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978-0-521-13447-7 - Thinking About Children: Sociology and Fertility in Post-War England

Joan Busfield and Michael Paddon

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Sociology and fertility in Post-War England

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*For our parents
and Lindsay*

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Preface

I

When we began this book we intended it to be the report of a survey of the 'social determinants of fertility', based on questionnaire interviews with some 300 women and most of their husbands, who were living in Ipswich in 1969-70. Our aim was to elucidate the factors influencing the couples' pattern of childbearing with a view to explaining both the changes in the birth rate in England in the post-war period and the differences in levels of fertility between various social groups. What we have written is now both less than and more than this. On the one hand, though the purpose of the study has not changed very markedly over time, our ideas about the value of survey research for answering the sorts of questions that interested us have. Our growing awareness of the limitations of research using structured and closed-ended questionnaire techniques and of the particular weaknesses of our own survey has diminished the importance we attach to the data that we obtained by this method, and its role in this book is now relatively minor. Instead we have made use of data from a variety of other sources, especially our own preliminary pilot study of 50 women, carried out in the same town in 1966-7. The interviews were much more open in their structure than those for the survey and the quality of data obtained at this stage of the research is very different. It is these interviews that have provided the bulk of the data for the substantive portions of the book.

On the other hand this book, like any other report of sociological research, provides an account of the research activity itself, and in this instance the account may be just as interesting as much of the substantive content of the research. Most reports of research tend to gloss over the activities involved in producing the final account. Although the 'methodology' sections outline the basic procedures used, much of the detail gets lost; all we have is the finished product and relatively little information as to how it was achieved. To some extent this is inevitable; as ethno-methodologists have shown us, providing an 'adequate' account can be an infinite task, and is usually sensibly routinised. However, whether desirable or not, with this research the conventional gloss was impossible to achieve. For the research was carried out by several people, and we found, as the work progressed, that we did not agree amongst ourselves: we did not agree about the value of certain theoretical approaches, about the way to understand and interpret the data we had obtained, or about what conclusions could be drawn from our material. Moreover no amount of discussion could reconcile our differences, for they are differences not only about

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specific methods and specific theories, but also about the nature of sociological activity itself. Such disagreements reflect the state of sociology and, where they exist, do not yield a ready compromise.

For us there were two alternatives. The one was to incorporate the disagreement within the covers of the same book and to attempt some dialogue between ourselves in the account of the research that we offered. The other was to present two separate accounts of the research, for the strongest disagreement was between the two of us who had worked the longest on the research, Joan Busfield and Geoffrey Hawthorn. Initially we chose the first alternative since this would allow some direct debate between us. In time, however, the necessity of adopting the second became more obvious. The problem was that even where we did agree about some of the details of an argument we did not agree about the way the point should be made, or about the sort of language that should be used to make it, so that the common ground between us came to seem smaller and smaller. We finally decided, therefore, to write two separate accounts of the research that we had carried out together. In theory at least the advantage of writing two accounts of the same empirical research is that it makes rather forcefully the familiar point that data is not neutral, waiting to be collected and displayed according to its inherent truth and reality; any data can be understood and interpreted in a variety of different ways. In practice we will in the end, almost certainly have used so little of the same material from the large amount we collected that the way in which the data has been interpreted and each account constructed will be less visible than we had anticipated. Nevertheless, we hope that comparison of two studies that focus on the same questions and draw upon the same body of research data will provide a better insight into contemporary sociological activity than other simpler research presentations. To our knowledge we will be unique in presenting as co-researchers alternative accounts of one body of research material. We do not advocate that this should be the standard method of reporting, not least because other research teams agree more closely than we did. But this does not make a single account less selective or biased: it is just less obviously so. With two accounts, however divergent, the 'cover up' is less successful.

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This book has, therefore, a double nature. On the one hand we discuss certain general theoretical and methodological issues in sociology by examining the history of one project, and the assumptions on which it was based. On the other we offer the beginnings of an explanation of marriage and childbearing in post-war England which draws on the substantive data obtained from that project. This twofold nature has created problems of structure and organisation, which we have handled in the following way.

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In our introductory chapter, after some preliminary comments about the nature of the study, we outline the demographic changes in post-war England in their historical context and consider some of their implications for family life. The first section of the book then deals with theoretical questions. In Chapters 2 and 3 we discuss two dominant theoretical traditions that have influenced attempts to explain patterns of marriage and childbearing: the Malthusian and the utilitarian. We conclude the first section by outlining in Chapter 4 our own theoretical presuppositions. This chapter is an essential preliminary to the methodological chapters that follow. Together with Chapter 5 it provides some account of how we reached the particular ideas, interpretations and conclusions that we put forward in the substantive chapters of the book.

The second section, focussing on questions of research design, describes both the development of the research and our retrospective judgements on the decisions that were made. Chapter 5 provides a chronological history of the research covering both the pilot and survey stages, which briefly describes its institutional and intellectual context and origins. In Chapter 6 we point to some of the main errors of the research when judged by conventional methodological standards, whilst in Chapter 7 we question an underlying premise of its design: that a survey was the best method of data collection available to us. Those more interested in our attempt to explain patterns of marriage and childbearing may wish to skip this section of the book, at least initially.

The third and final section presents our ideas about marriage and childbearing in post-war England. Chapter 8 deals with the ideological context of marriage and considers some of the factors that have encouraged increasing proportions to marry, and to marry at younger ages over this century up until recently. In Chapter 9 we turn to childbearing itself and describe some of the common ideas and beliefs that provide a context for decisions about having children in this society. Having examined this common set of ideas, in Chapter 10 we look at ideological variation, and set out a number of ideological perspectives which are associated with different images of family life and different ideas about family size and spacing, and also have implications for contraceptive use. Following this Chapter 11 turns to questions of uncertainty, conflict and change in ideas about family size and spacing, examining how these are effected by negotiation between husband and wife as well as their effect on contraceptive practice. Chapter 12 concentrates exclusively on the problem of realising intentions about having children and considers both the role of contraception and the more general influences on its use, apart from those intentions. The subsequent and concluding chapter draws together the threads of the previous arguments of the book by pointing to some of the factors that have contributed to trends in family size and spacing in post-war England.

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The number of those who have contributed to this research at some time or other is enormous and we could not hope to mention them all. Financial support for the pilot study was provided by the Nuffield Foundation, and for the survey by the Social Science Research Council. In addition the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex gave funds on a number of occasions for research assistance and data analysis.

Janet Cabot and Brenda Corti gave especial help with data collection and analysis; Diana Barker and Liz McGovern both acted as research assistants on the project at different times and were a valuable source of information and testing ground for our ideas; Phil Holden's regular help with computing was essential to us; Marion Haberhauer and Penny McHale helped to transform chaotic drafts into ordered typescripts; Diana Gittins, Stephen Hatch and Alan Ryan all spared some of their time to comment on drafts of various chapters; and Ruth Cohen helped with the proof reading.

Though Geoffrey Hawthorn does not agree with much of our argument, we are especially grateful to him for refusing to accept our view of sociology in general and of this research in particular, thereby forcing us to clarify our own ideas. Without the part that he has played this would be a different, and we believe, worse book.

Finally, Michael Lane has contributed to the research in a variety of ways, not least by pointing to numerous infelicities of style and argument in the drafts for this book; by advocating the view that a sociological text should not deter the reader with arid and confusing professional jargon; and by rejecting the belief that consensus and conformity are necessarily a moral good.

To them, to the men and women who talked to us so freely and willingly about having children, and to all our friends and colleagues, past and present, who have given help and support, we would like to express our thanks.