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Desired Family Size : Correlates and Reliability of Responses

1. Introduction

"As the number of children a couple desires is achieved or approached, unless it is a matter of religious conviction or suspected sub-fecundity, all but the rare exception revert to contraception" (Westoff—1963). Given adequate motivation and consequently lower desired family size it may be expected that any harmless method is acceptable. Given little motivation, however the only acceptable techniques of contraception are those that involve minimal inconvenience. Thus contraceptive acceptance is a function of desired family size which, of course, is an index of built-in motivational level. The studies pertaining to family size preferences are, therefore, of interest to population scientists.

A survey of 26 published studies (Agarwala 1962), revealed a considerable degree of uniformity in the responses to desired family size. The study reports, "The family attitude surveys show that while people in rural areas consider that four children constitute the ideal, in the urban areas three children are taken to constitute the desirable family size". In the Mysore Population Study (U. N. 1961) the average desired family size of Bangalore City sample was 4.0 for women and 4.4 for men and in the rural sample, 4.8 for women and 4.7 for men. The Indian Institute of

Public Opinion (1967) in their study based on samples from Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi, Madras found that the number of children regarded as ideal for the 'average' Indian family was 3.1. Family planning enquiries in Rural Shimoga (Kale 1971) and Dharwar (Kale and Koteswar 1971) found the average desired family size to be 3.0.

Thus while, several studies have been carried out to provide numerical responses to questions on desired family size, no attempt has been reported on the reliability of the responses. The present paper presents an attempt in this direction. It examines (i) the correlates of 'desired family size' in rural community and (ii) the reliability of responses to questions on desired family size in an interview survey.

2. The Population

This study is based on the data obtained from 534 interviews with currently married women in the age group 20 - 39 regarding their family growth pattern (University of Kerala 1965). The women interviewed belong to three selected villages on the outskirts of the Trivandrum City, Kerala. The households in the sample are more or less homogenous with respect to the socio-economic status ; an overwhelming majority belong to lower strata by any standard. The median family earning is about Rs. 2.25 per day. The group of women interviewed did not possess very high ambitions and held traditional values with respect to many things in life. However, interspouse communication on matters concerning family size was not infrequent in this group.

Two third of the women in the sample had less than 5 years of schooling and only one-tenth had studied upto the higher secondary level or beyond. Further, the younger wives were much better off in education as compared to the older ones. The average age at marriage of the women in the sample was 17.6 years and the average duration of marriage was 10.5 years. The older mothers in the age-group 35-39 had borne, on an average, 5.6 children, while the average for their younger sisters in the age group 20-24 was 1.8.

3. Analysis

The 'desired family size' of a respondent has been obtained by adding the number of additional children desired by the respondent to the present

number of her living children. Women who did not desire any additional child reported the achieved family size as their desired family size ; this may not be always true. This limitation, inherent with our cultural traits, cannot be easily overcome in cross-sectional surveys.

As shown by Table 1, 3 and 4 are the most popular sizes of desired family in the study group. The average desired family size for the sample comes to 3.8. 27.2 per cent of the sample women prefer a three child family and 22.3 per cent, a four-child family. One half of the women in the sample desired more than 3 children. The preferences for two, three and four children as shown here, are also found in many of the post-war fertility surveys in India and abroad.

TABLE 1-SAMPLE WIVES ACCORDING TO DESIRED FAMILY SIZE

<i>Desired family size</i>	<i>No. of women</i>	<i>Percent</i>
1	16	3.0
2	89	16.6
3	145	27.2
4	119	22.3
5	66	12.3
6	56	10.6
7+	43	8.0
Total	534	100.0

We may now turn to the pattern of responses to desired family size in relation to demographic and socio-economic factors. We may consider in turn age of wife, monthly income, education, religion and caste, experience of infant mortality and also relate desired family size to contraceptive behaviour.

Taking age of wife first, we have 277 respondents in the age group 20-29 and 257 in the next age group 30-39.

TABLE 2-PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF WIVES ACCORDING TO DESIRED FAMILY SIZE BY THEIR AGE

<i>Desired family size</i>	<i>Age of wife</i>			
	20-24 (N=132)	25-29(N=174)	30-34 (N=118)	35-39 (N=108)
1-2	36.4	19.0	10.2	13.9
3-4	59.1	62.6	44.1	23.1
5+	4.5	18.4	45.7	63.0
Mean DFS	3.1	3.5	4.1	4.7
Mean No. of Living children }	1.7	2.8	4.1	5.0

Younger women (20-24) prefer two and three-child families. In the next age group 25-29, the model preference is for a family of three to four children. The progression continues over the higher age groups. The proportion of women in the sample who desire five and more children increases with age. A similar progression is seen in the mean desired family size also. A plausible explanation is that there is a tendency among the younger women to idealise a limited number of children for the family and among the older women to rationalize the family size already achieved. This phenomenon is corroborated by the Puerto Rican, the Taiwan and the Thailand studies.

The association between the age of wife and desired family size is highly significant at .05 level ($\chi^2 = 134.4$ d.f. = 6).

Let us next consider socio-economic status, which has claimed primary importance in most studies of fertility differentials. In the present study, for analytical convenience, socio-economic status is classified into three broad groups : lower (monthly income less than Rs. 50/-), lower middle (Rs. 51-100) and middle (Rs. 100 and above).

About half ($N = 264$) of the sample women belonged to the lower group which is followed by the lower-middle group ($N = 178$).

TABLE 3—PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF WIVES ACCORDING TO DESIRED FAMILY SIZE BY SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

<i>Desired family size</i>	<i>Socio-economic status</i>		
	<i>Middle (N=81)</i>	<i>Lower-middle (N=178)</i>	<i>Lower (N=264)</i>
1-2	19.8	18.5	21.9
3-4	41.9	52.2	50.8
5+	38.3	29.3	27.3
Mean DFS	4.0	3.8	3.7

In the lower group, 22 per cent of the women desire one to two children and 51 per cent, three to four. In the lower-middle group, 52 per cent of the respondents prefer three-four children and only 19 per cent one to two. The percentage of women expressing a desire for five or more children follows U' shaped pattern as we proceed along the continuum of socio-economic status. On the other hand, the mean desired family size has a positive relationship with socio-economic status but the relationship does not bear any statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 4.436$ at 0.05 level, d.f. 4).

According to education we classify the sample into four categories as follows.

TABLE 4—PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF WIVES ACCORDING TO DESIRED FAMILY SIZE BY LEVEL OF SCHOOLING

<i>Desired family size</i>	<i>Level of schooling*</i>			
	<i>No. formal schooling (N=160)</i>	<i>1-4 Years</i>	<i>5-7 Years (N=194)</i>	<i>Upto SSIC (8-10 Years) (N=114)</i>
1-2	19.4	20.9	19.6	19.3
3-4	50.0	39.5	51.0	49.1
5+	30.6	39.6	29.4	31.6
Mean DFS	3.9	3.9	3.8	3.7

* 19 women who had some college education are not included.

An inverse relationship between mean desired family size and educational attainment is apparent, though statistically insignificant. Elites (those who have attained some college education) prefer only three-child families on an average but one third of them desire four or more children.

Nearly 80 per cent of the respondents belong to Hindu religion and 19 per cent are Christians. Among the Hindus, 46 per cent are Nayers and 23 per cent, Ezhavas ; the rest belong to other castes.

TABLE 5—PER CENT DISTRIBUTION OF WIVES ACCORDING TO DESIRED FAMILY SIZE BY RELIGIOUS AND CASTE GROUPS

<i>Desired family size</i>	<i>Religion and caste groups*</i>			
	<i>Nayars (N=201)</i>	<i>Ezhavas (N=107)</i>	<i>Other Hindus</i>	<i>Christians (N=89)</i>
1-2	20.9	22.4	18.6	20.2
3-4	53.7	47.7	49.6	43.8
5+	25.4	29.9	31.8	36.0
Means DFS	3.6	3.8	3.9	4.0

* 8 Muslim women are not considered for the analysis.

An examination of the pattern of mean desired family size by religious and caste groups indicates that 'Nayars' are slightly more small family oriented. Since more than 60 per cent of the Christians in the sample are Catholics, a possible explanation for the comparatively higher average desired family size expressed by this group may be the discernible impact of Pope's Encyclical 'Humanae Vitae' on them.

About experience of infant or child mortality seventy per cent of the wives in the sample did not have such experience during their married life. Apart from the recent general lowering of child mortality in India, a sufficient explanation for this may be the accessibility of improved medical services in the study area due to its proximity to the capital city of Trivandrum. About 25 per cent of the respondents experienced single-child mortality and only 5 per cent had experienced death of two or more children. Even though the popular preference is for the range of 3-4

children, the proportion of women desiring five or more children and the average desired family size tend to increase with child mortality experience. This supports the view of demographers that the child mortality experience has a bearing* to fertility planning and desires (e.g. Hassan, 1966). However, the relation between child mortality and the desired family size is not statistically significant at 5 per cent level ($\chi^2 = 3.31$, d.f. = 4).

TABLE 6—PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF WIVES ACCORDING TO DESIRED FAMILY SIZE BY CHILD MORTALITY

<i>Desired family size</i>	<i>Number of children dead</i>		
	<i>0</i> (<i>N=374</i>)	<i>2 (N=116)</i>	<i>2 and 3</i> (<i>N=38</i>)
1-2	22.2	16.4	13.2
3-4	48.9	50.9	52.6
5+	28.9	32.7	34.2
Mean DFS	3.8	3.9	4.0

Regarding contraceptive experience 3 per cent of the women were sterilized and 14 per cent were currently using one or the other of the family planning methods. Thirty six per cent of the respondents were not using any contraceptive method to limit or space the family.

TABLE 7—PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF WIVES ACCORDING TO DESIRED FAMILY SIZE BY CONTRACEPTIVE PRACTICE

<i>Desired family size</i>	<i>Contraceptive Practice</i>			
	<i>Not known any method</i> (<i>N=192</i>)	<i>Sterilized (N=15)</i>	<i>Currently using other methods</i>	<i>Known but currently not practising</i> (<i>N=222</i>)
1-2	26.0	6.7	13.7	19.8
3-4	47.9	60.0	54.8	45.9
5+	26.1	33.3	31.5	34.3
Mean DPS	3.7	4.1	3.9	3.8

*In recent times, a few countries show negative relationship between child mortality and family size preference or fertility. (Bogue, 1974).

It is interesting that 192 women (36% total) not using any method preferred family size in the range of 3-4. Most of them had at least a hearsay knowledge of family planning methods. A marked difference is noted among the sterilized persons. Their mean desired family size appears to be a projection of the family size they have achieved. For the rest the mean desired family size was 3.8.

4. Reliability of Responses

The second part of this paper seeks to find out how far the responses to desired family size are meaningful or reliable ? Do the responses appear as a 'fashionable slogan' only ? In the absence of a foolproof methodology to assess the reliability of this type of data, we focus attention on the respondents' level of consistency in answering questions relating to family size norms. The interview schedule used for the study provided a fairly good tool for measuring this. Four 'agree-disagree' statements relating to family size preferences have been asked in the earlier part of the interview. The same pattern of questions, with a diametrically opposite sense, have again appeared in the latter part of the interview schedule also. The time gap between these two sets of questions was, on an average, half an hour. The questions asked in the former part of the survey are as follows :

- (a) In life, there are many things more important than having children, generally speaking. Do you agree or disagree ?
- (b) Having many children is a lot of trouble, but it is worth it, generally speaking ? Do you agree or disagree ?
- (c) The fewer children a family has, the happier it is, generally speaking. Do you agree or disagree ?
- (d) Everything considered, it is better to have many children. Do you agree or disagree ?

The questions asked in the latter part of enumeration are given below :

- (a₁) In life, one of the most important things is to have children, gene-

rally speaking. Do you agree or disagree ?

(b₁) Having many children is a lot of trouble and it is not worth it, generally speaking. Do you agree or disagree ?

(c₁) The more children a family has, the happier it is generally speaking. Do you agree or disagree ?

(d₁) Everything considered, it is better to have a few children. Do you agree or disagree ?

In these four paired questions (*a* and *ai*, *b* and *bi*, *c* and *Ci*, *d* and *di*) the agree-response to the first question and disagreement to its counterpart or vice versa accounts for consistency in answering. The differentials in the consistency of responses vis-a-vis certain population characteristics are shown in Table 8. The answers for the second pair of questions, i.e. *Q(b)* vs *Q(b₁)* are not considered for the analysis since it was felt that those questions lacked validity in the sense that respondents were not conceptually clear to be able to distinguish the questions within the given frame of reference.

Irrespective of the variations in the level of educational attainment, we see a high proportion of respondents (60—80 per cent) answering consistently. By and large, the study area contains lower grade employees, skilled and unskilled workers- Among all groups, generally, over 60 per cent of the respondents show consistency in their responses pertaining to family size preferences. In regard to the various socio-economic groups, a high degree (65-100 per cent) of response consistency is noticed. The same trend is noticed in relation to the various religious groups too. Apart from this, the responses to those paired questions appear suggestive of norms of small family too.

From the foregoing analysis, it is found the respondents show a high degree of consistency of responses, thus minimising considerably the amount of ambivalence and indecisive attitude of the respondents. Thus it appears that the responses to desired family size are reliable or meaningful to a very, great extent.

TABLE 8-PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS WHO ARE CONSISTENT IN RESPONSES BY SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Consistency of Responses</i>		
	<i>Questions (a) vs (a₁)</i>	<i>Questions (c) vs (c₁)</i>	<i>Questions (d) vs (d₁)</i>
Level of schooling	%	%	%
No formal schooling	73.1	68.0	68.7
1 to 4 years	81.4	72.2	58.3
5 to 7 years	72.4	65.8	67.4
Upto SSLC.	71.5	55.4	62.5
Above matric	66.6	61.1	83.3
Occupation (Husband)			
White collar	75.2	69.5	77.5
Skilled workers	68.0	59.8	66.4
Unskilled workers	73.8	63.1	63.1
Farmers	74.4	63.3	66.0
Economically inactive	66.6	41.6	59.1
Socio-economic status			
Upper	66.6	100.0	100.0
Middle	78.7	60.4	65.6
Lower	70.3	66.5	68.4
Religious sub-classes			
Nair	73.2	68.2	72.0
Ezhava	71.6	65.0	69.0
Other Hindus	69.4	60.1	60.1
Christians	77.0	65.5	67.0

However, the scope for a generalization of this phenomenon is restricted since the characteristics of the sample studied here may not be generalisable for all parts of India. Thus, there is an imperative need for similar studies elsewhere in the country.

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