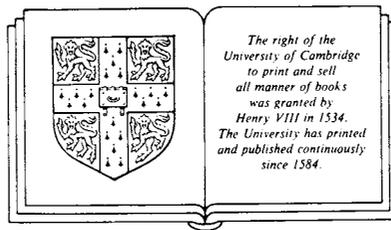


Istanbul households

Marriage, family and fertility
1880–1940

ALAN DUBEN and CEM BEHAR
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II

Issues, scope and sources

Our attention was caught a number of years ago by the striking juxtaposition of a few demographic figures for Turkey of the 1930s and 1940s which seemed to set Istanbul apart from the rest of the country in a very dramatic way. These figures revealed the rather simple fact that at a time when rural Turkish families were bringing into the world seven children on the average and those in towns and cities over four, the residents of Istanbul were barely replacing themselves biologically. They were giving birth to only slightly over two children.¹ We also soon discovered that this remarkably low fertility was accompanied by a very late age at marriage: twenty-three or twenty-four for women and around thirty for men, as contrasted with official figures of nineteen and twenty-two for rural women and men respectively, no doubt several years higher than was actually the case in Turkish villages.²

With fertility rates nearly a third of those in rural areas and marriage ages almost ten years higher, Istanbul had the demographic attributes of many pre-twentieth-century western European societies. How was that possible in the former capital of what was until the 1920s an Islamic empire? Had this been the case for some time? If not, what brought this situation about? And what does all of this mean for our understanding of Turkish society and the relationship between population and society in a more general sense?

¹ Frederic C. Shorter and Miroslav Macura, *Trends in Fertility and Mortality in Turkey, 1935-1975* (Washington, DC, 1982), 51.

² See Samira Berksan, 'Marriage patterns and the effect on fertility in Turkey' in F. C. Shorter and B. Güvenç, eds., *Turkish Demography: Proceedings of a Conference* (Ankara, 1969), for the official figures. Village ethnographies give us earlier marriage dates. See, for example, Niyazi Berkes, *Bazı Ankara Köyleri Üzerine Bir Araştırma* (Research on Some Ankara Villages) (Ankara, 1942), and Paul Stirling, *Turkish Village* (New York, 1965).

These are some of the questions that confronted us as we pondered the population figures we had discovered. We were, at the same time, quite aware of the widely shared view that Istanbul men and women married very young in past times, produced large numbers of children and lived in huge complex households. This was a perspective we also knew to be common to Europeans looking back at their own past, a perspective only recently fractured by the work of John Hajnal, Peter Laslett and a number of other scholars.³ Might we too look at such conceptions of the Istanbul past with scepticism? If so, what could we expect to find?

We soon came to believe, like Philippe Ariès, that the numbers we had encountered might be taken as signs of social and cultural events not so readily available to the observer; that they might be a kind of surface refraction of substrata of accumulated structures and changes.⁴ While, no doubt, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Istanbul was in many respects unique in the context of the Ottoman Empire, and even the Turkish Republic, we argue that, in its very extremes, Istanbul of the time dramatized certain basic social and cultural themes then new to Turkish society, some of which were to be central focal points of attention in the years to come.

Istanbul in context

Some time ago Massimo Livi-Bacci observed that, 'The urban population is still a concept in search of application'.⁵ That observation is as true today as it was in 1977. We still do not know what we are referring to when we speak of the urban population; we still do not know what it is about urban areas that makes them distinctive, or if indeed they are. This is a long-standing dilemma of urban sociology in general.⁶ It is also due to the dearth of urban-based historical demographic or historical anthropological studies dealing with family and fertility, since both fields have, for a variety of methodological and other reasons, a great proclivity to study clearly demarcated,

³ The seminal works are John Hajnal, 'European marriage patterns in perspective' in D. V. Glass and D. E. G. Eversley, eds., *Population in History* (London, 1965), and Peter Laslett, ed., assisted by Richard Wall, *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge, 1972).

⁴ Philippe Ariès, 'Two successive motivations for the declining birth rate in the West', *Population and Development Review*, 6 (December, 1980).

⁵ *A History of Italian Fertility during the Last Two Centuries* (Princeton, NJ, 1977).

⁶ Manuel Cassells, *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach* (London, 1977); R. E. Pahl, 'Urban social theory and research' in *Whose City? and Further Essays on Urban Society* (London, 1975).

small-scale rural areas and to neglect cities. The in-depth historical study of the family and of the population of cities has been neglected, despite the fact that urban areas have been an especially important locus of family change and fertility decline in various parts of the world, and that metropolises are absorbing increasingly larger proportions of the national population in most Third World societies. The result of this, in addition to our general ignorance of the nature of urban population issues, is that the theories, concepts and methods of the field have largely been dominated by the exigencies of rural societies.

Rural and urban, or rather metropolitan, patterns of fertility were, as we have seen – and still are – strikingly different in Turkey; but we do not really know why that is. The Princeton studies of the decline of fertility in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe also concluded that, ‘urban fertility [was] lower than rural fertility at virtually every date for which data were collected’,⁷ though there are cases in the past where it was higher in the city than in the countryside.⁸ The Princeton studies also show us that rural-urban fertility differentials can vary by country and by region within a country, though they provide us with no conclusive explanations for why that is so.⁹ We also know that household structures were quite different in rural, urban and especially metropolitan areas in the recent past in Turkey. During our period the impact of ‘westernization’, one of the major forces of change at the time, was limited to the major cities (and to scattered enclaves of people of urban origin in the provinces).

Though rural villagers knew about such ancient birth-control methods as *coitus interruptus*, there is no evidence that they were practising it or any other form of birth limitation in a systematic way. They were what demographers like to call a ‘natural fertility’ population. That is hardly surprising given a combination of the high infant mortality that prevailed in rural Anatolia, and their own incentives to produce children, particularly sons, to help them run their domestic agricultural enterprises and provide for their old age, and the encouragement they were getting to do so from a pronatalist state anxious to compensate for the huge losses of the First World War.

In Istanbul the situation could not have been more different. Women

⁷ Allan Sharlin, ‘Urban-rural differences in fertility in Europe during the demographic transition’ in Ansley J. Coale and Susan Cotts Watkins, *The Decline of Fertility in Europe* (Princeton, NJ, 1986), 236.

⁸ Roger P. Finlay, *Population and Metropolis: The Demography of London, 1580–1650* (Cambridge, 1981).

⁹ Sharlin, ‘Urban-rural differences’, 251.

were deliberately cutting short their child-bearing period to about age thirty – fifteen to twenty years before they would have been biologically incapable of reproducing. Clearly, families must have been practising birth control to have stopped bearing children so consistently early, as is evident from the statistical records they have left to posterity. Not only had they been curtailing their fertile years at the upper end for at least fifty or sixty years, but they had also been trimming them at the beginning by marrying later and later, though in all likelihood they were not marrying later in order to do so.

Islam provides the ideological underpinning for child limitation, and the Islamic world a plethora of methods, manuals and devices for carrying this out.¹⁰ Yet rural and small town Turkish Muslims by and large chose not to use them, and kept their fertility high, whereas their big city counterparts did so and achieved the low fertility which caught our attention.

As we shall see, the women of Istanbul were clearly forerunners in Turkey's first transition towards a lower level of fertility. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the city of Istanbul, with a total fertility rate of about 3.9, fell well below the so-called 'normal' range of total fertility rates of pre-industrial populations. The Muslim population of Istanbul indeed appears to have been the first sizeable Muslim group to have extensively practised family planning. In fact, the high degree of prevalence of parity-oriented family limitation within marriage, combined with a family formation system encouraging late female age at marriage, clearly set Istanbul apart from any discernible 'Muslim' or 'Middle Eastern' pattern. When trying to document the fertility decline in Istanbul in the first four decades of this century, we have, at each step, come across bits of evidence leading to the idea of a much earlier start in the fall of the indices used.

In no other Middle Eastern or Muslim city is there a parallel to these historical trends. In relation to the city of Beirut, for instance – in many respects quite a cosmopolitan place since at least the turn of the century – one reads that, 'on the whole, the census reports offer little evidence that urban educated women of the Levant had, by mid-[twentieth] century begun leading a trend toward smaller families. Only among the highly educated few is any such trend perceptible . . . upper class educated Muslims of Beirut began a trend toward smaller families sometime before mid-century'.¹¹ No predominantly

¹⁰ B. Mussallam, *Sex and Society in Islam* (Cambridge, 1983).

¹¹ E. T. Prothro and L. N. Diab, *Changing Family Patterns in the Arab East* (Beirut, 1974), 96–8.

Muslim country of the 1980s had as low a total fertility rate or as high a female mean age at first marriage as Istanbul achieved half a century ago.¹²

Istanbul Muslims clearly seem, then, to have stood apart from their coreligionists in the Middle East as pioneers in marriage age and household formation, in family planning practices and in fertility trends. Our perusal of the literature leaves little doubt that there was, and still is, a great variety of patterns of family and fertility in the areas of the world known to be Islamic or Middle Eastern. The unusual situation we have discovered in Istanbul and the present state of our knowledge of the diversity of the fertility and family patterns we have encountered lead us to question, following an argument of Clifford Geertz, in relation to other issues in other places and other times in the Islamic world,¹³ whether Islam in itself or the 'Middle East' could constitute an adequate or meaningful frame of reference for grouping or analysing things such as marriage, family formation patterns or fertility.

Fertility was, as we have seen, low in Istanbul even at the beginning of our period, and there are clear indications that families were consistently practising birth control as early as the 1860s or 1870s. This is not surprising given the limited need for a family labour force in a complex urban economy, which even in the pre-modern past could not have been entirely organized as an economy of domestic production and service units. Low fertility was in all likelihood also a response to the probable improved child mortality conditions in the nineteenth century. Theories which connect declining fertility to changing patterns of domestic labour use and intergenerational wealth transfers do not, therefore, have the same relevance in a largely non-domestic urban economy as they do in understanding what happens in the

¹² World Bank, *World Development Report* (1984) (Oxford, 1984). See also D. Smith, 'Age at first marriage', *World Fertility Survey Comparative Studies*, 7 (1980). The demographic indicators of two other prominent Middle East metropolises, Cairo and Alexandria, stand in the same relationship to those for early twentieth-century Istanbul as do the indicators for Beirut. In 1960 total fertility rates in the Cairo and Alexandria Governorates of Egypt were 6.0 and 5.8 respectively. In 1976 the figures for the urban areas of Cairo and Alexandria had fallen to 3.9 and 3.7, the level Istanbul had reached around the turn of the century. See *The Estimation of Recent Trends in Fertility and Mortality in Egypt* (Washington, DC, 1982), 64ff. A more recent estimate puts the total fertility rate in Metropolitan Cairo at 4.1 for the year 1980. See Huda Zurayk and Frederic C. Shorter, 'The social composition of households in Arab cities and settlements: Cairo, Beirut, Amman' (Cairo, 1988), 14. A recent study of Beirut calculates its total fertility rate for 1984 at 2.5, again a level which the Muslim population of Istanbul had reached in the 1930s. See H. Zurayk and H. K. Armenian, eds., *Beirut 1984: A Population and Health Profile* (Beirut, 1985).

¹³ *Islam Observed* (New Haven, 1968).

transformation of domestic-based rural ones.¹⁴ However, they do perhaps have a limited use in a situation where the organizational weight of the economy shifts from one in which domestic units are more prominent, to one in which the balance has tipped to extra-domestic work locales separate from family life.

Though we are far from having a clear picture of the details of these important changes, that is what appears to have happened in Istanbul from roughly the early to mid-nineteenth century onwards. The increasingly dense commercial connections of Istanbul with the European economy following the westernizing *Tanzimat* reforms of the 1830s not only eventually encouraged the development of a more widespread wage-labour economy, but even tied ordinary people in the city into the forces of an increasingly monetarized market. These developments picked up additional momentum in the 1880s.¹⁵ An expansion and modernization of the bureaucracy during those years eventually placed a significant proportion of the population of the city on a salary or a wage.¹⁶ Unfortunately, it is very difficult to pursue these very important developments connecting the Istanbul economy with domestic and demographic structures. The necessary details for an understanding of the economic and demographic situation in pre-1880s Istanbul are missing. There are neither detailed social and economic studies which examine the presumed transformation of the Istanbul economy, nor are there demographic data available for the period from the early nineteenth century to the 1880s. Even for the post-1880s period, the quality of the economic data available on employment, wages and cost of living is not adequate for a detailed analysis.

It is not only in economic structure that Istanbul changed during the nineteenth century. The impact of western ideas and manners began to have an impact on elite circles in the early years of the century and became quite widespread by its end. During the first decades of this century, particularly among the growing proportion of the population engaged in what we might call modern bureaucratic, com-

¹⁴ J. C. Caldwell, *Theory of Fertility Decline* (New York, 1982); 'Direct economic costs and benefits of children', in R. A. Bulatao and R. D. Lee, eds., *Determinants of Fertility in Developing Countries* (New York, 1983); Alan Macfarlane, 'Modes of reproduction' in G. Hawthorn, ed., *Population and Development* (London, 1978).

¹⁵ Şevket Pamuk, *Osmanlı-Türkiye İktisadi Tarihi, 1500-1914* (An Economic History of Ottoman-Turkey, 1500-1914) (Istanbul, 1988); Şevket Pamuk, *Osmanlı Ekonomisi ve Dünya Kapitalizmi, 1820-1913* (The Ottoman Economy and World Capitalism, 1820-1913) (Ankara, 1984).

¹⁶ Carter Vaughn Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire: the Sublime Porte, 1789-1922* (Princeton, NJ, 1980); Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel K. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey* (London, 1977), II.

mercial or industrial occupations, the same phenomenon was in evidence. The differences in social and cultural milieux separating Istanbul (and Salonica and Izmir) from most of the other cities in the Empire and from the vast underdeveloped rural areas of Anatolia were enormous. The density of urban life, of communications, education, fashions, and of the social and cultural emulation of the West, as well as the ever-present social mix of Muslim and non-Muslim, created an atmosphere in Istanbul that was quite unique. This flood of ideas, values, manners and aspirations brought with it many issues new to the Ottomans, such as a critique of women's position in society and of arranged marriages, the development of a new family ideal, new domestic manners, new concerns about children's place in society and about child-rearing. The totality of all of these social and cultural elements created an urban chemistry in Istanbul that absorbed and dominated the many newcomers to the city, and produced a unique configuration of personal and domestic life which was to persist until the 1940s.

The literate, bureaucratic classes were quite definitely the ideological forerunners of modern western ideas and institutions which had their impact, albeit indirectly and most often unintentionally, on marriage, family and fertility.¹⁷ Though there is much information about the way of life, values and aspirations of the literate classes, the great masses of artisans, shopkeepers and ordinary labourers have left little which would allow us to delve into the intimacies of their thoughts and family lives. What we do know is either extrapolated indirectly from the statistical records we have in hand, or is related to us through the pens of representatives of the literate classes. The result is that we have not been able to undertake an analysis of class-based patterns of thought and behaviour to the extent we would have liked.

Our study only concerns the Muslim population of Istanbul. At the inception of the research project we had to make a choice about the ethnic-religious boundaries of the population we were going to examine. This was a difficult decision because of the extraordinary ethnic and religious diversity found in the city during our period. A third to a half of the population of Istanbul was non-Muslim at various points during those years, the predominant groups being Greek, Armenian and Jewish. No doubt the non-Muslims shared many features of family and population with Muslims in the city,

¹⁷ For a discussion of a related pattern in Europe, see Massimo Livi-Bacci, 'Social group forerunners of fertility control in Europe' in Coale and Watkins, *The Decline of Fertility*; Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London, 1977); J. A. Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood* (London, 1954).

though the Christians and Jews became engaged in the processes of westernization somewhat earlier, which they then helped to diffuse to the population at large.

We decided in the end for a number of methodological and strategic reasons, that it would be necessary to limit our sample to the Muslim population only and, as a consequence, a significant segment of the urban population had to be excluded from our study. Statements we shall make about the whole of Istanbul should, therefore, be taken with this reservation in mind, *cum grano salis*.¹⁸

Family, fertility and society

The demographic patterns we have isolated were accompanied by a radical reorientation of family life which began during the last three decades of the nineteenth century and which had permeated much of Istanbul society by the 1930s. The Ottomans and their successors the Republican Turks referred to this process as 'Europeanization', and were in most cases quite self-conscious about many of its everyday features, such as changes in dress, manners, speech and gender roles. The Ottoman-Turkish family was in the throes of a civilizational transformation – a thoroughgoing restructuring of fundamental behaviours and attitudes, all of which carried great symbolic value beyond the tiny world of the family. This transformation taking place at home was in many ways a microcosm of processes that were taking hold of society at large.

In the mid-1960s John Hajnal wrote an essay that changed the nature of much thinking in historical demography and that, at the same time, provided the impetus for linking demographic studies with more sociological or anthropological ones which were concerned with families and the formation of households at marriage.¹⁹ In later studies, both theoretical and empirical, Hajnal and many of the members of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Struc-

¹⁸ The specificities of the Istanbul marriage and household formation patterns would be better highlighted with the help of parallel studies on the important non-Muslim segments of the population. The population records of Ottoman Istanbul were kept in separate registers for the various religious communities, and the data for those communities can be found in those registers devoted to them for the 1885 and 1907 censuses. In addition, baptism and burial records may also possibly exist for some sections of the Christian population of the city, and these could supplement such state records.

¹⁹ 'European marriage patterns'; 'Two kinds of preindustrial household formation system', *Population and Development Review*, 8 (1982), also in Richard Wall, ed. in collaboration with Jean Robin and Peter Laslett, *Family Forms in Historic Europe* (Cambridge, 1983).

ture developed and elaborated upon these connections. In the original essay and in his subsequent one, Hajnal contrasted a marriage system which he called European with another one called non-European or joint. Further refinements resulting from a flood of empirical studies in the 1970s and 1980s led to a more narrow delineation of the 'European' pattern to northern and northwestern Europe, with the Mediterranean region exhibiting a distinctive variation on the European structure, and the Balkans largely fitting into the catch-all non-European one that appeared to characterize the rest of the world. All of this did not preclude considerable intra-regional variation. The underdeveloped state of historical demography in the Asian and African world has not enabled us to make other refinements on what, no doubt, will some day be a more differentiated 'non-European' category. Recent work in the Far East²⁰ has already placed historic Japan in the 'European' category.

While the rural Muslim pattern we find in Anatolia in the past fits Hajnal's non-European or joint system, the urban one we have discovered in Istanbul clearly does not. It is a variation on his European marriage pattern, similar to the one often attributed to the Mediterranean world in the past. Of course, the Mediterranean region is itself not homogeneous, and the more that we learn about it, no doubt the more variation we shall observe. The Istanbul pattern might, for the time being, be called a northeast Mediterranean/Balkan urban one, since we have some evidence that it also characterized Beirut in the thirties and forties and some parts of urban Bulgaria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²¹ In this regional variation, proportions marrying remained high regardless of the changes in marriage age, such changes in western Europe being associated with significant percentages remaining celibate.

We shall focus considerable attention on the household structures of Ottoman Istanbul families since they are the locus of so many of our concerns. In doing so, however, it is important to take special note of what Ovar Löfgren has observed with respect to historical Swedish society, that is, that one should not give the household 'a far more prominent position in the social landscape than it often

²⁰ Arthur P. Wolf and Susan B. Hanley, 'Introduction' in S. B. Hanley and A. P. Wolf, eds., *Family and Population in East Asian History* (Stanford, Calif., 1985).

²¹ Prothro and Diab, *Changing Family Patterns*, 30-47; Maria Todorova, 'Population structure, marriage patterns, family and household (according to Ottoman documentary material from north-eastern Bulgaria in the 60s of the 19th century)', *Etudes Balkaniques*, 1 (1983), 59-72; 'Marriage and nuptiality in Bulgaria during the nineteenth century' (mimeographed, n.d.).

had'.²² We know, particularly from the contemporary anthropological literature on Turkey and elsewhere, that households are embedded to varying degrees in a large weave of kinship relations and are often fluid and not easily demarcatable social units.²³ Despite their demographic dissimilarities, a joint family cultural system prevailed both in Istanbul and its hinterlands, lending complexity and contradiction to the domestic system of the Ottoman capital. Close-knit familial, particularly intergenerational ties, penetrated the artificial boundaries of the household as a residential unit, creating a much more fluid and flexible system than might be extracted from household records alone.

While dense joint family relations cutting across households characterized Istanbul households and set them apart from their western European equivalents, they were coming in many other ways to resemble them. Certainly the aspirations of Istanbul families were in that direction. Increasingly egalitarian gender relations, a declining role of the parental generation in marriage arrangements, more companionate marriages, a greater focus on children and western manners and dress, all came to separate Istanbul Muslim families from those in the Islamic East – for that matter, even from Muslim western and central Anatolia – and in this sense drew them closer to Europe. The demographic events we shall discuss in some detail provided the sub-structure and were, at the same time, a kind of sign of those changes.

Studies in Europe for the pre-modern period, particularly in England, have gone to great lengths to link marriage, household formation, fertility and secular trends in wages and prices and have successfully demonstrated the connections between them.²⁴ Such linkages have not been as clearly developed for the numerous studies of the massive European decline in fertility in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, due to the relatively short time-span within which to observe changes and perhaps because of the aggregate nature

²² 'Family and household, images and reality: cultural change in Swedish society' in Robert McC. Netting *et al.*, eds., *Households: Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group* (Berkeley, Calif., 1984), 448.

²³ Alan Duben, 'The significance of family and kinship in urban Turkey' in Ç. Kâğıtçıbaşı, ed., *Sex Roles, Family and Community in Turkey* (Bloomington, Ind., 1982); Robert McC. Netting, 'Introduction' in Netting *et al.*, *Households*; S.J. Yamagisako, 'Family and household: the analysis of domestic groups' in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 8 (Palo Alto, Calif., 1979); Andrejs Plakans, *Kinship in the Past: An Anthropology of European Family Life, 1500–1900* (London, 1984); David I. Kertzer, *Family Life in Central Italy, 1880–1910: Sharecropping, Wage Labor and Coresidence* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1984).

²⁴ See, for example, E. A. Wrigley and R. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871* (London, 1981).

of the data utilized.²⁵ Where does the Istanbul demographic pattern fit, and how does it connect to the social, economic and cultural changes which we shall discuss?

Demographers of Turkey, and in particular Frederic C. Shorter, who as early as the 1960s began to have some glimmerings of the uniqueness of Istanbul, have speculated as to whether the pattern in Istanbul was due to something peculiar to Istanbul, to western regions of the country in general, or whether it was in some way connected to the exigencies of the economic and social structure of a very large city.²⁶ Since Istanbul families achieved a low level of fertility as early as the 1920s and 1930s that is still considered a national ideal in Turkey, the underlying causes of this pattern were, and are, of special interest to these demographers. Since post-Second World War fertility decline in Turkey has largely been attributed to birth control, little attention has been placed upon the role of marriage and issues concerning women and the family in the process. Fertility studies of contemporary non-western societies have, in general, de-emphasized what now appears to be a considerable impact of nuptiality upon fertility decline.²⁷ We have, in many ways, attempted to pick up where the demographers of Turkey have left off. The materials we discovered and our own interests have, however, led us in directions which they might not have followed.

Family history

Our efforts which led to writing this book have been directed by two overriding purposes: to document the changes in marriage patterns, family and household structures and household formation and fertility that characterized Istanbul between the years 1880 and 1940, and to attempt to explain them. In the process of doing so, particularly in our efforts to explain, we have moved away from the typical concerns and quantitative modes of demography into the social and cultural issues more commonly defined by socio-cultural anthropology. In our attempt to explain the demographic structures and changes, we have been led into a study of family and domestic life, the position of men

²⁵ Coale and Watkins, *The Decline of Fertility*.

²⁶ Paul Demeny and Frederic C. Shorter, *Estimating Turkish Mortality, Fertility and Age Structure* (Istanbul, 1968); Berksan, 'Marriage patterns'; *Turkey: Report of Mission on Needs Assessment for Population Activities* (New York, 1980); Leila Erder, 'The women of Turkey: a demographic overview' in N. Abadan-Unat, ed., *Women in Turkish Society* (Leiden, 1981); Shorter and Macura, *Trends in Fertility*.

²⁷ Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England, 1300-1840* (Oxford, 1986), 32.