Critical Perspectives on Schooling and Fertility in the Developing World

Review Author[s]:
Charles Hirschman


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Relentlessly empirical, demographic research tends to accumulate more empirical generalizations, and exceptions to empirical generalizations, than can comfortably fit within its classical theoretical corpus. This situation can sometimes lead to the appearance of a major theoretical impasse when, in fact, the problem simply requires a careful conceptual and methodological reassessment rather than a major theoretical overhaul. *Critical Perspectives on Schooling and Fertility in the Developing World*, published under the auspices of the prestigious National Research Council, is an edited collection of empirical papers and review essays on the relationship between schooling and fertility in developing countries. Although the book contains several valuable and interesting research reports, the overall project is flawed, in my judgment, because the editors package it as a fundamental revaluation of underlying theory. The phrase “critical perspectives” in the title of the volume is, perhaps, meant to highlight a postmodern interpretation of the education and fertility relationship.

One of the more consistent findings in the demographic literature is the association between education and fertility. In general, most cross-sectional studies show that women with higher education have fewer children than women with less schooling, and over time, educational expansion is associated with declining fertility. But the combination of occasional contrary findings and the pressure to find a “non-family-planning policy” has stimulated continuing reappraisals of the education–fertility relationship. Twenty years ago, Susan Cochrane published her classic meta-analysis (not formally billed as such), *Education and Fertility: What Do We Really Know?* that evaluated the state of research and theory concerning this relationship. Cochrane’s account revealed that the inconsistent findings (positive associations between schooling and fertility) were generally systematic: They were primarily concentrated at the lower end of the educational ladder and in societies with relatively low levels of overall education. In such settings, the causal impact of education on fertility could be affected by joint associations with other dimensions of social class and “supply-side” variables (fecundity, breastfeeding, spousal absence). By giving a plausible theoretical account for the occasional inconsistent findings, Cochrane’s book (along with those of many other demographers over the last two decades) has reaffirmed the salience of the causal impact of education on fertility. Indeed, in the debate between ideational and structural interpretations of fertility decline, both sides seek to claim education as “their” primary causal variable.

In the volume under review, the chapter on “Female Education and Fertility: Examining the Links” by Ian Diamond, Margaret Newby, and Sarah Varle presents an excellent overview of the recent empirical literature since the publication of Cochrane’s book. The authors note that studies reporting a positive impact (typically a reversed-U relationship) of education on fertility are rare among recent Demographic and Health Survey samples, relative to the earlier generation of World Fertility Survey studies. In addition to sorting through the mechanisms of the relationship (delayed marriage, lowered fertility goals, fertility control within marriage), Diamond et al. posit that the education–fertility relationship at the individual level is conditioned by national-level contexts, namely, the presence or absence of mass education, the strength of family planning programs, and employment opportunities for women.

Several chapters in the volume provide new empirical results that go beyond the standard education–fertility hypothesis. Using data from a comparative study of four developing countries, Mark Montgomery and Cynthia Lloyd find evidence that more schooling allows women to reduce unintended fertility, which, in turn, enhances the schooling of children—leading to a “virtuous circle” linking the education of mothers and their children. Bruce Fuller and Xiaoyan Liang, in a study of South Africa, find that a family’s financial strength increases the likelihood that the eldest daughter will remain in school, but that a mother’s participation in the formal wage sector may suppress her eldest daughter’s education, perhaps because of increased domestic demands. In two other chapters, the authors note that some
of the impact of female education on fertility may be mediated, in part, by the tendency of highly educated women to marry men with similar reproductive goals.

One might hope that the major conclusions of these chapters would be integrated and interpreted in light of the broader literature on the determinants of fertility in developing countries in the introduction by Caroline Bledsoe, Jennifer A. Johnson-Kuhn, and John G. Haaga and in the concluding chapter by Parfait M. Eloundou-Enyegue. Although some mention is made of the empirical findings in the introductory and concluding chapters, the primary aim is to question whether any causal relationship exists between education and fertility. In the introduction, Bledsoe et al. cite selective cases in which education has not led to lowered fertility and imply that the relationship is fairly uncertain and weak. In the conclusion, Eloundou-Enyegue notes that “summary statements on education-fertility relationships have tended to become more qualified and less definitive even as the volume of empirical evidence has expanded” (p. 301). These are glib generalizations that are not substantiated by the chapters in this volume nor by the broader research literature.

Of course, many unresolved questions remain, the most important of which is the lack of a clear-cut explanation of why education leads to lowered fertility. Claims about the plausible impact of education on access to new sources of knowledge, on values that allow women to be more independent, and on the ability of women to find employment are commonly expressed as post hoc interpretations in the literature, but these interpretations are rarely subject to empirical tests. Clearly, an important need exists for more study of the impact of the content and context of formal schooling, in addition to the number of years of schooling, on demographic outcomes. Such investigations will surely reveal much more complexity in the education-fertility relationship than is indicated by our current stock of knowledge, but this goal is not advanced, in my opinion, by the sweeping, and often misleading, statements in some of the essays in this volume.

Charles Hirschman, Boeing International Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Washington, Seattle

Andrzej Kulczycki
The Abortion Debate in the World Arena

“The political process, including the ideological preferences and values of the ruling elite, can be a far more important input into the formulation of abortion policy than data or knowledge about the actual context of abortion” (p. 152). That is the key message of Kulczycki’s monograph, The Abortion Debate in the World Arena. An assistant professor of Population Studies at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, he documents well the wide gap that continues to exist in many parts of the world between de jure public policy on abortion and the private behavior of women determined to limit their fertility. Kulczycki skillfully assesses trends in Kenya, Mexico, and Poland, which he considers regional bellwethers and strategically significant in the continuing international debate about abortion. He recognizes the diverse historical and cultural circumstances shaping national policies, the different stages of the demographic transition in each country, and the political impediments to sex education, access to modern contraceptives, and liberalization of abortion perpetuated by the organized constituency of the Roman Catholic Church.

The book’s objective is to enable “the reader to understand better the global nature of the abortion debate, its realities and prospects, especially as it relates to public policy” (p. xv). The concluding chapter reviews the main findings and major themes well. Kulczycki succeeds in demonstrating how debates about public health, population growth, women’s rights, sexuality, religion, and politics combine to keep the abortion debate boiling and what must be done to create a political environment where abortion becomes less common and as safe as possible.

The strength of Kulczycki’s approach, described in the appendix, is that his field observations, reflections on available literature, and analyses of 162 open-ended semistructured interviews with “elites” are interpreted from a political as well as a social, historical, and cultural perspective. He assesses how abortion policymaking is influenced by elite perceptions of the demands of opposing groups and the political power of the Catholic Church. Among the limitations of his assessment are that his observations are generally based on data from urban settings and that his interviews, conducted mostly in the first half of the 1990s, were recorded in shorthand rather than on tape. The structure of the volume makes some repetition unavoidable. The book is meticulously researched, but might have been strengthened further by incorporating important observations in the text rather than in a separate section of endnotes that many readers are likely to skip. The name and topical indices and the detailed 20-page bibliography will be appreciated by future researchers.

Kulczycki notes that existing research does not provide conclusive data on the mental-health effects of abortion, citing a conclusion reached in a letter from former US Surgeon General C. Everett Koop to President Ronald Reagan. In this connection, it might have been useful to