A New Tool For Exploring the History of American Women's Fertility Outcomes and Behaviors: The Integrated Fertility Survey Series

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This poster will describe progress on a 5 year project funded by NICHD to harmonize approximately 50 years worth of data on the fertility behavior of American women.  The projected is entitled the *Integrated Fertility Survey Series.*

The central goal of the project is to produce a harmonized dataset of U.S. family and fertility surveys spanning the 1955-2002 period, including the 1955 and 1960 Growth of American Families (GAF); the 1965 and 1970 National Fertility Survey (NFS); and the 1973, 1976, 1982, 1988, 1995, and 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (Cycles 1-6 of the NSFG). This new Integrated Fertility Survey Series (IFSS) and its associated data products will facilitate analyses across time, yielding new insights into changes in fertility and the family.

The past five decades have witnessed marked shifts in family and fertility patterns, which have been widely studied by social scientists and policy researchers from a broad range of disciplines. These include changes in union formation, union dissolution, childbearing, and attitudes about a range of family issues. After a brief period characterized by early marriage, low levels of divorce, and higher levels of fertility following World War II (i.e., the Baby Boom), recent decades have been marked by lower levels of childbearing, higher divorce rates, increases in the average age at marriage, rising nonmarital child-bearing, and an upsurge in unmarried cohabitation

While scientists have produced a large body of research on these trends and patterns, the ability to make comparisons over time – a central task for understanding family change – has been inhibited by difficulties in using multiple datasets (e.g., changes in universe, weighting procedures, imputation protocols, question wording, variable availability). This is especially the case when attempting to include surveys from the earlier years (i.e., 1950s and 1960s). Yet these early surveys, used in combination with later ones, would provide vital benchmarks for documenting and understanding transformations in fertility and the family.

This project has four goals. All are related to producing integrated data products and each serves a variety of users and purposes.  In this poster, we will describe our progress toward the third and first goal --- that is preparing and distributing the individual data files and facilitating variable selection on on-line data analysis.  The poster will also describe our planned approach to harmonizing the data and the schedule for release.

1.      To prepare clean, standardized electronic data files and documentation for ten fertility surveys and to archive and document the files at a single source site using Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) archival standards. The first stage of the process will be to fully archive ten surveys with readable and searchable electronic documentation and other available

metadata. This will allow researchers who wish to use a single year or to create their own harmonized subset to do so using the original data. ICPSR archival standards will include bibliography management for data in the series, as well as full syntax and portable files for SAS, SPSS, and Stata software programs. The data will be secured and preserved for the long term.

2.        To produce a harmonized data file with metadata, including the subset of variables of scientific significance for which consistency can be created across the years. This file will be vital for analysts interested in understanding changes across time. The metadata will include documentation of the harmonization process; weighting and changes in universe issues will also be addressed. This product, which will require the majority of the project effort, will enable users to create consistent time-trend analyses. As with the individual survey files, the harmonized file will be processed to ICPSR archival standards and preserved.

3.        To create online data analysis files with an analytic interface. We will make the harmonized file available and convenient to use through an enhanced interface already in use at ICPSR. This interface will allow for automated data extraction and subsetting, as well as descriptive and multivariate analysis with appropriate weighting and standard error calculations. This third data product is designed for users who have less experience with complex time series, but would like to examine time trends and conduct simple descriptive and analytic analyses or select simple extracts or subsets. Such individuals might include new researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. The Survey Documentation and Analysis (SDA) interface currently in use at ICPSR has most of the necessary functionality, but we will enhance it for use with the harmonized series. This third goal also encompasses the creation of enhanced Web-based documentation that permits users to navigate the harmonized file and compare original question wording and variable text across the series. We will also develop a complementary tool to assist users in assessing comparability across surveys with respect to the consequences of various analytic choices.

4.        To provide user training, which we view as an essential part of dataset development. We propose to offer two courses, appealing to different audiences, on using the harmonized data file and other data products created by the project. The ICPSR Summer Program series will be the site for these two focused workshops, educating users in data availability, structure, and use.

        Thus, the overarching purpose of this project is to advance scientific understanding of family and fertility changes over roughly the past 50 years in the United States by providing the research and policy communities with a harmonized data file as well as an easily usable analytic interface.