Sons or Daughters? Cross-Cultural Comparisons of the Sex Preferences of Australian, Greek, Italian, Malay, Chinese and Indian Parents in Australia and Malaysia

Victor J. Callan
University of Queensland, Australia
and
Poo-Kong Kee
East-West Population Institute, Hawaii

In examining reasons for fertility decline research has focused upon changes in the demand for children, in particular evidence of a transition in values and disvalues of children from high- to low-fertility countries. Two surveys of the value of children to 717 parents in Australia (Australian, Greek and Italian respondents) and 522 parents in Peninsular Malaysia (Malay, Chinese and Indian respondents) investigated the existence of and changes in sex preference and the motivations for wanting sons and daughters. Son preference was in general higher for couples interviewed in Malaysia. The reasons for wanting a son centered upon traditional values of old age support, continuation of the family name and the completion of male tasks in the home. Within Australia, Southern European immigrants mentioned the need to continue the family name, but the Australian-born emphasized the personality and companionship benefits of a son. The reasons for wanting a daughter indicated an even clearer breakdown of interests in the two countries over the traditional as compared to the more psychologically oriented benefits in having a girl. Overall, the comparison between countries indicated a general decline in son preference from high- to low-fertility regimes and somewhat less concern with the traditional roles of children.

Requests for reprints should be directed to Dr. V. Callan, Department of Psychology, University of Queensland, Brisbane 4067, Queensland, Australia. The research projects were funded by grants from the Population and Development Policy Research Program of the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, the Australian Department of Health, and the Australian National University.
From the superstructure of the demographic transition theory (Notestein, 1953) an abundance of reasons have emerged for the timing and the pattern of decline in birth rates in different countries. Elaborations and restatements of the theory have provided a list of crucial variables which influence fertility decline including education, family income, urbanization, media exposure, and life expectation. However, an apparent cost of this preoccupation with listing crucial variables was the minimal attention given to how these and other variables mold individual fertility behavior and cause fertility decline. More recently, however, conceptual frameworks have been developed which propose intermediate mechanisms operating within the economics of societies which change the demand for children (Bulatao, 1979; Caldwell, 1976a, 1978). Among these operative mechanisms are the rising aspirations of parents for themselves and their children, a process of emotional nucleation in the family and changes in the economic and non-economic role of children.

It is the series of studies in Africa (Caldwell, 1976b) and Asia (Arnold, Bulatao, Buripakdi, Chung, Fawcett, Iritani, Lee, & Wu, 1975) which have dramatically extended knowledge of the role of children and changes in the values and costs of children across the stages of fertility transition. In the Arnold et al. studies, cross-cultural comparisons of the attitudes of parents to having children have identified the diversity of societal benefits, psychological satisfactions, economic assistance, and socio-economic rewards in having children. In contrast to the values, the costs of children include direct financial disadvantages, restrictions upon parents, and the emotional demands of childrearing. One of the most interesting results of the value of children studies in Asia is the considerable variation in the values of having sons and daughters to parents in countries at various stages of fertility transition.

In the present study a relatively new technique was used to provide a more powerful index of the value on sons and daughters to parents in different countries. Previous measures of son and daughter preference have been limited as they were often insensitive to underlying preference structures and culture-bound, while information was predominantly gained only from wives (Coombs, Coombs, & McClelland, 1975; Williamson, 1972). A psychologically based technique developed by Coombs et al. (1975) using unfolding theory and conjoint measurement has appeared to be a valuable tool for resolving concerns about comparisons of sex preference across cultures. Its ability to separate the confounding ef-