

# A conceptual framework for migrant fertility

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[Please contact me with any questions. Thanks.]

## Abstract

Despite a long history of research on migrant fertility convergence (e.g. J. A. Hill 1913; Myers & Macisco 1975; Spengler 1931), it remains unclear how convergence should be defined, and how it should be investigated. Efforts to compile and evaluate empirical evidence on migrant fertility convergence, as well as assimilation and adaptation, may well be undermined by this lack of conceptual clarity. Comparisons of different strands of U.S. research make it clear that conclusions about the convergence of Mexican and Hispanic migrant fertility are dependent upon the way that convergence is defined, which in turn dictates the methods and measures used to compare the fertility of migrant generations (Bean, Swicegood, & Berg 2000; Frank & Heuveline 2005; Parrado & Morgan 2008). In order to provide a foundation for future research, this paper therefore undertakes a review of the concepts and methods that have been used to study immigrant fertility, and the fertility of subsequent migrant generations. In doing so, the paper proposes a conceptual typology of migrant fertility convergence that can be used as a critical tool to assess the current state of knowledge and to guide the design of new empirical studies.

## Extended abstract

Demographers have long been interested in understanding the differences in fertility between migrants and natives, and how these change over time (Claghorn 1901; Dumont 1894, 1897; J. A. Hill 1913; Kuczynski 1901, 1902). Although not always mentioned explicitly, the concept of convergence is often used to investigate this change. It has become increasingly important for the literature on migrant fertility, and has informed the development of research questions, theories, and hypotheses. Convergence lies behind some of the most prominent theories that have been used to explain migrant childbearing, in particular assimilation and adaptation. In a variety of settings, and using a range of different methods, researchers have investigated whether migrants *converge*, *assimilate*, or *adapt* to the fertility norms (of natives) at their destination (e.g. Dumont 1894; Forste & Tienda 1996; Goldscheider & Uhlenberg 1969; Goldstein & Goldstein 1983; Hervitz 1985; J. A. Hill 1913; L. E. Hill & Johnson 2004; Kulu 2005; Lorimer 1956; Myers & Macisco 1975; Sobotka 2008; Zarate & de Zarate 1975). However, there is relatively little research that has compared the analysis of migrant fertility across these different settings (although see: Zarate & de Zarate 1975).

Across the literature, it has been argued that knowledge of convergence is important for understanding and predicting the demographic impacts of migration, not only for migrants' destinations, but also for the migrants themselves. But there is no clear and accepted definition of what migrant fertility convergence means. Indeed, the concept is often introduced and applied without reference to the varied and ambiguous meanings that have been attached to it in previous research. For example, a recent study of European fertility states that "*a case of a complete convergence has not thus far been recorded*" (Sobotka 2008, p. 231). However, it remains unclear what "*complete convergence*" means and how it can be measured empirically. Indeed, this lack of clarity may explain why this statement seems at odds with the conclusions of earlier research on Western Europe, which has stated that: "*Convergence with the fertility of the host society has been achieved by almost all Mediterranean populations*" (Coleman 1994, p. 122). This article therefore aims to assess how migrant fertility convergence can be defined and tested empirically, and to use the empirical approaches derived from this assessment to guide a consideration of data needs and gaps in existing knowledge. It will meet this aim by undertaking a critical analysis in three parts.

The first part of this article defines the foundational concept ‘convergence’, and then evaluates what happens when we add the qualifiers ‘migrant’ and ‘fertility’. The analysis begins with this approach because no conceptual foundation currently exists in the literature. There is no clear or agreed definition in the literature on how to conceptualise migrant fertility convergence, and the foundations of the concept have never been explicitly clarified. Three conceptual definitions of *migrant fertility convergence* are established as a result of this analysis, and the remainder of the article is structured by discussing these definitions in turn.

The second part of this article evaluates each of the conceptual definitions in order to derive an empirical approach for measuring and testing migrant fertility convergence. This step in the analysis is necessary because testable definitions have not been derived by the literature in a consistent form, and because crude definitions do not provide sufficient detail to locate important gaps in knowledge or to develop the most appropriate study design that will address them.

The final section will use the conceptual typology to identify some of the directions for future research and to highlight some of the most pressing data needs.

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