THE STABILITY AND RELIABILITY OF EXPECTED FAMILY SIZE DATA[1]

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A S THE proportion of planned families increases, prefer-
ences in family size become an important component
of fertility behavior. Accordingly, there is an increas-
ing emphasis in fertility research on family size desires, ideals,
and expectations.[2] Recent studies have made use of family size
preferences in two ways: (1) as a means of extending cohort
fertility to make birth projections,[3] and (2) as a substitute or
approximation of completed family size in studies of differential
fertility.[4] In the latter case, the use of expected number of chil-
dren frees the researcher from some of the problems of *ex post
facto* design.[5]

The two major uses of expected family size data require two
types of evaluations. For purposes of projection, women's esti-
mates of their future fertility behavior can be evaluated on an
aggregate basis. How large is the net error in statements con-
cerning expected number of children? As a substitute for com-
pleted family size in studies of the social and psychological

[2] For example, *see* Muhsam, H. V. and Kiser, C. V.: The Number of Children
Desired at the Time of Marriage. The Milbank Memorial Fund *Quarterly*, July,
1956, XXXIV, No. 3, pp. 287–312; Freedman, R.; Goldberg, D.; and Sharp, H.:
"Ideals" About Family Size in The Detroit Metropolitan Area. The Milbank Me-
morial Fund *Quarterly*, April, 1955, XXXIII, pp. 187–197.

[3] Freedman, R.; Whelpton, P. K.; and Campbell, A.: FAMILY PLANNING, STE-
RILITY AND POPULATION GROWTH. New York: McGraw Hill, 1959.

[4] Mishler, E. and Westoff, C.: A Proposal for Research on Social Psychological
Factors Affecting Fertility: Concepts and Hypotheses. *In* CURRENT RESEARCH IN
HUMAN FERTILITY. New York: Milbank Memorial Fund, 1955, pp. 121–150.

[5] By using expected number of children as the dependent variable we can ob-
tain measures of the independent variables prior to the completion of families.
However, a study of families which have not completed their fertility presents the
problem of evaluating the final effect of independent upon dependent variable.

factors affecting fertility, we are usually concerned with the difference between expectations and behavior among the individual couples. However, even in studies of differential fertility, an argument can be made for considering net fertility differences between groups. Surely, no one can argue that in a process as complex as family building over a period of 15 or more years, expectations and performance for individuals will be identical. For almost any group there is probably a limited range within which voluntary variation is likely to take place so that numerous upward changes may be balanced by downward changes within such a range. These shifts are the consequence of a multitude of influences on the individual, even if there are no fundamental economic and social changes in the society.

Some research dealing with the accuracy of fertility preferences as an indicator of fertility performance has already been undertaken. Westoff, Mishler, and Kelly reported on the difference between statements of desired family size at time of engagement and completed fertility some twenty years later for a panel of 145 fecund, predominantly college-educated, Protestant couples.[6] Desired number of children was an extremely accurate predictor of actual number of children at the aggregate level. Actual and desired fertility differed by less than 5 per cent. However, the authors note that the similarity between desires and behavior for the total group resulted from a series of cancelling errors. When individual couples were considered, the correlation between desires and actual performance was a rather low .26.

The present report represents another attempt at assessing the probable accuracy or stability of statements about expected number of children. It differs from the previous work in a number of ways: the samples are not as homogeneous as the one used previously; the couples are married and for the most part have already had the experience of having some children; and

it deals with statements of expected family size rather than desired family size.[7]

THE DATA

There are three sources of data used in this report. Surveys conducted in Detroit in 1955 and 1958 will hereafter be referred to as the 1955 or the 1958 study. The third source was a telephone re-interview of the respondents first contacted in the 1955 study. All of the data were collected through the facilities of The University of Michigan's Detroit Area Study and the Program for Research in Population and Human Ecology. Both the 1955 and 1958 studies used probability samples of the tracted area of greater Detroit.[8]

Our major emphasis in this paper is on family size expectations rather than ideals or desires. The difference between the reality orientation of questions on expected number of children, and the element of fantasy in questions about ideals or desires seems to have been clearly recognized by most of our respondents. About one-half of the women in the 1955 and 1958 studies had expectations which differed from their preferences. Even among fecund couples the correlation between desires and expectations was no more than .43. Moreover, it has been observed in a number of studies in the United States and Western Europe, that average ideals or desires are generally higher than either expectations or behavior.

INDIRECT ASSESSMENT OF EXPECTATION ACCURACY

Perhaps the first question to be raised about the probable accuracy of data on expected number of children should be one

[7] The question used to obtain expected family size was: How many children do you expect to have altogether? Questions on desires usually request the respondent to specify the number of children *wanted* under various sets of conditions.

[8] The sample universe for these studies includes about 87 per cent of the Standard Metropolitan Area population of Detroit. The samples are described in: Takeshita, J.: Selection of A Sample of Dwelling Units for the Detroit Area Study: 1954-55. 1955 (mimeographed); Clausen, A. and Halsted, D.: The Sample Design for the 1958-59 Detroit Area Study. 1959 (mimeographed). The samples were designed and drawn with the assistance of the staff of the Survey Research Center's Sampling Section.

concerning consistency with past trends in fertility. Obviously the potential source of error in statements about expected number of children is located in the number of *additional* births expected by the interviewed women. To what extent, then, are replies to questions about expected additional births within the range of fertility performance recorded among previous cohorts? Freedman, Whelpton, and Campbell were confronted with this question in preparing their cohort projections for the United States. They found that with the exception of the oldest age group (35–39) in their study, the women's estimates of future fertility looked reasonable enough so that they could be used to extend the cohort tables.[9] The data on additional expected births collected in the Detroit sample are very similar to the data from the Growth of American Family Study. An historical comparison of the consistency of expectations with past fertility, however, only enables us to say that the expectations look "reasonable." To assess their accuracy requires additional types of data.

The presence or absence of uniformities in the gross timing patterns of births among older women, and the expected timing patterns for younger women, should present further evidence on the probable accuracy of expectations. Although there have been large differences in completed family size among the major socioeconomic and religious groups in the past, their timing patterns relative to duration of marriage are strikingly similar, at least in the Detroit area. For married women 40 and over, the number of births in the first five years of marriage, taken as a proportion of total births, varies between 45 and 48 per cent among the several groups considered in Table 1, column 1. The same consistency is found with respect to the proportion of total births that took place in the first ten years of marriage, varying between 72 and 77 per cent.

If the estimates of future births among the younger women are realistic, we should expect to find similar uniformities. Since completed family size is unknown, the actual number of

[9] Freedman, R.; Whelpton, P. K.; and Campbell, A.: *op. cit.* Chapter 10.

SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS	BIRTHS BY MARRIAGE DURATION AS PER CENT OF ACTUAL BIRTHS (OLDER WOMEN) AND AS PER CENT OF EXPECTED BIRTHS (YOUNGER WOMEN)						
	Women 40 and Older: Births by Given Marriage Duration as Per Cent of Actual Births			Women Under 40: Births by Given Marriage Duration as Per Cent of Expected Births			
	5 Years (Per Cent)	10 Years (Per Cent)	N	5 Years (Per Cent)	N	10 Years (Per Cent)	N
Husband's Occupation							
Blue Collar	46	74	175	44	222	73	126
White Collar	47	75	92	42	126	76	76
Husband's Income							
Under $5,000	45	72	123	44	158	73	84
$5,000 and Over	48	77	144	42	183	76	112
Wife's Education							
Less Than 12 Years	47	74	175	43	157	73	102
12 Years and Over	46	75	92	43	191	76	100
Wife's Religion							
Catholic	47	75	84	41	131	74	69
Protestant	46	74	140	43	195	73	120
TOTAL	46	74	267	43	348	74	202

Table 1. Births in the first five and the first ten years of marriage taken as a percentage of total actual births to women forty and over, and of total births expected by women under forty, by selected characteristics: 1955 study.

births in the first five or ten years of marriage is taken as a proportion of the number of births the women say they will eventually have. The anticipated timing of births among the younger women is almost identical to the actual timing pattern of the women who have already passed through the child-bearing period. Once again, we find only slight variations in timing from one group to another. Unpublished data from the Growth of American Families Study show virtually the same results.

Indirect tests such as these give us some confidence about the accuracy of expectation data for younger women. The ulti-

mate test will be in the fertility behavior of these women over the next ten or fifteen years. Since the Detroit study was done in early 1955, we have only a limited amount of information on the subsequent performance of the younger cohorts.

THE RE-INTERVIEW STUDY

In 1955 interviews were obtained from 427 married women under 40 years old in the Detroit area. At that time no plan was made for a re-interview study concerning the fertility performance of these women. However, the drastic change in the economic picture in Detroit, beginning in the fall of 1957, provided a natural setting for a test of the stability of expected family size data under a set of changing conditions. It was decided to evaluate expectation data in two ways: first, to locate the original respondents from the 1955 study and reinterview them; and second, to include a series of questions on future fertility performance in the 1958 Detroit Area Study.

The re-interview was carried out by making use of city directories and cross-indexed telephone directories.[10] Funds were not available to cover the large costs of returning to the dwelling units of the original respondents so we tried to gather our information through the telephone interviews and by mail questionnaires.[11] The followup took place exactly three years after the original interview.

Of the 427 potential respondents, 238 women (56 per cent of the original sample) provided us with information on their fertility behavior during the period 1955–1958. The reinterview rate for various sociodemographic groupings is seen in Table 2. Clearly, our re-interview population differs from the original sample. The survivors are heavily loaded in the higher status groups. This situation was partially a function of our inability to trace the non-white members of the 1955 sample. We located

10 We are indebted to Mr. J. W. Larsen of the Michigan Bell Telephone Company for his assistance in locating the respondents.
11 Most of the interviews were conducted over the phone. Respondents who could not be located by telephone were sent a mail questionnaire. Less than ten per cent of the questionnaires were returned.

more than six out of ten whites but less than a third of the non-whites. Data not shown here indicate that the same kind of economic selectivity was operative within the white population. Higher status whites were easier to locate than lower status whites.

Table 2. Selected characteristics of the respondents in the 1955 study and the 1955 characteristics of the 1958 reinterview respondents.

Selected Characteristics in 1955	1955 Study (N)	Re- inter- view Study (N)	Re- inter- view Rate (Per Cent)	Selected Characteristics in 1955	1955 Study (N)	Re- inter- view Study (N)	Re- inter- view Rate (Per Cent)
Live Births				*Husband's Income*			
0	57	24	42	Under $3,000	57	16	28
1	98	51	52	$3,000-$4,999	155	77	50
2	136	84	62	$5,000-$6,999	124	91	73
3	72	49	68	$7,000 and Over	81	53	65
4-8	64	30	47				
				Husband's Occupation			
Additional Births				Semi and Unskilled	173	71	41
Expected				Skilled	97	66	68
0	225	126	56	Clerical and Sales	59	38	64
1	105	65	62	Proprietor, Mgr., Off.	98	63	64
2	68	34	50				
3-5	28	12	43	*Wife's Education*			
				Grade School	62	22	35
Total Expected Births				High School 1-3 Years	124	57	46
0	29	17	59	High School 4 Years	197	130	66
1	43	21	49	College	44	29	66
2	115	60	52				
3	97	61	63	*Wife's Religion*			
4	89	54	61	Catholic	164	109	66
5-8	54	25	46	Protestant	233	112	48
				Other	30	17	57
Fecundity Status							
Probably Fecund	323	177	55	*Wife's Farm Experience*			
Reduced Fecundity	104	61	59	Some	115	45	39
				None	311	193	62
Age in Years							
20-24	83	30	36	*Race*			
25-29	95	57	60	White	350	214	61
30-34	125	74	59	Non-White	77	24	31
35-39	124	77	62				
Duration of Marriage							
0-4 Years	69	32	46				
5-9 Years	159	90	57				
10-14 Years	119	65	55				
15 and Over	80	51	64				
TOTAL	427	238	56	TOTAL	427	238	56

Although the re-interview population is not representative with respect to the social and economic characteristics, it does much better on the demographic side. The 1955 sample had an average of 2.09 live births, and expected to have an additional .80 births. The 1958 re-interview sample had given birth to 2.10 children by 1955 and expected an additional .74 births at that time. Given the deficiencies of the sample, it nevertheless represents one of the few available opportunities for examining the accuracy of the women's predictions.

Actually, there is no reason to believe that women who say they will have X children will have exactly X children. Even without changes in social and economic conditions, there will be many small compensating shifts in expectations and performance under the impact of the large number of forces affecting the individual family growth histories. Of immediate consequence, unanticipated fecundity problems and accidental births will modify the situation.

During the period considered (1955–1958), the economic circumstances had changed considerably in Detroit. In early 1955 only 4 per cent of the adults in the labor force were unemployed. Income rose throughout 1955, 1956, and the first three quarters of 1957. Then in the fall, the automobile and related industry layoffs began. When the sample was re-interviewed, about 11 per cent of the adult labor force was unemployed and another large fraction was experiencing partial unemployment. This situation continued throughout 1958.

At an aggregate level it appears that the depressed conditions in Detroit will have little effect on the total number of children the re-interviewed sample will eventually bear, although it may alter some of the timing patterns. In 1955 the 237 women expected to have an additional 176 children. By 1958 they had experienced 110 pregnancies, 84 live births, and expected to have 94 more births—totalling 178 births, actual and anticipated. Thus there was a net change of only two births in the total number of children expected by the sample. The net error, assuming the anticipated births will eventually take

place, is less than one child per 100 women. This error remains extremely small, amounting to no more than three births per 100 women, when the difference between the 1955 and 1958 expectations is standardized on the characteristics of the original sample (assuming a 100 per cent re-interview rate and that the persons who were re-interviewed from the various sociodemographic categories were similar to the persons who were not re-interviewed in the respective sociodemographic categories).

A net error of virtually zero results from a series of upward and downward revisions in expected number of children by the individual woman. After three years, 30 per cent of the women have changed their total expectations and 8 per cent of the re-interviewed women now have expectations which differ from their 1955 expectations by more than one child. Approximately equal numbers of women revised their estimates upward and downward.

Some of the changes in expected family size result from genuine shifts in the true value which are beyond the control of the respondent (fecundity impairments) rather than from unreliability in the data. It seems to us that a gross change of 30 per cent in a variable as complex as expected family size is remarkably small considering the fact that the interviews were spaced three years apart. Gross errors of this magnitude have occurred in data like education, rent, and income when the re-interview followed some weeks later.[12] Panel studies of consumer expectations, which are probably more comparable to the type of data used in this report, indicate that accurate predictions of aggregate purchases can be made from survey data, but they also show that about half of the persons who expect to purchase major goods such as new cars, furniture, or appliances in the following one year period, fail to make such purchases.[13]

[12] Eckler, A. R.: Extent and Character of Error in the 1950 Census. *The American Statistician*, 1953, VII, pp. 15–21.

[13] *See* Lininger, C.; Mueller, E.; Wyss, H.: Some Uses of Panel Studies in

ADDITIONAL CHILDREN EXPECTED IN 1955	AVERAGE NUMBER OF LIVE BIRTHS	AVERAGE NUMBER OF PREGNANCIES
0	.17	.22
1	.46	.55
2 and Over	.72	1.00

Table 3. Additional births expected in 1955 by average number of live births and pregnancies during the period 1955–1958: Re-interview Study.

In some respects, making use of anticipated births in 1958 to evaluate the accuracy of anticipated births in 1955 is unfair. Perhaps the criteria should be based on fertility behavior between the time of original interview and re-interview. Most of the couples seem to be acting in accordance with their original predictions. Women expecting no additional births have had an average of .17 births while those expecting two or more children have given birth to an average of .72 children over the three-year period (Table 3). In terms of error cases, 17 per cent of the women who predicted no future births have become pregnant and 42 per cent of those predicting some future births have not been pregnant, yielding a total of 29 per cent who may be classified as error cases, for the time being.

An analysis of the 1955 characteristics of the re-interviewed women reveals some conditions which seem to affect the accuracy of the original fertility predictions (Table 4). In the Westoff, Mishler, and Kelly article[14] it was suggested that prediction accuracy was probably a function of experience in the domestic role. This seems to be the case in our data. The percentage of women whose expectations were identical in 1955 and 1958 is directly related to age and duration of marriage. Less than half of the women aged 20–24 or married for less than five years had the same total expectations in 1955 and 1958. Combinations of the "experience" variables yield highly con-

Forecasting the Automobile Market. Paper presented at the 1957 meetings of the American Statistical Association; Lansing, J., and Withey, S.: Consumer Anticipations: Their Use in Forecasting Consumer Behavior. *In* SHORT TERM ECONOMIC FORECASTING. A Report of the National Bureau of Economic Research. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955.

14 *Op. cit.*

sistent results. For example, 53 per cent of the women married less than ten years, under 30 years old and with one child or less changed their expected family size, whereas 29 per cent of the women married less than ten years, but who are more than 30

Table 4. Changes in expected number of children between 1955 and 1958[1] by selected characteristics as of 1955: Re-interview Study.

Selected Characteristics in 1955	Same in 1955 and 1958 (Per Cent)	More in 1958 (Per Cent)	Fewer in 1958 (Per Cent)	Selected Characteristics in 1955	Same in 1955 and 1958 (Per Cent)	More in 1958 (Per Cent)	Fewer in 1958 (Per Cent)
Live Births				*Husband's Income*			
0	67	12	21	Under $3,000	56	19	25
1	62	22	16	$3,000–$4,999	67	18	15
2	71	18	11	$5,000–$6,999	74	14	12
3	74	10	16	$7,000 and Over	70	17	13
Additional Births Expected				*Husband's Occupation*			
0	83	17	—	Semi and Unskilled	66	17	17
1	62	20	18	Skilled	76	15	9
2	47	15	38	Clerical and Sales	76	16	8
3–5	33	—	67	Proprietors, Mgrs., Off.	64	17	19
Total Expected Births				*Wife's Education*			
0	82	18	—	Grade School	73	23	4
1	85	10	5	High School 1–3 Years	62	25	13
2	73	25	2	High School 4 Years	73	12	15
3	72	15	13	College	65	14	21
4	53	17	30				
5–8	67	4	29	*Wife's Religion*			
				Catholic	70	17	13
Fecundity Status				Protestant	69	16	15
Probably Fecund	68	15	17	Other	70	18	12
Reduced Fecundity	75	20	5				
				Wife's Farm Experience			
Age in Years				Some	67	9	24
20–24	40	40	20	None	70	18	12
25–29	61	25	14				
30–34	70	14	16	*Race*			
35–39	87	4	9	White	70	16	14
				Non-White	67	20	13
Duration of Marriage							
0–4 Years	47	28	25				
5–9 Years	62	25	13				
10–14 Years	73	13	14				
15 and Over	92	—	8				
Total	70	16	14	**Total**	70	16	14

[1]Same number of cases as given in Table 2.

years old and have two or more children, changed their expectations. In contrast to the demographic variables, the social and economic characteristics seem to have relatively little effect on prediction accuracy.

The women re-interviewed in Detroit were able to give us some indication of the perceived conditions precipitating the changes in their original fertility predictions. When the sum of the births between 1955 and 1958 plus the expected additional children in 1958 did not correspond with the expected additional children in 1955, respondents were told:

> When we last interviewed you, you said that you expected (X) more children. Now it appears that you may have (X±1 or 2) more. Can you tell me why you have changed your mind?

Among the respondents who had revised their estimates upward, the primary reasons given were accidental conception and attempts to balance the sex ratio among the children. Other reasons ranged from medical treatment making additional births possible, to having twins, to remarks such as, "I just like to have little babies around." The reasons given for having fewer children were either fecundity problems or economic strain. Seven of the nine women who revised downward by two or more children mentioned some kind of physical difficulty.

Other than fecundity impairments, economic strain was the only reason given by our respondents for downward revisions in the fertility estimates. Yet not a single respondent mentioned economic improvement as a condition which influenced her upward revision. In effect, our respondents told us that the relationship was entirely one-sided. This seemed highly unlikely in view of the strong correlation known to exist between fluctuations in the birth rate and economic conditions. With data on the characteristics of the couple in 1955 and with information on changes in these characteristics since 1955, economic strain and improvement could be measured.

In Table 5, status improvement is defined as a change in the husband's job involving a shift upward in a four unit occupa-

Change in Status	More Expected in 1958 (Per Cent)	Same in 1955 and 1958 (Per Cent)	Less Expected in 1958 (Per Cent)	Total (Per Cent)	Net Change per Person 1958 Less 1955	Number of Cases
Status Improvement	26	59	15	100	+.12	61
Status Stability	13	75	12	100	±.00	104
Status Decline	13	70	17	100	−.07	72

Table 5. Change in expected number of children by change in economic status, 1955–1958: Re-interview Study.

tional scheme (upper and lower blue collar, upper and lower white collar) or an increase of greater than $1,500 in the husband's income during the three-year period. Status decline is defined as current unemployment, an occupational change involving a downward shift, or a decline in income.[15] The results of Table 5 certainly do not agree with the impression one would derive from answers given by the respondents. An improvement in status is more likely to produce a change in expectations than a decline, and the relationship, though weak, suggests that economic improvement results in a greater proportion of upward revisions than decline results in downward revisions. In general, the re-interview data suggest that although socioeconomic changes produce some revisions of fertility estimates, the primary determinants of the accuracy of fertility predictions lie in the family cycle characteristics.

THE 1958 STUDY

The final source of data used in the evaluation of family size expectations is derived from a cross-section sample of greater Detroit adults done at the same time as the re-interview study. In the 1955 sample, only married females were eligible as respondents; in this sample, a randomly selected adult from each

[15] Median income increased by approximately $900 in Detroit during this period. *See:* The Detroit Area Study: Family Income in Greater Detroit: 1951–1957. 1958 (mimeographed).

sampled dwelling unit was interviewed. In both instances, the identical set of fertility questions was used. The data from the 1958 study, which are reported here, refer only to married persons who are less than 40 years old.

It should be recalled that the 1955 sample of women under 40 had an average of 2.09 children and expected to have an average of 2.89. By 1958, the same age group had given birth to 2.23 children, expected 3.21. Clearly, the slump in Detroit had not produced a decline in family size expectations, but why the increase? Only part of this increase can be explained by the difference in the marriage cohorts represented in the two samples. In 1955, 20 per cent of the sample consisted of prewar marriages whose eventual completed fertility will be lower than the post-war marriages. By 1958, 10 per cent of the sample were married in the prewar period.

Table 6 shows expected number of children classified by various characteristics of the 1955 and 1958 samples. The increase in expectations of .32 for the total population is not to be accounted for by the presence of males in the 1958 sample. Men and women have about the same expectations. We find a fairly uniform increase in expectations among socioeconomic groupings. However, there is some indication that the higher status groups have increased their family size expectations to a greater extent than the lower status groups over the three year period in question. This may reflect a continuation of the contraction in fertility differentials.

The major change in expectations is located among the religious groups. The expectations of Protestants have remained fairly stable at about three children per married couple, whereas Catholic expectations have increased by an average of .70 between 1955 and 1958. These data are in marked contrast to the results of the re-interview study, which showed that changes in expectations were negligible for both Protestants and Catholics. We find it difficult to believe that such a change could have occurred in the true value of expectations. Instead, we would like to suggest that the change in expected number of children

among the Catholics reflects a difference in the general content of the 1955 and 1958 interview schedules.

Although the fertility questions were the same in both studies, the 1955 research focused on nuclear family and kinship rela-

Table 6. Mean expected number of children by selected characteristics: 1955 and 1958 studies.

SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS	MEAN EXPECTED NUMBER OF CHILDREN, 1955 AND 1958				
	1955	1958	1958 Less 1955	Number of Cases	
				1955	1958
Sex					
Male	—	3.18	—	—	109
Female	2.89	3.24	+.35	427	118
Family Head's Occupation					
Blue Collar	2.93	3.20	+.27	270	134
White Collar	2.82	3.22	+.40	157	91
Family Head's Income					
Under $5,000	2.94	3.19	+.25	212	62
$5,000 and Over	2.83	3.22	+.39	205	160
Wife's Education					
Less Than 12 Years	3.03	3.30	+.27	186	75
12 Years and Over	2.78	3.17	+.39	241	152
Race					
Non-White	3.32	3.77	+.45	77	37
White	2.79	3.10	+.31	350	190
Wife's Farm Experience					
Some	3.05	3.38	+.33	115	45
None	2.83	3.16	+.33	311	182
Age in Years					
20–29	3.13	3.41	+.28	178	94
30–39	2.71	3.07	+.36	249	133
Wife's Religion					
Catholic	2.95	3.65	+.70	164	78
Protestant	2.91	3.00	+.09	233	132
Other	2.32	2.82	+.50	30	17
TOTAL	2.89	3.21	+.32	427	227

tionships, while the 1958 study dealt primarily with religious behavior. Respondents were asked about their religious preference, participation, beliefs, values, and commitments. Some thirty minutes of questions reminding the respondent of his position within his own church could have affected the family size expectations of the Catholic respondents. In this case, it would appear that the content of the study had the effect of producing a loaded question on fertility expectations for our Catholic respondents. Apparently the impact of the religious questions was more sharply felt by the female Catholics whose average expectations were 3.83 children in contrast to the 3.53 children expected by the male Catholics. There was practically no difference in the responses of the male and female Protestants (3.03 and 2.98).

If Catholics are excluded from the analysis because of a presumed bias of their answers in 1958, the net change in expected number of children among non-Catholics in the 1955 and 1958 studies is from 2.85 to 2.98, only slightly more than could be expected on the basis of the change in marriage cohorts reflected in the two samples, and well within the sampling error. In this case we may say that the 1955–1958 sample comparison is basically in agreement with the results of the re-interview study in showing stability of family size preferences.

SUMMARY

One factor clearly emerges from all of the data used in this paper—a short period of recession does not appreciably alter the average expected family size responses. Most persons probably view the slump as a temporary phenomenon. Although changes in the timing of births respond to the fluctuations in economic conditions, it would probably require a much more extended decline in the economy before completed family size expectations are revised downward.

Since our telephone re-interview data show practically no net change in expected number of children we should expect that cohort projections will be relatively accurate as long as

the cohorts upon which the expectations are based contribute the major share of the births in any given period. However, neither cohort nor any other type of projection can hope to deal with short term fluctuations in births.

At the individual level, it seems quite possible that as many as two-thirds of the newly married couples may change their family size preferences before passing completely through the reproductive period. We do not feel that these changes make expected number of children a poor variable for the analysis of social and psychological factors affecting fertility. If women change their expectations because of fecundity impairments, accidents, or through some unanticipated shift in the status of the family, it is precisely these factors which one would want to eliminate in studies of differential fertility. From the standpoint of the analyst, accidents and fecundity impairment represent error in the dependent variable. Obviously expected family size cannot be used as a substitute for completed family size at the individual level, but the preferences themselves may offer a conceptually purer and methodologically more useful variable in fertility studies.