

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

FERTILITY AND FAMILY PLANNING CONCERNS OF
THE POOR: A RE-EXAMINATION

BY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the general hypothesis that the poor have unique problems with family planning because their life situation or day-to-day lifestyle makes planning in general a meaningless activity. The assumption underlying this research is that planning for the future, essentially a middle-class phenomenon, tends to be lacking among poor persons. Consequently, the motivation to delay or prevent pregnancies by means of contraception is rejected as a meaningless, futile activity. The unique life situation of the poor eventually results in higher numbers of births for poor women than for other socio-economic groups.

The conceptual framework, loosely based on suggestions made by Chilman (1968, 1973), maintains that attitudes theoretically related to the life situation of the poor will have an effect on both family planning attitudes and behaviours. Five attitudinal scales based on research by Rainwater (1960, 1965) and others were utilized in order to operationalize the life situation concept: planning orientation, sex role attitude, attitude toward sex, locus of control, and conjugal role relationships. Attitudinal scales measuring concerns with family planning were selected to define attitudes toward family planning, and "actual births" provides a measure of family planning behaviour.

Ten specific hypotheses were generated to test the general hypothesis. They were designed to test each life situation attitudinal scale against family planning attitudes

and behaviours. Briefly, they were:

There will be a positive relationship between life situation (planning orientation, sex role attitude, attitude toward sex, locus of control, conjugal role relationships) and family planning concerns.

There will be a negative relationship between life situation and actual births.

Stated simply, the more favourable or liberal a person's attitude is toward the various life situation scales, the more likely she is to be concerned with family planning, and the less children she is likely to have. The more unfavourable or conservative a person's attitude toward the life situation scales, the less likely she is to be concerned with family planning, and the more children she is likely to have.

The study is a primary analysis of data collected in a survey conducted in the Winnipeg Health Sciences Women's Centre Outpatients Clinics. The research hypotheses dealing with family planning concerns were tested using Pearson's r correlations. Those hypotheses dealing with actual births were tested using first order partial correlations in order to control for the effect of age on births. The sample population was divided into two subsamples, poor and non-poor, in an attempt to demonstrate that the life situation variables would have a greater effect on the attitudes and behaviour of the poor.

The results show a statistically significant positive correlation between the life situation variables and family planning concerns. Differences between poor and non-poor subsamples were evident in all five tests of hypotheses, as

predicted.

Three of the five hypotheses testing the effect of life situation on actual births produced statistically significant negative correlations. Differences between poor and non-poor subsamples were not always evident.

The general hypothesis was accepted, with reservations. The conclusion arrived at was that poor persons are affected by their life situation in such a way that they tend to be unconcerned with family planning, and they experience slightly more births as a result. The study ends with generalizations and implications for further research.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

In the area of family planning, the poor¹ are frequently recognized as a group with special needs and problems. The difficulties which poor people tend to experience in delaying and preventing pregnancies are well documented in the family planning literature. These problems include high proportions of unwanted births and abortions, risks to health, and large numbers of teenage pregnancies. Many of the poor attempt to plan their families, but conflicting motivations often render this planning ineffective. The family planning attitudes of the poor generally indicate a lack of concern with the issues involved, even while practising birth control. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the poor are frequently characterized as ineffective family planners. For this reason, the study of family planning among the poor was selected as the subject of this sociological study.

The most promising framework for understanding the unique and problematic "family planning profile" of the

¹For the purpose of this thesis, "the poor" are defined in terms of the category outlined by the National Council of Welfare (1977) as the "non-working poor"; i.e., those respondents who identify themselves as currently receiving social assistance. That smaller segment of the population that is currently employed but reports an annual income of less than \$4,000.00, often termed the "working poor" (National Council of Welfare, 1975), is also included in this definition of the poor.

poor is the "life style" or life situation concept advanced by Chilman. Basically, the life situation approach contends that family planning is a practice not generally accepted by the poor as a solution to their problems. According to Chilman, planning for the future is primarily practiced by the middle class, and is largely irrelevant to persons in a situation of extreme poverty. This general lack of planning is mirrored in the specific lack of concern with family planning as a means of improving one's situation in life. As Chilman states:

The poverty situation itself tends to lead to inadequate family planning practices. As we have seen, early family formation and large family size are associated with such situational factors as low occupational status, low income, little education, discrimination, isolation in rural slums or urban ghettos, and inaccessibility of contraceptive services. Large family size is one of the outcomes of this total situation; in turn this outcome tends to reinforce the poverty situation. And this situation tends to produce life styles that foster attitudes and practices inimical to effective contraceptive behaviour.

These life styles tend to stand in the way of actively planning (as opposed to vaguely hoping) for a stable marriage, child-spacing, small family size and positive marriage, child-spacing, small family size and positive future goals for one's self and one's children. (Chilman, 1973: 176-177).

Thus, the context in which the poor attempt to plan their families appears to present obstacles to the effective prevention of unwanted pregnancies. The life situation concept would seem to be a useful framework for investigating the problems of family planning among the poor. The con-

tribution made by Chilman, however extends no further than her excellent suggestion of the life situation of the poor as an explanation for their difficulties with family planning. No research was carried out by Chilman on family planning and the poor. Consequently, the life situation concept was not applied in research.

Lee Rainwater attempted to provide an understanding of family planning difficulties of the poor by outlining the social context in which they operated. While his studies preceeded those of Chilman, they also suggested that an environment of poverty had an effect on the attitudes, concerns, and behaviour of individuals, (particularly with reference to family planning). By means of lengthy interviews with relatively small numbers of respondents, Rainwater uncovered a number of general factors which seem to inhibit effective practice of family planning. A "life history" approach to family design enabled Rainwater to make a number of generalizations about the family planning practices of the poor. For the most part, he found the poor lacked knowledge about sex and were often misinformed about contraceptives. In working families, the activities of men and women tend to be sharply separated, with women doing housework and raising children while men "support the family". Children often provide a source of status and gratification to poor couples.

Although Rainwater's findings seemed to be a reasonable report on the family planning concerns and behaviour of the poor, his methodological procedure limited

generalizations which might be made about the poor. Though his findings supported the independent suggestion of Chilman; i.e., that the life situation of the poor raised barriers to effective family planning, one would hesitate to state that all poor people are ineffective family planners. In addition, Rainwater's studies were published thirteen and eighteen years ago. Advances in contraceptive methods and changing attitudes and values may have altered the family planning profile of the poor in the meantime. Whether or not his findings apply to Canadian society also requires investigation.

In the research on family planning (c.f. Balakrishnan, et. al., 1975, Hill, et. al., 1959), the poor are usually treated as the lowest "rung" of the socio-economic ladder of upper, middle and lower classes. They are seldom isolated for study, in spite of the fact that each class has motivations and interests concerning family planning which are far different from those of other socio-economic groups.

Evidently, no real attempt has yet been made to empirically test the effect of the life situation of the poor on family planning. In this study an effort is made to apply the promising "life situation" approach suggested by Chilman, while at the same time avoiding the weaknesses of previous research.

This research strives to determine what effect, if any, the life situation of the poor has on family planning attitudes and behaviour. The life situation concept is measured by

five attitudinal scales theoretically related to family planning. Attitudes toward family planning, or family planning concerns, are also measured by attitudinal scales. A single item is employed to investigate family planning behaviour. In order to determine whether the family planning attitudes and behaviour of the poor are indeed unique, respondents were classified as either "poor" or "non-poor" according to the criterion previously set forth.

This study is expected to make several important contributions to sociological knowledge about family planning. As previously stated, this family planning research is one of few attempts to focus on the poor. This can be expected to have policy implications for those social agencies currently attempting to provide family planning services for the poor. The present study also appears to be the first to use the "life situation" approach to analyze the family planning attitudes and behaviour of the poor. Canadian data is also generated by this study. This will hopefully add to the information available on family planning in Canada. By concentrating on attitudes toward family planning as well as actual behaviour, an attempt has been made to investigate the underlying reasons for the unique "family planning profile" of the poor.

Thus, by investigating the affect of the life situation of the poor on family planning attitudes and behaviours in a Canadian setting, the study endeavours to contribute to existing knowledge in the sociology of family

planning.

Organization of Thesis

The remainder of the thesis is organized in the following manner. The existing research literature in the area of family planning and the poor is outlined and evaluated in Chapter II. The emergence of the "life situation" as a relatively new concept utilized to predict both a lack of concern with family planning and higher parity among the poor is outlined.

In Chapter III, the methods by which scales were developed to measure the independent and dependent variables are presented. The operationalization of the life situation concept and family planning concerns is discussed. The research hypotheses developed through examination of the inadequacies of existing research outlined, and the methods of data manipulation and statistical analysis are set forth.

The fourth chapter deals with the results of the study. The correlations between independent and dependent variables are presented and discussed in light of the research hypotheses.

Chapter V consists of a summary and discussion of the results. Shortcomings apparent in the results are also discussed. The relative "success" of this research in meeting the original objectives is also dealt with. The implications of this study in terms of the field of family planning and of future research in the area are also presented.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The following review critically evaluates the existing research dealing with family planning among the poor. The manner in which family planning and related activities differs between the poor and other socio-economic groups is set forth in the overview. Fertility patterns, family size (ideal, desired, expected, and actual), and use of contraceptives are discussed as examples of the unique "family planning profile" of the poor.

Explanations for these social class differences include the "life situation" of the poor and various aspects of the irrelevance of planning for an uncertain future. These aspects include: lack of planning orientation, locus of control, conjugal role relationships, sex role attitudes, and attitude toward sex. The differences between the poor and other socio-economic groups, in terms of these life situation dimensions, are useful in predicting class differentials in family planning concerns. The unique "life situation" of the poor is expected to result in a failure to consider the planning of one's family as a viable course of action.

With the exception of the work by Rainwater, Chilman,

and a few others, most family planning studies do not isolate the poor as the object of study; rather, broad social classes are analysed for differences in attitudes and behaviour. For the purpose of this review, however, discussion of research findings will be limited to those findings dealing (with the poor socio-economic group). Emphasis will be placed on Canadian data when it is available.

Family Planning and the Poor: An Overview

Fertility Differentials:

One of the factors most commonly associated with differentials in fertility is socio-economic status. According to Wrong:

The higher fertility of the lower classes has been observed so often in so many different countries that the existence of a negative correlation between fertility and class or socio-economic status has virtually acquired the force of a socio-demographic law (Wrong, 1967: 71).

The population of the United States as a whole is currently undergoing a general decline in fertility (Sweet, 1974). Despite the fact that the difference in reproduction rates between the upper, middle and lower classes is beginning to narrow, the poorest segment of the population is still unique in terms of several fertility variables which serve to accentuate the differences between their fertility patterns and those of the rest of the population. The poor tend to marry at an earlier age and to be younger at the birth of the first child than other socio-economic groups (Schorr, 1966: 173).

In addition, "large family size, children born more closely together, and a greater span of years of childbearing are behaviours more likely to occur for low-income families" (Schorr, 1966: 173).

As Canadian research indicates, fertility in Canada has been steadily declining for the past twenty years (Balakrishnan, et. al., 1975). In addition, a slight inverse relationship has been demonstrated between socio-economic indicators and both age at marriage and the time between marriage and the first birth in the Balakrishnan et. al. Metropolitan Toronto Study (1975). Henripin (1972) reports that, on the whole, Canadian fertility decreases as family income increases. According to Berg and Jackson: "Generally, studies have shown that people with higher occupations or professions have lower rates of reproduction than those lower on the occupation scale" (1975: 41). However, Balakrishnan et. al. (1975) did not find any significant variation between socio-economic status and the spacing of births. This may be due to the use of very broad socio-economic categories, which could tend to blur the type of results found when the poorest segment of the population is isolated for study (as in Rainwater's 1960 and 1965 studies, for instance).

Reproductive Ideals, Desired and Expected Family Sizes

A. Reproductive Ideals

It has been suggested that the poor may also differ

from the non-poor in terms of what they feel is the ideal number of children for families to have.

Early in life, a normative range of family size is internalized. Class, ethnic and religious membership all have some influences on family size values (Westoff and Potvin, 1966). In analyses of national surveys on public opinion, Blake (1966, 1967) determined that the two to four child family has encompassed the ideals of 80-90% of men and women since the 1930's. The average ideal in the 1960 survey was 3.6 children. The ideal number of children reported in the Canadian study by Balakrishnan et. al. (1975) also ranged from two to four, with three children being held as the most popular ideal family size.

Methodological problems with ideal family size have been raised by Ryder and Westoff (1971) and Blake (1967), particularly the possibility that respondents may not be answering from the same frames of reference. Since most Americans see themselves as "average", Blake considers that their answers generally refer to their notion of the average number of children under normal conditions, rather than ideal conditions (Blake, 1967). Consequently, differences between poor and non-poor groups in terms of ideal numbers of children should be expected only to the extent that the two groups have differentially internalized the norms.

B. Desired Family Size

The desired number of children, or the number wanted

at the time of interview as opposed to ideal family size, is considered to be a more realistic measure of family size preference. In the 1960 Growth of American Families Study by Whelpton, et. al., (1966) and the 1965 National Fertility Study by Ryder and Westoff, (1971), the survey results indicated that the desired family size was either insignificantly related to socio-economic status, or that there existed a positive relationship between social status and the number of children desired. These survey results seemed to raise doubts about the common assertion that low socio-economic couples want more children than the rest of society (Harkavy, et. al., 1969).

C. Expected Family Size

According to Blake (1966), the number of children a woman expects to have by the time she has reached menopause is a relatively good predictor of actual family size. If most couples have an expected family size of three children, the average family size in the country will likely be three children.

The poor are frequently characterized as reporting an expected family size which is greater than their desired family size. This means that they probably give birth to more children than they would actually prefer to have. Since there is an obvious difference between expected and desired family size, poor families are experiencing unwanted children. In both the Growth of American Families Study (Whelpton et. al.,

1966) and the National Fertility Study (Ryder and Westoff, 1971), "expected" exceeded "desired" family size in all socioeconomic classes. In contrast, the Balakrishnan et. al. (1975) study found that the total number of children expected was lower than both the ideal and desired family size and was not related to income.

D. Actual Family Size

Most studies include information on parity, which is the number of children to whom a woman has ever given birth. This includes children who have died, been given up for adoption, or are living away from home. Parity is of use in gaining descriptive information about the sample, when compared with the other three family size variables mentioned above. For example, if parity exceeded the number of children a woman desired, this would provide a measure of unwanted births. Similarly, if expected family size is greater than parity, one could predict that the respondent is planning for more births. This approach was used successfully by Bumpass and Westoff (1970) in their study of family planning among older women.

Parity is also useful in differentiating between socioeconomic groups. The poor have generally been portrayed as having larger numbers of children than the non-poor (Westhoff et. al., 1961; Whelpton et. al., 1966).

On the basis of these findings, we would expect the poor segment of our sample to have family size desires similar