

Researcher

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Declining Fertility, Social Networks, and Culture

Increasingly, we live in a world made up of smaller families. While research has delved into many of the socio-economic and demographic consequences of falling fertility rates, relatively little is known about its implications on the structures and meanings of relationships in which people are embedded. Using regression analysis and Exponential Random Graph Models, I investigate if individuals with fewer siblings, experience, negotiate, and construct meanings of relationships differently from those with larger families. In addition, I explore if they tend to occupy distinctive network structural positions.

Countries where the research will take place

Cross-national

How does the research describe the impact of population/reproductive health on poverty reduction and/or economic growth?

I address three main questions concerning declining fertility and social networks. Are people with fewer siblings embedded in distinctive network positions that facilitate or constrain their access to formal and informal social support? Do they experience and negotiate relationships distinctively; does sibling size (sibsize) affect the meanings individuals attribute to their various relationships? Then, I analyze the cultural, social, and economic implications to the extent that individuals with fewer siblings tend to occupy network positions that affect their access to social capital and institutional support; it will also affect their socioeconomic position. Similarly, if sibsize shapes an individual's understanding of and engagement in his or her various relationships, it will influence his or her access to informal social support. At the aggregate level, such contingency of meaning has the capacity to modify, reinforce, or challenge existing cultural frames around which relational experiences are organized.

How will the research address a policy need, and what kind of policy lesson is expected?

This research will address the complex and intersecting relationships between networks, culture, and socioeconomic capital. In particular, it will highlight the importance of expanding our understanding to include very local factors, such as sibsize, that complicate these relationships. The results from this study are relevant to policy in a number of ways. In the context of smaller families worldwide, this research has implications for familial caregiving, state-sponsored institutional support to compensate for smaller informal safety nets (especially for disadvantaged groups), greater

parental burden for an aging population, and changing cultural norms about relationships.

Methods used

I use two primary methodologies to analyze the relationship between sibsize and networks. I use binary logistic regression on a cross-national data set (composed of 28 countries) to assess patterns in network composition. Regression analysis is suitable in this survey data set because the observations can reasonably be assumed to be independent of one another. Second, I use a novel network simulation-based methodology, Exponential Random Graph Modeling, to construct a second data set of complete network data where each node is connected to multiple other nodes. These models are useful when observations are not independent of each other. The basic principle underlying this modeling strategy is to speculate upon the emergence of certain global properties of the network, such as core-periphery structure, from the concatenation of localized properties such as triangulation. Based on expectations about such local configurations, a model is specified with the aim of reproducing the global properties of the network using hundreds of thousands of simulations.

Data used

I will use two data sets to analyze these relationships. First, I employ the International Social Survey Programme's (ISSP) "Social Relations and Social Support" (Social Networks II) data component collected in 28 countries from 2000 to 2002. Samples were drawn using either simple random representative or stratified multistage techniques. I also analyze the social network component of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) data set. Add Health is a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of adolescents in grades seven to 12 in the United States during the 1994-to-1995 school year.

Research results

So far, I have discovered that individuals with zero to two siblings are considerably less likely than those with more siblings to draw support from their other siblings. They are considerably more likely to feel more entitled to seek support from their parents, and in some cases their nonkin ties such as friends and neighbors. These findings have implications for parental burden of caregiving at older ages, durability of networks, and access to social support over the lifespan, and variability in the meanings of close ties.

Research products

These results have been presented at several research conferences including the American Sociological Association Annual Meetings (2010, 2009); Eastern Sociological Society Annual Meeting (2009); Social Science History Association Annual Meeting (2010); and the Sunbelt Social Networks Conference (2010).

Notes

At least one research paper based on this study is currently under review at a sociology journal.