

Population Investigation Committee

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Source: *Population Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Mar., 1981), pp. 132-135

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of the Population Investigation Committee

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2174839>

Accessed: 19-12-2019 09:59 UTC

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Another Look at Fertility and Social Mobility

C. F. WESTOFF*

In the Princeton Fertility Study, a longitudinal study of women interviewed in 1957 shortly after the birth of their second child and concluded ten years later as they approached the end of their childbearing, a concentrated effort was made to evaluate the connections between social mobility and fertility. Both the implications of mobility for fertility and of fertility for mobility were explored. Social mobility was measured in almost every conceivable way: inter- and intra-occupational change, changes in income, and with a variety of psychological measures of levels of aspiration; no fewer than 25 different approaches to its measurement were attempted. The conclusions were essentially negative:

Social mobility appears to have little if any relation to fertility.¹

... there is no compelling evidence for any strong relationship between fertility and socioeconomic achievement and no support for the varieties of the mobility hypothesis which were considered. We find a small *positive* net effect of fertility during the re-study period on the occupational and economic achievements at the termination of the study, after all men are equated statistically for social origins, past educational and economic achievements, and their points in the life cycle.²

These negative conclusions were continually qualified with reservations about: (1) the specialized nature of the sample which included only native-born, white, once-married couples all of whom had their second birth in September 1956 and who in 1957, when interviewed, were living in the seven largest metropolitan areas of the United States; (2) the fact that the study reflected only one sample in time, a time that in retrospect may have been especially unrepresentative of U.S. demographic history, since it fell in the middle and end of the great post-war baby boom; and (3) the problems inherent in the study design which complicated the analysis of socio-economic correlates of fertility. The fact that all couples had experienced their second birth at a particular time means that those who were older at the time of their second birth had more opportunity (time) for occupational and economic achievement than those who reached that parity at younger ages, and were also likely to have fewer additional births, thereby introducing a bias toward an inverse association of socio-economic variables and fertility. Thus, our negative conclusions about the interrelations of social mobility and fertility had to be and were strongly qualified.

In his article,³ which embodies a basic methodological criticism of our analysis of the association between social mobility and fertility, Professor Zimmer reports a strong association between the two variables in a sample of once-married women in Aberdeen, who had experienced a birth during the period 1950–55. (That sample also contains some peculiarities such as the exclusion of childless couples and others who did not have a birth

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¹ C. F. Westoff, R. G. Potter Jr and P. C. Sagi, *The Third Child: A Study in the Prediction of Fertility*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 240.

² L. L. Bumpass and C. F. Westoff, *The Later Years of Childbearing*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 131.

³ This issue, p. 120.

in that period and the fact that over three-quarters of the parents of the respondents had only a minimal education, which implies a rather homogeneous social origin for the study of intergenerational occupational mobility.)

His fundamental criticism is an important one: that the hypothesized relationship only appears when the social origin and destination of the mobile couples and the social status of the non-mobile couples are considered. So far, so good. This is the classic formulation of the hypothesis, originally tested by Berent, that fertility will vary inversely among non-mobile women by social class position, that the fertility of upwardly mobile women from a given social class of origin will be lower than for women of the same class of origin who are not upwardly mobile, and that downwardly mobile women will experience higher fertility than other women of the same class of origin.

Zimmer's analysis, based on comparisons of wife's father's and husband's occupation, and wife's pre-marital occupation and husband's occupation, confirms this hypothesis. However, when the same data are re-classified into couples who were upwardly or downwardly mobile or immobile, regardless of class of origin and destination, the fertility differentials disappear. Zimmer asserts that this latter procedure is the basic methodological weakness of the Princeton Fertility Study and the erroneous basis on which the mobility—fertility hypothesis was rejected.

There are several problems with this line of reasoning, one logical, and others reflecting unaccountable inattention to what was actually done. The logical problem lies in Zimmer's inference that because both sets of data show no association when origin and destination are ignored but one set (the Aberdeen data) confirms the hypothesis when class of origin and destination are considered, that, therefore, the other set (the U.S. data) would show the same relationship if only this procedure had been followed. As Zimmer says in arguing against the possible uniqueness of the Aberdeen data: 'If this is the case, then we would not have expected the striking similarity in the findings, that we have observed, when the same method of analysis is applied to the Aberdeen sample as was used in the Princeton Studies. It is emphasized that when we replicated their findings, we agreed that the social mobility—fertility hypothesis should be rejected, which is a compelling argument against the uniqueness, at least in this respect, of the Aberdeen sample.'⁴

The other problem with the criticism is that we did not ignore class of origin and destination in the inter-generational analysis which is half of the evidence Zimmer presents, and as he himself acknowledges (p. 126). Two tables showing three different fertility variables as a function of movement between white-collar and blue-collar origins of husband's father's and husband's current occupation similarly dichotomized⁵ and a similar table from white-collar and blue-collar origins of the wife's occupational class (Table 70B) were published as the very first analysis of the subject in the Princeton Fertility Study. They showed very little evidence of any relationship. The same type of analysis was also repeated in the second round, with the same negative results.⁶ There, the dependent variable was whether the couple had experienced additional fertility beyond the second birth during the ensuing three-year period. All our analyses were performed within religious categories (Zimmer seems puzzled by this) because of the strong association of religion with all different measures of fertility and because of the fact that socio-economic status and fertility related in opposite directions for Protestants and Catholics.

It is true that we did not repeat this type of analysis for intra-generational occupational

⁴ p. 130.

⁵ C. F. Westoff *et al.*, *Family Growth in Metropolitan America*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961, Table 70A, p. 243.

⁶ *op. cit.* in footnote 1, pp. 133–135

change because of the negligible amount of intra-generational movement between blue-collar and white-collar occupations. However, we did examine the connections of fertility with change in husband's income in a tabulation⁷ which permitted comparisons of fertility for husbands whose income remained constant or dropped over a three-year period with those whose income increased by varying amounts. Again, very little patterning of fertility was evident and what little there was seemed to go in opposite directions for Protestants and Catholics. One could, of course, argue that a three-year period is too brief a time for such relationships to emerge.

In order to respond directly to Zimmer's contention, and despite the methodological reservations noted above, we have produced tabulations as close as possible to those he presents for the Aberdeen sample. The same system of grouping occupations into 'High', 'Medium', and 'Low' categories used in the British typology has been replicated for the Princeton data, with the exception that semi-skilled workers are classified as 'Low' rather than 'Medium' in order to provide sufficient cases in the 'Low' category. The mean number of children ever born toward the end of the childbearing period (an estimated 90 per cent of all births are estimated to have occurred, comparable to the Aberdeen sample) is shown in Table 1 for three occupational mobility comparisons.

The first panel of Table 1 replicates the first panel of Table 6 in Zimmer's article, the inter-generational mobility from the wife's social origin as indicated by her father's occupational status, and the status of her husband's current occupation. The second panel shows the inter-generational comparisons from the husband's social origin as indicated by his father's occupational status (a comparison not included in Zimmer's analysis). The third panel analyses intra-generational mobility during the span of the marriage as indicated by a comparison of the status of the husband's first occupation and his current occupation. Although not strictly comparable to Zimmer's test of the intra-generational movement which compared the wife's occupation before marriage with the husband's occupation, it is in the same spirit and is probably a superior measure since many women were not working and many of those who worked at that age would be in jobs that would not reliably indicate their social status.

Table 1. *Mean number of live births by social mobility*

Current Status	Status of origin		
	High	Medium	Low
Husband's current occupation	<i>Wife's father's status</i>		
High	3.1	3.4	3.1
Medium	3.1	3.2	3.4
Low	3.1	3.1	3.1
Husband's current occupation	<i>Husband's status at marriage</i>		
High	3.1	3.5	3.1
Medium	3.3	3.2	3.4
Low	*	3.4	3.0
Husband's current occupation	<i>Husband's father's status</i>		
High	3.1	3.2	3.3
Medium	3.2	3.3	3.2
Low	2.7	3.2	3.2

* Fewer than ten women.

The analysis in Table 1 was also replicated substituting social prestige ratings (based on the National Opinion Research Corporation study) for the census occupational classes; the results were the same.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 72.

This analysis completely confirms the conclusion reached in the published results of the Princeton Fertility Study, that there is no discernible relationship between social mobility and fertility in these data. Even when Protestants and Catholics are disaggregated, which strains the total sample size of women (not shown), there is no consistent pattern except to elucidate the absence of any association between fertility and the socio-economic status of the non-mobile (the main diagonals in Table 1). As suggested earlier, this is the consequence of the negative relationship among Protestants and the positive association among Catholics which offset each other in the aggregate.

Once again we should reiterate the qualifications of sample design and the period of time in which the study was conducted, but there is simply no evidence that the two variables are connected in the US study in the way that Zimmer describes in the Aberdeen study. We can speculate on why this difference might exist – it probably has some connection with the well-known fact that the social class system in Britain is more structured than in the United States; it may also reflect the fact of the sustained baby boom in the latter country. Whatever the reasons, Zimmer's inference, that the hypothesized association between the two variables would emerge if only we followed the 'correct' procedure, is simply not the case.