Orals Reading list: Fertility

In this field I aim to touch upon elements from throughout the broad spectrum of fertility literature in demography—from the classic works propounding the ‘Grand Theory’ of Demographic Transition and fertility decline to the more recent, micro-level, region-specific and technical literature—all aiming to answer different aspects of the over-arching question, ‘what determines the levels and trends of both aggregate and individual fertility?’ My specific interests in very low fertility, in cross-disciplinary explanations for fertility levels and trends, and in fertility change in Latin America are reflected in the choice of readings. The final section contains key pieces from the large literature on fertility measurement and the cohort/period problem, a topic of both philosophical and practical importance.

(** Denotes concentration piece)

1. The proximate determinants of fertility

Davis and Blake identified a set of ‘intermediate fertility variables’, through which and only through which socio-cultural influences can shape fertility levels. Bongaarts’ more recent ‘proximate determinants’ model used a similar principle to allow decomposition of the magnitude of these effects on individual fertility, focusing on the immediate biological mechanisms. The main value of both of these pieces is in stating the obvious in a formalized, organized way—analyzing complex reality into an ordered and exhaustive list of elements whose individual importance can then be examined.


2. ‘Natural’ fertility versus parity-specific control

Henry’s original conception of ‘natural fertility’ (frustrating though the terminology may be), shaped and continues to shape subsequent investigations into the routes to fertility decline—that is, the way in which the age distribution of childbearing changes as overall aggregate fertility falls. In particular, Coale and Trussell used the concept to construct model fertility schedules for use where fertility data were scarce. The concept of ‘parity-specific control’ has become a central tenet of theorizing on fertility decline and in particular has been used a proxy for identifying the onset of fertility transition.
3. Classical Demographic Transition theory and critiques

Notestein’s was amongst the first articulations of the theory of Demographic Transition, using functionalist arguments about the displacement of traditional functions of the family by other institutions over the course of industrialization and urbanization to paint a picture of an apparently universal element of the process of modernization: the transition from high fertility and mortality to low fertility and mortality. Subsequent theorizing and empirical analysis revealed a far more complex picture, raising questions about the universality and inevitability of this superficially simple process. This section includes both the classical statements of the theory and later attempts to question or re-formulate it, in terms of both observed patterns and their underlying causes.


4. Theorizing fertility decline—both generally, and with particular reference to Latin America

Following on the previous section, these papers examine the variety of explanations offered for fertility decline within the context of demographic transition. The importance of social interaction and the diffusion of ideas is discussed by Bongaarts and Watkins, while Cleland and Wilson contend that changing attitudes to deliberate fertility limitation have been more important than economic changes in the demand for children for driving fertility declines. The applicability of these ideas to the case of Latin
**America is examined by Bravo. Rodríguez asks of the Latin American countries some of the questions that have frequently been asked with regard to European countries about the component elements of fertility decline.**


**5. Fertility intentions**

Both academic and family planning program-based writing on fertility is replete with references to ‘unmet need’, ‘unwanted fertility’, ‘intended family size’, and other terms ascribing stable, rational intentionality to women (and/or couples) in planning their use or non-use of contraception and the timing and numbers of children they bear. This section explores the debates surrounding the accuracy of such terms and the assumptions underlying them, as well as the ways in which stated fertility intentions have been or can be used to predict outcomes. Pritchett uses notions of wanted fertility to produce a provocative argument that actual fertility is a direct consequence fertility desires, which are independent of costs of limiting fertility.


6. Explaining very low fertility—why it's so low, and why it's not lower

The long-term maintenance of below-replacement period TFRs in many European countries (many of them with levels now termed ‘lowest-low’, i.e. 1.3 or under) has prompted investigation of the phenomenon from several angles, in attempts to understand why it has fallen so low in these places, what the prospects are for future change in either direction, and what the likelihood is of other countries following suit. This section includes consideration of the social changes underlying the emergence of low fertility, as well as attempts to unite biological and sociological explanations of non-zero fertility.


7. Measuring fertility

The period total fertility rate has become by far the most commonly-used index of aggregate fertility, but the pieces in this section are representative of a large body of literature which recognizes that the TFR has shortcomings, (at least when used and interpreted in the ways that it often is). Such shortcomings, articulated earlier by Hajnal and famously by Ryder, are in Ní Bhrolcháin’s view an artifact of the frequent misuse and misinterpretation of the TFR, but she argues that a period perspective on fertility remains the only logical approach. Bongaarts and Feeney propose a method of adjusting the TFR to separate out period quantum from changes in tempo.
