Family Size Preferences

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Abstract

Family size preferences may be represented by family size desires, intentions, expectations, and ideals. Desired family size is the number of children wanted in one's lifetime and is viewed as a measure of the demand for children which, in combination with the supply of children and contraception determines the number of children born. Family size desires are conceptually and empirically distinct from family size intentions, expectations, and ideals. Desires, intentions, and expectations are often uncertain and change over the life course in response to new experiences and conditions. Ideals are shaped by the larger society and therefore change more slowly. Because childbearing is a two-person event, desires and intentions of sexual partners must be considered. As predictors of aggregate or individual fertility, family size desires must be adjusted to take into account partners' desires and changes over the life course, as well as fecundity, fertility control, and other constraints on individual behavior or outcomes.

Conceptualization and Measurement

Desired, Intended, Expected, and Ideal Family Size

Desired family size is conceptualized as the demand for children, that is, "the number of children parents would have if there were no subjective or economic problems involved in regulating fertility" (McClelland, 1983: p. 288). Desired family size is the basis for estimating the level of wanted versus unwanted fertility (Bongaarts, 1990, 2001). Family size intentions, on the other hand, reflect a decision to implement specific behaviors required to achieve a particular number of births (Miller, 2011). As such behaviors occur in sequence over a relatively long period of time, the concept of intention is better suited to a particular birth than to cumulative family size. Family size expectations incorporate both family size desires and perceptions of the likelihood that preferences can be translated into outcomes. Intentions and expectations are conceptually very close, but expectations incorporate a greater degree of uncertainty, especially with respect to changes in desires and circumstances and degree of fertility control. In settings with high levels of fertility control and for persons with high levels of efficacy, intentions and expectations may be empirically indistinguishable. The gap between desires and intentions or expectations arises from partner's desires, perceived fecundity and fertility control, or other known constraints on fertility behavior or outcomes (Bongaarts, 1990; Miller, 2011).

Ideal family size is of a quite different character. Personal ideas would be equivalent to desires, if there were no constraints on having children and perfect fertility control. In low-fertility contexts where costs of children and fertility control are high, personal ideal family size is larger than expected family size (Testa, 2006). Family size ideals are most often, however, specified for the population at large and in that respect constitute a social norm (Trent, 1980; Mason, 1983; Hagewen and Morgan, 2005; Testa and Grilli, 2006). Livi Bacci (2001) suggests that when fertility is very low, desired family size may not be a good indicator of fertility demand because it is strongly influenced by stereotypes of the normative two-child family. The same argument could be made for social contexts in which fertility is very high (Nauck, 2007).

Family size desires, intentions, expectations, and ideals are generally specified in terms of a single number of children. Terhune and Kaufman (1973) argued that family size desires should be conceptualized as a utility function with varying values across parities. For some, the function might have a clear peak, perhaps even only one family size with positive value. For others, the function might be relatively flat, with only extreme family sizes producing negative value. A similar function could be specified for family size expectations where each possible family size is assigned a probability, ranging from zero to one. The fact that one cannot intend two alternative outcomes at the same time makes it impossible to conceive family size intentions in a parallel fashion, again suggesting that intentions are better suited to sequential rather than cumulative childbearing. Ideal family size by definition requires a single choice among family sizes, but the aggregate distribution in a population of ideal family size can be viewed as a functional representation of the strength as well as content of a childbearing norm.

Measurement

Two types of questions are most commonly used to measure family size desires. The first asks respondents how many children they would want to have in their lifetime, if they could choose the exact number. For childless respondents, this question measures desires prospectively; for parents, the question includes a retrospective assessment of previous births with a prospective assessment of potential future births. Retrospective assessments of birth wantedness are subject to social desirability bias or rationalization and therefore produce upwardly biased estimates of desired family size (Bongaarts, 1990; Williams and Abma, 2000). Another version of this question attempts to give respondents permission to report previous births as unwanted by asking something like: "If you could start life over again, how many children would you want to have?" McClelland (1983) suggests that such questions produce less reliable and valid measures of fertility demand than prospective questions.

The second type of question asks respondents how many more children they would like to have; for childless respondents, the answer would presumably be the same as for the first type of

question, but for parents, retrospective assessments of previous births are excluded. To obtain an estimate of desired family size, some analysts simply add the respondent's current number of children to the additional number desired. This strategy assumes that all previous births were wanted, producing an even stronger upward bias than does the first type of measure.

Measures of family size desires that allow for a range of acceptable, possibly equally preferred family sizes require more questions (Terhune and Kaufman, 1973; Coombs, 1974; Ballweg and Klemmack, 1984; Hin et al., 2011). Scales based on unfolding theory (I-scales) distinguish preferences for number (IN) and sex (IS) of children (Coombs et al., 1975). Despite their superiority to single-choice measures in terms of reliability and predictive validity (see below), such measures have seldom been used in large-scale surveys.

Family size intentions, expectations, and ideals are also almost uniformly measured with questions that ask for a single choice. As intentions or expectations are oriented to the future, family size intentions or expectations are measured as the sum of the number of children already born and the number of any additional intended or expected children.

When family size desires, intentions or expectations are specified in terms of a specific birth, measurement is generally more precise. Desires may be measured along dimensions of intensity, centrality, and certainty (Schaeffer and Thomson, 1992; Thomson and Brandreth, 1995) and may incorporate both positive and negative components (Miller and Pasta, 1995). Intentions may be specified in terms of certainty (Thomson, 1997) and expectations in terms of likelihood or probability (Thomson and Brandreth, 1995).

Nonnumerical Responses and Uncertainty

In high-fertility societies, small but significant proportions of respondents do not provide a numerical response to questions about desired family size, reporting instead that the number of children they have is 'up to God' or that they will accept whatever number of children they have. These responses represent a completely flat family size utility function both theoretically (Terhune and Kaufman, 1973) and empirically (Jensen, 1985). Because such respondents are willing to express numerical family size ideals or preferences for one family size over another, and do report unwanted or mistimed births (McClelland, 1983; Riley et al., 1993), the 'up to God' response might reflect moral objections to, or lack of possibilities for fertility control. In a context of high child mortality, 'up to God' may also refer to uncertainties about the number of children who will survive (Sandberg, 2005).

Even where individuals have high control over childbearing, they may be uncertain about how many children they want, whether they want any children at all, and whether they want a second, third, or higher order birth (Schaeffer and Thomson, 1992). They might perceive a close balance between the positive and negative outcomes of childbearing or simultaneously experience strong positive or negative motivations for children (Miller, 2011), and therefore be uncertain how they really feel or what they really want.

When respondents are asked to state birth intentions – i.e., a plan to carry out behaviors that will result in a birth or not – they often express uncertainty. Uncertainty is inherent in the

theoretical construct of fertility expectations as unknown changes in external conditions and events must be taken into account. Uncertainty in intentions or expectations may arise from uncertain or weak desires or from uncertainty about future conditions for rearing children or success with fertility control (Ní Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan, 2012). As Ní Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan (2011: p. 120) point out, "...uncertainty is a reasonable response to the many contingencies and unknowns that people encounter through the life cycle"

Uncertainty about ideal family size should theoretically arise only if one is ignorant of the conditions and behaviors in the society at large. Those who do not know or refuse to provide an ideal family size are most likely to be expressing acceptance of a range of family sizes. In many countries, a small but significant proportion of respondents assert that there is no ideal family size (Hagewen and Morgan, 2005; Testa, 2006).

Changes in Family Size Desires, Intentions, Expectations, and Ideals

A major criticism of the concept of desired or intended or expected family size is that births usually come one at a time. Each birth provides new information that may influence future childbearing desires, intentions, and expectations (Namboodiri, 1983). Other experiences also intervene to change the perceived benefits and costs and the desire, intention, or expectation of having a particular number of children.

Miller (2011) argues that desires for children are more stable than intentions and expectations because they are linked to personality traits. Ní Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan (2012) argue to the contrary that the pervasive ambiguity in fertility desires is evidence that they are socially constructed over the life course. They go so far as to suggest that desires for children may be constructed in the process of answering survey questions (see also Schaeffer and Thomson, 1992). In both high- and low-fertility contexts, desires for children shift over relatively short periods of time (Bankole and Westoff, 1998; Miller and Pasta, 1995; Heiland et al., 2008).

The evidence is clear that family size intentions or expectations change over the life course (e.g., Freedman et al., 1965; Westoff and Ryder, 1977; Quesnel-Vallée and Morgan, 2003; Hayford, 2009; Liefbroer, 2009; Morgan and Rackin, 2010; Iacovou and Tavares, 2011). Changes are associated with experiences of the first birth, the influence of partners or educational and career trajectories. Changes in intentions or expectations generally occur within the range of normative family size (Freedman et al., 1965; Bankole and Westoff, 1998; Morgan and Rackin, 2010).

Changes in ideal family size may also occur at the individual level, but as indicators of change in social norms are of greater interest at the societal level. In low-fertility countries, ideal family size has been exceptionally stable, with the vast majority specifying two children. In recent years, significant downward shifts have been identified in a few European contexts (Sobotka, 2009). Goldstein et al. (2003) argued that persistent fertility under two children per women could shift ideal family size to well under two.

Her, His, and Their Family Size Desires, Intentions, and Expectations

Most data on family size desires, intentions, or expectations come from interviews with women, while ideal family size is more often asked of women and men in general-purpose social surveys. The assumptions underlying women-only fertility surveys are that (1) women and men share the same conditions of life and will therefore want, intend, and expect the same number of children; (2) because women bear children and are primary child rearers, their desires and intentions are those that determine fertility; and/or (3) women's desires, intentions, and expectations will incorporate those of their partners, reflecting resolution of any initial disagreements. In the aggregate, women's and men's respective family size desires and intentions are more similar than different (Mason and Taj, 1987; Bankole and Singh, 1998; Testa, 2006). Data collected from couples, on the other hand, consistently show that substantial proportions disagree about desires, intentions, or expectations for further childbearing or completed family size (e.g., Coombs and Fernandez, 1978; Thomson et al., 1990; Becker, 1996; Thomson, 1997; Bankole and Singh, 1998; Mason and Smith, 2000). Furthermore, when partners express diverging desires for children, they influence one another's intentions to have a child (Morgan, 1985; Miller and Pasta, 1996; Thomson, 1997). Thus, couple disagreement is a primary source of gaps between desires and intentions or expectations.

Family Size Desires, Intentions, and Births

The relationship between family size desires and births depends on relationships between desires and intentions, intentions and behavior, and behavior and outcomes. In addition to couple disagreement, a key source of gaps between desires and intentions or expectations is the perception of control over fertility. Those who believe themselves to be infecund may desire more children than they intend or expect; those who do not perceive themselves to be able to control fertility may intend or expect more children than they desire. Perceived social norms are also potential constraints on the translation of desires into intentions and subsequent behavior (Billari et al., 2009).

Measures of family size desires, particularly the desire for additional children, are strongly associated with eventual births at the aggregate levels (Bongaarts, 1990; Pritchett, 1994). Lee (1980) has demonstrated that a 'moving target' model of desired and achieved fertility produces even stronger correspondence between family size desires and period fertility. Bongaarts (1990) developed a model for adjusting average desired family size for upward and downward biases; the adjusted value is even more strongly associated with the total fertility rate than the initial value.

At the individual level, the relationship between childbearing desires or intentions and subsequent births is also quite strong (Westoff and Ryder, 1977; Schoen et al., 1999). The strength of the relationships depends on the length of time between observation of desires or intentions and births, the strength of desires or certainty of intentions, the capacity for fertility control, the strength of opposing social norms and other conditions that

might inhibit the translation of desires into behaviors (Davidson and Jaccard, 1979; Philipov, 2009; Hayford and Agadjanian, 2012). A key element is an agreement between the sexual partners. In virtually every study that includes the desires or intentions of both partners, their joint childbearing is influenced by the desires or intentions of each (e.g., Becker, 1996; Miller and Pasta, 1996; Thomson, 1997; Thomson and Hoem, 1998; Bankole and Singh, 1998; Becker, 1999; Mason and Smith, 2000).

Estimated relationships between fertility desires, intentions, expectations, and births also depend on measurement quality. The IN-scale discussed above provides more accurate measures of preferences and therefore has larger estimated effects on fertility behavior than does the single most preferred number of children (Coombs, 1979). Measures of the desire for children that incorporate dimensions of attitude strength have stronger effects on childbearing intentions and behavior than do yes-no-do not know responses to direct questions about desire for children (Thomson and Brandreth, 1995). Similarly, intentions or expectations measured with some degree of certainty or uncertainty are better predictors of births than a simple dichotomy (Thomson, 1997).

See also: Attitudes and Behavior; Children, Value of; Demographic Measurement: General Issues and Measures of Fertility; Norms; Second Demographic Transition.

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