'Fertile Debates: A Comparative Account of Low Fertility in the British and Greek National Press'

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1. Introduction

The pan-European phenomenon of low fertility has various roots and manifestations that continue to defy explanation. Despite the media being one of the key social institutions engaged in the process of creating and distributing 'particular forms of knowledge' (Lynn and Lea 2003, p.428) about a subject, they are a somewhat neglected source of influence. Scholars and policymakers can benefit from studying the creators of 'garbled demography' (Teitelbaum 2004) because they are one of the key architects of meaning about demographic phenomena. As a result, they are potential facilitators of change around what people think about having children, how they experience the process of family-formation and what they believe is an appropriate family size (Barber and Axinn 2004). Press coverage about below-replacement fertility may differ markedly between countries but it is widespread across Europe (Stark and Kohler 2002, 2004). In this paper, I focus on the ways in which Greek and British newspapers have approached the issue by highlighting the frequency with which they mentioned it, the causes and consequences that they associated with it, and the solutions or measures which they put forward to deal with it. Given that audiences are aware of the socially constructed nature of news stories (Fowler 1991; Misiti 2000), throughout the paper I assess the degree of conformity to the print media's discourses by a deliberately small sample of middle-class Greek women living in Athens with a similar sample of British women in London, drawing on an ethnographic study I conducted between February 2003 and August 2004 (Georgiadis 2006).

2. Methods

This paper rests on the analysis of articles published between 1st January 2001 and 31st December 2009 in the British and Greek press. The former were obtained from five newspapers and their Sunday editions, using the database Nexis® UK, while the latter were drawn from the online archives of four national newspapers, only three of which produced Sunday copies (Table 1). The keywords used to identify the relevant material are presented in Table 2. The final search terms chosen were those that provided the most results in each language. For example, 'low fertility', 'fertility decline' or 'below-replacement fertility' failed to return an adequate number of articles in Nexis® UK and so others were added. In the Greek press, a similar process occurred. All newspapers were selected on the basis that they reflected views from all sides of the political spectrum. While the UK's *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, and the *Daily Mail* have a conservative outlook - akin to Greece's *Kathimerini* - *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday* offered more centre to left-wing perspectives, along with *To Vima*, *Ta Nea*, and *Eleftherotypia*.

British newspapers	**No. of articles**	**Greek newspapers**	**No. of articles**
Daily Mail	32	Eleftherotypia	102
The Guardian	31	Kathimerini	55
The Daily Telegraph	26	To Vima	29
The Times	22	Ta Nea	25
The Independent	10		
The Observer	23		
The Sunday Times	14		
The Sunday Telegraph	5		
The Independent on Sunday	5		
The Mail on Sunday	1		
Total	**169**	***Total***	**211**

Table 1 - Number of articles on low fertility in Greek and British newspapers

Keywords	
British press	**Greek press**
'Births & birth rates' AND 'population & demographics'	'The demographic issue' AND Greece (*demografiko KAI Ellada*)
'Birth rate' or 'birthrate'	'Underfertility' (*ippoyennitikotita*)
'Fertility rate'	'Birth decline' (*meiosi genniseon*)
'Low fertility'	'Fertility' AND 'Greece' (*gonimotita KAI Ellada*)
'Below replacement fertility' OR 'below-replacement fertility'	'Ageing' AND 'Greece' (*yiransi KAI Ellada*)
'Sub-replacement fertility'	'Fertility' (*yennitikotita*)
'Population' AND 'birthrate'	
'Population' AND 'fertility'	
'Birthrate' AND 'fertility'	
'Fertility' AND 'below replacement'	
'Birth rate' AND 'fertility'	

Table 2 - Greek and English search terms

A number of articles were not included in the final analysis because: they were exclusively about worldwide or pan-European fertility; they referred to the birth rates of specific age groups without reference to national fertility rates; they were just about Scotland, Wales or (Northern) Ireland; they were only about teenage pregnancies; or, their main focus was immigration and/or population ageing. During the course of the eight years analysed in this study, the birth rate of each country has fluctuated. In 2001, for example, the United Kingdom's total fertility rate fell to a record low of 1.63 children per woman, while in 2008 it reached 1.96 children per woman, the highest level since 1973 (Office for National Statistics 2009). Both these events were reported in the press. However, any articles discussing a rise in the birth rate were left out of my analysis, unless they mentioned the persistence of below-replacement fertility, as they did not contribute to the debate under investigation. The final number of articles reviewed is shown in Table 1[1].

3. Results

a) Overall stance towards low fertility

In the Greek press, despite the existence of terms such as 'low fertility' (*hamili gennitikotita*) or 'low birth rate' (*hamilos deiktis gonimotitas*), below-replacement

[1] Readers' letters are included in the analysis.

fertility was referred to as 'underfertility' (*ipoyennitikotita*), and was characterised as the driving force behind the country's 'demographic problem' (*to demografiko provlima*) or 'the demographic issue' (*to demografiko*)[2]. These politically charged expressions, as opposed to their more neutral-sounding alternatives, were also favoured by Athenian interviewees. In the British press, comparatively objective terms, such as 'declining birth rate', 'low birthrate', 'fertility rate', 'total fertility rate' and 'below replacement fertility' were most frequently used. However, they had not been embraced widely by London-based study participants.

The different labels ascribed to low fertility by each set of newspapers did not deter either from characterising existing fertility trends and patterns using alarmist phrases. In the Greek papers, for example, 'underfertility' was described as a 'threat' (*To Vima*, 06/03/2007), which 'plagues our country' (*Kathimerini*, 21/06/2001), while the 'demographic issue' was 'acute' (*Kathimerini* 20/03/2002), a 'nightmare' (*Eleftherotypia* 26/11/2006), an 'illness' (*Eleftherotypia*, 17/02/2007), potentially 'fatal' (*Kathimerini*, 08/01/2005), and 'one of the most serious national problems' facing Greece (*Eleftherotypia*, 05/07/2005). Similarly, in UK newspapers, the situation was referred to as the 'baby bust' (*Independent* 27/09/2003), the 'baby crisis' (*Daily Mail*, 22/02/2006), the 'baby gap' (*The Observer*, 19/02/2006), the 'baby shortage' (*The Sunday Times*, 29/07/2007), the 'baby drought' (*The Observer*, 26/09/2004), the 'fertility crisis' (*Independent on Sunday*, 19/02/2006), the 'fertility time bomb' (*The Independent*, 04/07/05), the 'shrinking birth rate' (*The Observer*, 12/06/2005) and the 'plunging birthrate' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 08/05/2003).

Table 3 shows the proportion of articles in each set of newspapers which take a negative, a positive and a neutral stance. In both the Greek and British press, the majority portrayed low fertility as a negative development or a problem in need of a solution. However, among the latter, an almost equal proportion was impartial, whereas among the former, this was only the case for a quarter of the total. Moreover, a greater number of articles in English than Greek had a positive outlook. The print media's attitudes were only partially reflected in the interviewees' narratives. While the majority of Athenians were both well-versed in 'underfertility'

[2] The two other main events comprising the 'demographic [issue]' or 'problem' were the rise in life expectancy, which leads to an ageing society, and the increase in the country's immigrant population.

and, like the media, expressed concern over the course of its future development, Londoners did not reflect the stance of the press and were either uninformed or indifferent about the subject. Contrary to their Greek counterparts, on the other hand, a few British women did echo the minority print media view that the world was overcrowded and, therefore, a scarcity of births was better than an excess. This issue will be examined in more detail in the section on 'Consequences'.

Stance	**Number of articles**			
	Greek press		**British press**	
	Number	**Percentage**	**Number**	**Percentage**
'Low fertility is a positive development'	3	1.4	17	10.1
'Low fertility is a negative development or a problem in need of a solution'	155	73.5	79	46.7
Low fertility is neither negative nor positive'	53	25.1	73	43.2
Total	**211**	**100**	**169**	**100**

Table 3 - Overall attitude towards low fertility by Greek and British

Findings from a comparison of the number of times that each group of newspapers mentioned the causes or consequences of low fertility, measures to prevent or reduce it, or simply 'facts' about its composition are shown in Table 4. Clearly the Greek press debated the effects of 'underfertility' and ways of dealing with it in almost equal measure, placing slightly less emphasis on its causes. The British, on the other hand, were more inclined to communicate the reasons behind the latest UK fertility rate, contributing less to the discussion over outcomes and paying little attention to potential solutions. In both countries, an almost equal share of the debate was dedicated to the 'facts'.

Focus	**Frequency**			
	Greek press		**British press**	
	Number	**Percentage**	**Number**	**Percentage**
Causes	81	27	95	44.4
Consequences	98	32.7	78	36.4
Solutions	99	33	25	11.7
Factual	22	7.3	16	7.5
Total	**300**	**100**	**214**	**100**

Table 4 – Frequency of different foci in Greek and British press

The distinctive focus of the Greek and British print media is indicative of a more general difference in outlook by each to reproduction. In the UK having children was perceived to be a private affair, relevant only to the prospective parents. The idea that British women had a public duty to reproduce was roundly denounced, as the reaction to politicians who dared to make such a suggestion testifies[3]. 'To regard having children as a public matter is to believe that the individual is essentially a tool of the state. The production and rearing of children lie at the very core of personal liberty' (*Daily Mail*, 22/09/2004). Not surprisingly, therefore, newspapers were cautious about discussing the 'public' cost of ultimately 'private' decisions, and even more reluctant to propose ways of altering them. In contrast, references to 'underfertility' as a calamity for the Greek nation which people had a personal responsibility to try and avert were common and generally not subject to criticism.

b) Causes of low fertility

The reasons attributed to below-replacement fertility by the print media of each country are listed in Table 5. While the majority were asserted by both sets, some were mentioned exclusively by the Greek press (extra-marital childbearing, gender relations, unemployment) and others by the British (contraception, men's contribution to childcare, relationship formation, and religion). The three most popular 'causes' in the former were: 1) unemployment, particularly of youth, 2) financial reasons, and 3) the structure of the labour market, a major component of which was the issue of the work-family balance. In the latter, they were: 1) the postponement of childbearing, 2) the prioritisation of education and career development by women, and 3) a rise in infertility or childlessness.

These differences reveal a fundamental distinction between the two sets of newspapers. While both media debates were highly gendered, focusing primarily on women's contribution to low fertility, accountability was shared between women and the state in the Greek case, whereas it was women's alone in the British. Some did draw attention to the disproportionate focus on females (for example, Williams 2006,

[3] The politicians in question were: David Willetts, the Shadow Secretary of State for Work & Pensions, who, in 2003, said that the key to the pensions crisis and to economic growth was for Britons to have more children, and Patricia Hewitt, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, who in 2004 suggested that people should reproduce for the social and economic success of the country.

'Men have babies too: Having children is seen as collaborative when it's going well, the fault of women when it's not,' *The Guardian*), but their voices remained muted. The absence of the male perspective was, partly, a response to the demographic research available and, in part, a reflection of a broader tendency to hold women responsible for the reproduction of the nation or state (Brown and Ferree 2005; Kannaneh 2002; Yuval-Davis 1996).

Linked to the above, was the assumption, particularly explicit in the British media, that the decline in the birth rate was deliberate. 'Modern women choosing to have smaller families' (headline, *The Guardian*, 17/05/2002); 'Birth rate at record low as women opt for jobs' (headline, *The Times*, 17/05/2002); 'The childless choice' (headline, *The Daily Mail*, 28/06/2002); '92,000 babies a year are lost because of women choosing to delay motherhood' (main text, *Daily Mail*, 24/02/2006); 'women are turning their back on childbirth' (main text, *The Observer* 14/12/2003). Educated females, so the argument went, fully-focused on their careers, were deferring childbearing until, for many, it was 'too late' to have either any or 'many' children (*The Times*, 27/06/2003 & *Kathimerini*, 28/05/2006). In the UK, some, were even 'choosing' to remain childless (*The Times*, 11/05/2001) or to have only one child (*The Guardian*, 22/07/2006). However, such claims were misleading given that, although rates of childlessness have increased for recent British cohorts (1950-1960) and the proportion of two-child families has decreased, proportions at all other parities (including, one child) have remained relatively stable (Sigle-Rushton 2008).

In both countries, there were also reports of a rise in individualism, a preference for a more hedonistic lifestyle, a growing refusal to marry or to do so early, and a greater propensity to divorce and to have an abortion. These were linked to novel ideas about the family and the value of children with a detrimental impact on the birth rate. Yet the majority of women interviewed in Athens and London did not display the character proposed in this narrative. Although many of those who had embarked upon motherhood indeed had done so after completing their university studies, entered into a career, and were psychologically ready to leave behind a 'selfish' lifestyle, the forces which combined to make it the 'right' time for them to have children were mostly beyond the realm of 'choice'. Even the 'child-free' spoke of the 'slow dawning of recognition' that they were not going to have children rather

than the decision *per se*. In addition, most Greek and British women were aware of the prospect of infertility by 'leaving it too late' but could not bring forward the conditions perceived to be necessary for the start of family-formation.

'Causes'	**Frequency**			
	Greek press		**British press**	
	Number	**Percentage**	**Number**	**Percentage**
1. Abortion	8	5.7	5	1.5
2. Breakdown of family	1	0.7	6	1.7
3. Childcare provision	7	5	6	1.7
4. 'Childfree'/'voluntary' childlessness	1	0.7	17	5
5. Child quality/value of children	2	1.4	6	1.7
6. Contraception	0	0	8	2.3
7. Divorce	4	2.9	1	0.3
8. Extra-marital childbearing	1	0.7	0	0
9. (Female) education & careers	4	2.9	50	14.6
10. Financial reasons	22	15.7	26	7.6
11. Gender relations	2	1.4	0	0
12. Government policies/benefits	14	10	5	1.5
13. Housing market	1	0.7	27	7.9
14. Individualism	2	1.4	7	2
15. Infertility/Childlessness	7	5	37	10.8
16. Lifestyle	7	5	15	4.4
17. Marriage a. Lower rates b. Postponement	 6 4	 4.3 2.9	 4 6	 1.2 1.7
18. Men & childcare	0	0	3	0.9
19. Only children	1	0.7	10	2.9
20. Postponement of childbearing	4	2.9	63	18.4
21. Relationship formation	0	0	19	5.5
22. Religion	0	0	3	0.9
23. Unemployment a. Women b. Youth c. General	 4 13 6	 2.9 9.3 4.3	0	0
24. Work-family balance/Labour market structure	19	13.6	19	5.5
Total	**140**	**100**	**343**	**100**

Table 5 - Frequency of 'causes' mentioned in Greek and British newspapers

In most cases this meant being in a stable relationship and especially for Athenians, ideally, in a marital union. Yet the difficulties involved in finding a partner were never mentioned in the Greek print media, while in the British, where the issue was frequently debated, women were once again victimised for 'refusing to commit to relationships' (*Daily Mail*, 15/01/2001). Even once the 'correct' set of conditions was in place, a considerable degree of ambivalence, conflict and indecision shaped interviewees experiences of family building. For some, whether or not they would become mothers was never in question, speaking of having children as a 'need'; for others, it was not really a 'conscious decision' but an event that was allowed to happen. In fact, a number of births in both cities ranged from being 'planned accidents' to 'accidental plans' (Georgiadis 2006), challenging the procreative ideology of the 'willed pregnancy' (Ruhl 2002) conveyed in the press, in which individuals consciously and rationally manage their reproductive lives.

When the media did not hold women accountable for low fertility, they blamed the cost of childrearing, family-unfriendly employment conditions, insufficient child- or parent-friendly government policies and benefits, inadequate childcare provision, and the nature of the housing market. However, each set of newspapers either focused on different aspects of the same cause or placed a different degree of emphasis on each. For example, in reference to financial reasons, the Greek press mainly referred to low wages and the cost of education, in particular out-of-school tuition fees. The British, on the other hand, alluded to the high cost of childcare (*The Observer*, 09/05/2004), linking it to a cause almost entirely absent in the Greek media: property prices (*The Daily Telegraph*, 31/08/2001). 'High house prices are a very powerful contraceptive,' stated *The Times* (22/05/2004); 'Hot market may have cooled the birth rate,' claimed the *Sunday Times* (01/04/2001); 'Price boom, baby bust: As house prices keep rising, so the numbers of children being born in Britain keep falling. Could there be a connection?'. 'Yes, there could be,' answered *The Sunday Telegraph* (12/05/2002).

Although Athenian and London-based study participants did refer to most of the 'causes' mentioned in the print media in their own narratives of family building, they also referred to moral frameworks of a class-specific nature that the press did not touch on. Equally absent from the print media's accounts were the conflicting

feelings implicated in women's reproductive decisions. Although the lack of affordable childcare and restrictions around managing to work and mother were of concern to both Athenians and Londoners, they alone could not explain their attitudes towards childbearing and family size. Just as important were the values which influenced their views on what makes a 'good' mother, what is 'good enough' mothering or 'good quality' childcare. These values were themselves shaped by a multitude of forces, which the press largely ignored - as indicated, for example, by the Greek media's silence on the role of religious faith in 'underfertility' or their British counterparts' inattention to the impact of gender relations and, more generally, gender constructs. However, while in the media's debate over the 'causes' of low fertility underlying moral issues were concealed, in the discussion over 'consequences' they were much more explicit.

c) Consequences of low fertility

The leading concern in both the Greek and British print media was, in equal measure, the ageing of the population (Table 6). The issue was covered by newspapers with right- and left-wing political leanings and, in the majority of cases, was characterised in negative terms. An ageing population was linked to longer working hours and higher taxes (*Daily Mail*, 08/07/2002; *Ta Nea*, 22/01/2004), excessive pressure on the healthcare, pensions and social welfare systems (*The Guardian*, 17/09/2005; *Kathimerini* 13/10/2006), an increase in the retirement age (*The Guardian*, 23/03/2001; *Elefetherotypia*, 27/11/2007) and rising economic problems due to a growing proportion of savers and non-risk-takers (the old) rather than consumers and entrepreneurs (the young) (*The Observer*, 25/01/2004; *To Vima*, 04/08/2002). Solutions and attitudes to what was often described as a 'demographic time-bomb' (*The Independent*, 27/09/2003) varied, and are beyond the focus of this paper. It suffices to say that they ranged from encouraging women to have more children (*The Times*, 13/07/2007; *Ta Nea*, 22/01/2004) to increasing the rate of immigration (*To Vima*, 26/10/2003; *The Times*, 28/02/2003).

'Consequences'	Frequency			
	Greek press		British press	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1. Ageing society	43	38.4	38	38
2. Defence	6	5.4	1	1
3. Economic under-development	7	6.3	10	10
4. Education sector				
a. School closures	5	4.5	2	2
b. Fewer students	13	11.6	0	0
5. Environmental impact	0	0	30	30
6. Family	0	0	2	2
7. Population decline	33	29.5	17	17
8. Toy market	4	3.6	0	0
9. Voters	1	0.9	0	0
Total	**112**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Table 6 - Frequency of consequences mentioned in Greek and British papers

The second most important consequence of low fertility in the Greek press was population decline, even though Greece had not yet been affected by negative population growth[4] in large measure on account of immigration. The vast majority of articles focused on natural change and, more specifically, on the surplus number of deaths over births among Greeks. 'In half a century Greece will disappear!' exclaimed *Eleftherotypia* (24/04/2001). 'Greeks are getting older (and soon, fewer)' proclaimed *To Vima* (27/08/2008), following a report by Eurostat that the population of Greece is expected to fall by 2060. 'The threat of our self-disappearance is nightmarish, except that it is real,' said *To Vima* (04/02/2007). Such proclamations were reinforced by arguments that, at the same time, 'underfertility' was leading to a decrease in the armed forces, putting Greece in a vulnerable position viz. a viz. its more populous neighbours. 'The Turks today number 70 million and in a few years they will be 100 million, while we will be roughly the same as now. This is why our demographic problem constitutes a real national danger' (*Ta Nea*, 22/07/2003). With additional reports of a serious reduction in the number of Greek pupils and subsequent

[4] In 2008, the population of Greece grew to just over 11 million. However, the latest figures reveal that deaths were more numerous than births between 1998 and 2003 (Eurostat 2009). Although there has been natural population change since (Eurostat 2009), 17.4 per cent of the total number of births between 2004 and 2008 was due to immigrants (Drettakis 2010). In contrast, the population of the United Kingdom was just over 61 million in 2008 (Office for National Statistics 2009). Although net migration had been the main driver of population change between 1999 and 2008, natural population change was the leading contributor to population growth until mid-1999, while accounting for over 50 per cent of it in 2008 (Office for National Statistics 2009).

school closures (the third most frequently discussed consequence of 'underfertility'), the future of the nation looked bleak.

The British debate over population decline was a lot more subtle than the Greek one and was often linked to concerns over ageing (*The Daily Telegraph*, 07/08/2001). Between 2001 and 2009 only one newspaper used the phrase as a headline but even it took a positive spin on it, referring to its 'considerable environmental benefits' (*The Guardian*, 28/01/2006)[5]. On occasion, questions over the fate of the 'British-born' as opposed to the 'foreign-born' population (*The Daily Telegraph*, 23/08/2007) were raised (*The Observer*, 25/01/2004; *The Guardian*, 17/09/2005; *The Sunday Telegraph* 16/12/2007). However, it was not so much the decline of the 'native' population that was causing concern; it was - almost exclusively, in the right wing press - the reduction in the number of a certain 'class' of people: the middle-class. 'Overall population decline is only being prevented by immigration and a higher birth rate among non-graduate women' (*The Sunday Telegraph*, 22/04/07); 'The middle classes are letting us down: they must breed more' (*The Sunday Telegraph*, 14/11/2004); 'Nowhere is the population decline more marked than among the beleaguered middle classes. They have witnessed what is going on around them and feel unable to derive much hope. And so they prefer not to reproduce but retreat inside often childless lairs. It is a vicious circle spiralling ever faster' (*Daily Mail*, 01/02/2003).

Fertility differences by social class - and educational qualifications - have been identified by demographers. Haines (1989), for example, showed that fertility decline in England and Wales did not occur at the same time and with equal speed among the working-, middle- and upper-classes, while Buxton et al. (2005) have shown that parental social class and own social class, along with educational attainment, play an important role in determining the timing of first birth. However, the press simplified and distorted a very complex and inconclusive relationship between 'class' - itself difficult to define - education and fertility. As Rendall and Smallwood (2003) have argued, highly qualified women do reproduce later than those

[5] In contrast, population decline was frequently mentioned by the press in connection with Scotland. Reference to the UK population as a whole was more commonly in relation to its recent and prospective growth rather than decline.

with few qualifications but can end up having more children than them by shortening their birth intervals. For example, the majority of educated, professional mothers I interviewed in London had children in their early 30s but claimed they wanted to have at least two and most likely three children[6]. Berrington (2004), on the other hand, has also shown that women with a university degree were more likely than those without to remain childless or to have only one child - the latter being a situation that some of my informants could have easily found themselves in[7].

Some British newspapers also agreed with their Greek counterparts that a lower birth had a negative impact on a country's economic well-being (the fourth most commonly mentioned 'consequence' in both sets of newspapers). Their views, diverged, however, over the issue of climate change with none of the Greek newspapers debating the benefits of 'underfertility' on the state of the environment. This was in sharp contrast to the British press, which reported frequently on the issue. Interestingly, Athenian study-participants were as silent on the topic as their national media, while a number of the London-based interviewees, particularly the 'child-free', were keen to voice their concerns. In part, this divergence was due to the determined campaigning of the 'Optimum Population Trust' (OPT), a leading environmental charity and think tank concerned with the impact of population growth on the environment, unique to the UK. However, their success at attracting the British media's attention - and perhaps also that of the British women in my study - suggests that their movement, to a certain extent, was appealing. In addition, the 'green debate' (*The Guardian*, 15/04/2009) coincided with reports that the British and world populations were growing at alarming rates.

Whatever the reason, the reaction of the print media to the environmental debate ranged in tone. However, in accord with the afore-mentioned idea that in Britain reproduction is a 'private' affair (see section 3.a.), the majority of articles were against the OPT's widely reported campaign that, 'families should restrict themselves to having a maximum of two children' (*The Guardian*, 11/07/2007). 'Mind your own reproducing business,' cried *The Independent* (06/11/2007). 'The point … is that

[6] N.B. My sample was not representative.
[7] As the women I interviewed were still in the process of family-formation, I do not know how many children they ended up or will end up having.

individual families have the number of children they want to have for the most personal and local of reasons … A period of silence from the population control freaks would now be most welcome,' argued *The Sunday Times* (29/03/2009).

Critics of the OPT justified their approach on the principle that Britain's population was ageing and, thus, facing a pensions problem that only a higher birth rate could solve (*The Guardian*, 09/06/2007). In addition, the environmental argument, they claimed, was targeted at the middle-classes who already had a low fertility rate (*The Sunday Times*, 29/07/2007). 'We need babies, not Greens,' exclaimed a headline in *The Sunday Times* (13/05/2007). 'It is time we told the Optimum Population Trust to go forth and multiply'. Those in favour of fertility restrictions focused on its positives, such as the reduction of CO_2 emissions, global warming, water shortages, wars over oil, and the extinction of animal species (*The Independent*, 30/03/2006). Yet some questioned whether a lower birth rate would really have so many environmental benefits and so they took a more impartial view on the subject (*The Observer*, 11/11/2007). No matter what the perspective, this debate allows us to draw yet another interesting contrast between the Greek and British press: while the former urged readers to consider having children as a 'national' duty to prevent 'indigenous' population decline, the latter invited them to regard not having them as a 'moral' one (*The Times*, 31/08/2009). As the next section will show, this divergence in approach also resonated in the debate over 'solutions'.

d) Solutions to low fertility

In contrast to their Greek counterparts, the British print media did not commonly discuss strategies to increase the birth rate, yet when such strategies were mentioned, they tended to centre on improving the lives of families in general. While the Greek press also considered highly the policies that the British press held most dear (for instance those supporting working mothers and expanding the provision of childcare), it was overwhelmingly in favour of another approach in dealing effectively with 'underfertility', namely support for 'large' families. Various other measures were proposed in both debates (such as free treatment for infertile couples, more affordable housing, a demographic policy, a reduction in unemployment and an improvement in state education) but they were minor in comparison (Table 7).

'Solutions'	Frequency			
	Greek press		British press	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1. Bridge gap between desired versus actual fertility	4	2.9	5	8.1
2. Demographic policy	6	4.4	3	4.8
3. Economic development	6	4.4	0	0
4. Education	2	1.5	1	1.6
5. Family-friendly policies	45	32.8	43	69.3
6. Free infertility treatment	1	0.7	3	4.8
7. Housing market	2	1.5	1	1.6
8. Labour market conditions	11	8	2	3.2
9. Local government	3	2.2	0	0
10. Repatriation	2	1.5	0	0
11. Support for 'large' families				
a. General	0	0	1	1.6
b. *Polyteknoi*	28	20.4	0	0
c. 3rd child benefits	27	19.7	3	4.8
Total	**137**	**100**	**62**	**100**

Table 7 - Frequency of 'solutions' mentioned in Greek and British newspapers

Thus, despite a hostile reaction from the British media to the idea of childbearing as a national 'duty' (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2004), the government's 'laissez-faire' attitude towards fertility issues (Sigle-Rushton 2008) was subject to criticism, not so much because of its failure to deal with low fertility *per se* but because it signified a lack of attention to the needs of families in general, and working mothers in particular. 'Accommodating personal choice, the principle behind rejecting pro-family policy, is no longer expanding but limiting the freedoms of families,' argued *The Observer* (26/06/2005). Many believed that an increase in financial assistance for families and in measures to improve childcare options and the work-family balance was necessary, not just in order to raise the British birth rate but also to reduce a reported 'gap' between women's ideal and achieved family size (*The Observer*, 19/02/2006).

Particular attention was paid to policies being put into effect by the French government (*The Daily Telegraph*, 12/12/2003; *The Guardian*, 26/06/2004; *Daily Mail*, 23/09/2005). 'Why French women are better off,' argued *The Guardian*

(01/05/2003) in reaction to a scheme to give families in France €800 per month upon the birth of their first child and a further €235per month if one parent stayed at home for the first six months of the child's life. 'Pay us to be mothers,' declared another (*Sunday Times*, 25/09/2005), this time in response to a French government initiative to give middle-class women the equivalent of £500 a month to have a third child if they stopped working for a year. However, the French schemes and others like them did have their critics. Financial incentives were particularly controversial because, on the one hand, they were seen as encouraging women to 'stay at home' (*The Guardian*, 01/05/2003) and on the other hand, they were in danger of disrespecting the principle that family-formation was an exclusively private matter. 'The latest wheeze to boost the birthrate by giving cash for babies is very bad news,' reported *The Guardian* (24/05/2004) in response to an Australian 'baby bonus' scheme. 'Paying people to have babies is a crack-handed, retrograde, imperialist policy'.

This kind of reaction was very different from the sort expressed by the Greek press. In most cases, Greek newspapers and their readers not only welcomed financial incentives but demanded them in even greater quantity, especially for 'families with many children', known as *polyteknes oikoyeneies* or simply the *polyteknoi*. By law, the *polyteknoi* were those with four children or more, but since 2002 the Greek Conservative Party, *Nea Demokratia*, had made a pre-election pledge to extend the benefits entitled by such families to those with just three children. Having failed to deliver fully on its promises once in power, *Nea Demokratia* was subject to a barrage of criticism by both left- and right-leaning newspapers. 'Ranking families with three children with those of the *polyteknoi* will remain a dream,' maintained *Ta Nea* (07/12/2005). 'The financial cost of incorporating families with three children into the *polyteknoi*, with a parallel increase in benefits to the *polyteknoi* as a whole, is truly insignificant compared to the ensuing national gain,' explained an article in *Kathimerini* (05/03/2006).

While not everyone agreed with the government's show of favouritism towards the *polyteknoi* and the *triteknoi* ('families with three children'), few opposed state intervention in family affairs in principle or in the name of 'underfertility' as long as it was to their advantage. 'A government which stands next to the family is not necessarily a chauvinist government-nurturer, but simply an active government,'

purported *Kathimerini* (17/03/2006). Reports that Greece offered some of the lowest and most 'meagre' family benefits in Europe (*Ta Nea*, 13/03/2004) further encouraged such views. Others were against the privileges enjoyed by the *polyteknoi* but not against the ideology that childbearing was a 'national' duty. For example, *To Vima* (26/01/2003) argued that, 'to have many children does not constitute a national deed, not even a deed. A national deed is to produce good citizens and this is achieved both by those with many children (*polyteknoi*) and by those with few (*ligoteknoi*). In addition, there is no need to receive a reward for this because it is amongst our obligations.' Government assistance, the article concluded, should be offered to all those who are economically disadvantaged, irrespective of family size.

In both Greece and the UK, the print media's suggestions for enhancing fertility assumed that pronatalist and family-friendly policies were largely effective once implemented. *The Guardian* (19/05/2006), for example, asserted that a rise in the birth rate of England and Wales to 1.8 children per woman, its highest point in over ten years, 'may reflect Blair policies'. However, a number of demographic studies have shown that the link between policies and fertility is not so clear-cut (for a review of the literature see Gauthier 2007, and for an even more recent discussion see Special Issue of Vienna Yearbook of Demographic Research, edited by Gauthier and Philipov 2008).

Irrespective of arguments presented in either the press or the demographic literature, the women I interviewed in Athens and London had their own views. British interviewees never raised the issue of fertility-enhancing policies, which was hardly surprising given their lack of concern for low fertility in general. They did, however, talk at length about the difficulties of maintaining a work-family balance and arranging childcare, therefore indirectly voicing their opinions about the absence or ineffectiveness of certain family and work policies that could increase the birth rate. The Greek women were much more critical of their government's approach (or rather the lack of it) to the welfare of mothers, children and the family, and although they were concerned about 'underfertility' and how best to deal with it, they often complained it was ironic that the government spoke of the 'demographic problem' when it was doing so little to improve the lives of Greeks and their families. They, certainly, were not willing to have more children for the 'good of the country'.

4. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, differences in how the Greek and British print media debated the subject of low fertility emerged. Even issues that were covered by both sets of newspapers either assumed unique significance in each context or were given a distinctive emphasis. Dominating the discussion were two diverse ideologies towards fertility in general. On the one hand the British ideology defined childbearing as a matter of private choice, and on the other hand the ideology prevalent in the Greek press viewed reproduction as a process with significant implications beyond the individual couple. These ideologies appeared to have had considerable impact on whether or not women in Athens and London perceived low fertility to be important, on why they believed it had transpired and on what its consequences were likely to be. Yet they had only partial success in shaping their experiences of family-formation and their attitudes towards having children. By fully embracing these ideologies, therefore, the print media distorted and suppressed the many ways in which Greek and British women managed their reproductive lives. In conclusion, the media provide a wealth of information about cross-cultural approaches to low fertility and meanings of reproduction more generally, but they cannot be relied upon to inform scholars and policymakers of the issues that matter to the public. They can only point them in the direction of themes that need further exploration using theoretical and methodological tools that can better be utilised to capture the experiences and perspectives of individuals.

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