FERTILITY DESIRES AND FERTILITY OUTCOMES

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Over the last 30 years Australian fertility rates have fallen more than could have been predicted from changes in the numbers of children desired by women when they first married. This paper charts changes in desired and completed fertility in Australia, matches originally desired fertility with that ultimately achieved and explores some factors which may affect the relation between fertility desires and fertility outcomes.

Introduction

Studies which attempt to pinpoint changes in contemporary levels and patterns of childbearing are hampered by the fact that family formation may take place over many years. Considerable movements in annual fertility rates can be caused by the postponement and subsequent recouping of births without correspondingly great changes in completed family size.

The movements in fertility which occurred in all Western countries after the Second World War led many demographers to investigate the possibility of forecasting fertility by supplementing information on past childbearing with information on fertility preferences and plans for future childbearing.

Longitudinal studies indicated that individuals' fertility expectations and aspirations may be highly unstable even over short periods of time (Goldberg et al. 1959; Freedman et al. 1965). Few researchers expected fertility preferences to remain unchanged in the face of time and circumstance; but many considered that, to the extent that individual errors counterbalance one another, fertility expectations could yet serve as useful predictors of fertility at the aggregate level. The success of attempts since the 1960s to use reported fertility desires, intentions and expectations to forecast future behaviour has been varied, and has tended to be greater at the aggregate than the individual level (Westoff et al. 1957; Whelpton et al. 1966; Westoff and Ryder 1977a; O'Connell and Rogers 1983; van de Giessen 1988).

Yet there are other reasons for studying reproductive preferences than the quest for validated measures which might be used to predict future fertility. A comparison of trends in reproductive desires or intentions and actual family
building, for example, may shed light on the antecedents of fertility decline. Moreover, a comparison of the fertility achieved by individuals with their original desires may provide a useful starting place from which to analyse the sequential nature of decisions about family building.

In this paper we use data from a national survey of Australian women to examine changes in the fertility desired at the beginning of marital unions initiated since the 1950s. We then link individuals' desired fertility to the number of children they have ultimately borne. The aims of this descriptive article are threefold: to chart changes in desired and completed fertility; to match originally desired fertility with that ultimately achieved, both at the aggregate level and the level of the individual; and to explore some factors that may cause achieved fertility to match, or to diverge from, the fertility originally desired. In so doing we assess the potential fruitfulness of further exploration into the links between the two.

The data

The Australian Family Project was commissioned by The Australian National University to investigate the patterns, correlates and causes of declines in marriage and childbearing in Australia. A one-in-one-thousand national probability sample of private dwellings in Australia yielded slightly more than five thousand households which were screened to identify women aged 20-59 years who were usual residents of selected dwellings and thus eligible for a personal interview. Interviewing commenced in April 1986 and the average interview date was the 1st of July. Interviews were obtained from 2,547 women which represents 79 per cent of women identified as eligible and an estimated true response rate, adjusting for eligible women not identified during screening, of 75 per cent (Bracher 1987).

The core of the questionnaire was a collection of detailed life histories on such subjects as marital unions, childbearing and contraception. Respondents were asked the number of times they had been married or lived in a relationship without being married. They then provided such information on each of these marital unions as the dates delimiting the period of co-residence, the date of marriage (if applicable), whether they had thought at the beginning of the marital union that they would have children at some time, the number they had wanted and whether their husbands agreed. In the next section of the questionnaire, which dealt with children, respondents were asked the total number of children they had borne or who had lived with them for more than six months. For each child they then reported such information as the date of birth, whether it was their own child or had been fostered or adopted in or was a step-child and, if the child were no longer living with the respondent, whether it had been fostered or adopted out.

Fertility decline

The course of fertility decline in Australia is charted in Table 1, which shows age-specific fertility rates over five-year periods since 1961 as calculated from the retrospective histories collected in the survey. For validity of comparison with official statistics only Australian-born children, and exposure in Australia, contribute to the rates. The upper age limit for