

Revisiting “Missing the target”: Correspondence of fertility intentions and behavior in the U.S.

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Most young men and women intend to have children; two children is highly normative and the modal response. Fertility levels well below replacement result because these intentions are not met – a common occurrence in many countries. Using U.S. data (the NLSY79), we examine the co-variation in actual fertility and fertility intentions over a three-decade period. We build on Quesnel-Vallée and Morgan (2003 in PRPR) that used these same data. Specifically, the younger half of the sample has now reached the end of their reproductive years, and we can explore fully the correspondence between intended and realized family size (for women and men in the 1957 to 1964 birth cohorts). We begin to examine causes for the lack of correspondence in intent and behavior by examining the effect of blended families. Blended families change fertility intentions and realizations, contingent upon where previous children reside and other factors.

Work to date includes the three tables below. Table 1 shows the number of women and men that “underachieved”, “overachieved” and “met” their stated 1982 intention by age 40. Forty percent met their intention; of those that did not twice as many underachieved as overachieved. We estimate the mean “gross error” for men and women as .96 and 1.16 – the average woman/man misses the target by approximately one full birth! Consistent with the finding that underachievement is more common, the mean net error for men and women are -.4 and -.5 births respectively.

Table 2 shows these gross and net errors for different subpopulations. Notice how net errors for the youngest ages at first birth are positive but turn strongly negative as age at first birth increases. Also note the large negative net errors for the most educated. Our paper will show how these results fit with life course explanations that stress the importance of fertility postponement as the key process producing low fertility.

Table 3 shows multivariate models that examine differences in over- and under-achieving by characteristics in Table 2 and testing for differences between men and women. Interesting results include a much greater tendency for college women to underachieve compared to men. This finding clearly shows how the gender stratification impacts the likelihood of achieving both a high education and the number of children initially desired.

Our paper will place these interesting empirical findings in a gendered life-course model.

Table 1. Inconsistency between 2000 achieved parity and 1982 intended parity, NLSY79 data

| | Women | | Men | |
|---|----------|--------|----------|-------|
| | N | % | N | % |
| Panel A: Percent who overachieve/underachieve intended parity | | | | |
| Underachieved | 1414 | 40.05 | 1587 | 45.45 |
| Overachieved | 832 | 19.53 | 831 | 21.81 |
| Met Intentions | 1494 | 40.42 | 1097 | 32.74 |
| Total Observed 1982-2000 | 3740 | 100 | 3515 | 100 |
| Births occurring 1982-2006 | 4348 | 56.02 | 4863 | 72.40 |
| Pre-1982 births | 3414 | 43.98 | 1854 | 27.60 |
| Total | 7762 | 100 | 6717 | 100 |
| Panel B: Gross and net errors | | | | |
| Total births ^a | 4348 | 100 | 4863 | 100 |
| Due to met intentions | 1531 | 35.21 | 1464 | 30.10 |
| Due to underachievers | 976 | 22.45 | 1227 | 25.23 |
| Due to overachievers | 1841 | 42.34 | 2172 | 44.66 |
| Gross error ^b | 3633 | 100 | 4349 | 100 |
| Due to underachievers | 2444 | 67.27 | 2995 | 68.87 |
| Due to overachievers | 1189 | 32.73 | 1354 | 31.13 |
| Net error ^c | -1504.52 | | -1756.96 | |
| Panel C: Individual Level ^d | | | | |
| | Female | Male | | |
| Due to met intentions | 2.05 | 1.87 | | |
| Due to underachievers | 1.24 | 1.01 | | |
| Due to overachievers | 3.26 | 3.25 | | |
| Gross error | 0.96* | 1.16* | | |
| Due to underachievers | 1.70* | 1.83* | | |
| Due to overachievers | 1.44 | 1.52 | | |
| Net error | -0.40* | -0.50* | | |

^aSum of 2000–1982 achieved parity.

^bSum of the absolute value of the difference between 2000 achieved parity and 1982 intended parity.

^cSum of the signed values of difference between 2000 achieved and 1982 intended parity.

^dSignificant gender differences, as measured by two-tailed t-tests ($p \leq 0.05$ level), are starred.

Note: All analyses weighted with 2000 sampling weights.

Table 2. Gross and net errors (1982-2000) by selected characteristics, NLSY79 data

| | Female | | | | Male | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| | Achieved Parity ^a | Gross Error ^b | Net Error ^c | Fertility in 2006 | Achieved Parity ^a | Gross Error ^b | Net Error ^c | Fertility in 2006 |
| Panel A: | | | | | | | | |
| Age | | | | | | | | |
| 23 | 0.71 | 0.78 | 0.10 | 2.09 | 0.39 | 1.31 | -0.54 | 1.87 |
| 24 | 0.89 | 1.02 | -0.37 | 2.06 | 0.50 | 1.25 | -0.48 | 1.90 |
| 25 | 1.07 | 0.88 | -0.23 | 2.14 | 0.63 | 1.19 | -0.41 | 1.93 |
| 26 | 0.62 | 1.15 | -0.54 | 1.54 | 1.43 | 1.07 | 0.07 | 2.93 |
| Panel B: Age at 1st Birth | | | | | | | | |
| <20 | 2.10 | 0.87 | 0.01 | 2.97 | 1.85 | 1.26 | 0.32 | 3.25 |
| 20-24 | 1.24 | 0.84 | 0.03 | 2.50 | 1.16 | 1.07 | 0.03 | 2.64 |
| 25-29 | 0.04 | 0.82 | -0.14 | 2.14 | 0.03 | 0.99 | 0.00 | 2.31 |
| 30-34 | 0.00 | 0.79 | -0.32 | 1.86 | 0.00 | 0.97 | -0.44 | 1.89 |
| 35-39 | 0.00 | 0.87 | -0.40 | 1.48 | 0.00 | 0.92 | -0.55 | 1.72 |
| 40+ | 0.00 | 1.00 | -0.84 | 1.04 | 0.00 | 0.98 | -0.83 | 1.40 |
| Childless | 0.00 | 1.71 | -1.71 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 1.92 | -1.92 | 0.00 |
| Panel C: Children Intended | | | | | | | | |
| Want<2 | 0.37 | 0.78 | 0.48 | 1.20 | 0.29 | 0.93 | 0.71 | 1.27 |
| Want=2 | 0.68 | 0.78 | -0.18 | 1.82 | 0.40 | 0.98 | -0.29 | 1.71 |
| Want>2 | 1.44 | 1.31 | -0.88 | 2.78 | 0.79 | 1.70 | -1.22 | 2.44 |
| Panel D: Married | | | | | | | | |
| No | 0.57 | 1.16 | -0.53 | 1.68 | 0.25 | 1.41 | -0.78 | 1.54 |
| Yes | 1.14 | 0.81 | -0.19 | 2.40 | 0.92 | 0.91 | -0.05 | 2.43 |
| Panel E: Educ and enrolment 1982 | | | | | | | | |
| No HS, not enrolled | | | | | | | | |
| | 1.85 | 0.99 | -0.07 | 2.84 | 0.87 | 1.35 | -0.34 | 2.11 |
| HS grad., not enrolled | | | | | | | | |
| | 0.79 | 0.95 | -0.34 | 1.98 | 0.49 | 1.22 | -0.48 | 1.88 |
| Enrolled in college+ | | | | | | | | |
| | 0.35 | 1.17 | -0.67 | 1.58 | 0.17 | 1.17 | -0.59 | 1.72 |
| Education | | | | | | | | |
| Less HS | 1.85 | 0.99 | -0.07 | 2.83 | 0.86 | 1.34 | -0.35 | 2.10 |
| HS grad | 1.05 | 0.91 | -0.23 | 2.13 | 0.62 | 1.23 | -0.39 | 1.96 |
| Some Col | 0.40 | 1.05 | -0.53 | 1.78 | 0.24 | 1.21 | -0.65 | 1.72 |
| Coll + | 0.11 | 1.05 | -0.67 | 1.58 | 0.08 | 1.09 | -0.59 | 1.76 |

^a achieved parity in the 20s, at the age closest to 24

^b sum of the absolute value of the difference between 2006 achieved and intended parity at the age closest to 24

c sum of the signed value of the difference between 2006 achieved and intended parity at the age closet to 24

Table 3. Odds ratios and confidence intervals for the multinomial regression models, NLSY79 data

| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| | Main Effects | | Interactions | |
| | Underachieved | Over Achieved | Underachieved | Over Achieved |
| Race | | | | |
| Black | 1.38*** (1.20-1.58) | 1.29*** (1.12-1.49) | 1.35*** (1.18-1.55) | 1.20* (1.04-1.39) |
| Other | 1.25 (.96-1.63) | 1.16 (.87-1.55) | 1.25 (.95-1.63) | 1.14 (.85-1.53) |
| Women | 0.88* (.78-.99) | 0.67 (.59-.77) | 0.48*** (.35-.65) | 0.61** (.45-.81) |
| Age | 1.02 (.90-1.15) | 0.93*** (.82-1.06) | 1.02 (.90-1.15) | 0.94 (.82-1.07) |
| Childless | 4.57*** (3.92-5.33) | 0.59*** (.49-.67) | 4.67*** (4.00-5.44) | 0.53*** (.46-.62) |
| Want <2 | 0.28*** (.23-.34) | 1.87*** (1.67-2.29) | 0.22*** (.18-.28) | 1.75*** (1.44-2.13) |
| Want >2 | 4.55*** (3.95-5.25) | 0.77** (.67-.93) | 3.54*** (2.96-4.23) | 0.76* (.61-.96) |
| Married | 0.69*** (.63-.77) | 1.03 (.94-1.16) | 0.40*** (.33-.48) | 0.77** (.64-.93) |
| Education | | | | |
| Enrolled in college | 1.05 (.82-1.34) | 0.97 (.76-1.29) | 0.60** (.43-.83) | 0.79 (.54-1.13) |
| HS grad, not enrolled | 1.11 (.94-1.32) | 0.86 (.74-1.04) | 0.86 (.68-1.09) | 0.85 (.67-1.08) |
| College*women | | | 3.40*** (2.12-5.46) | 1.53 (.91-2.56) |
| HS*women | | | 1.87*** (1.34-2.61) | 1.09 (.79-1.52) |
| Want<2*women | | | 1.79* (1.08-2.97) | 1.28 (.92-1.79) |
| Want>2*married | | | 2.03*** (1.56-2.65) | 1.08 (.79-1.49) |
| N | 7018 | 7018 | 7018 | 7018 |

Meeting one's intentions is the omitted outcome category. "White" is the omitted category for race. "Men" is the omitted category for gender; "want 2 children" is the omitted category for children wanted; "unmarried in 1982" is the omitted category for married in 1982; "no high school diploma, not enrolled in school" is the omitted category for education/enrolment in 1982.

95% Confidence intervals in parentheses.

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).