

A Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery Inside an Enigma: Bi-modal Fertility Dynamics and Family Life in French-Canadian Quebec

DAVID LEVINE
JULIE SAVOIE*

Historians have struggled with an ingrained perception of what constituted the “traditional” Quebec family at the beginning of the twentieth century. Early studies on the demographic history of Quebec portrayed women as generators of large families, a practice prescribed by the political elite as well as the Catholic Church. The new social history, and most especially the recent generation of feminist-inspired historians, has revisited and criticized the myth of the large family. Aggregated demographic statistics would indicate that francophone families continued to produce significantly more children than their English-speaking counterparts well into the twentieth century, despite a longstanding experience of industrialization, urbanization and contraception — the so-called hallmarks of modernization. Yet statistics also make clear that, even before the onset of declining fertility in the late nineteenth century, the majority of Quebec families did not do so, and there was in fact wide variation in family size. The real distinctiveness of Quebec’s fertility decline was its unique and persistent minority of very large families that disappeared virtually overnight in the mid-twentieth century when the children of these families chose not to continue the pattern.

Les historiens luttent contre la perception bien ancrée de ce qu’était la famille « traditionnelle » du Québec du début du XX^e siècle. Les premières études sur l’histoire démographique du Québec dépeignaient les femmes comme des engendeuses de grandes familles, une pratique que prescrivaient tant l’élite politique que l’Église catholique. La nouvelle histoire sociale et plus particulièrement la génération récente d’historiens d’inspiration féministe, a revu et critiqué le mythe de la grande famille. Les statistiques démographiques agrégées donnent à penser que les familles francophones ont continué à faire beaucoup plus d’enfants que les familles anglophones

* David Levine is professor in the Department of Theory and Policy Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Julie Savoie is a doctoral student at OISE. This article has been read by a generous group of colleagues who have kindly offered support, encouragement, and criticism. The authors thank Gérard Bouchard, David Churchill, Gordon Darroch, Chad Gaffield, Danielle Gauvreau, Ed Hundert, Carl Keck, Katherine Lynch, Angus McLaren, Pavla Miller, Patrice Milewski, Barry Reay, Ruth Sandwell, Richard Smith, and Marie-Josée Therrien.

pendant une bonne partie du XX^e siècle même s'il y avait longtemps que l'industrialisation, l'urbanisation et la contraception – qualifiés de piliers de la modernisation – battaient leur plein autour d'elles. Or, les statistiques montrent aussi clairement qu'avant même que ne commence à décliner la fécondité à la fin du XIX^e siècle, la majorité des familles du Québec ne faisaient pas tant d'enfants et qu'en fait, la taille des familles variait beaucoup. Le véritable caractère distinct du déclin de la fécondité québécoise en a surtout été l'unicité et la persistance des très grosses familles, qui ont disparu pour ainsi dire du jour au lendemain au milieu du XX^e siècle, les enfants de ces familles ayant alors choisi de ne pas perpétuer la coutume.

THE DECLINE of marital fertility was a massive phenomenon of social adjustment that swept across the North Atlantic world in the space of three generations between the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The sheer numbers indicate the profundity of the scale of change: for example, the average woman marrying in 1860 would probably have had six or seven live births; three generations later, her grand-daughter, marrying in the 1920s, would have had two or three. Ansley J. Coale, principal investigator of the Princeton European Fertility Project, has noted that one key feature of this transition “is the increased uniformity of fertility” so that “there is little [internal] variation in the aggregate fertility and mortality of these highly modernized populations”.¹ Furthermore, as Susan Cotts Watkins claims, “The timing of the onset of the transition is ... particularly significant in view of the findings ... that once a 10-percent decline ... occurred, further decline inevitably followed. ...Curiously, however, even those who could be expected to find continued childbearing advantageous or family limitation unacceptable adopted family limitation rather soon after the leaders.”²

The Princeton demographers have done a fine job of describing the transformation of fertility, but, while their large data sets and crude modernization theories provide us with a great many useful statistical correlations, these are neither necessary nor sufficient explanations of historical causation. Methodologically, the Princeton approach to this subject seems to imply that provinces (registration districts), not couples, had babies. Moreover, by its very nature, the Princeton approach tends to homogenize experience rather than considering diversity and variation, which have always characterized human fertility statistics. Even after decades of intensive study, the fertility decline remains an enigmatic subject of inquiry.³

1 Ansley J. Coale, “The Decline of Fertility in Europe”, in Ansley J. Coale and Susan Cotts Watkins, eds., *The Decline of Fertility in Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 29.

2 Susan Cotts Watkins, “Conclusions”, in Coale and Watkins, eds., *The Decline of Fertility in Europe*, p. 446.

3 See David Levine, “Moments in Time: An Historian’s Context of Declining Fertility”, in John Gillis, David Levine, and Louise Tilly, eds., *The Quiet Revolution: European History in the Age of Fertility Decline* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1992).

In contrast to the generalized and ever-downward rates of fertility in evidence in the European societies studied by the Princeton demographers, the experience of Quebec women was different: so different, in fact, that one might consider it unique. According to the multiple studies done on Quebec fertility, on average, francophone women continued to produce large numbers of children well into the twentieth century.⁴ In aggregate, the decline of the fertility rate in the French-Canadian population does not seem to follow the usual pattern of demographic transition.⁵ Researchers have therefore argued that the theory of demographic transition has been insufficient to explain Quebec's fertility history because aggregated fertility rates remained high during the transitional generations.

Our central argument is that previous scholars who have studied demographic data have been misled in assuming that Quebec women, as a group, were much more fertile than their counterparts in other Canadian provinces — or even in other countries. This misapprehension arises from the presumption that completed family sizes in Quebec conformed to a random normal distribution, whereas, in point of fact, this distribution seems to be bi-modal. Thus, if one were to ask a sample of mid-twentieth-century Quebecers about the size of their family of origin, roughly half of all respondents would have said “large” or “more than seven”, yet the vast majority of all families were in fact small, having three or fewer children. A minority of families produced almost half of all children born in Quebec during the transitional generations. For most of the twentieth century in Quebec, then, the majority of Quebecers conformed to the wider, generalized experience of smaller family size, but a significant minority maintained extraordinarily high rates of reproduction into the middle years of the twentieth century.

This minority was significant because, in face of the usual sociological markers of “modernity” — the lack of available land, industrialization and urbanization, the advent of mass education, the shift to a more consumer-driven society, the Catholic Church's loss of influence on moral values paralleled by a rise in secularization, the increased number of women entering the work force, increased use of contraception, and the trend towards “quality” as opposed to “quantity” parenting accompanied by a precipitous decline in infant mortality rates — this small group of families continued to produce a large number of children while the majority followed the evolving pattern of demographic transition.

If the persistence of a minority of super-fertile women in Quebec is something of an historical mystery, then the overnight disappearance of this sub-cohort in the third quarter of the twentieth century is an unexamined riddle. These key problematics must be addressed if we are to gain a full under-

4 Enid Charles, *The Changing Size of the Family in Canada* (Ottawa: Ministry of Trade and Commerce, 1948).

5 Roderic Beaujot, “Les deux transitions démographiques du Québec, 1860–1996”, *Cahiers québécois de démographie*, vol. 29 (2000), pp. 201–230.

standing of francophone Quebec's peculiar demographic development. In examining Quebec's bi-modal fertility dynamics, we also discuss the study of fertility in Quebec families during the twentieth century.

Fertility Dynamics

Demography is the study of changes in population composition and vital rates, which combine to identify pivotal transformations in social life. In addressing the question of fertility, the issue that deserves to be considered first is: how do people without access to modern contraceptive technology restrict their numbers? Almost all anthropological investigations reveal a welter of cultural adaptations to the basic biological fact that human fertility is never close to its physiological maximum. The demographer's analytical tool — "natural fertility" — is, in fact, a heuristic device, which describes cultural constructions, not biological experiences. According to Henri Leridon, "[T]he biological maximum for women who remain fecund and exposed to risk [of pregnancy] from their fifteenth to their forty-fifth birthdays, and who do not breast-feed their children, would be 17 to 18 children."⁶ In point of fact, Leridon is less than generous in his assessment of what earlier generations would have called "prolific power" since there is much evidence of heroic mothers who gave birth to upwards of two dozen children. Of course, in any population there would also be some women who would be sterile.

In most historical populations that did not practise fertility control — but rather displayed "natural fertility" characteristics — some women had large numbers of children and bore them with great regularity while others had smaller numbers of births spaced further apart and with less regularity. The distribution of family sizes in "natural fertility" populations was random normal, by which we mean that, while there was a peak, usually located at the mean average family size, there was no pronounced concentration around an agreed-upon family size, a pattern that one would find in contemporary, late-modern populations that practise fertility control. The historical question that therefore comes into focus concerns the difference between Leridon's "biological maximum" and observed total fertility rates. How low were these pre-modern fertility rates?

Almost all human societies limit birth rates to some extent. Birth control patterns change over time. Hunting and gathering societies often limited births through prolonged lactation in contrast to agricultural societies, in which fertility was a combination of other strategies: on one hand making sure enough children were available to work as well as to inherit family land and possessions, while on the other limiting births to protect resources. Some societies focus on controlling how closely children are spaced, while others

6 Henri Leridon, *Human Fertility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 147; see also F. Lorimer, *Culture and Human Fertility: A Study of the Relation of Cultural Conditions to Fertility in Non-industrial and Transitional Societies* (New York: UNESCO, 1954); John Bongaarts, "Why High Birth Rates Are So Low", *Population and Development Review*, vol. 1 (1975), pp. 289–296.

(like China or Japan) have historically limited the number of girls who are born as a method of population control; this, in turn, affects relationships between boys and girls as well as unbalancing the sex ratio among adults, making marriage almost universal among the surviving girls but not so frequent among the over-represented males.⁷ Furthermore, birth-rate limitations often reflect socio-economic status; the very wealthy in pre-industrial conditions usually had more children than poorer groups because the rich had more resources to support larger families and survived longer, so that their marriages persisted as “fecund conjugal units”. In today’s Third World, by way of contrast, the incentive structure is quite different, as rich and middle-class families restrict fertility and practise a “quality not quantity” strategy, whereas their poorer neighbours behave in precisely the opposite way.⁸

A Bi-modal Fertility Pattern

The study of Quebecers’ fertility patterns has had a long history. Population census enumerations, parish registries, the Tanguay repository, the BALSAC index in the Saguenay, and more recently interviews, diaries, and autobiographies have been used in the study of family history. Early demographic studies were instrumental in identifying the socio-economic and cultural variables of fertility decline: language, religion, education level, habitat, profession, and income.⁹ In examining Quebec’s demographic weight in Canada, demographers have almost always compared the province’s declining fertility rate to that of other Canadian provinces.

Hubert Charbonneau describes a “demographic revolution” as a process whereby mortality and natality rates decrease significantly and designates three key phases to Quebec’s demographic evolution: first, from New France to about 1875; second, from 1875 to 1930; and third, from 1930 and the late 1960s to early 1970s.¹⁰

7 James Lee and Wang Feng, *One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Mythology and Chinese Realities, 1700–2000* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). See also T. C. Smith, *Nakahara: Family Farming and Population in a Japanese Village, 1717–1830* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977).

8 H. E. Daly, “A Marxian-Malthusian View of Poverty and Development”, *Population Studies*, vol. 25 (1971), pp. 25–38, and “Marx and Malthus in North-East Brazil: A Note of the World’s Largest Class Difference in Fertility and its Recent Trends”, *Population Studies*, vol. 39 (1985), pp. 329–338. See also J. C. Caldwell, “A Theory of Fertility: From High Plateau to Destabilization”, *Population and Development Review*, vol. 4 (1978), pp. 553–577.

9 Danielle Gauvreau and Peter Gossage, “Empêcher la famille : fécondité et contraception au Québec, 1920–1960”, *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 78 (1997), pp. 478–510. J. I. Little has used a modified version of family reconstitution to compare the fertility of a group of Scots-origin women living in the Eastern Townships with neighbouring French-Canadian women. See J. I. Little, *Crofters and Habitants* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991). Similar studies based on census materials, comparing different ethnic groups in nineteenth-century Montreal, have been undertaken by Sherry Olson and Patricia Thornton; see, for example, “Shared Spaces/ Partage de l’espace” (McGill University, Department of Geography Working Paper # 12/1993).

10 Hubert Charbonneau, ed., *La population du Québec : études rétrospectives* (Montreal: Éditions du Boréal Express, 1973), pp. 9–15.

Charbonneau argues that, during the first phase, between 1630 and 1875, fertility rates remained fairly constant. Over these nine or ten generations, 46 per cent of families had no more than four children, 28 per cent had between five and eight children, and the remaining 26 per cent had nine children or more.¹¹ Furthermore, the 11 per cent of mothers who bore more than 12 children produced a quarter of all legitimate births. Jacques Henripin reports that, between 1630 and 1875, “completed families” (that is, married couples who remained together until the end of the woman’s fertile period) had between 8.5 and 9 children. The average number for all married couples was 7.2 children.¹²

With industrialization and urbanization in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, mortality rates and birth rates decreased together, although Charbonneau argues that, at least in terms of aggregated statistical measures, Quebecers lagged behind their neighbours in the process of demographic transition. Yet by the end of the nineteenth century Quebec’s average fertility rate was beginning to decline: “Par rapport au niveau constant de 7.1 enfants qui avait été maintenu depuis 1711, les trois périodes de cinq ans qui suivent 1865 sont caractérisées respectivement par les nombres d’enfants suivants : 6.6, 6.7 et 6.8 enfants.”¹³ Despite this early evidence of a decline from the historic plateau, 45 per cent of women born between 1886 and 1895, who would have had a fertile period that began in approximately 1901 and ended in 1940, would have had more than six children. This represented a decrease of 25 per cent compared to the generation of women born around 1845.

The especially unique element of Quebec’s fertility history was that the “super-fertile” couples continued to be a significant element in the population. A quarter of the early-twentieth-century families had nine or more children; these “super-fertile” couples produced half of all live births. A generation later, 18.5 per cent of married women born between 1911 and 1916 — whose fertile period took place between 1926 and 1961 — had seven or more children.¹⁴

Charbonneau writes that, during the most recent phase of demographic transition in the 1960s, Quebecers were losing their demographic “distinctiveness” compared to English Canada; that is, they began to “imitate” their neighbours’ fertility patterns.¹⁵ In point of fact, when he was writing in the

11 This distribution would fit the “random normal” pattern mentioned earlier.

12 Jacques Henripin, *Naître ou ne pas être* (Quebec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1989), p. 26. The reader will note that even in “traditional” Quebec, during the reign of “natural fertility”, almost half of all families (46%) had no more than four children.

13 Jacques Henripin and Yves Péron, “The Demographic Transition in the Province of Quebec”, in *Population and Social Change* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), p. 39; Jacques Henripin and Evelyne Lapierre-Adamcyk, *La fin de la revanche des berceaux : qu’en pensent les Québécoises?* (Montreal: Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1974), p. 41.

14 Henripin and Péron, “The Demographic Transition in the Province of Quebec”, p. 39; Henripin and Lapierre-Adamcyk, *La fin de la revanche des berceaux*, p. 41.

15 Charbonneau, *La population du Québec*, p. 15.

early 1970s, the “super-fertile” minority was vanishing among the *pure laine, vraie/vieille souche* Quebecers. In Quebec, there was an unmistakable convergence around the uni-modal family type that is the common experience of North Atlantic families during our age of late modernity. Ironically, Quebec’s silent revolution seems to have stimulated the disappearance of its most unique institutional arrangement.

G rard Bouchard and Richard Lalou discuss the concept of “la sur-f condit ” in Quebec since the seventeenth century and compare their results to those describing English-speaking provinces, the United States, and Europe. In particular, they suggest that Quebec fertility in the last third of the nineteenth century may have been exceptionally high as a result of francophones’ tardiness to use contraceptive methods to limit their number of children in comparison with the English-speaking populations of North America. However, the data they review also suggest that many European countries had fertility rates equal to — or greater than — that of Quebec. Bouchard and Lalou conclude that “the hypothesis of nationalism as a basis of this phenomenon [high fertility rates] does not appear to be well substantiated”.¹⁶ However, it should be noted that they do not explain the divergent fertility patterns among francophones within Quebec nor do they consider the perdurance of the super-fertile minority. This sub-group not only raised the provincial average but also contributed to the emergence of a pronounced bi-modality in its fertility profile in the period after 1870.

What, then, is a “traditional” Quebec family? Researchers have talked about it endlessly, but, surprisingly, agreed-upon definitions are not easy to find. One element in most definitions is that a “traditional” family was rural. At the turn of the twentieth century, commentators were adamant about the importance of large Quebec families, traditionally loyal to the land. The key idea of the myth has been that a “traditional” Quebec family was characterized by its piety, its fertility, its morality, its family values, its bond with the land, its pride in its past, and its concern to preserve its culture. Quebec historiography about the “traditional” Quebec family, circa 1900, presented these families as an homogeneous group. Most studies on the demographic history of Quebec portrayed women as generators of large families as prescribed by the political elite, the medical community, and, above all, the Church.¹⁷

The other methodological issue facing us is numerical: what constitutes a “large” family? This issue is entangled with the belief that the majority of

16 G rard Bouchard and Richard Lalou, “La sur-f condit  des couples qu b cois depuis le XVII^e si cle, essai de mesure et d’interpr tation”, *Recherches sociographiques*, vol. 34 (1993), p. 9.

17 For a recent example of this perspective, see Diane Gervais and Danielle Gauvreau, “Women, Priests, and Physicians: Family Limitation in Quebec, 1940–1970”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 34 (2003), pp. 293–314; the same argument and evidence are presented in French by Danielle Gauvreau and Diane Gervais, “Les chemins d tourn s vers une f condit  contr l e : le cas du Qu bec, 1930–1970”, *Annales de d mographie historique* (2002), no. 2, pp. 89–109.

families were “super-fertile”. Henripin and his colleagues agglomerate families of five or more children to analyse women’s desire for children in the context of the declining fertility rate.¹⁸ In contrast, women interviewed by Denise Lemieux and Leon Bernier believed that a family of five children was “large”.¹⁹ Raising the stakes, Gérard Bouchard uses a benchmark of seven children.²⁰ With an unclear definition of what constitutes a “large” or even a “traditional” Quebec family, the reconstruction of past fertility practices inevitably creates some crucial misunderstandings concerning the dynamics of family life — and the particular contours of its declining fertility over time.

The perceived “super-fertile” majority was, in fact, a minority. Moreover, it appears that the Quebec family, circa 1900, was more varied than the secondary literature has led us to believe. Revisionist studies, especially those based on personal histories, stress the multiplicity of fertility experiences and the divergence of the majority from the supposed tradition of “super-fertility”. Marie Lavigne, the first to be concerned with this issue, points out that the use of averages to describe fertility is misleading; she makes this novel distinction but concentrates her attention on those women who had few or no children, either in or out of wedlock.²¹ Studies of multiple experiences of childbearing focus on groups that have been perceived as marginal — families with a small number of children, which did not follow the prescriptions of the Church. While these studies are accurate in some respects, there is a distinct need to identify different sub-groups of families to determine why a significant minority of families were prolific well into the 1960s while most were not.

The historiography on the Quebec family needs to be revisited to describe and explain more fully the compositional differences among its sub-groups.

18 Jacques Henripin *et al.*, *Les enfants qu'on n'a plus au Québec* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1981).

19 Denise Lemieux and Leon Bernier, “La transmission intergénérationnelle dans les projets de procréation : une approche qualitative et subjective des changements démographiques au Québec”, *International Journal of Canadian Studies* (1993), special issue, pp. 85–103. This contrast between the findings of Henripin and those of Lemieux and Bernier is more apparent than real since asking women about “large” families produces a different kind of answer than asking children about the size of their sibling group.

20 Gérard Bouchard, *Quelques arpents d'Amérique : population, économie, famille au Saguenay, 1838–1971* (Montreal: Éditions du Boréal, 1996).

21 Marie Lavigne, “Réflexions féministes autour de la fertilité québécoise”, in Nadia Fahmy-Eid and Micheline Dumont, eds., *Maîtresses de maison, maîtresses d'école : femmes, famille et éducation dans l'histoire du Québec* (Montreal: Éditions du Boréal, 1983), pp. 319–338. In our concern with what we might call “the tyranny of averages”, we are indeed on the same wavelength as Lavigne, but we draw quite different conclusions about how we can understand the distribution of family sizes among francophone *Québécoises*. We do not claim that we are “correct” and that Lavigne is “wrong”, nor do we dispute her claim that quite a few women were permanently celibate and that some married women had fewer than the average number of children. Rather, we are concerned to make clear that this is only part of the story.

This need is pressing because so much of the scholarly literature has been devoted to the analysis of aggregates and averages. Indeed, in aggregate, the decline of the fertility rate in the French-Canadian population does not follow a traditional pattern of demographic transition. However, when applied to the majority of the population — thereby excluding the “super-fertile” minority that produced large family sizes into the second half of the twentieth century — the pattern of declining fertility rates and smaller completed family sizes among francophone Quebecers resembles those of surrounding populations that adhered to the well-known pattern of demographic transition.

It has been argued that the theory of demographic transition is insufficient to explain Quebec’s demographic history because fertility rates continued to remain high while the usual factors held to be responsible for the decline in fertility rates — such as secularization, urbanization, industrialization, and declining levels of mortality — were very much in evidence. Dis-aggregating the sub-cultures of fertility provides a more refined vision of family formation practices. Attending to the demographic variations among the *vraie/vieille souche, pure laine* Quebecers avoids the interpretive muddle that arises from a slavish following of the theory of demographic transition.

Demographic Variations

The period from 1870 to 1960 falls between the “first fertility decline” and the more recent one dominated by the radical change in Quebec’s demographic characteristics in the late-modern age of safe, reliable, affordable, and accessible birth control. Jacques Henripin relied on the 1961 census, which he argues provides more detailed information about income, internal migration, and fertility than earlier enumerations.²² Between 1851 and 1951 the fertility rate in Quebec gradually decreased by 40.3 per cent, but demographic research also suggests that Quebec did not consistently have the highest fertility rate among Canadian provinces. In fact, prior to 1881, Ontario’s fertility rate was higher than that of Quebec.²³ Only between 1921 and 1951 was the fertility rate in Quebec higher than that of any other province in Canada (excluding recently settled Saskatchewan and Manitoba). Figure 1 also illustrates that, during the period reviewed, national fertility rates steadily decreased and underwent a marked decline between 1921 and 1941; this was followed by a post-war baby boom across all parts of Canada and, finally, a further decline as the baby boom waned and the era of reliable

22 Jacques Henripin, *Tendances et facteurs de la fécondité au Canada* (Ottawa: Bureau fédéral de la statistique, 1968), p. iii.

23 No doubt this higher aggregated fertility level in mid-Victorian Ontario needs to be more finely analysed to take into account the essential fact that migration into Ontario of people of childbearing age was much greater than migration into Quebec. Only Montreal received any substantial number of non-native-born outsiders; most other parts of Quebec reflected deeper, province-wide age distributions, and, indeed, many parts of Quebec were actually exporting people of childbearing age to the cities of the province and also to New England.

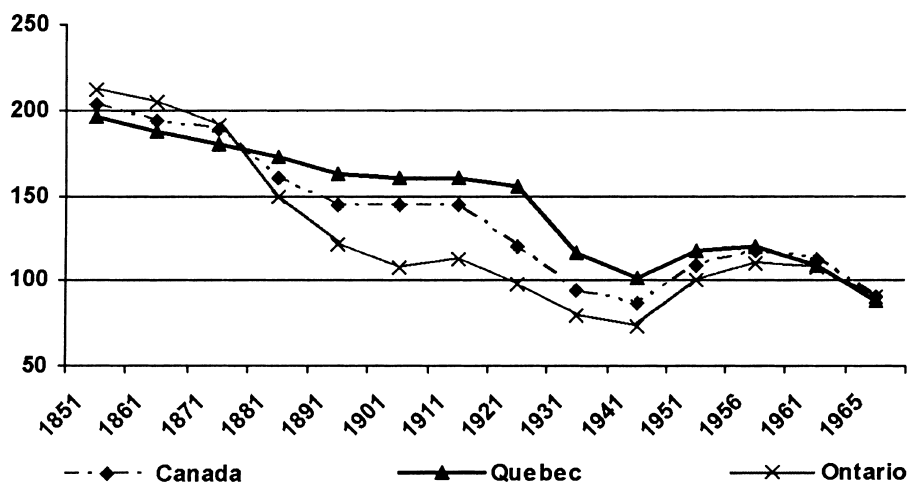


Figure 1 Examples of Fertility Rates in Canada. Henripin, *Tendances et facteurs de la fécondité*, p. 21.

contraception emerged with the introduction and dissemination of the estrogen pill. It is germane to point out that the shapes of the three fertility curves — national, Quebec, and Ontario — are essentially similar although these aggregated statistics do suggest that Quebec lagged behind other parts of Canada in its long-term fertility decline.

Henripin and Péron's analysis of these rates resulted in the following statement: "Le maintien d'un taux de fécondité aussi élevé est surtout dû aux Canadiens français du Québec pour lesquels la dimension des familles a manifesté une résistance remarquable à la diminution de la fécondité observée dans tous les pays industrialisés."²⁴ Ironically, as these commentators were doing their research and writing up their results, epochal changes were occurring in the fertility habits "inside the bedrooms of the nation".

Henripin and Péron refer to average fertility rates and report that between 1871 and 1961 Quebec's fertility decline was much slower than that of Ontario. Their aggregated data, illustrated in Table 1, do indeed suggest that Quebec's fertility rate was consistently higher and remained so longer when compared with that of Ontario. But these aggregated data obscure at least as much as they reveal.

In the early 1970s demographic historians began to use interviews in an attempt to gather additional information to explain the reasons behind the decisions couples were making with regard to the number of children they would have. The onset of dramatically declining fertility in the 1960s — itself a reflection of the overnight disappearance of *la sur-fécondité* of the

24 Jacques Henripin and Yves Péron, "La transition démographique au Québec", in Charbonneau, ed., *La population du Québec*, p. 39.

Table 1 Decline in Fertility, Quebec and Ontario

Time period	Province of Quebec	Province of Ontario
1871–1891	– 11%	– 27%
1891–1911	– 4%	– 14%
1911–1921	– 1%	– 20%
1921–1931	– 16%	– 17%
1931–1941	– 11%	– 20%
1941–1951	– 7%	13%
1951–1961	– 11%	0.07%

Source: Henripin and Péron, “La transition démographique au Québec”, p. 39.

minority and the “echo” after the “baby boom” among the rest — was a key factor that led Henripin and Lapierre-Adamcyk to provide recommendations for a “politique de la natalité” to counterbalance the contemporary perceptions of recent, precipitous declines in Quebec’s fertility rate. Henripin and Lapierre-Adamcyk’s study, titled *La fin de la revanche des berceaux*, was based on interviews conducted in 1971 with a group of 1,745 women between the ages of 15 and 65 about their reproductive behaviour and their desire to have children. The authors were attempting to describe a recent change in Quebec’s demographic history that boded ill for the future — the “abysmal” birth rates. In a subsequent study, part of the first group interviewed in 1971 by Henripin and Lapierre-Adamcyk was contacted again to re-assess participants’ decisions surrounding their choice to limit the size of their families.²⁵ As a result of this second study, the authors developed a table to illustrate the distribution of the number of children married women born between 1920 and 1950 had or were estimated to have. Figure 2 was created using part of the information contained in the table developed by Henripin and Lapierre-Adamcyk.

These data make clear that, prior to the generation born between 1936 and 1940, the percentage distribution of family sizes was stable. The slow rise in the likelihood that women would have two or three children then became more pronounced, while, contrarily, there was a very substantial drop in the group of women bearing five or more children. Among women born after 1946, the very large family (five children or more) essentially vanished, while the proportion of this cohort who would have had just two children nearly doubled. What these data reveal so strikingly is the late-twentieth-century convergence around the uni-modal family type that is the common experience of late modernity.

25 Henripin et al., *Les enfants qu’on n’a plus au Québec*.

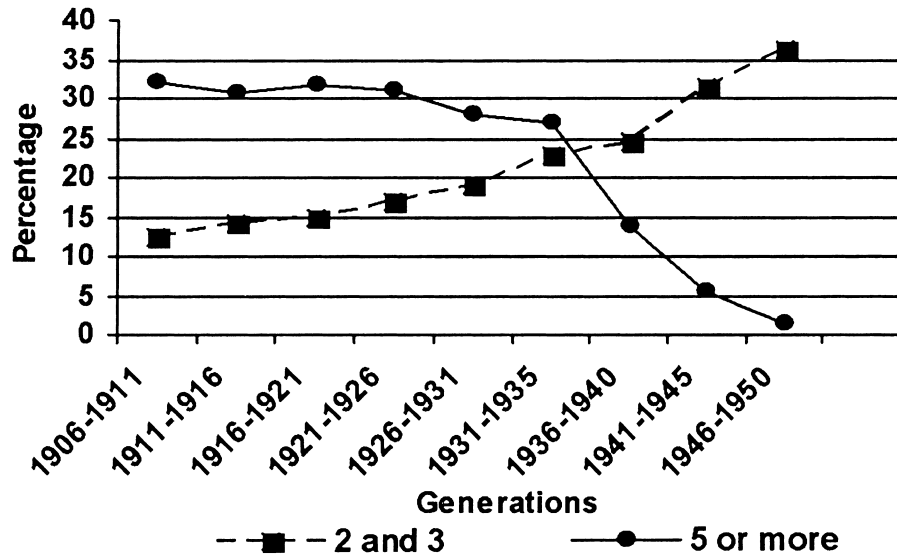


Figure 2 Percentage Distribution of the Number of Children per Married Woman According to their Date of Birth. Henripin *et al.*, *Les enfants qu'on n'a plus au Québec*, p. 32.

In his recent study *La fin de la famille moderne*, Daniel Dagenais examines declining fertility rates to argue that they reflected a change in the culture of family life from an “objective” fertility control (control by the institution of marriage) as opposed to a more “subjective” fertility control (cultural control stemming from the diffusion of middle-class values — what he calls “la société bourgeoise”). Dagenais creates an interesting table, similar to the one Henripin and his colleagues derived from their interview population. Dagenais uses data drawn from the Canadian census and the Bureau de la Statistique du Québec to distribute married women with legitimate children according to their generation of birth and the number of children they had borne. This table is reproduced here as Table 2.

Although his statistical results are relevant in the context of this discussion, Dagenais is more concerned with explaining when the change in family structure, limiting family size to two or three children, occurred for the majority of families in order to argue how the nature of the relationship between parents and children evolved. In the context of parents’ new “rapport” with their children or the place children came to occupy in the family unit, Dagenais chooses to address the emerging problem of below-replacement fertility and the redefinition of the parents’ role by stressing the impact of the “emancipation of the individual”, which he considers to be characteristic of a late-modern society, in which childbearing and child raising are no longer seen as the primary purpose of marriage. Dagenais’s monograph is not concerned with explaining why a substantial minority of Quebec women

Table 2 Percentage Distribution of Family Size per Generation and the Mother's Province of Origin

Generation	Number of children per woman as a percentage							Average no. of children
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6+	
1877								
Quebec	22.8	5.7	6.0	6.2	6.1	6.1	41.4	5.60
Ontario	24.2	11.2	12.8	11.5	9.9	6.8	21.7	3.50
1877–1886								
Quebec	23.1	6.8	7.1	6.9	6.6	6.2	43.2	5.40
Ontario	25.8	13.7	15.1	12.6	9.9	6.7	16.0	3.00
1887–1896								
Quebec	23.9	7.9	8.3	7.7	6.9	6.2	38.7	4.90
Ontario	25.6	15.2	17.3	13.5	9.3	6.2	12.5	2.80
1897–1901								
Quebec	27.8	8.7	9.4	8.8	7.3	6.4	31.1	3.79
Ontario	23.9	15.4	19.1	14.1	9.3	6.0	11.7	2.47
1902–1906								
Quebec	29.9	10.0	11.5	9.3	7.8	6.2	24.0	3.40
Ontario	24.8	16.3	20.2	14.2	8.8	5.4	9.9	2.39
1907–1911								
Quebec	30.0	10.9	13.1	10.4	7.9	6.1	21.2	3.17
Ontario	23.9	17.2	22.9	14.1	8.3	5.0	8.4	2.34
1912–1916								
Quebec	26.8	10.4	13.5	11.7	9.2	7.0	21.3	3.12
Ontario	20.9	16.1	23.7	16.3	9.4	5.1	8.1	2.42
1917–1921								
Quebec	22.4	18.5	14.6	13.1	10.5	7.9	21.7	3.28
Ontario	17.7	14.1	24.0	17.9	10.9	6.1	9.0	2.59
1922–1926								
Quebec	19.4	8.7	15.0	14.7	12.2	8.9	21.1	3.35
Ontario	13.5	11.7	23.5	19.9	13.0	7.3	11.0	2.76
1927–1931								
Quebec	17.6	9.1	16.5	16.3	14.1	9.3	17.2	3.29
Ontario	12.2	10.0	23.0	21.2	14.3	8.1	11.2	2.96
1932–1936								
Quebec	16.2	19.3	20.3	19.7	14.1	8.6	11.9	2.98
Ontario	10.6	9.3	23.9	23.4	15.5	8.1	9.3	2.92
1937–1941								
Quebec	15.3	11.6	27.7	22.4	11.9	5.8	5.4	2.29
Ontario	11.2	10.1	29.1	25.1	13.2	6.0	5.3	2.63

Table 2 (Concluded)

Generation	Number of children per woman as a percentage							Average no. of children
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6+	
1942–1946								
Quebec	16.5	15.0	35.5	20.6	7.9	2.7	1.8	2.05
Ontario	13.2	12.2	37.4	23.3	8.9	2.9	2.0	2.21
1947–1951								
Quebec	18.4	17.1	39.5	18.3	4.8	1.2	0.6	1.81
Ontario	15.5	14.1	41.2	20.5	6.2	1.6	0.8	1.97
1952–1956								
Quebec	21.8	19.1	38.8	15.9	3.4	0.7	0.4	1.64
Ontario	19.5	15.4	39.0	19.2	5.1	1.1	0.6	1.81
1957–1961								
Quebec	26.7	22.8	34.4	13.3	2.3	0.4	0.2	1.44
Ontario	26.8	19.9	33.3	15.4	3.5	0.7	0.3	1.52
1962–1966								
Quebec	37.6	28.5	24.8	7.8	1.0	0.1	0.1	1.07
Ontario	40.0	26.2	23.6	8.4	1.4	0.2	0.1	1.07

Source: Dagenais, *La fin de la famille moderne*.

persisted in producing very large families into the middle years of the twentieth century. It would be farfetched to argue that this minority persisted in “objectively” producing large numbers of children because of its adherence to “l’institution matrimoniale” while the majority had already moved toward what he describes as a “modern family structure” consistent with the establishment of “middle-class values”. Dagenais’s argument about the adoption of “la société bourgeoise” therefore seems contradictory because it fails to address the key issue concerning the persistence of large families through the middle decades of the twentieth century. His history of cultural change in relation to family dynamics seems to us to beg the crucial question rather than answer it.

Danielle Gauvreau and Peter Gossage analyse fertility and contraception between 1920 and 1960 with the use of interviews and data published in Henripin and Lapierre-Adamcyk’s *La fin de la revanche des berceaux*.²⁶ Gauvreau and Gossage’s study confirms that aggregated fertility rates had already begun to decrease by the late nineteenth century and that this slow decline continued through the mid-twentieth century, although the post-war

26 Gauvreau and Gossage, “Empêcher la famille”.

“baby-boom” provided a slight reprieve before the final period of definitive decline and convergence took place during the 1960s. The approach taken by Gauvreau and Gossage (as many other researchers have done) is to use aggregates to explain fertility patterns in Quebec history. To be sure, they separate the population according to linguistic and “ethnic” categories, but within each of these subsets their analysis is based on mean averages. The fine points of the distribution’s shape are essentially ignored. Such an analytical strategy makes sense in most circumstances when the distribution conforms to a random normal pattern, but, crucially, the distribution of family sizes in Quebec did not do so. Rather, it conformed to a bi-modal pattern in which so-called “out-liers” contributed about one-half of all children born to members of that sub-population.

Demographic transition theory can be employed to account for the majority of Quebec families which conformed to the expectations of the theory, even while a minority would have continued to have large families. The children of these fewer, but much larger, families raise the average so greatly that the aggregated data have led commentators to assume, mistakenly, that the demographic transition theory is not relevant to the demographic dynamics of the francophone population of Quebec. The key point is that the experience of this “super-fertile” sub-group, comprising approximately 15 to 20 per cent of families, not only contradicts the expectations of demographic transition theory but also inflates the mean average to such an extent that it does not accurately reflect the behaviour of the majority. In describing roughly one in five families as “anomalous” (or “out-liers”), we are stretching that concept, since this minority is perhaps more accurately a counter-culture of fertility that needs to be understood in its own terms.

Interpretations of Quebec Demography

The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.²⁷

The analysis of Quebec’s demographic history has almost always been interpenetrated with political issues, especially insofar as it has been conducted in terms of the representation of French Canadians in comparison with the rest of Canada. For example, Charbonneau’s 1973 collection of essays put

27 Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”, in Lewis Feuer, ed., *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 320.

great emphasis on the fact that French Canadians had been the dominant socio-cultural group within the Canadian population until the middle of the twentieth century.

In the third quarter of the twentieth century, it became apparent that the rapidly declining fertility of Quebec francophones — and in particular the end of the regime of bi-modality — engendered fears for the social and cultural future of Quebec. What had heretofore been a backburner issue went to the top of the political agenda, and recommendations were made to promote fertility to counteract its decline. Of course, the issue of language rights and the designation of linguistic paternity became critical topics, nowhere more so than in Montreal, where it appeared that francophones were heading towards a minority position, first in schools and later (and inevitably) in the general population.

A few years earlier in 1968, Jacques Henripin sparked this public debate by relating the particularities of the plummeting fertility rate to the evolving constitutional position of Quebec's francophones in Canada as follows:

Au Canada, l'examen des conséquences possibles des variations de la fécondité ne saurait passer sous silence un aspect majeur de la vie politique du pays : la concurrence linguistique. Elle se livre sur bien des plans, on ne saurait nier que l'un des éléments les plus importants de cette concurrence est la course démographique. Depuis trois quarts de siècle, un équilibre s'est maintenu : presque toute l'immigration a contribué à grossir les effectifs des anglophones, mais cela était compensé par la surfécondité des francophones. Cependant, depuis une quarantaine d'années, cette surfécondité s'amenuise et il est à peu près certain qu'elle ne suffit plus à assurer la compensation de l'immigration, [...] La fécondité devient ainsi l'objet d'interventions d'ordre politique; il n'est pas exclu qu'elle soit un jour l'objet d'interventions de la part des pouvoirs publics.²⁸

In their study published in Charbonneau's 1973 collection, Jacques Henripin and Yves Péron did not explore the reasons behind this "high" fertility level, but they did propose the following:

Peut-être la plupart des familles canadiennes-françaises n'ont-elles tout simplement pas eu les connaissances nécessaires pour limiter la dimension de leur famille plus tôt. L'obédience à la doctrine catholique a probablement été un instrument important dans cette absence de connaissances; elle l'a sûrement été pour ce qui concerne l'abstention de l'usage des moyens contraceptifs. Peut-être nulle part dans le monde, l'idéal catholique d'une nombreuse famille

28 Henripin, *Tendances et facteurs de la fécondité au Canada*, p. xxviii. In this quotation, the phrase *la surfécondité des francophones* refers to aggregated levels of fertility, not the kind of "super fertility" that we discuss here.

a-t-il été observé avec plus d'efficacité. Cet idéal fut renforcé par une propagande nationaliste vigoureuse en faveur de la revanche des berceaux et l'on peut difficilement douter du succès de ces idées.²⁹

It is worthwhile pausing to consider this analysis because it highlights a common misinterpretation of Quebec's demographic evolution. Henripin and Péron begin by stating that the majority ("la plupart") of francophone families did not have the knowledge ("les connaissances nécessaires") to limit the size of their families. Yet, as the statistics noted previously make abundantly clear, whether we are considering the situation in 1900 or 1968, the majority of the francophone population was, in fact, doing just that. While Henripin and Péron claim that pious obedience to Catholic preaching was crucial, an equally credible argument can be advanced that, in the face of repeated and vociferous attempts by clerics to influence the population's demographic behaviour, the majority was behaving in precisely the opposite manner.³⁰ Thirdly, Henripin and Péron suggest that nowhere else in the world was the Catholic ideal of large families being observed as effectively as in Quebec.³¹ Our discussion of the demographic statistics makes clear, however, that only a minority of francophone families in Quebec were "super-fertile". Finally, they claim that Quebec nationalism — and especially the call to increase Quebec's political profile through "la revanche des berceaux" — was undoubtedly behind the resistance of previous generations of Quebecers to the siren's call of fertility control. This final point is especially interesting because, yet again, it is widely asserted — but never demonstrated — that obedience to their secular leaders' admonishments was the reason for the persistence of this super-fertile sub-group for several generations while most of their contemporaries were acting privately to limit their fertility. In this instance, the power of discourse has overwhelmed the statistical reality of which Henripin and Péron would have been well aware, since they spent their academic careers working with fertility data. The image of the large, "traditional" family was more powerful than the concrete demographic realities that were amply documented in studies of Quebec's fertility.

One exceptional scholar tried to show that the emperor of *la surfécondité* had no clothes. Philippe Garigue questioned the theories of some of the major, turn-of-the-century historians and sociologists whose work was, he suggests, tantamount to political and ecclesiastic discourse. In this regard, he refers to Falardeau's argument about Quebec society, in part, as follows: "La culture canadienne-française traditionnelle est sociologiquement inadéquate et est destinée à disparaître pour la bonne raison qu'elle ne peut préparer les

29 Henripin and Péron, "La transition démographique au Québec", pp. 41–42.

30 This criticism is relevant to the recent publications of Gauvreau and Gervais ("Women, Priests and Physicians" and "Les chemins détournés").

31 This statement is simply hyperbolic; see, by way of contrast, Daly, "A Marxian-Malthusian View of Poverty and Development" and "Marx and Malthus in North-East Brazil".

Canadiens français à faire face aux exigences d'une vie urbaine industrielle."³² However, Garigue seems to have been a voice in the academic wilderness. Our survey of scholarly literature suggests that Garigue's work was almost entirely ignored in other publications on the subject of fertility decline — his essay was referred to in one article in 1966,³³ but not again until 1989,³⁴ after which he is cited more frequently.³⁵ Garigue played the devil's advocate, challenging the established academic literature of the social organization of Quebec written by the Chicago School. He clearly states: "Il ne s'agit pas seulement de montrer le caractère mythique ou idéologique de certaines idées courantes sur le Canada français, mais aussi celui de certaines déclarations faites par plusieurs chercheurs en sciences sociales, notamment les américains Redfield, Miner et Hughes."³⁶

Not only was Garigue's criticism ignored, but the peculiar appropriation of the Chicago School's sociology of Quebec continued to flourish in discussions of Quebecers' demographic behaviour during the final stages of the transition to lower, controlled fertility. This discursive image of the large, "traditional" family was at the heart of the demo-linguistic debate that raged in the 1960s and 1970s. Most contributors to this debate did not possess statistical or demographic training as did Henripin and Péron, although, as already noted, such training did not render them impervious to the lure of the discursive myth of the supposedly "traditional" family among Quebecers. To make sense of the power of this myth, we need to locate it within the politics of language/culture that was a crucial element in the emergence of a federated Canadian state in the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

Bruce Curtis's narrative of the evolution in census-making in mid-nineteenth-century Canada draws our attention to the social construction of both population and statistics. Neither was a neutral category that could be filled with "evidence" supplied by impartial enumerators. Rather, the whole process was embedded in the state formation activities of the Canadian political economy. Census-taking was an exercise in surveillance, but, to a rather

32 Philippe Garigue, "Réexamen de l'évolution sociale du Québec", in M. Rioux and Y. Martin, eds., *La société canadienne-française* (Montreal: Hurtubise HMH, 1971), p. 154. This article was first published in English in 1960 in the *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*. Quote taken from J. C. Falardeau, *Essais sur le Québec contemporain* (Quebec: Presses universitaires Laval, 1953), p. 8.

33 M.-A. Tremblay, "Modèles d'autorité dans la famille canadienne-française", *Recherches sociographiques*, vol. 7 (1966), pp. 215–230.

34 Denise Lemieux and Lucie Mercier, "Familles et destins féminins : le prisme de la mémoire, 1880–1940", *Recherches sociographiques*, vol. 28 (1987), pp. 255–271.

35 An indication of Garigue's invisible status is that, in a survey of twentieth-century Quebec historiography, Ronald Rudin never mentions Garigue, nor does he cite Garigue's work in his bibliography. See Ronald Rudin, *Making History in Twentieth Century Quebec* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

36 Philippe Garigue, *Études sur le Canada français* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1958), p. 6.

larger extent, it was also an exercise in the normalization of social relations, creating everyday and accepted categories into which “the population” could be organized. The modern liberal state’s ideological programme of self-representation was echoed in shuffling the deck of social relations. In a thoroughly Canadian way, language issues took precedence as a result of J.-C. Taché’s successful attempts to manipulate the data in a fashion most favourable for the francophone population. Taché’s construction of “the population” was part of the price that the Macdonald/Cartier coalition was willing to pay to bring the new nation’s first, post-Confederation enumeration into line with newly emerging international standards of social-scientific, statistical, information-gathering standards.³⁷

Taché’s project succeeded brilliantly since it was not until the latter decades of the twentieth century that these categories — of patriarchy, at any rate — were brought into question by Canadians. It is more than a little ironic that a francophone intellectual like J.-C. Taché, whose primary socio-political concern was with the St-Jean-Baptiste Society’s quest, *À l’Avenir de la Patrie*, and whose primary means of ensuring *la survivance* was to encourage rural society by fashioning a *canadien* cultural memory through popular literature, would usher the era of rational numerical calculation into Canadian history. Taché was a schoolmate and comrade of Cyprien Tanguay, who has been the historical personage credited with bringing the politics of population in line with the developing cultural imaginary that paid particular attention to the myth of *la revanche des berceaux*. This mythical politics of hyper-fecundity was first created in the late nineteenth century, then propagated until it took on its own discursive life. In so doing, it became influential in giving a peculiar inflection to the twentieth-century discourse on language, culture, and population in Quebec — and also, of course, in relation to *la francophonie* as well as Quebec-in-Canada.

By the turn of the twentieth century, a political, medical, and ecclesiastic discourse took form in reaction to declining fertility rates, high mortality rates (of both mother and child), increased immigration by non-francophones, rural migration to Montreal as well as to Quebec’s smaller cities, out-migration beyond the borders of Quebec, industrialization, and capitalist enterprise. By the time the Great Depression hit, the concept of the traditional Quebec family was fully developed as a key component of the multi-stranded discourse relating to language, culture, and provincial rights.³⁸ The growing anxiety of Quebec nationalists was anchored in the repetitive rehashing of the myth of the “traditional” Quebec family.

37 Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics and the Census of Canada, 1840–1875* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 286.

38 From Ronald Rudin’s discussion of the influence of Lionel Groulx, it seems clear that there was an inverse correlation between the marginalization of francophone Quebecers from the commanding heights of the provincial economy and Groulx’s glorification of “tradition” as a means of coping with downward mobility. See Rudin, *Making History*, especially pp. 103–104.

The Chicago School of scholars of rural sociology was instrumental in modernizing the inheritance from nineteenth-century, French-Canadian cultural nationalists like Tanguay by developing the concept of a “folk society” to describe Quebec. This collection of scholars comprised prominent sociologists and historians, Americans and Quebecers: Hughes and Miner, Gérin, Falardeau, and Rioux being the foremost among them. Their interpretation of the “folk society” they observed in Quebec was crucial to the discourse shaping their contemporaries’ beliefs about “traditional” Quebec culture.

The Chicago School strongly believed that a clash existed between rural and urban environments and that industrialization and urbanization would mean the disappearance of the Quebec culture. This “folk society” was unlikely to adapt itself to social change because of its deep grounding in tradition. Ironically, the Chicago School’s interpretive framework was itself appropriated from nineteenth-century Quebec cultural nationalists. In 1898 Léon Gérin published *L’habitant de St-Justin*, in which he described a “typical”, “traditional” Quebec family with strong ties to the land. Gérin’s 1937 book *Le type économique et social des Canadiens* likewise describes a “typical”, “traditional” Quebec family. E. C. Hughes, one of the most prominent Chicago School social scientists of the 1930s and 1940s, wrote approvingly of Gérin’s description of the Quebec society not just because it “represents the ideal rural life of which French-Canadian leaders and poets speak”, but also because it was “a reality for a good part of rural Quebec”. Philippe Garigue revisited Gérin’s study and concluded:

The argument that French Canada is essentially rural in character has been so extensively repeated that it has become a “myth” supporting numberless assertions. It was used during the depression to support a movement “back to the land”. It has also served as reinforcement to the teachings of social reformers who saw in the idealised life of rural Quebec the true state of nature where everything was at its best. It explains why a sociologist could write in an unguarded moment “the industrial revolution in Quebec abruptly disturbed a pastoral symphony”.³⁹

The most important representative of the Chicago School was Horace Miner, who in 1939 suggested that contemporary Quebecers lived with an ideal of a simple rural society that caused a deep cultural conflict between rural and urban areas: “Miner, for instance, was one of the earliest to argue that there was such a conflict [rural/urban], attributed it to the fact that the local social organisation was basically that of the seventeenth century, comparable to that of a ‘folk’ society isolated and without much money econ-

39 Philippe Garigue, “St Justin: A Case Study in Rural French-Canadian Social Organization”, *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, vol. 22 (1956), p. 318. Hughes’s approval of Gérin’s description of St-Justin is quoted by Garigue on p. 302 of this article.

omy, and one which, according to him, had remained unchanged for two centuries.”⁴⁰ Miner believed that rural Quebec in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was comparable in its modes of social organization to the pioneering society of the seventeenth century. In his fieldwork, Miner described the first few years of a couple’s marriage in Saint-Denis-de-Kamouraska to stress the commonness of large families and Quebecers’ attachment to their simple rural society as the cause of a deep cultural conflict between rural and urban areas.

The Chicago School scholars seem to have understood the mythical proportions taken by their views on Quebec culture, but they found ways to rationalize them. The Chicago School built a myth of the “traditional” family that could not be sustained in the conditions of social, economic, and cultural evolution that were taking place within the very “folk society” they were describing. The key point is that this fabrication was sustained in the face of facts on the ground — demographic “facts” as well as economic, geographical, cultural, and social “facts”. Or, as Marx suggested, “[J]ust when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service....”

Countering Gérin’s and Miner’s position, Garigue argued that Quebec society was — and had been since New France — “mainly commercial and urban”. Garigue’s arguments were nothing less than revolutionary but do not appear to have been well received by his contemporaries. Scholarly publications continued to emphasize the unease with which nationalist, francophone Quebecers viewed modernization, and especially the inevitable change in family structures and decreasing fertility rates associated with it. For example, Odoric Bouffard examined Quebec literature to highlight the disappearance of the traditional Quebec family.⁴¹ In much the same way, Maurice Lemire analysed Gabrielle Roy’s *Bonheur d’occasion* in the context of traditional Quebec families struggling to survive in an increasingly Anglo-Saxon, urban environment plagued by poverty.⁴² In 1972 René Jutras stated that the decline in “fecundity” since the 1960s was a clear indication of the state of the social climate in the province and that the State should examine the situation and provide solutions to enhance the importance of fertile families. It is salient to note that Jutras shared the same fears as the followers of Chicago School folk sociology in arguing that the double effect of industrialization and urbanization had had a negative impact on birth rates.⁴³ Through their articles on Quebec society and culture, the nationalists focused attention on

40 Garigue, “St Justin: A Case Study”, p. 326. The work by Everett C. Hughes to which Garigue refers is *French Canada in Transition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943).

41 Odoric Bouffard, “Le Canadien-français entre deux mondes”, *Culture*, vol. 28 (1967), pp. 347–356.

42 Maurice Lemire, “*Bonheur d’occasion* ou le salut par la guerre”, *Recherches sociographiques*, vol. 10 (1969), pp. 23–35.

43 René Jutras, “Viabilité de la famille québécoise”, *L’action nationale*, vol. 61 (1972), pp. 357–383.

what they thought were recent changes in the organization of the “traditional family” to urge the State (the provincial government of Quebec) to provide means to generate more children in an effort to preserve the strength of Quebecers in Canada.

Many demographic studies published from the 1960s to the late 1980s were used to support the nationalist political agenda and, especially, to promote programmes that would raise Quebec’s fertility rate so that the “Quebec nation” could keep its place as a distinct culture in Canada. There was a fear that the influence of francophone Canadians would rapidly lose constitutional status as a founding people because the Quebec provincial government had proved itself to be incapable of counteracting this relative loss in numbers. Charbonneau expresses this concern, central to the nationalist movement, which was explored extensively in Quebec’s demographic research: “Après avoir profité, puis espéré de la puissance du nombre, le Québec s’est orientée, délibérément ou non, vers le développement qualitatif de ses ressources humaines.”⁴⁴ Once again, however, the problematic was mis-stated: the issue was not that fertility rates had decreased radically because families now chose to go for “quality” as opposed to “quantity”; the majority of Quebec’s francophone families had been doing precisely that for several generations. The problem facing nationalists in the 1960s and 1970s was that the exceptional pattern of bi-modal fertility dynamics was disappearing in front of their eyes. Their ideologically and discursively blinkered vision prevented them from seeing this change for what it was — the disappearance of a super-fertile minority — but rather suggested that, somehow, this was a crisis in reproduction that afflicted the whole francophone population.

The concept of the traditional Quebec family as portrayed in Lemire was an important tool in the political and ecclesiastic discourse for most of half of the twentieth century.⁴⁵ Peter Gossage and Danielle Gauvreau analysed the public discourse of the early twentieth century, which concerned itself with the first phase of declining fertility rates among Quebecers:

While such trends [declining fertility rates] certainly contributed to the growing anxiety of conservative nationalists in turn-of-the-century Quebec, these fears were based as much on social and political ideology as on any detailed demographic analysis. As we shall see, World War I represented a significant turning point in this debate, a point at which the essentially political question of numbers took on a new urgency and when the once triumphant nationalist rhetoric around fertility began to take on a note of preventive exhortation.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Charbonneau, *La population du Québec*, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Most, if not all, of the articles published in the scholarly journal *L’action nationale* were political in nature. Through their articles on Quebec society and culture, the nationalists were able to find support for their design and method to their purpose.

⁴⁶ Peter Gossage and Danielle Gauvreau, “Demography and Discourse in Transition: Quebec Fertility at the Turn of the Twentieth Century”, *History of the Family*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1999), pp. 379–380.

Gossage and Gauvreau's conclusion is applicable in describing the state of historical and demographic research on the question of declining fertility among Quebecers that persisted until the 1990s. The research we reviewed suggests that Quebec historiography has shied away from non-traditional or revisionist approaches to its population history.

In the past 30 years, an astonishing amount of research has been conducted by statisticians and demographers located at the Université de Montréal's department of demography with respect to the declining fertility rate and the future of French language and Quebec in Canada. These studies were often prescriptive in nature; that is, they tried to devise strategies to promote births among Quebec families. René Jutras, describing the implications of this academic research into declining fertility for the benefit of his nationalist readers in *L'Action nationale*, wrote that "the nation" was an extension of the family and that *la famille québécoise* was now in crisis because it was failing to reproduce itself. According to Jutras, it was thus necessary to make recommendations to governments for its preservation:

Il n'y a aucune nation présentement qui voudrait risquer de se dispenser de la société familiale pour assurer non seulement la transmission de la culture nationale, mais aussi son fleurissement. Quand je parle de société familiale je veux dire un homme et une femme qui se vouent éternellement l'un à l'autre avec une bande d'enfants autour d'eux.⁴⁷

The literature we reviewed, and particularly that published in *L'Action nationale*, supported the political ideologies of the separatist movement. Demography was used to further its nationalist political agenda by promoting the importance of raising Quebec's fertility rate so that "the Nation" could keep its place as a distinct culture in Canada. Until the early 1980s and the failure of the Meech Lake accord, demographic history in Quebec not only supported the separatist agenda but did so by promoting sentimental myths about the "traditional" Quebec society that had become ingrained in the collective mind.

Quebec historiography had to wait for the revisionist studies that began to appear in the 1980s to free itself from the "tradition of dead generations [that] weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living". As long as the nationalists accepted "traditional" conceptions about Quebec history, derived from nineteenth-century cultural nationalists and modernized by the Chicago School studies, "they anxiously conjure[d] up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow[ed] from them names, battle cries and costumes".

Yet it is important to note that the natalist imprecations of neither the Church nor the nationalists seem to have been of much importance in determining how francophone women in Quebec decided to organize their ferti-

47 Jutras, "Viabilité de la famille québécoise", p. 361.

ity. The early-twentieth-century call for *la revanche des berceaux* seems to have fallen on deaf ears; although some women did continue to have very large families until the 1950s, many others did not. Also, when the question of francophone birth rates became urgently pressing — in the quite different context of below-replacement fertility in the 1960s and 1970s — the nationalists were again powerless to influence reproductive behaviour and the Church was essentially irrelevant. There was thus a lack of connection between ideology and behaviour.

This lack of connection is of real importance since it mirrors — through a glass darkly, perhaps — the earlier situation during which it was thought that the populationist urgings of both nationalists and clerics had been influential in the francophone bedrooms of the province. Our line of argument suggests that the significant minority of “modernist” women who first controlled their fertility did so in opposition to the commands of religious or ideological leaders; similarly, the later minority of women who did not control their fertility were not responding to religious or ideological commands, nor were they influenced by the “modern family ideal type” to which the majority of Quebec’s families already conformed in the first half of the twentieth century. In both instances, these women’s fertility histories need to be related to “their own reasons”, and this has yet to be done by historians, some of whom have been all too willing to accept at face value the pronouncements of clerics and nationalist ideologues. Historians might consider a new direction for research that takes seriously women’s “own reasons” when studying the curious — indeed, unique — differentials in Quebec’s fertility history.

Revising the discourse

By the late 1980s, demographic research no longer dovetailed with the nationalist agenda. According to Fernand Ouellet, the historiographical concerns of scholars were shifting from a traditional, nationalist perspective to one oriented towards social history. However, the nationalist discourse as well as traditional arguments and methods have continued to appear in recent research.⁴⁸ Feminist historians have helped to redirect this historiography by analysing sources from the perspective of the women they studied and by using oral history and women’s journals and biographies to describe their lives, but the process is far from complete.

The multidisciplinary approach of women historians to the study of Quebec has been vital in opening the door to the revisionist movement, whose proponents have reviewed, and revised, previous conceptions of family history. The need to investigate the role of women became a crucial factor in

48 Fernand Ouellet, “La modernisation de l’historiographie et l’émergence de l’histoire sociale”, *Recherches sociographiques*, vol. 26 (1985), pp. 11–83, and “La question sociale au Québec, 1880–1930 : la condition féminine et le mouvement des femmes dans l’historiographie”, *Histoire sociale/ Social History* vol. 21, no. 42 (November 1988), pp. 319–345.

the study of families.⁴⁹ The revisionist focus of recent demographic research in Quebec has emphasized declining fertility rates among francophones in twentieth-century Quebec. This revisionist focus has, to some extent, undermined the belief in the veracity of the mythical, “traditional” French-Canadian family, although it seems as if Quebec historians have had difficulty in letting go of Quebecers’ perceived “otherness” or “distinctiveness” for fear of losing their cultural identity. Furthermore, the revisionists’ arguments are rather more concerned with demonstrating that there was substantial variation in family formation practices in Quebec’s past than with analysing its one, truly distinctive feature in the period of demographic transition. The bi-modal dynamics we have identified have been lost in the revisionists’ rush to claim that Quebec’s demographic transition was like that occurring in other modern societies. It was not, and the reason was the persistence of a significant minority that maintained an extremely high level of reproduction for several generations after the onset of declining fertility.

Aside from Garigue’s pioneering articles, which attracted little attention when they appeared in the 1950s and 1960s, feminist historians were the first to revisit the myth of the large family from the perspective of women’s varied experiences. Marie Lavigne asked the following question in 1983: “Pourquoi les Québécoises auraient-elles eu une histoire semblable à celles des autres nord-américaines en ce qui concerne la vie publique et ont-elles tant tardé à les suivre dans leur vie privée?”⁵⁰ Her question was important and, in the context of so much mythologizing about the “traditional” family and misunderstanding about its fertility dynamics, novel. However, in trying to answer it, Lavigne emphasized only those groups of fertility-controlling women who had been ignored in the past by historians. Her purpose was to highlight “other experiences”, the marginalized and perceived marginalized, such as women who did not marry, whose children died in infancy, or who entered a religious order.

Lavigne’s path-breaking article first reviews Henripin’s demographic research to illustrate that not all women at the beginning of the twentieth century produced large families. She then makes the crucial point that, while the study of fertility and family size is — and has been in the past — done on the basis of averages, not all women at the turn of the century were alike. She next suggests that, if we are to understand the various facets of Quebec families, evaluations should not be made on a global level. Lavigne notes that many women did not bear any children; indeed, between 10 and 15 per cent of all women, circa 1900, chose to be permanently celibate and another 10 per cent were biologically incapable of reproducing.

49 Bettina Bradbury, “Feminist Historians and Family History in Canada in the 1990s”, *Journal of Family History*, vol. 25 (2000), pp. 362–383.

50 Lavigne, “Réflexions féministes autour de la fertilité québécoise”, p. 320.

Ainsi, 25% des Québécoises des cohortes de 1887, 1903 et 1913 ne connaissent pas la maternité et ne contribuent pas au renouvellement de la population. Si l'on ajoute à ce groupe celles qui ont eu un rôle reproducteur minimal (1 et 2 enfants), on a plus que 40% des Québécoises dont la vie ne correspond pas à l'image qu'on a conservé de Québécoises prolifiques. On pourrait émettre l'hypothèse que non seulement les femmes ont eu des expériences historiques fort différentes, mais que parmi elles s'est opérée une division du travail de reproduction biologique de l'espèce, le quart des femmes en étant exclues.⁵¹

To advance her argument concerning the multiplicity of life experiences of maternity, Lavigne makes an interesting observation, which unfortunately neither she nor other historians after her have explored. She indicates that approximately one in five woman would produce families of 10 or more children, thereby producing half of the children born in a given generation. Lavigne's study of "other experiences" may have been undertaken to contrast them to the large families, which were perceived to be the majority experience. Like so many of her predecessors, Lavigne seems to have assumed that previous explanations of large families were still valid. This is hardly surprising because, even at this time, almost half of the adult population of Quebec had been born into large families; half of all individuals had either been born into a large family or married someone who came from a large family, thus perpetuating the belief that most families were large. Yet, in fact, only a minority of couples were "super-fertile", and the majority of families followed a pattern of reproduction and decline similar to that predicted by demographic transition theory.

In 1991 Danielle Gauvreau published a study on the multiple experiences of women and motherhood in which she argued that about 12 per cent of married women were sterile and therefore did not have children.⁵² She also reported that "au-delà de la stérilité totale de certains couples, d'autres vivent des situations de stérilité précoce, sont peu féconds ou, malgré leur fécondité, ne réussissent pas à 'récupérer' leurs enfants. Dans tous ces cas, la taille de la famille effective est réduite."⁵³ Gauvreau used Lavigne's model to describe the multiple fertility experiences of Quebec women: some did not marry, some did not give birth in wedlock, not all married women produced many children, childbearing often ended in the death of either mother or child. But leaving aside those who chose celibacy in preference to marriage, she focused her attention on the experience of motherhood in the context of either the use of contraception or the reduction in the time period within which women bore children, rather than trying to provide a more global answer to the reduction of fertility rates over the past century.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 326.

52 Danielle Gauvreau, "Destins de femmes, destins de mères : images et réalités historiques de la maternité au Québec", *Recherches sociographiques*, vol. 32 (1991), pp. 321–346.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 326.

Danielle Gauvreau and Peter Gossage's article on "Canadian Fertility Transitions" describes the modality surrounding the declining fertility rate in Quebec at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵⁴ Their concern is to show that the majority of Quebec mothers followed the path predicted by demographic transition theory; however, they do not address the persistence of that minority of Quebec families which continued to produce large numbers of children for several generations after the majority made the shift to a modern family structure, characterized by fertility control.

The question of differential fertility experiences also has been studied in terms of its class dimensions. In 1992 Denyse Baillargeon published her study of the lives of married women living in a "blue collar" neighbourhood in Montreal during the period between 1929 and 1939.⁵⁵ More specifically, she investigates the intersection of their working lives and their reproductive experiences by focusing on certain aspects of these women's entry into the labour market in the context of the depression, "la crise économique". Baillargeon draws attention to the role played by these working women in their homes, with particular reference to the division of labour. The women she interviewed had been born between 1897 and 1916, and the majority of them grew up in families of between six and nine children. Some of the women of the sample grew up in Montreal, while the others had either immigrated to the city before or after their marriage. Most had little money to live on.

Although Baillargeon's interviewees may have had similar economic backgrounds, the number of children that each woman bore varied. Five of the 28 fertile women interviewed (30 were interviewed in total) had more than eight children (two of them had more than ten); six of these women had six or seven children; eleven of them had between three and five children; and six women had fewer than three children. These 28 women had about 129 children.⁵⁶ In terms of a simple average, these fertile working mothers had an average of 4.6 children. Baillargeon's interviews indicate that more than half of the women had tried to control their fertility. Baillargeon's results show that the reasons for doing so were varied and not always due to financial constraints. She states, in part, "Un certain fatalisme, attribuable tout autant à l'ignorance en matière de contraception qu'à l'intériorisation

54 Danielle Gauvreau and Peter Gossage, "Canadian Fertility Transitions: Quebec and Ontario at the Turn of the Twentieth Century", *Journal of Family History*, vol. 26 (2001), pp. 162–188.

55 Denyse Baillargeon, "La crise ordinaire : les ménagères montréalaises et la crise des années trente", *Labour/ Le travail*, vol. 30 (1992), pp. 135–162.

56 It is impossible to be more precise. We estimated that the five women with eight or more children had an average of ten each, which yielded a total of 50; the six mothers of six or seven children were equally divided so that their offspring totalled 39 children; the eleven women with three, four, or five children were multiplied by four to yield 44 children; and the six with two or fewer children were allocated, two apiece, to having none, one, and two children respectively, which yielded six children. Baillargeon is imprecise concerning the total number of pregnancies and the number of children who were stillborn or died in infancy (we do not know the circumstances surrounding the infertility of two of the women interviewed), so we can arrive at only a rough approximation.

des valeurs religieuses, l'origine rurale des conjoints et un nombre élevé d'enfants dans leur famille d'origine constituaient autant de facteurs qui pouvaient les amener à avoir une famille nombreuse en dépit d'une situation économique précaire."⁵⁷ Unfortunately, Baillargeon does not develop the point concerning the 18 per cent of the interviewed women who had more than eight children, thereby producing 45 per cent of all children born to the 28 members of the group she studied, to embark on a discussion of the persistent "super-fertility" among this minority. Nor is Baillargeon concerned to discuss the difference in fertility rates between her poor subjects and richer, bourgeois Montrealers; in fact, it is not clear that there was a significant difference that could be correlated with income or occupational levels.

The history of the family, next women's history, and then feminist approaches have proceeded in decadal waves among researchers since the mid-1960s; prior to this time, little interest was shown to women's perspective in history. With the women's liberation movement, the field grew in popularity as a means to describe women's many forms of "enslavement" in a male-dominated world. Radical feminist theorists were some of the first researchers to analyse the relation between women and families characterized by a patriarchal organizational structure in which women have been oppressed and alienated. Several theories followed which stemmed from Marxist theories, often based on Engels's theorizing. Women's oppression has been examined in the context of social class, and women's relation to families has thus been seen in the context of power relationships found in capitalist systems. More recent feminists who have continued to espouse Marxist theories have refined their methodology to overcome what they have seen as lacunae in earlier approaches, in which "la socialisation de la production ainsi que l'abolition de la propriété privée et des classes sociales représentent des conditions nécessaires mais non suffisantes pour mettre fin à l'oppression des femmes".⁵⁸ Although their work is determinative in many respects for the study of family life, feminist historians have tended to provide a one-sided view of family history by setting it in an antagonistic scenario. More recently, a new perspective to gender issues has emerged, partly due to the contributions of male researchers such as Gérard Bouchard and Peter Gossage to the study of women's reproductive history.

Gérard Bouchard followed the publication of his book, *Quelques arpents d'Amérique*, with another study that aimed to define the traditional Quebec family in its daily life as opposed to the romanticized, ideological concept that remained ingrained in Quebec's collective mind. As a result of his inquiry, he found more commonality with the rest of North America than the supposed "otherness" or "distinctiveness" that was (and still is in some cases) part of the

57 Baillargeon, "La crise ordinaire", p. 144.

58 Nadia Fahmy-Eid and Micheline Dumont, "Les rapports femmes/famille/éducation au Québec : bilan de recherche", in Fahmy-Eid and Dumont, eds., *Maîtresses de maison*, p. 10.

rhetoric in Quebec nationalism.⁵⁹ Recently, Bouchard proposed a slightly different approach to male/female relationship than the one offered by feminist theory. Bouchard perceives women to be “dominated and exploited in their conjugal and family lives ... these women had the power to influence but not to decide”. Bouchard focuses on the Saguenay region between 1860 and 1930 and distinguishes between the “macrosocial” and “microsocial” spheres of male/female relationships. He argues that, although at the macro level society was patriarchal, at the microsocial sphere women were “able to manoeuvre, to negotiate and to assert themselves”.⁶⁰

In response to the limitations of the theory of demographic transition to explain Quebec’s demographic history and the increasing popularity of women’s studies, historians and social demographers have recently spent a great deal of energy exploring women’s multiple life experiences. By highlighting “other experiences”, research has shown that not all families produced large numbers of children. By analysing the dynamics of family life, using socio-economic parameters employed in demographic analyses (for example, education level, urban/rural, occupational background, and knowledge/use of contraception), researchers have found that some families followed religious admonitions, some were influenced by the secular urgings of nationalism, and some used contraceptive methods, while the level of education and occupation also influenced the number of children per family. Demographic analysis paints a picture of multiple fertility experiences, resulting in a more — not less — confused portrait of family life in twentieth-century Quebec.

Conclusion

Until quite recently the study of women and family history in Quebec was based on an uncompromising view of the province’s large, religious centres of tradition. Furthermore, it has become evident that during, if not before, the Quiet Revolution of the mid-twentieth century the Catholic Church had lost its hold over the population. Historians have struggled with an ingrained perception of what constituted the “traditional” Quebec family history at the beginning of the twentieth century. Early studies on the demographic history of Quebec portrayed women as generators of large families, a practice prescribed by the political elite and the Church. Popular attachment to what was

59 Gérard Bouchard, “L’histoire sociale au Québec : réflexions sur quelques paradoxes”, *Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française*, vol. 51 (1997), pp. 243–269, and “Marginality, Co-iteration and Change: Social History as a Critical Exercise”, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, vol. 8 (1997), pp. 19–38.

60 Gérard Bouchard, “Through the Meshes of Patriarchy: The Male/Female Relationship in the Saguenay Peasant Society (1860–1930)”, *History of the Family*, vol. 4 (1999), pp. 399, 397. The same argument is advanced in a French version of this essay: “La sexualité comme pratique et rapport social chez les paysans du Saguenay (1860–1930)”, *Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française*, vol. 54 (2001), pp. 183–217.

defined *a posteriori* as the “traditional” Quebec family seems to have been rooted in the fear that losing its “otherness” would render Quebec culture a lesser portion of Canada’s history and thereby threaten the loss of both its cultural identity and its political clout.

The new social history — and most especially, the recent generation of feminist-inspired historians — has revisited and criticized the myth of the large family and, most especially, the monolithic view of Quebec families that has been an influential part of the collective consciousness. There is a peculiar double-sidedness to these revisionist studies. On one hand, according to studies of Quebecers’ aggregated fertility, francophone families continued to produce significantly more children than their English-speaking counterparts well into the twentieth century, despite a longstanding experience of industrialization, urbanization, and contraception — the so-called hallmarks of modernization. Yet, on the other hand, all studies of demographic statistics make it abundantly clear that, even before the onset of declining fertility in the late nineteenth century, there were not only widely differing inter-generational experiences in family size but also substantial differences in intra-generational families in terms of the number of children.

To a certain extent, the recent, revisionist focus on the multiplicity of fertility experiences has been valuable in that it has broken apart the myth of the “traditional family”. But revisionism seems to have gone too far. The real distinctiveness of Quebec’s fertility decline has been lost in the process. Historians and demographers need to revisit the family experiences of those who continued to produce large families and of those who lived in them to determine not only that this minority persisted in practising *la sur-fécondité* but also why, after the mid-twentieth century, so few of their offspring chose to maintain this pattern of reproduction.

Everyone living in Quebec (or Canada, for that matter) knows an anecdotal story concerning a Quebec friend (or a friend’s friend) who was one of a large sibling group but who has only one child. Indeed, until very recently about one-half of all francophone Quebecers would have been born into these very large families. The crucial element of truth in this anecdote has been lost, however, in the current fascination with explicating the post-modern concern with multiple life experiences without accommodating the “super-fertile” sub-group in these studies.

An important step in revisiting the current perspective of family life would be to refocus our attention on Quebec’s peculiar, persistent minority of very large families and to ask two basic questions:

1. Why did you choose to have so many children when families around you chose to limit their family size?
2. In what ways were your experiences of *la sur-fécondité* influential in your decision to break with this pattern?

To be more precise: why were “super-fertile” families so prolific? Why did this “super-fertile” minority not follow the transitional demographic patterns as did the majority of other families? And why, in the 1960s, did the children of these “super-fertile families” not continue to reproduce as had their parents and grandparents?

The persistence of “super-fertility” in twentieth-century Quebec was therefore anomalous. Its almost-overnight disappearance is the riddle wrapped in the mystery of its persistence, inside the larger enigma of declining fertility.