

Moving Beyond Elaborate Description: Towards Understanding Choices About Parenthood

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Introduction

Twenty years ago I had just become Chief of the Comparative Analysis Section at the World Fertility Survey and was faced with the thrilling, but daunting, task of setting out strategies for comparative analysis for the WFS World Conference (Hobcraft 1981). At that time, there was a sense of real excitement at the prospect of using comparable information from a wide range of developing and developed countries to improve our knowledge and understanding of the determinants of fertility and related demographic processes. Moreover, the WFS was especially well resourced, enabling us to build a staff of up to six high quality professionals in the comparative analysis section alone and to employ a wide range of other able scholars as consultants. The excitement spread beyond the WFS, to encompass the UN system (both the Population Division and the ECE had major projects) and to funders of research; many universities had their own major projects for comparative analysis of WFS.

Yet it is clear that the results did not live up to my own or to others highest expectations: comparative analysis projects are today much less common; the Demographic and Health Surveys, the daughter of WFS, have never had a serious comparative analysis capacity (beyond the mainly descriptive Comparative Studies); and many funding agencies now see other approaches as more likely to show returns. Some of this shift of emphasis results from international agencies (notably USAID and UNFPA, the main funders of all these comparative survey efforts) placing ever greater emphasis on within country work and finding it harder to justify funding less evidently policy relevant research. Since the overwhelming locus of comparative research has always been in the developed countries this is understandable, even if scholars may argue that it is short sighted. But the scientific community has also felt the returns from such comparative analyses to be meagre and is thus less likely to direct its focus to these issues and consequently there are often difficulties in obtaining funding.

In this paper, I shall reflect upon progress in international comparative analysis of coordinated survey efforts over the past 20 years and place some of the work on the current round of Family Formation Surveys in that context. I shall also try, in a limited way, to pose and answer questions about the viability of comparative research for the future. Perhaps inevitably, given my own investment in this field over the period, I shall be less gloomy than many about the prospects, although I shall argue that a profound shift of emphasis is required in order to make real progress. Since most of the rationale for fertility surveys is their utility for the individual country where the information is collected and much of the funding comes from national sources, it is usually essential that attempts to harmonise survey efforts for comparative analysis can be justified nationally. This issue has always been a more acute one for the surveys coordinated by UNECE, both because it has less funding leverage and because of differing traditions within countries, which make comparability over time at least as important as comparability with other countries.

Yet the main problem for comparative analysis, over and above the sheer scale of data manipulation, has always been the rather limited number of explanatory variables which are sufficiently standardised and accorded enough credibility to be collected in every country. In part, this problem arises from a lack of a commonly accepted theoretical framework for understanding fertility behaviour, but it is also arguable that we shall never remedy the problem without better agreement and testing of comparable information.

Let us take a concrete example: fertility in Italy is extremely low, with a period total fertility of 1.19 in 1998 – why? Can this be understood without reference to levels elsewhere in Europe? Of course not, and we surely must all believe that the real factors which determine fertility levels in Italy are broadly the same as in Sweden and other societies, even if we acknowledge some role for path-dependency. This statement does not mean that the factors determining fertility in different societies are at the same levels, but rather that it is variations in these factors which bring about variations in levels of fertility. This is an accounting truism if, as all too often, we limit ourselves to the proximate determinants of fertility; but such an emphasis is profoundly limited and boring. At the other extreme, it is possible to trawl a range of factors which are too remote as determinants of fertility to be anything but vaguely linked and we do not know what to do with resulting relationships. Work on broad value or attitudinal constructs such as post-materialism is in this class, though of value and interest in its own right (see, for example, Beets *et al* 1999, Casterline 1999, Moors and Palomba 1995 & 1998, and Van de Kaa 1998).

What is required is a serious attempt to reach agreement on the proximate real determinants of fertility (as opposed to the intermediate proximate determinants) and on how to incorporate measures of these into surveys. I shall further develop this theme later, but still feel that the broad framework elaborated by Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995) is a good starting point, with its strong multidisciplinary emphasis and focus on issues very close to the decision-making process about becoming a parent. The broad framework includes both pronatalist pressures and constraints upon parenthood, including issues of biology, time-management, employment, human capital, housing, and ideas, and cross-cutting issues of medium-term security and gendered structures. Also included was a ‘bold sketch’ applying the framework to an interpretation of fertility trends in Western Europe since the 1930s and of current broad regional differentials. The framework can easily encompass a broad explanation for the precipitous fertility declines seen over the past decade for Eastern European countries, especially through its emphasis on the medium to long term security aspect in reaching decisions about childbearing. Nevertheless, there are formidable measurement and conceptual problems in operationalizing this framework at the individual level. It is also clear that some of the institutions which shape or constrain choices about becoming a parent operate at the national level, although their effects and consequences may be modified according to individual perceptions, choices, and circumstances.

Strategies for Comparative Analysis Revisited

In 1980, I correctly surmised that most comparative analysis of WFS (and other survey data subsequently) would take the form of ‘comparative description’ or of

'replicated models' (Hobcraft 1981). Comparative description is simply assembling and interpreting the same tabulations for multiple countries, which is often of considerable descriptive value, but is never likely to provide deeper insights because of the limitations in the number of variables which can be used.

Replicated models have generally been the endpoint of most regression-based comparative analysis: the common feature is to take a standard regression model (i.e. with the same variables and usually the same categories for those variables) and to fit this model separately for each country. The comparative analysis then usually involves a descriptive comparison of the parameter estimates across the different countries. The main results usually take the form of statements and interpretations about how often particular parameters or variables are statistically significant and some descriptive commentary about the patterns of variation in the magnitude of the associations by geographical region or 'culture'. Sometimes such analyses also serve to pick out countries with apparently anomalous relationships, which merit further attention. Occasionally attempts were made to relate patterns in the regression parameter estimates to a limited range of aggregate national indicator variables.

At one level, such replicated analyses are immensely informative and have served to enhance our (albeit limited) understanding of behaviour. Since I shall subsequently express my disappointment that we have not moved on further, I make no apology for selectively drawing on my own efforts in this area to illustrate some of the benefits and insights gained. Evaluating the relative importance of mother's and father's levels of education as correlates of child mortality and discovering that mother's education is generally a more powerful correlate, but that this is not so in the sub-Saharan African countries included in the analysis, does move understanding forward, both by demonstrating some regularity and by raising further questions concerning the reasons for discrepancies (see Hobcraft, McDonald and Rutstein 1984; and Hobcraft 1993b & 1994). The finding that very strong and nearly universal associations exist between birth intervals and child survival was among the most influential of results from WFS comparative analysis in helping to reestablish the health rationale for family planning (Hobcraft, McDonald and Rutstein 1983 & 1985; Hobcraft 1994). The theoretical implications of the lack of association of fertility behaviour with parity beyond the second birth were of considerable interest, although never fully resolved (Rodríguez *et al* 1984; Hobcraft 1985 & 1993a; Ryder 1986). Many other examples could be given, but these suffice.

Yet, with hindsight, more ambitious theoretical insights have not emerged from comparative analysis. In 1980, I had high hopes that we would move beyond descriptive comparisons of replicated models towards 'global models' and towards multilevel models. Yet there has been very little progress in either of these directions. Let me begin by explaining what such strategies for comparative analysis involve and why they are of critical importance for understanding demographic processes, whilst acknowledging that these are ambitious goals, where progress is likely to be slow. However, moving theory forwards may make such progress essential.

Global models mean systematic exploration of the extent to which regression models for different countries can be constrained to have not just the same range of regressors, but also to have the same parameters. In principle, such testing should be straightforward and yet in practice is vanishingly rare. Yet surely progress towards

such global models is essential for good theory. Currently, we appear to be satisfied with very vague specifications, such as expecting a positive association of age at first birth with level of education, but surely this is not enough? A deeper understanding would involve a closer specification, whereby the strength of the relationship was the same everywhere *net of the correct range of other controls*, or the development of models which incorporate the factors which bring about variations in the strength of the relationship as a step towards the fuller model. To give a simple example, we know that levels of contraceptive use are generally higher, or fertility levels lower, for every level of education within virtually all societies when they reach higher aggregate levels of education, as well as in those societies where education is more prevalent than others; as a consequence, our models need to incorporate the societal levels of education (or the other developmental correlates) which account, however imperfectly, for the variations in the apparent strength of the individual-level relationship.

Why has so little effort or progress been made in these further elaborations? There are several reasons, some of which are prosaic, but others are perhaps of fundamental importance if progress is to be made.

Among the key issues are the sheer computational and organisational problems in handling the analysis of significant numbers of large-scale surveys. Anyone who has undertaken comparative analysis using ten or more such surveys will acknowledge the difficulties involved in data handling, concerns about comparability (even if the questions are the same, their cultural significance may differ), and in digesting, distilling, and displaying the results in a manageable form. Add to this the issues of computational power and software availability, which were certainly major constraints in the 1980s, when most WFS comparative analysis was done. Multilevel analysis still requires the use of specialist software. Small wonder that most analysts are satisfied when they achieve these limited goals and do not go the extra mile to pool datasets across countries and then test explicitly, thoroughly, and carefully for 'global' parameters or to assemble relevant national or regional indicators for inclusion in multilevel models.

Yet I do not believe or accept that laziness or computational constraints lie at the heart of our lack of progress towards global models and consequent theoretical insights. Of much greater importance are the very limited range of determinants of fertility (or whatever other demographic process being considered) which have been included in the major comparative surveys to date and, relatedly, a lack of conceptual and theoretical clarity about what elements should receive priority for inclusion.

Moreover, we must never lose sight of the fact that no major comparative international survey operation has yet been undertaken with the primary purpose of understanding or explaining fertility behaviour. Rather, the funding and goals have been (quite properly given the main actors) to provide country specific information of policy and programmatic relevance; comparative analysis has been a secondary goal at best and an explicit theoretical orientation has been lacking (a possible partial exception is the series of value of children surveys, although the focus was too narrow to permit real progress towards global models).

As a result of these limitations and probably also because of the tastes of the demographers who played a significant part in the design and implementation of these surveys, far more effort has been invested in ever more detailed analysis of the minutiae of event history information and its interplays, with regular forays into the safe haven of the proximate determinants of fertility. Over time, the content of these surveys has moved towards ever greater complexity and detail on these elements and there has been very little progress at all in refining and improving the range and depth of 'background' variables (this very term is surely contemptuously dismissive of the importance of understanding the processes underlying the behaviour being described). Much though I have enjoyed contributing to the exploitation of the limited demographic information from such surveys over the past twenty years, the increasing attention to minute wrinkles of interplays between demographic event histories strikes me as an ultimately fairly barren occupation.

It is time for a broader stock-taking on how to make scientific progress in understanding fertility behaviour, beyond that which comes from collations of widely differing small-scale studies on different societies or from detailed society-specific accounts. Neither of these latter approaches holds out great hope for reaching general theoretical understanding, although the rich insights they appear to provide should be used to inform the more structured approach advocated here.

The time is ripe to learn from our experiences so far and to consider a wide-ranging international comparative effort, which would include a significant national survey component, with the explicit goal of enhancing our understanding of fertility behaviour. The difficulties in any such project are huge, not least reaching agreement on a common and wide-ranging set of constructs for the proximate real determinants of fertility and operationalizing their measurement. Any such study would have to gather information about societal and institutional constraints and set out to discover how these are perceived to impinge upon individual decision-making with regard to parenthood. Moreover, we would have to persuade funders to invest in this project, both by convincing them of its fundamental value and importance and of its likely ability to make progress. In the remainder of this paper I shall begin the process of sketching some of the design and content that might form a starting point for launching such an enterprise.

Design Issues

Improving our understanding of if, when, and why couples and individuals choose 'freely and responsibly' to become parents is of fundamental importance to progress in demography (for varying interpretations see Chesnais 1997, Cliquet 1991, Coleman 1996, Hobcraft 1996, Kiernan 1993, Lesthaeghe 1995, Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988, Simons 1999, and Van de Kaa 1987, 1994, and 1996). Implicit in this statement is an understanding that we are not just considering the process of having a birth, but recognise that there is an underlying prior decision process (perhaps too often involving lack of choice or access to the means of implementing choice, especially not to have a child) and that the decision is not just to have a birth, but to become a parent, which has long-term implications (see Hobcraft and Kiernan 1995).

It is by no means clear that we are going to make major progress towards enhancing our understanding of processes through single round retrospective surveys, although

more imaginative pathways through questionnaires for different risk groups and more imaginative questions might take us further than existing instruments. Clearly, more complex questionnaire structures are much easier to administer with computer-aided interviewing. Thus, for example, we would probably ask different questions of parents and the childless; but the structure of questions to the childless would probably be very different depending upon their context (for example age or partnership context); and we might well ask quite different questions for recent parents and for those who have not had a further child for some considerable time.

Moreover, there is a strong case for purposive structuring of the samples to ensure that the groups faced with choices are included. For example, a decision could be taken to exclude teenagers, since normative pressures and realised fertility mean that many teenage births do not result from choice and these rare cases, though important in many other ways, would simply muddy our attempts at understanding. Equally, a first comparative study of this type might only include those who are in a partnership, in order to concentrate resources on the context where most births take place, in order to keep the study focused. Thus, some clear decisions have to be made to set out to enhance understanding for more commonplace or normative behaviours, rather than trying to cover all contexts and lose focus. Of course, understanding departures from norms is also valuable, but there is a trade-off between depth of understanding and breadth of coverage. Further comparative studies to enhance our understanding of less normative contexts for becoming a parent, such as early or non-cohabitational childbearing, would be likely subsequent efforts if we gained a real return from a more focused comparative effort (some progress has been made with FFS data - see Beets and Dourleijn 1999, Kiernan 1999, and Klijzing and Macura 1997).

A further consideration in trying to improve our understanding of process may well be to adopt a design which involves a prospective element. The initial sample might be of a 'case-control' type, whereby a sample of new parents are matched with controls who are childless (though what the control factors should be needs further thought – age, partnership, employment, and housing contexts might feature, though that might preclude demonstration of the key importance of these factors in determining choice and age might suffice). Batteries of current and retrospective questions would be asked about circumstances and perceived context and choice elements for each group, but with a very clear and somewhat limited focus on proximate real determinants of fertility. These two groups would then be followed up annually for perhaps five years, providing rich information on perceptions, context, choice and decision-making from the new parents on subsequent pathways to second births and from the initially childless on pathways to deciding whether to become parents or remain childless. Such a design would provide good prospects of getting insights into some of the key elements of decisions about parenthood, though leaving out many more marginal contextual questions.

Any major undertaking of this type would require serious collaboration between researchers from varying disciplinary perspectives and would require much give and take. Each discipline tends to believe that it is only possible to obtain useful information from very complex and detailed batteries of questions – examples would include demographers always wanting full event histories or perhaps overemphasising the detail on the proximate determinants; economists insisting on the full battery of questions on income or assets; or psychologists wanting long inventories of questions

to get reliability. Inevitably, development of instruments which could retain a broad decision-making focus and were applicable cross-nationally, whilst retaining enough disciplinary respect (e.g. use of simpler proxy questions), would necessitate a great deal of careful pilot work, probably involving qualitative work with focus groups and small scale tests of field instruments.

One of the biggest problems of maintaining comparability across nations arises from the need to explore individual responses and perceptions to the institutional context of fertility choice. For example, what are the realities and perceptions of: contraceptive and abortion access; institutional supports for combining parenthood with employment; benefit, health, education, and employment structures and their long-run security? More specifically these national contexts include:

- structures of housing markets, for example the relative importance of private rental and of social housing and their context as acceptable forms of long-term housing with security for parenthood;
- the ease of access to housing;
- gender-related contexts, such as the division of domestic labour, parental leave entitlements, access to child-care, norms about combining employment and motherhood, labour market segmentation, access to part-time work, provision of school meals, compatibility of school days with employment hours, after-school care, etc.;
- and the complex range of state benefits and tax structures for parents, lone parents, smoothing unemployment etc.

But it is the interplays of individual choice and perception with these institutional supports and constraints which are of interest – how do these national contexts shape and structure decisions about parenthood? And how much more difficult is it to depart from normative contexts in different structures?

A further design issue is the range and number of contexts that could usefully be explored. Once again, a focus on enhancing understanding suggests that a comparative study of this type need not try to cover as many countries as possible. Rather, there may be considerable benefit from retaining a purposive focus and carefully selecting both contrasting and superficially similar countries in order to help elucidate the nature of choices involved. But the key goal of trying to elaborate a ‘global’ (or European or developed country) theory of the elements of a common decision-making process would need to be kept firmly in sight. Ensuring a spread of partnership stability and contexts for childbearing, of differing housing markets, of employment patterns and contexts, of gender structures, of state supports, and of levels of fertility would mean that a significant number of countries would have to be included in order to try to tease apart the relative importance of these factors, although it is also clear that they are sufficiently inter-linked to make a full cross-classified design by context unachievable.

The last design issue to be considered here may also be among the more controversial. Most social scientists ignore the possible part that genetics plays in our reproduction and yet it is inconceivable that genes and reproduction are not linked. In the context of our discussion of understanding the determinants of fertility there are two key points to make. Firstly, there is some evidence that, even in the highly controlled fertility environment of Denmark today, there is a clear genetic component to fertility behaviour. Secondly, and probably more importantly, there are grounds to suppose

that gene-environment interactions may play a significant part in determining fertility behaviour, although the evidence for this so far is less direct (Kohler *et al* 1999).

In order to explore these issues it would, at the current stage of knowledge about genetic markers, be necessary to design a study to include siblings (and quite likely twins) of the couple, making sample selection much more expensive and complex. Whilst such questions are undoubtedly important in understanding fertility behaviour, it would almost certainly be over-ambitious to attempt to incorporate such an element in a comparative study at this juncture, for both operational and political acceptability reasons. But if clearer evidence of significant genetic components of fertility behaviour is established and the prospects of identifying specific genes related to fertility behaviour improve, it might prove possible to incorporate collection of genetic material at some stage during a prospective study, subject to all of the usual and very important ethical caveats.

In the light of this discussion, the best prospects for a well-focused and productive comparative study aimed at understanding fertility behaviour would appear to come from the following key elements:

- A five year prospective study comprising a fairly large initial sample of new parents and of non-parents (not in process of a pregnancy), matched for age and possibly partnership context, with both samples being restricted to those in a coresidential partnership and to perhaps ages 20 to 39, and both partners being included in the study;
- Qualitative individual and focus group studies and objective aggregate institutional data collection to supplement the prospective survey;
- A focus on the likely real determinants of fertility which are proximate to perceptions, choices, and decisions about becoming a parent;
- A strong interdisciplinary perspective, with attention to education and training, employment, housing, gender, and partnership and an emphasis on structures, medium-term prospects, constraints, perceptions, and contexts;
- Close attention to both perceptions and real experiences of time and money costs of childcare and childrearing, of the domestic division of labour, of medium-term prospects for security of partnership, employment, housing, and state benefits, and of requirements for becoming a parent in all of these contexts;
- A clear orientation towards understanding fertility behaviour in the context of choices about becoming a parent (rather than simply having a birth) and explaining variation both within and between countries, with a careful attention to the choice of societal contexts in order to maximise explanatory leverage;
- The overarching goal of moving towards global models, where the search is heavily focused on finding similar responses to similar circumstances and contexts across a wide range of countries – this requires quite complex and carefully conceptualised models, incorporating a range of different determinants and a multilevel approach to include the societal and institutional contexts.

Some aspects of content

In this section the goal is to outline some key issues on the topics requiring attention and to make some tentative suggestions for progress, whilst cognisant of the considerable investment of time required to make such suggestions sufficiently concrete to implement a comparative study. In particular, I shall try to focus on the

benefits from contrasting recent parents with the (initially) childless and issues where comparative analysis might provide special insights. Moreover, the illustrations will often stress the interplay between context (normative, institutional, and structural) and individual perceptions, choices, and decisions.

Requirements and constraints

The first broad topic to consider comprises the issues related to requirements and constraints concerning choices about becoming a parent. What are the perceived relative importance of the various domains? For example, Malpas and Lambert (1993) in an ECE survey found that about half of the childless (aged both under and over 25) put 'stability of the couple's relationship' at the top of the list of factors that may influence the number of children, with availability of suitable accommodation and issues to do with the 'economic crisis' and unemployment being next most frequent as the most important.

This theme deserves further exploration, including attention to all criteria that are perceived as important criteria for becoming a parent and, more importantly, what different individuals in differing circumstances perceive to be the levels of these requirements. What partnership context is seen as appropriate for becoming a parent? Is there an ideal age range? What types of housing are deemed suitable, in terms of space, environment, and tenure? What is seen as an appropriate level of income and employment security? What are the perceptions about requirements for child-care and parenting inputs? What would be the anticipated gender requirements for becoming a parent, including the domestic division of labour and continuing employment, and how would parenting, employment, and leisure be combined? How far are there perceived conflicts between societal constraints and norms and the outcomes that would be preferred (e.g. full or part time employment of mothers)? What are the perceptions about medium-term security of employment, housing, partnership, and state benefits? Are there additional criteria of readiness for the timing of becoming a parent bound up with stages in careers or unwillingness to accept changes in lifestyle (foregone leisure or income, or burdens of responsibility)? All of these questions relate to much recent literature on the topics of fertility and yet we do not know many of the answers (see, among others, Bernhardt 1993, Drew *et al* 1998, Friedman *et al* 1999, Gerson 1985, Hobcraft 2000, Hochschild 1990, Julémont 1993, Kiernan 1992, Lamb 1987, Pinnelli 1995, and Presser 1995).

The ability to contrast new parents with the childless at the outset of the study would permit a number of interesting explorations about differences in reported perceptions and contrasts with reality of circumstances, and allow these to be related to decisions about becoming a parent.

For the new parents, it would be desirable to explore the issues surrounding their choice (or lack thereof) to become parents. How much did they want the pregnancy at the time (on a scale rather than a dichotomy)? How far do they perceive themselves as having met all or most of the requirements for parenthood? What happened in the last couple of years to make them choose parenthood now? Did attitudes or circumstances change? Did change involve resolution of partner differences in attitudes or desires? Did they overcome a major constraint in housing, employment, partnership, or likely security? Or was the shift to becoming a parent much more diffuse, involving very

little in the way of easily identifiable changes, but rather involving a more subtle drift towards 'readiness'?

The initially childless group would provide information on whether and when they thought they might become parents. In addition, those who did not wish to become a parent 'now' would be asked a series of questions about how far they saw themselves as having already met the differing requirements for becoming parents and about what they saw as the major personal constraints to parenthood that meant they would not want to become parents now. On the other hand, if they expressed readiness to become a parent at the time of the first interview, the questions about the extent to which they felt they had met the requirements would still be used, but perhaps followed up by similar questions on recent changes to those used for the new parents.

This detailed information would then be used to explore the differing contexts of choices about becoming a parent between countries. How far are the requirements and constraints the same across different societies? How much is their relative importance altered by the societal context? What is the extent of disagreement by gender and how does this vary by context? Are there consistent patterns of difference in requirements and constraints across countries by indicators of stratification (income, class, education, employment status, housing, etc.)?

Although the search for global models would undoubtedly prove challenging, there are some good reasons to believe that this type of study would yield some progress. Firstly, concentration on practical choice factors, decision processes, and requirements and constraints for becoming a parent make it much more likely that commonality between societal contexts will exist, although we expect that this very context would have to be built into global models. Secondly the attempt to cover a fairly full and interdisciplinary range of these factors should improve the prospects of common responses, though again set in their context. We would expect far less chance of global models emerging if more remote determinants of fertility, or more reified attitudinal, behavioural, or social science measures were used. It is the grounded nature of the enquiry which holds out hope of progress.

Prospective follow-up

A longitudinal study, which followed the two groups for perhaps five years would enable much greater insights into the underlying processes of choice about parenthood. This prospective study would further enhance the comparison of perceptions with changing circumstances and permit some exploration of apparent cognitive dissonance. We shall only sketch some of the elements here, because the approach would necessarily evolve in the light of the initial pilot, qualitative, and survey work.

For the initially childless, it would be possible to monitor changing perceptions and circumstances, and for many, the processes involved in becoming a parent. How far did the transition to parenthood involve meeting the requirements and constraints that they perceived as being important and unmet at the time of the start of the study? Does couple dissonance narrow as part of this process? What else changed? Consequentially, we would get information as to how far choice was made and the

extent to which it was rationally based upon the (hopefully) full range of criteria about requirements and constraints being met.

For the initially new parents, we would focus on how far the realities of parenthood matched their expectations in terms of parental leave, return to employment, means of child-care, parental division of domestic labour including child-rearing, costs of children. We could also monitor how uncertainty and change affected the extent to which they continued to meet their requirements for parenthood and thus assess the security elements of the framework proposed by Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995).

A further important focus would be on the transition to the second child. Monitoring their experiences with the first child, including the perceived problems, costs, and benefits, and their changing circumstances (partnership, housing, employment, access to child-care, etc.) would provide an important backcloth to understanding who makes the transition to having a second child. How far is this decision made under less imperfect information through experience of parenthood? What are their own perceptions of the choices and processes involved in having a second child? To what extent do they feel constrained to have a second child through their perceptions of the normative context (e.g. prejudice against only children) - in other words is there less choice exercised?

Contextual information

There are several contexts within which decisions about becoming a parent are taken, including state provision of benefits and tax structures, much relevant legislation, public or private provision of schooling and childcare, gender structures, normative constraints, and media shaping of ideas (see, for example, Avramov 1993, Blanchet and Ekert-Jaffé 1994, Ditch *et al* 1998, Folbre 1994, Gauthier 1996, Gauthier and Hatzius 1997, and Hantrais and Letablier 1996). In a comparative framework, these differences in context at the national level are likely to shape or mediate the individual choices about becoming a parent, although effects may be small.

In addition, the aggregation of individual behaviour, for instance whether to remain in full-time or part-time employment after becoming a mother, provides a context from which departures may be easier or more difficult, whilst in part also reflecting the structural contexts outlined previously.

Thus, some means has to be found to capture the relevant contexts in any attempt to formulate global models, undoubtedly using multilevel models (for highly relevant discussions of the micro-macro dimensions of such models see Blalock and Wilken 1979, and Coleman 1990).

Conclusion

In taking the opportunity provided by the Flagship Conference to reflect upon our meagre progress to date in moving forward our real understanding of fertility behaviour through cross-national comparative surveys and trying to suggest ways in which such endeavours might be more fruitful, I have undoubtedly failed to pay enough attention to or to give sufficient credit for the comparative analyses that have been done using FFS data. Several analyses have made creative use of the available

information and are contributing to our understanding of fertility behaviour (for example, Beets and Dourleijn 1999, Di Giulio *et al* 1999, Jensen 1997, Klijsing and Macura 1997, and many of the papers presented at this meeting). We must also remember that such analyses often have a long gestation period and many more can be expected to emerge over the next few years.

My goal was to try to lift discussion to a higher plane and reflect upon the longer-term returns from comparative analysis of international collaborative large-scale surveys on fertility. Most such surveys have been intended to be comparable, but due to the constraints of funding and an overemphasis on purely demographic description and accounting, have not had a major impact on enhancing our understanding of when and why couples and individuals choose to become parents and what factors are involved in their versions of what constitutes responsible parenthood. Analysis, though creative, has been constrained by the content of the surveys and has been secondary. A problem with all secondary analysis is that the data collection instruments were designed and implemented by others who had different agendas and the data are thus rarely likely to be ideal for the purpose of the secondary analyst. As a consequence, it is hardly surprising if the returns in enhancing our understanding of choices about becoming a parent have not progressed far enough to meet the highest expectations.

In sketching a design and some of the content for a possible comparative study of the factors that shape choices about parenthood, I have been all too conscious of the ambition involved and the inevitably tentative nature of the proposals. However, for real progress to be made in enhancing our understanding of choices about becoming a parent, there are several requirements that would have to be met.

A first is the need for a group of committed scholars to come together to organise and carry out a study of this type. This would have to be a consortium of investigators, probably with at least one from each country involved and probably from the major demographic centres in the developed world, representing a flexible mix of disciplinary skills and backgrounds. This team would have to find seed funding, hammer out agreed approaches and initiate pilot work including qualitative studies in each of the countries. There would need to be a strong commitment to both collecting and analysing the results by the same team, with considerable cross-national collaboration. Much time would have to be spent in reflecting upon conceptual and analytic approaches to be taken, especially in order to move towards an overarching goal of global models of decisions about becoming a parent. Very substantial funding would be required from national and international sources and fieldwork might well best be carried out by the private sector. The funding would have to be guaranteed for both data collection and a major programme of comparative analysis.

Despite the formidable problems in achieving all of this, it seemed worth 'flying a kite' in this forum to discover whether the proposed approach resonated with scholars and funders sufficiently for the idea to be taken forward. My own belief is that real progress requires us to be bolder than hitherto and that even if the most ambitious goals for moving towards global models did not ultimately prove successful, the returns in enhancing our understanding of choices about parenthood would be very substantial indeed. If successful, further progress could then be made in looking at non-normative parenting and other topics. But the time has come to step boldly away from inward looking, ever more detailed, studies of the timing of fertility and its

proximate determinants. Instead, we need to move decisively towards recognising that choices are to become parents, not simply to have a birth, and undertake a coordinated and determined effort to understand the decision processes involved, beginning in a grounded way and avoiding entrapment with over elaborate constructs, which are too remote from the actual considerations of becoming a parent.

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