1952

Negro-White Differential Marital Fertility

Milton A. Lawson

Philander Smith College

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.uark.edu/jaas

Part of the African American Studies Commons, and the Human Ecology Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.uark.edu/jaas/vol5/iss1/29

This article is available for use under the Creative Commons license: Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-ND 4.0). Users are able to read, download, copy, print, distribute, search, link to the full texts of these articles, or use them for any other lawful purpose, without asking prior permission from the publisher or the author.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Arkansas Academy of Science by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact scholar@uark.edu, ccmiddle@uark.edu.
NEGRO-WHITE DIFFERENTIAL MATRITAL FERTILITY

MILTON A. LAWSON

Philander Smith College, Little Rock

There is a large body of data relating to racial differential fertility. In this paper the attempt is to bring together some of the more significant studies and findings and raise some questions and suggest some areas and problems of needed research.

One of the functional prerequisites for the survival of any cultural group or society is a positive net reproduction rate. In the American social system reproduction is expected to take place within the legal framework of marriage.

It is common knowledge that our rate of reproduction has been declining for the past one half century or more. This holds true for all racial and social groups. Part of the traditional stereotype is that the Negro reproduces at a higher rate than do native whites. The facts when subjected to rigorous analysis do not support the stereotype. The available data are limited and the conclusions cannot be accepted as absolute and final. Data on socio-economic groups studied. Virtually the opposite is found if the comparison is put on the basis of more refined indices of fertility. In an analysis of the National Health Survey material, Kiser reports that

The crude birth rates tended to be higher among colored than white wives, the opposite situation tended to prevail when the analysis was restricted to married women of child-bearing age.... In the combined data for all urban areas included in the Survey, the stand-
ardized rate in 1935 per 1000 women of child bearing age was 96 among native white wives and 86 among the colored.\(^1\)

With moderate corrections for under-enumeration the rate for colored wives was lower than those for native white wives. Part of the explanation is the undue high proportion of childless marriages in the Negro group. Notestein,\(^2\) in an analysis of 1930 census material for the East North Central States, reported the high incidence of childlessness among urban married Negroes. His data related to the average number of resident children under 10 years of age per marriage of 5-9 years duration, classified by nativity and color of head, by type of community and value of the home. In all types of communities, except rural farm, the fertility levels of Negro marriages fell below those for whites. When the comparisons were made on the basis of number of children under 10 per mother married 5-9 years, however, the Negro fertility indices were consistently higher in each type of community. This reversal was due to the large percentage of childlessness among urban Negro marriages. In the combined urban areas of the East North Central States, the proportion of childless marriages was 45 per cent among Negroes, 23 per cent among native whites, and 18 per cent among foreign-born whites.

It seems that there are certain biases in the Notestein study that should be taken into consideration. The study was based on the number of children born and under 10 in residence. This would eliminate all children who had died before the age of 10 or who were not living in household. Also the data related to unbroken marriages in which (1) neither the husband nor wife had been married more than once, (2) the wife was the home maker, (3) the husband was under 61 and the wife under 51 years of age, and (4) the wife had contracted her marriage between the ages of 15 and 40.

Kiser analyzing family surveys of whites in Columbus, Ohio, and Syracuse, New York, and Negroes in selected sections of the Harlem, New York City area found similar results. About 55 percent of the Harlem wives reported no children. \(^3\) "A side analysis confined to 139 native Negro wives of all classes 40 years of age and over and indicated that approximately 44 per cent of such virtually complete families in Harlem were fruitless (confined to marriages which remained unbroken and were spent in Northern cities during the fertile years of married life). Comparable percentages for 228 wives of skilled workers in Columbus and for 305 in Syracuse were 18 and 22 respectively.

The high proportion of childlessness would lead one to believe that the Northern urban Negro wife practices contraception quite effectively. There are not too many available data on the practice of contraception and the effectiveness of such practices, but what there are do not seem to support such a point of view. Pearl reports, in a study on fertility and contraception in New York, and Chicago that "attempted contraception was less frequent and less effective among Negroes than among whites in the samples from both cities".\(^4\) Pearl in a different study of urban areas found that about 35.8 per cent of the white women and 15.4 per cent of the Negro women in his sample had practiced some form of interference with conception.\(^5\) Pearl's finding would indicate that about 64 per cent of the white wives and 84 per cent of the Negro wives did not practice contraception. The conditions under which the information was collected reduced the area of falsification to a minimum. Pearl's second study takes into consideration only those women delivering in hospitals during the period of the study, but the findings do tend to shed some light on the extent of contraceptive practices.

\(^1\)Kiser, C. V., Group Differences in Urban Fertility, the William and Brown Co., Baltimore, P. 30.


NEGRO-WHITE DIFFERENTIAL MARITAL FERTILITY

Using the leads and hypothesis of Notestein and Pearl, Beebe made a study of differential fertility of coal miners in West Virginia. This study included 539 married women of reproductive ages, 30 per cent Negro, 70 per cent white. Each woman was offered contraceptive aid. Beebe reports:

The inference seems justified that the Negroes as a group have an involuntary basis for their lower fertility. ... Among the Negro non-contraceptors the percentage reporting no live births is 31 and significantly above the percentage of 18 for whites. Rates based upon fertile women reduced the differential between 17 and 20 to one between 22 and 31, the latter also being well outside the change range. In other words, while Negroes exhibit a markedly higher childlessness this fact alone by no means accounts for the lower fertility in the present sample.6

The Beebe study seems to confirm previous data on the high proportion of childlessness in Negro marriages. He also reports that fertile Negro marriages are less fertile than the white. This seems to be a contradiction to the Notestein finding in his 1930 census data. All of the data still support the contention that the Negro has a lower marital fertility rate, but the hypothesis of more effective practice of contraception is not supported by the available data. One hypothesis sometimes stated is that the difficulties of adjustment inherent in the recent migration of Negroes to urban areas tend to reduce birth rates. Kiser, in an analysis of approximately 2,300 Negro families in selected areas of Harlem sections of New York City, reports findings that fail to support such a hypothesis. In his analysis Kiser says:

The marital fertility within Northern cities was about the same for Negroes who migrated from Southern villages and rural areas as for Negroes of comparable age, social status who were born in the urban North. Birth rates were as low and the per cent of childlessness as high among Negroes born in Northern cities as among those born in Southern villages and rural areas.7

The available data support a differential marital fertility rates but the answer of why seems to be lacking. There is the possibility that present data are too few to be reliable and characteristic of the total population. For the moment let us assume that the data are correct. Why is this so? The two usually stated hypotheses are not supported by the data. First, the Negro couple does not practice contraception more effectively than any other group, and secondly, difficulties in adjustment to an urban environment do not account for the low rates. The Southern rural Negro does have a higher marital fertility rate than does the Negro in the North. Once in the urban environment his rates do not differ appreciably from the Negro born in the urban North. This seems to imply that he acquires very quickly birth rate patterns of the urban North. There are other possible explanations but at present there are no data to support them. One is that there is a high rate of involuntary childlessness in the Negro group, and that this is particularly characteristic of the Negro group.

Data on marital fertility rates in rural areas are less complete than in urban areas. Notestein8 in his study of the East North Central States reported a higher marital fertility rate for rural Negroes than for urban whites but lower than rates for rural whites. Beebe9 in his analysis of differential fertility rates of Miners in Logan County, West Virginia reported lower fertility rates for Negroes. Kiser’s10 compared marital fertility rates of whites and Negroes in purely rural areas of Georgia were about 9 per cent lower for colored wives. Kiser also reported that the rates for the rural Negro wives were lower than rates for Negro wives living in the Southern urban areas. This finding, I have a feeling, is due in part, if not wholly, to under-enumeration. This is at best only a guess. We need more data on different areas before we can say with

7Kiser, op. cit., p 369-381.
8Notestein, op. cit.
9Beebe, op. cit.
10Kiser, op. cit.
finality, although Kiser’s analysis of the Family Survey material in selected areas of Harlem, at least, implies a lower birth rate for rural Southern-born wives than for wives born in urban areas.

T. Lynn Smith made a study of the population of Louisiana.11 His findings tend to support previous findings of lower fertility rates of the Negro. Smith summarized his findings:

1. In the State as a whole Negroes seem to be multiplying slightly more rapidly than the white population, but this appears to be due to the fact that a higher proportion of the colored population resides amid rural surroundings.

2. In the cities the white population seems to be reproducing more rapidly than the Negro, while on the farm the opposite is true. In rural non-farm areas, the advantage also appears to be slightly in favor of the white population. However, in the Delta—cotton plantation sections along the Mississippi River, where such a large share of the State’s Negroes are concentrated, the white population who live on farms are reproducing much more rapidly than the Negro.

3. On the whole, the white population of Anglo-saxon Protestant North Louisiana is multiplying more rapidly than the Negro, while in French Catholic South Louisiana, the advantage lies with the colored race.

The present body of available data tends to indicate a lower marital fertility rate for Negroes.

Data on differential fertility within the Negro group is less extensive and less conclusive than differential data relating to the Negro and white group. Our open class society makes it rather difficult to set up definite criteria of class. Three of the major avenues to higher social status are education, family income, and occupation of the head of the family. Data on marital fertility of socio-economic classes in the white group show an inverse relation between fertility and educational attainment of the wife. Kiser’s analysis of the National Health Survey Material does not reflect the inverse relationship for the Negro group. Kiser reports:12

“Among colored wives in the total sample the fertility for the minority reporting college attendance was relatively low. There was a marked similarity in fertility among the more important subdivisions of the sample along educational lines. This similarity held true at all ages. The analysis by area and size of city also confirmed the general lack of substantial variation in birth rates of urban colored wives.”

A study of marital fertility of the Negro in Madison, Wisconsin, by education failed to show an inverse relation between education and fertility. In this study there was no significant difference in fertility rates on the scale from 1 to 12 years of schooling. Part of the explanation might be found in the relationship between marriage and opportunity for employment of the Negro woman of 12 years or less of schooling. Within the Negro group the occupational opportunities are limited for both the male and female. In the larger American society, the pattern seems to be the higher the educational level of the wife, the more likely she will have occupational and other activities that operate against having a large number of children.

One would expect an inverse relationship between fertility and occupation of the head of the family and education of the wife. The present data seem to indicate that such relationships do not hold for the Negro. The caste-like position of the Negro in American society tends to circumscribe his areas of social participation. In general, Negroes are expected to associate with Negroes only. This expected association has developed into what could be termed Negro society. The pattern of behavior and values of the Negro within his own group tend to follow the pattern and values of the larger American Society, but with some modifications.


NEGRO-WHITE DIFFERENTIAL MARITAL FERTILITY

In Warren S. Thompson's study of "Differentials in Fertility and Levels of Living in Rural United States," his findings support the hypothesis of an inverse relationship between levels of living and fertility for both whites and nonwhites. On racial differences in fertility, Thompson says "what many people have thought of as racial differences in fertility turn out to be more closely associated with level of living than race. When white and non-white belong to the same level of living group, they have much the same fertility such difference as there is being largely in favor of the whites."\(^{13}\)

The present body of data indicates a lower marital fertility rate for Negroes than for whites although the Negro has the higher crude fertility rate. The higher proportion of childlessness seems to indicate that Negro wives tend to practice contraception more effectively than white wives, yet the data do not support such an assumption. On the other hand, Negro mothers have a higher incidence of fertility than white mothers. This raises these questions: Is the high proportion of childlessness among Negroes involuntary? If it is involuntary, are the factors that contribute to sterility peculiarly characteristic of the Negro? If it is voluntary, why do such a large percentage of the Negro couples choose to remain childless?

If Thompson is correct in stating that fertility is more closely associated with levels of living than race, our question is, where on the level of living scale does the level of living begin to operate against fertility? What, if any are the differentials in the level of living at which they begin to operate against fertility in the white and Negro groups? Such an approach to differential fertility, by its very nature, means investigating one of the most private and personal areas of family living. But if it ever becomes necessary for us to formulate a population policy, we shall need accurate knowledge in this area.

Literature Cited

Beebe, Gilbert W., Differential Fertility by Color For Coal Miners in Logan County, West Virginia, Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly, Vol XIX, No 2, April, 1941.
