

Book review

Reproductive and genetic responsibility: whose burden?

Ivett Szalma: *Attitudes, norms, and beliefs related to assisted reproduction technologies among childless women in a pronatalist society*¹

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Ivett Szalma (Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence and Corvinus University of Budapest) has in the last decade established herself as one of the key researchers in the Hungarian and international sociological community who is taking on the task of understanding public attitudes towards childlessness, infertility, and assisted reproduction technologies (ART). The present book fits seamlessly into her area of expertise on the statistical analysis of public attitudes towards ART, but also expands on her former quantitative focus and takes on an investigation of the topic through in-depth qualitative inquiry. Thus, the research built upon in the publication draws on the findings of other relevant work of Szalma's, yet introduces the topic from a new methodological standpoint. To achieve a new level of understanding of social attitudes to medically assisted reproduction, Szalma adapts not merely one qualitative approach, but ventures into the topic with a multi-method qualitative research design. The combination of in-depth interviews and focus groups has been gaining ground in the qualitative research community recently. The choice to sample childless women allows for a unique, more focused investigation of ART that generates an understanding of the attitudes of its potential users.

1 Szalma, I. (2021). *Attitudes, Norms, and Beliefs Related to Assisted Reproduction Technologies among Childless Women in a Pronatalist Society*. Springer Nature.

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The book is part of Springer Essentials, a book series dedicated to disseminating up-to-date knowledge in concentrated forms with a genuine focus on the essence of relevant research topics and novel findings from a wide array of investigations, with the aim of delivering to the reader current and comprehensible research results. Szalma's edition in the series introduces specialist knowledge in a compact form and will be compelling for audiences interested in obtaining an overview of public attitudes to childlessness and its medical treatment, but may also be attractive to those wishing to gain more insight into the macro and micro workings of official governmental communication and social policies in pronatalist societies.

Szalma's analysis goes beyond merely looking at general attitudes and dives deeper into understanding a handful of specificities. Further issues that are investigated deal with interpretations of partnership roles, age-related restrictions, and the understandings of the physical and emotional burdens that accompany ART procedures, with all sub-topics embedded in the pronatalist approach which Szalma introduces uniquely and clearly in a dedicated chapter that is reviewed on the subsequent pages.

The book can be divided into five main sections: (1) it opens with an introduction to Hungarian demographic changes and challenges; (2) then follows Szalma's presentation of the pronatalist approach, which serves as the theoretical background for the analysis, but also represents the Hungarian social context of the research. Next, (3) a methodological section devoted to the detailing of the use of qualitative research methods relevant to interviews and focus groups is included. The following four chapters (4) introduce the main results and discuss their interpretations, while (5) the book finishes with well-thought-out concluding remarks by the author, and suggests important implications that may be the subject of future investigation.

The present review follows this linear logic of the book, but at times allows for some contextual explanations and discussion of the implications of the presented findings for the body of knowledge about gendered reproductive responsibility, attitudes concerning assisted reproduction technologies, and the utilization of multi-method qualitative research design. At the end of the review, the relevant contributions to the sociological body of knowledge exemplified by the author are collected and introduced in thematic groups.

The Rising Trend to Involuntary Childlessness

The author deals with several dimensions of childlessness, involuntary childlessness, and infertility in the introductory chapter. Szalma details how the rate of childlessness has grown since the socialist era, even though members of Hungarian society still see having children and parenthood as a highly important life event (Kapitány, 2015; Kapitány and Spéder, 2019; Miettinen and Szalma, 2014; Spéder, 2021). Birth rates are declining despite the fact that right-wing Orbán-led governments have prioritized economic support for families – and moreover have embedded public discourse within

a family-friendly pronatalist rhetoric. Szalma references Bourdieu (1996) when discussing how the government's family policy is rather restrictive in its definition of the family – the government and its policy measures favour traditional family settings based on the marriage of a man and a woman and their children. Szalma posits that this type of traditional family definition and interpretation persists to this day in Hungarian society, and the acceptance of these social norms regarding partnerships explains why one of the major reasons for contemporary childlessness is the lack of a suitable partner. Moreover, as Szalma had argued in earlier publications (2014), Hungarian society places very high value on biologically related children. In addition to the societal factors influencing childlessness, medically diagnosed infertility is also rising (Anderson, 2005; MHCH, 2019; Bayer, Alper and Pezinas, 2018). The share of infertile couples who need assisted reproduction technologies to conceive has risen dramatically in the last decade from 10-15% to 15-20% of all couples (MHCH, 2019), although the number of children born with the help of medically assisted reproductive technologies is considerably lower in Hungary than in Western-European or Anglocentric countries.

The Pronatalist Approach

The second chapter of the book is dedicated to detailing the pronatalist orientation of the Hungarian government and the policy measures introduced to encourage especially better-off or middle-class women to have more children. These include income-tax exemptions, low-interest loans for housing, debt waivers, and even subsidies for the purchase of a large vehicle. Balancing family and professional life is also supported. From the perspective of the study, the pronatalist ideology of these policies and their communication are even more important than the policy measures themselves. These almost only focus on or target women, and governmental rhetoric also defines the importance of having children as a dominantly female issue. This type of pronatalist framing of the problem creates an unequally distributed extra burden for women. Reproductive and genetic responsibility in pronatalist societies always over-emphasizes the role and duty of women (Heitlinger, 1991; Mills, 2011; Parry, 2005; Rivkin-Fish, 2010).

Quoting verbatim the prime minister and other leading politicians in the chapter is a clever tactic of the author for several different reasons. “*I want to make a comprehensive agreement with Hungarian women, because demography is ultimately up to them and it is [...] at their discretion. [...] So [it's] a personal matter that is also important to the community, I can also say that it is the most personal matter, and only the ladies can decide that [about it]*” (Orbán on Kossuth Radio, 20 April 2018). The above quote not only illustrates the political and social realities of pronatalism but also emphasizes the rhetorical and linguistic means of placing the burden of reproductive responsibility on women. This type of analytical approach, focusing on pronatalist discourse on infertility and assisted reproduction is less embedded in sociological inquiry.

Szalma argues that the pronatalist macro-level approaches to ART availability also affect women on a micro-level. The author accepts the feminist concept that ART can help women become mothers, but also emphasizes that this may lead to an additional burden on them as the use of ART becomes another form of responsibility – reproductive and genetic. This unequal distribution of the reproductive burden and blame is especially interesting since the medical literature clearly states that there are no significant differences between the sexes when it comes to fertility-related problems (MHCH, 2019; Bayer, Alper and Pezinas, 2018).

While pronatalist thinking values the birth of every child, pronatalist inclinations regarding the use of ART are more selective (Rivkin-Fish, 2010). The author points out that access to medically assisted reproduction is restricted – the Hungarian pronatalist approach “*explicitly favours heterosexual women and implicitly discourages single women*” (p. 7) (although research has shown that, in practice, lesbian women participate in ART as single women [Takács, 2018]). The discourses of governmental actors and legal restrictions are influential factors that are vividly introduced in Chapters 6 and 7 of the book, which discuss the public acceptance of traditional partnership norms and age-related restrictions on access to ART.

Using Qualitative Methods for Depth

Szalma’s prior investigations into the topic were carried out using large databases (Szalma, 2014; Miettinen and Szalma, 2014; Szalma and Bitó, 2021). In this book, she specifically highlights her intention to expand on this knowledge through qualitative understanding in order to identify women’s arguments and narratives behind the statistical patterns. The reviewer finds that the reliance on mixed methods is highly valuable in sociological inquiry, making the multi-method qualitative approach commendable and useful – especially in terms of how the author presents her results. Szalma provides a comparative analysis of the data stemming from the four research interests which not only structures the findings in an easily comprehensible way, but also highlights the unique benefits of the qualitative multi-method approach. The simultaneous use of individual qualitative methods (such as semi-structured interviews) and focus groups not only make detailed discussion possible, but also permit observation of how group dynamics influence opinions and answers pertaining to such a sensitive topic. This in itself is valuable for the sociological community, as we see that combining research methods is becoming increasingly popular in domestic and international research (Creswell, 2015). It also shows the author’s familiarity with quantitative and qualitative research paradigms alike.

Nuanced Attitudes

The introduction of the research results is quite direct and logical, helping the reader navigate the topics and the distinct methodologies. Szalma's earlier quantitative work has demonstrated that there is a supportive attitude towards ART in Hungary (Szalma 2014; Szalma and Djundeva, 2020; Szalma and Bitó 2021) and a similar conclusion was reached by Závecz (2017). International literature also shows that the general attitude towards ART is positive, and most societies see such treatment as an opportunity for parents to conceive the children they wish for. This relative uniformity of opinion cannot be observed in the results of the qualitative interviews, where the opinions and the underlying factors are more nuanced. As Szalma puts it: "*I found that they do not have a consistent view about ART, rather quite diverse attitudes*" (p 15).

The results show a spectrum of views, from supportive to dismissive, and the author theorizes that underpinning these differences is age and experiences of a "standardized life-course" – and an attitude that blames women for running out of time because they focused on building a career. The older women in her sample were much more prone to these negative opinions and to placing the blame and burden on women who remain childless. On the other hand, Szalma's results also resonate with other research findings that emphasize the need for financial and work-related stability before starting a family. In her own research, the author of the present review has found that the material dimension (burden) is one of the most important concerns for patients who partake of medically assisted reproduction, since until recently the costs of medication, treatment cycles, and missing work were seen as one of the major deterrents to having treatment (Bauer, 2021). An interesting finding of the interviews was how older women expressed resentment about the unnatural nature of the technology and found its use superfluous. The importance of age and socialization is also highlighted by Szalma when introducing the results of the focus groups in which participants were more supportive. Participants belonged to a younger age group, but the reviewer also sees a possible alternative explanation in the group dynamics and related unwillingness to express minority, unpopular opinions in an environment of focus group research.

One of the most interesting findings presented in the chapter is very much in line with the concept of gendered reproductive responsibility that is discussed earlier. As mentioned, pronatalist societies place the burden of reproduction on women: this is confirmed by Szalma's results, who found that participants focus on how the technologies can benefit women, but failed to express opinions about men – despite the relevant changes in the role of fathers in recent decades, including with respect to ART (Locock and Alexander, 2006; Reed, 2012).

The Hegemony of Heterosexual Partnerships

Szalma's results show that age is the most decisive determinant of attitudes towards single women who conceive using ART, and that the respondents' arguments focused

on how children need to learn the two main gender roles. This type of traditionalist thinking has been present in Hungarian public attitudes for a while, but definitely may have become more intense due to the attention the topic has received in official governmental communication. It is important to keep in mind that in the Hungarian public discourse there has been limited debate on biotechnological innovations in general, and ART only becomes the subject of social discourse when (for example) religious leaders take a stance about it, or the Fundamental Law is changed so that non-heterosexual couples are excluded from consideration as a family. In addition, religion also influences women's perceptions, but this argumentation is two-sided – while the latter reject the Catholic Church's negative attitude to ART, they only endorse its use as part of a traditional, heterosexual family. Interestingly, while theoretically supportive of the technology when asked if they would partake in treatments, participants excluded themselves from pursuing this option.

Does Age Matter?

The dilemma of age and knowledge about the fertility window are unique aspects of the sociological inquiry into ART. It has been shown by Vicsek (2018) that in some cases women are not overwhelmingly knowledgeable about the medical limitations of fertility treatment, and that their understanding of the success rate of ART is not always accurate (moreover, that at times they rely on examples from representations in the media, including extreme celebrity cases). This has also been confirmed by work of the reviewer (Bauer, 2021). Szalma's results concur with the findings: she states that interviewees see ART treatments as an effective way to overcome the decline in fertility that occurs after the age of 35 or 40 – they also tended to overestimate the age at which successful pregnancy is still possible. While these results to some extent also portray these misconceptions and “fertility myths”, the data also highlight other dimensions that influence the portrayed attitudes.

Surprisingly, the focus group discussions did not touch upon this issue of age – the only experience participants had of what it meant to have children later in life was that of their parents. In fact, the focus group participants mentioned that any restriction on access to ART based on age was unfair. Their focus was more on how long one should wait after unsuccessful conception to try ART.

The Physical and Emotional Costs of ART

A highly relevant question is raised in the last chapter that deals with the physical and psychosocial consequences of medically assisted reproduction. While several studies have investigated these consequences (Holter et al., 2006; Verhaak et al. 2006), the question has been studied through different lenses. While ample research focuses on the issue from a medical/psychological perspective, Hungarian sociological inquiry into

these experiences and their impact on decision making has been scarce (examples being Vicsek, Bauer and Szolnoki, 2019; Bauer, 2021). Szalma in this chapter contributes a relatively new outlook to the body of knowledge about the burden that accompanies medically assisted reproduction and the impact of being familiar with this on public attitudes towards ART. While the author of this review has dedicated several years to the study of the prior, these results of Szalma's help pinpoint another factor of influence in relation to the context of determining public attitudes and perceptions of the technology. This is not only important from a general perspective, but is highly relevant for understanding how, when, and why involuntary childless women choose treatment, or decide to avoid it, even though there may be a deep personal yearning and ample societal pressure to form a family. From the pronatalist approach to the study, we understand how – despite knowledge about potential side-effects and hurdles – there is still a heavy burden on women who participate in ART treatments to fulfil their prescribed role within a traditionalistic and pronatalist society. Throughout the research we observe that those who belong to the younger cohorts (between 30 and 35 and 40-45 years old) are less keen on utilizing ART. This can be explained by their greater caution about potentially adverse effects – both on their bodies and future relationships. This personal distancing appears despite the fact that the latter are much more supportive of the technology than their older counterparts.

Contribution of the Publication

The relevance and implications of the publication are manifold. Overall, it offers the reader a deep analysis of an important social issue, guiding them through the research process and outcomes step by step. This is directly in line with the aim of the Springer Essentials series: to promote interesting research that is relevant to a broader community. In addition, it highlights the author's ability to transition between quantitative and qualitative methodologies with ease and precision. The limitations are explained clearly, and the reviewer looks forward to seeing a comprehensive mixed-method study that also adds a quantitative element to the now multi-method qualitative research project.

Moreover, the publication's relevance can be viewed from three diverse perspectives, each of which add to the body of sociological inquiry into the topic of attitudes to assisted reproduction technologies.

- (1) From a theoretical perspective, we have been introduced to the mechanisms of pronatalism on a macro level in relation to both the rhetoric and policy of the Hungarian government. On a micro level, it has been made clear how this resonates with the public – with many of them echoing the pronatalist sentiment framed in the public discourse.
- (2) The empirical results provide significant new information about a specific domestic population, but also present insights on a larger scale. Neatly tailored with

Szalma's previous work, the reader learns not just about general attitudes but the factors behind them, and about how public opinion supportive of ART does not automatically convert into support for the technology for personal use. Additionally, it is observed that a heteronormative outlook can be identified, and that the institution of single motherhood is still viewed with discontent or pity. From the perspective of technological understanding, it is an interesting highlight to see how the participants were not always clear about the possibilities and limits of ART.

- (3) From the standpoint of methodological relevance, both multi-method qualitative designs and mixed-method research are increasingly popular for providing a comprehensive understanding.

To conclude, the reviewer strongly encourages the author to pursue this path of investigation through a large mixed-methods project as it may generate deeper understanding of how pronatalist policies resonate in public attitudes. Although the study is comprehensive in its exploration of the female perspective, a project involving male participants would have an enormous impact on our current knowledge about assisted reproduction technologies and treatments.

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