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Marriage as a subjective Choice – changing Attitudes towards formal Unions in the lowest-low fertility Country

Taking into consideration the changing socio-economic situation, new challenges and expectations, as well as the increasing awareness of the challenges, the pattern of transition to adulthood, and in particular its changes, seem to be particularly significant over the long-term perspectives. The collapse of socialism significantly changed the situation of people entering the adult life, who faced various obstacles mainly related to the economic sphere of life such as: instability of the beginning of market economy and corresponding instability of the labour market, growing unemployment or problems on the housing market that significantly hindered independence.

General uncertainty was the main reason for the postponement of the decision concerning starting a family, which in Poland was the main reason for leaving of the parental home ¹ and as the previous research revealed also the main trigger of the decision to move out of parental home. Marriage was and still remains the dominant reason for leaving parental home and is a first step towards life's independence. Whereas on the other hand, political changes had awakened expectations of the society that resulted in the general growth of life aspirations in both spheres: economic and social. Easier access to education, its popularization on the over-secondary level, new opportunities and offers on the labour market, in particular a larger range of offers in the services sector, comprised sufficient incentives to develop adaptive strategies.

The paper is a continuation of PhD dissertation on *The objective and subjective determinants of transition to adulthood*.

Lots of thinking has been given to the process of leaving parental home patterns as well as to the process of union formation. Regular practice in studies investigating life course is to apply methods of survival analysis, which was the case in part of the dissertation analyzing the objective determinants of leaving the parental home. Considering marriage as the main reason for leaving parental home in Poland and changes observed in the last 20 years ie., decreasing number of marriages, increasing instability of formal relationships, followed by rapidly increasing number of divorces accompanied by the general postponement of marriage, the aim of this study is to look for the explanation of this phenomena on a subjective level of decisive process. The act of marriage is a consequence of a rational decision of the individual, who anticipates various advantages and disadvantages. Moreover, the macro-scale outcomes are the result of micro-scale decisions, influenced

¹ See: A.C. Liefbroer, E. Frątczak, *The family formation process in Poland during the early years of the socio-economic transition: evidence from the Polish Family and Fertility Survey 1991*, Studia Demograficzne 1-2 (123-124), 1996, p. 41.

by personal norms, values and expectations. Taking into account this subjective perspective as well as looking for hints to explain complex process of transition to adulthood, the aim of this paper is to enrich detailed analysis of the objective transition to adulthood's determinants with more personal view, namely perception and the meaning of marriage, as the most common incentive to move out of parents and begin an independent life.

The main thesis of the presented paper is: social and economic changes of the transition period significantly influenced attitudes and behaviours concerning time and circumstances of leaving the parental home of successive generations because of union formation. Considering the revealed nature of the changes constituted mainly by human capital indicators, the general hypothesis is that micro-level choices are based on personal preferences derived from individual perception of marriage, which is shaped by socio-cultural norms and values as well as mutual expectations of spouses.

The objective of this study is to understand:

- what are the most common views on marriage represented in the society;
- to which extent the old, traditional perception of marriage evolved;
- if the 'modern' perception of marriage exists, what are the principal values constituting this view;
- whether the changes are time/age-dependant.

The presented study was based on two waves of the survey "Evaluation of changes in attitudes and reproductive behaviours of young and middle aged generations of female and male Poles and their consequences to the process of family, union and household formation and dissolution" carried out in 2001 and 2006 by the Institute of Statistics and Demography of the WSE. The Polish Retrospective Surveys are projects allowing the analysis of changes observed during transition period. For the first time, the issue of norms values attitudes and behaviours was surveyed on such a large scale. The use of this retrospective surveys served us with the unique opportunity of combining extensive retrospective research with the analysis of individual norms and values regarding marriage and family life.

To deal with the latent construct of combinations of norms and values expressed in qualitative scale the explanatory latent class analysis was applied. Several statements representing the opinions on different norms and values associated with marriage formation, family life as well as dissolution were questioned. The answers covered different fields i.e., perception of traditional values and socio-cultural norms, gender equality, division of household duties, family conflicts and the importance of marriage in stabilizing them. The study was extended to test the expected changes in time and the age effects as well as the influence of age-dependant life's experience i.e., experiencing formal relationship, having children, opinion on cohabitation, religiosity. Considering different paths of transitioning to adulthood, especially culturally driven male-breadwinner model of family, separate models for males and females were estimated.

As hypothesized, a map of distinct perceptions of marriage was created, including various traditional as well as modern and destandardized approaches. Expected age and life's experience effects were confirmed, counter to expectations little effect of time was revealed.

Union formation in Poland

For many years, starting a family has been in Poland the main reason for leaving the parental home. The concept of union formation refers to a marriage and still marginal, albeit of increasing significance, cohabitation. According to the data of the National Census on Population and Housing 2002, cohabitation constitutes 2% of the total number of unions. In the Western Europe countries informal unions and registered partnerships and much more common.

As regard the issue of unions' formation, notice should be taken at the observed trends: the number of newly contracted marriages during the period of transition in Poland and the mean age at the moment of concluding the first marriage. Poland, similarly to other East-European countries belonged to the eastern marriage pattern. Marriage in the western part of Europe characterised late conclusion and lower universality of this form of union. On the contrary, in Eastern Europe, marriages were concluded early and absolutely dominated as a form of the union. The mean age of marriage by women from eastern countries before transition amounted to 23 years.

In 1989 in Poland were concluded 255.7 thousand marriages, which means 6.7 marriages per 1000 citizens. The similar number of marriages per 1000 persons was observed in 1960 and it was the lowest result after the WW II. The mean age of entering the marital union in 1989 was 25.1 years among men and 22.8 years among women².

In 1989, over 50% of the brides and almost a half of the grooms were aged 20-24. Large discrepancies were observed between men and women in age groups: 15-19 and 25-29 years. In the younger group dominated women, whose number was 4 times higher than the number of men, while in a group of newlywed aged between 25 and 29 years men exceeded the number of women twice. Over the dozen or so years, the age of the newlywed has decidedly grown. At the beginning of the nineties, over a half of men concluding marriages did not reach the age of 25 years, while in 2006 – only 27%. The respective share among women decreased from 73% to 48%.

In 2006, the share of this group (age 25-29 years) among the newlywed amounted to 44% (at the beginning of the nineties over 48% of men concluded their marriage at the age 20-24 years, currently about 26%). The mean age of women getting married (age median) amounted to 25 years in 2006, as compared to less than 23 years at the beginning of the nineties, whereas among men increased by about 1.5 year - to 27 lat. The newlyweds in urban areas are by about 1.5 year older than those who live in rural areas.

² See: http://www.stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/PUBL_Sytuacja_demograficzna_2007.pdf, GUS, 2007, p. 5-7.

The total number of marriages at the beginning of the nineties became rapidly decreasing, a setback took place in the second half of the decade (1996-1999), when a slight growth was observed (by 7,8%). After systemic transition, the number marriages decreased by about 25% during the first ten years.

In addition, at the end of the nineties, the cohort of demographic boom began entering the marital age, while simultaneously the lowest figures of the concluded marriages were observed in that period. The changes were followed by the increasing during the period of transition number of divorces, to such extent that beginning from 1995, the number of divorces started exceeding the number of concluded marriages.

The phenomenon characteristic for the period of transition was the increase the number of one-person households. 85% men and 90% women below 50-th year of age had already been in marital union in 1989. These figures allow classifying Poland among the countries characterised with a high percentage of persons staying in the marriages. In the nineties, there was observed a decline in this indicator. At the beginning of the 21st century, for women, as well as for men, nuptiality indicators had already dropped below 60%; this drop was higher among women than among men. It leads to conclusion that marriage began losing importance in the Polish society. After 2004, the institution of marriage began its revival. The number of marriages per 1000 persons started increasing, which reflects entering the age typical for marriage concluding of numerous generations of demographic boom.

It is estimated that in 2007 were registered almost 249 thousand marriages – by over 22 thousand more than the year before. Marriage rate (per 1000 population) increased by 0.6 point to the level of 6.5‰. Beginning from 2003, there has been observed a growth in the number of new marriages.

The frequency of marriage concluding is slightly lower in the urban areas. Invariably, among the newly contracted unions, about 86% constitute first marriages, i.e. of single women with single men. Ecclesiastical marriages, i.e. concluded in Church and simultaneously registered in the Register Offices, comprise about 70% of the legally contracted unions³.

The characteristic feature of marriages in Poland is their homogeneity. In 1989, 45.6% of the newlywed belonged to the same age group, while more than a half (53.4%) had the same level of education. At the beginning of the 21st century, the homogeneity was even higher: 48.7% of new marriages were concluded between the partners belonging to the same age group, while 70% had the same level of education.

³ See: http://www.stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/PUBL_Sytuacja_demograficzna_2007.pdf, GUS 2007, s. 5