THE FAMILY FORMATION PROCESS AMONG U.S. MARRIAGE COHORTS

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Abstract—The family formation process is viewed as the progression of women through first marriage, first, subsequent, and last births and is examined for differential patterns of timing in 1930–1969 marriage cohorts. Based on the childbearing histories of approximately 17,000 white women once and still married, extracted from the June 1975 Current Population Survey, the study uses a dynamic model to show the varying importance across cohorts of the first birth interval as an important indicator of the total time spent in childbearing, social background effects in differentiating the timing of the first two births, and of prior birth transitions as affecting subsequent ones.

INTRODUCTION

In situations of highly regulated childbearing, the process of family formation assumes growing importance for researchers of fertility. The various approaches to examining fertility patterns in the past have been largely based on analyses of cross-sectional fertility statistics. Until recently, when appropriate data became available, fertility research necessarily overlooked the advantages of life history analysis and focused on the childbearing differentials at a particular point in time. The result was only an impression of the total forces underlying the family building process. The full conceptualization of fertility change, and related social change, requires extending beyond the use of time-series period data. There is growing appreciation now that childbearing, as a behavior occurring primarily within a family context, is the cumulative response to an ever-changing series of decisions over the family’s life cycle (Hout, 1978; Namboodiri, 1972; Westoff and Ryder, 1977). In order to understand the dynamic dimensions of the impact of social change on fertility, it becomes important to adopt longitudinal methods.

Improvements in longitudinal data collection and methodology have generated a number of dynamic constructs, e.g., the “life course” and the “life cycle” (Elder, 1975; Hareven, 1978; Hogan, 1978), or in marital fertility research, the “family life cycle” and “family building” (Glick and Parke, 1965; Waite, 1980). Dynamic analyses enable the examination of childbearing as an ongoing experience, comparing birth statistics at different points during the life course rather than in its cumulated and complete form. This development is entirely appropriate in view of the couple’s increased ability to enter and exit voluntarily from the pregnancy cycle facilitated by modern contraceptive technology. Akers perhaps with prescience remarked in 1965:

If we are to guess what the level of fertility is likely to be in the next five years, say, it is more important to know at what stage women are in the cycle of marriage and childbearing (i.e., in the cycle of family formation) than to know what their long range expectations are or what the state of the economy is likely to be. (Akers, 1965, p. 422)

The dynamic perspective on reproduc-
tion distinctively "focusses on the birth interval as a decision point and regards completed family size as the sum of a sequence of outcomes culminating in the decision to have no more children" (Hout, 1978, p. 140).

Equally important, if less recent, has been the application of the cohort concept (Ryder, 1968), which has the advantage of identifying temporal variations or patterns of social transformation that would otherwise not be detected from a cross-sectional series of data. The application of the cohort-historical perspective (Elder, 1975) allows cohorts defined by a common marriage date a unique point of entry into social history which will have a bearing upon the timing of their initial birth events in the family formation process. We argue that the socialization processes for reproductive behavior evolve differently during individual cohort life cycles and lead some cohorts to be more committed to the rapid establishment of larger families than others.

The objectives in this research are then (a) to identify cohort profiles of family formation and (b) to determine the social and demographic correlates of the family formation transitions. The study is methodologically innovative in using a dynamic model to analyze the differential process of family formation across marriage cohorts. Such an approach is informative of the critical transitions in the process.

The objective of locating distinct cohort patterns of family formation assumes that certain behavioral patterns of family growth emerge from the varied passage of cohort members through the stages of family building. Birth rates far below natural fertility levels attest to the continuous decision made to regulate individual fertility. Periodic variation in economic conditions impinges on family size decisions and outcomes (Becker, 1960; Easterlin, 1978; Waite, 1980; Willis, 1973). Secular change in female attitudes toward the maternal role (Blake, 1974; Keller, 1972) also suggests differential impact on marriage cohorts. The manner in which successive marriage cohorts arrive at decisions of birth timing is differentiated by the cumulative interaction with social conditions and life cycle stage.

The second objective assumes that family formation patterns are not randomly distributed across subgroups with cohorts but are differentiated by individual background factors. Intracohort heterogeneity in fertility behavior is derived from the cohort's internal composition of characteristics. The distribution of this heterogeneity tends to remain unchanged throughout the cohort's lifetime but will vary across cohorts. Since cohort character and behavior are intimately related to the structure of its internal composition, its experience with, for example, education training indicates differential capacities for social change and hence varying patterns of family formation.

THE FAMILY FORMATION PROCESS

Studies of modern American fertility patterns have benefited from the cohort analyses of Whelpton (1949, 1954) and Ryder (1969), who chart period and cohort fluctuations in births. The postwar phenomenon of recouped births between 1946 and 1963 following a rise in marriages has been observed in several studies (Kiser, Grabill and Campbell, 1968; Rindfuss and Sweet, 1977; Ryder and Westoff, 1971). Bernhardt (1971) finds a similar pattern of concentrated childbearing during the first ten years of marriage among postwar Swedish marriage cohorts. Apart from cohort fertility analyses are studies of the family life cycle which also describe tempo variations in family formation (Glick, 1977; Glick and Parke, 1965; Norton, 1974; Spanier and Glick, 1980; Uhlenberg, 1974) and compare cohort experiences in stages of family life cycle (largely defined by the events of first marriage, first and last childbirths, (first) marriage of last child,