PRELIMINARY: PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE

Fertility and Family Policy: An Intersectional, Feminist Perspective[1]

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Introduction

In his 1995 Plenary to the European Population Conference entitled "God Has Chosen to Give the Easy Problems to the Physicists: Or Why Demographers Need Theory", Guillaume Wunsch observed that "Demography has never had a grand explanatory paradigm, such as the postulate of rationality and the concept of utility in microeconomics…" (3. Do Demographers Have Theories, para 1). He went on to argue that "The lack of a grand unified approach is not necessarily a disadvantage…" (para 3) but it does mean that "that demographers have to cannibalize other fields of inquiry, in order to found their explanations" (para 4). I appreciate Wunsch's carefully chosen and evocative turn of phrase, even if, from a different vantage point, and one which benefits from an additional two decades' hindsight, it is not exactly the imagery I would choose. I have tended to think of demographers less as a tribe of cannibals and rather more as a colonized people[2]. But let's set that distinction aside, at least for now. Whether it has been ingested, plundered, or thrust upon us, the theoretical perspectives that inform demographic inquiry have often come from elsewhere. Few would argue, I think, that economics has played a particularly prominent role in the development of some areas of study, including family demography.

Just a few years before Wunsch gave his plenary, Eileen Crimmins (1993) surveyed three decades of work published in the journal *Demography* and outlined intellectual developments in the field. She cites the "growing influence of economists and economic modelling" (585) as one of the explanations for changes in "the theoretical models guiding demographic analysis" (585). The changing theoretical priorities encouraged the adoption of new methodological approaches. Crimmins observes that, in the early years of the journal, a relatively large share of studies involved the analysis of vital statistics and census data, with groups rather than individuals as the unit of analysis. By the early 1990s, she describes nothing short of a sea change in the methodology of social demography[3]: "We have moved from descriptive methods and data to analysis that is based largely on the

[1] Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Jan vanBavel, Dimitri Mortelmans, Frank Furstenburg and other participants at UCSIA workshop 19-21 March 2014 for helpul comments and suggestions. All remaining errors are my own.
[2] This imagery is far from original. See, for example Loriaux and Vichnevshaia 2006, p 871
[3] Crimmins distinguishes social and formal demography in her discussion, and social demography and I adopt her terminology here.

application of causal models. The availability of certain types of data and the power to easily apply complex statistical techniques have encouraged the development of methods appropriate to this emphasis on causal models." (1993: 585). We entered what she called the "era of the independent variable" (585), a process marked by the rapid increase in the number of studies making use of multivariate regression techniques, with a trend towards increasingly long lists of (most typically additive and separable) control variables (Sigle-Rushton 2014). This latter development, in particular, meant that the empirical models in social demographic research came to look and feel far less distinct from the reduced form models that were being estimated by applied micro-economists. I have reflected a good deal on what this methodological shift has meant for the way demographic research has evolved (see, for example, Sigle-Rushton 2012; 2014). I find it notworthy that it coincided with theoretical developments in the social sciences, such as the elaboration of intersectionality which, if contemplated, could have motivated, at the very least, a critical pause. They have certainly motivated me to think carefully about the way I approach my some of my research questions (Sigle-Rushton and Goisis 2013; Goisis and Sigle-Rushton 2014).

It is not so much the embrace of *economic* theories and methods that troubles me, but rather the rejection of some other theoretical perspectives. I won't pretend that I don't have some particular concerns about its "grand explanatory paradigm" and (even more) its methodological preoccupation with issues of selection and causation (Sigle-Rushton 2012), but I would be just as concerned about the hegemonic rise of any particular discipline or theoretical perspective. As we become increasingly comfortable with particular tools and methods it is all to easy to start to apply them as a matter of routine, to stop questioning whether and why they are appropriate for our particular purposes. When this happens, the value of utilizing an explicit theoretical or conceptual framework – the self-reflection and the outside scrutiny that is invites and facilitates – is compromised. We might, for example, fail to notice the way a particular perspective lends legitimacy to biases and chauvinism. Arland Thornton's (2001) incisive critique of developmental idealism and the methodology of reading history sideways that it legitimates is a salutary reminder that, even without an explicit theoretical frame, we impose meaning in ways that determine how we describe, interpret and seek to effect change in the world around us. The solution is not to abandon theory but to use it reflexively.

This is why I think it is important to ask why demography has remained remarkably impervious to the theoretical interventions of feminism and other critical perspectives (Riley and McCarthy 2003). Previous writers have suggested this might have been a conscious decision: "demography is highly invested in deflecting critical theories, including feminism, that highlight the political nature of science precisely because its theories, research questions, and applications are so very political" (Williams 2010). However, if that is the case, I wonder why social policy hasn't been equally resistant. Scholars in social policy (as well as political science and sociology) study demographic processes and ask some of the

same research questions as demographers do. As a field rather than a discipline in its own right, social policy has also had to look to other disciplines for much of its theory. Like demography, the influence of economics has figured prominently. However, in the past quarter of a century, feminist scholars have exerted far more influence on its intellectual trajectory. Even if some authors suggest that the integration of feminist concerns has been partial and incomplete (Brush 2002; Orloff 2009), critical and feminist perspectives have left a more discernible mark on mainstream social policy research than can be observed in mainstream social demography. This puzzles me.

In this paper, my aim is to demonstrate how demographic research would benefit from a more conscious consideration of a wider range of theoretical perspectives. To illustrate what I mean, I focus primarily on one particular (broad and flexible) critical analytic concept – intersectionality – and one particular area of enquiry: the relationship between family policy and fertility. Intersectionality, which Leslie McCall described as "...one of the most important theoretical contributions of Women's Studies, along with racial and ethnic studies, so far." (1771), was has been a fleet-footed traveler in the past couple of decades, but it has not, for some reason, crossed our disciplinary boundary. It is noteworthy that we see virtually no references to "intersectionality" on the pages of demography journals.[4] For this reason, I think it is sensible to begin in the next section with a brief introduction to the concept of intersectionality, focusing on the issues that I see as most relevant to quantitative research. I outline its theoretical premise and trace out some of the methodological implications. Next, I reflect on what a consideration of intersectionality would add to the study of fertility and family policy in demography. Here I focus on the question that is commonly used to motivate demographic studies of this topic: Can policy be used to increase or sustain fertility in low fertility countries? By demonstrating what intersectionality could contribute to the study of this particular topic and question, I hope to initiate a discussion amongst the demographic community about the productive potential of adopting a more critical and interdisciplinary theoretical perspective. In the process, I will identify some directions for future research.

Theory and Background[5]

Intersectionality: Its intellectual development and premise

Intersectionality is a concept, or perhaps even a paradigm, that developed over many decades. It encompasses a number of ideas about the complex multidimensionality of subjectivity and social stratification and the consequences of its misspecification. Its origins can be traced back to an "internal critique and self-reflection of the imagined community of

[4] Not a single study was returned when I searched (on the publishers' web pages) the online content of *Demography, Demographic Research, Population and Development Review,* the *European Journal for Population Studies* for the term "intersectionality".

[5] The presentation and discussion of intersectionality and its methodology draws heavily on Sigle-Rushton (2014) and Sigle-Rushton and Lindstrom (2012). See Brah and Phoenix (2004) for a detailed and comprehensive intellectual history.

feminism" (Knapp 2005: 260). A number of interventions, some of the most prominent of which came from Black feminist scholars and activists (Nash 2008), illustrated how the same exclusionary practices that allowed (some privileged groups of) men to lay claim to the term "humanity" could be identified in the way some privileged (white, able-bodied, middle class, heterosexual) feminists made use of the term "woman". These assessments, which rely on an understanding of analytic categories as socially defined, draw attention to the process of categorization as an act of power and exclusion. It follows that the meanings attached to categories cannot be taken as given but must be understood as reflecting a particular (dominant) perspective and always contextually contingent (Zinn and Dill 1996).

As these critiques were extended and refined, some scholars turned their attention to how multiple social dimensions were conceptualized in academic studies, when they were considered at all. The simplifying assumption that various axes of difference could be treated as additive and separable was extensively critiqued (see, for example, Spelman 1988). If we assume, for example, that experiences of sexism and racism can be examined in isolation, as we implicitly do when we introduce a separate "sex" indicator and a separate "ethnicity" categorical variable in a linear regression model, there may be substantial loss of information (Sigle-Rushton 2014). The possibility that the gendered experiences of Black women differ from those of White women or that their racial oppression differs from that experienced by Black men is assumed away, and as a consequence, the experiences of some groups, most often the multiply marginalized, are erased and potentially misrepresented. Developed and deployed over most of its history without a label or name attached to them, these various criticisms were only brought together and given the name "intersectionality" by legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, in the 1980s (Kanpp 2005). "Its articulation gave voice to long-standing and widespread theoretical preoccupations and provided a much-needed frame of reference for the comparison and negotiation of various endeavours, opening up space for critical dialogue" (Sigle-Rushton and Lindstrom 2012).

Although it remains a rather loosely defined concept, its main theoretical premise, as I have come to understand it in my own work (Sigle-Rushton and Lindstrom 2012; Sigle-Rushton 2014), is that analytic categories and concepts (hierarchies, axes of differentiation, axes of oppression, social structures, normativities) are socially constructed and mutually modifying. If we accept that basic premise, we immediately encounter a number of methodological dilemmas that, while potentially productive, cannot be completely resolved.

Methodological Implications

Intersectionality is a methodologically demanding concept that lacks a clearly specified methodology (Nash 2008). This is more or less inevitable. I struggle to envision just what it would mean to *do* a quantitative intersectional study. It is telling, I think, that McCall's (2005) careful methodological reflection focuses not on approaches to intersectionality but rather on approaches for dealing with its (inevitable and enormous) complexity. When multiple social dimensions are conceptualized as fully interacted – particularly in the "era of

the independent variable" - the amount of information that we must collect and interpret (and without resorting to any exclusionary overgeneralization) quickly becomes intractable. Taken to its logical limit, we would end up splitting our samples into increasingly detailed groups until there is nothing left to study.

Nonetheless, we can be more or less intersectional in our thinking and approach. Accepting the basic premise of intersectionality means acknowledging that it is (potentially) problematic to conceptualise individuals, or any broad category of individuals, such as "women", as a homogenous group. A consideration of intersectionality's basic tenets directs our attention towards the specification, interpretation and use of categories as well as the explicit and implicit assumptions we make about how they relate to one another. It underscores the need to exercise care when extrapolating from what we observe at the population level to particular (small) groups within that population, particularly when those observations are informed by measures which are thought to represent, but do not measure directly, a number of meanings and processes. For example, the socio-economic benefits that accompany fertility postponement, on average, might not be experienced universally (Goisis and Sigle-Rushton 2014). Education and career opportunities, discrimination, and rapidly declining health might modify the net benefits of delay for some ethnic minority groups and, as a consequence, the meaning attached to measures of *early* or *late* motherhood may be qualitatively different for particular subpopulations. Armed only with summary statistics or parameter estimates that reflect the average experiences of the wider (larger) population, we might conclude that some groups of women are behaving "irrationally" and should be encouraged to delay parenthood (or to marry (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2004)) without asking whether they are likely to benefit in the same way from the processes thought to be attached to that behavioural change.

Integrating and incorporating these concerns requires a rich and detailed descriptive foundation and a careful consideration of how our studies are conceptualized. It means that we do more than simply acknowledge heterogeneity, but we also attempt to locate, understand, and explain it as an integral part of the research process. To make the complexity manageable, Collins (1999) suggests a pragmatic strategy in which we take as our starting point "a concrete topic that is already the subject of investigation and … find the combined effects of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation, where before only one or two interpretive categories were used." (278). The reference to nation here is perhaps worth emphasizing, both in general and in the context of this paper. The programmatic associated with intersectionality involves a consideration of the potentially complex, modifying and conditioning effects of the wider macro-level context. At the same time, it is also important to stress that its contribution to methodology should not amount to an embrace of complexity for the sake of it. The art of model building and theory will always involve some amount of simplification. We should decide which combined effects to consider with some care, and we should remove unnecessary complexity when there is not substantive or substantial loss of meaning (Sigle-Rushton 2014; Hobcraft and Sigle-Rushton

2012).   It is through its application as a “frame checker” and “method checker” (Garry 2011: 830), that I have come to think that intersectionality offers the most potential in my own work.

To inform and guide an exploration of complexity, one option is to apply what McCall (2005) describes as the intra-categorical approach.   This involves a narrow and intensive analysis of a group of individuals whose experiences may have been previously oversimplified or overlooked: small groups in a particular location and with a particular combination of characteristics. Comparisons with some more broadly defined category to which that subgroup belongs provides opportunities to identify differences that may be theoretically (outliers) or practically (the multiply marginalized) relevant (Sigle-Rushton and Lindstrom 2012). Although this “intra-categorical” approach (McCall 2005) stands in stark contrast the typical *ceteris paribus* approach in which the distinctive experiences of special groups or outliers are seen as something to be expunged or controlled as a confounding effect, it represents a way of thinking and an approach that is not at all foreign to demographers. At a macro-level, we see it reflected, for example, in Caldwell’s (1986) exploration of the relationship between GDP and health which focused intensively on high achievers – those countries with better than expected health given their national income. A similar logic might inspire a close consideration of groups such as non-white, migrants from poorer countries who have settled within a particular destination country, like the UK. This group, which is often observed to have better than average health and health behaviors than the more advantaged, native population, may provide meaningful information as high achievers at the micro-level. However as a small group, their experiences – a limited marital status differential, for example - are occluded when estimation methods that rely on population averages are utilized (Sigle-Rushton and Goisis 2013).

An intersectional perspective reminds us that efforts to reveal and explain distinct sources of heterogeneity can contribute to and take forward knowledge.   What is most relevant will, of course, depend on the aims and objectives of the study. For this reason, we must not lose sight of the research question and its underlying motivation when we apply intersectionality as a critical lens. What do we want to know, and why do we want to know it? These considerations should be made explicit and guide the conceptual and analytic strategy that is employed. Although I’m inclined to think this is good research practice in general, I will leave it to the reader to decide whether Nancy Riley (1998) is correct to suggest that “"Demographers have spent much less time examining the politics, background, and motivations of their work than have neighboring social science fields" (538). In any case, the need to manage the level of complexity that accompanies an intersectional perspective necessitates it. For this reason, the subsequent analysis, which provides an example of how intersectionalty can be used as a “method checker”, starts with a brief consideration of what we (might) want to know and why.

Bringing an Intersectional Perspective to the Study of Fertility and Family Policy in Europe

Background and Motivation

A large number of demographic studies of fertility and family policy, particularly those that involve the study of European countries, begin with some reference to recent trends and cross-national variations: Over the past 30 years, the total fertility rate (TFR) in the majority of European countries, fell from above- to below-replacement level (Sigle-Rushton and Kenney 2003; Sobotka 2004; Neyer and Andersson 2008). Although low fertility levels have persisted, levels and trends in the extent to which the total fertility rate falls short of replacement level varies substantially across countries. In many of the Southern and Eastern European countries, the TFR fell below the "lowest-low" threshold of 1.3 (Kohler, Billari, and Ortega 2002). In other countries, fertility fell far less dramatically and has been sustained at relatively high levels. Consistent with macro-level studies that report a reversal of the relationship between female employment and fertility from negative to positive in recent decades (Esping-Andersen 2002; Rindfuss Guzzo and Morgan 2003; Billari and Kohler 2004), many of these countries have female employment rates well above the EU average.

Against a backdrop of concerns about how best to manage and respond to the challenges of population ageing, and the introduction of mechanisms like the Open Method of Coordination to guide the development of social policy at the EU level[6], the overarching motivation of many studies appears to involve questions of best practice and policy sharing. What can (some of) those countries which have managed to achieve "highest-low" fertility (Andersson 2008) and high female employment, tell us about how other countries can manage demographic change? The Scandinavian countries, and Sweden in particular (Rønsen 2004), have been the focus much attention. Could their policies provide a "blueprint for reform" (Ferrarini and Duvander 2010) in other low-fertility countries? Recent reforms to the parental leave system in Germany which deviated substantially from previous policy logics and path dependencies have been described as an attempt to adopt and reap the benefits of the Nordic (Swedish) model (Geisler and Kreyenfeld 2012; Spieß and Wrohlich 2008). For this reason, it is a timely and policy-relevant question.

Applying Intersectionality as a Critical Tool

A consideration of intersectionality highlights a number of broad issues that we can use to organize and think about our approach to the study of family policy and fertility in Europe. Because it is concerned with the exclusions and loss of information involved when a diversity of subjects are treated as similar, or as similarly situated, intersectionality directs our attention both towards the wider social and economic context and to individual level

[6] http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/employment_and_social_policy/social_inclusion_fight_against_poverty/em0011_en.htm

heterogeneity within any particular context. It reminds us to remain ever vigilant to the fact that categorization and the construction of indicators is about the management of difference. Decisions we make about how to manage difference have consequences for what we see and how we understand social phenomenon. Consequently, intersectionality highlights the need to proceed with caution when attempting to extrapolate from one person to another and from one context to another.

Although often only implicitly set out, most demographic studies of fertility and family policy are guided by a model in which the direct and opportunity costs of childbearing influence individual decisions about the timing and number of children. As I understand it, this *implicit model* focuses on the various feasible combinations of time allocation and consumption and the preferences that people attach to them. It assumes that, at any given point in time, individuals consider all of the options in their choice set taking into account the immediate and long term implications, including the various feasible combinations of time use (study, work, care, and leisure) and the consumption these decisions allow. Childbearing effects consumption both directly (some resources are directed towards the child) and indirectly through the demands of time and the impact of childbearing on earnings and career progression. Individuals rank all of the options according to their preferences. They will only (attempt) to have a(nother) child if the most preferred option is one that involves childbearing. By altering the direct or indirect costs, policy can make (some) choices which involve childbearing relatively more attractive than competing options for some people and so affect overall fertility rates.

The implicit model is slightly more complicated than a very simple economic model which is perhaps its point of departure. A *very simple model* conceptualizes family policy as a single mechanism which reduces only the direct costs of childbearing for everyone and in the same way. A universal child benefit is perhaps a good example of the kind of policy that would work this way. The distinction between the *very simple* and the *implicit* model is important, and I will refer back to it as we go on. In contrast to the *very simple model* which involves the comparison of two states of the world and the only change that policy makes is through the increased level of consumption that it allows, the *implicit model* requires that we understand how policy influences individual choice sets and whether any changes to the ranking of different choices has a meaningful impact on what is determined to be the best choice. It is a model that is acknowledges individual diversity and the interaction of family policy with the labour market.

It is fairly straightforward to solve the *very simple model* as a utility maximization problem, aggregate the solution, and obtain an empirical model with the TFR as the dependent variable and some aggregate measure of policy expenditure or entitlement (which is the same if everyone receives the same benefit and universally) as an independent variable. The *implicit model* does not produce such a simple individual-level solution which can be aggregated in the same way. It is not necessary to go back to basic economic principles and

actually solve this dynamic optimization problem to come to this conclusion (although that is one strategy). Intersectionality and the feminist perspectives which underpin it have much to say about how we might introduce and accommodate the greater complexity of the implicit model as we try to develop and test this model empirically. Given our question and the *implicit model*, few would argue, after some critical reflection, that a cross-national comparison of aggregate measures like the TFR and average levels of spending on family policy would provide sufficient or useful evidence to construct a response to our question. First of all, intersectionality suggests that averages and aggregate measures may mask substantively relevant variations. Importantly, these variations might differ from one context to another. With reference to our research question, we might ask what "moderately high fertility" as represented by, for example, the TFR, is assumed to represent in the context of the research question, and whether this interpretation is justified with reference to our sample and analytic strategy. By way of illustration, suppose we consider that the moderate fertility/ high employment[7] group also includes England and Wales in its ranks. In a case study of England and Wales that I carried out a few years ago (Sigle-Rushton 2008; 2009), I described a moderately high but relatively disadvantaged (as measured by education level) fertility profile (as measured by the TFR) compared to other moderately high fertility countries (see also Rendall et al 2010). The UK exhibits a qualitatively different version of "moderately high fertility" than what is observed in the Scandinavian countries. If the pattern of moderately high fertility is qualitatively different across countries, there might be multiple paths to the same fertility level with differences that are relevant to how we answer the question about whether (Scandinavian-style) family policies should be exported to low fertility countries (because they will work to ameliorate some of the negative consequences of population ageing). The implicit model with its multiple choice sets affecting a diversity of individuals in a particular social and economic context, makes the simplistic interpretation of aggregate data far from straightforward.

A number of demographers have concluded that individual-level analyses are better suited for the study of how fertility outcomes respond to family policy (e.g. Neyer and Andersson 2008; Rønsen 2014), and so would be better suited to answer the question I have posed here. But individual-level analyses which rely on average levels of social expenditure (Kalwij 2010) or an indicator of the average (or some other "representative") benefit level will be of limited use. Measures of average social expenditure which do not account for the details of how that expenditure is accessed (the details of entitlement) and allocated fail to capture important variations in the design and delivery of policies. These concerns, which have been well articulated and have been influential in other disciplines, are particularly salient in the case of family policy which involves a vast array of policies, each complex in their design and delivery (Gauthier 2002; Thévenon 2011). Even if we could easily identify and separate out what is "family policy" from other policy, it is not clear that the average level of

[7] France and Ireland, have relatively high fertility as well (Sobotka 2004), but their female employment rates are closer to the EU average.

expenditure is in any way a valid indicator of the reduction in the direct costs of childbearing that the average person could anticipate. Moreover the extent to which it falls short of this interpretation may vary across countries depending on the way their policies are designed. Where the bulk of family policy takes the form of flat rate universal transfers and entitlements, we might expect a stronger correlation between average expenditures and incentives because the context will more closely resemble the *very simple model*. Where the policy package is more varied, complex and targeted, the correlation will likely be much weaker.

Welfare regimes were developed, in part, as a response to concerns about the use of crude social expenditure measures and represent an effort to develop theoretically grounded conceptual measures which reflect "more fine-grained distinctions among patterns of social provision" (Pierson 1996: 150) that vary across national contexts.[8] Recently some demographers have sought to include measures of this kind in macro-analyses linking policy and fertility (Luci-Greulich and Thévenon 2013). Their findings indicate that differences in the policy approach as well as the wider policy regime may significantly moderate estimated associations between policy effort and outcomes. While this work makes a valuable contribution, it tells us little about *how* the broad differences in policy approach impact on individual-level choice sets and rankings within a particular context either. This is an important additional consideration if we are interested in identifying best practice and advocating for its adoption elsewhere.

Here is might be helpful to return to the simple theoretical model of decision-making that I outlined earlier. By acknowledging different choice sets, its additional complexity is inherently intersectional. Consider, for example, a person who is very committed to remaining in employment whether or not she has children. All of her top-ranking choices will likely involve a fairly rapid return to work. A cash-for-care policy will have no impact on the position of the top choice and any new alternative that the policy makes feasible. As a consequence, its "value" to her – through its impact on the overall cost of childbearing -- is effectively zero, rather less than the average level of expenditure or entitlement would suggest. The same policy might, however, influence the decision of a person who wants to stay at home with her children when they are young, but has previously found that option too costly. In that case, the policy innovation could make the second choice (withdraw from work and stay home) attractive enough that it becomes her top choice. However, policy is often even more complicated than that. A recent Swedish reform which allows parents to combine the cash for care payment with tax reliefs for paid domestic work which make it cheaper to hire a nanny might make the cash for care policy valuable for some women who want to return to work, but only those with a sufficient level of earnings that it is financially

[8] The welfare regime literature is often seen as the bridge which allowed feminist perspectives to enter the social policy mainstream literature, both because its inattention to gender issues provided a focus of critique, and because it is seen as a compromise between the large N, crude measure approach of the mainstream and the detailed case study approach that characterised the feminist literature.

feasible to outsource care in this way (Tunberger and Sigle-Rushton 2010). Complexities like these mean it is extremely unlikely that the average level of expenditure is in any way a valid indicator of the reduction in the direct and indirect costs of childbearing that the average person – or indeed the individual "on the margin" who might be incentivized to have a child – could expect to receive. Again, the nature and the impact of these complexities are likely to vary across countries.

A consideration of intersectionality focuses attention on how we might understand and model the "fertility-relevant structuring effects" (Neyer and Andersson 2008: 707) of family policy on particular groups of individuals, situated in particular contexts. On the one hand, its emphasis on the diversity of subject positions highlights the need to consider a wide range of conditioning factors at the individual, meso- and macro-level. The incentive effects of some policies depend on an individual's wage and employment history, and family policy entitlements operate as labour market regulations, so it is difficult to understand the impact of family policies without (at least) also taking into account the labour market and the wider economy (Tunberger and Sigle-Rushton 2014). The UK case, again, provides a useful illustration. Although in recent years, entitlements to paid leave have been extended and improved, the British family policy model remains far less generous, and so much less expensive, than the family policy packages that characterize the Scandinavian countries. My analysis[9] allowed me to hypothesize that the highest-low fertility enjoyed in England and Wales might well depend on its flexible, low-wage labour market (with easy entry and exit), high levels of inequality, and an income support system with benefits that are not generally categorized as family policy but that make it easier for low earners to become mothers at young ages even if they have not built up entitlements to maternity leave benefits (Sigle-Rushton 2009). If my hypothesis is correct, the sudden import of the Swedish model, which would involve stronger incentives for lower earners to postpone childbearing, might actually reduce fertility. Similarly, tax relief for paid domestic work and child care is only feasible if it is affordable. This requires that the purchaser earns (far) more than the provider of care (Donath 2000; Himmelweit 2007) . In labour markets with fairly compressed wages, the option will be feasible for only a small segment of the population. The take-up and impact of this new Swedish policy (which has been rather low) might be far greater if exported to

[9] "In this more residual family policy setting, career interruptions for childbearing can carry substantial economic costs for moderate to higher earning women. When minimal family policies are embedded in economies with high levels of earnings inequality, low levels of labour market regulation and low levels of firm-specific investment in workers (so that firing or demoting workers is relatively easy and inexpensive for firms) , the incentive to delay amongst the highest earners is likely to be intensified because early motherhood might result in relegation to the "mommy track" (especially if she wants to reduce her working hours) and substantially reduced lifetime earnings. For this reason, a minimal family policy regime creates incentives for these women to postpone….and the ultimate result is likely to be higher levels of childlessness (and smaller completed family size) amongst the most qualified and highest earners….For more disadvantaged women, movement into and out of employment in this sort of setting is not very costly since they are unlikely to obtain positions with great opportunities for advancement and their earnings trajectories tend to be flat. Moreover when the labour market is poorly regulated and the earnings at the bottom of the distribution are near the benefit level, the existence of low-level means tested benefits might provide insurance against early childbearing, but only for the lowest earners" (Sigle-Rushton 2009).

the UK setting. To answer questions of policy sharing we need to understand, and therefore model, the policy mechanisms and their impact on different groups in different institutional contexts (see, for example, Shalev 2008).

On the other hand, intersectionality takes issue with the way a large number of control variables have typically been accommodated in statistical models. It suggests that models which introduce all of the confounding effects as linear, additive and separable components may be inappropriate. The distinction between the *implicit* and the *very simple* model that I referred to earlier makes this clear. The very simple conceptualization of family policy – which sees policy effects as uniform and universal – allows us to isolate the impact of policy on consumption as a single, independent term. With this simple conceptualization of policy, individual and contextual characteristics represent systematic differences in preferences that are policy independent. They represent compositional corrections. In connection to this model, intersectionality asks that we consider whether the compositional corrections are adequately specified with additive and linear controls so that we can interpret the parameter estimate with confidence. This is an assumption that many demographers were happy to make as they marched bravely forward into the era of the independent variable.

When we think about intersectionality in the context of the implicit theoretical model - which acknowledges the complexity of policy on individual choice sets – we cannot mathematically isolate the family policy incentive in the same way. A statistical model that does not also take into account how these individual and contextual characteristics modify the impact of a policy is misspecified because the implicit model explicitly acknowledges that the impact of policy on fertility is complex and varies across groups. If the implicit model guides our thinking, models which do not take the intersectionality of the policy design and impact into account are difficult to interpret in any meaningful way. Of course, modelling this complexity directly is extremely difficult.

Guided a desire to isolate causal effects, some of the methodological approaches and advanced econometric techniques employed by family demographers have, for good reasons (some of which we have touched on above), sought to “control for” the confounding effects of individual and contextual diversity by attempting to remove rather than model it. Often these methods involve study designs which eliminate difference by making increasingly narrow comparisons of people who are as similar as possible except for their exposure to a particular policy or set of policies. One strategy[10] is to make use of family policy innovations that take place within a particular context and that intentionally or unintentionally incentivize certain behaviours. Comparing the fertility levels and trends of various groups of people before and after the “critical juncture” (Neyer and Andersson 2008) when a policy was implemented removes a number of potentially important

[10] The same concerns arise with other types of analytic strategies that rely on comparisons of individuals who are "most similar" and exploit policy variation across a particular administrative or categorical boundary (usually within the same country).

confounding factors, making it more likely that observed patterns represent a real behavioural response. The 1980 “speed premium” in Sweden[11] (Hoem 1993) has been used in this way, and evidence from a number of studies suggests that people of all education levels responded to the policy change, as predicted, with shorter birth intervals. Comparisons with other Scandinavian countries (roughly similar in terms of their economic, social, and political context) that did not adopt a similar policy bolster this interpretation (Andersson, Hoem, and Duvander 2006).

A consideration of intersectionality reminds us that the same concerns which motivate decisions to apply this analytic strategy – the potentially important confounding effects of the wider context – problematise efforts to extrapolate even the most convincing causal evidence to other contexts, particularly, but not only[12], when that other context is very different. While evidence from models which minimize difference may be extremely useful in relation to some aims and objectives, intersectionality reminds us that it is important to consider just what the evidence shows and how we can interpret and apply it. Methods which isolate the causal of effect of a particular innovation like the "speed premium" provide information about the marginal effect of a particular incentive which was included as part of a wider family policy package. It does not tell us much about whether we can attribute Sweden's relatively benign demographic profile to its generous and comprehensive family policy model. It does not tell us much, if anything about, how that policy would operate if introduced and embedded in a different policy setting. If the primary or eventual aim of the study is to say something about how policymakers in other (usually lower fertility contexts) can increase fertility, findings like these are of limited use, at least on their own.

To conclude from the previous discussion that we should abandon efforts to study the relationship between fertility and family policy would be to use a counsel of perfection to endorse a counsel of despair. That is not my intention. While it is clear that many of the approaches that have become standard in demographic literature have important limitations in connection to this research question, no method is without limitations. Good research practice requires that we evaluate the relative importance of the limitations and use that knowledge to guide our choice of method. My fear is that the uncritical acceptance of the very simple economic model has led to its uncritical empirical deployment even when we acknowledge in our implicit theoretical discussions that it is inaapropriate. The consequence is a potentially confusing and limited body of evidence. What I have set out here is a call for more evaluation and assessment of our methods as they relate to particular research questions and endeavours. We might, in the process, make better use of previous

[11] The speed premium entitles women to a continuous, wage-related parental leave benefit if they have another child while still in the first 30 months of leave.
[12] As Rønsen and Skrede (2010) discuss, differences in the family policy packages of Scandinavian countries might be important and might explain differential responses to external shocks such as the recession.

methodological insights and identify new areas of enquiry which can complement current projects or sharpen their approach.

If we are interested in the wider questions about how (best) to respond to low fertility, I think it is clear that we cannot proceed without a careful and detailed understanding of the relevant policy contexts and how they shape decision-making. We might find a new appreciation for previous demographic methodologies – descriptive and group-focused -- which were increasingly set aside as we moved into the era of independent variable. Similarly, case study approaches which delve more into both the social context and the detail of policies and which seek to understand any differential treatment and incentive effects, can be used to inform the design and interpretation of subsequent studies. The special collection of articles on Childbearing in Europe which was published in Demographic Research in 2008[13] provides some excellent examples of material that could be used in this way. Neither approach provides solid evidence of causality, but both could help generate testable hypotheses which would help us tease out meaningful causal relationships in creative ways. We can and should make use of findings from studies in other disciplines which apply these approaches, but I would like to see more work of this kind carried out by demographers, guided by our own research interests and questions and published in the pages of demography journals.

Conclusions

In the past two decades, intersectionality has transformed feminist theory and politics which, as part of a larger theoretical movement, has influenced the way research is conducted in most of the social sciences. Although demographic research relies to a great extent on the theoretical perspectives of other disciplines, there is little evidence that these critical perspectives have been embraced or integrated in any meaningful way. In this paper, I attempted to illustrate how intersectionality, when used as a standard against which we can interrogate our methodology, could be used to think about our analytic strategies and the relevance of the evidence we produce.

While demographers have paid increasingly careful attention to issues of causality, it is just as important to consider what those findings mean and how they can be put to use. To refer back to the example I focus on in this paper: given the prominent and widespread concerns about how best to address low fertility and ageing populations, I think it unfortunate that so few studies have acknowledged, much less thought carefully about how to produce, the kind of evidence needed to provide an evidence-based answer to *that* question. A comprehensive and defensible answer requires that we understand whether we can attribute the high fertility we see in one particular setting to its policy package and how that policy package, if moved somewhere else, would operate. To do so requires that we understand not just *whether* but *how* policy and outcomes are linked, and any method that

[13] http://www.demographic-research.org/special/7/

assumes away (with gaps between the theoretical or empirical model) or designs away the *how* is removing a crucial part of the answer.

To be clear, I am not calling for a rejection of what I see as the dominant economic perspective and approach that characterises much of the extant literature in family demography, but rather an uncritical, almost internalized acceptance of some aspects of it. It is time to worry when certain ways of thinking, certain approaches, and certain priorities are internalized to the point that they go without saying whatever the question, whatever the underlying motivation for asking it, and however many additional complexities we acknowledge might be relevant. If and when this happens, a more interdisciplinary critical perspective can be a valuable, if somewhat disruptive and importunate friend.

Of course, many of the issues I discuss could be identified and developed without making any reference to intersectionality. In an excellent methodological reflection which was described as "Drawing on sociological and political science research, [to] outline how studies of the effects of policies are best designed conceptually and methodologically in order to measure potential effects or non-effects of the policies." (700), Neyer and Andersson (2008) touch on many of the same issues that I identify in my analysis.[14] The extrapolation of evidence from research designs that deal with complexity by seeking to remove it is another example. Nancy Cartwright's critiques of Randomized Controlled Trials as the gold standard of social evidence (e.g. Cartwright and Hardie 2012) - a presumption that I think has figured prominently in the intellectual trajectory of research in economics and has spilled over into demography - makes roughly the same argument but with other conceptual tools. My main point is not that everyone should adopt and apply the particular conceptual tool that I utilize here, but rather that demography would benefit from the adoption of a wider range of tools which, in one way or another, invite (more) critical reflection. It is possible, without the (explicit) assistance or prompt of a theoretical tool, to think critically about our motivations, methods and the extent to which they are aligned (e.g. Kravdal 2010). While not strictly necessary, good theory can, however, help organize and direct that endeavour.

[14] This is to be expected because sociology and political science have been rather more influenced by critical race and feminist perspectives than demography which, in turn, draw on the criticisms that comprise intersectionality.

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