

# Laura Bernardi



*Statistics tell only part of the story. That's why **LAURA BERNARDI**, head of the "Culture of Reproduction" Independent Research Group at the Rostock-based **MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH**, always takes a look behind the scenes, seeking to gain insight into the way young couples view familial issues beyond mere numbers.*

**L**aura Bernardi collects life histories. Like this one, the story of Antje from Rostock: Steady job. A partnership she describes as "on and off." Having a family is "a definite possibility, at some point" – but not yet. "After all, I'm only 29," she says. And anyway, Antje hates making plans. "Because people get frustrated when they make plans, and then things don't turn out the way they thought they would anyway." Miriam from Lübeck provides another of the histories: 30 years old, single and also gainfully employed. She's wanted to have children for some time. When the time comes, Miriam thinks she'll definitely be a stay-at-home mom, for three years or more. But she also wants to be financially secure during that period. The partners she's had so far have either not wanted children or not wanted to be the main breadwinner with all that this would entail for their career choices.

Laura Bernardi has collected hundreds of life histories and self-narratives like these on the computer in her office at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research. The standing desk on which the monitor sits is right in front of a bank of windows with a view of the Warnow River, impressively wide as it nears the estuary and the industrial ruins of Rostock's old shipyards. There are plans in the works to build a walkway on the narrow strip of land between the institute and the river. The old shipyards will house a mix of cafes, restaurants, apartments and retail units in the future.

Laura Bernardi is pleased to see these signs of revival. After all, she recently bought an apartment in the city. "Perhaps I'm just too Italian to live in a rental for more than five years," she laughs. That's not hard to believe of the fashionably dressed,

friendly young woman with the long chestnut locks.

Laura Bernardi arrived in the port city of Rostock via a number of detours, which took her from Rome through Belgium, Kenya and the United States. The young social scientist also has a complicated rapport to her sphere of work, known as demography. Whereas the majority of demographic research has so far been done using statistical methods, Bernardi combines this with studying the cultural factors that influence people's decisions about parenthood at the level of personal experience.

## TRADITIONAL MODELS HAVE A LASTING EFFECT

The two childless women, Antje and Miriam, were interviewed by Laura Bernardi and her colleagues as part of a research project looking into the social influences on people's decisions to start a family in Eastern and Western Germany. The project intentionally sought out participants from the cities of Rostock and Lübeck: two urban centers that, while differing from each other as a result of being under different systems during the 40 years of Germany's division, are actually very similar in many respects. Both places are old Hanseatic cities with a Protestant background; each city has around 200,000 inhabitants; and the unemployment rate is relatively high.

The interview material collected by the team reveals that Antje's and Miriam's diverging views on life are no coincidence. They exhibit attitudes that are typical of the different approaches to family planning in the former East and West Germany. The traditional family models of the 1960s and 1970s still largely determine the views of today's 30-year-olds, more so than one might imagine. The man as the main breadwinner

with the related imperative "first a career, then children!" is the dominant concept in the West, as the interviews demonstrated.

The general interest of Laura Bernardi and her Independent Research Group on the Culture of Reproduction is directed toward the mechanisms through which values, attitudes and opinions on the subject of parenthood spread, and how they are incorporated into decision-making processes. Comparing young people from the East and West who are in similar relationships is interesting, as it shows how differently people there react: to terms and definitions in the realm of family planning, to vocational insecurity, to commuting to work or to be with their partner, and to the problem of reconciling work and family.

The interviews indicate that the same situation in life can induce opposite behaviors: in the West, for instance, job insecurity is a reason for people to delay having their first child. Conversely, in the East, starting a family is seen as a way of bringing security into a situation that is otherwise uncertain. Or another example: the connection between educational level, parenthood and personal financial situation. Highly qualified women put off having children in phases of professional or financial down-time. Women with a lower educational level, on the other hand, use such times as an opportunity to start a family.

Such effects are not immediately apparent – even when they can be proved by statistical data, as Laura Bernardi's colleagues at the Rostock Institute for Demographic Research succeeded in doing in the latter case. What the examples do demonstrate is how the macro-perspective of statistical analysis and the micro-approach of qualitative study comple-



Laura Bernardi in her split office: Anthropology books on one side and demographic essays on the other.

ment each other. The kind of research that Laura Bernardi does has only been around a few years in the field of demography.

**SHAPED BY A CAMP FOR IMMIGRANTS**

The young Italian woman appears to have ended up here almost by chance. She initially studied philosophy and modern history in Rome. Bernardi, today in her mid-thirties, wrote her master's thesis on diplomatic relations between London and Dublin in the Northern Ireland question. In 1998, she took a postgraduate course leading to a degree in demography. What her academic resume doesn't mention, however, is something that may well have been the decisive moment: after completing her degree in Rome, Laura Bernardi, who had previously lived with her parents on the city outskirts near the coast, decided to spend a year doing volunteer work abroad. She had already been to Belgium through placement by the International Civil Service twice during her studies.

So now that she had the time, she went to Liège to organize summer camps and help Turkish and Moroccan immigrants integrate into the community. She taught them to read and write and helped their children

to cope in school. "To be honest," says Laura Bernardi, "it was here, not at university, that I first became interested in how people perceive things. From the outside, it often looks as if many migrants choose to put themselves in a situation where they are worse off than they were at home. But what do the migrants themselves think about it?"

This is what made Bernardi want to go back to university – although changing the focus of her studies to the social sciences. She stayed in Belgium and completed a postgraduate degree at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve, majoring in demographic research. She then returned to the University of Rome and, within a short time, arrived at the Max Planck Institute in Rostock. Now a doctoral student, Laura Bernardi took part in a study in Kenya, researched the birth rate in Northern Italy for her dissertation, and subsequently spent a year as a post doc in the US, studying anthropological demography at the Population Studies and Training Center at Brown University in Rhode Island. At the end of all this, she applied for her current position as senior research scientist in Rostock.

These travels between the continents were also journeys between epistemic cultures. This is reflected in Bernardi's office, as well. On the one side is a bookshelf full of theory tomes and anthropological studies. In

anthropology, as in the history of science, monographs are still a relevant form of publication. In demography, however, things are different; here, scientific essays are the preferred format. Accordingly, the room's other wall is filled with ring binders containing texts from international journals that Bernardi has collected over the years.

In addition to her work as senior research scientist, Laura Bernardi has also held a junior professorship at Rostock University for the past two years. She applied for the post because she missed the academic environment, and partly because she wanted to get young sociology and demography students interested in her method – which is also why she established an international research group on Anthropological Demography in Europe at the European Association for Population Studies (EAPS). Despite the outstanding specialists working there, Rostock's relatively isolated location is still conspicuous; there are no other major



The color of relationships: The women interviewed arranged people around them according to how close they were to them.

PHOTO: MPI FOR DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH



Demographic researchers see society as somewhat akin to a kaleidoscope. From this perspective, the sculpture on the institute's terrace has a certain symbolic power.

research institutes in the social sciences there.

The program of study in demography at the university is still in the development stage, says Laura Bernardi. Asked if she can foresee staying in the field of demographic research for the long term, she says, "That depends on a lot of things. Disciplinary boundaries are often drawn differently from one country to the next. In Italy, demography tends to concentrate on statistics – my focus on the anthropological and social science aspects wouldn't fit in so well there. It's different in Canada or the Netherlands, where the subject tends to be more multidisciplinary."

Life in the smallish city on the Baltic coast, being close to work and to nature: Laura Bernardi loves it all. She recently took up kayaking. She also jogs regularly – she's even run in a marathon – and takes lessons in Tango Argentino. She has no complaints about what the city has to offer in terms of culture: "I spent more than half of my life in Rome, but you simply can't compare Rostock with that." What she finds more difficult is being apart from her husband,

who works at the Center for Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability at the University of Zurich, and from whom she is separated by an overnight journey on the Intercity sleeper train, plus a three-hour ride on the regional express.

**BIRTHRATE SLUMP WITHOUT A VALUE SHIFT**

Laura Bernardi's research methods combine a variety of approaches that have never before been applied together in the field of demography: statistical methods, anthropological theory, interview techniques and social network analysis. She is not only interested in finding out how far the cultural context can be crucial in certain hard factors – such as personal financial situation or job insecurity in relation to family planning – being interpreted very differently from case to case.

Laura Bernardi and her colleagues from the research group also want to reconstruct the way in which certain views or values spread. "Italy, for example," explains Bernardi, "has

not really experienced what we call the second demographic transition – the cultural transition that went hand in hand with the introduction of the pill, the increase in the number of couples living together out of wedlock and the rise in the divorce rate." In Italy, people live – or, until very recently, lived – by traditional values. Yet the birth rate has still declined, a phenomenon normally associated with the demographic transition described above. How can that be explained? Bernardi has long been in search of an answer to that question. Back in her days as a post doc, she spent six months traveling through Lombardy interviewing people. Recently, she was involved in another, more extensive study on the birthrate in her homeland.

Statistically, Italy and Germany appear to have similarly low birth rates. A closer look, however, reveals that the situation in the two countries is completely different. "Unlike in Germany," explains Bernardi, "it is unusual for young couples in Italy not to marry." And once they are



PHOTO: PRIVATE

**A social network in her parents' garden:** Laura Bernardi (second from left) with a school friend and neighbor (left), the friend's brother (second from right) and Laura's younger sister (right).

married, around 90 percent of Italian women have a baby. Only around 10 percent of women are childless, whereas one quarter of all women in Germany have remained childless during the past few years. And whereas in Germany and other European countries, highly qualified women in particular do not stop at one baby once they have made the basic decision to have a family, one child is the general rule in Italy.

Statistics cannot explain the reasons behind this. Through her interviews, Laura Bernardi thus tried to find out what role social pressure and social ideals play in Italian couples' family planning – and how these factors are communicated. “I asked the women when they started thinking about having children, what role the age of both partners played, what the significance of the type of relationship for family planning was, what views the women had about the optimum age gap between siblings, and so on. And how all of this is related to what their friends and relatives were doing and saying.”

The picture that emerged is fairly unambiguous. The social pressure from family or friends to marry and start a family was a palpable influence on the couples interviewed.

With the birth of the first child, however, social duties were fulfilled. Something else that stood out is the fact that, unlike in Germany, where it is normal for couples to talk confidently and openly about their decision not to have children, a marriage without children raises eyebrows in Italy. “Most people think there must be some health issue behind it, or possibly money trouble or selfish motives – the kinds of things you don't bring up if you don't want to jeopardize a friendship.”

### THE RIGHT REASONS FOR BECOMING A MOTHER

There was another recurrent motive that stood out: becoming a parent is seen as an altruistic undertaking in Italy. “The women brought up the subject again and again: whether a certain acquaintance had had a baby for the right reasons or whether she'd done it just to have someone to look after her in her old age. Whether it's selfish to remain childless. Or, more to the point, whether it's selfish to bring children into the world when you're so old that you're already grandparent-age when they grow up,” relates Laura Bernardi.

The researcher sums up the situation thus: in Lombardy, apparently opposing decisions are rationalized

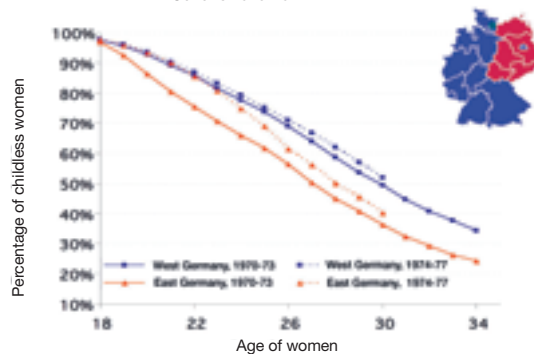
by appealing to the same highly regarded value of parenthood. “How people talk about what makes a good mother seems to be enormously important for their personal family planning. At the same time, exactly what it is that makes a good mother is constantly being redefined. For us, as scientists, this makes it very difficult to predict social effects associated with the spread of certain moral concepts.” And this applies to much more than just the issue of parenthood. “Any general theory concerned with how moral concepts spread through a mixed cultural environment must take this ambiguity into account,” says Bernardi – whether you're talking about moral ideals, opinions or fashions.

One thing is undeniable, however. Merely talking about pregnancy has its own effects – in whatever way. Since Laura Bernardi began working with her modestly sized research group in Rostock three years ago, five of her co-workers have had children. And the researcher doing the interviews in Lübeck became pregnant in the middle of the project and had to discontinue her work. “You can't expect someone you're interviewing to candidly discuss her family planning with a pregnant woman,” says Laura Bernardi with a laugh. “People figure it out immediately.”

Is she herself afraid of “catching the baby bug”? Laura Bernardi's research would indicate that this is not such a silly question, after all.

RALF GRÖTKER

Percentage of childless women by age, cohort and region  
Cohorts 1970-1977



Source: Microcensus 1988, 2000 and 2004, own elaboration (calculations by M. Kreyenfeld)

**A divided country in terms of family planning:** Women wait longer to have a child in the former West Germany than in the East.