WHERE IS THE STORK? 
SOCIOLOGICAL INSIGHTS INTO 
BARRIERS TO FERTILITY IN SINGAPORE

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Abstract

Low fertility has become a global phenomenon in developed economies, with low birth rates and shrinking populations threatening the projected labour supply of the future. The next generation of parents-to-be grew up in conditions that were governed by change in the ideologies of family, parenthood, children, and work. These new ideologies have resulted in raised expectations of the form that families should take, and have, inadvertently, become barriers to family formation. Focus group discussions with young, educated adults who were at the point in their life when decisions on marriage and procreation were impending highlighted two main ideologies in the discourse. The first was the ideology of the family—and particularly on expectations of parenthood—and the second the ideology of paid work. Both of these ideologies demand total compliance from young adults, and the resultant contradiction makes it impossible for them to serve both masters. The result is that many feel inadequate and unwilling to start a family.

Introduction

Singapore is experiencing its lowest fertility rate since gaining independence in 1965. In the initial years after independence, the state focused on nation building, economic development, and the curbing

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of population growth. Population control policies were quickly put in place, and information on birth control was disseminated, with generous state-sponsored incentives for exercising birth control serving as the carrot to conformity (see Straughan’s forthcoming study for details of family policies in Singapore; Graham 1995). The total fertility rate (TFR) reached replacement level in 1975 and has been declining ever since, largely because of declining marriage rates (Cheung 1999). Several macro-level elements have contributed to change in the marriage market. As Singapore strove to meet the human-power demands of a labour-intensive industrialized economy, opportunities for women to engage in both paid work and formal education were liberalized. Against this social backdrop, the structure and function of the family gradually changed from the traditional, extended form—in which there was a clear gender division of domestic responsibilities and women stayed at home to fulfill their primary responsibilities of caring for their children, home, husband, and elderly family members—to the contemporary form that is prevalent today, which tends to be nuclear in structure, and in which expectations of gender roles have converged somewhat, with both men and women eager to capitalize on the rewards of paid work. Women who participate in the labour force tend to have fewer children (Lesthaeghe 1995).

Marriage rates have been decreasing since the 1970s. In 2004, 20% of men between the ages of 35 and 39 were single compared to 11% in 1950. The figures for women tripled over the same period: 5% of females were single in 1970 compared to 16% in 2004 (Singapore Department of Statistics 2006). Delayed marriage among women translates into fewer years that are available for childbearing. Singapore has now fallen into a low-fertility trap, and it will be difficult for the government to raise fertility now that it has declined to below 1.5 births per woman (Lutz and Skirbekk 2005; McDonald 2002; Rindfuss et al. 2004).

As Singapore suffered its second straight year of a record low TFR in 2005 (1.24), the government intensified its campaign to promote the family as a social institution. Pro-family policies were rolled out with a great fanfare in 2000, and were enhanced in 2004. These policies include the “Baby Bonus Scheme” of financial incentives to encourage married couples to have larger families, the extension of maternity leave from 8 weeks to 12 weeks to help women strike a balance between work and family, and the introduction of paternity