

UNRESOLVED ISSUES IN RESEARCH ON FERTILITY IN LATIN AMERICA

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The purpose of this paper is to point up briefly some of the unresolved issues regarding fertility in Latin America. The issues discussed are not necessarily peculiar to Latin America. However, some may assume special importance for that area partly because of the high level of fertility and partly because of the marked expansion of research on fertility in that area in recent years.

FUTURE SOURCES OF FERTILITY DATA

Much discussion in recent years has centered on the question of whether national civil registration will ever become sufficiently complete and accurate with respect to births to become the chief source of fertility data for Latin America. Even in the largest cities of the most advanced countries of Latin America the registration of births leaves much to be desired. It is much worse or nonexistent in some of the rural areas of the less-developed countries. Because of this, special surveys on fertility have been made by CELADE, by the Population Division of the Association of Medical Colleges in Bogotá and by various universities and research groups in Argentina, Brazil and other countries. It is because of uncertainty as to the future source of fertility data that some students have urged that decennial censuses include questions on number of children ever born and secure the relevant accompanying information such as age at

marriage and times married to supply fertility data for Latin America.

It is recognized that each of the methods mentioned above has a special contribution to make and all are used in many countries of the world. Registration data afford various types of annual rates of natality. The decennial census can provide data on children ever born in relation to a variety of demographic and socioeconomic variables. Special surveys can provide data of the type not yet collected by official agencies such as prevalence and effectiveness of contraception, attitudes toward size of family and family planning, personality characteristics and motivations. However, it is not known to what extent the various countries will use the separate or combined methods and the unresolved issue is that of relative roles of registration, census and special surveys with respect to provision of fertility data in Latin America.

TRENDS AND VARIATIONS IN FERTILITY

Knowledge of the dynamics of fertility in Latin America is very general. Stycos stated in 1965 "the level of knowledge about Latin American fertility has recently not been far from the folkloric. So deficient is our knowledge of basic facts that we cannot with assurance answer the crucial question of whether or not birth rates are rising in a number of Latin American countries."¹ Since that time, thanks to the research at CELADE² and other places, the situation has improved, but we still need much more accurate and detailed data on levels, trends and variations in fertility in Latin America. We need better data for the nations, for regions, for rural-urban subdivisions, for ethnic groups and for classifications by indices of socioeconomic status such as occupation, education and income.

MARITAL STATUS AND CONSENSUAL UNIONS

In this day of the so-called revolt of youth and the sex revolution, an important unresolved issue is that of the future of mar-

riage. Will there be fewer formal marriages and more consensual unions? Will there be more separations and divorce? How will these trends differ by urban-rural status and by socioeconomic class? How will these trends affect fertility? Quite apart from unknown future trends of marital status, we need accurate data on fertility by age at marriage and by duration of marriage. We especially need data of the type that are beginning to emerge in Jamaica on fertility of consensual unions.

RELATION OF URBANIZATION TO FERTILITY

The need for research in this field was recently pointed up by Stycos.³ Some students claim that fertility in Latin America has not been affected much by urbanization since World War II. There is particular need to try to parcel out the relevance of various factors associated with urbanization such as education and employment of women. How much of the urban-rural variance in fertility can be explained by these factors?

RELATION OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TO FERTILITY

There are differences of opinion regarding this type of relation. The underlying theory of the demographic transition is that economic development brings declines in fertility. However, some recent evidence indicates that at least the initial result is that of rising fertility. This may be partly the result of improvement in health conditions and partly the implementation of more and earlier marriage.

Collver has taken the position that "fertility reduction is no automatic by-product of economic development" and explains his reasons with reference to Latin America as follows:⁴

Because of an important difference between the three countries that have made fertility transitions and the remaining 17 that have not, these three [Argentina, Uruguay, and Cuba] cannot be regarded as forerunners of a general fertility reduction in the region. All three had extremely high rates of immigration from Southern Europe after

1870. The immigrants undoubtedly brought with them the culture and behavior of modern Europe, including the practice of birth control. In other countries most of the inhabitants are native descendants of indigenous peoples or of early colonists. When fertility control is adopted in these countries, it will be a different process from the one that operated in Argentina, Uruguay and Cuba.

RELATION OF THE CHURCH TO FERTILITY

The future impact of the Church on fertility is an unresolved issue for large parts of Latin America. In large parts of that continent birth rates sluggishly remain above 40 and there is no definite basis for the statement that the influence of the church is declining, remaining the same or increasing insofar as its effect on family planning and fertility is concerned. Also related to this issue is the need for a better understanding of the sociology of religion and religiosity in relation to fertility.

SOURCES OF URBAN GROWTH

Even the leading students of migration and urbanization in Latin America, differ in their opinions as to the sources of urban growth. Durand and Peláez reported that during 1950–60 “the rate of growth of the urban population in Latin America was nearly twice that of the total population. The difference was due chiefly, if not entirely, to migration from the countryside to the cities.”⁵ On the other hand, Arriaga has concluded from his study of the components of city growth in Chile, Mexico and Venezuela during 1950–60: “Urbanization in Latin American countries is occurring faster than that observed in industrialized countries, past and present. The reason for that phenomenon does not seem to be that internal migration in Latin American countries is now greater than that observed at any time in the industrialized countries—it may even be smaller. The reason is that the natural growth rate in Latin American countries is at present higher than that in industrialized coun-

tries.”⁶ The two positions are not necessarily irreconcilable, but they illustrate the existence of an unresolved issue.

TRENDS AND DIFFERENTIALS OF ABORTIONS

Although some of the best data on induced abortions to be found in the world are those from studies in Chile and Colombia, for the continent as a whole there is a dearth of data on levels, trends and differentials in abortions by country, by urban-rural status and by socioeconomic status. There is lack of consensus on the best type of measure of abortion and on the role of abortion in fertility and fertility control.

There is a specific unresolved issue with respect to differentials by socioeconomic status. Studies by Armijo and Monreal,⁷ and by Requena⁸ indicate an inverse relation of abortion to socioeconomic status in Chile. On the other hand, a direct relation has been reported by Mendoza-Hoyos⁹ for Colombia and by Hall¹⁰ for Lima, Peru.

FAMILY PLANNING: TRENDS AND VARIATIONS

As with abortions, there are outstanding leaders of research in family planning in certain countries of Latin America. Nevertheless, there are neglected aspects and unresolved issues. Milos Macura, Director, Population Division, United Nations, has emphasized the need for research regarding regional variations in family planning in Latin America and research directed to a better understanding of the relative importance of economic, social and psychologic factors in relation to family planning.¹¹

Ruth Puffer of Pan American Health Organization has urged longitudinal studies of women in the childbearing ages, including their resort to contraception and the impact of this on their fertility. She has also urged operational research in maternal and child health programs in which family planning is introduced for current evaluation.¹²

THE PLACE OF FAMILY PLANNING IN MODERNIZATION PROGRAMS

There are sharp divisions of opinion regarding the place of family planning in modernization programs in the developing areas of the world. These have existed along religious and political lines. Even among those favoring, or having no religious or political objections to, family planning there are differences of opinion regarding the propriety or effectiveness of family planning programs as instruments for modernization. An example of a recent polarization of opinion of this type is afforded by the recent exchanges in *Science* between Blake¹³ and Harkavy, Jaffe and Wishik.¹⁴

Furthermore, even among those agreeing that family planning is important there is disagreement as to the context in which it should be introduced in developing countries. Hauser has described the gradations of contexts as follows:

1. Direct clinics independent and separate and devoted simply to provision of contraceptive devices and advice.
2. Family planning tied to programs of maternal and child health. This might be in the context of medical schools, schools of public health, departments of public health.
3. Family planning introduced as a constituent part of studies or institutes of family life. (This broad context was favored by Hauser.)
4. Family planning tied to economic incentives for limiting children.
5. Family planning tied to economic and political sanctions against uncontrolled fertility.¹⁵

METHODS OF FAMILY PLANNING

Despite the great growth of popularity of the oral pill and the intrauterine device during the past decade, the ideal method of contraception for Latin America and other developing areas has not yet been found. Experience has indicated that an appre-

ciable proportion of women expel the IUD spontaneously and that a larger proportion abandon use of the device after several years. There is much debate and increasing concern about the side effects of the pill. The search continues for a method that is simple, safe, effective, cheap and acceptable.¹⁶

PHYSIOLOGIC ASPECTS OF REPRODUCTION

Despite the large amount of research in this field there are still unresolved issues. One is the possibility of finding a means of giving temporary immunity to fertilization of the ovum.¹⁷

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGIC FACTORS IN FERTILITY AND FAMILY PLANNING

Studies of this type have by no means been completely successful in the developed countries, including the United States. Nevertheless, there is the constant challenge to study social and psychologic factors in relation to fertility and family planning not only to help interpret trends and differentials but also to provide guide lines for policy decisions. Various aspects of this topic have been mentioned in several of the previously described issues. However, this important topic warrants a separate category and remains a challenging unresolved issue.

PROJECTIONS OF FERTILITY

It is sometimes said that the purpose of science is not only to understand but ultimately to control and to predict the phenomena under question. Dealing as they do with the unknown future, fertility projections are in the nature of the case unresolved issues. Past projections of fertility frequently have not stood the tests of time. Nevertheless, there is the challenge to make projections of fertility not only because some students seem to enjoy doing this sort of thing but also because population projections are frequently requested by planners. There are various types of population projections, but the so-called

component method requires estimates of the future course of fertility, mortality and net gains from migration. Not only are the utility and method of population and fertility projections unresolved issues, but so also is the sponsorship. The United Nations has made projections of fertility for continents and regions for the whole world. Local people are sometimes in better position to make projections of fertility for their own countries or subdivisions of it. With respect to sponsorship, therefore, the unresolved issue appears to be that of weighing the advantages of trained personnel and machine equipment in an outside agency against the advantages of a more intimate knowledge of local conditions. This same issue is present in comparing capacities for statistical work in national agencies with those in state and local agencies.

NATIONAL POPULATION POLICY IN RELATION TO FERTILITY

Like many of the previously discussed issues, that of population policy in relation to fertility and family planning is complicated and difficult. National policies with respect to fertility and family planning must be hammered out of conflicting beliefs and ideologies. There are imponderables such as economic development, the political future and the role of the Church in the various countries. For different reasons the Marxist ideology and the Catholic Doctrine have had in common a traditional objection to family planning. Yet Marxism and Catholicism tend to be mutually antagonistic and both groups have become more tolerant of family planning in recent years.

Several Latin American countries give evidence of evolving or attempting to evolve broadly based and sound policy with respect to population. Discussions among intelligent citizenry regarding the economic and social implications of existing trends in fertility, mortality and migration seem to be taking place throughout Latin America. There are grounds for optimism that this can be translated into effective and rational policy.

Nevertheless, the overriding unresolved issue for most countries of Latin America is the race between growth of population on the one hand and increase of food production and economic and social development on the other.

CONCLUSION

Finally, I would like to emphasize that although some of the "unresolved issues" arise from the inadequacy of data for Latin America, the very inadequacy of data in the developing areas since World War II has been a stimulus for advance in demographic methodology. There is an old adage that "necessity is the mother of invention." This has been the case in demography during the past 25 years. The lack of adequate vital statistics and census data has stimulated research into ways and means of circumventing the shortcomings. It is hoped, however, that the deficiencies in the data for Latin America will soon be eliminated and that the issues described above will be resolved.

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