

Demographic transition theory and anthropological views of population growth

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- Demographic transition theory
 - Populations generally rose only slowly until a recent “demographic transition”
 - birth (fertility) rates were high, but so were mortality (death) rates
 - that is, lots of children died in infancy and childhood, and adults tended to die fairly young
 - but had lots of children, which kept the population constant or slowly rising
 - the transition was started by improved medical care and control of disease through improved sanitation
 - better water supplies
 - more attention to sewage disposal and other waste disposal in cities
 - this reduced the death rate
 - birth rates remained high, as they always were
 - so population began to rise rapidly
 - the transition was completed in some countries as the birth rate declined back into balance
 - as people came to trust that more children would survive
 - and to see that too many children were a burden they could not handle
 - values shifted towards smaller families
 - in part, this was made possible by the availability of contraception
 - but some ways to limit family size have always been available
 - abstinence
 - encouraged by norms of late marriage
 - or rules about avoiding sex during certain times, activities, until a child is weaned, etc.
 - herbal and mechanical methods of abortion
 - infanticide
 - what really matters is that the culture changed to favor smaller families
 - as a rational response to the better survival rates of children
 - and maybe to the shift from rural to urban, wage-labor life
- some countries have completed the transition
 - mostly the more developed countries
 - so they have low population growth rates
 - not counting the immigrants from countries that are still growing rapidly
- other countries are still in the transitional phase, with lowered death rates, but still high birth rates
 - mostly the less developed countries
 - so their populations are growing rapidly
 - in this view, these countries, too, will complete the transition to low birth rates
 - just as the developed countries did
 - for the same, rational, practical reasons

- the only reason that they have not yet completed the transition is that it takes time for cultures to change
 - especially ones that seem irrationally conservative and resistant to change
- Assumptions of demographic transition theory
 - 1. Robbins puts it a different way, but the key assumption is that human fertility is normally, naturally, high
 - people like sex, and in the absence of contraception, will churn out as many kids as biology allows
 - this is just a biological given
 - anthropologists know that this is simply not true
 - many societies have practices that keep their fertility below the biological maximum (some noted above)
 - some a lot, some a little, some not at all
 - so fertility rates vary widely, for cultural reasons
 - we can't just assume that humans automatically breed at full speed
 - if some group does have high fertility, we need to explain why
 - since others successfully opt to be less fertile
 - it is incorrect to assume that high fertility has just always automatically been the case until now
 - 2. the only solution to rapid population growth is medical contraception
 - again, since fertility has varied widely among past and present societies without medical contraception,
 - there must be other ways to reduce fertility
 - in fact, ones that people have voluntarily used for millennia
 - 3. resistance to using medical contraception is irrational
 - due to outmoded religious beliefs
 - stubborn cultural conservatism, etc.
 - 4. population growth is a result of
 - biological factors
 - (reduced mortality rates plus continuing high fertility rates)
 - rather than cultural ones
 - (incentives for laborers to have lots of kids, due to the situation created for them by capitalism)
 - demographic transition theory conveniently directs concern away from problems with the culture of capitalism
 - and towards solutions that the capitalist system can provide without making painful changes (and maybe even for a profit)
 - this is not necessarily why demographic transition theory was developed
 - but it is almost certainly why it is easily accepted by many people
 - it fits in with the culture of capitalism, rather than pointing out a problem with it
 - in the same way that neoclassical economic ideology fits in with the culture of capitalism
 - people find it easy to accept

- because it justifies their roles as consumers, laborers, and capitalists,
- even though it should be easy to see the many ways in which it is incorrect or ineffective
- What affects population growth rates?
 - demographic transition theory assumes that without medical contraception, the only variable is the mortality (death) rate
 - assumes that fertility is naturally always going to be as high as human biology allows
 - only a correspondingly high mortality rate has limited population growth before the modern demographic transition
 - but Robbins correctly catalogs a bunch of other factors that have affected population growth rates
 - fertility is not always at some biological maximum, for many reasons:
 - different cultures have very different birth spacing (average time between childbirths)
 - nursing (breast feeding) reduces fertility
 - so in cultures in which mothers nurse infants for a long time, up to five or more years,
 - mothers tend to have children spaced farther apart
 - and so have fewer in their lifetimes
 - cultural norms for how long to nurse vary widely, so birth spacing, and hence fertility, do also
 - post-partum abstinence rules can reduce fertility
 - some societies prohibit sex for a period, sometimes years, after childbirth
 - obviously increasing birth spacing and reducing fertility
 - different cultures have different rules for when a woman can become sexually active
 - if sex is mostly restricted to marriage, and women don't marry until, say, age 25
 - they will have fewer years in which to bear children than will women who start having sex at 15
 - other cultural factors may also affect fertility, but their importance is not clear
 - polygyny (a man having multiple wives) might reduce the number of children each wife has
 - death rates and migration rates also affect population growth in a region
 - some of these factors are also affected by culture, not just biology
 - the examples Robbins gives prove his point: people *have* adjusted their rate of population growth to fit their circumstances
 - so the assumption of demographic transition theory that population growth is due to naturally maximum fertility combined with artificially reduced mortality is just not complete
 - since people in the past have adjusted their fertility, we need to look at why growing populations have high fertility
 - we can't just assume that it is a biological given
 - that can only be fixed by medical contraception
 - and that all rational people will eventually want to do so

- example: foragers before the adoption of agriculture, or like the !Kung prior to the 1970s
 - were fairly healthy, did not have extremely high mortality rates
 - much lower mortality than their farming descendants
 - whose populations exploded
 - yet their populations grew at miniscule rates for tens of thousands of years
 - they must have controlled fertility through cultural means (well documented for the !Kung)
 - like long nursing
 - infanticide
 - etc.
 - probably in order to fit with a lifestyle in which the mother had to carry each infant while she was foraging, so she would not want more than one at a time
- In fact, populations began growing rapidly *before* significant modern reductions in mortality rates
 - Egypt from 2.5 million to 9 million in the 19th century
 - Mexico from 5.8 million to 16.5 million in the 19th century
 - we can't attribute this to modern medicine or sanitation
 - if it wasn't reduced mortality, then something else must have caused fertility to rise
- So, why have populations been rising rapidly since the early 19th century?
 - maybe in more recent times, in some cases, in part, due to reduced mortality, as demographic transition theory claims
 - but in some cases, that cannot be the reason, or can only be part of the reason
 - certainly also due to economic incentives to have larger families
 - due to more intensive agriculture in general
 - which requires more labor
 - due to colonial policies of
 - demanding more production from farmers
 - so they naturally want more kids to help with the work
 - using the best land for plantations
 - so subsistence farmers have to put more work in to survive on the remaining poorer land
 - so they want more kids to work
 - forcing families to provide males to work on plantations
 - so they want more kids to make up for the lost labor
 - paying for labor
 - so families want to have more kids out there earning wages
- Wealth flows theory
 - a fancy term for the idea that parents regulate the number of kids they have, and largely in response to the economic incentives
 - in general:
 - in less-developed countries, supporting kids is cheap

- so their labor under the situations above is a net gain
- lots of kids mean better support for the parents in old age
- wealth flows from children to parents
- in more developed countries, supporting kids is expensive
 - as in our case, with high costs of goods, health care, and education required for them
 - wealth flows from parents to children
- if kids are expected to be a net financial, social, political, etc. gain for the parents
 - (wealth flows from children to parents)
 - their labor produces more than they require in food, clothing, etc.
 - or their future labor will guarantee the comfort of the parents
 - or a large family is more prestigious,
 - or a large family can better defend its claims to land or other resources, etc.
 - then parents will tend to have a lot of kids
- if kids are expected to be a drain on the parents
 - (wealth flows from parents to children)
 - then families will tend have just a few kids
- Robbins ties this to extended versus nuclear family structures
 - in societies that emphasize extended family networks
 - wealth generally flows from children to parents
 - social ties outside the husband-wife pair are most important
 - parents have many kids
 - in societies that emphasize nuclear family structures,
 - wealth generally flows from parents to children
 - wide kin network is lost
 - parents have few kids
 - values stress greater individual independence, less kin support
- so controlling fertility will involve shifting from extended families to nuclear ones
 - hmm.
- Gender roles explanations
 - where women depend on men and children for economic support, they will have a lot of kids
 - as in the Barbados example
 - in the 1950s
 - fathers often absent, weak bonds to wives and children
 - strong bonds between mothers and children
 - due to extreme scarcity of decent-paying work, mostly available to men
 - women had to accept poor treatment because they needed a man's income, and there was a shortage of men due to migration
 - women used sex to keep their man around
 - producing lots of children
 - women worked to maintain close ties to their children
 - expecting the children to help support them
 - by the 1980s,
 - women did not depend much on men for income

- plantation work had declined drastically
- more factory and tourism jobs were available to women
- so women do not put up with as much mistreatment from men
- marriages are expected to be more equal
 - focusing more on the spouse requires focusing less on the mother
 - so children see themselves as less bound to their mothers
- children are expected to be a cost, not a financial support
- so fertility and population growth have dropped
- Wealth flow theory and gender role explanations are anthropological and culturally relativist
 - unlike demographic transition theory, which has an ethnocentric aspect
 - it assumes that people in high-fertility populations are irrational
 - they don't believe that most of their children will survive
 - they stick to irrationally conservative cultural norms that no longer make sense
 - if only those people could be as rational as we are, they wouldn't have so many kids!
 - in fact, cultural relativists say that people in high-fertility populations are just as rational as we are
 - they are just responding to different economic realities
- So?
 - If you want to reduce population growth, the answer is not just to hand out contraceptives (although that could help)
 - instead, it is to change the economic (and maybe other, like religious) circumstances so that choosing to have fewer kids makes sense
 - you are never going to convince people to have fewer kids when their survival now or in old age depends on having lots of kids!
 - At some point, population becomes a problem
 - but we don't know if we are approaching that point, or not
 - so we don't really know if reducing population growth should be a priority or not
 - if the costs are high, do we want to push for population control?
 - There may be a substantial cost: reducing population growth may involve shifting from extended families to nuclear ones
 - I am not entirely convinced of this one, and it sounds like Robbins backtracks on it, too
 - but if true, this is a big change in social organization of many cultures
 - at the very least, nuclear families encourage consumption
 - more households require more basic subsistence goods: pots and pans, stoves, cars, etc.
 - shifting wealth from parents to kids encourages kids to consume
 - all this new consumption is good for the economy
 - but bears with it all the ills of consumer culture that we saw earlier
 - there may be other social and psychological costs to losing the extended family support network
 - is it worth it to control population?
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