

STATISTICS NEEDED TO MEASURE AND PROJECT CHANGES IN MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE AND THEIR DEMOGRAPHIC CONSEQUENCES

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Introduction

During the next ten or twenty years, we may expect to see a great development of social statistics, particularly the measurement and statistical analysis of family formation and family life. There are several reasons why such a development may be anticipated:

1. We have cultivated this field very inadequately in the past and hence much needs to be done just to catch up with the progress of statistical work in other fields.
2. There is increasing urgency in the need to cope with certain problems, both in the United States and abroad, which involve conditions of, and changes in, aspects of human life that can be better understood with the aid of social statistics. Among them are population growth, poverty, unemployment, education, race relations, and housing.
3. In response to these problems, national governments are devoting greater resources to the collection of data and support of research in this field, though their progress is slow and uneven and much of the originating and experimenting is still being done with support from private foundations and donors.
4. While these problems typically center in individuals or in large groups of people, they have very important connections with family life and hence, whether the question is one of causes, effects, or cures, they call for a better understanding of what is happening to people in families and what people are deciding and doing in their family life.

This fourth reason for anticipating a great expansion of work in social statistics is exhibited in many particular interactions of family life and the larger web of life in the entire society. The marriage rate is influenced by the condition of the economy and in turn the resultant formation of new households affects the demand for housing, house furnishings, and various goods and services. The birth rate is also responsive to economic and social influences and in turn affects the demand for various goods and services, as well as

the economics and politics of urban and suburban development. Migration involves family life and relationships in many complex ways. It is clear that, in a certain sense, poverty is transmitted through families from generation to generation almost as if it were an hereditary disease. So, too, in the case of race prejudice, juvenile delinquency, adult crime, and other problems some of the processes that generate, aggravate, and maintain these problems are constituent parts of family life.

These relations between family life and the whole society have been recognized for many decades but now they are brought into prominence by the crucial problems of the day. The controversial Moynahan report is but one evidence of concern about inadequacies and malfunctioning of the family institution which in many ways is the foundation of the whole society. Indeed, an understanding of the constructive functioning of the family is more than a background for analyses of its involvement in social problems; it is an essential part of these analyses and hence the statistical contributions to such research will extend broadly into all the major phases of family life.

As the development of social statistics proceeds, much of the new information will be obtained first of all in small-scale special studies, often based on existing records and on interviews conducted in conjunction with other activities. Later there will be further exploration of similar questions in local surveys. After these exploratory studies some types of information will be obtained by well-established national surveys and finally a few statistical series will be established and maintained to measure trends and variation in rates. We can find examples of this evolutionary pattern in the now familiar statistical series on births, deaths, employment, unemployment, education and income. Many analogous developments can be observed in the field of health statistics.

In the case of statistics of marriage and the family, as in other branches of social statistics, demand for new and more detailed information will surely continue to exceed what can be supplied even by a considerable addition to currently available data. It is not too early to start a sustained discussion and review of the more attractive lines of development, the major obstacles and difficulties each would encounter, and

the likely benefits each might yield for better understanding and better control of the urgent problems of our time.

Present Sources of Statistics of Marriage and the Family

In 1959, Jacobson compiled a very useful compendium of marriage and divorce statistics for the United States. In his introductory comments he stated, "With respect to marriage and divorce, the information available for our country is woefully inadequate". A similar statement could be made for the greater part of the world's population outside Europe.

Substantial progress has been made in family statistics, especially with respect to the simpler facts of family composition, the characteristics of the heads of households, income, education, and several other major demographic variables. Thirty years ago almost none of this information was available. The advent of sampling for cross-tabulations as well as for data acquisition and the evolution of computer technology have contributed greatly to the progress since then and should continue to facilitate much more.

There are still weaknesses and gaps in the knowledge of family structure as well as a dearth of data on family functioning. We should not expect that all aspects of family life can or should be treated statistically. Indeed, there is some portion of merit to the otherwise extreme claims of those who attack statistics, such as the claim made for the author of a recent book-club selection "With gusto and bite he snatches the subject of marriage away from the adjustment engineers, the sex technicians, the whole army of today's statistical desplendorizers". Yet when all necessary concessions have been made for the limitations of statistical inquiry, there remains a great deal of knowledge and probably quite a little wisdom to be gained from further progress in statistical studies of family life. We find no reason to be complacent about the current output of family statistics.

After a long struggle the United States has attained a high statistical standard in birth and death registration, aided greatly by the establishment of Social Security and other programs that strengthen incentives. Many nations preceded us in this attainment and many are still far from the goal. We have had three successive national sample surveys centered on family size and contraceptive practices. Other countries have conducted notable studies of population growth and related family variables. Yet

we know all too little about the processes that generate decisions and behavior relative to marriage and childbearing when adequate means of contraception are readily available. We were puzzled by the Baby Boom after World War II and we lack a firm base from which to project the fertility of the cohorts of young people now approaching parenthood - the Baby Boom infants now becoming adults. A large and increasing number of studies contribute to our understanding of household finances, housing problems, educational trends, social stratification and other features of our society that are closely linked with family life. More are needed. Ultimately they must be fitted together in a coherent analysis revealing the complex system of interacting influences that underlies observable social change. Looking ahead, we should prepare a schedule of further exploration, well-designed experiment, and constructive development necessary to overcome the inadequacies of current sources of statistics and meet as well as we can future needs. Several observations may be offered now on what remains to be done.

Marriage

Marriage rates have been fairly stable except for the influence of wars and periodic changes in economic conditions. Nonetheless, they remain vulnerable to new influences and major cultural changes. A bride's age at marriage has in the past been closely related to her subsequent fertility. With ready access to contraception this may be less important and new statistical relations of the two variables may emerge. Changes in the participation of women in the labor force and entry into occupations previously filled by men may well be associated with changes not only in childbearing but in other aspects of family life. Changes have been observed in the financial contributions made to young married couples by their parents and many arrangements are being made that facilitate higher education for married couples.

Attitudes toward marriage and divorce are changing and will continue to change in the future. The direction of change and the consequences are difficult to foresee. Hence measurements of trends and variation are needed to provide up to date information. Discovery and analysis of the factors that determine marriage rates and changes in marital status will be an increasingly important task for social statisticians, working with other social scientists.

Households

Households are important as residential groups and economic units apart from their family aspects. Much of the statistical data on families is limited to the household group. Members of the family who reside elsewhere are simply ignored. This reflects a traditional concept, expressed, for example, on Civil Service Form 61 as follows: "A family is defined by the Attorney General as persons who live under the same roof with the head of the family and form part of his fireside. When they branch out and become heads of new establishments, they cease to be part of the old family". In the past thirty years the Census Bureau has distinguished groups of persons living together and related by blood, marriage, or adoption as families, noting that more than one family may reside in the same household. The relationship of each member of the family to the head is reported but no further analysis is made of the network of relationships. Some development would seem desirable to extend our knowledge of family composition, possibly from the Current Population sample. The effect of births and children on household arrangements is also an important subject for future analytic studies using new statistical data.

Kinship

The neglect of kinship relations and omission of family members not residing with the "head" of a family group should be corrected. Several recent studies point to the importance of studying families as they are defined in terms of kinship relations, as well as their more extended kinship networks. One such is Kinship and Casework by Hope J. Leichter and William E. Mitchell (Russell Sage Foundation, 1967). Marvin B. Sussman and others have written on the neglect of kinship in family studies (Kinship and Family Organization, edited by Bernard Farber, Wiley, 1966). Kinship relations form a central part of Elizabeth Bott's study of urban family roles, norms and external relationships in Family and Social Network (Tavistock, 1967). Anthropologists have wrestled with the problems of analyzing data on kinship; social statisticians will find fascinating as well as frustrating problems in extending traditional concepts and analyses into this domain.

Siblings

Very little has been done to provide data on the similarities and differences of siblings, including data on their life careers after they "leave home". Much more attention has been given to peer group interaction without distinguishing peers who are relatives from peers who

are not. This reflects, no doubt, the effect of school organization where siblings usually are separated by the class structure of the school or attend different schools. The interplay of school influences and family is coming to the forefront in the discussion of educational problems of the underprivileged. It may be of comparable importance for other children. Statistical analyses are difficult but may contribute much to the larger research activity on this aspect of family life.

Future Development of Statistical Research

These examples may be supplemented by others such as statistical analysis of the roles of husband and wife, father and mother, in the direction of the family, the care of children and management of the home, of travel and migration, and of participation in community affairs. Clearly there are limits to what can and will be done. The choice of what will be attempted will be determined by the strength of competing interests and other factors. Differing emphases may be given to child development, health, education, fertility and similar major programmatic interests. Some support will be given to more basic research problems expecting ultimately to gain greater understanding and control of problems by digging deeper into their roots. We may expect more emphasis to the examination of families as dynamic systems, responding to a complex and changing environment, maintaining some internal conditions in spite of interference from without, and going through a family cycle or metamorphosis in somewhat predictable ways.

Conceivably the direction of social change will be such that families will be regulated more from within than from without, paralleling the expansion of individual opportunity and freedom in many societies. Such a change makes more important the study of attitudes and motivations at the same time that it makes even average behavior more difficult to predict.

Problems

The greatest problem, it seems, is to determine what new variables will be valuable in measuring and explaining the most salient aspects of family life and how complex patterns and syndromes can be managed effectively in statistical analyses. The latter are presented descriptively in case studies but more than intuition is needed to establish the deeper systematic basis for what is observed. Some systematic relations will only be revealed by statistical analyses and others only confirmed by statistical tests. Relatively larger samples will be

required to detect changes in rates than were required to estimate the level attained by a rate.

Respondent cooperation will be difficult to obtain on some questions and for especially lengthy interviews. Many inquiries will be misunderstood and attacked as invasions of privacy or contrary to the public interest. We will find that for many variables even the best respondents are unable to provide the

information that is needed. We can expect that many exciting clues and attractive hypotheses will prove useless in the pursuit of better explanations of what we observe. In spite of these and other difficulties, however, we can be confident that the further development of social statistics centering in family life will be well worth the sustained, intensive, exploratory effort that now seems to be greatly needed.