

A comparison of prospective and retrospective fertility intentions in Northern Malawi

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Abstract

The measurement of unintended fertility in cross-sectional studies relies on questions about children already born and is therefore subject to ex post rationalization which is the propensity to reporting children as wanted when they were originally unwanted. Women may feel that to label a child as unwanted is to stigmatize him. In addition, an originally unwanted child is likely to loved one, hence eventually “wanted”.

Evidences on this issue in developing countries are limited. This study using annual information on couples’ fertility preferences collected both retrospectively and prospectively collected as part of a Demographic Surveillance System in Northern Malawi will add new empirical evidence in this area. We assess the extent of ambivalence of fertility intention by comparing retrospective and prospective fertility intention of the child over three years.

Introduction

The measurement of unintended fertility in cross-sectional studies has to rely on questions about children already born and is therefore subject to *ex post rationalization* (McClelland, 1983, Rosenzweig and Wolpin, 1993), which is the propensity to reporting children as wanted when they were originally unwanted. Women may feel that to label a child as unwanted is to stigmatize him. In addition, an originally unwanted child might have become a loved one, hence eventually wanted.

Evidence on this issue in developing countries is limited. Bankole and Westoff’s (1998) analysed a panel data of women interviewed in 1992 and 1995 and found that only 38 percent of the births classified as unwanted in the first survey were also classified as unwanted three years later, whereas 19 percent were classified as mistimed and 43 as wanted.

A longitudinal study in North India adduced evidence of substantial post-facto rationalization. When preferences were measured before childbirth, about 30 per cent of subsequent births were classified as unintended, compared with 10 per cent when measured retrospectively (Koenig et al. 2006). Very few studies have gathered information on fertility preference before the birth of a child and information on schooling or nutrition in a longitudinal format (Myhrman, et al. 1995, Brown and Eisenberg, 1995).

Some studies found that the relationship between retrospective and prospective measures of fertility intention varies with women’s socio-economic circumstances (Williams et al 1999; Joyce et al 2002). Other studies have found evidence of changes in fertility intention and reproductive behavior with knowledge of HIV status after testing (Yeatman, 2009).

In this study information gathered in three annual rounds on couples’ fertility preferences measured both retrospectively and prospectively will add new empirical evidence on this topic. This study aims to assess the extent of instability of fertility preferences by

comparing retrospective and prospective data on wantedness and desired timing of children. Prospective classifications of intendedness will be derived from a comparison of couples' future childbearing preferences with the advent and timing of subsequent births. Retrospective classifications will be based on statements on the intendedness at time of conception of births that have already occurred, using questions similar to those in the Demographic and Health Surveys. The stability over time of prospective fertility preferences will also be examined.

Hypotheses:

- The proportions of births classified as mistimed or unwanted under the prospective definition will be higher than those based on retrospective statements because of post facto rationalization.
- Inconsistency between prospective and retrospective measures will be higher for birth timing than for unwantedness.
- Consistency will be higher when both husband and wife have the same or very similar prospective fertility preferences

Data

This study uses data collected between October 2008 and September 2011 from a module on fertility intentions linked to an on-going Demographic Surveillance System (DSS) in rural north Malawi, collected in three rounds in 2008-2009, 2009-2010 and 2010-2011. The DSS baseline census was conducted in 2002-2004 following which the population has been under continuous surveillance. Using the DSS, a population-based adult HIV and sexual behaviour survey started in the DSS area in September 2007, as part of a work programme which is focused on HIV and infectious disease control in a rural African population supported by the Wellcome Trust grant n. 079828 (see Jahn et al.(2007) and Crampin et al (2012) for details on the demographic data collection procedures).

As part of a study funded by the Hewlett Foundation and the UK Economic and Social Research Council "Unintended Childbearing and family welfare in rural Malawi" a set of questions to measure retrospective and prospective fertility preferences of couples was designed in July and August 2008 and piloted from September to October 2008. During the pilot the questionnaire was modified in order to improve clarity and to ensure that the meaning of the questions were appropriately conveyed in the local language (Chitumbuka). The questionnaire was then back-translated from Chitumbuka to English during the pilot stage and further amendments made. The data collection began on October 28th 2008.

Women were asked questions on their past fertility (including total number of children ever born and surviving), their marital status (including how they got married; for example church/ traditional wedding, inherited, eloped). A section on prospective fertility intentions was introduced in order to assess whether or not the husband and wife/wives separately wish to have another child and the preferred timing of the next birth.

We analyse data on fertility intention of two rounds of data and use information from the prospective data on fertility intention in round one and the retrospective data in round two, we then repeat the analysis using prospective data in round two and retrospective data in round 3. Between round 1 and 3 a total of 1319 children were born. The analysis also assesses the stability of prospective fertility intentions over time using the 3 rounds of data. We then assess whether changes in stated intentions over time are related to women's socio-economic circumstances and whether she is in a polygynous union.

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