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Abstract. Despite increasing research on the causes, consequences, and measurement of low fertility, questions about the nature and the extent of popular concerns over low fertility have yielded more speculation than examination. We address this gap in the literature through an analysis of 328 German newspaper and news magazine articles mentioning low fertility from 1993 to 2001. Our analysis reveals a paradox: while fertility rates have remained well below replacement levels and governmental discussions of low fertility have increased, discussion of low fertility as a concern in and of itself has been small and unchanging over time. We find this to be true because the problem of low fertility is rarely invoked as a concern in its own right, but is most often used as a tool in the popular debate to discuss other problems – political, economic, and cultural.

Key words: Fertility, Germany, media, newspaper


Résumé. Malgré le nombre croissant de recherches sur les causes, les conséquences et la mesure de la basse fécondité, il n’existe pas de véritable analyse sur l’importance de la prise de conscience du phénomène par la population qui reste souvent de l’ordre de la spéculation. Nous essayons de combler cette lacune en analysant 328 articles de journaux ou magazines allemands qui traitent de la basse fécondité entre 1993 et 2001. Cette analyse montre un résultat paradoxal: alors que les taux de fécondité restent bien en dessous du niveau de remplacement et que les débats gouvernementaux sur ces bas niveaux sont de plus en plus fréquents, la basse fécondité est rarement considérée par la presse comme un problème en tant que tel et cette attitude a peu varié au cours du temps. La question de la basse fécondité est plutôt utilisée comme un moyen d’aborder d’autres problèmes, politiques, économiques et culturels.

Mots clés: fécondité, Allemagne, media, journaux
1. Introduction

Concerns about the causes, consequences, and measurement of low fertility have moved to the fore of professional and policy debates in the past decades. This move, in some part, has been justified by the sense that everyday people – parents, taxpayers, and voters – are concerned about the implications of low fertility. For example, some researchers characterize citizens as wanting governments to minimize the consequences of large-scale demographic changes, like low fertility, while also keeping parenting decisions private (e.g. Gauthier and Hatzius, 1997). Similarly, other researchers assert that people view policies that alter fertility levels – intentionally or not – as forms of taboo social engineering (e.g. Teitelbaum and Winter, 1985; Demeny, 1987).

In contrast, some researchers report that people are not concerned about low fertility at all. For example, reporting “the present apparent lack of concern” (p. 11), Caldwell et al. (2002) write that “the most significant aspect of the present period of low fertility is the near-silence on the subject from governments and the public alike” (p. 10).

Yet such popular concern over low fertility (or lack thereof) has been more often assumed than analysed. In this paper, we ask how low fertility is debated popularly, taking the popular press as our exemplary forum: is low fertility debated as a concern in its own right; when is low fertility used to debate other issues; and how are such debates carried out? Understanding the contours of the popular debate over low fertility is important for several reasons. First, empirical evidence of the nature of popular sentiments towards low fertility would help eliminate some of the ambiguities outlined above. In addition, understanding popular concerns would allow demographers to appropriately correct or reshape debates, informing more accurate and productive exchanges. Finally, knowing the substance and tenor of popular concern may help demographers not only correct, but actively contribute to both public and policy debates in relevant ways. In sum, analysing, rather than assuming the nuances of popular debate may help demographers inform – and open possibilities for – the most appropriate policy decisions and professional conversations.

To analyse the popular debate, we draw on articles in the popular press, which offer a broad view of how debates are structured beyond research institutions (Woolley, 2000), and which are important for policymakers in prioritizing policy decisions (Nelkin, 1987). Thus, we use a new methodology applied to 328 German news articles to show that low fertility is used to debate issues beyond those tied directly to population concerns. In addition, we show that low fertility is appropriated in different ways in the popular press depending on the issue being debated – “population decline” being just one among many topics, such as economic stagnation or gender equity, that also deploy low fertility arguments. Finally, we identify variations in the way