970 in Hungary the average age of women at first birth was 22.6, it was 25 in 2000, and went up to 27.5 in 2007 (*Demográfiai évkönyv* 2008). Nowadays a woman with university degree is expected to have her first baby around the age of 30 (Spéder and Kapitány 2006). Although in Hungary this average age for first childbearing is not to be considered outstanding, the rate of increase is significant compared to other countries (Population Statistics 2006).

### THE SEQUENCE OF LIFE EVENTS

In this chapter we examine in what order and in what time periods the events of reaching adulthood follow each other in the European countries under the scope of our study. The following milestones of the course of life are investigated: cohabitation without marriage, marriage, and first childbearing.

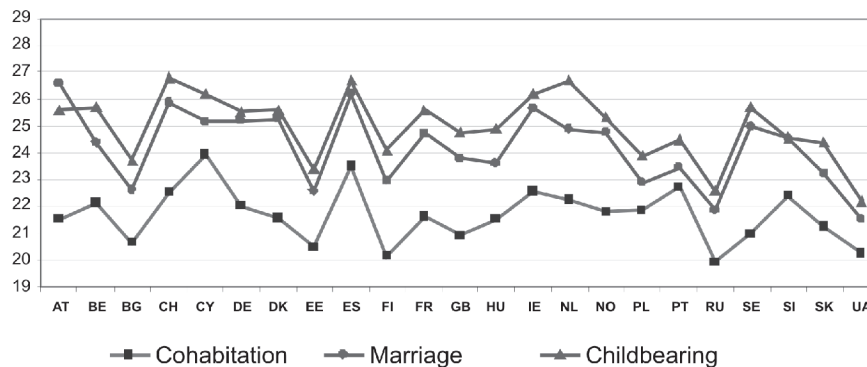


Figure 1 Age Norms of Major Life Events for Women

Figure 1 clearly shows that countries set the age norm of cohabitation with the partner at a slightly younger age (21.7 years on average) than that of marriage (24.2 years) or childbearing (25 years on average). The two latter events are much closer to each other than the ideal age of cohabitation. First childbearing is thought to be due right after marriage in Slovenia, but only after about half a year in Denmark, Germany, Spain, Ireland and Norway. Surprisingly the order of life events has turned round in Austria: the ideal age of becoming a mother was set a year earlier than that of marriage.

The timing of the abandonment of the parents' house is similar to the characteristics of the second demographic transition. Billari's 'latest late' phenomenon (Billari 2002) is observable in case of Spain and Portugal (and Cyprus), who set cohabitation i.e. the abandonment of the parents' house at the latest age (22.7–24). Among the Eastern countries where the young leave home the earliest the Scandinavian states, Great Britain and Austria have squeezed in.

Ages regarded as ideal for marriage (excluding a few exceptions) well reflect the dividing line between East and West that can be observed in case of actual marriages as well (Kamarás 2005) – namely in Eastern post-socialist countries people time their first marriages earlier. Among post-socialist countries Hungary ranks among the latest to marry, concerning both the age thought ideal for marriage (only people in Slovenia said older) and the actual ages of marriages as well.

The time range of the three events is the narrowest in Portugal (1.7 years), i.e. cohabitation, marriage and childbearing almost coincide. Portugal is followed by the middle-east European countries (1.9–3.3 years), Holland (4.4 years) and Sweden (4.7

years). It is Austria that closes the list, where 5 years might as well elapse between moving together and having children.

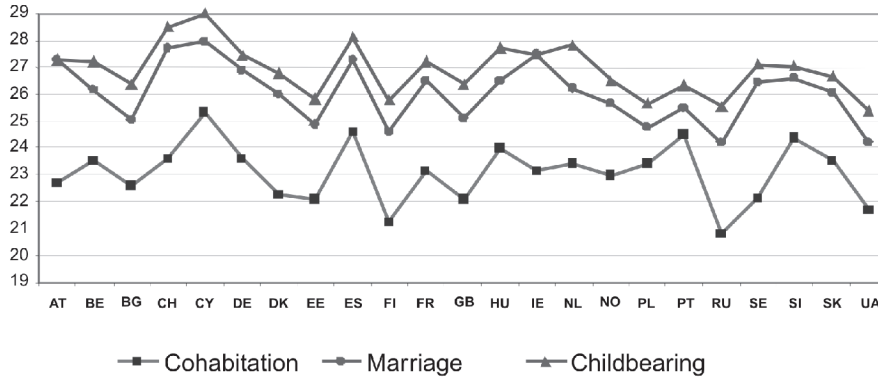


Figure 2. Age Norms of Major Life Events for Men

The results gained for men are similar to those for women. Interviewees reckon that in men's lives cohabitation should come first, then marriage soon after (Portugal: after 1 year, Hungary: 2.5 years, Austria: 4.5 years), and finally childbearing. In Austria and Ireland marriage and childbearing almost coincide, while the nation indicating the longest time (1.6 years) that should pass between the two events are the Dutch. People believe marriage is due at the same time as childbearing, i.e. partnerships should turn into marriage as soon as the couple decides to have a child (Spéder and Kapitány 2008).

In men's lives the abandonment of the parents' house – like in case of women – carries the characteristics of the second demographic transition. Moreover, the time range is again the narrowest in Portugal (1.85 years), but the widest in Sweden (5 years) and Switzerland, preceding Austria. Interestingly for fathers Russia indicated a rather long time period (4.7 years).

### IS CHILDBEARING NECESSARY FOR THE TRANSITION TO ADULthood?

In the following section we examine to what extent people in European countries regard having an own child as an important factor of counting someone to be an adult.

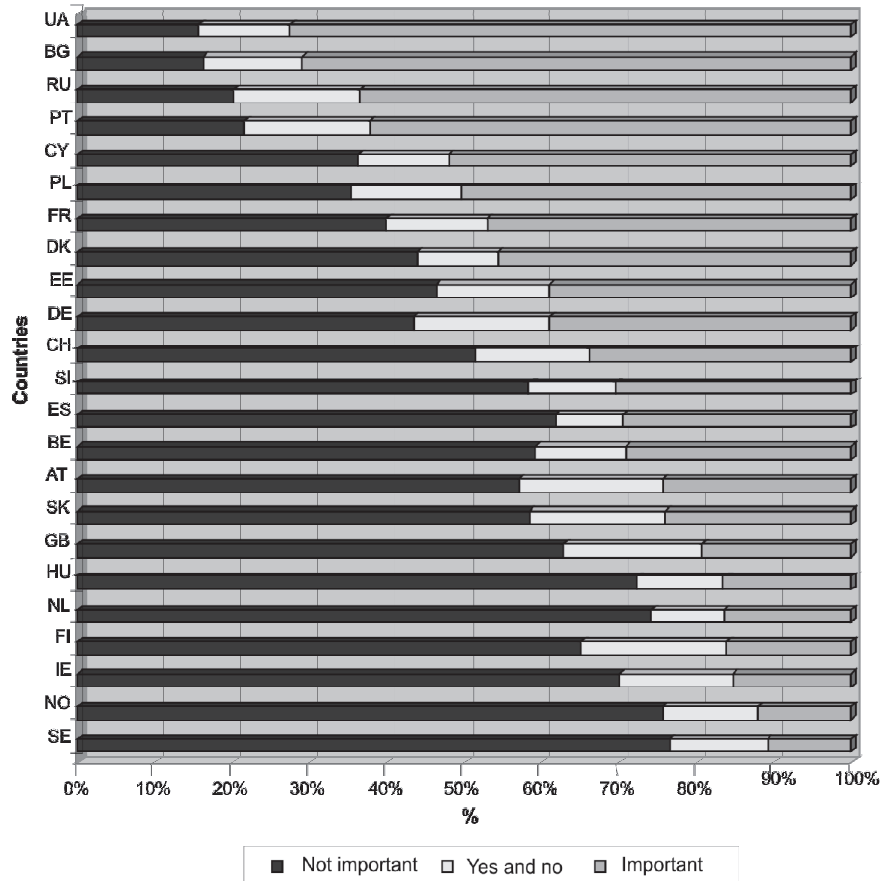


Figure 3. How Important is It When regarding People as Adults Whether They have an Own Child or Not?

In Sweden, Norway, Holland and Hungary more than 70% of interviewees reckon that being a parent is not a crucial aspect to consider someone to be an adult. On the contrary, in Ukraine and Bulgaria it is regarded essential from the point of view of becoming adults by over 70% of people. We can see that in post-socialist countries – except for Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia – becoming a parent is considered to have an important role in reaching adulthood.



## WHAT AGE IS IDEAL FOR BEARING CHILDREN?

### Ideal Age for Becoming a Mother. International Relations

The questionnaire asked interviewees to determine the ideal age for having a child. As explained in the chapter about the theoretical background when timing life events it is not only biological age that matters, so supposedly interviewees were also influenced by other conditions during answering. Before looking at the data, let us say a few words about the actual average age of childbearing for women.

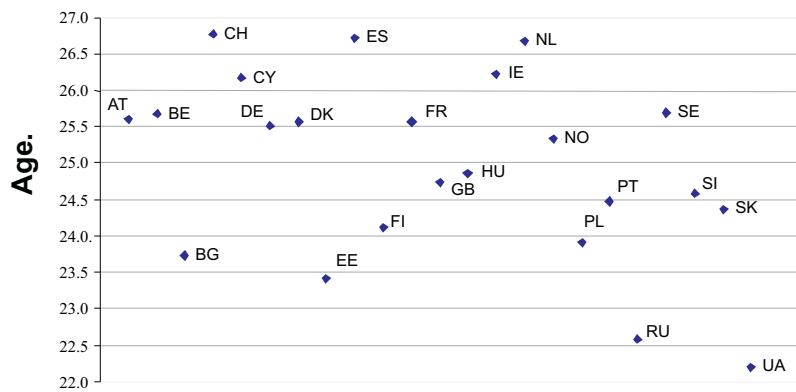
*Table 1. Average Age of Women at First Childbearing in Some Countries of Europe (2004)*

Highest Average Ages	Years	Lowest Average Ages	Years
United Kingdom	29.7	Bulgaria	24.4
Switzerland	29.3	Romania	24.5
Spain	29.2*	Baltic States	24.7–24.8
Hungary: 26.5 years			

Source: Population Statistics 2006.

\* 2003 data

In 2004 the average of the 15 EU countries was 28.9 years, while that of the 25 EU countries was 28.3 (Population Statistics 2006): obviously the mainly post-socialist countries decreased the average. Actual data are, however, different from the ages people consider ideal for childbearing. International relations show a great variety of opinion country by country regarding age norms of the ideal ages of becoming mothers.



*Figure 4. Ideal Ages of Childbearing for Women by Country*

*Figure 4* demonstrates that in East European countries – where actual average ages are lower – the ideal age of childbearing was set lower than by West European countries. Ukraine, Russia, Estonia, Bulgaria and Poland reckon the ideal age to be

below 24, while Switzerland, Spain, Holland, Cyprus and Ireland date it over 26. The role of Great Britain has to be highlighted: here women bear their first children the latest in Europe (at the age of 29.7<sup>3</sup>), although the ideal age in their opinion is even lower than that in Hungary, namely 24.7 years. This way, together with Finland, they ended up in the post-socialist block.

Among post-socialist countries the oldest ideal age of childbearing was set by Hungarians (24.9 years), which equals the average of the 23 countries involved in the study. At the time of the survey in 2006 Hungarian women had children at the age of 27.3 on average (*Demográfiai évkönyv 2008*), meaning that the difference between the ideal and the actual age in our country is 2.4 years.

All in all we can say that European societies set the ideal age of first childbearing for women 3.4 years earlier (to the age of 24.9) than in reality<sup>4</sup>. In East European countries (and in Austria) there is no big difference between reality and norms (between 0.7–1.8 years); however, the difference is significant in West European countries where women have children rather late: in Finland it is 3.7 years, in Great Britain 5 years. In other words the related age norms of typical second demographic transition countries fall quite close to the norms of post-socialist countries, therefore, in their case we find a bigger difference between age norms and actual behavior than in East-Central European countries.

#### Ideal Age for Becoming a Father. International Relations

The ideal average age for becoming a father was 26.9 years, which is about 2 years higher than that of becoming a mother (see Figure 5). As the figure clearly shows the countries followed the same pattern, so those setting the ideal age of becoming a mother earlier did likewise for becoming a father, and those setting the above-mentioned age later did the same in case of fathers as well.

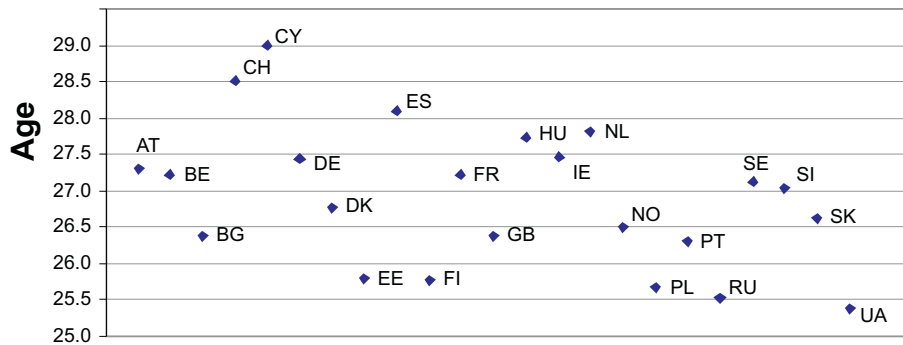


Figure 5. Ideal Ages of Childbearing for Men by Country

3 In 2004. Source: *Population Statistics 2006*.

4 Population Statistics data come from 2004, but data of the survey come from 2006. Supposedly the difference is somewhat bigger, and countries in the Population Statistics are not exactly the same.

As it is shown in the above Figure although the post-socialist countries reckon becoming a father to be due at an earlier age than West European countries, they do not form two separate blocks any more. Finland and Great Britain gave small numbers like in case of becoming mothers (25.8 and 26.4), and concerning the age of becoming fathers Slovakia, Slovenia and especially Hungary (27.7) broke away from the eastern block. In our country the interviewees gave an age 3 years older for the ideal age of becoming a father compared to that of becoming a mother, while in international relations the difference is a little less than two years. Consequently, the life courses of men and women in Hungary are slightly more different.

### Ideal Age Norms of Becoming Parents in Hungary by Social Group

The Hungarian data concerning the ideal age norms of becoming fathers and mothers have been further analysed in the light of educational level, type of residence, age groups, religion, and gender variables. For the analysis linear regression model was used.

*Table 2. What Factors influence People's Opinion about the Ideal Age for Becoming Parents? (Regression Equation)*

	Ideal Age for Becoming a Mother N=766		Ideal Age for Becoming a Father N=752	
	b	Beta	b	Beta
Constant	25.738		26.932	
Educational level <sup>1</sup>	0.306	0.068	0.411	0.082*
Region of residence <sup>2</sup>	-0.505	-0.126**	0.209	-0.046
Age <sup>3</sup>	-0.351	-0.116*	-0.531	-0.163**
Religion <sup>4</sup>	0.123	0.026	0.186	0.035
Gender <sup>5</sup>	0.335	0.052	1.161	0.165**

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

1. Categories of the educational level variable: 1= Elementary Education; 2=Secondary Education; 3=Higher Education.
2. Categories of the region of residence variable: 1=City, 2=Town, 3=Village.
3. Categories of the age variable: 1=People between 15–25; 2=Between 26–35; 3=Between 36–50; 4=Over 50.
4. Categories of the religion variable: 1=Attends religious services at least once a week; 2=More rarel; 3=Never.
5. Categories of the gender variable: 1=Male, 2=Female.

In the view of *Table 2* we can state that region of residence and age variables had a significant influence on the opinion of the ideal age of becoming a mother. As we can see the region of residence had the biggest effect on determining the ideal age of becoming mothers (Beta=0.126), i.e. the smaller place people come from, the younger age they think as ideal for becoming a mother. As for the significant effect of age, the

younger people are, the older age they indicate to be ideal for becoming a mother. Surprisingly gender, educational level or religion had no major effect.

When setting the ideal age for becoming a father gender, age and educational level had significant effects: gender had the biggest effect, followed by age and finally educational level. The ideal age for becoming a father set by women is higher than that set by men. In case of the age variable we find a similar correlation to what we explained in case of becoming a mother, so the ideal age is considered lower by older generations than by younger age groups. The higher educational level people have, the older age they regard to be ideal for becoming a father.

## WHEN IS CHILDBEARING TOO EARLY?

### Early Motherhood. International Relations

European countries, as we could see, have different opinions about whether childbearing is part of the process of reaching adulthood. In the rest of the study we examine the size of the time range socially accepted for childbearing as well as their variation by country.

Interviewees consider the age of about 25 to be ideal for becoming a mother. When asked about the age before which it would be too early, the answers were 19.2 (with little deviation), so 5.7 years lower on average than the ideal age. While post-socialist countries indicated the lowest ideal age, they did not do so in connection with too early motherhood. The value for Ireland is the highest, and for Portugal the lowest. The Irish society reckons a woman under 20.9 to be too young to have a child, while in Portugal – despite being the last to abandon the parents' house – people regard women over 18.3 mature enough for childbearing.

At the beginning of our study we supposed that countries setting the ideal age higher would think similar about the age of too early motherhood, and countries setting it lower would set the age of too early childbearing low as well. Results, however, show a different picture. Regarding the ideal age Switzerland, Spain and Holland drew the highest limit, but regarding too early motherhood the above countries are in the middle of the list. Russia and Ukraine set the ideal age of childbearing the lowest, but they were not the ones to do so about too early motherhood. The opposite is true for Denmark, Hungary and Portugal, who were in the middle of the sample in connection with the ideal age, but now Denmark (19.6 years) and Hungary (19.8 years) are at the top, while Portugal (18.3 years) at the bottom of the list. In other words Hungary is in the middle of the list about the ideal age (24.9), but as shown in the figure below draws the third highest limit (19.8) out of 23 countries for too early motherhood.

Strong correlation can only be observed in case of Catholic Ireland: both the ideal (26.2 years) and too early ages (20.8 years) are set fairly high.

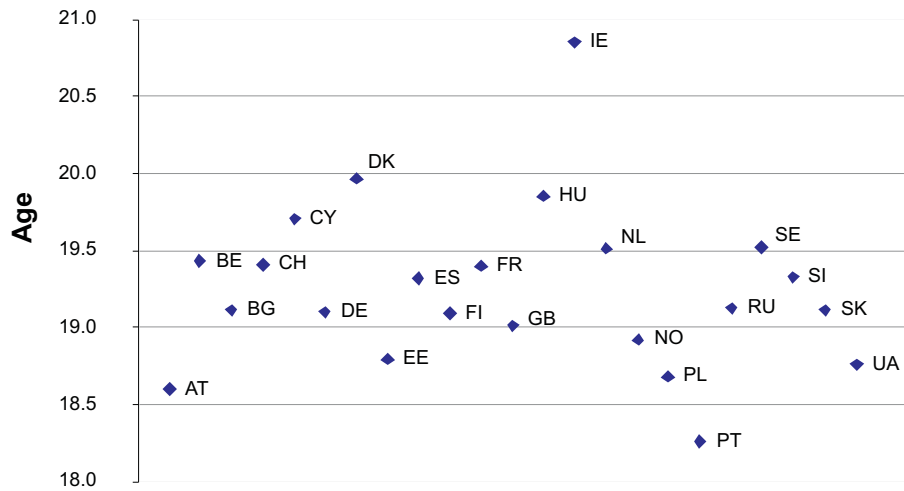


Figure 6. Below What Age is a Woman too Young for Childbearing?

By comparing averages of ideal and too early ages of childbearing for women we can state that people in all the countries believe that even if a woman is mature enough for childbearing (at the age of 19.2 on average), the ideal age of giving birth arrives only about five or six years later (at the age of 25 on average). The next Table well demonstrates that the two values mostly converge in the post-socialist countries (and Finland). In Ukraine, Russia, Bulgaria (and Estonia) interviewees think that even if a woman is not too young, she had better wait 3.4–4.6 years until her first child. In Spain, Switzerland, Holland and Austria this time range is 7 years or more.

Table 3. Difference between the Ideal and too Early Ages of Childbearing (Average Years)

<i>UA</i>	<i>RU</i>	<i>BG</i>	<i>EE</i>	<i>FI</i>	<i>HU</i>	<i>PL</i>	<i>SL</i>	<i>SK</i>	<i>IE</i>	<i>DK</i>	<i>GB</i>
3.4	3.5	4.6	4.6	5.0	5.0	5.2	5.2	5.3	5.4	5.6	5.7
<i>SE</i>	<i>FR</i>	<i>PT</i>	<i>BE</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>DE</i>	<i>CY</i>	<i>AT</i>	<i>NL</i>	<i>CH</i>	<i>ES</i>	<i>Ave- rage</i>
6.2	6.2	6.2	6.2	6.4	6.4	6.5	7.0	7.2	7.4	7.4	5.7

### Early Fatherhood. International Relations

In each country opinions about too young fatherhood and motherhood are fairly similar with the difference that the age limit of too early childbearing for men is one and a half years higher than for women.

Ireland sets the age limit for too early fatherhood quite high (22.2), just like for too early motherhood. Nonetheless, in case of fathers Hungary ranks at the top of the list: interviewees suggest that men should not have children before the age of 22.3. Now the

role of the Portuguese remains unchanged: they were the ones to set the lowest age limit for too early fatherhood (19.7 years) as well as motherhood.

The comparison of the ideal and too early ages of childbearing shows similar results in case of men and women. Cyprus, Switzerland, Spain and Holland, who indicated high ideal ages, again come in the middle of the list about too early fatherhood. Russia and Ukraine set ideal childbearing at the lowest age again, but were not the ones to set the lowest age for too early fatherhood (it was again Portugal).



Figure 7. Below What Age is a Man too Young for Childbearing?

Similarly to motherhood it is also true for the ideal and too early ages of fatherhood in each country that even if a man is mature enough for childbearing (at the age of 20.8 on average), the ideal age of having a child arrives somewhat later: in case of men about six years later (at the age of 26.9 on average). The following Table again shows that the two values mostly converge in the post-socialist countries (as well as in Ireland, Estonia and Finland), whilst the difference in Russia and Ukraine is less than 5 years. Spain and Cyprus have the biggest difference with a time range of about 8 years.

Table 4. Difference between the Ideal and too Early Ages of Fatherhood (Average Years)

<i>RU</i>	<i>UA</i>	<i>BG</i>	<i>IE</i>	<i>EE</i>	<i>FI</i>	<i>PL</i>	<i>HU</i>	<i>DK</i>	<i>SL</i>	<i>SK</i>	<i>GB</i>
4.6	4.6	5.1	5.3	5.3	5.4	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.7	5.9	6.1
<i>FR</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>BE</i>	<i>PT</i>	<i>DE</i>	<i>NL</i>	<i>AT</i>	<i>CH</i>	<i>CY</i>	<i>ES</i>	<i>Ave- rage</i>
6.1	6.1	6.5	6.6	6.6	6.7	7.0	7.3	7.3	7.8	8.1	6.1

### Differences between the Average Ages of Early Mother- and Fatherhood

As we have mentioned earlier, the age limit of too early childbearing for men is one and a half years higher than for women. By examining the values country by country we find that the smallest difference is in Spain (0.7 years), since either men or women are considered too young if they become parents before the ages of 19-20. The biggest difference is worth emphasizing since it is observable in our country: Hungarians think men reach the minimum age for parenthood an average of 2.4 years later than women. The next biggest differences can be found in other post-socialist countries: in Bulgaria, Ukraine, Slovakia and Russia.

### Age Norms of too Early Parenthood in Hungary by Social Group

The Hungarian data concerning the age norms of too early parenthood have also been further analyzed in the light of educational level, type of residence, age groups, religion, and gender variables in a linear regression model. Significant difference, however, was only found in the case of religion, and only for fatherhood. On the basis of Table 5 we can state that people who participate (or often participate) in religious services tend to set the age limit of too early fatherhood higher. It seems that the age of too early parenthood is not so much determined by social-demographic groups as the ideal age.

Table 5. Below What Age is a Man too Young to be a Father?  
(Regression Equation)

	Age of too Early Motherhood N=721		Age of too Early Fatherhood N=702	
	b	Beta	b	Beta
Constant	20.434		21.834	
Educational level <sup>1</sup>	0.329	0.066	0.272	0.044
Region of residence <sup>2</sup>	0.112	-0.025	0.054	0.009
Age <sup>3</sup>	-0.97	-0.029	-0.028	-0.007
Religion <sup>4</sup>	-0.252	-0.047	-0.539	-0.081*
Gender <sup>5</sup>	-0.271	-0.038	0.335	0.058

\*p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01.

- Categories of the educational level variable: 1=Elementary Education; 2=Secondary Education; 3=Higher Education.
- Categories of the region of residence variable: 1=City, 2=Town, 3=Village.
- Categories of the age variable: 1=People between 15-25; 2=Between 26-35; 3=Between 36-50; 4=Over 50.
- Categories of the religion variable: 1=Attends religious services at least once a week; 2=More rare; 3=Never.
- Categories of the gender variable: 1=Male, 2=Female.

## WHEN IS CHILDBEARING TOO LATE?

### Late Motherhood. International Relations

In contrast to early parenthood we now aim to find out what countries think about the age over which parents are too old to bear an(other) child. While the question about early parenthood obviously referred to first childbearing, in case of late parenthood the questionnaire did not specify any restriction. Therefore, while interpreting the answers we must be aware that the interviewees might even have meant the birth of the first, second, third, etc. child.

Countries involved in the study reckon that women over 41.8 on average are too old to have an(other) baby. Figure 8 demonstrates that the highest number 43.8 years was indicated in Austria, followed by Estonia (43.3 years), Spain (42.8 years) and Portugal (42.6 years). Our country has a key role as well, since out of the countries it was Hungary that gave the lowest average age. We believe that a woman is to give birth to her last child before the age of 39, which age is not only 4.6 years lower than the one indicated by neighbouring Austria, but the biggest deviation from the average (by 2.7 years). People in most post-socialist countries, though not all, but in Poland, Slovakia and Russia also set this age earlier, corresponding to the low values given by Denmark, Belgium and Holland.

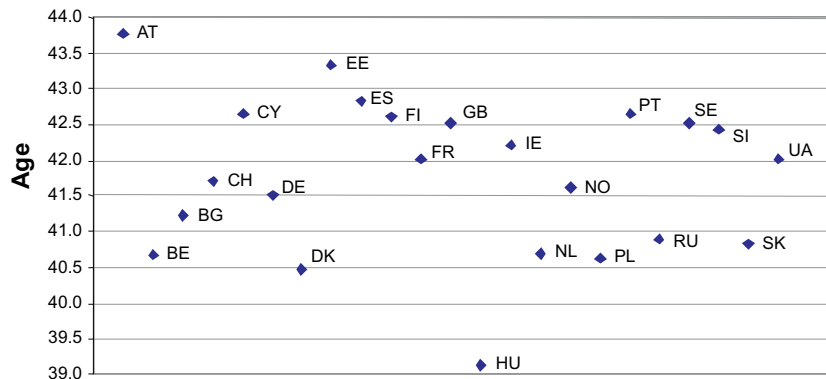


Figure 8. Over What Age is a Woman too Old for Childbearing?

It is interesting to analyse what age countries consider to be ideal for first childbearing (24.9 years) and what they think about the time period left for having more children. In all the countries this time period is nearly 17 years on average. The next Table (6) shows how this number varies country by country. Whilst the smallest differences between the ages of ideal and too early motherhood were observable in post-socialist countries, it is not so in this situation. The time period in question is the shortest in Holland and Hungary, about 14 years, and the longest in Estonia and Ukraine, where it is nearly 20 years.



Table 6. Difference between the Ideal and too Late Ages of Motherhood (Average Years)

<i>NL</i>	<i>HU</i>	<i>DK</i>	<i>CH</i>	<i>BE</i>	<i>DE</i>	<i>IE</i>	<i>ES</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>SK</i>	<i>FR</i>	<i>CY</i>
14.0	14.3	14.9	14.9	15.00	16.0	16.0	16.1	16.3	16.4	16.5	16.5
<i>PL</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>BG</i>	<i>GB</i>	<i>SL</i>	<i>AT</i>	<i>PT</i>	<i>RU</i>	<i>FI</i>	<i>UA</i>	<i>EE</i>	<i>Total</i>
16.7	16.8	17.5	17.8	17.9	18.2	18.2	18.3	18.5	19.8	19.9	16.9

### Late Fatherhood. International Relations

The societies involved in the analysis set the latest age for becoming a father (again) much higher than the one for becoming a mother, and the age difference between too late and too early parenthood is also bigger in case of the two sexes. In the background for both, certainly, there is also a biological explanation. In case of too young parents interviewees set the ages of fathers 2 years later, while in case of too old parents they set it 5.6 years later (to the age of 47.4 on average). Austria and Estonia – like for mothers – indicated a fairly old age (51.1 years) for fathers to have their last children. Based on our expectations we thought Scandinavian states would show big deviation from the average regarding too early, ideal and too late ages, however, significant deviation is observable only now, in case of too late fatherhood, and only for Finland, where this age is 50.5 years.

The group of countries indicating the youngest age is now more homogenous than it was for mothers, and includes almost the same countries, but this time Bulgaria as well. Interestingly, the Spanish gave quite an old age (42.8 years) for mothers concerning the last childbearing, but a lower one for fathers (45.9) in comparison with the other nations.

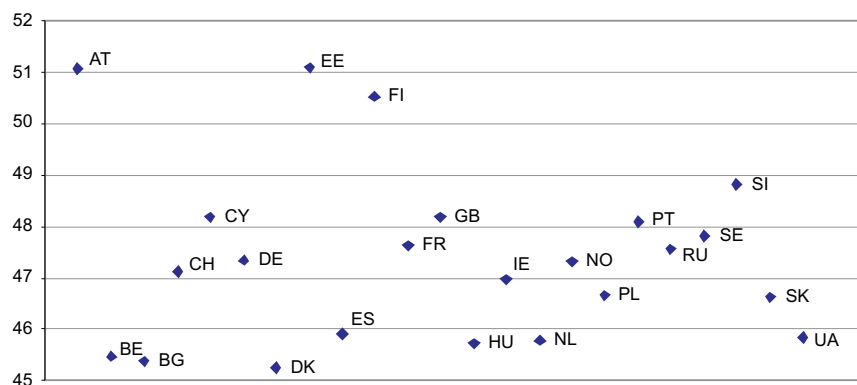


Figure 9. Over What Age is a Man too Old for Childbearing?

Our analysis demonstrates that the time range available for men between the ideal ages of their first and last childbearing (20.6 years) is approximately four years longer than for women (16.9 years). Like for mothers, the time period is again the shortest (18 years) in Hungary and Holland (and Spain), and the longest in Estonia and Finland, where it may even be as long as 24.7–25.3 years.

*Table 7. Difference between the Ideal and too Late Ages of Fatherhood (Average Years)*

<i>ES</i>	<i>HU</i>	<i>NL</i>	<i>BE</i>	<i>DK</i>	<i>CH</i>	<i>BG</i>	<i>CY</i>	<i>IE</i>	<i>DE</i>	<i>SK</i>	<i>FR</i>
17.8	18.0	18.0	18.3	18.5	18.6	19.0	19.2	19.5	19.9	20.0	20.4
<i>UA</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>PL</i>	<i>PT</i>	<i>SL</i>	<i>GB</i>	<i>RU</i>	<i>AT</i>	<i>FI</i>	<i>EE</i>	<i>Total</i>
20.5	20.7	20.8	21.0	21.8	21.8	21.8	22.1	23.8	24.7	25.3	20.6

### **Differences between the Average Ages of Late Mother- and Fatherhood**

The countries set the age of too late fatherhood on average 5.6 years later than the age of too late motherhood. While in case of early parenthood the biggest difference between the sexes appeared in post-Soviet countries, the situation is not the same with late parenthood. The biggest difference is found in Finland (7.9 years), followed by Estonians (7.8 years), Austrians (7.3 years), Russians (6.7 years), and finally Hungarians (6.6 years). The smallest difference regarding too late parenthood – like regarding the too early one – was found in Spain, namely 3.1 years, though it is again followed by the post-Soviet Ukraine (3.8 years) and Bulgaria (4.2 years).

### **Age Norms of Late Parenthood in Hungary by Social Group**

Late parenthood has also been further analysed according to educational level, type of residence, age groups, religion, and gender variables.

*Table 8. Over What Age are People too Old for Childbearing?  
(Regression Equation)*

	Age of too Late Motherhood N=704		Age of too Late Fatherhood N=636	
	b	Beta	b	Beta
Constant	39.549		43.356	
Educational level <sup>1</sup>	0.574	0.080*	0.565	0.051
Region of residence <sup>2</sup>	-0.527	-0.083*	0.313	0.032
Age <sup>3</sup>	-0.009	-0.002	0.642	0.092*
Religion <sup>4</sup>	0.132	0.017	0.011	0.035
Gender <sup>5</sup>	-0.291	-0.028	-0.058	0.165

\*p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01.

1. Categories of the educational level variable: 1=Elementary Education; 2=Secondary Education; 3=Higher Education.
2. Categories of the region of residence variable: 1=City, 2=Town, 3=Village.
3. Categories of the age variable: 1=People between 15–25; 2=Between 26–35; 3=Between 36–50; 4=Over 50.
4. Categories of the religion variable: 1=Attends religious services at least once a week; 2=More rarel; 3=Never.
5. Categories of the gender variable: 1=Male, 2=Female.

The table above shows that only educational level and region of residence variables had significant effect on determining the age of too late motherhood. Educational level had the following effect: the higher the educational level, the later the age of too late childbearing was set. As for the region of residence variable: the bigger the town, the later the determined age.

In determining the age of too late fatherhood only age had a significant effect: people of older age groups tended to indicate later ages of too late fatherhood. The explanation may also be the tendency of older age groups for having more traditional value systems, i.e. that these men are not so much affected by age norms but rather by social norms expecting men to have certain level of existence<sup>5</sup>.

### TIME RANGES OF BECOMING PARENTS

Nowadays the process of transition to adulthood is getting longer and longer and shifting to later periods, including different criteria society by society. Comparing the ages of early and late parenthood in *Figures 10 and 11* the results gained for Austria and Hungary are worth highlighting.

5 The background of this phenomenon would be interesting to further analyse, however, it is not feasible in the frames of the present study.

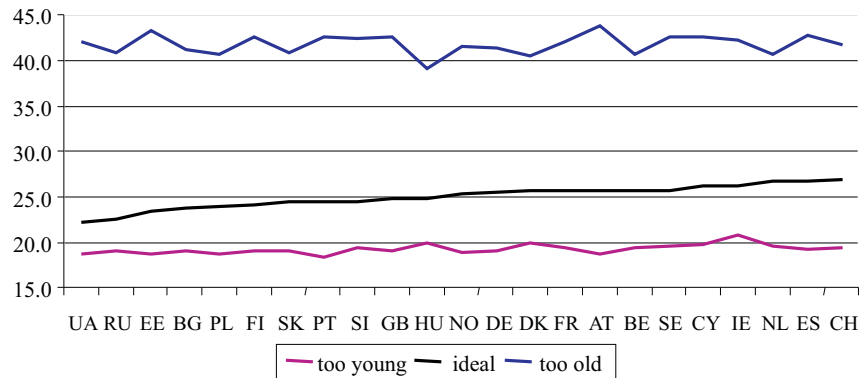
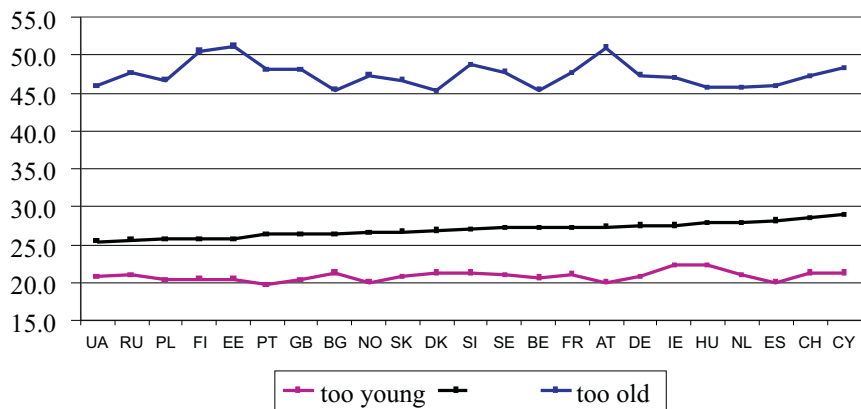


Figure 10

Figure 11. Too Young, Ideal and too Old Ages of Women for Motherhood



Austria was generally known for its lowest fertility in Europe after the two world wars. Strong economic growth and measures for welfare and family policy promoting childbearing did not only generate the baby boom lasting until 1977, but a wide network of institutional background for the promotion of childbearing was also established. Austria's longest period for motherhood is supposed to be mostly due to the above: in the interviewees' opinion altogether 26 years between the ages of 18 and 44 are available for women. In Hungary, where there is no appropriate institutional background even today<sup>6</sup>, this range is the narrowest: only 19 years between the ages of 20–39. The time period of the ideal ages of fatherhood is also the widest in Austria: men have altogether 31 years between the ages of 20 and 51.1, and the narrowest in case of Hungarians: 23.4 years between the ages of 22.3 and 45.7.

6 Low capacity of nursery schools and kindergartens, small number of part time job offers, and no share job opportunities (two young mothers taking one full time job by changing over and helping), etc. each other.

The narrow time range considered ideal for childbearing in Hungary is in sharp contrast with research results and facts stating that Hungarian people – before the change of the political system as well as after it – are family and child centred. Shortly after the change of the political system an international research (Pongrácz 2001) was carried out in five countries among families with small children analysing the role and significance of family life, work, and profession in personal life. Results demonstrated that 81 per cent of Hungarians attached more importance to family than profession, and nobody ranked profession before family. Ten years later, in 2000, these results have hardly changed: 75% of parents with small children regarded family to be more important and only 4–5% put profession before family. In 2003 another study including 12 European countries (Pongrácz 2005) also confirmed Hungarians' traditional value system about families, which is valid for young and old people as well as for men and women<sup>7</sup>. It seems that the outstanding family centeredness of Hungarians is to be interpreted only within the solid framework of the traditional family model. Family is considered important, but only by respecting the age norms prescribed by the traditional family model, i.e. even if family is the most important, women are supposed to have children between the ages of 20 and 39, and men between the ages of 22 and 46.

### SUMMARY

Our study reports the findings of a descriptive research and focuses on the ideal age and possible time range of becoming parents. We examined the three major milestones of the transition to adulthood: cohabitation, marriage and childbearing, and the question whether childbearing is associated with the process of becoming adults. The main focus of our attention was Hungary, but wherever possible we also tried to view it in international relations. Primarily we analyzed attitude type questions, and aimed to find out when people reckon it is ideal, too early and too late to bear a child. The Hungarian data have also been analyzed deeper according to educational level, type of residence, age groups, frequency of attending religious services and gender.

Regarding the sequence of the three major events of becoming adults we found that according to the 23 countries in case of women ideally 2.5, in case of men 3 years on average should elapse between moving together and getting married. The timing of marriage and childbearing considered ideal shows a smaller deviation: 0.7 years for women and 0.9 years for men. In other words marriage should replace cohabitation shortly before the birth of the first child. With the exception of Hungary childbearing is thought to be an indicator of the transition to adulthood mainly by post-socialist countries, while Sweden and Norway attach the smallest importance to this event. In Portugal and the Eastern countries the three events are the closest to each other in time, while in Austria they are the furthest.

7 At the same time Holland and Germany proved to be the least traditional, where women denied the traditional female roles.

Concerning childbearing we found that in Hungary it is not a precondition to have children to be counted an adult. By this our country breaks away from the eastern block and shares the views of the Scandinavian states.

The ideal age of childbearing is set at younger ages by East European countries than by Western ones. In the 23 countries the ideal age of motherhood is 24.9 years on average and 26.9 years for fatherhood, in Hungary these numbers are 24.9 and 27.7 respectively. In case of Hungarian women the number is 2.4 years lower than their actual ages at the birth of the first child. A deeper analysis of the data proves that younger generations reckon the ideal age for childbearing to be due later than older generations. Residents of bigger towns, however, think quite similarly only about motherhood, while people with higher educational level share the former opinion only about fatherhood. Regarding genders we can state that women indicated an older ideal age for becoming a father than men.

Speaking about too early and too late parenthood no dividing line between East and West can be found. Countries reckon that a woman below 19 years of age on average is too young to have a baby. There is no correlation saying that countries with low ideal ages for motherhood indicate low ages for too early motherhood also, except for Ireland, where both figures are fairly high. According to our findings societies believe that even if a woman is mature enough for childbearing, the ideal age of giving birth arrives only about five or six years later on average, around the age of 25. The ages of too early fatherhood were set one and a half years later on average than those of too early motherhood. Men over 21 are not thought to be too young for childbearing, but are supposed to have their first child only 8 years later. In Hungary a woman less than 19.8 years old and a man of 22.3 are considered too young for parenthood. More detailed analysis clearly demonstrated that regular participants of religious services indicated older ages for too early fatherhood (23.4 years).

The issue of late parenthood included bearing the first, second, etc. child as well. In Europe women over 42 and a men over 47 are regarded too old to have an(other) child. The figure is the lowest in Hungary both for women and men, because we think that women over 39 and men over 45.7 should not bear children. In Hungary the higher the educational level or the bigger the place of residence, the later the age defined for women, additionally, the older the people, the later age they indicate for men.

The longest ideal life period for childbearing was determined by Austrians both for women and men, while the shortest one for both genders was defined by Hungarians. In the face of this the family centeredness of Hungarians can be interpreted only within the frames of the traditional family model: family is considered important, but only by respecting the age norms prescribed by the traditional family model.

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