

Keynote address

**ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE FFS-PROJECT:
ACHIEVEMENTS AND LIMITATIONS**

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INTRODUCTION

Family and fertility surveys have been one of the important research challenges of the Population and Family Study Centre (CBGS). The data gathered in five surveys enabled the institute to monitor and analyse, on a systematic basis, relevant changes which took place in the last four decades of the 20th century in Flanders (Belgium) regarding the relational and reproductive behaviour and related issues such as contraception, abortion, subfecundity, and parenthood-employment incompatibility.¹ The first National Survey on Family Development (NEGO I) was undertaken in 1966, the most recent one (NEGO V) in the period 1991-1992. Due to the considerable experience of CBGS in planning and implementing surveys and the advanced planning stage for NEGO V, in the late 1980s the Centre took an active role in launching the European Fertility and Family Survey.

ORIGIN AND HISTORY

ECE Regional Meeting on Population and Development 1987

The event which gave an impetus and political underpinning to an all-European project was the United Nations/Economic Commission for Europe (UN/ECE) Regional Meeting on Population and Development held in Budapest 24-27 February 1987.

During this intergovernmental meeting a number of scientific advisors to the national delegations promoted the recommendation on the feasibility of a new round of fertility and family surveys in the ECE region as a follow up to the World Fertility Surveys. The meeting emphasised the need for policy-oriented research in the fields of family and fertility. In the recommendations it identified the study of determinants of family formation, family planning and fertility a priority activity for ECE. It endorsed a new round of comparative fertility surveys to address these issues in an innovative manner.

These recommendations were implemented in the programme of the UN/ECE Population Activities Unit (PAU) which co-ordinated a new round of fertility and family surveys (FFS).

¹ For references see *inter alia*: Cliquet, 1985; Cliquet & Callens, 1993; Corijn, 1996; Lodewijckx, 1984; Schoenmaeckers & Callens, 1999.

However, ECE did not provide for all of the necessary financial resources to implement this programme which had largely to be financed by UNFPA.

CBGS Ad Hoc Working Group 1987

Within the framework of its overall research programme on current and possible future trends in family development, its causes and implications, CBGS was preparing for a new, more comprehensive fertility and family survey to be implemented in the early 90s. Although this fifth NEGO was to provide data for the inter-survey comparison, it was not to be a mere repetition of the former ones. The CBGS team wanted to test the hypotheses underlying new theoretical approaches emerging in the scientific community. Several national population institutes in Europe had similar plans.

In view of this, CBGS took the initiative to bring together a group of experts from several European countries. The Ad Hoc Working Group met on 7 and 8 December 1987. In addition to members of the CBGS research team on relational and reproductive behaviour, the following experts participated in the meeting: Dragana Avramov (Demographic Research Centre, Belgrade), Jenny Gierveld (Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, The Hague), Ferenz Kamaras (Population Section, Central Statistical Office, Budapest), Ron Lesthaeghe (Centre for Sociology, VUB, Brussels), Hein Moors (Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, The Hague), Lars Ostby (Central Bureau of Statistics, Oslo), Rosella Palomba (Institute for Population Research, Rome), and Joseph Schmid (Lehrstuhl für Bevölkerungswissenschaft, Bamberg). It were brain storming sessions about aims, methods and inter-centre co-operation on fertility and family surveys to be undertaken in the early 1990s.

The participants presented their current or planned work on large scale fertility and family surveys, discussed the new survey orientations on the basis of their past survey experiences and new theoretical developments and identified priorities for common issues to be addressed.

The Ad Hoc Working Group, *inter alia*, recommended (CBGS, 1987):

- to concentrate the new survey on the recording of life event histories of the relational, reproductive and educational-occupational career, not only in order to analyse them on their own, but also to study their interrelations and feedback effects;
- to include questions on fertility attitudes, intentions and expectations with respect to future fertility timing as well as intensity, in view of elaborating more refined populations projections;
- to collect relevant data on sexual intercourse, contraceptive behaviour, abortion and subfecundity, in view of evaluating the fertility intentions and to assess future fertility behaviour;
- to test new hypotheses, more particularly with respect to the individuation process, and to include, in this respect, a parsimonious value battery on religiosity, materialism/postmaterialism and risk sensibility concerning partnership, parenthood and employment;
- to include classical background variables on the geographical, demographic, occupational and ideological origin and status of the respondent and his/her partner;
- to foresee inter-survey, and if possible, international comparative analyses;

- to include both men and women in autonomous samples, regardless of their marital status, and to cover a wide variety of age groups;
- to include, wherever possible, migrant workers and their descendants;
- to adopt the WFS formula in distinguishing a general core questionnaire and a limited number of optional modules on specific issues;

Looking back at the report of the 1987 CBGS Ad Hoc Working Group, it appears now that all of its core recommendations constitute the backbone of what was developed as the FFS.

Outline of the FFS Framework

After the Ad hoc Working Group meeting, the ECE/PAU commissioned to CBGS a draft framework paper and a draft questionnaire in 1988. Late Jo van den Boomen, then head of the UN/ECE/Population Activities Unit in Geneva, played a major role in this preparatory FFS phase.

UN/ECE/PAU also set up an Informal Working Group on the Promotion of Fertility and Family Surveys in the ECE Region. This Group met for the first time in December 1988 and discussed and provided suggestions for the amendment of the draft framework paper. The final version of the CBGS paper (Population and Family Study Centre, 1989) was published by ECE. For the survey in Flanders and Brussels, CBGS further elaborated the framework in a study published in 1992 (Cliquet *et al.*, 1992).

The starting point in the development of the theoretical framework for the FFS was, obviously, the new wave of demographic changes - particularly in the field of relational and reproductive behaviour – occurring in many European countries since the mid 1960s. They were resulting in a more or less pronounced trend towards below replacement fertility, anticipating a future substantial ageing and the possibility of a population decline. It was clear that these changes would require adaptive and responsive policies in many domains of social life. At the ECE Regional Population Meeting in Budapest, the concerns expressed in this respect by the experts and policy makers were in fact the rationale for the recommendation to launch a new round of fertility and family surveys.

It is a matter of dispute in the scientific quarters whether there can be a theoretical background to fertility and family surveys. Some consider - in our view, incorrectly – that large-scale fertility surveys are solely descriptive and thus of a non-theoretical nature. The viewpoint taken was that the study of relational and reproductive behaviour and its current changes in modern culture require several scientific approaches and sources of information, some of which can only be obtained through large-scale representative surveys. In their turn such surveys may serve several purposes indispensable for a variety of theoretical and policy oriented research purposes. The FFS design, consequently, was elaborated in an operational way, assembling and even accommodating several specific theoretical approaches for the issues to be included in the survey.

Although the ultimate goal of the new round of surveys remained better understanding of the current trends and the future course of reproductive behaviour, recent developments in the field of relational behaviour and family structures require that fertility be studied in the broader context of the relational life course. The increasing complexity and heterogeneity of the relational life course, involving a broader variety of formal and informal living arrangements between as well as within individual life cycles, led to the decision to broaden

the new round of surveys in the region to the relational and reproductive biographies - hence 'FFS' in stead of 'WFS'. Moreover, intimate relations, living arrangements and formal family structures deserve to be studied in their own right, for scientific, educational as well as policy reasons.

The major aims of the FFS were defined as follows:

- 1) the simultaneous acquisition of interrelated family and fertility data, complementary to census and vital registration data, to be used for several purposes of scientific, educational, administrative and political nature. This 'descriptive' part of the surveys would mainly concentrate on the recording of the life event histories of the relational career, the reproductive career, the educational-occupational career and other salient life course determining events, allowing for the causal analysis of their time-varying sequential interrelations and interactions;
- 2) the acquisition of various data to be used for the elaboration of more refined demographic projections. The shift from chance to choice in reproductive matters, strongly supported by modern family planning technology, indeed, results in a more rational decision making process. It was, consequently, hypothesised that the combined knowledge about phenomena such as relational behaviour, subfecundity, contraceptive practice, attitudes towards induced abortion, intended or expected timing and number of children, career aspirations and even value orientations might enhance the predictive power about future reproductive behaviour, at the individual as well as at the aggregate levels;
- 3) testing specific new hypotheses concerning some possible determinants of relational and reproductive behaviour. In addition to the analysis of the effects of traditional proximate determinants of reproductive behaviour – fecundity, sexual intercourse, contraceptive practice and induced abortion – and the interrelation with the educational-occupational biography, it was hoped that the new FFS would allow for the analysis of the effects of values and attitudes in the fields of life style options and life course flexibility, career aspirations and leisure preferences, newly emerging cultural values such as secularisation, individuation and post-materialism, and risk sensibility;
- 4) testing fertility and family related specific policy issues. Via the hypothetical question approach or the attitudinal policy acceptability approach insight might be gained on the relations between reproductive intentions and behaviour, on the one hand, and specific family related policy options, on the other hand. Also the hope existed that the Population Policy Acceptance survey might be linked to the new FFS;
- 5) undertaking inter-survey and inter-country comparison of the evolving relational and reproductive behaviour in the region. The value of large cross-sectional surveys increases whenever they can be repeated at regular intervals with at least partially identical sections on a number of essential relational and reproductive issues. They do not only allow within and between cohort comparisons, but also permit the validity of recorded data at different moments of time to be controlled. Inter-country comparisons of changing relational and reproductive patterns, imbedded in different socio-economic, socio-cultural and political contexts are, obviously, of great interest, both for analysing converging trends as for understanding persisting variations.

In addition to the aims of the new survey round, the FFS framework also formulated recommendations with respect to the sample design and the outline of the questionnaire,

which largely followed the lines of thought of the above mentioned CBGS Ad Hoc Working Group.

FFS Questionnaire

In the course of 1989-1990 CBGS prepared and tested several drafts of the FFS questionnaire which were discussed and amended by the ECE/PAU Informal Working Group and an expert group during the 1990-1991 period. These meetings were convened by the present PAU chief, Miroslav Macura.

The outcome of this process was a minimal core questionnaire and optional modules on migration history, contraceptive history, values and beliefs, and population policy acceptance, all of which were finalised by PAU, the staff of which, meanwhile, was extended with FFS project manager Erik Klijzing. The minimal core questionnaire was tested and further revised by the Institute for Resource Development in Chittenden County, Vermont, US, under the supervision of Martin Vaessen. The module on values and beliefs was prepared by Fred Deven from CBGS. Rosella Palomba from the IRP in Rome, Italy and Hein Moors from the NIDI in The Hague, Netherlands developed the module on population policy acceptance (Population Activities Unit, 1992).

In essence the FFS core questionnaire includes three biographies (relationships, reproduction and education-occupation), some elements on family origin and on values and attitudes, more particularly with respect to family development. The core questionnaire is structured in 10 sections:

- household characteristics
- parental home
- partnerships
- children
- other pregnancies
- fertility regulation
- views on having children
- other views
- education and occupation
- partner characteristics.

Together, core and modules include most of the issues that were originally intended to be investigated. Some of the original ideas, however, are missing, e.g. data on intergenerational social mobility, data on parenthood competing leisure activities, Schmid's hypothesis on risk sensibility. Some gaps are probably due to the absence of adequate research instruments, others were probably considered of a lower priority.

ACHIEVEMENTS

International co-operation

First of all it should be stressed that, notwithstanding its limited resources, the FFS project is an example of successful international scientific co-operation. The FFS Co-ordinator, UN/ECE/Population Activities Unit, should be congratulated on its outputs and the UNFPA thanked for its financial support.

It does not happen so often that 24 countries decide to co-operate in an scientific venture, and pool their manpower and resources for a common scientific goal of significant societal and policy relevance. Moreover, research institutes in several countries – Belgium, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Switzerland and US – spontaneously volunteered to contribute to the development of the project. Researchers from a larger number of countries were involved in the painstaking work of steering groups such as the PAU Informal Working Group on the Promotion of Fertility and Family Surveys in the ECE Region (IWG) and the PAU Advisory Group for the FFS Programme of Comparative Research (AG).

Common research goals and instruments

A crucial achievement of the FFS project consists of the common research aims and methodology that were adopted. The fact that the participating countries largely accepted to work with the same core questionnaire, and in some cases also with the proposed module questionnaires, and that they covered substantially identical population samples according to age, marital status and sex, is extremely important for one of the ultimate goals of the project: inter-country comparison.

Surveys in 24 countries

The FFS participation includes 24 countries from the ECE region, covering all major areas in Europe and overseas Anglo-Saxon countries (Population Activities Unit, 1992-1999). This substantial participation resulted in the creation of a database covering a total sample of more than 100.000 women and somewhat less than 50.000 men. It allows for in-depth cross-cultural and interregional comparative studies, but the data base as a whole also enables the transnational analysis of specific life events or particular population sub-groups which have only a small representation in each of the national samples.

Due to its dimension and participation, FFS is one of the very few truly international comparative social science research projects.

FFS Standard Recode Files (SRF)

One of the key achievements of the PAU is the setting up in Geneva of the FFS standardised database for comparative analysis. This database contains the Standard Recode Files (SRF) of most participating countries (Population Activities Unit, 1993). The Advisory Group of the FFS programme of comparative research grants, under standard scientific procedure, the permission to individual scholars to use the FFS data.

A praiseworthy aspect regarding dissemination is that the standardised data base is made available to researchers free of charge! PAU does not resort to the practice of some other international projects such as EUROSTAT – European Community Household Panel (ECHP) which sell to the research community at excessively high price data which were gathered thanks to public funding. Accessibility of data from the Standard Record Files has no doubt facilitated the elaboration of an impressive number of reports by scholars from a variety of institutions and a broad range of countries.

FFS Standard Country Reports (SCR)

Another key achievement of the FFS project is the production of the series of FFS Standardised Country Reports (SCR), the original common outline of which was devised by Gijs Beets of the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) and Lars Østby of Statistics Norway.

At this moment, already several country reports are available. More are in press or preparation and it is hoped that, in the end, all participating countries will produce this useful basic document.

The FFS Standard Country Reports are not only interesting basic case studies on family development, but they allow already a first inter-country comparison on many aspects of relational and reproductive behaviour which are not available elsewhere. The SCR also include biographic data on several basic FFS variables (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe & United Nations Population Fund, 1996-1999).

Other national studies

On the basis of the information which the participating countries forwarded to the FFS coordinator, it appears that already an impressive and diversified number of studies have been made. Extensive information on a diversity of studies is available from Finland, Italy, Germany, Norway, Poland and Sweden. I hope that this useful information can be completed, also about publications in national languages, and made available to the international research community.

In addition to general reports with preliminary results, the relation between family formation and labour participation is one of the prevailing topics of analysis. A few studies focus also on the effect of education. Obviously the two main subjects of the survey – relational and reproductive behaviour and their interrelations – are intensively studied. In the field of partnership, transition into adulthood, cohabitation and family dissolution are often subject of specific studies. As far as fertility is concerned, separate analyses are found on desired fertility, the timing of the first birth and on the occurrence of the third birth. Family planning – contraception, sterilisation and abortion – is dealt with in several countries. Other recurrent topics on reproductive behaviour are infertility and subfecundity, and reproductive health of adolescents. In a few countries attention is also paid to reproductive behaviour of minorities. Several studies deal with gender differentials and in a few countries there are some specific studies on men or fatherhood. A few contributions deal with the effects of values. Methodological studies, more particularly on event history aspects are reported from Germany, Italy and Poland. In several countries analyses are made at the internal regional level. A few inter-country studies, more particularly involving several neighbouring countries, are also available. Last but not least, family or population policy related studies have also been undertaken.

This preliminary and probably incomplete overview shows that all major components of the FFS are being exploited. Some topics – the family formation, family life and labour force participation, family planning, transition into adulthood, timing of the first birth, arrival of the third child - are well covered. Other relevant issues have only been analysed so far in a few countries, - e.g. the interrelations between relational and reproductive behaviour, infertility and subfecundity, impact of values, future fertility, and, policy implications. From the

available information, one cannot fully perceive to what degree the biographies are in all cases fully exploited in event history analyses. On the whole, however, already the present yield seems to be promising.

FFS Comparative projects

One of the important goals of the FFS project is to stimulate and organise international comparative studies on the basis of the FFS Standard Recode File database, archived at the premises of the FFS co-ordinator in Geneva. It was, however, accepted that the SRF database could also be used for national research purposes.

The PAU Advisory Group on the FFS programme of comparative research approved so far access to data for the impressive list of 70 projects (Population Activities Unit, 1999).

From the project titles or the list of countries which will be used in the studies it appears that most of research projects aim at international comparative studies. The research topics largely correspond to the studies that have been undertaken at a national basis. Most researchers clearly want to broaden their subjects of interest to international comparison.

As far as the use of the basic data sets in FFS, the following themes appear in the comparative projects:

- Partnership, living arrangements, partnership disruption
- Family formation
- Fertility (biography)
- Fertility regulation (contraception, abortion)
- Methodological analyses

Many comparative projects also concern the study of interrelations between some of the major FFS-themes:

- Partnership/fertility
- Employment/family building
- Values and attitudes/relational or reproductive behaviour
- Socio-economic determinants of family building
- Gender biographic differentiation

A striking gap in the present list of comparative projects is the absence of international research teams. Praiseworthy exceptions are Martine Corijn's international team on the transition into adulthood, the Austrian-German-Swiss project on attitudes towards family policy of J. Dorbritz and B. Fux , the Dutch-Flemish comparative study on family building of J. De Beer and F. Deven , and the F. Kamaras – I. Kowalska study on matrimonial and procreational attitudes and behaviour in Hungary and Poland.

LIMITATIONS

An international comparative project such as FFS has, notwithstanding or precisely because of its ambitious goals, also limitations.

The comprehensive study of relational and reproductive behaviour

As was already stated, it is not possible to study in a comprehensive way complex phenomena such as relational and reproductive behaviour by means of large-scale sample surveys alone. The FFS, consequently, is limited in its research opportunities and should be complemented by other types of research.

National and institutional constraints

It may sound as a commonplace remark, but large-scale research projects such as FFS are often handicapped in achieving their goals by unexpected institutional life course events, such as: the drying up of financial resources in later stages of the project; decreased interest of some research team members in whom a lot of resources and time was invested to get them involved in the project; changing research policy priorities of the institutional, administrative or political authorities, etc. Such life course events may prevent that all of the originally planned and more particularly some of the ultimate goals of such a project remain uncompleted.

International constraints

The same applies obviously to the achievement of the international goals. Personnel movements, budgetary constraints, policy changes often do not allow to realise all of the original goals which were fixed.

The FFS project is an interesting case in this respect. At the time when the project has reached maturity by making the Standard Record Files available, and when an impressive list of comparative research projects are underway, the project is brought to an end. This before it has seen its final and most important results.

Although it is understandable that the time has come to prepare and launch a new and further evolved round of family and fertility surveys, it is regretful that the FFS of the 1990s is not prolonged in parallel to the new activities. This extension of the activity is necessary in order to fully exploit the internationally comparative data, follow up the comparative projects and to synthesise and assess the results of the comparative component of the project. International comparative research takes time after the basic, national surveys have been finalised and the comparative data base has been established.

When one looks at the comparative research projects which have been introduced so far, the number and the diversity of the projects can not hide that some important issues still might be under-researched and deserve further attention. I think more particularly of the following themes:

- advanced analyses of the biographies and their interrelations;
- the development of more refined projections;
- the influence of values and beliefs on relational and reproductive behaviour;
- the policy implications of the project outcome;
- gender comparisons of the FFS biographies.

FUTURE

Although I fear I am pleading in vain and for a lost cause, it is my scientific responsibility to reiterate the need for extending the comparative study phase of the present FFS. It is from a scientific and policy point of view unacceptable that such a project stops in a stage when the most important results are still to come. Policy makers should be aware that advance scientific research, especially in an international comparative context, requires time. They should not content themselves with the reception of preliminary or elementary results.

Obviously, the existing SRF data base in Geneva should be kept available for the research community and later comparison with future FFS surveys.

As the PAU/IWG has rightly argued in its resolution of 20/3/96 (Population Activities Unit, 1996), a 2nd FFS round should be held in this first decade of the new century. The changing family and reproductive behaviour should be further documented and understood. Ongoing trends and changes should be monitored. The gaps in other data banks such as census and vital registration data should be filled. Above all, our knowledge should be further improved and extended in order to provide solid grounds for the formulation of informed public policies and programmes.

A new FFS round should obviously be based on the experience of the present wave which shows the advantage of a well co-ordinated effort. However, the project should be organised over a longer period in which sufficient time could be left for the comparative analysis.

As far as concerns the contents of the new round, it should certainly further evolve with times and include, in addition to comparative information to the present FFS, data on newly emerging issues and problems in particular regarding new social vulnerabilities and new vulnerable groups.

Most important of all perhaps is that the survey be extended, in both directions, over a much broader age group, involving not only adults in their reproductive phase of life, but also teenagers - and even children -, middle aged people and elderly. This is an idea developed by the CBGS research team in the project 'Families in transition' in which it was envisaged to undertake such an ambitious survey with a common core and age specific but thematically related modules (CBGS, 1997; 1999).

A similar idea is at the basis of the newly established **Network for Integrated European Population Studies (NIEPS)** which brings together eleven national population institutes in Europe (NIEPS, 2000). The project is funded by the European Commission under the 5th Framework Programme "Improving the Socio-economic Knowledge Base".

Three themes constitute the content of the NIEPS activity:

- gender-relations, family-building and patterns of work;
- ageing, intergenerational solidarity and age-specific vulnerabilities;
- demographic and cultural specificity and integration of migrants.

Two dimensions will be included in the discussion about the three themes and their interdependence:

- **retrospective**, which comprises the review of the-state-of-the-art research undertaken in recent years by the network members and pertinent research results obtained by other institutions;
- **prospective**, which will lay grounds for future policy relevant research comparable at the European level.

NIEPS will hold six thematic workshops and three technical meetings. The latter will bring together a small number of experts to work out recommendations for research frameworks and instruments for the prospective research. In this way NIEPS could contribute to paving the way for a new comparative European FFS type of survey, thus guaranteeing continuity in the policy oriented research on relational and reproductive behaviour.

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