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Fertility as a process of social exchange

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Abstract

By marrying and raising children, parents participate in a system of gift-exchange in which the gifts in question are human lives, and the parties to the exchange are the kinship groups recognised in the society concerned. Fertility reflects the attitudes of prospective parents to their place in the existing system of reproductive exchange, and the relationships of cooperation and authority which it implies - as well as their confidence in the system's continuing viability. It is shown that this view is compatible with earlier ideas about self-regulating population systems - and that changing economic circumstances are an important source of discrepancy between existing exchange systems and the attitudes and expectations of prospective parents. The discussion is developed with reference to data on European societies, including a case-study from the Alps, and concludes with an assessment of the relevance of the anthropological theory of gift exchange to contemporary fertility patterns in Europe and beyond.

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