

MODERN DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES AND THE FAMILY

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Keywords: demographic changes, nuclear family, mortality, migration

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1. Family and the demographic approach

Nowadays, asking most laymen what they mean by “family”, produces similar answers all referring to some preconceived model that embodies into a nucleus a parent couple and their children. This image of a perennial institution that would remain unchanged through history flashes spontaneously with the solid conviction of obviousness. And this, despite what can be daily observed in our present society: an emerging diversity of family forms. That a basic type of family succeeded in crossing the centennial stream of humanity, has, however, never prevented this model to fluctuate or to coexist with other family designs. Because of these variations, now perceived as detrimental to social life, people suddenly realize the importance of family, showing concern about what appears to be a loss of institutional support. As always, however, they grant more relevance to shifting forms than to meanings, forgetting that beyond its evolving role and structure, family is a flexible way of ordering social relationships.

As Claude Levy-Strauss once remarked, “there could be no society without families, but there would be no families if there were not already society”. It is true that the two institutions are so interdependent that one could not exist without the other, while it remains impossible to specify which of the two foreruns. Family is such a basic institution of human society that it seems unthinkable to conceive it in isolation. It is seen as the smallest supporting cell of society. Still, there is no satisfactory definition of the family that would once and for all ascertain Levy-Strauss remark. What is used for instance in the analysis of census data is the concept of household. This socio-economic unit assigned to residence and consisting “of a group of individuals who live together,..who share living quarters and their principal meals” denotes the difficulty of defining without ambiguity the “family” for statistical purposes.

The term “family”, from a demographic point of view, rather refers to “relationships which pertain to or arise from marriage, reproduction or adoption, all of which... regulated by law or custom” This definition is further qualified by the “nuclear family” involving a couple and their children, if any and by the “extended family”, the unit that contains interrelated nuclear families. These definitions are just telling at face value what should be consented as a family. While the “household” is an operational concept

for enumeration, the “family”, as a network of intra- and inter-relationships endowed with moral values, eludes statistics. Demography which studies population on the basis of the individual vital events, provides only limited tools to deal with a concept that is obviously multidimensional, meaning that this concept cannot be exclusively defined by a set of characteristics rather than by another. Moreover, most of these characteristics evolve or acquire new interpretations in no time, altering the form family takes and preventing its unequivocal determination.

Most population events can, however, be understood through demography, as the whole demographic process involves four basic elements, all contributing to the formation and dissolution of the family : nuptiality, fertility, mortality, and migration, as the dynamics of population spatial distribution. All these factors are actually constituent of the family. This is the reason why formal demographers, tend to consider this body as a reduction of the whole population and study its structure as well as family-related events. Therefore, proceeding from a definition of the family that implies its beginning with a legal first marriage, while remaining heavily dependent on current availability of data about single persons, they envisaged to describe the family by retracing its constitution and its evolution from birth to death as a sequence of parenthood stages composing a family life-cycle.

The life cycle concept, as initially conceived by Glick, considers the life course of a nuclear family, dividing it in seven phases, from the union to its dissolution by the death of both spouses.

These seven key events were indexed by the mean age:

- i first marriage
- ii birth of first child
- iii birth of last child
- iv marriage of first child
- v marriage of last child
- vi death of one spouse
- vii death of remaining spouse

Structure and timing are crucial. A sequence of life events determines both states and duration between their occurrence, eventually uncovering a rhythm of growth. For instance the time span between the first and the second birth is indicative of how the family grows, either according to conventions or erratically. It may call for explanation, being as well explanatory of regularities or changes in timing between two events. Because of the individualistic constraints of the demographic approach, members of the couple are considered separately, emphasizing for obvious reasons the role of woman, so that family itself is not really tackled, but reconstituted.

The difficulty of collecting accurate biographical data on the persons simultaneously involved in a vital happening, whether formation of the couple or sequence of live-born children, brings on serious problems of measurement. To which of the spouse, for instance, does “first marriage” refer ? If the term is strictly interpreted and involves both partners, what about the numerous combinations of first marriage and remarriages that

are not then taken into account? Homogeneity that would allow a fair measurement is only obtained at the expense of a limitation. Family becomes restricted to a norm, the legitimate stable first marriage of both partners. But even in this case, the complete history of a stable nuclear family, involving at least women with complete fertility, and retracing therefore the sequence of births up to the last child, has further drawbacks in term of time-lag, because of the age of the couples that can be considered.

Besides, dissolution of a marriage occurs not only by death, but also by divorce and legal separation. Remarriages may then occur and more than once. Moreover, vital events are not mutually independent. The age at first marriage, for instance, is likely to have some incidence on the stability of the union. Couples become statistically untraceable. The family life course develops into intricacy that defies quantitative description. As for explanation, this is not to be found in the shape of the pathways, even if more recently, the life course has been more accurately investigated through the adjunction of other variables whose correlated influence may help identify evolving patterns or propose some model of family formation, reproduction or dissolution.

The main problem, however, is probably the multiplicity of forms family displays, whereas formal demography has to linger with stable first marital union. More recently, it resolved to rely on small samples to gather biographical data for cohorts, in order to depict and comprehend the life course. It remains that family life cycle is only a partial view on family. “The family as an aggregate has non-demographic properties which strongly influence the occurrence of demographic events to its individual members, e.g., the place of residence, the kind of housing, the family income, the aggregate participation in the labor force.”

Family is highly depending on social backgrounds, shapes and values. The major problem of its definition is of deciding under which of its aspects family should be tackled. Determinants of the family and any attempt to describe or explain a structural unit that reproduces most features of the whole society, must eventually resort to an interdisciplinary approach. Partial definitions may be given through biology, demography, anthropology, sociology, economy, Law, or psychology, resulting in facets that reflect only a particular exposure of the institution, according to its functional diversity. Nevertheless, defining family as an organized body, remains of the highest significance insofar as the main open question is still “What is a family?”.

Backbone of the society, family must be seen as a system, an open system very sensitive to change. That a demographic approach provides only a partial picture does not mean that demographic factors have no or little incidences on the formation, dissolution or shape of the family. They should, however, be seen alternately either as resulting from family switches, or as a determinant of alterations family undergoes. More often, demographic events are only indicators of dynamic forces that subdue this social unit. This opens the door to a host of family models all over the world, with slight or major difference. A specific pattern only could, however, universally be referred to and tends to become global in theory: the western type of family, the nuclear family. To avoid getting lost into the jungle of details, this will be the basic reference of this study.

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