

Statement of Current and Future Research Program

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My research focuses on *human fertility*. More specifically I ask: what factors explain variation in fertility across populations? A mainstream sociological perspective guides my research. This perspective focuses attention on *group-specific structural and cultural factors*, such as differences in the nature of patriarchy, or variation in educational and economic institutions. Statistical and demographic techniques, new or unusual data, and particular research opportunities frequently provide *leverage*, that is, the power to answer key questions convincingly. Leverage plays a key role in my choice of particular research questions and projects.

Why study human fertility? My answer has both theoretical and practical components. First, fertility is closely linked to two prerequisites for group survival: biological replacement and social replacement. The former is the most obvious; populations survive only if new members are produced. The second, social replacement, refers to the socialization process that produces new, cooperating group members. In all societies, key aspects of socialization are carried out by the biological mother and, in most cases, by the biological father too (e.g., parenthood). Thus, fertility and parenthood are closely linked and are fundamental to the continuation of human society. Fertility variability also plays key roles in many explanations of contemporary social problems, such as rapid population growth in the developing world and the perpetuation of inequality across generations in the United States. There are pragmatic reasons to study fertility too. Several relate to the concept leverage, in this case leverage provided by measurement and resources. While measurement is often considered a mundane topic, it is fundamental to scientific advance. Being able to define and measure well the “dependent variable” is crucial. While there are difficulties in measuring fertility, they pale in comparison to topics frequently studied by sociologists (for example subjective phenomena like happiness, fairness or alienation). The second practical aspect, resources, refers not just to research monies that facilitate research in this area. Resources also refer to the scientific community that has organized around research questions relating to human fertility. In short, the importance of the topic and the resources focused on fertility make this an exciting and active research area.

Why adopt a sociological perspective?. The fundamental sociological insight is that *much variability in human behavior can be traced to group-specific structural and cultural factors*. Compare this insight to the key microeconomic insight: individuals make choices that advance their well-being or satisfaction. In short, microeconomics focuses on decision-making within particular social contexts, sociologists stress the behavioral variability across contexts and the macrolevel structures that produce this variability. My work focuses on the macroanalytic structures and how they influence behavior or behavioral processes but incorporates micro-level variability. Macroanalytic structures can take different forms. Frequently, my explanations of fertility variation have focused on variation in the institution of the family generally and in patriarchy in particular-- a theory of human fertility must be embedded in a theory of family and family change. But in turn, a theory of family must be embedded in a theory of social change. Consequently, economic, educational, political and other institutions play an important

explanatory role in my work on fertility and family. My work contributes to the sociological literature that stresses historical and cultural continuity in social change.

My experience suggests that interesting and important questions are numerous. In my own research and when training students, I consider leverage -- that is, are there aspects of my perspective or research method, or aspects of this particular problem that make it likely that I can make a contribution? Leverage can be gained by theoretical insight and conceptualization, by the availability of high quality data, by application of appropriate statistical methods, or by a key contribution to a research team.

Research on low and very low fertility

In the past seven years much of my research has focused on the very low fertility that characterizes many developed countries (i.e., levels well below replacement levels) and the contrasting comparatively high fertility in the United States (i.e., levels approximating replacement levels). My contributions stress that low fertility is not an inevitable result of advanced industrialization and is not the result of below replacement fertility intentions or desires. Instead, industrialized societies and globalization produce environments where children are costly and postponement of childbearing is widespread. However, institutional responses can buffer the high costs of childbearing so that many women and couples achieve their fertility goals. This argument is developed in my Presidential Address to the Population Association of America (Morgan 2003) and in work with colleagues (Morgan and Taylor 2006; Morgan and Hagewen 2005a; Morgan and King 2001). Empirical support is offered in a series of articles (Rindfuss et.al. 2007; Hagewen and Morgan 2005; Rindfuss et.al. 2003; Quesnel-Vallee and Morgan 2003). I am currently working on an integrated framework of factors that can account for fertility variation across economically advanced societies.

Research on Family Change and Variation

I am the PI for a 4-year, multidisciplinary, multi-institution project that aims to codify “what we know” and “the key unanswered questions” about family change and variation. As of 10/06, there is one year of funding remaining for this effort and the products of our work are beginning to emerge (see <http://www.soc.duke.edu/~efc/>). Substantively, my efforts focus on the development of a *consilient* model of family change and variation. Edward O. Wilson popularised consilience, the title of his best-selling book. Consilience means “a jumping together”, and in his book he encourages those who study the sciences to link together all the branches of learning. Some of my colleagues have taken up this challenge (see Johnson-Hanks et.al. 2006, http://www.soc.duke.edu/~efc/Docs/pubs/AJS_efc_final.pdf), and we are writing a book that posits a consilient theory of family change and that illustrates its usefulness.