

DISCUSSION

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The three papers presented at this session, although well done in terms of the present state of knowledge and technique, individually and collectively testify to the deplorable state of knowledge about factors affecting family size. Each of the papers is based on studies which may be described as significant, ambitious, and carefully and effectively pursued. Yet each, by reason of the state of the art and science involved rather than the competence and qualifications of the study directors or the authors, testifies to the ignorance more than the knowledge of the demographer, sociologist and statistician about the variables which account for family size, differentials in size, and family planning.

My discussion focuses largely on the Princeton study presented by Mr. Sagi, partly because it was the only paper made available to me in advance of this meeting and partly because my observations apply with about equal force to the others.

First, it must be noted that the Princeton study embodies a number of substantial gains over previous research in the field. It gives evidence of the accumulation of knowledge, both substantive and methodological, in the design of the study and in the nature of the findings. It represents an important step forward in utilizing a longitudinal approach, and in providing for the reinterview of respondents to check verbal reports by means of reports of subsequent actual behavior. It introduces more effective controls than previous fertility studies in concentrating on a single parity, and is ingenious in focusing on a point in family development which is critical in determining whether there will be relatively large or small families. Other innovations include the study of entire metropolitan area units, which are increasingly the crucial population agglomerations on the American scene; the utilization of an electronic computer which has made possible some 80,000 coefficients of correlation to keep the study personnel occupied; and the achievement of a relatively low refusal rate, 6 percent--low for the nature of this undertaking. Such a low refusal rate necessarily points to an effective coordination of research design and field operations.

Findings of the study some of which are presented in this paper are organized around the impact of religiousity, familistic orientation, personality characteristics, and the control of fertility on family size. A relatively important finding is indicated in the greater effect of religion than of class differences on fertility behavior. The findings speak for themselves and call for little further additional comment here other than the basic one, which documents my reference above to the deplorable state of knowledge in this general area. That is, it is doubtful whether this study will materially increase the explanation of variance in

fertility behavior above the 20 percent level achieved in the Indianapolis fertility study. It is the 80 percent area of ignorance which represents the target for students of fertility phenomena in the decades ahead; and from the looks of things it may well be decades before we materially improve our explanation of the variance in family size.

Let me turn next to the consideration of a few of the problems which are involved in this and similar studies and to their basic general limitation.

In my judgement, perhaps the basic problem which afflicts studies of this type, the problem which characterizes much of social science, is the inadequacy of the metrics which are available for many of the significant social and social-psychological variables. Undoubtedly, much of the failure to account for a greater proportion of the variance in family planning behavior and family size lies not so much in failure of theory and concepts as in the inability of investigators, as yet, to obtain good measurements of the social and social-psychological variables which are involved. This is a problem, of course, which afflicts much of social science and one which the demographer, in spite the relative hardness of his data and methods in other respects, shares with other social scientists when he attempts to study sociological and social-psychological variables in relation to demographic variables. This study, like many others, highlights the need to concentrate on ways and means of obtaining better metrics of social variables.

Second, another basic problem, harassing in studies of this type, is the relatively great cost of obtaining information by means of the interview method, even though the most recent advances in sampling are employed. High costs in the context of relatively scarce funds necessarily means frustration to investigators of fertility behavior. In the years which lie immediately ahead, it is doubtful that methodological developments will do much to reduce cost factors. If progress is to be made, therefore, in continued researches in this field, ways must be found to increase the resources allocated and available for research of this type. It should be possible to obtain the needed funds for researches into fertility behavior. With the resurgence of national population growth and its implications for the future population of the United States, it would seem that few problems have greater national import both from the standpoint of domestic policy and the place of the U.S. in the world order.

Third, the study will probably document the limitations of correlation analysis which one of my old teachers, Professor Thurstone, once referred to as a "confession of defeat." Adequate funds which would permit larger samples might well permit a more direct analysis of the data in multi-dimensional cross tabulations and, thus,

more directly unscramble confounded variables which hinder researches of this type.

Finally, I should like to call attention to a more basic limitation of research in this area, the limitation of "historicism." Studies of this type are necessarily conducted over a span of a few years at the most, in a specific context--social, economic, and political. The findings which are obtained must be regarded as representing a point on a secular trend line, a point on a possible business cycle, a point on a possible large deviation from trend represented by a major event such as war. Moreover, findings of this type must be interpreted in light of the nature of the American population in mid-twentieth century--an admixture of ethnic and racial groupings, most of them in a relatively early stage of acculturation, accommodation, and assimilation, to a common national life; and all of them caught in a swirl of rapid social change characterized by increasing and accelerating rates of urbanization and metropolitanization. Considerations of this type obviously point to major limitations to generalizations drawn beyond the specific studies.

The study of the Growth of the American Family presented by Messrs. Whelpton, Campbell, and Freedman is, in essence, subject to the same observations as those made above. The study contains much which represents addition to the fund of knowledge. But it is subject to the same type of specific and general limitations as those to which I have referred above in respect of the Princeton study. Perhaps the most important observation that can be made about the GAF study is that perhaps its most significant conclusion will not be achieved unless it is successful in the additional financing necessary to follow up and check verbal responses with actual behavior.¹

The Spivak and Ruterma study has touched on a relatively neglected as well as important field. It contains findings of considerable significance not set forth nor documented as well before, namely: (1) the religion of a physician is an important element in the determination of the nature of his medical practice in the family planning area; (2) the medical practitioner may follow, rather than lead, in social change in respect to family planning.

In this study, as in the others, the historical context undoubtedly greatly affects the ability of the authors to generalize beyond their specific population.

In conclusion, it should be observed and emphasized that each of these three studies represents an important step forward in achieving a better understanding of factors affecting family size. The teams which have been responsible for the design and operation of the researches have displayed competence, ingenuity, and creativity, both theoretical and methodological in the pursuit of these investigations. The studies, however, must be reviewed not only against the background of what we know but against the background of what need to know. The

studies represent progress in the light of the past, but, nevertheless, one must acknowledge the ignorance which all of us in population studies share in respect to the factors which account for family size.

¹Subsequent to the presentation of this discussion the enterprise did receive additional grant of funds from the Rockefeller Foundation to permit the follow-up study.