Late-forming Families, Life Course, and Generation in Spain Today

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Introducción

Many industrialized countries, particularly European countries, are showing increasing delays in family formation in recent years (Sobotka 2010). This is a widespread tendency which is almost certainly related to long-standing, broad patterns of kinship: according to the KASS project of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, countries where marriage has traditionally been later, where the new couple depends on inherited property to start up their household, and where the family rather than the state has had the main responsibility for people's welfare seem to be the ones that show this new tendency toward later family formation most strongly (see Heady, Gruber and Ou 2010 and Viazzo 2010). That said, however, I believe that our understanding of this phenomenon can be greatly enhanced by local case studies of people's experiences of this process. In this sense, it is important to keep in mind the "strong family"/weak social policy complex that Reher describes for Spain, among other countries (Reher 1998). Just as Kahn (2007) and Melhuus (2012) have shown that reproductive technologies, despite being an extended phenomenon existing in a globalized world, are understood and regulated locally, and that their local meanings are important for the people involved, late-family formation does not necessarily manifest itself in the same way and hold the same meanings in different local contexts.

Research

Finding the local meaning of late family formation in Spain is one of the objectives of our work. We are still in the midst of our research, which has been

financed by three grants: 1) Research Grant FEM2011-30306, Late-forming families: An ethnographic study of family configurations in Madrid and their social implications, from the Ministry of Science and Innovation (currently re-named the Ministry of Economy and Competitivity), 2) a post-PhD grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, Late-forming families. The organization of care-giving and the concept of generation, and 3) a grant from the National Distance Education University (UNED). The research team is made up of Raúl Sánchez Molina, Elena Hernández Corrochano, Alfredo Francesch Díaz, Sandra Fernández García and myself.[1] The grants have covered a research period that began in 2010 and will conclude, provisionally, at the end of 2014.

Methodology

Our methodology is mainly qualitative, although we have also gathered statistical data from the Spanish Instituto Nacional de Estadística. We have interviewed of members of late-forming families, attended events involving these families (at fertility clinics and an adoption association), interviewed "experts" in relation to this group (doctors, nurses, midwives) and monitored media coverage of the issue.

Late-forming families and life course: the theoretical approach

Statistical data from the Spanish Instituto Nacional de Estadística show that women's age at first birth has been increasing steadily, from the age of 25 in 1980 to slightly over 30 in 2011 (30,77 if only mothers with Spanish nationality are counted). The means behind this delay is the use of contraception to plan the timing of births, but

[1] Thanks are due to Dr. María Isabel Jociles Rubio and the researchers in her project Single Mothers by Choice. Strategies of Self-Definition, Distinction, and Legitimization of New Family Models (FEM2009-07717) for access to their research. I would also like to thank Dr. Patrick Heady at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology for his critical comments on our work, and to the students in the 2012-2013 Master's degree courses at the Institut für Volkskunde/Europäische Ethnologie at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich and at the Department of Anthropology at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid for their insights on my research and reasoning.

the causes must be sought in people's understandings of their life courses as compared to the life course schema that they hold: the conditions they understand to be necessary and the age considered "right" for having children. Using the data produced by our ethnographic research, I will argue that these elements, along with the intergenerational transfers that characterize these families and the concept of an implicit contract between the generations (Heady and Kohli, 2010) can help us to make sense of this tendency toward late family formation and its effects.

Generally speaking, the life course in Spain has, until recently, been quite rigid, with the different stages following one another through transition points or conjunctures (for the concept of conjuncture, see Johnson-Hanks 2002 and Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan and Kohler 2011: 50-53). A person was born, started school between ages 3 and 5, depending on the historical moment, and continued in school until the age of 16 or later (depending on the level of educational achievement and the time it took the specific person to complete the degree, this stage could last until the age of 21, or until the age of 25 or more). The first important transition was when the person left his or her parents' home. Until recent decades, this transition has been associated, for men, with gaining job stability, the acquisition of independent housing, and marriage followed by family formation; for women, it has been associated with marriage followed by family formation. This transition has generally been late in Spain, compared to other European countries, with people marrying in their late twenties and staying home until then. People raised their children who, in turn, became independent, and they eventually retired (or not, in the case of homemakers), helping to raise their grandchildren if their children lived nearby. The only loops in the life course occurred in the case of a person who was widowed –or, when it became legal, divorced- and reinitiated the marriage and family formation stage.

I believe that there are two useful ways to use the concept of life course to study people's actions (under the concept of action, I include anything expressed in words, understanding discourse as verbal action). The first way is to look at what people actually do and how it maps out on the life course, that is, what the shape of their lives over time really looks like. The second is to look at the life course models people hold. In this sense, the concept of *schema* as used by Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler (2011: 2-8) describes exactly what I am seeking to study here:

> The schematic components of structure are the largely underdetermined, and often taken-for-granted, ways of perceiving and acting through which we make sense of the world and motivate out actions. Using Sewell's vocabulary, we call them "schemas." […] We use it as an umbrella term for a range of related – although distinct- cultural and cognitive phenomena, including, for example, categorization, social scripts, and mental representations. Schemas are – definitionally- schematic, that is, underspecified and therefore potentially enactable in a variety of ways in a range of contexts; they are generally learned by induction through recurrent exposure rather than through direct instruction; they carry with them expectations or evaluations pertaining to the object or situation beyond what is directly perceptible at the time. [...]
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> Schemas are virtual. This implies that we do not observe them directly, any more than we observe hopes, beliefs, expectations, or decision-making directly. Like these other mental states, however, we can observe the effects of schemas. […]
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> They are abstract, implying only what is a "typical" enactment of a schema, but not the many ways in which its performance or actualization could vary. (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011: 2-4).

I will use these two aspects of the life course to shed light on late-forming families in Spain by comparing and contrasting the real, lived life courses that people have explained to me with the schemas that they express of how a life course should work. Of course, a person's life course involves not only an individual but also many other people: family members of the same or different gender and generation, as well as friends, romantic and/or sexual relationships, and relationships with bosses and co-workers, among others. In this sense, I will look particularly at intergenerational transfers of care-giving. The pathways that life courses take also involve the general conditions under which people live, such as the job market and unemployment, the

housing market, globalization and migration, among others. We shall see how these different relationships and conditions come into play when people explain why their life courses, as late-forming families, differ from the widely-held schema of what a life course should be.

In our research, we originally defined late-forming families as families that "are made up of parent(s) who are considered biologically and socially older and in which the generational difference between parent(s) and children is higher than the conventionally established difference, that is, around 40 years" (Hernández Corrochano 2012: 92; translated by Konvalinka). We are, however, working with families that have had their first child at the age of 35 or more (if it is a two-parent family, both must have been 35 or older), for three reasons. The first is that this is the time at which women's fertility begins to decline, making reproduction more difficult and causing people to use assisted reproduction techniques or form families through adoption. A second reason is that people themselves feel that the age of 35 is beginning to be "late" for family formation, as the empirical material gathered will show. Finally, setting the age at 35 provides a much larger group of families with whom to do research.

At present, late family formation is beginning to be an issue that makes the news and that is discussed, but people do not see late-forming families as a group with specific interests. As we shall see, people express that, personally, for a series of particular circumstances and reasons, they have had their children late. As I have discussed elsewhere (Konvalinka 2010, 2013, and at press), this is a structural situation which is perceived by the people involved to be the result of personal decisions, in the same way that involuntarily single people sometimes perceive a structural situation to be a personal failure (Bourdieu 2008 [2002], Konvalinka 2013).

How, then, do the people from late-forming families who are assisting us in our research explain their life courses, both as the trajectories that they have lived and with reference to their schema of how a life course should be? Let us see some examples.

Late-forming families and life course: analysis of cases

The first case, Couple 1, consists of a 42-year-old man and a 40-year-old woman who married when they were 26 and 24 years old, respectively.

> Man: We spent 10 years without having children. We lived a life, we lived our life. I mean, we got married, we had jobs, we enjoyed being together, we travelled, […] But what I'm saying, we travelled, we lived. But the time came, since the time comes for everything in life, a time when you say, well, what now? Well, now, we'll have children. And then it didn't happen, and we decided, well, a little late, a tiny bit. Not too late, but it's true, there are people our age who have older children.
> Woman: No, if it had worked normally, well, maybe when we were 30, when we decided, well, it would have been when we were 31 instead of…

A few years went by trying for children fruitlessly, undergoing medical tests, although the couple decided not to try assisted reproduction, and then going through the adoption process. Both had jobs and owned an apartment, that is, they covered all of the requirements that people in Spain are expected to fulfill before they have children: marriage or a stable couple, job stability, and an independent living situation. The woman, however, gave up her job in a private company because it did not allow schedule adjustments for parents; now she takes temporary work when it is available.

Another married couple, Couple 2, after having been married for about two years, spent nine years trying to have children on their own and with fertility treatments, before they started the adoption process, which took another couple of years.

The issue of enjoying life is a common theme with both couples and single mothers by choice. In fact, it is one of the aspects that people feel is a plus for older

parents, who have enjoyed themselves doing everything they want to and thus do not feel that the necessary changes in leisure activities when children come to be a sacrifice. Single Mother by Choice 1 expressed this quite clearly:

> It's that, well, I think that, when you're older, you are very clear on what you want. And you go and get it, in the issue of maternity and in other issues, too. And so it's like you've already covered a series of phases, you've done lots of things in life, you've had time to do lots of things, right? To travel, lots of phases. So now you don't need that, now you're like more focused on your child, on this life of, well, not just on your child. But, well, no, the child isn't an interruption. You don't feel frustrated because you can't go out, at least in my case, or things like that.

This woman, with a job and an apartment, had hoped to form a typical family of father, mother and children, but in her case the relationship with her partner did not work out:

> Well, I, the idea I had was a traditional family. Dad, mom, and a child, two children. Two children, preferebly a boy and a girl. But, well, when I saw I was a certain age, well I was more or less 36. The partner I had then did not want to have children. He had a child. And well, the time comes when I decide that this was the only, the last option, I mean, having a child on my own was the last choice I considered. Because there were people who had suggested it to me. And, why not? It was something that I had always wanted, to have children, and so, in the end I went to a clinic, I saw that there was a section for single mothers, and this encouraged me too, that I wasn't going to be an oddball […]. And that was it, it just took me a few months.

She, as well as others who have assisted us in our research, belongs to an association of "Single Mothers by Choice" (Madres solteras por elección), a name that emphasizes their decision as a conscious choice that they have thought through, in contrast to single mothers who find themselves in this situation due to other reasons, such as widowhood, separation or divorce, or abandonment, or unplanned single motherhood.

Single Mother by Choice 2 explained her decision as follows:

> Oh, yes, I always had the idea, I don't know why, that I wanted to adopt a child. I don't know why, it was a thing that I said, yes, I'm going to do that, I don't

> know when, but I'm going to do it. And well, about eight years ago […], I said, let's see, I have stability, I don't want to, I don 't need to, anymore, and that was it, I want a job that I like, to be comfortable, content. I was 40 and, so, well, I said, all right, it's time, because I had an economic and mental stability, I mean, those are no longer a priority. I was very clear on that.

She lived with her mother at the time, although she later moved to her own apartment. In fact, she now has a steady partner, but put off getting married because it would have stopped the adoption process.

Single Mother by Choice 3 confirms this idea of an age at which one simply must go ahead and have children if one really wants them:

> But before I was, there was a moment when I said, when I'm 35 years old, if I don't have a partner, I'll have a child on my own. I never knew if it was to calm myself down and not feel overwhelmed, but it was something that I was really going to be able to do. I was going to be capable of doing it, of course. The truth is that when I turned 35 I had no doubts, I did it, I got an appointment, the same day I turned 35, and my first child was born one year and one day afterwards.

She also says that the only condition that she was missing was a partner:

> The reason I put it off, mainly, in my case, I think, was that I didn't have a partner. If I had had a partner, I would have had children a few years earlier. I think at least five years earlier, for sure, you know? When I was 30, possibly. Also, in my case, I had had pretty good job stability for a long time. I finished studying when I was 21, when I was 23 I passed the public job entry exam, and, well, from then on, I had economic stability. And I had my own home from when I was 24. I mean, in my case, the only thing I didn't have was a partner. […] To have this idea of a family,I was clear on that. I mean, if you want, I was always clear on that I wanted to be a mother. And have a family. So, the biggest reason was that. Not having a partner. But it was the only reason. I suppose I would have waited a few years, even if I have been stable, to do things. To travel, I mean, to enjoy a few years, away from our parents' home and living your life, but, I mean, I was very clear on that idea.

So people seem to have a very clear idea that one should fulfill certain conditions in order to be ready to have children: job stability, access to independent housing, and a stable partner, and a few years of "enjoying life" with few

responsibilities beyond work. Lacking one or another of these conditions, as well as the extension of the time for "enjoying life," are reasons to delay parenthood, although they are not sufficient reasons to definitively forgo parenthood. However, when parenthood is delayed to the age of 35 or later, people feel that they are not fulfilling the ideal temporization of the different phases of the life course.

As I have mentioned, the life course is understood as a series of phases or periods, with certain vital conjunctures or moments of transition from one phase to another. These vital conjunctures are the moments at which a person fulfills the conditions for moving on to the next phase. So there is an interplay of achieving certain conditions and the time of the move to the following phase. Some phases can be stretched without major consequences. One example would be the concept of "youth" which can be lengthened through longer schooling, precarious job conditions and living at home, although this does have certain consequences, for example, for the timing of family formation. Another would be the concept of "retiree," which can variously begin at the age of 50, for many people who have pre-retired in the last decade, or at the age of 70, as seems to be the plan for many people at present; and greater life expectancy can give this phase a much higher relevance that it has ever had before.

But the phase of young adulthood before acquiring family responsibilities is not so flexible, as it comes up against the age at which women's fertility declines. Part of the business of fertility clinics is, in fact, to stretch this limit and help women who would have difficulty becoming pregnant due to their age to have a baby. Thus, the life course schema that people hold places two demands on them in order to form a family. On one hand, they must achieve certain conditions, as we have seen: economic stability, housing, a stable partner, and a period of enjoying life. On the other, they must do so before it is too late for the woman to have a baby. Up until recently, people were able to

fulfill the necessary conditions early enough to have children before the age of 30. At present, as we have seen, this is no longer the case. The two demands clash because people seem to be taking too long to fulfill these conditions and to arrive at the state in which they consider they are ready to have children.

The people who have spoken with us give specific, personal reasons for not achieving parenthood at an earlier moment in their life courses, when in fact, according to my analysis of the situation, it is a case of a very rigid life course schema which comes into conflict with a context which makes it difficult to fulfill the conditions stipulated for having children in a timely manner. Although people also find advantages to becoming parents later –they mention greater maturity, calmness, and balance, more perspective about what is really important and less of a sense of sacrificing other leisure activities, they are fully aware that they are not following the life course schema that they hold.

Single Mother by Choice 1 expressed this idea as follows:

> I see that this is not the ideal age. I'm really tired. Yes, your strength, it's not the same, I mean, I believe that you have to have your children earlier because, I don't know, biologically, vitally, well, now you get more tired. (…) I think that you are stronger when you're 28 than when you're 38. And when you're 30, more than when you're 40. I don't know, you have more stamina for everything. Of course, but that was my plan. But, well, you have to reconvert your plan, and that's how it is.

The husband in Couple 1 put it this way:

> We have friends and colleagues who are my age, and their children are older than mine. For the age we are, we should have had our children a little earlier, yes. But because of a generational thing. We're kind of at the limit, you know? We're not grandparents to our children, because there are adoptive families where the difference is really big (…). In this case, we are kind of at the limit, that is, people my age, maybe their kids are 12 or 14. (…) And let me tell you something, too. I think there's a time for everything in life. Getting down on the floor with a two-year-old, on the floor to play, when you're 40, fine, when you're 45, not so good, and when you're 50, what can I say. Bad. (…) It's the way I see things. There's a time, for everything in life there's a time.

Late-forming families and intergenerational care-giving: analysis of cases

Late family formation, however, affects the dynamics of intergenerational care-giving. First, though, we should consider other changes that have occurred. On one hand, it is precisely the second demographic revolution that makes late family formation possible, allowing people to put off childbearing until the "right" moment. In addition, increased life expectancy and improved health to increasingly late ages means that present and future grandparents will be around longer than in earlier periods and will be more active for more years. We shall see, through the eyes of the people who have explained their lives to us, that this results in a variety of grandparent situations.

This is the explanation given by Couple 1:

> Woman: Yes, well, the difference between my mother and me is 20 years. My mother, I'm 42 now, I'll be 43 on Sunday. And my mother is 62.
> Man: No, my parents are a lot older. My father is 79, no, 80, and my mother is 77. They're older. They're ill, too, when you're 80 years old, there's always something. But no, my parents, no, they don't help us much. The thing is, I'm the little one in my family, they've helped my brothers and sisters more, because they were younger, simply because of that. I think that if they had been young, if I had been the eldest, they would have helped, too. Right now they're ill and no, help from there, not much. (…)
> Woman: No, the people who really help, it's us who help them, not the other way around. In this case it's the other way around, but my parents, yes, my parents are young, my mother is 62, my father is 68. There's a six year age difference. But, anyway, they are fine and they help us with the children a lot, a lot. (…) Since she had me young, and there's a 20-year difference, the truth is that, fortunately, I've still got a young mother and besides, she's really, she's very active.

In the case of Couple 2, the husband's parents live far away, while the wife's parents are elderly and cannot help much.

The single mothers by choice only have one set of grandparents available. These are some of the explanations they offer. Single Mother by Choice 1 says:

> My mother is 67 years old. And, well, at first she said she was going to take care of my girl and everything, the thing is, that my father was diagnosed with an illness, a cancer, and so then that changed the whole perspective. And, and well, now my father died last year and now, well, everything's going really well with the woman who comes, and I don't want to put a burden on my mother, because it's like a job, I mean, it's a job. Well, not like a job, it's a job. I mean, she helps me, well, today, for example, or this weekend when we'll be going away, she'll take her.

Single Mother by Choice 2 describes her situation like this:

> Because I want my mother to help me, but not for it to be an obligation. (…) My mother can help me for specific things and she can come to my house to see my girl whenever she wants, but I don't want to make her, to make her be my daughter's nanny. Because my mother still has a long way to go, she goes to her dance classes, I mean, she has her life. And I've never thought that was right, you know? To make them. They are delighted to do it, but, well, it's an obligation that they shouldn't have.

Single Mother by Choice 3 depends heavily on her parents for childcare, but worries about what might happen if they become ill:

> My parents are young, they are, my mother had me when she was 23, and my father is five years older, so my mother is 65 and my father, 70. They're who take care of them when I'm working. Well, since I work nights, they come a while before I go to work, they maybe help me with the final preparations, dinner, baths, and such. But normally I have everything done and prepared, so that it's just the night, that they do. And they take them to school, sometimes I arrive in time and sometimes I don't. (…) And then, the only thing is that, since I work weekends too, when I have to do a weekend, they do the night and the morning, so I can sleep. (…) So this has been a basic help, these first years, which are the hardest, and as they grow up I think it will get easier and easier to take care of them. That's when they'll also have less strength. (…) And well, my parents, my mother, I would like to share it out a bit. I don't want them to get worn out. I don't want them to be too tired, and I would have liked to share out this caregiving work a little, right? Hiring someone from outside, but no, there's no way to convince her. (…) Well, now she's had, the only time it's happened, she had to go into the hospital for a few days, and the truth is it wasn't much of a problem because a sister-in-law of mine who sees them a lot took over (…) but, well, I realize that as the years go by, well, maybe I'll have to change my shift to make it easier…

These quotes show a variety of situations. Some of these families depend on one grandparent or set of grandparents for caregiving. Some have elderly, infirm grandparents for whom the parents must provide a certain amount of caregiving, a

situation that is likely to become exacerbated in the future as these grandparents age. The parents of these late-forming families are clearly concerned about over-burdening the members of the grandparent generation, but for different reasons: in some cases, because they are elderly or ill and cannot do so much work, but in other cases because they are relatively young and active and have their own activities and lives to live. In any case, the direction and intensity of care-giving, from the older generation to their children and grandchildren (helping one's grandchildren is helping one's children) is something that these people think about carefully, taking factors such as age, health, jobs, and leisure activities into account. It is not automatically assumed. In contrast, adult children's care-giving assistance to their parents and parents-in-law is assumed, by both parties. This leaves late-forming families, in particular, in a structurally weaker position in which they tend to look to the market for childcare in order not to overburden their parents, or when their parents cannot help them due to distance or infirmity. Simultaneously, they remain responsible for elder-care, unless they have siblings with fewer responsibilities who are willing to take on this responsibility.

So the changes these families are undergoing are not simple. Longer life expectancy and enhanced health conditions have changed the lives and aspirations of people over 60, lengthening this phase of the life course significantly and often keeping people quite active in the earlier years of this phase. This can mean that some younger grandparents are more able to help; but it can also mean that they are busy with other activities and have less time to assist in childcare. It may also mean that they will eventually require more care for longer, especially if we use a broad definition of care-giving that includes visiting them and keeping them company, accompanying them to doctor's appointments and other such tasks.

Late family formation, then, is not simply the product of personal circumstances. It has a great deal to do with the life course schema that people hold, and these schema include not only the different life course phases and their order but the proper timing of the transitions and the conditions that people should fulfill in order to make these transitions. In the cases that we have discussed, people have had difficulty, for one reason or another, in fulfilling the conditions in a timely manner and have not been able to make the transition to family formation at the time that they expected or wished to do so. This delay in family formation, in turn, affects the intergenerational transfer of care-giving. How it affects the intergenerational transfer of care-giving depends greatly on the age of these people's own parents. If their parents are elderly and require care, these people find themselves in a care-giving bind (Konvalinka 2013); if they are younger, these people are often unwilling to ask them to sacrifice significant amounts of their own time for enjoying life in order to care for their grandchildren. In both cases, there is a marked reluctance to demand childcare assistance from their own parents unless there is no other solution possible. This is the way that this situation plays out in Spain, with its "strong family" and weak family policy situation (Reher 1998).

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