Family, Friends Help Shape Childbearing Choices

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(May 2014) Worldwide, childbearing decisions may be more of a group effort than we realized.

Contact with family, friends, and acquaintances influences when couples become first-time parents and their ideal family size. These social interactions "regulate the speed of behavioral change" in a society by either moderating or accelerating the spread of new family patterns, such as the acceptability of having fewer children, adoption, delayed childbearing, or childlessness by choice, reports Laura Bernardi, a demographer at the University of Lausanne, in Switzerland, and deputy director of a Swiss national research center in the social sciences.

In both high- and low-fertility countries, "individuals observe the behavior of others around them, form their intentions in relation to significant others, and discuss their ideas about parenthood and childbearing with friends and relatives," she explains.

In a recent article focusing on post-industrial western countries, she surveys the growing field of social network research in demography, chronicling how researchers are examining the power of these interpersonal dynamics to explain changes in childbearing and other family patterns.[1]

Some examples:

- Studies find that women are more likely to have a baby if someone in their social circle (including work colleagues) has an infant or young child.[2]
- The daughters of women with strong desires for numerous grandchildren tend to marry rather than cohabitate.[3] And U.S. adolescents with strong ties to their parents and community social networks are less likely to give birth outside of marriage.[4]
- Couples with higher levels of social support have a second or additional child earlier than those who do not.[5]
- In Italy, social pressure to have children is strong and discussion of the benefits of voluntary childlessness is extremely limited. Couples who are childless by choice hide their decision, pretending to have health or job problems.[6]

Analyzing How the Ties Bind

Researchers have identified four different, though at times overlapping, categories of social interaction—social learning, social pressure, social support, and social contagion.

Social learning takes place through direct observation or conversation. "For example, a couple learns how life changes with a baby by watching and talking with family members, friends, and co-workers," Bernardi says. "It's a way of acquiring information on the consequences of a given action."

Social pressure is the way family and friends affect preferences. It can be an explicit sanction, "such as a parent saying 'I will not support you if you have a child out of marriage,' " she says. But the pressure also can be more subtle, rooted in the desire to please, comply, avoid conflict, or fit in. "For example, you might see that your parents are growing older, know that they want to become grandparents, and not want to disappoint them. Or, all your friends are having children and you are slowly being left behind, feeling out of step with your social group."

Social support describes the material or psychological resources new parents can mobilize from friends and family. It includes child care, emotional encouragement, and in some cases financial assistance. In Bulgaria, social support includes housing in the grandparents' home until the young couple can afford their own place, she notes.

Social contagion explains the way a behavior "catches on" among friends and family. Researchers have observed that the timing of childbearing within social networks tends to occur in sequence—one after another—within a several year time frame, reports Bernardi.

Contagion includes a distinct emotional reaction, but also involves the synergy of both social learning and social pressure. Bernardi describes interviews she conducted with young women in Italy who experienced strong emotions while holding small babies. "They consistently talked about the moment things clicked for them and they soon stopped using contraception to try for a baby." Nothing else changed in their lives to make the time right to have a first child; the women explained their decisions based solely on the feelings the baby triggered, she says.

Densely or Loosely Knit Networks

These social mechanisms function similarly in high- and low-fertility settings, although the structure and the composition of the social networks differ, according to Bernardi. In low-fertility settings, such as Switzerland, social networks are more segregated by age, and young people have less exposure to babies and children, limiting the opportunities for social learning and social contagion. In high-fertility settings, such as Kenya, where Bernardi studied health programs, babies are more visible in public settings, networks are more kin-based, and social contact among generations is more common, amplifying the role of social learning and social contagion.

New information (including technical innovations) tends to spread more quickly among sparse networks made up of weak ties among more heterogeneous individuals; voluntary childlessness and delayed childbearing follow this pattern. Social pressure is a powerful force blocking change within homogenous groups of people who know each other well and share similar attitudes—but once "new behaviors reach a critical mass, they spread rapidly," she explains.

An understanding of the interplay of these dynamics can improve reproductive health programs, policymaking, and population projections. For example, the motives of a government health clinic located outside a community may be suspect, but trained "local ambassadors" can much more effectively promote a behavior change—such as new forms of contraception—within their social network and among their peers, whether in rural Kenya or urban high schools in London.

Social networks may serve to multiply the impact of policy changes. In European countries where men are more involved in child care and childrearing (such as Sweden), couples have slightly more children than in countries where fathers' roles are more limited (such as Italy), Bernardi reports. In order to increase fertility, some European countries are considering paternity leave laws to spur more father involvement in child care. Particularly in densely knit societies, fathers may be initially slow to use the new leave time because of the high degree of social pressure to conform to existing gender roles; yet, once a growing number of men embedded in dense, homogenous social networks begin to take leave, it will catch on quickly, spread by social mechanisms, she says.

Population projections can be made more accurate by taking into account the role of social networks in multiplying change. Bernardi was part of a team that took social mechanisms into account to create a simulation of the distribution of fertility by age. Their model predicted the actual fertility observed in Austria between 1984 and 2004 much more accurately than a traditional model (a classic fertility behavioral model without social networks effects).[7]

Until recently, it was hard to quantify the impact of social mechanisms on demographic change because few surveys included information on social interaction. "Just because you can't see something, doesn't mean it doesn't exist," Bernardi says. Now quantitative surveys are increasingly adding questions about individuals' social ties, and the structure and composition of their social networks. In her view, this is crucial to improving our understanding of social processes.

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