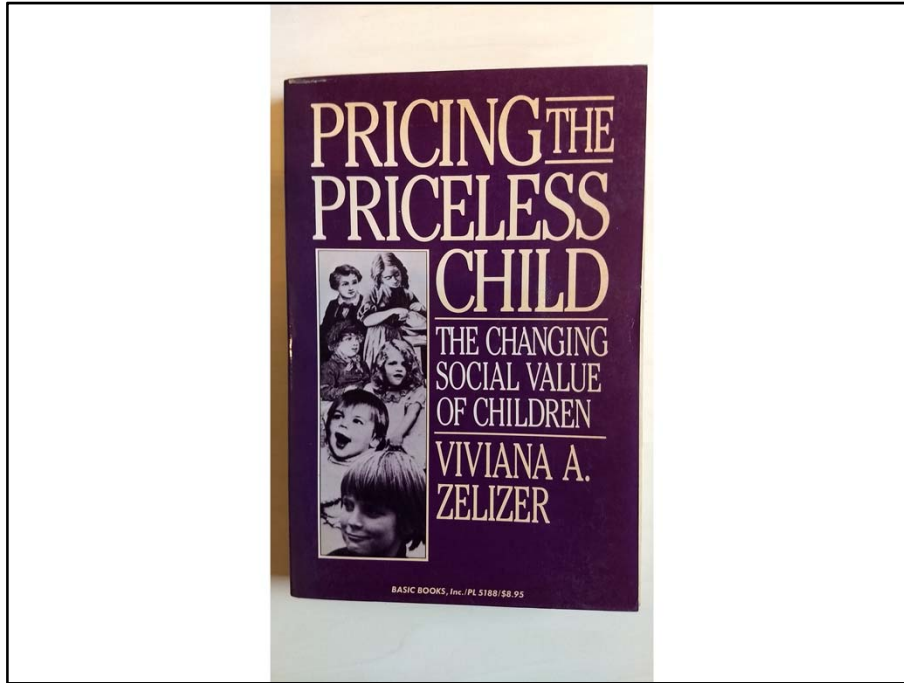


## Comparative perspectives on “pricing the priceless child”

Anne H. Gauthier  
IUSSP 2017

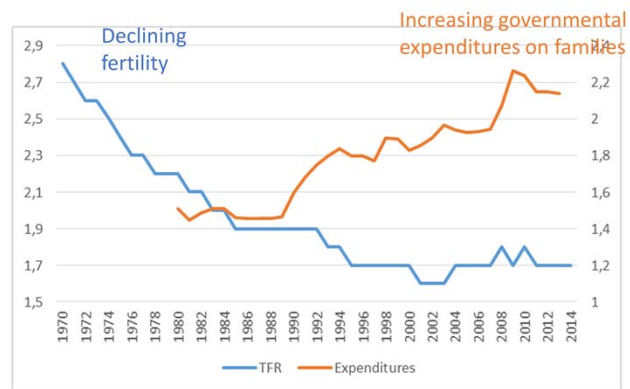
*Many thanks for this. I want first to thank the IUSSP and the Mattei-Dogan Foundation for this award: I am most honoured. My journey into comparative research has stretched over several continents. It all started with the Department of Demography at the Université de Montréal which continues today to inspire young scholars but especially to pass on to them a passion for demography and a deep respect for the IUSSP. My journey then continued to the UK, to the USA, back to Canada, and now at the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) where I have the privilege to work with great colleagues and with my GGP (Generations and Gender Programme) team and to share their commitment to make the best comparative data available to researchers. Thank you to all of you. And a special thanks to my husband, Nico, for all his support, love and wisdom. Our life together is totally connected to the IUSSP conferences – but that’s a topic for another time.*

What I intend to do today is to capture in a 10 to 15 minutes period some of the puzzles and research questions that have marked my work so far.



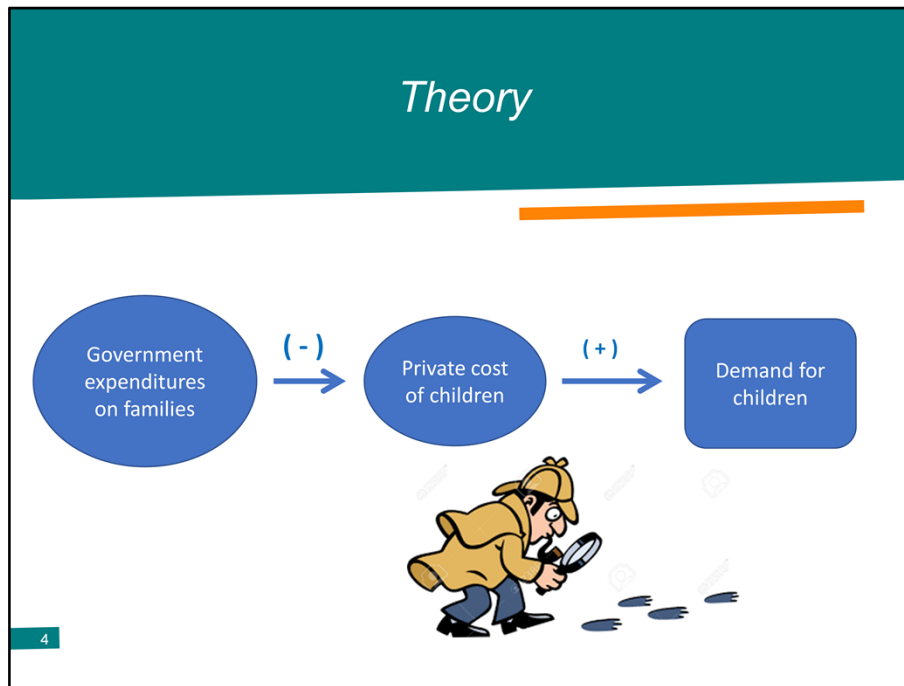
The title of my presentation is inspired by the book of Viviana Zelizer published in 1985. Her work focused on the period at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries and focused on institutions that were trying to put a price tag on children. I will take a different approach, first by focusing on a much more recent period, and second by looking at both public and private investment in children.

## Research puzzle



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But, as I keep repeating to my students, each intellectual journey starts with a research puzzle. In my case, it was the strong decline in fertility observed in industrialized countries since the mid-1960s and –at the same time --- a strong increase in governmental expenditures on families with children.



Such trends did not match the economic theory of fertility. Instead what the theory says is that an increase in governmental expenditures for families should decrease the private cost of children for parents, and in turn should increase the demand for children – at least if everything else is equal.

So, this was my starting point, or rather the question of what was actually the effect of family policies on fertility?



On my own and with colleagues, we have examined this question in several publications and via one database that is still used today and is open access (the Comparative Family Policy Database).

We looked at the effect of cash benefits to families (eg. family allowances, various leave arrangements in connection to childbirth and at childcare provision), the hypothesis being that they should have a positive effect on fertility.

## *Effect of family policy on fertility*

- Small magnitude (or none)
- Short-term (timing)
- Variation across countries, types of policies, and individuals



- Statistical issues & policy design (contradictions, stability),.....
- Eligibility to policies



Comparative Family Policy Database

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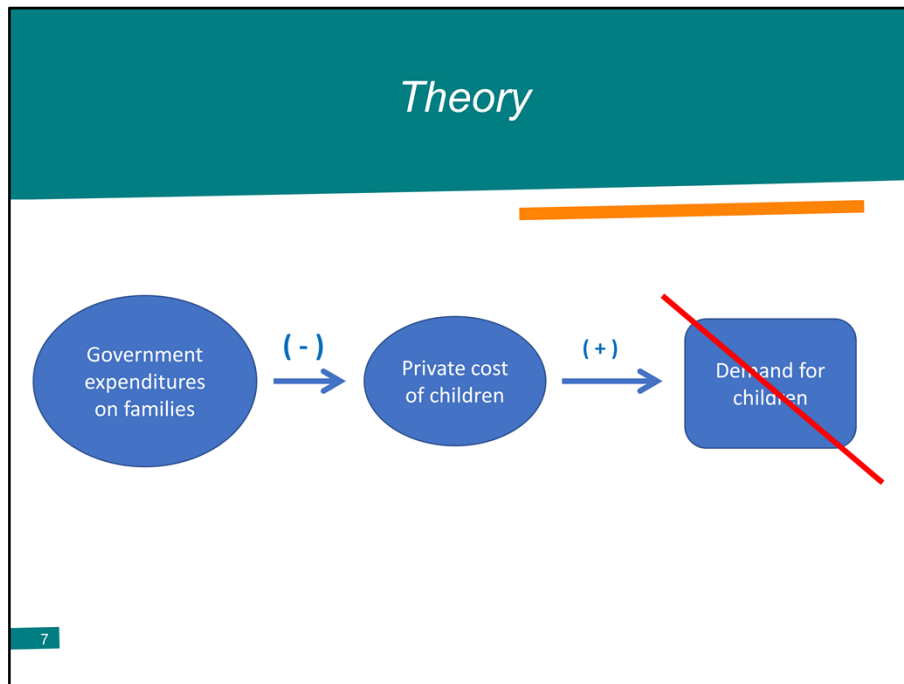
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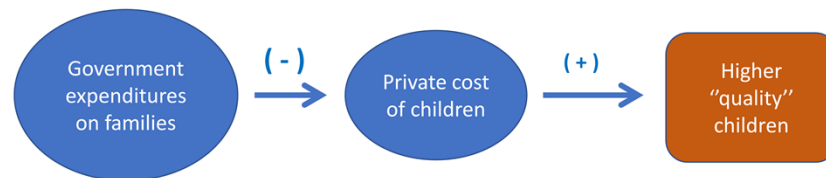
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What we found was no complete unanimity across studies. But in general, the effect of family policies on fertility tends to be of small magnitude (with some studies finding no effect at all), to be only short-term (that is by affecting more the timing of birth rather than the completed family size), and importantly to show large variations across countries, types of policies and individuals. These findings raise key questions regarding our statistical strategy to adequately capture and measure the impact of policy, but also raise issues related to the stability or not of policies over time, the contradictions embeded in national family policies (across different measures), and the sheer eligibility to policies which is an element which the literature has not sufficiently examined so far.



But of course, the theory also tells us that there is another possible mechanism by which an increase in governmental expenditures for families would NOT lead to an increased demand for children, but instead a demand for children of higher quality through a quantity-quality trade-off.

## Theory... Tradeoff

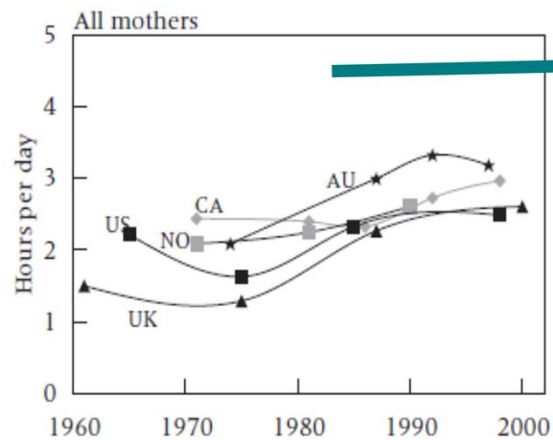


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Now, demographers and sociologists have never been totally comfortable with the term "higher quality" of children, so I will instead use the term cost of children or simply parental investment into children.



## Higher time investment

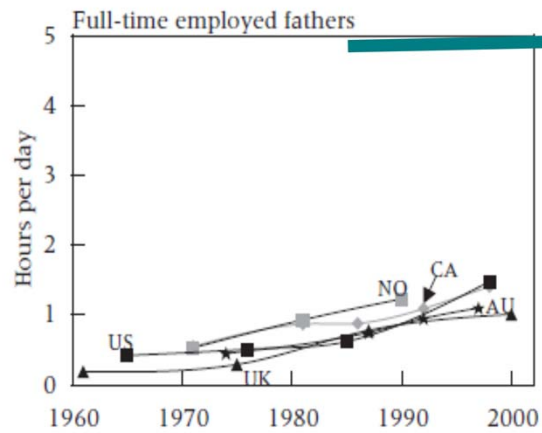


9 Source: Gauthier, A. H., Smeeding, T. M., Furstenberg, F. F., Jr. (2004). 'Are parents investing less time in children? Trends in selected industrialized countries'. *Population and Development Review*, 30, 4: 647–71.

So, what does the empirical literature tell us about it?

Using comparative time-use surveys, we were able to show that – contrary to what is often portrayed in the public press---- the time that parents devote to their children has increased over time. The data here show the trends for mothers for selected countries since the 1960s and show a clear increase over time.

## *Higher time investment*



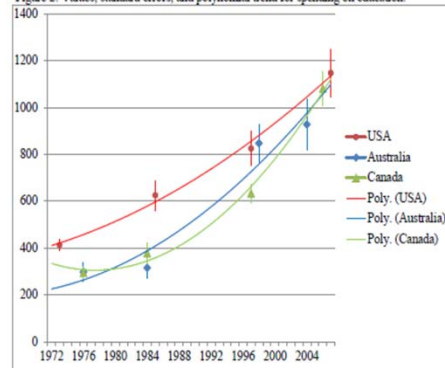
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Source: Gauthier, Furstenberg, Smeeding (2004).

We found similar results also for mothers who are active in the labour market (ie with a paid job) and also for fathers (displayed here).

## Higher financial investment

Figure 2: Values, standard errors, and polynomial trend for spending on education.



11 Source: Kornrich, S., Gauthier, A.H., Furstenberg, F.F.Jr. (2012). Changes in Private Investments in Children across Three Liberal Welfare States: Australia, Canada, and the United States

More recently, and using data from family expenditures surveys, we were able to document also the strong increase in parental expenditures on their children. The graph here shows the increase for three countries for the category of expenditures on education.

## *Higher parental investment*

- Universal? All countries?
- ... but strong educational and income gradient

WHY?

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So, all the evidence does point to higher parental investment in children – at least for the countries for which we have comparable data. At the same time, the data also point to strong differences across parents, ie across different education and income groups, and even to a polarization over time suggesting a growing inequality among children in the resources (time and money) that parents invest into them.

The key question is WHY? That is, why this steep increase in parental investment in children and is it observed in all countries?

## *Why are we investing more in children?*



Photo: own family archive

**A new social  
norm?**

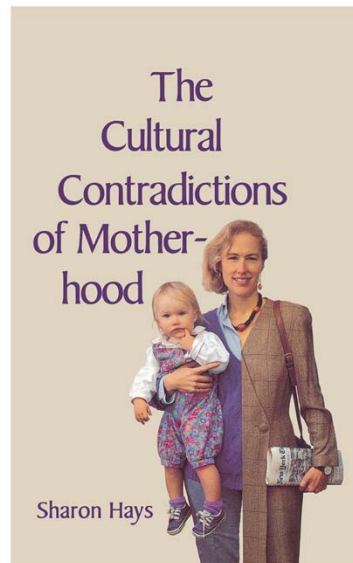


Photo by [Andrae Ricketts](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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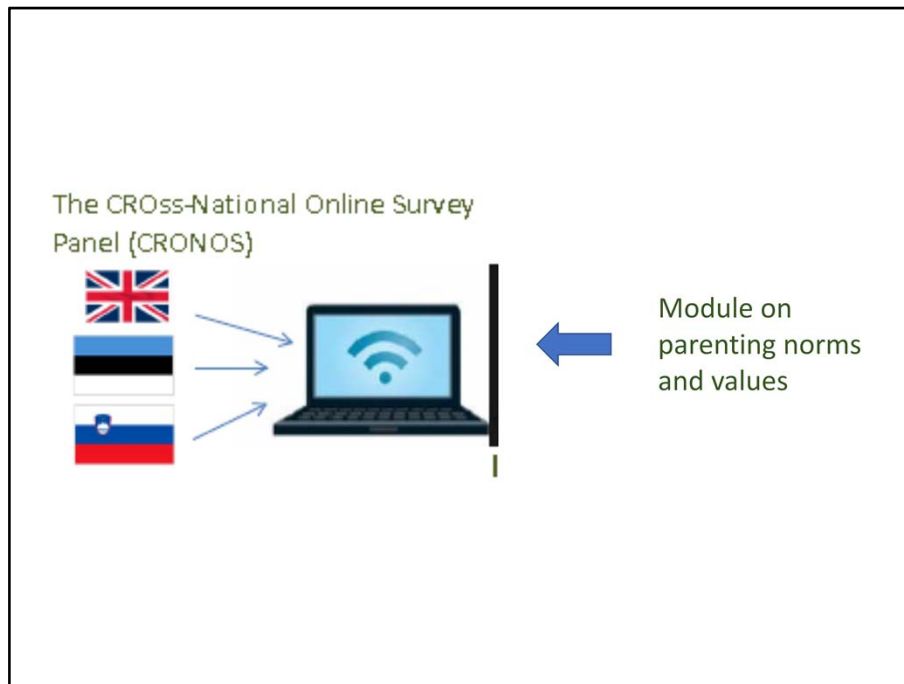
Each discipline seems to have its own answer to the WHY? The economists say that parents have increased their investment in children in order to increase the future earnings of their children (especially in increasingly competitive labour markets), while the sociologists have suggested that parents have increased their investment in children because of a new social norm that puts pressures on parents to invest more in their children.

Intensive mothering as  
...  
“child-centered, expert-  
guided, emotionally  
absorbing, labor  
intensive, and  
financially expensive”  
(Hays, 1986: 54)



In recent years, it is this question of a possible new social norm that I have been investigating together with colleagues: in other words, is there a new social norm in what is expected of parents – and especially in what is expected of good parents?

Part of the answer to this question comes from the qualitative literature especially the work of Sharon Hays (1996) who coined the term “intensive mothering” which she defines as “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive” (p. 54). Her point is that this new norm has redefined what is perceived as a good parent today, and has put high pressures on parents (mainly mothers) to comply to this new norm. But while there is some evidence of such a new norm of good parenting, this is mostly from qualitative studies, and from very few countries. The challenge for us is therefore three-fold: first to try to measure and quantify this new norm, to test it in different countries, and to better understand its link with fertility decisions.



With colleagues, we have been fielding a series of items aimed at measuring this new parenting norm in a recent pilot cross-national online survey (CRONOS). Our results so far (which we have presented in a poster at the IUSSP conference) are very preliminary. They suggest that indeed there seems to be strong social norms as to what defines good parents, and what is expected of them. These norms suggest an attitude to parenting that is very child-centered and which carries a large maternal responsibility. However it is still very unclear the extent to which the same results hold across the three countries of our study, and the links with fertility decisions still need to be explored.

Note: for more information on CRONOS, see: <https://seriss.eu/news/newsletter/survey-future-online-establishing-cronos/>

## *“Pricing the priceless child”*

- “pricing” – better estimates of public and private cost of children
- “priceless child” – better understanding of motives for parental investment



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I started my presentation with the title “Pricing the priceless child” and the journey continues. First, “pricing” because we need better estimates of the public and private cost of children: estimates which take into account the national context and the trends over time; second “priceless” in that we need to be able to better capture the societal pressures on parents to meet the new standards of good parenting, the reasons for these new standards, and their impact on fertility decisions.



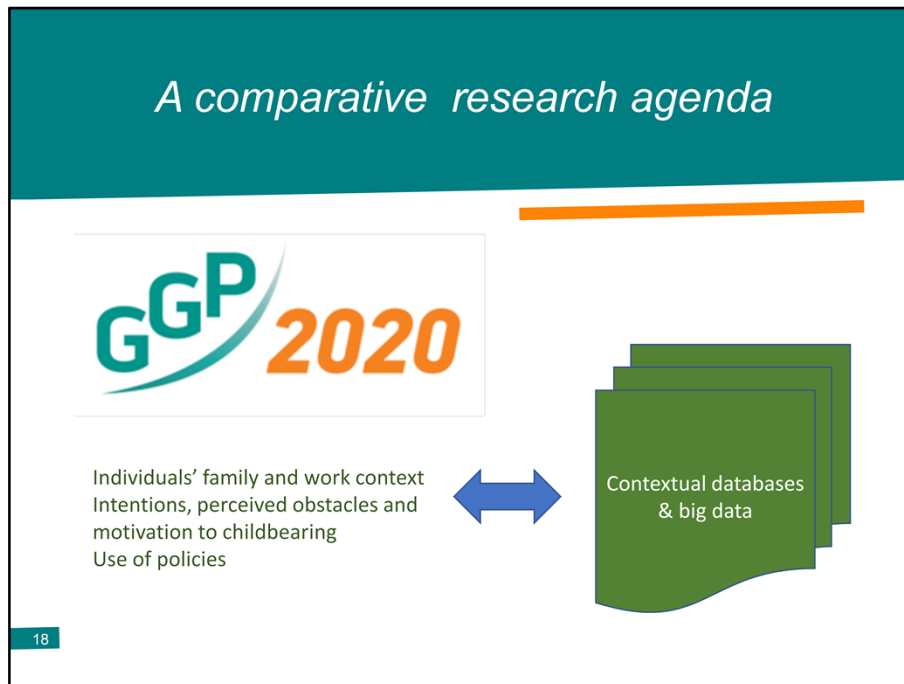
## *A comparative research agenda*



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But the keyword of my title is also “comparative”. In demography there is a rich tradition of cross-nationally comparable surveys including the World Fertility Survey (WFS), the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), the Family and Fertility Survey (FFS) in in more recent years the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP). These surveys have a wealth of information on fertility determinants but little on parent-child relationship and on parental investment into children.

As my team and colleagues are preparing for the new round of GGP data collection in 2020, the challenges will be to finance these surveys and to ensure their sustainability in terms of research infrastructure. But the challenges will also be to adjust our instruments as to better reflect and capture the complexities of today’s family forms and childbearing decisions.



In particular, we need to better understand the pressures on today's parents, their resistance to these pressures and the role of the economic and cultural context. To say that there has been a quality-quantity trade-off in the demand for children is probably too easy. In fact, the question, as raised by R. Schoen and colleagues in 1997, is: why do people still want children, especially in view of the very large personal investment that having a child entails. We do have some theoretical elements of response, but as more and more countries reach low fertility (and in totally different national context), we need to better understand how governments and individuals from various socioeconomic status do actually price the priceless child.

I thank you again, and especially the IUSSP for this award.

Reference: Why Do Americans Want Children? By Robert Schoen, Young J. Kim, Constance A. Nathanson, Jason Fields and Nan Marie Astone, Population and Development Review, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Jun., 1997), pp. 333-358

*Thank you*

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